EZEKIEL

Chapter 31

*A Cedar in Lebanon*

**In the eleventh year, in the third month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes: ”‘Who can be compared with you in majesty? 3 Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest; it towered on high, its top above the thick foliage. 4 The waters nourished it, deep springs made it grow tall; their streams flowed all around its base and sent their channels to all the trees of the field. 5 So it towered higher than all the trees of the field; its boughs increased and its branches grew long, spreading because of abundant waters. 6 All the birds of the air nested in its boughs, all the beasts of the field gave birth under its branches; all the great nations lived in its shade. 7 It was majestic in beauty, with its spreading boughs, for its roots went down to abundant waters. 8 The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor could the pine trees equal its boughs, nor could the plane trees compare with its branches— no tree in the garden of God could match its beauty. 9 I made it beautiful with abundant branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden in the garden of God. 10 ”‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because it towered on high, lifting its top above the thick foliage, and because it was proud of its height,  11 I handed it over to the ruler of the nations, for him to deal with according to its wickedness. I cast it aside,  12 and the most ruthless of foreign nations cut it down and left it. Its boughs fell on the mountains and in all the valleys; its branches lay broken in all the ravines of the land. All the nations of the earth came out from under its shade and left it.  13 All the birds of the air settled on the fallen tree, and all the beasts of the field were among its branches.  14 Therefore no other trees by the waters are ever to tower proudly on high, lifting their tops above the thick foliage. No other trees so well-watered are ever to reach such a height; they are all destined for death, for the earth below, among mortal men, with those who go down to the pit. 15 ”‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day it was brought down to the grave I covered the deep springs with mourning for it; I held back its streams, and its abundant waters were restrained. Because of it I clothed Lebanon with gloom, and all the trees of the field withered away.  16 I made the nations tremble at the sound of its fall when I brought it down to the grave with those who go down to the pit. Then all the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, all the trees that were well-watered, were consoled in the earth below.  17 Those who lived in its shade, its allies among the nations, had also gone down to the grave with it, joining those killed by the sword. 18 ”‘Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendor and majesty? Yet you, too, will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword. ”‘This is Pharaoh and all his hordes, declares the Sovereign LORD.’”**

Rarely are the boundaries of an oracle indicated so clearly by formal markers that coincide almost exactly with one entire chapter. After the date notice, 31:1–2 opens with the word-event formula, “the Word of Yahweh came to me,” and Yahweh’s address to the prophet as “son of man.” Then 31:18 closes with the divine signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh.” After the introductory material, the chapter divides naturally into three parts: (1) a description of a cosmic tree (31:2–9); (2) the destruction of the tree because of its pride (31:10–14); and (3) the descent of the felled tree into Sheol (31:15–18). The second and third parts are set off by the citation formula, “thus says the Lord Yahweh,” at their outset (31:10, 15). In contrast, the recognition formula, “(then) you/they will know that I am Yahweh,” is absent from the chapter. (CC)

**31:1** The fifth oracle against Egypt (see note on 29:1). (CSB)

 *eleventh year … third month … first day.* June 21, 587 b.c.; the ninth date in Ezekiel (see 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20). (CSB)

**31:2-7** The rhetorical question in 31:2 asking Pharaoh to whom he is comparable is answered immediately by Yahweh in the following verses. The comparison is to Assyria, described under an extensive metaphor of a cedar of Lebanon. Thus, Greenberg fittingly entitles the chapter “Assyria: A Lesson to Egypt.” Somewhat similarly, Keil uses the word “type,” although he is using the word in a general, everyday sense, not in the technical sense of biblical typology. (CC)

**31:3** *Consider Assyria.* A great nation that had fallen. In 609 b.c. Pharaoh Neco went to Carchemish to help the Assyrian empire, which was reeling from Babylonian attacks. The effort failed and Assyria passed from history. (CSB)

 *once a cedar.* The beginning of another allegory (see Ezekiel’s allegorical use of the cedar in ch. 17). (CSB)

 *Lebanon.* Known for its cedars (see vv. 15–18; Jdg 9:15; 1Ki 4:33; 5:6; 2Ki 14:9; Ezr 3:7; Ps 29:5; 92:12; 104:16). (CSB)

