EZEKIEL

Chapter 21

*Babylon, God’s Sword of Judgment*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophesy against the land of Israel  3 and say to her: ‘This is what the LORD says: I am against you. I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked.  4 Because I am going to cut off the righteous and the wicked, my sword will be unsheathed against everyone from south to north.  5 Then all people will know that I the LORD have drawn my sword from its scabbard; it will not return again.’ 6 “Therefore groan, son of man! Groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief.  7 And when they ask you, ‘Why are you groaning?’ you shall say, ‘Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every knee become as weak as water.’ It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign LORD.” 8 The word of the LORD came to me:  9 “Son of man, prophesy and say, ‘This is what the Lord says: ”‘A sword, a sword, sharpened and polished— 10 sharpened for the slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! ”‘Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son Judah? The sword despises every such stick. 11 ”‘The sword is appointed to be polished, to be grasped with the hand; it is sharpened and polished, made ready for the hand of the slayer. 12 Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people; it is against all the princes of Israel. They are thrown to the sword along with my people. Therefore beat your breast. 13 ”‘Testing will surely come. And what if the scepter of Judah, which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign LORD.’ 14 “So then, son of man, prophesy and strike your hands together. Let the sword strike twice, even three times. It is a sword for slaughter— a sword for great slaughter, closing in on them from every side. 15 So that hearts may melt and the fallen be many, I have stationed the sword for slaughter at all their gates. Oh! It is made to flash like lightning, it is grasped for slaughter. 16 O sword, slash to the right, then to the left, wherever your blade is turned. 17 I too will strike my hands together, and my wrath will subside. I the LORD have spoken.” 18 The word of the LORD came to me:  19 “Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to take, both starting from the same country. Make a signpost where the road branches off to the city.  20 Mark out one road for the sword to come against Rabbah of the Ammonites and another against Judah and fortified Jerusalem.  21 For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver.  22 Into his right hand will come the lot for Jerusalem, where he is to set up battering rams, to give the command to slaughter, to sound the battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to build a ramp and to erect siege works.  23 It will seem like a false omen to those who have sworn allegiance to him, but he will remind them of their guilt and take them captive. 24 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘Because you people have brought to mind your guilt by your open rebellion, revealing your sins in all that you do—because you have done this, you will be taken captive. 25 ”‘O profane and wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax,  26 this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low.  27 A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it.’ 28 “And you, son of man, prophesy and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says about the Ammonites and their insults: ”‘A sword, a sword, drawn for the slaughter, polished to consume and to flash like lightning! 29 Despite false visions concerning you and lying divinations about you, it will be laid on the necks of the wicked who are to be slain, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax. 30 Return the sword to its scabbard. In the place where you were created, in the land of your ancestry, I will judge you. 31 I will pour out my wrath upon you and breathe out my fiery anger against you; I will hand you over to brutal men, men skilled in destruction. 32 You will be fuel for the fire, your blood will be shed in your land, you will be remembered no more; for I the LORD have spoken.’”**

This entire Hebrew chapter is structurally a series of four oracles united by a common subject: the sword. Mostly it is the sword of Yahweh, although at times the sword is poetically personified and appears to act of its own volition. That uniting feature alone (prescinding momentarily from the vast differences in the style and vocabulary of the four oracles compared to the surrounding material) suffices to demonstrate the superiority of the Hebrew chapter division. (CC)

The “sword” (חֶרֶב) is one of Ezekiel’s favorite terms for the forces of war, death, and destruction. Of the various synonyms for those forces, this is the only one that dominates entire oracles. חֶרֶב occurs some ninety times in the book and fifteen times in this chapter alone. The word will be featured again in 32:11–15, which refers to other activities of Nebuchadnezzar. (CC)

None of the oracles in this chapter is dated, but all of them seem to refer to events closely related to Jerusalem’s capitulation in the summer of 586. Other parts of the chapter may well have been composed separately and later joined editorially, but if so, the prime candidate for “editor” is Ezekiel himself. (CC)

