

The Book of Ezekiel
Message of Doom and Hope

By
Daniel J. Lewis

© Copyright 1999
Troy, Michigan
USA

Preface

In an age when happy feelings are paramount, Ezekiel gets short shrift. His book is not a happy one, nor was Ezekiel a happy man. It was bad enough to be exiled from home and to be chosen to bear the message that one's homeland was yet to be totally decimated. But to make matters worse, God called upon him to perform humiliating mimes to illustrate his message of doom. He was ordered to eat his meals while shuddering. To be asked to lay on his side for well over a year, and during this time, to cook his daily rations over his own dung must have been extremely depressing, not to mention painful. In the end, his call to ministry cost him the human relationship which was most dear to him in all the world; as an illustration of the death of Jerusalem, his wife was suddenly stricken and died. As a symbol of shock, Ezekiel was not even allowed to grieve for her in the customary ways.

Yet as grim and foreboding as his early oracles were, the bright sunlight of the future broke upon him after the fall of Jerusalem. Before the city had fallen, he could utter nothing but doom. After it had fallen, he seemed to be inspired with nothing but hope. Sandwiched between the messages of doom and hope were several oracles for the surrounding nations. So, Ezekiel's message is a contrast of blacks and whites with very little gray. The book which bears his name is a solemn reminder that "tears may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning." After Golgotha comes Easter, after suffering comes glory. This is the burden of Ezekiel.

The Book of Ezekiel	1
Preface.....	2
Message Of Doom And Hope.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Ezekiel ben Buzi, the Man	5
Text and Canonization	6
Critical Issues.....	7
The Message and Theology of Ezekiel.....	8
Part I: The Judgment Upon Israel.....	9
The Opening Vision and Ezekiel's Commission (1:1--7:27).....	10
The Chariot Throne of Yahweh (1:1-28).....	10
The Commission (2:1--3:15).....	11
The Silent Watchman (3:16-27).....	12
Living Parables (4:1--5:17).....	13
The Doom of the Land of Israel (6:1-14)	14
Doomsday Oracle (7:1-27)	15
The Temple Vision (8:1--11:25).....	16
Paganism in the Temple (8:1-18).....	16
Death to the Idolaters (9:1-11).....	18
Ichabod (10:1-11:25)	18
The Inescapable Fall of Jerusalem (12:1--15:8)	20
Two Symbolic Portrayals of Jerusalem's Fall (12:1-20)	20
The Rebuttal of Two Popular Cliches (12:21-28)	21
False Prophets and Whitewash (13:1-23).....	22
Idolatry in the Heart (14:1-11).....	22
The Righteous Few are Not Enough (14:12-23).....	23
The Worthless Vine (15:1-8).....	24
Allegory, Fable, Proverb and Lament (16:1--19:14).....	24
The Allegory of the Foundling (16:1-63).....	24
The Fable of the Eagles, the Cedars, and the Vine (17:1-24).....	26
Personal Responsibility for Sin (18:1-32)	27
A Lamentation (19:1-14)	28
Arraignment and Sentence (20:1--24:27)	29
The Historical Case (20:1-44).....	29
The Sword of Judgment (20:45--21:32)	30
Further Images of Sin and Judgment (22:1-31).....	32

The Two Prostitute Sisters (23:1-49).....	32
The Cooking of Jerusalem (24:1-14).....	33
Ezekiel's Wife Dies (24:15-27).....	34
Part II: The Judgment Upon The Nations	34
The Doom of Canaan (25:1-17).....	35
The Doom of Phoenicia (26:1--28:26).....	35
The Doom of Egypt (29:1--32:32).....	37
Part III: The Restoration of Israel	38
The New Order (33:1--39:29).....	41
Renewal of Ezekiel's Commission (33:1-33).....	41
The Good Shepherd (34:1-31).....	42
A Final Word of Doom to Edom (35:1-15).....	43
Oracle to Israel's Mountains (36:1-38).....	43
The Vision of Dry Bones (37:1-14).....	45
The Oracle of the Two Sticks (37:15-28).....	45
The War of Gog Against Israel (38:1--39:29).....	46
The Glory Returns to the New Temple (40:1--48:35).....	47
The New Temple (40:1--42:20).....	49
The Glory Returns (43:1-12; 44:4).....	50
The Dedication of the Great Altar (43:13-27).....	50
The Closed Outer East Gate (44:1-3).....	50
The Laws for Priests (44:4-31).....	50
The Sacred District (45:1-8).....	51
The Sacred Ordinances (45:9--46:24).....	51
The River of Life (47:1-12).....	51
The Tribal Division of the Land (47:13--48:29).....	52
The Holy City and Its Gates (48:30-35).....	52

Message Of Doom And Hope

Introduction

The inexorable Deuteronomic code with its cursings for covenant disobedience determined the final chapters in the history of Judah and her kings. The northern nation had already been swept away by the Assyrian invaders (2 Kg. 17). The young King Josiah's valiant efforts at religious reform in the south (2 Kg. 22-23; 2 Chr. 34-35) lasted only until his death on the battlefield at Megiddo. As deeply spiritual and courageous as he was, Josiah's spiritual work could not wipe out the accumulated evil that preceded him and would continue after his death (2 Kg. 23:25-27). After Josiah died, there were no more good kings to stave off the coming judgment of God. Jehoahaz' three months on the throne ended when he was deposed and exiled by Pharaoh-Neco, who replaced him with the puppet-king Jehoiakim (2 Kg. 23:31-35//2 Chr. 36:2-4). While Jehoiakim vacillated between his loyalties to Egypt and Babylon, the tiny nation of Judah was riddled with the attacks of her enemies, both large and small (2 Kg. 24:1-4). When he died after a troubled reign of eleven years, his eighteen year old son, Jehoiachin, took the throne, only to face the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (2 Kg. 24:8-14). He had scarcely been king for three months when he was compelled to surrender to the Babylonian armies (2 Chr. 36:9). This surrender resulted in the first deportation of citizens to Babylon. Together with the booty stripped from the temple and the royal treasury, Nebuchadnezzar brought to Babylon the Jewish officers, soldiers, craftsmen and the royal family, including Jehoiachin (2 Kg. 24:10-16//2 Chr. 36:10; cf. Je. 24:1; 27:20; 29:2). Only the poor were left in the land (2 Kg. 24:14b). Over them Nebuchadnezzar set up Zedekiah as a puppet-king (2 Kg. 24:17; 2 Chr. 36:10b; Je. 37:1).

Two prophets, both of them also priests, figured prominently in this history. One was the brooding Jeremiah, who had predicted this very event, the exile of Jehoiachin (Je. 22:24-30). At the first deportation of exiles to Babylon, Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem to carry out his ministry during the final days of the kingdom of Judah. Ezekiel, his younger contemporary, was carried to Babylon, however. Though there is no clear evidence that Ezekiel engaged in any prophetic activity while still in Jerusalem,¹ in Babylon he became the prominent spokesman for Yahweh to the exiles who were now so far from home.

Ezekiel ben Buzi, the Man

Little is known of Ezekiel's early life in Jerusalem other than that he grew up in

¹However, see below under "Critical Issues."

the environs of the Jerusalem temple. He was born into the family of Buzi, a Zadokite priest (Eze. 1:3),² and presumably he had been trained for the priesthood, perhaps even formally taking the robes of office. When the first deportation occurred, Ezekiel was taken with the others on the torturous trek to Babylon, where they were settled by the Canal Kebar at Tel-Aviv (Eze. 1:1; 3:15).³ We know that he was married and that his wife died during his ministry in Babylon (24:15-18). In the fifth year of his exile (593 B.C.), he was called to prophetic ministry (1:2-3), and his preaching continued for some twenty years to the exiles in Babylon, the community in which the future hopes of the nation lay. His name has been variously interpreted, though the meaning "God is strong" or "God prevails" is probably best.

Text and Canonization

The Hebrew text of Ezekiel is difficult in that it contains many obscure technical expressions (such as measurements and dates) and *hapax legomena* (words appearing only once in the Hebrew Bible). Comparisons between the Masoretic Text (traditional Hebrew text) and the Septuagint and Syriac versions indicate that the text has suffered at the hands of editors and copyists.⁴ Though it is largely written in prose, various poetic sections are interspersed throughout the work.

The acceptance of the book into the canon of the Hebrew Bible apparently was established long before the Christian era. Subsequently, however, according to rabbinical tradition, there was talk of its being withdrawn during the Council of Jamnia. There were perceived discrepancies between Ezekiel and Torah, and the bizarre nature of some of Ezekiel's visions were thought to invite speculative mysticism and threaten Jewish orthodoxy.⁵ However, these problems were settled by an enterprising rabbi, who sat up night after night burning some 300 jars of oil until he had resolved the problems. The Book of Ezekiel was never a canonical problem for Christians, and in fact, many of the images in the New Testament (e.g., one flock, one shepherd; four living creatures; Gog and Magog) find their roots in Ezekiel's oracles.

²Zadok was one of the high priests of David's time, a descendant of Aaron (2 Sa. 8:17; 1 Chr. 6:1-8, 50-53; 18:16; Ezr. 7:2-5). He demonstrated unswerving faithfulness to David's line, even in the midst of troubled circumstances (2 Sa. 15:24-29, 36; 1 Kg. 1:7-8, 32-39). After David's time, Zadok's family became the ruling priests in Jerusalem (1 Kg. 4:2; 2 Chr. 31:10).

³The "River Kebar" is probably the canal mentioned in two cuneiform texts from Nippur which describe an obscure body of water, cf. M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20 [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 40.

⁴C. Howie, *IDB* (1962) II.212-213; R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 854-855.

⁵W. Brownlee, *ISBE* (1982) II.260; F. Bruce, "Ezekiel," *The International Bible Commentary* (England/Grand Rapids, MI: Marshal, Morgan & Scott/Zondervan, 1986) 807; Howie, 212.

Critical Issues

During the past century and a half, the literary critics analyzed most of the Old Testament, suggesting various theories of multiple authorship and later editing. For the most part, the Book of Ezekiel escaped this tendency toward source, form and redaction criticism until well up into the present century. The contents of the book continued to be considered a literary unity by a single author. In the second quarter of the 20th century, however, the literary critics began the same type of literary analyses of Ezekiel that they had used with the other documents of the Bible. A number of theories were proposed, suggesting various dates between the 7th and 3rd centuries B.C. and various authors and editors. In some of these hypotheses, Ezekiel was himself credited with very little of the content in the book, and in others, he was credited with substantial sections. Not much unanimity was found in these various explorations, however, and eventually most of the literary scholars came full circle so that today, most, if not all, would agree that the book is a literary unity composed in an exilic setting. This will be the position adopted here.⁶ The other critical issue of note is the locale of the prophet. To whom was he speaking? Based on the opening lines of the book, the oracles seem to have originated and been delivered to the exiles in Babylon who had been taken from Jerusalem in the first deportation. However, other passages in the first half of the book seem to be addressed to the citizens remaining in Jerusalem who were not deported (i.e., 12:1-6; 16:2; 22:2, etc.). Are these circumstances to be explained by clairvoyance or telepathy? How could Ezekiel have hoped to gain a hearing for his preaching from people who were over a thousand miles away? Various solutions have been offered, ranging from the suggestion that he had an early ministry in Palestine and a later one in Babylon to the idea that his apparent addresses to Jerusalem were the result of either mysticism or schizophrenia.⁷ In the end, however, we agree with those scholars who believe that the oracles, even those which might seem to be addressed to the citizens of Jerusalem, were in fact all given in the locale of Babylon. Ezekiel's symbolic actions concerning Jerusalem were not so much directed toward Jerusalem's own inhabitants as they were toward the exiles to convince them that Jerusalem was surely doomed. The first deportation was not the end of Jerusalem's travail, but the beginning, and in fact the city would collapse entirely.⁸

⁶For the arguments of literary sources, forms and redactions, see the standard introductions, such as: O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 367-381; Harrison, 823-849; E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 241-243; B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 357-370.

⁷Brownlee, 252-253; Howie, 205-206.

⁸Bruce, 808; B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 359-361.

The Message and Theology of Ezekiel

The opening vision of the exalted glory of Yahweh, the one who was sovereign over all, is the central message of the book. God is both omnipotent and transcendent, enthroned above the universe. Yet at the same time he is actively engaged in the world, directing the affairs of history. He is unlimited by time or space. Ezekiel's oracles are given so that *people may know that I am Yahweh*, a phrase that appears some fifty-four times in the book. The purpose of the book, then, is that the exiles may know God--his glory, his holiness and the sanctity of his divine name. In particular, of course, it is that they may recognize him through the events of the exile. They must realize that the first deportation was not a temporary deprivation, but rather, the prelude to a sweeping judgment that would ultimately decimate Jerusalem. This judgment was a mighty act of Yahweh just as were the other celebrated acts of Yahweh in Israelite history. Furthermore, the future as well as the past lay in Yahweh's sovereign hands. His promises of restoration and hope could be depended upon fully.

The Book of Ezekiel naturally falls into three sections. The first half (chapters 1-24) consists largely of messages of doom which were given prior to the final fall of Jerusalem. Then follows an collection of oracles announcing judgment upon the other nations of the ancient Near East (chapters 25-32). Finally, the book concludes with the visions of hope for the future restoration of the nation Israel (chapters 33-48), oracles given after the final fall of Jerusalem. Many of the oracles contain dates which, with a couple exceptions, follow a chronological sequence.

Part I: The Judgment Upon Israel

While the Book of Ezekiel naturally falls into three major sections (the judgment of Israel, the judgment of the nations, and the restoration of Israel), it is also composed of thirteen dated oracles which fall among the three sections. The date of the first deportation from Jerusalem (597-596 B.C.) was so significant to Ezekiel that he reckoned all time beginning with this event. Thus, his oracles are dated in terms of the years following this event and are given in chronological order, though three oracles are misplaced in the chronology. The oracles were apparently given orally on these dates and presumably collected at some later time by the prophet or an editor. It is not necessary to assume that all the material following a given date was actually given on that date, for some of the material seems to be unconnected with what precedes it (i.e., chapters. 26, 27 and 28). Following is a listing of the oracles by date insofar as they can be correlated with the known calendar:⁹

Oracle	Day/Mo/Yr	Yr of Exile (1=597/6)
1:2 Opening Vision	5/4/05	Jul. 31, 593 B.C.
8:1 Temple Vision	5/6/06	Sep. 17, 592 B.C.
20:1 Message to Elders	10/5/07	Aug. 14, 591 B.C.
24:1 Report of the Siege of Jerusalem	10/10/09	Jan. 15, 588 B.C.
26:1 Prophecy Against Tyre	1/1/11	Apr. 23, 587 B.C.(?)
29:1 Prophecy Against Pharaoh	12/10/10	Jan. 7, 587 B.C.*
29:17 Prophecy to Babylon About Egypt	1/1/27	Apr. 26, 571 B.C.*
30:20 Prophecy Against Pharaoh	7/1/11	Apr. 29, 587 B.C.
31:1 Prophecy to Pharaoh	1/3/11	Jun. 21, 587 B.C.
32:1 Lamentation Over Pharaoh	1/12/12	Mar. 3, 585 B.C.*
32:17 Lamentation Over Egypt	15/1/12	Apr. 27, 586 B.C.
33:21 Report of Jerusalem's Fall	5/10/12	Jan. 8, 585 B.C.
40:1 Vision of the Restored Temple	10/1/25	Apr. 28, 573 B.C.

* = *Out of chronological sequence*

⁹R. Parker and W. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.--A.D. 75* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942) pp. 25-26 as summarized in W. LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 465.

The Opening Vision and Ezekiel's Commission (1:1--7:27)

The Chariot Throne of Yahweh (1:1-28)

Ezekiel's prophetic ministry commenced with an epiphany of God which came to him during the fifth year of his exile (1:1-3). The vision began with a wind and lightning storm from the north (1:4). In the center of the storm was the chariot throne of Yahweh, led by four cherubim complete with faces, wings, hands and legs (1:5-14; cf. 10:1-2; 1 Chr. 28:18), along with four intersecting wheels full of eyes (1:15-21). Over the cherubim was the platform for the divine throne (1:22-24).¹⁰ Seated on the throne was the divine figure (1:25-28). It is clear that in describing this epiphany Ezekiel wishes to guard against reducing God to a physical being. The vision is representational, not scientific, and Ezekiel repeatedly uses phrases such as *ke'eyin* (= "looks like," cf. 1:4, 7, 16, 22, 27), *mare'eh* (= "appearance," cf. 1:5, 13-14, 16, 26-28), and *d'muth* (= "pattern, form or shape," cf. 1:5, 10, 13, 16, 22, 26, 28). Such phrases effectively distance the reader from any tendency toward crass literalism. What Ezekiel intends to describe is that which cannot be seen or described, the ineffable presence of God (cf. Ex. 24:10; 33:20, 23; Is. 6:5; Jn. 1:18; 1 Ti. 6:16; 1 Jn. 4:12). His language resembles other Old Testament theophanic descriptions of Yahweh, who appears in the storm at Sinai (Ex. 19:9, 16-25), rides on the backs of cherubim (Ps. 18:7-15), makes his way with chariots and lightning (Hab. 3:8), and sits enthroned in the heavens on a crystal platform (Ex. 24:9-10) surrounded by angelic creatures (Is. 6:1-4). In this vision, Ezekiel saw the glory of God (1:28).

