

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 32

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Ezekiel 32 consists of two distinct but thematically unified oracles against Egypt, both dated precisely (vv. 1–2 and v. 17). The first oracle (vv. 1–16) is a funeral lament (*qinah*) over Pharaoh and Egypt, using the mythological imagery of a great dragon or sea-monster (*tannin*) thrashing in the Nile. The LORD declares that He will cast His net over this beast, drag it onto the land, expose its carcass to the birds and beasts, and cover the earth with its blood and stench — a grotesque reversal of Egyptian imperial grandeur. The heavens themselves will be darkened, and the nations will be appalled. The second oracle (vv. 17–32) is a descent narrative — a dramatic vision of Egypt being consigned to Sheol, the realm of the dead, to take its place among other once-great nations already lying there in disgrace: Assyria, Elam, Meshech-Tubal, Edom, and the kings of the north. Each of these nations is described as “uncircumcised” and bearing their shame, having spread terror in the land of the living. Egypt will arrive to find she is not unique in her fall — she is merely the latest in a long line of proud empires brought low, laid beside the slain.

The chapter functions as the culmination of a sustained series of oracles against Egypt (chapters 29–32), many of them precisely dated to 587–585 BC, in the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon. Egypt had been Judah’s unreliable ally — a “broken reed” (Ezek. 29:6–7) — and its ongoing existence as a seemingly inviolable superpower would have represented a standing theological problem for the exiles: if God could allow Jerusalem to fall, why does proud Egypt still stand?

This Text — Intent

God intends through this chapter to dismantle any residual confidence in human imperial power — whether located in Egypt specifically or in the broader category of nations that “spread terror in the land of the living.” The vivid funeral lament over a still-living empire, the cosmic darkening of sun and moon, and the descent narrative with its gallery of disgraced empires are not merely predictive but pedagogical: God is showing the exiles (and all subsequent readers) that no earthly power stands outside His sovereign disposal. He buries empires. The repeated phrase “in the land of the living” (vv. 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 32) functions as a theological refrain — the living world, the world of human power and terror, is not the final word. The LORD has the final word, and it is a funeral. The intent is to produce in the reader a profound reorientation of awe — away from the apparently invincible powers of this age and toward the God who buries them, so that trust is placed where it belongs.

Subject Sentence: God pronounces Egypt’s funeral while she yet lives, consigning her to Sheol’s gallery of disgraced empires.

Primary Claim: Every empire that spreads terror in the land of the living is already under God’s funeral sentence — He alone decides who descends to Sheol and when, and no power that defies Him will be the exception.

Interpretive Evaluation

The mythological imagery in vv. 1–2

Pharaoh is compared first to a “lion of the nations” and then to a *tannin* — a sea-dragon or great monster — thrashing in the Nile and churning its waters with his feet. Some interpreters, particularly those operating within form-critical traditions, read this imagery as evidence of borrowed Ancient Near Eastern cosmological mythology (the chaos dragon of Babylonian or Canaanite religion), suggesting Ezekiel is engaging the mythology of empire on its own terms. This is worth *acknowledging* as a genuine insight into the rhetorical strategy: Ezekiel does deploy imagery that would have resonated with the iconographic world of his audience, and there is irony in reducing Pharaoh to a monster in a ditch. However, to read the chaos-dragon imagery as importing a cosmological dualism (God vs. chaos monster) would be to *refute* — the text is not a cosmic battle narrative; God does not struggle against the beast. He nets it, drags it out, and leaves it to the carrion birds with no resistance. The “battle” is asymmetric to the point of not being a battle. The mythological image is used precisely to deflate it.

