

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 124

Ezekiel 17

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Episode Summary

Ezekiel 17 presents a riddle or parable of two eagles about the treachery of Zedekiah, the puppet governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to replace Jehoiachin, the Judahite king taken captive in an earlier wave of exile of which Ezekiel had been a part. Zedekiah would be captured in the last phase of exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, in 586 B.C. Part of the riddle includes messianic language of the branch, verbiage that takes this episode's discussion into the Bible's adaptation of the ancient omphalos ("navel of the earth") myth.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 124: Ezekiel chapter 17. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, guess what? We play each other this week in Fantasy!

MH: That's true. You have my sympathy.

TS: You've got an early lead on me, so enjoy it while you can. (laughter)

MH: Yeah, I need a win. I'll be honest with everybody. I need the win.

TS: I'm sitting at the top of the league, so it's okay... I might throw you a win here or there. We'll see.

MH: (laughing) Right. All I've gotta do is make the playoffs—the whole second season.

TS: Long way to go.

MH: Yeah, I still have more guys to wind up on injured reserve between now and then.

TS: What does that mean if you don't make the playoffs in your own league? How sad is that?

MH: It is sad. And it's happened before. So I've been there before. I'll know how to cope. (laughter) And there's really no way to change the settings to make that not happen!

TS: Well, all right, Mike. I think chapter 16 was a good success. We got a lot of good responses from that.

MH: Good!

TS: We're not even halfway yet, are we? We've still got a long way to go with Ezekiel!

MH: Yeah, we've got a long way to go—48 chapters. I think maybe when we get to 40-48 (the whole temple vision thing), maybe we'll lump those together. But who knows—that's at the end. I don't know. If that's true, then we might be approaching halfway. But if it's not—nope, we're not there yet.

TS: All right, Mike. Well, Ezekiel chapter 17. I'm ready!

MH: All right, well let's jump in. And it is just chapter 17. I remember at the end of the last episode we weren't sure if it was going to be 17 and 18. Now that I've sort of been through it and taken a good look at it, it's going to be just chapter 17. Eighteen is pretty long in and of itself, and there's something in this chapter that I'm going to tack on at the end that kind of drills down on one particular point of something in this chapter that I think people will find interesting. Again, it's divine council related stuff. In view of that, we're just going to be good to tackle chapter 17.

Now, on the surface, this is a pretty transparent chapter *if* you're sort of acquainted with the tail end of Israelite history. Nebuchadnezzar comes into town and invades Jerusalem and destroys the temple. If you're familiar with that history, then this parable (and that's what Ezekiel 17 is—a parable of two eagles) will make sense in light of the way the Bible describes those events as Jerusalem falls—and really the events right before it when the puppet king of Judah (Zedekiah) is trying to get some help from the Egyptians against Nebuchadnezzar. If you're familiar with all that, then this is pretty straightforward, at least from our perspective. If you're the person originally hearing it (and of course, these things haven't happened yet)... If you're in exile in Babylon, you don't really know what's happening in Jerusalem, you don't have a frame of reference for it, so that's a different story. So when Ezekiel does give this parable, there's a lot of mystery to it for the people who are hearing it. But for us looking at things in hindsight, it's a lot clearer. And there are going to be parts of this chapter that actually parallel other parts of the Hebrew Bible that make the

reading of this "riddle" (this parable) pretty clear. But there's something in it, again, toward the end that I want to drill down on that I think will be not quite as apparent and actually (for those who sort of want to track on divine council stuff as we go through whatever portion it is we're doing in any given episode of the podcast) that you'll appreciate and find pretty interesting.

I want to open here with a short quote from Taylor's Tyndale Old Testament Commentary about chapter 17, and then another set of comments from Block to sort of set up what this is. I'm going to do that first, and then we'll start reading through the chapter, and you'll begin to see how things fit together. Taylor writes:

5:00

The theme of this chapter is the treachery of Zedekiah, the puppet-king appointed by Nebuchadrezzar to replace the captive Jehoiachin. It was as a result of this treachery that Nebuchadrezzar eventually marched on Jerusalem to besiege and destroy it (587 BC), but as this is foretold by Ezekiel in verse 20 it is clear that the utterance of this parable is to be dated a year or two before then, say about 590 BC. This accords well with the position of this oracle in the book, because the last preceding date (8:1) was 592 BC and the following date (20:1) is eleven months later.

So this is a pretty datable passage because of the historical setting. The chapter itself is going to tell us what the parable is about. So this isn't guesswork about Zedekiah. It's something that is pretty transparent read against the backdrop (especially in hindsight) of what's going on in Jerusalem to provoke the last phase of the captivity there in 587 and 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar returns from Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and the temple. If you have that in your head, what's said here is going to be pretty clear.

