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June 1st: Ezekiel 6 & Acts 8:4-25

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Ezekiel prophesies against the mountains. Confrontation with Simon the Sorcerer.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 6. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, and say, You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord God. Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills, to the ravines and the valleys, Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places. Your altars shall become desolate, and your incense altars shall be broken.

And I will cast down your slain before your idols, and I will lay the dead bodies of the people of Israel before their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars. Wherever you dwell, the city shall be waste, and the high places ruined, so that your altars will be waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense altars cut down, and your works wiped out. And the slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall

know that I am the Lord.

Yet I will leave some of you alive, when you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries. Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me, and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. And they will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations, and they shall know that I am the Lord.

I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them. Thus says the Lord God, clap your hands and stamp your foot and say, Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel, for they shall fall by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who is left and is preserved shall die of famine.

Thus I will spend my fury upon them. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols. And I will stretch out my hand against them, and make their land desolate and waste, in all their dwelling places, from the wilderness to Ribla.

Then they will know that I am the Lord. In Ezekiel chapter 4 and 5 Ezekiel had performed a sign against the city of Jerusalem. Ezekiel chapter 6 begins a new oracle introduced with the formula, The word of the Lord came to me.

Besides the wickedness of the kings of Judah and the abominations committed at the temple in Jerusalem, the key sites of the people's idolatry were the various shrines scattered throughout the land, especially on the mountains and by sacred trees. As in the preceding chapters, the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 continue to be very much in the background here. The ministry of the prophets rested upon the covenant that the Lord had formed with His people at Sinai.

The prophets prosecuted the terms of the covenant against rebellious people in the name of the Lord. Ezekiel is instructed to set his face against the mountains of Israel, much as he had formerly done against the city of Jerusalem. The land of Israel has the Jordan Rift Valley running through it, with the River Jordan and the Dead Sea in the middle, with a ridge of mountains on both sides like the backbone of the land.

Ezekiel addresses these mountains in particular, but also the hills, the ravines and the valleys. The mountains are especially emphasised as they were the primary sites of idolatrous worship. The general address to the mountains implies, as Daniel Block notes, the extensive and pervasive character of the idolatry for which the people are being judged.

It wasn't merely a couple of hills and mountains, but in every part of the land. You can imagine the effect that this might have had upon the exiles. They might have looked back longingly upon the land from which they were taken, and to the city of Jerusalem that they left behind.

However, in Ezekiel's prophecies to them, the exiles are taught that they are the fortunate ones. Both the city and the entire land are under the most devastating of judgements. As in Jeremiah's prophecy of the good and bad figs in Jeremiah chapter 24, or Ezekiel's prophecy of the hare, the situation of the exiles is presented as far more fortunate than is that of those who still remain in the land.

The high places and the altars and the other sites of idolatry had brought about the Lord's judgement upon his people. But those places will now also be subject to his judgement themselves. The altars will be desolated, the idols broken, and the incense altars destroyed, and they will all be defiled as dead men's bones are scattered all around them.

We might here recall the judgement of the man of God from Judah upon the idolatrous site at Bethel in 1 Kings chapter 13. When Israel first entered into the Promised Land, they had been charged to destroy all of the sites of idolatry within it, making no compromise with such idolatry themselves, nor multiplying shrines throughout the land in competition to the one appropriate site of worship in the tabernacle or temple. Now, as they had failed to observe the Lord's charge, the same devastating judgement that fell upon the Canaanites is going to fall upon them.

One particular dimension of the judgement that they will face is the defilement of the land and its sites of worship with their dead bodies, and the dishonouring of their corpses by being cast out upon the land as food for carrion creatures. Even in the middle of the horrific judgements that the Lord declared would fall upon his people in the curses of the covenant, he had held forth to them a promise of the preservation of a scattered remnant, a remnant that, from their devastation and self-loathing, would one day be brought back as a restored people. Leviticus chapter 26 verses 39-42.

And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them. But if they confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies, if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled, and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. In Ezekiel's prophecy against the mountains of Israel he speaks of those of the people who will remember the Lord among the nations.

They will start to recognise the Lord's hand in their distress, but also His heart towards them, His distress at their deep and persistent betrayal of Him. Their remembrance of the Lord will involve a sort of coming to their senses, a recognition of their character in His sight, and an intense self-loathing and disgust at their rebellion. As they recognise this, the faithful and holy character of the Lord will become utterly apparent to them in the disaster that He brought upon them, just as He had promised that He would centuries ago.

The Lord had been consistent with His word and with His character. A new part of the oracle begins in verse 11 with the instruction to Ezekiel to clap his hands and to stamp his foot. The meaning of these actions is not immediately clear.