Ezekiel 31 is not the only place where such a tree metaphor makes its appearance in the Bible. Yahweh himself has worked around the edges of the picture in Ezekiel 17 (which see). In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, portending his punishment, plainly is based on the same metaphor. And even our Lord’s parable of the mustard seed, related by all three synoptic evangelists, concludes with the image (Mt 13:31–32; Mk 4:30–32; Lk 13:18–19). (CC)

**31:4** *waters.* The Tigris and Euphrates. (CSB)

 *deep springs.* Or “the deep” (see note on 26:19). (CSB)

**31:6** *birds of the air.* See 17:23 and note; see also Da 4:12. (CSB)

**31:8** *garden of God.* The note of pride is introduced (see v. 10; cf. 28:13). (CSB)

After the long discourse on the magnificence of the tree in 31:3–7, the text suddenly takes a more theological turn by stressing that not even various majestic trees in “the garden of God” were its match. The proper noun “Eden” does not appear until the next verse, but there can be no doubt that “the garden of God” is the same thing. In chapter 28, where the application was to Tyre, it was debatable whether the referent was to some Tyrian version of the biblical story, or to the biblical story plus details not mentioned in Genesis 2–3, but now revealed to Ezekiel by Yahweh. Here, there is no reason to suppose that anything but the Genesis narrative is in mind. (CC)

**31:9** I MADE IT –That all this grandeur was Yahweh’s doing is now stated almost matter-of-factly. None of the other trees in paradise had the glory God had given to this cedar. Yet Assyria would not have given the one true God credit for its grandeur. Ancient heathen kings were not given to saying, *Soli Deo gloria!* When the tree became arrogant and incurred God’s wrath (as described in 31:10), it was no more its Maker’s fault than was the fall of Adam and Eve. Their fall brought sin and death upon the entire creation (e.g., Rom 5:12–21; cf. Rom 8:19–23). Echoes of that fall and its consequences may be heard in this chapter, which serves as an illustration of that point. (CC)

The great cedar among “the trees of Eden … in the garden of God” (Ezek 31:9) recalls the depiction of Eden in Genesis 1–3, with “the tree of life” in its midst (Gen 2:9). The fall of Adam and Eve caused their expulsion from paradise and exclusion from that tree (Gen 3:22–24). Yet access to “the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7), is gained through Jesus Christ. After his return, all the dead shall be raised, and believers shall enter the new garden paradise (Revelation 22), which shall have “the tree of life” (Rev 22:2, 14). (CC)

This may help explain the dendrite descriptions of the Messiah as the “Branch” (Is 4:2; 11:1; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12), perhaps rooted in the selection of this one son of Jesse from the family tree, and of his cross as a “tree” (ξύλον, Acts 5:30; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24) that was both an instrument of his death and the source of life for all who believe. Part of a traditional prayer used as the Proper Preface for Holy Week is this:

On the tree of the cross you gave salvation to mankind that, whence death arose, thence life also might rise again and that he [Satan] who by a tree once overcame likewise by a tree might be overcome, through Jesus Christ our Lord. (CC)

**31:10** Yahweh through the prophet here tells Pharaoh what he had once said to the king of Assyria. Much of the vocabulary in this verse (and some of the following verses) is familiar from preceding ones, but special note should be made of the play on the roots גָּבַהּ, “be high,” and רוּם, “be haughty.” Earlier they had referred to the physical height of the tree (31:4–5), but here with לָבֵב, “heart,” they take on the metaphorical sense of pride, arrogance, and so on, reflecting what in prophetic usage is virtually the primal sin. This is the only place in Ezekiel where רוּם is used in this derived sense of “haughty,” although that sense is found elsewhere in the OT. Ezekiel usually uses גָּבַהּ, “be high,” for “be arrogant, proud,” as in 28:2, 5, 17. (CC)