The chapter itself divides into three sections. We're going to get the parable itself in the first ten verses, then its meaning in verses 11-21, and then, again, Ezekiel is not going to leave everybody completely discouraged. We're going to get three verses of "better times are coming" and that sort of thing. We've seen Ezekiel do that before—not entirely closing the door on the people of God and talking about a remnant and so on and so forth. So that's going to be familiar.

Now Block, when he tries to set this up in his own (more detailed) commentary... I'm just going to read you a few things that he observes about it. He has similar things to say, but the level of detail is a bit different. So Block says:

17:1 marks the beginning of a new oracle that carries on to the end of the chapter, where it concludes with an expanded version of the recognition formula [MH: the same formulaic language]. The intervening material bears striking resemblances (vocabulary, structural parallels) to 12:1–16 (Judah's captivity symbolized by Ezekiel packing baggage for captivity) . . . the fable may be decoded

in the light of the events that it purports to interpret. Based on its historical referents, the story could be retold as follows: Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon (the first eagle) came to Jerusalem-Judah (Lebanon) and removed its king, Jehoiachin (the crown of the cedar), to Babylon (the merchant city). Meanwhile, he installed another member of the royal family, Zedekiah (the seed of the land) [MH: **some descendant from the land**], on the throne (the fertile soil with abundant waters), with the intention that this king should remain submissive (the low vine) and loyal to him (branches toward him). Instead Zedekiah redirected his allegiance (it turned its branches and roots) to Egypt (the second, less impressive eagle), thereby frustrating all the Babylonian king's aims. [MH: **This is what made Nebuchadnezzar mad.**] While this approach renders the tale understandable for the modern reader, it raises questions about its significance for the original audience, its genre, and its style. . . the story may also be treated as a genuine riddle, whose meaning is unlocked in the interpretation offered in vv. 11–21.

What Block is saying is that the ease with which this is parsed really depends on which audience we're talking about. Is it an audience after the fact, or is it the audience that was living in the immediate time period? Again, removed from the circumstances because they were in exile. Now he writes here:

10:00

...this oracle about eagles, a cedar, a vinestock, and an east wind has employed traditional ancient Near Eastern images to construct a verbal caricature of Judah's kings. However, he has underestimated the profound ambiguity of the fable. [MH: **again, for the original audience**] The prophet's intended meaning is not immediately obvious to the audience/reader. On the one hand, at the individual level, the vine might have symbolized any person who is destined for a full life but who commits suicide by cutting off his or her own roots...

I'll just interject here. Block is saying, "Somebody who heard this might have thought of themselves. They might have thought of *anybody* when they heard the terms of this. But those of us who are looking at it in hindsight, we can pretty much tell what's going on here."

Now let's jump into chapter 17. I think you'll see again how this begins to sort of fit together. The first ten verses is the parable. I'm going to be interjecting what things mean. And then in verses 11-21, the text will actually sort of verify or validate what I've said that the elements of the parable mean. So we'll get a little bit ahead of ourselves as far as identifying things, but then verses 11-21 will show where we're getting this. So in verse 1:

The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel;

The terms there: "riddle" is *hidah* (the same term that you'll see like in Judges 14 with Samson's famous riddle there with the Philistine men and his would-be wife at the time). It's an enigmatic or mysterious saying. That's what a *hidah* was. It's also called a "parable." A parable is sort of that same kind of thing. Some scholars would call it an allegory—telling a story, the elements of which have some sort of greater conceptual meaning. It points to something more abstract. Ezekiel himself (later in Ezekiel 20:49) is going to be called a "maker of parables." Block translates it as a "spinner of riddles." What that basically means is that Ezekiel had the reputation for telling parables and riddles and this kind of stuff. It was part of his prophetic routine (if you want to call it that). He was not an entertainer (obviously, most of what he says is just horrible to the listener). But he's also sort of, in part, a theater of the bizarre—the one actor theater of the bizarre. In this chapter (he's done it a little bit previously and then he'll do it some more) people will be thinking, "Well, here we go again. He's telling us another story. What does it really mean?" This is going to be something in Ezekiel that we see more than once—more than here. He's going to get that reputation. In verse 3, God says to Ezekiel:

³...say, Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. ⁴He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants.

