EZEKIEL

Chapter 13

*False Prophets Condemned*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the LORD!  3 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!  4 Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackals among ruins.  5 You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD.  6 Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, “The LORD declares,” when the LORD has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled.  7 Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, “The LORD declares,” though I have not spoken? 8 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign LORD.  9 My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD. 10 “‘Because they lead my people astray, saying, “Peace,” when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash,  11 therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth.  12 When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, “Where is the whitewash you covered it with?” 13 ”‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury.  14 I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD.  15 So I will spend my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, “The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it,  16 those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign LORD.”’ 17 “Now, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them  18 and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths for their heads in order to ensnare people. Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own?  19 You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live. 20 ”‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds.  21 I will tear off your veils and save my people from your hands, and they will no longer fall prey to your power. Then you will know that I am the LORD.  22 Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives,  23 therefore you will no longer see false visions or practice divination. I will save my people from your hands. And then you will know that I am the LORD.’”**

In chapter 12 Yahweh had answered the people’s deluded views about prophecy. Now in this chapter Yahweh turns to the false prophets and prophetesses themselves who are misleading the people. The chapter contains two oracles: the first addresses male false prophets and the second is directed to female practitioners. Both have the same structure:

      I.     False prophets (13:1–16)

      A.     Charges against the imposters (13:1–7)

      B.     Penalty (13:8–16)

      1.     First announcement of judgment (13:8–12)

      2.     Second announcement of judgment (13:13–16)

     II.     False prophetesses (13:17–23)

A.     Charges against the imposters (13:17–19)

      B.     Penalty (13:20–23)

      1.     First announcement of judgment (13:20–21)

      2.     Second announcement of judgment (13:22–23) (CC)

The transition from the first to the second oracle is facilitated by the repetition of the signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh” (נְאֻ֖ם אֲדֹנָ֥י יְהוִֽה), at the start and conclusion of the penalty announced to the false prophets (13:8, 16). Each of the four announcements of judgment includes the word “therefore” (לָכֵן, 13:8 [twice], 13, 20, 23). (CC)

The chapter has no indications of time or specific setting. We assume the two oracles were deliberately paired because of their similarity (a typical Ezekielian pattern). Modern commentators commonly assume that at least 13:2–9 was composed after the exile, at least in its present form. Even Greenberg is willing to entertain the possibility, partly because of the preponderance of perfect verbs (whereas the comparable material in Jeremiah 23, which is preexilic, has many participles and imperfects). Especially if the “editor” was Ezekiel himself, this possibility cannot be ruled out a priori, but I remain unconvinced. Prediction is a hallmark of true prophecy, and there would be no better way of denouncing false prophets than by predicting their demise in ways that later are fulfilled precisely. (Hence the perfect verbs are to be understood as prophetic perfects.) (CC)

**13:2** *out of their own imagination.* Cf. Jer 23:21–22. (CSB)

Ezekiel begins his long denunciation of false prophets by all but mocking the title “prophet” by which they were known. The precise label he gives them, “prophets of Israel,” should be high praise, but the context indicates that they have betrayed their privileged position. That label is unique to the book of Ezekiel (also in 13:16 and 38:17). It may distinguish these Israelite prophets in exile from their native Babylonian counterparts, who were more diviners than prophets from a biblical perspective. That would accord with 13:9, which states that the Israelite “prophets” “will not [re-]enter the land of Israel.” Or it may be targeted at false prophets still in the homeland, since 13:10 and 13:16 indicate they were proclaiming “peace” (i.e., that Jerusalem would not be captured), and 13:14 states that they “will perish within her” (i.e., in Jerusalem). (CC)

In principle, “prophets of Israel” would apply to all prophets who came under the umbrella of being Israelites. But as St. Paul would emphasize later, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6 ESV)Ethnic Israel was the “visible church” of the OT era, and then as now, the true “invisible church” consisting of believers comprised the real “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). The same distinction can be made between all who claimed the title “prophet of Israel” versus those who truly were called by Yahweh and given his Word to preach. In the modern visible church, a similar distinction can be made between all men and women who hold the title “pastor” versus those men who actually carry out their prophetic and apostolic pastoral office in accord with God’s call and Word. (CC)