**31:11-14** Arrogance will lead to divine destruction and dismemberment, described in some detail, with the tree metaphor and the application often intertwining. But the ultimate point comes in the כִּי clause of 31:14, “because they have all been handed over to death, to the underworld.” The haughtiness of those who were nourished by the mighty waters (31:4–5 and 31:14b) will come to naught. Like all mortals, they are ineluctably journeying toward the grave. As unbelievers, unless they repent and believe in Israel’s true God, they will be consigned to eternal perdition in hell. One does not ordinarily think of trees as inhabiting the underworld alongside humans, but Yahweh continues the metaphor there nonetheless. The piling up of words for death, to which Yahweh has handed them over, is a reminder that the depths to which they must inevitably “go down” will be commensurate with the heights that they arrogantly claimed—heights of which Yahweh is sole master, and to which only his believers may be exalted (cf. 17:24; Mt 11:23; 23:12; Lk 1:52). (CC)

The phrase אֶרֶץ תַּחְתִּית (with a singular adjective, 31:14, 16, 18), translated “the underworld,” is probably synonymous with the similar phrase אֶרֶץ תַּחְתִּיּוֹת (with a plural adjective, 26:20; 32:18, 24), also translated “the underworld.” It is possible that these could be understood in a comparative or superlative sense, “the lower/lowest parts of the earth/underworld,” and so point to the biblical doctrine of degrees of punishment in hell (e.g., Mk 12:40; Lk 12:47–48; James 3:1). Those unbelievers who were loftier in this life and used their greater power to commit more heinous sins will receive greater punishment in the lower regions of hell, as implied also in Ezekiel 32. (CC)

Ezek 31:14 happens to have the only occurrence in the book of the plural בְּנֵ֥י אָדָ֖ם (31:14), literally, “the sons of Adam/men,” translated “mortals,” a universal expression that generalizes the singular “son of Adam/man” by which Yahweh consistently addresses the prophet himself. We have already met בּוֹר, “pit,” picturing the realm of the dead as one mass grave, in 26:20 (which see; the word occurs again in 31:16). Ezek 31:15–17 will use the more common synonym שְׁאוֹל, “Sheol.” (CC)

**31:11** *ruler of the nations.* Probably Nabopolassar; or possibly Nebuchadnezzar. (CSB)

 *its wickedness.* Pride (see v. 10; Ge 11:1–8). (CSB)

**31:12** *most ruthless.* Babylon (see note on 30:11). (CSB)

**31:15** *grave.* See NIV text note. (CSB)

 *deep springs.* See note on v. 4. (CSB)

The motif of the journey to Sheol of the tree representing Assyria, and portending the fate of Pharaoh, is now expounded. The Tyre oracles (26:19–21; 28:8) had touched on the theme, and it will shortly receive its fullest treatment in the book of Ezekiel in 32:17–32. (CC)

The two asyndetic verbs at the beginning of the apodosis of the verse, “I caused mourning; I covered,” make for difficult Hebrew, but seem to provide the keys to the message of the entire unit. Signs of mourning pervade the entire verse. The deep is so incapacitated that it cannot perform its watering functions, and nature itself languishes because of the demise of the great cedar. That result somewhat precedes the cause, which is God’s covering the deep, that is, putting a cover on it, so that, without water, a drought results. (CC)

The language approximates that often used of Judgment Day. Although the text does not develop the eschatology as such, the judgments that befell Assyria and Pharaoh in OT history—and indeed, every divine judgment in history—can and must be understood as a miniature or even a “type” of the final judgment of all people at the end of the world, upon the return of Jesus Christ. Christians view judgment via the cross, where Christ suffered the entirety of divine judgment for humanity’s sin. All in Christ receive the free gift of his righteousness (2 Cor 5:21) and so will be acquitted on the Last Day. The cross is the hermeneutical key for reading the judgment oracles of the OT and, *sub contrario* (God working “under the guise of opposites”), the means by which he justifies all who believe. But those (like Pharaoh) who do not believe in the Son remain under God’s wrath and on the Last Day will be condemned to hell for eternity (e.g., Jn 3:18, 36; 6:40; 12:48). (CC)

We grasp much of the detail of the verse if we read it as an undoing of what was described in 31:2–5. The final judgment is often pictured as a dissolution of the present order of creation in order to enable a new creation. This is expressed classically in Jer 4:23–28, where the *tohu wa-bohu* (תֹ֖הוּ וָבֹ֑הוּ) of the primeval void returns (see Gen 1:2). See also, for example, 2 Pet 3:10–13. (CC)