The overall meaning of the vision is clear enough. Though Ezekiel, the priest, had been far removed from his temple in Jerusalem, and though he now resided with the Jewish exiles in a pagan land, God still reigned over the universe and human history. The failure of Judah was not the failure of God. The glory, power and presence of God was not tethered to the temple that Solomon built, as Solomon himself conceded (2 Chr. 6:18). Even in Babylon, the home of paganism, God was sovereign. His honor and power were not at stake in the fate of the temple on Mt. Zion. As the lightning-swift movements of the chariot throne imply, God was free of all limitations (1:9, 12, 14, 17, 19-21). Everything was naked and open to him (1:18; cf. He. 4:13).¹¹

The successive descriptions of the living creatures, the wheels and the platform produce an impression of God's overwhelming power and majesty. The description moves from lower levels to higher ones, beginning with the cherubim, then the platform, and finally the throne. Strikingly, it does not give detailed attention to the

¹⁰The word *raqia'* in 1:22 is used in the creation account to describe the dome of the heavens (Ge. 1:6-8).

¹¹J. Mays, *Ezekiel, Second Isaiah [PC]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 26-28.

divine figure of God. Rather, the greatness of God's being, which is ineffable, is implied by the greatness of that which is beneath him. While the precise meaning of some elements in the vision may be debated (the creatures' four faces,¹² the hands, etc.), the larger meaning is not in doubt.

The Commission (2:1--3:15)

Ezekiel's response to the vision, like that of John, had been to fall prostrate (1:28b; cf. Re. 1:17). However, the divine voice called for him to rise, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit (2:1-2). The title, "son of man," by which the divine voice addressed Ezekiel, is used throughout the book, where it appears some ninety times. It seems to be used to emphasize Ezekiel's humanness and finitude over against God's transcendence. The title prohibited Ezekiel from entertaining any illusions of grandeur. He was but a man standing in the power of the Spirit to speak the oracles of God.¹³ His commission was to preach to the Israelites, a people who had been in continual revolt against God throughout their history (2:3-7). They might listen to Ezekiel, and they might not, but in any case, they would know that a true prophet of God had spoken to them (2:5).

The divine voice then commanded Ezekiel to eat a scroll with writing on both sides (2:8-10). Similar scrolls were used in the ancient world as deeds.¹⁴ The legal description on the inside was protected against fraudulence after it was sealed, while the writing on the outside was available for inspection (cf. Je. 32:10-15; Re. 5:1).¹⁵ If indeed the description of this scroll draws from the practice of drawing up "double-deeds," with both a sealed and open text, then it represents the title deed for Israel's redemption, an oracle describing the nation's crime and punishment before restoration was possible. The conditions of redemption were clear--they were the elements of lament, mourning and woe (2:10). The eating of the scroll represents Ezekiel's acceptance of his commission to speak as God's spokesman (3:1-3; cf. Je. 15:16; Re. 10:8-11). He was sent, not to address a foreign culture with a foreign language, but to address his own people who had become hardened and obstinate against God (3:4-

¹²A common explanation for the faces is that they depict the fiercest of beasts (a lion), the most imposing of birds (an eagle), the most valued of domestic animals (a bull), and the foremost creature of all (the human).

¹³While this same title appears in Da. 7:13, it is unlikely that there is any direct relationship between the two usages. Daniel's vision describes a heavenly figure descending in the clouds to receive authority to rule the nations, quite different from anything in Ezekiel. Also, the term "son of man" in the gospels owes more to Daniel than to Ezekiel in orientation, cf. G. Ladd, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 145-158.

¹⁴An alternative explanation is that the scroll was so full that its content flowed over from the front to the back, leaving no room for any extraneous additions by the prophet. cf. F. Bruce, 814.

¹⁵For more detailed information on such deeds, see H. Shanks, "Jeremiah's Scribe and Confidant Speaks from a Hoard of Clay Bullae," *BAR* (Sep./Oct. 1987 Vol. xiii, No. 5) 64-65.

9).¹⁶ The words, "If I had sent you to them [foreigners], they would have listened" (3:6b), are strangely like the words of Jesus, "If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented" (cf. Mt. 11:20-24). Similarly, the words, "Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me," parallel Jesus' words, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (Jn. 14:7; cf. Lk. 10:16). As hardened and recalcitrant as Israel was, Ezekiel would be equally unrelenting in his message of doom (3:9). Still, there was no guarantee that the people would listen (3:10-11).

The commissioning concluded with Ezekiel being filled with the righteous anger of God against the Israelites (3:12-14). Like John, the scroll that had been sweet in his mouth had become bitter when its purpose was understood (3:14; cf. Re. 10:9-10). In this state of overwhelming shock, Ezekiel sat among the exiles, where he waited for an entire week before moving (3:15).

The Silent Watchman (3:16-27)

After sitting in silence for seven days, the word of Yahweh again came to Ezekiel (3:16). So far, there is no indication that he said anything to the exilic community, though we may assume they observed his state of acute shock. God's word was that Ezekiel was to serve as a sentinel to his people.¹⁷ He was responsible to warn them about the danger of their sin. While he had no guarantee that they would listen to him (cf. 2:5; 3:11), and while the covenant blessings and curses would surely be carried out in accord with their righteous living or sinful behavior (Dt. 28), Ezekiel would only be spared¹⁸ if he faithfully carried out his commission as a watchman (3:17-21).

After this warning to Ezekiel, Yahweh told him to go to the plain (3:22),¹⁹ apparently a place of solitude. When he arrived, he again saw the glory of Yahweh in

¹⁶His role would be just the opposite of what Isaiah described, when he said that because Judah would not listen to their prophets speaking to them in their own language, they would be compelled to hear the judgment of God "spoken" in the language of the invading Assyrians (cf. Is. 28:11-12).

¹⁷The same metaphor depicting the prophet as a watchman was used by Habakkuk (2:1), Isaiah (56:10), Jeremiah (6:17), and Hosea (9:8). It indicates that the primary role of the prophet, far from being simply a forecaster of future events to satisfy the curious, was to issue a call for righteous living in the present. To be sure, there is clear prediction in the messages of the prophets; however, such predictions were warnings to encourage a sincere response toward God.

¹⁸Based upon the older English versions, which translate *nephesh* as "soul," some have developed the theology that eternal salvation is dependent upon soul-winning. At best, this is an overstatement, and at worst, it becomes salvation by works. It should be understood that the term *nephesh* in Hebrew is not to be defined like the Greek *psyche* (= soul), but rather, it refers to the whole person and the whole life of a person, cf. H. Wolff, *The Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 10-25. Later translations are probably better in rendering 3:19b, "You will have saved your life" or "yourself" (RSV, NIV, NEB, NASB).

¹⁹Literally, a cleft between the mountains, cf. J. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction & Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1969) 72.

the form of the chariot-throne, and as before, he fell prostrate before the divine epiphany (3:23). Once more, he was filled with the Holy Spirit (3:24a). The divine voice commanded him to return to Tel-Aviv, shut himself in his house, and allow himself to be bound with ropes (3:24b-25).²⁰ He would become mute until, at the intervention of God, he would be given a voice to preach to the rebels (3:26-27).

Living Parables (4:1--5:17)

Ezekiel's first attempts at communicating God's message to the exilic community was acted out in symbolic performances. The burden of his message was that Jerusalem and Judah, which now clung to a precarious existence under Zedekiah, the puppet king, would not be spared. A popular notion, even among the Jews who had not been deported, was that the trial of Jerusalem would be short-lived. Soon Jehoiachin, the exiled king, would be brought home and reinstated (cf. Je. 5:12-13; 8:11; 21:1-2; 22:24-30). That this same hope was held by the exiles in Babylon is evident, not only from the writings of Ezekiel, but also from a letter that Jeremiah sent to the exiles (Je. 29). It fell to Ezekiel to dispel them of this false notion. Jerusalem, in fact, would be put under siege and destroyed. Judah's national existence as an independent political entity would come to an abrupt end.

To demonstrate this grim future, Ezekiel was instructed by God to draw a plan of Jerusalem, probably an outline or map, on a clay brick. Then he was to build a model of siege ramps around it to simulate the coming attack (4:1-2).²¹ He was to place an iron griddle between himself and the city as a sign that the city would be cut off by an impassable barrier (4:3). The prophet was to lie on his left side for 390 days, each day representing a year (4:4-5).²² He was to lie on his right side for 40 days, again a day for a year (4:6). Apparently, he was to align his body with the border which lay between Israel and Judah, his head pointing toward Jerusalem (4:7). He would be tied with ropes so that once he was in his position, he could not move until his ordeal was finished (4:8). As such, when lying on his left side he would be facing north, symbolizing Israel, and when on his right side he would be facing south,

²⁰There is no antecedent to the verbal-pronominal construction, "They will put ropes upon you." Some interpreters take this to refer to severe opposition from the exilic community to whom Ezekiel would be preaching, and others see it as self-inflicted, or at least, allowed.

²¹For more detailed information on the nature of siege warfare, see H. Shanks, "Destruction of Judean Fortress Portrayed in Dramatic Eighth-Century B.C. Pictures," and D. Ussishkin, "Defensive Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1984 Vol. X, No. 2) 48-73.

²²The LXX has 190 days rather than 390 days, and some scholars take this to be original (so NEB). In either case, if this posture was adopted continuously, it might have resulted in severe physical discomfort, including bone and joint degeneration, muscle loss, and bed sores. On the other hand, some have suggested that Ezekiel may have assumed this position for only certain periods of each day, while at other times he was free to fix meals or receive guests (cf. 4:9-12; 8:1), cf. R. Alexander, *EBC* (1986) VI.769.

symbolizing Judah. It is clear that this dramatization was intended to symbolize the sins of Israel and Judah. However, there is little unanimity regarding the precise interpretation of the time periods.²³ Finally, Ezekiel was to eat polluted siege rations to symbolize the stringency of exile (4:9-17).²⁴ Ezekiel's next living parable was to shave his head and beard, a symbol of captivity and defilement (cf. Is. 7:20; Lv. 21:5; Dt. 14:1). He was to perform this with a sword, the symbol of war (5:1a). After dividing the hair accurately into thirds with the help of a scale, and after his 430 day siege had been completed, he was to burn a third of the hair on the mud brick, use his sword to chop up a third of it around the outside of the model, and scatter the rest in the wind, except for a few strands, some of which he would tuck into his clothing and the rest which he would also burn (5:1b-4). This vivid and striking action would symbolize the terrible end of Jerusalem with a third of the population dying inside the city due to siege, a third dying outside the walls, and a third fleeing in terror (5:12). Jerusalem, which had been established as the centerpiece of God's favor in the world (5:5), had repeatedly broken covenant (5:6). She was even worse than the pagan nations which surrounded her (5:7). Therefore, God determined to bring the nation to a tragic end in full view of the pagans (5:8-12, 14-17). This divine judgment would convince the Israelites that God had dealt with them in covenantal zeal (5:13).

The Doom of the Land of Israel (6:1-14)

Ezekiel's striking parables were followed by prophetic oracles which pronounced doom upon the land of Israel. While the parables focused upon the city of Jerusalem, this oracle broadens the geographical focus to include the entire land, the heart of which was the central mountain range. The mountains were singled out because they were the location of the *bamoth* (= high places), the pagan sacred places, which were denounced so strongly by earlier prophets in the books of Kings and Chronicles (6:1-7).²⁵ Those who worshiped at the high places would be slaughtered in

²³The term *'avon* can mean either sin or punishment. If the former, the days refer to accumulated periods of covenant violation. Here, the 390 year period accords well with what we know of the history of the northern nation, that is, that it was in covenant violation from the time of Jeroboam I. However, the 40 year period does not come close to satisfying the lengthy covenant violations of Judah. On the other hand, if the days are taken to represent years of punishment for sin, Judah's exile might well fit into the 40 year span of a single generation, but how is one to take the 390 years for Israel? The LXX discrepancy produces even more uncertainty. No satisfactory solution has yet been found.

²⁴The original command to eat food cooked over a fire made from human excrement would have resulted in ritual impurity (cf. Dt. 23:12-14), and this was so offensive to Ezekiel that he was allowed to use animal dung instead.

²⁵The Deuteronomic code specified that when the Israelites entered the land, they were to destroy all the pagan shrines on the mountains of Canaan. Instead, they were to build a single place of worship, a place that Yahweh would choose (Dt. 12). However, it was assumed that this instruction would be carried out when the land was fully subdued, and it was not fully subdued until the time of David. David, of course, intended to build the permanent shrine called for in Deuteronomy, but his plans were postponed by God until the reign of Solomon, his successor (2 Sa. 7). Until Solomon had constructed the permanent temple, the high places were apparently tolerated, though perhaps with some reluctance (1 Sa. 9:11-14; 10:5, 13 1 Kg. 3:1-4). After the building of the temple, they are renounced without mitigation.

the Babylonian siege. Again, this judgment was not to be attributed to the vicissitudes of ancient politics, but rather, to the scathing judgment of God. In this judgment, the Israelites would "know that I am Yahweh" (6:7)! Those who did not succumb to the sword would be exiled into foreign lands (6:8). There they would acknowledge their sins and idolatrous practices (6:9); there they would realize that the covenant curses were not empty threats (6:10)!

The downfall of Israel would be accompanied by taunts (6:11), for God had specified, "Just as it pleased Yahweh to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you" (Dt. 28:63).²⁶ Whether far or near, disaster would take them in the form of war, famine and plague (6:12). The corpses lying strewn around the pagan high places would be a grim irony, since these same high places had been used in the fertility cults to worship the life-force of Ba'al and Asherah (6:13).²⁷ From one end of the country to the other, Yahweh's hand of judgment would be stretched out against them.²⁸

Doomsday Oracle (7:1-27)

The next oracle revolves around repeating expressions about the arrival of "the end." Though not usually printed as a poem, it contains three strophes, each of which conclude with the familiar, "You will know that I am Yahweh" (7:4, 9, 27). Also repeated is the declaration that Israel's sentence of doom is according to her conduct (7:3, 8-9, 27).

The first strophe, reminiscent of the words of Amos (cf. Am. 8:2), declares the end of the land of Israel, or more to the point, the end of any Jewish political entity in Israel (7:1-5). The second strophe announces unmitigated disaster for everyone who lives in the land (7:6-9). The third strophe pronounces that doom has budded into a rod of punishment which will leave nothing unscathed, neither people nor economy (7:10-14). The sword, famine and plague mentioned earlier (cf. 6:11-12) will spare none, killing most of them and terrorizing those who are not killed (7:15-22). The wealth of Israel's citizens will be worthless (7:19-21), and the temple will be desecrated and stripped (7:22). Blow after blow would strike the land, and neither prophet, priest, wise elder nor king would be able to speak a word to quell the awful tide of judgment (7:23-27).

If the exiles in Babylon from the first deportation held any false notions that

²⁶The gestures of hand-clapping and foot-stomping as well as the verbal taunt, "Aha," are clearly intended as expressions of malicious glee (cf. 25:3, 6). Here, the prophet is to act out these taunts to symbolize God's satisfaction in venting his rage upon Israel, cf. M. Greenberg, 135.

²⁷R. Hals, *Ezekiel [FOTL]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) XIX.40.

²⁸Diblah probably refers to Riblah, a location in Hamath to the far north. See the textual discussion in W. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19 [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 103.

the trial of Jerusalem was to be short-lived, Ezekiel's oracles were a blistering rebuttal! The first deportation was only a prelude to the full disaster. The capital city, Jerusalem, and the whole land would be decimated in judgment. The kingdom of Judah was not the kingdom of God, and it could and would come to a terrible end.

