

EZEKIEL

Introduction

Ezekiel and Daniel are the only prophets who wrote while in exile in Babylonia. Although the two books differ considerably in style and content, they both introduce us to a new kind of revelation of God's glory that was never displayed in pre-exilic times. To the Jews living in Palestine, the place of God's revelation was the temple in Jerusalem, particularly the Ark of the Covenant. God had said to Moses: "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."¹ Even before the construction of the temple, pious Jews believed that living abroad meant being separated from fellowship with God. When David was a fugitive and lived beyond the borders of the holy land, he complained to Saul: "They have now driven me from my share in the Lord's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods.' Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the Lord."² The Jews who were taken into captivity must have believed that they were "far from the presence of the Lord." Both Ezekiel and Daniel are proof of the fact that this was not the case. As a matter of fact, the glory of the visions of these prophets, particularly of Ezekiel, far outshines any vision ever given to pre-exilic prophets living in Palestine.

The Name

The name Ezekiel means: "God gives strength." It is the same name as Hezekiah. God addresses him as *Ben Adam*, "Son of man". *The Living Bible* calls him "Son of dust," *The Good News Bible*: "Mortal man." Jesus adopted the title "Son of man" for Himself, thus making it the highest honor anyone can receive. C. S. Lewis said: "The title 'man' is both the most glorious and the most despicable name by which we can be called."

Historical Background

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem in ± 606 BC during the reign of Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim surrendered to him. At that time, Nebuchadnezzar took some of the temple treasures and some prisoners, among whom Daniel.³ Nebuchadnezzar returned in 597 BC. King Jehoiakim had died and was followed by Jehoiakin, who reigned for only three months.⁴ He was taken captive to Babylon with the remainder of the temple treasures and other prisoners, among whom Ezekiel.

At the opening of the book of Ezekiel, the city of Jerusalem was still intact and the temple was still standing. On the basis of false prophecies, the expectation of the people was that the Lord would turn around the captivity and restore the old order. Jeremiah reacted against this in his letter to the captives.⁵ The Babylonians returned to Jerusalem in 586 BC and destroyed the temple and the city.

Time of writing

Ezekiel's prophecies cover a period of 27 years (592–570 BC). The first prophecy dates from the 5th year of captivity (592 BC), 14 years after the first group with Daniel had been deported.⁶ The last prophecy (ch. 40 - 47) dates from the 25th year. But ch. 29:17-21 is dated in the 27th year.

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1. Ex. 25:22
 2. I Sam. 26:19,20
 3. Dan. 1:1-4; II Kings 24:1
 4. II Kings 24:8
 5. Jer. 29
 6. Dan. 1:2

Place of writing

A settlement of captives at Kebar River, named Tel-Abib (1:1; 3:15). Kebar River was an important shipping route, connecting the Euphrates River with the Tigris.

The Person Ezekiel

Ezekiel was one of the captives taken to Babylonia (“Our exile”¹). He owned a house,² was married,³ was a priest, the son of Buzi, and he was probably thirty years old when God called him.⁴ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes about Ezekiel’s age at the time of his being taken to Babylon: “The question at what age Ezekiel had left Jerusalem has been answered in different ways. From his intimate acquaintance with the priestly institutions and with the temple service, as this appears particularly in chapters 40 to 48, the conclusion is drawn that he himself must have officiated in the temple. Yet, the knowledge on his part can be amply explained if he only in a general way had been personally acquainted with the temple, with the law and the study of the Torah. We accept that he was already taken into exile at the age of 25 years, and in his 30th year was called to his prophetic office; and in doing this we come close to the statement of Josephus, according to which Ezekiel had come to Babylon in his youth. At any rate the remarkable statement in the beginning of his book, ‘in the 30th year,’ by the side of which we find the customary dating, ‘in the 5th year’ (Ezek 1:1-2), can still find its best explanation when referred to the age of the prophet. We must also remember that the 30th year had a special significance for the tribe of Levi (Num 4:3,23,30,39), and that later on, and surely not accidentally, both Jesus and John the Baptist began their public activity at this age (Luke 3:23).”

The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary states that Ezekiel “Probably exercised the priestly office at Jerusalem before his departure in the captivity or transmigration ... of Jehoiachin, which took place 11 years before the city fell (2 Kings 24:15). His priestly character gave him much weight with his Hebrew fellow exiles. His priestly service was as real in the spiritual temple in Chaldea as it had been in the visible temple at Jerusalem (Ezek 11; 40:1-48:35; 4:13-14; 20:12-13). The priestly tone appears throughout his book, so that he is the priest among the prophets. Called to prophesy in the fifth year of Jehoiachin’s captivity (595 B.C.) ‘in the 30th year in the fourth month.’ i.e. the 30th from the era of Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar’s father (525 B.C.), an era he naturally uses writing in Babylonia. But elsewhere he dates from Jehoiachin’s captivity alone. This fact, and his expressly calling himself ‘the priest’ (Ezek 1:3), favor the view that his mention of the 30th year of his own age is in order to mark his entering on a priestly ministry to his exiled countrymen (that being the usual age, Num 4:23,30: ‘the heavens being opened’ to him, as they were to his Antitype in beginning His ministry in His 30th year at Jordan, Luke 3:21-23). Thus, he would be 25 when carried away.”

Drawing some lines of comparison between Ezekiel and Jeremiah, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “In respect of social rank Ezekiel belonged to the priestly order, being the son of Buzi, of whom nothing further is reported, though it is interesting to note that the name Ezekiel had been borne by one of sacerdotal dignity as far back as the time of David (... 1 Chronicles 24:16). Unlike Hilkiah’s son Jeremiah of Anathoth, who, as a priest of the line of Ithamar, sprang from the lower or middle classes of the community, Ezekiel, as a Zadokite (... Ezekiel 40:46; 43:19; 44:15, 16; ...1 Kings 2:35), deriving from the superior line of Eleazar the son of Aaron, was properly a member of the Jerusalem aristocracy — a circumstance which will account for his having been carried off in Jehoiachin’s captivity, while Jeremiah was left behind (... 2 Kings 24:14), as well as explain the readiness with which in one of his visions (... Ezekiel 11:1) he recognized two of the princes of the people. Nor is it likely that he remained insensible to the energetic ministry which, during all the twenty-five years of his residence in Jerusalem, had been exercised by his illustrious predecessor Jeremiah. Rather is there evidence in his obvious leaning on the elder prophet,

1. Ezek. 33:21; 40:1
2. Ezek. 8:1
3. Ezek. 24:15-18
4. Ezek. 1:1

revealing itself in words and phrases, completed sentences and connected paragraphs, that his whole inner life had been deeply permeated, and in fact effectively molded, by the spirit of his teacher, and that when the stroke fell upon his country and people as well as on himself, he went away into exile, whither Daniel had a few years before preceded him (... Daniel 1:1), inspired with the feelings and brooding on the thoughts he had learnt from the venerated seer he had left behind.”

Outline

John B. Taylor, in Ezekiel,¹ gives the following outline, which we will go by:

I. EZEKIEL'S VISION, COMMISSION AND MESSAGE 1:1 – 5:17

- a. Introduction 1:1-3
- b. The vision of the Lord's chariot-throne 1:4-28
- c. The commission to be the Lord's spokesman to the house of Israel 2:1-3:15
- d. The silent watchman 3:16-27
- e. Four enacted messages 4:1-5:17
 - i. The siege of Jerusalem 4:1-3
 - ii. The days of punishment of Israel and Judah 4:4-8
 - iii. The famine of Jerusalem 4:9-17
 - iv. The threefold fate of the people of Jerusalem 5:1-17

II. ORACLE OF JUDGMENT 6:1 – 7:27

- a. Prophecy against the mountains of Israel 6:1-14
- b. The end has come 7:1-27

III. VISION OF THE PUNISHMENT OF JERUSALEM 8:1 – 11:25

- a. The idolatries being practiced in the Temple 8:1-18
- b. The seven executioners : punishment by slaughter 9:1-11
- c. The Lord's chariot-throne : punishment by fire 10:1-22
- d. The death of Pelatiah 11:1-13
- e. A new heart for God's people in exile 11:14-25

IV. ORACLES ABOUT THE SINS OF ISRAEL AND JERUSALEM 12:1 – 24:27

- a. Two more enacted messages 12:1-20
 - i. Going into exile 12:1-16
 - ii. The terror of the inhabitants of Jerusalem 12:17-20
- b. Two popular sayings corrected 12:21-28
- c. Prophecy against the prophets and prophetesses of Israel 13:1-23
- d. Condemnation of those who are set on idolatry 14:1-23
- e. The righteous few will not avert the judgment 14:12-23
- f. The parable of the vine 15:1-8
- g. Jerusalem the faithless 16:1-63
- h. The parable of the two eagles 17:1-24
- i. The law of individual responsibility 18:1-32
- j. A lament over the kings of Israel 19:1-14

1. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries.*

- k. A review of Israel's past history and of God's future plans for her 20:1-44
- l. Judgment by fire and by sword 20:45-21:32
- m. Three oracles on the defilement of Jerusalem 22:1-31
- n. Oholah and Oholibah 23:1-49
- o. The rusty cauldron 24:1-14
- p. The death of Ezekiel's wife 24:15-27

V. ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS 25:1 – 32:32

- a. Against neighboring nations 25:1-17
- b. Against Tyre and Sidon 26:1-28:26
 - i. Prophecy of Tyre's destruction 26:1-21
 - ii. The shipwreck of Tyre 27:1-36
 - iii. The downfall of the prince of Tyre 28:1-10
 - iv. Lament over the king of Tyre 28:11-19
 - v. Prophecy against Sidon 28:20-26
- c. Against Egypt 29:1-32:32
 - i. The sins of Egypt 29:1-16
 - ii. Egypt and Babylon 29:17-21
 - iii. Judgment upon Egypt 30:1-19
 - iv. The arm of Pharaoh is broken 30:20-26
 - v. The great cedar tree 31:1-18
 - vi. A lament over Pharaoh 32:1-16
 - vii. Pharaoh's descent to Sheol 32:17-32

VI. ORACLES RELATING TO THE FALL OF JERUSALEM 31:1 – 37:28

- a. The watchman's duties restated 33:1-20
- b. The city falls but the people are unrepentant 33:21-33
- c. The shepherds of the past and the Shepherd of the future 34:1-31
- d. Denunciation of Edom's treachery 35:1-15
- e. A restored land and a transformed people 36:1-38
- f. The spiritual rebirth of the people 37:1-28

VII. PROPHECY AGAINST GOG 38:1 – 39:29

- a. The invasion of the armies of Gog 38:1-16
- b. The massacre 38:17-39:24
- c. God's final purposes for Israel 39:25-29

VIII. THE PLANS FOR THE NEW JERUSALEM 40:1 – 48:35

- a. The vision of the temple 40:1-42:20
- b. The glory of the Lord returns 43:1-12
- c. Regulations for the worship of the temple 43:13-46:24
 - i. The altar, its dimensions and its consecration 43:1-12
 - ii. The ministers, their duties and their entitlement 44:1-45:8
 - iii. The offerings and other regulations 49:9-46:24
- d. The life-giving waters 47:1-12
- e. The division of the land 47:13-48:35

I. EZEKIEL'S VISION, COMMISSION AND MESSAGE 1:1 – 5:17

a. Introduction 1:1-3

1 In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

2 On the fifth of the month — it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—

3 the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was upon him.

Chapters 1-3 describe the vision in which Ezekiel received the call to be the prophet to the exiles. The book opens with the Hebrew word *hayah*, which has the primary meaning of “to exist,” “to be,” or “to come to pass.” It could be rendered “and,” but according to *Strong’s Definitions*, it is “always emphatic, and not a mere copula or auxiliary.” We find it, among many other examples, in the verse: “And God said, ‘*Let there be light*,’ and *there was light*.”¹

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The use of the conjunction indicates here, as in ... Jonah 1:1, that the narrative that follows links itself on to something that has gone before. In ... Exodus 1:1 and ... 1 Samuel 1:1 it may point to a connection with the book that precedes it. Here the sequence is subjective. We may think of Ezekiel as retracing the years of his life till he comes to the thirtieth. Then, as it were, he pulls himself up. That must be the starting point of what he has to say. Our English use of ‘now’ is nearly equivalent to this.” But I prefer seeing in Ezekiel’s use of the word an introduction to a mode of existence that is more real than any experience we know. This is the real “to be.”

Although Ezekiel’s mention of time, “the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day” seems to be clear beyond argument, it has been a topic of controversy among Bible scholar throughout the ages. Some, like Origen, believe it to be a reference to the prophet’s own age. Priests and Levites began their public ministry at the age of thirty.² Others take it to be the thirtieth year of King Jehoiachin’s age, which would make it 585 B.C. Some go back to Josiah’s reform, making it 593/592 B.C. Modern Bible translations present it as the prophet’s own age. *The New Living Translation*, for example, reads: “On July 31 of my thirtieth year.” *The Living Bible*: “One day late in June, when I was thirty years old.” The older ones hold on to a literal rendering of “the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day.”

There is a strange switching back and forth between the first and the third person singular, particularly in first three verses of this chapter. This gives the impression as if Ezekiel could hardly believe that this is what happened to him. The phrase “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” is unusual in the Old Testament. None of the Old Testament prophets described their experience with God in this manner. The words “visions of God” can be interpreted in different ways.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The words admit of three interpretations: (1) Great, or wonderful, visions; as in the ‘mountains of God’ (... Psalm 36:6), the ‘cedars of God’ (... Psalm 80:10), the ‘river of God’ (... Psalm 65:9); (2) visions sent from God; or (3) actual theophanies or manifestations of the Divine glory, of these (3) is most in harmony with what follows, here and elsewhere, on the phrase (comp. ... Ezekiel 8:3; 40:2; 43:3). Such a theophany constituted in his case, as in that of Isaiah (... Isaiah 6:1), Jeremiah (... Jeremiah 1:9), Zechariah (... Zechariah 1:8-14), his call to the office of a prophet. The visions may be thought of as manifested to his waking consciousness in an ecstatic state, and are thus distinguished from the dreams of sleep (comp. ... Joel 2:28 for the distinction between the two — ‘visions’ belonging to the young, and ‘dreams’ to the old). The visions of Balaam, seen in a ‘trance,’ but with his ‘eyes open’ (... Numbers 24:3, 4), and of St. Paul, ‘whether in the body or out of the body’ he could not tell (... 2 Corinthians 12:2, 3), present suggestive parallels.”

1. Gen. 1:3

2. Num. 4:3,4

The Hebrew word, translated vision is *mar'ah*, which has the double meaning of “a vision” and “a mirror.” An example of the first meaning of the word is in “And God spoke to Israel in a *vision* at night and said, ‘Jacob! Jacob!’”¹ The only example of the second meaning of the word is found in “They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the *mirrors* of the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.”² The second meaning of “mirror” reminds us of Paul’s statement: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”³ Ezekiel saw the mirror image of God’s glory. That was the closest anyone could ever come to reality in the Old Testament. For the New Testament believer, Paul’s statement applies: “Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”⁴

V.2 seems to clarify the questions about the date mentioned in v.1, but, as *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “The real identity of these two dates is placed beyond doubt by the mention of the same day of the month, ‘on the fifth day of the month’ (v. 2 compared with v. 1). The fifth year from the commencement of Jehoiachin’s captivity is the year 595 B.C.; the thirtieth year, consequently, is the year 625 B.C. But the era, in accordance with which this date is reckoned, is matter of dispute, and can no longer be ascertained with certainty.”

The Hebrew text states: “The word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi.” The Hebrew word used is *hayah*, which literally means “to exist,” and which serves here to add emphasis to the statement. The experience of the vision is described as “the hand of the Lord was upon him.” The verb “was” is not in the Hebrew text. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about the expression: “The ‘hand’ of the Lord is the natural symbol of his power, and the phrase seems to be used to add to the consciousness of inspiration, that of a constraining, irresistible power. Ezekiel continually uses it (... Ezekiel 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1).”

One of the unusual parts of Ezekiel’s experience seems to be that he was physically taken away by the Spirit of God while the hand of God was upon him, and that he was returned to his place among the exiles at the end of his vision. We conclude this from the reference in a later chapter that reads: “Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound — May the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling place! — the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me. I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days — overwhelmed.”⁵ Ezekiel was the first human being ever to have this experience. Moses and Isaiah had seen God’s glory manifested on earth. Paul did not know whether his experience was in the body or out of the body,⁶ John had his revelation “in the spirit”,⁷ but Ezekiel was, evidently, taken up bodily.

b. The vision of the Lord’s chariot-throne 1:4-28

4 I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north — an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal,

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1. Gen. 46:2
 2. Ex. 38:8
 3. I Cor. 13:12
 4. II Cor. 3:16-18
 5. Ezek. 3:12-15
 6. II Cor. 12:2-4
 7. Rev. 1:9,10; 4:1,2

5 and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man,
 6 but each of them had four faces and four wings.
 7 Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze.
 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings,
 9 and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.
 10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of
 a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.
 11 Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of
 another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body.
 12 Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went.
 13 The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth
 among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it.
 14 The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.
 15 As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces.
 16 This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike.
 Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel.
 17 As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not turn
 about as the creatures went.
 18 Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.
 19 When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the
 ground, the wheels also rose.
 20 Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of
 the living creatures was in the wheels.
 21 When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the
 creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in
 the wheels.
 22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and
 awesome.
 23 Under the expanse their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its
 body.
 24 When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of
 the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.
 25 Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings.
 26 Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne
 was a figure like that of a man.
 27 I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from
 there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him.
 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.
 This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the
 voice of one speaking.

The first impression Ezekiel received was that of an enormous wind storm. The Hebrew words used are *ruwach ca`ar*, which stands for “a hurricane.” The phenomenon seems to have been the same as at the manifestation of God at Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments. We read there: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently.”¹

The vision came toward Ezekiel from the north. Several Bible scholars consider this to be a reference to the Chaldean invasion that came into Israel from the north. That would mean that Ezekiel saw himself as being in Jerusalem, which is inconsistent with the opening statement in which he declares himself to be by the Kebar River in Babylonia.

The Pulpit Commentary observes about “the north”: “In ... Jeremiah 1:13, 14 a like symbol is explained as meaning that the judgments which Judah was to suffer were to come from the north, that is, from Chaldea, upon the prophet’s countrymen. Here the prophet is himself in Chaldea, and what he sees is the symbol, not or calamities, but of the Divine glory, and that explanation is, accordingly, inapplicable. Probably the leading thought here is that the Divine presence is no longer in the temple at Jerusalem. It may return for a time to execute judgment (... Ezekiel 8:4; 10:1, 19, 20), and may again depart (... Ezekiel 11:23), but the abiding glory is elsewhere, and the temple is as Shiloh had been of old (... Psalm 78:60). Ezekiel was looking on the visible symbol of what had been declared in unfigurative language by Jeremiah (... Jeremiah 7:12, 14; 26:6, 9). That the north should have been chosen rather than any other quarter of the heavens is perhaps connected (1) with ... Job 37:22, where it appears as the region of ‘fair weather,’ the unclouded brightness of the ‘terrible majesty’ of God; (2) with ... Isaiah 14:13, where ‘the sides of the north’ are the symbols of the dwelling place of God. For the Jews this was probably associated with the thought of the mountain heights of Lebanon as rising up to heaven... or with the fact that the ‘north side’ of Zion (... Psalm 48:2), as the site of the temple, was the ‘dwelling place of the great King.’ Parallels present themselves in the Assyrian hymns that speak of the ‘feasts of the silver mountains, the heavenly courts’ (as the Greeks spoke of Olympus), ‘where the gods dwell eternally’ ... and this ideal mountain was for them, like the Meru of Indian legend, in the farthest north. So, in the legendary geography of Greece, the Hyperborei, or ‘people beyond the north,’ were a holy and blessed race, the chosen servants of Apollo ... possibly the brilliant coruscations of an Aurora Borealis may have led men to think of it as they thought of the glory of the dawn or the brightness of the lightning, as a momentary revelation of the higher glory of the throne of God.” But *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “Ezekiel here is not borrowing the mythological concept of the north as the home of the gods, but may be suggesting God’s transcendence.”

The way in which Ezekiel describes the vision gives the impression of it being so overwhelming and glorious that it is actually beyond description. Words as “look like,” “resemblance” and “appearance” are used to convey the impression. The Hebrew word used is *demuwth*, which denotes “similitude.” The first time the word is used is in the verse: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our *image*, in our likeness.’”¹ Ezekiel tries to convey to us that what he saw was actually incomparable; it could not be defined in terms of any earthly reality. The Apostle Paul, in describing his experience of being taken up into heaven, said that he “heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”² This reminds us of God’s word to Isaiah: “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the onset of this vision: “Alone with his thoughts, and doubtless sharing the gloomy views of his fellow-exiles about the separation from the presence of God in Jerusalem, he suddenly was aware of a black storm-cloud gathering in the north. It is possible that in his actual experience he began by observing some such natural phenomenon, from which there developed the supernatural vision of the glory of the Lord which occupies most of this chapter. The physical and visible led into the spiritual and the visionary. Alternatively, the whole thing from beginning to end was a vision experience with no starting-point in reality. At all events, the description of the vision moves from the normal to the supranormal, beginning with a thunder-cloud, black and threatening, with the brightness of the desert sun lighting up its edges and with lightning-flashes streaking across the darkened sky. The last phrase of verse 4 begins to show that this is more than the usual desert hurricane: its appearance is graphically described as being ‘like the gleam of glowing bronze from out of the fire.’ The rare Hebrew word *hašmāl*, used here and in verse 27 and in 8:2, is not amber (AV, RV) but some kind of shining metal (*cf.* RSV’s

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1. Ex. 19:16-18
 1. Gen. 1:26
 2. II Cor. 12:4

bronze): in every case it is descriptive of the Lord's dazzling splendor, and so it prepares the way for the supernatural features of the visions that follow."

Most of Ezekiel's description of this theophany centers on the four living creatures and the wheels that seem to carry them. The Hebrew word for "living creature" is *chay*, which has the basic meaning of "alive." "Live-ones" would be an acceptable translation. Ezekiel's vision resembles Isaiah's in many details, but it is not completely similar. We read in Isaiah: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."¹ The Apostle John also saw the same throne of God with four living creatures surrounding it. We read this in Revelation: "In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'"² Here too is a good deal of similarity, but the three pictures are not identical. Much of the difference may be attributed to the speed with which the living creatures seem to be moving. Ezekiel says: "The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning."

Ezekiel and John agree on the fact that the "living ones" resemble human beings, but their form is quite different from humans on earth. The most striking difference is the wings. Ezekiel seems to describe two sets of wings on each living being, a total of four. John distinguishes six wings on the creatures he describes. Ezekiel does not mention eyes, but John states that each "was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings."³ The greatest difference between Ezekiel's picture and John's is in the faces. Ezekiel states: "Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle."⁴ John states: "The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle."⁵

Looking at the two sets of images, there are two questions that arise: Are Ezekiel and John looking at the same pictures? And what is the meaning of the images? To begin with the last, there is an obvious emphasis on creation as we know it on earth. We are familiar with the human face, the face of the lion, of the ox and of the eagle. We all agree that the human face must be on a human body. We only put lion, ox, or eagle heads on human bodies by way of caricature. Looking at the pictures of Ezekiel and John, we must say that John's may be closer to reality, as we know it, than Ezekiel's. It is one thing to see an animal head on a human body, it is something impossible and weird to see four faces on one body.

As mentioned above, the fact that these four living creatures moved with the speed of lightning may account for the impression that each of the living creatures had four faces, whereas John only saw one face on each of the creatures.⁶ Speed may also be the reason why Ezekiel saw four wings on each of the creatures, whereas Isaiah and John identify six wings. Ezekiel mentions specifically that the four living creatures did not turn around, yet there was a high-speed movement which is attributed to huge wheels upon which the throne and the creatures rested. There are four wheels, which Ezekiel describes as "a wheel intersecting a wheel." The Hebrew text states: *haa`owpan batowk haa`owpan*, "a wheel in the middle of a wheel." That construction allowed for movement in all directions without

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1. Isa. 6:1-4
 2. Rev. 4:6-8
 3. Rev. 4:8
 4. Ezek. 1:10
 5. Rev. 4:7
 6. Isa. 6:2; Rev.4:8

actually turning around. The rims seemed to have impressed the prophet most of all; he states that they were high and awesome and full of eyes. John also mentioned the eyes, but he sees them on the wings of the angels. Here again, the speed of lightning may account for the apparent discrepancy.

The number of eyes, wherever they may be, speaks of multi-dimensional awareness. Our two eyes help us to perceive a three-dimensional reality. A multitude of eyes suggests a greater awareness than we know as humans. The awesomeness Ezekiel describes comes from the fact that the wheels are alive. These wheels have nothing in common with the mechanical devices we know. From the words “the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels,” we could deduct that the wheels were part of the bodies of the living creatures. The whole picture that is drawn for us goes far beyond anything we can imagine. In his effort to describe the scene, Ezekiel tries to compare what he sees to what we know on earth, but mere words fail to do justice to the glory of it all.

Ezekiel’s gaze moves from the wheels to the expanse above the living creatures, where he sees an expanse, which *The King James Version* calls “a firmament.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: “The translation *firmament* is not a good rendering of the Hebrew *raqiya`* in verse 22. It arises out of the *Vulgate firmamentum*, which is a literal rendering of the Greek *sterôma*, which in turn is trying quite correctly to indicate the Hebrew meaning of something ‘made firm’ by beating or stamping, e.g. a hammered piece of metalwork. It usually refers to the curve of the heavens, which to an observer on the ground appears like a vast inverted bowl of blue. In passages like Genesis 1:6, Psalms 19:1; 150:1; Daniel 12:3, it clearly has this meaning but in Ezekiel it has the sense of a firm, level surface or platform. In the book of Revelation this same phrase becomes ‘a sea of glass, like crystal’ before the throne of God (Rev. 4:6).” The Scripture references in this quotation read respectively: “And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.’ So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse ‘sky.’”¹ “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”² “Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.”³ “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”⁴

Ezekiel calls this glittering expanse of ice “awesome,” which is the translation of the Hebrew word *yare`* for “to fear.” The awe-inspiring view is accompanied by an awe-inspiring sound, “like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army.” This corresponds to John’s description in Revelation of the throne of God, where he states: “From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.”⁵ The psalmist expresses the greatness of God’s throne in similar words: “Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea — the Lord on high is mighty.”⁶

At that point the whole scene Ezekiel tried to describe comes to rest and the prophet hears the voice of the Lord.

V.26 reads literally in the Hebrew text: “And above that what [was] the appearance of the firmament over their heads [was] the appearance of a stone the likeness of sapphire [was] a throne: and upon the likeness of a throne [was] the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it.” The confusing way in which Ezekiel tries to describe the scene, although hard to follow in a literal sense, gives the impression of something which is in essence indescribable. The Hebrew words *mar’eh*, “appearance,” and *demuwth*, “resemblance,” occur respectively 15 and 10 times in this chapter. *The New Living Translation* renders this verse: “Above this surface was something that looked like a throne made of blue lapis lazuli. And on this throne high above was a figure whose appearance resembled a

1. Gen. 1:6-8
2. Ps. 19:1
3. Ps. 150:1
4. Dan.12:3
5. Rev. 4:5
6. Ps. 93:2,4

man.” Ezekiel sees here in one scene what John, in Revelation, describes as two separate sights as the appearance of Christ and the throne in heaven.¹ What Ezekiel succeeds in doing is to compare what he sees with what we know and to conclude, in comparing that which is incomparable with what is comparable, that heavenly reality is beyond description. Seeing the glory of the Lord, he fell facedown. John describes his reaction as: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”²

Being a priest, Ezekiel must have understood the value of the sacrifices brought in the temple; he saw the one to whom they were brought.

J. B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about Ezekiel’s experience: “At last the prophet can lift his eyes upwards to describe what is on top of the platform. He has been approaching this with the utmost caution, beginning with the features farthest away, but eventually he comes to describe the throne (like *sapphire*, or ‘lapis lazuli,’ a stone highly prized in the ancient world) and the One who sat upon it. Here either his eye or his nerve fails him. Whereas the four living creatures could be described in detail, all he could say of God was that He had human form and the *appearance of fire* (27). To say even this, however, was incredibly bold, for was not Yahweh invisible and therefore indescribable? It was an idea deeply written into Israelite thinking that no ordinary person could set eyes on God and live to tell the tale. Hagar, Jacob, Moses, Gideon and Manoah, all had remarkable experiences which proved the rule (Gn. 16:13; 32:30; Ex. 33:20-23; Jdg. 6:22; 13:22; cf. Dt. 5:24), but in their case they met what at first seemed to be a human being who subsequently turned out to be an angel or some other manifestation of God. Their sense of shock was based on being wise after the event and therefore on not having given the divine messenger due deference. With the prophets, however, some kind of experience of God, either purely auditory or, as with Isaiah and Ezekiel, in a vision, was almost a necessity in order to authenticate their later ministry. For Moses, God spoke out of a burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6). Jeremiah had no visual experience, though his call was associated with two messages based on the sight of an almond-rod and a boiling pot (Je. 1:11ff.). Isaiah, however, had a most impressive vision, all of which he recounts (Is.6), except for the actual appearance of the Lord whose ‘train filled the temple.’ Ezekiel opens the door a little further and lets God be seen in a human outline but with so dazzling a splendor that nothing more could be seen or said. It is left to Daniel to go all the way and to describe in detail the features of the Ancient of Days (Dn. 7:9ff.)”

c. The commission to be the Lord’s spokesman to the house of Israel 2:1-3:15

1 He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you."

2 As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

3 He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day.

4 The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.'

5 And whether they listen or fail to listen — for they are a rebellious house — they will know that a prophet has been among them.

6 And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house.

7 You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.

8 But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you."

9 Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll,

10 which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

1. Rev. 1:12-16; 4:2-6

2. Rev. 1:17

3:1 *And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel."*

2 *So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.*

3 *Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.*

4 *He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them.*

5 *You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—*

6 *not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you.*

7 *But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate.*

8 *But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are.*

9 *I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house."*

10 *And he said to me, "Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.*

11 *Go now to your countrymen in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says,' whether they listen or fail to listen."*

12 *Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound — May the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling place!—*

13 *the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound.*

14 *The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me.*

15 *I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days — overwhelmed.*

The Hebrew title given here to Ezekiel is *Ben-`Aadaam*, "son of man." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about this: "The first words that God addresses to Ezekiel appropriately put the prophet in his rightful place before the majesty which he has been seeing in his vision. The phrase *son of man* is a Hebraism which emphasizes Ezekiel's insignificance or, mere humanity. 'Son of' indicates 'partaking of the nature of' and so when combined with *`adam*, 'man,' it means nothing more than 'human being.' In the plural it is a common phrase for 'mankind.' Other examples of this usage are Isaiah 5:1, where the 'very fertile hill' is literally 'a hill, son of oil,' and Jonah 4:10, where the Lord says of the plant that sheltered Jonah for so short a time that it 'was a son of a night and perished a son of a night.' The same construction is reflected in Luke 10:6, where Jesus warned the seventy to stay only at a house where there was 'a son of peace,' meaning a man of good will, who would welcome them peaceably. From this, its simplest and non-technical use, which occurs over 90 times in Ezekiel and is characteristic of the prophet's self-conscious sense of human frailty before the awful might and majesty of God, the phrase 'son of man' takes on special significance through its use in Daniel 7:13, 14 to describe the personification of spiritual Israel, 'the saints of the Most High' (verse 18). In itself this is not yet a Messianic title, because in Daniel it simply indicates the qualitative distinction between the kingdoms of the world, represented by four great beasts, and the kingdom of the faithful, represented by a human being. But by the time *Similitudes of Enoch* were written (46:1,2) the Son of man had come to mean specifically the Messiah. Our Lord's use of the title seems to have taken advantage of the ambiguity between the simple and the technical meanings, so that in one sense He could not be accused of making any overt claim to Messiahship, while in the other sense He did not debar those with the requisite spiritual insight from accepting the fuller significance of His person." *The Living Bible* suggests the rendering "son of dust." Although this may be defensible from linguistic viewpoint, it seems to push the point a little too much to the extreme, although it may translate Ezekiel's emotional condition upon viewing the glory of the Eternal quite correctly.

Although the voice that speaks to Ezekiel is not immediately identified, it becomes clear that it is God who addresses him and tells him to stand on his feet. That command is accompanied by the supernatural assistance from the Holy Spirit, who not only gives him the strength to stand but also the ability to hear.

The most amazing feature of the words God addresses to Ezekiel here is that no specific instructions are given. Ezekiel is not told at this point what he must say to the people. The actual instructions will be given in written form, also in a most unique way. The main topic of this initial conversation is the attitude of the people toward God, and Ezekiel's possible reaction to the rejection of his person and message.

The words used to describe the attitude of the people are "rebellious," "revolt," "obstinate" and "stubborn." Ezekiel is told that he will not have a receptive audience for what he is going to tell them. His main task will be to live among rebels and model the life of a person who walks with God. God includes a warning against becoming infected by the negative attitude of the people among whom he will live. Ezekiel must be aware of the fact that the dangers that face him are not the outward ones: "briers, and thorns and scorpions"; the greatest dangers will be the ones from within. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about "briers" and "thorns": "The two Hebrew nouns are not found elsewhere, and have consequently puzzled translators." Ezekiel is not given any guarantee that his message will have any effect upon the people. The chances that he will become popular are very slim. His only success and assurance will be in his fellowship with God.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states here: "Ezekiel is scarcely given an opportunity to make excuses for himself, in the tradition of Moses (Ex. 3:11 – 4:17) and Jeremiah (Je. 1:6), for God immediately forestalls any hesitation by giving him an exhortation to take courage (2:5-8), followed by a foretaste of his message (2:9 – 3:3). This in turn is followed by the promise of the power to persevere in the face of opposition (3:4-9). To judge from his subsequent ministry, Ezekiel does not give the impression of being anything but fearless. It is almost as if he is immune to the many human reactions of fear and inadequacy and sorrow that dog most of God's servants. It is therefore all the more illuminating to see the repeated way in which God has to tell him to be free of his natural fears and not to be *dismayed at their looks*. The verb here is a very strong word, meaning 'to be shattered.' And the Israelite exiles are described as *though briers and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions*. The prophet's feelings will be painfully hurt by the cruel rancorous treatment he must expect to receive from the exiles in response to his oracles. But it will be easier for him to bear it if only he realizes that such reactions are entirely in character as far as his hearers are concerned, for they are a rebellious house."

The way in which Ezekiel receives the words he must proclaim to the people in exile is most unusual. The Word is given to him in written form. It is true that Jeremiah describes his experience with the Word God gave him as eating, but he resorts to poetry, saying: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty."¹ What Ezekiel is ordered to do is not poetic, although it is symbolic. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "As in the parallel of ... Revelation 10:9, the words imply that what was to be given him was no message resting, as it were, on the surface of the soul. It was to enter into the prophet's innermost life, to be the food and nourishment of his soul; to be, in our familiar phrase, 'inwardly digested' and incorporated with his very flesh and blood. He was to live 'not by bread only' (... Deuteronomy 6:3), but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of Jehovah."

In the passage in Revelation, where the Apostle John is given a scroll to eat, the angel who gives it to him says: "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey." John adds: "I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour."² The fact that Ezekiel does not mention an upset stomach after the eating of the scroll does not mean that his ministry as a prophet was easy and did not affect him at all.

Twice the Word of God is compared to honey in *The Book of Psalms*. We read: "The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb."³ "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"⁴

1. Jer. 15:16

2. Rev. 10:9,10

The symbolic act of eating the scroll means that the Word of God becomes part of the human being in the same way as physical food builds the cells of the human body. An intense preoccupation with the written Word of God will have a transforming effect upon our life. Jesus says that the effect of the Word of God upon a human life will be that the Word makes us participate in the nature of God.¹

The fact that consumption of the Word is pleasant and transforming does not mean that the Word is only given to us for our enjoyment; it is given to us for us to give to others. The Word made Ezekiel into a prophet so that he would be able to prophesy.

The reference to language in the phrase “You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel— not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand” means that Ezekiel had to translate the Word of God into his own language. Ezekiel was in Babylon, the birthplace of human language, the place of confusion of languages. The people that were taken into exile could not understand Chaldean. Eventually, they would learn and they that would return to Palestine at the end of captivity would have forgotten their mother tongue. But at this point in time, Ezekiel and the exiles only spoke Hebrew. God tells Ezekiel that he must prophesy in a language his people could understand. The fact that they could understand but would not act upon it increased their guilt.

Ezekiel could only speak to his own people, but they would resist. If he had been sent to the Babylonians, they would have repented in the same way as the people of Nineveh repented upon hearing the Word of God from Jonah. Jesus said to the people in Galilee: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”²

The exiles would not listen to Ezekiel’s message from God because they were “rebellious.” The Hebrew word used is *meriy*, which is derived from a word meaning “bitterness.” The word occurs sixteen times in *Ezekiel*. The people in exile were bitter because of what had happened to them. They were angry with God for what He had done to them. God calls this “rebellion.” If we react with bitterness to God’s discipline in our lives, we actually rebel against God.

Twice Ezekiel says: “Then the Spirit lifted me up.” The second time he adds “and took me away,” concluding with “I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the Kebar River.” Bible scholars disagree about whether the experience was objective or subjective. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The words are to be interpreted as in ... Ezekiel 2:2. Luther, however, gives ‘a wind lifted me up.’ The parallels of ... Ezekiel 8:3 (where, however, we have the addition, ‘in the visions of God’) and ... Ezekiel 11:1 suggest the conclusion that this was a purely subjective sensation, that it was one of the phenomena of the ecstatic state, and that there was no actual change of place. On the other hand, the use of like language in the cases of Elijah (... 1 Kings 18:12; ... 2 Kings 2:16), of our Lord (... Mark 1:12), of Philip (... Acts 8:39), would justify the inference that the prophet actually passed from one locality to the other. The language of ... 1 Kings 18:46 probably points to the true solution of the problem. The ecstatic state continued, and in it Ezekiel went from the banks of Chebar to the dwellings of the exiles at Tel-Abib ... at some distance from it.” The two Scripture references, referring to the language used in regard to Elijah, read: “I don’t know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn’t find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshiped the Lord since my youth” and: “‘Look,’ they said, ‘we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.’ ‘No,’ Elisha replied, ‘do not send them.’” It could be objected that those verses do not refer to an actual physical experience. They could be seen as an expression of people’s superstitious ideas about the supernatural way prophets travel.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, takes another view, stating: “Still in the context of his visionary experience Ezekiel was aware of being *lifted up* by the same divine impulse that had earlier raised him to his feet (2:2). This was

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3. Ps. 19:9,10
 4. Ps. 119:103
 1. John 10:35
 2. Matt. 12:41

no psychic levitation, but a subjective experience of feeling airborne, which was coupled with the audible sounds of the whirring of wings and rumbling of wheels *like a great earthquake* (RSV), which the prophet had noticed in 1:24.” It seems somewhat inconsistent to compare Ezekiel’s experience of being transported back to his place of residence to his being raised to his feet in the previous chapter. If being raised to his feet was not a physical phenomenon, his falling facedown in chapter 1 cannot have been physical either. A point in favor of considering Ezekiel’s “space travel” to be spiritual, rather than physical, seems to be that it would require an unnecessary miracle.

Bible scholars also disagree about the origin of the doxology “may the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling place!” which is interjected in the narrative. Some ascribe this to the living creatures, others believe it is an editorial comment.

Ezekiel describes the departure of the glory of the Lord as “a loud rumbling.” The Hebrew words used are *ra`ash gadowl*. *Ra`ash* is sometimes translated “earthquake,” as in “Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an *earthquake*, but the Lord was not in the *earthquake*. After the *earthquake* came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.”¹ Also in “The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa — what he saw concerning Israel two years before the *earthquake*, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.”²

Being left to himself, Ezekiel describes his emotions with great honesty, saying “I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me.” This strikes us as an unusual reaction to seeing the glory of God and being called to prophetic ministry, especially for one belonging to the cast of priests. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: “Ezekiel describes his first reactions as he was led away from the scene of his vision with the words *I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit*. LXX omits the word ‘bitter’ and translates ‘I set off at the impulse of my spirit,’ but this does little justice to the strong language of MT. Hebrew *mar*, ‘bitter,’ can express fierce temper or anger, as of a bear robbed of her cubs (2 Sa. 17:8); discontentment, as of the Adulamites (1 Sa. 22:2); or wretchedness, as of Job (Jb. 3:20) and Hezekiah (Is. 38:15). Of these possible meanings the associated phrase ‘heat of spirit’ points to anger as the dominant emotion in Ezekiel’s heart. It is not impossible that he was roused to such bitterness by the prospect of being committed to a patently unsuccessful ministry of the word of the Lord. His natural feeling rebelled against his calling and so the hand of the Lord had to be heavy upon him to subdue and control him. The more usual interpretation, however, is to regard this as an example of the prophet’s being caught up into the righteous anger of God against His people so that he enters into the burden of the ‘lamentation and mourning and woe’ which constituted the message of God to Israel (2:10).”

At some points in his life Jeremiah expresses the same kind of frustration with the ministry God had called him to, saying: “O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”³ Even more violent is Jeremiah’s following curse: “Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, ‘A child is born to you — a son!’ May that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever. Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?”⁴ If there is any similarity between Ezekiel’s emotions and Jeremiah’s, we must conclude that Ezekiel’s anger was directed towards God. He had seen God’s glory, and he did not like the implications the vision had upon his own life. Ezekiel may not

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1. I Kings 19:11,12
 2. Amos 1:1
 3. Jer. 20:7-9
 4. Jer. 20:14-18

have been the gentle, flexible person some Bible scholars make him out to be. He learned to be obedient to God's call, but at a great price.

Coming back to his fellow captives, Ezekiel states: "I sat among them for seven days — overwhelmed." The Hebrew word used is *shamem*, which can be rendered "numb." It is used of wasteland, as in the verse: "I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted."¹ The prophet of the Lord felt emotionally drained.

d. The silent watchman 3:16-27

16 At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me:

17 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

18 When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

19 But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.

20 "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

21 But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."

22 The hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said to me, "Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you."

23 So I got up and went out to the plain. And the glory of the Lord was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown.

24 Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me and said: "Go, shut yourself inside your house.

25 And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people.

26 I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house.

27 But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house.

After Ezekiel's seven-day desert experience, God spoke to him again and appointed him to be a watchman over Israel. The Hebrew word used is *tsaphah*, which has the primary meaning "leaning forward," or "to peer into the distance." This appointment is repeated later on in the book.²

Vv.16-21 contain some of the most severe warnings ever given to any prophet or other human being. Being a watchman means being responsible for the fate of one's fellowmen. The words "I will hold you accountable for his blood" are the translation of the Hebrew "I will require his blood from your hands." In other words "You will be guilty of murder." This is God's answer to Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?"³ The Apostle John comments on this: "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. We know that we have passed from

1. Lev. 26:22

2. See Ezek. 33:1-16.

3. Gen. 4:9

death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”¹

The severity of the warning makes us believe that Ezekiel’s anger amounted to a refusal to accept God’s call to being a prophet. Being born into the priest-caste, his responsibility was to bring sacrifices for individuals and for the nation. God now added to this the task of preaching. That was the part Ezekiel did not want. Like Moses, he wanted God to send someone else. We do not read that he presented any excuses as did Moses or Jeremiah. But God made him understand in an undeniable way that he would have the blood of people who died on his hands as if he had personally killed them.

After experiencing personal salvation, the greatest joy a Christian can experience is to see someone else come to faith in Christ. The reverse of this joy is to see someone die in his sin and not do anything about it. The Apostle Paul expresses this burden, saying: “I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”² Paul felt himself as having their blood on his hands, and in a sense he had because of the crimes he had committed before his conversion. This made him cry out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”³

God mentions two kinds of people to Ezekiel: the wicked and the righteous and He places them into two different situations, in the one the person is not warned and in the other he is. The two Hebrew words used are *rasha`*, “someone who is morally wrong,” and *tsaddiyq*, “the lawful man.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here on the terms “wicked” and “righteous”: “We must be careful not to read New Testament doctrine back into the Old and interpret this in the full light of Pauline justification. The *righteous* (Heb. *saddiq*) was essentially the man who showed by his good living his adherence to the covenant.” We cannot take this passage as proof that salvation cannot be eternally secure or that it can be.

God says to Ezekiel, “When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die.’” That does not mean that God warns the wicked person personally. The fact that Ezekiel is appointed as watchman means that he was the one addressed with the message to be passed on to the wicked person. That individual, being a member of the people of Israel, had already enough personal knowledge of the moral law, to know that he was guilty. What Ezekiel had to say to him was no new revelation. This is true even more so in the case of the righteous, the man who had observed the law and who had backslidden. Sin has a dulling effect upon the conscience. We all need to be reminded of the consequences of our acts, even though we know.

The phrase “the hand of the Lord was upon me” occurs several times throughout this book.⁴ In most of the instances in which this is mentioned the experience seems to have been positive for Ezekiel. Here it appears to have added to his frustration and heaviness. God tells him to go down to the plain. In this case there was no experience of being physically moved to a different location. Ezekiel had to walk to the place where God was present and waiting for him. The place does not seem to have been the same where Ezekiel had his first vision, but the vision appears to be the same as the one described earlier. Ezekiel’s reaction was the same; he fell face down. Again the Spirit of God raised him to his feet and he is given the order to go home.

Much has been written about the meaning of vv.25,26: “And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house.” Some Bible scholars have suggested that Ezekiel was cataleptic, neurotic, hysterical, psychopathic or even schizophrenic. But that does not explain the strange implications of the Word of God that came to him at this time. *The New International Version* states: “They will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people.” Those words allow

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1. I John 3:12,14,15
 2. Rom. 9:1-4
 3. I Cor. 9:16
 4. See Ezek. 1:3; 3:14,22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1 and 40:1.

for a multitude of applications, since the text does not state who does this or whether this is done literally or symbolically. God takes responsibility for his silence, as we read “I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent.” Nothing prevents us from taking this to mean that God also caused Ezekiel’s inability to move around freely. The following description makes us believe that Ezekiel may have suffered a stroke which caused partial paralysis and inability to speak. We have no indication that Ezekiel had done any public speaking or given warnings to the people after God had appointed him as watchman over Israel. The previous mention of bitterness and the anger of his spirit rather suggests that Ezekiel had refused to say anything. God now came to him and told him that his refusal to speak would become inability to speak. Refusal becomes inability.

At the same time God’s discipline of His prophet turns into a severe mercy, to borrow the words of C. S. Lewis. When the moment came that Ezekiel’s tongue was untied, he would not longer be able to resist the command to speak, realizing that his word was the Word of the Sovereign Lord. So far God had not given him the text of the message. The emphasis had been on the source of the message: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says.” The medium was the message, first of all to Ezekiel and then to the people. The reason given in connection with these words was “they are a rebellious house.” God wanted both Ezekiel and the people to fully understand who the One who spoke was: *YHWH Adonay*. Thus far Ezekiel had joined the people in his rebellion, although he had seen God’s glory; after the following experience of forced silence he would speak.

e. Four enacted messages 4:1 – 5:17

i. The siege of Jerusalem 4:1-3

1 "Now, son of man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it.

2 Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams around it.

3 Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.

Ezekiel is ordered to enact the siege of Jerusalem as a silent parable. He must do this by taking a clay tablet on which he drew a map of the city. He had to make certain constructions around the tile, symbolizing the siege which the Babylonians were carrying out at that time. We can image a picture similar to a child building a sand castle and placing tin soldiers around it. An iron skillet would serve as a fence between him and the tablet.

One question that has divided Bible scholars is whether Ezekiel did carry out these instructions literally, or whether this was all part of an ecstatic experience. Since part of the parable was an object lesson it seems logical that it was meant to be seen. That would also answer the question as to whether Ezekiel carried out the instructions in private or at a place that allowed observers. As John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, points out: “The actions were pointless unless they could be watched by a large number of people, and we must suppose that it was not long before the word got around that Ezekiel was doing some unusual things near his home. In a close-knit community like that of the Tel Abib exiles, nothing could be kept secret for long.”

The first recipient of the lesson was the prophet himself. God wanted Ezekiel to identify with the people under siege in Jerusalem, but also with Himself, as He was looking down from above to the suffering on earth in the same way that Ezekiel looked at the scene in front of him. God wanted Ezekiel to know that He was to “not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but ... one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.”¹

Ezekiel must also put himself in the place of the Babylonians. The words “It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it” mean that he must wear the moccasins of the Babylonians. They were the instruments in God’s hand, God’s means of discipline for the Israelites. They were also the people God had created, people that were the object

1. Heb. 4:15

of God's love and people He wanted to be saved. Since Israel was the apple of God's eye, we would have thought that God would identify with the chosen ones. But God does not take sides in our conflicts. When Israel entered Canaan, we read: "Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' 'Neither,' he replied, 'but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.'"¹

ii. The days of the punishment of Israel and Judah 4:4-8

4 "Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the house of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side.

5 I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel.

6 "After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year.

7 Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her.

8 I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege.

Ezekiel is then ordered to lie on his left side in front of the object lesson for 390 days, representing the northern kingdom and their sins. If it is true that, at this point he was suffering from a partial paralysis, he had no choice but to obey the command. He must have had some helping hands to allow him to carry out the instructions. In this Ezekiel became a type of the coming Messiah on whom God would lay the sins of this world. The left and right side represent at the same time the north and the south, or in this case the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern of Judah.

About the number of days, *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "Now Jerusalem was besieged the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah, 2 Kings 25:1-2, and was not taken till the eleventh year of the same prince, 2 Kings 25:2. But properly speaking, the siege did not continue the whole of that time; it was interrupted; for Nebuchadnezzar was obliged to raise it, and go and meet the Egyptians, who were coming to its succor. This consumed a considerable portion of time. After he had defeated the Egyptians, he returned and recommenced the siege, and did not leave it till the city was taken. We may, therefore, conclude that the four hundred and thirty days only comprise the time in which the city was actually besieged, when the city was encompassed with walls of circumvallation, so that the besieged were reduced to a state of the utmost distress. The siege commenced the tenth day of the tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah; and it was taken on the ninth day of the fourth month of the eleventh year of the same king. Thus the siege had lasted, in the whole, eighteen months, or five hundred and ten days. Subtract for the time that Nebuchadnezzar was obliged to interrupt the siege, in order to go against the Egyptians, four months and twenty days, or one hundred and forty days, and there will remain four hundred and thirty days, composed of 390 + 40 = 430."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the left and right side: "Left side - referring to the position of the ten tribes, the Northern Kingdom; as Judah, the Southern, answers to 'the right side' (Ezek 4:6). The Orientals, facing the East in their mode, had the North on their left and the South on their right (Ezek 16:46). Also, the right was more honorable than the left; so Judah, as being the seat of the temple, was more so than Israel. According to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it, thou shalt bear their iniquity - iniquity being regarded as a burden; so it means, 'bear the punishment of their iniquity' (Num 14:34). A type of Him who was the great sinner, not in mimic show, as Ezekiel, but in reality (Isa 53:4,6,12)."

1. Josh. 5:13,14

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, disagrees with the above, stating: "Whereas, in the first, the prophet occupied the role of Yahweh with his face set against Jerusalem, in the second he plays the part of his own people and acts as the bearer of the punishment for their sins. This is not to be taken in any way as a vicarious act, as if he could suffer on behalf of his people. It is purely descriptive, and its aim is to show the duration of the punishment of the two nations, and also that Judah as well as Israel will be sharing in it."

Bible scholars have been puzzled by the numbers of 390 and 40 given here, as the LXX has 190 days only. *The Pulpit Commentary* assumes that the LXX gives the original reading and the Hebrew text is a later correction. The commentary states as reason for this assumption: "Jerome and Origen bear witness to the fact that most copies of the former gave 190 years, some 150 and others, agreeing with the Hebrew, 390. The first of these numbers fits in with the thought that Ezekiel's act was to represent the period of the punishment of the northern kingdom. That punishment starts from the first captivity under Pekah about B.C. 734. Reckoning from that date, the 190 years bring us to about B.C. 544. The punishment of Judah, in like manner, dates from the destruction of Jerusalem in B.C. 586, and the forty years bring us to B.C. 546, a date so near the other, that, in the round numbers which Ezekiel uses, they may be taken as practically coinciding. It was to that date that the prophet, perhaps, unacquainted with Jeremiah's seventy years (... Jeremiah 25:12), with a different starting point (B.C. 600) and *terminus* (B.C. 536), looked forward as the starting point of the restoration of Israel. It is obvious that Ezekiel contemplated the contemporaneous restoration of Israel and Judah (... Ezekiel 16:53-55; 37:19-22; 47:13), as indeed Isaiah also seems to do (11:13, 14), and Jeremiah (31:6, 12, 27). The teaching of Ezekiel's acts, then, had two distinct purposes. (a) It taught the certainty of the punishment. No plots, or rebellions, or alliances with Egypt, could avert the doom of exile from these who should survive the siege of Jerusalem. (b) It taught the exiles to accept their punishment with patience, but with hope. There was a limit, and that not very far off, which some of them might live to see, and beyond which there lay the hope of a restoration for both Israel and Judah. If that hope was not realized to the extent which Ezekiel's language implies, the same may be, said of the language of Isaiah 40-66., whether we refer those chapters to Isaiah himself or to the 'great unknown' who followed Ezekiel, and may have listened to his teaching."

iii. The famine of Jerusalem 4:9-17

9 "Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side.

10 Weigh out twenty shekels of food to eat each day and eat it at set times.

11 Also measure out a sixth of a hin of water and drink it at set times.

12 Eat the food as you would a barley cake; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel."

13 The Lord said, "In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them."

14 Then I said, "Not so, Sovereign Lord! I have never defiled myself. From my youth until now I have never eaten anything found dead or torn by wild animals. No unclean meat has ever entered my mouth."

15 "Very well," he said, "I will let you bake your bread over cow manure instead of human excrement."

16 He then said to me: "Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair,

17 for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin.

Ezekiel was put on a starvation diet, similar or identical to the one the people of Jerusalem were subjected to during the time of the siege. It was hunger that made Jerusalem fall into the hands of the Babylonians.¹ The mixture of grain to be used for the baking of bread indicates that wheat, the normal substance, had become so scarce that it had to be supplemented by anything edible, or even inedible. We read in Deuteronomy: "Do not plant two kinds of

1. II Kings 25:3,4

seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled.”¹ A mixture, such as indicated, probably defied the commandment not to mix seeds, making the product ceremonially unclean.

The result of this diet must have been a loss of weight for Ezekiel that could have endangered not only his health, but his life. Parents used to admonish their children who did not want to finish their food by reminding them of hunger elsewhere in the world. Someone mentioned to me once that, while growing up, he used to hate “those orphans in India.” Ezekiel’s obedience and endurance is put here to the test in a more severe way than was Jesus’ when He fasted for forty days in the desert.

Ezekiel’s trust in God was even tested more with the command to bake his food using human excrements. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: “While the prophet could accept calmly the limitations imposed on his diet, his whole being revolted at the command to bake his bread over a fire of human excrement. This was intended to show the defilement which would come upon the exiles through their being compelled to live and eat in a heathen environment. They would not be able to ensure that the meat they bought or were given had been killed correctly according to Levitical requirements, nor were they to know if it had been offered first at heathen sacrifices. ... It seems strange that God should command a thing and then just as quickly retract it or modify it. He certainly did not treat the apostle Peter in the same way when he saw the sheet containing unclean animals let down before him on the housetop in Joppa (Acts 10:14f.). Perhaps the original command was never intended to do anything more than illustrate the uncleanness of their diet, which would never have come over to Ezekiel or his watchers (*cf.* verse 12, in their sight; could this have been acted out?), if the cow’s dung had been used from the start. At all events, it is gratifying to note the concession that God graciously made to his servant’s priestly scrupulousness on this occasion.”

In actually commanding Ezekiel to defile himself by using human excrements for fuel, God put his faith to the test. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes rather dryly about Ezekiel’s objections: “Verse 14 is one of the few recorded prayers in the book.” In the case of Daniel and his friends,² God blessed their intent to keep themselves pure and in allowing Ezekiel to change the instructions, God was not inconsistent.

The Pulpit Commentary explains about the use of dung for fuel: “In a besieged city the supply of wood for fuel soon fails. The first resource is found, as still often happens in the East, in using the dried dung of camels or of cattle. Before Ezekiel’s mind there came the vision of a yet more terrible necessity. That supply also might fail, and then men would be forced to use the dried contents of the ‘draught houses’ or cesspools of Jerusalem. They would be compelled almost literally to fulfill the taunt of Rabshakeh (...Isaiah 36:12). That thought, as bringing with it the ceremonial pollution of ... Leviticus 5:3: 7:21, was as revolting to Ezekiel as it is to us; but like Dante, in a like revolting symbolism ... he does not shrink from naming it. It came to him, as with the authority of a Divine command, that he was even to do this, to represent the extreme horrors of the siege. And all this was to be done visibly, before the eyes of his neighbors at Tel-Abib.”

According to the explanation given to Ezekiel, the point of that part of the instructions was not identification with the people of Jerusalem under siege, but affinity with the exiles. The inhabitants of Jerusalem did worse than defiling themselves ceremonially. Their idolatry and murders in the bringing of human sacrifices rendered them more unclean than any trespass of dietary regulations could have done.

Much of what the inhabitants of Jerusalem experienced during the siege in Ezekiel’s day was the fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy given to the Israelites before they entered Canaan. After having warned the people that some of the consequences of disobedience would be sickness, failed harvests because of inclement weather, attacks by wild animals, God said to them: “If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over. And I will bring the sword upon you to avenge the breaking of the covenant. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a plague among you, and you will be given into enemy hands. When I cut off your supply of bread, ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven, and they will dole out the bread by weight. You will eat, but you will not be satisfied. If

1. Deut. 22:9

2. Dan. 1:8-15

in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over. You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you. I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins. Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.”¹

iv. The threefold fate of the people of Jerusalem 5:1-17

1 "Now, son of man, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber's razor to shave your head and your beard. Then take a set of scales and divide up the hair.

2 When the days of your siege come to an end, burn a third of the hair with fire inside the city. Take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city. And scatter a third to the wind. For I will pursue them with drawn sword.

3 But take a few strands of hair and tuck them away in the folds of your garment.

4 Again, take a few of these and throw them into the fire and burn them up. A fire will spread from there to the whole house of Israel.

5 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.

6 Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.

7 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you.

8 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations.

9 Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again.

10 Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds.

11 Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not look on you with pity or spare you.

12 A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword.

13 "Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath upon them, they will know that I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.

14 "I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, in the sight of all who pass by.

15 You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you when I inflict punishment on you in anger and in wrath and with stinging rebuke. I the Lord have spoken.

16 When I shoot at you with my deadly and destructive arrows of famine, I will shoot to destroy you. I will bring more and more famine upon you and cut off your supply of food.

17 I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. Plague and bloodshed will sweep through you, and I will bring the sword against you. I the Lord have spoken."

1. Lev. 26:23-35

In introducing this chapter, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “Each of the four actions described in 4:1 – 5:4 dealt with a different aspect of the disaster that would shortly befall Jerusalem. First came the fact of the siege (4:1-3), then the duration of the punishment of Israel and Judah (4:4-6), and then the famine conditions of the siege and of the exile (4:9-17). Last of all came the enacted oracle of the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (5:1-4).”

The shaving off of hair, even in part, was forbidden for Levitical priests. The law stated: “Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards or cut their bodies.”¹ It is true that the instructions were originally given in the context of the pagan mourning rituals, but the application seems to have been maintained in general. Even though God allowed Ezekiel not to defile himself ritually by using human feces for fuel, he was forced to obey this command to the letter.

As John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, explains: “It takes little imagination to see Ezekiel in action. First, whetting the sword-blade to a sharp cutting-edge while the crowd gathered to see what new act was going to be performed. Then the horrified gasp from the bystanders as he went to work with his crude razor, followed by the meticulous weighing of the hair in the balances. Finally when all the hair was burnt or chopped up small or thrown to the winds, he would put down his sword and go looking on the sand for a few remaining hairs to tuck into the fold of his garment, and even some of these would be thrown into the fire that was burning beside the brick that represented Jerusalem.”

The fact that this is the only place in Scripture where the word “barber” is used is an indication how scrupulously the Israelites observed the law that forbade the cutting of hair.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary gives us a clear outline of Ezekiel’s action: “Here is a new emblem produced, in order to mark out the coming evils.

1. The prophet represents the Jewish nation.
2. His hair, the people.
3. The razor, the Chaldeans.
4. The cutting the beard and hair, the calamities, sorrows, and disgrace coming upon the people. Cutting of the hair was a sign of mourning; see on Jer 45:5 Jer 48:37; and also a sign of great disgrace; see 2 Sam 10:4.
5. He is ordered to divide the hair, Ezek 5:2, into three equal parts, to intimate the different degrees and kinds of punishment which should fall upon the people.
6. The balances, Ezek 5:1, were to represent the divine justice, and the exactness with which God’s judgments should be distributed among the offenders.
7. This hair, divided into three parts, is to be disposed of thus:
 - a. A third part is to be burnt in the midst of the city, to show that so many should perish by famine and pestilence during the siege.
 - b. Another third part he was to cut in small portions about the city, (that figure which he had portrayed upon the brick,) to signify those who should perish in different sorties, and in defending the walls.
 - c. And the remaining third part he was to scatter in the wind, to point out those who should be driven into captivity. And,
 - d. The sword following them was intended to show that their lives should be at the will of their captors, and that many of them should perish by the sword in their dispersions.
 - e. The few hairs which he was to take in his skirts, Ezek 5:3, was intended to represent those few Jews that should be left in the land under Gedaliah, after the taking of the city.
 - f. The throwing a part of these last into the fire, Ezek 5:4, was intended to show the miseries that these suffered in Judea, in Egypt, and finally in their being also carried away into Babylon on the conquest of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar.”

We are not told at what point of the siege Ezekiel was supposed to perform these acts. The fact that he was ordered to keep the hair he had cut and weighed till the end of the siege, may indicate that the object lesson turned into a drawn-out performance.

1. Lev. 21:5

How heartrending this all was to God Himself is clear from the words in v.5 where God speaks of His original intent for Jerusalem and the people. They had been meant to be the spiritual center of the world, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, and God's bridgehead in a fallen creation. It is as if God surrenders the last stronghold He possessed in this world to the enemy. The fall of Jerusalem thus becomes a shadow of the cross. The whole captivity symbolized the death of God. Who could know at that time that God would conquer death by submitting to death Himself?

Vv.5-17 contain the verdict God pronounces over the city that had been meant to be the center of the world, the place of revelation of God's glory. It had turned into the greatest cesspool of iniquity the world had ever known. In their effort to please their evil idols the Israelites had sacrificed their own children to them. They ended up in a cannibalistic condition that would even have made cannibals shudder. Among the primitive tribes that practice cannibalism only human flesh from enemies would be consumed. Fathers eating their own children or children eating their own fathers would have been looked upon by them with horror. Yet, that was the depth to which the members of God's chosen people had fallen.

It sounds strange to us that God takes responsibility for the horrible acts of cannibalism that were committed during the siege. That seems to be the meaning of the word "therefore" in verse 10. It does, of course, not mean that God ordered fathers to eat their own children and children their own parents. By taking away His restraining presence, God allowed evil to take over and run its full course. This was total break failure of the same kind as the Apostle Paul describes, saying: "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts ..."¹

V.12 gives the explanation of what Ezekiel had been ordered to do symbolically with the hair he had shaved off: burning a third on the tablet that represented the city, cutting up a third with the sword and scattering a third in the wind. The reason for the severity of the judgment was the crimes committed by King Manasseh. This is clear from the parallel prophecy of Jeremiah, in which he says: "Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity. I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem."² Manasseh's reign ended approximate 50 years before the fall of Jerusalem. But none of the kings following that evil king had ever done anything to remedy the corruption of morals he had left behind.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the last verses of this chapter: "In this concluding paragraph the judgments which God promised in verse 8 are described more fully. Words similar to those used in Isaiah 1:24 of the Lord's wrath against His enemies are now used against His own people (13). *I will vent my fury* (RSV) is literally 'I will quieten my fury' in the sense of 'appease' or 'assuage' (as in Ze. 6:8); and the phrase "*I will be comforted*" (AV, RV) similarly implies the relief that comes after the unburdening of powerful emotions, such as grief or anger. *Satisfy myself* (RSV) is a most misleading rendering of the Hebrew word *hinnehamitî*."

Actually, the Hebrew text of v.13 reads literally: "Then my anger shall be accomplished and I will cause my fury to rest; and I will be comforted upon them." The Hebrew word for "comforted" is *nacham*, which literally means "to sigh." It is sometimes rendered "to be sorry," or "to pity." It also occurs in Isaiah's famous statement: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."³ Taylor gives the conjugated form of the root word in the above quotation. *Barnes' Notes* explains about the meaning of the word "comforted": "In the sense of 'consoling oneself' and 'feeling satisfaction in punishing;' hence, to 'avenge oneself.' The fury is to 'rest' upon them, abide, so as not to pass away. The 'accomplishment' of the divine anger is not the 'completion' in the sense of bringing it to a close, but in the sense of carrying it out to the full." *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The phrase meets us again in ... Ezekiel 16:42; 21:17; 24:13. To 'rest' here is to 'repose' rather than to 'abide.' The thought is that a righteous anger, like that of Jehovah, rests (*i.e.* is quieted) when it has done its work, and that in this sense God is 'comforted,' either as rejoicing in the punishment of evil for its own sake (as in ... Deuteronomy 28:63; ... Isaiah 1:24), or because the punishment

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1. Rom. 1:24
 2. Jer. 15:2,4
 3. Isa. 40:1

does its work in leading men to repentance. Israel may be comforted, because God is comforted as he sees that his judgments have done their work, and that his wrath can find repose.”

What happened during the siege and capture of Jerusalem and in the captivity of Judah served also as a warning to the surrounding nations. The fact that God can say this indicates that some of the testimony of God’s presence among the Israelites throughout the ages must have seeped through beyond the borders of Israel. Edom and Moab and some of the others must have gotten the message that when Israel obeyed God’s orders, as during the reign of Hezekiah, God protected them supernaturally. And when they allowed themselves to be drawn into the idolatrous practices of their neighbors, they perished.

Repetitions of the phrase “I the Lord have spoken” affirms the earlier and following statements: “They will know that a prophet has been among them,” and “And they will know that I am the Lord.” People who had taken the presence of God in their midst lightly or had ignored Him completely, came to the painful experience that “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹

II. ORACLES OF JUDGMENT 6:1 – 7:27

a. Prophecy against the mountains of Israel 6:1-14

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them

3 and say: 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.

4 Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols.

5 I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars.

6 Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste and the high places demolished, so that your altars will be laid waste and devastated, your idols smashed and ruined, your incense altars broken down, and what you have made wiped out.

7 Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the Lord.

8 "But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations.

9 Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me — how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices.

10 And they will know that I am the Lord; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them.

11 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out "Alas!" because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the house of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague.

12 He that is far away will die of the plague, and he that is near will fall by the sword, and he that survives and is spared will die of famine. So will I spend my wrath upon them.

13 And they will know that I am the Lord, when their people lie slain among their idols around their altars, on every high hill and on all the mountaintops, under every spreading tree and every leafy oak-places where they offered fragrant incense to all their idols.

14 And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land a desolate waste from the desert to Diblah- wherever they live. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'"

1. Heb. 10:31

In these verses the mountains of Israel are being addressed as if they were personified, which gives this section a highly poetical tone. This poetry, however, does not enhance the beauty of the text; it accentuates the gravity of the warning and the horror of the message. In addressing the mountains, Ezekiel speaks not only to the terrain and the rocks, but to everything and everyone on them. The ones addressed are the idols and what they represent and the people who involve themselves with them.

God had created the mountains, and although in some cases mountains were treated as symbols of rebellion against God, that is not the reason for their condemnation here. Isaiah saw mountains as obstacles to the coming of the Messiah and he prophesied: “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.”¹ And Zechariah called Satan “mountain,” who tried to prevent the rebuilding of the temple. He said: “What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’”²

Here, the mountains are the sites of Israel’s idolatry. They were the places the inhabitants of Canaan used for their idol worship. God had told the Israelites to destroy them when they conquered the land. It was because of the “high places” that the Israelites had to expel the original inhabitants of the land. We read: “When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places.”³ John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, explains: “Many prophets before him had attacked the high places, and with good reason. Although worship was carried on at them nominally in the name of Yahweh, most of them had been originally Canaanite shrines which the Israelites had taken over for their own purposes. The idea may have been good in essence but in practice it blurred the distinctiveness of Israel’s religion and led to all kinds of local corruptions of Yahweh worship. The prophets to a man deplored this policy and fought to remove the high places for ever, but they had little success. The kings of Judah who were Yahweh worshippers removed many idolatrous shrines and symbols, but most of them balked at wholesale destruction of high places. The two notable exceptions were Hezekiah (c. 716-687 BC) and Josiah (c. 640-609 BC), but Hezekiah’s reformation was immediately reversed by his successor, Manasseh (2 Ki. 21:3), and it does not seem as if Josiah’s efforts were much more successful. In contrast with this chapter, it is worth reading 36:1-15, where the mountains of Israel are again addressed in a context of promised restoration.”

Those who brought human sacrifices on the idol altars would become sacrifices themselves, and their bones would testify against their own evil religion. The words “you will know that I am the Lord” are evidently addressed to the survivors, unless we take this to mean that the victims carried that knowledge with them into the grave.

In v.8 and following verses Ezekiel addresses those who had been taken into captivity with him as well as those who would follow after the fall of Jerusalem. These verses also reveal some of God’s own tears over the condition of the people He loved and whom He intended to draw unto Himself. The term “adulterous hearts” equates idol worship to marital infidelity. It brings the matter of Israel’s sin to a level the people could relate to. Every human being knows what it means to be rejected by those one loves. God tells us here that He has the same capacity of feeling pain as we do; only His is total and eternal. This means that, if we respond to God’s wooing toward us, the love He demonstrates to us is total and eternal also.

Ezekiel is then ordered to give body language to God’s pain by clapping his hand, stamping his feet and crying out “Alas!” The Hebrew word used is *ach*, which is an expression of pity. Ezekiel is the only one in Scripture who uses this word.⁴ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* calls this: “gesticulations vividly setting before the hearers the greatness of the calamity about to be inflicted. In indignation at the abominations of Israel, extend

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1. Isa. 40:4
 2. Zech. 4:7
 3. Num. 33:51,52
 4. Also see Ezek. 21:15

thine hand, toward Judea, as if about to 'strike' and 'stamp,' shaking off the dust with thy foot, in token of how God shall 'stretch out His hand upon them,' and tread them down (Ezek 6:14; 21:14)."

The object of this demonstration, apart from expressing God's sorrow over the fate of the people of Jerusalem, is to awaken Ezekiel's audience to the fate that awaited those who were left behind in the homeland. Those captives might have considered themselves the victims of God's wrath, whilst in reality they were the ones who escaped punishment. We could see in them an image of the church in the rapture and the inhabitants of Jerusalem as those left behind.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, interprets Ezekiel's behavior in a rather unexpected way. We read: "A fresh oracle is introduced with the formula, *Thus says the Lord God*. It is a kind of triumph-song at the vindication of God's honor in judgment. Clapping the hand and stamping the foot were gestures of scornful delight more suited to the Ammonites of Ezekiel's time (*cf.* 25:6) than to the Christian reader of today. The taunt-song was, however, a literary device in Hebrew poetry which could even be put into the mouth of God without any sense of inappropriateness. So we should perhaps interpret it for what it said about a particular situation and recognize that poetical zeal for God would probably be expressed somewhat differently in the cold light of prose. In keeping with the style of triumph-song the phrase *Say, Alas!* should properly be rendered 'Say, Hurrah!' The anomaly of the words that follow it may be explained by understanding that it is the judgment on the evil abominations which is welcomed, not the abominations themselves."

Three kinds of punishment awaited the ones left behind, three forms of death: sword, famine and plague. Some centuries earlier David had been given the choice between those three as punishment for his sin of pride. God sent the prophet Gad to him with the question: "Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me." David answered: "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men."¹ Here the people were not given any choice. They had already chosen against God in their idolatry.

This chapter ends with the recurring phrase: "Then they will know that I am the Lord." It is terrible to get to know God via the way of punishment. There is knowledge of God which leads to eternal life, but that is only acquired in the way of obedience. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: "The aim of God's judgment is described four times in this chapter: Then they will know that I am the Lord (7, 10, 13, 14). The words typify Ezekiel's message and longing, that Yahweh may be known by all men, Israelite and non-Israelite, for what He is – the one true God, the God of the world, the God of history, the God who speaks and does not speak in vain (10)."

b. The end has come 7:1-27

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign Lord says to the land of Israel: The end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land.

3 The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

4 I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will surely repay you for your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

5 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Disaster! An unheard-of disaster is coming.

6 The end has come! The end has come! It has roused itself against you. It has come!

7 Doom has come upon you — you who dwell in the land. The time has come, the day is near; there is panic, not joy, upon the mountains.

1. II Sam. 24:13,14

8 I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

9 I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow.

10 "The day is here! It has come! Doom has burst forth, the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed!

11 Violence has grown into a rod to punish wickedness; none of the people will be left, none of that crowd — no wealth, nothing of value.

12 The time has come, the day has arrived. Let not the buyer rejoice nor the seller grieve, for wrath is upon the whole crowd.

13 The seller will not recover the land he has sold as long as both of them live, for the vision concerning the whole crowd will not be reversed. Because of their sins, not one of them will preserve his life.

14 Though they blow the trumpet and get everything ready, no one will go into battle, for my wrath is upon the whole crowd.

15 "Outside is the sword, inside are plague and famine; those in the country will die by the sword, and those in the city will be devoured by famine and plague.

16 All who survive and escape will be in the mountains, moaning like doves of the valleys, each because of his sins.

17 Every hand will go limp, and every knee will become as weak as water.

18 They will put on sackcloth and be clothed with terror. Their faces will be covered with shame and their heads will be shaved.

19 They will throw their silver into the streets, and their gold will be an unclean thing. Their silver and gold will not be able to save them in the day of the Lord's wrath. They will not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it, for it has made them stumble into sin.

20 They were proud of their beautiful jewelry and used it to make their detestable idols and vile images. Therefore I will turn these into an unclean thing for them.

21 I will hand it all over as plunder to foreigners and as loot to the wicked of the earth, and they will defile it.

22 I will turn my face away from them, and they will desecrate my treasured place; robbers will enter it and desecrate it.

23 "Prepare chains, because the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of violence.

24 I will bring the most wicked of the nations to take possession of their houses; I will put an end to the pride of the mighty, and their sanctuaries will be desecrated.

25 When terror comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none.

26 Calamity upon calamity will come, and rumor upon rumor. They will try to get a vision from the prophet; the teaching of the law by the priest will be lost, as will the counsel of the elders.

27 The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with despair, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on this chapter: "Ezekiel 7 is a climax to chapters 4-6. In partly lyrical, partly homiletical fashion, it declares that the time has come for the final punishment of Israel. Four short oracles of doom open the chapter (vv. 1-18) with the recurring theme, 'the end has come' (vv. 2-4), 'evil has come' (vv. 5-9), 'the day has come' (vv. 10, 11), 'the time has come' (vv. 12,13). The final scenes of the desolation of the state (vv. 14-27) picture the uselessness of defense (vv. 14-18), the wealth of the city becoming a prey to the invader (vv. 19-22), and the stupefaction seizing all classes of people (vv. 23-27). The city (vv. 13-15), king (v. 27), Temple (vv. 20-22), and enemy (v. 24) are all referred to in enigmatic fashion. The chapter abounds in repetitions, and the Hebrew presents many textual problems."

Harold J. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: "A new collection of pronouncements is introduced with the same formula as began chapter 6. Verses 2-13 consist of three short oracles, all in similar vein, linked together by the common phrase 'the end has come,' 'your doom has come,' 'the time has come.' The fact that the message needed so

much reiteration can only be understood against the background of popular belief in the inviolability of Jerusalem. Its destruction was inconceivable to the Israelite mind. As long as God was God, God's Temple and God's city would stand. This had been the message of Isaiah when kings of Judah had feared for the city's safety and were toying with the idea of turning to heathen armies for assistance. But now the situation was different. Isaiah's confidence could no longer be justified after 150 years of increasing apostasy. The people were living in the past, but God was judging the present. His verdict was that the end was imminent."

The question presents itself why God would take the pains to announce beforehand what He was going to do to a people who were not listening to Him to begin with? We come back to the principle that God's announcements of judgment are always acts of mercy. They are never meant to cause panic, as if God would enjoy seeing people running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Their intent is to bring people to pause and reflect on the consequences of their acts and come to repentance. The ultimate goal of all God's acts, however incomprehensible and cruel they may appear to us, is the salvation of the world.

Although this is definitely a new section introduced by the words "The word of the Lord came to me," the topic is a continuation of the previous chapter. It suggests, as *The Pulpit Commentary* observes, "that there was an interval of silence, perhaps of meditation, followed by a fresh influx of inspiration; and, so far as we may judge from the more lyrical character of the chapter, a more intense emotion." Whereas in the previous chapter the prophecy was particularly addressed to "the mountains of Israel," here the whole country is spoken to. As we saw before, the focus on the mountains stressed the sin of idolatry; in this section all detestable practices are referred to. As fellowship with God will change the whole of our behavior, so will spiritual infidelity lead to criminal behavior.

