

# EZEKIEL

## Chapter 21

*The LORD Has Drawn His Sword*

The word of the LORD came to me: 2 “Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries. Prophecy against the land of Israel 3 and say to the land of Israel, Thus says the LORD: Behold, I am against you and will draw my sword from its sheath and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked. 4 Because I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked, therefore my sword shall be drawn from its sheath against all flesh from south to north. 5 And all flesh shall know that I am the LORD. I have drawn my sword from its sheath; it shall not be sheathed again. 6 “As for you, son of man, groan; with breaking heart and bitter grief, groan before their eyes. 7 And when they say to you, ‘Why do you groan?’ you shall say, ‘Because of the news that it is coming. Every heart will melt, and all hands will be feeble; every spirit will faint, and all knees will be weak as water. Behold, it is coming, and it will be fulfilled,’” declares the Lord GOD. 8 And the word of the LORD came to me: 9 “Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus says the Lord, say: “A sword, a sword is sharpened and also polished, 10 sharpened for slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! (Or shall we rejoice? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood.)[c] 11 So the sword is given to be polished, that it may be grasped in the hand. It is sharpened and polished to be given into 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 delivered over to the sword with my people. Strike therefore upon your thigh. 13 For it will not be a testing—what could it do if you despise the rod?” declares the Lord GOD. 14 “As for you, son of man, prophesy. Clap your hands and let the sword come down twice, yes, three times, the sword for those to be slain. It is the sword for the great slaughter, which surrounds them, 15 that their hearts may melt, and many stumble. At all their gates I have given the glittering sword. Ah, it is made like lightning; it is taken up for slaughter. 16 Cut sharply to the right; set yourself to the left, wherever your face is directed. 17 I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury; I the LORD have spoken.” 18 The word of the LORD came to me again: 19 “As for you, son of man, mark two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come. Both of them shall come from the same land. And make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to a city. 20 Mark a way for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites and to Judah, into Jerusalem the fortified. 21 For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver. 22 Into his right hand comes the divination for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to open the mouth with murder, to lift up the voice with shouting, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up mounds, to build siege towers. 23 But to them it will seem like a false divination. They have sworn solemn oaths, but he brings their guilt to remembrance, that they may be taken. 24 “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have made your guilt to be remembered, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to remembrance, you shall be taken in hand. 25 And you, O profane wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come, the time of your final punishment, 26 thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted. 27 A ruin, ruin I will make it. This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs, and I will give it to him. 28 “And you, son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus says the Lord GOD concerning the Ammonites and concerning their reproach; say, A sword, a sword is drawn for the slaughter. It is polished to consume and to flash like lightning— 29 while they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you—to place you on the necks of the profane

**wicked, whose day has come, the time of their final punishment. 30 Return it to its sheath. In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you. 31 And I will pour out my indignation upon you; I will blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and I will deliver you into the hands of brutish men, skillful to destroy. 32 You shall be fuel for the fire. Your blood shall be in the midst of the land. You shall be no more remembered, 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)

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)

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)

**21:1–17** Though Ezekiel’s hearers complained that he spoke in riddles, he continued to sound the alarm of God’s judgment. He now describes a sword drawn for a great slaughter. The victims of the sword are identified at the very outset as Jerusalem and the land of Israel (v 2). (TLSB)

**21:3** *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)

In catastrophes of nature and national disasters, there is no distinction in the outward fate that overtakes an entire community. (TLSB)

**21:4** *from south to north.* Here it applies to all the refugees of Judah, where the horrors of war continue to afflict “everyone” indiscriminately. (CC)

**21:6** *groan ... with breaking 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)

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

**21:9** *A sword, a sword.* A sword song, possibly accompanied by dancing or symbolic actions. Such songs may have been sung by warriors about to go into battle. (CSB)

The instrument of death is personified. Jeremiah also addressed a sword and invoked it to slaughter the Philistines and Babylonians (Jer 47:6–7; 50:35–38). (TLSB)

**21:10** *my son ( Judah).* Corresponds to “my people” in v. 12 (see Ge 49:9). (CSB)

*shall we rejoice?* Ezekiel’s hearers still were tempted to think the sword was drawn to destroy their enemies. Ezekiel unmasked their hypocrisy with a terse statement of the facts. (TLSB)

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

**21:12** *Cry out and wail ... strike therefore upon your thigh.* Eighth symbolic act. (CSB)

Gesture to express anguish and despair. (TLSB)