The technically redundant phrase “the ‘prophets’ of Israel who are ‘prophesying’ ” has sarcastic overtones of something like “prophesying at will,” “ranting,” or the like. But the most damning accusation (to be expanded in 13:3–7) is that the source of their utterances, and their only authority, is “their own heart” (13:2). The same accusation (“out of their own heart”) will be leveled against the false prophetesses in 13:17. In OT usage לֵב (“heart”) usually implies the faculties of what we call the “mind” and “will” and often is interchangeable with רוּחַ, a person’s human “spirit,” as in the next verse, which states that they “follow their own spirit” (13:3). We meet similar accusations elsewhere in the OT. In a parallel context Jeremiah denounces false prophets who “speak the vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of Yahweh” (Jer 23:16). Evil King Jeroboam of northern Israel devised idolatrous altars and a false worship festival at an unordained liturgical date he invented “from his heart” (1 Ki 12:33). Apostasy results in “uttering lying words from the heart” (Is 59:13). (CC)

The obvious contrast to their self-inspiration is a true prophet’s inspiration by Yahweh (although the false prophets probably claimed that). Moses, a true prophet (Deut 18:15; 34:10), declared that he was sent by Yahweh to perform deeds that were “not from my own heart” (Num 16:28). The false prophets may even have been sincere in their delusion, but they were sincerely mistaken. In any case, Yahweh establishes that Ezekiel is an authentic messenger by ordering him to use the formula “Hear the Word of Yahweh.” (CC)

**13:3** *have seen nothing.* No revelation from God was received. (CSB)

The essence of Ezekiel’s denunciation of the false prophets comes in this verse. After intervening invective in 13:4–5, this denunciation will be resumed and expanded slightly in 13:6–7. Three overlapping reasons are given for the initial “woe.” First and most generally, the false prophets are “foolish.” Especially in the Wisdom literature various Hebrew terms for “fool” and “foolish(ness)” describe all sorts of religious and moral deficiencies and misbehavior. The same term as used here, נָבָל, twice refers to a “fool” who “says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ” (Pss 14:1; 53:1). The accent here is probably on the deceitfulness of their behavior and also on their failure to confess the true God and his ways. In particular, they encourage the people to believe they can have salvation without judgment, or that they deserve no judgment to begin with. A true prophet preaches Law and Gospel, but false prophets preach only a smug and self-confident “gospel.” (CC)

Second, their god is ultimately a figment of “their own spirit.” The Holy Spirit and divine inspiration play no role in their theology. Their “spirituality” is their own creation. This text says nothing about any evil spirit from Satan, but in total biblical context that might well be included. In principle, these “prophets” had succumbed to the spurious offer dangled before Adam and Eve in the garden, acting “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). This “spirit” they had followed, erecting their own norms. (CC)

The third indictment (“who follow … that which they have not seen”) seems to be a sort of sarcastic play on their claim to be true “visionaries.” The verb for “see” used here (רָאָה) occasionally refers to prophetic sight (e.g., Is 30:10; Amos 7:8; 8:2), and the cognate nouns מַרְאָה (Ezek 1:1; 8:3; 40:2) or מַרְאֶה (8:4; 11:24; 43:3), “vision,” refer to some of Ezekiel’s prophetic visions, although חָזָה (“to see”) and its cognate noun חָזוֹן (“vision”) are more common terms for prophecy (e.g., Is 1:1; Ezek 12:27; 13:16). 1 Sam 9:9 indicates that the participle of the verb used here, רֹאֶה, “seer,” was an older synonym of “prophet” (נָבִיא). The Christian church is still plagued by self-appointed “visionaries,” who, if they have really “seen” anything at all, pursue a will-o’-the-wisp or a narcissistic reflection of themselves. (CC)

**13:4** *jackals.* Animals that travel in packs and feed on dead flesh—a powerfully negative image (see Ps 63:10; La 5:18). (CSB)

The association of jackals with ruins is frequent in the Bible, and the Israelites were probably acquainted with the reality underlying the metaphor. No explanation of the picture is offered, but to the original audience, it must have evoked a vivid picture of these scavengers who not only frequented ruins, but often enlarged the breaches or undermined the walls as they dug their own lairs. “Israel, a religio-moral ruin, teems with jackal-prophets who batten on the decay, and by telling the people what they want to hear, hasten the end.” (CC)