"The four corners of the land" covers the whole of Israel's territory. Actually the Hebrew word *kanaph*, translated "corners," usually refers to the wings of a bird. We find it for the first time in Scripture in the verse: "So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind."¹

As mentioned above, it is not primarily the land that is being punished, although the Babylonian army would destroy the cities and ravage the countryside. The object of God's wrath would be the people. The Promised Land would vomit out its population as God had warned by mouth of Moses: "If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you."² Idolatry and the detestable practices connected to it had as result that the people had lost their concept of God. The demonstration of God's wrath would cause a renewal of their knowledge of God, but not in a way that would bring salvation. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Fear must teach men the lesson which love had failed to teach."

God had said to Abraham that his offspring, the people of Israel, would not occupy Canaan until the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure.³ Now Israel's cup of iniquity was full and running over.

The message of the Bible is well summed up by the Apostle John in the words "God is love."⁴ When God says here, "I will not look on you with pity or spare you," we may assume that God is suppressing what would be His natural tendency. Hosea expressed God's inward struggle when He was about to punish the northern kingdom of Israel. We read that God said to Himself: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man — the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath."⁵

The New International Version renders v.5 "Disaster! An unheard — of disaster is coming." The Hebrew word used is *ra`*, which has the basic meaning of "bad," or "evil." The first time the word is used is in the verse: "And

1. Gen. 1:21
2. Lev. 18:28
3. Gen. 15:16
4. I John 4:8
5. Hos. 11:8,9

the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”¹

Disaster is personified in these verses, indicating that *ra`* is a person. God does here to His people what the Apostle Paul suggested to the church in Corinth, saying: “Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”² God handed His people over to the enemy so that their sinful nature, not their soul and spirit would be destroyed. The extreme disaster was meant to lead them to salvation. Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable, who became burdened for the salvation of his five brothers,³ the people of Israel who underwent God’s wrath would pray for the salvation of their children.

V.10, after stating “The day is here! It has come!” introduces the image of a budding rod. Bible scholars disagree about the application of the image, whether the rod represents Israel or Babylon. It seems to me that a rod of punishment would not be one that blossoms and bears fruit. *The Pulpit Comment* comments on this: “It is come. Read, as before, *it cometh*; and for morning, doom ... The rod hath blossomed, etc. The three verbs imply a climax. The ‘doom’ springs out of the earth; the rod of vengeance blossoms (the word is the same as that which describes the blooming of Aaron’s rod (... Numbers 17:8), and the phrase was probably suggested by the history); pride (either that of the Chaldean ministers of vengeance, or of Israel as working out its own punishment ...) buds and bears fruit.”

Barnes’ Notes interprets it as representing Judah. We read: “The people of Judah have blossomed into proud luxuriance. In Ezek 7:11 it means the rod to punish wickedness. The meaning of the passage is obscure, owing to the brief and enigmatic form of the utterance. We may adopt the following explanation. The Jews had ever exulted in their national privileges—everything great and noble was to be from them and from theirs; but now Yahweh raises up the rod of the oppressor to confound and punish the rod of His people. The furious Chaldean has become an instrument of God’s wrath, endued with power emanating not from the Jews or from the multitude of the Jews, or from any of their children or people; nay, the destruction shall be so complete that none shall be left to make lamentation over them.”

Some Bible scholars believe that the punctuation of the Hebrew word translated “rod” should be different and the phrase should read: “injustice has blossomed, pride has budded.”⁴

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about vv.10-13: “The imminence of the day is likened to a rod ... that has put forth blossom and, like Aaron’s rod, it is meant to act as ‘a sign for the rebels’ (Nu. 17:10). For the rod is typical of, and parallel to, *pride* which *has budded* (10) and *violence* which has grown (11). But none of the things in which pride takes satisfaction shall remain: *abundance, wealth, pre-eminence* (11, RSV), all shall go. Once this doom falls commercial transactions will be of no consequence, and the smile of the buyer who thinks he has made a good bargain and the long face of the seller who pretends he has been worsted will be a thing of the past (12). And as for the restitution in the year of jubilee, that is quite unthinkable (13; cf. Lv. 25:10, 13f.). Once again the oracle is a hotch-potch of irony and word-play; at one stage *wrath* (Heb. *hârôn*) is *upon all their multitude* (12), at the next the vision (Heb. *hâzôn*) is *upon all their multitude* ... The seller *shall not return* and the vision *shall not turn back* (13: same word).”

The morale of the people in Jerusalem had become such that honesty in social relations has broken down completely. Commerce and barter suffers from a complete absence of honesty, corrupting society to the core. This means that when the enemy comes to lay siege around the city, the people have the intuitive feeling that there is nothing left to fight for. The soldiers ignore the blowing of the trumpet that calls them into battle. Yet, the city gates

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1. Gen. 2:9
 2. I Cor. 5:3-5
 3. See Luke 16:27,28
 4. *Revised Standard Version*

are not open, and nobody surrenders to the enemy either, as Jeremiah had suggested as a means of saving one's life.¹ The lack of will to fight is the result of God's wrath, as the text indicates. Had Judah been in a right relationship with God, they would have fought to defend the place of His revelation. Now the thought that God dwelt among them had ceased to exist.

Death will be in the city as well as outside. Those who tried to escape would be caught and killed by the sword of the enemy, and those who remained in the city would die from starvation or sickness. Some would make it to the mountains and go in hiding there. But that does not give any relief either. Ezekiel describes them as "moaning like doves of the valleys, each because of his sins." The picture of Lot and his two daughters comes to mind. The plot of Lot's daughters that made Lot the father of his own two grandsons through drunkenness and incestuous relationships must have been a fatal blow to the testimony of Lot's righteousness.²

The scene of the city of Jerusalem under siege prefigures the war that will mark the end of the world under the reign of the Antichrist. John, in *Revelations*, depicts this under the symbols of the opening of a scroll by the Lamb of God. When the second, third and fourth seals are opened, war, hunger and death appear in the form of a red, a black and a pale horse.³

Ezekiel describes the panic that is spread over the city and the people like a thick and suffocating blanket, spelling death in its worst form. The phrase "every knee will become as weak as water" is unique to Ezekiel and has been interpreted in some strange manner by some Bible scholars, owing to the translation given by the *Septuagint*, which renders "weak" as "polluted." Some of the older commentators interpret this to mean that the people were so panic stricken that they could not hold their urine, or worse. Sackcloth, which is usually a symbol of repentance, lacks any redeeming feature in this picture. It simply means the end of everything that makes life normal and enjoyable. Under ordinary circumstances, the acts of the people would be interpreted as evidences of repentance and remorse, but since no change of heart is evident, shaving one's head and throwing away of gold and silver, metal that was used to fabricate idol statues, has no effect upon the wrath of God. If money, the substance that forms the security of life for most people, becomes worthless, hope is gone for the average individual. After the First World War in which Germany was defeated, the German mark lost its value. People needed a wheelbarrow full of banknotes to buy a loaf of bread. This created a state of depression which made the country ready for the coming of the twenty-century Antichrist Adolph Hitler.

When the Babylonians entered the city, the money-covered streets were a welcome sight to them. They must have made a clean sweep of all the roads and alleys before proceeding to burn the city and temple to the ground.

The crucial message in this section is in v.22 – "I will turn my face away from them, and they will desecrate my treasured place; robbers will enter it and desecrate it." God would allow the enemy to desecrate the place where He had revealed Himself. He did the same when He allowed the enemy to flog the body of His Son and hang Him naked on a cross.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on the words "Prepare chains" in v.23 and the following text: "*Make the chain* (RV, RSV mg.), to carry the exiles into captivity, cries the prophet. But the Hebrew is difficult and RSV follows LXX in joining the words to the previous verse and translating *and make a desolation*. As so often the variant shows us little more than the translator's look of despair, a despair matched by that of the afflicted Israelites who in the midst of their suffering *will seek peace* (25), but it will be too late. The then recognized channels of God's guidance will be blocked. *Prophet, priest and elders* will have nothing to say (26): king prince and people will be helpless with despair (27). A similar threat had been spoken by Micah (Mi. 3:5-7), and the words may well be a deliberate riposte to the arrogance of Jeremiah's contemporaries who thought that 'the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the words from the prophet' (Je. 18:18). Notice that there is no suggestion of a conflict between prophet and priest: both are accepted spokesmen in Israelite religious life. The prophet received oracles through religious experience (*vision*); the priest gave instruction (law; Heb. *tôrâ*) based on known judgments,

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1. Jer. 38:17,18
 2. Gen. 19:30-38
 3. Rev. 6:3-8

either codified as law or handed down as tradition; the elders gave advice to the king in affairs of state. Ezekiel normally avoids the word for king (Heb. *melek*), preferring the term *nāsi'*, *prince*, so it may be that in 27a we have a doublet which expresses only one idea in two phrases. This possibility is strengthened by the LXX, which omits *the king mourns*."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes about the chains: "As they enchained the land with violence, so they shall be chained themselves. It was customary to lead away captives in a row, with a chain passed from the neck one to the other. Therefore translate, as the Hebrew requires, 'the chain'-namely, that usually employed on such occasions. Calvin explains it that the Jews should be dragged, whether they would or no, before God's tribunal, to be tried as culprits in chains. The next words favor this, 'the land is full of bloody crimes.'"

A phrase that catches the eye is "Calamity upon calamity will come, and rumor upon rumor" (v.26). The Hebrew word translated "calamity" is *havvah*, which has the primary meaning of "desire," or "eagerly coveting and rushing upon something." In most cases in modern versions, it is translated "calamity." But in connection with the following *shemuw`ah* for "announcement," or "rumor," it acquires the meaning of wishful thinking. The rumors would either come in the form of hope of relief, which was totally unsubstantiated, or as an announcement of coming destruction. During the last days of the siege of Berlin, which marked the end of World War II in Europe, the desperate Nazi leaders encouraged one another with visions of miraculous divine intervention as occurred in the days of Frederic the Great.

III. VISION OF THE PUNISHMENT OF JERUSALEM 8:1 – 11:25

a. The idolatries being practiced in the Temple 8:1-18

1 In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign Lord came upon me there.

2 I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal.

3 He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood.

4 And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain.

5 Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy.

6 And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing — the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

7 Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall.

8 He said to me, "Son of man, now dig into the wall." So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there.

9 And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here."

10 So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel.

11 In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising.

12 He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.'"

13 Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."

14 Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the Lord, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz.

15 He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this."

16 He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.

17 He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose!"

18 Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

The date being given specifically, it seems that no difference of opinion would be allowed for. Yet, Bible scholars disagree about the date in which Ezekiel's vision occurred. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "We begin with a fresh date. One year and one month had passed since the vision of Chebar, and had been occupied partly by the acted, partly by the spoken, prophecies of the preceding chapters."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "This vision is dated fourteen months later than that of Ezekiel's call about August-September, 591 B.C."

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary, giving the most detailed explanation, states: "Between Ezek 1:1-2 (the fifth day of the fourth month in the fifth year) and Ezek 8:1 (the fifth day of the sixth month in the sixth year) we have one year and two months, that is to say (reckoning the year as a lunar year at 354 days, and the two months at 59 days), 413 days; whereas the two events recorded in Ezek 1-7 require at least 437 days, namely 7 days for Ezek 3:15, and 390 + 40 = 430 days for ch. 4:5-6. Consequently the new theophany would fall within the 40 days, during which Ezekiel was to lie upon the right side for Judah. To get rid of this difficulty, Hitzig conjectures that the fifth year of Jehoiachin (Ezek 1:2) was a leap year of 13 months or 385 days, by which he obtains an interval of 444 days after adding 59 for the two months—a period sufficient not only to include the 7 days (Ezek 3:15) and 390 + 40 days (Ezek 4:5-6), but to leave 7 days for the time that elapsed between ch. 7 and 8. But however attractive this reckoning may appear, the assumption that the fifth year of the captivity of Jehoiachin was a leap year is purely conjectural; and there is nothing whatever to give it probability. Consequently the only thing that could lead us to adopt such a solution, would be the impossibility of reconciling the conclusion to be drawn from the chronological data, as to the time of the two theophanies, with the substance of these divine revelations."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: "In the sixth year - namely, of the captivity of Jehoiachin, as in Ezek 1:2 the 'fifth year' is specified. The lying on his sides 390 and 40 days (Ezek 4:5-6) had by this time been completed at least in vision. That event was naturally a memorable epoch to the exiles; and the computation of years from it was to humble the Jews, as well as to show their perversity in not having repented, though so long and severely chastened."

Ezekiel is very specific about the circumstances in which this vision began. He was sitting in his house, talking with some of his fellow captives, which he calls "the elders of Judah." Some believe that these could be people who visited from Judah. That seems rather unlikely to me. Even if people were free to travel back and forth in an empire that believed in maintaining peace by dislocating the people it conquered, it seems highly doubtful that faithful Jews would want to visit, by their own volition, places that could be their future imprisonment. No further details about the reason for the visit or topics discussed are given.

Ezekiel describes the experience in the same words he had used before "the hand of the Sovereign Lord came upon me."¹ What follows, however, is most unusual and difficult to understand. The vision begins with the appearance of a man, whom the prophet describes in terms that the *Ezekiel Commentary* of John B. Taylor calls "reverential vagueness." Ezekiel uses words as "a figure like that of a man," "what appeared to be his waist down," etc. The picture drawn is much like the one the Apostle John gives of the Lord Jesus Christ in the opening chapter of *Revelation*.² It is therefore quite probable that Ezekiel saw the Second Person of the Trinity.

1. See Ezek. 1:3; 3:14,22.

2. Rev. 1:12-18

He feels himself transported to Jerusalem by the hair of his head and deposited to the inner court of the temple. Although the hand of the Lord took him by the hair, it was “the Spirit” that lifted him up and moved him. It seems that these words mean more than that Ezekiel had a spiritual experience of being moved, although that was undoubtedly the case, but that he knew that he had an encounter with the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Although it would not have been impossible for God to physically move Ezekiel back and forth from Tel-Abib to Jerusalem, it is more likely that the prophet remained where he was but saw what happened in the temple of Jerusalem while in a trance. The addition of the words “in visions of God” would otherwise have no meaning.

The description of Ezekiel’s trip through space is amazing. He felt himself being lifted up between earth and heaven. The fact that the hand had taken a hold of a lock of his hair did not mean that he was dangling that way during the journey. There is no hint that he felt any physical pain or was in any way uncomfortable. The change of venue, however, was not instantaneous. Some time elapsed between Ezekiel’s awareness of being in Tel-Abib and being in Jerusalem. But the way the vision is described is as if he were really in Jerusalem.

The place of landing is the entrance to the north gate of the inner court of the temple. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, explains: “The northern gateway was one of three which gave access from the outer court of the Temple to the inner court (the other two facing east and south respectively). Ezekiel sees two realities that could not be farther apart: an idol statue, which he calls “the idol that provokes to jealousy” and “the glory of the God of Israel,” which is called “the Shekinah.” It is most amazing that the two are found in the same place. When in the earlier history of Israel the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in their temple in front of the statue of Dagon, the idol was broken to pieces.¹ That was how God revealed Himself in a heathen temple, but here God was in His own house and the people of Judah had introduced this abomination. The tension must have been unbelievably high. What is even more amazing is that God would remove Himself from the idol’s presence as if in defeat, as we will see in the chapters following this one.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks appropriately: “It is remarkable that, despite all the corruptions that existed, Ezekiel should say that the glory of the God of Israel was there (4). It was as if he wanted to throw into sharp relief the difference between the God who belonged there and the deviations which were practiced there, so making the crimes all the more heinous. Perhaps he was also trying to say that God would stay with His people until the very last moment of their rejection of Him.” In New Testament terms “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”²

It is difficult to determine which is the idol represented in the vision. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The words that follow probably give his explanation of the strange phrase, not found elsewhere, though it might naturally be suggested by ... Deuteronomy 32:16, 21; ... Psalm 78:58. What this image was we can only conjecture. The word for ‘image’ is a rare one, and is found only here and in ... Deuteronomy 4:16; ... 2 Chronicles 33:7,15. It may have been the Asherah (the ‘grove’ of the ... Authorized Version), or conical stone, such as Manasseh had made and placed, with an altar dedicated to it, in the house of the Lord (... 2 Kings 21:3; ... 2 Chronicles 33:3), or one of Baal, or of Ashtaroth, or even of Tammuz (see ver. 14). As the word ‘grove’ does not occur in Ezekiel, it may be sufficient to state that the *Ashera* was a pillar symbolical either of a goddess of the same name, or, as some think, of the Phoenician Astarte. The worship seems to have first become popular under Jezebel (... 1 Kings 18:19), and took deep root both in Israel and Judah. The cultus, as in ... 2 Kings 23:7, seems to have been connected with the foulest license, like that of the Babylonian Mylitta ... The work of Josiah had clearly had but a temporary success, and the people had gone back to the confluent polytheism of the reign of Manasseh. In such a state of things the worst was possible.”

V.6 does not describe any particular action. It was the very fact that there was an idol statue on the temple grounds that made it so detestable. It was a taunt to God as if the people wanted to challenge God by their idolatry.

1. I Sam. 5:1-5
2. John 1:9-11

It appears that the Spirit guided Ezekiel out of the temple court to the outside of the wall that surrounded the whole of the temple area. He sees there a hole in the wall, which he is told to enlarge by digging through it. This scene is in contrast with the first one, where the idol image was erected in public. What happened on the other side of the hole was done in secret, suggesting even greater abomination. It was literally something that could not stand the light of the day. There are sins of which the ones who commit them are so ashamed that they would not want anyone else to know about them. The Apostle Paul refers to those in his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, saying: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.”¹

Ezekiel sees seventy elders, led by a person whom he recognizes as Jaazaniah son of Shaphan, standing in front of a wall covered with images of crawling beasts and other idols. Most Bible versions use the word “portrayed” for the way these images appeared, but the Hebrew word *chaqah* actually means “to carve.” It is the word used for the carved decorations of cherubs Solomon had made on the olive wood doors that led to the inner sanctuary of the temple.² The seventy elders were worshipping the carvings, using censors filled with incense, which symbolizes prayer. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the creatures portrayed: “They are not by definition all unclean, as the AV of Leviticus 11:41 would suggest, for the word translated ‘creeping things’ in that context is the Hebrew *šereʿ*. They do, however, include many reptiles and small verminous creatures that scurry and slither over the ground, from snakes to scorpions, and these certainly were unclean. The Babylonian serpent-deities known from Egyptian, Canaanite and Babylonian religions give grounds for supposing that this incident reflects the widespread influence of foreign cults on Israelite worship, cultivated no doubt from political, more than purely religious motives.”

We do not know who Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was. There was a Shaphan who served King Josiah. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “If this man was the son of Shaphan, who had assisted in Josiah’s reform (2 Kings 22:3-10; Jer 26:24; 29:3; 36:10-12; 39:14), he had greatly corrupted the faith of his family.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: “The very name means ‘Yahweh hears,’ giving the lie to the unbelief which virtually said (Ezek 9:9), ‘The Lord sees us not.’” Ezekiel does not mention what were the “things that are even more detestable” done by these men besides swaying their censors in front of the images. That must have been the things about which Paul said that they are “shameful even to mention.”

The next scene brings Ezekiel back to the north gate, where he sees a group of women “mourning for Tammuz.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about Tammuz that he was a Phoenician deity, known by the Greeks as Adonis. “He was originally a Sumerian or Babylonian sun-god, called Dumuzu, the husband of Ishtar, who corresponds to Aphrodite of the Greeks. The worship of these deities was introduced into Syria in very early times under the designation of Tammuz and Astarte, and appears among the Greeks in the myth of Adonis and Aphrodite, who are identified with Osiris and Isis of the Egyptian pantheon, showing how widespread the cult became. The Babylonian myth represents Dumuzu, or Tammuz, as a beautiful shepherd slain by a wild boar, the symbol of winter. Ishtar long mourned for him and descended into the underworld to deliver him from the embrace of death ... This mourning for Tammuz was celebrated in Babylonia by women on the 2nd day of the 4th month, which thus acquired the name of Tammuz ... The women of Gebal used to repair to this temple in midsummer to celebrate the death of Adonis or Tammuz, and there arose in connection with this celebration those licentious rites which rendered the cult so infamous that it was suppressed by Constantine the Great ... Considering the disgraceful and licentious rites with which the cult was celebrated, it is no wonder that Ezekiel should have taken the vision of the women weeping for Tammuz in the temple as one of the greatest abominations that could defile the Holy House.”

The final scene brings Ezekiel back to the temple court where he sees a group of about twenty-five men, worshipping the rising sun, their backs turned to the place of God’s revelation. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about this: “The crowning abomination was to take place at the very *door of the temple of the Lord* (16). There, in the place where they ought to have been weeping and calling upon God to spare His people (Joel 2:17), the priests were

1. Eph. 5:8-12

2. See I Kings 6:34,35.

deliberately turning their backs on Him. By its east-west orientation, the Temple lent itself to solar worship, and the fact that Josiah in his reformation had to destroy 'horses dedicated to the sun' and 'the chariots of the sun' (2 Ki. 23:11) indicates that some kings of Judah had exploited the possibilities. The number given, about *twenty-five men*, suggests that not a large number of priests had succumbed to this particular form of worship. Nevertheless, they were senior men (9:6 calls them 'elders') and they were publicly misusing the Temple for a practice which was an outright denial of the holy purpose for which it was dedicated."

V.17 is proof of the fact that we all act out in daily life what we believe. Our doctrine determines our actions. Idol worship means not only turning from the living God to dead statues or to nature, but it brings us into the camp of the enemy. People who do not place themselves under divine protection come under the control of Satan. If we do not love God we will not love our neighbor either. The idolatry Ezekiel saw practiced here filled "the land with violence." It led to crime and murder. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Calvin, who commented: "Not content with outraging 'with their violence' the second table of the law-namely, that of duty toward one's neighbor – 'they have returned' (i.e., they turn back afresh) to provoke me by violations of the first table."

Bible scholars have struggled about the meaning of the words "putting the branch to their nose!" John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states that it could be an obscure rite connected to the Adonis cult. He writes: "But the Hebrew is doubtful. *Their nose*, 'appâm, is traditionally held to be a scribal correction for 'my nose,' appî: an understandable desire to avoid such a crude reference to God. The word for *put* really means 'send forth.' Early Jewish commentators translated ז'מôrâ (branch) as 'stench.' The result, 'they put forth a stench before my nose,' is still somewhat obscure, but now it falls more appropriately in the category of obscenity rather than of Tammuz-worship, which is not required at this stage. To say that anything 'stinks in God's nostrils' is not a pretty phrase to use, but then these forms of idolatry were not pretty either."

The reason God showed these things to Ezekiel was, undoubtedly, to make him identify with God's disgust and wrath over what the priests and leaders of Judah were doing. It would make him understand why God allowed such awful disaster over the city and the people, to the point where He even let His own house be destroyed. There was a sense in which not the Babylonians destroyed the temple, but the Jews did themselves.

b. The seven executioners: punishment by slaughter9:1-11

*1 Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, "Bring the guards of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand."
2 And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar.*

3 Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side

4 and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."

5 As I listened, he said to the others, "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion.

6 Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.

7 Then he said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!" So they went out and began killing throughout the city.

8 While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?"

9 He answered me, "The sin of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice. They say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land; the Lord does not see.'

10 So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done."

11 Then the man in linen with the writing kit at his side brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded."

The creatures that are called “the guards of the city” are obviously not the human watchmen that guard the city gates; they are celestial beings. Their original duty had been to protect the city; here they are summoned to destroy it. *The Revised Standard Version* calls them “executioners of the city.” But the Hebrew word *pequddah* means primarily “visitation.” The first time the word occurs in Scripture is in the verse “The chief leader of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest. He was appointed over those who were *responsible for the care of the sanctuary.*” *The New Living Translation* calls them: “the men appointed to punish the city!” The word “weapon” is the translation of the two Hebrew words *keliy mashcheth*, literally “implement of destruction.” A different word is used in the following verse, *keliy mappats*, which means “an implement to smite to pieces.”

The whole group consists of seven individuals, but one of them is a secretary. He is described as “a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side.” The white clothing of the secretary singles him out from the others. He was probably dressed like a priest or a Levite. “Writing kit,” or “inkhorn” as *The King James Version* calls it, is the rendering of the Hebrew *qeceth*. Ezekiel is the only one who uses the word and it is only found in this chapter. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The word seems to be a loan-word from Egyptian. This was a case for reed pens, with an ink container attached, and was carried in the girdle or sash.”

The group gathers at the bronze altar, the place where the bloody sacrifices were made. We could say that they gathered at the foot of the cross. What follows is rife with symbolism. First of all, the glory of the Lord begins to move “from above the cherubim,” from above the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, toward the exit of the temple. The glory of the Lord was leaving the temple, as the spirit leaving the body. From that point on the temple would be like a dead body. The scene reminds us of Jesus’ conversation with the Jews, when He said: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” And John comments: “The temple he had spoken of was his body.”¹ Jesus spoke of His death and resurrection. What we see here prefigures the death of Christ, and the beginning of the destruction of the body of Jesus. It seemed like the end of all, but actually it was the beginning of all.

Then the One who sits on the throne gives instructions to the secretary to put a mark on the foreheads of “those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in” the city of Jerusalem. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks about this: “The *mark* which is to be put on men’s foreheads is the *tâw*, the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Early Christian commentators were quick to notice that in the oldest Hebrew script the letter was written as X, a cross. To the Hebrew reader this meant nothing more than a mark used for a signature (as in Jb. 31:35) or an asterisk in the margin of a book (as the Qumran scribes annotated some Messianic passages in one of their Isaiah scrolls). But many Christians would echo Ellison’s verdict that ‘this is one of the many examples where the Hebrew prophets spoke better than they knew.’ It is worth noting that the procedure for inflicting God’s punishment was selective, in keeping with the principle of 18:4, ‘The soul that sins shall die.’ The basis for exemption from the slaughter was the individual’s deep concern (*who sighs and groan*, 4) over the city’s apostasy. This was what Amos had looked for among the luxury-loving revelers of Jerusalem and Samaria whom he castigated with his tongue. Their most guilty sin was that they ‘did not grieve over the ruin of Joseph’ (Am. 6:6). In both cases the criterion that was needed was not strictly a religious quality, like faith, or an outward act, like sacrifice, but an affair of the heart – a passionate concern for God and for His people. Failing that, there was no mark, and judgment followed just as surely as it had done for those households that lacked the blood on the doorposts on the night of the first Passover. There was no other exemption: age and sex did not enter into it (6): only the mark would save. The judgment began, as it always must (*cf.* I Pet. 4:17), with the household of God. The first to be slain by the six executioners were the elders who were before the house, probably the twenty-five priestly sun-worshippers of 8:16. Their slaughter meant defilement of the holy place (7), but that was a small price to pay for the vindication of God’s name.”

1. John 2:19,21

As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* points out, the Hebrew words for “grieve and lament” are very expressive, consisting of similarly-sounding verbs, articulating the prolonged sound of their grief: *hane^anaachiyim w^ahane^anaaqiyim*.

Ezekiel’s reaction to the scene of slaughter is very moving. He falls down on his face and begins a prayer of intercession, similar to Abraham’s prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah. In the case of the latter, most Bible versions read: “but Abraham remained standing before the Lord.”¹ The NIV states in a footnote: “Masoretic Text; an ancient Hebrew scribal tradition ‘but the Lord remained standing before Abraham.’” Having told Abraham what was about to happen with the sinful cities, by lingering before Abraham, God wanted to show how this affected Him and He wanted to see how this information would affect Abraham. We find here a similar case in which the Almighty shares His pain with Ezekiel and the prophet responds by crying out in a prayer of intercession for his people. The essence of intercessory prayer is always the sharing of God’s burden.

We do not read that Ezekiel follows Abraham’s pattern of prayer, but it is obvious from God’s answer that there was no remnant of ten righteous men in Jerusalem that could have saved the city. Those who were marked by the angelic secretary must have been very few in number.

c. The Lord’s chariot-throne: punishment by fire 10:1-22

1 I looked, and I saw the likeness of a throne of sapphire above the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim.

2 The Lord said to the man clothed in linen, "Go in among the wheels beneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city." And as I watched, he went in.

3 Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court.

4 Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord.

5 The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.

6 When the Lord commanded the man in linen, "Take fire from among the wheels, from among the cherubim," the man went in and stood beside a wheel.

7 Then one of the cherubim reached out his hand to the fire that was among them. He took up some of it and put it into the hands of the man in linen, who took it and went out.

8 (Under the wings of the cherubim could be seen what looked like the hands of a man.)

9 I looked, and I saw beside the cherubim four wheels, one beside each of the cherubim; the wheels sparkled like chrysolite.

10 As for their appearance, the four of them looked alike; each was like a wheel intersecting a wheel.

11 As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the cherubim faced; the wheels did not turn about as the cherubim went. The cherubim went in whatever direction the head faced, without turning as they went.

12 Their entire bodies, including their backs, their hands and their wings, were completely full of eyes, as were their four wheels.

13 I heard the wheels being called "the whirling wheels."

14 Each of the cherubim had four faces: One face was that of a cherub, the second the face of a man, the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

15 Then the cherubim rose upward. These were the living creatures I had seen by the Kebar River.

1. Gen. 18:22

16 When the cherubim moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the cherubim spread their wings to rise from the ground, the wheels did not leave their side.

17 When the cherubim stood still, they also stood still; and when the cherubim rose, they rose with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in them.

18 Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim.

19 While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the Lord's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

20 These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim.

21 Each had four faces and four wings, and under their wings was what looked like the hands of a man.

22 Their faces had the same appearance as those I had seen by the Kebar River. Each one went straight ahead.

Based on the statement in 9:3, where we read: "Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple," *The Tyndale Commentary* states that the throne Ezekiel saw was empty at this point. We must resist the temptation to read too much in this though, or to look for a spiritual implication. Suffices it to say that there are points in God's revelation of Himself in which He is seen as standing up to emphasize the great importance of the moment. David imagined God rising up as in "May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him."¹ Here God's own children have become His enemies and God is about to destroy the place of His revelation on earth. Since v.4 makes again mention of the LORD moving from above the cherubim, it could be that Ezekiel saw Him seated, but failed to mention it.

In his description of the throne, Ezekiel is again overwhelmed by a reality that is beyond what he had ever seen on earth. Ezekiel must have been familiar with the throne Solomon had made when he became king. It is described as "a great throne inlaid with ivory and overlaid with fine gold. The throne had six steps, and its back had a rounded top. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Twelve lions stood on the six steps, one at either end of each step. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom."² Here he sees the original of which Solomon's may have been an imitation, and he finds himself at loss for words in the description of it.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section as follows: "The important feature about the chariot-throne which this chapter incorporates is the identification of the 'living creatures' of 1:5ff. with *cherubim* (15). Why it has taken so long for this identification to be made is baffling, but it may be that Ezekiel is saying that only when he saw the cherubim in the Temple did he realize that these were the very creatures which he had seen in his vision by the river Chebar. That is a reasonable explanation, because Ezekiel had not yet qualified as a priest before he went into exile and so he would never in person have seen the cherub-figures carved on the inside walls of the Temple (I Ki. 6:29) and on the double-doors (I Ki. 6:35) and on the Temple furnishings (I Ki. 7:29,36), where only priests could see them clearly. But there is no need to press the point too much, for he could hardly have been brought up in a priestly family without this kind of knowledge. It is just that for reasons of literary artifice he deliberately withholds the identification until this stage, and in so doing he cleverly fills in the moment of suspense which follows the angel's departure from the presence of the Lord to carry out his destructive task."

The angelic secretary is ordered to take some of the burning coals from between the wheels of the cherubim and scatter them over the city, setting it afire. Apparently, the first place to be burned was the temple, for we read that the man in white went into the inner court and that the place was filled with smoke. This was not a literal burning but a fire of judgment that would allow the Babylonians to literally make the whole city go up in smoke. We read: "On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of

1. Ps. 68:1

2. I Kings 10:18-20

the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.”¹ Moses had said about God: “The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” And the author of Hebrews quoted these words in his epistle.² The fire here was the fire of God’s jealousy.

In vv.9 and 10 Ezekiel describes the cherubim in practically the same manner as he had done in the first chapter. The difference is in the substitution of one of the faces. In 1:10 we read: “Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle, but in this chapter “the face of an ox” is substituted for “that of a cherub.” Some Bible scholars believe that the substitution is a scribal error. Both Hebrew words have consonants in common. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, however, states: “In this verse, what may be meant is that the prophet, standing to the north of the chariot and looking at it, saw the one face of each cherub that was turned toward him rather than all four faces of the four cherubim. Thus, at the front of the chariot directly in the line of his vision was the ox (in place of the cherub), while on the north was the man, at the rear of the chariot the lion, and on the south, the inner visible face, was the eagle.”

At this moment the glory of the Lord, which had filled the house of the Lord at the time of Solomon’s dedication of the temple,³ left the temple. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “Successive steps are marked in His departure; so slowly and reluctantly does the merciful God leave His house. First, He goes up from the cherub, whereupon He was, to the threshold of the temple (Ezek 9:3); then He elevates His throne above the threshold of the house (Ezek 10:1); leaving the cherubim ‘on the right side of the house’ (Ezek 10:3), He mounts up and sits on the throne (Ezek 10:4); He and the cherubim, after standing for a time at the door of the east gate (Ezek 10:18-19), where was the exit to the lower court of the people—leave the house altogether (Ezek 11:2-3), not to return until Ezek 43:2.”

Actually, the glory of the Lord returned briefly to the temple when Jesus entered the temple at the conclusion of His triumphant entry in Jerusalem, at which the people had shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”⁴ At that time He cleansed the temple of the commerce that was carried on in the court. Later we read: “Jesus left the temple and was walking away.”⁵ *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Josephus, who reports the tradition that at the destruction of the second temple, a voice was heard, saying “Let us depart hence.” Jesus would say similar words to His disciples as He left the upper room on His way to Golgotha and the cross.⁶ Jesus’ entering and leaving was incognito and as such it was never recognized as the Shekinah entering and leaving the temple and the city. But what Ezekiel saw here prefigured Jesus’ movements at the end of His life on earth.

d. The death of Pelatiah 11:1-13

1 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the gate of the house of the Lord that faces east. There at the entrance to the gate were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people.

2 The Lord said to me, "Son of man, these are the men who are plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city.

3 They say, 'Will it not soon be time to build houses? This city is a cooking pot, and we are the meat.'

4 Therefore prophesy against them; prophesy, son of man."

1. II Kings 25:8,9

2. Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29

3. I Kings 8:10,11

4. Matt. 21:9

5. Matt. 24:1

6. See John 14:31

5 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, and he told me to say: "This is what the Lord says: That is what you are saying, O house of Israel, but I know what is going through your mind.

6 You have killed many people in this city and filled its streets with the dead.

7 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: The bodies you have thrown there are the meat and this city is the pot, but I will drive you out of it.

8 You fear the sword, and the sword is what I will bring against you, declares the Sovereign Lord.

9 I will drive you out of the city and hand you over to foreigners and inflict punishment on you.

10 You will fall by the sword, and I will execute judgment on you at the borders of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

11 This city will not be a pot for you, nor will you be the meat in it; I will execute judgment on you at the borders of Israel.

12 And you will know that I am the Lord, for you have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you."

13 Now as I was prophesying, Pelatiah son of Benaiah died. Then I fell facedown and cried out in a loud voice, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?"

This section is again a text about which Bible commentators have a variety of opinions. Ezekiel feels himself lifted up and taken to where the Lord had moved at the east gate. The group of men Ezekiel sees here gathered outside the temple in front of the east gate is not the same as the priests he saw earlier worshipping the sun. *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* calls them *sar*, "prince."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, makes the following general comment on this chapter: "Despite hesitations that have been expressed by many commentators, it seems best to understand the whole of this chapter as being part of the vision which began in 8:2 and ends in 11:24. This means that Ezekiel prophesied in the context of his vision and that, still only in vision, one of his hearers, named Pelatiah dropped down dead. Any other interpretation demands some dislocation or emendation of the text as we have it, and it is clearly our duty first to try to understand what has been given before ever we venture to improve on it."

At this point the Lord explains to Ezekiel what the sin is of which these princes, counselors to the king and to the people, are guilty. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: "*The wicked counsel* of which these men are accused is summarized by the cryptic slogan attributed to them: *The time is not near to build houses; this city is the cauldron, and we are the flesh* (3, RSV). The possible interpretations of these words are as follows: (a) AV translates, *It is not near* (i.e. the threatened judgment); *let us build houses*. This sentiment expresses confidence that all will be well and, if building houses is taken as a symbol of peaceful activity (cf. 28:26), it advocates a policy of ignoring the threat of a further Babylonian invasion. A variant of this is to interpret houses as 'fortification,' but this is not warranted by the ordinary Hebrew word *bâtîm*, though it would fit a context of warlike preparations. A more serious weakness of this interpretation is the linguistic one. The Hebrew reads *lô' b^eqârôb b^enôt bâttîm*, lit. 'not at hand to build houses.' The infinitive 'to build,' can hardly become the hortative 'let us build,' and the word 'at hand' must be complementary to the idea of 'house-building.' (b) On the basis of Jeremiah 29:5, Keil took 'house-building' as a reference to living in exile and this slogan as a deliberate attempt to ridicule Jeremiah's policy. The meaning would thus be 'the house-building in exile is still a long way off; it will not come to this, that Jerusalem should fall ... into the hands of the king of Babylon. This ingenious suggestion presupposes, however, that reader as well as hearer would automatically recognize the allusion to Jeremiah's teaching, and this must be considered very doubtful. (c) RV mg. and RSV mg. put the phrase as a question, *Is not the time near to build houses?* That is to say, 'We are quite safe: let us carry on our normal peace-time occupations.' This is not impossible, and LXX also translates interrogatively 'Have not the houses been recently rebuilt?'; but it is not easy to see why the advocates of such peaceful policies should be condemned by Ezekiel as devising iniquity and giving wicked counsel. (d) There is much to be said, therefore, linguistically and in the context, for the RV, RSV rendering, namely that it is inappropriate to be building for peace when danger threatens. The only right policy is to prepare for war in the firm assurance that the city defenses will be impregnable: the defenders will be as safe from the fires of war as meat is in the cauldron that protects it from the flames. Such an attitude would readily be seen by Ezekiel to be sheer folly and deserving of the sternest condemnation. It not only

ignored the explicit warnings of Jeremiah that resistance to Babylon would bring greater disaster than submission (cf. Jr. 21:8-10), but it also reeked of the sublime self-confidence which was to be Jerusalem's undoing."

Still in the trance of his vision, Ezekiel receives the command to prophesy. The order is urgent, as is evident from the repetition "prophesy, prophesy." Then the Holy Spirit takes over and gives Ezekiel the words to say in reply to the arrogant attitude of the princes.

Ezekiel's words are the answer to the slogan of the princes "This city is a cooking pot, and we are the meat." God tells these people, "I know what is going through your mind." "What is going through your mind" is the rendering of the single Hebrew word *ma`alah*, which literally means "elevation," or "a journey to a higher place." We find the word first used in the verse: "And do not *go up* to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it."¹ It is also the title given to Psalms 120-134: "A song of *ascents*." The idea, therefore, is not merely "I know what you are thinking," but "I know your haughty thoughts." It was this arrogance that had made them disregard the warnings of Jeremiah and that would make them ignore God's word through Ezekiel. These people were murderers; yet, these criminals considered themselves to be too intellectual to pay attention to their Lord and Creator. After WWII, Corrie ten Boom, who had survived the Nazi concentration camp in which her sister died, went back to Germany to witness of her faith to her former camp guards. But they refused to listen to the Gospel, saying that they were too "high-philosophical" and "deep-theological" to listen to such simple talk.

God says to the criminal princes of Jerusalem that the meat in the cauldron are the victims of their crimes. They are the ones who are safe from the flames. The princes would receive the cruel treatment that they had given to their own victims. Their slaughter would occur outside the confining walls of the city. The Babylonian troops would drag them out to the borders of the Promised Land and they would be either expelled or executed. They had allowed themselves to be influenced by the corrupted ways of their pagan neighbors and they would receive the wages of their corruption.

At that point in Ezekiel's prophecy, one of the princes, Pelatiah son of Benaiah, collapses and dies. *The Pulpit Commentary* notes: "Nothing is known further as to the persons named. Jaazaniah is distinguished by his parentage from his namesake of ... Ezekiel 8:11 and ... Jeremiah 35:3. Both were probably familiar to those for whom Ezekiel wrote, as leaders of the party that was 'always devising mischief,' in opposition, *i.e.*, to Jeremiah and the true prophets."

We assume that Ezekiel was not physically present in Jerusalem; all this occurred to him in the context of a spiritual experience in which his body had remained in Tel Abib. What Ezekiel experienced was what he saw happen as in a dream; not in the same way as we dream, but in a vision in which events at faraway places were shown as happening before his very eyes. We may therefore assume that Pelatiah did not physically die in Ezekiel's presence. It is most likely that he did die in the same manner as Ezekiel saw him collapse, but that may have occurred at a later moment. Still being in the trance of his vision, however, the sight of Pelatiah's collapse produced a terrifying shock for Ezekiel. Ezekiel falls face down before the Lord and enters into an intense prayer of intercession for all the people he had seen in his vision. Ezekiel reacts as God obviously wants him to react. His spirit responds to God's Spirit in reaction to the horror of judgment that came upon God's chosen people. Ezekiel's response places him in the company of Abraham and Amos who became God's intercessors in the process of God's judgment.

e. A new heart for God's people in exile 11:14-25

14 The word of the Lord came to me:

15 "Son of man, your brothers — your brothers who are your blood relatives and the whole house of Israel — are those of whom the people of Jerusalem have said, 'They are far away from the Lord; this land was given to us as our possession.'

1. Ex. 20:26

16 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.'

17 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.'

18 "They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols.

19 I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.

20 Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

21 But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord."

22 Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

23 The glory of the Lord went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.

24 The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God. Then the vision I had seen went up from me,

25 and I told the exiles everything the Lord had shown me.

God's answer to Ezekiel's prayer would not save Pelatiah's life, but it would bring healing and comfort to those who had been taken into captivity. The philosophy of life of the Israelites had been that fellowship with God was only possible at the place of God's revelation of Himself. In order to be able to pray, one had to be in the vicinity of the temple where the Ark of the Covenant stood and where God resided between the cherubim that stood over the cover of the ark. The true believers who crossed Israel's border into a neighboring country felt themselves removed from the presence of the Lord. But God assures the captives now that He will be with them in their captivity in an even more accessible way than had been possible in the land of their origin.

The Lord makes clear to Ezekiel that those who had remained in Jerusalem were not the remnant the prophet was praying for. God's remnant were those that had already been taken into captivity and some who would follow after the fall of the city. We could see this section as prefiguring the rapture of the church before the manifestation of the Antichrist and the outbreak of the great tribulation. But it does not seem advisable to build a dogma upon this shadow, if a shadow it is.

The Lord tells Ezekiel what the people he saw in his vision were thinking about those who had been taken into captivity. There was no trace of sorrow or compassion in their hearts. Their attitude amounted to "good riddance!" They felt that the captivity of others gave them the advantage of having more space in the Promised Land.

The Pulpit Commentary states about the words "your blood relatives": "The full force of the phrase can hardly be understood without remembering that the word for 'kindred' implies the function and office of a *goel*, the redeemer and avenger of those among his relations who had suffered wrong (... Leviticus 25:25, 48; ... Numbers 5:8), and the point of the revelation is that Ezekiel is to find those who have this claim on him, his true 'brethren,' not only or chiefly in his natural relations in the priesthood, but in the companions of his exile (the LXX., following a different reading, gives, 'the men of the Captivity'), and the whole house of Israel, who were in a like position, who were condemned by those who had been left in Jerusalem. As in Jeremiah's vision (... Jeremiah 24:1), they were the 'good figs;' those in the city, the vile and worthless. They were the remnant, the residue, for whom there was a hope of better things. They were despised as far off from the Lord. They were really nearer to his presence than those who worshipped in the temple from which Jehovah had departed."

The promises God gives to Ezekiel to pass on to those who are in exile with him are full of incomparable comfort. The exiles must have felt themselves rejected, being "far from the presence of the Lord in a foreign land." God not only promises to them return to the Promised Land but much more: "an undivided heart" and "a new spirit." God promises them a new birth by the Holy Spirit.

It is obvious that this promise goes well beyond a physical return of a few thousand refugees. Those who would return at the end of the captivity hardly fit the picture we are shown here. They certainly did not demonstrate having a new heart and a new spirit, although they did not return to the idolatrous practices of the past. Ezekiel's prophecy refers to Pentecost and the birth of the church. We read in *Haggai* about those who returned from captivity: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'These people say, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'" 'Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? My house ... remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house.'"¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about this: "It is early to be finding at this stage a prophecy of hope for the exiled community. In the main this was kept of the period after the fall of Jerusalem, *i.e.* in chapters 33 onwards. But other passages in these opening oracles indicate that God had plans to restore a remnant of His people (*e.g.* 5:3; 6:8, 9; 12:16; 16:60, *etc.*), and these would return to their native land to become the heirs of all their nation's heritage and not least to enjoy a new covenant-relationship with their God. In this Ezekiel was aligning himself with the hopeful outlook of his older contemporary, Jeremiah (*cf.* Je. 24:7; 31:33; 32:39f.)"

The problem of man in his relationship to the law of God has always been the condition of the heart. The law of God is the expression of God's character. The demands of the law meet with rebellion in us, because of our sinful nature. Moses coined the expression "circumcise your hearts," meaning the experience of inner renewal that causes us to desire the will of God above anything else. He presents the act of circumcision of the heart as something we have to do for ourselves as well as something God does for us. We read on the one hand: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer,"² and on the other: "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."³ Although the two statements seem to contradict each other, they do in reality compliment one another. We circumcise our own heart by confessing our sins and realizing what our real condition is. God then will respond by giving us the transformation only the Holy Spirit can operate within us.

After Ezekiel receives God's wonderful promises of renewal of the remnant, he sees the Shekinah depart from the city and stop on the mountain east of Jerusalem. In the same way Jesus would leave the temple and tarry on the Mount of Olives for the last time before His crucifixion.⁴

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on the departure of the Shekinah: "This vision is no mean proof of the long-suffering of God. He did not abandon this people all at once; he departed by little and little. FIRST, he left the temple. SECONDLY, he stopped a little at the gate of the city. THIRDLY, he departed entirely from the city and went to the Mount of Olives, which lay on the east side of the city. Having tarried there for some time to see if they would repent and turn to him,-FOURTHLY, he departed to heaven. The vision being now concluded, the prophet is taken away by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, and there announces to the captive Israelites what God had showed him in the preceding visions, and the good that he had spoken concerning them; who at first did not seem to profit much by them, which the prophet severely reproves."

IV. ORACLES ABOUT THE SINS OF ISRAEL, AND JERUSALEM 12:1-24:27

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1. Haggai 1: 2,4,9
 2. Deut. 10:16
 3. Deut. 30:6
 4. See Matt. 24:1-3.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, gives the following general introduction to this section: "The argument of the book so far has consisted mainly of the iteration of Ezekiel's message that Jerusalem is doomed. He has demonstrated this by symbolic action, in vision and by spoken oracle. He has given adequate justification for such a fate by describing the iniquities, religious and moral, which have brought it on. Now a new series of actions and oracles attempts to deal with objections that people raise to this horrifying prospect. The section could, in today's idiom, be entitled 'Objections to Judgment,' as long as it is understood that the objections are raised only to be demolished. They are the objections of those who say, 'We have heard all these threats before, but nothing has ever come of them.' Or of the false prophets who claim equal authority for oracles which promise peace and safety. Or of those who think that it is impossible for the Lord to cast away His people: they *must* be delivered, either for the sake of the righteousness of the few, or on the ground of God's covenant-mercies in time past. However, before he deals with all these varying viewpoints, the prophet has some more symbolical acts to perform. Note in passing the parallelism between the acted prophecies of chapter 4 and 5, following directly after the first account of his vision, and those of chapter 12, which follow the second account."

a. Two more enacted messages 12:1-20

i. Going into exile 12:1-16

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.

3 "Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house.

4 During the daytime, while they watch, bring out your belongings packed for exile. Then in the evening, while they are watching, go out like those who go into exile.

5 While they watch, dig through the wall and take your belongings out through it.

6 Put them on your shoulder as they are watching and carry them out at dusk. Cover your face so that you cannot see the land, for I have made you a sign to the house of Israel."

7 So I did as I was commanded. During the day I brought out my things packed for exile. Then in the evening I dug through the wall with my hands. I took my belongings out at dusk, carrying them on my shoulders while they watched.

8 In the morning the word of the Lord came to me:

9 "Son of man, did not that rebellious house of Israel ask you, 'What are you doing?'

10 "Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and the whole house of Israel who are there.'

11 Say to them, 'I am a sign to you.' "As I have done, so it will be done to them. They will go into exile as captives.

12 "The prince among them will put his things on his shoulder at dusk and leave, and a hole will be dug in the wall for him to go through. He will cover his face so that he cannot see the land.

13 I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare; I will bring him to Babylonia, the land of the Chaldeans, but he will not see it, and there he will die.

14 I will scatter to the winds all those around him — his staff and all his troops — and I will pursue them with drawn sword.

15 "They will know that I am the Lord, when I disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries.

16 But I will spare a few of them from the sword, famine and plague, so that in the nations where they go they may acknowledge all their detestable practices. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

We learn about the people in exile that they have learned nothing from their experience. Although they were the “lucky ones” in the sense that they would survive further judgment and would form the core of the new generation that would return, their heart had not been changed. The same stubbornness that typified the people that left the slavery of Egypt and went on their way to the Promised Land had survived the ages and was demonstrated in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah. God had said to Isaiah, one century earlier: “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”¹ Isaiah’s words reveal God’s eagerness to heal and Israel’s refusal to be healed. By mouth of Jeremiah, God said to those who remained in Jerusalem after the others had been deported: “Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear...”² The same words now fall upon the deaf ears of the captives in Babylon. No one had learned the lesson. The message of the false prophets who promised an early return to the wicked city was eagerly received. The message that required repentance and confession was studiously ignored.

God orders Ezekiel to act out a parable for his fellow exiles to see. According to the dictum that a picture is worth a thousand words, this was done in the hope that “perhaps they will understand.” As John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “No doubt Ezekiel’s strange doings were becoming a common talking-point among the exiles, and there was never a shortage of spectators to watch and to gossip about every detail of what he did. In this way he soon developed as good a system of communication as any in Tel Abib.”

No details are given as to what Ezekiel was allowed to take with him on his symbolic going into exile. His baggage would be limited to what he could carry on his shoulders for a long journey. That stuff was to be prepared in brought daylight in view of curious onlookers. The most remarkable part of the instructions was the way he had to leave his house, not through the door, but by making a hole in the wall. Evidently, the houses in which the captives lived in Tel Abib had walls made out of bricks dried in the sun, which could be removed without making the whole structure crumble.

Ezekiel’s way of leaving his house referred to the way King Zedekiah and the army tried to escape from Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege. We read: “By the ninth day of the [fourth] month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king’s garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city.”³ The strange command to cover his face as he sets out on his exile, probably, refers to the way Zedekiah would go into exile. We read that the king was captured and “taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.”⁴ Ezekiel would go as a blind man who could not see the land as Zedekiah would when he arrived in exile. Ezekiel’s covering of his face may also typify the fact that Zedekiah probably disguised himself when he fled, so that he would not be recognized as the king.

The next morning Ezekiel was allowed to explain the meaning of his strange behavior. The delay would give the captives ample time to talk and gossip about what they had seen. This would guarantee a larger crowd to hear the explanation of the object lesson of the evening before.

The Hebrew text of v.10 reads literally: “This burden concerns the prince.” There is a play-on-word in the words for “prince,” *nasiy*’ and “burden,” *massa*’. Both words have three Hebrew consonants in common. Zedekiah is not call “king” in v.12 but “prince.” He had not been the man God had chosen to be the king of Israel; he was put on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar.⁵

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1. Isa. 6:9,10
 2. Jer. 5:21
 3. II Kings 25:3,4
 4. II Kings 25:6,7
 5. II Kings 24:15-17

There is no indication that the message that was acted out by Ezekiel in Babylon ever reached the ears of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. If it did, it failed to leave an impression upon him and those who were with him. But it would make sense if Ezekiel's prophecy was known to the people to whom it pertained. It would give more meaning to the words "They will know that I am the Lord, when I disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries."

Those who would survive the ordeal would not only recognize for themselves the truth of Ezekiel's prophecies, but they would also become a testimony to the people in the country of their captivity in the same way as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh.¹

ii. The terror of the inhabitants of Jerusalem 12:17-20

17 The word of the Lord came to me:

18 "Son of man, tremble as you eat your food, and shudder in fear as you drink your water.

19 Say to the people of the land: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says about those living in Jerusalem and in the land of Israel: They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair, for their land will be stripped of everything in it because of the violence of all who live there.

20 The inhabited towns will be laid waste and the land will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "The second action is very brief and can scarcely be compared with the first. It simply involves the manner in which the prophet is to eat the economy rations, which were allotted to him in 4:9-17. He is to put on a show of fearfulness and terror and to explain it as being symbolic of the frightening violence and destruction which are to come upon *the people of the land* (19) ... All this will come about *on account of the violence of all those who dwell in it, i.e.* in the land. The sufferings that the population will have to undergo are attributed directly to the sufferings which they have inflicted on others."

It was ultimately hunger that brought down the defenses of Jerusalem. We read in *Second Kings*: "So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the [fourth] month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat."² Nebuchadnezzar's patience paid off within the space of one-and-a-half year. The terror of the people inside the city is hard to imagine for those who have never been hungry. It must be a terrible experience to be between the rock and the hard place of facing either death by starvation or by the enemy sword. The words "Then you will know that I am the Lord" acquire a frightening meaning in that context.

b. Two popular sayings corrected 12:21-28

21 The word of the Lord came to me:

22 "Son of man, what is this proverb you have in the land of Israel: 'The days go by and every vision comes to nothing'?"

23 Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to put an end to this proverb, and they will no longer quote it in Israel.' Say to them, 'The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled.

24 For there will be no more false visions or flattering divinations among the people of Israel.

1. Luke 11:30

2. II Kings 25:1-4

25 But I the Lord will speak what I will, and it shall be fulfilled without delay. For in your days, you rebellious house, I will fulfill whatever I say, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"

26 The word of the Lord came to me:

27 "Son of man, the house of Israel is saying, 'The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.'

28 "Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"

Proverbs that would have been appropriate to quote in connection with false prophecies were applied to prophecies of the Lord's prophets. The Apostle Peter comments on the attitude of the people of his time who expressed their doubts about the Second Coming and the end of the world. We read: "They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."¹ *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "Strange, that the very means used by the most gracious God to bring sinners to repentance, should be made by them the very instruments of their own destruction!" And *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "For the true prophet there is always a near fulfillment, though there may be also an ultimate and more complete reality of which that is the pledge and earnest."

It is true regarding the prophecy of the Second Coming that a delay of 2000 years tends to slacken the urgency of the expectation. But everyone ought to realize that the world we live in is not "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."² Our planet is rather covered by a blanket of evil and iniquity that caused two world wars in the twentieth century and a holocaust in which six million people perished in Nazi Germany and seventeen million in Soviet Russia. Not to mention the killing fields of Cambodia and other countries. We have virtually reached the pre-flood condition about which we read that "the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."³ To imagine that God could permit the earth's existence to continue eternally in its present condition would be utterly foolish. Yet, such was the attitude of the people in Ezekiel's day. They imagined that Jerusalem could remain while innocent people were being murdered within its walls and disgusting idolatry was carried on in the precincts of the temple of the Lord.

Some "Acts of God" in recent history, such as a tsunami, devastating earthquakes, and fatal floods may not mark the world's last night, but they are reminders that intend to bring this world's population to repentance.

c. Prophecy against the prophets and prophetesses of Israel 13:1-23

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the Lord!'

1. II Peter 3:4-9

2. Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14

3. Gen. 6:5

3 *This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!*

4 *Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackals among ruins.*

5 *You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord.*

6 *Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, "The Lord declares," when the Lord has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled.*

7 *Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, "The Lord declares," though I have not spoken?*

8 *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

9 *My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.*

10 *"Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash,*

11 *therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth.*

12 *When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?"*

13 *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury.*

14 *I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the Lord.*

15 *So I will spend my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, "The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it,*

16 *those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign Lord."*

17 *"Now, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them*

18 *and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths for their heads in order to ensnare people. Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own?*

19 *You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live.*

20 *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds.*

21 *I will tear off your veils and save my people from your hands, and they will no longer fall prey to your power. Then you will know that I am the Lord.*

22 *Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives,*

23 *therefore you will no longer see false visions or practice divination. I will save my people from your hands. And then you will know that I am the Lord."*

In a way this chapter continues the theme of the previous one. There the topic was the test of prophecy. The fact that prophets had predicted certain events, which never came to pass, qualified them as false prophets and gave birth to some popular sayings that placed genuine prophecy in a very dim and ridiculous light. God had said through Moses: "You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?' If what

a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.”¹

In this chapter Ezekiel turns from the prophetic message to the prophet and attacks the source of their prophecies. The prophets were not inspired by the Spirit of God, but by their own spirit, which God calls “their own imagination.” The problem of the human spirit is that there is no neutral place for it to operate. The human spirit has only two choices, identifying itself with the Spirit of God by an act of willful surrender, or becoming a tool of God’s enemy. There is no third choice that would make “self” an independent entity. False prophets, therefore, are always tools of Satan. The person who has come under his influence may not be aware of this. He may believe that his supernatural experience is by necessity divinely inspired. Such lack of spiritual discernment does not mean that the person is innocent. An evil root of inspiration will always produce evil fruit that can be recognized easily enough.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “As an independent witness, Ezekiel confirms at the Chebar the testimony of Jeremiah (Ezek. 29:21,31) in his letter from Jerusalem to the captive exiles against the false prophets, wherein he foretells the slaughter by Nebuchadnezzar of the false prophets Ahab and Zedekiah, who should be roasted in the fire, and the punishment of Shemaiah and his seed for having ‘caused the people to trust in a lie.’ Of these some were conscious knaves, others fanatical dupes of their own frauds; e.g., Ahab, Zedekiah, and Shemaiah. Hananiah must have believed his own lie, else he would not have specified so circumstantial details (Jer 28:2-4): the conscious knaves gave only general assurance of ‘peace’ (Jer 5:31; 6:14; 14:13). The language of Ezekiel has plain references to the similar language of Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 23:9-38), the bane of false prophecy, which had its stronghold in Jerusalem, having in some degree extended to the Chebar: this chapter, therefore, is primarily intended as a message to those still in the Jewish metropolis, and secondarily for the good of the exiles at the Chebar.”

God compares the false prophets to “jackals among ruins.” The Hebrew words used are *shuw`al*, “jackal,” or “fox” and *chorbah*, “drought,” or “desolation.” *The New King James Version* translates “like foxes in the deserts.” *The New International Version* reads: “like jackals among ruins.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “The heart of this denunciation is the phrase *like foxes among ruins* (4, RSV; AV deserts, only in the sense of deserted habitations), a picture which suggests that the prophets have no real concern for the people among whom they live. They burrow among the foundations without any regard for the welfare of the place, intent only on making dens for themselves or, to change the metaphor, on feathering their own nests. Such reprehensible action is not only foolish and irresponsible, but morally reprehensible, and Ezekiel uses the strongest word to describe their folly. *Foolish* (3) is the Hebrew *nâbâl*, which covers much more than mere stupidity. The fool was spiritually and morally insensitive; he was inclined to blasphemy (Ps. 74:18) and to atheism (Ps. 14:1); he was churlish and arrogant, like his namesake Nabal of Carmel (1 Sa. 25); he was capable of gross immorality (2 Sa. 13:13). He was in fact the very antithesis of all that the wise man stood for in terms of spiritual perception, self-discipline, restraint, godly fear and humility. For prophets to be described thus was strong language indeed, but when we remember that Jeremiah had accused two of them of committing adultery with their neighbors’ wives (23:14; 29:23), we can see that it was fully justified. The whole of Jeremiah 29 really needs to be read in conjunction with Ezekiel’s denunciations in order to appreciate the complexity of the problem with which these two men of God were faced.”

In a later chapter, God will say to Ezekiel: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.”² Here the false prophets are charged with the same crime of “not [going] up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel.” God looked for intercessors in Jerusalem, people who, like Moses and Paul, would pray and take the brunt of God’s wrath so that it would not destroy others. When the Israelites had made the gold calf in the desert, Moses had said to God: “But now, please forgive their sin — but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”³ And the Apostle Paul confessed: “I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from

1. Deut. 18:21,22
2. Ezek. 22:30
3. Ex. 32:32

Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”¹ The One who would ultimately stand in the gap for all of mankind is Jesus, of whom Paul states that He “rescues us from the coming wrath.”²

Although the word “wall” is not mentioned in this Psalm of David, the idea of God being someone’s protection is well expressed: “But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. For surely, O Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.”³ Standing in the gap, therefore, means bringing people back under God’s wing of protection. And another Psalm expresses this even more beautifully and powerfully, saying: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ If you make the Most High your dwelling — even the Lord, who is my refuge — then no harm, will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.”⁴ But Israel had already long ago withdrawn from the only One who could protect them.

The phrase “I am against you” is found frequently in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Hebrew word ‘*el*’ is actually a neutral preposition denoting place. It is as if God says to these false prophets, “You are facing Me!” provoking a confrontation. It conveys the shock of realizing who the opponent is. Peter shows the difference in God’s attitude toward those who are righteous and those who are evil: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”⁵

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: “The first two verses of this section give the condemnation which the false prophets are to suffer. Basically, it is that they merit the implacable opposition of God, *I am against you* (8). They have therefore no hope of ultimate success or recognition for their ministry, and their expectation that the Lord will *fulfill their word* (6) will be rudely shattered. Their punishment is to be threefold (9). First, they will lose the place of honor which they have long enjoyed among the leading citizens of Israel: the *assembly* (AV; council, RV, RSV) means the inner circle of the community. Secondly, they will be struck off the cherished rights of any adult Israelite male. And thirdly, they would never return to the land of Israel and so would be deprived of the one hopeful prospect which made exile endurable.”

The message of the false prophets to the people of Jerusalem was “peace.” Jeremiah exposed their sham by saying: “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”⁶ The false prophets looked at people whose injuries were fatal and they offered them a band aid. If they did this because of ignorance, it amounted to criminal neglect. If they did it knowingly, they proved themselves to be sadists. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to Munich for a conference with Adolph Hitler. Hitler promised Chamberlain everything he wanted to hear, without intending to keep any of his promises. Chamberlain returned to England and waved the paper with the contract before the press, proclaiming “Peace in our time!” A few weeks later the world was engulfed in World War II.

The problems of the false prophets consisted in their source. Some of them may have believed they were speaking for the Lord, having no idea that they were working for the enemy. Others may have consciously sown the seed of deception. Israel’s moral condition ought to have been an eye-opener for every thinking person. Those who witnessed the immorality and crimes being committed in Jerusalem, thinking that God would overlook, had no idea

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1. Rom. 9:1-4
 2. See I Thess. 1:10.
 3. Ps. 5:11,12
 4. Ps. 91:1,2, 9-13
 5. I Peter 3:12
 6. Jer. 6:14

with whom they were dealing. The Apostle Paul had to say to some Christians in Corinth: “Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.”¹ Jeremiah and Ezekiel could have said the same to the false prophets of their time. Just because one has an unusual experience that seems to be supernatural, does not mean that one has a message from God. Satan is a supernatural being also and he disguises himself well. Paul says: “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”²

Instead of placing themselves under God’s protection and inviting their audience to do the same, the false prophets built their own flimsy walls and invited people to gather in its confines. The whitewash served to make it look attractive.

The Hebrew text is rather vivid in its description of the disaster that will come upon the false prophets. We read: “There shall be an overflowing shower, and O you great hailstones will fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: “There is a double meaning concealed in the first of these phrases. The word for ‘overflowing’ means both ‘flooding’ as of a raging torrent (well expressed by RSV *a deluge of rain*) and also ‘rinsing off,’ as if the effect of the downpour is to wash away the whitewash and have the flimsy wall naked and exposed to the destructive hailstones.”

If the wall of protection these false prophets built collapses, more will be exposed than the unreliability of their offer, the whitewash also stands for the veneer that masked their own lives. The tree will show its rotten fruit. The picture of the collapsing wall reminds us of the parable with which Jesus concludes The Sermon on the Mount. “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”³ Like the wall in Ezekiel and the house in Jesus’ parable, the structure is not merely what one has built, it is what one is. God says: “The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it.”

In the last seven verses of this chapter God makes Ezekiel prophesy against the female false prophets in Jerusalem. There must have been a whole group of them, not just one of two individuals. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks: “The only female prophets that are known to us are women like Deborah (Jdg. 4:4ff.) and Huldah (2 Ki. 22:14), though Moses’ sister Miriam, merited the title (Ex. 15:20) and Nehemiah refers to ‘the prophetess Noadiah’ among his intimidators (Neh 6:14). While recognizing therefore that prophecy was open to women as well as to men, there do not appear to have been many such women and it is probably a mistake to think of a class or order of prophetesses. Indeed, Ezekiel’s language suggests that these were more like witches or sorceresses who practiced strange magic arts (cf. 1 Sa. 28:7). In times of national decay or crisis such quacks are often thrown up and they prey upon credulous and anxious minds. It is not surprising that at this time Israel had her share of them. No doubt the successful encroachment of Babylonian influence, where divination and necromancy abounded added further encouragement to their work.” Isaiah also refers to his wife as “the prophetess,” but that does not necessarily mean that she personally had the gift of prophecy.⁴

Jeremiah had to contend with some women, and their husbands, who had moved to Egypt after the Babylonian invasion. The women seemed to play a leading part in the continuing idol worship that had brought disaster upon the nation. We read: “Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present — a large assembly — and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, ‘We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink

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1. I Cor. 15:34
 2. II Cor. 11:14
 3. Matt. 7:24-27
 4. See Isa. 8:3.

offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.”¹

Ezekiel concentrates particularly upon the magic those female sorcerers were engaged in. It was apparently not so much what those women said as what they did. Bible scholars have puzzled over the meaning of some of the words Ezekiel uses here. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes, and make kerchiefs upon the head of every statue to hunt souls.” The Hebrew word rendered “pillows” is *keceph*, which is only found in this place in Scripture. The Hebrew word *micpachah* translated “kerchief,” or “veil” is also unique to Ezekiel. *The New Living Translation* renders the verse: “You tie magic charms on their wrists and furnish them with magic veils.” Evidently, the women dealt in amulets and charms, proclaiming supernatural protection for those who wore them. That the supernatural was demonic must have been known to them, but that did not deter them from practicing their art. The protection they offered was like putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop. Even some of the righteous had been influenced by their magic. This is another instance in which it is obvious that holiness is not contagious, but corruption is.

The magic veils these women wore and advertised were the equivalent of the whitewash on the wall used by their male partners. Both covered up evil. As the whitewashed walls crumbled, so the veils would be torn off and expose their wickedness. God saw these women as bird catchers, trapping non-expecting souls in their nets.

Since the prophetesses were obviously in the power of demons, we may assume that their male counterparts were the same. This supernatural effort to influence public opinion against God is part of Satan’s strategy to slow down or stop the advance of the Gospel in this world. There is nothing new under the sun. God’s answer to those necromancers is what Jesus said to Peter: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”²

d. Condemnation of those who are set on idolatry 14:1-11

1 Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me.

2 Then the word of the Lord came to me:

3 "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?

4 Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the Lord will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry.

5 I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.'

6 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!

7 "When any Israelite or any alien living in Israel separates himself from me and sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet to inquire of me, I the Lord will answer him myself.

8 I will set my face against that man and make him an example and a byword. I will cut him off from my people. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

9 "And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the Lord have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel.

10 They will bear their guilt — the prophet will be as guilty as the one who consults him.

1. Jer. 44:15-18

2. Matt 16:18

11 Then the people of Israel will no longer stray from me, nor will they defile themselves anymore with all their sins. They will be my people, and I will be their God, declares the Sovereign Lord.’”

In chapter 8:1, we read: “I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me...” Here Ezekiel’s visitors are identified as “some of the elders of Israel.” Whether this distinction is of any importance is doubtful. As far as we know, the captivity of the northern kingdom had been carried out exclusively by Assyria. But there may have been some northerners among those Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Judah also. We certainly should not jump to conclusions that the ones from the northern kingdom who survived captivity were more prone to idolatry than those from southern Judah.

We are given no details about the reason of the gathering of these men either. The suggestion is that they had come to ask Ezekiel to consult the Lord in their behalf, but that is not specifically stated. The fact that God treats them as if that had been the reason for their coming may be seen as an unveiling of their hidden motives. Since they are identified as idolaters, their inquiring about the will of God cannot have been sincere.

The way God’s charge against them is formulated suggests that these men did not openly practice idolatry. The idol image was enthroned in their hearts. Two Hebrew words used are: *gilluwl* and *mikshowl*, “idol,” and “stumbling-block.” Both have the basic meaning of “a log.” The obvious inference is that their lives are not totally dedicated to the Lord. They may not have been openly practicing idolatry, but they led a double life of appearing to be faithful Jews but remaining “open-minded” about other religions. That attitude seems to have been what made King Solomon go down in ignominy at the end of his life.

Bible scholars have voiced different opinions about what caused this inward split. *The Pulpit Commentary* believes “They were hankering after the old false worships in which they had once, taken part.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “The charge against them is that they have been infected by their Babylonian environment and the attractions of its idolatrous religions.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* suggests for “Should I let them inquire of me at all?” the reading: “Should I with inquiry be inquired of by such hypocrites as they are?”

The Hebrew text of the last part of v.4 and v.5 reads literally: “I Yahweh will answer him that comes according to the multitude of his idols. That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are estranged from me through all their idols.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: “The words have a sinister ring about them and verse 8 enlarges on their meaning, but the ultimate aim is put positively in verses 5 and 11. The Lord intends to capture the hearts of His estranged people so that they may become His people in reality.”

Such answer to human hypocrisy is amazing. We read the same astonishing declaration in Hosea, where God says to His wayward people: “‘I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot,’ declares the Lord. ‘Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. In that day,’ declares the Lord, ‘you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’” I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked.”¹ God will bring about this change by removing the heart of stone and replacing it with a new heart, as Ezekiel mentions several times in his book.² The answer to hypocrisy is regeneration by the Holy Spirit. But regeneration will not come about without repentance.

In v.7 God states what will happen if people refuse to repent. Although the same words are used here as previously, they have a different content. Evidently, these people had come to Ezekiel in the belief that a consultation with God’s prophet could be done without any serious consequences. As in the case in which the people consulted Jeremiah, saying that they would do whatever the Lord told him, but then denied that the Lord had spoken to him, when they did not like the answer,³ so here. Consultation would not lead to obligation, they believed.

1. Hos. 2:13-17

2. See Ezek. 11:19, 36:26.

3. Jer. 42:1-43:5

This kind of attitude is not uncommon. It is easy to be religious and not take God seriously. Imagine the shock for people who have this attitude, to be confronted with the living God Himself! That is what happens here. These people believed they were speaking with Ezekiel, when all of a sudden they realized that God Himself answered them. The author of Hebrew issues this warning: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’”¹ Those who never took God seriously will meet Him as “a consuming fire.”

It seems that the warning against the false prophets in v.9 is not exclusively directed to them, but that it also contains a warning for Ezekiel to keep his relationship with God pure. It seems strange that God would take responsibility for messages proclaimed by false prophets. It cannot mean, of course, that God would tell lies, but He allows some people to lie because they have decided against which they know to be the truth. There is the case of the prophet Micaiah, who revealed that God allowed a lying spirit to invade some of King Ahab’s prophets so he would find his death in battle.² We can only recognize the truth when the truth is in us.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes here about “I the Lord have enticed that prophet”: “Not directly, but through Satan and his ministers; not merely permissively, but by overruling their evil to serve the purposes of His righteous judgment, to be a touchstone to separate the precious from the vile, and to ‘prove’ His people (Deut 13:3; 1 Kings 22:23; 2 Thess 2:11-12). Evil comes not from God, though God overrules it to serve His will (Job 12:16; James 1:13). This declaration of God is intended to answer their objection, ‘Jeremiah and Ezekiel are but two opposed to the many prophets who announce ‘peace’ to us.’ ‘Nay, deceive not yourselves, those prophets of yours are deluding you, and I permit them to do so, as a righteous judgment on your willful blindness.’” *Barnes’ Notes* adds: “A deep truth lies beneath these words, namely, that evil as well as good is under God’s direction. He turns it as He will, employing it to test the sincerity of men, and thus making it ultimately contribute to the purification of His people, to the confirmation of the righteous, to the increase of their glory and felicity ... The thoughts of men’s hearts were revealed, the good separated from the bad, and the remnant of the people purged from the sins by which of late years the whole nation had been defiled.”

e. The righteous few will not avert the judgment 14:12-23

12 The word of the Lord came to me:

13 "Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals,

14 even if these three men — Noah, Daniel and Job — were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign Lord.

15 "Or if I send wild beasts through that country and they leave it childless and it becomes desolate so that no one can pass through it because of the beasts,

16 as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved, but the land would be desolate.

17 "Or if I bring a sword against that country and say, ‘Let the sword pass throughout the land,’ and I kill its men and their animals,

18 as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved.

1. Heb. 12:25-29

2. I Kings 22:18-23

**19 "Or if I send a plague into that land and pour out my wrath upon it through bloodshed, killing its men and their animals,
 20 as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness.
 21 "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments — sword and famine and wild beasts and plague — to kill its men and their animals!
 22 Yet there will be some survivors — sons and daughters who will be brought out of it. They will come to you, and when you see their conduct and their actions, you will be consoled regarding the disaster I have brought upon Jerusalem — every disaster I have brought upon it.
 23 You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions, for you will know that I have done nothing in it without cause, declares the Sovereign Lord."**

The key to understanding what God says here to Ezekiel seems to be in the last two verses of this section. Ezekiel must have gone through the same kind of emotional struggle Jeremiah experienced in Jerusalem. Jeremiah came to the point where he felt he could no longer prophesy the message of doom and punishment. He said: "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot."¹ Soldiers who have been in combat for a long time can suffer emotional and psychological distress to the point of damage. Killing with words or with the sword will harm our own soul. Therefore, God promises Ezekiel consolation that will come in the testimony of those who survive the ordeal.

There is in this section an indirect reference to Abraham's prayer of intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah.² Abraham was convinced that God would not "kill the righteous with the wicked." He therefore interceded and said: "Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"³ He was told that ten righteous people would have saved the cities, but they were non-existent.

Here God presents Ezekiel with the hypothetical picture of the presence of three righteous people, one of whom was Ezekiel's contemporary, Daniel, the other two historical figures, Noah and Job. Incidentally, the mention of Job's name pleads for the fact that he was a historical person, not merely a character in a fiction, as some theologians believe.

We find a similar picture in Jeremiah, where we read: "Then the Lord said to me: 'Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!'"⁴

One point that emerges from the text is that there can be circumstances in which three righteous people could save a city or a country. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, even the presence of one person, the righteous Lot, would have made it impossible for the angel to destroy the cities. Lot asked to be allowed to flee to Zoar, which was granted to him. We read that the angel says to Lot: "I cannot do anything until you reach it."⁵ But in the case of the nation of Israel, no one could save them from the wrath of God that had built up over the centuries.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on the attitude of the people who believed that God would not punish the nation of Israel, because of a small pious remnant: "This attitude is nothing less than using the saints as an insurance policy to cover the sinners. It has been a human failing in every generation. A community is a trifle

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1. Jer. 20:8,9
 2. Gen. 18:16-33
 3. Gen. 18:25
 4. Jer. 15:1
 5. Gen. 19:22

embarrassed to have a saint among its number, but it derives a sense of security from his presence, rather like the possession of a religious lucky charm.”

Barnes' Notes observes about the names of Noah, Daniel, and Job: “Three striking instances of men who, for their integrity, were delivered from the ruin which fell upon others. Some have thought it strange that Daniel, a contemporary, and still young, should have been classed with the two ancient worthies. But the account of him (Dan 2) shows, that by this time Daniel was a very remarkable man (compare Ezek 28:3), and the introduction of the name of a contemporary gives force and life to the illustration. There is in the order in which the names occur a kind of climax. Noah did not rescue the guilty world, but did carry forth with him his wife, sons, and sons' wives. Daniel raised only a few, but he did raise three of his countrymen with him to honor. To Job was spared neither son nor daughter.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about vv.13 and 14: “*Committing a trespass* (RV) is far too mild a translation for a strong Hebrew verb with its cognate accusative following it. The root meaning is of ‘acting treacherously’ and so breaking a solemn covenant. It is used of the sin of Achan in relation to the devoted thing (the *herem*, Jos. 7:1) and of a wife’s adulterous act (Nu. 5:12), both of which incurred the death penalty. The meaning here is similarly of a land which by its unfaithfulness deserves the ultimate in punishment.” About the name Daniel, Taylor disagrees with other Bible scholars, saying: “Daniel alone is unknown from the Bible. He can hardly be Ezekiel’s contemporary in exile: in any case the word used here is ‘Dani’el’ and not ‘Daniyyel’ as in the book of that name. The likelihood is that this is the ‘Dan’el’ of the ancient Canaanite epic discovered in 1930 at Ras Shamra, the ancient Ugarit, on the north Syrian coast, and dating from about 1400 BC. He appears there mainly as the dispenser of fertility, but also as the upright one, judging the cause of the widow and of the fatherless. We must suppose either that this early Semitic literature was known to later Hebrew generations or, more likely, that ancient Hebrew traditions which have not survived incorporated material centered around a character of the same name and similar character to the Ugaritic Dan’el.” Basing his rejection of the Biblical Daniel on different spellings of the name seems to require more ingenuity and faith than most Biblical scholars with authority can produce.