Again, the meaning of this, as we're going to see in a little bit (viewed against verses 11-21 and also viewed in hindsight on what actually happens to Jerusalem), this is going to be clear. But for our purposes here, the point of verse 3 and 4 is that Nebuchadnezzar is going to be the great eagle. He comes with great military power to Judah and he snatches away its rulership, its nobility, its king—the top of the cedar (verse 3)—and takes him to Babylon. So again, reading it after the fact you're going to sort of know this guy was this great eagle snatching off the top of the tree, the branch, the cedar, and taking him back... obviously that's Babylon. The pieces are going to start to fit. So here in verses 3 and 4, the parable is about Nebuchadnezzar coming and snatching away the leadership of Jerusalem and taking them back to Babylon. Verse 5, talking about the great eagle:

⁵Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, ⁶and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him [MH: toward the eagle], and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.

15:00

So the seed of the land, as we're going to find out in a moment, corresponds to a member of the royal family—most likely Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah. According to 2 Kings 24:17, Zedekiah is the one that Nebuchadnezzar installs after the second wave of the exile. Zedekiah gets installed to be the puppet ruler, and that's going to work for a while, but then Zedekiah makes very poor decisions that provoke Nebuchadnezzar to coming back and finishing the job—finishing off the city, destroying the temple, the whole bit. So Nebuchadnezzar removes the ruler (Jehoiachin)—the top of the cedar, takes him back to Babylon, and in his place he installs Zedekiah. (Remember the royal family.) So he's from the "seed of the land." He's an Israelite. He's in a position to be a governing official and know what he's doing, but Nebuchadnezzar picks one of the ruling family and says, "Okay, you're in charge now. You'd better listen to me or I'll be back." We know this story from the book of Kings, for example. (The books of Kings, specifically 2 Kings and what-not.) Again, this is going to be familiar looking back in hindsight. The whole phrase "planted like a willow twig" means that Zedekiah is installed in his native Jerusalem. It's a good position, and he gets to "play king" essentially. But he's a puppet. He's a "low-spreading vine," in the words of the parable. He doesn't spread his own influence outward. He's a vassal. He's hemmed-in. He's restricted on what he can actually do. He's ruling in a subservient position to Nebuchadnezzar. So he's not independent. And the vine's (Zedekiah's) branches turn "toward the eagle" (toward Nebuchadnezzar), which indicates that he's subservient to his Babylonian overlord. Verse 7:

⁷“And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine [MH: Zedekiah] bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. ⁸It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.

⁹“Say, Thus says the Lord God: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots [MH: This is really a reference to the first eagle.] and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. ¹⁰Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”

So this little section of verses 7-10 are about the second eagle and the vine. The vine is Zedekiah, the puppet-ruler. The second eagle is great, but not as impressive as the first. In other words, that's evident from what we read here because the second eagle doesn't really do anything. He's just simply there and he attracts the attention of the vine, who turns his branches toward him, hoping,

"Oh, you'll give me something! Water me and it'll help me flourish..." And again, the parable is like, "Nebuchadnezzar put you here, and you would have flourished if you had just listened to him. If you would have followed orders you would have been okay, you'd be under no threat. But now that the second eagle has drawn your attention and you're looking to get something from him..." Namely, the historical referent is getting help from Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar. "When Nebuchadnezzar (the first eagle) learns of this, you're going to get plucked up. You're going to get destroyed. This is not going to work." So most scholars think this is an allegorical description of how Zedekiah (the vine) turned toward Egypt looking for assistance against Babylon. That's what we read in the account in the books of the Kings. The second eagle is powerful, but he ain't Nebuchadnezzar. This is a failed tactic. This is something that's not going to produce any good result. Now the validation of this interpretation is really given in verses 11-18. We read through verse 10, so let's jump into verse 11:

20:00

¹¹Then the word of the LORD came to me: ¹²"Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. ¹³And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), ¹⁴that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. ¹⁵But he rebelled against him [MH: this appointed king rebelled against the king of Babylon] by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?

¹⁶"As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. ¹⁷Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. ¹⁸He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape.

Now, the covenant here is this treaty agreement that Zedekiah had made with Babylon. This is not a reference to a biblical covenant (God's covenant or anything like that). In the context, it's an agreement that Zedekiah had made with Nebuchadnezzar, and vice versa: "I'm going to install you here. I'm taking your king. I'm taking the rest of the important people back with me to Babylon." (Of course, Ezekiel was part of the second wave of the captivity.) "I'm going to leave

you here, Zedekiah, and you're going to be fine as long as you obey me." This is a vassal status, a vassal agreement. Zedekiah is not going to be independent. "If you put up with that, if you abide by our agreement, you're going to be okay. It's a good job. It's a good gig." But that isn't what Zedekiah does. Zedekiah begins to solicit Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar is going to find out about it, and that's going to be it. They're going to be history. Nebuchadnezzar is going to come back and finish the job. He's going to destroy the city and destroy the temple in the last wave of the captivity. So basically, what the parable really means to teach us is that Zedekiah is a fool. He tries to avoid what's going to happen here. It's kind of interesting if we read in verses 19-21, there's a little bit more detail here about how God looks at Zedekiah. Let's read that:

¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely it is my oath that he [MH: Zedekiah] despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. ²⁰I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. ²¹And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken."