The identity of Sheol in vv. 17–32

The descent narrative raises hermeneutical questions across traditions about what Sheol represents. Roman Catholic and some Lutheran readings may interpret the passage in light of developed doctrines of purgatory or an intermediate state, seeing in Sheol’s “divisions” (the variously shamed and honored dead) anticipations of post-mortem differentiation. This should be *qualified*: the text does not teach a developed theology of the intermediate state, and importing those categories into this passage distorts its primary rhetorical function. Sheol here is deployed not as a doctrinal teaching about what happens after death but as a dramatic device — a theater of disgrace where the proud learn their proper place. The Reformed reading rightly treats this as eschatological imagery in service of a present-tense claim about sovereignty: God has already assigned these empires their verdict. The vision of Sheol is the verdict rendered visible.

The “comfort” of v. 31

Verse 31 is exegetically striking: Pharaoh will “see” all of the fallen empires in Sheol and be “comforted” — the same word (*nacham*) used of genuine consolation elsewhere in Ezekiel.

Some interpreters read this as genuine consolation for Egypt — misery loves company — and move toward a softened view of Egypt’s judgment. This reading should be *refuted* at a homiletical level: the text is not offering Egypt genuine comfort but rather completing the humiliation. To be “comforted” that you are no worse off than Assyria and Elam, whose disgrace is described in graphic terms throughout the passage, is a consolation that only confirms the verdict. The Reformed reading correctly notes the bitter irony: this is not redemption but reduction — Egypt is reduced to being merely one more name in the gallery.

The Reformed Reading

The text is a sovereignty declaration in funeral form. God does not merely predict Egypt’s fall — He pronounces it as already accomplished in the divine decree. The darkening of the heavens, the cosmic mourning, and the Sheol gallery all serve one purpose: to establish that the LORD alone is the sovereign disposer of nations, that no power spreads terror in the land of the living outside His permission, and that every such power will be brought to account. This reading is warranted by the consistent pattern across chapters 29–32, by the dating of these oracles in the aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall (making the anti-Egypt polemic pastorally urgent for the exiles), and by the canonical pattern of prophetic oracle-against-the-nations literature.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 14:3–23** — The taunt-song over Babylon uses the same Sheol-descent motif (“How you have fallen from heaven, morning star!”), confirming that the descent-to-Sheol literary form is a canonical convention for pronouncing God’s verdict on proud empires, not a one-off Ezekielian device.
- **Psalms 82** — God judges among the gods and declares that the “mighty ones” will die like men and fall like every prince; provides the theological grounding for divine sovereignty over all claims to power, earthly and cosmic.
- **Daniel 4:28–37** — Nebuchadnezzar’s humiliation narrative provides a narrative parallel: the greatest emperor of his age is reduced to beast-like existence until he acknowledges that “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (Dan. 4:32). The same theological claim, narratively enacted.
- **Revelation 18** — The lament over Babylon in Revelation 18 deliberately echoes the Ezekiel oracle-against-nations form, applying it to the eschatological imperial power; the merchants weep, the kings stand at a distance, and the proud city is gone “in one hour.” The Ezekiel 32 funeral-lament form reaches its canonical terminus in the final judgment of all empire.
- **1 Corinthians 1:26–29** — God chooses what is weak and foolish to shame the strong; the logic of Ezekiel 32 reversed from the bottom up — not only does God

bring down the mighty, but He consistently works through what the mighty despise, so that no human power may boast before Him.

Aim: To reorient the reader's awe and confidence decisively away from the apparently invincible powers of this age and toward the God who pronounces their funerals before they fall — producing a living trust that is not dependent on which empire is currently dominant.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2a	Date formula: twelfth year, twelfth month, first day; Ezekiel commanded to take up a lament over Pharaoh	Second of two dated oracles in the chapter; this one ~585 BC, after Jerusalem's fall
2b	Pharaoh compared to a lion of the nations, then corrected — he is more like a <i>tannin</i> (dragon/monster) churning the Nile	Rhetorical demotion: lion (noble) → dragon in a ditch (ignoble)
3–5	The LORD declares He will cast His net over Egypt with a great company of peoples; drag Pharaoh out, fling him on the land, expose him to birds and beasts	Imagery of trapping and exposing; no battle — God simply declares it done
6–8	Egypt's blood will drench the land; the heavens will be darkened — sun, moon, and stars covered; light fails over Egypt	Cosmic mourning language; echoes plague of darkness (Ex. 10:21–23)
9–10	Nations will be appalled; kings will shudder; they will tremble “on the day of your fall”	The fall of Egypt is a world-event; even other kings are undone by it
11–12	The sword of the king of Babylon will come against Egypt; Babylon is God's instrument; Egypt's multitude destroyed	Historical instrumentality: Babylon is God's agent, not an independent force