Here, the Lord paints four pictures before the eyes of Ezekiel, not that Ezekiel would choose one of them, but to emphasize the point of Israel’s complete moral failure and to show that the judgments that take place on earth are not the final ones. Famine, wild animals, war and sickness are shadows of the final judgment that will mark the end of this world. Jesus warned the generation of His days of this, saying: “And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”¹ We tend to think that when God turned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into what is now the Dead Sea, this was the final judgment. Jesus says that there will be a day of judgment at which the people of those cities, together with the citizens of Capernaum and the rest of the population of this world will stand before God and the books will be opened. The Apostle Paul tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead in order to save us “from the coming wrath.”²

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains the phrase “You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions” “Ye, the exiles at the Chebar, who now murmur at God’s judgment about to be inflicted on Jerusalem as harsh, when ye shall see the wicked ‘ways’ and character of the escaped remnant, shall acknowledge that both Jerusalem and its inhabitants deserved their fate: this recognition of the righteousness of the judgment will reconcile you to it, and so ‘ye shall be comforted’ under it (Calvin). Then would follow mercy to the elect remnant, though that is not referred to here, but in Ezek 20:43-44.” The last quoted reference reads: “There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name’s sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

1. Matt. 11:23,24

2. I Thess. 1:10

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The words end with a gleam of hope shining through the judgments. For Ezekiel, as for Isaiah, there is the thought of a 'remnant that shall return' (... Isaiah 10:20-22). It has been questioned whether 'the ways and the doings' which are to bring comfort to men's minds are those of the evil past or of the subsequent repentance. I incline to the view that they include both. Men should see at once the severity and the goodness of Jehovah. His punishments had not been arbitrary nor excessive. They had also been as a discipline leading men to repentance. In each of those facts there was a ground of comfort for men who asked the question, which Abraham asked of old, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (... Genesis 18:25). In either aspect men will recognize that God has not done without cause all that he has done. In this way the prophet seeks, as others have done since, to justify the ways of God to man. Ezekiel's word for 'remnant' is, it may be noted, not the same as Isaiah's, its primary significance being 'these that *escape*.' Ezekiel does not quote the earlier prophet, though his thoughts are in harmony with him."

Although it may be difficult to distinguish in all the elements of judgments, whether they are positive or negative, and which groups will receive the "comfort" that seems to be hidden in them, it is clear that the outcome will be positive in that it will bring glory to God. And God's glory benefits all of creation. When the youngest son in Jesus' *Parable of the Prodigal Son* came to the end of his rope and was compelled to hire himself out to a citizen of the country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. That was not the highlight of his life he had envisioned when he left his father's house. But it was the best thing that ever happened to him. For we read that "He came to his senses."¹ There is comfort in the words of the Psalmist: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word."² C. S. Lewis coined the phrase "A severe mercy," which can be very appropriately applied to those who go through any kind of trial and come out purer.

f. The parable of the vine 15:1-8

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, how is the wood of a vine better than that of a branch on any of the trees in the forest?

3 Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on?

4 And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything?

5 If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred?

6 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem.

7 I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the Lord.

8 I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign Lord."

The image of the vine as a symbol for Israel originates with Jacob who blessed his son Joseph with the words "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall."³ Asaph uses the image in one of his psalms: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land."⁴ And several of the Old Testament prophets refer to Israel as a

1. Luke 15:15-17
2. Ps. 119:67
3. Gen. 49:22
4. Ps. 80:8,9

vine God had planted.¹ The image is rich with positive meaning because in all cases, except in the way Ezekiel uses it, the emphasis is on the grapes or “wine that gladdens the heart of man.”² In contrasting it with the joy of the Lord, David makes it a pointer to his fellowship with God, saying: “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”³

But Ezekiel looks at the wood of the vine without any reference to fruit, because there is none. The vine’s only value is in its fruit. Compared to any other tree, it is inferior as far as the quality of its wood is concerned. As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “In all respects, except in their being planted by God, the Jews were inferior to other nations, as Egypt, Babylon, etc.- e.g., in antiquity, extent of territory, resources, military power, attainments in arts and sciences ... What superiority has the vine, if it be but a branch among the trees of the forest? i.e., if, as having no fruit, it lies cut down among other woods of trees?” The wood of the vine is useless.

The question is what was the fruit that was not produced, which God expected Israel to bear? He intended Israel to be His “my treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”⁴ The Jews believed that God had chosen them for their outstanding natural abilities and their excellent character. Moses had warned the people against pride as a response to God’s election. He said: “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”⁵ What Paul says about the church of Jesus Christ applies to the nation of Israel also: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”⁶ If Israel thought that, in the absence of fruit, she could boast in the quality of her wood, she was delusional.

We cannot interpret this parable correctly without a reference to Jesus’ words about the vine. We read that, on the night before His death, He said to His disciples: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”⁷ The only way the vine of Israel, as well as the church of Christ, can bear fruit is in her fellowship with the Lord. In forsaking God, as Israel and the people of Jerusalem had done, they proved themselves to be as worthless as they were before God called them. As in Ezekiel’s parable, the branch that does not produce fruit is thrown in the fire and burned.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks: “Implicit in the parable is the prophet’s response to those who imagined that Israel, as the vine of the Lord’s planting was indestructible. Cut down she might be, they thought, but it was only a temporary setback: before long the stock would shoot again and Israel would flourish as she had done in days gone by. Such naïve optimism was the object of Ezekiel’s incessant condemnation. Israel and Jerusalem were finished.”

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1. See Isa 5; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1.
 2. Ps. 104:15
 3. Ps. 4:7
 4. Ex. 19:5,6
 5. Deut. 7:7,8
 6. I Cor. 1:26-29
 7. John 15:5-8

g. Jerusalem the faithless 16:1-63

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices

3 and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.

4 On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths.

5 No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised.

6 "'Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'Live!'"

7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

8 "'Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

9 "'I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you.

10 I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments.

11 I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck,

12 and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.

13 So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen.

14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord.

15 "'But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.

16 You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. Such things should not happen, nor should they ever occur.

17 You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them.

18 And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them.

19 Also the food I provided for you — the fine flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat — you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign Lord.

20 "'And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough?

21 You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.

22 In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood.

23 "'Woe! Woe to you, declares the Sovereign Lord. In addition to all your other wickedness,

24 you built a mound for yourself and made a lofty shrine in every public square.

25 At the head of every street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, offering your body with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by.

26 You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity.

27 So I stretched out my hand against you and reduced your territory; I gave you over to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were shocked by your lewd conduct.

28 *You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too, because you were insatiable; and even after that, you still were not satisfied.*

29 *Then you increased your promiscuity to include Babylonia, a land of merchants, but even with this you were not satisfied.*

30 *"How weak-willed you are, declares the Sovereign Lord, when you do all these things, acting like a brazen prostitute!*

31 *When you built your mounds at the head of every street and made your lofty shrines in every public square, you were unlike a prostitute, because you scorned payment.*

32 *"You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!*

33 *Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors.*

34 *So in your prostitution you are the opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you.*

35 *"Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the Lord!*

36 *This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children's blood,*

37 *therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness.*

38 *I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger.*

39 *Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare.*

40 *They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords.*

41 *They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers.*

42 *Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry.*

43 *"Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done, declares the Sovereign Lord. Did you not add lewdness to all your other detestable practices?*

44 *"Everyone who quotes proverbs will quote this proverb about you: "Like mother, like daughter."*

45 *You are a true daughter of your mother, who despised her husband and her children; and you are a true sister of your sisters, who despised their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite.*

46 *Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom.*

47 *You not only walked in their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.*

48 *As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done.*

49 *"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.*

50 *They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.*

51 *Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done.*

52 Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

53 "However, I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and of Samaria and her daughters, and your fortunes along with them,

54 so that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all you have done in giving them comfort.

55 And your sisters, Sodom with her daughters and Samaria with her daughters, will return to what they were before; and you and your daughters will return to what you were before.

56 You would not even mention your sister Sodom in the day of your pride,

57 before your wickedness was uncovered. Even so, you are now scorned by the daughters of Edom and all her neighbors and the daughters of the Philistines — all those around you who despise you.

58 You will bear the consequences of your lewdness and your detestable practices, declares the Lord.

59 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant.

60 Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.

61 Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you.

62 So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord.

63 Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign Lord."

Hosea could have written these words! John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this awesome and, in a way, awful chapter, as follows: "It has been the genius of Hosea to understand the relationship between the Lord and His people in terms of the covenant of marriage, and he had drawn on the experiences of his own wife's unfaithfulness to demonstrate Israel's spiritual adultery. Hosea had stressed by contrast the faithful covenant-love that God still showed to His wayward bride (Ho. 2:14-20). Ezekiel drew on this analogy of the marriage-bond but couched it in terms which might well have been borrowed from a popular oriental take of a foundling child being rescued by a passing traveler and eventually wedded by him. The idea of the 'rags-to-riches' plot has endeared itself to every generation and every culture that likes listening to good stories. As told by Ezekiel, however, the story is no longer endearing. It has great pathos in its conception, but only a tragic crudity in its telling. The Christian reader may, not surprisingly, feel nauseated at the indelicate realism of Ezekiel's language, but Ezekiel meant it that way. He was telling of ugly sins and he made the parable fit the facts."

The Pulpit Commentary adds: "The thought that underlies Ezekiel's parable, that Israel was the bride of Jehovah, and that her sin was that of the adulterous wife, was sufficiently familiar. Isaiah (... Isaiah 1:21) had spoken of the 'faithful city that had become a harlot.' Jeremiah (... Jeremiah 2:2) had represented Jehovah as remembering 'the kindness of her youth, the love of her espousals.' What is characteristic of Ezekiel's treatment of that image is that he does not recognize any period in which Israel had been as a faithful wife. But even here he had a forerunner in Hosea, who, in order that his own life might be itself a parable, was ordered to take to himself 'a wife of whoredom,' one, *i.e.*, whose character was tainted before her marriage (... Hosea 1:2). Ezekiel would seem to have dwelt upon that thought, and to have expanded it into the terrible history that follows."

Most Bible scholars agree that, although the message of this parable, in all its explicitness, is clear enough, there are details that are difficult for us to understand, because of the distance of time and culture that separates us from Ezekiel's day.

Ezekiel addresses particularly the citizens of Jerusalem in this parable. Unless there would be a good deal of traffic going back and forth between Babylon and the homeland of the captives, his prophecy would be less than effective, unless the captives that originated from the city are the primary target. It is, however, understood that "Jerusalem" represents the whole nation of Judah and Israel on both sides of the demarcation line.

The opening phrase “Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite” has given cause to multiple and often contradictory interpretations. Some Bible scholars have tried to limit it to the origin of the city of Jerusalem, which historically was in Amorite territory, consisting of Jebus and Salem. The original inhabitants of the city were called Jebusites. When David conquered Jerusalem, he made it the capital of his kingdom, rightly believing that it would promote and maintain the national unity of the twelve tribes. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “A prosaic literalism ... has seen in Ezekiel’s language the assertion of an ethnological fact. ‘The Jebusite city,’ the prophet is supposed to say, was never really of pure Israelite descent. Its people are descended from Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, and are tainted, as by a law of *heredite*, with the vices of their forefathers. Rightly understood, it is believed that Ezekiel’s words imply the very opposite of this. As Isaiah (... Isaiah 1:10) had spoken of ‘the rulers of Sodom, and the people of Gomorrah;’ as ... Deuteronomy 32:32 had spoken of the vine of Israel becoming as ‘the vine of Sodom;’ as our Lord speaks of the Jews of his time as not being ‘the children of Abraham’ (... John 8:39); so Ezekiel, using the strongest form of Eastern vituperation, taunts the people of Jerusalem with acting as if they were descended, not from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but from the earlier heathen inhabitants of what was afterwards the land of Israel.”

When God orders Ezekiel to confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices, He refers to the sins of the original inhabitants of the land, which the Israelites had adopted and developed to a greater level. Centuries before the birth of the nation, God had shown Abraham what would happen to his offspring: “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”¹ God commanded Israel to conquer Canaan and cleanse it from the sins of the Amorites that had reached its full measure. That cleansing had been partial and ineffective.

In the same way as when Israel left Egypt, they took Egypt with her in her heart, so in settling in Canaan, they adopted the sins of the land. That is the reason God tells the Jerusalem of Ezekiel’s day “Your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.” In the same way the Jews in Jesus’ day protested “We are not illegitimate children. The only Father we have is God himself.” To which Jesus answered: “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”²

The problem with the above interpretation is that it would make more sense if Israel were described here as an adult who had gone astray; but the picture begins with a new born baby that was left to die. *The Pulpit Commentary* furthermore states: “We ask, as we interpret the parable, of what period in the history of Israel Ezekiel speaks. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ignored by him, and he starts from a time of misery and shame. It is obvious that the only period which corresponds to this is that of the sojourn of Israel as an oppressed and degraded people in the land of Goshen. The whole scene may have been painted from the life. Such a birth may well have been witnessed during the march of the exiles, when the brutality of their Chaldean drivers allowed no halt, and the child was left to perish of neglect, and the thought may then have flashed across Ezekiel’s mind that the pity which he felt for the deserted infant was a faint shadow of that which Jehovah had felt for Israel in the degradation of their heathen bondage.” The idea that Israel was born as a nation at the time when God led them out of Egypt, makes, indeed, the most sense in the interpretation of this parable.

In describing what was not done to the newborn baby, we get a clear picture of the way the birth of a child was handled in the days of the Old Testament. After the umbilical cord was cut, the baby was washed, rubbed with salt and wrapped in cloth. One problem in v.4 is the word that *The New International Version* renders “to make you

1. Gen. 15:13-16

2. John 8:41-44

clean.” The Hebrew word *mish`iy* is found nowhere else in Scripture. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “The word for *to supple thee* (AV; Heb. *l^emis^eti*) is unknown elsewhere. The Targum has ‘for cleansing,’ based probably on a kindred Arabic root meaning ‘to wash.’ Vulgate’s *in salutem* links it with the root *yâde*, ‘to save.’ LXX and many commentators omit the word altogether. RV, RSV follow the Targum tradition, which gives the required sense, but the word still remains a philological mystery.” The application of salt on the body of a newborn would seem to be a crude form of disinfecting, but we have no idea how it was done.

The picture in v.6 is beautiful. The Almighty and omnipresent God presents Himself as a casual wanderer, who happens to pass by and discovers a foundling that was given up to die. The umbilical cord not being cut would leave the baby to bleed to death. This seems to be expressed in the repetition of the words “kicking about in your blood,” “lay there in your blood.” The baby was saved by God’s creative word “Live!” In a sense the picture is one of resurrection from the dead. Israel prefigures here the Son of God to whom, when He lay in the tomb, the Father said “live!” That God had Jesus Christ in mind when He brought His people out of Egypt is obvious from Matthew’s quotation of Hosea’s prophecy: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”¹

The Pulpit Commentary has the following interesting comment: “The commentary of the Chaldee Targum is sufficiently curious to be quoted: ‘And the memory of my covenant with your fathers came into my mind, and I was revealed that I might redeem you, because it was manifest to me that ye were afflicted in your bondage, and I said unto you, ‘I will have compassion on you in the blood of circumcision,’ and I said unto you, ‘I will redeem you by the blood of the Passover.’ ... The thought underlying this strange interpretation is that blood might be the means of life as well as of pollution, and in that thought there is a significance at once poetical and profound, almost, as it were, anticipating the later thoughts that the blood of Jesus cleanseth from all sin (... 1 John 1:7; ... Revelation 1:5), that we make our robes white in the blood of the Lamb (... Revelation 7:14). There is no reason, however, for believing that such thoughts were present to the prophet’s mind.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary paraphrases and comments: “I designed thee for life when thou wast doomed to destruction, and resolved to save thee from death.’ Those shall live to whom God commands life. God looked upon the world of mankind as thus cast off, thus cast out, thus polluted, thus weltering in blood, and his thoughts towards it were thoughts of good, designing it life, and that more abundantly.”

V.7 would give the impression that God neglected the child for a period of time and allowed it to grow up by itself without providing the most elementary articles of clothing. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “The opening words are almost certainly confused. It is best to join the opening words to verse 6 and amend with LXX to read, ‘Live and grow up; like a plant in the field I have made you.’ *Thou are come to excellent ornaments* (AV) makes as little sense in English as in Hebrew; a slight alteration of the text makes the more appropriate ‘Thou didst come to the time of menstruation,’ which lies behind the RSV *and arrived at full maidenhood*.”

The literal Hebrew makes in fact more sense than it is given credit. We read: “I have caused you to multiply like the buds of the field, and you have increased, and waxed great, and have come to your excellent ornaments: your breasts are formed and your hair has grown where you were bare and naked.” “Bare and naked” does not necessarily refer to her present conditions, but serves as a comparison between what is used to be in the beginning and what she has now grown up to be. God says to Israel: “When I found you, you were a rejected dying baby, now you have grown into a beautiful young woman.”

V.8 describes symbolically a proposal to marriage. “I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness” does not necessarily imply that the girl was naked and had to be covered to be decent. When Ruth suggested to Boaz that he should marry her, she said: “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.”² As God exchanged vows with His bride Israel, the picture of how He first found her is continually before His eyes. The years of physical and emotional development were not necessarily years of want and exposure. The bathing and cleansing of blood, mentioned in v.9, does, therefore, not describe what happened on the day of engagement, but refers to the baby’s condition on the day God found her. When I look at my children, who are

1. Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1

2. Ruth 3:9

now fine grownups, parents and grandparents of their own children, I often think back to them as when they were first born, bathed and put in diapers. Even the fifty-year-olds are still “my babies.” That was what God saw when He looked at Israel.

Bible scholars have struggled to fit the details of Ezekiel’s parable with the known facts of Israel’s history. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “The reference in verse 8 to entering into a covenant with you, while being a legitimate expression for the marriage contract (cf. Pr. 2:17; Mal. 2:14), hints at the historical reality of which this story is but the allegory. It seems therefore quite permissible to historicize the description of this courtship and to see the covenant of marriage as a reference to the Sinai covenant, the time at which Israel in the purpose of God had come of age as a nation. The first time that the Lord passed by would then be either in patriarchal times ... or when Israel was in Egypt ... Certainly the period of nakedness and pollution corresponds well with the Egyptian period where Israel grew up into a large nation, but it is less easy to determine precisely whether patriarchal times were allowed for this allegory or not. ... Having said that, we must be on our guard against over-pressing a parable like this in order to insist that every feature has its historical counterpart. The broad picture is discernible but there will inevitably be omissions and inconsistencies.”

Vv.15-22 describe in graphic detail Israel’s idolatry in terms of prostitution. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this section: “We enter on the history of the apostasy, and the root evil was that the bride of Jehovah had been unfaithful to her Lord. She looked on her glory as her own, and did not recognize that everything in it was the gift of God (... Hosea 2:8). The words obviously point to the policy which Solomon had initiated, of alliances with the heathen and the consequent adoption of their worship. This, as from the earliest days of Israel, was the ‘whoredom’ (Revised Version) of the unfaithful with (... Exodus 34:15,16; Leviticus 17:7; ... Deuteronomy 31:16; ... Judges 2:17; ... Isaiah 1:21; ... Jeremiah 2:20; Hosea 1, 2). And it was, so to speak, a promiscuous whoredom. Every passer by was admitted to her embraces, every nation that offered its alliance had its worship recognized and adopted. In the closing words of extremest scorn, the prophet adds, his it was.”

Fellowship with God is foreshadowed in human sexual relations. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in the New Testament, when he writes: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.”¹ As adultery and fornication are expressions of marital infidelity, so is forsaking intimacy with God the ultimate form of spiritual adultery. The very purpose of our creation and our reason for existence is to know God intimately and to be united with Him in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said to His disciples about their experience at Pentecost: “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”² If we never enter into this relationship we have forfeited our “raison d’être.” That is, in fact, what Ezekiel is saying here to his fellowmen.

It all began when Israel failed to recognize that it was God’s grace that had made her what she was. She believed that God had chosen her because of her outstanding character and attributes. Evidently, even before Israel entered Canaan, she had illusions about God’s election. And Moses had to say: “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”³ Pride because of qualities God gives us in His grace will always bring us in the camp of the enemy.

V.20 is one of the few verses in Scripture that reveal the full horror of idolatry in the form of child sacrifices. V.21, which *The New International Version* renders “You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols,” reads literally in the Hebrew text: “That you have slain my children and delivered them to cause to pass them through [the fire] for them?” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “Putting children through the fire to Molech (a phrase found in Lv.13:21; 2 Ki. 23:10; and Je. 32:35) is here explained as involving first slaying the child and then burning its body as a sacrifice to the god. Ahaz was guilty of this (2 Ki. 16:3) and so was Manasseh (2 Ki. 21:6). It was

1. Eph. 5:31,32
2. John 14:20
3. Deut. 7:7,8

abhorrent to the true religion of Israel, for whom the ancient tradition of God's thwarting of the sacrifice of Isaac on Mouth Moriah must have been a permanent reminder that such behavior was not required (Gn. 22:13). Though it was by some mistakenly regarded as being the ultimate in religious devotion, Micah taught that something far deeper and more demanding was asked by Yahweh of His worshippers (Mi. 6:6-8)."

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The next stage of idolatry is that of Moloch worship, which never wholly ceased as long as the monarchy of Judah lasted (... 2 Kings 16:3; ... Psalm 106:37; ... Isaiah 57:5; ... Jeremiah 7:32; 19:5; ... Micah 6:7; ... Leviticus 18:21; 20:2). It will be noticed that the words, 'the fire,' are in italics, *i.e.* are not in the Hebrew, the verb 'to pass through' having acquired so technical a meaning that it was enough without that addition. This, as the closing words indicate, was the crowning point. As though idolatry in itself was a small matter, it was intensified by infanticide."

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about this: "The image of Moloch was a human figure with a bull's head and outstretched arms, ready to receive the children destined for sacrifice. The image of metal was heated red hot by a fire kindled within, and the children laid on its arms rolled off into the fiery pit below. In order to drown the cries of the victims, flutes were played, and drums were beaten; and mothers stood by without tears or sobs, to give the impression of the voluntary character of the offering."

The double "woe" in v.23 pertains to two sins Israel committed against the Lord. The people built literal shrines of idolatry on the streets of Jerusalem. The "mounds" and "lofty shrines" were places of prostitution in the context of idol worship. The *Adam Clarke's Commentary* calls them "brothels." The second sin consisted in the political alliances Judah made with nations that ought to have been her enemy. God wanted the break with Egypt to be absolute and final. Moses had warned: "The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.'"¹ King Solomon disobeyed God's order, first of all by marrying Pharaoh's daughter,² and then by getting horses from Egypt.³ At the end of Solomon's life, we read: "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites."⁴

On Israel's political alliances with her surrounding "super-powers" John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: "The hostility of the prophets to such political affiliations was only partly because they regarded them as showing a lack of trust in the protecting power of Yahweh. The main reason was that in any such alliance between a lesser and a greater power, it was normal for the weaker party to take into its religious system the gods and the worship of the stronger as a sign that they were accepting his patronage. So here the religious and political are closely intertwined in the interpretations of the allegory. God's reaction was that He was provoked to anger (26), for which His appointed punishment was to diminish her *allotted portion* (27), which refers to loss of territory by enemy annexation. We know from the Taylor Prism that Sennacherib did just that in 701 BC. Her paramours, while taking advantage of her licentiousness, were in fact disgusted and ashamed because of it (27). And she herself found no satisfaction in what she did, but craved insatiably for more (28,29). Quite apart from the allegorical interpretation of these verses, they stand as a shrewd observation for any generation on the effects of prostitution and the three parties most closely involved."

Israel's prostitution was unnatural in that she did not engage in it for gain. The prime reason for which girls engage in "the world's oldest profession" is because it is lucrative. But Israel paid her lovers instead of receiving gifts. This observation dims the lines between what is emblematic and literal in the parable. It is clear that Israel's infidelity was not only spiritual in that she exchanged her allegiance to Yahweh for idol worship, but in her idolatry people did in fact practice physical prostitution as part of the rituals.

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1. Deut. 17:16
 2. I Kings 3:1
 3. I Kings 10:28
 4. I Kings 11:4-6

The Hebrew of v.30 reads literally: “How weak is your heart...” *The New International Version* renders this “How weak-willed you are...,” but *The New King James Version* has: “How degenerate is your heart!” and *The New Living Translation*: “What a sick heart you have.” “Degenerate” seems to be the best choice of words in this context. It was more in excess of determination that Judah and Jerusalem persisted in her act of defying the Lord. Her perversity turned off even those who took advantage of her. Sometimes those who do not profess to be religious have a sharper understanding of what godly morals ought to be like than those who claim to know God.

There is an expression of deep pain in the exclamation “You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!” In the light of the New Testament revelation of God’s love, Old Testament passages like these acquire a deeper meaning. No one in Jeremiah or Ezekiel’s day could understand how God’s love for Israel and for the world would be demonstrated in God becoming man and giving His life for the salvation of the world. The Apostle Paul explains this best in his Epistle to the Romans, saying: “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”¹ If spurned love hurts so deeply on a human level, how deeply is God hurt by man’s rejection! He said by mouth of Jeremiah: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”²

Vv.35-42 are God’s sentence upon Israel, which is similar to the one pronounced upon the Babylon of the Book of Revelation. In graphic detail Ezekiel describes what will happen to those who committed spiritual adultery and murder. The Levitical law demanded the death penalty for both parties involved in adultery.³ The sentence was to be carried out by stoning.⁴ The sentence for Judah was partly carried out in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. The punishment of the great prostitute Babylon will be administered on the final day of world history. All of mankind will have to give account to God for their rejection of His peace in Jesus Christ.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the phrase “Then I will hand you over to your lovers” (v.39): “Interpreting the parable, the ‘lovers’ are the nations with which Judah had allied herself, and whose religion she had adopted. In that confederacy of Moabites, Ammonites, Syrians, Philistines, Edomites and Chaldeans there should be small difference between those whom she had loved and those whom she had hated. All alike would exult in her shame and her fall (comp. ... Psalm 137:7; ... 2 Kings 24:2).” The two Scripture references mentioned read: “Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’” and “The Lord sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him. He sent them to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the Lord proclaimed by his servants the prophets.”

The words in v.42 may strike us as strange and atypically vindictive, coming from God: “Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: “Only when all this has been done for all to see (41), and Israel has been rendered incapable of playing the harlot any more, will God’s fury be assuaged and He *will be no more angry* (42). Such references to fury, jealousy and wrath are readily misunderstood by readers of the Old Testament (though the New Testament is not without such language), who think of these as essentially human and sinful qualities. Certainly the expressions are vigorously anthropomorphic, but then any language about a personal God must be. They need to be understood not in the light of human emotions of vindictiveness and malice, but in the context of God’s righteousness, holiness and consistent purity.” Quoting a certain “Tasker,” the commentary continues: “Just as human love is deficient if the element of anger is entirely lacking ... so too is anger an essential element of divine love. God’s love is inseparably connected with His holiness and His justice. He must therefore manifest anger when confronted with sin and evil.” It is good and wholesome for us to exhibit a deadly fear of God’s wrath. We must always remember the warning of Hebrews that “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁵

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1. Rom. 5:6-8
 2. Jer. 31:3
 3. Lev. 20:10
 4. Deut. 22:23,24

Without this kind of fear a love relationship with God lacks the purity required of both parties. The fact that God reveals Himself to us as “the Lamb” tends to make us lose sight of the fact that He is also “the Lion of Judah.” On the Day of Judgment, sinners will acquire this sense of reality that makes them cry out to the mountains and the rocks: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”¹

V.44 makes reference to the beginning of this chapter where God said to Jerusalem: “Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.” The proverb “Like mother, like daughter” does not imply that Jerusalem was doomed to fail because of heredity; she failed by choice. It was from her heredity that God had saved her, as is expressed in the parable of the foundling. But instead of building on the foundation of salvation God had provided for the one He loved, Jerusalem chose to surrender herself to corruption and death.

The reference to Samaria and Sodom has puzzled Bible scholars. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “No very adequate reason appears for the assignment of the respective ages of the two sisters. Historically, Sodom, as the oldest representative of evil, would have seemed to claim precedence. Samaria may have had this position assigned to it as more closely connected with Judah. The left and right hands indicate respectively a position to the north and south of Jerusalem, the observer of the heavens looking east, as, we may note, the temple did (... Ezekiel 8:16). The comparison with Samaria is developed more fully in ch. 23. *The daughters* are, as elsewhere, the cities dependent on Sodom and Samaria respectively.” And John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “At this stage Ezekiel takes up a completely new allegory, but links it on to the first by the reference to Israel’s mixed parentage so as to make it appear an expansion of what has gone before. Two sisters, Samaria the elder and Sodom the younger, are invented for the sinful Judah, but the prophet says that even though they were in their day a byword for complacent prosperity and pride (Sodom, 40, 50), and religious abominations of every kind (Samaria, 51), Judah’s sins have outstripped theirs both in number and in intensity (52). In so doing Judah is said to have *justified* her sisters (52; AV, RV), or better, *made your sisters appear righteous* (RSV). There will, however, be a day of restoration for Sodom, Samaria and Jerusalem, but this will bring nothing but a heightened sense of shame and further humiliation for the harlot city.” John, in Revelation, ascribes sodomite characteristics to Jerusalem, when he designates it as the place of Christ’s crucifixion. We read: “Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.”²

Thinking of the sin of Sodom, we would not define it as pride but rather as sexual perversion. God identifies it as pride because that was the basis for her perversity. As human sexual relations are symbolic of our spiritual relationship with God, perverting fellowship with our Creator is idolatry. The people of Sodom had lost all sense of awe of their Creator to the point when Lot warned his future sons-in-law of God’s upcoming judgment, they thought he was joking.³ Idol worship allows humans to control the objects of their religion. After all, idols are manmade.

Samaria’s sin consisted in abandoning the place of revelation. The sin of Jeroboam was not that he ceased to worship God, but that he decided where and how to do it. That led eventually to total idolatry. In both cases there was no surrender of human authority to the authority of God. Pride, the original sin, prevented the people of Sodom and Samaria to recognize God for who He is.

Jerusalem outshone Sodom and Samaria in that she had seen the glory of the Lord at the place of His revelation and she not only ignored that glory but tried to defile it by committing idolatry under God’s very eyes. She was like a woman carrying on an affair with another man in the presence of her husband. What God had done for Jerusalem, He had done for no one else. But Jerusalem responded by killing her own children as sacrifices to God’s enemy.

5. Heb. 10:31

1. Rev. 6:16,17

2. Rev. 11:8

3. See Gen. 19:14.

Vv.53-58 present some problems of interpretation. The Hebrew text of v.53 reads literally: “When I shall bring again their captivity, the captivity of Sodom and her daughters, and the captivity of Samaria and her daughters, then I will bring again the captivity of your captives in the midst of them.” The Hebrew word used is *shebuwth*, which can be variously translated “exile,” “prisoners,” or “a former state of prosperity.” The word is used in the Psalm that reads: “Restore our *fortunes*, O Lord, like streams in the Negev,” of which the opening verse states: “When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.”¹ That context proves that “captivity” can be a fitting translation. A return from captivity for Samaria could be an option, although no historical record of such event exists. But Sodom was wiped off the face of the earth. Literal and physical restoration seems to be excluded for her and her inhabitants. The translation of the Hebrew word *shuwb* with “however” is probably permissible from a linguistic point of view, but the primary meaning is “to turn back.” The first time the word is used is in the verse “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you *return* to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will *return*.”²

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The Authorized Version reads like a sentence of hopeless and perpetual condemnation, as *per impossible*. When Sodom and Samaria should be pardoned, then, and not till then, should there be hope for Judah. But all that follows in the chapter shows that what is meant is a promise of restoration, not for Judah only, but also for her less guilty sisters. Ezekiel sees a far off hope for his own nation, and he cannot limit the mercy of God in bringing them also, as she was to be brought, to repentance. For them also punishment was a means to an end beyond itself, corrective, and not merely retributive. The language of Isaiah (Isaiah 19:23-25) as to Egypt and Assyria presents a striking parallel, and may have been in Ezekiel’s thoughts.” The verses in Isaiah read: “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “However, the gracious promise rather begins with the ‘nevertheless’ (Ezek 16:60), not here; because Ezek 16:59 is a threat, not a promise. The sense here thus is, Thou shalt be restored when Sodom and Samaria are, but not until then (Ezek 16:55) - i.e., never. This applies to the guilty, who should be utterly destroyed (Ezek 16:41-42); but it does not contradict the subsequent promise of restoration to their posterity (Num 14:29-33), and to the elect remnant of grace (Calvin).”

Yet, the main idea in these verses seems to be that Jerusalem will one day wake up to the reality of God’s grace and the sight of God’s dealing with human perversion will bring upon her a deep sense of conviction of sin. Zechariah expresses this in his prophecy about the second coming of Christ, saying: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives.”³ The Apostle John, in Revelation, quotes this prophecy and extends it to the population of the whole world, saying: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”⁴

One important conclusion is that God has a solution for sexual perversion and human pride which is at the basis of it. Realization of His grace will bring about conviction of sin which allows Him to grant restoration.

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1. Ps. 126:1,4
 2. Gen. 3:19
 3. Zech. 12:10-14
 4. Rev. 1:7

There are some perplexing surprises in the last five verses of this chapter. God will keep the record of Judah's sin as a reminder of the past. This seems to contradict previous promises of forgiveness. To Jeremiah God had said: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."¹ And: "In those days, at that time ... search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare."² And Micah proclaimed: "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."³ Yet, here the books will remain open as a testimony to God's righteousness and Judah's infidelity. The reason for this is twofold: It will bring to Israel and Judah conviction of sin, a return to reality and an escape from the lie that is at the basis of all sinful behavior; it will give God the opportunity to introduce His everlasting covenant.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: "When God forgives our sins, He also forgets them (Is. 43:25). But the sinner can never completely forget: Paul remembered that he had persecuted the church (I Cor. 15:9; I Tim. 1:13); John Newton remembered his slave-trading days. The value of such memory is that it keeps a man back from pride. Not even the justified sinner should forget that he has a past of which he is right to be ashamed."

The Hebrew words used are *beriyth`owlam*. *Beriyth* refers to the practice of passing between pieces of flesh that have been cut up, and *owlam* stands for a concealed vanishing point; the end is invisible. God used these words in His promise to Noah: "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember *the everlasting covenant* between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."⁴ The author of Hebrew mentions the eternal covenant that was the basis for Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We read: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."⁵

Ezekiel uses the Hebrew word *kalam*, ashamed, several times throughout his book. It has the meaning of wounding someone emotionally, or to make someone blush. We find it three times in this chapter alone and twice in later chapters.⁶

h. The parable of the two eagles 17:1-24

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable.

3 Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar,

4 he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders.

5 "He took some of the seed of your land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, 6 and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out leafy boughs.

7 "But there was another great eagle with powerful wings and full plumage. The vine now sent out its roots toward him from the plot where it was planted and stretched out its branches to him for water.

1. Jer. 31:34

2. Jer. 50:20

3. Mic. 7:19

4. Gen. 9:16

5. Heb. 13:20,21

6. Ezek. 16:27,54,61; 36:32; 43:10,11

8 It had been planted in good soil by abundant water so that it would produce branches, bear fruit and become a splendid vine.'

9 "Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Will it thrive? Will it not be uprooted and stripped of its fruit so that it withers? All its new growth will wither. It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it up by the roots.

10 Even if it is transplanted, will it thrive? Will it not wither completely when the east wind strikes it — wither away in the plot where it grew?'"

11 Then the word of the Lord came to me:

12 "Say to this rebellious house, 'Do you not know what these things mean?' Say to them: 'The king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon.

13 Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land,

14 so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty.

15 But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the treaty and yet escape?

16 "'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, he shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose treaty he broke.

17 Pharaoh with his mighty army and great horde will be of no help to him in war, when ramps are built and siege works erected to destroy many lives.

18 He despised the oath by breaking the covenant. Because he had given his hand in pledge and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.

19 "'Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As surely as I live, I will bring down on his head my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke.

20 I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare. I will bring him to Babylon and execute judgment upon him there because he was unfaithful to me.

21 All his fleeing troops will fall by the sword, and the survivors will be scattered to the winds. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken.

22 "'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

23 On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.

24 All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. "'I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.'"

The parable of the eagles is found in vv.1-10; it is followed by an explanation in vv. 11-21. The concluding three verses are another parable about a cedar tree that also was part of the original story.

The Hebrew word for “parable” is *chiydah*, meaning “a puzzle,” or “a dark saying.” Ezekiel only uses the word in this chapter. Asaph used it in “I will open my mouth in *parables*, I will utter hidden things, things from of old,”¹ which is the psalm Matthew quotes in his explanation of Jesus’ use of parables. We read: “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.’”²

Introducing this chapter, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: “The theme of this chapter is the treachery of Zedekiah, the puppet-king appointed by Nebuchadrezzar to replace the captive Jehoiachin. It was as a result of this treachery that Nebuchadrezzar eventually marched on Jerusalem to besiege and destroy it (587 BC), but as this is

1. Ps. 78:2

2. Matt. 13:34,35

foretold by Ezekiel in verse 20 it is clear that the utterance of this parable is to be dated a year or two before then, say about 590 BC. This accords well with the position of this oracle in the book, because the last preceding date (8:1) was 592 BC and the following date (20:1) is eleven months later.”

About the two eagles, Taylor observes: “The first *great eagle* is Nebuchadrezzar who, with his massive military array, comes to Judah (represented by Lebanon), marches away its nobility (*the top of the cedar*, 3, RV, RSV) and removes them to Babylon. Knox translates: ‘he ... carried it off to Merchant-land, set it down in Traffic City.’ He then take *of the seed of the land*, i.e. a member of the royal family, namely Jehoiachin’s uncle, Zedekiah (cf. 2 Ki. 24:17) and plants him *like a willow twig* in a fertile seed-bed (5; lit. ‘a field of seed’), which can be no other than his native Jerusalem, where he duly flourishes. However, he is never anything more than a low spreading vine (6), with limited powers and influence, always dependent on his Babylonian master and with his *branches turned* in subservience *toward him*. The second eagle (7) is Egypt, to whom this vine turns for sustenance, but the prophet sees no future in this move. The vine will wither away and be uprooted by the king of Babylon with the greatest ease (9, 10).”

The Pulpit Commentary explains the mention of Lebanon, which seems to be somewhat out of context, by stating: “If the cedar was chosen to be the symbol of the monarchy of Judah, then it followed that Lebanon, as the special home of the cedar, should take its place in the parable. Possibly the fact that one of the stateliest palaces of Solomon was known as the ‘house of the forest of Lebanon’ (... 1 Kings 7:2; 10:17, 21) may have made the symbolism specially suggestive.”

The Hebrew word *tsammereth*, rendered here “the top of,” occurs only in Ezekiel in this chapter and in chapter thirty-one where it is translated “thick foliage.”¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel* comments on v.8: “Verse 8 presents a problem of interpretation. AV, RV seem to imply the happy state of Zedekiah under Nebuchadrezzar’s authority. The words are virtually a repeat of verse 5, as if to show how unnecessary and unwise it was of him to be courting Egypt. RSV, translation *From the bed where it was planted he transplanted it*, or better, with mg., *it was transplanted*, suggests that Zedekiah’s appeal to Egypt was like a further transplanting of the tender young vine which would render it weaker and more vulnerable. This is an attractive and legitimate rendering of the MT, but it confuses the picture. Before, Zedekiah’s planting had been in the watered fertile lands of Palestine, the ‘land of brooks of water’ (Dt. 8:7; 11:11), where he was able to grow up in dependence upon Babylon. A change of direction in the vine’s growth is a very different thing from being transplanted to another situation altogether. This would mean that Zedekiah was moving his court from Jerusalem to Egypt, and nothing so drastic was ever envisaged, so far as we know. The only way that RSV’s interpretation can be logically defended is by explaining verse 5 as the planting of the seed royal (Jehoiachin or Zedekiah?) in the watered land of Babylon, i.e. in the sphere of his allegiance ... On the whole the AV, RV interpretation is more consistent with the parable being told.”

In v.9 God asks the question of the people, presumably Ezekiel’s audience, whether an alliance of Judah with Egypt would have any chance of success. The people in exile would be the most knowledgeable on the topic of Babylon’s military power. The question is more or less rhetorical since the answer is immediately given. According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, the fruit that withers refers to “the children of Zedekiah” and the new growth represent “all the nobles; all shall perish with Zedekiah.”

Although the parable suggests that “It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it up by the roots,” it would take a long siege before Nebuchadrezzar’s army could break through the walls of Jerusalem and destroy the city. But it is true that the capture of the city was not the result of a grueling battle with overwhelming force.

Zedekiah’s rebellion against Nebuchadrezzar was actually rebellion against God. Nebuchadrezzar had made Zedekiah swear an oath by the name of YHWH.² From a political point of view that was one of the shrewdest things the king of Babylon could have done. He may not have realized how beneficial it would be for him to have the name of the God of Israel on his side. On the other hand, it would be Babylon’s undoing that she thought the God of

1. See Ezek. 31:3,10,14.

2. II Chron. 36:13

heaven and earth could be manipulated for political purposes. Zedekiah's oath would also become his own ruin. When he pronounced the name of YHWH, which was considered so sacred that no Jew would take it in his mouth, he did not take God seriously. That turned out to be his greatest failure. The main point of this parable is not the breaking of political treaties with Babylon or Egypt, but the breaking of the oath by the name of YHWH.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about the explanation of the parable: "The most notable feature of the prophet's explanation is the way it shows how the dependent relationship imposed by Nebuchadrezzar on Zedekiah is regarded as amounting to a solemn covenant which the vassal breaks at his peril. Whatever may be thought of the standards of heathen nations, and Nebuchadrezzar's policy was undoubtedly to make his neighbors weak and to keep them weak (14), Zedekiah had no option but to submit to his overlord. By sending ambassadors to Egypt, he despised *the oath* and *broke the covenant* (18), and, says Yahweh, this was *my oath* and *my covenant* (19). Such rebellion would bring not only the displeasure of Babylon, but the punishment of God – though in practice the one was identical with the other (20). The implications of this attitude are far-reaching. It indicates that agreements entered into and obligations incurred by worshippers of God are as binding as if they had been made with God in person. And what applies to nations must presumably be binding for social and personal relationships as well. The breaking of a treaty, a contract, a promise or any other kind of covenant involves God as well as the person who is thus aggrieved."

One amazing feature in the explanation of the parable is that God seems to take responsibility for the cruel way the Babylonians would treat the people of Judah and their king. God is not responsible for human cruelty. He did not inflict suffering on Job, although He allowed Satan to do it. God was not the one who ordered the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. When the righteous suffer, He is with them to carry them through. But for those who refuse His love and protection, what happens to them is part of the wrath of God. Jesus said: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."¹

What Ezekiel predicts here about the fate of Zedekiah was fulfilled to the letter, as the report in Second Kings indicates.²

There is a third parable in vv.22-24, which is a Messianic prophecy that turns the previous parable of judgment and failure into a glorious promise of restoration. Zedekiah was Israel's puppet-king who replaced Jeconiah who had been taken into captivity and who died in Babylon, ending David's dynasty. Jeremiah had prophesied about Jeconiah that none of his children would ever ascend Israel's throne again. We read the dramatic announcement: "O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Lord says: 'Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah.'"³ David's line of royal offspring via Solomon would end with Jeconiah. The son of David through whom the Messiah would be born was Nathan,⁴ about whom we know nothing except that he was one of David's children.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "This time it is the Lord God who takes action. After the failure of the two great eagles to make a success of establishing the state of Israel under their extensive and powerful patronage, God says, *I myself* (emphatic) *will plant it* upon a high mountain where it will grow and be conspicuous and attract the birds of the air to shelter under its protection. *The sprig from the lofty to of the cedar* (22, RSV) refers to a member of the Davidic dynasty, though Ezekiel could hardly have known how this was going to be fulfilled. The kingly line would, however, flourish, contrary to all appearances, and other nations would be incorporated under its secure and wide-spreading dominion. In so doing, the Lord would reverse the expected order of things, so that powerful nations like Babylon and Egypt (*the high tree, the green tree*) would wither and fade, while the low and dry

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1. John 3:17,18
 2. II Kings 25:3-7
 3. Jer. 22:29,30
 4. Luke 3:31

would by His word be made to flourish (24; cf. I Sa. 2:408; Lk. 1:51-53).” *Barnes’ Notes* adds about “the mountain heights of Israel”: “The parallel passage (Ezek 20:40) points to the mountain on which the temple stood. But it is not here the actual Mount Moriah so much as the kingdom of which that mountain was the representative, the seat of the throne of the anointed Son of God (Ps 2:6; compare 40:2).”

i. The law of individual responsibility 18:1-32

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

3 "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel.

4 For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son — both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

5 "Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.

6 He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or lie with a woman during her period.

7 He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked.

8 He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man.

9 He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign Lord.

10 "Suppose he has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other things

11 (though the father has done none of them): "He eats at the mountain shrines. He defiles his neighbor's wife.

12 He oppresses the poor and needy. He commits robbery. He does not return what he took in pledge. He looks to the idols. He does detestable things.

13 He lends at usury and takes excessive interest. Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he will surely be put to death and his blood will be on his own head.

14 "But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things:

15 "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife.

16 He does not oppress anyone or require a pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked.

17 He withholds his hand from sin and takes no usury or excessive interest. He keeps my laws and follows my decrees. He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live.

18 But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people.

19 "Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live.

20 The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.

21 "But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.

22 None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live.

23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

24 "But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die.

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

26 If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die.

27 But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life.

28 Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die.

29 Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

30 "Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall.

31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

The prophecy in this chapter is based upon the common proverb “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” It was evidently a well-known saying, since Jeremiah also refers to it.¹ The obvious meaning is that children suffer the consequences of their parents’ sins. The truth seems to have some Biblical foundation, since God says in the Ten Commandments: “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”² There, however, the context is idol worship, which opens the door to the influence of evil spirits who may become generational demons that keep families in their power for several generations.

The topic in Ezekiel’s prophecy here is not that children suffer from the sins of parents, which is an undeniable fact, but that we cannot blame heredity and environment for our sinful acts, for God holds everyone responsible for his own sins. Also, the subject is not suffering in this life, but eternal death as opposed to eternal life. The recurring theme in this chapter is “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” The death is spiritual death, not merely the dying of the body. The Apostle Paul confirms the principle when he writes to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³ This is illustrated with three pictures, each introduced in *The New International Version* with the word “suppose,” a word that is not in the actual Hebrew text.

As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes about the examples given: “The verses that follow are noticeable as forming one of the most complete pictures of a righteous life presented in the Old Testament. It ads characteristic of Ezekiel that he starts from the avoidance of sins against the first table of the commandments.”

God reacts strongly to the use of the proverb that shirks responsibility for personal failures by blaming it all on heredity and environment. “As surely as I live,” in Hebrew *Chay-`aaniiy*, is the equivalent of an oath by which God swears by His own existence. Even atheistic philosophers admit that what distinguishes a human being from his fellow creatures is his ability to choose responsibly. Our relationship with God is determined by the decision to love. Those who say they cannot love God because of the sour grapes their fathers ate, have made their choice.

1. Jer. 31:29

2. Ex. 20:5

3. Rom. 6:23

The Hebrew word for “soul” is *nephesh*. It is what man became when God breathed His breath in his nostrils, as we read: “the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”¹ It is the image of God we bear. That is the reason God claims our soul, saying: “Every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son — both alike belong to me.” Since our souls do not belong to ourselves but to God, we are responsible for what we do with them. This does not mean that we are on our own as far as the condition of our soul is concerned. David testifies to the fact that God performed miracles for him, saying: “Come and hear, all you who fear God, And I will declare what He has done for my soul.”² God loves us and if we do not respond to His love, we cannot blame our reactions to matters of heredity or environment; it is our choice.

Looking at the stipulations of a righteous life, we may get the wrong impression that we can earn our salvation by being good, by working for it. The key to the understanding of these verses is in v.9 – “He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws.” Jesus defines the righteousness that is required by saying: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” And “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”³ That is the foundation for the separation from the acts of sin described in these verses.

The realm covered in these verses refers to five basic areas: abstinence from idolatry, adultery, oppression, dishonesty in financial matters as well as not mediating in difficult inter-human relations. Love of God will demonstrate itself in an exclusive worship of God alone, in sexual purity and in fairness in all relationships. Handling of finances plays an important part in this. A father who has this kind of relationship with the Lord will love his son. But the son, who is the subject in vv.10-18, does not respond to his father’s love and never discovers God’s love for him, although it was never hidden. The young man cannot claim that he went astray because his dad did not practice what he preached.

Barnes’ Notes comments about “live” and “die” as used in vv.9-13: “In the writings of Ezekiel there is a development of the meaning of ‘life’ and ‘death.’ In the holy land the sanctions of divine government were in great degree temporal; so that the promise of ‘life’ for ‘obedience,’ the threatening of ‘death’ for ‘disobedience,’” in the Books of Moses, were regarded simply as temporal and national. In their exile this could not continue in its full extent, and the universality of the misfortune necessarily made men look deeper into the words of God. The word ‘soul’ denotes a ‘person’ viewed as an ‘individual,’ possessing the ‘life’ which God breathed into man when he became a ‘living soul’ (Gen 2:7); i.e., it distinguishes ‘personality’ from ‘nationality,’ and this introduces that fresh and higher idea of ‘life’ and ‘death,’ which is not so much ‘life’ and ‘death’ in a future state, as ‘life’ and ‘death’ as equivalent to communion with or separation from God—that idea of life and death which was explained by our Lord in the Gospel of John (John 8), and by Paul in Rom 8.”

The words “He will surely be put to death and his blood will be on his own head” suggest capital punishment and, consequently, physical death. The problem, however, is that in the Jerusalem of Ezekiel’s days no one was executed because of the sins mentioned; everyone was practicing them. It was not true either that Nebuchadnezzar’s army only killed idolaters and adulterers and the righteous were spared. The point is, evidently, that there were no righteous people in Jerusalem who could have prevented the destruction of the city and the massacre of its inhabitants. And God cannot be blamed for the death of the sinners; their “blood is on their own head.”

The third example in vv.14-18 concerns the righteous acts of the son of a sinful father. That person will not suffer the consequences of his father’s unrighteous life.

V.19 poses the question “why?” *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “The question, ‘Why does the son not help to bear?’ is not a direct objection on the part of the people, but is to be taken as a pretext, which the people might offer on the ground of the law, that God would visit the sin of the fathers upon the sons in justification of their proverb. Ezekiel cites this pretext for the purpose of meeting it by stating the reason why this does not occur

1. Gen. 2:7
2. Ps 66:16 (NKJV)
3. John 14:15,21

... This proved the proverb to be false, and confirmed the assertion made in v. 4b, to which the address therefore returns (v. 20). The righteousness of the righteous man will come upon him, i.e., upon the righteous man, namely, in its consequences. The righteous man will receive the blessing of righteousness, but the unrighteous man the curse of his wickedness.”

In asking the question the people seem to accuse God of being unrighteous. As is pointed out above, the proverb which is the basis of this chapter provided the sinners with an excuse for their behavior. If they cannot blame their fathers, then why not blame God. If God is no longer the measure of righteousness, no one would even be able to discuss the subject. If the definition of sin is falling short of the glory of God,¹ then God’s glory and righteousness are identical. A lack of God’s total and infinite character would mean that God is no longer God. By definition God and righteousness are identical. Every judgment consists of a comparison of man’s acts with God’s character.

The final point of this whole chapter is in the last verses that declare: “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!” The mere idea that God would enjoy punishing people is an insult to God’s love, similar to the insult to His righteousness in the preceding verses. The answer to the proverb about the grapes and the teeth is “repent and live!”

In conclusion, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks: “This classic statement of individual responsibility must not, however, be taken in complete isolation. It is not a flat contradiction of the traditional view of corporate responsibility. It is rather a counterpoise to it. The corporate unity of the family or tribal group was of the *esse* of Hebrew psychology. It was bound up with the idea of the continuance of the family line by direct sonship, as well as with the covenant relationship that existed between the God of Israel and the community of Israel. To have denied all this would have needed more than a bare assertion. The whole attitude to life would have had to be radically rewritten and dogmatically reformulated by Ezekiel. Communal solidarity and corporate responsibility were facts, to which experience bore witness. Ezekiel’s aim is to show that they are not the only facts. God’s redeemed community is a nation of righteous or repentant individuals. And in the situation with which the prophet was immediately concerned, it was dangerous for the exiles to be concealing themselves behind an unbalanced view of their national responsibility in order to avoid the prophetic demand for repentance and a new way of life.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “Every preacher of righteousness in every age has to warn the evil doer that he is working evil for generations yet unborn, to whom he transmits his own tendencies, the evil of his own influence and example. It is well that he can balance that thought with the belief that good also may work in the future with a yet wider range and mightier power.”

j. A lament over the kings of Israel 19:1-14

1 "Take up a lament concerning the princes of Israel

2 and say: "What a lioness was your mother among the lions! She lay down among the young lions and reared her cubs.

3 She brought up one of her cubs, and he became a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men.

4 The nations heard about him, and he was trapped in their pit. They led him with hooks to the land of Egypt.

5 "When she saw her hope unfulfilled, her expectation gone, she took another of her cubs and made him a strong lion.

6 He prowled among the lions, for he was now a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men.

7 He broke down their strongholds and devastated their towns. The land and all who were in it were terrified by his roaring.

8 Then the nations came against him, those from regions round about. They spread their net for him, and he was trapped in their pit.

1. Rom. 3:23

9 With hooks they pulled him into a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon. They put him in prison, so his roar was heard no longer on the mountains of Israel.

10 "Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water.

11 Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler's scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous or its height and for its many branches.

12 But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel, it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them.

13 Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land.

14 Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter.' This is a lament and is to be used as a lament."

There are two parables in this chapter, which is called "a lament." The Hebrew word is *qiy nah*, "a dirge." It is used in Scripture for the first time in the song David composed at the death of Saul and Jonathan. We read: "David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, and ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament of the bow."¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about Ezekiel's lament: "This poem is the first example Ezekiel has given us of the *qinâ*, variously translated 'dirge,' 'elegy' or 'lamentation.' It consists of a composition written in the distinctive mournful tones of the *qinâ* rhythm, in which the two member of the couplet are of unequal length in the pattern of 3:2. Only rarely can this rhythm be caught in an English translation, because in Hebrew the beats are usually one to a word and when translated a single Hebrew word often needs several English words to express its meaning. Verse 2b illustrates the meter best:

1 2 3
In-the-midst of-lions she-couched,
 1 2
rearing her-whelps.

Other examples of the same meter in Ezekiel are found in 26:17f; 27:3-9; 28:12-10; 32:2-8. It occurs frequently elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (where even Psalm 23 uses it) and in prophetic laments, and of course it is typical of much of lamentations."

The first parable represents the kings of Israel as two young lions; the second depicts them as a luscious vine. Both images are borrowed from Jacob's blessing of Judah. We read: "You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness — who dares to rouse him?" And: "He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk."² Ezekiel uses three different words in these verses for "lion": *labiy*, *ariy* and *kephiy*. Isaiah used the name *Ariel*, "lion," for the city of Jerusalem, predicting the siege and capture of the city. We read: "Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David settled! Add year to year and let your cycle of festivals go on. Yet I will besiege Ariel; she will mourn and lament, she will be to me like an altar hearth."³ The lioness in this parable is the city of Jerusalem, the place of the throne of David.

The question is which of the Judean kings Ezekiel has in mind in these parables. According to *Barnes' Notes*, "Ezekiel regarded Zedekiah as an interloper (Ezek 17:1 ...), therefore he here (in Ezek 19) passes over Jehoiakim and Zedekiah as mere creatures of Egypt and of Babylon, and recognizes Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin as the only legitimate sovereigns since the time of Josiah. This dirge is for them, while it warns the usurper Zedekiah of an approaching fate similar to that of the two earlier kings." *The Pulpit Commentary* agrees that "The whole chapter

1. II Sam. 1:17,18
2. Gen. 49:9,11,12
3. Isa. 29:1,2

finds a parallel in Jeremiah's review of Josiah's successors (... Jeremiah 22:10-30)." The commentary states: "The lioness is Israel, the kingdom idealized and personified. The lionesses among whom she had lain down are the heathen kingdoms. The question asks why she had become as one of them and adopted their cruelty and ferocity."

The first lion cub is Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah. The Bible states about him: "Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his fathers had done."¹ We read about Jehoahaz's fate, to which Ezekiel refers: "Pharaoh Neco put him in chains at Riblah in the land of Hamath so that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and he imposed on Judah a levy of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim son of Josiah king in place of his father Josiah and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. But he took Jehoahaz and carried him off to Egypt, and there he died."²

The next lion whelp in Ezekiel's parable may be Jehoiakim about whom Jeremiah prophesied, condemning him for his extravagance at the expense of the people.³ Jeremiah predicted what the people's reaction would be to his death: "Therefore this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah: 'They will not mourn for him: 'Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!' 'They will not mourn for him: 'Alas, my master! Alas, his splendor!' 'He will have the burial of a donkey — dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem.'"⁴

But, as we saw, Bible scholars disagree about whether Jehoiakim or Jehoiaquin is meant as the second whelp. *Barnes' Notes* believes him to be Jehoiaquin, stating: "Jehoiachin who soon showed himself no less unworthy than Jehoahaz. The 'waiting' of the people was during the absence of their rightful lord Jehoahaz, a captive in Egypt while Jehoiakim, whom they deemed a usurper, was on the throne. It was not until Jehoiachin succeeded, that they seemed to themselves to have a monarch of their own." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, agrees with this, stating: "Jehoahaz was succeeded by his brother Jehoiakim, but Ezekiel passes over him and moves straight on to the latter's son, Jehoiachin. He also reigned for only three months before becoming the victim of his father's misdemeanors. Jerusalem was already under attack, because of Jehoiakim's refusal to pay tribute to Nebuchadrezzar, when the eighteen-year-old prince came to the throne. His reign was brief and pathetic, and his exile in Babylon long and wearisome."

In the second parable, vv.10-14, Ezekiel compares the kingdom to a vine. The Hebrew of v.10 reads literally: "Your mother is like a vine in your blood, by the waters: she was fruitful and full of branches by reason of many waters." The problem word in this verse is the Hebrew word *dam*, which has the primary meaning of blood, but can also mean "the juice of the grape." As such Jacob uses it in the earlier quoted blessing he pronounced on Judah, saying: "He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the *blood* of grapes."⁵ *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "No satisfactory meaning can be got out of the words, the nearest being 'in thy life, thy freshness,' the sap of the vine being thought of as its blood; and critics have been driven to conjectural readings or renderings." Various translations illustrate the problem. *The New King James Version* reads: "Your mother was like a vine in your bloodline, Planted by the waters, Fruitful and full of branches Because of many waters." *The New International Version*: "Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water." *The New Living Translation* circumvents the problem with: "Your mother was like a vine planted by the water's edge. It had lush, green foliage because of the abundant water." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: "*In thy blood* (AV, RV) can hardly be right, and many emendations have been proposed. The likeliest presuppose a confusion of *dâm*, 'blood,' with either *dâmâ*, 'to be like,' (so RV mg., in thy likeness), or *râmâ*, 'height,' 'loftiness.' RSV *vineyard* is weak."

There is again confusion among Bible scholars as to whom Ezekiel is talking about in this parable. In the two earlier instances in which he used the same symbol, the whole nation of Israel was targeted, as in chapter fifteen,

1. II Kings 23:31,32
2. II Kings 23:33,34
3. Jer. 22:13-17
4. Jer. 22:18,19
5. Gen. 49:11

or King Zedekiah, in chapter seventeen. *Barnes' Notes* takes the view that "Ezekiel here takes a general view of the king and princes of the blood royal." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* believes that the subject is "Zedekiah, and his many sons." We read: "Zedekiah grew proud of his numerous offspring and prosperity; and although he copied the example of Jehoiakim, yet he thought he might safely rebel against the king of Babylon." *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* believes that the scepter or rod can be either "Zedekiah or Jehoiachin." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states unapologetically about v.14: "The verse refers to Zedekiah's rebellion which brought in its wake the punitive Babylonian measure which virtually ended Israel's national identity, at least for many years, and certainly brought the Davidic line to an end. Thus the cause of its own destruction was found within itself, and it is worth noting that most institutions involving human beings end in much the same way."

k. A review of Israel's past history and of God's future plans for her 20:1-44

1 In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and they sat down in front of me.

2 Then the word of the Lord came to me:

3 "Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign Lord.'

4 "Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers

5 and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of the house of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, "I am the Lord your God."

6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands.

7 And I said to them, "Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

8 "But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt.

9 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt.

10 Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert.

11 I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them.

12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy.

13 "Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws — although the man who obeys them will live by them — and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert.

14 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.

15 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them — a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands—

16 because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols.

17 Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert.

18 I said to their children in the desert, "Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols.

19 I am the Lord your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

20 Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God."

21 *"But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws — although the man who obeys them will live by them — and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert.*

22 *But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.*

23 *Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries,*

24 *because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes [lusted] after their fathers' idols.*

25 *I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by;*

26 *I let them become defiled through their gifts — the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the Lord.'*

27 *"Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In this also your fathers blasphemed me by forsaking me:*

28 *When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings.*

29 *Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to?'" (It is called Bamah to this day.)*

30 *"Therefore say to the house of Israel: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images?*

31 *When you offer your gifts — the sacrifice of your sons in the fire — you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, O house of Israel? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will not let you inquire of me.*

32 *"You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen.*

33 *As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.*

34 *I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered — with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.*

35 *I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you.*

36 *As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

37 *I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.*

38 *I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, yet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord.*

39 *"As for you, O house of Israel, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols.*

40 *For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord, there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices.*

41 *I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will show myself holy among you in the sight of the nations.*

42 *Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers.*

43 *There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done.*

44 *You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"*

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this chapter with the following: “Unlike the illustrations of the founding child (chapter 16) and the parable of Oholah and Oholibah (chapter 23), we have here a description of Israel’s past history of continuing rebellion against the Lord, expressed in actual historical terms without the aid of metaphor and allegory. The chapter traces the main events of the past, beginning with Egypt and leading on to the Exodus, the wilderness experience, life in Canaan and eventual dispersion among the nations. There are a number of themes which recur: (a) the rebelliousness of Israel, despite God’s merciful treatment of them in giving them numerous blessings and in repeatedly withholding His wrath from being poured out upon them. (b) The wilderness wanderings, as being more than simply an episode in Israel’s history. They represented a state of mind and its consequences. So the final period of Israel’s history, the dispersion in exile, is seen as a reversion to the wilderness life which had preceded the settlement in Canaan (verse 35: ‘I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples’). (c) The motive of Yahweh’s concern for His own name. This is a new feature in Ezekiel’s writing and it appears later on in chapters 36 and 39, but it is not wholly absent anywhere from the prophet’s thought. Its significance is that it represents a cessation by God of His covenant blessing towards Israel because they had so completely abandoned their own responsibilities under the covenant. All the covenant requirements, like the statutes and ordinances of Sinai, had been broken and the covenant sign, the sabbath, had been profaned: God was therefore justified in carrying out the sanctions of the covenant. He was still, however, a God of mercy; but now His merciful acts were prompted primarily by concern for His own ‘name’ (*i.e.* glory, reputation), and with an eye to the conclusions which would be drawn by the watching nations of the world.”

This is the third time Ezekiel records a visit by the elders, who were with him in captivity, who came to his house to consult the Lord for them.¹ As in the other instances, the topic of inquiry is not mentioned. From the content of Ezekiel’s prophecy here, we could deduct that the elders had come to ask about what the future would hold for them. We assume that these men were familiar with the letter Jeremiah had sent to the captives approximately five years earlier, in which he wrote: “This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.’”² Jeremiah had sent the letter with Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.³ According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, this transaction took place in the first or second year of Zedekiah’s reign.

As far as the date given, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “A new date is given, and includes what follows to ... Ezekiel 23:49. The last note of time was in ... Ezekiel 8:1, and eleven months and five days had passed, during which the prophecies of the intervening chapters had been written or spoken. We may note further that it was two years one month and five days after the prophet’s call to his work (ch. 1.), and two years and five months before the Chaldeans besieged Jerusalem (... Ezekiel 24:1).” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, quoting Calvin, states: “This computation was calculated to make them cherish the more ardently the hope of the restoration promised them in 70 years, for, when prospects are hopeless, years are not computed.”

As on the previous occasion when the elders had come to inquire of the Lord, God refused to answer their question because they had not abandoned idolatry in their heart. In an earlier chapter we read that the Lord said: “Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?”⁴

Those who forget their history are unable to face the future, and those who do not learn from history are forced to repeat it. That is why God gives these men a history lesson. Ezekiel is ordered to take them back to the time Israel was still in Egypt in slavery. Israel as a nation had not been born yet; the Israelites, although numerous, were still an extended family. When Moses revealed to them that God would lead out of their slavery, and Pharaoh refused

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1. See Ezek. 8:1; 14:1.
 2. Jer. 29:10
 3. Jer. 29:3
 4. Ezek. 14:3

by increasing the requirements of their slave labor, they protested to Moses and Aaron, saying: “May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”¹ When God sustained them supernaturally in the desert, they rebelled against the menu saying: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost — also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”² Immediately after receiving The Ten Commandments in which they were warned not to practice idolatry, the people made the gold calf, saying: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”³ God had said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and they are a stiff-necked people indeed!”⁴ And to Jeremiah the Lord declared: “These people have stubborn and rebellious hearts; they have turned aside and gone away.”⁵

Not much is known of Israel’s religious practices in Egypt. God reveals to Ezekiel that they practiced idolatry there and that He had contemplated punishing them while still there. As *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “This is a circumstance that Moses has not mentioned, namely, their provoking God by their idolatry, after he had sent Moses and Aaron to them in Egypt.” The reason God did not destroy them is given in v.9 – “But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt.” Amos mentioned about Israel’s idolatry in the desert: “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god—which you made for yourselves.”⁶ A footnote in *The New International Version* gives some alternate readings of Amos’ verse: “Or lifted up Sakkuth your king | and Kaiwan your idols, | your star-gods; Septuagint lifted up the shrine of Molech | and the star of your god Rephan, | their idols.”

When God revealed Himself to Israel, He intended her to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.⁷ This implied that in their behavior the Israelites would demonstrate some characteristics of God’s nature and show to the outside world who God is. When David committed the double crime of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah, God said to him: “By doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt.”⁸

The statement “I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them” sounds strange to us because of statements in the New Testament, particularly Paul’s, that teach that salvation is not by observing the law but by faith in the accomplished work of Christ. As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul uses the same words as Ezekiel twice in his epistles,⁹ even calling the requirement to observe the law, “the curse of the law.”¹⁰ We must remember, however, that with the exception of the Sabbath, the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, although not as requirements for salvation but as the fruit of it. Also “the law” represents both the moral law and the ritual law, which provided for forgiveness of sins committed by the bringing of the appropriate sacrifices.

In mentioning the requirements of the law, God singles out the Sabbath, using the words “My Sabbaths.” The fact that keeping the Sabbath by cessation of physically activities is not longer a New Testament requirement,

1. Ex. 5:21
2. Num. 11:5,6
3. Ex. 32:4
4. Deut. 9:13
5. Jer. 5:23
6. Amos 5:25,26
7. Ex. 19:6
8. II Sam. 12:14
9. Rom.10:5; Gal.3:12
10. Gal. 3:12

does not mean that the Sabbath is no longer meaningful. The author of Hebrews brings out the real meaning of the Sabbath, by inviting us to enter into God's rest, by resting from our own activities. We read: "There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."¹ God's original intent for us was that we would enter into His rest with Him. The hymn "Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart" expresses this beautifully.

God calls the Sabbath "a sign between us." The Hebrew word used is *'owth*, meaning "a signal," "a prodigy, or "evidence." The first time the word is used in Scripture is when God created the sun and moon: "And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as *signs* to mark seasons and days and years.'"² When Noah came out of the ark after the flood God said to him: "This is the *sign* of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the *sign* of the covenant between me and the earth."³ Abraham's circumcision became the *sign* of the covenant between God and him.⁴ The first time the Sabbath is called "a sign" is in the verse: "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a *sign* between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.'"⁵ God called the plagues of Egypt and the miraculous exodus *'owth* saying: "Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous *signs* I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times — not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it."⁶

The seventy-year captivity was calculated by the number of years in which the people neglected to allow the Promised Land to enjoy its Sabbath rest. We read: "The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah."⁷

"I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by" contrasts with God's law about which we read: "The man who obeys them will live by them." The first statutes are manmade rules and regulations and demonically inspired laws as part of idolatry; the second is the law that is the expression of God's character. Bible scholars have objected to the statement that God would give people over to rules issued by Satan. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about this: "The simple meaning of this place and all such places is, that when they had rebelled against the Lord, despised his statutes, and polluted his Sabbaths-in effect cast him off, and given themselves wholly to their idols, then he abandoned them, and they abandoned themselves to the customs and ordinances of the pagan. That this is the meaning of the words requires no proof to them who are the least acquainted with the genius and idioms of the Hebrew language, in which God is a thousand times said to do, what in the course of his providence or justice he only permits to be done."

People who sacrifice their own children to idols suffer the consequences in their own emotions. The image of God within us rebels against such practices, as it rebels against any kind of murder. Dostoyevsky expresses this beautifully in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, in which the hero commits a double murder and goes through the torture of his remorse. Soldiers in combat suffer from the acts of killing they have to perform. The thirst of the rich

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1. Heb. 4:9,10
 2. Gen. 1:14
 3. Gen. 9:12,13
 4. Gen. 17:11
 5. Ex. 31:13
 6. Num. 14:22
 7. II Chron. 36:21

man in hell in Jesus' parable was the thirst of his soul.¹ God reveals Himself in the voice of our conscience. "I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the Lord."

Barnes' Notes explains about the word *Bamah* in v.29: "The Hebrew word for 'high place.' Another instance of the perversion of God's laws. When the Israelites first entered Canaan they were to set up the 'tabernacle' on a 'high place,' and upon this and upon no other they were to worship Yahweh (1 Sam 9:12 ff; 1 Kings 3:4). But the Israelites followed the custom of the country, and set up idol-worship on every high hill, and the word 'high place' ('Bamah,' plural 'Bamoth') became a by-word (compare 'Bamoth-Baal,' Josh 13:17). 'Bamoth' occurs on the Moabitic stone, which records the erection of high places in honor of Chemosh. The name 'Bamah' was thus a brand of the divine displeasure, and a memorial of the people's guilt."

In v.30 the elders who are sitting in front of Ezekiel are addressed as representatives of the whole nation of Israel. The prophecy is for "the house of Israel," but the message is given to those who had come to inquire of Ezekiel. These men may not have been practicing human sacrifices in Babylon, but as we read earlier, they had "set up idols in their hearts."² They were under the same demonic dominion as their parents had been. That is the punishment of "the third and fourth generation of those who hate [God]" to which the first of the Ten Commandments refers.³ Their spiritual pollution makes them unfit to receive the Word of God. Only the pure in heart will see God.⁴

The Pulpit Commentary comments on v.30 ff: "The prophet reads the secret thoughts of the inquirers. If the temple were destroyed, they thought, then the one restraint on the idolatries they loved would be removed. They would be no longer a separate people, and would be free to adopt the cultus of the heathen among whom they lived. If that was not Jehovah's purpose for them, then there must be no destruction of the temple, no dispersion among the nations. They come to Ezekiel to know which of the two alternatives he, as the prophet of Jehovah, has in store, and his answer is that he is bound to neither. They could not abdicate their high position, and would remain under the burden of its responsibilities. Scattered though they might be among the heathen, yet even there the 'mighty hand and the stretched-out arm' (we note the phrases as from ... Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15) would hunt them down, and punish them for their iniquities."

V.32 reminds us of the words the elders of the people used to Samuel when they asked for a king, saying: "Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."⁵ When Samuel reported this to the Lord, the Lord's answer was: "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you."⁶ There is nothing new under the sun!

The people in Ezekiel's day would go through the same experience as their ancestors had when they left Egypt on their way to Canaan. They would not go into the desert as a geographical area, but they would go through a desert-experience in "the desert of the nations" (v.35). Interestingly, the time Israel spent in Egypt is also called a desert. The desert represents the tests of hardship God allows us to go through for the purpose of drawing us to Himself. In Hosea this is expressed beautifully when God says to Ephraim: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt."⁷

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1. Luke 16:24
 2. Ezek. 14:3
 3. Ex. 20:5
 4. Matt. 5:8
 5. I Sam. 8:5
 6. I Sam. 8:7,8
 7. Hos. 2:14,15

The Apostle Paul states that Israel's experiences in the desert are meant to be a warning for us "to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did."¹ Deserts are inhabitable places. They are death-like experiences that remind us of what life is all about. The Word of God is meant to keep us alive in the deserts of life. When Jesus was in the desert, tempted by Satan, He used the written Word of God to defeat the enemy.² In the desert we learn "that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."³

According to the message Moses had to deliver to Pharaoh, the purpose for Israel's going into the desert was to worship God. Several times God said to Pharaoh: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert."⁴ Israel did very little worshipping in the desert and the place of worship became a judgment seat. It was Israel's idolatry, then and later, that changed worship into judgment.

God says that He will make His people "pass under my rod." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* explains: "This alludes to the custom of tithing the sheep. I take it from the rabbis. The sheep were all penned; and the shepherd stood at the door of the fold, where only one sheep could come out at once. He had in his hand a rod dipped in vermilion; and as they came out, he counted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine; and as the tenth came out, he marked it with the rod, and said, 'This is the tenth;' and that was set apart for the Lord." The principle of tithe in which every tenth is dedicated to the Lord underlines the fact that all belongs to Him. The procedure would bring all of Israel "into the bond of the covenant." The Hebrew words used are *macoreth beriyyth*. *Beriyyth* is the compact made by passing between pieces of flesh of an animal. The word *macoreth* is only found in this verse in Scripture.

In the original *beriyyth* God concluded with Abraham, God was the only party that passed between the pieces of cut up animals, indicating that His covenant with Abraham was one-sided. We read: "So the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.' Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram."⁵ God does the purging, both in the nation as well as in individual lives. As God said to Israel in the desert, so He says here: "I am the Lord, who makes you holy."⁶

But God does not force holiness upon anyone. In bringing back to mind Israel's desert experience, David sang in one of his psalms: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"⁷ Those who would be taken away were the ones who would never enter into God's rest.

Several Bible scholars consider v.39 to be an irony, certainly not a command. It emphasizes the hypocrisy of those who try to appease both God and idols simultaneously. When people refuse to surrender to God alone and love Him will all their heart and mind and strength, God surrenders them to the enemy. That is what the Apostle Paul states in Romans: "Men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity

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1. I Cor. 10:1-13
 2. Matt. 4:1-11
 3. Deut. 8:3
 4. Ex. 7:16; 8:1,20; 9:1,13; 10:3
 5. Gen. 15:9-11,17,18
 6. Lev. 20:8
 7. Ps. 95:6-11

for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”¹

From v.39b through v.44 God draws a picture of healing and restoration of the nation and its individual members. It is the portrait of a converted soul, a soul that experienced salvation and restoration and that remembers with horror the pit of iniquity from which it was drawn. Ezekiel gives us here a preview of the last chapters of his book, in which a new Israel worships God in a new temple. It is as if God felt so overwhelmed by the sorrow of having to punish and chastise His people that He allows Himself this look into the future in order to be consoled by the outcome. It also helps us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”²

I. Judgment by fire and by sword20:45-21:32

45 The word of the Lord came to me:

46 "Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest of the southland.

47 Say to the southern forest: 'Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it.

48 Everyone will see that I the Lord have kindled it; it will not be quenched.'"

49 Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! They are saying of me, 'Isn't he just telling parables?'"

21:1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophesy against the land of Israel

3 and say to her: 'This is what the Lord says: I am against you. I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked.

4 Because I am going to cut off the righteous and the wicked, my sword will be unsheathed against everyone from south to north.

5 Then all people will know that I the Lord have drawn my sword from its scabbard; it will not return again.'

6 "Therefore groan, son of man! Groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief.

7 And when they ask you, 'Why are you groaning?' you shall say, 'Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every knee become as weak as water.' It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign Lord."

8 The word of the Lord came to me:

9 "Son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Lord says: "'A sword, a sword, sharpened and polished—

10 sharpened for the slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! "'Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son [Judah]? The sword despises every such '.

11 "'The sword is appointed to be polished, to be grasped with the hand; it is sharpened and polished, made ready for the hand of the slayer.

1. Rom. 1:21-28

2. Heb. 12:2

12 Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people; it is against all the princes of Israel. They are thrown to the sword along with my people. Therefore beat your breast.

13 "Testing will surely come. And what if the scepter [of Judah], which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign Lord.'