**21:13** *despise the rod.* The question anticipates the final interruption of Davidic kingship, which came in 586 B.C. (see vv. 25–27). (CSB)

God must use a sword to punish a nation that He chose to be His people, because chastisements with a rod did not bring them to their senses. (TLSB)

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

The Lord urged Ezekiel to keep striking the people with his prophecies. (TLSB)

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 synonymy 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)

**21:15** *At all their gates.* Babylonians surrounded them for a siege. (TLSB)

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

**21:18–27** The sword of the Lord is more than a figure of speech. It had already been “given into the hand of the slayer” (v 11). Nebuchadnezzar, chosen to serve God as His executioner , is already marching. When he captures the people within Jerusalem, they will know that he is divinely commissioned to bring their guilt to remembrance, even though Nebuchadnezzar may act out of selfish motives. For breaking a sworn covenant, the prince of Israel will be disgraced and dethroned (cf Ezk 17:14–21). Nothing will remain of his kingdom but ruin (21:27). (TLSB)

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

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

*make a signpost.* An advance unit marks the way for the main force to close in. (TLSB)

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

*Ammonites.* For the role they played in Israel’s history and their ultimate fate. (TLSB)

**21:21** *shakes the 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)

Nebuchadnezzar did not reach a decision until he received favorable omens from three kinds of augury: (1) Arrows, marked to indicate divergent options, were shaken in a quiver. When the king drew out one of them with his right hand, the divination for Jerusalem (v 22) emerged. (2) Teraphim, carved or sculptured images in human form, were consulted (see note, Gn 31:19). How they were manipulated to foretell the future is not known. (3) Professional soothsayers were engaged to examine the liver of slain animals. They interpreted the coloring and the lines of the organ to indicate whether a contemplated action would succeed or not. Archaeologists have discovered clay diagrams of livers, which assisted with such interpretations. One was found at Megiddo in northern Israel. (TLSB)

*look at 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)

**21:22** *open the mouth with murder.* Describes battle cries. (TLSB)

**21:23** *them.* The people of Jerusalem, who believed that Nebuchadnezzar’s favorable omens would prove to be a false divination. (TLSB)

*false divination.* 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)

Lit, “oaths of oaths are to them.” They were so sure that Nebuchadnezzar was being deceived that they swore oath upon oath. The Hbr noun for “oaths” may denote “weeks.” If translated “weeks of weeks are to them,” the meaning is that the people are saying, “It will not be for ages, if ever, that the divination will come true.” (TLSB)

**21:24** *made your guilt to be remembered.* The people flaunted their sins. (TLSB)

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

**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)

*Remove the turban ... crown.* Resign. (TLSB)

*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 fall of Jerusalem and exile will overturn Judah's society. (TLSB)

**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 judgment belongs.*† The Messiah; apparently an allusion to Ge 49:10 (see note there). (CSB)

When Zedekiah dies in disgrace, the house of David will become defunct until the messianic King establishes His rule. (TLSB)

**21:28–32** The sword of the Lord, deflected from the Ammonites for a time, will in due course be drawn for the slaughter. (TLSB)

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

*their reproach.* When their day has come (v 29), the Ammonites will no longer rejoice over Jerusalem's ruin. (TLSB)

*A sword, a sword.* Nebuchadnezzar's. (CSB)

**21:29** *false visions ...divine lies.* Apparently Ammon also had false prophets of peace. (CSB)

*place you on the necks.* The sword. (CSB)

An execution is described. However, the nouns and pronouns are unclear. Some wicked people are under threat, whether Ammonites or Judeans. (TLSB)

**21:30** *Return tit to its sheath.* Addressing Nebuchadnezzar. (CSB)

If addressed to Ezekiel, God directs him to cease brandishing the sword that symbolized God's wrath. If addressed to Ammon, it is an ironic summons to give up the fight, because all resistance is in vain. (TLSB)

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

Cyrus would lead Medes and Persians against the Babylonians (the swords) and overthrow them in 539 BC. (TLSB)

**Ch 21** God's hand draws His sword of judgment: Nebuchadnezzar. The righteous and unrighteous will both perish as Babylon strikes Jerusalem. In a section of Scripture filled with foreboding, destruction, and doom, there seems scant room for God's peace, salvation, and forgiveness. Yet, as quickly as God drew His sword, He returns it to its scabbard. God claps His hands and His fury abates (v 17). Today, He is equally ready to put away His wrath and forgive your sins. • Father, daily we witness Your infinite Sacraments call us to forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)