**13:5** *You have not gone up.* The function of true prophets is described (cf. 22:30; Ps 106:23). (CSB)

The two related metaphors in this verse (going up into the breaks in the wall and repairing it) are different than the one in 13:4, but both verses have to do with walls. Israel is defenseless because its “wall”—God’s covenant, with its promises of grace and forgiveness—has been demolished by the Israelites’ own unbelief and faithlessness. That is why Jerusalem’s (literal) walls will be breached by the enemy. A true prophet would stand in the (spiritual) breach to lead the defense or launch a counterattack. He would do something “constructive”: rebuild the broken walls by warning the people, eliciting their repentance, reinstructing them in the true faith, and so on. A partial parallel is 22:30, which highlights the prophetic responsibility of intercession, and that may be applicable here also. Ps 106:23 uses the figure of standing in the breach to describe Moses’ decisive action when confronted with the golden calf apostasy (Exodus 32). In contrast, the false prophets, if they recognized the danger at all, did nothing to deflect it but instead only looked after their own welfare. (CC)

The phrase “gone up into the breaks” (Ezek 13:5) probably is based on the tactics of siege warfare. The attacking army would erect ramps and run battering rams up them in order to break through the middle and upper courses of the wall, which were thinner than the wall’s base. Hence the breaches would be in the higher portions of the wall, to which the defenders would need to ascend. After fending off the immediate attack, the defenders then would have “repaired the wall” (13:5), but the false prophets have not done that either. (CC)

 *day of the Lord.* See note on 7:7. (CSB)

The ministry of a true prophet has the goal that Israel “might stand in battle on the Day of Yahweh” (13:5). The battle is unavoidable; the Day of Judgment will come for all people. To “stand” on that day means to survive the judgment, not to be condemned, as “stand” is used in contexts of forensic justification. The contrasting idiom of not standing (Mark 3:25; or “fall,” Rom 14:4) means to be condemned. The war language applies not only to the imminent Babylonian assault on Jerusalem, but to the church in all ages. The church’s strategy will always be both defensive and offensive. A church that has ceased to be the church militant is either a dying church or one that has already succumbed (become acculturated to its pagan surroundings). The war motif pervades all of Scripture, especially from the exodus (“Yahweh is a man of war,” Ex 15:3) through Easter (the *Christus Victor* motif, as in church hymnody), all the way to the final showdown, accented especially in apocalyptic literature, as in Ezekiel 38–39 and Rev 16:16; 19:11–20:10. (CC)

The real enemy is not “flesh and blood” (cf. Eph 6:10–20), and in the case of judgment, the danger comes from Yahweh himself. Yahweh is the enemy of the sinful people, whom the prophetic “watchman” must warn so that they may repent and be saved (Ezek 3:16–21; see also 22:30; 33:7–9). The figure of the Day of Yahweh pervaded chapter 7. The idiom refers to any day when decisive, ultimate action is taken. The context here is not overtly eschatological, but those overtones should not escape us. Every day that Law and Gospel are preached is a judgment day, since sinners are condemned and eschatological salvation is proffered. But that existential dimension cannot eclipse the final and eternal judgment on the Last Day, when our Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth and all the dead are raised (Rev 20:11–15). The fall of Jerusalem is one of the major “types” of biblical history, portending the ultimate “Day of Wrath” (Zeph 1:15; see further the commentary on Ezek 7:8). (CC)

**13:6** *Their visions are false.* Whether the false prophets had actual visions is unknown, but they claimed to have received revelations from God when in reality their messages only proclaimed what their hearers wanted to hear (see Isa 30:10; Jer 23:9–17; 2Ti 4:3). (CSB)

After the metaphorical interlude (13:4–5), Ezekiel now takes up where he had left off in 13:3. He sharpens his attack on the false prophets, who presume to use the signatory formula, “Yahweh says.” Perhaps they had a rather magical conception of the formula, as though they could coerce God by its simple utterance. The statement that “they hope/expect” (יָחַל) God “to fulfill [their] word” does indicate that they were sincere, not mere charlatans. In orthodox biblical piety that verb is a prominent one for the exercise of true, saving faith. The use of standard Yahwistic language by the heterodox is a reminder that determining truth involves more than merely recognizing traditional words and rituals. (CC)

**13:7** By rephrasing 13:6 as a rhetorical question and switching to the second person (“Have you not … ?”), Ezekiel challenges his competitors to confront the truth question themselves. Precisely how they were to do this is not specified, but events would soon determine who was divinely inspired and who was deluded. (CC)

**13:8** *I am against you.* See 5:8 and note – (A short and effective phrase of judgment used often by Ezekiel (see 13:8; 21:3; 26:3; 28:22; 29:3, 10; 30:22; 34:10; 35:3; 38:3; 39:1; see also Jer 23:30–32; 50:31; 51:25; Na 2:13; 3:5). (CSB)