The chapter is easily divisible into four discrete oracles:

1.     The riddle of the sword and its interpretation (20:45–21:7)

2.     The Song of the Sword (21:8–17)

3.     The historical activity of the sword and its consequences (21:18–27)

4.     The return of the sword to its scabbard (21:28–32) (CC)

These divisions are not arbitrary, since they are clearly marked by common prophetic formulae. The first three open with the word-event formula, “the Word of Yahweh came (to me)” (20:45; 21:8, 18; also 21:1), followed by commands to do something. The fourth begins with a command to prophesy plus the citation formula (“thus says the Lord Yahweh,” 21:28). A clear progression in the sword’s involvement is also evident: (1) in the first oracle, Yahweh himself wields the sword; (2) in the second, the sword seems to act independently; (3) in the third, Yahweh gives the sword to his agent to act for him; and (4) in the final oracle, the sword is returned to its sheath after doing its job. (CC)

All four oracles are closely tied to historical circumstances, so their theological yield for the church requires an understanding of that history. The chapter contains little overt theological expatiation, but has important Christological implications. (CC)

**21:2** *set your face.* See note on 20:46. (CSB)

*against the sanctuary.* See 9:6 and note. (CSB)

Almost in the form of a strict allegory, the three figurative representations of the south in 20:46) are here specifically identified. Teman is Jerusalem, Darom is her sanctuaries, and the Negev is the entire land of Israel. The repetition of the same three verbs, “set … preach … prophesy,” from 20:46 confirms the matches. (CC)

**21:3** *I am against you.* See note on 5:8. (CSB)

*my sword.* For the sword of the Lord’s judgment see Isa 31:8; 34:6; 66:16. This is the first of five sword oracles (see vv. 8–17, 18–24, 25–27, 28–32). Here the sword refers to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar (v. 19). (CSB)

*both the righteous and the wicked.*† Indicates the completeness of the judgment that is about to come on Israel. No one will escape its devastating effects, not even the righteous in the land. In national disasters there often is no distinction in the outward fate which overtakes an entire community. Contrast God’s deliverance of Noah (Ge 6:7–8) and Lot (Ge 18:23; 19:12–13). (CSB)

Here he is not addressing the issue of individual accountability before God, but of simply the external, empirical side of things. Just as a raging forest fire consumes everything in its path, so in the horrors of war, innocent civilians often suffer just as much as the combatants, and righteous believers may be killed together with wicked unbelievers. Block may be correct in adding that the expression is not merely a literary merism, but also “a deliberately offensive rhetorical device intended to shock, designed to awaken his [Ezekiel’s] audience out of their spiritual lethargy.” (CC)

**21:4** *from south to north.* See note on 20:47. (CSB)

Here it applies to all the refugees of Judah, where the horrors of war continue to afflict “everyone” indiscriminately. (CC)

**21:5** The recognition formula here obviously corresponds to that of 20:48, only now using the common verb יָדַע, “know,” for the formula, instead of the infrequent . “Everyone” again translates כָּל־בָּשָׂר, but here apparently in a wider sense than in 21:4, namely, the world at large will recognize that Yahweh is punishing his own people for their infidelity. (CC)

**21:6** *groan … with broken heart and bitter grief.* Ezekiel’s display of intense grief is to serve as another prophetic sign and as an occasion for a new message of impending judgment. (CSB)

Even after the initial riddle has been explained, the people are apparently still too dismissive of Ezekiel as a mere actor or jester to understand or take seriously what he has just tried to communicate. Accordingly, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to perform another action prophecy, predicting nonverbally what the future conduct of the people will be. The immediate intent is to provoke them to ask seriously what the action meant, and the next verse shows that that objective was readily accomplished. (CC)

**21:7** *when they ask you.* Cf. 12:9 for the people’s response to Ezekiel’s behavior. This is Ezekiel’s seventh symbolic act (see Introduction: Literary Features). (CSB)