The Temple Vision (8:1--11:25)

To appreciate the significance of Ezekiel's temple vision, one must have a fair understanding of the theological meaning of the temple within Israelite culture. In the exodus, God revealed to Moses the architectural details of the tent of meeting, a mobile sanctuary for worship (Ex. 25-30). However, in the repetition of the law to the second generation Israelites, the ones who would actually invade Canaan, Moses also indicated that when the land was fully subdued, a permanent temple should be constructed to replace the temporary tent of meeting (Dt. 12). This single place of worship would symbolize the Israelites' permanency in the land of promise. Repeatedly in Deuteronomy, this permanent shrine was described as a place that Yahweh would choose for himself and there "place his name" (Dt. 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 26; 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2, 6-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8, 10; 18:6; 26:2; 31:11). The full subjugation of the land was not accomplished until the time of David, and it was he who made preparations for the construction of a permanent temple (2 Sa. 7:8-16; 1 Chr. 21:22--22:5; 28:11-19; 29:1-9). Solomon, of course, built it (2 Chr. 2-7).

The theological significance of the temple is captured in several of the psalms. Zion, the site of the temple, was the place where Yahweh had enthroned himself (Ps. 9:11; 48:1-3; 87:1-2; 99:1-3). He had chosen Zion over all the other mountains of Canaan (Ps. 78:67-69; 132:13-16). The city and temple were believed to be eternally secure because of his presence there (Ps. 46:1-7; 48:4-14; 125:1-2; 133:3; 146:10). Given this kind of theology, it must have come as a shock to hear from Jeremiah that the temple would be destroyed, an oracle that Ezekiel may have personally listened to prior to his deportation (Je. 7, 26). Now it would fall the lot of Ezekiel to convince the exiles in Babylon that this predicted doom for the temple was true. This is the meaning of the temple vision.

Paganism in the Temple (8:1-18)

A year and almost two months had passed since Ezekiel's inaugural vision and call (8:1a). It is possible, though not necessary, that the reader should assume Ezekiel to have completed his mock siege of Jerusalem and the 430 day vigil upon his left and right sides (cf. 4).²⁹ He had by this time been accepted in the circle of exiles as a prophet. The elders among the exiles had come to him for consultation (8:1b). The

²⁹Of course, such an assumption would demand that the 390 day period and the 40 day period be taken as conterminous. If they are taken as consecutive, then this vision occurred while Ezekiel was still acting out the siege.

vision which he had in their presence struck at the very heart of Israel's existence, for in it Ezekiel revealed that judgment truly begins at the house of God (cf. 9:6; 1 Pe. 4:17). It is important, of course, to keep in mind that what Ezekiel tells them is visionary, not historical (8:3; 11:24). At the same time, the content of the vision is a striking indictment against the syncretism of Israelite religion.

The figure of God, as seen in the inaugural vision (1:26-27), now appeared again (8:2). Grasping Ezekiel by the hair, he carried him across the Mesopotamian desert to Jerusalem (8:3). Here, the prophet was shown four cases of paganism within the very precincts of the temple. In the first, he saw "the idol that provokes," quite possibly a pillar-image of the female fertility goddess Asherah, the consort of Ba'al (cf. 2 Kg. 21:7).³⁰ This pagan image contrasted sharply with the glory of God which properly belonged in the temple (8:4). It was an insult to God, his temple and the nation, an utterly detestable desecration of God's chosen dwelling (8:5-6). In the second example, Ezekiel was directed to a hole in the courtyard wall, which he was able to enlarge enough to find a doorway through which to pass (8:7-8). Once inside, he discovered an array of detestable creatures carved in bas-relief on the walls.³¹ These carvings were possibly of creatures from the Egyptian cult based on the Book of the Dead or perhaps Babylonian cultic carvings, but in any case, the carvings were of creatures that were taboo (8:9-10; cf. Lv. 11:10-42).³² Even worse, the seventy elders of Jerusalem, including Jaazaniah ben Shaphan, were offering incense before this display of pagan theriomorphic deities. The significance of Jaazaniah is not immediately clear, but if he was the son of the royal secretary Shaphan, who in the previous generation had read the Torah scroll to King Josiah (cf. 2 Kg. 22:8-10), then his participation was especially shocking (8:11-13).³³ The third detestable thing was a scene of the Israelite women weeping for Tammuz, the Sumerian fertility god who annually was lamented upon his death and descent into the underworld (8:14-15).³⁴ This mourning ritual occurred in mid-summer so that it might counteract the waning of the life-force during the sterile heat of summer. Finally, Ezekiel was taken into the inner court between the porch and the altar. Here, in the place where there ought to have been penitential weeping (cf. Jl. 2:17), he observed twenty-five Israelite men

³⁰W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel [OTL]*, trans. C. Quin (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 122.

³¹The NIV rendering "portrayed" is too weak. The Hebrew expression *mehuqeh* means scratched or incised work, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 114; H. Ringgren, *TDOT* (1986) V.140.

³²The reference here is general enough that some scholars hesitate to be specific, cf. Greenberg, 169-170; J. Wevers, *Ezekiel [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 69.. Others, however, are convinced that it refers to Egyptian prototypes, cf. Eichrodt, 124; Bruce, 817-818.

³³Bruce, 818,

³⁴H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 64-66.

facing the east while engaging in astral worship of the sun (8:16-18; cf. 2 Kg. 23:5, 11). The worship of Shamash, the Sumerian sun god of justice, was probably instituted by Manasseh (cf. 2 Kg. 21:5).³⁵ All of these pagan practices were utterly detestable before God, bringing his wrath upon the nation and depriving the Israelites of any pity in the coming judgment.

Death to the Idolaters (9:1-11)

As the temple vision continued, Ezekiel saw the summoning of six executioners along with a priestly scribe (9:1-2).³⁶ The glory of God rose up from the Most Holy Place and moved to the threshold of the temple (9:3a), a move that anticipated the eventual full departure of God's glory from Zion (chapter 10). The priestly scribe then marked the forehead of all those in Jerusalem who were vexed with the paganism of its citizens with a Hebrew *tau*.³⁷ The executioners slaughtered everyone who was not so marked, beginning at the sanctuary (9:3b-7).³⁸

While the executions were underway, Ezekiel, like Moses, Amos and Jeremiah before him (Nu. 14:11-19; Am. 7:1-5; Je. 14:19-21), interceded for the remnant of Israel (9:8). While he was not given a direct promise of restraint, the appearance of the priestly scribe to announce the completion of his task indicated that judgment would be tempered with mercy (9:9-11).

Ichabod (10:1-11:25)

The similarity between God's judgment on the tent of meeting in the days of Eli, the priest (1 Sa. 4), and the coming destruction of the temple on Mt. Zion was not lost upon the prophets. At the time Shiloh had been destroyed some four centuries earlier, Eli's daughter-in-law had died in childbirth. Before she expired, she named her son *Ichabod*, that is, *No Glory*, as a final gesture of bitterness (1 Sa. 4:21). Now, Ezekiel will see that the same glory of God, which long ago had abandoned the tent of meeting, would now abandon the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Jeremiah, also, called

³⁵The reference to putting a branch to the nose cannot be identified precisely. Older interpreters searched for a pagan ritual to match this description but were unsuccessful. Another possibility is that it refers to some provocative gesture or gesture of humility toward the gods, cf. Greenberg, 172-173.

³⁶That the man with the writing kit was a priest is deduced from his clothing, inasmuch as priests were described as "those who wore the linen ephod" (cf. Ex. 28:42-43; 1 Sa. 2:18; 22:18).

³⁷Because the form of a *tau* in early Hebrew script was written as an X (a T in Greek and Latin), many early Christians believed that it was a prophetic sign of the cross, cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, III.xxii; Cyprian, *Treatise* V.22; XII.book ii.testimonies 22. Just as the sign of the *tau* in Ezekiel's vision saved from execution those who were sealed with it, the cross also would save from the judgment at the end of time those who were so sealed. The use of the sign of the cross traced upon the forehead in baptisms may very well be traced back to this passage.

³⁸Of course, this sealing of God's faithful has its counterpart in the Apocalypse of John, when the true servants of God are sealed on their foreheads (Re. 7:1-8). The statement, "Begin at my sanctuary," is later echoed by Peter (cf. 1 Pe. 4:17).

attention to this parallel, announcing that the temple on Mt. Zion would become like the shrine at Shiloh (cf. Je. 7:12-14; 26:4-6).

The priestly scribe, who previously had sealed the remnant with a *tau*, now assumed the role of a messenger of vengeance. He was instructed to take coals of fire from the chariot throne of Yahweh and cast them over Jerusalem in order to set fire to the city (10:1-2).³⁹ As he did so, the cloud of divine glory arose from the Most Holy Place and moved to the threshold, as was anticipated earlier (10:3-5; cf. 9:3a). The priestly scribe took coals from the hand of a cherubim, just as he had been told (10:6-8). Then, the chariot throne of glory left the threshold of the temple and paused at the east entrance (10:9-22).⁴⁰

Once again lifted up, presumably by his hair (cf. 8:3), Ezekiel was transported to the east temple gate (11:1a). Here he saw a group of some twenty-five leaders from Jerusalem planning for the future (11:1b-3). In spite of the tenuous political situation in Jerusalem, they believed that the future was bright, especially for themselves as the prime "meat" in the stew.⁴¹ It may even be that they had decided to capitalize on the absence of the exiles who had been taken away in the first deportation by seizing their property (cf. 11:15). They may have considered themselves to be favored by God, since they had not gone into exile, like the others. Ezekiel was commanded to speak out against this false optimism and treachery (11:4). As he did so (11:5-12), one of the leaders fell dead at his feet (11:13a).⁴² Once more, Ezekiel prostrated himself in intercession before Yahweh to pray that God might save a remnant of Israel (11:13b). He was told that God would indeed save a remnant of Israel, but it would not be this petty group of plotting leaders in Jerusalem! Rather, the surviving remnant lay with the exiles who had found sanctuary in Babylon (11:14-16).⁴³ The scattered exiles would be the ones God would bring back to the land. They would be cleansed and restored by the gift of the Holy

³⁹This act has its New Testament counterpart in the avenging angel who takes fire from heaven's altar and casts it into the earth (cf. Re. 8:3-5).

⁴⁰In the first vision by the River Kebar, Ezekiel does not use the name cherubim, while here he says he "realized" that the living creatures were cherubim (10:20). This might be explained if Ezekiel had not been confirmed in his priesthood before the deportation. Perhaps he had never been inside the Holy Place of the temple and viewed the carvings of the cherubim on the walls, doors and furnishings (cf. 1 Kg. 6:29, 35; 7:29, 36). If so, it may not have been until the temple vision that he realized the living creatures and the cherubim in the temple were one and the same, cf. Taylor, 104.

⁴¹The translation of 11:3 has long been a problem. While different English Versions give different renderings, the general sense of the passage is still that these men considered their future to be secure. For more extensive discussion on the translation, see H. May, *IB* (1956) VI.119.

⁴²The name of this leader, Pelatiah, is a subtle irony, since it means "Yahweh preserves (a remnant)", cf. Bruce, 819. However, the remnant which would be preserved would not come from these leaders!

⁴³Notice this same message preached by Jeremiah, Ezekiel's contemporary, in his parable of the two baskets of figs (Je. 24).

Spirit (11:17-21).⁴⁴

Finally, Ezekiel saw the chariot throne of Yahweh's glory rise from the city of Jerusalem and pause at the Mt. of Olives (11:22-23). Then, the prophet was returned to the community exiles in Babylon, where he explained his vision to them (11:24-25). This was how the chariot throne of God came to be in Babylon in his first vision by the River Kebar. God's glory had vacated the temple on Mt. Zion because of the pagan idolatry of the Israelites in Jerusalem. The glory had departed the temple and now resided with the exiles in a strange land. Jerusalem and its temple were now desolate. The glory of Yahweh, which had filled the temple when Solomon dedicated it, was gone (2 Chr. 5:13-14; 7:1-3). The stern threats which God made to Solomon concerning the temple had now become a reality (2 Chr. 7:17-22).

The departure of the Spirit of Yahweh from Jerusalem concludes the opening movement of the Book of Ezekiel. The return of the Spirit to the temple will be the final movement of the book (cf. 43:1-5). It should be observed, of course, that the remnant of Israel in exile, who would be eventually restored and repatriated, was not morally superior to the Jewish community in Jerusalem, as the material of the book continually points out. However, the sovereign judgment of God, as well as his grace and mercy on a remnant, are trenchant calls for repentance. The exiles who were rejected from the land were, in fact, the chosen. Those who were allowed to remain in the land after the first deportation were, in fact, the rejected. It is no wonder that in the New Testament St. Paul declares, "...that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (Ro. 3:19).⁴⁵

The Inescapable Fall of Jerusalem (12:1--15:8)

Two Symbolic Portrayals of Jerusalem's Fall (12:1-20)

The next several oracles predict the inevitability of Jerusalem's fall. Though there seemed to be much optimism among the citizens still in Jerusalem as well as in the community of exiles in Babylon, it was unfounded. The prediction of Jerusalem's

⁴⁴Ezekiel will develop further the theme of the gift of a new heart and a new Spirit (cf. 18:31; 36:24-27). This promise is very similar to Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant (cf. Je. 31:31-34). There is disagreement over how the term *ruah* (= spirit) is to be translated. Does this refer to a renewed human spirit as a poetic parallel to a new heart (so NIV, AB, NEB, KJV, NASB, RSV, NAB, ASV), or does this refer to the gift of the divine Spirit as promised by the prophets (cf. Is. 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; Jl. 2:28-29)? Later, God will say to the remnant through Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit in you" (36:26-27; cf. 37:14; 39:29), and on this basis, I have followed the idea that all the passages refer to the gift of the divine Spirit. However, Alexander is probably correct in saying that if the term *ruah* refers to a renewed human spirit, the renewal itself is the result of the outpouring of the divine Spirit, cf. Alexander, 793.

⁴⁵Eichrodt, 144.

fall begins with two more symbolic portrayals, vivid dramas which would impress the message of doom upon the hearts of the rebels who had unseeing eyes and unhearing ears (12:1-2). In the first, Ezekiel was instructed to mime the approaching total exile of Jerusalem by packing his possessions in the daytime and staging a departure in the evening (12:3-4). As part of this mimicry, he was to dig through the wall of the house,⁴⁶ pass through the opening, shoulder his pack, and hide his face as though trying to escape incognito (12:5-7). These striking gestures, which were a *mophet* (= portent, omen) of the future, were intended to raise the obvious question as to their significance (12:8-9). The explanation of the sign was that Ezekiel's actions portrayed the exile of Zedekiah, the puppet king of Jerusalem,⁴⁷ as well as the entire body of Israelites who lived there (12:10-11). Zedekiah would attempt to escape near the end of the city's siege through a breach in the wall, but the Babylonians would capture him nevertheless, scattering his troops and bringing him to Babylon in chains (12:12-14; cf. 2 Kg. 25:4-7). The exile of the remaining citizens of Jerusalem would testify to Yahweh's sovereignty (12:15). Only a few would be spared in order to express repentance for the nation's grievous sins (12:16). This scenario harks back to Ezekiel's earlier demonstration with his hair and beard (cf. 5:1-4). Some citizens would be burned in the city (cf. 10:2), some would be struck with the sword outside the city, and others would be scattered among the nations (cf. 12:14). Only a few would be spared (12:16).

In the second symbolic portrayal, Ezekiel was commanded to eat his meals while shuddering (12:17-18). His tremors would be a sign pointing toward the horror of the coming invasion of the holy city (12:19-21).

The Rebuttal of Two Popular Cliches (12:21-28)

The false optimism of the Israelites concerning Jerusalem was clearly evident in two popular aphorisms, *the fulfillment never comes*, or if it does, *it won't happen for a long time* (12:21-22, 26-27). Both of these adages demonstrate that in the opinion of most people, the doom of Jerusalem foretold by the prophets was either a false prophecy, or if not, it was aimed at some indeterminate period in the far future. It will be remembered that Jeremiah contended with some of the same attitudes in the city of Jerusalem (Je. 5:12; 6:14; 7:10; 8:11; 26:10-11; 27:9-10, 14-16). He even sent a letter to the Babylonian exiles of the first deportation explaining that anyone who encouraged the people to anticipate a short stay in Babylon were false prophets. This letter Ezekiel undoubtedly read, since it specifically included the priests in its address (Je. 29:1-3, 8-19). As far as the two cliches bandied about among the exiles, Yahweh

⁴⁶The word *qi'r* (= wall) is usually used of a house as opposed to *homah* (= a city wall), cf. Holladay, 97-98, 318.

⁴⁷Zedekiah is not given the title "king," but is called a "prince," probably to emphasize that Jehoiachin was still reckoned to be the official king, even if in exile, and Zedekiah was at best an interloper.

declared that he would put an abrupt end to such sayings (12:23-25, 28). The prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction certainly would be fulfilled, and they would come to pass very soon!

