EZEKIEL

Chapter 19

*Lament for Israel’s Princes*

**“Take up a lament concerning the princes of Israel  2 and say: ”‘What a lioness was your mother among the lions! She lay down among the young lions and reared her cubs. 3 She brought up one of her cubs, and he became a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. 4 The nations heard about him, and he was trapped in their pit. They led him with hooks to the land of Egypt. 5 ”‘When she saw her hope unfulfilled, her expectation gone, she took another of her cubs and made him a strong lion. 6 He prowled among the lions, for he was now a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. 7 He broke down their strongholds and devastated their towns. The land and all who were in it were terrified by his roaring. 8 Then the nations came against him, those from regions round about. They spread their net for him, and he was trapped in their pit. 9 With hooks they pulled him into a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon. They put him in prison, so his roar was heard no longer on the mountains of Israel. on the mountains of Israel. 10 ”‘Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. 11 Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler’s scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and for its many branches. 12 But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel, it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them. 13 Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. 14 Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler’s scepter.’ This is a lament and is to be used as a lament.”**

With this chapter, we are abruptly plunged back into the political circumstances of Judah’s last days, where we were in chapter 17. That the chapter begins with Yahweh’s simple address to Ezekiel, “as for you” (וְאַתָּה), makes it sound more like a section within a unit than the beginning of a new unit. Indeed, Ezekiel, as the likely editor of his book, may well have placed chapter 19 here deliberately, as the last section of a unit that began with 17:1 and clearly ends at the close of chapter 19. (CC)

**19:1** *lament.* A metered (three beats plus two beats) chant usually composed for funerals of fallen leaders (as in 2Sa 1:17–27), but often used sarcastically by the OT prophets to lament or to ironically predict the death of a nation (see Isa 14:4–21; Am 5:1–3). See also 2:10. (CSB)

*princes.* Kings. (CSB)

**19:2-9** We turn our attention first to the lion metaphor of the first and larger portion of the chapter. A poetic figure like a lion can and will naturally be used to represent various things. In the Psalter, lions are usually emblems of a ferocious enemy (e.g., Ps 7:2; 17:12). Similarly, in much of prophecy, lions represent fierce cruelty, especially in Nahum 2:12–14 (ET 2:11–13), representing Assyria. A number of other terms are shared by Nahum 2 and Ezekiel 19. (CC)

The lion was a common symbol of royalty in the ancient Near East—in Israel as well as Egypt and Assyria. Even though Yahweh refuses to dignify the kings of Ezekiel’s day with the title מֶלֶךְ, “king” (in 19:1 he uses נָשִׂיא, “prince,” instead), there is no doubt that he is talking about kings in the text before us. In connection with royalty, the lion metaphor had special significance, going back to the earliest times. In Balaam’s oracles, the nation of Israel itself is compared with a lion (Num 23:24; 24:9). In Moses’ blessing, the figure of a lion is used of the tribe of Gad (Deut 33:20). (CC)

However, the main predecessor source of Yahweh’s present oracle is indisputably Jacob’s blessing of Judah in Gen 49:8–12. So much of the vocabulary is shared that there must be a genetic relationship between the two pericopes: “lion cub” (גּוּר, Gen 49:9; Ezek 19:2, 3, 5); “prey” (טֶרֶף, Gen 49:9; Ezek 19:3, 6); “crouch” (רָבַץ, Gen 49:9; Ezek 19:2); the similar Hebrew terms for “lion” (לָבִיא, Gen 49:9) and “lioness” (לָבִיָּא, Ezek 19:2); and the similar terms for “lion” (אַרְיֵה, twice in Gen 49:9) and “lions” (אֲרָיוֹת, Ezek 19:2, 6). (There are additional correspondences between Gen 49:8–12 and Ezek 19:10–14. (CC)

