EZEKIEL

Chapter 29

*A Prophecy Against Egypt*

**In the tenth year, in the tenth month on the twelfth day, the word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt.  3 Speak to him and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “‘I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams. You say, “The Nile is mine; I made it for myself.” 4 But I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales. I will pull you out from among your streams, with all the fish sticking to your scales. 5 I will leave you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams. You will fall on the open field and not be gathered or picked up. I will give you as food to the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air. 6 Then all who live in Egypt will know that I am the LORD. ”‘You have been a staff of reed for the house of Israel.  7 When they grasped you with their hands, you splintered and you tore open their shoulders; when they leaned on you, you broke and their backs were wrenched. 8 ”‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will bring a sword against you and kill your men and their animals.  9 Egypt will become a desolate wasteland. Then they will know that I am the LORD. ”‘Because you said, “The Nile is mine; I made it,”  10 therefore I am against you and against your streams, and I will make the land of Egypt a ruin and a desolate waste from Migdol to Aswan, as far as the border of Cush.  11 No foot of man or animal will pass through it; no one will live there for forty years.  12 I will make the land of Egypt desolate among devastated lands, and her cities will lie desolate forty years among ruined cities. And I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. 13 ”‘Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the nations where they were scattered.  14 I will bring them back from captivity and return them to Upper Egypt, the land of their ancestry. There they will be a lowly kingdom.  15 It will be the lowliest of kingdoms and will never again exalt itself above the other nations. I will make it so weak that it will never again rule over the nations.  16 Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.’” 17 In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me:  18 “Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw. Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre.  19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the land as pay for his army.  20 I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign LORD. 21 “On that day I will make a horn grow for the house of Israel, and I will open your mouth among them. Then they will know that I am the LORD.”**

From Genesis to Revelation, the number seven plays a pivotal role in Scripture in symbolizing completeness, as also in Ezekiel’s oracles against Egypt (chapters 29–32). Egypt is the seventh and last of the countries to be addressed in Ezekiel’s oracles against the nations (Ezekiel 25–32), and seven separate oracles are addressed against it. These seven can again be divided into two segments that somewhat parallel each other, 29:1–31:18 and 32:1–32. Each segment describes Egypt’s destruction by the Babylonians, concluding with the picture of Pharaoh descending into Sheol. (The “seven days” in Ezek 3:15–16, as well as the seven angels in 9:2, also connote completeness.) (CC)

That the choice of seven was deliberate is shown by the fact that two Gentile oracles occur outside chapters 25–32, one against Ammon in 21:28–32and another against Edom in chapter 35. These could have been included among the other Gentile oracles, but apparently were placed elsewhere to preserve the number seven. The practice of gathering oracles against seven Gentile nations is not unique to Ezekiel, although his collection is more central and structural in comprising an entire section of his prophetic book (about one-twelfth of the entire book). Similar collections of seven appear also in Amos 1–2 and Jeremiah 46–49. Probably the biblical pattern is founded by the assertion in Deut 7:1 that Israel must defeat seven Canaanite nations in order to possess its inheritance. The symbolism of seven can also be documented in extrabiblical literature. (CC)

Also striking is the concentration of dates for these oracles against Egypt. All are in chronological order except for the second (29:17–21). (The third oracle, 30:1–19, is undated.) Throughout the book, all but one of the dates are calculated, as 1:2 indicates, from the exile of King Jehoiachin in 597 b.c. (which coincides with the exile of Ezekiel too). The first date in the oracles against Egypt, in “the tenth year” (29:1), is about a year after Nebuchadnezzar began his siege of Jerusalem, which would last two and a half years. The date in 29:1 is two years before a fugitive brings the news of the city’s fall to Ezekiel and the exiles in Babylon (33:21). Thus, 29:1–16 is the earliest of Ezekiel’s Gentile oracles, even earlier than chapter 26 (see 26:1). (CC)