The reply Ezekiel is to give his questioners remains rather cryptic. He is to speak only of “news” that will be paralyzing and demoralizing. The “news” is practically expanded in the Song of the Sword in 21:8–17, but even then no explicit clarification is forthcoming. One surely must assume that the reference is to the approach of Nebuchadnezzar for the fateful siege that will lead to the fall of Jerusalem itself. Yahweh may still hope to evoke some genuine repentance before the sword falls. However, the chapter does not indicate that any believed the prophecy or repented. Rather, it seems that the people persisted in their self-denial and false sense of security. Yet the time would soon come when they would imitate Ezekiel’s behavior. (CC)

**21:8-9** A new section of the chapter begins here. Ezek 21:8–9a introduces what is almost universally known as the Song of the Sword, 21:9b–17. As “song” indicates, it is mostly written in a highly turgid and poetic style. Probably for that very reason, its Hebrew teems with an unusual number of textual and syntactical difficulties. Poetry, almost by definition, is written in an unusual style and with unique vocabulary (which, in turn, greatly increased the chances that later scribes would not understand or would otherwise miscopy). There is no way of determining whether the song is an original composition Yahweh inspired Ezekiel to write or if it was a preexistent piece that Yahweh directed the prophet to adapt for use here. A poetic proclivity of the prophet is generally not in great evidence in his book. In any case, the present form of the song has been thoroughly mortised into its larger context. (CC)

What is striking about the song is that the “sword” is apostrophized and thus appears to take on an independent existence. That it remains Yahweh’s sword is, of course, in no doubt, but the literary (and thence the theological) impact of its personification is great. (There may be an exmythological remote origin of the figure, in which kind of thought, the sword would have been objectified and deified, but except perhaps as a foil for an Israelite audience, such a possible background is irrelevant to biblical meaning.) (CC)

The figure is not unique to Ezekiel. As “a man of war” (Ex 15:3), Yahweh is often depicted as not only wielding the sword himself, but as commanding it to execute judgment. Various Hebrew verbs are employed: Yahweh may “command” (צִוָּה, Amos 9:4; cf. Josh 11:12) or “send” (שָׁלַח, e.g., Jer 9:16; 24:10) the sword. The sword can even be described as getting drunk on the blood of its victims (רָוָה, Is 34:5; Jer 46:10). Other passages where the sword is addressed personally or is described as raging independently include Jer 47:6–7; 50:35–37; and Zech 13:7, which is cited in Mt 26:31 and Mk 14:27 as fulfilled in our Lord’s passion.The verbal forms describing the sword in Ezek 21:b–c are both repeated and applied in the following verses. (CC)

**21:9** *A sword, a sword.* A sword song (see note on v. 3), possibly accompanied by dancing or symbolic actions. Such songs may have been sung by warriors about to go into battle (see note on 2Sa 1:18). (CSB)

**21:10b** To think that the Babylonians would conquer every other country except Judah was a false hope.

The people have misunderstood the announcement of a sword prepared for slaughter as good news that Yahweh will soon deliver them from Babylon. The basis of their false hope is summarized in the slogan “staff of my son” (or, if vocative instead of construct, “staff, my son”), which they claim will defend them from the menacing sword. שֵׁבֶט could be understood as Yahweh’s “rod” of discipline (so RSV and NRSV also KJV but probably in a different sense). שֵׁבֶט is so used in 2 Sam 7:14: “when he does iniquity, I will discipline him with the *rod* of men.” But the interpretation here is that the word denotes “scepter,” symbolizing political power (so NKJV, NIV) if so translated, the appeal to Genesis 49 and the royal promise in 2 Samuel 7 becomes likely. The phrase בְּנִי, “my son,” derives from Gen 49:9, where the patriarch addresses Judah, comparing him to a young lion (NIV adds “Judah” as an appositive to “my son” in Ezek 21:10), as well as to 2 Sam 7:14, where Yahweh says about David’s S/son, “I will be his Father, and he will be my S/son” (cf. Ps 2:7, 12). שֵׁבֶט is used of the royal scepter of David’s S/son in Ps 2:9: “you will rule them with an iron *rod*.” If כָּל־עֵֽץ in Ezek 21:10 is then translated as “all wood,” which is despised, the idea is that Judah’s scepter rejects every other ruler’s staff as bad wood—which, as such, would be correct, except for the application Ezekiel’s contemporaries were making of it. (CC)