The theme of mourning becomes even more vivid in the last two clauses. The Hiphil of קָדַר, “to darken,” occurs elsewhere only in the parallel 32:7–8, but the Qal is often used in connection with mourning (e.g., Jer 4:28). Scripture often expresses that nature mourns because of man’s evil. Of course, in other contexts, the opposite is also true: all nature rejoices in God’s redemption of man (e.g., Pss 96:11–12; 98:7–9; and many others). It is idle to try to compare this biblical language with nature’s mourning in mythology, where it expresses the change of the seasons in a divinized nature. In the Bible, nature is as much a part of creation as man himself is. The creation is not an inert stage upon which God’s interaction with man takes place, but an integral part of the cosmic drama (cf. Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13; Rom 8:19–22). It is a case where the poetic details (e.g., trees clapping hands in Is 55:12) must not be taken literalistically, but seriously nonetheless. This is expressed in the Christmas hymn “Joy to the World”:

No more let sins and sorrows grow Nor thorns infest ground;

      He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found. (CC)

Finally, in all of this, one must not lose sight of the overall emphasis that everything is totally under Yahweh’s control—the cedar, Assyria, Egypt, the reaction of the nations, and—be it noted—also Sheol. It is not a place he frequents, but also not a place beyond his reach, which is true also of Hades in the NT (see Rev 1:18). In some passages, Sheol refers to the grave as the common destiny of all people since the fall into sin. In others it denotes the eternal realm of the damned (e.g., Num 16:30), but God in Christ has redeemed his people from that fate, and so Scripture can speak of God delivering believers from Sheol (1 Sam 2:6; Jonah 2:2), even as he did Christ himself (Ps 16:10; translated with ᾅδης, “Hades,” in Acts 2:27, 31). (CC)

**31:16** *nations tremble.* As at Tyre’s fall (see 27:35; 28:19). (CSB)

 *were consoled.* Because the mightiest of trees had joined them in the “grave” (Sheol). (CSB)

The quaking of the nations at the tree’s fall apparently parallels or amplifies the wilting/fainting of “the trees of the field” in the preceding verse. (CC)

The rest of the verse takes place in Sheol. Those who have already gone there are the other choice, but fallen, trees of Eden and Lebanon—which here are combined. Three essentially parallel phrases describe the company found there. “All the trees of Eden” are other powerful and noble princes and/or the empires they ruled that had preceded Assyria/Egypt. “The choicest and best of Lebanon” has the same import. Third, the repetition of “all drinkers of water” (from 31:14) combines the figure and what it represents—trees and humans who together share a common need for water and a common mortality. (CC)

All these find a macabre consolation (נִחַם, “be comforted, relieved, quieted”) in the fact that the cedar tree, formerly incomparable in its power and beauty, which they had once envied (31:9), has joined them in “the democracy of the dead,” and like all human potentates, it has become as impotent as they. This theme will surface again briefly in 32:31, but its incomparable parallel is Is 14:10–17, applied to the king of Babylon, which may well have influenced Ezekiel here. (CC)

**31:17** *those killed by the sword.* Those who met a premature death. (CSB)

**31:18** *you.* The Egyptian pharaoh. (CSB)

 *you, too.* It would happen to Pharaoh as it had happened to Assyria. (CSB)

 *uncircumcised.* See note on 28:10. (CSB)

The chapter ends with the same rhetorical question with which it began (31:2), thus forming an inclusio, a format of which Ezekiel was apparently rather fond. And again we have direct speech, Yahweh addressing Pharaoh and asking him to compare himself with Assyria. If he deludes himself into thinking that he is Assyria’s legitimate heir, let him ponder the oblivion now besetting Assyria. And so the initial question is expanded by a prediction of Pharaoh’s forthcoming journey to the realm of the dead together with all his congeners, even those he found repulsive in this world, including the “uncircumcised.” The final epigraph removes all possible doubt that the subject of the oracle is, indeed, Pharaoh (who has not been mentioned since 31:2), even though the focus of most of the chapter has been Assyria. The signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh,” functions almost as authorization for immediate implementation. (CC)