By contrast, the second oracle (29:17–21) is the latest dated oracle (as well as one of the shortest) in the entire book. Apparently it was placed in Ezekiel 29, the first chapter of oracles against Egypt, in order to locate it close to the oracles against Tyre in chapters 26–28. According to this second oracle, Nebuchadnezzar was not able to capture Tyre fully, and so he will be given Egypt as a kind of consolation prize. Once this second oracle breached the chronological order of the oracles against Egypt, it was apparently easy to place next the undated one in 30:1–19. Topically, 30:1–19 fits well after chapter 29 because it contains the threats against Egypt’s הָמוֹן, “horde/army” (30:4, 10, 15), mentioned previously 29:19. In addition, these two oracles are the only ones among the oracles against Egypt to mention Nebuchadnezzar by name (29:18–19; 30:10; he is also named in 26:7 in an oracle against Tyre). (CC)

Ezekiel himself never names the pharaoh who apparently triggered at least some of the oracles against Egypt, but it is easy to identify him as Hophra (Greek: Apries). Jer 37:5–8 records that when Nebuchadnezzar began to besiege Jerusalem, Hophra dared to challenge him, forcing him to lift the siege at least temporarily. But, as Jeremiah predicted (37:7), the Egyptian feint was easily disposed of (and may well have been only a token effort to begin with). From Ezekiel’s standpoint, then, Hophra simply joined the list of others who attempted to thwart Yahweh’s intent to use Nebuchadnezzar to punish Jerusalem. (CC)

But that relatively minor incident can scarcely have been the only occasion for the extensive attention Yahweh pays to Egypt in Ezekiel 29–32. While it is the only concrete event to which we, with our limited knowledge of ancient history, can point, in a way it was only the last in a long series of contacts between Israel and Egypt, which began with Abram’s sojourn there (Gen 12:10–20) and culminated with the four hundred years (Gen 15:13) the Israelites spent there before the exodus (mid-fifteenth century b.c.). (CC)

Not long after the exodus under Moses, Egypt ceased to be a world power, but it was not for lack of desire. Hophra’s foray into Israelite territory was only the most recent of Egyptian incursions, although previous ones had usually been with hostile intent against Israel. And Egypt was still smarting from the defeat Nebuchadnezzar had inflicted upon its armies at Carchemish in 605 b.c. in the contest to determine who would replace Assyria in world dominance. But whatever the details, Egypt remained the major threat to Babylonia, which was God’s agent for punishing Jerusalem, and Yahweh really needed no further motivation than that for the oracles in Ezekiel 29–32. (CC)

In light of Egypt’s antagonistic role throughout Israel’s history, it is remarkable that Yahweh issues a salvation oracle for Egypt (29:13–14; cf. Is 19:18–25). In those verses, Yahweh describes the restoration of Egypt in identical terms used elsewhere for the eschatological restoration of Israel, for example, “gather” and שׁוּב שְׁבוּת, “bring about the restoration of.” Thus Egypt itself will undergo a kind of “new exodus” deliverance and receive the same salvation promised to reconstituted Israel. This is a depiction in OT language of the present church age, in which believing Jews and Gentiles are equal members in the body of Christ, “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). All baptized believers in Jesus Christ are heirs of God’s covenant promises to Abraham (Gal 3:26–29; cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:11–22). Therefore the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all peoples, and in the eternal state, the church triumphant shall consist of the redeemed from all nations and languages (Rev 5:9; 7:9–17; 14:6). (CC)

This chapter consists of two oracles. The first (29:1–16) focuses almost exclusively on the judgment of Egypt. The second (29:17–21) continues the theme of divine judgment for Egypt, but at the hands of the king of Babylon, who, by subduing Egypt, receives a recompense for his labor (only partially successful) in attacking Tyre. The second oracle concludes with a striking Gospel promise of a “horn” for Israel. (CC)

**9:1** *tenth year … tenth month … .twelfth day.*† Jan. 7, 587 b.c.; the sixth date in Ezekiel (see 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1). This is the first of seven oracles against Egypt, all of which are dated, except one (30:1). (CSB)

**29:2** *set your face.* See note on 20:46. (CSB)

In all of Ezekiel’s oracles against Egypt, the message is almost simultaneously against the pharaoh, the land over which he rules, and the people inhabiting it. Even when one of the three is singled out, the other two are implicated. Hence, the pronouns and predicates vary freely in number and gender, although the variation is less obvious in English than in the more inflected Hebrew language. (CC)

 *Pharaoh.* Hophra, 589–570 b.c. (see Jer 44:30). (CSB)