*scepter.* Represents rule, government or kingdom. (CSB)

*my son ( Judah).* Corresponds to “my people” in v. 12 (see Ge 49:9). (CSB)

*sword.* Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar (v. 19). (CSB)

**21:11** *slayer.* Nebuchadnezzar (v. 19). (CSB)

**21:12** *Cry out and wail … beat your breast.* Eighth symbolic act (see Introduction: Literary Features). (CSB)

**21:13** *come.* On Judah. (CSB)

*what if the scepter … does not continue?* See note on v. 10b. The question anticipates the final interruption of Davidic kingship, which came in 586 b.c. (see vv. 25–27). (CSB)

The present heirs of Judah have failed the test, so the sword of God’s judgment will … ; the text seems to leave it to the audience to supply the answer or fill in the blank! Ezekiel has already provided the answer many times and will continue to do so. (CC)

**21:14** *strike your hands.* See 6:11 and note. (CSB)

*Let the sword strike twice.* Cf. 2Ki 13:18–19. (CSB)

That Ezekiel’s “prophecy” (usually understood as verbalization) is to consist of an action prophecy is also as good an illustration as any of the virtual synonymity of prophecy and typology (nonverbal). Also parallel is the complementarity of Word and Sacrament. God’s Word is a spoken “Sacrament,” and a Sacrament is a visible form of the Word. (CC)

The precise meaning of the jussive, literally, “let the sword be doubled a third,” is unclear. I have acceded to the common view that “a third” is akin to another jussive, “let it be tripled.” Since the reference is scarcely to a multiplication of the number of swords, the picture would then be that of the rapid back-and-forth vacillation of a sword in action, which to the eye, however, would create such an illusion. Hence the paraphrase “let the sword strike twice, even thrice.” (CC)

The text emphasizes that the sword will result in those “slain.” The word חָלָל also has overtones of judicial execution. As the divine Judge, Yahweh is also commissioning the sword to execute his forensic sentence—the opposite of justification (cf. Rom 5:12–21). (CC)

**21:15** It must not escape our attention that in this verse for the first time in the song Yahweh speaks of himself in the first person: “I have set the point of the sword.” This is continued even more sharply in 21:17. Thus all three actors in the song come into view: (1) the people (Babylonians) who wield the sword (sometimes the apostrophized sword itself); (2) the prophetic messenger; and (3) Yahweh himself, who really directs everything, even if mediately. (CC)

The confused panic, as all avenues of escape are cut off, may reflect the common theme of Israel’s “holy war” (which today probably should be called “Yahweh’s war,” lest it be confused with the *jihad* of Islam), in which Yahweh brings victory by inducing panic in the hearts of the enemy or takes away their will to fight. Here, however, Yahweh will be employing that tactic on his own apostate people. (CC)

**21:16** Yahweh here addresses the sword directly, commanding it to perform its gruesome task insatiably and fully. (CC)

**21:17** *strike my hands.* In scorn and in harmony with God’s command to Ezekiel in v. 14. (CSB)

The final verse of the song uses about the most emphatic language possible (וְגַם־אֲנִ֗י, “I myself … also”) and one of the strongest anthropomorphisms in the book: “I myself will also clap my hands.” Yahweh himself will do what he had commanded the prophet to do in 21:14, so both he and his prophet anticipate the victory over the sword’s enemies. By clapping his own hands, he will arouse the sword to full fury. And in so doing he will “satisfy” his own “fury/wrath.” We met the idiom of Yahweh (literally) “causing his wrath to rest” in 5:13 (which see) and 16:42, and we will encounter it again in 24:13. Probably not accidentally, a prophecy on the use of Yahweh’s sword against his own people concludes in 5:17 with these words: “I, Yahweh, have spoken.” The Song of the Sword concludes the same way. (CC)