These three verses transition to God through Ezekiel essentially evaluating the theological implications of the riddle of the parable and Zedekiah's decisions. Now Zedekiah's behavior in these three verses is treated as a rebellion against God. You might ask why. Because the context is clear about the agreement made with Nebuchadnezzar, and it all fits the historical series of events. We can go read it in Kings, etc. Why does God look at Zedekiah's behavior here as some sort of personal offense? Well, 2 Chronicles 36:13 makes that apparent. We read there about Zedekiah. Let's go back up to verse 11:

¹¹Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. ¹²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. ¹³He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel.

What you have going on here is that as part of keeping Zedekiah under control (reaching this agreement), Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah swear by the name of the Lord that he would abide by and be bound by this agreement. So when Zedekiah starts soliciting Egypt to get out from under this agreement (to get rid of

Babylon), God takes that as an offense because he had sworn by the Lord to do this particular thing and now he's trying to get out of it. So that would be taking the Lord's name in vain—treating God's name with contempt. And that's why God is offended here. Block writes:

25:00

As if legal authorization is required, this oath offered Yahweh the grounds for intervening against the king because of his rebellion against the Babylonians. To violate a political covenant is to challenge the divine Guarantor.

It was very common in the Ancient Near East when people entered into agreements to make their god or gods part of the agreements as witnesses. There are a number of... Psalm 89 is kind of a famous one with the Davidic Covenant, where the witness to the covenant is the "witness in the clouds." It's singular. Those of you who remember the old *Myth* draft maybe, or my old newsletter from years and years ago, there's a very good case that can be made that the witness in the clouds (to the Davidic Covenant—that's what Psalm 89 is about) is Yahweh himself or, again, this sort of second Yahweh figure. It could actually be the Messiah himself or God himself. Commentators disagree on that, and you could construct an argument either way. But you have this idea that God or the gods are brought into the agreement to be witnesses, and their witnessing of it... Just think of how you have witnesses when you get married. They're supposed to hold you accountable to the decision you make. You have asked them to be witnesses to your decision, and when you violate that, the witnesses are supposed to call you out. That's what God's doing here: He's calling him out. God is treating it as an offense. "Is my name so insignificant that you would use it frivolously to enter into this agreement? You're just not going to get away with that, Zedekiah. I'm going to lower the boom on you, just like Nebuchadnezzar is going to."

So [Zedekiah] again shows himself to be a fool by what he's doing here. Earlier he was a political fool. Here he's a spiritual fool. Zedekiah is just a fool in this whole chapter (Ezekiel 17).

The last few verses are the thing that I want to sort of drill down on for the rest of the episode. Again, I think you're going to find it interesting. It's probably a question that you've asked yourself at some point. But we read this. This is 22-24:

²²Thus says the Lord God: "I myself [MH: after Zedekiah is going to be dog meat here] will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar [MH: remember the cedar was Jehoiachin and the royal dynasty] and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it [MH: or "him"—you could translate it either way] on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On the

mountain height of Israel will I plant it [MH: or “him”], that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

This isn't really about replanting the Tree of Life or something like that. It's not abstract in that direction. The mountain height of Israel... Don't think directly of the Tree of Life and of Eden. You'll see some commentators go that direction. Rather, it's describing a replanting of the Davidic line in or on Mount Zion. That little sprig (maybe the term "branch" would be more familiar to you) will grow into a great tree. And, of course, under that tree there will be all the birds of the sky, of all different sorts, will find refuge under this tree. This imagery... You can already start to get the notion here because of the other "planting" imagery used in the prophets and other books about the Messiah. And, of course, when you're talking about the Messiah and birds of all varieties taking refuge in and under this tree, it's a reference to the Messiah asserting global sovereignty. These are very familiar themes in biblical theology. Certainly if you've read *Unseen Realm*, some of the previous podcasts (the whole reclaiming of the nations thing), this is another angle to it and another metaphor, another set of symbols for the symbolic language of it. Block writes this:

30:00

The prophet highlights the special origin of the sprig. Not only is it the topmost crown; it is also a special shoot, a *rak*. [MH: which gets translated “tender one”] The word seems to derive from *rākak*, “to be tender, soft,” but Ezekiel’s usage is without parallel. Other prophets had employed a variety of horticultural expressions to designate the messianic scion who would revive the Davidic line: *ḥōṭēr*, “shoot,” and *nēšer*, “branch,” in Isa. 11:1; *šemaḥ*, “sprout,” in Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. In this context *rak*, “shoot,” [MH: again, this “tender shoot”] serves as a harbinger of the messianic figure who will be presented in greater detail in later salvation oracles. . . .

