

## The Allegory of the Cedar Trees.

Ezekiel 17. A Verse by Verse Study.  
Or, What God is Doing in Israel and Human History  
The text used in this study is the English Standard Version

**:1 The word of the LORD came to me:** First of all note that what we are to read has Divine origin. Whilst all of the Bible is claimed to be God inspired and good for basic understanding, some is God highlighted, emphasised, solemnised. Therefore take note. Added to this is **:3 say, Thus says the Lord GOD** Ezekiel is to communicate to his people that he is speaking by Divine authority, therefore they had best take note. We have here a double affirmation. Repetition was to the Hebrews what bold type or underlining is to us. It says: "Take note. This is important." More than that we find at the end of the section a concluding affirmation of the message. **:24 I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.** Verse 24 was to them what a signature and seal to a solemn document such as a declaration or a will, is to us. It is God's promise to perform. It is not an agreement of contract based on the compliance of an other party. Performance is wholly an obligation of the Lord. Know this: God will do it.

It is therefore important for us to understand what God is saying, and if we want God's blessing in our lives it is important to us to choose to fall in with what God is doing. If you have not already chosen Jesus Christ to be your saviour and have not already called Him your Lord, then we urge you to do so now. Otherwise you are outside His plan and excluded from His provision. Once you have made this commitment be obedient to your Lord.

### Part One: The Riddle within an Allegory

**:2 Propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel;**

The Bible is full of puzzles. The stories Jesus told were sometimes accompanied by interpretations. See for example Luke 8:9 "And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said . . ." Other times we are left to work it out. You are expected to do the work, and as you do you will be blessed by adding knowledge to knowledge about not only God's word, but God's heart - God Himself.

Assignment: Interpret Matthew 13:33. What exactly was Jesus' teaching?

**:3 A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colours, A Pinion is the outer part of a birds wing including its flight feathers.**

**came to Lebanon** not the country we know today but a mountainous forest north-east of lake Galilee, from whence the Sidonians took their timber, timber which supplied

the building of the temple. In the days of Solomon it was Israel's northern region, but by now not a part of Judah.

**and took the top of the cedar.** Top is explained in verse 4, "the growing twigs."

**:4 and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants.** Land of trade is "country of Canaan," traditionally a nation of traders. The meaning of this phrase seems strange to us, but it is explained by its parallel line, "a city of merchants."

The inferred meaning of this phrase, you probably missed when reading Ezekiel chapter 16. In verse 29 where the phrase "the trading land of Chaldea" or more explicitly as it is in the NIV "Babylonia, a land of merchants." The concept which is key to understanding the chapter. *Judah's king is like a cutting of a cedar tree which a richly adorned vulture plucked and planted in Babylon.*

We need to pause to explain that this part of Ezekiel is Hebrew poetry. At first it may be hard see this in an English Bible. Poetry is easily recognised in Psalms, Proverbs, Job and other places where the lines are set out for us by the translators.

Hebrew poetry uses similar or contrasting ideas, not like our similar sounds and regular beats. Here are a couple of examples with which you are now familiar:

great wings - long pinions  
rich in plumage - of many colours  
top of the cedar - topmost twigs  
land of trade - city of merchants

Now that you have the idea, you will see Hebrew poetry in many places in the Old Testament. (Look for a *series* of repeating similarities or ideas in contrast, but not the odd line which may occur due to translation.)

**:5 Then he took of the seed of the land** that is a native of Israel

**and planted it in fertile soil.** Set in its own native land

**He placed it beside abundant waters** where it could grow and in time flourish

**He set it like a willow** twig which has as yet no root.

**:6 and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood.** So it rooted, became a vine incapable of greatness. And it grew in dependence on its gardener. "Low in height" indicates humility.

**:7 Another great eagle** Another is 'one other' or, a different one of the same type. **bent its roots toward him by channelling water from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it.** Thus it also **shot forth its branches toward him** instead.

The second eagle took over the planting of the first eagle.

**:8** Verse 8 can be read two ways. The issue seems to be with the Hebrew word 'planted' which also can be rendered 'transplanted' The RSV renders it, "He (the second eagle) transplanted it to good soil by abundant waters that it might bring forth branches and bear fruit." This seems to be more in keeping with the story.