Since Jacob had assigned to Judah dominance over his enemies and over the other tribes (Gen 49:8–9), the lion in Ezekiel 19 is obviously a symbol of rule. But this chapter describes a rule that had miscarried and become a caricature of God’s intent. We first hear that theme in Zeph 3:3, written perhaps a half century before Ezekiel. Here, however, it has become all encompassing, and only judgment could silence it until Yahweh caused a thorough change of heart to take place (Ezek 11:19; 18:31). As often in Scripture, God uses judgment upon his own people not only to renovate them, but to accomplish his larger salvific purposes. The church has never had difficulty understanding the blessing of Judah as messianic, and remaining cognizant of that, 19:1–9 can only be read as a prediction of a certain eclipse of the application of that prophecy until its ultimate and climactic fulfillment appears in the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5:5), Jesus Christ himself. (CC)

The nagging question that still remains is that of which specific royal figures the lioness and her cubs represent. The first such figure we meet (Ezek 19:2) is some queen mother. Which one(s) depends, of course, on which kings we understand the cubs to portray. In this case we can identify her historically with Hamutal, mother of Jehoahaz and Zedekiah. Although Israel’s queens are mentioned frequently in the OT, we should not attach excessive significance to any particular queen. Rather, the ultimate “mother” is the entire Davidic line, from which all the legitimate individual kings emerged. This understanding will be quite explicit in 19:10, where the image shifts to portray “your mother” as “like a vine,” from which all the branches emanate. But already in the first part of the chapter “your mother” has several cubs (19:2–3, 5), and so the figure is not limited to Hamutal. (CC)

The picture here is not identical with, but ultimately can and must be integrated with St. Paul’s reference to “the Jerusalem above [which] is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal 4:26). (CC)

The larger question perhaps is which kings are in view. The first lion cub (Ezek 19:3–4) is obviously Jehoahaz, the only royal scion to be exiled in Egypt (see the textual notes on 19:4). If nothing else, that undebatable datum assures us that Ezekiel is speaking of real history and is not inventing mythological allegories. (CC)

As for the second cub (19:5–9), we have three remaining possibilities: Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. The second cub was brought “to the king of Babylon” (19:9), which may mean that he was brought to Babylon itself. It is clear that both Jehoiachin (2 Ki 24:12–15) and Zedekiah (2 Ki 25:7) were taken to Babylon. As for the earlier King Jehoiakim, 2 Chr 36:6 and Dan 1:1 suggest that Nebuchadnezzar himself was in Jerusalem after the battle at Carchemish (605 b.c.), when Babylon had defeated Egypt and so Babylon’s hegemony over Israel had replaced that of Egypt. 2 Chr 36:6 describes Nebuchadnezzar as binding Jehoiakim in bronze shackles “to take him to Babylon.” However, 2 Ki 24:6 states that Jehoiakim “slept with his fathers,” which may suggest that he was buried in Jerusalem. Neither text explicitly reports a deportation of Jehoiakim to Babylon, so the exile Nebuchadnezzar intended (2 Chr 36:6) may not have been carried out. If Jehoiakim was not taken to Babylon, and if Ezek 19:9 implies that the second cub was, that would eliminate Jehoiakim from consideration as the second cub. However, 19:9 may simply mean that the second cub was brought before the king of Babylon, as Jehoiakim apparently was in Jerusalem (2 Chr 36:6). (CC)

Be that as it may, all three of the possible kings are vigorously championed by various commentators, who advance seemingly persuasive arguments in favor of the king they prefer. (CC)

As I indicated above (in “Introduction to Ezekiel 19”), I believe all of these arguments are somewhat beside the point. What gives a certain verisimilitude to all the proposals is that there probably *is* an element of truth in all of them. But Ezekiel’s figurative and generalized language indicates that his purpose is not to rehearse details of a history already too familiar to his audience. Instead, he wishes to stress that the entire Davidic line in recent times has substituted its own purposes for God’s (with the exception of Josiah [640–609 b.c.], who initiated reformation after rediscovering the Torah in the temple, but who does not enter into Ezekiel 19). It is not explicit in 19:9, but “Babylon” often functions in the Bible as a symbol of death and the grave (preeminently in “Babylon, the Great Harlot” in Revelation 14–18, “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus,” Rev 17:6). Like the remainder of Ezekiel 19, the imminent overthrow of the royal house and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple were intended “to annihilate every hope that things might not come to the worst after all.” Only when resurrected from that grave in ways that only God could foresee and accomplish would his kingdom really come, ruled by the crucified and risen “King of kings” (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16). (CC)

