

Ezekiel 8:5-13

“Ezekiel is Shown the Idolatry in Jerusalem”

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, raise your eyes now toward the north.’ So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance. And He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, so that I would be far from My sanctuary? But yet you will see still greater abominations.’ Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall. He said to me, ‘Son of man, now dig through the wall.’ So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. And He said to me, ‘Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.’ So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts *and* detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around. Standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censor in his hand and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, “The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.”’ And He said to me, ‘Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing.’”

The Prophet Ezekiel was shown a rather graphic and condemning exposition on the leaders of Judah, “in the sixth year, on the fifth *day* of the sixth month” (8:1), which examiners often think was September (17¹ or 18²), 592³ B.C.E. Ezekiel is brought by the Lord in a vision from Babylon to the city of Jerusalem, to the Temple, where He is shown some of the idolatrous activities occurring that have been provoking Him to jealousy (8:3). While the condemnation of the idolatry of these people is significant to be offended by, the involvement of unclean animals and what is witnessed, is important to notice. This may very well serve as important, Tanach background information, regarding what the Apostle Peter would be shown by God in the First Century C.E., in Acts chs. 10, 11.

8:5-6 The Lord directed the Prophet Ezekiel, “‘Son of man, raise your eyes now toward the north.’ So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance” (v. 5). Entering into the Temple complex, Ezekiel witnesses a *semel ha'qinah* (סֵמֶל הַקִּינָה), with the term *qinah* (קִינָה), regarding God, often associated with emotions such as “activity in punitive sense...meaning anger, wrath” (*HALOT*).⁴ The Hebrew *semel ha'qinah* is variably translated as “image of jealousy” (RSV/NRSV/ESV), “idol of jealousy” (NASU, NIV), “offensive statue” (HCSB), “infuriating image” (NJPS), “outrageous image” (Common English Bible), and “Image of Provocation” (ATS). This should provide an appropriate window of options, for how offensive this was to God.

The image which is said to enrage the Lord, is widely agreed to have been a statue of Asherah or the Queen of Heaven, which was commonly worshiped by the Israelites during the Divided Kingdom era (1 Kings 15:13; 18:19). King Manasseh of the Southern Kingdom erected an image of Asherah on the Temple Mount (2 Kings 21:7; 2 Chronicles 33:7). This image, however, was something that was removed by the period of King Josiah’s reforms (2 Kings 23:6), but by Ezekiel’s time was apparently put back. The image seen by the Prophet Ezekiel is probably the same that was attacked by the Prophet Jeremiah, in his denunciation of the worship of the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17-30).

¹ Cooper, 119; Wright, *Ezekiel*, 97.

² Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 278.

³ Craigie, *Ezekiel*, 56.

⁴ *HALOT*, 2:1111.

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While the image of Asherah, once having been removed and now placed back on the Temple Mount, is something revolting and offensive—the Lord further speaks to Ezekiel about *to'eivot gedolot* (תועבות גדולות), “greater abominations”:

“Son of Man, do you see what they do? Great abominations are [the people of] the House of Israel committing here, to cause Me to distance Myself from My Sanctuary. And now you will yet again see great abominations” (v. 6, ATS).

As will be seen, it is not enough for the people to have erected a reprehensible, offensive image on the Temple Mount—because there are secret sins taking place as well!

8:7-8 Ezekiel describes how, “Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall” (v. 7, NIV). The term *chor* (חור) can mean a “hole in [a] chest, wall” (*HALOT*),⁵ or something “hollow” (*BDB*).⁶ This could also be viewed as some sort of recess (1 Samuel 14:11; Job 30:6). As v. 8 records, “He said to me, ‘Son of man, now dig through the wall.’ So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance.” *IVPBBC* describes the likely scene of the Prophet Ezekiel accessing this hole or portal:

“The rectangular temple structure (facing east) is surrounded by a walled inner courtyard. Outside of this wall is the outer courtyard. Outside of this wall is the outer courtyard. The wall is lined with chambers used for various purposes. Ezekiel first is set down in his vision outside the north gate leading from the outer courtyard into the inner court. From this outer courtyard, Ezekiel could look through the gate at the altar that dominated the inner courtyard. The gates leading into the temple precincts were added after Solomon’s original construction of the temple (2 Kings 15:35). The hole near the gateway (v. 7) area may have led into one of those chambers lining the courtyard wall, perhaps a storage room that had been transformed into a shrine where the seventy elders stood in their own separate niches and worshiped idolatrous images.”⁷

The verb *chatar* (חָתַר) is notably rendered as “tunnel” (ATS) or “break” (NJPS), in the two major Jewish versions. In the estimation of S. Fisch, “The vision of the prophet digging through the wall and finding idols alludes to the breaking of the wall by the enemy as punishment for the idolatry practised in the Temple.”⁸

8:9-10 Having broken or tunneled through, God tells Ezekiel, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here” (v. 9, ESV), the NIV somewhat paraphrasing *ha'to'eivot ha'ra'ot* (הַתּוֹעֲבוֹת הַרָעוֹת) for v. 9, having, “Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.” Breaking in to see what activity is occurring, Ezekiel states, “So I went in and saw; and there, portrayed upon the wall round about, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel” (v. 10, RSV).

Various suggestions have been made regarding the origin of these images that were worshiped. Some suggest a combination of idols from Egypt, Canaan, and Babylon.⁹ Egyptian influence on the idolatrous practices exposed, are widely preferred, though, given the Egyptian political involvement in the Southern Kingdom following the death of King Josiah (2 Kings 23:31-35), with some temporary relief from Egypt against Babylon actually witnessed (Jeremiah 37:5-10). Charles L. Feinberg, as a Hebrew Christian interpreter, also leans toward what Ezekiel sees being Egyptian-styled idolatry.¹⁰ And if Egyptian deities were at all being venerated in this secret place that Ezekiel has to break in to see, then those Judean leaders involved were likely pro-Egyptian, having experienced great tumult at the hands of Babylon. Peter C. Craigie is keen to observe,

⁵ Ibid., 1:348.

⁶ *BDB*, 301.

⁷ Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, pp 695-696.

⁸ Fisch, 42.

⁹ Taylor, pp 98-99; Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in *BKCOT*, 1243.

¹⁰ Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, 50

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“So why, with a public altar outside, was there *secret worship* of other false gods inside? Probably, there were two forms of false religion present. The open altar outside represented the public false cult, that akin to the religion of neighbouring Canaan. But the leaders of the land had not lost their nationalistic spirit, even if they had lost their faith; they still sought deliverance from the enemy, Babylon. But in seeking that deliverance, they turned to Egypt; they were engaged in secret in the worship of Egypt’s gods. And thus there is further terrible irony in the scene. After the Exodus from Egyptian slavery, seventy elders had participated in the making of the covenant (Exod. 24:1, 9). Now, threatened by slavery once again, seventy elders of another age turned back to Egypt, of all places, in seeking salvation.”¹¹

Eugene Lamar Cooper also concurs,

“There was no apparent reason for the secrecy of this group of worshipers. Some interpreters suggest that these practices resembled Egyptian worship rather than Babylonian cults. If so, the group would have had to worship in secret because the gods of the Egyptian pantheon would have been offensive, perhaps even illegal under Babylonian rule.”¹²

Joseph Blenkinsopp draws the further conclusion, regarding the images witnessed, that “The scene is reminiscent of Egyptian burial chambers, the walls of which were covered with brilliantly painted images of deities in animal form, including Anubis, the jackal-headed god who weighed the souls of the dead.”¹³ Surely, this is useful to consider as well, but what cannot go unnoticed are the connections between the forbidden images detailed in Deuteronomy 4:16-18, and what is recorded here in Ezekiel 8:10:¹⁴

DEUTERONOMY 4:16-18	EZEKIEL 8:10
[S]o that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.	So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts <i>and</i> detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around