That Yahweh himself will satisfy his own wrath by executing judgment is a prototype of God’s climactic, vicarious satisfaction of his wrath on Calvary. The same thought underlies the propitiatory efficacy of all OT sacrifice, and the NT explicitly applies it to the work of Christ (Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:2). The sinless Son of God became incarnate to “save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21) through his perfect life of obedience; his atoning death on the cross, where he endured the punishment for the sins of all humanity; and his glorious resurrection, portending the resurrection of all believers in Christ to life everlasting. (CC)

**21:18-22** he word-event formula, “the Word of Yahweh came to me” (21:18), begins an entirely new section of the chapter, connected to what precedes only by the prominence of חֶרֶב, “sword.” This section continues through 21:27. Then the citation formula in 21:28 signals a separate, but closely related final sword account (21:28–32).

Now the subject is the final campaign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, against Jerusalem, and at the same time, against Ammon. It seems all but certain that this oracle (21:18–27) can be dated to late 588 or very early 587 b.c. (cf. 2 Ki 25:1; Jer 39:1), after Zedekiah, king of Judah, rebelled against Babylon as his overlord, as also did the nation of Ammon. At a certain point in the itinerary of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, he must decide which of the two countries to target first. At the time of this oracle, his decision apparently had not yet been made, and Ezekiel’s hearers (the exiles in Babylon, mindful of their kinsmen in Judah) were probably awaiting it anxiously. (CC)

Ezekiel’s action of sketching out the fork in the road may be described as another action prophecy. It required no particular prescience, let alone supernatural revelation, to know that a decision would have to be made at the place where the roads divided. At the junction, Nebuchadnezzar could either continue south on the King’s Highway (cf. Num 20:17; 21:22) to Rabbah, the capital of Ammon, or turn right toward Jerusalem. Damascus is often pinpointed as the site where the crucial decision had to be made. No doubt, Damascus was (and is) a major crossroads of the Near East, but there are any number of other places farther south where the army could have veered off to the right and west. But that sort of detail is of no importance here.

Ezek 21:18–22) dramatically predicts Nebuchadnezzar’s fateful decision to attack Jerusalem before Ammon. These verses give us considerable information about some of the divinatory and military practices of antiquity. However, even these pagan divination practices, which may appear to us to have been games of chance, were made subservient to Yahweh’s redemptive purposes, and Nebuchadnezzar’s decision ultimately was determined by God. The judgment of Jerusalem must take place as part of Yahweh’s plan to bring redemption to the entire world. The same dynamic pertains to the atonement of Christ, who suffered divine judgment, executed in part through a game of chance, but in fulfillment of Scripture, according to God’s plan (Ps 22:18; Mt 27:35). (CC)

**21:19** *king of Babylon.* Nebuchadnezzar. (CSB)

*same country.* Babylon, or possibly Aram (Syria)—Nebuchadnezzar headquartered at Riblah in northern Aram (see 2Ki 25:6). (CSB)

**21:20** *Rabbah.* Capital of Ammon (Jer 49:2); modern Amman (capital of Jordan). (CSB)

**21:21** *cast lots with arrows.* Divination with arrows, for the purpose of seeking good omens for the coming campaign—a practice not elsewhere mentioned in the Bible. Apparently arrows were labeled (e.g., “Rabbah,” “Jerusalem”), placed into a quiver and drawn out, one with each hand. Right-hand selection was seen as a good omen (see v. 22). (CSB)

*idols.* The Hebrew for this word is translated “household gods” in Ge 31:19. Consulting them is referred to in Hos 3:4; Zec 10:2. The household gods of Ge 31:19–35 were small enough to hide in a saddle, but others were life-size (1Sa 19:13–16). (CSB)

