

Prophecy Against the Negev

The Parable of the Forest Fire

Ezeki'el 20: 45-49

DIG: What are the three different Hebrew words all translated south? When used symbolically, "fire" commonly refers to an invading enemy, and "forest" refers to a mass of people. What is God saying here? How do you feel about both the green and dry trees burning together? Why does ADONAI do that? Did the hearers of this prophecy heed this warning? Why or why not? How do you think Ezekiel felt about it?

REFLECT: What was God's purpose in this warning? In the New Covenant, what is the unquenchable or eternal fire (Luke 3:17; Matthew 25:41)? Do you ignore or concentrate on the bad news God has for our culture? On a scale of one to ten, how well do you accept unpleasant news? How do you react when someone you care about is suffering under God's discipline? How will you survive YHVH's "scorched earth" policy?

591 BC during the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah

Some time later, Ezekiel's long prophecy of 20:1-44 was followed by a short parable. **The one main point of the parable of the forest fire is that Nebuchadnezzar was going to devastate the Negev by the fire of judgment that will spread to engulf all of Judah.**

In this **near historical prophecy** against Judah, Ezekiel describes Nebuchadnezzar's invasion. The prophecy extended beyond 591 BC, but the sins and the problems he is speaking of are of that time. **The word of ADONAI came to me (Ezekiel 20:45).** In the Hebrew text of Ezekiel, this verse is the beginning of Chapter 21, where the connection is clear and the figure is explained in direct prophetic language.

Son of man, set your face toward the south (Ezekiel 20:46a). In verse 46 there are three different Hebrew words all translated south. Here, the word south is *teiman*, which literally means *that which lies on the right hand*. On our maps the top of the map is north, but on their maps the top was eastward, so if you are facing east, *that which lies on the right hand* would be south.

Preach comes from the Hebrew verb *nataph* and can be translated as *drip, drop, or speak*, which is translated **preach** here. To *drop a word* is used of the message of the prophets. The picture is of a drop of water from a tilted pitcher (**Deuteronomy 32:2; Amos 7:16 translated prophesy; Micah 2:6 and 11 translated prophesy**). **Preach against the south (Ezekiel 20:46b).** The Hebrew word translated south here is *darom*, which means *to emit streams of light*.

And drop a word against the forest of the southland (Ezeki'el 20:46c). The Hebrew word for south here is a proper noun, **the Negev**, specifically referring to the southern part of Isra'el, meaning *the dry land* (Joshua 15:21). **The southland** had always been invaded, as far as the Mesopotamian powers were concerned, from the north. The parable of **the forest** does not relate to Babylon, but to the land of Judah.

But as **Ezekiel** declared **his** parable, it quickly became clear to **him** that **his** audience did not understand its meaning. They complained that **the prophet** could **only speak in parables**, and, though they were not a particularly perceptive audience, the parable should have been clear to them. To speak of a **forest fire** in **the Negev** was crazy; everybody knew it as barren land in the south of Y'hudah. Therefore, with **God's** permission, **Ezekiel** explained **his** parable.²⁹⁵

Say to the Negev forest, "Hear the word of ADONAI. Adonai ELOHIM says, "I will light a fire in you; it will devour every tree in you, green and dry alike, **a figure for the righteous and the wicked**; a blazing, unquenchable flame that will scorch every face from the Negev to the north." To **everyone** who saw the devastating fire its source would be evident, it was **God** who had kindled **the fire** that would not be put out (Ezeki'el 20:48).

Whenever the word **forest** is used symbolically, it always speaks of a mass of people. So the prophecy is not against literal **trees**, but against the people of **the Negev**. **Any resistance that the Judeans give to the Babylonian army, the unquenchable flame, will be futile**. It would touch every life. From Dan in **the north** to **the Negev** in **the south**. What will be judgment for the godless will be refining for the godly. So it was when Babylon invaded **the Land** for the third time, bringing about the destruction of Judah in 586 BC. No power on earth could hinder the invasion; it was started by **God** and carried out through **Him**. Through the messages of **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel**, however, no Israelite could doubt as to who brought about the catastrophe (see **Ae - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**).²⁹⁶

Then **Ezeki'el** said: **Oh, Adonai ELOHIM! They complain that I speak only in perplexing parables (Ezeki'el 20:49)**. Though **he** was prophesying Judah's destruction, the exiles were only confused by **his** words. They were hard-hearted and refused to comprehend **his** message. **There is never enough proof for unbelief**.²⁹⁷