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“Stones of Fire”

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With

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Stones of Fire

Ezekiel 28:14, 16 describe an “anointed cherub” who walked in the midst of “the stones of fire” and was removed from among “the stones of fire.” What are the stones of fire? What do these verses describe? How do the phrases relate to what’s going on in Ezekiel 28 and its “twin,” Isaiah 14?

[blog post referenced](#)

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 92, Stones of Fire. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MSH: Very good. How are you?

TS: I'm doing good. I'm excited about this one.

MSH: Yeah, this is something I get asked about online periodically, what are the stones of fire. Years ago I did something about it on the Paleobabble blog but I really only presented one option there because of the context of the question. I'll allude to that toward the end of our time here and I actually think that an alternative interpretation is probably better but I answered it in a certain way on Paleobabble because of the nature of the question. But when we get to that point, I'll bring that up again. The phrase stones of fire, for those who are wondering what in the world is this about, really comes from Ezekiel 28, specifically Ezekiel 28:14, 16. So I'm just going to read 14 through 16 so we get the flavor of what the passage says. So we read in Ezekiel 28 beginning in verse 14, it says,

- ¹⁴ You were an anointed guardian cherub.
I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God;
in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.
- ¹⁵ You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created,
till unrighteousness was found in you.
- ¹⁶ In the abundance of your trade
you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned;
so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,
and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub,
from the midst of the stones of fire.

MSH: Now this is a familiar passage to people who have read Unseen Realm. Ezekiel 28 just generally speaking is not about specifically the episode in Eden. But there is a lot of that Edenic flavoring in it. Specifically what it's about, it's a lament directed toward the Prince of Tyre and the issue is with it with scholars, and just a correct accurate reading of it, is that the prophet Ezekiel is using some sort of back story about a primeval rebellion as material to cast the Prince of Tyre in a certain way, to talk about the Prince of Tyre's hubris and his pride and his arrogance in a certain way. Now I take the minority view here. Readers of the Unseen Realm know this. I take the minority view that the back story is about a divine rebel. The majority position, both in terms of evangelical scholars and secular scholars if we can use that term, is that the back story is the primeval rebellion of a human, namely Adam.

So I don't take the Adam view. I take the divine rebel view. So now in the normative majority view, evangelical and otherwise, the idea goes like this. The cherub that's mentioned in Ezekiel 28 there is with Adam or in some cases that language will be attributed to Adam. The place that the back story occurs in is Eden. We get that from Ezekiel 28:13 which actually reference's the garden of God, Eden, the garden of God in verse 13. Also this cosmic mountain language that we read in those verses, verses 14-16, that takes us back to Eden because as

readers of Unseen Realm know, the cosmic mountain idea refers to the abode of God, the place from which God runs his affairs, the place where the divine Council meets in his throne room so to speak. All of that fits very nicely in biblical theology with Eden. Thirdly, the majority view would say there's no divine rebel figure in view in Ezekiel 28 at all. That's just a phantom character.

He's not there at all. It's just about Adam. And fourthly, Ezekiel 28, since it is a lament over the king of Tyre for his unrighteous pride, they believe, the majority believes that the analogy being struck is comparing the king of Tyre's pride with the pride, the hubris of Adam. Right away I'm sure there's listeners thinking out there well, the Genesis 3 story never really casts Adam that way, and frankly, no other passage casts Adam that way. That's true but I think that's only one of the disconnects that leads me to take the minority view, the view I do hold. And that is that we're talking about a back story that involves a divine rebel, not a human rebel, not Adam. So in my view, the picture is different. The passage is a lament over the king of Tyre. I acknowledge that. I've no problem with that. The back story, the analogy in play is not what happened with Adam. It's not about Adam but rather the back story is a tale of divine rebellion, a specific divine being who through his hubris, his arrogance, his pride, rebels against the authority of God. Therefore when I look at the passage, the cherub here is not with Adam. Adam is not with the cherub.