By repetition of the formulaic signal of punishment that also began 5:7 (“Therefore, thus says the Lord Yahweh”; see the textual notes) and by an accumulation of other devices, this verse underscores the gravity of the divine verdict against Israel. The following formula, “Behold, I am against you,” occurs here for the first time in the book of Ezekiel. This Hebrew formula (sometimes called the hostile orientation formula) is thought to have originally been a challenge to a duel in face-to-face combat (e.g., Samson and the Philistines in Judg 16:9), but more characteristically it announces imminent retribution upon the enemies of God’s people (e.g., Nah 2:13). But now Israel has proved to be God’s enemy, and so the phrase is applied to Israel itself. In Ezekiel God uses the formula “Behold, I am [הִנְנִי] against [עַל or אֶל] …” fourteen times, more than any other prophet. (CC)

**13:9** *They will not belong.* A threefold punishment, resulting in total exclusion from the community. (CSB)

The first announcement of judgment (13:8–12) begins with Yahweh answering in the affirmative (13:8) the rhetorical question he had posed in 13:7. Then he declares, “My hand will come upon the ‘prophets’ ” (13:9). Yahweh’s “hand” often came upon Ezekiel to empower him to prophesy (see the textual notes and commentary on 1:3). Perhaps the false prophets had claimed that same divine empowerment, but Yahweh now uses that phraseology ironically. They will, indeed, experience Yahweh’s “hand,” but in a way they have not expected, namely, in judgment. (CC)

Three negative results of Yahweh’s “hand” upon them are specified in 13:9. First, they will not be included in the “council” (סֹוד) of God’s people. The OT frequently uses the analogy of an earthly king surrounded by his council of advisors for Yahweh and his prophets, who are pictured as heralds or messengers of that council. The most fruitful parallel may be in Jer 23:18, 22, where Jeremiah asserts that the false prophets did not belong to Yahweh’s heavenly “council” because if they did, they would have spoken his Word. Since here Yahweh denies the false prophets admittance to “the council of my people,” not only is he seconding Jeremiah’s expression about the heavenly council, but he is also proclaiming their exclusion from the communion of the faithful people on earth as well. “The council of my people” then is synonymous with “the house of Israel” in the following clause. A certain vertical typology of the church triumphant above and the church militant below may also be implied, and we shall note a similar vertical feature in the two parallel statements following. (CC)

The second negative result is that “they will not be recorded in the register of the house of Israel” (Ezek 13:9). If this register is an official list of true Israelites on earth, the closest analogy we have is the census lists of returnees from the exile in Ezra 2:62 and Neh 7:64. However, some OT passages refer to Yahweh having a heavenly “book (of life/the living).” That suggests that Ezekiel may have a supernatural, eschatological register in mind as well. Ultimately, this points to the final Day of Judgment, when “the book of life” shall be opened, and “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:12, 15; see also Rev 3:5; 17:8; and “the Lamb’s book of life” in 13:8; 21:27). (CC)

Third, and perhaps climactically, the false prophets “will not enter the land of Israel” (Ezek 13:9). This exclusion would be especially devastating to Ezekiel’s immediate audience of exiles. Similarly, 20:38 will similarly exclude the wicked from the returnees. All indications are that the false prophets predicted—and the exiles expected—a speedy return to the land of Israel. Ezekiel asserts that even if the false prophets’ predictions did come true, they themselves would not participate in that fulfillment. Even those still in Jerusalem would soon enter “the wilderness of the peoples” (20:35) like the generation of their ancestors who wandered in the wilderness for forty years and perished before Israel entered the Promised Land. (CC)

In this theme too, vertical and horizontal typology converge. Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea and Jordan River and entrance into the earthly promised land was a type of the entrance into the new heavens and new earth promised to all believers by grace for Christ’s sake (e.g., Isaiah 11; 65:17–25; Revelation 21–22). Christians too understand themselves as pilgrims on this earth and keep their eyes on the land above and beyond (cf. Gal 4:25–26; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12), yet already now worship “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.” (CC)

**13:10** *“Peace,” when there is no peace.* See v. 16; Jer 6:14; 8:11. (CSB)

Ezekiel now zeroes in emphatically on the deceptive message of the false prophets, then introduces another metaphor, which will dominate the rest of the announcements of judgment (13:10–16), namely, that of a cover-up of a poorly constructed wall (repeated later in 22:28). (CC)