**19:2** *lioness.* Although a lament, this chapter is an allegory like that in ch. 17 (to which it is related in content). Ch. 17 gives an interpretation, but this one does not. The lioness may be a personification of Israel (see v. 1), Judah (see 4:6; 8:1, 17; 9:9) or Jerusalem (see 5:5), all of which may be considered to be mother to the kings (see vv. 10–14). (CSB)

**19:3** *one of her cubs.* Jehoahaz (see 2Ki 23:31–34; Jer 22:10–12), who reigned only three months. (CSB)

*devoured men.* A reference to his oppressive policies (see Jer 22:13). (CSB)

**19:5** *another of her cubs.* Perhaps Jehoiachin (who reigned only three months, 2Ki 24:8), but probably Zedekiah (of whom v. 7 appears a more likely description). Both were taken to Babylon (v. 9). If the reference is to Jehoiachin (2Ki 24:15), this was a true lament; if to Zedekiah, it was a prediction (2Ki 25:7). (CSB)

**19:10** *Your mother was like a vine.* The one previously pictured as a lioness (v. 2) is here a vine (see 15:2 and note; 17:7). (CSB)

This section of the chapter begins with the theme already familiar from 17:5–8 of a vine planted by a copious supply of water. As a result, it produces many branches and much fruit. Superficially, it was a beautiful picture of perfect health, pleasing to both God and man. The picture resembles many other biblical passages with fruitful plants beside flowing water, including 47:1–12, where Ezekiel himself will later expatiate upon the theme eschatologically. (CC)

**19:11** This verse appears to say that the royal family was large. “The strong branches” (מַטּ֣וֹת עֹ֗ז) uses the noun מַטֶּה, “branch; staff, scepter,” which originally may have been an official insignia for a tribal chieftan (consistent with Ezekiel’s use of premonarchical נָשִׂיא, “prince,” in place of “king”; see “Introduction to Ezekiel 19” above). Here the “branches” refer to members of the royal family. Messianic overtones are closely connected with the Hebrew phrase rendered “strong branches.” For example, in Ps 110:2, a pivotal Christological text, the same (singular) Hebrew phrase (מַטֵּה־עֹז) refers to Christ’s “mighty scepter,” which extends from Zion (Calvary; see the commentary on 8:5, 12–13) and enables him to rule over his enemies. Thus while the context requires the translation “strong branches,” the Hebrew term (מַטֶּה, “branch”) can be a synonym of the term in the parallel phrase “scepters [plural of שֵׁבֶט] of rulers.” “Scepter” derives directly from Gen 49:10:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,

      nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,

until *shiloh* comes,

and to him shall be the obedience of peoples.

In Ezek 21:27 Yahweh seems to allude to Gen 49:10 and to interpret *shiloh* as meaning “the one to whom justice/justification belongs.” And in the NT Psalm 110 is one of the most frequently cited and alluded to OT passages regarding Christ’s victorious reign after his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension to procure justification for sinners. (CC)

In the second half of Ezek 19:11 comes what is undoubtedly the key to the understanding of this entire section of the chapter. The vine (the “mother” of the Davidic dynasty, 19:10), from which the ruling Davidides sprouted (with many other potential ones in the wings) abandoned its God-given role of producing grapes and acted like a towering tree, arrogant as could be: “His stature soared high among the clouds.” (The motif will reappear in chapter 31, where Egypt and Assyria are depicted as a huge cedar guilty of hubris.) Here the picture moves from an allusion to the many kings of Davidic descent to the one final king, whose self-aggrandizement is ended by God’s overthrow of Judah by means of Babylon, thus ending the era of Israel’s monarchy.(CC)

The picture of the vine’s mighty bough towering among the clouds sounds an ominous note of human attempts to play God (cf. Gen 11:4). In the prophets, “highness” by itself evokes the idea of forgetting God and usurping his place (e.g., Ezek 16:50; 17:24; cf. Deut 8:14). To God alone belongs “height.” That is why his temple mount is “a high and lofty mountain” (Ezek 17:22; cf. 40:2; Ps 48:2–3). (CC)

**19:12-14** In a sudden act of destruction, the vine is “uprooted in wrath” and “hurled” to the ground (19:12). The real agent behind the passive verbs is Yahweh himself. Some of the same language is also used in Lam 2:1:

How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!