Ezekiel’s image of a huge tree offering nourishment and protection for all creatures represents a Hebrew version of a widespread ancient mythological motif known as “the cosmic tree.” This tree, which is not to be associated with the “tree of life” in a paradisaical garden [MH: I’m going to add *directly* as a caveat here. I think there’s more to this than what Block is saying, but he’s right—this isn’t about the Tree of Life directly, but it is going to have something to do with that.], is typically portrayed as a huge plant with its crown reaching into the heavens and its roots going down to the subterranean streams from which it draws its nourishment. Although Ezekiel may have been introduced to the

“cosmic tree” motif in Babylon, the present passage may also have been inspired by Isa. 11:1–10, which conjoins the elements of a newly sprouted messianic shoot, the mountain of Yahweh, and peaceful coexistence with wild animals. [MH: these are all kingdom images] Whatever its antecedents, Ezekiel’s tree bears his own stamp. This tree is planted on the *high mountain of Israel*, a clear allusion to Mount Zion. Although this mountain will become increasingly significant in later oracles, only here in Ezekiel are the motifs of Davidic line and Zion brought together. Both elements are truly remarkable, reminding the exiles that Yahweh had not forgotten his covenant with David (2 Sam. 7). The dynasty would survive the deportation; it would be revived within the context of its original founding, and its protective influence would be felt all around the world.

I want to do a little bit of an excursus on this "world tree" thing, but here's the larger question (this is the question you may have asked yourself): Why do we get this "branch" language (branch, shoot, root, tender one, sprig, sprout) for the Messiah in the Old Testament? You see it in a lot of places. I think there are two trajectories to this. One of them is more common in commentaries. You'll run into it more quickly in commentaries than the other one. The other one, though, I think is much more interesting and it gets us into Israelite cosmological thinking—not only that, but also into some of the motifs associated with the divine council: the divine abode, the mountains, the cosmic mountain, the cosmic garden, and all this sort of stuff. Block has alluded to it. This "cosmic tree" idea is a very Ancient Near-Eastern Semitic thing. So you have two trajectories and the cosmic tree thing is going to be the second—the one that's less commonly discussed in relation to this question.

But the first one (the one that you'll probably run into in most ordinary commentaries) would say that the branch or sprig language is associated with God's choice, and also with new life. And here's sort of the go-to passage for this idea: Numbers 17:1-7. In Hebrew, this is verses 16-23 (there's a versification mismatch between Hebrew and English there). This passage says this:

35:00

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each fathers' house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff, ³and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each fathers' house. ⁴Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony [MH: the ark], where I meet with you. ⁵And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you [MH: He's talking to Moses].” ⁶Moses spoke to the people of Israel. And all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. And the staff of Aaron was among their staffs. ⁷And Moses deposited the staffs before the LORD in the tent of the testimony.

We know what happens: Aaron's rod buds. It sprouts. So this denotes God's choice of leadership. You also have dead staffs. This whole idea of newness of life is going to become important when it is associated with Messiah because when Messiah comes he's supposed to bring the dead nation back to life (this whole metaphorical set of ideas). So that's usually what you'll read in commentaries if you ask the question, "What is all this horticultural language doing when it comes to Messiah?" Commentators will typically take you back to this and say that this is just one of the familiar Old Testament signs for God's choosing, God's election, God's choice of leadership.