**:9 Say, God speaking, Thus says the Lord GOD:** See the comments v1-3 above for emphasis. **Will he,** the first eagle allow this? Will he **not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers?**

**:10** The East wind in Israel is a hot, dry wind coming off the Arabian desert.

## Part Two: The interpretation.

**:11 Then the word of the LORD came to me:** There was probably a little time allowed for the hearers to interpret the allegory. Time for consideration makes more impact of the intended meanings.

**:12 Do you not know what these things mean?**

The First Eagle and the Cedar sprout:

**Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon.** Read the story in 2 Kings 24:11-16.

The First Eagle and the seed of the land planted in native soil

**:13 And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath.** He made Zedekiah to be a puppet king. Read the story in 2 Kings 24:17-20, and Ezekiel 17:13-15.

**:14 that the kingdom might be humble.** Zedekiah was given a opportunity to rule a small but prosperous dependancy under Nebuchadnezzar. Had he kept his covenant with him and with God, all would have been well.

**:15** Obviously Zedekiah wanted his freedom from his puppet king status. It is the old temptation, "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." Do your own thing, be independent. Run your own life. Be a man. He thought that he could use Egypt to gain his own ends.

**:16** Sentence is passed, **in Babylon he shall die.** God does not honour broken vows, dishonoured contracts, perjury or lies. They reek of the pit. See what happened. 2 Kings 25:6&7.

**:17 Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war.** Pharaoh at this time was a powerful monarch in the region, but not powerful enough to stand against the superpower, Babylon.

**:18 He despised the oath . . . the covenant** to Nebuchadnezzar.

**:19 It is my oath that he despised, and my covenant** A broken oath to man is a slight on God as it is against His law, the ninth commandment 'Thou shalt not bear false witness,' the embodiment of His truth, an expression of His nature. A broken oath taken before God, such as the marriage vow, or before a court sworn on the Bible is a double insult to God. More than that his actions were in direct contravention of God's covenant with Israel in times past Exodus 19:5.

**:20 I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgement with him there.** Read the story of Zedekiah and his last days in Jeremiah 52:1-11.

**:21 And you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken.** We know that the Lord is true because the word which he has spoken occurs just as He has said. He is truth. His word is thus truth.

## Part Three: An Encouraging Prophecy

**:22 Thus says the Lord GOD:** The man of God is a true man of God when he stands in the place of God bringing the word of God to the people of God, regardless of the cost. Hear then what God is going to do.

**"I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar** this twig is of the same kind as that taken by Nebuchadnezzar, a king of Israel. He is not the same twig, but one of the Lord's choosing. His name in the prophets is 'the Branch'.

Isaiah 4:2 In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious. His name: Jesus.

**A tender one** speaking of His lowly human condition.

Isaiah 53:2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, *there is* no beauty that we should desire him.

**:23 On the mountain height of Israel** that mountain is Mount Zion **will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar.** Unlike Zedekiah the lowly vine. The Hebrew word 'noble' has the meaning of great or majestic and this describes our Jesus.

**And under it** 'Under' is Hebrew idiom meaning 'at the foot of' **will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.** Under the narrow, legalistic dispensation of Jewish control in those days, there was little expectation of God's intention that through His provision all peoples would be blessed. But through the sacrificial demonstration of the Father's love and the superintending ministry of the Holy Spirit, His hand picked disciples have multiplied to encompass the globe. Millions today nest beneath His shade. Myriads upon myriads and thousands upon thousands are today around His throne and this is their song "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"

**:24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD;** that is, the other nations. Just as the cedar represents the kingdom of Israel, so these trees are the nations of the world. Look around the world today. What can you see? The nations are pursuing their own ends. The poor become poorer. The rich become affluent on the back of the poor. When Jesus comes, He will **bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.** Hasten the day. How can this be accomplished? **I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.** We have His word. We notice the solemnity of His seal.

SOURCES: Principal references used in preparing these notes are: Alfred Barne's *Notes on the Bible*. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown *Commentary*, Brown Driver Briggs *Hebrew Lexicon*, Strongs *Exhaustive Concordance*, The *Ellicott Commentary on Ezekiel*, Ezekiel, J B Taylor. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*. The Bible text used and quoted is that of the English Standard Version except if otherwise noted.