**29:3** *I am against you.* See note on 5:8. (CSB)

The rather general challenge formula “I am against you” links this oracle with the preceding ones against Tyre and Sidon (26:3; 28:22). (CC)

 *great monster.* Or “crocodile”; pictured as being in the Nile. See note on Ex 4:3; see also Job 41:1 and NIV text note; Isa 27:1 (“monster”). (CSB)

Specific Egyptian coloration begins with the direct address to the pharaoh as “the great monster” (הַתַּנִּים֙ הַגָּד֔וֹל). No single English word reproduces the Hebrew fully because of its multivalence. The description of the creature’s capture in 29:4makes one think of a crocodile, reinforced by the similar language in an account by Herodotus of a crocodile’s capture נִּין is usually rendered “snake/serpent” (although that is normally expressed in the OT by נָחָשׁ). תַּנִּין is used of the “snake” into which Moses’ staff turned before the first plague (Ex 7:9–10, 12), and hence often understood as the reptilian crocodile (perhaps also in Deut 32:33; Ps 91:13). But by itself “crocodile” is scarcely adequate because of the following claim that it created the Nile. Neither is it to be entirely dismissed, partly because of the known veneration of the crocodile god, Sobek, in parts of Egypt, especially in the delta region. In addition, the ancient Egyptians regarded their Pharaohs as actual deities. (CC)

But this only begins to hint at the exmythological overtones that Ezekiel will have intended. Hence, many translations have “dragon” (KJV, RSV, RSV) but in my judgment, that word sounds like functional mythology to modern ears, although it continues to be used even in the NT. See Rev 12:3–13:11, where, for the Greek δράκων, all English versions use “dragon.” “Monster” (as in NKJV and NIV) has seemed better to me here, although it is paler. Possibly “sea monster” (cf. Gen 1:21 and Ps 148:7) would be even better. The original Canaanite myth described the annual, autumnal triumph of Baal (Hadad) over Moth (“death”) and Yammim (“sea”). “Exmythological” means that Israelite believers would have recognized that Ezekiel is using language adapted from the pagan myths, but, of course, he is using it to proclaim the one true God over against the pagan “gods,” who at most, in biblical thought, represent the devil and the forces of evil. Similar exmythological uses of sea-monster language for the evil defeated by God are in, for example, Is 27:1; 51:9; Pss 74:14; 89:9. (CC)

Sometimes the sea monster, god of chaos, is called Rahab and Leviathan (the latter known in Ugaritic). In its demythologized form in the Bible, the tale was used to describe Yahweh’s winning battle over idols or would-be gods. As already Gen 1:21 (using תַּנִּינִם) had indicated, in its various manifestations, it was finally only another creature and no possible threat to the almighty Creator, and so “Leviathan” is described in Is 27:1 and Ps 104:26 (and probably Job 41 as well). But creatures, especially in human form, can rebel and play god, that is, represent Satan, and in Revelation 12–13, such creatures will represent Satan himself. Thus here, although the language is a demythologized metaphor, the pharaoh is indicted for virtually the same arrogance as the king of Tyre, who had flatly said “I am a god” (28:2). Possibly it is coincidental, but the pharaoh’s braggadocio sounds like an explicit challenge to Yahweh’s assertion in 17:24; 22:14; and elsewhere: “I, Yahweh, have spoken, and I will accomplish it.” Isaiah had expressed the same thought even more strongly in Is 47:8, 10, where arrogant Babylon boasts: “I am, and there is none besides me.” Not only hegemony, but the existence of another bona-fide God is at issue. (CC)

At the risk of overexegesis, one may even detect exmythological overtones in the description that the monster “lies” (רֹבֵץ) in the water. The word may only connote a creature at ease, sprawling or couching. But the biblical scholar will note that God had used the same verb in his warning to Cain before his fratricide (Gen 4:7), where “sin” (הַטָּאת) had been pictured as a monster “couching” (the same Hebrew participle) at the door. In Akkadian, the cognate *rabiṣum* is a term for a demon. (CC)

 *your streams.* Nile delta and canals (cf. Isa 7:18; 19:6; 37:25). (CSB)

 *You say.* Boasts inscribed on Egyptian monuments (such as in Shelley’s “Ozymandias”) had become proverbial. (CSB)