I'm not going to say there's nothing to that, but I think the second one is a little more significant. The second trajectory is this cosmic tree thing, but scholars typically talk about it in much bigger terms. This is going to sound really strange, but the cosmic tree idea is part of what scholars refer to as the "navel of the earth" mythic thinking. This is what Block alluded to, but he doesn't connect the cosmic tree with the bigger picture. This is also referred to as the *axis mundi*—the world axis. Think of Israelite cosmology: you've got a round flat earth, underneath the earth you've got the waters that are under the earth, you've got the pillars and all this stuff, and above you've got the firmament (the solid dome), etc. In their thinking, there was sort of a polar access that ran up through the middle of the earth—the center of the earth. The Old Testament and other texts refer to it as the "navel of the earth." That's an important idea—this sort of perpendicular pole, this invisible pole that ran from the bottom to the top, underneath, through the earth, and up to the top of the dome. The thinking was that all of this is a metaphor for the fact that heaven and earth were connected. If we can think on these terms, we're not so much really fixated on the image, but on what the image was meant to convey. Where heaven and earth were connected was by this idea of a cosmic tree. That does take us back to Eden and the Tree of Life, because the Tree of Life is in the presence of God. God is there on earth, heaven has met earth, heaven has come to earth. This is where God lives, this is the source of life. Think about the word "navel." Apply that to childbirth and that's the point at which the child is connected to the mother—the mother gives it life and sustains it, etc. These are, again, big metaphorical ideas that are applied to just the way the world is in the context of Israelite cosmology.

So heaven and earth are connected, and the point at which they are connected (this imaginary world tree kind of thing) runs through the center of the earth, all the way up and all the way down. In Greek thinking, the term for navel is *omphalos*. You've probably seen that before if you're into ancient religion and ancient mythology. I'll read a little bit from an article from LBD—the *Lexham Bible Dictionary* that we created at Logos. This is a free resource, by the way, that you can get for nothing (obviously, if it's free!). You can search for it on the web and you can get it. But here's the entry for the Navel of the Earth. Part of it reads as follows:

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The myth of the “navel of the world” was common in many ancient cultures. The myth is often known as the *omphalos* myth, from the Greek word for “navel” (ὀμφαλός, *omphalos*). The *omphalos* myth often held that a sacred mountain was located at the center of the earth where the national deity dwelt and could be communicated with.

So why a mountain? A mountain appears to go up to the top of the sky. And, of course, mountains are sitting on the ground. But the idea was that if you can penetrate the mountain (maybe through caves or something), you can actually go down, as well. So this mountain is just sort of this stone pillar (try to work with the imagery here) that reached down to recesses of the earth and all the way to the top of the earth. So for many, this "polar symbolism" (if we can call it that) was pictured with a great mountain. Others had this great tree idea. Different cultures expressed it in different ways. But the whole point was that heaven and earth were connected, and also under the earth. Continuing with the entry:

The rest of creation was oriented around this location (Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 38–39).

So wherever this sacred mountain or sacred tree was, that was sort of where all the action was. That's where the deity or the gods really run things from. Everything else is sort of oriented around them and around this location. Wensinck is an important source on this. And by the way, you can get this source for free. We have this linked at the episode page for this episode. It's a public domain source—one of the few scholarly works on the world tree idea (the navel of the earth idea). So you can get this source.

Wensinck notes five general characteristics associated with the myth (Wensinck, *Ideas*, xi—xii):

1. The location was exalted above the surrounding areas.
2. It was the place from which creation occurred.
3. It was the center of the earth.
4. It was the place of communication between heaven, earth, and the underworld.
5. It was the medium of distributing food over the earth.

In other words, it's the thing that not only created life (from which creation sprang), but it's the thing that sustained all life. It connected all aspects of the perceived cosmology. We can see how Eden would fit into this. Eden is called the "cosmic mountain." It's called a mountain. It's a biblical sort of illustration for this thinking about this particular place where God lives and heaven meets earth and this is the source of life. All of this makes sense when you start to think about

it in these very big-picture kind of terms. Back to our LBD article, the author (David Phillips) writes:

The Septuagint translators chose to translate the Hebrew word “center” (טֵבּוּר, *tabbur*) in Judg 9:37 and Ezek 38:12 with the Greek word for “navel” (ὀμφαλός, *omphalos*). Based on this and usage of the term in other Jewish writings, Levenson argues that no other understanding of the word had been passed down. . . . [Reverend] Childs notes that other passages in the Bible speak to the concept of the “navel of the earth” with their themes of the exaltation of Jerusalem.

As you can imagine, in the early chapters of Genesis, this is Eden. Eden is the center of of the earth, it's the source of life, it's where the deity lives, it's where everything happens, it sustains everything else—at least that was the plan, obviously. But later you're going to have this be Mount Zion (Jerusalem). The entry continues:

Passages that could be understood as depicting Zion and Eden as the sacred mountain at the center of the earth include Gen 2:10–14 [MH: the familiar Edenic description]; Ezek 28:13 [MH: where Eden is referred to as the “garden of God” and will later be referred to as the “mountain of God”]; and Zech 14:8.

This one's a little less familiar:

⁸On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter.