Are they celebratory actions? Do they express anger, or maybe scorn, or schadenfreude? In chapter 21 verse 17, as Block observes, the gesture is associated with the Lord's anger. I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury, I the Lord have spoken. Moshe Greenberg points to chapter 25 verse 3 and 6 as evidence that the gestures are connected with malicious glee.

In verse 3 of that chapter, say to the Ammonites, hear the word of the Lord God. Thus says the Lord God, because you said, Aha, over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile. And then on to verse 6, for thus says the Lord God, because you have clapped your hands, and stamped your foot, and rejoiced with all the malice within your soul against the land of Israel.

As Block argues, by instructing Ezekiel to perform these gesticulations, he wants Ezekiel to convey something of his anger towards his people. In his prophetic theatre to this point, Ezekiel has represented the Lord's relationship to his people on several occasions and in different ways. He continues to do this in these actions.

Having performed these gestures, he proceeds to speak about the disasters that will pursue the people, the pestilence, the sword and the famine, destroying both those near at hand and those far away. Block observes that, as in the sign of the three parts of the hare, there are three discernible groups in concentric circles, those far away, the scattered group, those nearby, the group around the city, those that remain, the group destroyed within the city. The oracle began with a focus upon the land, with the prophecy against the mountains, and it returns to this at the end.

The air of the places of idolatry, which had once been scented with incense rising to the false gods, will become thick with the putrid stench of dead bodies. The land will be swept clean of its people, rendered utterly desolate. A question to consider, the idolatry of the people is connected with their whoring heart in verse 9. What is the connection between idolatry and adultery and how is this relationship explored elsewhere in scripture? How might this relationship help us better to understand the Lord's judgement

against the idolatry of his people here? Acts chapter 8 verses 4-25 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits crying out with a loud voice came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

So there was much joy in that city. But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city, and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the power of God that is called great.

And they paid attention to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.

And seeing signs and great miracles performed he was amazed. Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For he had not fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said to him, May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money.

You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

And Simon answered, Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me. Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. In Acts chapter 8, the mission of the early church starts to move beyond Jerusalem.

Verse 4 is a transitional text. God is achieving his purposes through his enemies. The persecution faced by the church in Jerusalem encourages the spread of the movement.

At this point, it might also seem that the Jerusalem Christians have an advantage of not having deep roots within Jerusalem. They had sold their property, their tent pegs had

been removed, and now they can move on. Persecution here is a mechanism of fulfilling chapter 1, verse 8, the calling to go beyond Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

In this way, Stephen's death ends up kicking off the mission. The scattering that happens to the church could be a negative thing or it could be a positive thing. People can be scattered as a form of judgment.

They can also be scattered as a sowing of seed. The Christians of Jerusalem are now being sown among the nations, sown throughout the empire, where they will have a much broader influence. Philip is one of those scattered, and it is in Philip that the movement from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria occurs.

The Samaritans are an important feature of Luke's gospel. A Samaritan village does not receive Christ in chapter 9, verses 51-56. There is the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10, verses 33-35.

There is the return of the Samaritan leper to express his thanks to Christ in chapter 17, verses 16-18. In 2 Kings chapter 17 we read that after Israel was deported by the Assyrians, the Assyrians repopulated the land with people from other nations, pagan peoples. Presumably there would have been a remnant of Israelites in the land, and now they have been mixed with these other groups of people.

Samaritan villagers would have largely spoken Aramaic, but in the larger towns and cities they would probably have spoken Greek and would have been largely Hellenized. They are neither Orthodox Jews nor Gentiles. In the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria in John chapter 4 we have a window into some of the disputes that existed between the Samaritans and the Orthodox Jews.

They worshipped the same God, but they were somewhere in between Jews and Gentiles. For the Samaritans their holy mountain was Mount Gerizim, whereas the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. A number of candidates have been put forward for the city that Philip probably came to in this chapter.

Some have suggested that the city was Sebaste. Sebaste was a Gentile city in the Samaritan region. It was built on the site of the Old Samaria and was also a capital.

Sychar, Gitto, Shechem and others have all been suggested. It is likely impossible to be certain on what city it was, besides the fact that it was an important centre of Samaritan population. Philip was introduced back in Acts chapter 6 and now he becomes a focus of the narrative.

His ministry is accompanied by signs. Unclean spirits are cast out, paralyzed people are healed and lame persons are healed too. In Philip we see that it's not just the apostles that perform signs.

Other leaders of the early church are performing signs too. During the initial stages of the church's mission in a particular region, the signs and wonders would have played an important confirmatory role. The signs were the signs of the kingdom.

In Luke chapter 7 verse 22 Jesus describes the signs that he performs. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. This also draws upon Old Testament prophecy such as Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6.

As Scott Spencer observes, Philip is a character juxtaposed with Simon the sorcerer. Simon works wonders in verse 11. Philip works wonders in verses 6 and 13.

Simon draws crowds in verses 9-10. Philip draws crowds in verses 6-7. The people pay attention to Simon in verses 10-11.