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13–14	All of Egypt’s livestock destroyed; the waters will run clear and still — no more Pharaoh to churn them	Irony peace: Egypt’s “greatness” was the disturbance; its removal brings stillness
15–16	Egypt desolated, stripped of its fullness; then they will know that I am the LORD — the recognition formula; women of the nations will chant the lament	The recognition formula anchors the theological purpose; the lament becomes canonical
17	Second oracle dated: twelfth year, fifteenth of the month (likely same year, two weeks later)	Rapid succession of oracles; editorial urgency
18–19	Command to Ezekiel: wail, send Egypt down with the nations to the “world below” (<i>eretz tachtit</i>); does she excel the others?	Rhetorical question deflates Egyptian exceptionalism: no, you are not special
20–21	Egypt will fall among those slain by the sword; those already in Sheol speak: “Come down, be laid with the uncircumcised”	The dead receive Egypt; Sheol is populated with the previously proud
22–23	Assyria and all her company — her graves surround her; all slain, who had “spread terror in the land of the living”	First named empire in the gallery; the repeated refrain begins
24–25	Elam and her multitude — slain, uncircumcised, bearing their shame; set in the pit with the slain	Second empire in the gallery
26–27	Meshech and Tubal — they do not lie with the mighty warriors of old who went down with their weapons, because they spread terror	Contrast: they are not honored dead — they are shamed; their weapons are not under their heads
28	“You too, O Pharaoh, shall be broken and lie with the	Direct address: Egypt is explicitly placed in this

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	uncircumcised”	company
29	Edom — her kings and princes, despite their might, given over with the slain	Edom’s inclusion may carry special resonance given Judah’s relationship with Edom
30	The princes of the north and all the Sidonians — gone down in shame; their might put to shame	Northern powers; Sidon’s maritime pride irrelevant in Sheol
31	Pharaoh will see them and be “comforted” — he is not alone; his multitude slain by the sword	Bitter consolation: not redemption but reduction to the common verdict
32	For God “spread his terror in the land of the living” — Pharaoh and his multitude laid with the uncircumcised; the closing verdict	The divine passive of terror: what Pharaoh claimed as his own glory was actually God’s instrument of judgment

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–16	The Funeral Lament: God Casts His Net over the Dragon
2	17–21	The Descent Commanded: Egypt Sent to the World Below
3	22–30	The Gallery of the Disgraced: Empires Already in Sheol
4	31–32	The Verdict Finalized: Pharaoh Takes His Place

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God pronounces Egypt’s funeral while she yet lives, consigning her to Sheol’s gallery of disgraced empires.

Primary Claim: Every empire that spreads terror in the land of the living is already under God’s funeral sentence — He alone decides who descends to Sheol and when, and no power that defies Him will be the exception.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Recognize that the powers currently dominating the world's stage are already under their verdict.

The exiles watching Egypt from Babylon had every reason to believe that the world's arrangement of power was simply the world's arrangement — that Babylon would always dominate, that Egypt would always be there as a potential counterweight, that these were fixed features of existence. Ezekiel 32 insists this is a lie. The empires of this age — financial, political, military, cultural — are not permanent. They are already operating under a sentence that has been pronounced in the divine counsel. The believer who grasps this does not need to live in anxiety about which power is currently ascendant, because the ultimate arbiter of all power has already spoken His verdict. Stop reasoning about the future as though the dominant powers of today are fixed realities. They are not. They are already in the queue.

2. [Affections/Worship] Feel the weight of God's incomparable greatness by sitting with the Sheol gallery.