14 "So then, son of man, prophesy and strike your hands together. Let the sword strike twice, even three times. It is a sword for slaughter — a sword for great slaughter, closing in on them from every side.

15 So that hearts may melt and the fallen be many, I have stationed the sword for slaughter at all their gates. Oh! It is made to flash like lightning, it is grasped for slaughter.

16 O sword, slash to the right, then to the left, wherever your blade is turned.

17 I too will strike my hands together, and my wrath will subside. I the Lord have spoken."

18 The word of the Lord came to me:

19 "Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to take, both starting from the same country. Make a signpost where the road branches off to the city.

20 Mark out one road for the sword to come against Rabbah of the Ammonites and another against Judah and fortified Jerusalem.

21 For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver.

22 Into his right hand will come the lot for Jerusalem, where he is to set up battering rams, to give the command to slaughter, to sound the battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to build a ramp and to erect siege works.

23 It will seem like a false omen to those who have sworn allegiance to him, but he will remind them of their guilt and take them captive.

24 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because you people have brought to mind your guilt by your open rebellion, revealing your sins in all that you do — because you have done this, you will be taken captive.

25 "'O profane and wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax,

26 this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low.

27 A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it.'

28 "And you, son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says about the Ammonites and their insults: "'A sword, a sword, drawn for the slaughter, polished to consume and to flash like lightning!

29 Despite false visions concerning you and lying divinations about you, it will be laid on the necks of the wicked who are to be slain, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax.

30 Return the sword to its scabbard. In the place where you were created, in the land of your ancestry, I will judge you.

31 I will pour out my wrath upon you and breathe out my fiery anger against you; I will hand you over to brutal men, men skilled in destruction.

32 You will be fuel for the fire, your blood will be shed in your land, you will be remembered no more; for I the Lord have spoken.'"

The section actually consists of four prophecies, each introduced with the words "The word of the Lord came to me."¹ This is followed by two statements that begin with the words "This is what the Sovereign Lord says."²

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states by way of introduction: "Ezekiel is commanded to address his words toward the south (46). Although the word appears three times in this verse in AV and RV, the Hebrew uses three different words (*têmânâ*, *dârôm* and *neḏeb*). Of these the first two are general poetic words to describe the southerly

1. Ezek. 20:45; 21:1,8,18

2. Ezek. 21:24,28

direction, whereas the third refers to a named geographical area, called in modern Israel the Negev, which lay to the south of the Judean hills. Today this is waterless desert, except where agricultural settlements have irrigated it into a state of cultivation, but we know that in Old Testament times there was greater afforestation throughout Palestine, and so a reference to the forest of the Negev (RSV) does not have to be regarded as completely figurative. Ezekiel may have reinforced his words by facing southwards as he uttered his oracle, prediction that the Lord will cause a forest fire to sweep through the land from south to north. All will see it and no-one will be able to avoid its heat (47; *all faces ... shall be scorched by it*). Men will realize that it has been sent by the Lord as an act of judgment. Verse 49 presupposes that Ezekiel has spoken his oracle and has been ridiculed by his hearers as a speaker of parables (RV), or, to retain the cognate form of the Hebrew, a ‘riddler of riddles.’ In view of what has gone before the complaint is not without its justification.”

Instead of the words “preach against the south,” the Hebrew text reads “drop your word toward the south,” on which *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The verb is used specially of prophetic utterances (... Ezekiel 21:2; ... Amos 7:6; ... Micah 2:6, 11), and stands, therefore, in the Hebrew without an object. *Toward the south*. Three distinct words are used in the Hebrew for the thrice-repeated ‘south’ of the Authorized Version. (1) One which primarily means ‘the region on the right hand,’ *sc.* as a man looks to the east, which Ezekiel also uses in ... Ezekiel 47:19; 48:28); (2) the ‘shining land,’ used repeatedly in Ezekiel 40., 42. (... Deuteronomy 33:23; ... Job 37:17; ... Ecclesiastes 1:6; 11:3); and (3) the *Negeb*, the ‘dry’ or ‘parched’ land, the South (always in Revised Version with a capital letter), of ... Joshua 15:21, and the historical books generally, the region lying to the south of Judah. The use of the three words where one might have sufficed is, perhaps, characteristic of Ezekiel’s affluence of diction. The LXX treats all three as proper names, and transliterates them as *Thaiman*, *Darom*, and *N’ageb*. Against this region and its inhabitants (they, of course, are the ‘trees’) Ezekiel is directed to utter his words of judgment. The parenthesis in the last sentence gives the key to the prophet’s cipher writing. From Ezekiel’s standpoint on the Chebar, the whole of Judah is as *the forest of the south*. The ‘green tree,’ as in ... Psalm 1:1, 2, is the man who is relatively righteous; the ‘dry tree’ is the sinner whose true life is withered; the ‘fire’ the devastation wrought by the Chaldean invaders, as executing the Divine judgment. In our Lord’s words in ... Luke 23:31 we may probably find an echo of Ezekiel’s imagery.” The verse in Luke, referred to here, reads: “For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

The imagery of prophesying to an entity other than human seems to be particular to Ezekiel. Earlier God had told him to address the mountains of Israel. We read: “The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them and say: ‘O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.’”¹ Here the prophecy is directed to a forest. Whereas the mountains represented the place of idolatry, the sins people committed against the Lord, here the trees represent the people. In one instance “mountain” is used as a symbol of satanic opposition. We read in Zechariah: “Who are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground.”² (“Who” instead of “what” is referred to in a footnote in *The New International Version*).

It is obvious, as *The Pulpit Commentary* indicates, that “the forest” is the nation of Judah and the trees are the people. The forest fire symbolizes the Babylonian invasion and subsequent capture of Jerusalem and captivity of the people. The fact that even the green trees are not spared indicates that God deviates here from the principle that a small number of righteous people can save a community, as would have been the case in the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah.³ But as referred to above, the burning of the true green tree occurred when Jesus died on the cross.

Ezekiel continues his prophecy against Jerusalem, abandoning the parable and using clear, straightforward language. Although this prophecy is addressed to the temple (the sanctuary) and the land, the actual addressees are the people. Again, the warning is that no one will be spared in the ordeal that is about to come upon the city.

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1. Ezek. 6:1-3
 2. Zech. 4:7
 3. Gen. 18:32

An announcement of judgment by God is always an act of mercy. It allows room for repentance, as *Jonah* demonstrates. This is also obvious from Jeremiah's words to Zedekiah: "This is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from their hands.'"¹

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on the words "I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked": "All shall be removed from thee. Some shall be cut off-removed by the sword; shall be slain in battle, or by the pestilence; and some shall be cut off-die by the famine; and some shall be cut off-removed from the land by captivity. Now, among the two latter classes there might be many righteous as well as wicked. And when all the provisions were consumed, so that there was no more bread in the city, during the siege by Nebuchadnezzar, the righteous must have suffered as well as the wicked; for they could not be preserved alive, but by miracle, when there was no bread; nor was their perishing for want any loss to them, because the Lord would take them straight to his glory. And however men in general are unwilling to die, yet there is no instance, nor can there be, of any man's complaint that he got to heaven too soon. Again, if God had permitted none to be carried off captive but the wicked, the case of these would be utterly hopeless, as there would be none to set a good example, to preach repentance, to reprove sin, or to show God's willingness to forgive sinners.

But God, in his mercy, permitted many of the righteous to be carried off also, that the wicked might not be totally abandoned, or put beyond the reach of being saved. Hence, both Ezekiel and Daniel, and indeed several others, prophets and righteous men, were thus cut off from the land, and carried into captivity. And how much was God's glory and the good of men promoted by this! What a seed of salvation was sown, even in the pagan countries, by thus cutting off the righteous with the wicked! To this we owe, under God, many of the Psalms, the whole of the Book of Ezekiel, all the prophecies of Daniel, the bright example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the decrees passed in favor of the religion of the true God by Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, etc. And to this dispensation of God's merciful providence we owe the Books and example of Ezra and Nehemiah. Where then is the injustice, so loudly declaimed against, of God's thus cutting off from the land of Judea the righteous with the wicked? The righteous were not cut off for the crimes of the wicked, (see Ezek 18) nor were these crimes visited upon them; yet several of them shared in the common calamity, but none perished. Those that were removed by a violent death, (and I believe we shall find few such,) got a speedier entrance into eternal glory."

God commands Ezekiel to groan and be brokenhearted about the prophecy he just uttered. The Hebrew text of v.6 reads literally: "Sigh therefore you, son of man, with the breaking of your loins; and with bitterness sigh before their eyes." To this, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: "Ezekiel's distress is yet another symbol of the overwhelming dismay that will come upon Israel in their moment of judgment. Just as his failure to mourn over the death of his wife is treated as symbolic of grief too great for tears (24:29), so here he speaks his message with the symbolism, not of actions, but of emotions. *With the breaking of thy loins* (AV, RV), for which RSV gives *with breaking heart*, is a phrase expressing deep emotional distress. The loins were regarded as the seat of strength, and so this represents complete nervous and physical collapse (cf. 29:7; Ps. 69:23; Na. 2:10). The sense of panic and emotions paralysis will afflict the people when they hear the tidings, or 'the news: 'It's coming!'"

More than Ezekiel's deep emotions or the panic of the people, these words are an expression of God's deep feeling of sorrow at the suffering of the people He loves with an eternal love. People who have become a friend of God share both in His joy and His sorrow. The Apostle Paul experienced this, as he wrote: "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."² And to the Philippians he wrote: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him."³

1. Jer. 38:17,18
2. Col. 1:24
3. Phil. 1:29

Vv.8-17 are given in the form of a poem. It could be called “The Ode of the Sword.” The poetical beauty adds to the terror of the announcement in a similar vein as Moses prophesied: “I lift my hand to heaven and declare: As surely as I live forever, when I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me.”¹

V.10 has puzzled Bible scholars, as the Hebrew text is unclear. It reads: “Shall we make mirth of the rod of my son; as it contemns every tree.” The Hebrew word rendered “rod” is *shebet*, meaning “to branch off,” “a ‘,’ or “a scepter.” It is the word Jacob used in his blessing for Judah: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.”² Since “the sword” represents here the military power of Babylon, the phrase probably means that Nebuchadnezzar’s army would have no respect for Judah’s kingdom and that the Babylonians would cut down the forest in their siege of Jerusalem.

The preparation for the onslaught is described as the polishing and sharpening of the sword. The Babylonian soldiers would literally do this as they readied themselves for war. The way this is expressed is as if their victims see them do this, knowing that the sword will be used on them. Again God appeals to His prophet’s emotions and tells him to take his sorrow to a deeper level. The Hebrew words used are *za`aq*, “to shriek in anguish,” and *yalal*, “to howl.” Again, this is an expression of God’s deep feelings in which His wrath clashes with His love.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, believes that Ezekiel may actually have been acting out the prophetic poem by swishing a sword in the air, quoting or singing the words of an existing sword dance. That would make his prophecy a display that could not fail to make an impression upon his audience.

V.13 is another verse that has given problems of interpretation. The Hebrew text reading is incomprehensible: “Because it is a trial, and what if even the rod contemn [the sword]? It shall be no [more], saith the Lord God.” The reading of *The New International Version* seems to make most sense: “Testing will surely come. And what if the scepter [of Judah], which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign Lord.” *The New Living Translation* takes quite a bit of liberty that the Hebrew does not seem to warrant: “It will put them all to the test. What chance do they have? says the Sovereign Lord.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The LXX and Vulgate connect ‘because there is a trial’ with the preceding clause, rendering it respectively, ‘for it has been justified...’ and ‘because it has been tested...,’ and translate what follows — the LXX., ‘What if even a tribe be repulsed? It shall not be;’ and the Vulgate, ‘And this when it (the sword!) has overturned the kingdom, and it shall not be,’ etc.”

Taking the reading of *The New International Version* we could adopt the meaning that Judah’s king, Zedekiah paid no attention to the coming Babylonian threat and that this would be his undoing. But we must join those who remain puzzled by the text.

Whether “strike your hands together” (v.14) is meant to be applause or the same kind of gesture as “beat your breast” (v.12) is not clear. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, believes that Ezekiel applauds because he agrees with God’s verdict. In v.17 God says that He will also strike His hands together and that this will be an indication that His wrath is satisfied. We could interpret this motion as a sign of a job that is finished. Striking the hands together vertically, as if to take off the dirt, indicates in our time that the job is done. That may be what is meant here.

In vv.18-23 Ezekiel is commanded to act out another object lesson. As in the earlier stage of his prophetic call, where he had to take a clay tablet and build a rampart around it, symbolizing the siege of Jerusalem and the suffering of the people,³ so here he has to act out the way Nebuchadnezzar would decide his attack upon the city. We are not exactly told the way this demonstration had to be enacted. Ezekiel may have drawn a map on the ground, tracing a picture in the dirt, or he may have taken a parchment and made a drawing on it. Whatever way it was, it became a picture to drive home the message in the mind of the audience.

Time wise, the scene preceded the acting out of the siege in the earlier chapters. King Nebuchadnezzar had not decided yet whether he would attack Rabbah in Ammon or Jerusalem. In order to make the decision, the king consulted the spiritual powers above. This manner of divination must have been common at that time. The king

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1. Deut. 32:40
 2. Gen. 49:10
 3. Ezek. 4:1-5:4

believed in powers that were higher than he. This was not an effort to ask the Lord for guidance; the king took his advice from God's enemy. Yet, as Proverbs states: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."¹ John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the king's manner of divination: "Three methods of divination are described. The first is shaking the *arrows*, or *belomancy* ... In this, arrows were marked with names of people or places, shaken up in a quiver, and one was drawn out, as in drawing lots. The second is consultation of the *teraphim*: these were small images of household or ancestral gods, the possession of which played an important part in matters of legal inheritance (*cf.* Gn. 31:19ff.). They were sometimes used idolatrously or for necromancy and were among the abominations removed by Josiah (2 Ki. 23:24). What they looked like or how they were consulted we do not know. But if they were figures of ancestors they would presumably be used as mediums for obtaining oracles from the departed. The third is *hepatoscopy*, examination of the *liver* or entrails of a sacrificed victim. This was a common feature of Babylonian divination and it was carried over into ancient Rome as well. The interpretation of the markings on such organs was one of the skills in which Ancient Near Eastern soothsayers were instructed, as numbers of clay models unearthed by archaeologists appear to indicate."

It is stated in v.23 that the Jews in Jerusalem, who must have heard about the decision Nebuchadnezzar made and the way he came to the conclusion, believed that the king had been deceived. There is a suggestion in these words that they actually believed in the legitimacy of the process. Isaiah's words confirm this: "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?"²

The reason for Nebuchadnezzar's assault on Judah was the breaking of the agreement she had made with the Babylonian king, swearing by the Name of YHWH.³ Zedekiah had invoked the Name of God before a heathen king. By breaking his vow he indicated that he took the God of Israel less seriously than Nebuchadnezzar did. Neither the king of Babylon, nor the Almighty would forgive him. Although the sins of Jerusalem were numerous enough to bring about judgment, it was the broken oath that brought about the fall of the kingdom and the ruin of the temple.

Ezekiel then turns to the person of Zedekiah, calling him profane and wicked. The Hebrew words are *chalal*, "pierced," or "polluted," and *rasha`*, "morally wrong," "ungodly." We find *chalal* in the verse "The sons of Jacob came upon the dead bodies and looted the city where their sister had been defiled."⁴ *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests the rendering: "O deadly wounded." Either reading seems acceptable.

The verse reads literally in Hebrew: "And you profane wicked prince of Israel, whose days has come when your iniquity shall have an end..." The reading of *The New International Version* is quite acceptable: "O profane and wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax..." because the Hebrew word *qets* (end) means "an extremity." Zedekiah's measure of sin was full to the brim. The words remind us of what God said to Abraham about the sins of the Amorites: "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."⁵ There was no longer any difference between the moral condition of God's people and the nations that had been expelled from the Promised Land because of their iniquity. Therefore the king's crown and throne are taken away and he is taken into captivity.

There is yet a pearl of promise in this verdict. There is a reference to the coming of the Messiah, to whom the crown and throne of Israel rightfully belongs. He is the Shiloh of whom Jacob prophesied in his blessing for his son Judah: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."⁶ The angel who visited Mary confirmed this prophecy, saying: "The

1. Prov. 16:33

2. Isa. 8:19

3. II Chron. 36:13; Ezek. 17:13,14

4. Gen. 34:27

5. Gen. 15:16

6. Gen. 49:10

Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”¹ And in her hymn of praise, Mary referred to Ezekiel’s prophecy, “The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low,” with the words: “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.”²

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on vv.28-32: “In a passage which is very obscure but has obvious affinities with earlier parts of the chapter, especially verses 9-17, the Ammonites are represented as wielding a sword against Israel. This may reflect the period during or after the siege of Jerusalem when the Ammonites joined with others in taking advantage of Judah’s plight by attacking and plundering her lands. This apparently is done under the influence of false auguries and lying visions (29), but God stays their hand and calls upon them to *return it to its sheath* (30). Words of condemnation follow: in his own land Ammon will be judged and punished. He will suffer at the hands of *brutish men, skilful to destroy* (31), who are later designated as ‘the people of the East’ (25:4), *i.e.* the savage tribesmen of the desert. So the Ammonites’ vindictive plans will rebound back upon themselves, as the further oracle on their fate makes clear (25:1-7). Their ultimate fate will be worse than Israel’s and worse even than Egypt’s, for they will be *no more remembered*. To the Semite mind nothing could be more terrible: no prospect of restoration, no continuance in succeeding generations, no memorial, not even a memory. Oblivion.”

m. Three oracles on the defilement of Jerusalem 22:1-31

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, will you judge her? Will you judge this city of bloodshed? Then confront her with all her detestable practices

3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O city that brings on herself doom by shedding blood in her midst and defiles herself by making idols,

4 you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries.

5 Those who are near and those who are far away will mock you, O infamous city, full of turmoil.

6 "See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood.

7 In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow.

8 You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths.

9 In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts.

10 In you are those who dishonor their fathers' bed; in you are those who violate women during their period, when they are ceremonially unclean.

11 In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor's wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father's daughter.

12 In you men accept bribes to shed blood; you take usury and excessive interest and make unjust gain from your neighbors by extortion. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign Lord.

13 "I will surely strike my hands together at the unjust gain you have made and at the blood you have shed in your midst.

14 Will your courage endure or your hands be strong in the day I deal with you? I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.

1. Luke 1:32,33

2. Luke 1:52

15 I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you through the countries; and I will put an end to your uncleanness.

16 When you have been defiled in the eyes of the nations, you will know that I am the Lord.'"

17 Then the word of the Lord came to me:

18 "Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are the copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. They are but the dross of silver.

19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into Jerusalem.

20 As men gather silver, copper, iron, lead and tin into a furnace to melt it with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you.

21 I will gather you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her.

22 As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you.'"

23 Again the word of the Lord came to me:

24 "Son of man, say to the land, 'You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.'

25 There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her.

26 Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

27 Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.

28 Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says'-when the Lord has not spoken.

29 The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

30 "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

31 So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, gives the following introduction to this chapter: "This chapter consists of three oracles, each beginning with the phrase, 'The word of the Lord came to me' (1, 17, 23). They may originally have been uttered on separate occasions, but they have been grouped together because they share the same theme of indictment of Jerusalem for her sins ... The first (2-16) condemns Jerusalem as the city of blood and catalogues the variety of sins, religious, sexual, social and judicial, which are found in her. The two most frequently used words are *blood* (2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 12, 13) and *in you* (6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16). The punishment for all this is to be dispersion among the nations, as if that will enable the Lord to consume away the city's defilement from her (15). The second oracle (17-22) uses the metaphor of the smelting of silver, and this points to the long and painful agonies of testing which Israel is about to undergo. All the elements in the nation will be gathered together in Jerusalem and will there experience the fires of wrath of God. There is no mention of any refined silver resulting from the process, though silver may be reckoned among the elements which make up Israel ... The verdict on Israel is that they are all dross (19). The third oracle (23-31) makes detailed criticism of the different classes of Israelite society – the princes, the priests, the prophets, the nobles and the people of the land. All of them have failed in their responsibilities; not a man has been found who will stand in the breach. So the Lord will pour out upon them the due recompense for their misdeeds. Their fate is sealed."

The introductory words "Will you judge?" are also found in a previous and following chapter.¹ This is not only an invitation to Ezekiel to enter into the counsel of God, but also a sharing of God's sense of righteousness with

1. Ezek. 20:4; 23:36

a human being. Everyone has a measure of understanding of what righteousness is. The Apostle Paul makes that fact a criterion for God's judgment of man's sin. We read in Romans the reason for God's judgment over the nations: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."¹ The image of God in us testifies to the fact that God is righteous. Elsewhere Paul states: "Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.'"² In involving Ezekiel in His judgment over Jerusalem, God will be justified by the prophet.

But it is not only a matter of punishment and justification. The announcement of judgment before punishment is administered is always an act of grace, since it allows for repentance. In involving Ezekiel in His verdict, God gives to him the impetus to plead more powerfully with his fellow Israelites to repent and be saved. As long as the city has not been destroyed, there is hope. Ezekiel could become the one to stand "in the gap in behalf of the land."

In joining the Lord in judgment, Ezekiel remains the prophet, passing on the Word of God to man. He introduces his opinion with the words: "'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.'" Jerusalem had been "the holy city," the place of God's revelation on earth. Now she is defiled because of her involvement with idols. Daniel would prophesy about another desecration of the city and the nation after the return from captivity. He called this "abomination that causes desolation." The term occurs three times in his book.³ Daniel's prophecy probably refers to Antiochus Epiphanes, who attempted to Hellenize the Jews by making them sacrifice a pig on the altar of Jerusalem. He forbade circumcision and destroyed all the Old Testament books he could find. This became the occasion for the Maccabean war in which the Syrian armies were defeated.⁴ Jesus places Daniel's prophecy into the larger context of the coming of the antichrist with the quotation of the words, saying: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel ..."⁵ indicating what would precede His second coming.

Jerusalem's doom is sealed by her sin against the first of the Ten Commandments. Her idolatry required human sacrifices. Since idols represent demons and Satan is called "a murderer from the beginning,"⁶ shedding of blood and idolatry go together. But the people of Jerusalem would become so proficient in evil that even those that have no revelation of God's glory will be appalled by her destruction. Moses had already prophesied: "You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the Lord will drive you."⁷ People, who have no personal knowledge of God, sometimes have a clearer understanding of what the testimony of God's children ought to look like than the children themselves.

The slaughter of infants on Moloch's altar was not the only way in which blood was shed in Jerusalem; those in power in the city and the country misused their authority and power to commit crimes. Ahab's acquisition of Naboth's vineyard⁸ is an example of this.

V.7 is another instance of sin against the Ten Commandments. Not honoring father and mother constitutes a sin against the fifth commandment. Evidently, the generation gap is an age-old phenomenon. The reward for honoring parents was a long life in the Promised Land. The Apostle Paul observes that this "is the first commandment

1. Rom. 1:32

2. Rom. 3:4

3. Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11,12

4. *Pictorial Bible Dictionary* – pg.48

5. Matt. 24:15

6. John 8:44

7. Deut. 28:37

8. I Kings 21:1-16

with a promise.”¹ But *The Book of Proverbs* warns: “If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.”²

The fact that God’s chosen people were oppressing the alien indicates that they had no idea that God had chosen them to be a kingdom of priests, people who would be a bridge between God and the rest of the world, as a means of salvation. Mistreating orphans and widows, however, stands for a sin against the household of God. All this leads to the ultimate sin of desecrating the Sabbath. The command to keep the Sabbath was meant to be a means of fellowship with the Creator. God created the Sabbath as the finishing touch of His creation. It was the day on which He rested and rejoiced in what He had made. God made man to enter into His joy and enjoy His Sabbath rest. Desecrating the Sabbath means missing what life is all about.

Life without fellowship with God will lead to all kinds of sexual deviations, such as incest and adultery. In social life it affects the structure through bribery and all kinds of financial dishonesty. All of these sins are enumerated in vv.6-12.

For the fourth time Ezekiel uses the image of striking the hands together.³ Every time the motion signifies a different emotion. In v.13 of this chapter it probably indicates the giving of a command to the angel of death to start his work of destruction.

The second oracle, vv.17-22, uses the image of a crucible used in purifying precious metals, such as gold or silver. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “The figure of the refining of precious metal is frequently employed by Old Testament writers (cf. Is. 1:22,25; 48:10; Je. 6:27-30; 9:7; Zc. 13:9; Mal. 3:2-4), but whereas the purpose is usually to produce the refined product, Ezekiel here uses the figure to show that Israel is nothing but worthless dross.”

In the world of precious metals the smelting is proof to the goldsmith that his product is pure. No one would put any ore to the test knowing that dross is all there is. In the image Ezekiel uses, the testing is done for the benefit of the people. God wants them to know what they are so that they will be shocked and cry out for mercy. God’s intent in subjecting His people to the proof by fire is not meant negatively; it is not meant to destroy them. As the goldsmith uses the fire to enhance the quality of gold, so God allows the fire of suffering to purify us. That is the sense in which the Apostle Peter uses the image, saying: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”⁴ But in this instance God subjects His children to the smelting process so that they would come to the conclusion: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.”⁵

Ezekiel’s use of the image in Babylon equals what God wanted Jeremiah to be in Jerusalem. We read that God said to Jeremiah: “I have made you a tester of metals and my people the ore, that you may observe and test their ways. They are all hardened rebels, going about to slander. They are bronze and iron; they all act corruptly. The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out. They are called rejected silver, because the Lord has rejected them.”⁶

There was still time for the people of Jerusalem to repent before the city would turn into a crucible by the fire the Babylonian army would set to it. As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “There is hope as well as terror in the parable.”

In the third oracle, vv.23-29, Ezekiel addressed the whole land of Judah. There are some textual problems in vv.24 and 25 which result in different readings of the text. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks: “Most commentators

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1. Eph. 6:2
 2. Prov. 20:20
 3. See Ezek. 6:11; 21:14,17; 22:13.
 4. I Peter 1:6,7
 5. Rom. 7:18
 6. Jer. 6:27-30

prefer to follow LXX in verse 24, which translates not ‘cleansed’ but ‘rained upon’: thus, ‘a land without rain and without shower.’ Similarly, LXX seems to have preserved a better reading in verse 25, ‘whose princes’ (*`ašer n^eet’êhâ*), for the MT ‘a conspiracy of her prophets’ (*qešer n^ebi’êhâ*). This word for ‘prince’ (*nâûî*) is different from that used in verse 27, where the word is *úârîm*, ‘nobles.’ The former refers to members of the royal house; the latter is used for leaders of chiefs of the people.” “Prophets” and “priests” does make more sense since it signifies the class of people that is supposed to be the instrument of God’s communication.

The Hebrew word for “conspiracy” is *qesher*, which has the basic meaning of “an alliance,” in most cases, however, in a negative sense of a conspiracy, as in the verse: “While Absalom was offering sacrifices, he also sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counselor, to come from Giloh, his hometown. And so the conspiracy gained strength, and Absalom’s following kept on increasing.”¹ The prophets who ought to have been the voice of God had betrayed their trust in becoming the enemy’s mouthpiece. They said that their message was from the Lord, but it was demonically inspired. As Britain’s prime minister’s “Peace in our time” turned out to be the beginning of World War II, so the “peace, peace” of these prophets was a satanic strategy that would lull the people of Jerusalem to sleep and lead to their death. The taking of treasures and precious things referred to in v.25, may mean that they required payment for their prophecies.

While the prophets ought to have been the communication from God to man, the priests represented the bridge between mankind and God. But the bridge was broken. No traffic could pass, which means that sins were not atoned for and prayers were not sent up to heaven. This was done in erasing the dividing line between holiness and sin. These priests took a liberal view of the message of Leviticus, which God had given to Moses and the people as a guide to holiness. The rituals of sacrifices and regulations regarding food were not mere rituals; they represented a picture of the holiness God intended to share with mankind. The message of Leviticus is: “I am the Lord, who makes you holy.”² The civil authorities also used their position for their own benefit; filling the land with corruption and murder. All this made the land into a spiritual desert. We read in v.24 that Ezekiel was ordered to prophesy to the land of Judah: “You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “You are the land not cleansed, nor rained upon in the day of indignation.” The words may mean that there was a physical drought that had caused failed harvests. It can also refer to a spiritual dryness, or to both. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses had told them: “The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.”³ Jerusalem had become like Egypt without irrigation.

The corruption that began at the top had penetrated to the grassroots. The whole population practiced extortion and committed robbery; they oppressed the poor and needy and mistreated the alien, denying them justice.

This made God cry out, as in despair: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.” Ezekiel does not hear what Isaiah heard when God uttered the same words more than a century earlier. We read: “He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.”⁴ And: “I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.”⁵ The salvation that the arm of the Lord would work out would be the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, who would stand in the gap

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1. II Sam. 15:12
 2. Lev. 20:8
 3. Deut. 11:10-12
 4. Isa. 59:16
 5. Isa. 63:5

and give His body for the salvation of the world. Ever since Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, God looks for people to stand in the gap. When D. L. Moody heard a preacher say that no one can know what God can do with a man who is fully dedicated to Him, he answered: "By the grace of God, I want to be that man!" The call is still heard.

n. Oholah and Oholibah 23:1-49

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, there were two women, daughters of the same mother.

3 They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed.

4 The older was named Oholah, and her sister was Oholibah. They were mine and gave birth to sons and daughters. Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.

5 "Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians — warriors

6 clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen.

7 She gave herself as a prostitute to all the elite of the Assyrians and defiled herself with all the idols of everyone she lusted after.

8 She did not give up the prostitution she began in Egypt, when during her youth men slept with her, caressed her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her.

9 "Therefore I handed her over to her lovers, the Assyrians, for whom she lusted.

10 They stripped her naked, took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword. She became a byword among women, and punishment was inflicted on her.

11 "Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister.

12 She too lusted after the Assyrians — governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen, all handsome young men.

13 I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way.

14 "But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red,

15 with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea.

16 As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea.

17 Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust.

18 When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her nakedness, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister.

19 Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt.

20 There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses.

21 So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.

22 "Therefore, Oholibah, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stir up your lovers against you, those you turned away from in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side—

23 the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, all of them governors and commanders, chariot officers and men of high rank, all mounted on horses.

24 *They will come against you with weapons, chariots and wagons and with a throng of people; they will take up positions against you on every side with large and small shields and with helmets. I will turn you over to them for punishment, and they will punish you according to their standards.*

25 *I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury. They will cut off your noses and your ears, and those of you who are left will fall by the sword. They will take away your sons and daughters, and those of you who are left will be consumed by fire.*

26 *They will also strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry.*

27 *So I will put a stop to the lewdness and prostitution you began in Egypt. You will not look on these things with longing or remember Egypt anymore.*

28 *"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to hand you over to those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust.*

29 *They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you naked and bare, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity*

30 *have brought this upon you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols.*

31 *You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her cup into your hand.*

32 *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "You will drink your sister's cup, a cup large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision, for it holds so much.*

33 *You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of ruin and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria.*

34 *You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and tear your breasts. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

35 *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Since you have forgotten me and thrust me behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution."*

36 *The Lord said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices,*

37 *for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them.*

38 *They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths.*

39 *On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.*

40 *"They even sent messengers for men who came from far away, and when they arrived you bathed yourself for them, painted your eyes and put on your jewelry.*

41 *You sat on an elegant couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed the incense and oil that belonged to me.*

42 *"The noise of a carefree crowd was around her; Sabeans were brought from the desert along with men from the rabble, and they put bracelets on the arms of the woman and her sister and beautiful crowns on their heads.*

43 *Then I said about the one worn out by adultery, 'Now let them use her as a prostitute, for that is all she is.'*

44 *And they slept with her. As men sleep with a prostitute, so they slept with those lewd women, Oholah and Oholibah.*

45 *But righteous men will sentence them to the punishment of women who commit adultery and shed blood, because they are adulterous and blood is on their hands.*

46 *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Bring a mob against them and give them over to terror and plunder.*

47 *The mob will stone them and cut them down with their swords; they will kill their sons and daughters and burn down their houses.*

48 *"So I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not imitate you. 49 You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord."*

This allegory is written in such a way that the explicit language evokes feelings of disgust and embarrassment. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about this aspect: "The chapter deals with their intrigues with

foreign powers, described in the crudest of terms, and with their subsequent downfall. Despite the distasteful theme and the indelicate language, the reader of these verses must appreciate that this is the language of unspeakable disgust and must try to recognize Ezekiel's passion for God's honor and his fury at the adulterous conduct of His covenant people. The feeling of nausea which a chapter like this arouses must be blamed not on the writer of the chapter nor even on its contents, but on the conduct which had to be described in such revolting terms. At the same time it is possible to see that Ezekiel's language shows considerable awareness of the fundamental characteristics of apostasy."

In this chapter the northern and southern kingdom are represented as two girls of the same parents. Although only the mother is mentioned, the suggestion is that God Himself is the father. This suggests, however vaguely a reference to the incarnation, in which the Holy Spirit impregnated a human virgin, bringing about the birth of Christ. The relationship between this allegory and the reality of the incarnation of the Word of God is as a shadow to its reality. But the shadow accentuates the horror of the fact that that which is supposed to be holy, as Jesus was, turns out to be polluted and corrupt to the core.

One of the amazing features of the story is that Oholah and Oholibah are depicted as two separate members of the one family as it was in Egypt. None of this distinction is ever made between Judah and Joseph in the Pentateuch. Although there is little emphasis on the tension and strife that must have existed between the tribes that eventually split after the death of Solomon, the fact that David chose Jerusalem as the seat of his power, had the strategic significance that it kept the factions connected.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: "Chapter 23 contains an allegorical portrayal of the history of Samaria and Jerusalem as two sisters unfaithful to their divine spouse. In the allegory of chapter 16, Israel's religious unfaithfulness because of the seductions of Canaanite worship is likened to adultery. The present chapter treats of Israel's political alliances with heathen nations, involving distrust in the power of the Lord, under the figure of harlotry. In a poem exhibiting much repulsive detail (vv. 1-35), the prophet describes (1) the infidelities of Oholah (Samaria) and her punishment (vv. 1-10); (2) the infidelities of Oholibah (Jerusalem; vv. 11-21) and her punishment (vv. 22-35). An appended address (vv. 36-49) pictures the two sisters sinning and receiving judgment contemporaneously. The kingdom of the Lord must be faithful to him rather than rely on pagan alliances."

Another of the problems in this chapter is that God is both portrayed as the father and the husband of both girls. Also the fact that God presents Himself as the husband of both is amazing, since the Levitical law strictly forbade this. We read: "Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living."¹ The only explanation would be in the fact that this is an allegory and that the separation between the two kingdoms was not the way God looked at the people of Israel. For Him there was only one nation, as the church is only one body.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the meaning of the names Oholah and Oholibah: "The exact meaning is a matter of dispute. As written, it seems to mean a tent-woman, or the woman living in a tent. ... The term is used symbolically by Ezekiel to designate Samaria or the kingdom of Israel. Oholibah - 'tent in her,' or 'my tent is in her': An opprobrious and symbolical name given by Ezekiel to Jerusalem, representing the kingdom of Judah, because of her intrigues and base alliances with Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia, just as the name Oholah ... was given to Samaria or the Northern Kingdom, because of her alliances with Egypt and Assyria. There is a play upon the words in the Hebrew which cannot be reproduced in English Both Oholah and Oholibah, or Samaria and Jerusalem, are the daughters of one mother, and wives of Yahweh, and both are guilty of religious and political alliance with heathen nations. Idolatry is constantly compared by the Hebrew prophets to marital unfaithfulness or adultery."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains how Assyria could be considered to be the neighbor of the kingdom of Israel: "On the northeast the kingdom of Israel bordered on that of Assyria, because the latter had occupied much of Syria. Their neighborhood in locality was emblematic of their being near in corruption of morals and worship. The alliances of Israel with Assyria, which are the chief subject of reprobation here, tended to

1. Lev. 18:18

this (for instance, 2 Kings 15:19, Menahem's connection with Pul king of Assyria; 2 Kings 16:7,9, Ahaz's alliance with Tiglath-pileser; 2 Kings 17:3, Hoshea's connection with Shalmaneser; Hos 8:9)."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the names: "The names, Oholah and Oholibah, derive from the Hebrew '*ôhel*, meaning 'a tent.' It could be reference to a tented place of worship, but it is not clear whether this is Israel's tabernacle in the wilderness or a pagan shrine. The name of Esau's wife, Oholibamah (Gn. 36:2), or 'tent of the high place,' suggests the latter, as do the tents of the gods described in the Ugaritic texts. On the other hand, Oholah could mean 'her tent' and Oholibah almost certainly means '*my tent (is) in her,*' which suggests Yahweh's sponsorship of Jerusalem. But again the details must not be pressed too far. It is enough that the names had a cultic flavor."

Hosea castigated Israel for her relationship with Assyria, comparing it to adultery. We read: "For they have gone up to Assyria like a wild donkey wandering alone. Ephraim has sold herself to lovers."¹ Although biblical history does not describe the relationship of Israel with Assyria as a love affair, as something the kings of the northern kingdom enjoyed doing, the general mood of the population may have been pro-Assyrian. Assyrian culture may have been popular and considered worthy of imitation. This would bring with it an adaptation to a pagan religion and its practices. It could be that this is the aspect of Ezekiel's charge, rather than the political agreements that were made between a small nation and a world power.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: "The historicity of the charge is borne out by a good deal of evidence. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III illustrates Jehu prostrating himself before the Assyrian king (the date would be about 840 BC, at the beginning of Jehu's reign) and offering gifts, possibly with a view to buying support against Hazael of Damascus. Adad-Niari III (c. 812-782 BC), in an inscription found at Nimrud, also claimed to have received tribute from 'the territory of Omri,' and there is no reason to doubt the truth of this. 2 Kings also describes the paying of tribute by Israel to Assyria in the reigns of Menahem (c. 745-738 BC) and Hoshea (c. 732-724 BC); see 2 Kings 15:19ff.; 17:3."

The charge against Samaria had not been regarding sexual but spiritual prostitution. In currying the favors of Assyria, the northern kingdom had abandoned her relationship with YHWH. She had spurned the love of God, which is here compared to a marriage bond.

Isaiah had earlier prophesied in Jerusalem, mentioning Assyria in the much wider context of God's plan of salvation. King Ahaz had worried about a possible attack by Damascus and Samaria. Isaiah had encouraged the king to put his faith in the God of Israel, saying: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."² For the confirmation of his faith, the king had been given the option to ask for a sign from the Lord, which he refused. At that point, Isaiah had pronounced a prophecy which foreshadowed the virgin birth of Christ: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."³ Isaiah then said to King Ahaz: "The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah — he will bring the king of Assyria."⁴

Although Isaiah's words are not about Samaria in the same sense as Ezekiel's, his prophecy indicates that Ezekiel's prophecy is not merely regarding political alliances and spiritual relations, but that the fundamental issue is the struggle between God's light and Satan's darkness, love and hatred, life and death. After all, idolatry inevitably leads to the devil. Man is either the receiver of God's love or the victim of Satan's manipulation.

When Ezekiel prophesied, the fall of Samaria was ancient history. The Assyrian king Sargon II captured the city and took the people into captivity in 722 B.C. The Babylonian captivity did not begin until 597 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar first appeared at Jerusalem and deported Jehoiachin and part of the population. The second stage, in

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1. Hos. 8:9
 2. Isa. 7:9
 3. Isa. 7:14
 4. Isa. 7:17

which Jerusalem was destroyed and the rest of the population was deported did not occur until 586 B.C. Ezekiel's prophecy here was given somewhere in between these two dates.

The disaster of Samaria with its defeat and destruction ought to have been a warning for Jerusalem. *II Kings* reports the destruction of Samaria and comments on the reasons for the disasters. We read: "The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes. All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that provoked the Lord to anger. They worshiped idols, though the Lord had said, 'You shall not do this.' The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: 'Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.' But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the Lord their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, 'Do not do as they do,' and they did the things the Lord had forbidden them to do. They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger. So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence. When he tore Israel away from the house of David, they made Jeroboam son of Nebat their king. Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the Lord and caused them to commit a great sin. The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them until the Lord removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there."

Although the sins of Samaria are described in terms of sexual desire and promiscuous behavior, the real issues were spiritual, not physical. The prey was not the human body but the soul and spirit. Some rituals connected to idol worship entailed sexual acts, but that was not the root of the problem. The reason for Ezekiel's use of sexual loaded words in this context is to evoke the proper kind of disgust we feel when reading the one level and transporting it to the deeper level. The damage caused by an act of adultery is not the physical pain but the broken heart and defeated spirit. When Judas gave Jesus the kiss of betrayal, Judas was the one who died, not Christ. God will not die when we fail Him and join the enemy; we do.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments about the sins of Oholibah: "Jerusalem's guilt is even greater than her sister's. She apeed Samaria in courting Assyria, apparently failing to learn the lesson of Samaria's fate. The obvious historical episode behind this accusation is the approach made by Ahaz to the Assyrians during the Syro-Ephraimite war (2 Ki. 16:8). This was roundly condemned by Isaiah (Is 7:7-9) who warned Ahaz of the consequences of such foolish and faithless overtures. But Ezekiel's message concentrates on the further harlotries committed by Jerusalem with the Babylonians. Again the temptation came through the sight of gorgeously appareled military men (14f.), not flesh and blood, but painted in glorious Technicolor (in typical Babylonian style) on the wall of buildings. The glamour of the sight prompted an invitation to enjoy the sensual pleasures of adultery, and this, once taken, turned quickly to disgust (17). She was not alone in this, however, for her sensuality had also caused the Lord to turn in disgust from her. So once again the pattern of life begun in Egypt had repeated itself in Judah's later history. Verse 17 reflects the pendulum-like swing from a pro-Babylonian policy to an anti-Babylonian policy that marked Judah's

political history during the last hundred years before the exile. *Discovered* (18, AV, RV) is well translated in RSV with the words *carried on openly* and *flaunted*. The references to Egypt in 19-21 may possibly reflect contemporary pro-Egyptian intrigues (*cf.* Je. 37:5), but it is not necessary that it should be so interpreted. The dominant thought is the influence of Judah's Egyptian upbringing."

The change of mood on the political scene is depicted as a turning from passionate, sexual desire to passionate disgust. The disposition Ezekiel ascribed to Samaria in v.17 is now applied to Judah and Jerusalem. The reaction is well illustrated in Amnon's treatment of his half sister Tamar after he raped her. We read: "Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her."¹ The idea that Judah would have loved Babylon is, of course, preposterous. Any love-hate relationship between nations is based on self-interest. As it is now, it was then. The only true love is in a relationship with God; all other relationships, unless they reflect the original model of God, are a fake. Satan can display a gamut of affections and niceties, but his ultimate goal is always murder. He who is not the real shepherd only enters the sheep pen to steal and kill.² Babylon's goal was world hegemony.

Bible scholars have been puzzled by the mention of "the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa" in v.23. *The Septuagint* treats them as proper names and some of the older translations have followed that interpretation. Some interpreters prefer to translate "rulers, lords, and nobles." The names have been thought to designate certain people bordering on the Chaldeans; but no geographer has ever been able to find them out. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "In our old translations these names were considered appellatives-rulers, mighty men, and tyrants. Others, following the literal import of the words, have translated, visiting, shouting, and retreating. Others have applied them to the habits of the Chaldean soldiers. Pekod signifying the muster or review of armies; Shoa, the magnificence of their uniform and arms; and Koa, the marks or embroidery of the clothes of the captains and generals. Grotius thought that they might be names of contiguous nations: Pekod, the Bactrians; Shoa, a people of Armenia; and Koa, the Medes. I have nothing to add that would satisfy myself, or be edifying to my readers."

V.24ff. describes the siege of Jerusalem and its consequences. God warns His people that He is about to hand them over to the enemy and let the enemy do with his victim as he wants. We learn from the life story of Job that such a treatment is not meant for destruction. In the same manner the Apostle Paul suggested to the church in Corinth to hand a back-sliding member of the church over to Satan, "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."³ We must also remember that the purpose of such prophetic announcement of judgment to come is to avoid it be repentance.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the whole section of vv.22-35: "This section consists of four oracles beginning with the formula: 'Thus says the Lord God' (22, 28, 32, 35). Of these the first two and the last share a certain amount of language in common, but the third is in a class by itself and consists of a poem about the cup of judgment." About this third section, Taylor observes: "The reference to her cup (31) is the connecting link which leads on to the poem about the cup of Samaria (32-34). This is a strange little stanza: it does not appear to say very much that has not already been said, and its interpretation is made more difficult by textual uncertainties. Its main impact is made by its striking language and pregnant phrases, as so often in this type of Hebrew poetry. To render it in English demands so much paraphrase and interpretation that the effect, especially of the 3:2 meter, is usually lost. RSV tries to keep close to the Hebrew; JB renders it wordily but well. Its starkness may be judged by this literal rendering:

Cup of-your-sister you-shall-drink
(which is) deep and-wide.
She/it/you-shall-be for-laughter and-derision
Much to-contain.
Drunkenness and-anguish you-will-be-full of,

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1. II Sam. 13:15
 2. John 10:10
 3. I Cor. 5:4,5

Cup-of-waste and-desolation.
Cup-of-you-sister, Samaria,
You-will-drink it and-drain (it);
And its-pieces you-shall-break (?)
And-your-breasts you-shall-tear-apart.”

The New Living Translation renders it:

“You will drink from your sister’s cup of terror,
a cup that is large and deep.
It is filled to the brim
with scorn and derision.
Drunkenness and anguish will fill you,
for your cup is filled to the brim with distress and desolation,
the same cup your sister Samaria drank.
You will drain that cup of terror
to the very bottom.
Then you will smash it to pieces
and beat your breast in anguish.”

Judah’s forgetting of the Lord, as mentioned in v.35, is not a lapse of memory but an act of the will of the same caliber as the fool who says in his heart, “There is no God.”¹ Judah had rejected God, as expressed in the words “thrust me behind your back.” It was a choice of evil and corruption instead of goodness and love. This is expressed in terms of prostitution, which is the opposite of an expression of marital love.

The final section of this chapter, vv.36-49, opens with the same words as before: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah?” The Hebrew word *shaphat*, “judge,” as in English, can be a verb or a noun. We could read the sentence as if God said to Ezekiel: “You be the judge.” In that sense God’s creation will declare that God is right in the way He deals with sin, as the multitude in Revelation chants: “True and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”²

Ezekiel treats Samaria as if she were still an existing nation, although she had disappeared from the map long before his day. There is a stage of judgment that goes beyond the suffering of the consequences of our acts during life on earth. This is what Jesus referred to when He said about Capernaum: “I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”³ The destruction of Sodom in the days of Abraham and Lot was not the final judgment.

The brazenness of the sisters’ sin was not only that they practiced idol worship and committed murder, but that they would then enter the temple, the house of the Lord, and do as if they had not done anything wrong. That amounted to a complete denial of the reality of God’s presence. To come before God and act as if He is not there is the greatest insult one can commit. Even in human relations this is not done. It amounts to total rudeness, a denial of a person’s dignity. God felt His holiness desecrated by such acts.

The picture of vv.36-39 is not allegorical. This is what happened in reality. But vv.40 and 41 return to the image of adultery. The use of God’s incense and oil for the adulterous affair described here is another insult to God’s dignity. What God had given to Samaria and Judah was used against Him. This is the opposite of what the woman did when she anointed Jesus’ feet with her own very expensive perfume.⁴

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1. Ps. 14:1
 2. Rev. 19:2
 3. Matt. 11:24
 4. Matt. 26:6

Vv.42 and 43 contain some more textual problems, probably due to copying errors that have crept in over the centuries. Some Bible scholars believe that “Sabeans” should simply be rendered “drunkards.” The scene, if possible, has deteriorated to the point where the sisters no longer wooed the handsome army officers described earlier, but surrendered their bodies to anyone, however low and rowdy. God surrenders them to their evil, indicating that they are beyond hope of salvation. Yet, the fact that these words are given as a prophetic warning, indicates that the door to repentance and restoration is still open.

The ones who enjoy the prostitution will end up murdering the prostitute. One does not become intimate with a murderer. There cannot be a relationship of intimacy and enjoyment of any kind with Satan.

o. The rusty cauldron 24:1-14

1 In the ninth year, in the tenth month on the tenth day, the word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, record this date, this very date, because the king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.

3 Tell this rebellious house a parable and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "Put on the cooking pot; put it on and pour water into it.

4 Put into it the pieces of meat, all the choice pieces — the leg and the shoulder. Fill it with the best of these bones; 5 take the pick of the flock. Pile wood beneath it for the bones; bring it to a boil and cook the bones in it.

6 "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "Woe to the city of bloodshed, to the pot now encrusted, whose deposit will not go away! Empty it piece by piece without casting lots for them.

7 "For the blood she shed is in her midst: She poured it on the bare rock; she did not pour it on the ground, where the dust would cover it.

8 To stir up wrath and take revenge I put her blood on the bare rock, so that it would not be covered.

9 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "Woe to the city of bloodshed! I, too, will pile the wood high.

10 So heap on the wood and kindle the fire. Cook the meat well, mixing in the spices; and let the bones be charred.

11 Then set the empty pot on the coals till it becomes hot and its copper glows so its impurities may be melted and its deposit burned away.

12 It has frustrated all efforts; its heavy deposit has not been removed, not even by fire.

13 "Now your impurity is lewdness. Because I tried to cleanse you but you would not be cleansed from your impurity, you will not be clean again until my wrath against you has subsided.

14 "I the Lord have spoken. The time has come for me to act. I will not hold back; I will not have pity, nor will I relent. You will be judged according to your conduct and your actions, declares the Sovereign Lord."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states about the date, the “ninth year ... tenth month ... tenth day of the month”: “The day of the commencement of the siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1; Jer 30:1; 52:4). January 587 (or 588) B.C. During the Exile and till 518 B.C., this day was observed as a fast (Zech 8:19).” *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “The prophecies in this chapter were delivered two years and five months after those of the previous section (Ezek 20:1).”

The Pulpit Commentary adds: “We pass from the date of ... Ezekiel 20:1 (B.C. 593) to B.C. 590, and the very day is identified with that on which the army of Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem (... Jeremiah 39:1; ... 2 Kings 25:1-12). To the prophet’s vision all that was passing there was as plain as though he saw it with his own eyes. The siege lasted for about two years. The punishments threatened in Ezekiel 23, had at last come near. We may probably infer that a considerable interval of silence had followed on the Aholah and Aholibah discourse. Now the time had come to break that silence, and it was broken, after the prophet’s manner, by a parable. In the ‘rebellious house’ we find, as in ... Ezekiel 2:3 and elsewhere, primarily Ezekiel’s immediate hearers, secondarily the whole house of Israel as represented by them.”

It is not clear whether Ezekiel had to enact the parable by putting a cooking pot on a wood fire and boiling pieces of meat in it, or whether he merely drew a word picture. Some Bible scholars believe that the prophet actually gave a life demonstration.

The image of a boiling pot is used elsewhere. When Jeremiah received his call, he saw the coming Babylonian invasion as “a boiling pot, tilting away from the north.”¹ In an earlier prophecy Ezekiel indicated that the people of Jerusalem themselves had used the image of meat cooking in a pot as a picture of safety and protection.² Here this same picture is turned against them.

Ezekiel had had earlier experiences in which he witnessed events that occurred in Jerusalem, although not being there physically. The Holy Spirit had transported him in visions to the city and the temple.³ Here, the prophet is simply told what happened. The prophet Elisha was an eye witness of his servant’s deception, although he was not physically present.⁴

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about vv.3-5: “Some think that the imperative verbs are addressed to the prophet and that this is therefore another of Ezekiel’s acted parables, but if that were so one would expect a concluding phrase such as ‘And I did as the Lord commanded me ...’ Nevertheless the poem is an allegory and has its detailed application to the circumstances of the day, as any acted parable would. The cauldron is Jerusalem, the fire underneath and around it is the siege, the pieces of flesh are the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The word for cauldron (Heb. *sîr*) normally refers to any large wide-mouthed pottery utensil used for washing or cookery, though in this instance we find in verse 11 that it is made of copper. In verse 5 there are a number of textual emendations which RSV has followed. The first reference to bones (*a’âmîm*) should probably read logs (*e’îm*); the otherwise unknown cognate accusative in ‘boil its boilings’ (*r’âtâhêhâ*) is best altered, as in two MSS, to its pieces (*n’âtâhêhâ*), a word specially used of joints of meat; and the final verb can easily be altered to an imperative, seethe its bones, but this is less necessary. JB has ‘until even the bones are cooked.’”

The cooking pot on the fire with the pieces of meat boiling in it is a picture of the siege of Jerusalem and the people inside the city. The prophetic warning has passed the point of no return. From now on the outcome of suffering and destruction is unavoidable. In more than one sense the heat is on and Jerusalem with the people will fall apart as meat that is overcooked to the point where it separates from the bone. It is a picture of unimaginable suffering.

V.6 reads literally in Hebrew: “Wherefore, thus says the Lord God; Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose scum is therein, and whose scum is not gone out of it! Piece by piece bring it out let no lot fall upon it.”

The Hebrew word rendered “scum” or “deposit” in *The New International Version*, is *chel’ah*, which is derived from the Hebrew word *chala’*, meaning “to be sick.” As such we find it in the verse: “In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet.”⁵ This chapter in Ezekiel is the only place where *chel’ah* is found. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: “Here are two oracles dependent upon each other and on the poem of the cooking-pot. The first (6-8) deals with the blood-guiltiness of Jerusalem, harking back to the message of 22:1-16, and introduces this by making play on the corrosion which the boiling of the cauldron has brought to light, probably in the form of a rusty scum ... Out of this reddish mess the contents are to be removed *piece by piece* indiscriminately. That is to say, the inhabitants of the besieged Jerusalem are to be scattered in all directions. But Jerusalem’s guilt still remains, like blood spilled *on the bare rock*, uncovered by earth in burial and therefore still crying out to God for vengeance ... The second oracle (9-14) deals with this question in a different way. In verse 5 the logs were piled under the cauldron to boil the contents of the stew; now the Lord intends to kindle a fire which will eventually melt the cauldron itself. To this end the contents are first disposed of (following RSV, *boil well the*

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1. Jer. 1:13
 2. Ezek. 11:2-12
 3. Ezek. 8:3-11:24
 4. II Kings 5:26
 5. II Chron. 16:12

flesh, and empty out the broth, 10), the bones of the meat are burnt, and then the empty pot is stood on the burning coals so that it may become red-hot and all its filth and rust be melted away.”

In vv.6 and 9, Ezekiel borrows the words of Nahum about Nineveh: “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!”¹ The Hebrew word used in “mixing in the spices” in v.10 is *raqach*, which usually refers to perfume. We find it in the chapter that deals with the preparation of the oil used for anointing² and in the verse: “As dead flies give *perfume* a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”³ Most Bible scholars do not know what to do with the expression. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “Spice it well - that the meat may be the more palatable; i.e., I will make the foe delight in its destruction as much as one delights in well-seasoned savory meat. Grotius, needlessly departing from the obvious sense, translates, ‘let it be boiled down to a compound.’” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “We are reminded of the ‘bubble, bubble’ of the witches’ cauldron in ‘Macbeth.’”

The melting of the copper cooking pot depicts the destruction of the city and the temple as well as the slaughter of the people and the being led into captivity of the remnant. Vv.12 and 13 refer to God’s earlier efforts to get through to the people and bring about conviction of sin and repentance. None of the previous chastisements had resulted in contrition in any form. There had been no change of heart and turning back to God. As a matter of fact the people who survived the disaster blamed their bad luck on the fact that they had temporarily suspended their idolatry. They said to Jeremiah: “Ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.”⁴ The people’s spiritual blindness seemed to be absolute. God had said to Israel: “I am the Lord, who makes you holy.”⁵ But Israel had refused to be made holy. And God does not sanctify us against our will.

p. The death of Ezekiel’s wife 24:15-27

15 The word of the Lord came to me:

16 "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears.

17 Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food [of mourners]."

18 So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

19 Then the people asked me, "Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us?"

20 So I said to them, "The word of the Lord came to me:

21 Say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary — the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword.

22 And you will do as I have done. You will not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food [of mourners].

23 You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves.

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1. Nah. 3:1
 2. Ex. 30:22-25
 3. Eccl. 10:1
 4. Jer. 44:18
 5. Lev. 22:32

24 Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.'

25 "And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well—

26 on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news.

27 At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "These verses conclude what we have been upon all along from the beginning of this book, to wit, Ezekiel's prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem; for after this, though he prophesied much concerning other nations, he said no more concerning Jerusalem, till he heard of the destruction of it, almost three years after, ch. 33:21. He had assured them, in the former part of this chapter, that there was no hope at all of the preventing of the trouble; here he assures them that they should not have the ease of weeping for it."

For those of us who are happily married, as well as for others, this story will not fail to make a deep impression. The death of a spouse is one of the hardest losses a person can suffer. As we observed earlier, God never allowed His servants, the prophets, to preach without experiencing personally the contents of their messages. That suggests that God wants convey to His servants how He feels about the matter that He gives His servants to transmit. To have fellowship with God means to share in His sorrow as well as His joy.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section with the following: "In these verses we catch a glimpse of the inner Ezekiel which rarely appears through his apparently harsh and unyielding exterior. His austerity and rigid self-discipline, his passion for truth and for the honor of God's holy name, very nearly conceal the tender heart that lies within. While not wishing to romanticize Ezekiel in any way, it is worth commenting that often a man is seen for what he really is only when he is seen in conjunction with his wife. Whereas in the other forty-seven chapters we are impressed, if not overawed, by Ezekiel's personality, in this chapter at the heart of the book which bears his name we meet him and find him attractive with human emotions like our own. This is borne out by the phrase he uses to describe his wife: 'the desire of his eyes, the one in whom his eyes delight.'" We could modify this statement by adding that whereas it seems that God Himself appears "harsh and unyielding" in proclaiming His wrath over human unrighteousness, this section gives us insight in *His* warm, loving and compassionate heart. What Ezekiel saw in his wife who was the delight of his eyes, God sees in His people, which He loves with an everlasting love. As a matter of fact the love for a spouse and marital relationships are a reflection of the love of Jesus Christ for His bride. In the same way as God wanted Abraham to feel what it meant to sacrifice his son, God wanted Ezekiel to feel what God felt when He ordered the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the people. If we do not read this in these verses, we miss the point.

We have difficulty understanding what death means to God. If death is the last enemy, our enemy, it is because death is God's enemy. God hates death more than we ever can. All things cannot be made new until death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire.¹

No details are given as to how Ezekiel's wife died or whether Ezekiel was allowed to prepare her for her final hour. Ezekiel, being a priest, was not allowed to participate in mourning for other people, but the law allowed him to go through the process of mourning for his wife. We read in Leviticus: "A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband — for her he may make himself unclean. He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself."² But the only groaning Ezekiel was allowed to do was in silence before the Lord. The fact that Ezekiel obeys God without any remonstrance is proof of the fact that the love of God had become the priority of his life. He

1. Rev. 20:14

2. Lev. 21:1-4

loved God more than he loved his wife. That sense of priority had made her the delight of his eyes. If we love God more than anyone or anything else, His love will become the source of our love for all the others.

Mourning in Palestine was, to use the words of *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, “noisy, violent, and demonstrative.” The Hebrew word used in v.16 for “lament” is *caphad*, which means “to tear the hair and beat the breasts.” Sometimes professional mourners were hired for the occasion. We read about the death of Jairus’ daughter: “When Jesus entered the ruler’s house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, ‘Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.’”¹ It was the absence of such outward demonstrations that made the people ask Ezekiel what was the meaning of his unusual behavior. Actually, they asked “Won’t you tell us what these things have to do with us?” Evidently, they had become accustomed to the fact that Ezekiel’s idiosyncrasies had a purpose.

We do not know much about the reasons behind mourning customs. In the primitive society in which my wife and I worked among people who were just emerging from the Stone Age in Indonesia, mourning practices were governed by fear of the spirits of the dead that would return and take revenge upon those who would not display adequate signs of grief. This would lead to the cutting off of finger joints and other kinds of physical mutilation of the body. Much of the way in which death is dealt with has to do with concepts of life after death. How much of the theological perception, or the lack of it, governed the mid-eastern mind is difficult to determine.

Ezekiel describes the temple in Jerusalem with the words “the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection,” in part the same words God used for Ezekiel’s affection for his wife.

The last part of v.23 reads literally in the Hebrew text: “but you shall pine away for your iniquities and mourn one toward another.” The Hebrew word rendered “pine away” is *ýmaqq*, which literally means “to melt, “to flow,” or “to dwindle.” We find it in the psalm verse: “My wounds *fester* and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.”² Moses had prophesied what would happen to the people when they forsook the Lord: “Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins; also because of their fathers’ sins they will waste away.”³ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “The Jews’ not mourning was to be, not the result of insensibility, anymore than Ezekiel’s not mourning for his wife was not from want of feeling. They could not in their exile manifest publicly their lamentation, but they would privately ‘mourn one to another.’ Their ‘iniquities’ would then be their chief sorrow (‘pining away’), as feeling that these were the cause of their sufferings (cf. Lev 26:39; Lam 3:39). The fullest fulfillment is still future, when they shall not merely mourn for the punishment of their sins, but ‘shall look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn for Him’ with true repentance (Zech 12:10-14). It seems, however, that more is meant here than that exilic conditions prevented the Jews to give public utterance to their grief. “Pining away,” according to the root meaning of the Hebrew word, has a connotation of corruption. Sin has its own built-in punishment. In describing hell, Jesus says that it is the place where “Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”⁴ It is the worm of corruption inside that makes life after death such an excruciating experience for the lost. It was “the worm” inside the captives that kept them from mourning for their sin.

We can hardly imagine the inner turmoil this must have caused in Ezekiel’s heart. The death of his wife must have broken his heart. The realization that what happened in the world inside him was a picture of what would happen to the world at large, which again depicted what happened in the heart of God, made the experience overwhelming to the highest degree. In this context, the words “You will know that I am the Sovereign LORD” acquire a meaning that goes well beyond “I told you so!” For Ezekiel it must have meant an insight into God’s character that was both frightening and comforting.

We had earlier suggested that Ezekiel could have suffered a stroke which limited, or partly impaired his speech. After the Lord had called him to the ministry of prophet, Ezekiel seemed to have reacted with reluctance and

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1. Matt. 9:23,24
 2. Ps. 38:5
 3. Lev. 26:39
 4. Mark 9:48

God had said to him: “I will make your tongue ‘to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house. But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’ Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house.”¹ Yet, Ezekiel communicated verbally with his fellow exiles. The promise given in v.27 that the prophet would again be able to speak after a refugee arrived with word of the fall of the city, could therefore hardly mean that Ezekiel had not been able to speak at all. *Barnes’ Notes* observes, probably correctly: “Ezekiel had been employed four years in foretelling the calamities about to come to pass. He had been utterly disregarded by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and received with apparent respect but with real incredulity by those in exile. Now until the city had been actually taken, the voice of prophecy should cease, so far as God's people were concerned. Hence the intervening series of predictions relating to neighboring and foreign nations (Ezek 25-32). After which the prophet’s voice was again heard addressing his countrymen in their exile. This accounts for the apparently parenthetical character of the next eight chapters.” For the duration of the siege, he was silent as far as speaking to the Israelites was concerned, but he did prophecy about the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Edomites and some of the other nations that were neighbors to the Israelites, as we shall see in the following chapters.

When word of the fall of Jerusalem reached Ezekiel, we read: “In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘The city has fallen!’ Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent.”²

V. ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS 25:1 – 32:32

As a general introduction to chapters 25:1 – 32:32, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, makes the following observation: “Although the Old Testament prophets addressed their messages primarily to their own people, or to a part at least of God’s covenant community, it was characteristic of them to survey the other nations of the world in order to demonstrate the Lord’s sovereignty over the heathen as well as over Israel. This is the pattern in Isaiah (chapters 13-23), in Jeremiah (chapters 46-51) and also in Amos (chapters 1,2). The purpose of this kind of writing is twofold. First, it arises out of a belief in monotheism, and is intended to show the out-workings of monotheism. If Yahweh is the God of the whole earth, He clearly has something to say about the history and destiny of nations other than Israel. Secondly, the future prospects of Israel, whether they are thought of in terms of a day of judgment or Davidic Messianism or a new covenant, must be matched by judgment on peoples who have often flagrantly disregarded the laws by which all mankind are to be judged. Such national sins as aggression, arrogance, atrocities and the breaking of covenants, to name but a few, deserve God’s wrath, whether committed by Jewish or Gentile powers.”

After elaborating on the fact that Babylon is omitted in the list and commenting on the suggestion of some that the elaborate treatment of Tyre may be a cryptic reference to Babylon, the commentary continues: “One further observation needs to be made. The editor, whether Ezekiel or another, has inserted these oracles between chapters 24 and 33 in order to heighten the dramatic tensions of waiting for the news of the fall of Jerusalem to burst upon the doubting exiles. At the same time this section marks a clear hiatus between Ezekiel’s ministry and message before 587 BC and his quite different treatment of the exiles once the disaster had vindicated his words and created the atmosphere of stunned repentance, in which he could begin to restore the nation’s confidence in the good purposes of God.”

1. Ezek. 3:26,27

2. Ezek. 33:21,22

a. Against neighboring nations 25:1-17

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set your face against the Ammonites and prophesy against them.

3 Say to them, 'Hear the word of the Sovereign Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you said "Aha!" over my sanctuary when it was desecrated and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the people of Judah when they went into exile,

4 therefore I am going to give you to the people of the East as a possession. They will set up their camps and pitch their tents among you; they will eat your fruit and drink your milk.

5 I will turn Rabbah into a pasture for camels and Ammon into a resting place for sheep. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

6 For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet, rejoicing with all the malice of your heart against the land of Israel,

7 therefore I will stretch out my hand against you and give you as plunder to the nations. I will cut you off from the nations and exterminate you from the countries. I will destroy you, and you will know that I am the Lord.'"

8 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because Moab and Seir said, "Look, the house of Judah has become like all the other nations,"

9 therefore I will expose the flank of Moab, beginning at its frontier towns — Beth Jeshimoth, Baal Meon and Kiriathaim — the glory of that land.

10 I will give Moab along with the Ammonites to the people of the East as a possession, so that the Ammonites will not be remembered among the nations;

11 and I will inflict punishment on Moab. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'"

12 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because Edom took revenge on the house of Judah and became very guilty by doing so,

13 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill its men and their animals. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword.

14 I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"

15 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because the Philistines acted in vengeance and took revenge with malice in their hearts, and with ancient hostility sought to destroy Judah,

16 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to stretch out my hand against the Philistines, and I will cut off the Kerethites and destroy those remaining along the coast.

17 I will carry out great vengeance on them and punish them in my wrath. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I take vengeance on them.'"

These prophecies were obviously given after the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is ordered to prophesy the doom of four nations, three of which are neighbors who were indirectly related to Israel through Abraham. Ammon and Moab were the offspring of Lot and Edom was the twin brother of Jacob. The Philistines were part of the original inhabitants of Canaan, who ought to have been expelled or exterminated when Israel conquered the promised land. They were descendants of Ham¹ and lived in Palestine in the days of Abraham² and Isaac.³

These prophecies differ from the ones Ezekiel had spoken against the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea in that there were not warnings of judgment to come, allowing for repentance and deferment. These words are a verdict God pronounced upon the nations for the role they played in Israel's punishment. Their human reaction to the doom of God's chosen people ought to have been awe and sorrow instead of malicious joy. The Ammonites had reacted to

1. Gen. 10:14

2. Gen. 20,21

3. Gen. 26:1ff.

the fall of Jerusalem by laughing and cheering. “You said ‘Aha!’ over my sanctuary when it was desecrated and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the people of Judah when they went into exile” (v.3); “you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet, rejoicing with all the malice of your heart against the land of Israel” (v.6).

In earlier days, the sons of Korah had sung in one of their psalms: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me – Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush – and I will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’”¹ God had intended to include Ammon among those for whom He had revealed Himself on earth, but they had refused to be “born in Zion.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary states: “If Israel was not spared, much less the pagan, utterly corrupt, and having no mixture of truth, such as Israel in its worst state possessed (1 Peter 4:17-18). Their ruin was to be utter: Israel’s but temporary (Jer 46:28). The nations denounced are seven, the perfect number; implying that God’s judgments would visit, not merely these, but the whole round of the pagan foes of God. Babylon is excepted, because she is now for the present viewed as the rod of God’s retributive justice, a view too much then lost sight of by those who fretted against her universal supremacy.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments: “When Nebuchadnezzar left Babylon, he was in doubt whether he should besiege Riblath, the capital of the Ammonites, or Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, first: and having used his divination, he was determined, by the result, to attack Jerusalem the first. He did so; and the Ammonites, seeing the success of his arms, made friends with him, and exulted in the ruin of the Jews. God resents this, and predicts their downfall with that of Edom, Moab, and the Philistines. The fulfillment of this prediction is not noted in Scripture: but Josephus tells us, that about five years after the taking of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar turned his arms against the Ammonites and Moabites, and afterwards against Egypt; and having subdued those nations, he returned to Babylon.”

Twice in this prophecy against Ammon, we read the words “you will know that I am the LORD.” When Ezekiel used the same words to his fellow exiles in Babylon, they had quite a different meaning attached to them. Knowing the LORD would be a revelation that leads to salvation. In the case of Ammon, who had refused to acknowledge God’s revelation of Himself in Jerusalem, the knowledge of God would be the most terrifying experience imaginable. It would be equal to what the Apostle John describes in *Revelation*: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”²

Not much is known of Rabbah in Biblical times. It must have been the capital of Ammon, but this is nowhere stated specifically.

In the verdict of Moab, the charge is that they had said: “Look, the house of Judah has become like all the other nations.” This implies that, at one point in history, Moab had acknowledged Israel’s unique position as the people of God, which must have made them feel guilty. There is always an element of conviction in others if the people of God maintain their spiritual testimony.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about the prophecy against Moab: “The hostility between Moab and Israel dates back to Balak and Moses (Nu. 22-24). As a nation they were closely associated with their Ammonite neighbors (*cf.* Gn. 19:30-38), but they were more settled people and had a well-developed culture. Their crime is contempt for Judah and rejection of her claims to be a peculiar people with a uniquely powerful God. Presumably her defeat in battle was regarded as adequate justification for this view, but it was none the less culpable. Moab would share the Ammonite fate. Her *flank* (9, RSV; lit. ‘shoulder’) would be exposed to attack through the destruction of her strongly-fortified cities. Three of these are named and their exact position can be seen on a good Bible atlas ... Oracles against Moab occur in the writings of other prophets also (*cf.* Is. 15; 16; Je. 48; Am. 2:1-3; Zp. 2:8-11). It is worth noting that not long after this both Ammon and Moab were overrun by Nabatean tribesmen and ceased to have any independent existence as nations.”

1. Ps. 87:4

2. Rev. 6:15-17

Barnes' Notes observes about the opening of Moab's flank that made her vulnerable to attack: "There is an ironical stress on 'his' cities, because these cities belonged not to Moab but to Israel, having been assigned to the Reubenites (Num 32:38; Josh 13:20). They lay to the north of the river Arnon, which was the proper boundary of Moab (Num 21:13). The Moabites had in the last days of the kingdom of Israel recovered this territory (Isa 16). They still occupied this land in the time of Ezekiel (see Jer 48)." About "the glory of that land" the commentary states: "This tract, belonging to the district called by the Arabians 'Al Belka,' has been at all times highly valued on account of the excellence of its pastures for cattle. The most southern of these three cities is Kiriathaim, called on the Moabitic stone Kirjath, and now Kureiyat. The dual termination of the name Kiriath – 'aim,' is explained by the fact that Kureiyat is situated on two sister hillocks half a mile apart, both covered by the ancient city. It is situated about eight miles north of the Arnon, and seven miles east of the shore of the Dead Sea. Baal-meon is about ten miles north of Kureiyat-known at present as Main. It is probable that Kiriathaim was the 'Kirjath-Huzoth' (city of streets), and Baal-meon, the 'Bamoth-Baal' (high places of Baal), to which Balak took Balaam (Num 22:39,41). Baal-meon occurs on the Moabitic stone as a place which Mesa built or fortified. He probably erected a stronghold on the old locality, reviving the ancient name. Beth-jeshimoth is identified with a knoll at the north-eastern-most point of the Dead Sea."

The severity of judgment over Moab is wonderfully and graciously compensated for in the story of the Moabite girl Ruth, who migrated to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi and became a link in the chain that would bring the Messiah into this world. The other story in which Moab figured predominantly, in which King Balak hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel in the Name of YHWH, emphasizes the fact that Moab took Israel's God seriously, but not to the point of surrender to Him.

Vv.12-14 contain the verdict over Edom, Israel's twin brother. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on the judgment: "Israel and Edom had a long-standing feud, traceable back in ancient tradition to their twin ancestors (Gn. 25:23). From time to time this hatred erupted violently, as it did at the fall of Jerusalem, when the Edomites took advantage of Judah's plight in a way that earned them undying and bitter animosity of the kind reflected in Psalm 137:7-9, Obadiah 1-21 and Malachi 1:3-5 ... What the Edomites actually did we cannot say for sure, but they certainly sided with Nebuchadrezzar against Jerusalem and after the exile there is evidence of Edomite occupation of southern Judah. Their crime of acting revengefully is expressed by Ezekiel in the strongest terms (12), and their punishment is in the same style. Israel is to be the agent for this vengeance (14, by the hand of my people Israel), and it is interesting to note that although Edom proper was also overrun by Nabataeans, the ancestors of the modern Arabs, Edomite survivors were later subdued first by Judas Maccabaeus and then by John Hyrcanus, who incorporated them into the Jewish race by compulsory circumcision. Ezekiel, however, does not predict that they will ever 'know that I am the Lord.'"

Instead of "They will know that I am the Lord," we read "they will know my vengeance." What is implied in God's vengeance over Edom is expressed in Malachi's post-exilic prophecy: "'I have loved you,' says the Lord. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the Lord says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.' Edom may say, 'Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.' But this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord. You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the Lord-even beyond the borders of Israel!' '"¹

The last three verses of this chapter are devoted to the verdict over the Philistines. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel* comments: "These inhabitants of the southern part of the coastal strip of Palestine were also inveterate foes of Israel during her early history, but they had no ties of kinship and were originally Mediterranean 'sea peoples' from the Aegean. David finally broke their military ascendancy but they continued to cause occasional trouble during the monarchy, though we have no record other than this oracle of their hostility at the time of Jerusalem's fall. The Cherethites, who were regularly linked with them, may well be etymologically the same as the Cretans, as LXX translates. David employed them in his standing army of mercenaries, and it is likely that 'the Pelethites' who shared this duty with them were Philistines under a slightly different name. The punishment pronounced on them for their vengeful wrongs done against Jerusalem (doubtless they too sided with Babylon) is expressed in the form of a play on

words: *I will cut off (hikrattî) the Cherethites (et k^er^etîm).* After Maccabean times, the Philistines completely vanished from sight as a people and only the names of their cities remained.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the Philistines: “They are noticed 286 times in the Old Testament, and their country 8 times. The question of their race and origin is of great importance as affecting the genuine character and reliability of the Bible notices. In Gen 10:14 (1 Chron 1:12) they are reckoned with other tribes in Mizraim (Egypt) as descendants of Ham, and as cousins of the old inhabitants of Babylonia (verse 6). They are said to be a branch of the Casluhim - an unknown people - or, according to Septuagint, of the Casmanim, which would mean ‘shavers of the head’ - a custom of the Phoenicians (forbidden to Hebrews as a rule), as known from a picture of the time of Thothmes III in the 16th century B.C.. They are also connected with the Caphtorim or people of Caphtor, whence indeed they are said to have come (Jer 47:4; Amos 9:7).”

We find the Philistines in Canaan at the time of Abraham. At that time they may have been believers in God as Abraham was. We read that Abimelech, (which may have been a title rather than a person’s name, in the same way as “Pharaoh” was in Egypt), recognized God’s blessing upon Abraham. Abimelech and Abraham made a covenant with each other, promising to respect each other’s rights in future generations.¹

b. Against Tyre and Sidon 26:1-28:26

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section with: “Tyre’s pre-eminence in world trade was due to her natural situation, with two excellent harbors, one on the mainland where a portion of the city was built and the other on the off-shore island which gave the city its name (Tyre, *Tsor* = rock). The two were connected by a causeway, built in the tenth century BC by Hiram I, and this effectively doubled the trading potential of the city. At the same time, when danger threatened, it made it possible to retreat into the island stronghold which thus became both treasure-chest, warehouse and impregnable fortress of the Tyrians. As a commercial center, Tyre was famous for her glassware and for her dyed materials, using the purple dye made from the local murex shell-fish. Inevitably she was a prey at which foreign powers looked greedily and she had to pay a heavy tribute to Assyria as the price for commercial freedom. Her continuing prosperity would have encouraged a sense of complacency within herself and of jealousy from her less privileged neighbors, and these attitudes are fully reflected in Ezekiel’s oracles.