The people pay attention to Philip in verse 6. Simon is a great power in verse 10. Philip performs great powers in verse 13. Simon amazes the Samaritans with his claims and with his magic in verses 9-11.

Philip's miracles amaze the Samaritans in verse 13. Craig Keener adds to this. He observes the contrast between Simon claiming to be someone great in verses 9-19 and Philip only acting in the name of Jesus in verses 12-16.

There are a number of confrontations or contrasts with sorcerers and people performing magic arts in the book of Acts. Paul has a conflict with Elymas the sorcerer in chapter 13 verses 6-11. Paul and Silas confront the Philippian slave girl in chapter 16 verses 16-24.

And perhaps we could also include the failed exorcism attempts of the sons of Sceva in chapter 19 verses 13-16. Magic was a source of fascination and fear in the ancient world. Potions and poisons, the invoking of spirits and demons, divination and a lot of other such practices were an important part of life in ancient society.

Along with various forms of idolatry, this was part of the old order that the advent of the gospel disrupted. In the Old Testament we read of conflicts with the magicians in Pharaoh's court. In Moses and Aaron, particularly in the first three plays, the Lord proved that his power exceeded that of the arts of the Egyptian magicians.

Simon Magus is mentioned by a number of people in early Christian tradition. Justin Martyr about a century later, who himself came from the region of Samaria, wrote of Simon Magus. But much that he reports was probably later embellishment of the story.

Simon claimed to be someone great and many scholars have read this as a claim to some sort of deity. However when the gospel came on the scene with Philip, there was a widespread conversion in response. The Samaritans were baptised, which might have been a surprise to observing Jews.

They were baptised without the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans seeming to provide an obstacle. The question of which earthly mountain you're supposed to worship upon is of slightly less import when the Lord is establishing a new temple. Simon the sorcerer is also described as having believed at this point, presumably in response to the signs.

This is an indication of the greater power of Christ and his name over the magical arts of people such as Simon. In verses 14-17, news reaches Jerusalem of the success of the Samaritan mission and they send Peter and John to confirm it. They must acknowledge the validity and the membership of the Samaritans.

The new Davidic king has been established in Judah and now the remnant of the Northern Kingdom must be joined with them so that as one people they might go forward. Such acts of mutual recognition are very important in the history of the church. They are a sign of the unity of the church and of Christ that exceeds all the differences that might divide us.

The Samaritans had been baptised by Philip but they had not yet received the spirit. They received the spirit as the apostles lay their hands upon them. The church is one apostolic church.

It is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And it is important that the Samaritan mission is built on the same foundation as the rest of the church. Seeing the power of Peter to communicate the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying hands upon people, Simon the sorcerer seeks to buy the gift from him.

He sees this power as something that can be bought with money. He seeks to buy office. Throughout the book of Acts, money has been an important theme.

Judas betrayed Christ for silver. The early church sold their property in order to give money to the poor. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit over money.

And now Simon the sorcerer is another example of someone led astray by his love for money. In his desire for money and power he risks his ruin. The sin of simony, the buying and selling of church office and other such sacred things, is derived from Simon the sorcerer's name.

One of the things that Simon presumes is that if he has power and wealth and influence, he ought to be able to use these things to gain status and privilege within the church. But that is not how the kingdom of God works. Peter, who could be juxtaposed with Simon, there are two Simons in this story, rebukes Simon in the very harshest of terms.

Simon the sorcerer, as Peter presents him, is standing in the very greatest spiritual jeopardy. If he does not repent, he and his money will perish together. He does present Simon with hope though.

He must pray to the Lord. And Simon, seemingly penitent, calls upon Peter to pray for him. One of the things that the story of Simon the sorcerer reveals is the great danger among early converts of trying to put the gospel and the message of the Christian faith into the structures that were familiar from pagan practice.

Even though they might accept Christ, they might try and fit Christ within the familiar framework of the old pagan ways. The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Shmemin described the effect of a sort of piety that coloured everything that was received about the Christian faith. He describes what he calls mysteriological piety as a faith in cult, in its saving and sanctifying power.

He observes the way that this pattern of piety inherited from paganism influenced so much about Christianity's development in those early years. It led to the idea of the church as a sanctifying cult, something that makes people holy through its buildings, through its practices, through its rites, through its clergy. Simon the sorcerer is another example of a sort of piety that could be taken to the Christian message.

Simon the sorcerer thinks in terms of magic and power, and he sees the gospel in those frames too. Familiar with the system of magic, he thinks that the gospel can be slotted into that same pattern. Just as one might be able to buy magical arts from someone, he expects that he should be able to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit.

Simon needs to learn that this is not the way that the Kingdom of Christ works at all. A question to consider. Why don't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they first believe? Why do you think that they have to wait until Peter and John lay their hands upon them?