The idolatrous images, that the Prophet Ezekiel broke into seeing, are described as *kol-tavnit remes u'beheimah sheqetz v'kol-gillulei* (כל־תבנית רמש ובהמה שקץ וכל־גלול׳), “all-of kind-of crawling-thing and animal detestable and-all-of idols-of” (Kohlenberger).¹⁵ Bible readers can definitely be aware of the Apostle Paul’s observation of fallen humanity, “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:22-23). It is recognized by various examiners how there is likely some connection, even if just via the classifications of animal images as idols listed, that the animals represented are listed as unclean according to the Torah.¹⁶ Steven Tuell is one who confirms, “The Hebrew words rendered ‘crawling things and detestable

¹¹ Craigie, *Ezekiel*, 61.

¹² Cooper, 121.

¹³ Blenkinsopp, 55.

¹⁴ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 292, fn#46 makes some specific connections between the Hebrew of both Deuteronomy 4:16-24 and Ezekiel 8:10.

¹⁵ Kohlenberger, 4:317.

¹⁶ Alexander, in *EXP*, 6:783; Blenkinsopp, 55.

animals' refer to unclean creatures that pious Israelites were forbidden to eat, or even to touch (see Lev. 7:21; 11:44)."¹⁷

8:11-12 The secret worship scene is described: "Before them stood seventy men, elders of the House of Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing in their midst. Everyone had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense smoke ascended" (v. 11, NJPS). A censor of incense was used on *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:12-13), but burning incense as a part of idolatrous worship is also witnessed in the Tanach (Isaiah 65:3; Jeremiah 19:4, 13). There is also some kind of likely allusion to the seventy elders of Israel from the Torah here (Exodus 24:1, 9; Numbers 11:16-25), with leaders who had once witnessed the intimate presence of God in the Tabernacle—to now their presumed successors who have an Asherah abomination out in public (v. 5), and likely Egyptian worship in private (v. 10). In the view of Daniel I. Block, the leaders secretly conducting this idolatrous activity, were those who had been left over after the deportation of King Jehoiachin to Babylon:

"The term *zēqēnīm* [זְקֵנִים] refers to the lay leaders who had risen to prominence in Jerusalem after the deportation of Jehoiachin and his officials (2 Ki. 24:12-16). These were obviously important men in the city, probably including the *śārīm* [שָׂרִים], 'officials,' whose primary function was to offer counsel ('*ēṣā* [עֲצָה], Ezek. 7:26) in the government of the community. The number seventy immediately recalls the group that assisted Moses in governing the nation during their wilderness wanderings (Exod. 24:1, 9; Num. 11:16, 24, 25). In this context, however, the number of elders seems to have been determined by the number of images, rather than vice versa. Given his background, Ezekiel must have been horrified at the sight of this large group of civic officials usurping priestly prerogatives by encroaching on the sacred site and taking charge of cultic rituals."¹⁸

Why is Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan mentioned? It has been widely thought that this is the son of King Josiah's secretary (2 Kings 22:8-14; 2 Chronicles 34:15-21). Ahikam the son of Shaphan, was a supporter of the Prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:24), with other members of clan Shaphan closely associated with his work as well (Jeremiah 29:3; 36:10; 40:5, 9, 11; 41:2; 43:6). In the view of John B. Taylor, "Clearly Jaazaniah was the black sheep of a worthy family."¹⁹

Ezekiel is told by the Lord, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land'" (v. 12, NIV). An uncommon Hebrew term is employed, *maskit* (מַשְׁכִּית), meaning "show-piece, figure, imagination" (*BDB*).²⁰ With each of the elders worshipping at a niche, *chaderei maskito* (חַדְרֵי מַשְׁכִּיתוֹ) has been variably translated as "his room of pictures" (RSV), "chambers of his imagery" (KJV), "his image-covered chamber" (NJPS), "his rooms paved for prostration" (Keter Crown Bible). These leaders believe that the God of Israel has completely abandoned them, and so they, albeit privately, seek out other gods of their own choosing.