**29:4** *hooks.* Cf. 19:4. (CSB)

 *fish of your streams.* Egypt’s conquered territories or mercenaries. (CSB)

By virtue of the very exclusivity of his nature, Yahweh must respond to such hubris. Syncretism of any sort is incompatible with the very essence of biblical faith. Hence the overtones of monstrosity in which the pharaoh’s boast had been couched is now shown to be the figment of human imagination that it is by simply disappearing from sight. Instead the figure of a sea monster is replaced by that of an ordinary fish, not only incapable of eluding capture himself, but dragging along with himself all the other fish caught in his scales. The mention of the capture of the “big fish” and all the “small fry” together with him corresponds to the way in which the entire pericope alternates in consideration of the pharaoh himself and the inhabitants of Egypt, whose fate is inextricably bound up with his. (CC)

**29:5** So unimportant is this pompous Pharaoh that he not only will not be given a grand state burial, but his carcass and that of his people will be abandoned to the elements or left to be eaten by animals (a common curse or threat in ancient literature). The metaphorical language here anticipates historical prophecies, first the scattering of the Egyptian populace in 29:12 and then in 29:13 their gathering again in their homeland. (CC)

**29:6** *You have been a staff of reed.* A comparison made earlier (see Isa 36:6). Hophra briefly but unsuccessfully diverted the Babylonians from laying siege to Jerusalem (see Jer 37:1–10). (CSB)

The verse should be divided into two (see the first textual note on this verse). The recognition formula in 29:6a emphasizes that Yahweh has been the real actor all along and that when he changes the pharaoh’s arrogance into ignominy, even the Egyptians will acknowledge Yahweh’s supremacy. (CC)

In 29:6b the specific charge of the pharaoh’s interference in Israelite affairs comes to the fore. The metaphor of trying to use a hollow Nile papyrus reed as a crutch or cane arises to express Hophra’s inability to be of any real help to Israel and Israel’s desperate gullibility in even entertaining the notion that it might be otherwise. The weakness and brittleness of the reed was proverbial. We meet it first in Scripture in the taunt of the Assyrian Rabshakeh to besieged Jerusalem (Is 36:6 || 2 Ki 18:21), describing Egypt over a century earlier as a broken “reed” that is a poor “staff” (using the same vocabulary as here). This metaphor is also known in Assyrian, Hittite, and Indic literature. (CC)

**29:7** The metaphor of the unreliable reed is expanded in two directions. It will cause debilitating injury to both the upper and lower parts of the body, as the Israelites should have learned long ago. Addressing the Egyptian people as a single individual, they are faulted for leading Israel into a state of false trust. Egyptian blandishments had made them even less willing to repent and lean on Yahweh’s promises. Egypt’s guilt was compounded by assisting Zedekiah’s resistance to Yahweh (the obverse of 17:15–18, where Zedekiah had appealed to Egypt for help), and thus standing in the way of Yahweh’s inexorable plan for Israel. (CC)

**29:8** *sword.* Nebuchadnezzar’s (see note on 21:3). For the entire expression, which is not found in other prophetic books, see 6:3; 11:8; 14:17; 33:2; see also Lev 26:25. (CSB)

**29:9** As in 29:6, the second part of this section of the oracle, after initial prophecies of judgment on Egypt, ends with the recognition formula in mid-verse. With 29:9b the final section of the oracle (through 29:16) begins by quoting the pharaoh’s bombastic boast in 29:3. But how empty the boast was is shown by the fact that this is the last we hear of the pharaoh. When he claims divinity in confrontation with the only true God, he is quickly exposed (and deposed) as a non-entity. God has given rulers a legitimate ministerial function (Rom 13:1), but to claim more inevitably brings confrontation and destruction. (CC)

There are only minor differences between the form of the pharaoh’s boast in Ezek 29:3 and its quotation here. The variations seem to have some significance. In 29:3 לִי (“mine,” calling attention to the pharaoh) came first, while here it follows. That “Nile” comes first here and lacks the first person possessive suffix accents the river, not Pharaoh’s ego. The same effect is achieved by the absence here of the first person object suffix on the verb. (CC)