This idea that Jerusalem is the source of "living waters" is an important idea. In addition to that, there are passages (for instance, in 1 Enoch) that refer to Jerusalem as the center of the earth. 1 Enoch 26:1 says:

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And from there I proceeded to the center of the earth, and I saw a blessed place where there were trees that had branches that abide and sprout. And there I saw a holy mountain. From beneath the mountain water (came) from the east, and it flowed toward the south...

Consider the language there: "flowed from the east," "toward the south." You're going to have biblical precedence for that being described as Jerusalem. Jubilees 8, though, gets a little more explicit, talking about events after the Flood:

¹⁸ And Noah rejoiced because this portion was assigned to Shem and for his sons. And he remembered everything which he spoke with his mouth concerning him because he said:

May the LORD God of Shem be blessed,
and may the LORD dwell in the dwelling place of Shem.

¹⁹And he knew that the garden of Eden was the holy of holies and the dwelling of the LORD. And Mount Sinai (was) in the midst of the desert and Mount Zion (was) in the midst of the navel of the earth.

It's very explicit there—this idea that the dwelling place of God is the center of the earth. Now here's the point for our purposes here: Jerusalem is viewed in biblical thinking as the center of the earth, the navel of the earth. Jerusalem (or Zion) is described as a cosmic mountain in the Hebrew Bible. We get that reference in Psalm 48:1-2, in which Mount Zion is the holy mountain in the far reaches of the north. If you remember from *Unseen Realm*, the uttermost north is Tabor, the mountain of Baal (the mountain where lots of Israelites and Canaanites thought that Baal lived and ran the show from; this is where Baal and his council met and lived). The Psalmist is saying, "That isn't true. The real sovereign here is the God of Israel and he rules from Zion." So it's taking that language. Isaiah 2, Micah 4:1-3 (referring to Jerusalem and Zion as the mountain of the Lord). This is pretty familiar.

If you look at Ezekiel 5:5, though, it says:

⁵“Thus says the Lord God: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.

Again, going back to where we started this whole idea of Tabor being the navel of the earth, in Ezekiel 38:12 we read this (which is part of the Gog/Magog passage)... Look at how the place they're invading (which we know from reading all of chapters 38 and 39 that it's going to be Jerusalem), we read that Gog is coming:

¹²to seize spoil and carry off plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods, who dwell at the center of the earth.

The word there is *tabbur*. So there's this notion that Jerusalem (Zion) is the center of the world. That has very cosmic theological significance. It's also described as a well-watered garden, just like Eden. Isaiah 33:20-22 (and these cross-references are in *Unseen Realm*, but we don't often think of Zion being a well-watered garden like Eden—this place that marks the center of everything, the center of the world):

**²⁰Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts!
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,
an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent,**

**whose stakes will never be plucked up,
nor will any of its cords be broken.**

**²¹But there the LORD in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams [MH: Zion with rivers and streams?],
where no galley with oars can go,
nor majestic ship can pass.**

It's applying this "cosmic waters" idea to Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 47:12 (and this is going to be part of the whole temple vision in chapters 40-48 when we get there), you have water flowing from the temple. Here's chapter 47, starting at the beginning:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.

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Again, this place of flowing waters, flowing rivers: Zion. We read Zechariah 14:8, so we'll go to Joel 3:18—another one of these references:

**¹⁸“And in that day
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the *streambeds* of Judah
shall flow with water;
and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD
and water the Valley of Shittim.**

Again, this isn't real, literal geography. This is cosmic geography. Not in the sense of the nations around Israel being controlled by other gods, but this is a part of cosmic geography that we really haven't developed much in *Unseen Realm*. There's a smattering of this (a little bit in the chapters about temple and Zion and Eden and all that sort of stuff), But here we need to be called back to remember it.

Let's go back to the question we asked: Why do we have this horticultural imagery of the sprout, sprig, shoot, branch—all this stuff about the Messiah? It's because the Messiah comes from the house of God. He comes from the place where God lives (obviously, because he is God). He comes from the place where God exists. The place where God exists is a cosmic mountain, it's a cosmic garden, and a cosmic tree. This is why Messiah is spoken of in tree language—in garden/horticultural language. It's supposed to take your mind back to the cosmic

tree, the cosmic garden—to Eden. Zion is just another Eden. That's what it was intended to be and that's what it will be.