There are five major sub-divisions of these chapters, each beginning with ‘the word of the Lord came to me’ (26:1; 27:1; 28:1, 11, 20). They are (i) the prophecy of Tyre’s destruction (26:1-21); (ii) a lamentation of the shipwreck of Tyre, pictured as wealthy trading-vessel (27:1-36); (iii) an oracle about the downfall of the prince of Tyre (28:1-10); (iv) a lament over the king of Tyre (28:11-19); (v) a prophecy against Sidon (28:20-26).”

i. Prophecy of Tyre’s destruction 26:1-21

1 In the eleventh year, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, because Tyre has said of Jerusalem, ‘Aha! The gate to the nations is broken, and its doors have swung open to me; now that she lies in ruins I will prosper,’

3 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, O Tyre, and I will bring many nations against you, like the sea casting up its waves.

4 They will destroy the walls of Tyre and pull down her towers; I will scrape away her rubble and make her a bare rock.

5 Out in the sea she will become a place to spread fishnets, for I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord. She will become plunder for the nations,

1. See Gen. 21:22-24.

6 and her settlements on the mainland will be ravaged by the sword. Then they will know that I am the Lord.

7 "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: From the north I am going to bring against Tyre Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses and chariots, with horsemen and a great army.

8 He will ravage your settlements on the mainland with the sword; he will set up siege works against you, build a ramp up to your walls and raise his shields against you.

9 He will direct the blows of his battering rams against your walls and demolish your towers with his weapons.

10 His horses will be so many that they will cover you with dust. Your walls will tremble at the noise of the war horses, wagons and chariots when he enters your gates as men enter a city whose walls have been broken through.

11 The hoofs of his horses will trample all your streets; he will kill your people with the sword, and your strong pillars will fall to the ground.

12 They will plunder your wealth and loot your merchandise; they will break down your walls and demolish your fine houses and throw your stones, timber and rubble into the sea.

13 I will put an end to your noisy songs, and the music of your harps will be heard no more.

14 I will make you a bare rock, and you will become a place to spread fishnets. You will never be rebuilt, for I the Lord have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord.

15 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Tyre: Will not the coastlands tremble at the sound of your fall, when the wounded groan and the slaughter takes place in you?

16 Then all the princes of the coast will step down from their thrones and lay aside their robes and take off their embroidered garments. Clothed with terror, they will sit on the ground, trembling every moment, appalled at you.

17 Then they will take up a lament concerning you and say to you: "'How you are destroyed, O city of renown, peopled by men of the sea! You were a power on the seas, you and your citizens; you put your terror on all who lived there.

18 Now the coastlands tremble on the day of your fall; the islands in the sea are terrified at your collapse.'

19 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When I make you a desolate city, like cities no longer inhabited, and when I bring the ocean depths over you and its vast waters cover you,

20 then I will bring you down with those who go down to the pit, to the people of long ago. I will make you dwell in the earth below, as in ancient ruins, with those who go down to the pit, and you will not return or take your place in the land of the living.

21 I will bring you to a horrible end and you will be no more. You will be sought, but you will never again be found, declares the Sovereign Lord."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: "Once again the prophecy can be further sub-divided into separate sections, each introduced by the oracular formula, *thus says the Lord God* (26:7, 15, 19). These do, however, hold together and each adds further significance to the over-all message of the chapter. The first section (1-6) is in typical 'because ... therefore ...' style of the previous chapter. The offence of Tyre is that she rejoices over the fall of Jerusalem and congratulates herself that she has lost a serious commercial competitor. *The gate of the peoples* (2) suggests that Jerusalem was at the intersection of a large number of international trade-routes and so was able to impose her own tolls. Presumably Tyre looked forward to taking these over herself."

The Pulpit Commentary observes about Tyre: "As the nearest great commercial city, the Venice of the ancient world, Tyre, from the days of David (... 2 Samuel 5:11) and Solomon (... 1 Kings 5:1) onward, had been prominent in the eyes of the statesmen and prophets of Judah; and Ezekiel follows in the footsteps of ... Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9, 10; Isaiah 23., in dealing with it. The description in Vers. 5 and 14 points, not to the city on the mainland, the old Tyre of ... Joshua 19:29, which had been taken by Shalmaneser and was afterwards destroyed by Alexander the Great, but to the island city, the new Tyre, which was, at this time, the emporium of the ancient world. The extent of her commerce will meet us in Ezekiel 27. Here, too, as in the case of the nations in Ezekiel 25, Ezekiel's indignation is roused by the exulting selfishness with which Tyre had looked on the downfall (actual or imminent, as before) of Jerusalem. 'Now,' her rulers seem to have said, 'we shall be the only power in the land of Canaan.' Jerusalem, that had been the gate of the peoples, was now broken. The name thus given may imply either."

The time given for this prophecy is the first day of the eleventh year. This could be New Year's Day, but most Bible scholars do not interpret the words as such. *Barnes' Notes* states: "The number of the month being omitted, many suppose 'the month' to mean the month when Jerusalem was taken (the rebirth month), called 'the month,' as being so well known. The capture of the city is known to have taken place on 'the ninth day of the fourth month' and its destruction on 'the seventh day of the fifth month.' This prophecy therefore preceded by a few days the capture of the city." *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* adds: "Verse 2 implies that the oracle came after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, news of which Ezekiel did not hear until the twelfth year and the tenth month (Ezek 33:21)."

Calling Jerusalem "The gate to the nations" could refer to more than just a reference to its international commercial importance. Since the days of King David, Jerusalem had been the place of God's revelation on earth. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant stood. David had composed a psalm at the occasion of the entrance of the ark into the city: "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty — he is the King of glory."¹ Israel's boasting about the gates of Jerusalem may have had a spiritual meaning, as the place of entrance into the presence of the Lord. If this is true, Tyre's rejoicing over the destruction of the city could be considered an act of rebellion against God. The fact that in the extended prophecy against Tyre, the city becomes a symbol meaning of Satan himself, would give a much deeper meaning to the taunt and the verdict.

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary comments on "The gate to the nations": "Different explanations have been given of the meaning of the words put into the mouth of Tyre. 'The door of the nations is broken in pieces.' The plural *daltowt* indicates the folding doors which formed the gate, and are mentioned in its stead. Jerusalem is the door of the nations, and is so called according to the current opinion of expositors, because it was the centre of the commerce of the nations, i.e., as a place of trade. But nothing is known to warrant the idea that Jerusalem was ever able to enter into rivalry with Tyre as a commercial city. The importance of Jerusalem with regard to other nations was to be found, not in its commerce, nor in the favorable situation which it occupied for trade ..., but in its sanctuary, or the sacred calling which it had received for the whole world of nations ... That Jerusalem is called a gate of the nations, not because it had hitherto been open to the nations for free and manifold intercourse, but for the very opposite reason, namely, because the gate of Jerusalem had hitherto been closed and barred against the nations, but was now broken in pieces through the destruction of the city, and thereby opened to the nations. Consequently the nations, and notably Tyre, would be able to enter now; and from this fact the Tyrians hoped to derive advantage, so far as their commercial interests were concerned. But this view is not in harmony with the text. Although a gate is opened by being broken in pieces, and one may force an entrance into a house by breaking the door (Gen 19:9), yet the expression 'door of the nations' cannot signify a door which bars all entrance on the part of the nations, inasmuch as doors and gates are not made to secure houses and cities against the forcible entrance of men and nations, but to render it possible for them to go out and in. The source from which the envy and the enmity manifesting itself in this malicious pleasure took their rise, is indicated in the last words: 'I shall fill myself, she (Jerusalem) is laid waste,' which Jerome has correctly linked together thus: ... to be filled with merchandise and wealth, as in Ezek 27:25. On account of this disposition toward the kingdom of God, which led Tyre to expect an increase of power and wealth from its destruction, the Lord God would smite it with ruin and annihilation."

This prophecy gives more than a description of the international animosity of one nation against another; it depicts the struggle between light and darkness, between God and Satan. Generally speaking, we know very little about the fall of Lucifer and the confrontation between the devil and the Creator. We owe much of our knowledge to the two prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel.² In pronouncing a verdict against Tyre, God reveals Himself as the adversary of Satan, who is God's adversary. And in the announcement that Tyre's punishment will be carried out by "many nations," who will come "like the sea casting up its waves," God announces that Satan will be defeated by

1. Ps 24:7-10

2. Isa. 14 and Ezek. 27

mankind which he inspired to rebel against God. The prophecy over Tyre foreshadows the ultimate victory of mankind, as described in the words in Revelation: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”¹

When God is through with Tyre, she will be nothing more than “a bare rock.” There are two words in Hebrew for “rock.” One is *tsuwr*, a rock as foundation, from which the name Tyre is derived, the other is *cela`*, a cracked rock. *Tsuwr* will become *cela`*. The play on the name Tyre in Hebrew is difficult to translate in English. In the same way as the busyness of Rabah in Ammon would “a resting place for sheep,”² so the busy harbor of Tyre would become “a place to spread fishnets.”

Vv.7-14 describe in detail how the destruction of Tyre by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar will take place. The Hebrew text uses the name Nebuchadrezzar, on which John B. Taylor, in Ezekiel, comments: “This spelling of his name was thought to be more correct than Nebuchadnezzar, being closer to the Babylonian *Nabu-kudurri-ussur*, but both forms are found in the Hebrew Bible and Nebuchadnezzar may have been the common western Aramaic form.

God calls the king of Babylon “king of kings,” which is another indication that this prophecy has a much deeper meaning than a foretelling of the future of Tyre. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “There is a special emphasis of abruptness in the way in which Ezekiel brings in the name of the great Chaldean conqueror ... of whom he speaks as ‘king of kings.’ The title is used by Daniel (2:37) of Nebuchadnezzar, and by Artaxerxes of himself (... Ezra 7:12), by Darius in the Nakshi Rustam inscription ... by Tiglat-Pileser, with the addition of ‘lord of lords.’”

In his conquest of Tyre, King Nebuchadnezzar foreshadows the King of kings who will appear at the end of world history, of whom the Apostle John writes: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”³

The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary comments on Ezekiel’s prophecy about the siege and destruction of Tyre: “The first stage of this prophecy came true when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged the mainland city of Tyre for 13 years (585 B.C. - 572 B.C.) and apparently destroyed it. However, Nebuchadnezzar had no navy; so he could not flatten the island city. But losing the mainland city was devastating to Tyre. This destroyed Tyre’s influence in the world and reduced her commercial activities severely. The second stage of Ezekiel’s prophecy was fulfilled in 332 B.C., when Alexander the Great besieged the island city of Tyre for seven months. He finally captured it when he built a causeway from the mainland to the island. Hauling cedars from the mountains of Lebanon, he drove them as piles into the floor of the sea between the mainland and the island. Then he used the debris and timber of the ruined mainland city as solid material for the causeway. Hence, the remarkable prophecy of Ezekiel was completely fulfilled.”

The last section of this chapter, vv.15-21, describes the reaction of the surrounding nations to Tyre’s destruction. If the next two chapters can be seen as a reference to Satan, personified in “the ruler of Tyre,”⁴ then this section symbolically refers to the destruction of the kingdom of darkness. The lament of the princes of the coast is echoed by the Apostle John in Revelation in connection with the fall of Babylon, as a symbol of the fall of the empire of the Antichrist.⁵ We will see more about the similarity in the next chapter.

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1. Rev. 12:11
 2. Ezek. 25:5
 3. Rev. 19:11-16
 4. Ezek. 28:2
 5. Rev. 18:9,10,16-19

ii. The shipwreck of Tyre²⁷:1-36

1 *The word of the Lord came to me:*

2 *"Son of man, take up a lament concerning Tyre.*

3 *Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says:"You say, O Tyre, "I am perfect in beauty."*

4 *Your domain was on the high seas; your builders brought your beauty to perfection.*

5 *They made all your timbers of pine trees from Senir; they took a cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you.*

6 *Of oaks from Bashan they made your oars; of cypress wood from the coasts of Cyprus they made your deck, inlaid with ivory.*

7 *Fine embroidered linen from Egypt was your sail and served as your banner; your awnings were of blue and purple from the coasts of Elishah.*

8 *Men of Sidon and Arvad were your oarsmen; your skilled men, O Tyre, were aboard as your seamen.*

9 *Veteran craftsmen of Gebal were on board as shipwrights to caulk your seams. All the ships of the sea and their sailors came alongside to trade for your wares.*

10 *"Men of Persia, Lydia and Put served as soldiers in your army. They hung their shields and helmets on your walls, bringing you splendor.*

11 *Men of Arvad and Helech manned your walls on every side; men of Gammad were in your towers. They hung their shields around your walls; they brought your beauty to perfection.*

12 *"Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods; they exchanged silver, iron, tin and lead for your merchandise.*

13 *"Greece, Tubal and Meshech traded with you; they exchanged slaves and articles of bronze for your wares.*

14 *"Men of Beth Togarmah exchanged work horses, war horses and mules for your merchandise.*

15 *"The men of Rhodes traded with you, and many coastlands were your customers; they paid you with ivory tusks and ebony.*

16 *"Aram did business with you because of your many products; they exchanged turquoise, purple fabric, embroidered work, fine linen, coral and rubies for your merchandise.*

17 *"Judah and Israel traded with you; they exchanged wheat from Minnith and confections, honey, oil and balm for your wares.*

18 *"Damascus, because of your many products and great wealth of goods, did business with you in wine from Helbon and wool from Zahar.*

19 *"Danites and Greeks from Uzal bought your merchandise; they exchanged wrought iron, cassia and calamus for your wares.*

20 *"Dedan traded in saddle blankets with you.*

21 *"Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your customers; they did business with you in lambs, rams and goats.*

22 *"The merchants of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; for your merchandise they exchanged the finest of all kinds of spices and precious stones, and gold.*

23 *"Haran, Canneh and Eden and merchants of Sheba, Asshur and Kilmad traded with you.*

24 *In your marketplace they traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted.*

25 *"The ships of Tarshish serve as carriers for your wares. You are filled with heavy cargo in the heart of the sea.*

26 *Your oarsmen take you out to the high seas. But the east wind will break you to pieces in the heart of the sea.*

27 *Your wealth, merchandise and wares, your mariners, seamen and shipwrights, your merchants and all your soldiers, and everyone else on board will sink into the heart of the sea on the day of your shipwreck.*

28 *The shorelands will quake when your seamen cry out.*

29 *All who handle the oars will abandon their ships; the mariners and all the seamen will stand on the shore.*

30 *They will raise their voice and cry bitterly over you; they will sprinkle dust on their heads and roll in ashes.*

31 They will shave their heads because of you and will put on sackcloth. They will weep over you with anguish of soul and with bitter mourning.

32 As they wail and mourn over you, they will take up a lament concerning you: "Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?"

33 When your merchandise went out on the seas, you satisfied many nations; with your great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth.

34 Now you are shattered by the sea in the depths of the waters; your wares and all your company have gone down with you.

35 All who live in the coastlands are appalled at you; their kings shudder with horror and their faces are distorted with fear.

36 The merchants among the nations hiss at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.'"

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this chapter as follows: "This chapter consists of two separate compositions: a long poem in the *qînâ* meter (3b-9, 25b-36), and a prose catalogue which is inserted in the middle of the poem (10-25a). The poem is an extended allegory about the good ship Tyre, superbly fitted out and expertly crewed, but so laden with merchandise that in heavy seas she sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Thereupon all the sailing peoples of the Mediterranean gather on the shore to bewail her loss." About vv.1-9 Taylor states: "The description of every lavish detail of the trading vessel that represents the city of Tyre is expressed as an elaboration of Tyre's opinion of her own matchlessness: '*I am perfect in beauty*' (3). There is no hint in the poem that this is the reason for her downfall, as is explicitly stated in the following chapter (28:2-8), but the poem is so subtly constructed that the point would be recognizable to any but the dullest reader. Verse 4, *thy borders* (some would understand 'thy moorings') *are in the midst of the seas*, is similar to Ashurbanipal's description of the conquered Tyrians as those who 'dwelt in the midst of the sea.' The ship's construction is as sound as it could be, with timbers from Senir, the Amorite name for Hermon (so Dt. 3:9), masts from Lebanon, oars from Bashan oaks and the decking material from Cyprus pine (follow RSV here) which was inlaid with ivory. The sails were made from finest Egyptian linen, embroidered with variegated colors, which would serve as an ensign or pennon, and her awnings were of two shades of purple which came from *Elishah*. This is probably Alašiya in Cyprus, but some would argue for a site in Syria. The crew came from Sidon and from Arvad, an off-shore island a hundred miles farther north; the *pilots*, lit. 'rope-pullers,' should simply be 'sailors' and they were all *skilled men of Zemer* (so RSV,8), a city associated with Arvad (Gn. 10:18) and identified as modern Sumra, a few miles to the south of Arvad. The most experienced craftsmen of Gebal (modern Byblos) were on board as carpenters (lit. 'repairers of the seams'), and she was attended by all the navies of the world to assist in the handling of her merchandise (9)."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: "It was yet in the height of its prosperity, and there appeared not the least symptom of its decay; yet the prophet must lament it, because its prosperity is its snare, is the cause of its pride and security, which will make its fall the more grievous. Even those that live at ease are to be lamented if they be not preparing for trouble. He must lament it because its ruin is hastening on apace; it is sure, it is near; and though the prophet foretell it, and justify God in it, yet he must lament it. Note, We ought to mourn for the miseries of other nations, as well as for our own, out of an affection for mankind in general; it is a part of the honor we owe to all men to bewail their calamities, even those which they have brought upon themselves by their own folly."

The lament over Babylon in Revelation parallels Ezekiel's, but there the kings of the earth are the ones who do the weeping. The fact that God orders Ezekiel to bewail the fall of Tyre indicates that God bewails Tyre. Tyre may be an image of Satan, but the Tyre on earth is a city inhabited by humans who are the victims of demonic oppression. Ezekiel's dirge gives expression to God's sorrow over them. In this poem Ezekiel describes the ship, without mentioning the cargo, which in Revelation includes "bodies and souls of men."¹

Commerce in itself is not sin, but greed and failure to recognize God as the source of blessing are. Tyre did not accept her affluence as a blessing coming from the Lord. She gave all the credit to herself, believing that her prosperity came from her own ingenuity. Tyre was very rich but also very lost. Asaph puts prosperity in the right

1. Rev. 18:13

perspective in one of his psalms. He begins by saying: "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."¹ But then he realizes that he is richer than the rich because of his fellowship with God, which they lack. We read his conclusion: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds."² And Jesus issues the warning: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"³

The Pulpit Commentary makes the very interesting observations about Ezekiel's prophecy that it equals the great poems of ancient literature. The commentary states that it: "is almost, if not altogether, without a parallel in the history of literature. It can scarcely have rested on anything but personal knowledge. Ezekiel, we must believe, had, at some time or other in his life, trod the sinful streets of the great city, and noted the mingled crowd of many nations and in many costumes that he met there." The poem about the good ship Tyre describes Tyre during its "golden age." That is what the period of prosperity and affluence is called in a country, when income is abundant and poverty eradicated. Dutch history books call the seventeenth century Holland's Golden Age. Dutch ships had taken over the hegemony of the seas and oceans from the Spanish Armadas and brought spices from the East Indies and silver from South America. They also shipped African slaves from Africa to North America. Holland's affluence, her golden age, came at a great price. Trade posts in the East and West had to be protected with guns and colonies turned into colonialism. In my opinion, Holland's Golden Age occurred one century earlier when Luther and Calvin's reformation hit the Netherlands and people who read their Bibles were burned at the stakes. That was when people did not count their lives precious because they trusted God. In the so called "Golden Age" people had affluence, but they were not rich in God.

The ship of Tyre was a beautiful vessel, but God was not on it. It shipwrecked in a storm because God was not at the helm. God can save the rich, but it requires a miracle and they have to ask for it.

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"⁴ With this prophecy God pleads with Tyre to ask for that miracle.

iii. The downfall of the prince of Tyre 28:1-10

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god.

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1. Ps. 73:3
 2. Ps. 73:16-28
 3. Matt. 16:26
 4. Matt. 19:23-26

3 Are you wiser than Daniel? Is no secret hidden from you?

4 By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries.

5 By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.

6 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god,

7 I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendor.

8 They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas.

9 Will you then say, "I am a god," in the presence of those who kill you? You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you.

10 You will die the death of the uncircumcised at the hands of foreigners.

I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord."

The question has been asked as to who is being addressed in these verses. The Hebrew text calls him *nagiyd Tsor*, which refers to the person in charge, a commander, leader, prince, or ruler of Tyre. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "Throughout the east the majesty and glory of a people were collected in the person of their monarch, who in some nations was worshipped as a god. The prince is here the embodiment of the community. Their glory is his glory, their pride, his pride. The doom of Tyre could not be complete without denunciation of the prince of Tyre. Idolatrous nations and idolatrous kings were, in the eyes of the prophet, antagonists to the true God. In them was embodied the principle of evil opposing itself to the divine government of the world. Hence, some of the fathers saw upon the throne, not simply a hostile monarch, but 'the Prince of this world, spiritual wickedness (or wicked spirits) in high places.' Whenever evil in any way domineers over good, there is a 'prince of Tyrus,' against whom God utters His voice. The mystery of iniquity is ever working, and in that working we recognize the power of Satan whom God condemns and will destroy."

It is true that in ancient times the monarch of a country was often believed to possess divine characteristics. Pharaoh in Egypt may have been considered to possess divinity, although not all Bible scholars agree about this. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, however, states: "The Pharaoh was probably the most important person in Egyptian society. The Egyptians believed he was a god and the key to the nation's relationship to the cosmic gods of the universe. While the Pharaoh ruled, he was the Son of Ra, the sun god, and the incarnation of the god Horus. He came from the gods with the divine responsibility to rule the land for them. His word was law, and he owned everything. Thus there were no law codes, because the king upheld order and justice and insured the stability of society." In more recent times the emperor of Japan was believed to be a god. When Japan was defeated in the Second World War, Emperor Hirohito lost his divinity.

To see in Ezekiel's denunciation of the ruler of Tyre Satan himself, may be pushing the point too far. It is true that Satan ambitiously proclaims himself to be divine, but God tells the prince of Tyre that he is a human being. It is also true that, however we interpret the word "wise" in this text, Satan's intelligence, if not wisdom in the Biblical sense of the word, surpasses anything human beings possess, even if their name is Daniel. It may be better to see in Ezekiel's condemnation of the ruler of Tyre a prophecy about the New Testament Antichrist. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "We are reminded of Isaiah's words (14:13, 14) as to the King of Babylon. Did Ezekiel emphasize and amplify the boasts of Ethbaal, with a side-glance at the Chaldean king, who also was lifted up in the pride of his heart (... Daniel 4:30)? For like examples, see the boast of Hophra, in ... Ezekiel 29:3; and the praise given to Herod Agrippa by the Tyrians (... Acts 12:21). It is noticeable that St. Paul's description of the man of sin (... 2 Thessalonians 2:4) presents the same picture in nearly the same words." Paul's warning to the Thessalonians reads: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God."¹

1. II Thess. 2:3,4

Another point of controversy is the mention of the name Daniel. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, says about this: “the Daniel of verse must be understood as the same character as appears in 14:14,20. Although there he is renowned for his righteousness, while here it is for wisdom, the unusual spelling (Dani`el) is common to both, and is quite impossible to say dogmatically that this is the same as the Ugaritic Dan`el, but the two cannot be entirely separated ... It is interesting to note that both righteousness and wisdom were two of the qualities of the Daniel of the Bible (cf. Dn. 1:17-20; 2:47; 4:18, etc.), and he was a classic example of a man whose head was not turned by his success.” *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: “There is, of course, a marked irony in the words. Daniel was for Ezekiel — and there seems something singularly humble and pathetic in the prophet’s reverence for his contemporary — the ideal at once of righteousness (... Ezekiel 14:14) and of wisdom. He was a revealer of the secrets of the future, and read the hearts of men. His fame was spread far and wide through the Chaldean empire. And this was the man with whom the King of Tyre compared himself with a self-satisfied sense of superiority, and he found the proof of his higher wisdom in his wealth.”

The actual person addressed here as the ruler of Tyre is Ithobal II. Whether this man really believed himself to be divine is difficult to determine. He was undoubtedly believed to occupy the throne because of his relationship with a higher spiritual authority, but this was not the Creator of the universe.

The ruler of Tyre fell into the same temptation as King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon by taking credit for his affluence and that of his nation. We read in Daniel how Nebuchadnezzar’s power went to his head: “Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, ‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’”¹ God brought him back to reality by allowing him to become temporarily insane. But such grace was not extended to the prince of Tyre, unless we consider Ezekiel’s prophecy to be God’s act of grace. And what would be the purpose of this prophecy if it were not a warning to the ruler of Tyre to reconsider his way of life?

In vv.6-10 Ezekiel predicts how Tyre will come to its end. The monarch of Tyre considered himself to be invincible and of possessing eternal life as a god. Nebuchadnezzar’s army would attack and conquer Tyre and the ship of Tyre would shipwreck, drowning the ship’s crew and leaving their bodies at the bottom of the sea. According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, the Phoenicians practiced circumcision and “to die like the despised uncircumcised was a great shame.”

iv. Lament over the king of Tyre 28:11-19

11 The word of the Lord came to me:

12 "Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "'You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

13 You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared.

14 You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.

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

16 Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones.

17 Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.

18 By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching.

1. Dan. 4:29,30

19 All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.’”

Barnes’ Notes writes about this section that it is: “The dirge of the prince of Tyre, answering to the dirge of the state. The passage is ironical; its main purpose is to depict all the glory, real or assumed, of ‘the prince of Tyrus,’ in order to show how deplorable should be his ruin.”

Most Bible scholars see in this dirge a poem that is modeled on the first chapters of Genesis in which Adam and his fall in sin is the main theme. Only a few allow for the possibility that the words may apply to the fall of Satan. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, for instance, observes: “Ezekiel applies to the king of Tyre a tale current among the Phoenicians. It has only cursory resemblances to the Garden of Eden account in Gen 2; 3. In the garden of God in Eden there lived with the cherub who kept it an ideal person (the Urmensch, or first man), the perfection of wisdom and beauty. Though only a man, in his pride he claimed to be a god. For his sin he was driven out of the garden by the cherub. According to God’s word to Ezekiel, the king of Tyre, for a similar offense was to be brought to ruin. Some early Church Fathers interpreted this section as having ultimate reference to the fall of Satan or the Antichrist (cf. Isa 14:4-20). This view is also held by some evangelical groups today.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The words are suggestive, as showing that Ezekiel was familiar with the history of Genesis 2 and 3 (compare the mention of Noah, in Ezekiel 15:14, 20). To him the King of Tyre seemed to claim a position like that of Adam before his fall, perfect in beauty and in wisdom, the lord of the creation. And in that fancied Eden he stood, so he thought, not like Adam, ‘naked and ashamed,’ but like one of the cherubim that guarded the gates of the primeval Paradise (... Genesis 3:24), covered with all imaginable splendor. Ezekiel returns to the phrase in ... Ezekiel 31:8, 16, 18 and 36:35. Other instances meet us in ... Joel 2:3 and ... Isaiah 51:3.” About *Every precious stone* the commentary states: “All the stones named are found in the list of the gems on the high priest’s breastplate (... Exodus 28:17-20; 39:8-14). Three, however, of those gems are wanting — those in the third row of the breastplate — which are not named elsewhere; and the order is not the same. The LXX makes the two lists identical, apparently correcting Ezekiel by Exodus. St. John (... Revelation 21:19) reproduces his imagery in his vision of the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem, but naturally returns to the fullness of the symbolic number — twelve. Possibly the description of gold and bdellium and onyx (or beryl), as in ... Genesis 2:11, 12, may have suggested the thought that Eden was a land of jewels.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary mentions the possibility of applying the dirge to Satan, but disagrees with this conclusion. We read: “Many expositors have suggested that besides the literal sense of this lamentation there is an allegory in it, and that it is an allusion to the fall of the angels that sinned, who undid themselves by their pride. And (as is usual in texts that have a mystical meaning) some passages here refer primarily to the king of Tyre, as that of his merchandises, others to the angels, as that of being in the holy mountain of God. But, if there be any thing mystical in it (as perhaps there may), I shall rather refer it to the fall of Adam, which seems to be glanced at, v. 13. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God, and that in the day thou wast created.”

It seems to me that there is little in the Genesis account of creation that justifies the picture of “the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” to apply to Adam. If the first part of this chapter, regarding “the ruler of Tyre” can be seen as a prophecy about the coming of the Antichrist, I see little reason not to see in this part features that pertain to the fall of Satan himself. It was the spirit of commerce, the greed that tries to turn every human need into a means to make money, that governed the behavior of Tyre’s merchants and that still is at the root of all commercial transactions. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”¹ Much of modern advertising is inspired by the one of whom it is said in Paradise “Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned.” Commerce and trade can provide a way for an honest living, but the desire to make a fast buck will drag a person into the kingdom of darkness. It did the king of Tyre and his subjects and it still does modern man.

By switching back and forth between the actual condition of Tyre and the powers of darkness that dominated Tyre’s commercial activity, Ezekiel creates a poem that penetrates into the darkest recesses of the human soul and

1. I Tim. 6:10

reveals the mystery of sin and selfishness that leads to perdition in all stages of world history. What Ezekiel says here about the king of Tyre, Isaiah said earlier about the king of Babylon, referring to the same supernatural angelic being: “Those who see you stare at you, they ponder your fate: ‘Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble, the man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?’ All the kings of the nations lie in state, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch; you are covered with the slain, with those pierced by the sword, those who descend to the stones of the pit. Like a corpse trampled underfoot, you will not join them in burial, for you have destroyed your land and killed your people. The offspring of the wicked will never be mentioned again.”¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, concludes his comment on this passage with the words: “The seeds of a nation’s destruction are usually to be found within herself. And the comment of those who see is once again, *you have come to a dreadful end* (cf. 26:21; 27:36).”

v. Prophecy against Sidon 28:20-26

20 *The word of the Lord came to me:*

21 *"Son of man, set your face against Sidon; prophesy against her*

22 *and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I am against you, O Sidon, and I will gain glory within you. They will know that I am the Lord, when I inflict punishment on her and show myself holy within her.*

23 *I will send a plague upon her and make blood flow in her streets. The slain will fall within her, with the sword against her on every side. Then they will know that I am the Lord.*

24 *"No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbors who are painful briars and sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.*

25 *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When I gather the people of Israel from the nations where they have been scattered, I will show myself holy among them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own land, which I gave to my servant Jacob.*

26 *They will live there in safety and will build houses and plant vineyards; they will live in safety when I inflict punishment on all their neighbors who maligned them. Then they will know that I am the Lord their God."*

Sidon is the name of the son of Canaan and the grandson of Ham. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the city of Sidon: “In Gen 10:19 it is the chief city of the Canaanites, and Joshua (Josh 11:8) calls it Great Sidon. It led all the Phoenician cities in its early development of maritime affairs, its sailors being the first to launch out into the open sea out of sight of land and to sail by night, guiding themselves by the stars. They were the first to come into contact with the Greeks and we find the mention of them several times in Homer, while other Phoenician towns are not noticed. Sidon became early distinguished for its manufactures and the skill of its artisans, such as beautiful metal-work in silver and bronze and textile fabrics embroidered and dyed with the famous purple dye which became known as Tyrian, but which was earlier produced at Sidon.”

The Adam Clarke's Commentary observes: “Sidon for a long time had possessed the empire of the sea and of all Phoenicia, and Tyre was one of its colonies; but in process of time, the daughter became greater than the mother. It seems to have been an independent place at the time in which Tyre was taken; but it is likely that it was taken by the Chaldeans soon after the former.”

In this brief prophecy over Sidon, God reveals Himself as her great opponent. In that sense Ezekiel’s text shows the other side of the coin which the Apostle Paul presents when he writes: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”²

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1. Isa. 14:16-20
 2. Rom. 8:31-32

As John B. Taylor observes in *Ezekiel*, “No indication of Sidon’s offences is given. It is couched in typical Ezekiel phraseology and describes the judgments which Yahweh will execute in Sidon as an indication of His *glory* (22).”

“I will gain glory” is the translation of the Hebrew verb *w⁴nikbadtiy*, which is derived from the noun *kabad*, meaning “to be heavy.” The word can be interpreted in a positive or a negative way. We find it in: “Abram had become *very wealthy* in livestock and in silver and gold”¹ and also in “Then the Lord said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so *grievous*.’”² There is something fascinating in the thought that glory is represented by weight. The basis for this concept is probably the fact that precious metal was used for barter in the same way we use money. Spiritually, the glory of God has weight, whereas sin is compared to chaff. “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.”³ This concept was clearly in the Apostle Paul’s mind, when he wrote: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”⁴

In Ezekiel’s prophecy against Sidon, the glory of God was their undoing. Their sin had made them so light that the weight of God’s glory crushed them.

Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Sidon would cause the plague to breakout inside the city walls, killing off the population, and the sword would do the rest once the walls were breached. The people of Sidon would recognize that the God of Israel was the One who caused this disaster. This can mean that they had been informed of Ezekiel’s prediction of their coming doom and experienced its fulfillment, or that they understood that what happened to them was the result of the way they had treated Israel and despised her God. Israel’s neighbors may have had a clearer understanding of God’s revelation of Himself in Jerusalem than Israel had herself.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on v.24: “There is a special appropriateness in Ezekiel’s imagery. The words had been used in ... Numbers 33:55 of the Canaanites at large (comp. ... Joshua 22:13). Ezekiel applies them to the cities which were the most conspicuous survivors of the old Canaanite races. Israel, he implies, had been wounded with those thorns and briars, had caught (as *e.g.* in the case of Jezebel) the taint of evil life and evil worship from those races; but for her there is, as in Ver. 25, the future of restoration, and when that future comes, the Canaanite cities, with their idolatries and vices, should have passed away forever.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on vv.25 and 26: “Finally, in a forward look beyond the exile to the days of return, Ezekiel foretells the gathering together of the dispersed exiles and their dwelling in safety in their own land once again. This act of God will be His way of manifesting His holiness in and through His people before the nations of the world. The holy people are the channel through whom the Holy God reveals Himself. There is no mention of judgments upon Israel: that is presumably thought of as a thing of the past. The nations against whom these oracles have been uttered will be judged, and Israel will dwell securely in simple, agricultural prosperity.”

The last words of v.24 are repeated in v.25 where they are applied to Israel. Sidon’s knowledge of YHWH would mean death and destruction; Israel’s knowledge would be life and peace. Proof of this knowledge will be the return from captivity. God’s plan for His people went well beyond a physical return to Canaan. God wants all of His children to enter into His Sabbath rest: the enjoyment of His creation in fellowship with Him. This is best expressed by the author of Hebrews: “It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”⁵ The testimony of God’s holiness in the lives of His children will be clear if they follow Peter’s advice: “In

1. Gen. 13:2
2. Gen. 18:20
3. Ps. 1:4,5
4. II Cor. 4:17

your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”¹

c. Against Egypt 29:1-32:32

In his introductory remarks about these chapters, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “The oracles against Tyre and Sidon are followed by four chapters against Egypt. These contain seven ‘words from the Lord’ addressed to the nation or its ruler, Pharaoh, and all but one of them are given a specific dating (29:1, 17; 30:1 undated; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1,17). It seems strange that a twelfth of Ezekiel’s book should be devoted to an *exposé* of this one heathen power, just as it seems strange to find a section as large as this one (chapters 25-32) dealing exclusively with non-Jewish affairs. The reason, however, is not hard to find. We have already had cause to note the geographical finitude of Judah in relation to the Middle East of the time, and no commentary on the life and future prospects of her people would be complete without reference to the mighty neighbors who jostled for power around her. Judah’s very existence was bound up with the foreign policies of nations like Assyria and Babylon, Egypt and Persia. They determined whether the little Hebrew kingdom was allowed to retain her independence, like a little Switzerland, or whether she should become a political satellite or a military staging-post or an international bargaining-point. They could no more be ignored than can the United States and Soviet Russia in the policies of a state in Europe or South-East Asia today.

What Ezekiel was at pains to point out, however, was that the final say in Israel’s destiny was not theirs but God’s – and God was Israel’s God! More than that, he said that even the destiny of the great powers, such as Egypt, was in the hands of Israel’s God. Yahweh controlled everything. The situation was in fact the very reverse of what appeared to be the case. The secular historian saw Israel dwarfed into insignificance by mighty neighbors; the religious commentator, the prophet, saw the great powers held firmly in the hand of little Israel’s mighty God. The lesson for the Christian minority is not difficult to draw.”

In an introduction to chapter 29, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The precision with which the dates of the several portions of the prophecy against Egypt are given, here and in Ver. 17 ... Ezekiel 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 7, shows that each was called forth by the political events of the time, and has to be studied in connection with them. It will be well, therefore, to begin with a brief survey of the relations which existed at this period between Judah, Egypt, and Babylon. After the great defeat of Pharaoh-Necho by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish (B.C. 604), on which Jeremiah (46.) dwells fully, he was succeeded in B.C. 594 by his son Psammetik II ... who invaded Ethiopia, and died in B.C. 588, leaving the throne to his son Uah-prahet, the Pharaoh Hophra of ... Jeremiah 44:30 ... The Greek historian [Herodotus] tells us that he attacked Tyre and Sidon, failed in an enterprise against Cyrene, and was deposed by Amasis (B.C. 569). Zedekiah and his counselors, following in the steps of Hezekiah (Isaiah 30.) and Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 46.), had courted his alliance against the Chaldeans. As Ezekiel had prophesied (... Ezekiel 17:11-18), they found that they were once more leaning on a broken reed. We have now come to B.C. 589, when Jerusalem was actually besieged, but was still dreaming of being relieved by an Egyptian army.”

Barnes’ Notes observes about the dates: “The first prophecy against Egypt delivered some months before the preceding prophecies against Tyre (see Ezek 26:1), the prophecies against the nations being given, not in their chronological, but in their geographical order, according to their nearness to Jerusalem.” And *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* dates the first prophecy “January 586 (or 587) B.C., seven months before the fall of Jerusalem.”

Ever since the days of Abraham, Egypt had played an important role in the life of Israel, the nation through whom God chose to reveal Himself in this world. Israel’s relationship with Egypt had been a love/hate one for centuries.

5. Heb. 4:6-10

1. I Peter 3:15,16

i. The sins of Egypt 29:1-16

29:1 *In the tenth year, in the tenth month on the twelfth day, the word of the Lord came to me:*

2 *"Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt.*

3 *Speak to him and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams. You say, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself."*

4 *But I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales. I will pull you out from among your streams, with all the fish sticking to your scales.*

5 *I will leave you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams. You will fall on the open field and not be gathered or picked up. I will give you as food to the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air.*

6 *Then all who live in Egypt will know that I am the Lord. "'You have been a staff of reed for the house of Israel.*

7 *When they grasped you with their hands, you splintered and you tore open their shoulders; when they leaned on you, you broke and their backs were wrenched.*

8 *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will bring a sword against you and kill your men and their animals.*

9 *Egypt will become a desolate wasteland. Then they will know that I am the Lord. "'Because you said, "The Nile is mine; I made it,"*

10 *therefore I am against you and against your streams, and I will make the land of Egypt a ruin and a desolate waste from Migdol to Aswan, as far as the border of Cush.*

11 *No foot of man or animal will pass through it; no one will live there for forty years.*

12 *I will make the land of Egypt desolate among devastated lands, and her cities will lie desolate forty years among ruined cities. And I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries.*

13 *"Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the nations where they were scattered.*

14 *I will bring them back from captivity and return them to Upper Egypt, the land of their ancestry. There they will be a lowly kingdom.*

15 *It will be the lowliest of kingdoms and will never again exalt itself above the other nations. I will make it so weak that it will never again rule over the nations.*

16 *Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.'"*

Using the same words "I am against you" as God used in the prophecies against Tyre and Sidon,¹ God now addresses Pharaoh and Egypt. God calls Pharaoh "a great monster." The Hebrew word used is *tanniyn*, which has a variety of meaning. *The King James Version* uses the words "dragon," "sea-monster," "serpent," and "whale." We find *tanniyn*, among other, in the following verses: "So God created *the great creatures of the sea* and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind."² "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become *a snake*.'"³ And "But you crushed us and made us a haunt for *jackals* and covered us over with deep darkness."⁴ John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about this: "Pharaoh is likened to a great dragon (Heb. *tanniyn*, 'sea-monster'), a word which represented both the crocodile,

1. Ezek. 26:3; 28:22
2. Gen. 1:21
3. Ex. 7:8,9
4. Ps. 44:19

with which the Nile was infested, and also the chaos-monster of Semitic mythology. It appears in several passages in the Old Testament, identified either as ‘the serpent,’ or as ‘Leviathan’ or ‘Rahab’ (e.g. Jb. 9:13; 26:11-13; Ps. 89:10; Is. 27:1; 51:9; Am. 9:3), but it was never allowed to be regarded as a real and effective opponent of Yahweh as it was with the warring divinities of Canaanite religion. Indeed Genesis 1:21 specifically mentions the *nannîm* as being part of God’s creation, thus killing decisively the myth of their rival pre-existence. The language of mythology was frequently imported into Hebrew poetry, however, and it was a particularly apt simile for the age-old enemy, Egypt, whose sun-God, Rç`, claimed to be self-begotten.”

As in the prophecy against Tyre, so here against Egypt, the object of judgment is both the human authority and the spiritual power of darkness upon which it rested. When God promised to deliver Israel out of Egypt on the night of the first Passover, He stated to Moses: “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.”¹ Not only the crocodile Pharaoh, but Satan himself acted as if he had created Egypt and could do with the country as he pleased.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the words “You say, ‘The Nile is mine; I made it for myself’: “The words probably imply that Hophra, like his grandfather Necho, in his plan of a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea, had given much time and labor to irrigation works in Lower Egypt. The boast which rose to his lips reminds us of that of Nebuchadnezzar as he looked on Babylon (... Daniel 4:30). He, like the kings of Tyre and Babylon, was tempted to a self-apotheosis, and thought of himself as the Creator of his own power.”

Pharaoh, and with him Satan, is here compared to a crocodile which was, evidently, the emblem of Egypt. As such the animal appears on some Roman coins. The crocodile was probably regarded as a deity by the Egyptians. Ezekiel describes here in vivid language how God captures the animal and drags him out to the desert and leaves him there to die, with the fish of the Nile hanging on his scales.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary sees this prophecy fulfilled in the insurrection that dethroned Pharaoh Apries. We read: “Amasis, one of this king’s generals, being proclaimed king by an insurrection of the people, dethroned Apries, and seized upon the kingdom; and Apries was obliged to flee to Upper Egypt for safety. Most fish are sorely troubled with a species of insect which bury their heads in their flesh, under their scales, and suck out the vital juices. The allusion seems to be to this. Pharaoh was the crocodile; the fish, the common people; and the sticking to his scales, the insurrection by which he was wasted and despoiled of his kingdom.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “A second apt metaphor for Egypt, the land of reeds is now used. Egypt is a broken reed that fails all who trust in her.” Taylor continues about the image that this “suggests that the description was almost proverbial. It does not take many instances to establish a reputation for unreliability. Verse 9b brings out yet another ground for Yahweh’s declaration, *I am against you* (3, 10; cf. 28:22). Egypt, whose prosperity was dependent on the irrigation of the river Nile, was actually claiming to be its owner and originator.”

The comparison of Egypt to a staff of reed, something that looks sturdy but splinters when one leans on it, is an image that occurs several times in Scripture. The commander of the Assyrian army used it during the siege of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. He shouted to the people on the wall of the city: “Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man’s hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him.”²

ii. Egypt and Babylon 29:17-21

17 In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month on the first day, the word of the Lord came to me:

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1. Ex. 12:12
 2. II Kings 18:21

18 "Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw. Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre.

19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the land as pay for his army.

20 I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign Lord.

21 "On that day I will make a horn grow for the house of Israel, and I will open your mouth among them. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

Barnes' Notes observes: "We have no record of the circumstances of the Chaldean invasion of Egypt, but it is possible that it did not take place until after the fall of Tyre. We gather of what nature it must have been by comparing the description of the results of Assyrian conquest (Isa 37:25 ff). Minute fulfillment of every detail of prophecy is not to be insisted upon, but only the general fact that Egypt would for a time, described as 40 years, be in a state of collapse. No great stress is to be laid on the exact number of years. The number of years passed in the wilderness became to the Hebrews a significant period of chastisement. Nebuchadnezzar's occupation of Egypt was of no long duration, and his ravages, though severe, must have been partial. Peace with Babylon was favorable to the development of home-works, but since the peace was in truth subjugation, it was hollow and in fact ruinous. Further, it is to be remembered that God fulfils His decree by a gradual rather than an immediate process. The ravages of Nebuchadnezzar were the beginning of the end, and all the desolation which followed may be looked upon as a continuous fulfillment of God's decree. The savage fury with which Cambyses swept over Egypt amply realized all that Ezekiel foretold. Many places recovered some wealth and prosperity, but from the time of Herodotus the kingdom never again became really independent. Egyptian rulers gave place to Persian, Persian to the successors of Alexander the Great, who gave place in turn to Rome. So thoroughly was the prophecy of Ezekiel fulfilled (Ezek 29:14-15)." And *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: "Jerome remarks, the number 40 is one often connected with affliction and judgment. The rains of the flood in 40 days brought destruction on the world. Moses, Elias, and the Savior fasted 40 days. The interval between Egypt's overthrow by Nebuchadnezzar and the deliverance by Cyrus was about 40 years. The ideal 40 years wilderness-state of social and political degradation, rather than a literal non-passing of man or beast for that term, is mainly intended (so Ezek 4:6; Isa 19:2,11)."

And John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, concludes: "In terms of literal fulfillment these threats never became reality: Egypt never endured an exile as Judah did. But her subsequent history has consisted of repeated conquest and humiliation. She has never been anything more than a 'lowly kingdom' and it is unlikely that she will ever again enjoy the glory that once was hers."

The Pulpit Commentary states: "It need hardly be said that history reveals no such period of devastation. Nor, indeed, would anything but the most prosaic literalism justify us in looking for it. We are dealing with the language of a poet-prophet, which is naturally that of hyperbole, and so the 'forty years' stand, as, perhaps, elsewhere (... Judges 3:11; 5:31, etc.), for a period of undefined duration, and the picture of a land on which no man or beast sets foot for that of a time of desolation, and consequent cessation of all the customary traffic along the Nile. Such a period, there is reason to believe, did follow on the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar. It is implied in Vers. 17-21, which carry us to a date seventeen years later than that of the verse with which we are now dealing; and also in ... Jeremiah 43:10-12. Josephus ... speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as having invaded Libya. The reign of Amasis, which followed on the deposition of Hophra, was one of general prosperity as regards commerce and culture, but Egypt ceased to be one of the great world-powers after the time of Nebuchadnezzar and fell easily into the hands of the Persians under Cambyses. It is noticeable that Ezekiel does not, like Isaiah (19:18-25), connect the future of Egypt with any Messianic expectations." About the Egyptians being scattered among the nations, the same commentary states: "As before, records are silent as to any such dispersion. All that we can say is that such a deportation was uniformly the sequel of the conquests of an Oriental king, as in the case of the captivities of Samaria (... 2 Kings 17:6) and Jerusalem, and of the nations that were settled in Samaria (... 2 Kings 17:6), and of the Persians by Darius; that if we

find reason to believe that Egypt was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of Jerusalem, we may assume, with little risk of doubt, that it was followed by what Ezekiel describes.”

The problem with facts about unfulfilled prophecy is that the absence of record does not mean that the predicted events did not occur. We can also state that an unfulfilled prophecy cannot be considered unfulfilled until the end of world history.

On the concluding verses of this chapter, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “This oracle is the latest in the whole of the book, being dated on New Year’s Day in 571 BC. Although much later than any of the other oracles against Egypt, it is inserted at this point because it links the punishment of Egypt with the raising of the siege of Tyre, an event which took place in c. 574 BC. It is therefore put as near to the group of oracles against Tyre as the context will allow. Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Tyre had lasted for thirteen years, and by the end of that time *every head was made bald and every shoulder was rubbed bare*, a graphic description of the chafing of helmets and the carrying of burdens for the siege-works. We do not know whether Tyre was captured by the Babylonian force or not, though a few years later Babylonian officials were in residence in the city and Babylonian suzerainty was acknowledged. All that Ezekiel tells us is that the rewards of the siege were not commensurate with the effort involved. There was insufficient booty to pay off the army (perhaps the treasures had been evacuated by sea), and so Nebuchadnezzar was to divert his attention to the more lucrative prey, Egypt. This is seen as a gift to him from God, inasmuch as his efforts against Tyre had been at the behest of Yahweh and so he was entitled to his reward (*they worked for me*, 20). In point of fact the Babylonian expeditionary force did not attack Egypt until after the date of this oracle (c. 568-567 BC) and we have no contemporary records of its measure of success, because the Babylonian inscriptions recording the campaign have been damaged. Ahmose II (Amasis), who had supplanted Pharaoh Hophra in 571 BC, had to come to terms with the invaders, so we may presume that Nebuchadnezzar won the tribute to pay his armies as Ezekiel had prophesied. Jeremiah also foretold Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign (*cf.* Je. 43:8-13; 46:1-25).”

This chapter ends with the announcement that God “will make a horn grow for the house of Israel.” The Hebrew word for “horn” is *qeren*, which may refer to any kind of projecting object, ranging from an animal horn to a mountain peak. In the Scriptures it is often used as a symbol of power, either good or evil.

On this, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Israel was to rise on the fall of Egypt, because of the everlasting covenant which God made with His elect people (Ezek 29:21). God ‘caused the horn of Israel to bud forth’ after the 70 years of depression and captivity. Herein God fulfilled in part His promise in Ps 132:17, ‘I will make the horn of David to bud.’ The fuller accomplishment of this word took place when He ‘raised up a horn of salvation for His people in the house of His servant David’ (Luke 1:69), in the first coming of Messiah the Savior. The fullest accomplishment shall be when Messiah shall come again in glory as the universally recognized King of the Jews, and when His ancient people, as well as all His saints, shall hail Him, saying, ‘Hosanna! blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’ (Mark 11:9-10.)”

One of the problems in seeing a future fulfillment in the last verse of this chapter is that God links the growing of the horn to the opening of Ezekiel’s mouth. We read: “On that day ... I will open your mouth among them.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, says about this: “To interpret this verse in relation to Ezekiel’s ritual dumbness demands that it is taken in isolation from its context, because by the time of this oracle his dumbness was a thing of the past (*cf.* 33:22). It seems better to take it simply as a reference to the authentication of Ezekiel’s prophecy through fulfillment. The oracle ends with the refrain, *then they will know that I am the Lord*, which has punctuated this chapter three times already (verses 6, 9 and 16). It is Ezekiel’s overriding desire.”

iii. Judgment upon Egypt 30:1-19

1 *The word of the Lord came to me:*

2 *"Son of man, prophesy and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "'Wail and say, "Alas for that day!"*

3 *For the day is near, the day of the Lord is near — a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations.*

4 A sword will come against Egypt, and anguish will come upon Cush. When the slain fall in Egypt, her wealth will be carried away and her foundations torn down.

5 Cush and Put, Lydia and all Arabia, Libya and the people of the covenant land will fall by the sword along with Egypt.

6 "This is what the Lord says: "The allies of Egypt will fall and her proud strength will fail. From Migdol to Aswan they will fall by the sword within her, declares the Sovereign Lord.

7 "They will be desolate among desolate lands, and their cities will lie among ruined cities.

8 Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I set fire to Egypt and all her helpers are crushed.

9 "On that day messengers will go out from me in ships to frighten Cush out of her complacency. Anguish will take hold of them on the day of Egypt's doom, for it is sure to come.

10 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I will put an end to the hordes of Egypt by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

11 He and his army — the most ruthless of nations — will be brought in to destroy the land. They will draw their swords against Egypt and fill the land with the slain.

12 I will dry up the streams of the Nile and sell the land to evil men; by the hand of foreigners I will lay waste the land and everything in it. I the Lord have spoken.

13 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I will destroy the idols and put an end to the images in Memphis. No longer will there be a prince in Egypt, and I will spread fear throughout the land.

14 I will lay waste Upper Egypt, set fire to Zoan and inflict punishment on Thebes.

15 I will pour out my wrath on Pelusium, the stronghold of Egypt, and cut off the hordes of Thebes.

16 I will set fire to Egypt; Pelusium will writhe in agony. Thebes will be taken by storm; Memphis will be in constant distress.

17 The young men of Heliopolis and Bubastis will fall by the sword, and the cities themselves will go into captivity.

18 Dark will be the day at Tahpanhes when I break the yoke of Egypt; there her proud strength will come to an end. She will be covered with clouds, and her villages will go into captivity.

19 So I will inflict punishment on Egypt, and they will know that I am the Lord.'"

Again, the fact that God orders Ezekiel to "Wail and say, 'Alas for that day!'" indicates that God grieves over what will happen to Egypt, even though the ultimate judgment is against the idols and images, representatives of the demonic powers that had taken over the land. It was God who had created Egypt and who made the Nile and who had allowed the Egyptians to live there.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments upon the date and upon the first 5 verses of this section: "This, the only undated oracle of the collection against Egypt, is probably to be dated shortly after January 587 BC, the date given in 29:1. The oracle that follows it (30:20-26) is only three months later. There is nothing, however, in these verses to indicate their date, except the reference in verse 10 to Nebuchadnezzar as the agent of Egypt's doom ... *The day of the Lord*, which has previously been announced only in relation to Israel (cf. 7:2-12), is now proclaimed as being the day when judgment by the sword will fall upon Egypt. Cf. also the 'sword' prophecy of 21:1-17. The passage needs to be compared with other 'day of the Lord' teaching in Isaiah 2:12-17; Joel 1:15; 2:1,2; Amos 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1:7, 14-18. On this great day, when judgment will come upon the Gentiles (as well as upon unfaithful Israel, contrary to much popular expectation), Egypt's allies will share her punishment too."

The topic of the lament is the Day of Judgment, which *The New International Version* calls "the day of the Lord — a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations." The word "doom" is not in the Hebrew text. *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* simply uses the words "the time of the heathen." But most of the newer versions paraphrase this as "a time of doom."

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary comments on the nations mentioned in connection with Egypt: "The announcement in v. 6, that Cush, Phut, etc., are to fall by the sword along with the Egyptians ... is sufficient of itself to show that these tribes, even if they were auxiliaries or mercenaries of Egypt, did not constitute the foundations of the Egyptian state and kingdom; but that, on the contrary, Egypt possessed a military force composed of native

troops, which was simply strengthened by auxiliaries and allies. We therefore interpret *y^acodowteyhaa*, after the analogy of Ps 11:3 and 82:5, as referring to the real foundations of the state, the regulations and institutions on which the stability and prosperity of the kingdom rest. The neighboring, friendly, and allied peoples will also be smitten by the judgment together with the Egyptians. Cush, i.e., the Ethiopians, Phut and Lud, i.e., the Libyans and African Lydians ... are mentioned here primarily as auxiliaries of Egypt, because, according to Jer 46:9, they served in Necho's army. By ... the whole of the mixed crowd ... we are then to understand the mercenary soldiers in the Egyptian army, which were obtained from different nations (chiefly Greeks, Ionians, and Carians ...). In addition to these, Cub¹ is also mentioned ... They inhabited a portion of Asia farther north even than Palestine, a district of Media, from which, however, the Egyptians can hardly have obtained mercenary troops."

The intent of Ezekiel's prophecy is, obviously, to indicate that Nebuchadnezzar's campaign into Egypt would cause an upheaval that reached well beyond the borders of the land itself. The whole area of North East Africa as well as the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea would be unhinged by it.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: "Throughout the length and breadth of the land they will fall by the sword ... and the nearby Ethiopians, who dwell securely in the lee of their powerful neighbor, will be terrified as messengers go forth to them *in ships* ... up the waterways of the Nile to tell them of Egypt's downfall. They will be sent *from me*, i.e. from the Lord, because He will be present in Egypt working His destruction upon her cities. The agent of the judgment is now named as Nebuchadnezzar, but it is not to be his action alone. He will cause the destruction of the people in Egypt (11), but it is God Himself who will *dry up the Nile* and be responsible for the devastation which will be brought about. Behind *the hand of foreigners*, who appear to act as His agents, is the word of God (I, the Lord, have spoken), which is the all-powerful ultimate agent which can turn spoken prophecy into actual fact."

V.13 indicates again that the actual confrontation is not, to use the words of the Apostle Paul, "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."² God's war is against the idols, representing the demonic agent who considered himself to be "a prince in Egypt."

iv. The arm of Pharaoh is broken 30:20-26

20 In the eleventh year, in the first month on the seventh day, the word of the Lord came to me:

21 "Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt. It has not been bound up for healing or put in a splint so as to become strong enough to hold a sword.

22 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt. I will break both his arms, the good arm as well as the broken one, and make the sword fall from his hand.

23 I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries.

24 I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon and put my sword in his hand, but I will break the arms of Pharaoh, and he will groan before him like a mortally wounded man.

25 I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh will fall limp. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon and he brandishes it against Egypt.

26 I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

The Pulpit Commentary comments here: "Assuming that the whole section, ... Ezekiel 29:17-30:19, were a later insertion, that which follows was written in April, B.C. 586. Its contents show that it was written at or about the time of the abortive attempt of Pharaoh-Hophra to come to the relief of Jerusalem (... Jeremiah 34:21; 37:5-7). This

1. *The New International Version* renders this "Libya."

2. Eph. 6:12

was the breaking of the arm of Egypt, of which the next verse speaks. Ver. 21. — *I have broken the arm*. The metaphor was in itself one of the most familiar (... Ezekiel 17:9; 22:6; ... 1 Samuel 2:31; ... Jeremiah 48:25). What is characteristic in Ezekiel is the way in which he follows the figure, so to speak, into its surgical details. A man with a broken arm might be cured and fight again; but it was not to be so with Pharaoh. His arm was not to be bound with a roller (the equivalent of the modern process of putting it in 'splints'). The Hebrew word for 'roller' is not found elsewhere, and Ezekiel's use of it is one of the instances of his knowledge of surgery. The corresponding verb is used by him of the bandages or swaddling-clothes of infancy (... Ezekiel 16:4). The image is pressed yet further. A warrior whose sword-arm was broken might go on fighting with his left. Hophra might continue to struggle, though with diminished strength. Ezekiel's words shut out the hope of any such struggle. The left arm also should be broken as the right had been. The Chaldean king should wax stronger and stronger. The sword of Nebuchadnezzar should be as truly 'the sword of Jehovah,' as that of Gideon had been (... Judges 7:18). Figuratively, he should stand before him groaning as a man wounded to the death. So in ... Jeremiah 43:9; 44:30; 46:26, we have allusions to an invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, which was to end in his sitting on his throne in the stronghold of Tahapanes."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, adds: "By the time Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt, after the siege of Tyre was ended, Hophra had been killed in civil war. He had conducted a disastrous campaign in Libya, which brought on a major revolt from a rival faction under Ahmose, who was eventually responsible for doing him to death. We are not to interpret an oracle like this one of Ezekiel in too personal terms, but it clearly fits in admirably with Hophra's fate. Once again we are faced with uncertainty about the outcome of Nebuchadnezzar's Egyptian campaign, but this is only a problem to those who insist on finding literal fulfillments for every prediction in Scripture. We should not always expect this to occur, though the broad outline of events is usually fulfilled, and we must admit that we are still waiting for the fulfillment of the statement that all Egypt *will know that I am the Lord* (26)."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section, saying: "This chapter has a clear unity, indicated both by its subject-matter, the allegory of the cedar tree and its fall, and by the introductory and closing phrases in verses 2a and 18d. It is in three sections: the poem of the magnificent tree to which Pharaoh is likened (2-9), and two prose oracles describing its downfall at the hand of foreigners (10-14) and its descent into Sheol (15-18). The date given in verse 1 is a further two months on from that of the previous oracle (30:20) and is June 587 BC. The use of a cedar of Lebanon as an allegory for a mighty nation is no new thing. Ezekiel used the same idea in 17:1-10, 22-24, and other echoes of the language of this chapter may be found in 19:10-14; 26:19-21; 28:11-19. Isaiah's description of the descent of the king of Babylon into Sheol has distinct similarities (Is. 14:4-21), and Daniel's description of Nebuchadnezzar's dream uses much the same imagery (Dn. 4:1-12, 19-27). Some of the language is even carried over into the New Testament, as in the parable of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:31f.).

Most Bible scholars agree that "Assyria" does not fit in the text; a mistake that is due to a scribal error. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "The MT reads, Behold, Asshur (i.e., Assyria) was a cedar. The chapter has nothing to do with Assyria, nor is there any call to compare Egypt with Assyria. Supplying a missing letter to *ashshur*, making it *teashshur*, gives the reading, 'Behold a cedar, a cedar in Lebanon.'"

Reading the introduction to this poem in which God commands Ezekiel to address Pharaoh and "his hordes," one wonders how this prophecy could ever reach Pharaoh's ears. There would be a slim chance that the Israelites, who fled to Egypt after the murder of Gedaliah,¹ would take the message with them, but that is conjecture. If, however, the demonic powers that ruled Egypt are the subject of this message, the problem of communication is solved. Satan could hear what Ezekiel said and he could read what the prophet wrote. To see the demonic "prince of Egypt" as the addressee also gives deeper meaning to the references to Paradise in these verses.

The comparison of people to trees is not uncommon in Scripture. The Psalmist says about the righteous: "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."² Although the tree ranks lower in the order of creation than man or even animal, its height and beauty

1. Jer. 41:1-3; 43:4-7

never fail to impress. It is not amazing that trees in fairytales are often endowed with personality and the gift of speech. Jesus' comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a tree is probably derived from Ezekiel's text. We read: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."¹

The picture of a cedar representing the demonic powers of Egypt also gives a deeper meaning to the two trees that formed the centerpiece of Paradise. Although there were probably two real trees with real fruit in Paradise, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they represented more than common fruit trees. They stood for fellowship with God or separation from God. Actually, Ezekiel attributes human characteristics to all the trees in Paradise, saying: "I made it beautiful with abundant branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden in the garden of God" (v.9).

In this poem the tree stands for power and honor. The word "majestic" in v.7 describes well what this is all about. The Hebrew text of v.7 reads literally: "He was fair in his beauty," using the words *yaphah* "to be bright, or "beautiful" and *godel*, "magnitude," or "greatness." The sons of Korah use *yaphah* in the "wedding song" to describe the beauty of the bridegroom: "You are the *most excellent* of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever."² Moses uses *godel* in reference to God's revelation of Himself at Mount Sinai: "The Lord our God has shown us his glory and his *majesty*, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him."³

Elsewhere, Ezekiel placed Satan in paradise in his oracle about the prince of Tyre. We read there: "You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings."⁴

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on vv.10-14: "This oracle gives the reasons for the cedar's downfall (10), describes its ruin (11, 12) and adds the intention that motivated God in effecting such a catastrophe (14). The all-too-familiar pattern of pride preceding downfall comes out in verse 10 (*cf.* Tyre, 28:2; Babel, Gn. 11:4), and this is described as *wickedness* (11), a positive wrongdoing which incurs guilt, not simply a human failing to which all are excusably prone. The result is that God casts it out, just as He expelled Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. So, deprived of God's favor and protection, the cedar is a prey to *the most terrible of the nations* (12; *cf.* 28:7; 30:11; 32:12) and is cut down and scattered all over the land. The birds and beasts which once sheltered under its branches will prey on its remains (13), and the event will prove an object-lesson to all other nations not to aspire to such heights, because nations are human and human beings have no end but that which is common to all, the nether parts of the earth and the pit (14). Death is the great equalizer and the surest antidote to an excess of ambition. Even the Egypts of this world, who have success-stories despite their godlessness, need to be taught the lesson that may be hidden in verse 9 that *I (Yahweh) made it beautiful*. The prosperity of the wicked is, in the last analysis, all due to the mercy and goodness of God."

Obviously, in this section Ezekiel switches back to addressing the human government of Egypt. We can hardly assume that these verses are addressed to the spiritual powers that ruled Egypt, since God's handing Egypt over to Babylon would mean that Satan would be fighting Satan. And Jesus says: "Every kingdom divided against

2. Ps. 1:3

1. Matt. 13:31,32

2. Ps. 45:2

3. Deut. 5:24

4. Ezek. 28:13,15-17

itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?"¹

But in the verses that conclude this chapter, Satan again seems to be the object addressed. The scene may refer to what happened among the hosts of angels and archangels of which Lucifer was one of the main members. The fall of Egypt is then an earthly representation of what went on in the heavenly realms when Satan fell and dragged a number of spiritual powers with him, while other angelic forces stood by and witnessed. We could say that what happened to Egypt when the Babylonians invaded it and left it a scourged and burned out nation, was a replay of the prehistoric scene to which all human wars and sufferings are related.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on these verses: "The face of the whole world of nature is painted by the prophet as sharing in the awe and terror of that tremendous fall Lebanon was made to *mourn* (literally, to be *black*), the waters failed in their channels, the trees (all that drink water) shuddered. They formed part, as it were, of the pageantry of woe at the funeral of the fallen kingdom. It is as if the prophet felt, in all its intensity, what we have learnt to call the sympathy of nature with the sorrows of humanity. It would, perhaps, be over-literal to press details; but the picture, in one of its features at least, suggests a failure of the inundation of the Nile, like that indicated in ... Ezekiel 30:12."

Here, as elsewhere, there are traces of God's sorrow over all manifestations of sin and its consequences, including the original fall of Lucifer.

vi. A lament over Pharaoh 32:1-16

1 In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month on the first day, the word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, take up a lament concerning Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him: "You are like a lion among the nations; you are like a monster in the seas thrashing about in your streams, churning the water with your feet and muddying the streams.

3 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "With a great throng of people I will cast my net over you, and they will haul you up in my net.

4 I will throw you on the land and hurl you on the open field. I will let all the birds of the air settle on you and all the beasts of the earth gorge themselves on you.

5 I will spread your flesh on the mountains and fill the valleys with your remains.

6 I will drench the land with your flowing blood all the way to the mountains, and the ravines will be filled with your flesh.

7 When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light.

8 All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land, declares the Sovereign Lord.

9 I will trouble the hearts of many peoples when I bring about your destruction among the nations, among lands you have not known.

10 I will cause many peoples to be appalled at you, and their kings will shudder with horror because of you when I brandish my sword before them. On the day of your downfall each of them will tremble every moment for his life.

11 "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "The sword of the king of Babylon will come against you.

12 I will cause your hordes to fall by the swords of mighty men — the most ruthless of all nations. They will shatter the pride of Egypt, and all her hordes will be overthrown.

13 I will destroy all her cattle from beside abundant waters no longer to be stirred by the foot of man or muddied by the hoofs of cattle.

14 Then I will let her waters settle and make her streams flow like oil, declares the Sovereign Lord.

1. Matt. 12:25,26

15 When I make Egypt desolate and strip the land of everything in it, when I strike down all who live there, then they will know that I am the Lord.'

16 "This is the lament they will chant for her. The daughters of the nations will chant it; for Egypt and all her hordes they will chant it, declares the Sovereign Lord."

This chapter contains two oracles that conclude the prophecy about Egypt. The one before us is again a lament. The Hebrew word *qiy nah* means "a dirge, as accompanied by beating the breasts or on instruments." We can imagine that Ezekiel would have chanted this elegy, either beating his breast or playing his lyre, inviting "the daughters of the nations" to join in with him.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about the date: "The last two oracles against Egypt, which comprise this chapter, are both dated in the *twelfth year, i.e.* 586/5 BC, a short time after the news of the fall of Jerusalem had reached the exiles (*cf.* 33:21)."

Pharaoh is compared to the most fearsome of animals, the lion and the crocodile; Hebrew *kephiyr* and *tanniyn*. The last may refer to any kind of aquatic animal. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: "Pharaoh is 'as a lion' on dry land, 'a crocodile in the waters' - i.e., an object of terror everywhere; formidable alike by land and sea."

Barnes' Notes observes: "Pharaoh should have been like the king of beasts, but he is a mere sea-monster. There is strong irony here, because the Egyptian king was proud of the comparison between himself and the mighty crocodile."

God does here to Pharaoh under the image of catching a crocodile, what no human power could achieve before. We find a description of the catching of a crocodile in *The Book of Job* that describes the procedure. God said to Job: "Can you catch a crocodile with a hook and line? Or put a noose around his tongue? Can you tie him with a rope through the nose, or pierce his jaw with a spike? Will he beg you to desist or try to flatter you from your intentions? Will he agree to let you make him your slave for life? Can you make a pet of him like a bird, or give him to your little girls to play with? Do fishing partners sell him to the fishmongers? Will his hide be hurt by darts, or his head with a harpoon? If you lay your hands upon him, you will long remember the battle that ensues and you will never try it again! No, it's useless to try to capture him. It is frightening even to think about it! No one dares to stir him up, let alone try to conquer him. And if no one can stand before him, who can stand before me? I owe no one anything. Everything under the heaven is mine. I should mention, too, the tremendous strength in his limbs and throughout his enormous frame. Who can penetrate his hide, or who dares come within reach of his jaws? For his teeth are terrible. His overlapping scales are his pride, making a tight seal so no air can get between them, and nothing can penetrate. When he sneezes, the sunlight sparkles like lightning across the vapor droplets. His eyes glow like sparks. Fire leaps from his mouth. Smoke flows from his nostrils, like steam from a boiling pot that is fired by dry rushes. Yes, his breath would kindle coals-flames leap from his mouth. The tremendous strength in his neck strikes terror wherever he goes. His flesh is hard and firm, not soft and fat. His heart is hard as rock, just like a millstone. When he stands up, the strongest are afraid. Terror grips them. No sword can stop him, nor spear nor dart nor pointed shaft. Iron is nothing but straw to him, and brass is rotten wood. Arrows cannot make him flee. Slingstones are as ineffective as straw. Clubs do no good, and he laughs at the javelins hurled at him. His belly is covered with scales as sharp as shards; they tear up the ground as he drags through the mud. He makes the water boil with his commotion. He churns the depths. He leaves a shining wake of froth behind him. One would think the sea was made of frost! There is nothing else so fearless anywhere on earth. Of all the beasts, he is the proudest-monarch of all that he sees."¹

It is obvious that the passage describes more than Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt and the defeat of Pharaoh. Even if we see in the portrayal Egypt's mountains and valleys covered with the flesh the defeat of the Egyptian army, on whose dead bodies the birds of prey swoop down, the moon and the stars of heaven were not snuffed out in a literal sense. This lament depicts the ultimate defeat of Lucifer, the original bearer of light, who turned into the prince of darkness and who will end up in the ultimate darkness of God's judgment. In the judgment upon Pharaoh God judges the spiritual power that stood behind him.

1. Job 41:1-34 – *The Living Bible*

Babylon, which is the instrument of God's judgment upon Egypt, will end up the same way, when the nations of the world intone their lament over its fall. We read: "When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: 'Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!'"¹

Vv. 9 and 10 are again written in prose. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about the following verses: "This leads in to the next poem (11-15) which takes up the well-used theme of the sword of the Lord (cf. 21:9; 30:25) which is put into the hands of the king of Babylon to be wielded against the Egyptians. So great will be the slaughter and devastation that Egypt will be uninhabited by either man or beast, and verses 13-15 vividly describe the land in such a state. The waters will be unruffled by foot of man or hoof of beast; they will be clear and will flow as smoothly as oil through the devastated country-side. There will be no man left in Egypt to *know that I am the Lord* (15), so unless we take this as a conventional, stereotyped ending to an oracle of this kind, we must suppose it to refer to the watching nations who alone will benefit from the sight of such an act of God."

vii. Pharaoh's descent into Sheol 32:17-32

17 In the twelfth year, on the fifteenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me:

18 "Son of man, wail for the hordes of Egypt and consign to the earth below both her and the daughters of mighty nations, with those who go down to the pit.

19 Say to them, 'Are you more favored than others? Go down and be laid among the uncircumcised.'

20 They will fall among those killed by the sword. The sword is drawn; let her be dragged off with all her hordes.

21 From within the grave the mighty leaders will say of Egypt and her allies, 'They have come down and they lie with the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.'

22 "Assyria is there with her whole army; she is surrounded by the graves of all her slain, all who have fallen by the sword.

23 Their graves are in the depths of the pit and her army lies around her grave. All who had spread terror in the land of the living are slain, fallen by the sword.

24 "Elam is there, with all her hordes around her grave. All of them are slain, fallen by the sword. All who had spread terror in the land of the living went down uncircumcised to the earth below. They bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.

25 A bed is made for her among the slain, with all her hordes around her grave. All of them are uncircumcised, killed by the sword. Because their terror had spread in the land of the living, they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit; they are laid among the slain.

26 "Meshech and Tubal are there, with all their hordes around their graves. All of them are uncircumcised, killed by the sword because they spread their terror in the land of the living.

27 Do they not lie with the other uncircumcised warriors who have fallen, who went down to the grave with their weapons of war, whose swords were placed under their heads? The punishment for their sins rested on their bones, though the terror of these warriors had stalked through the land of the living.

28 "You too, O Pharaoh, will be broken and will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.

29 "Edom is there, her kings and all her princes; despite their power, they are laid with those killed by the sword. They lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.

30 "All the princes of the north and all the Sidonians are there; they went down with the slain in disgrace despite the terror caused by their power. They lie uncircumcised with those killed by the sword and bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.

1. Rev. 18:9,10

31 "Pharaoh — he and all his army — will see them and he will be consoled for all his hordes that were killed by the sword, declares the Sovereign Lord.

32 Although I had him spread terror in the land of the living, Pharaoh and all his hordes will be laid among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword, declares the Sovereign Lord."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about the date of this part of the dirge: "The date omits the number of the month and RSV follows LXX in supplying *the first month*. It is more natural to suppose that this should be 'the twelfth month,' as at 32:1, and that it was either omitted deliberately (it being the same as given earlier) or it dropped out through confusion with *the twelfth year*. The date would then be a fortnight later in March 585 BC."

This part of the elegy describes Pharaoh's descent into the grave, or the underworld. The Hebrew word used is *Sheol*. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states that Sheol was, "in Old Testament thought, the abode of the dead. Sheol is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Hades, which means 'the unseen world.' Sheol was regarded as an underground region (Num 16:30,33; Amos 9:2), shadowy and gloomy, where disembodied souls had a conscious but dull and inactive existence (2 Sam 22:6; Eccl 9:10). The Hebrew people regarded Sheol as a place to which both the righteous and unrighteous go at death (Gen 37:35; Ps 9:17; Isa 38:10), a place where punishment is received and rewards are enjoyed. Sheol is pictured as having an insatiable appetite (Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5). However, God is present in sheol (Ps 139:8; hell, NKJV). It is open and known to Him (Job 26:6; Prov 15:11). This suggests that in death God's people remain under His care, and the wicked never escape His judgment. Sheol gives meaning to Ps 16:10. Peter saw the fulfillment of this messianic psalm in Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:27)."

As *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: "With the lamentation, or by means thereof, is Ezekiel to thrust down the tumult of Egypt into hell. The lamentation is God's word; and as such it has the power to accomplish what it utters."

The dirge pertains not only to Pharaoh and Egypt, but also to "the daughters of mighty nations." It includes all who rebel against the authority of God. Ezekiel's dirge is the counterpart of the psalm David wrote at the conquest of Jerusalem: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"¹ Here, God does not laugh, but sheds tears over those who experience the death of separation from Him. As in all the laments God inspires His prophets to chant, the prophet expresses God's sorrow for the consequences of sin, both among fallen angels and fallen men.

Ezekiel's lament has a strong resemblance to the "taunt against the king of Babylon" Isaiah intoned about the earthly king who embodied Satan, the "morning star, son of the dawn."²

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about "the daughters of mighty nations": *The daughters of mighty nations* must mean those who will go down to Sheol with Egypt, *i.e.* her satellites, but a very slight change of pointing produces the better sense that these are the womenfolk who are to join in the lament with Ezekiel: *you and the women of the mighty nations* (Moffat). As happened with Tyre (28:8f.), the much-vaunted grandeur of Egypt will appear as nothing when she stands at the entrance to the underworld and is drawn down to lie with the uncircumcised who were slain by the sword (20). Her arrival is greeted by mooching words of welcome from the mighty chieftains who are already there."

About the concluding verses of this chapter, 22-32, Taylor states: "Now begins the conducted tour of the nations in Sheol: 'the mighty conquerors of history pass in review.' ... First to be mentioned is *Assyria* (22), the great tyrant of the past, whose only epitaph is that she once *spread terror in the land of the living*. *Elam* (24) was an ancient nation to the east of Babylon, known for the warlike traditions and formerly absorbed into the great Assyrian Empire. She survived the shockwaves of the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, which brought Assyria to her knees, and apparently

1. Ps. 2:1-6

2. Isa. 14:3-20

was still a power to be reckoned with, for she later contributed to Cyrus' armies which overthrew Babylon. She too had spread terror, but now was bearing here shame. *Meshech and Tubal* (26) seem a strange choice of nations. Many suggest that they represented the traditional 'foe from the north,' but we at this remove know relatively little about them except that they harried the Assyrians on their northern frontier (... 27:13). They were not allowed to lie in Sheol with the fallen warriors who had been buried with full military honors (27), though some commentators follow LXX in omitting the *not* at the beginning of the verse, which would therefore cancel out the little piece of discrimination. In verse 28, the person addressed is not Meshech and Tubal, but Pharaoh. *Edom* (29) has a place, with her kings and princes, as have *the princes of the north*, presumably the rulers of the Phoenician cities north of Palestine, and the *Sidonians* (30). All these will be seen by Pharaoh, and he will take what little comfort he can from the thought that he is in good company with other nations who in their day caused terror and have now been brought low."