*examine the liver.* Looking at the color and configurations of sheep livers to foretell the future was common in ancient Babylonia and Rome, but the practice is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. (CSB)

**21:23** *false omen.* The leaders of Jerusalem, once submissive to Nebuchadnezzar but now in rebellion (2Ki 24:20), hoped that the result of the omen-seeking (vv. 21–22) was misleading. (CSB)

**21:24** The verse is a commentary on the preceding one. That this is the end game of Yahweh’s dealings with preexilic Israel, or (to change the metaphor) the straw that breaks the camel’s back of God’s patience with Israel, is indicated by the accumulation of four different, but essentially synonymous, expressions for sin: עָוֹן, “iniquity”; פְּשָׁעִים, “rebellions/rebellious acts”; חַטָּאוֹת, “sins/missing the mark”; and עֲלִילוֹת, “misdeeds.” Corresponding to the four nouns are four verbs: the Hiphil of זָכַר, “bring to mind, remind”; the Niphal of גָּלָה, “be disclosed”; the Niphal of רָאָה, “be revealed, seen”; and the Niphal of זָכַר, “be brought to mind.” (CC)

Finally, it should not be overlooked that in this and the next verse, Yahweh no longer uses the third person for his people, but the second person of direct address (“you … your”). The people’s lostness is no longer being spoken *about*. They are being confronted personally by the righteous Judge they had tried to evade. (CC)

**21:25** *prince of Israel.* Zedekiah (see note on 7:27). (CSB)

Ezekiel now suddenly focuses all his fury on Zedekiah, the “prince of Israel” who has frequently been targeted in this book and will be again. Block calls this verse “a tirade … unequalled in this book or any other prophet for its forthrightness and harshness.” The עָוֹן, “iniquity,” spoken of in the previous verses (21:23–24) is corporate, committed by all of Israel, but Zedekiah is the “head of the body,” and ultimately the responsibility for the iniquity that brought the “final punishment” on Jerusalem was Zedekiah’s. We know that Jerusalem just before the fall was torn by pro- and anti-Egyptian factions, but Zedekiah ultimately cast his lot with the former, and with that revolt against Babylon’s rule, and against Yahweh’s, the whole “house of Israel” (e.g., 3:1) would soon collapse. (CC)

After having called him a “corpse” or “walking dead man,” no further explanation is required of what would happen on his “day” when Yahweh would intervene. The parallel “time of [your] final *punishment*” uses עָוֹן now in the sense of “the consequence of iniquity” (עָוֹן meant “iniquity” itself in 21:23–24). This punishment will be meted out at a set time (קֵץ, “*final* punishment”) in the counsel of God when the cup of his wrath will finally spill over. (CC)

**21:26** *turban.* Only here is it mentioned as royal headwear. Elsewhere it is worn by priests (Ex 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Lev 8:9; 16:4), as a setting for the crown (Ex 28:36–37; 29:6; 39:31; Lev 8:9). It was made of fine linen (Ex 28:39; 39:28). (CSB)

There is some question whether Ezekiel envisions the unfrocking of both high priest and king or only the latter. Lexically, both understandings are possible (see the textual note). Since Ezekiel plainly envisions a total revolution involving all strata of society, inclusion of the priesthood would help paint a more comprehensive picture. On the other hand, a reference to the priesthood seems rather intrusive in this royal context. (CC)

*lowly…exalted…exalted…brought low.* A common Biblical expression for the reversal of human conditions because of the intervention of the Lord (see 17:24; 1Sa 2:7–8; Lk 1:52–53). (CSB)

The inversion of the low and the high in the verse inevitably reminds one of Jesus’ logion in Mt 23:12 and Lk 14:11 and many similar statements (e.g., Lk 3:5; 18:13; 1 Pet 5:6). The NT contexts are generally focused more on individuals, although Zedekiah is in the fore here in Ezekiel too. Ultimately, however, the theme is almost a *cantus firmus* throughout Scripture: God ultimately overcomes all human pride and lofty striving that will not let him be God. Conversely, he lifts up the lowly and exalts them to the highest place with his Son (see, e.g., Lk 1:52; 1 Cor 1:26–29; Phil 2:5–11). (CC)