The cherub is this divine being and Adam is not present. So the first view of the majority says this divine rebel, this divine being, a divine being in the garden, that's just a vapor. That's just a phantom. I say the opposite. I say that Adam is not in view in the passage at all. And then lastly, the back story would be about the hubris of the divine being in Eden, the place of the Divine Council, the cosmic mountain. I think that we do get the figure the *nacash* in Genesis 3 but that figure as that figure is talked about later, specifically we you get in between the Testaments and when you get on into the New Testament, that figure is talked about in terms of pride and arrogance and whatnot, there is more of a rebellious figure, rebellious feeling to it then you have if it's just the Adam story. I'm not saying that Adam didn't rebel. He did. There's a transgression there of sin but the feeling I don't get from it is this hubris, this act of I'm just so much of this or that that I'm going to go off on my own way. I don't think the passage reads that way.

Now to get more technical, and if people want the details on this, you're not going to find them specifically in Unseen Realm but you can find them on the companion website, moreunseenrealm.com. And if you go up to the chapters, I think it's like 11 or 12 that deal with the subject on the website, you're going to get more detail. Now the majority view follows the Septuagint. The Septuagint, instead of in verse 14 us reading you were an anointed guardian cherub, the Septuagint actually reads I placed you with the cherub in the holy mountain of God. So that creates the feeling that there's this cherub here, this divine being here but there's somebody with him. And then that somebody becomes Adam. Now I don't follow the Septuagint in this regard. I follow the Masoretic Text. And you say why don't people follow the traditional Hebrew text here? It's because there is some really odd grammatical and morphological forms in the Masoretic Text in this chapter that many scholars have said that they just don't make sense. We don't know what to do with them.

We either need to change them or go with the Septuagint, and frankly, they opt for both of those, that the Septuagint is the better text here so that's what we're going to read. There are a lot of scholars, a substantial number of scholars that think that's just a big mistake. The

Masoretic Text does not need to be changed here. It does not need to be amended. The Hebrew forms are rare but they are understandable. If you go to the moreunseenrealm.com site, I'm going to reference a specific article on this regard by James Barr who's a very famous Old Testament scholar. Barr mounts a really serious defense and a coherent defense of the Masoretic Text reading in this passage, and I think he's right. And if you go with the Masoretic Text, you've only really got one option. Adam is not there, which means you have to go with the divine rebel and that's the view I take. You look at some of this and you think what does this have to do with the topic? Well, the stones of fire either describes the place of the Divine Council, that has something to do with the description of the cosmic mountain, or it describes the members of the Divine Council.

The stones of fire would be divine beings. So it either has to do with the place or the members of the council. I think that it makes a lot more sense and the direction I'm going to go in, I'm going to give you material for both here but the direction I'm going to go that stones of fire are the members of the Divine Council. I think it actually makes more sense in the broader scope of things. If you think about what I wrote in Unseen Realm about the *nacash*, about Eden and all that stuff, one of my major arguments and another one of the major reasons I take the minority view here, I go with the Masoretic Text and I see a divine rebel is because everybody, every Old Testament scholar, regardless of what they do with Ezekiel 28, every one of them will say there is a very close relationship between Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14. And if you look Isaiah 14, look at the language you get. You get a reference to this rebel figure, the rebel figure of Isaiah 14, wanting to be above the stars of El, the stars of God, "getting exposed" before kings and getting sent down to Sheol and all this sort of stuff.

Now I would suggest to you that none of that language applies to Adam as we get the story in Genesis 3 but it does apply to a divine rebel. And so my big question for my opponents here is why is it that if you recognize a close relationship between Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, why don't you be consistent with that relationship and let Isaiah 14 influence or help you read Ezekiel 28? In other words, what you say about Ezekiel 28, who the rebel is there, who the perp, who the major character of the back story is there, whatever you say about Ezekiel 28, you ought to be consistent and say I need to be able say that about Isaiah 14. And that's what many scholars refuse to do. They refuse to be consistent on the way they read both passages, keeping them together in this tight relationship that they all say is there but then somehow they just split them apart when it comes to this issue. It's very inconsistent. So I'm going to hold my ground here and say this is a divine rebel in Ezekiel 28 and now let's go back to the verses and think about the stones of fire. I've already prepped you by saying you can go one of two directions here. You can either say it's the place or the members and I think the members makes more sense. And if we read it as though there's a divine rebel story here, the *nacash* idea, I think that's actually going to make the second option, as far as what the stones of fire are, a little clearer. So let's go back to Ezekiel 28. I'm just going to read it again.