False Prophets and Whitewash (13:1-23)

The problem of prophets who spoke what the people wanted to hear was a very real one. As early as the 9th and 8th centuries in the northern nation, court prophets had appeared, that is, prophets who operated under the wing of the monarchy and whose task was to support the policies of the king (cf. 1 Kg. 22:6, 10-13, 24; Is. 30:10). Those who dissented from the status quo could be banned (Am. 7:10-13) or dismissed as madmen (Ho. 9:7). Court prophets were obviously mercenary (cf. Mic. 3:5), and the situation became so bad in Jerusalem that Jeremiah declared a moratorium on the prophetic formula, "Yahweh says" (Je. 23:9-40). Some, like Hananiah of Jerusalem, predicted a reversal of Judah's fortunes within two years (Je. 28:1-4). However, the real issue was not whether the prophetic message was palatable, but rather, whether it was historically accurate (Je. 28:5-9; cf. Dt. 18:20-22).

Among the exiles of the first deportation, there were also self-appointed prophets and prophetesses (13:1-3, 17). They were like jackals among ruins, burrowing among the foundations without any regard for the welfare of the place (13:4-7). Such false emissaries would be banned from the restoration of the land (13:8-9). Like their counterparts in Jerusalem (cf. Je. 6:14; 8:11), they preached a deceptive message of prosperity and peace, whitewashing the true gravity of the situation (13:10-16).⁴⁸ Prophetesses, of which there was a long Israelite tradition (cf. Ex. 15:20; Jg. 4:4; Is. 8:3; 2 Kg. 22:14), were equally unreliable (13:17). Not only were they false in what they said, they sold magic charms which were supposed to ward off the approaching evil (13:18-19). Yahweh stood in judgment against such charlatans, and in the end, he would rescue a remnant from their deception (13:20-23).

Idolatry in the Heart (14:1-11)

Once more, the elders of the exilic community came to Ezekiel for consultation (14:1). Perhaps they wanted a further word about the future of Jerusalem or their own fortunes. In any case, while they were there, Yahweh gave to Ezekiel a message directed to them personally. He declared that although they had not outwardly succumbed to the idolatry which surrounded them in Babylon, nevertheless they had allowed the thinking behind idolatry to enter their hearts (14:2-3). Therefore, their

⁴⁸The older English versions rendered the uncertain word *taphel* as "untempered mortar," but most modern English translations render it as whitewash, cf. *TWOT* (1980) II.978.

inquiry after God issued from a divided heart, and because it did, they should not expect God to play along with such mixed allegiance. He certainly would give them a reply, though it would be as he saw fit and not as they anticipated (14:4, 7-8)! His divine purpose was not to satisfy their curiosity or to resolve their fears, but to recapture their hearts (14:5, 11). What he wanted from them was a repentant heart (14:6).

The true prophet who was so consulted would not venture to speak. Only a false prophet would answer an inquirer with a divided heart. God would allow such a false prophet to mislead the inquirers, and both would be destroyed (14:9-10).⁴⁹

The Righteous Few are Not Enough (14:12-23)

Abram's assessment of God's justice was that he would not sweep away the righteous with the wicked, but would do what was right (cf. Ge. 18:22-25). Even a small remnant of righteous people might be enough to avert judgment (Ge. 18:26-33). However, the remaining righteous people in Jerusalem were so few that they would not be enough to avert the coming judgment. Even if righteous intercessors like Noah, Job and Danel⁵⁰ were to live there, they would only be able to save themselves (14:12-14). Noah was able to save his children from the great flood, but here he would not even be able to do that (14:15-20). Coming against Jerusalem was the terrible fourfold judgment of sword (14:17), famine (14:13), beasts (14:15) and plague (14:19, 21). Still, God would spare a remnant who would be saved through means of a second deportation (14:22). When they arrived in Babylon with their stories of horror, the exiles of the first deportation would be thankful that they had gone into exile early (14:23a). God's purpose in the exile would finally be clear (14:23b).

⁴⁹There is an account of such inquiry from a divided heart in Ahab's question to his court prophets (1 Kg. 22). Their replies were all falsehoods, for God had given to them a lying spirit so as to deceive Ahab, whose allegiance to Yahweh was mixed with his allegiance to Ba'al.

⁵⁰Noah and Job are well-known righteous figures from antiquity (cf. Ge. 6:9; Jb. 1:1, 8; 2:3). However, the name *Danel* (also mentioned in 28:3) presents a problem, since he was not a known person of antiquity. The Hebrew spelling here is different than that of Daniel, the prophet, the former being *Dani'el* and the latter being *Daniyye'l*. We know of no biblical character named Danel, but there is someone by that name who appears in the Ugaritic literature of the 14th century B.C., a person with the reputation of being a wise and righteous ruler who aided the cause of widows and orphans, cf. Bruce, 822. Also, in the Jewish pseudepigraphical book Jubilees there is mentioned a Danel who was said to be the uncle and father-in-law of Enoch (Jub. 4:20). If either of these identifications are what Ezekiel intends, and it is not at all certain that they are, then the three names Noah, Job and Danel may have been brought together as examples of righteous non-Israelites (as opposed to Jeremiah's similar statement about the righteous Israelite intercessors, Moses and Samuel, cf. Je. 15:1). For the position that the prophet Daniel, a contemporary of Ezekiel, is here in view, see Alexander, 808. We do know that Daniel the prophet was capable of profound intercession (cf. Da. 9:4-19).

The Worthless Vine (15:1-8)

The metaphor which describes the nation Israel as a spreading vine (or a vineyard) was already known (cf. Ps. 80:8-11; Is. 5:1-7; Ho. 10:1). Here, God calls attention to the fact that a vine is only worthwhile if its fruit is worthwhile. Unlike trees, which can yield lumber and wood capable of being shaped into useful items, a vine is quite useless in and of itself (15:1-3). After it has been charred in the fire, it is even more useless (15:4-5). Jerusalem was just such a worthless vine. It had indeed been charred by fire in the first siege, even though the city was spared total destruction. However, the worthless vine would yet be consumed totally (15:6-8)!

Allegory, Fable, Proverb and Lament (16:1--19:14)

The next two oracles, in the form of an allegory and a fable, describe the moral collapse of Jerusalem as well as the theological implications of her vacillating loyalties among the nations. Ezekiel follows these oracles with a striking correction to a popular proverb. He then composes a funeral dirge concerning the historical events near the end of the life of the nation Judah.

The Allegory of the Foundling (16:1-63)

In the allegory of the foundling, Ezekiel describes Jerusalem and her detestable violations of the covenant by comparing her to a baby girl once exposed to die immediately after birth (16:1). The imagery of sexuality, both inside and outside of marriage, are particularly apt in light of Israel's fascination with the Canaanite fertility cults and the rituals of sacred prostitution.

Jerusalem was born in the land of the Canaanites to an Amorite father and a Hittite mother (16:3), statements which are biting sarcasms aimed at the pre-Israelite origins of Jerusalem.⁵¹ Even the most basic survival measures were ignored,⁵² and the baby girl was thrown into a field to expire (16:4-5). She was saved when Yahweh passed by, saw her, and rescued her (16:6), an allusion to the Israelite takeover of Jerusalem. She developed into a vibrant young woman, attractive and sexually mature (16:7). When she was old enough for marriage, Yahweh claimed her as his own (16:8), probably an allusion to the Davidic covenant which established Zion in

⁵¹It will be remembered that the decadence of the Amorites in Canaan was pointed out to Abraham as representative of the delinquency of the whole land, and that this degeneration would reach its full measure just at the time the Israelites would invade the land in the days of Joshua (cf. Ge. 15:16). Similarly, the disgusting lives of the Hittite women was well-known to Isaac and Rebekah, prompting Isaac to make arrangements for his son to travel to Padan-Aram to seek a wife (cf. Ge. 27:46--28:2).

⁵²The rabbis considered such measures following birth to be so vital as to allow them on the sabbath. The rubbing of an infant with a mixture of salt and oil was believed to toughen the skin, and then the baby was swaddled with strips of cloth for a period of up to six months, cf. Greenberg, 274-275.

Jerusalem as the residence of Yahweh (cf. 2 Sa. 7:12-16; 1 Chr. 23:25-26; Ps. 78:67-68; 132:11-16).⁵³ Yahweh adorned her with precious jewels, and Jerusalem became famous among the nations (16:9-14), an allusion to the splendor of Solomon's reign (cf. 1 Kg. 10).

However, Jerusalem turned to prostitution, using the adornments God had given her to seduce her foreign suitors (16:15-19). She had given herself to the fertility cults of the Canaanites, even sacrificing her own children (16:20-22; cf. 2 Kg. 16:3; 21:6). She built altar bases (mounds) for prostitution and high places for idolatry (16:23-26).⁵⁴ Historical judgments did not deter her, and even the pagan Philistines were shocked at her behavior (16:27). She flirted with the Assyrians and Babylonians as well (16:28-29; cf. 2 Kg. 15:7-8; 20:12-18). Unlike regular harlots, who at least were paid for their services, Jerusalem had bribed her foreign suitors for the chance to co-mingle with them (16:30-34).

Therefore, because of Jerusalem's political and religious promiscuity, God had sentenced her to be executed according to covenant law (16:35-41; cf. Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:20-24). She had exposed herself for sin, and now God would expose her for judgment. Only after judgment would God look upon her without anger (16:42). She would be taunted with the proverb, "Like mother, like daughter," for her entire family was sexually degraded, including her Hittite mother, her Amorite father, and her sisters, Samaria and Sodom (16:43-48). Sodom, like Jerusalem, had been arrogant, prosperous and calloused, not to mention brazen in her "detestable acts" of perversion (16:49-52).⁵⁵ Jerusalem, however, was even worse!

Yet, as bad as Samaria, Sodom and Jerusalem had been, there was still the hope for God's forgiveness and mercy when they should repent (16:53-58). God would deal with her citizens in judgment, but judgment was not his final act. He would discipline them in history (16:59), yet he would also not fail to remember his everlasting covenant which had been made with them when Jerusalem was young

⁵³The ritual of "spreading the corner of the garment" over a young woman was a gesture symbolizing betrothal for marriage among both ancient Israelites and Arabians (cf. Ru. 3:9), cf. Greenberg, 277. It was understood to mean that the woman was now covered to all except her husband. Thus, the violation of the marriage bed is described in Dt. 22:30 (23:1 in the Hebrew text) as literally "uncovering the skirt of one's father."

⁵⁴There is a play on words here between *ramah* (= high spot) and *bamah* (= cultic high place). The first is a raised platform or couch for public prostitution (or "couch" and "high stool", NEB), and the second refers to the high elevations on the hills where public idolatry occurred, cf. Bruce, 823.

⁵⁵It has been argued by the gay religious community, on the basis of Eze. 16:49, that Sodom's sin was not homosexuality at all, but rather, bad social manners. Such an interpretation is unwarranted. The context of the allegory, with its ribald sexual allusions, the sexual nature of the Genesis account of Sodom's sin (cf. Ge. 19:1-9), and the description of Sodom's *to'evah* (= abominable thing), which is used in the Torah to describe homosexual behavior (cf. Lv. 18:22) militate against such a tendentious hermeneutic. It is fair to say that homosexual behavior was not Sodom's only sin (cf. Ge. 18:20-21), but homosexual practices were certainly a prime expression of the city's degradation.

(16:60).⁵⁶ Even the adulterous sisters, Samaria and Sodom, would be reconciled to Jerusalem by an act of divine grace (16:61).⁵⁷ In the end, the sins of Jerusalem would be expiated by God himself (16:62-63). This promise parallels Jeremiah's prediction of a new covenant of forgiveness to be established with the people of Israel (cf. Je. 31:31-34).

The Fable of the Eagles, the Cedars, and the Vine (17:1-24)

The second oracle⁵⁸ describes the vacillating political policies of Zedekiah, the puppet king in Jerusalem. It has the character of a classical English fable in that it depicts members of the animal and plant worlds as the characters in the story. In the fable, a powerful eagle came to Lebanon, breaking off the top of a tall cedar and transplanting it in a far-off city of merchants (17:1-4). Back in Lebanon, the eagle took some native seed and planted it in a fertile soil-bed, where it grew into a vine, stretching out its roots and branches to the eagle for sustenance (17:5-6).⁵⁹ However, the vine turned from the first eagle and sent out roots toward a second eagle for sustenance (17:7-8). The story is followed by the question, "Will it thrive?" Obviously not! Its vacillation toward the second eagle will stir up the anger of the first one, and the vine would be uprooted (17:9-10).

Ezekiel now expounds the meaning of the fable. The first eagle was Nebuchadnezzar, and the top of the tall cedar removed to a far-off land was Jehoiachin and the first deportation (17:11-12; 2 Kg. 24:8-16; 2 Chr. 26:10). The native seed which became a vine was Zedekiah, the puppet king (17:13-14; 2 Kg. 24:17; 2 Chr. 36:10). Zedekiah, however, determined to break his ties with Babylon, so he appealed to Egypt for protection (17:15; 2 Kg. 24:20b; Je. 37:5).⁶⁰ Instead of

⁵⁶Many commentators regard the covenant made "in the days of your youth" to refer to the Sinai covenant. However, since the subject of the allegory is Jerusalem, it may very well refer to the Davidic covenant of which Jerusalem was such an integral part. Jerusalem did not belong to the Israelites until the time of David, and the expression "everlasting covenant" is an appropriate name for the promises God made to David (cf. 2 Sa. 23:5). Indeed, the idea of an "everlasting covenant" to be made in the future is regarded as the fulfillment of the covenant of David in the Book of Consolation (cf. Is. 55:3).

⁵⁷The fact that favor would be shown to Samaria and Sodom apart from God's covenant with Israel implies the idea of divine grace.

⁵⁸The Hebrew text calls it a *hiydah* (= riddle, enigmatic question), and this in turn invites the interpreter to search for the meaning.

⁵⁹The imagery of a vine stretching out its roots to an eagle for sustenance is certainly odd, but the literary form of a fable permits considerable metaphorical license.

⁶⁰The annals of Kings and Chronicles record Zedekiah's rebellion but do not mention his appeal to Egypt. However, a new Pharaoh, Hophra, had taken the Egyptian throne, and in his interest to interfere in Asian affairs, he must have assured Judah of his support, J. Bright, *History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 328-329. We know from the Lachish ostraca that military officers of Judah had made contact with the Egyptians, cf. J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) I.213. In any case, Jeremiah warned Zedekiah against trusting the Egyptians to defend him (cf. Je. 37:5-10).

freeing himself from the Babylonians, however, Zedekiah would merely bring down the wrath of the superpowers upon Jerusalem. He would be taken to Babylon where he would die in exile (17:16-21; cf. 12:12-14; 2 Kg. 25:2-7).

Doom, however, was not Yahweh's final word. God himself would take a cedar shoot and plant it on top of a high mountain where it would flourish (17:22-24). Like Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, this sprig would also come from the family of David. Unlike them, however, it would not be brought to ruin. It would become so great that it would serve as a shelter for the birds, an image that several hundred years later Jesus would use to describe the growth of the kingdom of God (cf. Mt. 13:31-32).⁶¹ While this final expansion of the fable is not explained, it obviously ties in with all the other messianic visions of the prophets about a future age when the kingdom of God will flourish in the earth.

Personal Responsibility for Sin (18:1-32)

The oracle in chapter 18 comes as a response to a popular proverb among the Jews, "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:1-2). This aphorism intended to teach that the tragedy of Jerusalem was not the fault of its current citizenry, but rather, the fault of their ancestors. The proverb was popular not only among the exiles in Babylon, but also among those Jews still living in Jerusalem (cf. Je. 31:29-30). It was based upon the phrase from the decalogue that God would visit judgment upon children to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their fathers (cf. Ex. 20:5; Dt. 5:9). Furthermore, the exile was clearly connected, at least in part, to the atrocities committed during the reign of Manasseh in the previous generation (cf. 2 Kg. 24:3-4). In short, then, the proverb aimed at saying, "It's not our fault," and even worse, if judgment falls upon us for our ancestors' sins, then, "Yahweh is not fair" (18:25, 29). Ezekiel's oracle corrects this caricature.

The correction comes in poetic form, in which Yahweh declares that judgment falls upon the one who sins, not upon his children (18:3-4). God presents a hypothetical case involving three generations. He shows that a righteous person who conscientiously keeps Torah will live (18:5-9). However, if that man has a son who does not obey Torah, that son will die for his sins (18:10-13). If a son in the third generation turns away from his father's sins and lives faithfully to Torah, he also will live, his father's sins notwithstanding (18:14-18). The righteous son will not be judged for his father's sins, and the wicked son will not be excused because of his father's righteousness. This oracle, then, cuts across the proverb that the actions of the ancestors are judged in the lives of the children. Rather, everyone will be judged for

⁶¹The imagery of a tree sheltering the birds is used later by Ezekiel to describe the former flourishing empire of Assyria (cf. 31:3-9) and by Daniel to describe the majesty of Babylon (cf. Da. 4:10-12).

his own sins (18:19-20). Even if a person is a transgressor, repentance will procure mercy for him (18:21-23). However, by the same token, if a righteous man forsakes Torah and falls into paganism, he will die under judgment (18:24).