The metaphor is introduced by the charge that the false prophets “have misled my people” by preaching “peace.” Micah issued a similar charge in the eighth century b.c. (Micah 3:5), and Jeremiah, Ezekiel’s older contemporary, charged likewise in Jer 23:13–40 (in a chapter with many links to this one). As often in prophetic literature, we may hear an element of outrage in “my people.” It would have been tragic enough if the false prophets had preached a false gospel to heathen, but to mislead the chosen, covenant people was incalculably worse. An application to pastors of baptized and confirmed Christians is at hand: judgment begins at the house of God (1 Pet 4:17; see the commentary on Ezek 9:6). (CC)

Again echoing earlier literature (Micah 3:5 and especially Jer 6:14; 8:11), Yahweh’s denunciation is summarized in the objection that the false prophets preach, “ ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace.” It is commonly recognized that שָׁלוֹם has fuller connotations than the English word “peace” can capture. It is comprehensive enough that the word might be paraphrased as “divine favor” or “salvation.” The immediate context here makes it likely that military peace was a prominent part of the word’s intent, but Israel’s security was a result of Yahweh’s covenant of grace with her. The use of “peace” at the end of the Aaronic benediction (Num 6:26) after “Yahweh bless” and “be gracious” (Num 6:24–25) is a good reminder that spiritual aspects are always present with “peace” in any Israelite or Christian context. (CC)

The religious misguidance countered by Ezekiel and other true prophets was more serious than the false political and military hopes the false prophets aroused. In contemporary application, one thinks of preachers whose message could virtually be summarized in the slogan “Smile, God loves you,” who seem to know much of God’s love but little of his wrath over sin, and who do not preach Law *and* Gospel in proper balance and relationship to each other. Or in a worship context, when “the peace” is passed, one may ask whether the people have any idea what “peace” they are exchanging. The satisfaction of God’s terrible wrath at our sin by Christ’s bitter suffering, agony, and bloody death is the basis for divine love and peace. (CC)

 *whitewash.* The Hebrew for this word is used only by Ezekiel (see 22:28). A similar-sounding Hebrew word means “unsatisfying things,” and Ezekiel may have chosen the word he did because of its similarity to the other one. (CSB)

A poorly built wall that could easily be plastered over with a little mud was undoubtedly familiar enough to Ezekiel’s audience. If Jeremiah 23 underlies Ezekiel’s oracle, as seems likely, one can probably see a wordplay between תָּפֵל (“mud plaster”) here and the תִּפְלָה, “senselessness/nonsense” of which Jeremiah accused the false prophets in Jer 23:13. Especially if so, the “mud plaster” represents the same deceptive veneer called שָׁוְא (“vacuity/vacuous, emptiness, worthlessness,” Ezek 13:6–9, 23) and כָּזָב (“lie, lying” Ezek 13:6–9, 19). (CC)

The application is clear: the people have a one-sided, naive optimism that Yahweh would protect Jerusalem indefinitely no matter how much they have sinned. Their fallacy is based on their misconceptions of the covenant, which they have shattered, and of the inviolability of Zion, as preached especially by Isaiah (which they misinterpreted as the inviolability of Jerusalem; see the commentary on Ezek 8:12–13). Instead of exposing that fallacy as an unsteady “wall,” the false prophets with their self-inspired predictions of “peace” have merely concealed the worthlessness of the structure (cf. Mt 23:27; Acts 23:3; 1 Cor 3:10–17). (CC)

**13:11** *Rain will come in torrents.* The violent thunderstorm of God’s judgment (imagery frequently used in the OT) was about to sweep them away (see, e.g., Ps 18:7–15; 77:17–18; 83:15; Isa 28:17; 30:30; Jer 23:19; 30:23). (CSB)

Yahweh commands Ezekiel to tell the metaphorical plasterers (false prophets) that the wall, whose flimsy construction they had concealed by a mere coat of mud plaster, will collapse under the onslaught of three kinds of violent, inclement weather. The first, “driving/flooding rain,” uses the participle of a verb (שָׁטַף) that is common in prophetic oracles of divine judgment by means of flooding. The second, “hailstones,” recalls one of the plagues on Egypt (Ex 9:18–34, accompanied by rain; cf. Ps 78:47–48; 105:32) and also Yahweh’s war against the Canaanites (Josh 10:11–14). Thus Israel will be treated no differently than those pagan nations were. The third, “a violent wind” (repeated in Ezek 13:13), uses the same Hebrew vocabulary as the theophany in 1:4, suggesting Yahweh’s personal involvement, which will be made explicit in 13:13–14. (CC)

