

EXPLORING SOLUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES INFLUENCING THE 21ST CENTURY SOCIAL FABRIC: ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

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Abstract

The book of Ezekiel presents a narrative of environment, natural resources, change of climate, and sustainability of the land of Israel relative to the pre, during, and post Israelite captivity in Babylon. This research paper explores the environment, natural resources, change of climate, and restoration in the land of Israel prior, during, and after the Israelite captivity in Babylon.

The condition of environment, natural resources, change of climate, and restoration runs its full cycle. The questions that are raised by such a situation in the book of Ezekiel are: What causes the negative change of the deterioration of environment, depletion of natural resources, and setting in of adverse weather? What brings about the positive change of the conducive environment, abundant resources, and favorable climate?

The methodology adopted in this research paper involves an inductive or exegetical approach, analyzing the key concepts of environment, natural resources, climate change, and restoration in order to examine the relationship between the cause and effect of the activities of the Israelites and the environmental condition before, during, and after their Babylonian captivity.

Due to the scope of the research, a limited application will be made to contemporary environment, natural resources, climate change, and viability in the 21st century.

Key words: environment, natural resource(s), climate, restoration, law

Introduction

The book of Ezekiel presents a narrative of environment, natural resources, climate change, and restoration of the land of Israel relative to the pre-Babylonian, during-Babylonian, and post-Babylonian Israelite captivity in Babylon. In the pre-Babylonian Israelite captivity, the land is glorious, but during the Israelite Babylonian captivity, the land is desolate. In the post-Babylonian Israelite captivity period, the country reverts to its former beauty.

Biblical scholars generally view the book of Ezekiel as structured into two:

1) judgment – Chapters 1-32; and 2) restoration – chapters 33-48 (Mutua, 2014). Not only does God judge and restore Israel whom He had made physically given His law of the covenant, but also punishes and rehabilitates other surrounding and distant nations whom He had not made a covenant with.

The Israelites were carried by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon, because God judged them for breaking His covenant with them (Joyce, 2002). Nevertheless, the Lord

promised to restore them to their land from Babylonian captivity after they repented in while in exile (Vawter & Hoppe, 1991). The Lord disciplined His people Israel and the other nations by the same standards of His law by desolating their lands and displacing the inhabitants, because of their violence (Ezekiel 25-32). The Lord, however, promised to restore some of them (Ezekiel 29:13-14).

Statement of the problem

The condition of environment, natural resources, change of climate, and sustainability runs full cycle. The questions that are raised by this phenomenon are:

- 1) What causes the negative change in deterioration of the environment, depletion of natural resources, setting in of adverse climate?
- 2) What brings about the positive change of conducive environment, abundant natural resources, and favorable climate?

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this research paper involves an exegetical approach –analyzing key concepts of environment, natural resources, climate change, and restoration in order to examine the relationship between the cause and effect of the anthropogenic activities of the Israelites and the environmental condition before, during, and after their Babylonian captivity relative to God’s covenant. Due to the scope of the research, a limited application is made to contemporary environment, natural resources, climate change, and viability in the 21st century social fabric.

Environment, Natural Resources, and Climate before the Israelite Babylonian Captivity

The book of Ezekiel paints a positive picture of environment, natural resources, and climate before the Israelites were taken into

Babylonian captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar in the 6th century B.C. (B.C.E). The land of Israel epitomizes the blessings that would accompany Israel if they obeyed God’s law (Lev 26; Deuteronomy 28) (Fredenburg, 2002). The land is portrayed as fertile and full of milk and honey –a language explaining lush pasture for cattle and luxuriant growth of farmland vegetation of vineyards. It is called צְבִיָּא *zevii* (glorious) land (Ezekiel 16:14; 20:6, 15). For example, Kings Uzziah and Hezekiah of Judah were prosperous rulers under the blessings of the Lord in the land (2 Chr 26; 32:27-30). The land of Israel was associated with God as His land (Ezekiel 36:20).

Environment

The Lord searched out a splendid and glorious land for His people Israel (Ezekiel 20:16). The Hebrew word צְבִיָּא *zevii* suggests that the country is opulent, beautiful, and attractive. There was an abundant rainfall that sustained prolific growth of vegetation and occasioned plenty of water (Ezekiel 19:10). The hills, valleys, ravines, and plains are covered with green. The land of Israel is allegorized as the garden of Eden –the garden of God (Ezekiel 29). The land is “a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth” (Judges 18:10). Archaeological finds collaborate the Biblical factual information found in the book of Ezekiel and elsewhere of a good land.