In the end, then, the charge of injustice against God is turned against the accusers. Yahweh is just, and they are not (18:25-29). Each will be judged on his own merits (18:30), so the incentive exists to turn from evil and pursue righteousness (18:31-32). Of course, Ezekiel does not here comment on the weakness of the human constitution and the inability of people to live righteously within their own powers. It will be left to St. Paul to address this aspect of the human dilemma in the New Testament. However, he does issue a trenchant call for repentance. "Repent and live," he declares.

A Lamentation (19:1-14)

A characteristic meter in Hebrew lament or dirge is the *qinah*, that is, a line of five stressed syllables with a 3 + 2 pattern, similar to English pentameter. Chapter 19 is such a lament, though the meter can hardly be captured in English translation.⁶² An approximation of the meter in 19:2b would be:

*In-the-midst of-lions she-crouched
rearing her-whelps.*

While lamentation in the ancient Near East was used to honor someone at death, it was also used to describe the fate of cities, communities and kingdoms, and Ezekiel uses this latter form here (19:1).

In the dirge, Ezekiel depicts the recent fortunes of the royal dynasty in two extended metaphors. In the first, Judah was described as a lioness (19:2),⁶³ and her cubs were the kings in David's line. One of her cubs, Jehoahaz, grew up to be a strong lion but was trapped⁶⁴ and taken away to Egypt (19:3-4; 2 Kg. 23:31-33, 34b). Another cub, Jehoiakim, also became a strong lion and ascended to the throne (19:5-9; 2 Kg. 23:34a). He was fierce and threatening, but he also was trapped and taken in chains to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kg. 24:1-7; 2 Chr. 36:5-7).⁶⁵

⁶²E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry [FOTL]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 10-11.

⁶³Judah's emblem was a lion from ancient times (Ge. 49:9; cf. Rv. 5:5), so the metaphor is particularly apt.

⁶⁴Apparently, a particularly effective way to snare a lion in Judah was in a pit or deadfall (cf. 2 Sa. 23:20). The lions of ancient Palestine were the Asiatic subspecies, and they did not become extinct in Palestine until around the time of the Crusades, cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1986) III.141.

⁶⁵Commentators differ as to the identify of the second cub. Some believe that Jehoiakim was simply passed over, and that the second cub refers to Jehoiachin. Others hold that Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin were both passed over and the second cub refers to Zedekiah. The order of the last kings of Judah and their fates is as follows:

The second metaphor returns to the vine symbolism used earlier (cf. 15, 17). Here, Judah is described as a vine with strong branches which could be fashioned into a king's scepter (19:10-11).⁶⁶ Nevertheless, in spite of its strength, the vine was uprooted and shriveled by the east wind. The east wind, of course, symbolizes Babylon (19:12). The vine was transplanted in the desert of exile (19:13). A fire from one of its main branches consumed the vine to the extent that no limbs were left for carving royal scepters (19:14). This final image indicated the extermination of the kings of David's line, a judgment that Jeremiah also envisioned (cf. Je. 22:24-30).

Arraignment and Sentence (20:1--24:27)

Ezekiel now embarks on his third series of oracles beginning not quite a year after his temple vision (20:1 cf. 8:1). The repeating theme of these oracles is the indictment of the nation of Judah for her many sins and the sentence of judgment which would be speedily carried out (20:4; 22:2; 23:26).⁶⁷ As before (cf. 8:1; 14:1), the catalyst provoking the oracles is the inquiry of the elders (20:1). Because of their divided loyalties between Yahweh and paganism, these leaders did not deserve to hear from God (20:2-3; cf. 14:2-3). Nevertheless, Yahweh inspired Ezekiel to confront them with the case against them.

The Historical Case (20:1-44)

The first part of the indictment traces the historical rebellion of the nation (20:4). While Ezekiel does not intend to countermand his earlier oracle, which corrected the false notion that the judgment of God was simply to be blamed on the ancestors (cf. 18:1-4), he does intend to point out that the present depravity of the nation is no more than a continuation of their historical bent. At the beginning, when God chose the nation Israel in Egypt, he gave his oath that he would bring them up from Egypt to Canaan (20:5-7; cf. Ex. 6:6-8). He demanded that they put away all vestiges of Egyptian religion (cf. Ex. 20:1-3; Jos. 24:14). Nevertheless, they clung to

Jehoahaz (taken to Egypt)

Jehoiakim (taken to Babylon)

Jehoiachin (taken to Babylon)

Zedekiah (taken to Babylon)

Identification is especially difficult since all three of the final kings were taken to Babylon (cf. 2 Chr. 36:6, 10; 2 Kg. 25:7). We have followed the interpretation, admittedly uncertain, that the two cubs refer to Jehoahaz and his successor, Jehoiakim, while the main branch of the vine, in the succeeding metaphor, refers to Jehoiachin, the deposed king who was exiled in the first deportation. This interpretation has the advantage that when it gets to the last king, he is said to be in Babylon *'attah* (= now, at the present moment, cf. 19:13). This statement could hardly be said of Zedekiah, who still was in Jerusalem.

⁶⁶Once again, the imagery of a scepter for Judah goes back to the ancient blessing of Jacob toward his sons (cf. Ge. 49:10).

⁶⁷The force of the double question, "Will you judge?" is imperatival.

these relics as epitomized in the golden calf (20:8; cf. 23:3; Ex. 32:1-6).⁶⁸ The only reason God did not immediately destroy them was in order to protect his "name," that is, his reputation of power, compassion and forgiveness (20:9-10; cf. Ex. 9:16; 34:5-7; Jos. 7:9). So, he continued to reveal himself to them in the desert, giving them the Torah (20:11-12). Still, the people repeatedly lapsed into disobedience and idolatry, earning for themselves the historical judgments of Yahweh at Kadesh and elsewhere (20:13-16; cf. Nu. 14:21-23; Ps. 95:8-11). The history of the first two generations of Israel was an account of both mercy and judgment (20:17-22). God's intent was for them to "obey and live by" his decrees and laws (20:11, 13, 21; cf. Lv. 18:5), but this they did not do, in spite of the severe warnings in the Deuteronomic code (20:23-24; cf. Dt. 28:64; Lv. 26:32-35, 38-39). So, he "gave them over" to follow the practices of pagan religion (20:25-26; cf. Jg. 2:10-15).⁶⁹ In every sacred *bamah* (= high place) of Canaan, the Israelites worshiped (20:27-29).⁷⁰

If the ancient nation behaved in this way, its descendants had been no better (20:30). Yet they still wanted to inquire of Yahweh (20:31). Their divided heart spelled disaster! As their ancestors, they wanted to be like the nations surrounding them (20:32). This Yahweh would not allow. He had chosen them for himself, and they would fulfil this purpose, even if it meant that they would reap the heavy judgment of exile (20:33). Just as they once went into the desert of Sinai, now they would go into the desert of the nations (20:34-36), where they would be purified by judgment (20:37-38). So, the nation had been given over to pursue its infatuation with paganism (20:39). In the end, however, after the purgation of judgment, Israel would be restored to the land as a holy people, chastened and repentant (20:40-43). In this way, Yahweh would uphold his "name," that is, his reputation for judgment and mercy (cf. Ex. 34:5-7).

The Sword of Judgment (20:45--21:32)

The coming judgment would set Judah on fire, burning and scorching everything in its path (20:45-48).⁷¹ Yet the ambivalence of the elders of Judah is

⁶⁸The assumption here, of course, is that the golden calf was a lapse back into something the Israelites had been exposed to while still in the Nile Delta. We know from archaeology that Ba'al, who was often depicted as riding upon a calf, was known and worshiped in the Nile Delta by Semitic peoples resident there, cf. K. Kitchen, *NBD*, 2nd. ed. (1982) 160; R. Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973) 214.

⁶⁹This "giving over" of people to follow their own inclinations toward evil is described by St. Paul in the New Testament with reference to the gentiles, also, cf. Ro. 1:24-32.

⁷⁰There is a play on words in 20:29 which is recognizable only in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew *mah* (= what?) and the verb *ba'* (= to go) also make up the syllables in the word *bamah* (= high place). Thus, the question, "What is this high place you go to?"

⁷¹The English Versions have a less desirable chapter division than the Masoretic Text. In the Hebrew Bible, 20:45-49 appear as 21:1-5, thus making Chapter 21 a total of 37 verses, and this division fits the text much better.

apparent in that they dismissed Ezekiel's warning as just another parable (20:49).

Already, Ezekiel has used the imagery of the sword several times to depict the coming catastrophe of war (cf. 5:1-2; 6:3; 9:1-2, 5-7; 12:14). Now he develops this imagery in four strophes. In the first, he describes Yahweh drawing the battle sword from the scabbard to destroy Jerusalem and Zion and to slay her citizens (21:1-7). His description was accompanied by deep groans symbolizing the bitter grief of those who would fall.

The second strophe is the poetic Song of the Sword (21:8-10a). In it, the prophet declared that the nation was like a rebellious son who would not accept corrective whipping with a wooden stick (21:10b). Therefore, the rebellious son would be destroyed with the sword of slaughter (21:11-17).⁷²

In the third strophe, Ezekiel pictures the Babylonian armies marching southward from Carchemish until they reach a fork in the road. The right fork would lead to Jerusalem in Judah and the left would lead to Rabbah in Ammon (21:18-20). Both nations, apparently, had sought to shed their vassal relationship with Nebuchadnezzar, and he would stop at the fork to seek a magical omen in order to determine who to attack first (21:21-22).⁷³ To Ezekiel's audience, the whole scenario seemed ridiculous (21:23). Yet even here, Yahweh's sovereign will would be accomplished, for the lot would fall to Jerusalem! The day had come for Judah's leader to be brought low (21:24-26). No other leader would rise until the indeterminate future, when God's messianic leader would finally appear (21:27).⁷⁴

In the final strophe, Ezekiel returns to the Song of the Sword, this time directing it against Ammon (21:28-32). Since the fork in the road to Judah was the first to be taken, the Ammonites exulted in the siege of her old enemy (21:28; cf. 25:3). Her rejoicing would be short-lived, however, for God spoke to the sword in an apostrophe, calling it down upon the necks of the Ammonites (21:29). Then, after the sword had been returned to its scabbard (i.e., after Nebuchadnezzar had returned to Babylon), the Babylonians, also, would face divine judgment (21:30-32).⁷⁵

⁷²The Deuteronomic Code envisions the execution of a flagrantly rebellious son who will not receive corrective discipline (Dt. 21:18-21), and Ezekiel's imagery may be a reflection upon this statute.

⁷³Divination by arrows (belomancy) was known among the Arabs as well as the Babylonians, and divination by inspecting livers (hepatoscopy) is well attested in Mesopotamian archaeology, cf. May, 180.

⁷⁴Once again, Zedekiah, the "wicked prince," is not granted the title of king (cf. 12:10). Traditionally, some dispensationalists have insisted that the "wicked prince" is the anti-christ at the end of the age, cf. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 334, 336. The context militates against such an interpretation. On the other hand, the identification of the one who would rightfully be given the throne clearly echoes the scepter prophecy of Jacob (Ge. 49:10) and points to the messianic future.

⁷⁵The meaning of the apostrophe to the sword in this strophe is much debated. I have followed the interpretation that the second person feminine singular pronominal suffixes consistently refer to the sword as a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, cf. Eichrodt, 306-307.

Further Images of Sin and Judgment (22:1-31)

In three more vivid oracles, Ezekiel addresses the sins and coming judgment of Jerusalem. In the first, Yahweh denounces Jerusalem as a city filled with bloodshed (22:1-5). It will be remembered that Manasseh had "filled Jerusalem with blood" due to his practice of child sacrifice (cf. 2 Kg. 21:16), so some of this blood-guilt was connected with pagan worship. Jehoiakim had slaughtered a contemporary of Jeremiah, because he raised his voice against the sins of Jerusalem (cf. Je. 26:20-23), so some of the bloodshed was due to religious persecution. Ezekiel also indicates that some of the bloodshed was from strong arm political tactics against residents in Jerusalem, probably along the same lines as the Naboth incident in the time of Elijah (22:6-8, 12). Furthermore, the insatiable lust for sex drove leaders toward endless acts of promiscuity and adultery, some of which also involved menstrual blood (22:9-11; cf. Lv. 18:6-30). Jerusalem was indeed a city of blood, and she deserved the judgment that was coming upon her (22:13-16)!

The second oracle employs the metaphor of the smelter. Jerusalem was so corrupt that it was like a smelting furnace filled with waste products. While pure silver was what Yahweh wanted, all he could find was the inferior dross of base metals (22:17-22). Jerusalem was like a white-hot furnace, and God's wrath was the fire which would melt her citizens.

In the third oracle, Ezekiel addresses the land of Judah as a spiritual wasteland (22:23-24). Her princes, priests, prophets and people were all rapacious law-breakers, flagrantly violating Torah again and again (22:25-29). God had looked for someone in the city to intercede for the sins of the nation, like one mending a broken wall, but there was no one to be found (22:30). Nothing was left, therefore, but terrible judgment (22:31). Earlier, it was stated that even Noah, Job and Daniel, all noted intercessors, would not have been able to save anyone but themselves if they were in the city (cf. 14:14, 20). This being so, the question must be raised as to who was possibly sufficient to the task of standing in the breach to prevent judgment. No answer to this question is given by Ezekiel, but a final answer is wonderfully provided in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. He would rise as the royal prince from Judah, and he would serve as the great high priestly intercessor for all (cf. 21:27).

The Two Prostitute Sisters (23:1-49)

Much along the same lines as the allegory of the foundling (16) and Jeremiah's metaphor of the two unfaithful sisters (cf. Je. 3:6-7), Ezekiel now presents another striking metaphor based on promiscuity. This time he compares Jerusalem and Samaria, the respective capitals of Judah and Israel, to two sisters, both of whom took up careers of prostitution (23:1-4). The imagery reflects upon the political alliances made between the northern and southern nations with foreigners throughout their history.

The two sisters are named Oholah and Oholibah.⁷⁶ Their promiscuity began all the way back in Egypt, prior to the exodus (23:3). This implies what Ezekiel explicitly stated earlier, that is, that the Israelites were involved with pagan religion during their bondage in Egypt (cf. 20:6-7). Nevertheless, both sisters were taken to be wives of Yahweh. Both were "his" (23:4b-5). Oholah (Samaria) prostituted herself to the Assyrians by forming political alliances with them (23:5-8; cf. 2 Kg. 15:19; Ho. 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:1),⁷⁷ and Yahweh sent her into exile by these same Assyrians (23:9-10; cf. 2 Kg. 17). Oholibah (Jerusalem), her sister, did not learn from this tragedy (23:11). She also prostituted herself with foreigners, first the Assyrians (23:12-13; cf. 2 Kg. 16:7-10, 18; 18:13-16; 2 Chr. 28:16, 19-21) and then the Babylonians (23:14-17a; cf. 2 Kg. 20:12-18; 24:1; 2 Chr. 32:31; Is. 39:1-7). Tiring of them (23:17b), she took up an anti-Babylonian stance while trusting her ancient lover, Egypt, to protect her (23:18-21; cf. 17:15; 2 Kg. 18:21; 24:1, 7; Je. 2:36; 37:5-8). Therefore, her former lovers, Babylon and all her hordes,⁷⁸ would put the city to siege, destroying it completely (23:22-35). In a hideous poem, the wrath of Yahweh against Jerusalem is compared to a large cup of wine from which Jerusalem would drink deeply, just as had Samaria (23:32-34).⁷⁹

Thus, judgment was inevitable! The prostitution of Oholah and Oholibah issued from a divided heart. On the very day that the Israelites had sacrificed their children to the pagan gods, they then entered the sanctuary on Zion to worship Yahweh, still with blood-stained hands (23:36-39). Their shameless cavorting with foreigners would come to an end, however, for Yahweh had decreed destruction and judgment upon them (23:40-49).

The Cooking of Jerusalem (24:1-14)

Ezekiel now draws to a close his series of oracles pronouncing doom upon the city of Jerusalem. The date of this final oracle in the series is deeply significant, for it is the same date given by the Deuteronomistic historian as well as Jeremiah for the beginning of Jerusalem's siege, January 15, 588 B.C. (24:1-2; cf. 2 Kg. 25:1; Je. 52:4). Of course, it would not be until quite some time later that the exiles of the first deportation would receive official notice of the siege and the fall of Jerusalem (cf.