Think of the end of the book of Revelation. You have the heavenly Zion—heavenly Jerusalem—coming down to the earth. Again, we have a global Eden. It's the center of the world. So this is what the Israelites are thinking, so when the writers use these terms, they were trying to deliberately conjure these images of the place where God lives—his house, where he's from. Think about what happens there: it's the source of life. It's the thing that sustains all life. The tree imagery we get here in Ezekiel 17 about how God himself is going to pluck a branch... He's going to take (if I can abstract it this way) something from the cosmic Garden of Eden (specifically, not just a thing, but this thing represents a person—an entity—*someone*). God is going to take him up, and that one is also not just going to be divine (because we're talking about God's house here, we're talking about Eden, the cosmic garden, the cosmic mountain, the cosmic tree), but he's going to be from the line of David. He's *human*, as well. And he's going to plant him in Zion someday. This is Ezekiel talking, so this is going to be really far in the future because bad things are happening right now. But in the future, God is going to plant on Mount Zion essentially this little sprig that's plucked from Eden, from the very dwelling place of God (this place where heaven meets earth). It's going to grow into this great tree, and the tree is going to provide refuge and sustenance for the whole world.

This is, again, a complex matrix of ideas that is largely lost on us, but it would have meant something for them. The cosmic garden is in there, the Tree of Life (a metaphor for the presence of God), just like the menorah represented the Tree of Life and the tabernacle and the temple where God was taking residence. The branch (and all this branch and sprig language)... these are extensions of the tree, extensions of the garden. And, thus, the cosmic garden and the cosmic mountain ultimately represent the life-source, which is God. It's an extension of God himself. And connecting that imagery to David's line telegraphs a human extension from Eden, a human extension from God's family. It's messianic. It's overtly messianic. We can sort of pick up on this from here and there in the different passages, but we lack the cosmological worldview. We lack this matrix of ideas, where when we come across passages that talk about the Messiah like a root or sprig or a branch... You might wonder what possible significance that might have—it's just something that grows in the ground! No, it's a whole lot more than that. It really meant a whole lot more in their cosmological outlook than that.

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As strange as it sounds, using this language of a descendant from David would have indicated that there's something about this descendant of David that is divine. It's God *plus* the descendant of David. This figure is going to be right out of Eden, yet also a man. So it's very important language to articulate Old Testament messianic thinking. I think it's important, not just because it's kind of neat to be able to think like an Israelite, but it's also neat to head off dumb

statements that are often made by critics... that the idea that Messiah was just purely earthy—purely a human being. That this idea of a divine Messiah was something they made up after the fact. That's just nonsense. That just tells me (and it ought to tell you now) that whoever's making that statement doesn't have any idea of how an ancient Israelite would have thought in their own context when they're thinking about the Messiah. For that alone, I think it's an important thing to camp on.

We spent a lot of time on that, but it's a good content/teaching point—and frankly, a good apologetic point—that what the New Testament says about Jesus in this matrix of ideas in Christology has deep, deep Old Testament Ancient Near Eastern roots, and is not just a contrived invention.

TS: That's interesting! That's one of the... better than I thought it would be! (laughs) That's interesting where you went with that.

MH: It's just one of those things that's not self-evident, but when you see it you won't really be able to un-see it because you'll just get it. You'll know how they were thinking.

TS: All right, Mike. Next week we're going to have a special guest with us.

MH: Yep, we're going to have Johnny Cisneros as a guest on the podcast. Johnny is a long-time friend of mine; for many years had been a colleague of mine at Logos Bible Software. Johnny and myself were the ones who created "Learn to Use Greek and Hebrew," so we've had many discussions over the years about how to get tools into people's hands that are beneficial, that are useful to move people beyond just being Bible readers to becoming Bible students. Sort of the entry point for doing that (a lot of our audience is going to be familiar with this) is word studies. People are used to using Strong's numbers. I know Chuck Missler put out some stuff about doing word studies and what-not. We're going to talk about that—about biblical word study—and very specifically, something that Johnny and I have created. It's a tool—really a course—for helping people become proficient in word study. It doesn't require that you buy software. It doesn't require that you buy *anything*. We're going to show you through this course what we're going to talk about next time... We'll talk about the philosophy of what we're trying to accomplish here. You're going to be able to do what we show you if have software and if you don't (with free resources, too). So this is an effort that we're making to create something that people can get that will take them to the next level in their Bible study, and also really understand why they would do certain things and what the interpretive payoff should be when you're trying to do certain things in your Bible study.

TS: I'm excited about that and how I can incorporate some of these other tools that you're going to be talking about, and even what y'all have created. That's going to be interesting to hear about.

MH: Yeah, I think it will be a good episode and a good chat with him.

TS: That sounds good. Again, I just want to ask everybody if you haven't already, please go rate and leave us a review (if you will) anywhere where you consume our podcast. Please go subscribe to the newsletter at drmsh.com if you have not done so already. And with that, Mike, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.