VI. ORACLES RELATING TO THE FALL OF JERUSALEM 31:1-37:28

a. The watchman's duties restated 33:1-20

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman,

3 and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people,

4 then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head.

5 Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself.

6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.'

7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

9 But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

10 "Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"' '

11 Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

12 "Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, 'The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys, and the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it. The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.'

13 If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done.

14 And if I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right—

15 if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die.

16 None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.

17 "Yet your countrymen say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just.

18 If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it.

19 And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so.

20 Yet, O house of Israel, you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But I will judge each of you according to his own ways."

This chapter marks a new phase in Ezekiel's ministry which coincides with the fall of Jerusalem, word of which was received in the section that begins with v.21. Several themes occur in these verses, some of which seem to be a repetition of the call God issued to Ezekiel at the beginning of his prophetic ministry. We read there: "At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. 'Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself.'"¹

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter with: "If we may think of Ezekiel as compiling and arranging his own prophecies, we may think of him as returning, with something like a sense of relief, to his own special work as the watchman of the house of Israel. For upwards of two years the messages which it had been given him to write (how far they were in any sense published we have no means of knowing) in Ezekiel 25-32., had dealt exclusively with foreign nations. Now his own people are again the object of his care. He resumes his pastoral office at once for warning and consolation. From this point onwards, with the exception of the strange Meshech-Tubal episode in Ezekiel 38., 39., all is leading onwards to the final vision of the rebuilt temple, and the redistributed land of Israel, and through them to the times of the Messianic restoration. No date is given here for *the word of the Lord* which now came to him, but it may, perhaps be inferred, from Vers. 21, 22, that it was immediately before the arrival of the messenger who brought the tidings that Jerusalem was taken. In the ecstatic state indicated by 'the hand of the Lord' he knew that some great change was coming, that he had a new message to deliver, a new part to play."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: "During the period covered by the first twenty-four chapters of his book, his main concern was with Jerusalem as it was and as it had been. From chapter 33 onwards, he is mainly interested in what it will be. As he prepares himself for this new phase in his life's work, God reminds him once again of his awful responsibility as a watchman, a lonely figure who is committed to the task of standing apart from his fellow-men in order that he can keep a constant vigil and warn his people of dangers that lie ahead. At the same time, his hearers are held responsible for acting in accordance with the watchman's warnings. They are neither to trust in their own righteousness nor to despair and with a fatalistic shrug of the shoulders to give in to their unhappy circumstances. Nor are they to take the easy way out by blaming all their misfortunes on the injustice of God. Every man has his chance and every man must act according to God's word to him. These are Ezekiel's terms of reference, and only when they have been clearly enunciated does the news break upon the waiting exiles that the city has fallen and Ezekiel's word has been proved true."

Ezekiel had the privilege of knowing the meaning of his own circumstances and those of his compatriots. The book of *First Chronicles* mentions the "men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should

1. Ezek. 3:16-21

do.”¹ *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* explains this statement with: “According to the Targum they were all astronomers and astrologers: ‘and the sons of Issachar, who had understanding to know the times, and were skilled in fixing the beginnings of years, the commencement of months, and the intercalation of months and years; skillful in the changes of the moon, and in fixing the lunar solemnities to their proper times; skillful also in the doctrine of the solar periods; astrologers in signs and stars, that they might show Israel what to do; and their teachers were two hundred chiefs of the Sanhedrin: and all their brethren excelled in the words of the law, and were endued with wisdom, and were obedient to their command.’-Targum. It appears that in their wisdom, experience, and skill, their brethren had the fullest confidence; and nothing was done but by their direction and advice.”

Ezekiel did not get his wisdom from the stars and planets but from the Lord who created them. Although he lived in Babylon, the center of astronomy and astrology, that discipline was not the source of his understanding of the times. Jesus chided the people of His time for not understanding the time in which they lived. We read: “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”² In order to understand the meaning of events on earth one has to be able to look down upon them from above. That was the gift God had given to Ezekiel.

In the section copied above where Ezekiel had received his call and was given the warning, God addressed him as the watchman over Israel. Here, the remnant in Babylon is addressed with the message of the watchman. The message is the same but the recipients differ. All of this must be seen in connection with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. We read earlier that Ezekiel saw in visions how the glory of the Lord left the temple.³ What Nebuchadnezzar destroyed was a building from which the Spirit of the Lord had departed. The place of God’s revelation on earth no longer existed. In a way it could be said that God had died. As such the demolition of the temple symbolized the death of Jesus on the cross. It is against this background that Ezekiel issued his warning of repentance. In connection with the message that the city had fallen, Ezekiel showed his compatriots that they must respond to the event by repenting of their sins and mending their ways. Like the men of Issachar, Ezekiel understood the times and told Israel what to do.

His understanding made the warning into a message of hope. Like John the Baptist’s cry in the desert and Jesus’ call at the beginning of His ministry, the call was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”⁴ The “death of God” intoned the coming of the kingdom. It was because of God’s ultimate sacrifice that sins could be forgiven if repentance of sin was evinced.

The people who heard the message of the fall of the city and the call of repentance reacted, however, by saying “The way of the Lord is not just.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “Yet the children of your people say ‘the way of the Lord is not equal.’” The Hebrew word used is *takan*, which means “to balance,” as in using a pair of scales to weigh. Hanna used the word in her song of praise, saying: “Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are *weighed*.”⁵ The thought seems to be that God ought to take a person’s good deeds and compare them to his sinful acts in order to see if one outweighs the other. But that is not the way justice is applied even in human society. We do not let a murderer go free, because of the good deeds he has done at other times. As James states: “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”⁶ The people compared God to a dishonest salesman.

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1. I Chron. 12:32
 2. Matt. 16:2,3
 3. Ezek. 9-11
 4. Matt. 3:2; 4:7
 5. I Sam. 2:3
 6. James 2:10

b. The city falls but the people are unrepentant 33:21-33

21 In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen!"

22 Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the Lord was upon me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent.

23 Then the word of the Lord came to me:

24 "Son of man, the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he possessed the land. But we are many; surely the land has been given to us as our possession.'

25 Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Since you eat meat with the blood still in it and look to your idols and shed blood, should you then possess the land?

26 You rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?'

27 "Say this to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: As surely as I live, those who are left in the ruins will fall by the sword, those out in the country I will give to the wild animals to be devoured, and those in strongholds and caves will die of a plague.

28 I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud strength will come to an end, and the mountains of Israel will become desolate so that no one will cross them.

29 Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done.'

30 "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.'

31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

32 Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

33 "When all this comes true — and it surely will — then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section with: "At long last the blow fell and the news reached the exiles that Jerusalem had fallen. Although this came with the force of a tragedy to the exiles, Ezekiel himself was fully prepared to receive it. He of course had been given prophetic foreknowledge of the event (*cf.* 24:2), but he had also been in an ecstatic state the previous evening and his ritual dumbness had been somehow relieved. According to 24:27, this release from his divinely-imposed silence was an indication that the day of the tragic news was about to dawn. It meant that he was now able to speak publicly and freely of all the things that had been brewing up inside him. When he did speak, his first remarks consisted of messages about the people who were left in the land of Judah (23-29) and about his fellow-exiles (30-33)."

Bible scholars have wrestled with the fact that there seems to have been a lapse of time, approximately one-and-a-half years, between the date Jerusalem fell and the date the message reached the exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah reports: "And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, the city wall was broken through."¹ And Ezekiel announces: "In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, 'The city has fallen!'"² Some explain the discrepancy suggesting that Jeremiah used the Hebrew calendar and Ezekiel the Babylonian. That would probably make most sense. Others believe that Ezekiel does not refer to the day of the hearing of the news but to the fact that his tongue was loosened.

The Pulpit Commentary states: "The capture of Jerusalem took place in the fourth month of the eleventh year (... Jeremiah 39:2; 52:6) from the captivity of Jehoiachin and the beginning of Zedekiah's reign. Are we to

1. Jer. 39:2

2. Ezek 33:21

assume some error of transcription? or is it within the limits of probability that eighteen months would pass without any direct communication from Jerusalem of what had passed there? There is, I conceive, nothing improbable in what is stated. The exiles of Tel-Ahib were not on the highroads of commerce or of war. All previous communications were cut off by the presence of the Chaldean armies.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: “The date here appears to be a full eighteen months after the city’s fall, and most commentators regard this as being too long and unrealistic a time-lag. Some MSS and Syriac read ‘eleventh year’ for MT *twelfth year*, and this is much more likely, especially as the two words differ only by one consonant in written Hebrew and hardly at all in speech. Ezra and his company took four months to make the journey over a century later (Ezr. 7:9), and so a six-month trip by an exhausted fugitive is not unreasonable for the present context.” As far as instant communication is concerned mankind has come a long way!

Still remains the mystery of Ezekiel’s dumbness. At the very beginning of God’s call, Ezekiel had been told: “I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house.”¹ Yet, we do not have the impression that from that moment until the word of the fall of Jerusalem was received, the prophet had been unable to communicate verbally. If, as we assumed, the dumbness was the result of a stroke, the moment at which the word of the fall was received, was one of physical healing also. God had foretold Ezekiel at the time his wife died that he would be able to speak audibly again and that that moment was related to the news about the fall of the city. We read: “And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart’s desire, and their sons and daughters as well— on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news. At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord.”² It is impossible for us to know exactly what happened. What is clear is that the news of the death of the city was also the beginning of good news, in the same way as the death of God’s Son is good news, “Gospel.”

The first message Ezekiel was given in this new phase of his ministry was for the people who had been left behind in the ruins of the Promised Land. In view of the lapse of time in communication, we assume that the text of Ezekiel’s prophecy never reached to people back home. That means that, although it spoke of them, it was meant to be heard by those who were in exile in Babylon.

The assumption that Abraham owned the land was false to begin with. The only place Abraham ever owned in Palestine was the grave of Sarah he had bought.³ Abraham had lived in Canaan as a foreigner. The Psalmist had sung about dwelling in the Promised Land: “Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever. The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever. Wait for the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.”⁴ The Israelites who were left behind had forfeited their right of possession because of their moral failures.

On Ezekiel’s charge to the remnant of the fallen city, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “The passage illustrates with remarkable aptness the overweening arrogance of the minority who wake up one morning and find themselves in the majority. Moreover, like so many minorities, they live in the past and endeavor to draw on ancient precedents to buttress insubstantial claims for the present. Our Lord had to answer similar claims from the Jews of His time (Jn. 8:33-40), as did John the Baptist before Him (Lk. 3:8). Ezekiel’s answer was the bitter accusation that morally and religiously they had not a leg to stand on (25, 26). Their sins were the very same sins as had brought destruction upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem (22:6-12); cf. 18:10-13). Therefore their chances of escaping scot-free were nil. Abraham’s title to the land was his righteousness.”

The New International Version’s reading “You rely on your sword” (v.26) is the translation of the Hebrew “You stand upon your sword.” *The New King James Version* reads this: “You rely on your sword.” *The New Living*

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1. Ezek. 3:26
 2. Ezek. 24:25-27
 3. Gen. 23:3-20
 4. Ps. 37:27,29,34

Translation simply exclaims: “Murderers!” The reference is probably to Ishmael’s murder of Gedaliah, the new governor installed by the Babylonians.¹ The prohibition of eating meat with the blood still in it predates the Law of Moses; it dates from the days of Noah.² The practice was probably related to idol services in which the sacrificial animals were not killed in a manner which was kosher.

The sins of the people made the land sick to its stomach. Moses had used the idea of the land vomiting out its inhabitants. It was the sin of the original inhabitants that caused their destruction and it was because Israel had become infected with the same transgressions they were supposed to have eradicated, that they were evicted also. Moses had said: “And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you,”³ and “Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.”⁴ Their continuation in the same corrupt way of living that had caused the captivity would continue to exterminate those who went in hiding in the caves. For those who call upon the mountains to cover them from the wrath of God, the sin that resides within them will continue to destroy them. Sin is self-destructive.

It sounds as if the Lord takes credit for the destruction of the Promised Land, but it is actually the people themselves who were to blame. A land that keeps on vomiting out its inhabitants has ceased to be healthy and beautiful. It turns into a sick and emaciated body.

Vv. 30-33 depict the reaction of Ezekiel’s audience to his ministry of prophecy. The people liked to listen to what Ezekiel had to say. They liked the way he presented his prophecies because of the beautiful form in which they were given. It satisfied their aesthetic tastes, without putting them under any obligation to put into practice what was being said. They loved the form but not the contents. Having heard Ezekiel’s prophecies, the people would go away and say: “Nice, very nice!” It was when it was too late for repentance that they would find out that “the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”⁵

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: “The issue under discussion in the previous section (23-29) was the identity of the true Israel, as between the cream of the land who were in exile and the people of the land who remained in Judah. Jeremiah dealt with the same conflict in his vision of the two baskets of figs, and he was shown that the Lord’s choice was to be found among the exiles, the good figs, and not among Zedekiah and the remnant in Jerusalem (Je. 24). Ezekiel clearly sided with Jeremiah’s verdict. He was skeptical, however, of the depth of sincerity of the exiles, particularly at a time when he was being lionized and listened to as the prophet whose words had come true. Everyone was talking about him (30; not *against* him, as in AV) and encouraging each other to go and listen to what he had to say. Religious meetings were never so well attended. But was the meaning going deep? Ezekiel concluded that it was not: the people listened well and spoke with *much love* (31), but they betrayed themselves by their actions, which showed up their true priorities, *their heart is set on their gain*. As with Simon Magus (Acts 8:18), their receptivity to the word of God was distorted by the inner feeling of ‘what is there in this for me?’ Despite the prospect of future blessing and restoration that the prophet was holding out to them, their attitude was one of self-seeking. They listened to Ezekiel as men listen to *a lovely song* (lit. ‘a songs of love,’ especially of a highly sensuous kind) and *a pleasant voice* and one who *plays well on an instrument*. The grammatical relationship between these phrases is not clear and translations vary slightly, but the sense is clear. Popular music in every age has been renowned for its ability to move its hearers only fleetingly.”

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1. II Kings 25:25; Jer. 41:1-3
 2. Gen. 9:4
 3. Lev. 18:28
 4. Lev. 20:22
 5. Heb. 4:12

c. The shepherds of the past and the Shepherd of the future 34:1-31

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?'

3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.

4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

7 "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

8 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock,

9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

10 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

11 "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land.

14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.

16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

17 "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats.

18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?

19 Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

20 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away,

22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.

23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

24 I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

25 "I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety.

26 I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing.

27 The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them.

28 They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid.

29 I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations.

30 Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord.

31 You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

Introducing this chapter, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: “It is not unusual, either in the Old Testament or in other writings from the Ancient Near East, to find rulers designated as shepherds (*cf.* Is. 44:28; Je. 2:8; 10:21; 23:1-6; 25:34-38; Mi. 5:4,5; Zc. 11:4-17). Moses and David are given this description (Is. 63:11; Ps 78:70f.) and it is not without significance that both these men received their call to leadership while they were actually serving as shepherds of a flock. The word ‘shepherd’ suggests leadership and caring, and it was therefore an appropriate metaphor to use for hereditary monarchs who might otherwise think only in terms of lording it over their people. Israelite history shows how rarely this ideal of responsible leadership was achieved, and Ezekiel was particularly conscious of the failures of the most recent kings before exile (*cf.* 19:1-14; 21:25). He therefore precedes his promise of good leadership to come with a searing attack on the greed and selfishness of the leaders of the past. They had exploited the people as if the flock belonged to them, the shepherds. But the people were the Lord’s flock (*my sheep*, 6) and the kings ruled them by the Lord’s appointment (*my shepherds*, 8). Therefore the shepherds would be punished and the sheep, scattered by exile, would be rescued and returned to their own pastures and cared for by God as their good Shepherd. He would judge them righteously and would appoint His servant, David, as His vicegerent and prince (24), and all would be peace and harmony, blessing and prosperity. The passage is illustrative of a high ideal of kingship in the Old Testament and of the place of Yahweh as the true *melek*-king of Israel from whom the kingship of the house of David was derived. It is also worth noting that the close connection between the king and the shepherd-motif justifies us in seeing a certain kingly quality in such well-known passages as Psalm 23 (where the rod in verse 4 is the same word as royal scepter) and John 10.”

Several instances come to mind, both in The Old and New Testament, in which God is compared to a shepherd, watching His flock. Moses was the first one to use the image. We read: “Moses said to the Lord, ‘May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.’”¹ The most famous of all is David’s Shepherd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”² With Moses’ words in mind, Matthew describes Jesus’ reaction to human suffering, saying: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”³ Jesus refers to Himself as “the good shepherd,” who “lays down his life for the sheep.”⁴ And The Epistle to the Hebrews calls Jesus “that great Shepherd of the sheep.”⁵

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1. Num. 27:15-17
 2. Ps. 23:1
 3. Matt. 9:36
 4. John 10:11
 5. Heb. 13:20

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “The three accusations leveled against the kings of Israel are, first that they cruelly exploited the people who were under their care, fleecing them and fattening themselves at their expense (2,3); secondly, that they showed none of the pastoral qualities that were required of them in caring for the weak and defenseless members of the community (4); and thirdly, that instead of keeping the flock together in safety they allowed them to be scattered over all the earth (the word occurs three times in verses 5 and 6, and is a favorite word of Ezekiel to describe the dispersion of the exiles). This meant that they were an easy prey for wild beasts, representing here the hostile nations of the world. They were in that most pathetic of all states, at least to the eastern mind; they were as sheep without a shepherd.”

Jeremiah uttered a similar prophecy, which may have partly inspired Ezekiel for this one. We read: “‘Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,’ declares the Lord. ‘I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,’ declares the Lord.”¹

The Pulpit Commentary, looking to apply this section to present-day Christianity, observes: “Our modern associations with the words, our use of terms like ‘the pastoral office,’ ‘the pastoral Epistles,’ lead us to think of the priests and prophets, the spiritual guides of the people, as being those whom the prophet has in view. In the language of the Old Testament, however ... the shepherds of the people are always its kings and other civil rulers (... 1 Kings 22:17; ... Psalm 77:20; 78:71; ... Jeremiah 23:1-6), and those whom Ezekiel had in his thoughts were the tyrannous rulers of the house of David, like Jehoiakim and Zedekiah and their satellites. Our Christian thoughts of the word are the outcome of the leading of ... John 10:1-16; 21:15-17; ... 1 Peter 5:2-4; ... Acts 20:28; but it is probably true that even there the original thought is still dominant. Christ is the ‘good Shepherd,’ because he is the true King. His ministers are shepherds as being officers in his kingdom.”

One question that arises in connection with this chapter is that, if it was pronounced after the fall of Jerusalem, what was the point in giving such a prophecy at all. There were no longer any kings and magistrates occupying their office in Israel. Jehoiachin was in prison in Babylon, as was the blinded King Zedekiah. Most of Judah’s other officials had either been killed or had fled to Egypt. The only recipients of Ezekiel’s message were those who were with him in captivity, who liked his style (as we saw in the previous chapter) and ignored the contents of his prophecy. As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The kernel of the chapter is found in the Messianic prophecies of vers. 23, 24, as the first stage in the restoration of Israel which is beginning to open to the prophet’s gaze.” It is this change of tone, the introduction of hope that is the important feature of Ezekiel’s communication.

On the question “Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: “The question is an appeal to the universal conscience of Israel and of mankind. No shepherd was worthy of his name who did not do that which the very name implied. He that neglects that duty is simply as a hireling or a robber (... John 10:10, 12).”

The Apostle Peter applies the principle of sound leadership to the pastoral office of the church, saying: “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”² Paul’s admonition to slaves can be applied to every working relationship: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It

1. Jer. 23:1-4

2. I Peter 5:1-4

is the Lord Christ you are serving.”¹ And more generally speaking, it involves everything we do in daily life “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”²

In stark contrast to the picture Ezekiel paints here of the mentality of Israel’s shepherds stands Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”³ The shepherd God has in mind does more than going out of his way to save and restore. The frame of mind that only looks for personal gain does not come from the Holy Spirit but from the enemy.

This does not mean that there cannot be any legitimate remuneration for work done. Paul wrote to Timothy: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’”⁴

The words “They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them” (v.6) seem to indicate that the captivity had already scattered the population of Judah. As far as the northern kingdom was concerned, that was already ancient history in Ezekiel’s day. What God expected the Jews to demonstrate was a passion for souls such as Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra would demonstrate when the captivity came to an end and as Jesus evinced when He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. We read: “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’”⁵

Because of a lack of accountability among the shepherds they find God to be their adversary. “I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock” (v.10). How this contrasts Paul’s exclamation: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?”⁶ When God is against us, all is against us. And the writer of Hebrews states: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁷

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: “This is a rather milder verdict than appeared in Jeremiah 23:2, where punishment was threatened to the shepherds. Ezekiel does not at this stage prophesy the punishment of the rulers, but only the rescue of the people from their voracious grasp. In point of fact, the exile had already removed many Israelites from the jurisdiction of their national rulers, but the phrase in verse 10b seems to imply that the yoke of kingly rule (Gedaliah perhaps?) was to be taken away even from those who were left in the land of Judah.” It seems, however, that having the Lord as an adversary implies punishment. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit appears as our advocate; here God has become the prosecutor, which means that their case in court is a priori lost.

Beginning in v.11, God presents Himself as the good shepherd of the flock. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, remarks about this: “A flock of sheep must be looked after by someone, and here God represents Himself as taking on the role of Shepherd to His people. His job will be to find the straying, to rescue the lost, and to feed and tend the whole flock, giving particular attention to the weak and ailing members. The picture of the shepherd searching out the wanderer, in verse 12, is a remarkable foreshadowing of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:4ff.), which our Lord doubtless based on this passage in Ezekiel. It illustrates as clearly as anything can do the tender, loving qualities of

1. Col. 3:22-24
2. I Cor. 10:31
3. Luke 15:4-7
4. I Tim. 5:17,18
5. Matt. 9:36-38
6. Rom. 8:31
7. Heb. 10:31

the God of the Old Testament, and strikes a death-blow at those who try to drive a wedge between Yahweh, God of Israel, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor is it the only passage that speaks of the tender shepherd (cf. Pss. 78:52f.; 79:13; 80:1; Is. 40:11; 49:9f.; Je. 31:10). The reference to a day of clouds and thick darkness (12, RSV) has eschatological overtones (cf. Ps. 97:2; Joel 2:2; Zp. 1:15) and suggests that this deliverance is to be the day of the Lord for Israel, that is to say, the day when the Lord acts in salvation and judgment to usher in a new age of His righteous rule on earth.”

Nothing represents so clearly man’s inability to save himself and care for his deepest needs as the picture of a sheep. The sheep is one of the few members of God’s creation that cannot find its own way. Isaiah’s definition: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way”¹ still stands as the correct analysis of our condition. A sheep that falls into a ditch filled with water does not have enough sense to climb out; it will drown by the weight of its wet fleece. Without a shepherd’s care a sheep cannot survive.

It is difficult for us to imagine the feeling of hopelessness that must have prevailed among the believing Jews who survived the fall of Jerusalem. For them the temple was more than a place of worship, it was the place where God revealed Himself on earth. The destruction of the temple was for them like the death of God. Daniel’s prayer in “his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem”² indicates the importance of the place. Ezekiel’s prophecy after the fall of Jerusalem gives more than a ray of hope; it tells not only that God is alive and well, but that He is the same God who reveals Himself to those who wait for Him.

What Ezekiel prophesies here is God’s answer to the prayer Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple: “When they sin against you — for there is no one who does not sin — and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to his own land, far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their conquerors and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly’; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their fathers, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their conquerors to show them mercy; for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace.”³

But the fact that we are all like lost sheep does not put the whole flock on the same level of perdition. As, in the words of George Orwell, “all sheep are equal but some are more equal than others,” so some are more lost than others. That is why God’s judgment affects the flock also. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on vv.17-22: “So far Ezekiel has pronounced God’s judgment only upon the bad shepherds, *i.e.* the kingly rulers. The good Shepherd now turns judge and deals with the bad sheep within the flock, *i.e.* the oppressive nobles or the bullying merchant-classes. A confusion of interpretation has arisen here because of the inclusion of the rams and the he-goats in verse 17. Comparison with Matthew 25:31-33 has led some to impose the New Testament pattern of a separation between sheep and goats upon this figure in Ezekiel. But the distinction is between the fat and strong, and the weak and helpless (20). The flock in biblical times, as today in the Middle East, regularly consisted of a mixture of sheep and goats, and the Hebrew word *æeh* in 17, 20, 22 (translated equally misleadingly as cattle, AV, and sheep, RSV) simply meant a member of the flock, whether a sheep or a goat. Ezekiel is saying that the powerful and prosperous citizens, who had been greedily taking for themselves all the good things of the land and denying the benefits of them to their fellows, were going to be judged by the Shepherd. The flock will in fact be purified, not only of its bad leadership but also of its bad members. The language of this metaphor sets Ezekiel fairly and squarely in the prophetic tradition of Amos, for whom social justice and freedom from oppression of the poor by the rich were the two main planks of his message. It would be interesting to know whether Ezekiel had any specific examples of oppression in mind as he

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1. Isa. 53:6
 2. Dan. 6:10
 3. I Kings 8:46-51

uttered these words. The shoddy treatment of the Hebrew slaves during the siege of Jerusalem was certainly an apt example of the truth of his allegations (Je. 34:8-11).”

One amazing feature of Ezekiel’s prophecy about the restoration of Israel as God’s chosen nation is the mention of the name David. All Bible scholars agree that no resurrection of the actual person by that name is intended here. No Jewish rabbi ever interpreted this passage in that way. No one contradicted the Apostle Peter when, on the day of Pentecost, he said: “Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.”¹ David was, in the words of Samuel, a man after God’s own heart.² He was this mainly, not because of his own sinless perfection, which obviously he did not possess, but because he reminded God of His own Son to be born from his lineage: Jesus.

Barnes’ Notes states about this David: “David was a fit type of the True King because he was a true and faithful servant of Yahweh. That which David was partially and imperfectly, Christ is in full perfection.”

And *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “The Lord Jesus refers to this prophecy (John 10:14), ‘I am THE good Shepherd.’ Also ‘one’ as uniting in one the heretofore divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and also, ‘in the dispensation of the fullness of the times, gathering together in one all things in Christ, both of which are in heaven and which are on earth’ (Eph 1:10); thus healing worse breaches than that between Israel and Judah (Col 1:20, ‘God by Him reconciling all things unto Himself, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven’). David - the antitypical David, Messiah, of the seed of David, which no other king after the captivity was: who was fully, what David was only in a degree, ‘the man after God’s own heart.’ Also, David means beloved; Messiah was truly God’s beloved Son (Isa 42:1; Matt 3:17). Shepherd means King, rather than religious instructor; in this preeminently He was the true David who was the Shepherd King (Luke 1:32-33). Messiah is called ‘David’ in Isa 55:3-4; Jer 30:9; Hos 3:5.”

And *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Here, more than ever, we have an anticipation of our Lord’s teaching in ... John 10:1-18. He claims to be the Fulfiller, as of the prediction of ... Isaiah 40:11 and ... Jeremiah 23:1-3, so also of this. He, the ‘Son of David,’ is the David that inherits that among other promises. It has to be noted, however, that Ezekiel’s words paint, less distinctly than those of the earlier prophets, the picture of an individual Messianic king, and seem rather to point, as do those of ... Zechariah 12:10 ... to a line of true rulers, each faithfully representing the ideal David as the faithful Ruler, the true Shepherd of his people (... Psalm 78:71; comp. ... Ezekiel 37:24; 45:8, 9).”

The Messiah is called by the Hebrew word *nasiy*’ meaning “an exalted one, a king or a prince.” The word is used for the first time in Scripture in a prophecy about Ishmael, about whom God says: “He will be the father of twelve *rulers*, and I will make him into a great nation.”³ It is true that the title is never given to a king in Scripture. But then Jesus is called “wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”⁴ by Isaiah. No more glorious title can be thought of.

Vv.25-31, which conclude this chapter, announce God’s covenant of peace with the restored nation. The Hebrew words are *beriyth shalom*. *Beriyth* means “to cut.” It is the word used of the covenant God made with Abraham by passing between the pieces of cut up animals.⁵ At that time God said to Abraham: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states about *shalom*: “Shalom is a very important term in the Old Testament and has maintained its place in Mishnaic, rabbinic, and modern Hebrew. In Israel today, people greet the newcomer and each

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1. Acts 2:29
 2. I Sam. 13:14
 3. Gen. 17:20
 4. Isa. 9:6
 5. Gen. 15:9-21

other with the words *mah shlomka*, ('what is your peace,' 'how are you doing,') and they ask about the 'peace' ('well-being') of one's family."

In the covenant with Abraham, God was the only party that passed between the pieces of cut up animals, indicating that He took full responsibility for the pledge. The pieces of animal meat symbolized the punishment that the party would incur that did not fulfill its obligations. In the death of Jesus on the cross, God took upon Himself the consequences of all human sin.

The reconciliation with God has its healing effect, not only upon the human soul but also upon the land. The sons of Korah expressed this in the psalm: "You showed favor to your land, O Lord; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger."¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: "The absence of wild animals does not quite give the same picture as is found in Isaiah 11:6-9, because for Ezekiel the security of the inhabitants is based on the removal of danger, as in Leviticus 26:6, whereas for Isaiah there was a real harmony between traditional enemies (*cf.* Ho. 2:18). The abundant fertility of the land, however, is paralleled in other golden-age prophecies, such as Hosea 2:22; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13f.; Zechariah 8:12, all of which see God's future blessings in terms of agricultural prosperity." The embedded Scripture references of Leviticus and Hosea read respectively: "I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country,"² and: "In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety."³

We must bear in mind that the Promised Land is a picture of the eternal Sabbath into which God wants us to enter in our relationship with Him in Jesus Christ. About this, the writer of Hebrews states: "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.' And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.' It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience."⁴ What God promises here in Ezekiel is the messianic peace of restoration of fellowship with God. Although the restoration is depicted in terms of physical and material blessing, the ultimate blessings are spiritual. When we enter into God's rest in Jesus Christ we are "blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."⁵

The New International Version renders v.29: "I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops." The Hebrew text reads literally: "And I will raise up for them a plant of renown," upon which *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The words at first suggest the thought that Ezekiel was reproducing the ideal picture of the 'branch, the 'root,' the 'stem,' the 'plant.' of ... Isaiah 11:1; ... Jeremiah 23:5; ... Zechariah 6:12. Here, however, the word is

1. Ps. 85:1-3
2. Lev. 26:6
3. Hos. 2:18
4. Heb. 4:1-11
5. Eph. 1:3

collective, and is translated 'plantation' in ... Ezekiel 17:7, 'planting' in ... Micah 1:6; ... Isaiah 60:21; 61:3. It can hardly be taken as speaking of more than the general fertility of the land. The rendering of the LXX, 'a plant of peace,' obviously implies a different reading (*shalom* instead of *shem*) ... So taken, the words naturally lead on to what follows — the promise that men should *no more be consumed with hunger.*" That, however, does not seem to rule out the possibility of seeing in it a prophecy about the Messiah.

The Hebrew of the last verse of this chapter reads literally: "And you, my flock, the flock of my pasture you [are] men (Adam), and I [am] your Elohiym, says Adonaay Yahweh." *The Pulpit Commentary* calls this statement "The great utterance," stating: "we might call it the 'ode of the shepherds,' comes round to the point from which its second portion started (ver. 11). All blessings were summed up in the thought that, behind every representative of the Father's care, the ideal David and his house, there was the eternal relationship between Jehovah and his people, even that of the Shepherd and his sheep. The LXX omits the words 'are men.'" *The Revised Standard Version* follows *The Septuagint* and gives the reading: "And you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God." That seems to lose some of the magnificence of the utterance. The use of the name Adam lifts us up, out of the comparison with sheep to the level of the bearer of the image of God.

d. The denunciation of Edom 35:1-15

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir; prophesy against it

3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste.

4 I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

5 "Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax,

6 therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you.

7 I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste and cut off from it all who come and go.

8 I will fill your mountains with the slain; those killed by the sword will fall on your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines.

9 I will make you desolate forever; your towns will not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

10 "Because you have said, "These two nations and countries will be ours and we will take possession of them," even though I the Lord was there,

11 therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will treat you in accordance with the anger and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them and I will make myself known among them when I judge you.

12 Then you will know that I the Lord have heard all the contemptible things you have said against the mountains of Israel. You said, "They have been laid waste and have been given over to us to devour."

13 You boasted against me and spoke against me without restraint, and I heard it.

14 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: While the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate.

15 Because you rejoiced when the inheritance of the house of Israel became desolate, that is how I will treat you. You will be desolate, O Mount Seir, you and all of Edom. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'"

Regarding the place this chapter occupies in the book, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: "The Edomites received a brief reference in the oracles against the nations (25:12-14), and the question is inevitably raised why a whole chapter is devoted to them at this particular stage in the development of the book, when the restoration of Israel is the overriding theme. The easy answer is to regard it as interpolated, but that will not bear examination because the oracle has close links with chapter 36, both in the invective style of its prophecies ('because ... therefore') and in the contrasting addresses to the mountains of Edom and Israel (35:3; 36:9). The probable answer is that the Edomites are known to have betrayed their relationship with Israel by plundering their land at the moment when Jerusalem was on

the point of collapse, and that this action would account for the virulence of the prophecy as well as its position just after the news of the fall of Jerusalem. Also, if a preliminary to Israel's restoration was to be the removal of her hostile neighbors (the 'wild beasts' of the land, of 34:25?), then again the prophecy of desolation of Edom is well placed here."

The prophecy is directed, not against the people, at least not primarily, but against "Mount Seir." *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states that it is: "The mountainous country stretching from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, east of the gorge called the Arabah ... The elevations of Seir range from 183 meters (600 feet) to 1,830 meters (6,000 feet). Two of Seir's outstanding features are Mount Hor, where Aaron died (Num 20:27-28), and the ancient city of rock, Petra or Sela (Isa 16:1). The region was named after a Horite (Hurrian) patriarch whose descendants settled in this area."

We find a similar expression "set your face against ..." followed by the designation of a mountain, or mountains, earlier in Ezekiel's prophesies directed against Israel. We read: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them and say: "O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord."'"¹ The mountain represents more than a geographic area. In Zechariah's prophecy: "What (or who) are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'"² the mountain represents the demonic opposition against God. When God delivered Israel from Egypt when the twelfth plague struck the country, He said to Moses: "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord."³ The evil powers that dominated the country were the demons that manipulated the people. So here in Edom; the people were the puppets, the real power was the prince of darkness, called "Mount Seir."

This does not mean that the people are not responsible for their acts born from their allegiance to their evil master. About this, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: "The inhabitants of Mount Seir are accused on three counts: (a) because of their perpetual hatred and for their attacks on the children of Israel *in the time of their calamity* (5); (b) because of their aspirations to territorial aggrandizement, which may well have led them to barter their support for Nebuchadnezzar for the promise of parts of Judah and Israel (10); (c) because of their arrogant boasts and cruel gloating over the downfall of Jerusalem (12-15). The particular heinousness of these offences is expressed in verses 10, 12 and 13. In reply, Ezekiel states that Edom's claim to land was invalid because Judah and Israel were God's territory (*the Lord was there*, 10), and unauthorized peoples possessed it at their peril (*cf.* the fate of the Assyrian colonists of the northern territory in 2 Ki. 17:24-28). And the arrogant insults hurled at the people of Judah were tantamount to blasphemies against the Lord, which He had heard. In each case the judgment pronounced by God was in the form of retribution. The *lex talionis* is invoked to bring slaughter in return for the bloodshed Edom had caused; hatred for hatred, and desolation for desolation."

The word "desolate" appears seven times in this chapter, but it is not always the same Hebrew word that is being used. The basic meaning, however, is the same in that the devastation will be so overwhelming that it will cause amazement among those who witness it. The words *meshammah* and *shemamah* both have the meaning of "a waste or amazement" and "devastation or astonishment." The effect of God's judgment over Edom is expressed in what happened to Israel when God allowed the ark to be captured by the Philistines and when Jeremiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem. We read in the first case: "And the Lord said to Samuel: 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle.'"⁴ And in Jeremiah: "Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle."⁵

1. Ezek. 6:1-3
2. Zech. 4:7
3. Ex. 12:12
4. I Sam. 3:11

The New International Version's "Because you harbored an ancient hostility" (v.5) is the rendering of the Hebrew text that reads: "Because you have had a perpetual hatred ..." Edom and Israel were twin brothers. We read about their mother's pregnancy: "The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'"¹ Normally, after some months of pregnancy, when a child starts to make his presence known inside the mother's womb there is a commotion going on. But what Rebekah experienced was out of proportion. This was not the moving of a child; it was war. And war it turned out to be. Rebekah was upset because she didn't understand what was going on. So she sought the Lord. The Hebrew text of her prayer reads: "If ... so, why ... thus?" God revealed to her not only that she was going to have twins, but also what the destiny of these twins would be. "The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'"

We understand very little about fetal life. We believe that life and personhood exist from the moment of conception. In the debate about abortion rights, the pro-choice movement maintains that a fetus is a non-person for the first several months and that, consequently, abortion cannot be called murder. There are two instances in the Bible of a fetus reacting to a spiritual reality. In *Luke's Gospel* we read: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."² Here we have two babies in the same womb, starting to act out a future history of animosity and war. It was as if the Holy Spirit were getting a hold of baby Jacob and Satan was trying to get Esau and so the two were at loggerheads. Strange and unbelievable as this may sound, that seems to have been the case. There was a pre-natal war going on between light and darkness, between the truth of God's revelation and Satan's attempt to darken it and keep it hidden. It seems a prelude to what we read in John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."³ We understand why Rebekah was upset. This was more than a normal pregnancy.

This historic animosity between the twins carried on throughout the centuries and developed into a lasting hostility which continued even when Israel split into two separate kingdoms. When first Assyria and then Babylonia came upon the scene, Edom tried to take full advantage of her neighbor's weakened condition by occupying the whole of Palestine. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: "The Edomites, shut away in their mountain fastnesses, must often have cast greedy eyes at the more fertile lands to the north-west of them. But their only chance of success lay in Judah's weakness, and this they attempted to exploit. It is interesting to note that, even in the hour of Judah's judgment, God is still regarded as being there in the land and is shown to identify himself with His people (12)."

It appears that the reason for Edom's disdain of Israel was more than brotherly jealousy; it was hatred toward Israel's God. Humanly speaking our sympathy tends to be more with Esau than with Jacob. Esau was right when he said: "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!"⁴ Yet, the Scriptures call Esau "immoral," because he acted flippantly in selling his birthright and never repented.⁵

The Hebrew word, rendered here "contemptible things," is *ne`atsah*, which actually means: "blasphemy." As such it is translated in the prayer in Nehemiah: "Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed

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5. Jer. 19:3
 1. Gen. 25:22,23
 2. Luke 1:41,44
 3. John 1:5 (RSV)
 4. Gen. 27:36
 5. Heb. 12:16

awful *blasphemies*.”¹ Interestingly, the image of the mountains is continued in this context. It is Mount Seir that heaps blasphemy upon “the mountains of Israel.” In the latter expression there may be a reference to the Trinity.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “Edom’s wickedness should be requited by his being made to suffer the indignities he designed to heap on Israel. In him the *lex talionis* should have full sway. Edom’s misconception as to Jehovah’s relation to the land and people should be corrected when Jehovah should rise up in judgment against him. Those judgments should in the first instance be a revelation to Israel and Judah, who should discern therefrom that they had not been utterly abandoned by Jehovah (ver. 11; cf. ... Ezekiel 20:5); and in the second instance should open Edom’s eyes to perceive that Jehovah had been a silent listener to all the blasphemies she had uttered against the mountains of Israel (ver. 12), and had reckoned these as blasphemies uttered against himself (ver. 13).”

God’s final judgment of Edom will take place “while the whole earth rejoices.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests: “Probably this refers to the time of the Maccabees.” It seems more appropriate to see here a reference to the Millennium, when Satan will be bound and Christ will reign upon the earth.”² Isaiah refers to this in his prophecy: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.”³

e. A restored land and a transformed people 36:1-38

1 "Son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say, 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord.

2 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: The enemy said of you, 'Aha! The ancient heights have become our possession.'" ' "

3 Therefore prophesy and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because they ravaged and hounded you from every side so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations and the object of people's malicious talk and slander,

4 therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord: This is what the Sovereign Lord says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, to the desolate ruins and the deserted towns that have been plundered and ridiculed by the rest of the nations around you—

5 this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In my burning zeal I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, for with glee and with malice in their hearts they made my land their own possession so that they might plunder its pastureland.'

6 Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I speak in my jealous wrath because you have suffered the scorn of the nations.

7 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn.

8 "'But you, O mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home.

9 I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor; you will be plowed and sown,

10 and I will multiply the number of people upon you, even the whole house of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt.

1. Neh. 9:17,18

2. Rev. 20:1-5

3. Isa. 65:17-19

11 I will increase the number of men and animals upon you, and they will be fruitful and become numerous. I will settle people on you as in the past and will make you prosper more than before. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

12 I will cause people, my people Israel, to walk upon you. They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you will never again deprive them of their children.

13 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because people say to you, "You devour men and deprive your nation of its children,"

14 therefore you will no longer devour men or make your nation childless, declares the Sovereign Lord.

15 No longer will I make you hear the taunts of the nations, and no longer will you suffer the scorn of the peoples or cause your nation to fall, declares the Sovereign Lord."

16 Again the word of the Lord came to me:

17 "Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight.

18 So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols.

19 I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions.

20 And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land.'

21 I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

22 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.

23 I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

24 "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

28 You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

29 I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you.

30 I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine.

31 Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices.

32 I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!

33 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt.

34 The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it.

35 They will say, "This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited."

36 Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.'

**37 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Once again I will yield to the plea of the house of Israel and do this for them: I will make their people as numerous as sheep,
38 as numerous as the flocks for offerings at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts. So will the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord."**

In a way this chapter is a glorious piece of poetry. The land of Canaan is endowed with personality as God addresses it in its mountains and hills, ravines and valleys. We saw this principle earlier in a negative sense as the land reacted to the sins committed in it by vomiting up its population.¹ A farmer who works his fields that have belonged to the family for generations feels this kind of affinity with the earth that yields him his crops. As God addressed Mount Seir in the previous chapter as the embodiment of the powers of evil, so here the Promised Land becomes the picture of the people who have entered into God's rest.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "Ezekiel's promises of restoration for Israel began in chapter 34 with the prospect of new leadership in the person of the Lord as the good Shepherd and the Davidic Messiah as His nominee. The future hope is now taken up again with the prospect, first, of a new land and then finally of a renewed people to dwell in it. The order of leader, land and people is an interesting indication both of the recognition of the importance of national leadership in Israel, and also of the inseparable relationship between a people and the physical contours of the land where they dwelt. The first point we readily recognize today, but the second is much less easy for us to appreciate. It does not necessarily imply a belief in localized deities, though the Old Testament did have a high regard for the locations of sanctuaries where God appeared to their forefathers, *e.g.* El Beth-el, the God of Bethel (Gn. 31:13; 35:7). But it is to be set alongside such facts as the place of Canaan, the promised land, in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and the selection of Jerusalem or Mount Zion as the place where the Lord was thought particularly to dwell and where His worship was to be carried on. To those who feel that this is altogether too materialistic a concept of God and too constricting for the God of the whole earth, the enlightened Israelite would probably answer that it is no more unreasonable than that the God of all time should declare one day in seven as His own and that the God of all nature should claim a tenth of its produce for Himself. Authority over the whole is witnessed to by the surrender of the part. So the Hebrews regarded the actual land where they lived, the mountains, the valleys, the plains and the rivers, as a kind of God's acre in the world, and its welfare was intimately bound up with the welfare of God's people who lived in it. Just as this applied in chapter 35 to Mount Seir, and by implication to its inhabitants, so now God addressed the mountains of Israel (1-15), and this leads on to oracles concerning the people of Israel (16-38).

This chapter is the opposite of the earlier one in which Ezekiel was commanded to set his face against the mountains of Israel and prophesy against them.² There the idols had taken possession of the mountains and innocent infants were being sacrificed on altars consecrated to evil powers. God equated Israel's entrance into Canaan with a celebration of the Sabbath. When Israel arrived at destination after their exodus from Egypt, the generation of redeemed slaves failed to enter the promised land because of their lack of faith. According to the Psalmist, God said: "For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"³ The author of Hebrews comments on this: "Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my

1. Lev. 18:25,28

2. Ezek. 6:1,2

3. Ps. 95:10,11

rest.””¹ As Adam’s sin prevented mankind from celebrating the Sabbath with God in paradise, so here God’s enemy had succeeded in keeping Israel from living in the land in the spiritual sense of the word.

For a division of this chapter, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, suggests the following: “(a) The oracle addressed to the mountains of Israel has two parts to it. Verses 1-7 promise that the nations round about Israel, and Edom in particular, will suffer reproach for the way they have treated Israel. Verses 8-15 speak more positively of the prospect of fruitfulness for the mountains of Israel and repopulation of the land by the homecoming exiles. (b) The second main section consists of an introductory flashback over Israel’s past showing that it was concern for His holy name which prompted the Lord to punish His people (16-21), and this is followed by three oracles dealing with the new blessings which the people are to receive and enjoy (22-32, 33-36, 37, 38).”

In the opening verses 1-7 Ezekiel uses six times the expression “This is what the Sovereign LORD says” and once the analogous “hear the word of the Sovereign LORD.” In vv. 13-37 the first expression is used interchangeably with “declares the Sovereign LORD” a total of eight times. About these repetitions, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “As it were, the prophet’s emotion is so strong, and his indignation against Israel’s enemies so vehement, that, though he three times in succession begins to prophesy to the mountains of Israel, he on each occasion breaks off before he can get his message told, to expatiate upon the wickedness of Israel’s foes. In the prophet’s estimation that wickedness was so heinous as to inevitably carry in its bosom appropriate retribution.”

Although the Word is addressed to inert matter, we can see the creative power of the God’s speaking in a way similar to God’s speaking the earth into being on the third day of creation: “And God said, ‘Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And God saw that it was good. Then God said, Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds. And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning — the third day.”²

Contrasting with these divine pronouncements stands the “malicious talk and slander” by the pagan nations comparable to the lies that opposed the Word of God the serpent told Eve in paradise. This was another effort by God’s enemy to steal God’s promise of rest and prevent God’s people from entering it.

Barnes’ Notes observes correctly: “The promises are those of temporal blessings; and although these temporal blessings were typical of Messiah’s reign, yet we may not doubt that this prophecy had for its first object the return of prosperity to the land and to the people, after their return from Babylon.”

The Hebrew of v.6 reads literally: “Behold, I have spoken in my jealousy and in my fury because of shame . . .” The words used are *qin’ah*, for “jealousy,” or “envy” and *chemah* for “heat,” “anger,” or “poison.” *Qin’ah* occurs in the verse that speaks of a jealous husband. We read: “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him by sleeping with another man, and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act), and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure — or if he is *jealous* and suspects her even though she is not impure . . .”³ And we find *chemah* in David’s psalm: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your *wrath*.”⁴

The mockery of those who ridiculed Israel for clinging to a God, they believed to be the Lord of all the earth instead of being a local deity, would bounce back upon their own heads. If Israel were the green wood, they would turn out to be the dry. As Jesus said when He was lead away to be crucified: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren

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1. Heb. 3:16-4:3
 2. Gen. 1:9-13
 3. Num. 5:12-14
 4. Ps. 6:1

women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then ‘‘they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’’’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?’¹

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: ‘‘The contrast with what has gone before is marked by the emphatic introductory words, *But you*. The promises of being fertile and densely populated are the very opposite of the fate held out for the mountains of Edom (35:3,7,15). And the benefits of the land’s fruitfulness will be enjoyed by the exiles, *for they will soon come home* (8, RSV).’’ At this point Taylor states in a footnote: ‘‘The AV rendering, *for they are at hand to come*, takes the subject, not as Israel, but as the blessings which have been promised. This is perfectly possible, but the context seems to favor the RSV translation.’’ The commentary continues: ‘‘No contradiction is to be seen here with Ezekiel’s statement, expressed in 4:6, that the punishment of the house of Judah would last for forty years. Now that Jerusalem’s punishment has been fulfilled, Ezekiel sees nothing but the imminent fulfillment of the promise of restoration, in a kind of prophetic foreshortening of the immediate future. This is because God is *for you* (9), *i.e.* on Israel’s side, in contrast with His attitude to Israel in former times (6:2; 3b) and with His attitude to the nations round about (26:3; 28:22; 29:3; 35:3). And for this reason, He is going to repopulate the mountains of Israel with *all the house of Israel*, presumably with both Israel and Judah, and the ruined cities will be rebuilt and re-inhabited, and the wastelands will once again be cultivated and bring forth produce. As so often, when God acts in blessing, he does *more good to you than ever before* (11).’’

As the subsequent post-exile history shows, this did not actually happen. God’s promises are not automatically self-fulfilling. Without faith and prayer they are not realized. Although Cyrus appealed to all of Israel to return to their land, only a handful did return. Most of the deportees had established themselves comfortably in their place of exile that they felt no urge to return to the land of God’s promise.

In vv.13-15 God continues to address the mountains as if they possessed personality. One of the reasons for this was that the people spoke about their land as if it were a person. The mountains were accused, both by the inhabitants as well as by the surrounding nations, of devouring men and depriving the nation of children. The reference is probably to the human sacrifices that were brought on the mountains where idol worship had been practiced. If earlier the land had been depicted as vomiting out the people that practiced idol worship, now it is accused of swallowing up its inhabitants. In either case the land did nothing; it was the people who suffered the consequences of their sinful behavior.

When God tells the mountains that they will no longer be maligned, He points to the change in heart that will come over the people who repent of their sins and experience a regeneration, which is mentioned later in this chapter.

In vv.16-20 the focus is on the people who defiled the land and made it unclean by their sinful conduct. The nation of Israel is compared to a woman who has her monthly period. This strikes us as strange, since menstruation is a natural phenomenon for which a woman cannot be held morally responsible. The Hebrew word *niddah*, ‘‘impurity,’’ however, refers to an abnormal flow of blood, as in the verse: ‘‘When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than *her monthly period* or has a discharge that continues beyond *her period*, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of *her period*.’’² The use of this image of sickness as a representation of moral impurity gives a deeper meaning to the story of the woman who had suffered from this kind of bleeding for twelve years and who was healed by touching Jesus’ clothes.³

It was not because of Israel’s desire to repent, but because God wanted to protect the glory of His Name that He demonstrated His grace to them. Asaph refers to this in one of his psalms: ‘‘Remember how the enemy has mocked you, O Lord, how foolish people have reviled your name.’’⁴ Our sins cast a stain upon the holiness of God which cannot be tolerated. If God would allow His holiness to be tarnished, He would cease to be perfect and all of

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1. Luke 23:28-31
 2. Lev. 15:25
 3. Mark 5:24-34
 4. Ps. 74:18

creation would collapse. His holiness is the guarantee of our existence. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, the prophet Nathan said to him: “But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.”¹ Our conduct ought to be a demonstration of God’s holiness; if it is not we cause Him to be blasphemed. When Israel failed to be a living testimony of God’s holiness, God acted in order to protect both His own reputation and the existence of all of creation.

This brings us to vv.24-38, which is in many respects the glorious mountain peak of Ezekiel’s message. It is a description of the effect the atonement made for our sins in the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross will have upon Israel and upon all of mankind who accept it by faith. Although the cross is not mentioned here, it was on the day Jesus cried “It is finished!” and gave up His Spirit² that the Lord cleansed us from all our sins (v.33).

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the phrase “I will sprinkle clean water on you”: “phraseology taken from the law: the ‘water of separation’ used in the ‘purification for sin’ of those unclean—namely, the water taken from a running stream and mixed with the ashes of a heifer, and sprinkled with a hyssop on the unclean (Num 19:9-18); the thing signified being the cleansing blood of Christ sprinkled on the conscience and heart (Heb 9:13-14; 10:22; cf. Jer 33:8; Eph 5:26).” And *Barnes’ Notes* adds: “Ezekiel the priest has in view the purifying rites prescribed by the Law, the symbolic purport of which is exhibited in Heb 9:13-14; 10:22. As the Levites were consecrated with sprinkling of water, so should the approved rite ‘sprinkling of water’ thus prescribed by the Law and explained by the prophets, give occasion to the use of water at the admission of proselytes in later days, and so to its adoption by John in his baptism unto repentance. It was hallowed by our Lord when in His discourse with Nicodemus, referring, no doubt, to such passages as these, He showed their application to the Church of which He was about to be the Founder; and when He appointed Baptism as the sacrament of admission into that Church. In this sacrament the spiritual import of the legal ordinance is displayed—the second birth by water and the Spirit. As Israel throughout the prophecy of Ezekiel prefigures the visible Church of Christ, needing from time to time trim or purification—so does the renovated Israel represent Christ’s mystical Church (Eph 5:26). The spiritual character of the renovation presumes a personal application of the prophet’s words, which is more thoroughly brought out under the new covenant (e.g., Heb 11:16). Thus the prophecy of Ezekiel furnishes a medium through which we pass from the congregation to the individual, from the letter to the spirit, from the Law to the Gospel, from Moses to Christ.”

One of the problems in equating the ritual of sprinkling water with “the water of cleansing,” which was mixed with the ashes of a heifer, as described in Numbers 19:9-18, is that Ezekiel speaks of “clean water,” “not water of cleansing.” The emphasis here seems to be more on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in bringing about regeneration than upon the application of the atonement. It is true though that one cannot be applied without the other. The spiritual heart transplant described in v.26 also speaks of a total spiritual renewal. Ezekiel had earlier voiced a similar promise: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.”³ What God promises here is the opposite of what He did when Israel was in Egypt and Pharaoh hardened his heart refusing to let God’s people go. God then hardened Pharaoh’s heart, making the process Pharaoh had started irreversible.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “We cannot sanctify God’s name unless he sanctify our hearts, nor live to his glory, but by his grace. All that have an interest in the new covenant, and a title to the new Jerusalem, have a new heart and a new spirit, and these are necessary in order to their walking in newness of life. This is that divine nature which believers are by the promises made partakers of.”

Israel’s problem had been that the requirements of the law were external. The will of God clashed with their sinful nature, and obedience to the commandments went against everything their human ambitions stood for. When Adam sinned his spirit died and the line of fellowship with God was severed. Every human being born into this world is born with a dead spirit, which makes it naturally impossible to experience communion with God. In regeneration

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1. II Sam. 12:14
 2. John 19:30
 3. Ezek. 11:19

our dead spirit is brought to life in the same way as the body of Christ was raised from the dead. The effect of this is expressed here as God removing the heart of stone from our body and replacing it with a heart of flesh, the kind of mentality and mindset He created us to possess. The image of God in us will respond to God in whose image we are made and wanting to do the will of our Creator and Savior will be the most natural thing for us.

That is what living in the Promised Land is all about. David expressed this in the psalms: “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.”¹ It is what the author of Hebrews calls “entering into God’s Sabbath’s rest.”²

As the land had earlier reacted to the sins of its inhabitants by vomiting them up, so it will react to the regeneration of its people by bring forth a rich harvest of fruit and grain. The Promised Land will again be flowing with milk and honey.³ The Sons of Korah prophesied about this in one of their psalms: “You showed favor to your land, O Lord; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.”⁴

On v.32 – “I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments that it “repeats and emphasizes the thought of ver. 22, that the true ground of God’s gracious dealing with Israel should be found, not in their merit, but in his grace. So far as their ways were concerned, there was cause only for judgment on his part and self-humiliation on theirs.”

The ministry of the Holy Spirit that caused regeneration and would restore Israel to what God intended it to be will result in a sense of guilt and shame. Jesus said about the Holy Spirit: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”⁵ For the nation of Israel this conviction of sin will come upon them at the Second Coming of Christ, about which John said in Revelation: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”⁶

This theme of conviction of sin and shame over the past runs like a scarlet thread through Ezekiel’s prophecy.⁷ Understanding of the damage sin has done in one’s life rarely appears in its full measure until after conversion and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. It is the first indication of the healing of the soul.

Vv.33-38 state that the restoration of Israel will be a testimony to the grace of God both to the nations surrounding it and to the people themselves. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: “The statement of verse 35 is in striking contrast to the earlier verdict of verse 20. It tallies with the teaching of much ‘golden-age’ prophecy that the glorious days to come will be like a return to the blessing of Eden before the Fall (cf. Is. 11:6-9; 51:3; Joel 3:18; Am. 9:13-15). It will be just as much an act of God’s creation as was the original garden of Eden. God, not man, will be responsible for the consummation of this present age.”

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1. Ps. 37:3-6
 2. Heb. 4:10
 3. Ex. 3:8 etc.
 4. Ps. 85:1,2
 5. John 16:8-11
 6. Rev. 1:7
 7. See Ezek. 16:52,54,61,63; 36:32; 43:10,11.

f. The spiritual rebirth of the people 37:1-28

1 The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'

5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'"

10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet — a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'

12 Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.

14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"

15 The word of the Lord came to me:

16 "Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, 'Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.' Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, 'Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.'

17 Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.

18 "When your countrymen ask you, 'Won't you tell us what you mean by this?'

19 say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph — which is in Ephraim's hand — and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah's stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.'

20 Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on

21 and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land.

22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.

23 They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

24 "'My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.

25 They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever.

26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.

27 My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.

28 Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’”

The valley to which the Spirit of the Lord led Ezekiel was obviously not a literal geographical location. This vision differs from others in which the prophet saw himself transported to a specific place on earth, as in the vision of the sins committed in the temple and the departure of the glory of the Lord from the temple area.¹ This vision, like some of the ones in following chapters, was spiritual and mainly symbolic.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, warns against an interpretation of this well-known chapter of Ezekiel that sees in it an exposition of an Old Testament doctrine of bodily resurrection. He writes: “The key to understanding this chapter aright is to see it in its context. Ezekiel had been promising his people a change in their fortunes: new leadership, a restored land, rebuilt cities, and many of the features of the Messianic era. It is not surprising that he was met with skepticism: the fall of Jerusalem had meant the break-up of their faith and it was not going to be restored as easily as that. They looked at the shattered remains of their people in exile and they could only say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. Can these bones live?’ The answer appeared to be unmistakably ‘No.’ Ezekiel, however, believed that it could happen. If God’s purpose was to restore Israel, He would do it by however great a miracle. Both the vision and the oracle of the two sticks conveyed this message. In the case of the first (1-14), the nation was shown that God’s Spirit had the power to turn what looked like a host of skeletons into an effective army of men, a picture of Israel restored to life again and filled with the Spirit. In the second (15-28), Ezekiel shows that the old divisions between Israel and Judah will pass away; the new nation will unite the remnants of both peoples in one land under one king, and without their traditional animosity.”

Although Taylor is correct in stating that every chapter in the Bible must be interpreted in the context of the whole, the scene of the destruction of the city and the temple does foreshadow the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, the resurrection of the dead bones must also prefigure the resurrection of Jesus. There can be no doubt about it that the primary intent of this vision was for the benefit of the people in exile. It was a powerful stimulus of hope, a revival in the literal sense of the word. What the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come,”² can be applied here also to us. As twenty-first century Christians we read the Old Testament not merely as an ancient history book, but as a Word of the Holy Spirit to the church today. We ought to feel free to see in this chapter a promise of spiritual revival as well as of the blessed hope of the resurrection.

Barnes’ Notes comments: “In Ezek 37:1-14, Ezekiel sees in a vision dead men raised to life; its meaning is given (Ezek 37:11-14). In it, the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body is at least implied. Such a figure would only have force with those who were familiar with this idea (compare 1 Sam 2:6; Job 19:25-27; Ps 16:10-11; Dan 12:1). The vision was intended not only to comfort the despairing children of Israel—prefiguring the reinstatement of Israel now scattered and lifeless, as a community restored to their home, and reinvigorated with spiritual life—but also to impress upon them the great truth of the Resurrection, which was greatly developed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but found its clear and unambiguous enunciation in the New. The prophecy concerns not only the Israel after the flesh but also the Israel of God; it points to a home in heaven and to a life of immortality.”

The vision speaks of more than death alone. When the human body decomposes after death and only dry bones are left it means that the process has come to an end and is irreversible. Even in the miracles of resurrection Jesus performed in His days on earth, none of the dead bodies had reached this stage. Lazarus had been dead for three days and his resurrection was one of the greater miracles Jesus performed. What Ezekiel sees in this vision is what will happen on the last day of world history about which Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”³

1. Ezek. 8-11
2. I Cor. 10:11
3. John 5:25,28,29

The Holy Spirit asked Ezekiel the question: “Son of man, can these bones live?” We assume that Ezekiel believed in life after death and in the resurrection of the body. He must have realized that the question was not hypothetical, and he had no reason to assume that he would witness a physical resurrection at that point in world history or that he would be instrumental in bringing about the miracle.

The Word of the Lord Ezekiel was told to proclaim was: “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.” As Jesus would state centuries later, the dead do hear the voice of God. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains about the Hebrew word translated “breath”: “The Hebrew word *ruah* is translated ‘breath’ in verses 5,6,8,9,10, ‘winds’ in verse 9, and ‘spirit’ in verses 1,14. The context usually determines the translation. Breath is a sign of life, identical with wind or air, and becomes, in this prophecy, the living principle itself, spirit.”

In Ezekiel’s vision the resurrection of the dry bones occurs in two stages, each of which is initiated by a prophetic Word. In the first prophecy God says: “I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord” (vv.5,6). The miracle occurs in which the bones come together and form the human body in which they existed before, but the result is merely an earlier stage of death. In the second oracle God says to Ezekiel: “Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’”

The strange implication here is that the multiple meaning of the Hebrew word *ruwach* which can mean “wind,” “breath,” “life,” “spirit,” or even “the sky” is completely disregarded. Jesus referred to this linguistic Hebrew phenomenon when He said to Nicodemus: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”¹ David speaks of a storm at sea as the breath of God, when he says in one of the psalms: “The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.”² So here, as on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is equated to the wind that comes from the four corners of the earth.

The Hebrew text of v.9 reads literally: “Then he said to me, prophesy to the wind, prophesy, son of man, prophesy to the wind and say to the wind, thus says the Lord God; come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” The Hebrew word *ruwach* occurs four times in this sentence, three times as “wind” and once as “breath.”

The fact that the dead are said to be slain indicates that there was a war and that these dead bodies belong to the fallen. And since the bodies had decomposed to the point where only the dry bones were left the battle cannot have been a recent one. This suggests that the primary reference here is not to the captivity or to the destruction of the country of Israel, but to a much older struggle. We may see in this vision an image of the condition of all of mankind as victim of the age-old battle between God and Satan.

The people of Israel, as well as all of humanity were seen in the previous chapter as having a heart of stone. They were spiritually dead, deader than the bones in this vision. The bodily resurrection portrayed here is parallel to the removal of the heart of stone and the giving a heart of flesh.³

The explanation of the meaning of the vision God gives to Ezekiel as pertaining to the whole house of Israel does not contradict the above. The vision did require an immediate application in order to make it meaningful. When the people state that their hope is gone because they had been evicted from the Promised Land and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed with the temple, the place of God’s revelation, God gives them a hope that goes well beyond a physical restoration and rebuilding. No graves were opened and no dead were raised when the remnant was allowed to return. Even to this day the prophecy of this vision has not yet been fulfilled. The Apostle Paul explains in Romans the mystery of God’s plan with Israel. We read: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come

1. John 3:8
2. Ps. 18:15
3. Ezek. 36:26

in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”¹

In the second part of this chapter, vv.15-28 are no longer part of a vision; they are an object lesson Ezekiel had to give in public. He was told to take two sticks and write on one the words “Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him,” and on the other “Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.” Then he had to hold both sticks in one hand as if they had become one.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The symbolic action thus prescribed to the prophet was manifestly based on the well-known historical fact that the tribes of Israel, in Mosaic times, had been represented by a rod, on which was inscribed the name of the tribe (... Numbers 17:2); but whether the stick Ezekiel was instructed to take was a staff ... or a block ... or simply a piece ... of wood on which a few words might be traced, cannot be decided.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “These represent the two kingdoms of former days, before Samaria fell to the Assyrians under Sargon II (722/1 BC) and Israel, the northern kingdom, lost her identity. He is to take one of them in his right hand, concealing one end of it in his clenched fist. Then he is to take the other stick and join it to the first one, end to end. His clenched fist will thus grasp the place where the two sticks meet, and it will appear as if he is holding one long stick in the middle. Understood in this way, it is not necessary to postulate any kind of miracle in the symbolic act. The meaning of the action is that in the restored Israel, the old divisions of the north and south will be abolished and the nation will be united in God’s hand ... The explanation given in 21-28 is futuristic. It describes the ideal, Messianic kingdom of the last days. The children of Israel will be gathered from among the nations where they have been dispersed (21); they will be resettled in their own land; they will no longer practice idolatry, but they will be purified from all their defilement (23). They will live a life of obedience to the Lord and will enjoy an everlasting covenant with Him (24, 26). The Lord will establish His sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore, and the heathen will know that *I the Lord do sanctify Israel* (26-28). Now all this is the language of the golden age to which Israel looked forward at the culmination of her national religious existence. Any question of ‘fulfillment’ has to be related to the whole picture that is given and not to isolated features of it. The answer of the New Testament to this future hope of Israel is that it has come about, but has not been fulfilled. The golden age has dawned in the coming of Jesus the Messiah; fulfillment has begun. But it has not yet been completed. The experience of the church finds that many of the expectations of the past have become realities, but even the realities are only a foretaste of the full and final Messianic joy of the world which is to come. An over-literal interpretation of one aspect of this future hope prevents one from seeing that the prophet is mainly concerned with the ideal of unity in the Messianic kingdom, *i.e.* a spiritualized pattern of the future Israel based on the historical precedent of David’s united monarchy, which was the golden age of the past.”

Taylor’s point is well taken. The only time in which Israel existed as one nation under God was during David’s reign and most of the reign of Solomon. David understood the danger of division of the nation. He realized that the twelve tribes were not one happy family and that unless Jerusalem, which was unconquered territory when he came to the throne, became the hub of the nation, the country could split up in a northern and southern kingdom, which happened after the death of Solomon. But David also understood that the land over which he had become king was only a shadow of a greater reality that existed beyond the realm of this earth. The songs he wrote about Zion as a symbol of heaven testify to the fact. Interpreting the unity of Judah and Joseph as something more than merely a return from Assyrian and Babylonian captivity is quite in line with David’s principle of interpretation.

That the fulfillment of this prophecy is not only futuristic but also spiritual is obvious from the fact that it has never become a physical reality simply in the return of the people from their captivity. Living in the land in peace and unity may be seen as referring to the millennial reign of Christ, but it is even more true in its spiritual fulfillment for those who enter into God’s rest of which Canaan was the symbol.

The best commentary on this is found in *Hebrews*, where we read: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘So I declared on oath

1. Rom. 11:25-27

in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.' And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.' It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience."¹

In an earlier chapter the Messiah was introduced by the name David. We read: "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken."² Here the Messiah is presented as the shepherd-king who "will be their prince forever" (v.25). The new relationship, which was earlier presented when God promised to give the people a new heart³, is here called "an everlasting covenant."

The author of *Hebrews* speaks of this covenant, relating it to the death and resurrection of Christ and to our equipment as participants. We read: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."⁴

This makes Ezekiel's prophecy very pertinent to us as New Testament Christians. And, as the last verse of this chapter indicates, the world will know when God lives among us and His holiness is displayed in our daily walk.

VII. PROPHECY AGAINST GOG38:1-39:29

a. The invasion of the armies of Gog38:1-16

1 The word of the Lord came to me:

2 "Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; prophesy against him

3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.

4 I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army — your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords.

5 Persia, Cush and Put will be with them, all with shields and helmets,

6 also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops — the many nations with you.

7 "'Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them.

8 After many days you will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety.

9 You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land.

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1. Heb. 4:1-11
 2. Ezek. 34:23,24
 3. Ezek. 36:26
 4. Heb. 13:20,21

10 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme.

11 You will say, "I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people — all of them living without walls and without gates and bars.

12 I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land."

13 Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all her villages will say to you, "Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?" ' ‘

14 "Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it?

15 You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army.

16 You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, O Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

Much has been written about the fact that the place of this prophecy against Gog seems to be out of context with the rest of the book of Ezekiel. It has been noted that the Jewish historian Josephus records that Ezekiel wrote two books. Some Bible scholars believe that the present chapters as well as the final nine chapters of this book are a separate compilation. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: "We incline to the view that chapters 38 and 39 are a separate composition, written in a different literary genre, which were added to 1-37 as a kind of postscript, and that 40-48 were a later appendix which built on to the concluding chapter of the original work, 1-37. This would account both for the verbal links between 37:24-28 and 40-48, and also for the lack of such links between 38, 39 and their context." We may note these matters without being obliged to form an opinion about them.

Roughly following the introduction to this section by *The Pulpit Commentary*, we note that various Bible scholars have tried to identify God and his armies with particular nations, as for instance with the Chaldeans, the Scythians, the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanes, and even the Turks (Luther). *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Either the highly idealized picture the prophet sketches was designed ... to sum up and present in one great battle-piece all the conflicts which, throughout subsequent centuries, the restored and united Israel should have to maintain against the heathen world; or it was intended, as ... others believe, to point to one closing struggle, in which the world's hostility to the Church of God should culminate, and in which it should be utterly and finally broken. In favor of this latter view stand the facts that by the prophet the uprising of Gog is located in 'the latter days,' and by the author of the Apocalypse, who seems to allude to the same event, the last battle between the powers of evil and the Church of God is placed immediately before the final judgment and the emergence of the new heavens and the new earth."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary believes this prophecy to be a parable instead of a literal prediction of future events. We read: "The prophetic delineations of the divine principles of government are thrown into the familiar forms of Old Testament relations. The final triumph of Messiah's truth over the most distant and barbarous nations is represented as a literal conflict on a gigantic scale, Israel being the battlefield, ending in the complete triumph of Israel's anointed King, the Savior of the world. It is a prophetic parable ... However, though the details are not literal, the distinctiveness in this picture, characterizing also parallel descriptions in writers less ideally picturesque than Ezekiel, gives probability to a more definite and generally literal interpretation. The awful desolations caused in Judea by Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria (1 Maccabees; and Porphyry, quoted by Jerome on Ezekiel), his defilement of Yahweh's temple by sacrificing swine and sprinkling the altar with the broth, and setting up the altar of Jupiter Olympius, seem to be an earnest of the final desolations to be caused by Antichrist in Israel, previous to his overthrow by the Lord Himself coming to reign (cf. the little horn and the 'king of fierce countenance,' who, 'when the transgressors are come to the full ... shall destroy the holy people,' Dan 8:10-26; and the 'king of the north,' who 'shall do according to his will, and exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and speak marvelous things against the God of gods, and shall enter also into the glorious land, and shall plant the

tabernacles of his palaces between the seas in the glorious holy mountain, and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps,' Dan 11:21-45; 12:1; Zech 13:9; 14:2-3) ... Ezekiel describes the anti-Christian confederacy which is to assail the Holy Land before the Millennium; Rev 20:7-9 describes the corresponding and last anti-Christian confederacy which is to assail the beloved city at the close of the Millennium."

The names Gog and Magog appear elsewhere in Scripture, but they give little or no indication that is helpful in identifying the topic of Ezekiel's prophecy. Magog is mentioned as one of the sons of Japheth¹ and we assume that Ezekiel refers to the place where this person took up residence. Gog is mentioned once in the genealogy of Ruben as the grandson of Joel.² But none of this is of any help in the interpretations of this prophecy.

The phrase "Son of man, set your face against ..." is typical for the style of Ezekiel. We find the expression a total of nine times throughout the book. It is used variously in prophesies of judgment against "the mountains of Israel," against "the daughters of [Israel] who prophesy out of their own imagination," against "the south" and "the forest of the southland," against "Jerusalem" and "the sanctuary," against "the Ammonites," against "Sidon," against "Pharaoh king of Egypt" and "all Egypt," against "Mount Seir," and here for the last time against "Gog."³ The term evidently communicates more than merely looking in the direction of the object or the people, but it expresses a stern look of judgment that adjusts the facial expression to the severity of the message.

Ezekiel uses here the same image of judgment upon Gog as he did earlier in his prophecy against Pharaoh of Egypt. The king of Egypt was depicted as a crocodile in the River Nile and God said to him: "I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales. I will pull you out from among your streams, with all the fish sticking to your scales."⁴ John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: "The language used in verse 4 (*I will turn you about, and put hooks into your jaws*) may be a conscious echo of the mythological capture of the great sea-monster (see on 29:3-5), and if this is so it would strengthen the belief that Gog is to be understood as the personification of the cosmic forces of evil."

Gog is addressed as "the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal." The Hebrew word used is *nasiy'*, which has the meaning of "an exalted one," or "king." We think of Daniel's mention of the demonic powers that stood behind the empires of his time, such as "the prince of the Persian kingdom." The angel that belatedly appeared to Daniel in answer to his prayer said: "But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia."⁵ In that verse the Hebrew word used for the prince of Persia is *sar*, which basically has the same meaning as *nasiy'*, but may refer to a lesser rank than *sar*. In this verse *sar* is used for the archangel Michael. From this we could deduct that Gog here stands for the highest ranking archangel among the fallen angels, which would be Satan himself.

In *Revelation*, John mentions Gog and Magog at the end of the Millennium when Satan is released from prison. We read: "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth — Gog and Magog — to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."⁶ In that context the term "Gog and Magog" could be applied either to the nations deceived by Satan or to the deceiver himself.

1. Gen. 10:2; I Chron. 1:5

2. I Chron. 5:4

3. See Ezek. 6:2; 13:17; 20:46; 21:2; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2,3; 35:2; 38:2.

4. Ezek. 29:4

5. Dan. 10:13

6. Rev. 20:7-10

Gog's attack described here is projected in the far distance of time, much like the events reported by Daniel at the end of his book. Daniel is told by the angel to "close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end" and to "Go [his] way, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end."¹ The nations in coalition with Gog are mentioned as Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer and Beth Togarmah from the far north. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: "With Gog come five other nations, of which the first three are certainly not from the north, *Cush* being Ethiopia, and *Put* being probably Cyrenaica in North Africa (*cf.* 27:10, however, where they served in Tyre's army). *Beth-togarmah* (RSV) is probably Armenia (*cf.* 27:14), and *Gomer* is usually identified with the Gimirrai of the Assyrians, or the Cimmerians of Greek literature, who came originally from north of the Black Sea."

Ezekiel's description of Gog's planned invasion in vv.7-9 reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy about the end of time. Isaiah prophesied this in the context of judgment over Tyre. His language is even more poetical than Ezekiel's, but it is obvious that both speak about events that go well beyond a conflict on a merely human level. It involves the whole realm of demonic powers in heaven and on earth. We read: "In that day the Lord will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders, gloriously."² Many Bible scholars believe that Ezekiel's prophecy found its fulfillment in the reign of terror under Antiochus Epiphanes. But although Antiochus can be seen as a type of the Antichrist, he was nothing more than a type in the same way as John would later use the emperor Nero in *Revelation*. Jesus referred to Antiochus desecration of the temple as a prefigure of what the Antichrist would do at the end of time, when He said: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel — let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."³

In spite of the symbolism and poetry which makes it difficult to envision how and when this prophecy applies, it seems safe to assume that the last scene of the drama of world history will be played out on the geographical location of Israel, at the place John calls Armageddon,⁴ which refers to the valley of Megiddo.

Vv.10-13 place Gog's invasion at a time when the earth will be at rest and is experiencing millennial conditions of peace and prosperity. Here again we can see a picture of situations that have already occurred on earth, even in recent history. Both world wars that ravaged the twentieth century began with attacks on peaceful unsuspecting and unprepared nations.

Since Gog's attack is of "the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations" his object is obviously the restored nation of Israel after her return from captivity. The people are said to be "living at the center of the land." The Hebrew word used is *tabbuwr*, which literally means "to pile up," referring to a summit. The word is only found in this verse and in Judges, where it is translated "the center of the land."⁵ According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the *LXX* translates this "the navel of the earth." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this: "Israel is said to be set 'in the midst of the nations:' 'This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations;' not physically, but morally; a central position for being a blessing to the world. It is on this account (as the favored or 'beloved city,' Rev 20:9) that it becomes to the godless foe an object of envy. Grotius translates *tabbuwr*, 'In the height of the land' (so Ezek 38:8), 'the mountains of Israel,' Israel being morally elevated above the rest of the world. The literal sense, 'navel,' seems to point to the fact of its being the moral center of the world, not to its moral eminence, as Ezek 5:5 also implies."

Although the attack may be a physical assault upon an unsuspecting nation, the prophecy suggests that it is also, or maybe mostly, an attack upon the moral values of God's people. As in a literal sense the umbilical cord is the

1. Dan. 12:4,9
2. Isa. 24:21-23
3. Matt. 24:15,16
4. Rev. 16:16
5. Judg. 9:37

lifeline to birth, so there is a spiritual cord that leads to the new birth. The navel being a reminder of the birthing process, so in a spiritual regeneration, there is a reminder that moral values are the fruit of a life that is nourished by the Word of God.