**29:10** *Migdol.* Location unknown; probably in northern Egypt (see Jer 44:1; 46:14). (CSB)

 *Aswan.* A town in southern Egypt. “From Migdol to Aswan” (see 30:6) probably indicated all Egypt, just as “from Dan to Beersheba” meant all Israel (see, e.g., Jdg 20:1; 1Sa 3:20). (CSB)

The punishment, introduced by לָכֵן, “therefore,” begins by repeating the challenge formula of 29:3, although as already noted, the pharaoh is fading from view, and Yahweh’s wrath is concentrated on the land and the Nile channels. The second half of the verse is almost thetical for the material through 29:12. Ezekiel begins here by piling up words for the utter desolation to come, and prophecies that it will encompass all of Egypt from its northern to its southern border. (CC)

**29:11** *forty years.* Sometimes used to signify a long and difficult period (cf. 4:6). (CSB)

The land will be completely devoid of life for a generation. The threefold repetition of the number in 29:11–13 emphasizes it. (CC)

**29:12** As he had prophesied earlier that Judah would be scattered among the nations (e.g., 5:10, 12; 12:14–15; 20:23; 22:15), Ezekiel now predicts that the Egyptian population too will be scattered. It is hard not to compare Ezekiel’s prophecies here with the earlier historical accounts of Jeremiah 43–44. Jeremiah does not seem to describe such utter devastation as Ezekiel, but his oracles are more vivid and detailed: Nebuchadnezzar attacking the pharaoh’s palace in Tahpanhes, burning the temples of the Egyptian gods, breaking up the obelisks at Heliopolis, and bringing disaster on the Judahite exiles in that land. Interestingly, though, in his anti-Egyptian Gentile oracle in 46:13–26, Jeremiah’s language more closely approximates Ezekiel’s. (CC)

**29:13-16** It is hard to know how to deal with these verses exegetically. It strikes one that the language employed to describe both Egypt’s judgment and its restoration is very similar to that which is otherwise used of Israel. But why is Egypt favored with a promise of restoration when the other foreign nations are condemned to annihilation? Part of the answer must lie in the different attitude of Egypt. While the other nations had gloated over Jerusalem’s misfortune, we read nothing of that sort about Egypt. After all, in the near past, Egypt had tried to come to Israel’s aid, even though it had failed. In contrast to the king of Tyre’s crass claim to divinity, Egypt’s *hubris* had stopped short of that. Egypt’s real fault had been in tempting Israel to a false trust, in deflecting it from reliance solely on Yahweh and his promises. That problem Yahweh could solve by something less than the country’s total annihilation. Its reduction to “third world” status would suffice for that.

Later, in 30:23, when the prophecy of the dispersal of the Egyptians is repeated, there is no mention of a forty-year limitation (as in 29:11–13), nor a promise of their eventual restoration. Many critics raise suspicions that 29:13–16 is simply a mitigating afterthought, inserted at some later time. But militating against that notion is the fact that other prophets also envisioned some exceptional status for Egypt in the future. We glimpse this thought briefly in Jer 46:26b and in detail in Is 19:18–24, where the vision has moved into full-blown eschatology (including even a restored Assyria). There is something eschatological about this oracle in Ezekiel as well, although his focus is limited more to Israel’s near restoration, to be described in more detail in chapters 34–48. But whether short or long range, prophecy is typically couched in terms of present, known realities. One can no more deduce a this-worldly political program (ancient or modern) from it than some millennialists who seek to interpret modern Near Eastern history on the basis of biblical history. God’s program of restoration is universal, as had been promised already to Abraham (Gen 12:3). The Gospel of God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed throughout the world, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Yet the message is not universalistic; sinners are only saved through repentance and faith in Jesus, whose atonement on Calvary and whose empty tomb have procured redemption for all. (CC)

**29:14** *Upper Egypt.* Southern Egypt (see 30:14; Jer 44:1, 15). (CSB)

**29:17** The second oracle against Egypt (see note on v. 1). (CSB)

 *twenty-seventh year … first month … first day.* Apr. 26, 571 b.c.; the seventh date in Ezekiel (see v. 1; 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1) and the latest date given in the book. Since the remaining dated oracles are in more or less chronological order, the date is mentioned here probably because of the subject matter (Egypt). (CSB)

**29:18** *hard campaign.* Nebuchadnezzar besieged Tyre for 15 years, from 586 to 571 b.c. (see 26:7–14). (CSB)

 *every head was rubbed bare.* Probably from the leather helmets. (CSB)