**13:13-16** In this second announcement of judgment on the false prophets, two shifts take place. First, Yahweh makes explicit that the kinds of violent weather in 13:11 are no mere meteorological phenomena, but his personal wrath in action. The earlier clause was “a violent wind will break out” (13:11), but now Yahweh declares, “*I will make* a violent wind break out *in my wrath*” (13:13). The modern, secularized Western mind has been conditioned by our cultural construct of “science” to dissociate God from “acts of nature,” but the biblical worldview sees all creation under the dominion and in the service of the Creator. Second, the metaphor of a hastily built field-wall shifts to Ezekiel’s real point, the destruction of Jerusalem’s walls (“you will perish within her” in 13:14 refers to Jerusalem) and the death of virtually all who had placed their confidence in them. (CC)

Ezek 13:15–16 wraps up the announcements of judgment, especially the reigning metaphor of the wall since 13:10. So no one will miss the application, Yahweh specifies the false prophets and their vacuous assurances that God would keep harm away from them. He attaches his own signature to the message (the signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh”). (CC)

**13-17-23 Prophetesses in Scripture**

The rest of the chapter (13:17–23) is directed against female practitioners of false prophecy. Rarely does the OT target a class of women as such (other examples are in Is 3:16–4:1; 32:9–13; Amos 4:1–3). Prophetesses were common in the pagan religions of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and also Greece. However, the OT evidence indicates they were quite rare in Israel. While the OT refers to many named and unnamed prophets and “sons of the prophets” (e.g., 1 Ki 20:35; 2 Ki 2:3), there are only five in the OT who are called a “prophetess”: Moses’ sister Miriam (Ex 15:20); Deborah (Judg 4:4); Huldah (2 Ki 22:14 || 2 Chr 34:22); Isaiah’s wife (Is 8:3); and in postexilic times, Noadiah (Neh 6:14). However, נְבִיאָה (“prophetess”) may have substantially different meanings in these instances. (CC)

Since Noadiah was among the evil “prophets” who tried to intimidate Nehemiah (Neh 6:14), she clearly was a false prophetess. Miriam does not ever prophesy, and the sole verse that calls her a prophetess (Ex 15:20) immediately adds that she is “the sister of Aaron” (Moses’ brother). She most likely is called a prophetess because of her relationship to Moses and Aaron, both of whom are called prophets (Aaron in Ex 7:1; Moses in Deut 34:10). In her case “prophetess” may mean “sister of (a) prophet(s).” Likewise, Isaiah’s wife never engages in prophetic ministry. Isaiah calls her a “prophetess” only when he describes his union with her (“I drew near to the prophetess”) and the resulting son to whom she gave birth, who had a prophetic name (“Maher-shalal-ḥa’h-baz,” Is 8:3). Thus in her case “prophetess” may mean “wife of a prophet” and perhaps also “mother of prophetic sons.” (CC)

Only Deborah and Huldah actually engaged in leadership comparable to that of a prophet (Huldah) or judge (Deborah). Deborah’s role is described as that of a judge (Judg 4:4–5). She attempted to persuade Barak to be the sole leader of Israel into battle, and only because of his request did she reluctantly accompany him (Judg 4:6–9). Hence her role as co-leader was due to the cowardice and default of men. (CC)

That leaves Huldah as the sole woman in the OT who truly prophesied. Probably within a few years of Ezekiel’s birth, after the Torah was rediscovered in the temple, King Josiah sent his men to inquire from Yahweh what would become of Israel since the nation had fallen into idolatry. Huldah prophesied that the covenant curses in the Torah would indeed be fulfilled by Israel’s destruction (as happened during Ezekiel’s ministry), but not until after repentant Josiah would die in peace (2 Ki 22:14–20 || 2 Chr 34:22–28). (CC)

In the NT, the only woman called a true “prophetess” (προφῆτις) is Anna (Lk 2:36–38). In Rev 2:20 Christ condemns the church in Thyatira for tolerating a woman named (probably symbolically) Jezebel who called herself a “prophetess” and seduced some into sexual immorality and idolatry. The eschatological prophecy of Joel 2:28–29 includes women among those who will receive the Spirit and prophesy, and it is cited by St. Peter as fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17–18). Four unnamed virgin daughters of Philip are called “prophesiers” (participle of προφητεύω, Acts 21:9). Prophesying (προφητεύω), including that by women (1 Cor 11:4–5), becomes a major topic in 1 Corinthians 14. It may suffice to say here that the phenomenon to which St. Paul refers may have been limited to the NT era, and the apostle expressly prohibits women from prophesying or speaking as worship leader in church (1 Cor 14:33–40). The church catholic has always understood this to prohibit women from the office of pastor. (CC)