¹⁴ You were an anointed guardian cherub.

I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God;
in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.

¹⁵ You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created,
till unrighteousness was found in you.

¹⁶ In the abundance of your trade
you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned;
so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,
and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub,
from the midst of the stones of fire.

¹⁷ Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.
I cast you to the ground;
I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.

MSH: None of that is true of Adam. It just doesn't make much sense. So what about the stones of fire? A lot of people are influenced in their reading of this by one passage in 1 Enoch that I'm going to read here, and I think you'll see that there is certainly some relationship here but when I read this from Enoch, what you're also going to hear is that both options for the stones of fire, either the place or the beings who are present, they're actually both in this passage, too. So on the one hand it's not going to give us complete clarity but I want to read this to you because this influences how people think about Ezekiel 28. Here's the passage, 1 Enoch 17, Enoch says,

They lifted me up into one place where there were the ones like flaming fire and when they so desire they appear like men.

MSH: So, let's just stop there. Here in 1 Enoch 17, the first verse, you have a reference to beings who are like flaming fire. That's going to be language drawn from the Old Testament. There are passages, and I'll give you the verse references here in a moment, where divine beings, members of the divine Council, are described as fiery, flames of fire. But they can also appear like men. This fits the "angelic idea" as well. So it fits the stones of fire actually being a reference to divine beings view pretty well, but that's not all there is to the passage. When we get into the next chapter, chapter 18 we kind of get a little bit of a different angle. So Enoch continues in chapter 18 in verse 3 here,

I saw how the winds ride the heights of heaven and stand between heaven and earth. These are the very pillars of heaven. I saw the winds which turn the heaven and caused the star to set, the sun as well as the stars. I saw the souls carried by the clouds. I saw the path of the angels and the ultimate end of the earth and the firmament of the heaven above. And I kept moving in the direction of the West and it was flaming day and night toward the seven mountains of precious stones, three toward the east and three towards the south. [Verse 10] And I saw what was inside those mountains, a place beyond the great earth where the heavens come together. And I saw deep pit with heavenly fire on its pillars. I saw inside them descending pillars of fire that were immeasurable in respect to both altitude and depth. And on top of that pit I saw place without the heavily firmament above it or earthly foundations under it or water. There was nothing on it, not even birds. It was a desolate and terrible place. And I saw there the seven stars which were like great burning mountains. Then

the angel said to me, this place is the ultimate end of heaven and earth. It is the prison house for the stars and the powers of heaven.

MSH: So we'll stop there. Now you see what you get there. You get references to mountains; mountains are made of stone, mountains that were burning. They are described as this sort of flaming language. Flaming is the word that is used there in verse 6 of 1 Enoch 18. So the mountains are described as flaming. They're described as precious stones, which in Ezekiel 28 are the shining luminous stone, so this shininess, this light, a brilliant appearance kind of thing. But then when you get down to verse 13, we get the star language. I saw the 7 stars there. And you think the stars, isn't that like the language that's used of divine beings, the sons of God in Job 38? It is but look at what Enoch does with it. I saw there the seven stars which were like great burning mountains.