**29:19** *I am going to give.* God’s sovereignty over the nations is again proclaimed. (CSB)

**29:21** *make a horn grow for.*† Revive the strength of (see NIV text note). (CSB)

 *open your mouth.* Ezekiel’s muteness (3:26; 24:27) would be removed, and this word anticipates that of 33:22. (CSB)

A simple, surface translation of the verse is easy, but the import of those words is anything but clear. “On that day” binds this final verse with the previous four, for in a way it treats a separate topic: the aftermath and consequences of what has just been prophesied. “That day” is indefinite. The immediate referent must be Nebuchadnezzar’s imminent conquest of Egypt, something that should happen soon enough that the booty obtained then should clearly be compensation for his failure to receive any “pay” for his siege of Tyre. But at least in my understanding, an eschatological element is intertwined with it—the kind of double application one frequently encounters in prophecy. (CC)

To “make a horn sprout” is obviously a mixed metaphor. “Horn,” applied to the house of Israel, is itself plainly metaphorical. In fact, it is often given as a classical illustration of the difference between “formal” and “dynamic equivalence,” the two main theories of translation. In the “formal” method, one will simply translate literally “horn” and leave it to the reader to decide for himself what the metaphor means. In contrast, the “dynamic” procedure will usually offer some interpretation of the metaphor. If that interpretation is correct, a much more intelligible translation will be the result; if it is incorrect, confusion or damage of various sorts may ensue. The translator’s presuppositions will inevitably evidence themselves much more in the “dynamic equivalence” method. While, in general, I have much sympathy for the “dynamic” approach, in this instance I have retained the literal “horn” translation, simply because of my own (and a common) uncertainty as to what precisely is meant. (CC)

Since an animal’s strength often expressed itself through its horns, the word is often a figure for strength, often as a gift of God’s grace in various contexts, but also in the negative sense of “arrogance.” For example, in Lam 2:3 God had cut off Judah’s “horn” when he caused its fall (see also Ps 75:4–5). A classical example of the positive usage would be in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1): “my horn is exalted in Yahweh,” transmuted by Mary into “my soul magnifies the Lord” in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46). In the Benedictus Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesies:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has visited and worked redemption for his people

and has raised up *a horn of salvation* for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old. (Lk 1:68–70) (CC)

In Rev 5:6, Christ himself is seen as a Lamb who has been slain “with seven horns and seven eyes.” (CC)

A major issue is whether the “strength” apparently indicated by “horn” here is messianic. The identical idiom is used in Ps 132:17, where Yahweh promises, “I will make a horn sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.” Many other passages relate a “horn” to God and his salvation. (CC)

Until recent times, some sort of messianic or at least eschatological interpretation of Ezek 29:21 was widespread, with the Babylonian conquest of Egypt as a harbinger of Israel’s restoration, ultimately in Christ. Even Keil limits its application to “the Messianic salvation” without reference to a personal Messiah, but sometimes this is almost a distinction without a difference. Zimmerli argues that Messianism was “fairly unimportant” in Ezekiel and wishes to limit the expression’s meaning to “a general reference to an approaching deliverance for Israel.” However, this is not entirely convincing because Ezekiel had concluded the oracles against Tyre and Sidon with an eschatological picture (28:25–26), and, as Block argues, Ezekiel will shortly make some explicitly messianic predictions (34:24; 37:24). Just possibly, we may even see a reinforcement of the messianic idea in the verb “sprout” (Hiphil of צָמַח) used in 29:21, since the noun derived from that root, צֶמַח, “branch, shoot,” is frequently a metaphor, sometimes almost becoming a proper noun, for the messianic king. (CC)