⁷⁶The meaning of the two names may be significant. Both are derived from the Hebrew *'ohel* (= tent). What is not clear is whether the tent theme is related to the Tent of Meeting in the desert, which the Israelites defiled by their sins, or to the pagan shrine tents on the high places in Israel.

⁷⁷There is also corroborating archaeological evidence for these alliances. On the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, Jehu is depicted prostrating himself before the Assyrian overlord and offering gifts. Also, according to another Assyrian inscription, Adad-Nirari III received tribute from "the territory of Omri," cf. Taylor, 172.

⁷⁸Pekod, Shoa and Koa (23:23) are all in Mesopotamia, the Babylonian homeland, cf. Wevers, 136.

⁷⁹The imagery which depicts God's wrath as a cup of potent wine is used elsewhere by the prophets (cf. Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17, 22-23; Je. 25:15-18, 27-29). Of course, its most famous usage is in the New Testament (Rv. 14:9-10; 16:19).

33:21). In memory of this terrible date, the exilic community would establish a day of fasting which would be observed on into the time of the post-exilic community (Zec. 8:19).

Ezekiel's oracle on this date included the Song of the Cauldron, an extended metaphor which described Jerusalem as a pot ready for cooking (24:3-5). The imagery echoes Jeremiah's boiling cauldron metaphor (Je. 1:13-14). Earlier, Ezekiel had addressed the false optimism of those leaders in Jerusalem who believed themselves to be "the meat in the pot," that is, the beginning of an optimistic future for Jerusalem (cf. 11:3). Now, the pot was to be put on the fire, and Jerusalem and her impurities would be thoroughly cooked in the crucible of judgment! Like a pot, the city was encrusted with rust and baked on food, images that represented her many sins (24:6a). The pot would be emptied of its contents, piece by piece, as her citizens would go into exile (24:6b). The innocent blood which had been shed in the city had not been covered, and it cried aloud for vengeance (24:7-8; cf. Ge. 4:10; Job 16:18; Is. 26:21). So, the city would be cooked until all the water had boiled away and the remaining pieces were charred (24:9-14).

Ezekiel's Wife Dies (24:15-27)

The national tragedy of Jerusalem now takes on a final personal dimension in the marriage of Ezekiel. God warned him that his wife, whom he deeply loved, would die, a symbol of the death of Jerusalem. When she died, he was not to mourn her, but to remain unmoved in his shock (24:15-17).⁸⁰ He reported this terrible news to the people in the morning, and by evening, his wife was dead (24:18). When the people asked about his lack of emotional response, he explained that this was a sign to them of the death of Jerusalem and the overwhelming shock that would accompany it (24:19-24). The final siege had already begun, and when it was over, a fugitive would bear the news that Jerusalem had fallen (24:25-26; cf. 33:21). Until then, Ezekiel would be mute by the hand of Yahweh.

Part II: The Judgment Upon The Nations

From the doom of Jerusalem and Judah, Ezekiel turns to the doom of the nations surrounding Israel. That God holds accountable all the nations of the world is theologically significant, especially in light of the popular assumption that in the Old Testament, God was concerned only with Israel. The books of Ruth, Job, Jonah, Nahum and Obadiah all point to the fact that God's concern is larger than Israel. Even

⁸⁰The normal custom for mourning the dead include going barefooted and bareheaded, R. DeVaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) II.59.

within books which are largely concerned with the historical fortunes of Israel and Judah, substantial sections are also devoted to God's sovereignty over the nations for judgment and salvation (cf. Is. 13-21, 23-24, 34, 47; Je. 46-51; Da. 2, 7; Jl. 3; Am. 1-2; Mic. 4; Zep. 2). Furthermore, God's covenant with Abraham, the fundamental covenant for Israel, was established in order to bring blessing to all the nations (Ge. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). One of the purposes of Israel's calling to be Yahweh's servant was so that the nation could be priests to the other nations (Ex. 19:3-6), though in this task Israel failed miserably (Is. 42:18-19). Another servant ultimately would replace her (Is. 42:1-4). The pantheons of all the other nations in the ancient world might be provincial, but Yahweh was not! He was the Creator of all, and he held all accountable to himself!

Ezekiel's oracles to the nations, then, fall in line with Yahweh's universal sovereignty. They are collected in the second part of his work, sandwiched between his oracles of doom toward Judah and his oracles of hope for the future. The nations he addresses are those who were Israel's neighbors to the east, north and south, and in that order. Their judgment bears a special relationship to Israel. They are judged with respect to how they treated Jerusalem and Israel (cf. 25:3-4, 8-9, 12-13, 15-16; 26:2-3; 28:24; 29:6-9a; 36:5-6). Seven nations are addressed, and seven separate prophecies are given concerning the seventh nation, Egypt. This pattern seems to be intentional, suggesting the symbolic concept of fulness.⁸¹

The Doom of Canaan (25:1-17)

The first series of oracles concern Israel's closest neighbors, Ammon, Moab and Edom in the transjordan, and Philistia to the southwest. They appear to have been given shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, for the nations are chastised for their taunts hurled at Jerusalem when she fell (25:3-4, 8). Ammon and its capital, Rabbah, would be destroyed (25:1-7; cf. 21:28-32). Moab and its northern frontier towns would be invaded as well (25:8-11). Edom (25:12-14) and Philistia (25:15-17) would also suffer God's judgment within history.

The Doom of Phoenicia (26:1--28:26)

Next, Ezekiel turns northward to the nations further away. For the most part, his concern is with Tyre, the greatest of the Phoenician seaports, though near the end he also briefly addresses Sidon. Tyre had two harbors which were alternately usable depending upon the winds, one on the mainland and the other on its island fortress.

⁸¹Other prophets, also, produced oracles against the nations in sets of seven (cf. Je. 46-49; Am. 1-2). Furthermore, according to Dt. 7:1, seven Canaanite nations would fall before Israel could take possession of the land. By comparison, perhaps the number seven here suggests the necessary number of judgments to occur before the new exodus and re-entry into the land by the exiles, cf. Hals, 180.

The city was well-known as the foremost maritime center in the levant.⁸² Tyre, like the Canaanite nations, had also greeted the fall of Jerusalem with glee. Jerusalem had long controlled the north/south trade routes, and now this "gate" to the south was open (26:1-2). However, Tyre had joined other nations in attempting to throw off the Babylonian suzerainty yoke (cf. Je. 27:3-11), and she would pay the price. Her harbor and fortress would be decimated by Nebuchadnezzar's war machine (26:3-14). Her life in merchant service would come to an abrupt end (26:15-21).

In a fitting poetic dirge, Ezekiel describes the fall of Tyre in the metaphor of a powerful sailing vessel which breaks apart in the high seas and sinks. Though she employed craftsmen, sailors and soldiers from all over the ancient world (27:1-11), and though she was enriched by her extensive commerce which reached far out into the Mediterranean (27:12-24), yet the stately ship, heavy with cargo, would be shattered by the east wind from Babylon (27:25-36). The description of Tyre's extensive commercial enterprises parallel John's apocalyptic description of Babylon's similar commerce under divine judgment (cf. Rv. 18).⁸³

Finally, Ezekiel delivers a withering blast toward the ruler of Tyre, probably Ithobal II. Like many other rulers in the ancient Near East, he was considered to be divine, and as Ezekiel points out, he was not reluctant about accepting such acclaim (28:1-2). He considered himself to be the epitome of wisdom and commercial diplomacy (28:3-5).⁸⁴ All his supposed advantages notwithstanding, he also stood under the judgment of God (28:6-10).

The divine claims of Ithobal II lead to yet a further oracle against him (28:11-19). The language in this second oracle is highly symbolic and has occasioned much discussion. The poem obviously uses the images of the primeval creation to symbolize the Tyrian ruler's arrogant claims, for it mentions "Eden, the garden of God" (28:13), and it alludes to the guardian cherub and the expulsion of the first creature from paradise (28:14, 16).⁸⁵ In this same way, the ruler of Tyre would be

⁸²M. Cochrane, *ISBE* (1988) IV.932-935.

⁸³Most of the place names in Tyre's commercial trade are identifiable in the ancient world.

⁸⁴As in 14:14, 20, the identification of Daniel is debated (see footnote #50).

⁸⁵There is particular difficulty in translating the reference to the guardian cherub. The different recensions of the text and versions do not always agree. The LXX, for instance, reads, "From the day you were created, along with the cherub, I placed you in the holy mountain of God" (28:14), and later, "You have been cast down from the mountain of God, and the cherub drove you out of the midst of the stones of fire" (28:16). This recension is followed by several English translations (NEB, RSV, NAB). Other English translations, however, do not envision the primordial human along with the guardian cherub, but rather, follow the Masoretic Text in taking the primordial creature to be the cherub (so KJV, NASB, NIV). If the former rendering is accepted, then the imagery is of the primordial human with the addition of considerable elements which are not to be found in the Genesis account. These elements may have come from Ugaritic mythologies and may have been used by Ezekiel, because they were familiar to the hearers of his oracle, cf. LaSor, 473-474. On the other hand, if the latter translation is accepted, then it is possible that what is envisioned is a recollection of the sin and expulsion of Satan from the primal heavens. A very similar type of imagery appears in Is. 14 concerning the

brought low by God's judgment.

The final word against Phoenicia is directed toward the city of Sidon, Tyre's northern neighbor. Sidon, also, would receive her deserved judgment (28:20-23). Due to the destruction of Tyre, Sidon and the Canaanite nations, the land of Israel would be cleared of all her ancient antagonists (28:24). Finally, in the future, God would regather his scattered people from exile so that they might once more live safely in the land (28:25-26). All nations, both Israelites and foreigners, would then know that Yahweh was truly God!

The Doom of Egypt (29:1--32:32)

The last of the oracles toward foreign nations address Egypt. While the chronology of dated oracles is broken here (29:1, 17; 32:1; cf. *Introduction to Part I*), it seems reasonably certain that they have been placed out of chronology deliberately so as to be included along with the oracles to the other nations.

In the first oracle, there are two metaphors describing Egypt. The first is a double entendre (29:1-3). Egypt is like a great crocodile, though the actual word *tannim* (= sea monster) is also the word for dragon, the chaos-monster of ancient mythology.⁸⁶ Yet Yahweh is the sovereign God who controls Egypt, too! Egypt and her mercenaries would all be hooked and jerked out onto the land to be consumed by beasts (29:4-6a). In the second metaphor, Egypt is compared to a reed-staff, too flimsy to bear any weight. When Israel leaned upon this weak stick for protection against Babylon, it splintered (29:6b-7; cf. 2 Kg. 18:21; Is. 36:6).⁸⁷ Therefore, divine judgment would fall upon Egypt for a forty year period (29:8-16).

The second oracle describes Nebuchadnezzar's frustrating siege of Tyre. Tyre remained obstinate, and the heads and shoulders of those carrying military packs were rubbed raw (29:17-18). Because he did not gain much from the Tyrian campaign, Nebuchadnezzar vented his frustration by invading Egypt (29:19-20). The oracle ends with a word of encouragement for Israel. In the future, a kingly power (i.e., "horn") would rise, and Ezekiel would be able to speak words of hope (29:21).⁸⁸

king of Babylon, and the imagery used to describe him also suggests to many readers the fall of Satan. In any case, whether the imagery is of the primal human or of the fall of Satan, the fact remains that the fall of the Tyrian ruler of is compared to the fall of some primal being. In the viewpoint of this author, the interpretation following the imagery of the fall of Satan fits well with the Tyrian ruler's divine claims.

⁸⁶That biblical writers used ancient Near Eastern mythologies for their metaphorical value seems undeniable, cf. H. Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Biblical Creation Story," *Creation in the Old Testament*, B. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 35-44. One finds similar references to these mythological images in other biblical documents (cf. Job 9:13; 26:12-13; 40:19; Ps. 74:13-14; 89:10; Is. 27:1; 51:9). The point is not to give historical credence to such tales, anymore than it would be for the modern person who employs the ancient Greek mythologies for their metaphorical value.

⁸⁷This allusion to Egypt's failure to support Israel is probably connected with Zedekiah's appeal for help from Pharaoh Hophra mentioned in Je. 37:6-8.

⁸⁸It is unclear whether this reference is messianic (i.e., in the spirit of Ps. 132:17 and Lk. 1:69) or simply an allusion to the

The third oracle describes the Babylonian invasion of Egypt as the Day of Yahweh, a familiar Old Testament figure of judgment (30:1-4, 10-12). Egypt and her allies would be crushed (30:5-9). Her pagan religion and important cities would be devastated (30:13-19).

The fourth oracle declared that Yahweh would crush Pharaoh as surely as if he had broken both his arms (30:20-26). In the metaphor, Pharaoh's first broken arm was probably when he was turned back from his efforts to relieve Jerusalem during her siege (cf. 17:17; Je. 37:5-10). If the first break was a simple fracture, now both his arms would be shattered.

The fifth oracle begins with a description of the rise and fall of Assyria, depicted in the metaphor of the giant cedar (31:1-9). Just as Assyria was cut down a quarter of a century earlier (31:10-17), so Egypt would also be cut down (31:18). In this oracle, the imagery of the underworld figures significantly. Assyria is personified and described as descending into Sheol, the place of the dead (31:15-17). Later, the fall of Egypt will also be described by the same figure.

In the sixth oracle, Ezekiel addresses the powerful Pharaoh Hophra, who is like a lion or a sea monster (32:1-2).⁸⁹ In spite of his vigor, he would be snared with Yahweh's gaff hook and hauled onto the land to die (32:3-6). The heavens would go black on this, the Day of Yahweh (32:7-10).⁹⁰ Nebuchadnezzar would destroy Pharaoh Hophra and all his mercenaries (32:11-16).

Finally, in the seventh oracle Egypt, also, is depicted as descending into the underworld (32:17-18). All the other mighty political powers who were already there will be amazed that mighty Egypt, too, has been consigned to Sheol (32:19-21). Assyria who fell in 612 B.C. (32:22-23), Elam who was conquered by Assyria in 645 B.C. (32:24-25), and Meshech and Tubal who participated in the Scythian invasion in 626 B.C. (32:26-27) are already there. So also is Edom (32:29) and the Sidonians (32:30). Now, Pharaoh and his armies would follow them into the realm of the dead (32:28, 31-32).⁹¹

Part III: The Restoration of Israel

The third major section of the Book of Ezekiel shifts from the unrelenting

resurgence of political freedom in the return from exile.

⁸⁹Once more, the image is either of the crocodile or the primal chaos-monster.

⁹⁰The apocalyptic disintegration of the heavens is a familiar image used in concert with the Day of Yahweh (cf. Is. 13:10; 24:23; 34:4; Jl. 2:10, 30-31; 3:15; Am. 8:9).

⁹¹The realm of sheol seems to be depicted as a shadowy, semi-conscious continuing existence for the dead. Various theories about it have been offered through the centuries, but there is not much unanimity. In the Old Testament, at least, it is not described as a place of torment, but rather, a place of confinement away from the realm of the living, cf. D. Stuart, *ISBE* (1988) IV.472.

message of doom to an announcement of hope for the future. In spite of their terrible failure, judgment was not Yahweh's final word to his people. His final word was restoration and hope, and as before, Ezekiel was his spokesman. The catalyst for this change in tone was the refugee's report that Jerusalem had fallen at last (33:21). For years, Ezekiel had been predicting this event, but the popular opinion was that he was either wrong (cf. 12:21-22), or if not, that his prediction of judgment would not occur any time soon (cf. 12:26-27). On the day that the final siege of Jerusalem began, January 15, 588 B.C. (24:1-2; 2 Kg. 25:1; Je. 52:4), Ezekiel gave his final oracle, the oracle of the cooking of Jerusalem (24:3-14). That same evening, his wife died as a symbol of the death of his beloved city (24:15-18). Ezekiel was struck mute by God, not permitted to speak again until the report had been received by the refugee that the city had finally fallen (24:25-26). So, for almost three years,⁹² Ezekiel's mouth had been closed. During his earlier ministry, his face had been set like flint against every hope for the future (cf. 3:9). Now, with the fall of the holy city and the vindication of his message of doom, Ezekiel was free to open his mouth with a message of hope.

The interpretation of this final section of Ezekiel has long been a knotty problem, given its eschatological and apocalyptic genre. Mormons have used 37:16-20 as a prediction of the coming of the Book of Mormon.⁹³ Some dispensationalists have appealed to chapter 36 as a prophecy of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and to chapters 38-39 as a prediction of the invasion of Palestine by the Soviet Union, East Germany and various other confederates.⁹⁴ Yet others have taken chapters 40-48 to refer to a Jewish temple to be reconstructed during the millennial reign of Christ, complete with the restoration of ancient temple worship and blood sacrifice.⁹⁵ As is not uncommon, obscure or ambiguous passages in the Bible become the happy hunting ground for unrestrained interpreters.