8:13 With the Prophet Ezekiel having seen the secret idolatry taking place in the wall of the Temple, the Lord further tells him, "You shall see even more terrible abominations which they practice" (NJPS). In v. 14, it is recorded, "Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the LORD's house which was toward the north; and behold, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz," Tammuz being an ancient Mesopotamian deity of spring vegetation.²¹ Further abominations are specified, which the Lord is obviously not at all pleased with:

"He said to me, 'Do you see *this*, son of man? Yet you will see still greater abominations than these.' Then He brought me into the inner court of the LORD's house. And behold, at the entrance to

¹⁷ Tuell, 47.

¹⁸ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, pp 289-290.

¹⁹ Taylor, 99.

²⁰ *BDB*, 967.

²¹ Cf. Mourning for Tammuz," in *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 1320.

Also consult J. Gray, "Tammuz," in *IDB*, 4:516; P.W. Gaebelein, Jr., "Tammuz," in *ISBE*, 4:725-726.

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the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, *were* about twenty-five men with their backs to the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east; and they were prostrating themselves eastward toward the sun. He said to me, 'Do you see *this*, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose. Therefore, I indeed will deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor will I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I will not listen to them'" (vs. 15-18).

Ezekiel 8:5-13 application The scene impressed upon the Prophet Ezekiel by God is fairly despicable to consider. It is not enough for there to just be outward idolatry permitted by the Babylonian state, but there is private idolatry with probable Egyptian veneration, that was illegal. All of this is prohibited by the God of Israel, who is enraged at what has been taking place, and how significant the abominations of His people have devolved. Craigie astutely summarizes,

"Ezekiel...entered the secret room, and an extraordinary sight met his eyes. The walls of the room were decorated with the paintings, or reliefs, of all kinds of creatures; there were insects, reptiles and vermin, most of them considered unclean for purposes of consumption under Israel's dietary laws. But it was not the art on the walls that evoked the prophet's horror; rather, it was the art of idolatry that the inhabitants of the room were practising. Seventy of Israel's leading citizens were there, offering their worship and incense to the inanimate murals decorating the room. And in the midst of this scene of debased religion was the man of good family and distinction, Ja-azaniah; his father, Shaphan, had played a leading role in Josiah's great reform of the faith (2 Kings 23:3-20). Ja-azaniah's presence there in the secret room indicated how sadly Israel's faith had fallen since the days of Josiah's reformation."²²

While the various idolatrous images were portrayed in the form of animals classified as unclean on the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, might Ezekiel 8:5-13 provide some important background information for what is witnessed later in Scripture? It cannot go unnoticed that the same sort of terminology is employed by the Apostle Peter, in the vision of the sheet shown him by God, in Acts 10, 11:

EZEKIEL 8:10	ACTS 10:11-12 (cf.11:5-6)
So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts <i>and</i> detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around.	[A]nd he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all <i>kinds of</i> four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air.

Peter's vision of the sheet is commonly interpreted by Christian examiners as an indication that the Torah's dietary laws have been abolished for the post-resurrection era (Acts 10:13-15; 11:7-9). Many Messianic people, however, would object, noting the subsequent actions of Peter himself regard him going into the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:17-48; 11:11-18), particularly embodied by his word, "You yourselves know that it is not permitted for a Jewish man to associate with a non-Jew or to visit him. Yet God has shown me that I should call no one unholy or unclean" (Acts 10:28, TLV). The conclusion drawn is that Peter's vision involves the spiritual cleansing of pagans via the work of Israel's Messiah, and that Peter should not hesitate to interact with them. An admitted weakness, of much Messianic examination of Peter's vision, has been in trying to establish whether or not the unclean animals on the sheet can be representative of pagans

²² Craigie, *Ezekiel*, pp 59-60.

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in their idolatry. The scene of Ezekiel 8:5-13 would certainly provide some Tanach substantiation for this (discussed further).