The iron age II-III in the land of Israel may be characterized as an urban period, reflected in the large number of urban settlements, the rise in the standard of living, the distribution of luxury goods outside the royal palaces, and the view of society obtained from the archaeological and biblical record (*The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 304). More than one-half a century before Israel was

carried to captivity in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. (B.C.E), the land of Israel had a conducive environment, spurring prosperity. King Uzaiiah of Judah loved the soil, farmed on the hills and fertile lands, and kept cattle on the lowlands (2 Chr 26:9-10). King Hezekiah of Judah too amassed minerals, spices, weaponry, vessels, grain, wine, and oil, built cities, kept cattle, and diverted streams of waters for use in Jerusalem (2 Chr 32:27-29 (*Ancient Israel*, 1992).

Natural Resources

The land of Israel was endowed with abundant natural resources, including but not limited to: water bodies and courses –lakes, rivers, springs, rainfall, and glacier; flora – forests, grass, and crops; minerals –gold, silver, stones, basalt, salt, copper, bronze, tin, and lead; fertile soil –limestone, alluvium, volcanic, sand, and clay; fair weather –sunshine and wind; fauna –animals, birds, fish, and insects. The wild animals included: lions, leopards, panthers, bears, wolves, foxes, and wild boar; (*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 119). The land of Israel was a complete package containing מתנת *matanot* (gifts) which the Lord had bestowed upon His people Israel. The Hebrew word מתנת *matanot* (gifts) implies a blessing from God, for the Lord Himself had given them as a blessing (Deuteronomy 16:17; Ezekiel 20:26, 39).

The natural resources supported the following:

Agriculture

The fertile soil, abundant sunshine, plenteous moisture, and clean air sustained successful farming of grains, fruits, honey, and dairy which generated agricultural products such as flour, oil, milk, wine, wax, honey, and balm (Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001). Such fecund soil included the rich volcanic soils of Golan heights, Bashan, and alluvium soils of the valley of Acco (Cleave, 1999). Not only were

the agricultural products used for domestic consumption in households and the temple of God in Jerusalem, but also traded abroad. Archaeological evidence reveals that, “ten incense altars have come to light, some of them insitu and all in context related to the extensive oil industry at the site” (*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 362). Containers such as jars and decanters signify the presence of vineyards, producing wine (*Ancient Israel*, 1992). The *lamelekh* jars found in Lachish stored large amounts of liquids (*Ancient Israel*, 1992). Oil presses and ovens in the fourth central chamber points to the olive oil industry (*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 332).

Fishing

The water bodies provided fishing grounds and thereby supported families with food. The lakes and rivers made travel and transportation of commodities domestically and internationally viable.

Metallurgy

The availability of metals, minerals, and stones caused the technology of forging hardware, tools, coinage, and jewelry to thrive in Israel, giving rise to cities and towers. The hardware was used to forge military weaponry and the metallic coins were used extensively for exchange in the worship services in the temple of God in Jerusalem. A good example of mining was the Timna valley copper mines. Archaeological collaborative evidence states that, “with the increased working of silver mines, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula, and other distant regions, silver became the main medium of payment” (*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 361). Fire and destruction of a tower in Jerusalem by the Babylonians reveals arrow heads ((*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 368).

Timber Industry

The forests and woodland of the country of Israel provided a good source of plants for herbal medicine, writing materials, and timber for building and construction for housing, furniture, chariots, and carts. Winter and summer houses and beds of ivory, a product of abundant wild life, are attested in the book of Amos –an 8th century B.C. (B.C.E) Israelite writing prophet (Amos 3:15; 6:4). Construction of cities, towers, and agricultural farming were flourishing during the 10th – 6th centuries B.C. (B.C.E), for example in Samaria by Kings Omri and Ahab (Cleave, 1992). “In a number of caves there is a clear continuity beginning as early as the late seventh-century and lasting through most of the sixth century. These tombs contain much jewelry and prestige items, which reflect considerable wealth rather than poverty” (*Ancient Israel*, 1992, p. 372).

Cloth Industry

The animal products such as skins and wool and plant raw material provided a source for clothing and writing materials, occasioning domestic and foreign trade. Trade flourished in Judah in the 7th century B.C. (B.C.E). An abundance of seals, including weights, is an indication of literacy, administration, and trade ((*Ancient Israel*, 1992, pp. 350, 360).