The descent narrative in vv. 22–30 is not designed to produce clinical reflection — it is designed to produce a visceral reorientation of awe. Assyria is there. Elam is there. Meshech-Tubal, Edom, Sidon — all there, all shamed, all stripped of the terror that once made the earth tremble at their names. These were not minor powers. These were the civilizations that defined what power meant in their ages. And they are laid in the pit, uncircumcised, bearing their shame. Let the gallery do its work on your affections: if these powers are there, what remains worthy of your ultimate reverence and trust? The answer the text is pressing toward is not an abstraction — it is the LORD, the One pronouncing the funeral, the One who is not in the gallery because He does not descend. Worship that is not shaped by this vision of God is worship aimed too low.

3. [Will/Behavior] Stop seeking security by attaching yourself to whatever empire currently appears most stable.

The specific pastoral problem behind Ezekiel 29–32 is that Judah had repeatedly sought Egypt as a political and military guarantor — trading the covenant relationship with the LORD for alliance with a powerful neighbor. This is not an ancient problem. Every generation finds its Egypt — the institution, the political party, the economic system, the cultural movement that seems to offer stability and protection if only the covenant community will align itself with it. Ezekiel 32 exposes this as not merely spiritually mistaken but practically absurd: you are aligning yourself with something that is already being fitted for a coffin. Identify specifically where you are seeking security outside of the LORD's own provision, and withdraw that misplaced trust — not because the empire is necessarily wicked in every respect, but because it cannot hold.

4. [Mind/Belief] Understand that God's use of Babylon as His instrument (v. 11) does not make Babylon righteous — it makes God sovereign.

The text is explicit: the sword of the king of Babylon will come against Egypt, and it is the LORD's sword. This is the doctrine of divine instrumentality — God uses even the most pagan, brutal powers as instruments of His purposes without those powers being morally approved or ultimately endorsed. This matters enormously for how the believer reads history. When a godless power rises and inflicts real damage, the Reformed reading does not conclude either that God is absent or that the rising power is validated. God used Babylon to judge Egypt; He used Assyria to judge Israel; He used Rome to judge Jerusalem. The instrument is not the point — the Sovereign behind the instrument is the point. Christians who are disoriented by the apparent success of godless powers have not yet absorbed the lesson of v. 11.

5. [Affections/Worship] Grieve what is genuinely worth grieving — including the ruin of great things — while remaining anchored to the One who outlasts all ruins.

The *qinah* form of the first oracle (vv. 1–16) is not a triumphalist celebration of Egypt's destruction. It is a lament. There is something genuinely tragic about the fall of what was once great — even when that greatness was corrupt and its power was used for oppression. The women of the nations will chant this lament (v. 16). There is a rightful grief over civilizational ruin, over the loss of cultural goods, over the human suffering that accompanies imperial collapse. The believer is not called to a cold detachment that refuses to mourn. But the lament is sung by those who already know the outcome — who can grieve the ruin precisely because they are not undone by it. Grief and stability are not opposites here. They coexist in the one who knows that the LORD of the lament is also the LORD of what comes after the lament.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ezekiel 32 makes a sustained, concrete claim about the absolute sovereignty of God over the nations — not as a theoretical proposition but as a funeral pronouncement. The LORD is not merely watching the rise and fall of empires from a distance; He is the One who casts the net, drags out the beast, and assigns each fallen power to its place in Sheol's gallery. The "recognition formula" in v. 16 ("they will know that I am the LORD") anchors the theological purpose: all of this — the darkened heavens, the desolated Nile, the gallery of disgraced empires — is in service of the knowledge of God. The chapter also presses a claim about the theological meaning of power itself: what empires call their "terror" (the fear they spread in the land of the living) is ultimately a power exercised under divine permission and subject to divine revocation. No force operates outside God's sovereign disposal. The cosmic darkening imagery (vv. 7–8) extends this claim to the created order itself — heaven and earth respond to God's judicial acts among the nations.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ezekiel 32 grounds the Reformed insistence on divine sovereignty in one of its most dramatically rendered biblical forms. The chapter resists two errors that Reformed theology is positioned to correct: the error of functional deism (God is sovereign in principle but uninvolved in the actual movements of history) and the error of national exceptionalism (our nation, our civilization, our culture occupies a privileged position that God would not allow to collapse). The gallery of Sheol — Assyria, Elam, Meshech-Tubal, Edom, Sidon, Egypt — is a roll call of nations that each, in their heyday, would have seemed to qualify as exceptions to the rule of imperial collapse. None were. The Reformed doctrine of Providence does not merely affirm that God permits or oversees history; it affirms that He is the primary agent behind the outcomes of history, working all things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11) — including the netting of dragons and the populating of Sheol. This passage also serves the gospel by preparing the hearer for the only kingdom that will not be assigned a place in the gallery: the kingdom of the Son of Man, who receives dominion that is everlasting and will not pass away (Dan. 7:14).