Well now wait a minute. Well if the stars here, what's going on here, stars, mountains, flaming fire mountains, and all this kind of stuff, what's going on? And then he actually turns it around the very next verse and says that this place is the prison house for the stars, the powers of heaven, a very clear reference to divine beings. So what Enoch does here is he actually emerges both options that these flaming stones, flaming mountains, flaming stars, brilliant luminous stars, that it's both the place and its , also entities. So now people have looked at this, this passage and thought, sure the book of Enoch is going to be at least a couple centuries later, two or three centuries later than Ezekiel so it's poor method to assume that this was what Ezekiel was thinking but this is Second Temple Jewish literature. It's apocalyptic. It's not a direct connection back to Ezekiel 28 but it uses the language here that sort of sounds like Ezekiel 28 so maybe we should sort of read one into the other.

I am a bit more cautious there. I think what we need to do is instead of this passage, even though it's very interesting and you could use part of it to argue either view, but even despite that fact, I think what we need to do is we need to actually go back and ask ourself this question. Enoch's later but what is Enoch drawing on? What is the Enoch passage drawing on? And the answer is Old Testament material. And so we need to ask ourselves let's go back and look at the Old Testament. You never get a specific description of mountains, plural, being described as fire in the Old Testament. You do get one mountain associated with fire, a fiery presence, and that's Sinai. Some of these episodic events we get to the Old Testament from Mount Sinai, Deuteronomy 33, the Sinai account itself in Exodus, that there's fire on the mountain.

We get that. It's never plural so does that really help much, because Sinai is the dwelling place of God. We know that the Divine Council is there because, in Unseen Realm I talk about the verses about the angels being present for the giving of the law and all that kind of stuff. There are passages like that but it's never pluralized and I think that that needs to be taken into consideration. The other thing you have is you do have brightness language associated with stars in the Old Testament and you also have star language applied to divine beings. And I think, this is just me talking now, I think that is a more secure trajectory than trying to take the Old Testament language about Sinai and then making that the point of the stones of fire, plural, in Ezekiel 28. I think you're better to take the plural language of stars being bright and the plural language of divine beings being stars and also being luminous, I think that is the better backdrop, the more consistent backdrop to Ezekiel 28. Let me give you a few examples. Brightness is associated with the stars in Daniel 12:3 for instance.

³ And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

MSH: We have a reference in forth Maccabees. This is a non-biblical text obviously. We have here a reference toward the end of the verse, we have this,

The moon in heaven, with the stars, does not stand so august as you, who, after lighting the way of your star-like seven sons to piety, stand in honor before God and are firmly set in heaven with them.

MSH: Forth Ezra, a pseudepigraphical reference here, refers to the light of the stars and applies that language to being the like the angels in heaven. We get references like this, the stars of the ones being punished in 1 Enoch 18 so it's consistent there even though we get the mountain imagery as well. Star language is applied to divine beings, the sons of God in the Old Testament. And it's not just Job 38. There's one reference in here that I think is going to be really important for this but it's also Isaiah 14. Remember I said Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, everybody in Old Testament scholarship knows that these passages have a strong relationship to one another. If that's the case then I'm going to suggestion to you that the stones of fire that this divine rebel is cast out from are also the stars of God in Isaiah 14:13, the ones that the divine rebel wanted to be above. I will ascend above the stars of God, Isaiah 14:13. Let me just read it.

You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;

MSH: The stars of God, he wants to be above the stars of God. He wants to be the chief authority and so if we take Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, letting them inform each other consistently, not only do we not have Adam in view, not only do we not have a human rebel in view, but a divine rebel. We also have other members of the Divine Council that enter into the picture and the discussion and the back story. And whereas this divine rebel wanted to be above them, God casts him out from among them. You used to walk among the stones of fire but I'm going to “destroy you from walking among them”. I'm going to get rid of you. I'm going to cast you down. To me it's just a more consistent reading. Jude 13 in the New Testament compares the false teachers to “wondering stars”. I've commented in other podcasts a little bit on how the language of the watchers, the villainy of the watchers is used to false teachers.