Climate

The climate was favorable to sustain humans, animals, birds, fish, and insects. The mountains offered a cooler weather, the valleys, ravines, and plains afforded moderate weather, and the lowlands sustained a warmer breeze, supporting a luxuriant growth of forests, vegetation, and grass respectively. For example, the Negev desert was forested (Ezekiel 20:7). The conducive climate was

one of the מתנות *matanot* (gifts) that the Lord had blessed Israel with for their prosperity (Waltke & Yu, 2007).

Environment, Natural Resources, and Climate Change during the Israelite Babylonian Captivity

The book of Ezekiel depicts the degradation of environment, deterioration of natural resources, and disturbance of climate during the Israelite captivity in Babylon. The basis for such a gloomy picture is that Israel had broken her covenant, the law of God, with the Lord – both His moral and natural law (Joyce, 2009). The Lord turned His פני *pani* (My face) from Israel and their city Jerusalem (Ezek 15:7; 39:23). God’s moral law constitutes of the ten commandments which the Lord gave to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 20). His natural law operates in the physical realm of the universe (Pss 119:89; 19:1-6).

Concerning God’s covenant with Noah for all humanity which is a precursor of the Sinaitic covenant, Wright (2004) observes: This is explicitly a universal covenant with all life on earth, in which God binds himself in covenant commitment to humans and all other life forms simultaneously . . . it is the covenant within which we stand *alongside* the other creatures on the planet. A covenant relationship binds us both (humans and other creatures) to God our creator. It is therefore at least a fair assumption that God intended some form of covenantal obligation also to exist between us (i.e. not just between human beings, but between human beings and the rest of the creatures.

When the Lord made a covenant with Israel, He promised them blessings and prosperity if they would obey His covenant, but

curses and retrogression when they transgress His law (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 11:26-32:28; Joshua 8:30-35). The Babylonian captivity was a reminder to the Israelites of their rebellion, apostasy, and flouting of God's covenant –the law given through Moses (Chisholm, 2002).

In the context of the book of Ezekiel, the relationship between the sustainability of environment, natural resources, and climate and obedience to the law of God is captivating, because it is the Lord who creates and sustains a conducive environment, abundant natural resources, and favorable climate (Doran, 2011).

Environment

The beautiful land *צביא zevii* (glorious) land which the Lord had acquired for His people Israel was going to be *שׁממא shemama* (desolate) during their captivity in Babylon, because they had violated God's covenant –law (Ezekiel 6:11, 14; 15:8; 30:28, 29; 33:29; cf. Jeremiah 4:1, 4, 27) (Mein, 2001; Wright, 2007). The Hebrew *שׁממא shemama* (desolate) suggests a ruined land without inhabitants (Genesis 47:19; Jeremiah 33:10; 34:22; Ezekiel 6:14; 14:15).

There is a cause and effect of the actions and activities of Israel as regards their breaking of God's law and therefore, bringing devastation upon their beautiful land. Thus, the Lord uprooted Israel from their land and the land became barren without inhabitants (Lyons, 2021). The Israelites had committed the following vices, but not limited to:

- Shedding of blood
- Dishonoring the elderly
- Oppressing the widows, orphans, poor, needy, and foreigners
- Committing adultery
- Despising holy things

- Profaning the Sabbath
- Worshipping idols
- Stealing
- Practicing bribery
- Prophesying falsely
- Engaging in extortion
- Eating flesh with blood
- Having sex during menses
- Burying their dead within the temple precincts

The wicked deeds of Israel provoked the Lord to bring four severe acts of judgments upon them and their land, namely: war, famine, disease, and wild animals (Ezekiel 14:21) (Hiebel, 2019). The four sore acts of punishments disastrously overwhelmed the land and its inhabitants. The war waged against Israel by their neighbors and distant nations, destroyed the environment, including cities, houses, and shrines especially by fire. The exploitation of natural resources by the foreigners diminished the abundance of the wealth of the land. The drought ushered in hunger not only for the people but also domestic and wild animals. The pestilence precipitated an environmental health hazard. The wild beast killed people and domestic animals, threatening environmental security.

Natural Resources

The natural resources affected by the four austere judgments of God of war, hunger, plague, and wild beasts include: water bodies, vegetation, and soil. The water courses experienced diminished water content because of drought and deficiency in rainfall, causing thirst among people and animals. The vegetation and crops, including forests and herbage withered, compounding the problem of timber for construction of buildings and food for people and animals. The dire situation spelled

doom for food security and temple sacrifices of food and animals. The soil was exploited by the invading armies and incursions of the enemy neighbors of Israel such as the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites (Ezekiel 36:5).