**21:27** *A ruin! A ruin!… a ruin!* Threefold repetition for emphasis (see Isa 6:3; Jer 7:4). (CSB)

*until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs.*† The Messiah; apparently an allusion to Ge 49:10 (see note there). (CSB)

The almost redundant נְתַתִּֽיו, “I will give it,” at the end of the verse (the same verb used in the already cited 23:24b) is a final divine reminder that Nebuchadnezzar will serve as Yahweh’s agent. (CC)

**21:28** *Ammonites.* See v. 20. After judgment on Jerusalem, the foreigners would be dealt with (cf. Isa 10:5). (CSB)

Although it too is daring, I am attracted to the view of Greenberg that “Ammonites” (as he translates בְּנֵ֥י עַמּ֖וֹן) is code for the Babylonians. He compares it with Jeremiah’s use of the code name “Sheshach” for Babylon (Jer 25:26). He notes that it was dangerous for Ezekiel in Babylon to make an explicit prophecy of Babylonia’s ultimate destruction when it was at the height of its power. By describing the prophecy as “concerning the Ammonites/sons of Ammon and their taunts,” and by inserting it at this point, Ezekiel could deflect any possible Babylonian suspicion by relating it here both to the present situation (Ezek 21:19–22) and to the post-fall setting of 25:3–7. This view, strained as it might seem at first blush, seems to me to be confirmed by the rest of the chapter. (CC)

*their insults.* See 25:3, 6; also cf. 36:15. (CSB)

*A sword, a sword.* Nebuchadnezzar’s (see vv. 9, 19 and notes). (CSB)

**21:29** *false visions … lying divinations.* Apparently Ammon also had false prophets of peace (see v. 10 and note; 13:10; Jer 6:14; 8:11–12). (CSB)

*it.* The sword. (CSB)

To exegete this verse, one must know what the referents are, and, as in the previous verse, any certainty eludes us. If one thinks of the Ammonites as the subject, it would be a reference to their own soothsayers who either influenced Ammonite policy or assured them that they had nothing to fear from Nebuchadnezzar. But I have already given my reasons why I dismiss this view. (CC)

It is just possible that the reference is to the deceits of prophetic attempts by the Judeans and/or the exiles themselves, which would have encouraged their tendency to dismiss the Babylonian divinations as שָׁוְא, “false,” as reported in 21:23. Jer 27:9 indicates that such activity was not unknown among those groups. (CC)

If my understanding of the entire section of 21:28–32 is correct, this verse should be taken as a reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s divinations at the crossroads (21:19–22). Unbeknownst to him, these divinations had led him to do Yahweh’s bidding and turn toward Jerusalem. But still hidden from him was what would happen to Babylon later: its demise and destruction, as 21:30–32 will proceed to proclaim. (CC)

**21:30** *Return the sword.* Addressing Nebuchadnezzar. (CSB)

The point of the entire section now comes into clear focus. Now that the bloody work of the sword is finished (as far as Ezekiel is concerned in this pericope), it, that is, Nebuchadnezzar’s force, is to be sheathed, that is, withdrawn from Judah and returned to its homeland (Babylon), there to face God’s judgment itself. (CC)

**21:31** *brutal men.* The people of the East, as in 25:4. (CSB)

Different figures are now used to describe God’s judgment. The figure of fire becomes prominent, perhaps forming a framework or inclusion with the beginning of the (Hebrew) chapter, 20:45–48. But while that first one was a forest fire, here it is the fire of a forge or foundry. Like a smelter, Yahweh will pour his wrath upon his erstwhile agents. Or in a slight shift of the metaphor, he will blow the fire of his fury upon them—perhaps an allusion to bellows. The noun מַפֻּחַ, “bellows” (Jer 6:29), is derived from the verb here, פּוּחַ, or from the related verb נָפַח, both of which mean “blow.” (CC)