Well, if that's the case then this language in Jude, and by the way, that happens in Peter and Jude where the watchers or the angels that sinned are conceptually linked in some way, it might be peripheral, in some way with false teachers, if that's the case then referring to the false teachers as wondering stars should not be a surprise. Another text here, a nonbiblical but Baruch 3:34-35 refers to stars as being divine beings, the stars do not come out; the stars he calls by number, that sort of thing. And that language actually comes from Isaiah, comes from Isaiah 40:26 where there's a reference to God calling out the stars by number, calling out the members of his host by number. You say well that's just God numbering stars up in the heavens.

Only God can do that. He's just counting just like an accountant. Well, there's a little more to it than that because if we take that versus, the idea of numbering the stars, numbering the host, members of his host, kind of like there are raid is an army in this host language. If you take that and go to Psalm 148, let me just read the first five verses, it takes a different flavor.

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights!
² Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his hosts!

³ Praise him, sun and moon,
 praise him, all you shining stars!
⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD!
 For he commanded and they were created.

MSH: That takes this language and clearly applies it to angels, clearly it has something to do with personification so it's not just celestial objects. It links the two ideas and so you get this reference to Isaiah 40:26, the heavenly host is ordered, arranged, and numbered by God. And Baruch picks up on this language to describe a heavenly army. I don't want to belabor the point. A lot of these things are fairly familiar but I just think it's better to see, if we're going to keep Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 in relationship and allow one to inform the other, then these references to the stars of God ought to inform our understanding of the stones of fire and that equation is consistent because divine beings are described as fiery in appearance and the stones element would have to do with the whole notion of celestial objects.

Objects, they might hurl through the sky. They might hit the ground, meteors or whatever. But this language, stone and star language, is fairly common in the ancient world. So I'm not claiming that they knew astronomically what stars were or that they knew they were balls of gas or something like that, but they do know that there are objects in space that hurl themselves to the ground and they're stones and meteorites. Look at the wormwood language of Revelation, this sort of thing where you're taking celestial objects that have some relationship to divine beings. That's very common. And so what I'm suggesting is I think it's just more consistent to look at them as entities, stones of fire entities that the rebel, the divine rebel was once part of, once among them and he gets cast out. He gets cast down from among their membership, among their company as opposed to this just being language that refers to the place, the cosmic mountain. One note here that I think is important to address is this language about, going back to Ezekiel 28 to wrap up here, in verse 17, the verse I added,

Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
 you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.
I cast you to the ground; [erets]

I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.

MSH: And prior to that in verse 16, I destroyed you from the midst of the stones of fire. This destroying language, this casting down language, this exposing language we need to take a little a closer look at the Hebrew lemmas there because it is kind of interesting. The destroyed language there is the Hebrew lemma *abad*. It's *Aleph Bet Dalet*, and it can mean destroyed which makes it sound a little incongruent. Well, the *nacash* wasn't destroyed, like God didn't blow him up or something. No, he didn't but the term can also mean go astray. So we could read that reference to something like instead of, I destroyed you oh guardian cherub from the midst of the stones of fire, it could be a reference to, I removed you. I took you away. I put you away. I steered you away, basically that God took this one, this rebel, and put him in a different destination, changed his course if you want to use that language against more star language there.

But it actually is used to becoming lost, to going astray or being led astray, or being put off course, that sort of thing. You have references to this in the Old Testament. For instance, just sort of a generic one, in the story of Saul losing his father's donkeys and he goes out to look for them. The donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, were lost. That's actually the lemma *abad*. They weren't destroyed because they're still around. Saul's going to look for them and they wind up being directed by God back to Kish's father, so they were still around. They weren't destroyed. They were lost. They had gone off course. So I think the language there, even that lemma, evokes this imagery of taking language that you would use of stars being in course, being in a group, that sort of thing. and what God does is God changes that course. He removes that particular entity from among the rest of the stones of fire and casts them down. Frankly, I think that this language is actually what is behind the wormwood references.