The war waged against the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon not only wrecked the country, the city, and the temple of God, but also other Israelite towns and homes, leaving the land *שְׁמָמָה* *shemama* (desolate) (Wood, 1986). The land was rendered unproductive (Doran, 2011).

Climate

The change in prevailing atmospheric temperatures ushered in sweeping extreme cold and hot seasons over the land, bringing in frost and dry spells which destroyed vegetation and crops. The lack of forests and vegetation to modify the climate exacerbated the horrid climatic conditions.

Environment, Natural Resources, and Climate after the Israelite Captivity in Babylon

The book of Ezekiel paints the land of Israel as having a restored suitable environment, plentiful natural resources, and auspicious climate after the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 34; 36; 37) (Dumbriell, 2013). The Lord had shattered the country, because the Judeans had broken the covenant of God – both His moral and natural law. The Israelite Babylonian captivity served as God’s disciplinary measure to win back the wayward Israel to the loyalty of their God of the covenant in obeying His commandments (Ezekiel 14:22, 23; 33:10, 11; 16:61; 20:43; 36:31). Commenting on the repentance of Israel on Ezekielian chapters touching on restoration, Strine (2012) states:

Rather, Ezekiel 14:12-23, 18:10-32, and 33:10-20 explain that YHWH’S future community will respond to this judgement by accepting guilt for the current predicament and demonstrate their ongoing faithfulness through rejecting idol based worship. This response leads to life (Ezekiel 14:14, 16, 18; 18:19, 17, 21; 32; 33:11, 15). And that life is in the land, a view confirmed by both the three well-known ‘new heart and new spirit texts (Ezekiel 11:14-21; 18:30-32; 36:23b-38).

Just as the Lord, by His prophets, prophesied the desolation of the land and captivity of Israel to Babylon due to their apostasy, causing their departure from the land to Babylon, He also, through the same prophets, predicted about *שׁוּב* *shuvv* (restoring) Israel to their land from Babylonian captivity on the basis of their repentance and His forgiveness for their wickedness and turning His *פָּנָי* *pani* (My face) towards the land for tilling and planting (Ezekiel 12:16; 16:53, 55; 20:43, 44; 36:9, 31, 32; 39:29). With respect to the blessings and curses cited by the Lord in books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy for Israel if they obey or disobey the covenant of God, Fredenburg (2002, p. 292) writes that: “Ezekiel expected the covenant curses to be fulfilled tangibly, materially, and literary – and they were. Therefore, we should not hesitate to affirm that Ezekiel’s audience expected the covenant blessings drawn from the chapters as the curses, to be fulfilled tangibly, materially, and literally also.”

The restoration of the land from desolation and the return of the Israelites, point to the sustainability of the environment, natural resources, and climate which God afforded for His people Israel. Not only does the Lord promise to restore the people and the land as in

former times, but also that He will do more for them and the country even more (Ezekiel 36:11).

Environment

The outlook of the land of Israel is reversed for the better. Instead of the country being *שׁממָה* *shemama* (desolate) and without its inhabitants, it is replenished and teeming with occupants. The mountains, hills, valleys, ravines, and plains are covered with green vegetation than ever before (Ezekiel 36:11). The fields are cultivated, the cities are built and inhabited, and the favorable annual climatic seasons run their full course once again. The land of Israel resembles the garden of Eden (Ezekiel 36:35). The insecurity posed by the presence of war, famine, disease, and wild animals is banished (Ezekiel 34). Dumbriell (2013, p. 275-276) argues that “the transformation of the people of God proceeds concurrently with, and indeed affects the renewal of their environment. As we should have expected, the renewal of the creature begins progressively the renewal of creation (cf. Rom 8:19).”

Natural Resources

Water bodies and courses have returned to their original distribution and regular flows – with lakes, rivers, springs, and rain water moistening the land. Baukham (2010) as cited in Lyons (2021, p. 13) says that: Ezekiel’s vision is of ecological renewal that recaptures the vision of the original creation, in which the living creatures of the waters were to multiply and fill them (Genesis 1:21-22), as well as surpassing the original in its depiction of the marvelous fruitfulness of the trees that are nourished by the river. The key to all this life-giving vitality is, of course, the fact that the river flows from the Temple, that is, from the presence of God. Life is renewed from its source in God.

The soil gained its fertility, because of the abundance of foliage and moisture, for it had rested for seventy years while the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon, including also now a better farming practice adhered to by the Judeans in obeying the moral and natural law of God. Marine creatures such as fish restocked the waters, supplying food for the inhabitants of the land and stimulating domestic and foreign trade.