Vv.14-16 are the most remarkable in this prophecy. They demonstrate the principle of God's dealing with human sin in which God ends up being glorified. Gog's intent was to destroy what God had created for His glory. His objective seems to be reached and in a way he will be victorious. It is as if God and Satan are playing chess; God sacrifices most of His valuable pieces and yet ends up winning the game. That was what happened at Golgotha. When Jesus died it seemed as if the enemy had won. But death turned out to be too small a prison to contain the Son of God. He not only broke out but took the keys with Him. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "Whereas the previous oracle regards Gog as fully responsible for planning the operation, these verses show that God is bringing him against Israel. There is no inconsistency here: 'a divine purpose overrules while it makes use of, the base human motive' (Cooke). The same paradox marks Isaiah's teaching on the Assyrian invasion (Is. 10:5-19) and Habakkuk's attitude to the Chaldean menace (Hab. 1:5-11). It does not mean that Gog is a luckless pawn in the hand of an all-powerful but immoral God. Gog freely acts according to the evil dictates of his lust for conquest and easy spoil, but behind everything in the universe (and especially as it relates to God's people) there is the controlling hand of God, who orders all things with a view to the ultimate vindication of His honor among the nations. What Gog imagines to be a victory for himself, the Lord turns into an opportunity for His glory (16; *I shall be sanctified, i.e. I shall be recognized to be holy and to be the true God*)."

b. The massacre 38:17 – 39:24

17 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Are you not the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel? At that time they prophesied for years that I would bring you against them.

18 This is what will happen in that day: When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign Lord.

19 In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel.

20 The fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, every creature that moves along the ground, and all the people on the face of the earth will tremble at my presence. The mountains will be overturned, the cliffs will crumble and every wall will fall to the ground.

21 I will summon a sword against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign Lord. Every man's sword will be against his brother.

22 I will execute judgment upon him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him.

23 And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'

39:1 "Son of man, prophesy against Gog and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.

2 I will turn you around and drag you along. I will bring you from the far north and send you against the mountains of Israel.

3 Then I will strike your bow from your left hand and make your arrows drop from your right hand.

4 On the mountains of Israel you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals.

5 You will fall in the open field, for I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord.

6 I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coastlands, and they will know that I am the Lord.

7 "I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the Lord am the Holy One in Israel.

8 It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign Lord. This is the day I have spoken of.

9 *"Then those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and use the weapons for fuel and burn them up — the small and large shields, the bows and arrows, the war clubs and spears. For seven years they will use them for fuel.*

10 *They will not need to gather wood from the fields or cut it from the forests, because they will use the weapons for fuel. And they will plunder those who plundered them and loot those who looted them, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

11 *"On that day I will give Gog a burial place in Israel, in the valley of those who travel east toward the Sea. It will block the way of travelers, because Gog and all his hordes will be buried there. So it will be called the Valley of Hamon Gog.*

12 *"For seven months the house of Israel will be burying them in order to cleanse the land.*

13 *All the people of the land will bury them, and the day I am glorified will be a memorable day for them, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

14 *"Men will be regularly employed to cleanse the land. Some will go throughout the land and, in addition to them, others will bury those that remain on the ground. At the end of the seven months they will begin their search.*

15 *As they go through the land and one of them sees a human bone, he will set up a marker beside it until the gravediggers have buried it in the Valley of Hamon Gog.*

16 *(Also a town called Hamonah will be there.) And so they will cleanse the land.'*

17 *"Son of man, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood.*

18 *You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls — all of them fattened animals from Bashan.*

19 *At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk.*

20 *At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind,' declares the Sovereign Lord.*

21 *"I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay upon them.*

22 *From that day forward the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord their God.*

23 *And the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sin, because they were unfaithful to me. So I hid my face from them and handed them over to their enemies, and they all fell by the sword.*

24 *I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their offenses, and I hid my face from them.*

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, introduces this section with a description of God's anger: "The defense of helpless Israel is here undertaken directly by God. He will become incensed at the unprovoked invasion by the hordes from the north and He will bring all kinds of natural disasters upon them. All these are described in the future tense, because not only is the passage predictive of what is to come in the last days, but Ezekiel is also aware that what he is saying amounts to a fulfillment of the prophecies of the past (17). Not that Gog had ever been specifically mentioned by earlier prophets, but their predictions of danger from the north were to be fulfilled in him. The weapons which will be used against God are earthquakes (19f.; cf. Is. 24:18-20; Joel 3:16; Hg. 2:6f.), the sword (21, AV), pestilence and bloodshed (22; cf. 5:17; 28:23), and torrential rains, hailstones, fire and brimstone (22; cf. Gn. 19:24; Ps. 11:6; Is. 30:30; 34:9). All of these, except the sword, are non-human agents frequently associated with God's judgments, and this is partly why RSV follows LXX in emending 21 to *I will summon every kind of terror* against him. But despite the difficult Hebrew, the AV rendering is full consonant with passage such as 5:17; 6:3; 11:8; 12:14, *etc.*, and it alone makes sense of the consequent *every man's sword shall be against his brother*, as the demoralized heathen slay each other in their panic and add to the general destruction (cf. Jdg. 7:22; 1 Sa. 14:20; Hg. 2:22; Zc. 14:13)."

Although Gog is a new figure at the horizon, he is here identified as an old foe, a historical enemy. Ezekiel's predecessors have prophesied about him before Ezekiel's time and his successors will do the same. The human being or beings to whom the name Gog is assigned may be new, but the prince of Gog, the supernatural power that rules

and inspires the movement is the old serpent. The old serpent has many skins which change according to the décor of the time, but the beast is the same. In C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, several witches occur. Some are white, some are green, but it is noted that they are all basically the same in their purpose and their ways of reaching their goals.

The other prophets had foretold the end of Gog's battle. Isaiah said: "The Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire. Then the hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel, that attack her and her fortress and besiege her, will be as it is with a dream, with a vision in the night — as when a hungry man dreams that he is eating, but he awakens, and his hunger remains; as when a thirsty man dreams that he is drinking, but he awakens faint, with his thirst unquenched. So will it be with the hordes of all the nations that fight against Mount Zion."¹ And Zechariah prophesied: "Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him."²

John in *Revelation* describes the end of Gog's attack, saying: "But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."³ That will be the fate of Gog and of the satanic power that inspired and upheld him throughout world history. It will be the annihilation of the mystery of evil which entered the universe at its beginning and permeated life on our planet for the duration of its existence.

Gog's attack of Israel will provoke a unique demonstration of God's wrath. The Hebrew words used are *chemah* for "heat," or "anger" and *'aph*, meaning "nose" or "nostril," conveying the idea of "rapid breathing." *The New International Version* renders this with "my hot anger will be aroused." *The King James Version* reads: "my fury shall come up in my face." *The New Living Translation*: "my fury will boil over!" The words describe God's reaction of fury and indignation to sin and death. Jesus demonstrated the same reaction at Lazarus' tomb, where we read: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."⁴ The Greek word used there is *embrimaomai*, which literally means "to snort with anger."

The Apostle John, in *Revelation*, places Gog's attack at the end of the Millennium. We read: "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth — Gog and Magog — to gather them for battle."⁵ Satan's release from prison raises several questions. It is obvious that he could not be released without God's permission. This would not be a breakout. Although no reason is given, we could assume that some kind of agreement between God and Satan must have occurred, in which the devil may have asked God for an opportunity to prove himself transformed by his thousand-year-long imprisonment. This freedom would be like some sort of parole in which Satan could show that he was serious in his intentions and that he was willing to undo the enormous damage he had caused. It could even be that this conversion is not a fake or a put-up job. It would, of course, be simple for God to unmask deceit. We could imagine that, as soon as the former adversary is let loose and is restored to his previous glory and authority, his original temptation would assert itself again also. The same pride that made him make a dash for the throne before could become too powerful. The same would happen to those who had followed him and who had converted and had sworn to the same renunciation. Evidently, the Antichrist and his prophet are not included in this party. A mass

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1. Isa. 29:6-8
 2. Zech. 14:3-5
 3. Rev. 20:9,10
 4. John 11:33
 5. Rev. 20:7,8

rehabilitation of those we now consider to be lost, would give an explanation for the millions who, all of a sudden, come marching across the breadth of the earth to conquer Jerusalem. All of this is, of course, mere speculation, but it could give us a reasonable explanation for facts that are difficult to interpret otherwise.

This assumption cannot be proven, but it would explain God's unusual fury at the moment of Satan's final rebellion. No further proof would be needed for a final ultimate punishment.

As God says to Ezekiel: "I will execute judgment upon him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him," John, describing the same scene, simply states: "Fire came down from heaven and devoured them."¹

Ezekiel depicts the final act of world history in terms of "a great earthquake in the land of Israel" (v.19). But at the same time God says: "All the people on the face of the earth will tremble at my presence" (v.20). It is difficult to determine whether this is a description of a literal earthquake or of a panic of such proportions as had never affected the human soul. We find portrayals of both throughout the Scriptures. Isaiah describes the final judgment in terms of an earthquake. We read: "But your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes like blown chaff. Suddenly, in an instant, the Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire."² And: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you."³ Nahum states: "The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him."⁴ John, in *Revelation*, mentions an earthquake several times.⁵

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: "The weapons which will be used against Gog are earthquakes (19f.; cf. Is. 24:18-20; Joel 3:16; Hg. 2:6f.), the sword (21, AV), pestilence and bloodshed (22; cf. 5:17; 28:23), and torrential rains, hailstones, fire and brimstone (22; cf. Gn. 19:24; Ps. 11:6; Is. 30:30; 34:9). All of these, except the sword, are non-human agents frequently associated with God's judgments, and this is partly why RSV follows LXX in emending 21 to *I will summon every king of terror against him.*"

The Pulpit Commentary divides chapter 39 in two parts: vv. 1-20 describes the overthrow of Gog and vv.21-29 the impression this event makes upon Israel and the world population. The commentary states: "In the first main division Ezekiel repeats the substance of what has already been advanced concerning the defeat of Gog (vers. 1-8), after which he strives to represent its completeness (vers. 9-20), by setting forth

- (1) the immense quantity of spoil Israel should obtain from the fallen foe (vers. 9, 10).
- (2) the length of time it should take Israel to bury the dead and cleanse the land from defilement (vers. 11-16, and
- (3) the horrible carnage which should ensue on Gog's destruction, symbolized by a vast sacrificial feast prepared by Jehovah for the beasts and birds (vers. 17-20)."

Most Bible scholars agree that Ezekiel does not introduce a new subject here, but that this chapter recounts the same events as the previous one. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on this: "The overthrow of Gog and his forces is here retold in different language and in fuller detail. This is typical of Hebrew poetry and of the kind of semi-poetical writing which is used in these oracles. It is fond of repetition and delights to revert to previous statements and enlarge on them, even though the result is to destroy all sense of consecutive arrangement. Failure to appreciate this has led many western commentators to find doublets, contradictions and inconsistencies, and so to assume multiple authorship where this is quite unnecessary. The first two verses repeat 38:3,4, but instead of the phrase 'put hooks into your jaws,' a new word used in 39:2 which AV wrongly conjectures to mean to *leave but the*

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1. Rev. 20:9
 2. Isa. 29:5,6
 3. Isa. 64:1-3
 4. Nah. 1:5,6
 5. See Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13,19; 16:18.

sixth part of thee. Although the root of this verb has affinity with the Hebrew for 'six,' the Versions are probably right to translate it to 'lead on,' *drive forward* (RSV). The picture is of God leading His enemies forth in order to disarm and destroy them (3-5), and the ultimate indignity for them will be that their bodies will be left unburied for the wild beasts to devour (4). The oracle goes on to describe how the spoilers will be spoiled, their weapons providing firewood for the Israelites for seven years to come (9,10), and how the remains of Gog's army will be buried in the valley of *Hamon-gog* (i.e. 'the multitude of Gog') to the east of the Dead Sea, and so just outside Israelite territory. This cleansing-up operation will take seven months, so great will have been the slaughter; and at the end of that time a permanent commission will be set up to search for any unburied remains, to make sure that no cause of pollution is left remaining in the land (14, 15). The repeated reference to the number 'seven' is a reminder that we are here dealing with apocalyptic symbolism, and that therefore fulfillment of these details is not to be sought. The purpose behind this massacre is described in terms of (a) the fulfillment of God's prophetic word (*I have spoken*, 5,8); (b) the desire to vindicate God's holy name, which the sufferings and punishment of Israel had done so much to discredit (7); and (c) the illumination of the heathen (*the nations shall know that I am the Lord*, 7), though Ezekiel does not go as far as to see their eventual salvation through this knowledge as other prophets did."

It is difficult, if not impossible to determine how and when this prophecy will be fulfilled. We must caution against the tendency of some sincere Bible believing Christians to put a newspaper next to Scripture portions such as these and interpret modern political events in the light of this kind of prophecy. Although an invasion of Israel by powerful neighbors of the north, such as Russia, cannot be ruled out, there is an implicit warning in the text against such applications. If a literal interpretation is applied, it must be applied to all details. And to envision a modern superpower attacking another country with bows and arrows as Ezekiel depicts here, is out of the question. Even in case of a non-nuclear war, the defeated army could hardly leave combustible war material behind enough to provide the nation of Israel with fuel for seven years. If we interpret this to mean that there will be enough gasoline for that purpose, we reinterpret the bow and arrow into drums of oil.

Some Bible scholars see only a spiritual application in Ezekiel's text. *Barnes' Notes*, for instance, states: "The present chapter describes the defeat of Evil and the triumph of God and His people. As the prophet predicted the advance of Evil under the figure of the invasion of an actual army; so he declares the overthrow of Evil by the figure of a host routed and slain, and the consequent purification of a land, partially overrun and disturbed. Some forgetting that this is a figure, have searched history to find out some campaign in the land of Israel, some overthrow of invaders, on which to fix this prophecy, and have assigned localities to the burial-place 'Hamon-Gog' (Ezek 39:11)." But to rule out any situation in which part or all of this prophecy would find a literal execution in events on earth, does not seem to do justice to Ezekiel's text either.

The prophecy opens with the announcement that God will overturn the plans of Gog. That seems to be the intent of the Hebrew word used. As Taylor observed, the Hebrew word *shawshaw*, "to annihilate," had been confused by *The King James Version* with *shashah*, which refers to the number "six." Since this is the only place in all of Scripture where *shawshaw* occurs, it is impossible to check out how the word is used in other contexts. *The New International Version* translates: "I will turn you around and drag you along." *The Revised Standard Version* reads: "I will turn you about and drive you forward" and *The Living Bible* states: "I will turn you and drive you toward the mountains of Israel." The suggestion seems to be that Gog had been heading in northern direction, but changed direction. Or it could simply mean that Gog's original plan of action was reversed.

Ezekiel's description of Gog's fate reminds us of the picture John draws in *Revelation* about the end of the reign of the Antichrist. We read: "And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.' Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."¹ In John's version the scene plays before the Millennium. A problem there is that "Gog and Magog" are not mentioned in *Revelation*

until the end of the Millennium.¹ One helpful feature in comparing *Ezekiel* to *Revelation* is that the war that is fought is a spiritual battle and not a physical one. The sword that kills is not in the hand of Christ but the one “that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse,”² meaning that they were killed by the Word of God.

The main point of Ezekiel’s prophecy seems to be expressed in v.7, where God says: “I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the Lord am the Holy One in Israel.” There is in this a reference to God’s revelation to Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God said to the people: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”³ God not only chose the land of Israel to reveal Himself in this world, as He had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites,”⁴ but He also intended to reveal Himself to the world in and through the people of Israel. He had said: “be holy, because I am holy.”⁵ God’s presence among Israel was supposed to make them holy, as God said: “I the Lord am holy — I who make you holy.”⁶ The very fact that Israel had gone into captivity in Assyria and Judah in Babylon meant that Israel had desecrated God’s holiness instead of allowing themselves to be sanctified by God’s holiness.

In vv.17-24 the roles are reversed in that which is normally a sacrificial ritual. Sacrifices were supposed to be brought by man to God. Here it is God who prepares the sacrifice. The Hebrew word used is not the regular word *qorban*, “sacrifice,” but *zebach*, which is mainly used in the context of a peace offering. The scene is abounding with bitter irony or sarcasm, the picture being taken from a human battlefield in which one army massacres another. Another reversal of sorts is that normally a sacrifice consists in the killing of an animal in substitution for man. Here man becomes the sacrifice brought for the benefit of the animals of the world. One can hardly imagine scenes more gruesome than the one depicted here. Nothing is farther removed from God’s original creation than the picture shown here. God never created either man or animal for the purpose of dying or for feasting on each other’s flesh and blood. Fat and blood were even forbidden to be eaten by the person who brought a sacrifice in the temple. It is as if God borrows those parts of human depravity that most clearly depict the depth of the fall in sin in order to paint this picture of horror.

c. God’s final purpose for Israel 39:25-29

25 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name.

26 They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid.

27 When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations.

28 Then they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind.

1. Rev. 19:17-21
1. Rev. 20:8
2. Rev. 19:21
3. Ex. 19:5,6
4. Ex. 25:22
5. Lev. 11:44
6. Lev. 21:8

29 I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord."

The conclusion of it all is that this is what happens when God hides His face. In the blessing Aaron was told to pronounce upon the people we read: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."¹ Here is shown how God turns His face away, withdrawing the blessing He wanted to give to His creation. It may be difficult for us to see how such turning away could be a display of God's glory. But we often appreciate blessings and good things more when they are being withheld. We realize how important some of our bodily functions are when they cease to function as they should.

In the section that concludes this chapter, vv.25-29, Ezekiel sums up God's final purpose for Israel. The prophecy is consistent with the theme that was first introduced by Moses and that runs through the whole Bible. Moses stated: "When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you."²

The Hebrew word for captivity is *shebuwth*, which also has the meaning of "a former state of prosperity," or "fortunes." We find it used in the verse: "After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord *made him prosperous* again and gave him twice as much as he had before."³ And in both senses in: "When the Lord brought back *the captives* to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Restore our *fortunes*, O Lord, like streams in the Negev."⁴

According to John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, the phrase "They will forget their shame" "is a minor amendment of the MT, which has *they shall bear their shame* (so RV), a reading which is to be preferred as being more in keeping with the teaching of 6:9; 16:6; 20:43; 36:31." That is also consistent with the purpose of the final section of Ezekiel's prophecy about the temple, where God says to Ezekiel: "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins."⁵

If there is no embarrassment and sense of guilt in the confession of our sins, there will also not be the joy of our salvation. The Apostle Paul was never able to completely forget his past, as is evident from what he wrote to Timothy: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."⁶ We learn the meaning of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins.⁷ The restoration of Israel will be a demonstration of God's glory to the rest of the world. God says: "I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations." The same will be true for the gentiles who accept the Gospel. The salvation of one will be the condemnation of the other. As the Apostle Paul writes: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."⁸

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1. Num. 6:25,26
 2. Deut. 30:1-3
 3. Job 42:10
 4. Ps. 126:1,4
 5. Ezek. 43:10
 6. I Tim. 1:13,14
 7. Luke 1:77
 8. II Thess. 1:9,10

The Pulpit Commentary states: “That its fulfillment began with the return from Babylon is not inconsistent with the view that its fulfillment will terminate with the final ingathering of Israel out of the nations by her conversion to Christianity, and her consequent admission to the Church. That its first cause will be ‘mercy’ to the whole house of Israel will not prevent that cause from being at the same time a jealous regard for the Divine holiness (comp. ... Ezekiel 36:21, 22).” God has a final plan for Israel, which will mark the end of world history.

VIII. THE PLANS FOR THE NEW JERUSALEM 40:1-48:35

In his general introduction to this final section of Ezekiel, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, tries to establish the connection of these chapters with the rest of the book. We copy: “These last nine chapters of Ezekiel, although written some years later than the rest of the book, except for 29:17-21, are an integral part of the prophet’s teaching and balance certain features found in chapters 1-39. It is particularly appropriate that the book should end, as it began, with a vision. Chapters 1-3 introduced to Ezekiel the vision of God visiting His people in exile; chapters 40-48 present Ezekiel with the vision of God returning to dwell in the midst of His people, now restored and re-established in their own land. These chapters also have links with the vision of the profanation of the Temple and the departure of the glory of the Lord from Jerusalem (8:1-11:25), for they picture the rebuilt temple to be thought of not as a completely independent composition, only loosely tacked on the end of the main body of Ezekiel’s work, but as a real climax to his thought as it has been maturing through twenty years of prayer, meditation and ministry.”

There are several problems in connection with these chapters. First of all, they make for what could be called, without disrespect to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, “tedious reading.” The many minute details given in the description of the rooms leave the reader with the question of what blessing is to be found in this part of the Word of God.

And then there is the question of interpretation. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, distinguishes four main views, which he calls: *the literal prophetic interpretation*, which considers these chapters as a blueprint for the rebuilding of the temple. The second is *the symbolic Christian interpretation*, which sees Ezekiel’s vision fulfilled in the New Testament church. The third version can be called *the dispensational view*, expounded by *the Scofield Reference Bible*, which entitles Ezekiel 40-48: “Israel in the Land during the Kingdom-age.” The fourth view considers these chapters not as a prophecy, but as *apocalyptic*, to be interpreted according to the canons of Hebrew writing. About this, Taylor states, that “its features are symbolism, numerical symmetry, and futurism.”

The Pulpit Commentary, looking at the outline and content of these chapters, states about Ezekiel: “His material he arranges in three main divisions, speaking first of a re-erected temple (Ezekiel 40-43.), next of a reorganized worship (Ezekiel 44-46.), and lastly of a redistributed territory (Ezekiel 47., 48.). That Ezekiel, sorrowing over the first Israel’s glories which had vanished with the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of her temple, and filled with eager anticipations of the golden era which was then beginning to loom up before him in ever fairer proportions and brighter colors — that Ezekiel himself may have inwardly believed or hoped the picture he was then placing on his canvas would be ultimately realized upon the old soil, is by no means improbable; that the Holy Spirit, the real Author of the temple-vision, was drafting for the new Israel, soon to arise from the ashes of the old, a fresh religious and political constitution, which could not be satisfied with any merely local, temporal, and material realization, such as might be given to it in Palestine on the close of the exile, but reached out to something larger, broader, and more spiritual, even to the Israel of Messianic times, *i.e.* to the Church of God in Christian ages; — that the Holy Spirit had some such design is at least an idea which one might be pardoned for entertaining.”

a. The vision of the temple 40:1-42:20

For the sake of clarity, we will subdivide this part into the following 14 sections:

- (1) The man with the measuring rod40:1-4
- (2) The east gateway of the outer court40:5-16
- (3) The outer court 40:17-19
- (4) The other two gates of the outer court40:20-27
- (5) The three gateways to the inner court40:28-37
- (6) The equipment for sacrifice40:38-43
- (7) The priests' chambers 40:44-47
- (8) The vestibule of the temple40:48,49
- (9) The nave and the inner sanctuary41:1-4
- (10) The side chambers 41:5-12
- (11) The measurements of the temple41:13-15a
- (12) The decorations and furnishings of the temple41:15b-26
- (13) The priests' chambers in the temple yard42:1-14
- (14) The external dimensions of the temple area 42:15-20

- (1) The man with the measuring rod40:1-4

1 In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city — on that very day the hand of the Lord was upon me and he took me there.

2 In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city.

3 He took me there, and I saw a man whose appearance was like bronze; he was standing in the gateway with a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand.

4 The man said to me, "Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see."

Ezekiel dates his vision in the twenty-fifth year of his own captivity, that is from the time Nebuchadnezzar took King Jehoiakim and most of the important people of Jerusalem and brought them over to Babylon. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments on the date: "The date is 573 BC, and *the beginning of the year* (1) certainly suggests the first month, and may have conscious associations with the Passover (Ex. 12:3) or the entry into Canaan under Joshua (Jos. 4:19). But if the year was regarded as beginning in the autumn, this would mean the seventh month, Tishri, the *tenth day* of which was the Day of Atonement (Lv. 23:27; 25:9), and there are indications that this was a New Year's Day. The new age was beginning with the new year." As to whether the date was the first month or the seventh month of the year depends on which time table Ezekiel used here. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the Jews did not calculate the beginning of the year at the seventh month until after the captivity and consequently it is believed that Ezekiel follows here the Mosaic calendar, which makes it the day of Passover and the day on which Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt.

As in the beginning of the book, Ezekiel finds himself transported in the spirit to Jerusalem or to what was left of the city and temple, now in ruin. The vision is described as "visions of God," in Hebrew *mar'ah Elohiym*. Ezekiel used the same words at two other occasions, at the beginning of his calling as a prophet and at the time where he felt transported to Jerusalem before the destruction. We read: "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw *visions of God*" and "The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in *visions of God* he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood."¹ The wording marks the uniqueness of the experience. The Hebrew word *mar'ah* (vision) also has the meaning of "mirror." We could read this as if God allowed His prophet to look in His mirror.

1. Ezek. 1:1; 8:3

The spiritual, rather than the physical aspect of the experience seems to be emphasized by the height of the mountain and the sight of “some buildings that looked like a city.” Mount Zion was not a place of impressive height.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the section as a whole: “The arrangements as to the land and the temple are, in many particulars, different from those subsisting before the captivity. There are things in it so improbable physically as to preclude a purely literal interpretation. The general truth seems to hold good that, as Israel served the nations for their rejection of Messiah, so shall they serve him in the person of Messiah when he shall acknowledge Messiah (Isa 60:12; Zech 14:16-19: cf. Ps 72:11). The ideal temple exhibits-under the Old Testament forms, used as being those then familiar to the men whom Ezekiel, a priest himself, and one who delighted in sacrificial images, addresses-not the precise literal outline, but the essential character of the worship of Messiah as it shall be when He shall exercise sway in Jerusalem among His own people, the Jews, and thence to the ends of the earth. The very fact that the whole is a ‘vision’ (Ezek 40:2), not an oral face to face communication, such as that granted to Moses (Num 12:6-8), implies that the directions are not to be understood so precisely literal as those given to the Jewish law-giver. The description involves things which, taken literally, almost involve natural impossibilities. The square of the temple, in Ezek 42:20, is six times as large as the circuit of the wall enclosing the old temple, and larger than all the earthly Jerusalem. Ezekiel gives three and a half miles and 140 yards to his temple square. The boundaries of the ancient city were about two and a half miles.”

The most tangible feature in the vision is the man Ezekiel sees, “whose appearance was like bronze.” The language used here is much more concrete than in the first vision Ezekiel received which he described as: “in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man.”¹ Although most commentaries see in this figure an angelic being, the person Ezekiel saw appears to be more human than that. If the man Ezekiel saw was “the Son of Man,” which is the title he had been given throughout this book, then we may see in these chapter a hidden reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection, of which the destruction and rebuilding of the temple was a shadow. We are reminded of Jesus’ exchange with the Jews in John’s Gospel. We read: “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.”² Such an interpretation would give greater depth to the detailed description and supernatural features of these chapters. There was as much difference between Ezekiel’s temple and the one Solomon built as there is between Jesus’ mortal body and His resurrected body. The Apostle Paul says about this: “There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”³

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary agrees with this view. We read: “The particular discoveries of this city (which he had at first a general view of) were made to him by a man whose appearance was like the appearance of brass (v. 3), not a created angel, but Jesus Christ, who should be found in fashion as a man, that he might both discover and build the gospel-temple. He brought him to this city, for it is through Christ that we have both acquaintance with and access to the benefits and privileges of God’s house. He it is that shall build the temple of the Lord, Zech 6:13. His appearing like brass intimates both his brightness and his strength. John, in vision, saw his feet like unto fine brass, Rev 1:15.”

The man says to Ezekiel: “Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see.” The Hebrew text, rendered “pay attention,” reads literally: “set your heart upon all.”

In *Revelation*, the Apostle John mentions twice a measuring rod. In the first instance we read: “I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, ‘Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers

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1. Ezek. 1:5
 2. John 2:19-21
 3. I Cor. 15:40, 42-44

there.”¹ The Greek does not have the word “count” in the text. The context there is the Great Tribulation and the role the church is to play in that period of world history. The meaning seems to be that John must not take the measurements of a building but of the body of Christ, that is the believers. We may see the same principle in Ezekiel’s vision. The temple, the place of fellowship with God, stands for fellowship itself, that is for the people in their relationship with God. We will become what we are meant to be when our relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ is perfected. In human society, measurements of people are usually taken for the purpose of clothing them. There may be a reference to our justification and sanctification when we are being clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

This measuring of people is even clearer in the second instance in which John speaks about a measuring rod. We read in the last chapter of *Revelation*: “The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls.”² The city to be measured there is the New Jerusalem, which is the bride of the Lamb. It will be helpful if we keep this in mind when we read the details of Ezekiel’s description of God’s new creation: His people.

In the opening scene of Mozart’s opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, the bridegroom is taking the measurements of the bed in which he will spend the first night with his bride. This may serve as a comical illustration of what Ezekiel is shown here. It is not the measurements that matter as much as the joy of anticipation.

(2) The east gateway of the outer court40:5-16

5 I saw a wall completely surrounding the temple area. The length of the measuring rod in the man’s hand was six long cubits, each of which was a cubit and a handbreadth. He measured the wall; it was one measuring rod thick and one rod high.

6 Then he went to the gate facing east. He climbed its steps and measured the threshold of the gate; it was one rod deep.

7 The alcoves for the guards were one rod long and one rod wide, and the projecting walls between the alcoves were five cubits thick. And the threshold of the gate next to the portico facing the temple was one rod deep.

8 Then he measured the portico of the gateway;

9 it was eight cubits deep and its jambs were two cubits thick. The portico of the gateway faced the temple.

10 Inside the east gate were three alcoves on each side; the three had the same measurements, and the faces of the projecting walls on each side had the same measurements.

11 Then he measured the width of the entrance to the gateway; it was ten cubits and its length was thirteen cubits.

12 In front of each alcove was a wall one cubit high, and the alcoves were six cubits square.

13 Then he measured the gateway from the top of the rear wall of one alcove to the top of the opposite one; the distance was twenty-five cubits from one parapet opening to the opposite one.

14 He measured along the faces of the projecting walls all around the inside of the gateway — sixty cubits. The measurement was up to the portico facing the courtyard.

15 The distance from the entrance of the gateway to the far end of its portico was fifty cubits.

16 The alcoves and the projecting walls inside the gateway were surmounted by narrow parapet openings all around, as was the portico; the openings all around faced inward. The faces of the projecting walls were decorated with palm trees.

It is difficult to determine the exact measurements Ezekiel mentions, because it is not clear if the Babylonian or the Mosaic cubit is meant. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states about this: “Ezekiel is using the long cubit for all his measurement, *i.e.* approximately 20 ½ ins, as against the customary cubit of 17 ½ ins. The angel’s measuring-rod

1. Rev. 11:1

2. Rev. 21:15

would thus be about 10 ft. 3 ins. long, and this would be the thickness and the height of the solid wall which surrounded the temple area, effectively marking off the sacred from the secular world outside.”

In John’s vision of the New Jerusalem we read the following about the measurements: “The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using.”¹

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments about the boundary wall: “The imperfections in the old temple’s boundary wall were to have no place here. The buildings attached to it had been sometimes turned to common uses-e.g., Jeremiah was imprisoned in one (Jer 20:2; 29:26). But now all these were to be holy to the Lord. The gates and doorways to the city of God were to be imprinted in their architecture with the idea of the exclusion of everything defiled (Rev 21:27). The east gate was to be especially sacred, as it was through it the glory of God had departed (Ezek 11:23), and through it the glory was to return (Ezek 43:1-2; 44:2-3).”

The Pulpit Commentary observes about this section: “The ‘house’ ... was the temple as the dwelling-place of Jehovah; only not the temple proper, but the whole complex structure. The ‘wall’ belonged to the outer court; that of the inner court being afterwards mentioned (... Ezekiel 42:7). In having a ‘wall round about’ Jehovah’s sanctuary resembled both Greek and Babylonian shrines ... but differed from both the tabernacle, which had none, and from the Solomonic temple, whose ‘wall’ formed no essential part of the sacred structure, but was more or less of arbitrary erection on the part of Solomon and later kings. Here, however, the wall constituted an integral portion of the whole; and was designed, like that in ... Ezekiel 42:20, ‘to make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place.’”

In John’s description of the wall of the New Jerusalem in *Revelation*, we read: “It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”² There, the wall is part of the glory of God which makes it shine like a precious jewel. The names of the tribes of Israel and of the apostles written on the gates and the foundations represent the Old and New Testament in which the glory of God that was revealed in human history is here sublimated in eternal values.

We do not read whether Ezekiel wrote down the details of the measurements as given in feet and inches, or whether the survey made such an indelible impression on him that he was able to repeat everything when it was complete.

All this will make more sense if we lay Ezekiel’s text next to Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesus: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”³ It becomes even more valuable if we look at Paul’s use of the word *immeasurable* in the next verse: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”⁴ And we find the same measurement of glory in the doxology: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”⁵

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1. Rev. 21:15-17
 2. Rev. 21:12-14
 3. Eph. 3:16-19
 4. Eph. 3:20,21

(3) The outer court 40:17-19

17 Then he brought me into the outer court. There I saw some rooms and a pavement that had been constructed all around the court; there were thirty rooms along the pavement.

18 It abutted the sides of the gateways and was as wide as they were long; this was the lower pavement.

19 Then he measured the distance from the inside of the lower gateway to the outside of the inner court; it was a hundred cubits on the east side as well as on the north.

According to *Barnes' Notes*, "The 'outward' or outer 'court' corresponds to what was in Herod's temple the court of Women, into which all Jews, but not Gentiles were admitted."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about these verses: "Built on to the wall around the outer court, and facing inwards on to a paved area (the lower pavement, 18, as distinct from the upper pavement of the inner court) were thirty chambers (17), probably arranged in three groups of ten against the north, east and south walls, and with the gateways dividing the ten into two groups of five. Their use is not described, but they would almost certainly have been either for worshippers or for the Levites who were on duty in the temple."

The Hebrew word for "pavement" is *ritspah*, which has the primary meaning of "a hot stone." As such we find it used in Isaiah in the verse: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a *live coal* in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar."¹ The means used for Isaiah to apply the atonement of the altar to his lips and his life become the building blocks of the glory of God and of the redeemed in the New Jerusalem. "The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass."²

The Pulpit Commentary states about the use of the chambers: "The chambers were cells, or rooms always signifying single rooms in a building (see ... Ezekiel 42:1; ... 1 Chronicles 9:26) — whose dimensions, exact sites, and uses are not specified, though, as they were thirty in number, it is probable they were arranged on the east, north, and south sides of the court, five upon each side of the gate, and standing somewhat apart from each other; that they were large enough to contain as many as thirty persons (see ... 1 Samuel 9:22; and comp. ... Jeremiah 35:2); and that they were designed for sacrificial meals and such-like purposes (see ... Ezekiel 44:1, etc.). In pre-exilic times such halls had been occupied by distinguished persons connected with the temple service (see ... Ezekiel 8:8-12; ... 2 Kings 23:11; ... Jeremiah 35:4, etc.; 36:10; ... Ezra 10:6)."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary beautifully explains the spiritual lessons that can be drawn from Ezekiel's description of the inner court and outer court: "Divers courts are here spoken of, an outermost of all, then an outer court, then an inner, and then the innermost of all, into which the priests only entered, which (some think) may put us in mind 'of the diversities of gifts, and graces, and offices, in the several members of Christ's mystical body here, as also of the several degrees of glory in the courts and mansions of heaven, as there are stars in several spheres and stars of several magnitudes in the fixed firmament' ... Some draw nearer to God than others and have a more intimate acquaintance with divine things; but to a child of God a day in any of his courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. These courts had porches, or piazzas, round them, for the shelter of those that attended in them from wind and weather; for when we are in the way of our duty to God we may believe ourselves to be under his special protection, that he will graciously provide for us, nay, that he will himself be to us a covert from the storm and tempest, Isa 4:5,6. On the posts were palm-trees engraved (v. 16), to signify that the righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree in the courts of God's house, Ps 92:12. The more they are depressed with the burden of affliction the more strongly do they grow, as they say of the palm trees. It likewise intimates the saints' victory and triumph over their spiritual enemies; they have palms in their hands (Rev 7:9); but lest they should drop these, or have them snatched out of their hands, they are here engraved upon the posts of the temple as perpetual monuments of their honor. Thanks be

5. Rom. 11:33-36

1. Isa. 6:6

2. Rev. 21:18

to God, who always causes us to triumph. Nay, believers shall themselves be made pillars in the temple of our God, and shall go no more out, and shall have his name engraved on them, which will be their brightest ornament and honor, Rev 3:12.”

(4) The other two gates of the outer court40:20-27

20 Then he measured the length and width of the gate facing north, leading into the outer court.

21 Its alcoves — three on each side — its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as those of the first gateway. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide.

22 Its openings, its portico and its palm tree decorations had the same measurements as those of the gate facing east. Seven steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them.

23 There was a gate to the inner court facing the north gate, just as there was on the east. He measured from one gate to the opposite one; it was a hundred cubits.

24 Then he led me to the south side and I saw a gate facing south. He measured its jambs and its portico, and they had the same measurements as the others.

25 The gateway and its portico had narrow openings all around, like the openings of the others. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide.

26 Seven steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them; it had palm tree decorations on the faces of the projecting walls on each side.

27 The inner court also had a gate facing south, and he measured from this gate to the outer gate on the south side; it was a hundred cubits.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: “These verses indicate that the gateways in the north and south wall of the outer court of the temple area were of an identical design to the east gateway already described (7-16). They add nothing to our knowledge except that they were approached by *seven steps* (22,26), a number omitted by the Hebrew text of verse 5, and this indicates that the temple area is thought of as a huge raised area, built up above the level of the surrounding land.”

(5) The three gateways to the inner court40:28-37

28 Then he brought me into the inner court through the south gate, and he measured the south gate; it had the same measurements as the others.

29 Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide.

30 (The porticoes of the gateways around the inner court were twenty-five cubits wide and five cubits deep.)

31 Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated its jambs, and eight steps led up to it.

32 Then he brought me to the inner court on the east side, and he measured the gateway; it had the same measurements as the others.

33 Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide.

34 Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated the jambs on either side, and eight steps led up to it.

35 Then he brought me to the north gate and measured it. It had the same measurements as the others,

36 as did its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico, and it had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide.

37 Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated the jambs on either side, and eight steps led up to it.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “Although it does not say so, we must suppose that another wall surrounded the inner court. This was pierced by three further gateways, identical to the three outer gateways and

positioned directly opposite them at a distance of 100 cubits. The only difference was that the vestibule of these inner gates was towards the outer court. The inner court was also raised above the level of the outer court and *eight steps* (31, 34, 37) led up to the inner gateways. ‘Each successive elevation represents an increasing degree of holiness.’ Verse 30 is generally agreed to be unintelligible and a dittograph of 29; several MSS and LXX omit it.”

An interesting feature of the steps that increase in number as the center of the temple is being approached is that the use of steps was initially forbidden. We read in Exodus in connection with the building of an altar: “And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.”¹ The change that not only allows steps to be used, but that even prescribes them, strongly suggest that the shame of sin has been dealt with.

(6) The equipment for sacrifice 40:38-43

38 A room with a doorway was by the portico in each of the inner gateways, where the burnt offerings were washed.

39 In the portico of the gateway were two tables on each side, on which the burnt offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings were slaughtered.

40 By the outside wall of the portico of the gateway, near the steps at the entrance to the north gateway were two tables, and on the other side of the steps were two tables.

41 So there were four tables on one side of the gateway and four on the other — eight tables in all — on which the sacrifices were slaughtered.

42 There were also four tables of dressed stone for the burnt offerings, each a cubit and a half long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit high. On them were placed the utensils for slaughtering the burnt offerings and the other sacrifices.

43 And double-pronged hooks, each a handbreadth long, were attached to the wall all around. The tables were for the flesh of the offerings.

Bible scholars have come up with some questions about these verses that are difficult to answer. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: “It is not clear whether the tables for sacrifice referred to here were in the vestibule of the inner east gate or the inner north gate. The former is suggested by 46:2; the latter by one interpretation of the obscure 40:40, and by 46:19f. It is not impossible that each of the three gates had this sacrificial equipment, and that worshippers could approach by any of the three entrances. The actual siting of the twelve tables mentioned in 41, 42 is baffling; beyond the fact that eight were used for slaughtering sacrificial victims and four smaller tables were near at hand to carry the implements of the sacrifice, little more positive comment can be made. Whether they were on either side of the vestibule (cramped conditions indeed) or some inside and some outside the vestibule (but how does one get to those outside?), the Hebrew does not clearly say. For 43b, LXX has ‘and over the table up above was an awning to shelter from the rain and the heat,’ which certainly suggests that some were out-of-doors, but the reading has no authority.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The cells under consideration were expressly designed for washing ‘the inwards and the legs’ of the victims brought for sacrifice (... Leviticus 1:9).”

Another problem is the interpretation of v.43, where the Hebrew word *shaphath* is used. The only other place where this word occurs is in the psalm that reads in *The New International Version*: “Even while you sleep among the campfires, the wings of [my] dove are sheathed with silver, its feathers with shining gold.”² *The New King James Version* translates there “sheepfolds,” while *The King James Version* has “pots.” *The Pulpit Commentary* rejects the rendering “sheepfolds” in this context and suggests that it refers to “a forked peg” used to hang the carcasses “fastened in the wall for hanging the slaughtered caresses before they were flayed.” This is supported by the Chaldean paraphrase of the text.

1. Ex. 20:26

2. Ps 68:13

The Matthew Henry's Commentary provides us with the most meaningful comment on this section. We read: "We find no description of the altars of burnt-offerings in the midst of that court till ch. 43:13. But, because the one altar under the law was to be exchanged for a multitude of tables under the gospel, here is early notice taken of the tables, at our entrance into the inner court; for till we come to partake of the table of the Lord we are but professors at large; our admission to that is our entrance into the inner court. But in this gospel-temple we meet with no altar till after the glory of the Lord has taken possession of it, for Christ is our altar, that sanctifies every gift. Here were eight tables provided, whereon to slay the sacrifices, v. 41. We read not of any tables for this purpose either in the tabernacle or in Solomon's temple. But here they are provided, to intimate the multitude of spiritual sacrifices that should be brought to God's house in gospel-times, and the multitude of hands that should be employed in offering up those sacrifices. Here were the shambles for the altar; here were the dressers on which they laid the flesh of the sacrifice, the knives with which they cut it up, and the hooks on which they hung it up, that it might be ready to be offered on the altar (v. 43), and there also they washed the burnt-offerings (v. 38), to intimate that before we draw near to God's altar we must have every thing in readiness, must wash our hands, our hearts, those spiritual sacrifices, and so compass God's altar."

(7) The priests' chambers40:44-47

44 Outside the inner gate, within the inner court, were two rooms, one at the side of the north gate and facing south, and another at the side of the south gate and facing north.

45 He said to me, "The room facing south is for the priests who have charge of the temple,

46 and the room facing north is for the priests who have charge of the altar. These are the sons of Zadok, who are the only Levites who may draw near to the Lord to minister before him."

47 Then he measured the court: It was square — a hundred cubits long and a hundred cubits wide. And the altar was in front of the temple.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, LXX text reads, "And he led me unto the inner court, and behold two chambers in the inner court, one at the back of the gate which looks towards the north, and bearing towards the south, and one at the back of the gate which looks towards the south, and bearing towards the north." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "On the north and south sides of the inner court, adjacent to the gateways, were chamber for the sacrificing priests (not singers, as in AV, RV; RSV is right to follow LXX). The guide explains that those on the north side were for the priests who were responsible for the day-to-day running of the temple (45; cf. 44:10-14), while those on the south (facing north) were for the priests who sacrificed at the altar (46), viz. the Zadokites, whose status is further described in 44:15-21."

According to *The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Zadok was a high priest in the time of David. He was a son of Ahitub (2 Sam 8:17) and a descendant of Aaron through Eleazar (1 Chron 24:3). During David's reign he served jointly as high priest with Abiathar (2 Sam 8:17). It is an interesting feature that the Zadokites are singled out here as the serving priests. This constitutes a hidden reference to David as a figure of the Messiah as in other parts of Ezekiel's prophecy.¹

(8) The vestibule of the temple40:48,49

48 He brought me to the portico of the temple and measured the jambs of the portico; they were five cubits wide on either side. The width of the entrance was fourteen cubits and its projecting walls were three cubits wide on either side.

49 The portico was twenty cubits wide, and twelve cubits from front to back. It was reached by a flight of stairs, and there were pillars on each side of the jambs.

1. Ezek. 34:23,24; 37:24,25

The measurements given here by Ezekiel of the portico or vestibule of the temple have caused problems and differences of opinion among Bible scholars. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, some believe that one entered by a folding door of two leaves, each three cubits broad, which were attached to two side pillars five cubits broad, and met in the middle, so that the whole breadth of the porch front was six cubits, or, including the posts, sixteen cubits. The measurements in v.49 of the length of the porch (from east to west) twenty cubits, and the breadth (from north to south) eleven cubits. The assumption is that the pillars, which were five cubits broad in front, were only half that breadth in the inside, the side wall dividing it in two, so that, although to one entering the opening was only six cubits, the moment one stood in the interior it was $6+2 \times 2.5 = 11$ cubits. Others believe the three cubits to refer to the portion of the entrance on either side which was closed by a gate, perhaps of lattice-work, leaving for the entrance and exit of priests a passage of five cubits. In this view the whole front of the porch would be 5 cubits of passage + $6(2 \times 3)$ cubits of lattice-work + $10(2 \times 5)$ cubits of pillar, equal in all to 21 cubits. A third party believes that the three cubits of door in the five cubits of post, and, supposing the temple entrance to be ten cubits, makes the whole front to have been twenty cubits. It is obviously beyond us to choose sides.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: "At last the prophet is brought up the steps (*ten steps* this time, 49) to the entrance-way to the temple, where the angel-guide continues to take all the relevant measurements. LXX has preserved a better text here, which RSV follows, notably in giving the breadth of the vestibule as *twelve* and not 11 cubits, which is demanded by the other measurements. We would reverse the terms *length* and *breadth* in 49, for the vestibule was 20 cubits wide, corresponding to the width of the nave and the inner sanctuary, but Hebrew always calls the longer measurements the length, irrespective of its orientation. The *pillars beside the jambs* are not described nor are their measurements given, but Ezekiel must have had in mind Solomon's pillars named Jachin and Boaz (I Ki. 7:15-22) which were free-standing."

(9) The nave and the inner sanctuary 41:1-4

1 Then the man brought me to the outer sanctuary and measured the jambs; the width of the jambs was six cubits on each side.

2 The entrance was ten cubits wide, and the projecting walls on each side of it were five cubits wide. He also measured the outer sanctuary; it was forty cubits long and twenty cubits wide.

3 Then he went into the inner sanctuary and measured the jambs of the entrance; each was two cubits wide. The entrance was six cubits wide, and the projecting walls on each side of it were seven cubits wide.

4 And he measured the length of the inner sanctuary; it was twenty cubits, and its width was twenty cubits across the end of the outer sanctuary. He said to me, "This is the Most Holy Place."

The Pulpit Commentary divides this chapter in the following sections:

- (1) The interior of the temple, or the holy and most holy places (vers. 1-4);
- (2) the wall and the side buildings (vers. 5-11);
- (3) the gizrah, or separate place (vers. 12-14);
- (4) the projecting portions of the temple building (vers. 15-26).

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: "Like Solomon's temple, Ezekiel's has three part: the porch or vestibule, the nave and the most holy place (Heb. *d^ebîr*, from a root meaning 'back,' 'rear'). Ezekiel is conducted into the nave, which as a priest he is entitled to enter, but he stops short at the entrance to the inner sanctuary where only the guide goes in (*cf.* Lv. 16; Heb. 9:7). Notice how the breadth of the entrance-way to each room narrows from 14 cubits (40:48) to 10 cubits (41:2) to 6 cubits for the way into the most holy place (41:3 RSV). The increased narrowness symbolizes increasing sanctity."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks: "As in the measurement of the outer porch he had pointed to Solomon's temple, so here, in the edifice itself, he points to the old tabernacle, which, being eight boards in breadth (each one and a half cubit broad), would make in all twelve cubits, as here. Internally it was only ten cubits." *The Pulpit Commentary* disagrees with this, stating: "The length of the holy place, forty cubits, and the breadth, twenty, were the same as in the Solomonic structure."

(10) The side chambers

41:5-12

5 Then he measured the wall of the temple; it was six cubits thick, and each side room around the temple was four cubits wide.

6 The side rooms were on three levels, one above another, thirty on each level. There were ledges all around the wall of the temple to serve as supports for the side rooms, so that the supports were not inserted into the wall of the temple.

7 The side rooms all around the temple were wider at each successive level. The structure surrounding the temple was built in ascending stages, so that the rooms widened as one went upward. A stairway went up from the lowest floor to the top floor through the middle floor.

8 I saw that the temple had a raised base all around it, forming the foundation of the side rooms. It was the length of the rod, six long cubits.

9 The outer wall of the side rooms was five cubits thick. The open area between the side rooms of the temple 10 and the [priests'] rooms was twenty cubits wide all around the temple.

11 There were entrances to the side rooms from the open area, one on the north and another on the south; and the base adjoining the open area was five cubits wide all around.

12 The building facing the temple courtyard on the west side was seventy cubits wide. The wall of the building was five cubits thick all around, and its length was ninety cubits.

The Pulpit Commentary states here: "The measuring commenced with the wall of the house, *i.e.* with the outer wall, which, beginning at the pillars (ver. 1), enclosed the temple on its south, west, and north sides. Its great thickness, six cubits, corresponded with and even surpassed the colossal proportions of architecture in the ancient East. The walls of Solomon's temple, though not mentioned in either Kings or Chronicles, could hardly have been less than four cubits thick (see ... 1 Kings 6:6), and were probably more. Like the Solomonic (... 1 Kings 6:5-10), the Ezekelian temple had side chambers, which, like those of the earlier building, served as storehouses for priests' clothing, temple utensils, and temple treasures (... 1 Kings 7:51; ... 2 Kings 11:2; ... 2 Chronicles 5:1), and measured four cubits broad in the clear."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about the side chambers: "These were ranged along three sides of the temple, north, south and west, and consisted of thirty rooms in each of three storeys. They were probably store-rooms for Temple equipment and furnishings, and for the tithes and offerings that were paid to the temple servants (cf. Mal. 3:10). They are similar to those found in the description of Solomon's Temple (I Ki. 6:5-10), but the measurements differ slightly. The walls of the temple against which they are built are offset one cubit each story, so the lower chambers are 4 cubits broad (5) and in the topmost story they would be 6 cubits broad (the wall to the adjoining temple being correspondingly thinner). They were approached by an entrance in the north and south wall (11), from which a staircase led upwards to the top (7). Surrounding the temple was a raised platform, or paved area, 6 cubits above the level of the inner court (8), and this extended for 5 cubits around the outskirts of the actual temple building (9). Between this raised platform and the priest's chambers situated to north and south was a space of 20 cubits' breadth, described in AV as a *separate place* (12) and equally unimaginatively, in RSV as a *temple yard* (Heb. *gizrâ*). To the west side, instead of chambers there was a large *building* (12), 70 x 90 cubits in area, which was presumably also used for storage purposes."

The New Living Translation renders vv.12-15: "A large building stood on the west, facing the Temple courtyard. It was 122½ feet wide and 157½ feet long, and its walls were 8¾ feet thick. Then the man measured the Temple, and it was 175 feet long. The courtyard around the building, including its walls, was an additional 175 feet in length. The inner courtyard to the east of the Temple was also 175 feet wide. The building to the west, including its two walls, was also 175 feet wide."

(11) The measurements of the temple 41:13-15a

13 Then he measured the temple; it was a hundred cubits long, and the temple courtyard and the building with its walls were also a hundred cubits long.

14 The width of the temple courtyard on the east, including the front of the temple, was a hundred cubits.

15 Then he measured the length of the building facing the courtyard at the rear of the temple, including its galleries on each side; it was a hundred cubits.

Having analyzed the measurements given here, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, states: “Only a man like Ezekiel could have found such pleasure in this kind of symmetrical precision. To him it meant that everything about the temple was a perfect fit: nothing was out of place.”

If that is the only conclusion that can be made of Scripture verses like these, little or no spiritual blessing can be expected to be drawn from it. The blueprint only becomes meaningful when it is put in the context of purpose. When God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle in the desert, He said: “Set up the tabernacle according to the plan shown you on the mountain.”¹ Moses would never have been able to look at the measurements given to him without remembering the circumstances under which they were given to him in the presence of the Lord. The author of *Hebrews* comments on the priests, who served in the Old Testament tabernacle, saying: “They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.’”² What Ezekiel records here must be put against the background of his spiritual experience of being in the presence of God. Ezekiel must have felt the same kind of excitement the Apostle Paul felt when he wrote to the Corinthians: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ,” and “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”³

The wall of Ezekiel’s temple is the counterpart of the white fence that surrounded the tabernacle in the desert, which was made of curtains of finely twisted linen,⁴ expressing the holiness of God.

(12) The decorations and furnishings of the temple 41:15b-26

15b The outer sanctuary, the inner sanctuary and the portico facing the court,

16 as well as the thresholds and the narrow windows and galleries around the three of them — everything beyond and including the threshold was covered with wood. The floor, the wall up to the windows, and the windows were covered.

17 In the space above the outside of the entrance to the inner sanctuary and on the walls at regular intervals all around the inner and outer sanctuary

18 were carved cherubim and palm trees. Palm trees alternated with cherubim. Each cherub had two faces:

19 the face of a man toward the palm tree on one side and the face of a lion toward the palm tree on the other. They were carved all around the whole temple.

20 From the floor to the area above the entrance, cherubim and palm trees were carved on the wall of the outer sanctuary.

21 The outer sanctuary had a rectangular doorframe, and the one at the front of the Most Holy Place was similar.

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1. Ex. 26:30
 2. Heb. 8:5
 3. I Cor. 3:10,11,16
 4. Ex. 38:9-11

22 There was a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits square; its corners, its base and its sides were of wood. The man said to me, "This is the table that is before the Lord."

23 Both the outer sanctuary and the Most Holy Place had double doors.

24 Each door had two leaves — two hinged leaves for each door.

25 And on the doors of the outer sanctuary were carved cherubim and palm trees like those carved on the walls, and there was a wooden overhang on the front of the portico.

26 On the sidewalls of the portico were narrow windows with palm trees carved on each side. The side rooms of the temple also had overhangs.

The Hebrew text presents problems that defy interpretation. That is why *The Pulpit Commentary* gives us different and sometimes contradictory analyses by various Bible scholars. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel* comments on the paneling: "The interior of the temple was intricately paneled and surrounded by a design of alternate palm trees (cf. 40:16) and two-headed cherubs, which may have been inlaid in ivory, like those found in Samaria, or carved into the paneling and overlaid with gold, as in Solomon's Temple (I Ki. 6:29-32). These covered the walls from the floor to above the level of the doors (20), that is to say, almost to the sills of the high clerestory, splayed windows that lit the nave on either side from above the level of the side-chambers. (The inner sanctuary was, of course, kept in total darkness)."

The Pulpit Commentary observes more convincingly about the cherubs: "Each cherub had two of its four faces exhibited (since four could not be conveniently represented on a plain surface) — a man's face (symbolizing the rational creation) directed towards the palm tree on one side, and a young lion's face (symbolizing the irrational creation) turned towards the palm tree on the other side." Whether the lion merely symbolizes "irrational creation" seems overly simplistic. In the representation of the Messiah as the Lion of Judah the emphasis is more on kingship than on irrationality.

The main message the angel-decorations of Ezekiel's temple conveys to us is that in the heavenly reality this earthly image represents, angels are present in overwhelming numbers. As at Bethel, the first house of God mentioned on earth, the angels of God are ascending and descending on the stairway that connects the earth with heaven.¹

Regarding the altar Ezekiel mentions, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: "In front of the double-doors which led into the most holy place was *something resembling an altar* (21f.). It was made of wood, was about 3 ft 5 ins square, and stood just above 5 ft high. This was specifically called *the table which is before the Lord* (22), but is better known from its counterpart in Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9; I Kings 6:20, as the table of the Presence, or the table of showbread. It was not strictly an altar (hence its description as 'something resembling an altar'), but a table, on which were placed every sabbath twelve newly-baked cakes of fine flour to serve not only as an offering to God but also as a constant reminder that God was 'man's Provider and Sustainer, and that man lives constantly in the presence of God.'"

The Pulpit Commentary disagrees with this interpretation and states about the altar: "This was the altar of incense (... Exodus 30:1, etc.), which stood in the holy place in contradistinction to the altar of burnt offering, which was located in the outer court. The altar of burnt offering in Solomon's temple was of brass (... 2 Chronicles 4:1), and in the tabernacle of shittim wood (... Exodus 27:1); the altar of incense in the tabernacle (... Exodus 30:1) and in Solomon's temple (... 1 Kings 7:48) was constructed of wood overlaid with gold, but in this temple only of wood."

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary adds: "The angel describes this altar as the 'table which stands before Jehovah' - in perfect harmony with the epithet already applied to the sacrifices in the Pentateuch, the 'bread (*lechem*) of God,' though not 'because the altar table was intended to combine the old table of shewbread and the altar of incense' ... The table of shewbread is not mentioned any more than the candlestick and other portions of the temple furniture. - The altar of burnt-offering stood before Jehovah, i.e., before the entrance into the holy of holies."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments: "We have here the description of the altar of incense, here said to be an altar of wood, v. 22. No mention is made of its being over-laid with gold; but surely it was intended to be

1. Gen. 28:12

so, else it would not bear the fire with which the incense was to be burned, unless we will suppose that it served only to put the censers upon. Or else it intimates that the incense to be offered in the gospel-temple shall be purely spiritual, and the fire spiritual, which will not consume an altar of wood. Therefore this altar is called a table. This is the table that is before the Lord. Here, as before, we find the altar turned into a table; for, the great sacrifice being now offered, that which we have to do is to feast upon the sacrifice at the Lord's Table. Here is the adorning of the doors and windows with palm-trees, that they might be of a piece with the walls of the house, v. 25,26. Thus the living temples are adorned, not with gold, or silver, or costly array, but with the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible."

(13) The priests' chambers in the temple yard 42:1-14

1 Then the man led me northward into the outer court and brought me to the rooms opposite the temple courtyard and opposite the outer wall on the north side.

2 The building whose door faced north was a hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide.

3 Both in the section twenty cubits from the inner court and in the section opposite the pavement of the outer court, gallery faced gallery at the three levels.

4 In front of the rooms was an inner passageway ten cubits wide and a hundred cubits long. Their doors were on the north.

5 Now the upper rooms were narrower, for the galleries took more space from them than from the rooms on the lower and middle floors of the building.

6 The rooms on the third floor had no pillars, as the courts had; so they were smaller in floor space than those on the lower and middle floors.

7 There was an outer wall parallel to the rooms and the outer court; it extended in front of the rooms for fifty cubits.

8 While the row of rooms on the side next to the outer court was fifty cubits long, the row on the side nearest the sanctuary was a hundred cubits long.

9 The lower rooms had an entrance on the east side as one enters them from the outer court.

10 On the south side along the length of the wall of the outer court, adjoining the temple courtyard and opposite the outer wall, were rooms

11 with a passageway in front of them. These were like the rooms on the north; they had the same length and width, with similar exits and dimensions. Similar to the doorways on the north

12 were the doorways of the rooms on the south. There was a doorway at the beginning of the passageway that was parallel to the corresponding wall extending eastward, by which one enters the rooms.

13 Then he said to me, "The north and south rooms facing the temple courtyard are the priests' rooms, where the priests who approach the Lord will eat the most holy offerings. There they will put the most holy offerings — the grain offerings, the sin offerings and the guilt offerings — for the place is holy.

14 Once the priests enter the holy precincts, they are not to go into the outer court until they leave behind the garments in which they minister, for these are holy. They are to put on other clothes before they go near the places that are for the people."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments: "Again, much of the Hebrew text is obscure and so the architectural details cannot be fully understood; RSV again leans heavily on LXX, and this is the reconstruction which we follow here. The buildings on the north side are described more fully, because those on the south side are an exact replica of them (10-12). Each side consists of two building complexes, covering a total area of 100 x 50 cubits. One of these faced on to the temple yard and consists of changing-rooms for the priests and rooms for eating and storing the offerings given to them (13, 14). The other, separated from the first by a passageway 10 cubits wide, was a three-storied block facing directly on to the outer court. This was only 50 cubits in length (8) but it was continued by a *dividing-wall* for a further 50 cubits to balance the 100 cubit length of the first block of rooms (7). There was an

entrance at the east end of this building, which may have allowed direct access by a private stairway from the outer court (9), but it may simply have been at the end nearest to the inner gateways.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “The details are obscure and the text is corrupt. Apparently there are two structures, one running parallel to the temple yard, 100 x 20 cubits in size (v. 2), with a passageway beside it 10 cubits wide (v. 4), on the other side of which, overlooking the outer court, is the second structure, 50 x 20 cubits in size (v. 8). The two structures plus the passageway total a width of 50 cubits (v. 2). The chambers within these structures may be arranged in three stories (v. 6) or in three rows on terraces descending to the outer court. Somewhere below the eastern end of the shorter series of chambers is an entrance, giving access up a flight of ten steps (40:49) from the outer court to the priests’ chambers (v. 9).”

Little else can apparently be said about this section than that the details of the text are difficult to interpret because the original text has not been preserved too carefully throughout the ages.

(14) The external dimensions of the temple area 42:15-20

15 When he had finished measuring what was inside the temple area, he led me out by the east gate and measured the area all around:

16 He measured the east side with the measuring rod; it was five hundred cubits.

17 He measured the north side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod.

18 He measured the south side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod.

19 Then he turned to the west side and measured; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod.

20 So he measured the area on all four sides. It had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits wide, to separate the holy from the common.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The seer’s guide, having completed his measurement of the house with its courts, proceeds to measure its encompassing wall, for this purpose conducting the prophet out by the east gate, and measuring, first the east, next the north, thirdly the south, and lastly the west wall, each five hundred reeds in length, or three thousand cubits, so that the entire area of the quadrangle amounted to $3000 \times 3000 = 9,000,000$ square cubits, equivalent to 2,250,000 square yards.”

The Hebrew text uses the word *qaneh* “reed,” instead of ‘*ammah* “cubit,” as the unit of measurements here. It is the word used to describe what the guide had in his hand when Ezekiel was first introduced to him.¹ *The Septuagint*, however, translates it as “cubit.” John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “The Hebrew has five hundred reeds (AV) for the measurements of the four sides of the temple area (16-19), but this is obviously wrong: we must understand five hundred cubits (RSV), which corresponds with all the measurements previously given, unless we are to suppose that the reference here is to a previously unmentioned outer wall forming a square of 3,000 cubits each way ... but this is most unlikely. The sum of 500 cubits can easily be reckoned from north to south by adding together: length of north gateway 50 + breadth of outer court 100 + length of north inner gateway 50 + distance across inner court 100 + south inner gateway 50 + outer court 100 + south outer gateway 50 = 500 cubits. From west to east the measurements begin with the building and yard 100 (41:13) + the length of the temple outer courts and the length of two gateways. Once again we see the perfection and balance of the layout of God’s sanctuary. The outer wall effectively separated the sacred within from the secular without (20).”

b. The glory of the Lord returns 43:1-12

1 Then the man brought me to the gate facing east,

1. See Ezek. 40:3

2 and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.

3 The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown.

4 The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east.

5 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

6 While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple.

7 He said: "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The house of Israel will never again defile my holy name — neither they nor their kings — by their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings at their high places.

8 When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger.

9 Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings, and I will live among them forever.

10 "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan,

11 and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple — its arrangement, its exits and entrances — its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations.

12 "This is the law of the temple: All the surrounding area on top of the mountain will be most holy. Such is the law of the temple.

As we saw the glory of the Lord depart from the temple in earlier chapters,¹ leaving the buildings and empty hull, a dead body, so here the glory re-enters. The first thought that comes to mind is what happened to the body of Christ. In His argument with the Jewish leaders, Jesus had said: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." We read: "The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?' But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said."² The ultimate fulfillment of this vision is in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is obvious that the temple Ezekiel saw being measured does not correspond to the one built by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity, nor to any other of the temples built or reconstructed afterwards. Not only have those structures not survived, but we read nowhere that God's glory came to fill them like Ezekiel describes here. God's statement: "This is where I will live among the Israelites forever" cannot be applied to any situation or any place on earth, except to the resurrection body of Jesus. We can form an impression of what is meant when we look at the picture John draws for us in *Revelation*, where he sees "the Son of Man," "dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest" and "His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."³

This vision also explains the purpose of the blueprint shown to Ezekiel. God tells Ezekiel what to do with his vision. We read: "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple — its arrangement, its exits and entrances — its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations."

Zechariah predicted what Israel's reaction would when they recognized that it was their Messiah they had rejected. We read: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with

1. See Ezek. 9-11.

2. John 2:19-22

3. Rev. 1:13,16

their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives.”¹ The Apostle John puts this in a universal context, saying: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”²

The Matthew Henry's Commentary probably gives the most meaningful comment on these verses. We read: “After Ezekiel has patiently surveyed the temple of God, the greatest glory of this earth, he is admitted to a higher form, and honored with a sight of the glories of the upper world; it is said to him, Come up hither. He has seen the temple, and sees it to be very spacious and splendid; but, till the glory of God comes into it, it is but like the dead bodies he had seen in vision (ch. xxxvii.), that had no breath till the Spirit of life entered into them. Here therefore he sees the house filled with God's glory. He has a vision of the glory of God (v. 2), the glory of the God of Israel, that God who is in covenant with Israel, and whom they serve and worship. The idols of the heathen have no glory but what they owe to the goldsmith or the painter; but this is the glory of the God of Israel. This glory came from the way of the east, and therefore he was brought to the gate that leads towards the east, to expect the appearance and approach of it. Christ's star was seen in the east, and he is that other angel that ascends out of the east, Rev 7:2. For he is the morning star, he is the sun of righteousness. Two things he observed in this appearance of the glory of God:— 1. The power of his word which he heard: His voice was like a noise of many waters, which is heard very far, and makes impressions; the noise of purling streams is grateful, of a roaring sea dreadful, Rev 1:15; 14:2. Christ's gospel, in the glory of which he shines, was to be proclaimed aloud, the report of it to be heard far; to some it is a savor of life, to others of death, according as they are. 2. The brightness of his appearance which he saw: The earth shone with his glory; for God is light, and none can bear the luster of his light, none has seen nor can see it. Note, That glory of God which shines in the church shines on the world. When God appeared for David the brightness that was before him dispersed the clouds, Ps 18:12. This appearance of the glory of God to Ezekiel he observed to be the same with the vision he saw when he first received his commission (ch. 1:4), according to that by the river Chebar (v. 3); because God is the same, he was pleased to manifest himself in the same manner, for with him is no variableness. ‘It was the same’ (says he) ‘as that which I saw when I came to destroy the city, that is, to foretell the city's destruction,’ which he did with such authority and efficacy, and the event did so certainly answer the prediction, that he might be said to destroy it. As a judge, in God's name, he passed a sentence upon it, which was soon executed. God appeared in the same manner when he sent him to speak words of terror and when he sent him to speak words of comfort; for in both God is and will be glorified. He kills and he makes alive; he wounds and he heals, Deut 32:39. To the same hand that destroyed we must look for deliverance. He has smitten, and he will bind up ...The same hand inflicted the wound and healed it.”

The fact that Ezekiel is told to describe to the people suggests that this is not a blueprint for a future physical construction, but a spiritual one. Jesus confirmed this in His conversation with the Samaritan woman, when He said: “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”³

c. Regulations for the worship of the temple 43:13-46:24

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1. Zech. 12:10-14
 2. Rev. 1:7
 3. John 4:21-24

John B. Taylor, in Ezekiel, divides these chapters into three sections, and several subdivisions which division we will follow:

- i. The alter, its dimensions and its consecration43:13-27**
 - a. The dimensions of the alter43:13-17**
 - b. The ordinances for the altar43:18-27**

- ii. The ministers, their duties and their entitlements44:1-45:8**
 - a. The closed east gate 44:1-3**
 - b. Proscription of foreigners44:4-9**
 - c. Responsibilities of the Levites44:10-14**
 - d. Responsibilities of the Zadokite priests44:15-27**
 - e. Their inheritance 44:28-31**
 - f. The allotment of the sacred portion of the land 45:1-8**

- iii. The offerings and other regulations45:9-46:24**
 - a. A plea for honesty 45:9-12**
 - b. Offerings to the prince 45:13-17**
 - c. Some festival regulation45:18-25**
 - d. Sabbaths and new moons46:1-8**
 - e. Entry and exit 46:9,10**
 - f. General regulation 46:11-15**
 - g. Alienation of property forbidden46:16-18**
 - h. Arrangements for cooking the sacrificial meals46:19-24**

- i. The alter, its dimensions and its consecration43:13-27**
 - a. The dimensions of the alter43:13-17**

*13 "These are the measurements of the altar in long cubits, that cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth: Its gutter is a cubit deep and a cubit wide, with a rim of one span around the edge. And this is the height of the altar:
14 From the gutter on the ground up to the lower ledge it is two cubits high and a cubit wide, and from the smaller ledge up to the larger ledge it is four cubits high and a cubit wide.
15 The altar hearth is four cubits high, and four horns project upward from the hearth.
16 The altar hearth is square, twelve cubits long and twelve cubits wide.
17 The upper ledge also is square, fourteen cubits long and fourteen cubits wide, with a rim of half a cubit and a gutter of a cubit all around. The steps of the altar face east."*

The altar of which the measurements are given here is the burnt offering altar which stood in the inner court of the temple. Its measurements are given in cubits, which is described as "a cubit and a handbreadth." *The New International Version* describes these measurements in a footnote stating: "The common cubit was about 1 1/2 feet" and "about 3 inches." In metric measurements that would be about 58 cm. According to *The New Living Translation*, 1 cubit + 1 span adds up to 76 cm. There is no reason for us to worry about a difference of a few inches.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes about the altar: "This relates to the altar in this mystical temple, and that is mystical too; for Christ is our altar." The Flemish poet and priest Guido Gezelle wrote: "Jesus Christ is my sacrifice, is my altar, is my right. Nothing gives me greater freedom than this altar, this sacrifice and this unmerited grace upon which my salvation is built!"

The altar is described as consisting of three tiers, of which *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states: "The description commences with the foundation of the altar, and, proceeding upwards, gives the height and breadth of the several gradations of the walls of the altar, up to the horns at the four corners (vv. 13-15). It then passes from above

downwards, to supply the length and breadth or the circumference of the different stages (vv. 16 and 17). As the first, or lowest part, the *cheeyq* is mentioned, literally, the bosom or lap; then by transference, the hollow formed by the sides of a chariot (1 Kings 22:35); here the lower hollow or base of the altar, formed by a border of a definite height, to merely 'a frame running round, a stand in which the altar stood' ... nor merely 'the hollow filled with earth' ... but both together. This ground-framework was a cubit and a cubit broad. That *haa`amaah* (cubit) is to be taken as referring to the height, is evident from the statement of the breadth which follows ... *Rochab*, breadth, is the extent to which the bosom projected beyond the next enclosure on every side, and formed a support, the circumference of which was a cubit more than the lower cube of the altar on every side."

We could say that, in a way, the altar consisting in three tiers represents the Trinity. The Son sacrificed Himself to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹

b. The ordinances for the altar 43:18-27

18 Then he said to me, "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: These will be the regulations for sacrificing burnt offerings and sprinkling blood upon the altar when it is built:

19 You are to give a young bull as a sin offering to the priests, who are Levites, of the family of Zadok, who come near to minister before me, declares the Sovereign Lord.

20 You are to take some of its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar and on the four corners of the upper ledge and all around the rim, and so purify the altar and make atonement for it.

21 You are to take the bull for the sin offering and burn it in the designated part of the temple area outside the sanctuary.

22 "On the second day you are to offer a male goat without defect for a sin offering, and the altar is to be purified as it was purified with the bull.

23 When you have finished purifying it, you are to offer a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect.

24 You are to offer them before the Lord, and the priests are to sprinkle salt on them and sacrifice them as a burnt offering to the Lord.

25 "For seven days you are to provide a male goat daily for a sin offering; you are also to provide a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect.

26 For seven days they are to make atonement for the altar and cleanse it; thus they will dedicate it.

27 At the end of these days, from the eighth day on, the priests are to present your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on the altar. Then I will accept you, declares the Sovereign Lord."

Ezekiel is given here the role that had been assigned originally to Moses in the consecration of the tabernacle. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "These were not the regulations for the sacrificial worship to be afterwards performed upon this altar, but the rites to be observed at its consecration when the day should arrive for its construction. As the altar in the tabernacle (... Exodus 29:1-46; ... Leviticus 8:11-33), and that in Solomon's temple (... 1 Kings 8:63-66; ... 2 Chronicles 7:4-10), so was this in Ezekiel's 'house' dedicated by a special ceremonial before being brought into ordinary use. The particular ritual observed by Solomon is not described in detail; but a comparison between that enjoined upon and practiced by Moses with that revealed to and published by Ezekiel shows that while in some respects they agreed, in other important particulars they differed. In both the ceremony largely consisted in offering sacrifice and smearing blood, and lasted seven days; but in the former the ceremony was performed exclusively by Moses, consisted, in addition to the above, of an anointing of the altar, the holy utensils, and the tabernacle itself with oil, and was associated with the consecration of the priests; whereas in the latter, in addition to some variations in the sacrificial victims, which will be noted in the course of exposition, the priests should bear an active part — there should be no anointing with oil, and no consecration of the priests, the priesthood being assumed as already existing. If in Ezekiel's ritual there was no mention of a cleansing of the sanctuary (that of

1. Heb. 9:14

... Ezekiel 45:18 referring to a special case), but only of the altar, that was sufficiently explained by the circumstance that Jehovah was already in the 'house.' The final clause, to *offer burnt offerings thereon, and to sprinkle blood thereon*, indicates the purpose for which the altar was to be used."

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary questions how literal these instructions ought to be taken or whether Ezekiel had to perform the described task of consecration only "prophetically." We read: "At the altar in the tabernacle Moses performed the whole act of consecration, as the mediator of the covenant, the anointing as well as the preparation of the sacrifices. Here, however, the priests already consecrated for their service are to complete the sacrificial ceremony. It is true that the expressions used in v. 20, 'take of its blood,' etc., and in v. 21, 'take the bullock of the sin-offering,' etc., apparently indicate that the prophet was to perform the sprinkling of the blood and the burning of the sin-offering. But it is obvious that this is only to be understood as signifying that he was to do it through the medium of the priests, i.e., was to enjoin the performance of it upon them, from the use of the plural *hiT^auw* in v. 22 b: 'they shall absolve the altar, as they have absolved it with the bullock.' It is not all the priests of the tribe of Levi however, who are to perform this service, but simply those of the family of Zadok, who alone are selected in the new temple for specifically priestly service (cf. Ezek 40:46 and 44:15 ff.)."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary states: "These are the ordinances of the altar ... to offer burnt offerings thereon, and to sprinkle blood thereon. The sacrifices here are not mere commemorative, but propitiatory ones; or at least relatively propitiatory. The expressions, 'blood' (Ezek 43:18) and 'for a sin offering' (Ezek 43:19,21-22) prove this. In the literal sense they can only apply to the second temple. Under the Christian dispensation they would directly oppose the doctrine taught in Heb 10:1-18 - namely, that Christ has by one offering forever atoned for sin."

It may be helpful to remember here what the author of Hebrews states about the Old Testament sacrifices that they were "only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves."¹ Even the cross upon which Jesus died was not the essence of the atonement, just as the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve ate in paradise was not the essence of their sin. It was the physical expression of a spiritual reality. Christ's death on the wooden cross that was planted in Golgotha's soil had eternal value and consequences because He was "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world."² And Adam and Eve's transgression consisted in their choosing the side of him whom Jesus called "a murderer from the beginning."³ Their eating of the forbidden fruit was the physical expression of that.

The altar had to be atoned for. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about this: "The *sin-offering* (*chatta'ah*) was offered in order to *cleanse* the altar (20; Heb. *hitte'*, lit. 'to de-sin) and to *make atonement* for it (Heb. *kipp^{er}*, from a root meaning either 'to cover' or 'to wipe away'), and its effectiveness derived from the blood which was the victim's life sacrificed before God. The rest of the animal had to be burnt away from the sacred area (21), *i.e.* outside the camp (cf. Lv. 8:17; Heb. 13:11-13)."

To God death is the most abhorrent thing conceivable. It goes against the essence of His being, constituting separation from Him. Crucifixion was the cruelest form of capital punishment imaginable. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* states: "This form of punishment was in use among the Egyptians (Gen 40:19), the Carthaginians, the Persians (Est. 7:10), the Assyrians, Scythians, Indians, Germans, and from earliest times among the Greeks and Romans. After the conquest of Tyre, Alexander the Great ordered two thousand Tyrians to be crucified as punishment for the resistance which that city made. Crucifixion was abolished by Constantine, probably toward the end of his reign, owing, doubtless, to his increasing reverence for the cross. Punishment by the cross was confined to slaves or to malefactors of the worst class. Exemption from it was the privilege of Roman citizenship." The altar, therefore, as an representation of death, was unacceptable to God. Yet, the altar in the Old Testament and the cross in the New Testament would be the place where the broken relationship with God was restored, where love found its deepest

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1. Heb. 10:1
 2. Rev. 13:8
 3. John 8:44

expression, where death was swallowed up in victory. As the altar was being splashed with blood, which symbolized the death of the Savior, it became the expression of life in its indestructible and eternal form. It is impossible for us to sound the depth of this divine paradox. But everything God touches turns into gold; even death turns into life eternal.

ii. The ministers, their duties and their entitlements 44:1-45:8

a. The closed east gate 44:1-3

1 Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut.

