

The land devours its inhabitants: Ezekiel 36:13

by Douglas E. Cox

Ezekiel's prophecy of chapter 36 describes the promised land, the land of Canaan, as a land which "devourest up men," but he said that this would change. The land would no more devour its inhabitants. What does this prophecy mean? Ezekiel wrote:

Ezekiel 36:13-14

Thus saith the Lord GOD; Because they say unto you, Thou land devourest up men, and hast bereaved thy nations: Therefore thou shalt devour men no more, neither bereave thy nations any more, saith the Lord GOD.

Patrick Fairbairn noted that the prophet meant that the land would not only cease devouring its inhabitants, but that it would also cease causing them to *stumble*. Fairbairn wrote: [1]

There is here a play of words in the original, which is necessarily lost in the translation. The prophet had mentioned the reproach against the land as being only the grave of its people, devouring and bereaving them, like a cruel unnatural mother. But now, in predicting the better future, while he says, it should not devour any more, he suddenly changes the other verb, and instead of saying, (...) thou shalt not bereave, he says, (...) thou shalt not make to stumble or fall. The Kri reading substitutes the former, evidently for the purpose of affording an easy explanation, and the ancient versions also express it. Most modern commentators adopt the Kri, so still Ewald and Hitzig; but Havernick properly adheres to the text. For the repetition of (...) in the next verse is a proof that here a change of meaning is introduced; and a change, that also very suitably prepares the way for the truths to be declared in the next section (ver. 16, etc.), which unfolds the moral cause of the past destructions, the sins and defections of the people. Canaan must not only cease to devour and swallow up its people, but even to prove an occasion of stumbling to them. By being this in time past, it had necessarily proved a destroyer, but henceforth both cause and effect should be taken away. Throughout, the land is personified, and represented as doing that, which was done on it.

The meaning of the land devouring its inhabitants is obvious when we consider the role of land as a repository for the dead. In the Proverbs, the *grave* is one of four things that are *never satisfied*.

Proverbs 30:15-16

There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, It is enough: The grave; and the barren womb; the earth that is not filled with water; and the fire that saith not, It is enough.

In Ezekiel 36:11, the prophet said of the mountains of Israel, that God "will do better unto you than at your beginnings." E. W. Hengstenberg related this to the coming of Christ, and the gospel. He wrote: [2]

"Better than in your past:" this was fulfilled when He appeared in the holy land, who could say of Himself, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden," and who far outshone Solomon in all his glory.

"Thou shalt no more make them childless" (ver. 12): the self-evident condition is, if they do not fill up anew the measure of their sins.

On the land devouring men, Hengstenberg wrote: [3]

"Thou devourest men" (ver. 13). The land of Israel had a dangerous position. It was a land of transit (Zech. ix. 8), an apple of discord for the Asiatic and African powers, and exposed to oppression by the surrounding nations of the wilderness, who always went to it for barter. On account of this dangerous position, it is designated even in Num. xiii. 32 as a land that devours its inhabitants. Precisely such a land had God chosen for His people. They should always have occasion to look up to Him; and when they fell away, the rods were also laid up. Peaceful seclusion would have produced a stagnant condition, the worst that can befall the people of God.

Numbers 13:32 refers to the land as "devouring" its inhabitants; all of the ten spies who brought an evil report upon the land, and the Israelites who believed their report, died in the wilderness, not in the promised land, so the wilderness where the Israelites dwelt for 40 years "devoured its inhabitants" too.

Numbers 13:32

And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature.

The land eating up its inhabitants was common to all lands, and it is a consequence of man's mortality. The land of Canaan was unique because in it that natural order of things would cease.

Comments by Albert Barnes echo those of Hengstenberg: [4]

A land that eateth up . . . – *i.e.* it is a land which from its position is exposed to incessant attacks from one quarter and another, and so its occupants must be always armed and watchful.

Dispensationalist William Kelly thought that Ezekiel's prophecy about the land no longer devouring its inhabitants could not have been fulfilled by the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon, and is even yet unfulfilled. He denied that the prophecy could apply to the gospel, or to the church. He wrote: [5]

The Lord thus pledges His oath, jealous for the blessing of Israel and indignant at their reproach not yet come, still continued from the heathen. In vain do men apply such glowing words to the return from Babylon, which was but an earnest of what is coming for the entire people. Can any one who respects scripture and knows the facts pretend that the Lord multiplied men on the mountains of Israel, "all the house of Israel, even all of it?" (Ver. 10) Such words seem expressly written to guard souls from such meagre and misleading views. Did Jehovah settle the returned remnant after their old estate, and do good more than at their beginning? (Ver. 11) Did the land, did the mountains, become Israel's inheritance and no more bereave them? (Ver. 12) Do we not know that under the fourth empire a still worse destruction came and a longer dispersion, instead of the land devouring no more, neither bereaving its own nations nor bearing the insult of the Gentiles any more? (Ver. 15)

No! the fulfilment of the prophecy is yet to come, but come it will as surely as Jehovah lives and has thus sworn through His prophet concerning the land of Israel. To suppose that the gospel or the church is meant by such language is very far from simplicity or intelligence.

When we consider that the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a *shadow* and *type* of spiritual, eternal things, the meaning of Ezekiel's prophecy becomes evident. The land of Canaan devoured its inhabitants, all those who died and were buried in it, but in the "better country," mentioned in Hebrews 11:16, which is the reality that Canaan foreshadowed, there is no dying, or bereavement. In fact, Hebrews 11:6 probably alludes to Ezekiel 36:11, which promises something "better" than the mountains of Canaan. Ezekiel's prophecy contrasts the literal land with the heavenly, spiritual inheritance of the saints.

Hebrews 11:16

But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Jesus promises eternal life to those who have faith in him; I suggest that this is the significance of Ezekiel's prophecy that says the land will "devour men no more." This is confirmed by the spiritual nature of the promises in the following verses in Ezekiel 36.

In verse 24, "For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land" has a spiritual meaning; for example, flawed beliefs, delusions will be abandoned. Jesus said the Spirit will guide the believers into the truth.

In verse 25, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean," corresponds to "washing of water by the word" in Ephesians 5:26.

In verse 28, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you" is the promise of the Spirit to the Church. "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my

statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" is the New Covenant promise referred to in Hebrews 8:10.

In verse 28, "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God" the land is a metaphor that represents the promises to those who trust in Christ, as Paul said, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." [2 Corinthians 1:20]

References

1. Patrick Fairbairn. Ezekiel and the book of his prophecy: an exposition. T. & T. Clark, 1855. p. 388, note.
2. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg. The prophecies of the prophet Ezekiel elucidated. Tr. by A. C. & J. G. Murphy. T. & T. Clark, 1869. p. 311.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Barnes' Notes on the Bible
5. William Kelly. Notes On Ezekiel. 1876.