Climate

The atmospheric conditions were reversed. The rain brought showers in the its seasons to water the land (Ezekiel 34:26; cf. Ezra 10:9). The sun shined and regulated the weather in summer, autumn, winter, and spring without disruption as in the days before the desolation of the land.

Limited Application of the Book of Ezekiel to the 21st Century

The 21st social fabric is grappling with similar issues which the nation of Israel faced during times of the prophet Ezekiel – challenges of environment, natural resources, climate, and sustainability (Lyons, 2021). Briggs (2018, p. 41) contents that:

In the light of the growing importance of creation in contemporary discussions of the theology of the Hebrew Bible as well as modern ecological concerns. Ezekiel 6; 35:1-36:15 texts portray Yahweh with issues of order, land and land ownership, and pollution of the land. Human idolatry and failure to recognize that the land belongs to Yahweh leads to pollution of the land and the violation of recreational order. . . In contexts both ancient and modern, Ezekiel speaks against notions of unbridled human dominion over creation and asserts that humans are deeply intertwined with the world around them, in line with Terrance Frethein’s conception of creation theology.

Environmental advocates are confronted by environmental degradation, pollution, and alterations (Woke, Balatunde, & Aleleye, 2013; Mbwenye, 2021). Natural scientists are dealing with baffling phenomena such as migration and extinction of birds, animals, insects, and marine creatures. Geologists are troubled by uncontrollable volcanic eruptions, devastating earthquakes, water, wind, and sand erosion, and human exploitation of diminishing earth minerals. Climatologists are stressed by the reality of melting ice, dwindling forests, advancing deserts, depletion of ozone layer, carbon emissions, green-houses effect, and extreme weather conditions (Umoh & Ekpoh, 2007). Humanitarians are wrestling with the refugee crisis which precipitate diseases, crime, violence, exposure to vagaries of weather, and putting a financial strain on the host government. Nations are kept on their toes in maintaining balance of animal and human conflicts, human to human clashes, and animal to animal struggles. Health scientists are perpetually concerned with pandemics such as Covid19, Ebola, HIV, SARS, Influenza, Plague, and Cholera (Oyem, 2011).

Social and moral ills which posed a challenge to the Israelite society in the B.C. (B.C.E) era are currently being experienced by the 21st century A.D. global community and more such as:

- Bloodshed
- Dishonoring of parents and the elderly
- Oppression of the poor, differently enabled, widows, widowers, orphans, and singles
- Despising the things related to God
- Profaning the Sabbath
- Devil and idol worship
- Stealing
- Committing adultery and fornication

- Incest
- Bribery

The question which begs an answer from the book of Ezekiel on this limited application is: Is there a cause and effect as regards the human actions and activities of the 21st century in relationship to the moral and natural law of God?

In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord not only desolated the land of Israel and displaced His people Israel when they violated His covenant comprising of moral and natural law, but also devastated the foreign nations although those non-Israelite nations had not made a covenant with God. These nations included: Egypt, Ammon, Tyre, Edom, Philistine, Moab, Ethiopia, Lud, Put, and Arabia. Catastrophe came to both the Israelites and non-Israelites alike irrespective of the covenant of God. In this case, there seems to be a cause and effect in breaking the God's moral and natural law whether the nations possess the knowledge or are ignorant of the law of God. The fact that people are not aware of the existence of the moral and natural law of God does not mean that the law of God does not exist and the consequences of breaking it do not have a cause and effect.

Take for example, a negative cause and effect of deforestation, air, water, and soil pollution, overgrazing, overfishing, bribery, incest, and injustice –such ills potent, in the 21st century, an environmental disaster of diseases, soil erosion, depletion of natural resources, road carnage, psychological torture, and societal unrest respectively. Take another example of a positive cause and effect of forestation, pollution control, controlled grazing, regulated fishing, soil management, bribery free zone, marriage fidelity, and justice –such activities in-

line with the law of God ushers in conducive environment and sustainability of natural resources and climate.

Conclusion

The book of Ezekiel offers a solution to the contemporary issues influencing the 21st century social fabric concerning environment, natural resources, climate change, and sustainability by pointing out that there is a cause and effect in obeying the moral and natural law of God whether people are conversant or ignorant with the law. On the one hand, if the law of God is violated willingly or ignorantly, the negative consequence is deterioration of environment, diminution of natural resources, and disruption of climate. On the other hand, if the law of God is acknowledged and followed, the Lord Himself restores and sustains the environment, natural resources, and climate.

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