**13:17** While details in the Hebrew text remain obscure to us, the ways in which the women Ezekiel denounces were “playing the prophet” (13:17) suggest that they were more like sorceresses, fortunetellers, or witches. They might be compared to the witch of Endor, who was a medium or channeler of spirits (1 Samuel 28), or to “Wiccans,” the term preferred today for practitioners of ancient nature religion who claim to have good intentions and to use only “white magic.” In any event, the fact that Ezekiel refrains from calling them “prophetesses” seems to be a deliberate show of disrespect for them (see the textual note on 13:17). It is impossible for us to determine whether the implication that they were witches (versus the description of the false prophets in 13:2–16 as pretenders to a sacred and noble office, that of a male “prophet”) is another polemical insult because of their gender (Yahweh deemed it even worse that women should pretend to hold the sacred office) or whether it is an accurate depiction based on their actual activities. If the female type represented a special class or order among false prophets, we have no way of knowing. (CC)

“*Set your face against* the daughters of your people” begins with the same Hebrew idiom used in 6:2, where Ezekiel prophesied against the mountains of Israel because of the idolatry performed on them. Allen calls it “a symbolic gesture” that “announces a virtual counterspell that puts the evil eye on these sorcerers,” but since the formula is a common idiom in Ezekiel, we must regard that as eisegesis, at best. Yahweh would not counter witchcraft with his own sorcery; his prophetic Word is more than sufficient to overcome evil.

**13:18** *magic charms.* Exactly what the women were doing is not known, but that it was some kind of black magic or voodoo is clear. The Bible consistently avoids explicit description of occult practices. (CSB)

Our minimal understanding of key words in this verse makes it hard to exegete. The use of an intensive stem (Polel) of the verb צוּד, “hunt,” depicts the women’s actions as predatory and destructive from an orthodox, Yahwistic perspective, even if they and their clients considered their intentions to be benign. It is commonly assumed that the “bands” were intended to symbolize the binding power of the spell or the incantation that accompanied it. That is plausible enough (so magic is always thought to “work”), but there is no explicit statement in the text to that effect. (CC)

The rhetorical question “Will you women entrap the souls of my people, but preserve your own souls?” implies that the women supposed that their own souls would be spared when God’s judgment came even though they had trapped the souls of their victims by using their sorcery, which only confirmed and deepened the apostasy of God’s people. Yahweh’s implied answer is that they shall not preserve their own souls. Since they entrapped others, they too shall be entrapped in the divine punishment. Thus, this part of the verse parallels the prophecy in 13:14–16 that their male counterparts would perish within the city (Jerusalem). (CC)

**13:19** *for a few handfuls of barley.* Involvement in religious matters of any kind for mere gain is consistently condemned in the Bible (see, e.g., Jer 6:13; 8:10; Mic 3:5, 11; Ac 8:9–24; Tit 1:11). For the proper attitude and motivation see 2Co 11:7; 2Th 3:8; 1Ti 3:3. (CSB)

The accusation “you women profane me” is doubly shocking. The verb itself (Piel of חָלַל, “to profane”) implies some shockingly sacrilegious act. Usually the verb’s object is something holy such as God’s altar (Ex 20:25), the Sabbath (Ezek 20:13), the sanctuary (Ezek 23:39), or God’s name (e.g., Lev 21:6; Ezek 20:39). Here the second shock is that the direct object is God himself (אֹתִ֜י, “me”). This is the only verse in the OT to contain this expression. To profane Yahweh or his name means to deny his holiness, to put him on a par with other gods, and, in this context, probably to try to manipulate him by magic. (CC)

The most common understanding of the preposition (בְּ) is that it means “*for* handfuls of barley and scraps of bread,” the meager payment that the diviners required to perform their services, although the commentators are not unanimous. Greenberg argues that the profanation of Yahweh involved offering these grain items to Yahweh as part of the divination (he compares it to the barley meal used in the ordeal ritual of Num 5:11–31) or that the divination ritual made use of these materials, perhaps throwing them on water, as in Babylonian rites. He mentions the Greek practices known technically as aleuromancy and alphitomancy, that is, “divination by wheat and barley meal.” Without further information in the biblical text, it is impossible to choose among these alternatives with any certainty, but the choice probably does not affect the exegesis of the entire passage. (CC)