It is fair to point out at least five general positions in regard to this whole

⁹²Some manuscripts read "eleventh year of our exile," while the LXX reads "tenth year." Some scholars have suggested that there may be discrepancies between the calendars used by Ezekiel, Jeremiah (Je. 39:2; 52:6, 12) and the author of 2 Kings (2 Kg. 25:3-4, 8). If the Masoretic Text is correct in dating the refugee's report, then Ezekiel would have heard of Jerusalem's fall nearly eighteen months after the fact. This seems like an unnecessarily long interval, but not impossible given the uncertainties of travel in a war-torn area.

⁹³A personal foreword in a copy of the Book of Mormon, which this author received at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, appeals to this very passage to prove that the Book of Mormon is true and that it was predicted by Ezekiel as another authoritative record of "the word of the Lord to his children on earth."

⁹⁴H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 59-71. Of course, these interpretations necessarily had to be extensively modified after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the old Soviet Union.

⁹⁵J. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 512-531. In fairness, it should be pointed out that blood sacrifice is not envisioned by Pentecost as an expiation for sin, but rather, as a memorial. Still, such a caveat does not take the sting out of the conflict of such a view with the New Testament's emphasis on the cessation of blood sacrifice upon the death of Christ, especially as emphasized in the Book of Hebrews.

eschatological section of Ezekiel. First, there is the *non-prophetic view*, that is, non-prophetic in the traditional sense. Such a view does not regard prophetic oracles as divine mandates for history, but rather, as conditional or speculative predictions that may or may not happen. As such, Ezekiel's visions are not binding. The prophecies fall due to adverse historical circumstances. That Ezekiel's speculative hopes for the future were never realized in the post-exilic community or beyond is not a problem, since prophecy is not considered to be a mandate for the future in any case.⁹⁶ Second, there is the *historical view* which accepts the visions as prophetic but interprets them as hyperbolic descriptions of the post-exilic community and its return from exile. Any discrepancies between precise details in the visions (the layout of the temple, for instance) and the post-exilic reality (the actual building of the second temple) are dismissed as simply the differences between Ezekiel's idealism and the way in which history played itself out. Third, there is the *spiritual view*, which interprets Ezekiel's eschatological visions as symbolisms or typologies of the future Christian church. Elements in his visions, such as, the gift of the Spirit, the Good Shepherd, the restored Israel, the new temple, the covenant of peace, the priestly prince, and so forth, are interpreted as being messianic. They are thought to be fulfilled at Pentecost, in the church as the new Israel and the new temple, in the new covenant established through the blood of Christ, and in Christ himself as the Priest-King who inaugurates the kingdom of God.⁹⁷ Fourth, there is the *dispensational view* which anticipates a literal fulfillment at the close of the present age. In a thousand-year reign of peace upon the earth, following Christ's return, a millennial temple will be reconstructed. Here, the central focus of the oracles is the Jewish race. The promises are not to be spiritualized; they refer specifically to national Israel.⁹⁸ Fifth, there is the *new earth view* or *heavenly view* which takes the visions to symbolically refer to the state of God's people after the conclusion of history and the final judgments, either in the new heavens or the new earth.⁹⁹

There are arguments to be advanced in favor of each of these views, of course, and there also are some interpreters who adopt approaches that overlap more than one of these systems. Probably the wisest interpreter is one who will hold forth his/her

⁹⁶This viewpoint is generally espoused by historical-critical scholars. They may even question whether the material was written by Ezekiel at all or by a school of disciples which looked backward to Ezekiel as their mentor, cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 202-207. Such scholars describe Ezekiel's work as the product of a "lively imagination." While they may give some credence to elements in the predictions, they do not hesitate to say, "the dream did not materialize," cf. B. Anderson, *Understanding*, 373, 374.

⁹⁷This is the viewpoint usually espoused by older evangelical commentators, such as, Matthew Henry, prior to the rise of millenarianism in the 19th century. Furthermore, it was the view generally adopted by the early church fathers. In summary, one may find the viewpoint described in Young, *Introduction*, 246-248.

⁹⁸R. Alexander, 906-907.

⁹⁹A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 207-208, 211-212.

opinions with reservation and a good deal of theological humility. It may well be that the disillusionment of the post-exilic community was due to the fact that many of the returned exiles took such predictions to be historical mandates for themselves. When historical reality did not match their interpretations, they became deeply discouraged. However, to concede that the post-exilic community may have taken the predictions as historical mandates for their own times is not at all the same thing as saying they were correct in their assumptions. It is also quite true that the rabbis of the time of Jesus, not to mention various Jewish sects, including the Qumran sect, put constructions upon these oracles which did not materialize. Modern Christians, then, would do well to avoid defending their various positions as unassailable, whatever they may be.

The approach taken in this exposition will follow the line that many of the prophecies are double entendres, having a near reference as well as a distant one. If Ezekiel's message of hope was to have any meaning at all for his audience in Babylon, it must have had some relationship to the upcoming decree of Cyrus that the Jews could return home.¹⁰⁰ Thus, when Ezekiel says that "my people will soon come home" (36:8), there is no reason to doubt that he refers to the return from exile under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra. Still, such a historical fulfillment need not exhaust the scope of the prediction. Statements like, "David, my servant, shall be king over them" (37:24), and, "They shall live in the land....that I gave to my servant Jacob....they and their children and their children's children will live there forever" (37:25), could hardly apply to post-exilic Judaism! Surely such promises must be messianic in some sense. Whether the messianic character of Ezekiel's final oracles are to be interpreted spiritually in the sense of Christ and his church or literally in terms of a Jewish millennium or symbolically in terms of the final triumph of all God's people in eternal blessedness--or even some combination of the above--is yet unclear.

The New Order (33:1--39:29)

So, Ezekiel's next series of oracles look to a future bright with hope. This future would not be merely a patched up revision of the old order. It would be a new order altogether, an order of life ordained, effected and maintained by the power and grace of Yahweh for "the sake of his name" (cf. 36:22-23).

Renewal of Ezekiel's Commission (33:1-33)

Chapter 33 is composed of parallels from previous sections of the book.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰As such, Ezekiel's eschatology of "near" and "far" would parallel that of Isaiah 40-66.

¹⁰¹33:1-9//3:16b-21; 33:10-20//18:1-32

Yahweh renews Ezekiel's commission as a watchman for his people (33:1-9). However, the attitude of the prophet's audience has now shifted somewhat. From skepticism and brazen disobedience, they have at least admitted to a despairing recognition of their transgressions against Yahweh's covenant (33:10). In the language of suffering, they despair of survival. However, their sincerity seems questionable in light of later comments (cf. 33:31-32), and their attitude is more along the lines of despair because they were caught rather than because they were ready to change their ways. Yet the prophet assures them that Yahweh does not enjoy dispensing punishment. The goal of God's law is life, not death (33:11; cf. Dt. 30:15-20). As individuals, each one of them is responsible for repentance or rebellion. Many righteous acts would not cancel out a final rebellion. On the other hand, a host of broken commandments would not outweigh a final, heartfelt contrition and restitution (33:12-20).

With his commission renewed, Ezekiel then receives word through a refugee that his prediction of doom upon Jerusalem has been vindicated (33:21-22; cf. 24:26). His period of silence is now over (cf. 24:27).

Even after the final collapse of the city, the "poorest of the land," whom Nebuchadnezzar did not deport (cf. Je. 52:16), were still clinging to their blind optimism (33:23-24), as did their predecessors (cf. 11:1-4). However, they, too, would reap the sword of judgment (33:25-29). As before, the exiles in Babylon came to hear Ezekiel's warnings, but they did not alter their lifestyles (33:30-32). Only after the full therapy of judgment and its aftermath would they give Ezekiel full credit as a prophet (33:33; cf. 2:5).

The Good Shepherd (34:1-31)

The metaphor of rulers as shepherds was familiar, not only in Israel, but in many nations of the ancient Near East. The shepherd-king of Israel has David as its archetype (cf. 2 Sa. 5:2; Ps. 78:70-72). Yahweh, who was the divine shepherd-king of the nation even higher than David (Ps. 80:1; 100:3; Is. 40:11) is the speaker in this oracle, and he denounces the abusive kings of the Davidic dynasty. Instead of caring for the flock, these kings stripped the people of their wealth so as to care for themselves (34:1-6). Now, these same shepherds had been removed in judgment (34:7-10), and the flock of Israel was scattered over the hills of the nations in exile. Yet, Yahweh would not fail to search them out and find them (34:11-16). He would discipline not only the false shepherds but also any other members of the flock who abused the weak (34:17-22). Over them he would place the best possible shepherd, a leader like David (34:23-24).¹⁰² The good shepherd discourse of Jesus in the New

¹⁰²The use of David's name is not intended to conjure up images of David *redivivus*, contra Pentecost, 500-501. Rather, the name is intended as a metaphor for the messianic figure from David's family, a metaphor also used by Hosea and

Testament intentionally echoes this passage (Jn. 10), and the reference to "one flock and one shepherd" (Jn. 10:16b) is a clear allusion to 34:23.

For his regathered flock, God would establish a covenant of peace so that his sheep might live in safety in their land (34:25; cf. 37:26). Abundant rain, fertility, freedom and security would be graciously provided to sustain them (34:26-31). This covenant of peace is undoubtedly the same as what Jeremiah describes as a "new covenant" (Je. 31:31-34). The conditions of this covenant, as in Jeremiah, call for a new heart (cf. 11:19; 36:25-27).

A Final Word of Doom to Edom (35:1-15)

The counterpart to the restoration of Israel was God's judgment upon those nations arrayed against her. Earlier, in his oracles of judgment against the nations (chapters 25-32), the various entities who exulted over Jerusalem's fall, who acted in hostility toward Israel, or who failed in their commitments to defend Israel are called to judgment precisely on account of their abusive treatment of God's chosen people (cf. 25:3-4, 8-9, 12-13, 15-16; 26:2-3; 28:24; 29:6-9a).¹⁰³ Edom was particularly flagrant in her mockery of Jerusalem's tragedy, especially in light of the close kinship between the two peoples (35:1-9; cf. Ob. 10-14; Ps. 137:7).¹⁰⁴ It is even implied that the Edomites were involved in an act of betrayal when Jerusalem fell (35:5), though the historical circumstances are unknown. When first Israel and then Judah fell, the Edomites wished to seize upon the opportunity of annexing their lands (35:10). Therefore, divine judgment would be visited upon Edom for her treachery (35:11-15).

Oracle to Israel's Mountains (36:1-38)

Earlier, in his oracles of doom, Ezekiel had pronounced judgment on the mountains of Israel (cf. 6:1-14). The mountains were singled out, because they were the sites of the *bamoth* (= high places), the pagan sacred places where Israel had participated in sacred prostitution and idolatry. Now, these same mountains are addressed with a message of hope.

The pagan nations surrounding Israel had hoped to annex Israel's central hill-lands when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (36:1-2). The history of Israel is littered with invasions by these nations (36:3). Because of such hostilities, Yahweh

Jeremiah (cf. Je. 23:5-6; 30:9; Ho. 3:5).

¹⁰³This judgment in Ezekiel is very similar to Jesus' pronouncement of judgment for the end of history, when the nations will be judged with respect to how they treated Jesus' "brothers" (cf. Mt. 25:34-46). It may be that in Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives he was deliberately alluding to the Ezekiel passages, and if so, then the argument that Jesus considered his disciples to be the nucleus of a new Israel is considerably strengthened. In any case, George Ladd is probably correct in his interpretation that the Matthew passage has to do more with Christ's apostles than with the general category of needy and neglected people, cf. G. Ladd, "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Recent Interpretation," *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Longenecker and Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 191-199.

¹⁰⁴Bruce, 837.

determined to bring judgment on the aggressive neighbors of Israel, especially Edom (36:4-7; cf. 35:1-15). The mountains of Israel, however, would once more be blessed with an Israelite population, for the exiles would soon be returning home (36:8-11). Never again would the mountains become places for child sacrifice or objects of scorn due to the fall of the nation (36:12-15; cf. 16:20-21). The judgment of exile came upon the people of Israel because they had filled the land with blood (36:16-19; cf. 22:1-16). Their dispersion among the nations, even though a necessary judgment, became cause for dishonor to God's reputation, since the pagan nations taunted Israel that her God was too small and ineffective to protect his land (36:20-21).

Now Yahweh determined to clear his name (36:22-23). His mighty act of restoring the exiles to their land would make clear that he was sovereign over all the nations. The exile of Israel was a judgment, not an evidence of God's weakness. So also, the return from exile would be an act of grace demonstrating Yahweh's power. The restoration would not occur because Israel deserved it but in order to vindicate God's integrity in the eyes of the nations (36:22, 32). He would regather the exiles (36:24), cleanse them of their sins (36:25), give to them a new heart (36:26),¹⁰⁵ bestow upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit (36:27),¹⁰⁶ and give them back their land (36:28).¹⁰⁷ The gift of the Spirit, like the new covenant envisioned by Jeremiah (Je. 31:33-34), would enable the people to follow God's laws, something they were not able to do under their own power. Their relationship with Yahweh would be repaired (36:28b).¹⁰⁸ Once more, the land would be fertile (36:29-30). The Israelites would be cleansed from their transgressions so that they might live in the land as a sign of Yahweh's sovereign power (36:31-36). Just as he did in the first exodus, Yahweh would again listen to the plea of his people and save them (36:37-38). Yet as before, the credit would go to God's grace, not Israel's worthiness (cf. Dt. 7:7; 9:4-6).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵For Hebrews, the concept of the heart embraces the aspects of total personality and character. It is the most important word in the Hebrew vocabulary of anthropology (used more times even than "soul"), and it is the seat of feelings, wishes, reason, and volition, cf. Wolff, 40-58.

¹⁰⁶See discussion of the word *ruah* (= spirit) under 11:19 (footnote #43). Of course, the gift of the Spirit was a sign of the messianic age (cf. Is. 11:2; 32:15; 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; Jl. 2:28-29).

¹⁰⁷Ritual cleansing through water looks backward to the purification ceremonies described in Torah (cf. Ex. 30:17-21; Lv. 14:51-52; Nu. 19:17-22). The imagery of cleansing through "clean water" and God's "Spirit" may well lie behind the preaching of John the Baptist, who baptized with water for the forgiveness of sins but anticipated a greater one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (cf. Mk. 1:4-8). It may also have influenced the words of Jesus concerning birth by "water" and "the Spirit" (Jn. 3:5).

¹⁰⁸The expression, "You will be my people, and I will be your God," is echoed in the Apocalypse of John when he described the union of God and his people in the New Jerusalem (cf. Re. 21:3).

¹⁰⁹These promises were understood by the rabbis as messianic, cf. Bruce, 838.

The Vision of Dry Bones (37:1-14)

In a vision, Ezekiel was placed by Yahweh in a valley filled with bones (37:1-2).¹¹⁰ As lifeless as they seemed (37:3), they were not beyond rejuvenation. At Yahweh's word, Ezekiel preached to the bones, and as he did so, they joined together with sinews, muscles and skin (37:4-8). Again Ezekiel preached, and the corpses were filled with the breath of life (37:9-10). The valley of bones symbolized the lifeless and hopeless exiles under judgment, scattered among the nations like the bones were scattered throughout the valley (37:11). Yet the scattered exiles would come together again into a unified nation. The expression "whole house of Israel" includes not only the exiles from the southern nation, but also those from the north. The fall of Israel and Judah was not the end of the nation. God determined to bring the exiles back to life, filling them with the Holy Spirit¹¹¹ and resettling them in the land he had promised them (37:12-14).

The Oracle of the Two Sticks (37:15-28)

In yet another symbolic gesture, Ezekiel was instructed to take two sticks, inscribing one with the name of the southern nation, Judah, and the other with the name of the northern nation, Ephraim (37:15-16).¹¹² These two sticks were to be held in the prophet's hand as though they were one (37:17), thus signifying the future union of the divided nation into a single entity (37:18-19). The exiles from both Judah and Ephraim would be regathered to their land in unity, having a single king (37:20-22). They would be cleansed of their sins and reunited with their God (37:23). A monarch from David's lineage would shepherd them with integrity in the land (37:25).¹¹³ A covenant of peace (cf. 34:25) would perpetually prevail, and Yahweh's dwelling would once more be among his people (37:26-27).¹¹⁴ Then, God's reputation would be vindicated among the nations (37:28).

The meaning of the joining of two sticks is hardly obscure in the context of the passage. Nevertheless, in the 19th century, an era which sometimes gloried in mystical interpretations, there were some bizarre treatments. The Mormon interpretation that the two sticks refer to the double authority of the Book of Mormon

¹¹⁰The "valley" may well be the same as that mentioned near the beginning (cf. 3:22).