2 The Lord said to me, "This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered through it.

3 The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the Lord. He is to enter by way of the portico of the gateway and go out the same way."

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary observes about the whole chapter: "With the consecration of the altar of burnt-offering the way is opened for the congregation of Israel to appear in the sanctuary before the Lord, to serve Him with sacrifices. If, however, the use of the new house of God was to be in harmony with the holiness of the God who dwelt therein, it was requisite that still further directions should be given concerning the entering of the people into it, and the character of the servants of both the altar and the sanctuary. These directions follow in the chapter before us—first, as to the place which the prince was to occupy at the service in the temple (vv. 1-3); secondly, as to the admission of foreigners and the appointment of Levites and priests for the service (vv. 4-16); and lastly, as to the conditions requisite for the administration of the priest's office, and the duties and privileges of that office (vv. 17-31)."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: "Ezekiel, taken by the angel to the outer east gate (v. 1), is informed that the gate will remain shut after the Lord's entrance through it, lest the entrance of a mortal desecrate it (v. 2). The 'Golden Gate' in the east wall of Old Jerusalem today is walled up. The walls were built by the Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, in 1542. He closed the gate to prevent festivals commemorating 'the recovery of the Holy Cross.'" John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, adds: "There is no evidence that the east gate of either Zerubbabel's or Herod's Temple was closed, though its use may have been restricted to priests, and the walled-up Golden Gate in the present east wall of Jerusalem reflects a later tradition and should not be related to this passage."

The Pulpit Commentary notes: "Whether Ezekiel stood upon the outside of this door as in ... Ezekiel 43:1, or upon its inside, cannot as yet be determined; but in either case he observed that it was shut — again, whether on the east side towards the temple precincts, or on the west towards the outer court, is not mentioned, and cannot at this stage be decided. What led the seer to notice that the gate was closed was probably the circumstance that the last time he stood beside it, it was open (... Ezekiel 43:1), though proof cannot be given that he passed through it (... Ezekiel 43:5), conjoined with the fact that it formed the principal entrance to the temple, and as such had been described to him and measured (... Ezekiel 40:6)."

It is likely that Jesus entered the temple through this gate, either on the day of His triumphal entrée in Jerusalem, or on the next day. That was the last time in His earthly life that He visited the place. It was the last time that the glory of the Lord entered the house of the Lord. Even if the closing of that gate by the Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent was not done for that specific reason, it does not mean that the Holy Spirit did not intend it to happen as a fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy here.

b. Proscription of foreigners 44:4-9

4 Then the man brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple. I looked and saw the glory of the Lord filling the temple of the Lord, and I fell facedown.

5 The Lord said to me, "Son of man, look carefully, listen closely and give attention to everything I tell you concerning all the regulations regarding the temple of the Lord. Give attention to the entrance of the temple and all the exits of the sanctuary.

6 Say to the rebellious house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Enough of your detestable practices, O house of Israel!

7 In addition to all your other detestable practices, you brought foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary, desecrating my temple while you offered me food, fat and blood, and you broke my covenant.

8 Instead of carrying out your duty in regard to my holy things, you put others in charge of my sanctuary.

9 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and flesh is to enter my sanctuary, not even the foreigners who live among the Israelites.

The Hebrew text of v.4 reads literally: "Then he brought me the way of the north gate before the house: and I looked, and behold, and the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord: and I fell upon my face." In the same way as Ezekiel had seen the glory of the Lord depart from the temple several years earlier, leaving the building an empty hull,¹ so here he sees the same glory returning and filling the new temple. This had not happened since the day Solomon dedicated the temple.²

For Ezekiel this was a physical experience; it was overwhelming to the point where he fell face down. Yet, the glory of the Lord had been present earlier in the old temple without the people noticing it. Ezekiel had seen before that people practiced idolatry at the very place where he saw God's glory that was obviously hidden from the others.³ We conclude from this that what Ezekiel experienced physically was actually a spiritual reality that was hidden from those who were spiritually blind. The Apostle Paul had good reason to pray "that the eyes of [our] heart may be enlightened in order that [we] may know the hope to which he has called [us], the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."⁴

What Ezekiel saw in the context of the new temple, we are invited to behold in the miracle of Christ's resurrection from the dead. In the same way as Ezekiel said "behold, and the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord," so the risen Lord says to the Apostle John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."⁵

While in the presence of the Lord, Ezekiel is reminded of the horrifying vision he had seen so many years ago of people practicing idolatry in the very precincts of the temple. God says to him: "No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and flesh is to enter my sanctuary, not even the foreigners who live among the Israelites." John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "Foreigners, who were *uncircumcised in heart and flesh* (7), were not members of the covenant and therefore profaned the sanctuary by their presence. Israelites who allowed this to happen were breaking the covenant (read *you have broken*, 7, RSV; and not *they*, AV) and rendering their own offerings to God null and void. The fault was attributable to the former practice of allowing foreigners to act as temple servants, e.g. the Carite temple guards (2 Ki. 11:4), and this was now strictly forbidden as a profanation of *my holy things* (8). These restrictions, with the renewed emphases on holiness, the covenant and circumcision, were a feature of post-exilic Judaism and they were carried further by Haggai, Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezr. 4:1-3; 10:10-44; Ne. 13:1-9; Hg. 2:14). Herod's Temple had a warning notice put up forbidding Gentiles to pass beyond a certain point on pain of death."

Although the Jews may have interpreted Ezekiel's prophecy in this literal sense, excluding certain non-Jews from entering the temple area, the proscription was probably meant to exclude many Jews also. Going by Paul's

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1. See Ezek.9-11.
 2. I Kings 8:10,11
 3. Ezek. 8:9-11
 4. Eph. 1:18-23
 5. Rev. 1:18

definition, we confirm: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”¹ The Apostle Paul further defines circumcision, saying: “It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.”² And: “In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”³

c. Responsibilities of the Levites 44:10-14

10 "The Levites who went far from me when Israel went astray and who wandered from me after their idols must bear the consequences of their sin.

11 They may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them.

12 But because they served them in the presence of their idols and made the house of Israel fall into sin, therefore I have sworn with uplifted hand that they must bear the consequences of their sin, declares the Sovereign Lord.

13 They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices.

14 Yet I will put them in charge of the duties of the temple and all the work that is to be done in it.

Bible scholars disagree about the application of these verses. Some believe that those Levites are meant who joined the cult Jeroboam initiated when the northern kingdom separated from the south after the death of Solomon.⁴ But there is no indication that any Levites joined the north at that time. Rather, when Hezekiah became king of Judah and revived the temple cult in Jerusalem, we read that he called upon the priests and Levites to consecrate themselves and “remove all defilement from the sanctuary.”⁵ This proves that both priests and Levites had been involved in idol service at that time. There may have been Levites among the men Ezekiel saw in an earlier vision in which the Lord showed him the secret idol worship that was carried out in the temple during the last days of its existence.⁶

Barnes' Notes observes about the demoting of the Levites: “As, according to the new system, the Levites, as a body, were to receive their portion in the ‘oblation’ (Ezek 45:5); the only manner in which the Levites of Ezek 44:10 could live at all, was as part of the whole body, to which they were therefore reunited, but in the lowest grade. It is remarkable that the number of Levites who returned after the captivity was very small, not exceeding 400, of whom only 74 were priests’ assistants (Ezra 2:40-42; compare 8:15-19). The gap in their number was filled up by 220 Nethinim (‘given’ ones), probably originally strangers and captives, who, although employed in the temple services, were held by the Jews in the lowest repute.”

It is difficult to determine how serious the demoting of most of the Levites was since it is not clear how they functioned in the temple of Solomon. As long as there was a tabernacle that had to be taken apart, transported and rebuilt, the different clans of Levi had very specific assignments. Once the tabernacle came to rest, those tasks were no longer required. David gave some specific tasks to the Levites, which they probably kept on performing till the time of captivity. We read: “He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, to make petition,

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1. Rom. 2:28,29
 2. Phil. 3:3
 3. Col. 2:11,12
 4. I Kings 12:26-30
 5. II Chron. 29:5
 6. Ezek. 8

to give thanks, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, Zechariah second, then Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God.”¹ We may assume that in Ezekiel’s temple the Levites were no longer allowed to have those ministries.

The main lesson to be drawn from these verses is that sin has consequences. The Hebrew words used are *nasa*’ “to lift,” and *avon*, “evil.” *Nasa*’ is, ironically, the same word used in the task description the Levites had when carrying the different section of the tabernacle. We read: “This is the service of the Gershonite clans as they work and *carry* burdens: They are to *carry* the curtains of the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, its covering and the outer covering of hides of sea cows, the curtains for the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the curtains of the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, the curtain for the entrance, the ropes and all the equipment used in its service.”²

Both words are found in the text: “Cain said to the Lord, ‘My *punishment* is more than I can *bear*.’”³

There is forgiveness for every kind of sin, but every wound leaves a scar. The scars of our forgiven sins are only offset by the scars in Jesus’ body. As far as Cain is concerned, the blood of Jesus “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”⁴ God did not allow full restoration to the Levites who had sinned, because He did not want them to forget.

It must be observed, however, that the Levites to whom these words were addressed were not the ones who had gone astray; they were several generations removed from their wayward ancestors. Although God will not hold us personally responsible for the sins of previous generations, we cannot escape the collective guilt of our race. Jesus said to the people of His time: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.”⁵ On the Day of Judgment the blood of Abel will testify against us unless we are covered by the blood that speaks a better word.

d. Responsibilities of the Zadokite priests 44:15-27

15 "But the priests, who are Levites and descendants of Zadok and who faithfully carried out the duties of my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me; they are to stand before me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares the Sovereign Lord.

16 They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service.

17 "When they enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple.

18 They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire.

19 When they go out into the outer court where the people are, they are to take off the clothes they have been ministering in and are to leave them in the sacred rooms, and put on other clothes, so that they do not consecrate the people by means of their garments.

20 "They must not shave their heads or let their hair grow long, but they are to keep the hair of their heads trimmed.

21 No priest is to drink wine when he enters the inner court.

1. I Chron. 16:4-6
2. Num. 4:24-26
3. Gen. 4:13
4. Heb. 12:24
5. Matt. 23:35,36

22 They must not marry widows or divorced women; they may marry only virgins of Israelite descent or widows of priests.

23 They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean.

24 "In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. They are to keep my laws and my decrees for all my appointed feasts, and they are to keep my Sabbaths holy.

25 "A priest must not defile himself by going near a dead person; however, if the dead person was his father or mother, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister, then he may defile himself.

26 After he is cleansed, he must wait seven days.

27 On the day he goes into the inner court of the sanctuary to minister in the sanctuary, he is to offer a sin offering for himself, declares the Sovereign Lord.

The Pulpit Commentary states: "That Ezekiel derived the phrase, *the priests the Levites*, from Deuteronomy (17:9; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9) may be granted without admitting that the Levites were all priests, or that the phrase had other import than that the priests were ... The priesthood, at its institution, having been entrusted to Aaron and his sons (... Exodus 27:20, 21; 28:1-4; 29:9, 44; ... Numbers 3:10; 16:40; 18:7; 25:13), on Aaron's death the high priesthood passed into the hands of Eleazar, his eldest (living) son (... Numbers 20:26-28), and after Eleazar's death into those of Phinehas, his eldest son (... Numbers 25:11-13). In the last days of the judges, when the ark and tabernacle stood at Shiloh, the high priesthood belonged to Eli, of the line of Ithamar (comp. ... 1 Samuel 14:3 and 22:20 with ... 1 Chronicles 24:3), in which line it continued till the reign of David, when it was held conjointly by Abiathar (called also Ahimelech) of the line of Ithamar, and Zadok of the line of Eleazar (... 2 Samuel 8:17; 20:25; ... 1 Kings 4:4). This arrangement, however, Solomon eventually overturned, by deposing the former for espousing Adonijah's pretensions to the throne (... 1 Kings 1:7; 2:26), and from that time forward till the exile the high priesthood remained with Zadok and his sons (... 1 Kings 2:35; ... 1 Chronicles 29:22). When, therefore, it is announced to Ezekiel that his vision-sanctuary should have as *priests the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of Jehovah's sanctuary, when the children of Israel went astray from him*; the first question that arises is — *To what does this allude?* [Some Bible scholars believe] it cannot mean that, while Israel as a whole declined into idolatry, the Zadokite priests remained faithful to the worship of Jehovah, because the vision of Judah's idolatries granted to the prophet, in ... Ezekiel 8:16, revealed quite clearly that the priesthood was as much caught in the national apostasy as were the princes or the people. Nor is the language of the text perfectly satisfied by the view of ... others, that it goes back to Zadok's fidelity to the throne of David at the time of Absalom's rebellion (... 2 Samuel 15:24-29), a fidelity exhibited also by Abiathar, or to his adherence to Solomon in preference to Adonijah (... 1 Kings 1:8, 39), this time without Abiathar's concurrence, rather in the face of his opposition. In neither of these instances was Zadok's fidelity specially directed towards Jehovah's sanctuary, but concerned expressly and exclusively David's throne. Hence the commendation of the Zadokites' fidelity can only signify that, while the priesthood as a body were corrupt like the people, there were among them, as among the people, some who, like Ezekiel, continued steadfast to Jehovah's sanctuary; that these faithful few were Zadokites (see ... Ezekiel 48:11), and that to these should be entrusted the priesthood in the new sanctuary. But, at this point, a second question starts — *Was it intended to declare that the new priesthood should be Zadokites in body, i.e. in respect of lineal descent, or only in soul, i.e. in respect of moral and religious excellence?* The former is contended by ... others, who see in the vision-sanctuary a plan of the second, or post-exilic, temple, and in its ordinances a program for the establishment of the Levitical hierarchy; but this contention shatters itself on the fact that no proof exists either that the second temple was constructed after Ezekiel's as a model, or that those who served in it were exclusively flesh and blood Zadokites. The latter opinion ... appears the more correct, that moral and spiritual resemblance to the sons of Zadok should form the first qualification for the priesthood in this ideal sanctuary of the future."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, adds: "Only the sons of Zadok were allowed to minister in the sanctuary as priests. They were ultimately descended from Aaron, according to the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6:50-53, but Zadok was a priest in David's time. Alongside Abiathar (2 Sa. 8:17; 15:24ff.) and he superseded him as chief priest by successfully backing Solomon as David's successor (1 Ki. 1:8, etc.). The nomination of the Zadokite line in Ezekiel is

thus a clear restriction of priestly privilege and must have earned the hostility of priests of other lines. However, the Zadokite line maintained its superiority through the period of the second and retained the high priesthood until 171 BC, when Antiochus IV transferred it to Menelaus, a Benjaminite. It is interesting to note that the Qumran covenanters looked forward to the restoration of the Zadokite line in Jerusalem.”

Regarding the stipulation about the priests’ clothing to wear linen instead of wool while serving in the temple, I am reminded of a sermon I heard on the subject in which the preacher emphasized that God hates sweat. Jesus impressed upon His disciples: “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”¹ If we really believe that we are unable to produce any kingdom fruit by using our own creative juices, we will refrain from making any effort. It is not so much the physical strain which makes the body perspire, but the spiritual efforts of carnal energy that defiles the life and hinders communion with God. Resting in God will bring about the fruit our Lord is looking for. As the author of Hebrews states: “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” Our attitude should be “Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what thou art.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “Concerning their clothes; they must wear *linen garments* when they *went in to minister* or do any service in the inner court, or in the sanctuary, and nothing that was *woolen*, because it would *cause sweat*, v.17,18. They must dress themselves cool, that they might go the more readily about their work; and they had the more need to do so because they were to attend the altars, which had constant fires upon them. And they must dress themselves clean and sweet, and avoid every thing that was sweaty and filthy, to signify the purity of mind with which the service of God is to be attended to. Sweat came in with sin and was part of the curse. *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread*. Clothes came in with sin, coats of skins did; and therefore the priests must use as little and as light clothing as possible, and not such as caused sweat. When they had finished their service they must change their clothes again, and lay up their linen garments in the chambers appointed for that purpose, v. 19, as before, ch. 42:14. They must not go among the people with their holy garments on, lest they should imagine themselves sanctified by the touch of them; or, *They shall sanctify the people*, that is (as it is explained, ch. 42:14), they shall *approach to those things which are for the people*, in their ordinary *garments*.”

And *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* makes the interesting observation: “The reason is plain; wool is more apt than linen to contract dirt and breed insects; linen breeds none; besides, this is a vegetable, and the other an animal substance. It was an ancient maxim, that whatever was taken from a dead body was impure in matters of religion, and should not be permitted to enter into the temple. The Egyptian priests always wore linen on their bodies, and shoes of matting or rushes on their feet. The Mohammedans never write the Koran upon vellum or skin of any kind, since they would consider that as a defilement.”

Regarding the requirements detailed in vv.20-27, John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes: “The priests were by their lives to be examples of separateness; their ritual holiness was intended to promote ethical holiness among the people they were called to serve. The regulations are reminiscent of Nazirite vows (Nu. 6:1-21), which were also scrupulous about defilement through contact with a dead person (25-27). Similar regulations for priests may be found in Leviticus 21:1-9. In keeping with their duty to be examples of holiness to the people, the priests also had certain duties of a judicial character and as guardians for the proper observance of festivals and sabbaths (24).”

e. Their inheritance 44:28-31

28 *“I am to be the only inheritance the priests have. You are to give them no possession in Israel; I will be their possession.*

29 *They will eat the grain offerings, the sin offerings and the guilt offerings; and everything in Israel devoted to the Lord will belong to them.*

30 *The best of all the firstfruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests. You are to give them the first portion of your ground meal so that a blessing may rest on your household.*

31 *The priests must not eat anything, bird or animal, found dead or torn by wild animals.*

1. John 15:5

It takes spiritual insight to appreciate the greatness of these statements. Our human reaction would be to conclude that in withholding from the priests and Levites the means to work for their own livelihood, the whole priestly cast would be condemned to a life of poverty. Those who “live by faith” in our present economy do not seem to be blessed with affluence. Most people, even those who profess to trust the Lord, would rather choose a solid financial investment with a bank account that pays interest than an income from an invisible source that is based on God’s promises. The admonition in Hebrews: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”¹ fails to give us the emotional security we feel we need in life.

Ezekiel’s text refers to the arrangement God had made for the priests and Levites in the desert, as Israel was on her way to the Promised Land. We read: “The Lord said to Aaron, ‘You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.’”² And: “The priests, who are Levites — indeed the whole tribe of Levi — are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel. They shall live on the offerings made to the Lord by fire, for that is their inheritance.”³

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “Those who have God for their inheritance and their possession may be content with a little, and ought not to covet a great deal of the possessions and inheritances of this earth. If we have God, we have all; and therefore may well reckon that we have enough.” Paul’s statement also confirms this when he writes to the Corinthians: “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”⁴

God’s arrangement for the livelihood of the priests and Levites was meant to protect them from the damages materialism could cause to their spiritual life. The old Scottish writer George MacDonald once asked the question: “Do you believe God can punish a person by making him rich?” He answered: “yes.” Our greed can keep us from understanding what real riches are. We may consider ourselves rich when we inherit a gold mine. But the one who inherits the Creator of all gold mines may know himself to be connected to the source of all that constitutes value and satisfaction.

The prohibition to eat an animal that was found dead did not pertain to all of Israel. The Israelites were forbidden to eat the fat of an animal found dead or torn by wild animals,⁵ but they were not allowed to eat any animal fat.⁶ The average Israelite was allowed to eat an animal found dead or torn by wild animals, but it would make him ceremonially unclean for the rest of the day.⁷ The fact that the priests and Levites were forbidden to pollute themselves by eating an animal that had died by itself or that was the victim of another predator, suggests that God wanted to distance Himself from the effects of sin upon the fauna He had created. Originally, there was no place for death in God’s creation even in the animal world.

f. The allotment of the sacred portion of the land 45:1-8

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1. Heb. 13:5,6
 2. Num. 18:20
 3. Deut.18:1
 4. I Cor. 3:21-23
 5. Lev. 7:24
 6. Lev. 3:17
 7. Lev. 17:15

1 "When you allot the land as an inheritance, you are to present to the Lord a portion of the land as a sacred district, 25,000 cubits long and 20,000 cubits wide; the entire area will be holy.

2 Of this, a section 500 cubits square is to be for the sanctuary, with 50 cubits around it for open land.

3 In the sacred district, measure off a section 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. In it will be the sanctuary, the Most Holy Place.

4 It will be the sacred portion of the land for the priests, who minister in the sanctuary and who draw near to minister before the Lord. It will be a place for their houses as well as a holy place for the sanctuary.

5 An area 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide will belong to the Levites, who serve in the temple, as their possession for towns to live in.

6 "You are to give the city as its property an area 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000 cubits long, adjoining the sacred portion; it will belong to the whole house of Israel.

7 "The prince will have the land bordering each side of the area formed by the sacred district and the property of the city. It will extend westward from the west side and eastward from the east side, running lengthwise from the western to the eastern border parallel to one of the tribal portions.

8 This land will be his possession in Israel. And my princes will no longer oppress my people but will allow the house of Israel to possess the land according to their tribes.

Introducing the whole chapter, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "From the sustenance of the priests (... Ezekiel 44:29-31), the new Torah naturally passes in the present chapter to the maintenance of the temple service as a whole, setting forth in the first section of the chapter (vers. 1- 8) the portions of land that should be allotted respectively to the sanctuary, *i.e.* for the temple buildings, and the priests' and Levites' houses (vers. 1- 5), to the city and its inhabitants, that they might be able to discharge their religious and civil obligations on the one hand to the temple, and on the other hand to the state (ver. 6), and to the prince to enable him to support himself and meet the charge of those public offerings which were required of him as the head of the community (vers. 7, 8); in the second section (vers. 9-17) dealing with the oblations the people should make to the prince for this purpose, reminding the prince, on the one hand, that these should not be levied from the people by extortion (ver. 9), and the people, on the other, that these should be delivered to the prince with honesty (vers. 10-16), and both that a certain part of the prince's revenue from the people's oblations should be devoted to the furnishing of offerings for the solemnities of the house of Israel (ver. 17); and in the third section (vers. 18-25) instituting a new feast-cycle, beginning with a Passover in the first (vers. 18-24) and ending with a Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh (ver. 25) month."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, explains about these first eight verses: "They deal only with the central portion of land, and the tribal divisions are continued in 47:13 – 48:35, with a certain repetition of this material in 48:8-22. The sacred district is called *an oblation* (1, AV, RV; Heb. *ṯrūmā*), the word normally translated a 'heave-offering' in AV, but it is more accurately designated a 'levy' or compulsory contribution. This was the Lord's rightful claim on a part of what was all His land. New ideas are introduced in verse 2 with reference to the *open space* (AV *suburbs*) which surrounds the temple area (a kind of 'green belt' between the sacred and profane), and in verse 5 with a special area marked off for Levitical cities (reading, for *cities to live in*, in preference to AV *for twenty chambers*), instead of the pattern proposed in Numbers 35:2-8. The city, or the state, is also allotted an area of land adjoining this central holy portion (6), and so is the prince (7,8). All the rest is for the tribes to live in: there is to be no more alienation of the land by royalty in the state that is to come (*cf.* Is. 5:8). The story of Naboth's vineyard is to be repeated no more (8)."

The piece of land described in these verses allocated to the temple and the priests who serve was to be considered a heave-offering to the Lord. The first time the expression is used in Leviticus in that sense is in connection with the thank-offering. We read: "If he offers it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering he is to offer cakes of bread made without yeast and mixed with oil, wafers made without yeast and spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour well-kneaded and mixed with oil. Along with his fellowship offering of thanksgiving he is to present an offering with cakes of bread made with yeast. He is to bring one of each kind as an offering, a contribution to the Lord; it belongs to the priest who sprinkles the blood of the fellowship offerings."¹

If we interpret these verses in a literal sense, meaning that the people who would return from captivity would again divide the land by casting lots as was done in the days of Joshua, we run into serious problems. There was never

a complete return of the twelve tribes or a reunification of the northern and southern kingdom as in the days of David and Solomon. It seems better to construe the whole section, both here and in following chapters, in the sense in which David describes “living in the land” as a spiritual experience. He expressed this in the psalm that reads: “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” And: “Evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.”¹

iii. The offerings and other regulations 45:9-46:24

a. A plea for honesty 45:9-12

9 *“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: You have gone far enough, O princes of Israel! Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right. Stop dispossessing my people, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

10 *You are to use accurate scales, an accurate ephah and an accurate bath.*

11 *The ephah and the bath are to be the same size, the bath containing a tenth of a homer and the ephah a tenth of a homer; the homer is to be the standard measure for both.*

12 *The shekel is to consist of twenty gerahs. Twenty shekels plus twenty-five shekels plus fifteen shekels equal one mina.*

These verses are proof of the truth of Lord Acton’s dictum “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” John B. Taylor, in Ezekiel, comments here: “Even in the new restored Israel, there is the recognition that power can corrupt. A practical expression of this is to have standardized weights and measures, variations in which were a frequent cause of complaint in the Old Testament (e.g. Lv. 19:35f.; Dt. 25:13-16; Pr. 11:1; Am. 8:5; Mi. 6:10-12).” Taylor adds a footnote, taken from an article “Weights and Measures,” by D. J. Wiseman, stating: “Since ancient balances had a margin of error of up to 6% ... and no two Hebrew weights yet found of the same inscribed denomination have proved to be of exactly identical weight, the importance of this exhortation can be seen.”

The importance of this demand for honesty is at least twofold. The first is that a right relationship with God makes a person an honest businessman. People who try to cheat their fellowmen by making “a fast buck” have no idea who is the God they are dealing with.

The second lesson to be drawn is that moral demands are absolute because they are related to the character of God. If morality is relative, depending on culture and majority vote, crimes such as mass murder and ethnic cleansing cannot be condemned as being immoral. If there is no absolute standard of good, whether in weights and measurements or in public behavior, human society is doomed. As is obvious from the previous section, the only way to live in the Promised Land is to trust in the Lord and do good. Those who are dishonest do not live in the land, wherever they may be located in Canaan.

b. Offerings to the prince 45:13-17

13 *“This is the special gift you are to offer: a sixth of an ephah from each homer of wheat and a sixth of an ephah from each homer of barley.*

14 *The prescribed portion of oil, measured by the bath, is a tenth of a bath from each cor (which consists of ten baths or one homer, for ten baths are equivalent to a homer).*

15 *Also one sheep is to be taken from every flock of two hundred from the well-watered pastures of Israel. These will be used for the grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the people, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

16 *All the people of the land will participate in this special gift for the use of the prince in Israel.*

1. Lev. 7:12-15

1. Ps. 37:3,4,9

17 It will be the duty of the prince to provide the burnt offerings, grain offerings and drink offerings at the festivals, the New Moons and the Sabbaths — at all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel. He will provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the house of Israel.

These verses designate the prince of Israel as the responsible person to present the sacrifices specified. But the people are the ones who bring the grain, oil and animals. As the prince foreshadows the Messiah, he is the one who is not only responsible for all the sacrifices in behalf of the people, he represents himself the ultimate sacrifice. It is about Him that the author of Hebrew, quoting the fortieth psalms, says: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, “Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.”’”¹ That being the case, the sacrifices brought in by the people are donations after the fact. It is on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice that we are able to return to the Lord a portion of that with which He blessed us. David’s words come to mind here, when he gave of his wealth for the construction of the temple and received the contributions of the people: “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”²

The Pulpit Commentary comments here: “Compared with the offerings prescribed by the Law of Moses, these discover important variations. (1) Of flour, the Law demanded one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour with a lamb (... Exodus 29:40), with a ram two-tenths (... Numbers 15:6), with a bullock three-tenths (... Numbers 15:9); of wheat and of barley Ezekiel’s Torah requires one-sixteenth of an ephah for each, i.e. one-third in all. (2) Of oil, the Mosaic ordinance was, with a lamb should be presented one-fourth of a hin, i.e. one-twenty-fourth of a bath; with a ram, one-third of a hin, i.e. one-eighteenth of a bath; with a bullock one-half of a hin, i.e. one-twelfth of a bath. Ezekiel’s ordinance was in every case one-tenth of a bath. (3) Of animals, the Pentateuchal legislation left the necessary victims, whether rams, goats, or bullocks, to be provided by the offerers at their own free-will, stipulating as compulsory only the firstborn of the flocks and herds (... Exodus 13:2, 12; 22:29, 30; ... Leviticus 27:26; ... Numbers 3:13; 8:17; ... Deuteronomy 15:19), the first ripe fruits of the earth (... Exodus 22:29; ... Numbers 18:12), and the tithes, or tenths, of seed, fruit, the herd and flock (... Leviticus 27:30-33); the Ezekielian omits the latter, but ordains in lieu of the former that one animal out of every two hundred in every flock shall be obligatory on Jehovah’s worshippers. Thus the demands of Ezekiel’s Torah surpass those of the earlier or Mosaic Torah in quantity as well as quality. That these demands are definitely specified does not prove they should partake rather of the nature of a tax than of a free-will offering. That they were not to be regarded as taxes is shown by the absence of any allusion to penalties for neglect of payment; that they were designed to be looked upon as free-will offerings is plain from the circumstance that Jehovah never supposes for a moment that these generous offerings will be withheld; and perhaps all that is really signified by them is that the liberality of Jehovah’s people in the future age should greatly exceed that which had been practiced at any former time.”

c. Some festival regulation 45:18-25

18 “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In the first month on the first day you are to take a young bull without defect and purify the sanctuary.

19 The priest is to take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorposts of the temple, on the four corners of the upper ledge of the altar and on the gateposts of the inner court.

20 You are to do the same on the seventh day of the month for anyone who sins unintentionally or through ignorance; so you are to make atonement for the temple.

21 “In the first month on the fourteenth day you are to observe the Passover, a feast lasting seven days, during which you shall eat bread made without yeast.

1. Heb. 10:5-7

2. I Chron. 29:14

22 On that day the prince is to provide a bull as a sin offering for himself and for all the people of the land.

23 Every day during the seven days of the Feast he is to provide seven bulls and seven rams without defect as a burnt offering to the Lord, and a male goat for a sin offering.

24 He is to provide as a grain offering an ephah for each bull and an ephah for each ram, along with a hin of oil for each ephah.

25 "During the seven days of the Feast, which begins in the seventh month on the fifteenth day, he is to make the same provision for sin offerings, burnt offerings, grain offerings and oil.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments about the festivals mentioned here: "These are described very sketchily and presuppose that the fuller rituals were known and would be observed without needing to be elaborated here. They cover New Year's Day (18-20), Passover (21-24) and the Feast of Tabernacles (25). A number of commentators explain the regulations of verses 18-20 as being purificatory rites at the beginning of the two main divisions of the religious calendar (the first and the seventh month), preliminary to the feasts in those months. This would account for the surprising omission of the third main festival, the Feast of Weeks, but it demands that we follow LXX in verse 20; *in the seventh month, on the first day of the month* (RV mg.). It is difficult to understand why, in MT of verse 20, a second atonement is to be made six days after the first for the sake of those who sin through *error or ignorance* (20, RV) unless this is intended to be a modified 'Day of Atonement.' Whatever it is meant to be – a modification of former practices or a new pattern designed by Ezekiel – it illustrates the fact that in ancient Israel no less than today liturgical experimentation was demanded by new situations."

There are two things to be noted here: the first that human sin has its effect upon things in heaven as well as on things on earth, and the second that even unintentional sin pollutes us. The author of *Hebrews* brings out the first in the powerful statement: "It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."¹

As far as sinful pollution is concerned, we must realize that the very air we breathe can defile us spiritually and morally. If we lean against a wall or a doorpost that is freshly painted, our clothes will show paint, whether we read the sign or not.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: "Even sanctuaries on earth need cleansing, frequent cleansing; that above needs none, (which is not what Scripture teaches!) Those who worship God together should often join in renewing their repentance for their manifold defects, and applying the blood of Christ for the pardon of them, and in renewing their covenants to be more careful for the future; and it is very seasonable to begin the year with this work, as Hezekiah did when it had been long neglected, 2 Chron 29:17. They were here appointed to cleanse the sanctuary upon the first day of the month, because on the fourteenth day of the month they were to eat the Passover, an ordinance which, of all Old-Testament institutions, had most in it of Christ and gospel grace, and therefore it was very fit that they should begin to prepare for it a fortnight before by cleansing the sanctuary."

There was in the previous dispensation a consecration of the tabernacle and the temple, but not in the sense in which Ezekiel describes here the consecration of the temple. We read in Exodus about the consecration of the altar: "Do for Aaron and his sons everything I have commanded you, taking seven days to ordain them. Sacrifice a bull each day as a sin offering to make atonement. Purify the altar by making atonement for it, and anoint it to consecrate it. For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy."² And Solomon's temple was consecrated by a very large number of sacrifices: "And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God."³

1. Heb. 9:23,24

2. Ex. 29:35-37

3. II Chron. 7:5

The application of the blood at the doorposts reminds us rather of the Passover celebration in which the blood was applied to the houses. The general lesson seems to be that we can only worship God in His temple, that is through Jesus Christ, if the blood of His sacrifice has been applied to our lives. It is because the heavenly things have been purified by the blood of Christ, “we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”¹

d. Sabbaths and new moons 46:1-8

1 “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: The gate of the inner court facing east is to be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day and on the day of the New Moon it is to be opened.

2 The prince is to enter from the outside through the portico of the gateway and stand by the gatepost. The priests are to sacrifice his burnt offering and his fellowship offerings. He is to worship at the threshold of the gateway and then go out, but the gate will not be shut until evening.

3 On the Sabbaths and New Moons the people of the land are to worship in the presence of the Lord at the entrance to that gateway.

4 The burnt offering the prince brings to the Lord on the Sabbath day is to be six male lambs and a ram, all without defect.

5 The grain offering given with the ram is to be an ephah, and the grain offering with the lambs is to be as much as he pleases, along with a hin of oil for each ephah.

6 On the day of the New Moon he is to offer a young bull, six lambs and a ram, all without defect.

7 He is to provide as a grain offering one ephah with the bull, one ephah with the ram, and with the lambs as much as he wants to give, along with a hin of oil with each ephah.

8 When the prince enters, he is to go in through the portico of the gateway, and he is to come out the same way.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “This chapter falls into three divisions. The first (vers. 1-15) gives supplementary directions for the prince and the people of the land when engaged in solemn acts of worship; the second (vers. 16-18) furnishes the prince with instructions as to how he may dispose of his portion or inheritance; the third (vers. 19-24) adds particulars about the sacrificial kitchens for the priests and for the people.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: “The prince had the obligation of producing the offerings, not only for major festivals, but also for sabbaths and new moons (*i.e.* the first day of the month). Just as he had privileges in connection with the closed east gateway of the outer court (44:3), so he was also allowed to enter the east gateway of the inner court and to go as far as its innermost threshold (2). There he would have a full view of what was going on at the central altar, but he was not permitted to set foot within the inner court, which was reserved exclusively for priests and Levites. The privilege was reserved for the new moons and sabbaths; on working days the east gateway to the inner court would be closed (1). The sacrifices offered on these special occasions were the same: six lambs and a ram for a burnt-offering, a statutory ephah of flour for a cereal-offering to go with the ram, a further optional cereal-offering to go with the lambs, plus a hin of oil to each ephah (4,5). In addition, on the new moon, a young bull and an ephah of flour were to be offered (6,7). This again is a variation on the sabbath sacrifices described in the Pentateuch (Nu. 28:9f) and those for the new moon (Nu. 28:11-15).”

e. Entry and exit 46:9,10

9 “When the people of the land come before the Lord at the appointed feasts, whoever enters by the north gate to worship is to go out the south gate; and whoever enters by the south gate is to go out the north gate. No one is to return through the gate by which he entered, but each is to go out the opposite gate.

1. Heb. 10:19-22

10 The prince is to be among them, going in when they go in and going out when they go out.

These verses seem to indicate that more is involved than regulating the flow of worshippers. One Bible scholar suggests that the reason cannot be sought in the endeavor to avoid a throng, since in that case it must have been ordained that all should go in by the same gate and go out by the opposite one; it must have been “a theological one,” viz. to signify that each should go out of the sanctuary another man than he came in.

When Moses gave instructions regarding the future king of Israel, he stated: “The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, ‘You are not to go back that way again.’”¹

There is a sense in which an encounter with God ought to make us turn around and retrace our steps, but that is only supposed to happen at the first time. Once we have repented, our fellowship of God takes us out of the same well-trodden paths, leading us forward to where we never were before.

f. General regulation 46:11-15

11 “At the festivals and the appointed feasts, the grain offering is to be an ephah with a bull, an ephah with a ram, and with the lambs as much as one pleases, along with a hin of oil for each ephah.

12 When the prince provides a freewill offering to the Lord—whether a burnt offering or fellowship offerings — the gate facing east is to be opened for him. He shall offer his burnt offering or his fellowship offerings as he does on the Sabbath day. Then he shall go out, and after he has gone out, the gate will be shut.

13 “Every day you are to provide a year-old lamb without defect for a burnt offering to the Lord; morning by morning you shall provide it.

14 You are also to provide with it morning by morning a grain offering, consisting of a sixth of an ephah with a third of a hin of oil to moisten the flour. The presenting of this grain offering to the Lord is a lasting ordinance.

15 So the lamb and the grain offering and the oil shall be provided morning by morning for a regular burnt offering.

The Hebrew word used for “festivals” and “appointed feasts” are *chag* and *mowed*. Moses used the word *chag* when he said to Pharaoh: “We will go with our young and old, with our sons and daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a *festival* to the Lord.”² It is also used to denote the feast of unleavened bread that followed the Passover celebration, as in the verse: “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a *festival* to the Lord — a lasting ordinance. For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast.”³

“*Mowed* can denote “time,” “place,” or “people.” It occurs first in the creation story where God said: “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark *seasons* and days and years.”⁴ Also in “In the *Tent of Meeting*, outside the curtain that is in front of the Testimony, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.”⁵ Referring to people, we find it in the verse: “Your foes roared in the place where you met with *us*; they set up their standards as signs.”⁶ It is always in the context of meeting with God. *The King James Version* sometimes renders it “the solemnities.”

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1. Deut. 17:16,17
 2. Ex. 10:9
 3. Ex. 12:14,15
 4. Gen. 1:14
 5. Ex. 27:21

The main theme of these verses seems to be the grain offering that was to accompany the sacrifices at specific feasts. The quantity described here differs slightly from that prescribed in the previous chapter.

The grain offerings do not refer to man's sinful condition. They were "a pleasing aroma" to the Lord. The grain, which is the main element in this offering, is a product of nature. Jesus uses the image of the grain for His own life. He says: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."¹ This reference, as well as the parables of the sower and of the weeds in the field, gives a deeper meaning to this sacrifice.

The grain is uniquely a symbol of the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as of our own humanity. The purpose of grain is to be eaten. It is also our "reason d'être" to present us as a sacrifice to God. The reason for our being created is that we give our body and our human nature over to God. That was God's expectation when He breathed the breath of life into Adam and made Adam and Eve into living beings. God waited in vain for this surrender. He is still waiting in vain for most people's surrender. Even if sin had not entered the world, God would have expected us to give our body to Him as a sacrifice. Paul expresses this in *Romans*, where he says: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship."² Now, as sin has become a major issue in our lives, this sacrifice is the even more urgent.

We could say that there is a three-fold death in the grain offering: In John's Gospel Jesus speaks about the need for the kernel of corn to fall into the ground and die in order to produce fruit.³ Secondly, the grain was ground into flour, and the olives were crushed in order to make oil, and, finally, the sacrifice was put on the fire and burned. It is this last act which symbolizes complete surrender which makes this sacrifice "a pleasing aroma to the Lord." It is clear that Jesus fulfilled these three facets of the sacrifice. His humbling Himself in His baptism, His suffering of hardship, His self-denial and, ultimately, His death on the cross give the complete picture of what is expressed in this grain offering.

In the description of the various daily sacrifices, the evening sacrifice is not mentioned. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "Not only is he to perform official acts of worship on holy days and feasts, but in 'voluntary' offerings daily he is to show his individual zeal, surpassing all his people in liberality, and so setting them a princely example. The prince goes forth on the most solemn occasions, not only holy days, but when offering extraordinary sacrifices, through the gate looking toward the east, whereby the God of Israel entered in, because of the prince's close connection with Messiah, whose representative he shall be."

g. Alienation of property forbidden 46:16-18

16 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: If the prince makes a gift from his inheritance to one of his sons, it will also belong to his descendants; it is to be their property by inheritance.

17 If, however, he makes a gift from his inheritance to one of his servants, the servant may keep it until the year of freedom; then it will revert to the prince. His inheritance belongs to his sons only; it is theirs.

18 The prince must not take any of the inheritance of the people, driving them off their property. He is to give his sons their inheritance out of his own property, so that none of my people will be separated from his property."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes: "The impassioned plea of 45:8f. is here expressed in terms of a regulation having divine authority. The prince is permitted to make gifts of land to his sons and they are permitted to hold it by right of inheritance. But gifts made to royal servants may be held only on a leasehold basis: they must be returned in

6. Ps. 74:4

1. John 12:24

2. Rom. 12:1

3. John 12:24

the *year of liberty* (17), *i.e.* in the seventh year, when bondservants were to be freed (*cf.* Je. 34:14), or more probably in the fiftieth year, the year of jubilee (*cf.* Lv. 25:10-13; 27:24). In this way the prince's inheritance is safeguarded and kept within the family, and as it is further ruled that the prince is not to alienate the property of others (18), the inheritance of the common people are also protected. After all, the land is not theirs but the Lord's, and both prince and people are His lessees."

In as much as the prince prefigures the Messiah, the matter of inheritance pertains to us also. We are heirs. Paul expresses this beautifully in Romans: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."¹ The Apostle Peter mentions this also linking it to our present suffering. We read: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."² And since we have become priests in Christ, what the Lord said to Aaron pertains to us as well: "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites."³

h. Arrangements for cooking the sacrificial meals 46:19-24

19 Then the man brought me through the entrance at the side of the gate to the sacred rooms facing north, which belonged to the priests, and showed me a place at the western end.

20 He said to me, "This is the place where the priests will cook the guilt offering and the sin offering and bake the grain offering, to avoid bringing them into the outer court and consecrating the people."

21 He then brought me to the outer court and led me around to its four corners, and I saw in each corner another court.

22 In the four corners of the outer court were enclosed courts, forty cubits long and thirty cubits wide; each of the courts in the four corners was the same size.

23 Around the inside of each of the four courts was a ledge of stone, with places for fire built all around under the ledge.

24 He said to me, "These are the kitchens where those who minister at the temple will cook the sacrifices of the people."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, comments here: "In these verses we return to the conducted tour of the temple which Ezekiel was being given in chapter 42, and many would want to transpose this section to the end of 42:14. Certainly, as far as the context is concerned, somewhere in chapter 42 would be more fitting. On the other hand, it is quite understandable that verses which deal with the disposal of the sacrifices should be held over until the detailed regulations governing them have been explained. The prophet is first shown the kitchen at the western extremity of the north row of priests' chambers in the inner court, and we may safely assume that there was a similar place on the south side of the court as well. There the priest were to boil the flesh of the guilt- and sin-offerings and to bake the flour of the cereal-offering, taking great care not to carry any of these into the outer court for fear that they may *sanctify* (AV; *better communicate holiness to*, RSV) *the people* (20). The prophet then sees the four kitchen areas in the four corners of the outer court of the temple where the Levites (*the ministers of the house*, 24) boil the people's

1. Rom. 8:16,17
2. I Peter 1:3-7
3. Num. 18:20

sacrifices for them. So the temple was a place for sacrificing, cooking and eating, as well as for prayer and so-called 'spiritual' activities. The Christian church has been the poorer when it has drawn a firm dividing-line between spiritual life and social activities. In Ezekiel's temple, at any rate, there was envisaged a healthy fusion of the two elements, and this was typical of much in Old Testament worship."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary adds: "All this implies that no longer are the common and unclean to be confounded with the sacred and divine, but that in even the least things, as eating and drinking, the glory of God is to be the aim (1 Cor 10:31)."

As far as the sanctity of the sacrifices is concerned, it was considered holy because it represented the sacrifice of the body of Christ. God had said to Aaron: "I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me; all the holy offerings the Israelites give me I give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share. You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire. From all the gifts they bring me as most holy offerings, whether grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons. Eat it as something most holy; every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy."¹ Jesus made clear how the eating of the designated portions of the sacrifices, as was regulated in the Old Testament, foreshadowed the fellowship we, New Testament believers, would experience. He said: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever."²

One interesting feature of these verses is that they suggest a reversal of the principle of contagion. We know from daily life experience that sin, sickness and corruption are contagious; holiness, health and goodness are not. Habakkuk illustrates this well. We read: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?' The priests answered, 'No.' Then Haggai said, 'If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?' 'Yes,' the priests replied, 'it becomes defiled.'"³ That was the Old Testament principle. But in the New Testament, those who touched Jesus, even if only the hem of His garment, His holiness "infected" them and they were healed.⁴

In this chapter the reality of salvation had not dawned yet. But the revelation of this new principle is proof of the fact that this new temple refers to the body of Christ.

d. The life-giving waters 47:1-12

1 The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar.

2 He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

3 As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep.

1. Num. 18:8-10

2. John 6:53-59

3. Hag. 2:11-13

4. Matt. 14:6; Mark 6:56

4 He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist.

5 He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in — a river that no one could cross.

6 He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this? "Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

7 When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river.

8 He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh.

9 Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.

10 Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds — like the fish of the Great Sea.

11 But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt.

12 Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

These verses are among some of the greatest portions of biblical truth in Ezekiel, if not in all of Scripture. From this section it clear that the temple that was shown to Ezekiel was not a blueprint for a building to be constructed in Jerusalem at the conclusion of the Babylonian captivity or at any other time. It is impossible to envision a river that begins as a trickle that comes from under the threshold of one of the entrances to the temple and increases into a rushing torrent that has a life-transforming effect upon the Dead Sea. And if one feature cannot be taken literally, then the whole cannot be taken that way.

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter with the following remarks: "If read in continuation of the foregoing, it depicts the blessed consequences, in the shape of life and healing, which should flow to the land of Israel and its inhabitants from the erection in their midst of the sanctuary of Jehovah, and the observance by them of the holy ordinances of Jehovah's religion. Viewed as a preface to what follows, it exhibits the transformation which the institution of such a culture would effect upon the land before proceeding to speak of its partition among the tribes. The prophet's imagery in this paragraph may have taken as its point of departure the well-known fact that the waters of Shiloah (... Isaiah 8:6; Psalm 46:4) appeared to flow from under the temple hill, the Pool of Siloam having been fed from a spring welling up with intermittent action from beneath Ophel ... To Isaiah 'the waters of Shiloah that go softly,' had already been an emblem of the blessings to be enjoyed under Jehovah's rule (... Isaiah 8:6); to Joel (3:18) 'a fountain,' coming forth from the house of the Lord and watering the valley of Shittim, or the Acacia valley, on the borders of Moab, on the other side of Jordan, where the Israelites halted and sinned (... Numbers 25:1; 33:49), had symbolized the benefits that should be experienced by Israel in the Messianic era when Jehovah should permanently dwell in his holy mount of Zion; to Ezekiel, accordingly, the same figure naturally occurs as a means of exhibiting the life and healing, peace and prosperity, that should result to Israel from the erection upon her soil of Jehovah's sanctuary and the institution among her people of Jehovah's worship. Zechariah (... Zechariah 13:1; 14:8) and John (... Revelation 22:1,2) undoubtedly make use of the same image, which, it is even probable, they derived from Ezekiel."

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, adds: "The picture of the river flowing from under the threshold of the temple and fertilizing the barren areas of the Dead Sea valley is a clear instance of symbolism, expressive of the blessings which will flow from God's presence in His sanctuary to other parts of the land. To attempt to take this literally, as some have done, is to miss completely the point which is being made. So we need not pause over the traditions that suggest that Mount Zion, on which the temple was built, concealed beneath its rocky exterior 'an inexhaustible supply of water and underground reservoirs' ... No amount of water-divining will confirm Ezekiel 47. The fact that this represents an idealization of God's abundant blessing is confirmed by passages such as Psalms 46:4; 65:9; Isaiah 33:20f. Blessing, fertility and water are almost interchangeable ideas in the Old Testament. The commentator is, however, justified in looking for parallels to and antecedents for this kind of symbolism, and most turn to the creation

narrative in Genesis 2. The former paradise which was water by the four-streamed river (Gn. 2:10) is here paralleled by the new creation which also has its river and its trees (7). If we add to this the fact which has already been observed (on 28:1-19) that Ezekiel seems to have known of a paradise tradition linked to a 'holy mountain of God' (28:14,16) as well as a 'garden of God,' the parallel to our present passage is almost complete. The river grows in volume as it descends eastwards through the mountains towards the Dead Sea and before long it becomes too deep to wade through. The sheer physical impossibility of this (for no tributaries are mentioned that would swell the stream; indeed they would nullify the symbolic message that it all comes from the one true source), while it may worry us, holds no inconsistency for the writer. For this is accepted apocalyptic imagery: what is said and what that means are more important than the logic of the way it is expressed. The context is the continuation of Ezekiel's vision. From visiting the kitchens in the outer court, the prophet is taken back to the door of the temple (1) where he sees the water trickling from the southern corner of the temple threshold (so RSV). It flows from there past the altar of burnt-offering, still on the south side, and eventually issues from the temple area on the south side of the closed eastern gateway (2). Ezekiel has to make a detour through the north gateway in order to get to see it, for even in his vision he was earth-bound. A thousand cubits eastwards from the temple wall he is led across the stream and finds it ankle-deep (3; Heb. *mê`opsayîm*, lit, 'water of ankles'). So strange did this phrase seem to the LXX translator that he virtually transliterated it and made 'water of remission' (*hydôr apheseôs*), with the result that many early Christian commentators applied this symbolism to the waters of baptism. A warning to both translators and interpreters! Similar phrases follow as the water reaches to knees and loins (4), and then the river becomes impassible on foot. The guide who shows all this to Ezekiel and measures it out with the help of his measuring-line (3; cf. 40:3) explains that the river flows eastwards towards the Arabah (8, RV, RSV; AV *desert*), which is 'the depression' (Arabic '*el-Ghôr*') of the Jordan valley, the Dead Sea and the Wadi el-Arâbâ running southwards from it. Although the river is described in verses 5-9 as a *nahal* (or wady, 'which dries up for much of the year'), it is obvious that it is an ever-flowing stream which brings lasting fertility in its wake. The stagnant water of the Dead Sea become fresh and swarm with fish (8,9), and trees flourish on its banks, producing fresh fruit *every month* (12 RSV). Even their leaves will have medicinal properties, and the reason given for all this is that the water for them flows from the sanctuary (12, RSV). The temple is to be the source of life, healing and fruitfulness. By miraculous means the impossible is going to be achieved ... While the Dead Sea becomes a fisherman's paradise, the swamps around it retain their saltiness (11), so that these rich mineral deposits can still be exploited, presumably for both domestic and liturgical use (43:24). The visionary still retains a touch of practical realism."

What has not been mentioned so far is that the water from the sanctuary, the symbol of God's revelation of Himself on earth, could be emblematic of the Holy Spirit and that this vision, in which Ezekiel crosses the river at various stages, represents his experience with the Spirit of God.

The Hebrew text of v.1 reads literally: "Afterward he brought me again unto the door of the house; and, behold, water issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward; for the forefront of the house stood toward the east, and the waters came down from under from the side of the right of the house, at the south side of the altar." The amount of water is not indicated here, but it is obvious that it could not have been anything but a trickle. Water does not gush out by the gallons from under a threshold. If the stream has already increased to the point where a thousand cubits farther, it has to be waded through, it means that the volume has increased already in the distance covered. *The New Living Translation* renders the distance measured between the various places where Ezekiel is ordered to cross the stream as 1750 feet.

Now, if we interpret the vision in terms of Ezekiel's experience with the Holy Spirit, as I believe we may, it is different from the experience of other people in the Bible. There is an obvious difference between the way the Holy Spirit worked in the Old Testament and in the New. In the New Testament, the filling with the Holy Spirit was an overwhelming event. On the day of Pentecost the apostles were overpowered by the power of the Holy Spirit, who manifested Himself as "a sound like the blowing of a violent wind," showing "tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them," and enabling them "to speak in other tongues."¹ In the pictures of Ezekiel, this would go beyond the point where Ezekiel could no longer cross. The apostles drowned, so to speak, in Ezekiel's river. The

1. See Acts 2:2-4.

apostles' experience repeated itself when the Holy Spirit came and shook the place where they were praying.¹ But even in the Old Testament, some people experienced the Holy Spirit as an overwhelming power. We read about Samson: "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat."² We read about King Saul: "The Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he joined in their prophesying."³ And after David had been anointed, we read: "from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power."⁴

In comparison, what happened to Ezekiel in this vision was that the prophet got "his feet wet" and went a little beyond that, although never experiencing the total filling with the Spirit of God. Yet, he received visions of God's glory that no one before him had ever seen. Even Isaiah and Daniel were not exposed to God's glory in the same way he was.

We could see in the various crossings Ezekiel had to make a picture of spiritual growth. Even if the Holy Spirit of God takes a hold of a person, His infilling is never total and permanent. Even after the day of Pentecost the apostles were filled again. There must be in the life of every believer phases of spiritual growth. It is as we process in our fellowship with God that we become to realize how little we know and how much more there is to be attained.

The apostles made it clear in their New Testament epistles that fellowship with God is subject to growth and that total intimacy is subject to increase. From Paul's letters we quote the following examples: "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁵ "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."⁶ "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God."⁷

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."⁸

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."⁹

"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."¹⁰

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1. Acts 4:31
 2. Judg. 14:6
 3. I Sam. 10:10
 4. I Sam. 16:13
 5. II Cor. 4:6
 6. Eph. 4:11-13
 7. Phil. 1:9-11
 8. Eph. 1:17,18
 9. Phil. 3:10,11
 10. Col. 2:2-4

And Peter writes: “Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹

Water that increases in volume is growing and growth means life. This water, therefore, can be called “living water.” Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman about living water, saying: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. Everyone who drinks this [well] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”² And to all of us, He says: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”³ With the words “as the Scripture has said” Jesus probably referred to Ezekiel’s vision here.

If we surrender our lives to God the Holy Spirit will saturate us with Himself and make us a member of the body of Christ, as Paul says: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”⁴ The Greek word used is *baptizo*, which is derived from the verb *bapto*, meaning “to immerse,” or “to dip.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states that the word is “derived from a root signifying ‘deep’, also signified ‘to dye,’ which is suggested in Rev 19:13, of the Lord’s garment ‘dipped (i.e. dyed) in blood.’”

In vv.6b-12 Ezekiel is led back to the place where he started. This is more than a look at previous experiences. It is the putting personal experiences in the context of the greater pattern. What happened to Ezekiel on a smaller scale is what the Spirit of God is doing in all. Ezekiel realizes that he has become a channel of healing. As the name indicates, the Dead Sea is the embodiment of death. It is more than the place of judgment over the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; it represents the total fruit of human sin, the accumulation of all corruption of God’s perfect creation. God’s Holy Spirit makes us channels of healing as soon as we surrender our bodies to Him.

How wonderful when God lifts a tip of the veil and shows us something of the part we play in the overall picture of restoration and resurrection! Even Sodom and Gomorrah will be resurrected from the dead.

The Apostle John sees the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision as part of the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb. We read: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”⁵

Finally, we end this section with an observation by *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, which states: “If we search into the things of God, we shall find some things very plain and easy to be understood, as the waters that were

1. II Peter 1:2-8
2. John 4:10,13,14
3. John 7:37-39
4. I Cor. 12:13
5. Rev. 22:1-5

but to the ankles, others more difficult, and which require a deeper search, as the water to the knees or the loins, and some quite beyond our reach, which we cannot penetrate into, or account for, but, despairing to find the bottom, must, as St. Paul, sit down at the brink, and adore the depth, Rom 11:33. It has been often said that in the scripture, like these waters of the sanctuary, there are some places so shallow that a lamb may wade through them, and others so deep that an elephant may swim in them. And it is our wisdom, as the prophet here, to begin with that which is most easy, and get our hearts washed with those things before we proceed to that which is dark and hard to be understood; it is good to take our work before us.”

e. The division of the land 47:15-48:35

1. The boundaries of the land 47:13-21

13 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "These are the boundaries by which you are to divide the land for an inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel, with two portions for Joseph.

14 You are to divide it equally among them. Because I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your forefathers, this land will become your inheritance.

15 "This is to be the boundary of the land: "On the north side it will run from the Great Sea by the Hethlon road past Lebo Hamath to Zedad,

16 Berothah and Sibraim (which lies on the border between Damascus and Hamath), as far as Hazer Hatticon, which is on the border of Hauran.

17 The boundary will extend from the sea to Hazar Enan, along the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hamath to the north. This will be the north boundary.

18 "On the east side the boundary will run between Hauran and Damascus, along the Jordan between Gilead and the land of Israel, to the eastern sea and as far as Tamar. This will be the east boundary.

19 "On the south side it will run from Tamar as far as the waters of Meribah Kadesh, then along the Wadi [of Egypt] to the Great Sea. This will be the south boundary.

20 "On the west side, the Great Sea will be the boundary to a point opposite Lebo Hamath. This will be the west boundary.

21 "You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel.

In this last section of the book, God tells Ezekiel to re-allocate the land to the twelve tribes. Ezekiel follows basically the instructions God gave to Moses before the Israelites entered Canaan. We read in Numbers: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Command the Israelites and say to them: “When you enter Canaan, the land that will be allotted to you as an inheritance will have these boundaries: Your southern side will include some of the Desert of Zin along the border of Edom. On the east, your southern boundary will start from the end of the Salt Sea, cross south of Scorpion Pass, continue on to Zin and go south of Kadesh Barnea. Then it will go to Hazar Addar and over to Azmon, where it will turn, join the Wadi of Egypt and end at the Sea. Your western boundary will be the coast of the Great Sea. This will be your boundary on the west. For your northern boundary, run a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor and from Mount Hor to Lebo Hamath. Then the boundary will go to Zedad, continue to Ziphron and end at Hazar Enan. This will be your boundary on the north. For your eastern boundary, run a line from Hazar Enan to Shepham. The boundary will go down from Shepham to Riblah on the east side of Ain and continue along the slopes east of the Sea of Kinnereth. Then the boundary will go down along the Jordan and end at the Salt Sea. This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side.”¹

The main question that arises here is how to interpret God’s instructions to Ezekiel. The land had been divided “on paper” and occupied when Joshua led Israel into Canaan. Israel never completely settled in every part

1. Num. 34:1-12

that had been allotted to her. The closest she ever came to take all God wanted her to have was during the reign of Solomon.

Historically, none of what Ezekiel describes here ever occurred. The northern tribes, with the exception of a few individuals, who migrated to Jerusalem when Jeroboam instituted his own brand of worship, never even returned from their Assyrian captivity. This leaves us little option but to draw spiritual implications from this blueprint in the same way as from the measurements of the temple and the description of the rituals.

Israel actually consisted of thirteen tribes, the tribe of Joseph being divided into Ephraim and Manasseh. But since the tribe of Levi did not receive any territory in the land, the division deals with only twelve tribes. The splitting up of Joseph into two factions dates from the days of Jacob. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "Joseph's sons were given the birthright, forfeited by Reuben the first-born because he defiled his father's bed (1 Chron 5:1). Therefore the former is here put first. His two sons having distinct portions, make up the whole number, twelve portions, as he had just before specified 'twelve tribes of Israel;' for Levi had no separate inheritance, so that he is not reckoned in the twelve."

We read about Jacob's initiative: "Now Israel's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. Israel said to Joseph, 'I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too.' Then Joseph removed them from Israel's knees and bowed down with his face to the ground. And Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn. Then he blessed Joseph and said, 'May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm — may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.' When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to him, 'No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.' But his father refused and said, 'I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.' He blessed them that day and said, 'In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."' So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, 'I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers. And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.'"¹

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary observes: "The definition of the boundaries commences with v. 15. In form it differs in many points from Num 34:1-5, but in actual fact it is in harmony with the Mosaic definition. In Num 34 the description commences with the southern boundary, then proceeds to the western and northern boundaries, and closes with the eastern. In Ezekiel it commences with the northern boundary and proceeds to the east, the south, and the west. This difference may be explained in a very simple manner, from the fact that the Israelites in the time of Moses came from Egypt i.e., marching from the south, and stood by the south-eastern boundary of the land, whereas at this time they were carried away into the northern lands Assyria and Babylon, and were regarded as returning thence. Again, in Ezekiel the boundaries are described much more briefly than in Num 34, the northern boundary alone being somewhat more circumstantially described."

If these instructions are not meant to be interpreted literally, we ask what the spiritual lesson to be drawn is. Having seen that the measuring of the temple and its various parts has a spiritual meaning, we can apply the same sense to the inheritance God wants His children to possess.

The author of *Hebrews* interpreted the meaning better than anyone else, saying: "So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways."' So I declared on

1. Gen. 48:10-22

oath in my anger, “They shall never enter my rest.” See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. 3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘So I declared on oath in my anger, “They shall never enter my rest.”’ And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.’ And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.” It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”¹

2. The place of aliens 47:22,23

22 *You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.*

23 *In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance," declares the Sovereign Lord.*

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, writes about this: “An interesting example of broad-mindedness is incorporated at this stage, and it is the only indication within the vision that any but true-born Israelites can have any real place within the restored Israel of the future. The *aliens* (Heb. *gərîm*) who reside among the Israelites are to have a share in the inheritance of the tribe with which they live. This is in keeping with the regulations of the Pentateuch (*cf.* Lv. 24:22; Nu. 15:29) and with the teaching of Isaiah 56:3-8, and it is not inconsistent with Ezekiel’s earlier words (*cf.* 14:7; 22:7). It is based on the principle that if these men choose to accept the standards, the religion and the way of life within Israel as a permanency, *i.e.* as proselytes who settle and have children there (22), then they are entitled to the same treatment as native Israelites.”

But the intent of these verses goes well beyond simple “broad-mindedness” on the part of the Israelites. If broadminded at all, it is God who is “broadminded.” It is the broad-mindedness that is celebrated in the psalm in which God says about Zion: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me — Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’ Indeed, of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her,’ and the Most High himself will establish her.’ The Lord will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion.’ Selah As they make music they will sing, ‘All my fountains are in you.’”² This is what Peter describes in his epistle, saying: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s

1. Heb. 3:7-4:10

2. Ps. 87:4-7

power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”¹ These are those who entered into God’s rest, who the Apostle Paul calls “the Israel of God.”²

The text in Isaiah to which Taylor refers preaches the Gospel to the whole world, illustrating the meaning of the fact that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. We read: “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the Lord says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant — to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.’ The Sovereign Lord declares — he who gathers the exiles of Israel: ‘I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.’”³

3. The seven northern tribes 48:1-7

1 "These are the tribes, listed by name: At the northern frontier, Dan will have one portion; it will follow the Hethlon road to Lebo Hamath; Hazar Enan and the northern border of Damascus next to Hamath will be part of its border from the east side to the west side.

2 "Asher will have one portion; it will border the territory of Dan from east to west.

3 "Naphtali will have one portion; it will border the territory of Asher from east to west.

4 "Manasseh will have one portion; it will border the territory of Naphtali from east to west.

5 "Ephraim will have one portion; it will border the territory of Manasseh from east to west.

6 "Reuben will have one portion; it will border the territory of Ephraim from east to west.

7 "Judah will have one portion; it will border the territory of Reuben from east to west.

The Pulpit Commentary points out that there is a difference between the divisions mentioned here and those given in *Joshua*. We read: “These should be seven, lie in parallel strips from the Mediterranean to the east border, and be allocated to the tribes of Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben, and Judah. The divergences between this and the earlier division under Joshua (14-19.) are apparent. (1) In that Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh received portions on the east of Jordan; in this no tribe obtains a lot outside of the boundary of the Holy Land. (2) In that the allocation commenced in the south with Judah; in this it begins in the north with Dan ... (3) In that the most northern portions, those of Asher and Naphtali, started from a point a little above Tyre; in this the most northern portion, that of Dan, proceeds from the entering in or the south border of Hamath, some fifty or sixty miles north of Damascus. (4) In that the portions were scarcely ever parallel; in this they always are. (5) In that the portions of Judah and Reuben lay south, and that of Dan west of Jerusalem; in this all three are situated north of the city.”

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes here: “The pattern which the allocation of the land follows is that, because the central sacred portion is well to the south, seven tribes have land to the north of it and the remaining five have land to the south. The northern tribes (beginning from the north) are Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben and Judah. Of these it is worth noting that the three which are farthest from the sanctuary are tribes descended from the sons of Jacob’s concubines, Dan and Naphtali having been born to Rachel’s maid Bilhah, and Asher to Leah’s maid Zilpah (Gn. 30:5-13). The fourth son by concubinage, Gad, is the farthest away from the sanctuary among the southern group of tribes (27). Judah has pride of place immediately to the north of the central portion, as being the inheritor of the Messianic promise through the blessing of Jacob (Gn. 49:8-12), and he supersedes Reuben,

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1. I Peter 1:3-5
 2. Gal. 6:16
 3. Isa. 56:3-8

the first-born, who is the next position away on the north side. The other two places are held by the two grandsons of Rachel, the children of Joseph.”

From *Matthew Henry's Commentary* we gather the following: “Every tribe in this visionary distribution had its particular lot assigned it by a divine appointment; for it was never the intention of the gospel to pluck up the hedge of property and lay all in common; it was in a way of charity, not of legal right, that the first Christians had all things common (Acts 2:44), and many precepts of the gospel suppose that every man should know his own. We must not only acknowledge, but acquiesce in, the hand of God appointing us our lot, and be well pleased with it, believing it fittest for us. He shall choose our inheritance for us, Ps 47:4,5. [The] tribes lay contiguous. By the border of one tribe was the portion of another, all in a row, in exact order, so that, like stones in an arch, they fixed, and strengthened, and wedged in one another. Behold how good and how pleasant a thing it is for brethren thus to dwell together! It was a figure of the communion of churches and saints under the gospel-government; thus, though they are many, yet they are one, and should hold together in holy love and mutual assistance. ... [The] sanctuary was in the midst of them. There were seven tribes to the north of it and the Levites, the prince's, and the city's portion, with that of five tribes more, to the south of it; so that it was, as it ought to be, in the heart of the kingdom, that it might diffuse its benign influences to the whole, and might be the centre of their unity. The tribes that lay most remote from each other would meet there in a mutual acquaintance and fellowship. Those of the same parish or congregation, though dispersed, and having no occasion otherwise to know each other, yet by meeting stately to worship God together should have their hearts knit to each other in holy love.”

4. The central portion 48:8-22

8 "Bordering the territory of Judah from east to west will be the portion you are to present as a special gift. It will be 25,000 cubits wide, and its length from east to west will equal one of the tribal portions; the sanctuary will be in the center of it.

9 "The special portion you are to offer to the Lord will be 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide.

10 This will be the sacred portion for the priests. It will be 25,000 cubits long on the north side, 10,000 cubits wide on the west side, 10,000 cubits wide on the east side and 25,000 cubits long on the south side. In the center of it will be the sanctuary of the Lord.

11 This will be for the consecrated priests, the Zadokites, who were faithful in serving me and did not go astray as the Levites did when the Israelites went astray.

12 It will be a special gift to them from the sacred portion of the land, a most holy portion, bordering the territory of the Levites.

13 "Alongside the territory of the priests, the Levites will have an allotment 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. Its total length will be 25,000 cubits and its width 10,000 cubits.

14 They must not sell or exchange any of it. This is the best of the land and must not pass into other hands, because it is holy to the Lord.

15 "The remaining area, 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000 cubits long, will be for the common use of the city, for houses and for pastureland. The city will be in the center of it

16 and will have these measurements: the north side 4,500 cubits, the south side 4,500 cubits, the east side 4,500 cubits, and the west side 4,500 cubits.

17 The pastureland for the city will be 250 cubits on the north, 250 cubits on the south, 250 cubits on the east, and 250 cubits on the west.

18 What remains of the area, bordering on the sacred portion and running the length of it, will be 10,000 cubits on the east side and 10,000 cubits on the west side. Its produce will supply food for the workers of the city.

19 The workers from the city who farm it will come from all the tribes of Israel.

20 The entire portion will be a square, 25,000 cubits on each side. As a special gift you will set aside the sacred portion, along with the property of the city.

21 "What remains on both sides of the area formed by the sacred portion and the city property will belong to the prince. It will extend eastward from the 25,000 cubits of the sacred portion to the eastern border, and westward

from the 25,000 cubits to the western border. Both these areas running the length of the tribal portions will belong to the prince, and the sacred portion with the temple sanctuary will be in the center of them.

22 So the property of the Levites and the property of the city will lie in the center of the area that belongs to the prince. The area belonging to the prince will lie between the border of Judah and the border of Benjamin.

A parallel description of this part of the land is already given earlier.¹ The difference in this section is that the land set aside for the sanctuary is to be a freewill offering by the people to God. The Hebrew word used is *teruwmah*, “offering.” The word is first used in Exodus, when the Israelites were asked to bring material for the building of the tabernacle. We read: “Tell the Israelites to bring me an *offering*. You are to receive the *offering* for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. These are the *offerings* you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.”² It is the *teruwmah* that gives to this section its special character.

The Creator of heaven and earth has, of course, the right to our entire planet. “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.”³ Yet, He does not force His presence upon mankind; He only dwells by invitation. God will only rule if we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁴ And Jesus will only return if we pray “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”⁵ It is nigh to impossible for us to grasp the fact that the richest Person in heaven would make Himself dependent upon our generosity. Yet, such is the case!

Jesus paid the bride price of our redemption, but the marriage of the Lamb will not take place unless we accept His proposal. The New Jerusalem will only come down from heaven, filled with the glory of God, only if we say “yes” to Him.

According to *The New Living Translation*, “The area set aside for the Lord’s Temple will be 8 miles long and 6 miles wide. For the priests there will be a strip of land measuring 8 miles long by 3 miles wide, with the Lord’s Temple at the center.” That is a huge area for one building. John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel* comments: “According to verse 9 (MT) this latter phrase describes a section of only 25,000 x 10,000 cubits, presumably the portion which is for the use of the priests, but in verse 14 the Levites’ portion of the same size is added on and both are called *holy to the Lord* (14). LXX has the measurement of 25,000 x 20,000 in both 45:1 and 48:9,13 and this would certainly be more consistent. As with the prince’s territory (46:17), there is to be no alienation of this land: it is *holy to the Lord* (14) ... The total area of the whole of this central square, 25,000 x 25,000 cubits, would be about 50 square miles by the conventional cubit or 69 square miles by Ezekiel’s longer cubit (*cf.* 40:5).” If applied upon the map of present-day Israel, the area would cover most of the territory.

Beside the allotment to the priests and Levites, we find the stipulation that the land cannot be sold. That is the same clause found in *Leviticus*: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.⁶ If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold.”⁷

1. See Ezek. 45:1-8.

2. Ex. 25:2-7

3. Ps. 24:1-2

4. Matt. 6:10

5. Rev. 22:20

6. Ezek. 40:46; 43:19

7. Lev. 25:23-25

As was mentioned earlier, the Zadokites were singled out as priests under the new dispensation. Zadok was the high priest under the reign of King Solomon.¹ According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, the name means: "righteous." It may be that the choice is symbolic and that the meaning of the name is emphasized, more than the people belonging to that particular clan. Only the righteous have a right to serve.

The section ends by mentioning the location of the area that belongs to "the prince," the one who represents the Messiah.

5. The five southern tribes 48:23-29

23 "As for the rest of the tribes: Benjamin will have one portion; it will extend from the east side to the west side.

24 "Simeon will have one portion; it will border the territory of Benjamin from east to west.

25 "Issachar will have one portion; it will border the territory of Simeon from east to west.

26 "Zebulun will have one portion; it will border the territory of Issachar from east to west.

27 "Gad will have one portion; it will border the territory of Zebulun from east to west.

28 "The southern boundary of Gad will run south from Tamar to the waters of Meribah Kadesh, then along the Wadi [of Egypt] to the Great Sea.

29 "This is the land you are to allot as an inheritance to the tribes of Israel, and these will be their portions," declares the Sovereign Lord.

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, observes about these verses: "To the south of the holy portion are the allotted areas for the remaining five tribes. Benjamin has the privileged position nearest to the sanctuary, as his father's youngest son by Rachel; Simeon, Issachar and Zebulun come next, all born of Leah; and finally, as we have already noticed, Gad, the child of the concubine, Zilpah. It needs little imagination to realize that, apart from Judah and Benjamin, which adjoin the holy portion and which always had the closest geographical interest in Jerusalem, the other ten tribes are allotted without any regard to their original position in the land of Israel at the time of the conquest. Once again it has been a case of Ezekiel's symbolical patterning of the future according to his own inspired judgment."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary gives the following outline of the division: "This is the land which ye shall divide. Thus the order of allotments is:

DIVISION OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

NORTH

Dan

Asher

Naphtali

Ephraim

Reuben

WESTJudahEAST

A

B

C

Benjamin

Simeon

Issachar

Zebulun

1. I Chron. 29:22

Gad

SOUTH

In the middle of A was the temple, and this whole portion was given to the priests of Zadok's line. B was given to the Levites. C is the secular portion, in the center of which stands the city. Thus the holy portion of the land does not stand midway between the two divisions of tribes, but has seven north of it and five south of it."

The enumeration of the tribes and their allotment reminds us of John's vision of the "sealed ones" in *Revelation*: "Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: "144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah

12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000."¹

John's list is as symbolic as Ezekiel's, omitting Dan and including Levi. Ezekiel omits Levi and mentions Dan.

6. The gates of the city 48:30-35

30 "These will be the exits of the city: Beginning on the north side, which is 4,500 cubits long,

31 the gates of the city will be named after the tribes of Israel. The three gates on the north side will be the gate of Reuben, the gate of Judah and the gate of Levi.

32 "On the east side, which is 4,500 cubits long, will be three gates: the gate of Joseph, the gate of Benjamin and the gate of Dan.

33 "On the south side, which measures 4,500 cubits, will be three gates: the gate of Simeon, the gate of Issachar and the gate of Zebulun.

34 "On the west side, which is 4,500 cubits long, will be three gates: the gate of Gad, the gate of Asher and the gate of Naphtali.

*35 "The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits." And the name of the city from that time on will be: **THE LORD IS THERE.**"*

What Ezekiel describes here is "the city of God," the real Jerusalem of which the capital of Israel was a shadow. This is the Jerusalem about which the author of *Hebrews* says: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a

1. Rev. 7:4-8

better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”¹

It is the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, which John describes in Revelation, saying: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”²

The gates were an important part of a city in the olden days in which human habitats had to be surrounded by walls that protected from enemy attacks. Interestingly, the gates are called “exits” instead of “entrances.” The Hebrew word *tow`ebah* that is used makes the description even more interesting, because the literal meaning of the word is “something morally disgusting.” We find it used for the first time in Scripture in: “They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is *detestable* to Egyptians.”³

The fact that the gates are called “exits” suggests that the inhabitants of the city are inside and that the idea of ever wanting to leave the place is not only inconceivable but morally disgusting.

The Pulpit Commentary comments about “the goings out of the city”: “These were not ... the city exits, or gates, which are afterwards referred to, but ... the extensions or boundary-lines of the city, in other words, the city walls in which the gates should be placed, and which are measured before the gates are specified. The north wall, with which the rest should correspond, should be four thousand and five hundred measures; literally, *five hundred and four thousand ... by measure.*”

The crowning statement with which Ezekiel closes his prophecies is YAHWEH SHAAMAAH, “THE LORD IS THERE.” This corresponds with John’s description of the New Jerusalem: “It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”⁴

John B. Taylor, in *Ezekiel*, closes his study of the book with: “Ezekiel’s closing words gave to the city its new name: *Yahweh Sammah, The Lord is there* (35). This was a grand finale to his book and to his ministry. In his twenty-five years of exile and in the forty-eight chapters of his book, Ezekiel had seen the Lord withdraw from His temple because of the sins that were being committed there, he had met with Him by the waters of Babylon in the vision of the chariot-throne, he had promised the exiles that there would be a new covenant when God would be with His people as their God for ever, he had seen in symbolic vision the temple and the Israel of the future. Now at last the Lord would be there, with His people, for ever. For Ezekiel, the climax had been reach: but it was still only a vision. John, the exile in Patmos, who saw Ezekiel’s words fulfilled in the coming of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us, also looked forward to the day when a great voice would be heard from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people’ (Rev. 21:3). The glory of heaven is the ultimate fulfillment of it all. It is to that great culmination that all Ezekiel’s readers should be led.”

Toccoa Falls, GA, June 9, 2009

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1. Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16; 12:22; 13:14
 2. Rev. 21:9-14
 3. Gen. 43:32
 4. Rev 21:11