      He hurled from heaven to earth the glory of Israel.

Not only is the vine’s height reversed, but what had been its legitimate glory, its “fruit,” is destroyed by the “east wind” (Ezek 19:12; see also 17:10). Then it is planted “in a dry and thirsty land” (19:13), which undoubtedly refers to Babylon. Physically, Babylon is a harsh environment for a vine to flourish, let alone a mighty tree, and metaphorically for the Israelites exiled there, life itself will be difficult. (CC)

What is more, “its strong branch” is torn off and devoured by fire (19:12)—a theme to which 19:14 will return. This being poetry, we should not expect to be able to associate every detail with known history, but a few comments can be made. The “strong branch” in 19:12 (the phrase is repeated in 19:14) and the “main branch” in 19:14 refer to Israelite kings. Probably it is futile to try to limit the identification of each branch to any one king. As in the previous section (19:2–9), we have an amalgam of Israel’s kings, especially the last three before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 b.c., namely, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (for their ends, see the commentary on 19:2–9). (CC)

We are not certain how or where Jehoiakim died. Jehoiachin was torn off the throne and deported to Babylon, so 19:12–13 would apply to him. The “main branch” that emerges in 19:14 apparently is a different king than the one in 19:12. Many commentators have noted that the fact that the destroying fire comes out from the “main branch” in 19:14 is reminiscent of Jotham’s historical fable, where a worthless bramble starts a fire that destroys the cedars of Lebanon (Judg 9:7–20, especially 9:15, 20). The point in Ezek 19:14 appears to be that the conceited king is himself the immediate cause of the people’s plight. They were all implicated in his arrogance, and all suffer, in effect, his own fate. In 19:12, the fire that destroyed the “strong branch” represented God’s wrath executed by external forces (the Babylonian invasion). The destroying fire in 19:14 represents divine wrath triggered by the king himself, and this likely points to Zedekiah’s conniving and subversive behavior. But the very vagueness of the language permits any number of applications. (CC)

While the divine wrath is a consuming fire, Ezekiel does *not* say that the “scepter” would indeed depart from the royal house of Judah until God’s final judgment came; he does not negate the ancient messianic promise in Gen 49:10. Ezekiel describes the result as “that it [the vine] no longer has a strong branch”—but here he leaves open the possibility that is explicitly added in Ezek 17:22–24, namely, that Yahweh will one day plant a new sprig that will indeed bear fruit (cf. Mt 21:33–41; John 15). (CC)

Naturally, nearly all critics take at least Ezek 19:12–14 as “prophecies after the event” composed after 586 b.c. Since critical dogma is involved, there is no point in attempting a refutation using critical logic. For many critics it is axiomatic that genuine predictive prophecy cannot occur, and for them none will be admitted “even if a man should rise from the dead” (Lk 16:31). (CC)

Orthodox exegesis takes the verbs in Ezek 19:12–14 (mostly perfects and some imperfects with *waw* consecutive) as prophetic perfects, especially common in laments or dirges (e.g., Amos 5:2). This enables us to understand even the independent little “colophon” or postscript at the very end of the chapter (“This is a lament, and it became a lament”) as words composed by Ezekiel himself before 586 b.c., emphasizing the credibility of the prediction the chapter contains. As Yahweh communicated to Ezekiel already in 19:1, the entire chapter is a “lament” (קִינָה), and using a final “prophetic perfect” (וַתְּהִ֥י) in anticipating that reality, Ezekiel prophesies that it will be used as a “lament” when it is fulfilled. Mere lamentation over the loss of vain hopes does not imply repentance, but it does invite it. (CC)

**19:12** *east wind.* Nebuchadnezzar and his army (see note on 17:10). (CSB)

**19:13** *desert.* Babylonia—which to Israel seemed like a desert (see 20:35). (CSB)

**19:14** *Fire.* Rebellion (see 2Ki 24:20). (CSB)

*one of its main branches.* Zedekiah. (CSB)

*to be used as a lament.* Indicates repeated use (see Ps 137:1). (CSB)