You look at the wormwood reference and it's really about, it's not just a cosmic celestial tragedy but it can actually speak of a, it's not just associated with the beast, it can speak of not necessarily an astronomical event even though that's the metaphor there. But it can be something more sinister, some sort of, I hate to use the word invasion or visitation but you actually could use the language that way because you do get this wandering star language where the whole point of it is not a literal celestial object but actually a rebellious divine entity or entities. There is that feeling to the whole context. The bit about being cast down to the ground, cast down to *erets*, "exposed before kings", well, the casting down we get from the Isaiah 14 passage and the Ezekiel 28, casting down, I spent a lot of time in Unseen Realm talking about the *nacash* and what this means wanting to be like the Most High, being put down to the lowest place, to the earth, the *erets*.

The *erets* is also the underworld. He becomes lord of the dead and all that stuff, that you have a reference to here as well. It would be very consistent with Isaiah 14 but what about the verb for exposed? Well, that's a simple verb in Hebrew. It's *nathan*. It's just used hundreds of times. And the interesting thing about it is that Ezekiel uses the same word in Ezekiel 32 for being present in or put down to Sheol. Believe it or not, we have another reference to Sheol here. Let me just get this. I'll find a specific reference here in Ezekiel 32 where this lemma is used because it's a real nice conceptual connection here. So in Ezekiel 32, we have here kind of an underworld picture just like we have Isaiah 14. Remember when Isaiah 14 that the fallen one, the one it's cast down is among the slain there, among the dead, the dead kings, and all that

stuff. Well, the Ezekiel language about being exposed before kings you actually get this *nathan* in the reference to being in Sheol. And the example here is in verse 29 but let's just go back to verse 27. We'll pick up a little more of the context here. So he's talking about Meshach-Tubal. There we go again with more Ezekiel language later on.

²⁶ “Meshech-Tubal is there, and all her multitude, her graves all around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword; for they spread their terror in the land of the living. ²⁷ And they do not lie with the mighty, the fallen from among the uncircumcised, who went down to Sheol with their weapons of war, whose swords were laid [*nathan*] under their heads, and whose iniquities are upon their bones; for the terror of the mighty men was in the land of the living. ²⁸ But as for you, you shall be broken and lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword.

²⁹ “Edom is there, her kings and all her princes, who for all their might are laid [*nathan*; exposed] with those who are killed by the sword; they lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.

MSH: So it's a very clear reference to Sheol, just like you have in Isaiah 14. So my view, to wrap all this up, is that the stones of fire are not the place, even though I was asked this on the Internet years ago, are the stones of fire other planets? I realize you could take the language about the stars, about divine beings and talk about planets there, so I'm not entirely exclude that. I did argue it that way in that post back in Paleobabble to talk about, basically the questioner wanted to know is this a reference to extraterrestrials and the answer that is no. But you can have some sort of this celestial object language in there. But it doesn't mean those objects are populated with ET's in spaceships and all that stuff. So that was what I was going after in that post.

But for those of you who are familiar with that post, I think if we're going to actually just stick with Ezekiel 28, I think the better reading is that the stones of fire are actually collectively a group of divine beings and that the anointed cherub had been in their midst, had been part of this entourage and is cast down because of hubris. He's cast down to the *erets* and you see that in Isaiah 14. If the stones of fire are entities, you get the stars of God in Isaiah 14 so that's another connection. The idea of being exposed before kings, you get references to kings in Sheol, being put in Sheol with slain kings who, in Isaiah and other passages, are the Rephaim, the Gibborim, as well, the bad place that it is occupied by these particular entities. You get that language in Isaiah 14 and you also get it in Ezekiel 32, and I would suggest also a little bit of it here in Ezekiel 28.

So I think the pictures are actually consistent and the best way to look at stones of fire is that they are divine beings and the divine rebel is cast out of their midst. He is dispensed with. He is put on, to use the astral language, a different course. He is removed from their presence and he is removed from the abode of God, from the Divine Council to rule his own realm, to carve out his own living space in Sheol where he does become the lord of the dead but he no

longer has this place. He no longer has this access with the other loyal members of the Divine Council.

TS: Good deal Mike. And that article was back from 2009 and I'll put a link to that on the show so people can go back and read that post and some of the comments there.