¹¹¹One should note that there is a continuing word-play with the Hebrew *ruah*, a word which does triple duty in meaning breath, wind and Spirit.

¹¹²In the records of Kings, the northern nation is invariably called Israel, but in the prophets, the northern nation often is called by the name of its principle tribe, Ephraim. Of course, the southern nation was called by the name of its principle tribe, Judah.

¹¹³See the comments on the name David at 34:23-24 and footnote #102.

¹¹⁴Once again, Ezekiel's words are taken up in the Apocalypse of John to describe God's people in the New Jerusalem (Re. 21:3).

and the Bible is so alien to the context that it is amazing anyone would give it serious consideration. Scarcely more credible is the Anglo-Israelite theory that the stick of Ephraim refers to the lost ten tribes of the northern nation who became the founders of the British Empire. Even more fanciful, upon the collapse of the British Empire, is the theory that the Americans have had transferred to them the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

The War of Gog Against Israel (38:1--39:29)

Continuing his vision for the future of Israel after the exiles have been repatriated to their land, Ezekiel predicts a last great eschatological battle between the nations and the people of God. This concept was not unique to Ezekiel, for one finds it also in his predecessors (cf. Jl. 2:18-27; Zp. 1:14-18; Is. 29:5-8; Is. 66:15-16). Later, the theme will be picked up in Daniel (11:40-45), Zechariah (cf. Zc. 12:1-9; 14:1-15) and the Apocalypse of John (Re. 20:7-10). That this battle is the same as the eschatological conflict envisioned by the earlier prophets is specifically stated (cf. 38:17).

The identification of the tribal names of the hordes is tentative, at best. The names Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Cush, Put, Gomer, Togarmah, Sheba, Dedan and Tarshish are all taken from the Table of Nations (38:1-6, 13; cf. Ge. 10:2-7; 1 Chr. 1:5-9). They are tribes from the lines of Japheth and Ham, Noah's sons. Gog is not identifiable, but appears to be the personified head of the hordes mustered against Israel.¹¹⁵ In general, these tribes are probably from western and northern Asia Minor, northern Mesopotamia, and Africa. It may be that Ezekiel collects them as way of describing the non-Semitic peoples arrayed against Israel, that is, the gentile nations of the world. Be that as it may, the hordes would be incited to war against God's people after the restoration (38:7-9). Thinking to loot the holy land (38:10-13), they would be used by Yahweh as a target for his zeal and wrath. He would execute on them his apocalyptic judgments, thus demonstrating his power and holiness before the world (38:14-23).

The terrible slaughter of this horde of armies would provide the carrion birds and scavengers a great feast (39:1-6, 17-20).¹¹⁶ The debris of war would provide firewood for seven years (39:9-10), and the burial of the dead necessary to cleanse the land from ceremonial defilement would take seven months (39:11-16).¹¹⁷ In the end,

¹¹⁵Some have suggested that the term *ro's* (= chief, head) is also a place name, but if so, it is not identifiable in either biblical or extrabiblical literature. The tendentious notion that *ro's* refers to Russia because of the similarity of the phonetics (cf. Lindsey, 65-66) can only be described as unsound, cf. Alexander, 930. Attempts to find contemporary nations who fit these ancient tribes is at best risky and at worst folly.

¹¹⁶The idea of a great slaughter or sacrifice for the birds and beasts is to be found elsewhere, also (cf. Is. 34:6-7; Zp. 1:7; Mt. 24:28; Re. 19:17-21).

¹¹⁷The repeating number seven may suggest that what is described is apocalyptic symbolism rather than literalism.

God's judgment of Israel through exile and his judgment of the nations through this final slaughter would establish beyond all question his universal sovereignty (39:7-8, 21-24). The account closes with a final summary of Israel's restoration, cleansing, and the gift of the Spirit (39:25-29).

The Glory Returns to the New Temple (40:1--48:35)

Holiness is a central characteristic of the Divine Nature. The term *qodesh* (= holy) is used to denote that which is separated from regular usage and reserved for sacred purposes. Holiness is primarily associated with Yahweh himself, and only secondarily with objects and places as they come into contact with his holy presence.¹¹⁸ The final section of the Book of Ezekiel describes the new commonwealth of a restored Israel. The central feature of this new commonwealth is the holy presence of Yahweh enthroned in the Most Holy Place on the holy mountain adjacent to the holy city in the midst of the holy land. The holiness of the new commonwealth derives from the fact that Yahweh is there (48:35b).

In the history of the divided kingdom, the paganizing tendencies of the people had caused Yahweh's holy name to be profaned. God, in faithfulness to the deuteronomic code, drove them from their land into the nations (cf. 22:8, 26; 36:20-21; cf. Dt. 28:64-68). The holy presence of Yahweh vacated the temple on Mt. Zion, moving eastward with the exiles (cf. 10:3-5, 18-19; 11:22-24). In the restoration, however, the promise was held forth that Yahweh would show himself to be holy in the sight of the nations by regathering his exiled peoples and establishing them in the holy land (cf. 20:41; 36:22-23; 39:7, 25, 27). God would dwell in holiness in the midst of this restored people (43:6-7). Ezekiel envisioned the holy commonwealth in concentric areas of holiness. In the center would be the new temple with the Most Holy Place, then the Holy Place, and then the inner and outer courts. The temple area was to be separated from the outside by a wall, which marked it off as especially holy (42:20; 43:12). Outside the temple area would be a holy district designated for priests, levites, the holy city and the lands of the prince regent (45:1-8). Finally, extending north and south from the holy district would be allotments for the twelve tribes of Israel, God's holy people who had been cleansed of their sins. The divine glory which had abandoned the first temple would once more take up residence in the new one (cf. 43:2-5; 44:4; 48:35b).

The interpretation of this glorious vision has been quite varied, following the general lines of interpretation discussed earlier (see introductory comments to Part III). While the exiles did return, as Ezekiel had predicted, it is immediately clear that the new temple as envisioned by him was not built by them, even if he intended such.

¹¹⁸W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 51-52.

The second temple and its environs were quite modest. Far less was there a fulfillment of the new government and new division of the land in the post-exilic community.¹¹⁹

Given this discrepancy between the vision and the actual history of the post-exilic community, interpreters have struggled to make sense of Ezekiel's message. Of course, those without a high view of Scripture can simply say that the prophet's imagination got the better of him. However, those who affirm Scripture to be the Word of God must take his message more seriously. In brief, then, here are some major approaches.

Dispensationalists see the vision as anticipating the millennial reign of Jesus Christ after his second coming. Here, the Jews will be restored to their land. The strength of this view is its simplicity, the weakness its questionable restoration of the animal sin offerings of the old covenant. Amillennialists tend to see the vision as a symbolism of the new heavens and new earth in the eternal state, particularly since much of the imagery in the Revelation of John concerning the new heavens and new earth are derived directly from this section of Ezekiel.¹²⁰ While this view does not compromise the finished sacrificial work of Christ, it seems to convey a message which would have been incomprehensible to the first listeners. Still others attempt to correlate the vision with the Christian church by means of figurative imagery, and as pointed out earlier, this view was favored by many older commentators as well as by the early church fathers. Once again, while such a view protects the New Testament's theology of Christ's atonement, it renders ambiguous the meaning of the vision for the first listeners. Because the oracle is visionary, some would virtually eliminate the prophetic character altogether, but it should be pointed out that even if the oracle is visionary, it must mean something. The amount of detail which Ezekiel gives could hardly be intended as an exercise in futility. Many expositors bypass the question of interpretation altogether. (This author finds it interesting to observe how many writers who treat eschatology do not address this vision, or if they do, address it only cursorily.)

It can at least be said that if the vision is apocalyptic in genre, the reader ought to expect the use of symbolism, numerical symmetry and an eschatological perspective,¹²¹ though of course, interpreters differ on what these things may mean. In

¹¹⁹Those who think the vision was a blueprint for the returning exiles depend heavily upon 43:10-11 to support their viewpoint.

¹²⁰Compare the various parallel images of: 1) the glory of God filling the temple (Eze. 43:5;44:4//Re. 15:8), 2) the voice from the most holy place declaring that the judgments were completed (Eze. 43:6-9//Re. 16:17), 3) the dwelling of God forever among his people (Eze. 43:7, 9//Re. 21:3), 4) the gates of the new Jerusalem named after the twelve tribes of Israel (Eze. 48:31-34//Re. 21:10-13), 5) the river of the water of life flowing out from God's throne (Eze. 47:1-9//Re. 22:1), and 6) the trees along the river whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Eze. 47:12//Re. 22:1).

¹²¹Some would say that Ezekiel has laid the ground-plan for the apocalyptic literature still to come, but nevertheless, the

the end, as was stated earlier, the vision seems to have messianic intent and to herald the messianic age, even though the title *mashi'ah* (= messiah) is not used in it. At the same time, it also must have had meaning for the returning exiles who came from Babylon to build the second temple. The precise meaning of all the visionary elements with respect to history is yet unclear.

The New Temple (40:1--42:20)

The vision begins when Ezekiel was set on a high mountain from which he could view the temple complex. His guide was a bronze-like man with a measuring rod (40:1-4). The prophet was shown the wall enclosing the temple area, with particular attention given to the east gate and its decorations (40:5-16). No doubt the east gate is immediately in focus because the glory of Yahweh had departed earlier from this side (cf. 10:19; 11:23). Inside the wall was a court with various chambers (40:17-19), and in addition to the east gate, there were gates on the north and south (40:20-27). The outer court was accessible to the people. Inside this outer court, was an inner court with gates on the south, east and north; the inner court was reserved for priests (40:28-37, 47; cf. 44:17-19). There were areas for the preparation of the levitical sacrifices described in the Torah (40:38-43; cf. Lv. 1-7), and there were rooms for the priests (40:44-46).

After his inspection of the courts, Ezekiel was shown the temple proper. This included the portico with its pillars (40:48-49), the holy place (41:1-2), and the most holy place (41:3-4). Surrounding the temple walls were three stories of rooms, presumably for storage, on the north, south and west of the building (41:5-7). A raised pavement surrounded the entire structure, and from this open area, the lower storage rooms could be reached (41:8-11). Yet another building of undesignated use was on the west side of the temple (41:12). All these structures were measured by Ezekiel's visionary guide (41:13-15a). The interior of the temple's holy place was paneled with wood and decorated with alternating palm trees and cherubim. It had clerestory windows for light (41:15b-20). The furnishings in the holy place included a table, presumably for the bread of the Presence (41:21-22; cf. Ex. 25:23-30). The entrance consisted of hinged double doors which could be folded back upon themselves (41:23-26). On the north and south sides of the temple were the priests' chambers for eating, robing and storage (42:1-14).

The whole temple area, with its outer and inner courts and various buildings, rested on a square of 500 cubits in each dimension (42:15-20).

point stands that the passage is very much like apocalyptic even if dissimilar in some ways, cf. L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 82-83. For a full treatment of apocalyptic literature, see D. Russell, *The Message and Method of Jewish Apocalyptic [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

The Glory Returns (43:1-12; 44:4)

It had been nineteen years since Ezekiel had seen the glory of Yahweh depart from the first temple (cf. chapters 10-11). Now, he saw this same glory, which rested on the sacred chariot throne, returning through the east gate, the same side where it had departed (43:1-4). Once again, just as in the dedication of the original temple, God's glory filled the precincts (43:5; 44:4). The judgment of Israel through exile was now complete, for God's voice was heard from within the most holy place declaring that now he would dwell among his people forever (43:6-9; cf. 11:16-25). The vision of the new temple was directed to the exiles so that they might be conscious of the sins which led to their banishment from the holy land (43:10-12). In hearing the precise building dimensions and regulations, they would understand that Yahweh intended his laws to be followed to the letter.

The Dedication of the Great Altar (43:13-27)

Next came the measurements of the great altar for burnt offerings in the inner court, which was stepped in form like a ziggurat (43:13-17). Then the altar was consecrated in a week-long ceremony of cleansing (43:18-27).

The Closed Outer East Gate (44:1-3)

After the glory of Yahweh had entered the sanctuary through the east gate, the gate was to be closed so that no one, except the prince regent, would ever use it again (44:1-3). The finality of this act would affirm the eternal nature of Yahweh's return. He had returned, and he would never abandon his sanctuary again.

There is no historical reason to think that this passage underlies the eventual walling up of the Golden Gate in the current east wall of Jerusalem. The current east gate, the most elaborate of the eight gates in the walls of the Old City, is of sixth century Byzantine construction and has been closed for centuries. The east gate of the city was not closed in the second temple, and in any case, Ezekiel's vision describes a gate within the temple precincts, not a gate in the city's outer wall. Nevertheless, the tradition persists that when Messiah comes he will enter the temple by this east gate, and then it will be opened for his entrance. Usually, this tradition assumes the unwarranted conclusion that the "prince" is the Messiah. Actually, the identity of the prince is unknown. That he is not Jesus Christ seems apparent in that he offers a sin offering for himself (cf. 45:22) and fathers children (cf. 46:16-18).

The Laws for Priests (44:4-31)

Because of the enthroned glory of Yahweh in the temple (44:4), no one outside

the covenant of Israel would be allowed to minister there (44:5-9).¹²² The lesser services of the temple would be performed by the Levites. Because of their previous sins, they were not allowed to serve at the great altar or within the holy place (44:10-14). Only the priestly family of Zadok would be allowed to perform duties in the sanctuary, and when they did so, their conduct and dress were strictly regulated (44:15-31).¹²³

The Sacred District (45:1-8)

In the new division of land among the tribes, a sacred district was to be established running all the way from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River (45:1-8). This sacred zone would surround the temple precincts and would include land for the holy city, the Levites, the priests and the prince regent.

The Sacred Ordinances (45:9--46:24)

Various laws were to regulate the new order. Accurate weights and measures were necessary to prevent exploitation and to calculate the required offerings (45:9-17). No longer would Israel's leaders be allowed to cheat their subjects, but the prince regent would lead the people in offering proper sacrifices and worship. Major festivals in the new sacred calendar, the festivals of Passover and Booths, were to be carefully followed (45:18-25). The minor festivals of the weekly sabbaths and the monthly new moons were to be marked by the opening of the east sanctuary doors, which were closed at other times, and on these occasions the prince regent would present to the priests the appropriate sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the people (46:1-15). The royal lands of the prince were not permitted to pass from his family on any permanent basis (46:16-18). Finally, special kitchens were to be built for the priests at the west end of the inner court for cooking the sacrificial meals (46:19-20). Separate kitchens were to be used by the Levites, thus further emphasizing the holiness of the Zadokite priests over the Levites in general (46:21-24).

The River of Life (47:1-12)

The theme of a river of life flowing from the house of Yahweh is not unique to Ezekiel. Besides the apocalyptic reference to it in the Revelation of John (cf. Re. 22:1-2), it also appears in other Old Testament prophets (Jl. 3:18; Zec. 14:8).¹²⁴ In

¹²²By way of contrast, some foreigners in earlier times were allowed to serve in menial labor and guard duty in the temple (cf. Jos. 9:23, 27; 2 Kg. 11:4, 19).

¹²³The Zadokite lineage is included in the Chronicler's record (1 Chr. 6:1-15). Zadok became prominent during the reign of David (2 Sa. 8:17), and he was especially loyal to David and Solomon (2 Sa. 15:24ff.; 1 Kg. 1:8).

¹²⁴It may be that Jesus had this passage in mind when he spoke of the Spirit flowing out of one's innermost being like a river (cf. Jn. 7:38), for he indicates that his pronouncement is "as Scripture has said."

Ezekiel's vision, the river flowed in ever-increasing volume toward the Dead Sea, cleansing it and making it suitable for aquatic life (47:1-11). Everywhere the river flowed, there was life (47:9). Trees with healing leaves grew along the banks of the river (47:12).

The Tribal Division of the Land (47:13--48:29)

The land of Canaan was to be equally divided among the twelve tribes, two portions going to Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, with the Levites being restricted to the sacred district (47:13--48:29). Altogether, there would be thirteen parallel zones: seven for the northern tribes, the sacred district, and then five more for the southern tribes. Special provision were to be made for resident aliens (47:21-23). The arrangement of these tribal zones obviously differs from the original tribal allotments under Joshua (Jos. 13-21).

The Holy City and Its Gates (48:30-35)

The holy city lay within the sacred district, and it had twelve gates, three in each of its foursquare walls. Each gate was inscribed with the name of one of Jacob's twelve sons. The eternal name of the holy city would be *Yahweh Shammah* (= the LORD is there). If the earlier oracles of Ezekiel were unmitigated in their pronouncement of judgment, his final oracles are equally brimming with hope. Through judgment and redemption, Yahweh showed himself to be the sovereign God who rules over the nations. His eternal purposes would not be thwarted by human failure.