For the promise to Ezekiel himself that “on that day” Yahweh will give him (literally) “openness of mouth” (29:21), my free translation is anything but a formal equivalent. One’s initial reflex is to think of a lifting of the prophet’s muteness (3:26–27; 24:25–27, and the report of that occurring in 33:21–22). But that issue is tethered to the fall of Jerusalem, not of Egypt, and, if that were the intent, one would have expected the simple “I will open your mouth” (cf. 24:27; 33:22). The more oblique idiom here suggests that it has other overtones. It may be related to a cognate Akkadian idiom referring to part of the ritual by which sacred images were consecrated, that is, empowered to function as believed. Applied to Ezekiel, that would imply a vindication of his ministry so that the people would “give [him] a hearing,” that is, actually listen to his message and know that Yahweh is God (nowhere does the recognition formula flow more naturally out of its context than here in 29:21). The use of the expression once before in Ezekiel (16:63; which see) seems to confirm this interpretation; there it is used negatively of repentant Jerusalem’s inability to find an audience for its boast of supposed superiority over its “sisters.” (CC)

If so, it sounds as if Ezekiel’s whole credibility as a prophet had been called into question because of the failure of Tyre to capitulate, at least in the way predicted in chapters 26–28. (Earlier in 12:27 already the people had tended to dismiss Ezekiel’s messages because they referred to “distant times” that did not seem relevant to the people’s current plight.) (CC)

This raises the question of true versus false prophecy, which is at issue in this entire appendix-like conclusion to the chapter. In fact, the problem may even be exacerbated by the present prediction about Egypt. External evidence for an invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar is scanty, at best. A damaged and fragmentary cuneiform tablet does refer to some kind of military action against Egypt in Nebuchadnezzar’s thirty-seventh year (568/567), that is, within three years of this prophecy. Reference seems to be made to Amasis, who, at least according to Herodotus, succeeded Hophra in connection with a civil war that erupted upon the latter’s death. It can be hypothesized that Nebuchadnezzar took advantage of the disorder in Egypt to launch some kind of military action. But at about the same time, the Egyptians are describing Amasis’ defeat of some Asiatic invaders, very possibly Babylonians. But whatever the facts, the incursion into Egypt does not seem to be nearly as devastating as 29:19 would lead one to believe. We are hampered enough, however, by exiguous (and contradictory) evidence that one hesitates to make definite assertions. Jeremiah is implicated as much as Ezekiel, for in Jer 43:8–13 he also predicts in different, but more detailed, language major depredations in Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar. (CC)

So the whole hermeneutics of the fulfillment of prophecy come into focus here. According to Deut 18:21–22, if a prophecy failed to come to pass, it proved that a false prophet was speaking. Of course, the question immediately arises: how precisely must the fulfillment match the prediction? The prophets often spoke in highly figurative and hyperbolic poetry where literalism can easily raise unnecessary questions. As far as we know, Tyre’s walls were never breached by battering rams and so on, as 26:6–14 would indicate, because Nebuchadnezzar could never bring such war machinery to bear against the island city. Yet it does seem clear that Tyre did make enough concessions that the Babylonians seem to have declared victory and bothered Tyre no more. Something comparable may have occurred in Egypt, as we just noted. One should not forget that Deuteronomy cites yet another criterion of true prophecy, namely orthodoxy or “Mosaicity” (Deut 13:1–5). (CC)

Then there is the so-called “contingency” of prophecy. Whether enunciated or not, a conditional clause appears to accompany virtually all prophecy, pivoting on whether or not the hearer(s) repent and/or continue to be faithful or not. The Bible itself records many instances where God “relents/changes his verdict,” sometimes for reasons not revealed to humanity. If some unknown factor required a shift in strategy, that was all in the inscrutable mystery of the Godhead. This understanding of prophecy is obviously capable of abuse, which if used carelessly, could evacuate prophecy of all solid, meaningful content. The prophets were themselves aware that they, under inspiration, spoke more than they knew, as the NT also informs us (1 Pet 1:10–12). The subject cannot be trivialized, but, as especially some millennialistic “evangelists” in our day illustrate, “preoccupation with the fulfillment of predictions has a tendency to deafen hearers to the primary message of God and his agent in any age.” (CC)

Finally, some commentators read this pericope as primarily God’s message of reassurance to Ezekiel himself, who supposedly had begun to doubt his own vocation. This is certainly not out of the question, and Scripture does record such moments in the lives of prophets (perhaps classically Elijah in his flight from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19; see also Jeremiah’s lament in Jer 20:14–18; cf. even the Servant in Is 49:4). But Ezekiel virtually never reveals his inner feelings, so that even if it were the case, we could hardly expect him to verbalize it, and I see nothing in the words of the text itself to lead us to such a conclusion. (CC)