Perhaps now Ezekiel is abandoning figurative language and replacing it with the nonmetaphorical language of new wielders of God’s sword, who will do to the Babylonians as they have done to others. God will allow brutal, barbarous invaders to wreak their carnage and devastation on the land. None are named, but the Caucasus region to the north teemed with people who could be described as “expert destroyers.” If we look for people relatively close to the Babylon at Ezekiel’s time who would fit that description, we might think first of the Medes, who had a reputation of being ruthless murderers, and whose values were not those of civilized peoples (Is 13:17–18). Later it was the Medes, by that time incorporated into the Persian Empire, who captured Babylon and ended its empire in 539 under Cyrus the Mede. In any case, people of this sort all but form the stuff of history: Mongols, Huns, Vandals, Goths, Vikings, and countless more. God allows them to destroy nations, yet he constantly preserves and rebuilds his church. (CC)

**21:32** Apparently using the figures of fire and blood, we have here the picture of a violent bloodbath. The picture of fire is now familiar, but mention of blood is new. It appears to me simply to underscore the shedding of blood, sometimes in vast amounts, that unfortunately nearly always accompanies warfare, ancient or modern. Greenberg, after analyzing other Ezekelian uses of “blood in the midst of,” argues that the phrase, rather than simply predicting widespread bloodshed, accents rather the iniquity of this bloodshed (presumably that which the Babylonians themselves have been responsible for with their many victims), which will entail punishment upon Babylon. While such a thought is compatible with the context and with biblical thought otherwise, it seems to me to introduce an alien emphasis at this point. From 21:28 on, there has been little detailing of the Babylonians’ specific atrocities, which will now bring judgment upon them too. Rather, there has simply been a poetic description of God’s turning of the tables. No earthly power ever becomes so mighty that it escapes the scrutiny and verdict of the Lord of history. (CC)

Although it will ultimately be true, we make difficulties for ourselves if we press too far the final prediction that Babylon “will no longer be remembered.” The expression is a rather stereotyped commonplace. Indeed, in about half a century (539 b.c.), Babylonian (really Chaldean or Aramean!) hegemony will be over. All ancient reports indicate that by that time, the local populace was so exasperated by the dereliction of Nabonidus, king of Babylon, that they welcomed Cyrus the Great as a liberator; their city could thus be taken with minimal bloodshed. Although deprived of independent political power, the city of Babylon, with only brief interruptions, continued to be a great city during subsequent Persian, Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid rule. Only with the city’s conquest by the Arabs in a.d. 641 does power and significance finally begin to leave the city for points north, especially Baghdad. This means that it was a good millennium after Ezekiel that dust began to cover the abandoned city. The tourist today can visit the only partially excavated site. As someone has said, “God’s mills grind slowly, but they grind very fine.” (CC)

The final כִּי clause, “for I, Yahweh, have spoken,” occurred first in 5:13. Thus the biblical connection between the spoken Word and “word” in the sense of history (“his-story”) is drawn very clearly. (CC)

Allen makes the point that the chapter’s conclusion is that God’s final word is not the sword; it must be sheathed. This “implicitly lets a chink of light into the dark early messages of Ezekiel. Beyond hopelessness there might yet be hope.” Babylon, like all the kingdoms of this world, must ultimately fall (the message of the Gentile oracles, Ezekiel 25–32), but God’s eternal kingdom will not. Jerusalem too will fall, but exiles will return from the grave of the exile (37:1–14). (CC)

Christ, as antitype and Israel/humanity reduced to one, will also enter the grave, but will rise victoriously on the third day. And this is the heart of the Christian credo, that all who are baptized into him and believe will rise with him (Acts 2:38–39; 22:16; Rom 6:1–4; 1 Pet 3:21). They will not be forgotten, their only memorial a neglected tombstone in some forgotten cemetery, but they will reign as kings and priests with him through all eternity (1 Pet 2:5–9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). (CC)