 *you have killed.* The women had used their evil powers to unjust ends, involving even matters of life and death. (CSB)

The further accusation that the women were “killing souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live” (Ezek 13:19) could be taken physically. The living conditions of some of the Israelites in exile, and certainly the conditions in Jerusalem when it was under Babylonian siege, were so dire that such little amounts of food could be a matter of life or death. More likely, however, the accusation refers to the spiritual condition of the people involved. The “souls who should not die” are the Israelites (“my people,” 13:18–19) who are seduced into apostasy (“those who listen to lies”) by the prophetesses’ act of “lying” (13:19). Those “who should not live” include the lying women themselves, as Yahweh had commanded, “You shall not allow a sorceress to live” (Ex 22:18; cf. Deut 18:10). The prophetesses may keep themselves alive physically by the food they receive in payment, but nevertheless they should and shall die. Some may perish in the fall of Jerusalem or in the harsh conditions of exile, but for all of them the sentence of eternal death awaits on Judgment Day. “Sorcerers,” along with idolaters, the sexually immoral, and all who love and do what is false, are consigned to the lake of fire and are excluded from the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:8; 22:15). (CC)

**13:20-21** Comparable to 13:13–16 on the male offenders, Yahweh here personally intervenes against the female charlatans. He will personally take away their magical paraphernalia, in which much of the populace was putting great stock. Again, even in the midst of a judgment oracle, we see Yahweh’s overriding concern that his people (“my people,” the recurrent refrain in 13:9–10, 18–19, 21, 23) not be victimized by quacks who peddle nostrums that cannot cure. He remains Redeemer at the same time that he must be Judge. The imposters will be held personally accountable by the personal God—all that is implied by the sacred, revealed name “Yahweh” (“then you will know that I am Yahweh,” 13:21). (CC)

**13:22-23** Somewhat echoing 13:19, this final pronouncement of judgment targets not merely the prophetesses’ magical chicanery, but the general effect their parasitical behavior had on the morale of the community. Morale cannot be separated from morals, and morals cannot be separated from religion and theology. Again, the dichotomy between “the righteous man” (צַרִּיק) and “the wicked man” (רָשָׁע) is drawn sharply (cf. especially 3:16–21; 18:1–32; 33:1–9). Although behavior is clearly up front here, we need to keep the basically forensic orientation of the two vocables in mind. “The wicked man” (רָשָׁע) is a person who, though he may be an Israelite, does not trust Yahweh as his Creator and Redeemer; thus he stands apart from Christ and has been found guilty before God. (CC)

Conversely, “the righteous man” (צַרִּיק) is the person who is justified vicariously, by grace alone and through faith alone in the covenant promise, centering in Christ. On that basis (*propter Christum*), “the righteous man” has been declared innocent, and he bears the fruit of faith (good works). He will understand that, although he too may have to bear the cross because of his membership in Israel (the visible OT church, a mixed body of true believers and false brethren), the suffering he may endure as part of Israel under judgment is a manifestation of God’s love toward him (cf. Rom 5:3–5; 8:28), not the capricious behavior of an implacable god, much less some impersonal fate or bad luck. Knowing that is much of what it means to “know that I am Yahweh” (13:23), all the more so as manifested in his Son, Jesus Christ. (CC)

Especially 13:17–23 gives occasion to remind ourselves of the hold that magic and the occult (Satanic arts) still have on our world, even in the so-called “enlightened” West. The loss of biblical and creedal certainty and doctrinal clarity in mainstream “Christian” churches has clearly abetted the revival of superstitious practices of the “New Age” variety and of notions that sometimes insidiously coexist with more traditional, orthodox ones. Secular*ism* and spiritual*ism* are simply false religions that are incompatible with Christianity but have infiltrated orthodoxy in various covert ways. One thinks of the many people who claim (nonsensically) that they are “spiritual” but not “religious” (much less “Christian”). The template for much of the perennial battle is the theory of evolution, which posits that human life is the result of random chance (an accident of nature) and that events are governed by the natural laws of the cosmos. That makes human life purely naturalistic, without any spiritual purpose. To the extent that people (including some Christians) buy into that theory, they find it harder to trust in the God of Israel and the Lord of the church and are tempted to turn to alternative means to seek “spiritual” meaning and security in life. (CC)