Main Takeaway

God has pronounced a funeral over every empire that spreads terror in the land of the living — Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and every power since. He is not impressed by their armaments, their economies, or their ideological certainty, and He has already assigned them their place in the gallery. The only question Ezekiel 32 leaves open is this: where are you putting your trust — in one of the empires that is already being fitted for a coffin, or in the One pronouncing the funeral?

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as primarily a historical prophecy about Egypt rather than a canonical claim about divine sovereignty.** The temptation is to spend the bulk of exposition verifying the historical fulfillment (Babylon did in fact move against Egypt) and treating that verification as the point. It is not. The fulfillment is evidence in service of a present-tense claim about the LORD's character and authority. A sermon that ends with "and this is exactly what happened historically" has missed the intent entirely. The passage is designed to reorient the reader's trust, not to satisfy historical curiosity.
- **Missing the pastoral urgency of the exilic context.** These oracles were delivered to a community that had just watched Jerusalem fall and was now living under Babylonian domination. Egypt's apparent survival would have been a genuine theological problem — if God can allow Jerusalem to fall, why is Egypt still standing?

Failing to feel the pastoral weight of that question means failing to feel the pastoral force of God's answer. The chapter is not academic theology; it is pastoral address to the bewildered and the tempted.

- **Flattening the *qinah* form into either triumphalism or detached neutrality.** The funeral lament of vv. 1–16 is simultaneously a judgment speech and a genuine lament. Preaching it as pure triumph (“God finally gets Egypt!”) misses the grief embedded in the form. Preaching it as merely neutral historical description misses the judgment. The form requires holding both: this is a real funeral, over a real civilization, pronounced by a God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked even as He executes judgment on it.
- **Using the Sheol gallery as an occasion to import later doctrines of hell or the intermediate state.** Ezekiel 32:17–32 is not a teaching passage about the afterlife. Sheol here is a rhetorical and imaginative device in service of a sovereignty claim, not a topographical description of the underworld. Importing developed eschatological doctrines into this passage — whether from a Catholic, evangelical, or annihilationist framework — displaces the passage's actual claim with a different conversation. Let the descent narrative do what it is doing: dramatizing the verdict, not mapping the geography.
- **Misreading v. 31's “comfort” as genuine consolation or as evidence of God's mercy toward Egypt.** This is exegetically important. Pharaoh's “comfort” in seeing the company of the disgraced is not a softening of the judgment — it is the completion of the humiliation. Egypt is comforted only in the sense that she now knows she is not uniquely terrible; she is ordinarily terrible, one more name in a long list. Preaching this verse as though God is showing kindness to Egypt in Sheol domesticates both the passage and the judgment.
- **Failing to make the contemporary application sufficiently specific.** The generic application “don't trust in earthly powers” is technically correct but homiletically inert. The preacher must press the congregation to identify their specific Egypt — the political party, the economic security, the cultural institution, the national identity — to which they are currently looking for the stability that only the LORD can provide. Ezekiel 32 is pointed; its application must be equally pointed.