

**Preachers' Gatherings 2018**

# **Preaching Ezekiel**

**Booklet 1: Introduction**

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**October/November 2018**

‘Get a new heart and a new spirit’

*Ezekiel 18.31*



‘I will give you a new heart  
and put a new spirit in you;  
I will remove your heart of stone from you  
and give you a heart of flesh.  
And I will put my Spirit in you’

*Ezekiel 36. 26, 27*

# Preaching Ezekiel Booklet 1, Introduction

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## **The Vision**

*For preachers to be thrilled by, keen to unfold and unleash, all-Ezekiel; and to feel able to do so.*

## **The Remit**

‘To equip preachers, over four hours, to be able to start teaching a book of the Bible within two weeks.’

## **The Resource**

**Booklet 1**      Introduction to Ezekiel

**Booklet 2**      Sermon Resources

# Ezekiel at a glance: summary of chapters

*(Italics = the good news amidst the accusations, judgement and warnings)*

## I Ch. 1 – 24: *Before* the fall of Jerusalem. Warning. Prophecies of 593-587 BC

### A<sup>1</sup>. Ezekiel's visions of God and call (1-3)

1. Storm, chariot vision, radiant figure. Ezekiel heard voice, fell.
2. He told me to speak, + or – welcome, to Israel. Scroll written both sides. Lament.
3. Ate scroll. H.S. took E. to Tel Abib to warn both wicked and righteous. E. is to be bound and dumb until God opens his mouth again (33.22).

### B. Woe to Israel/Judah (4-24)

4. Make a model of Jerusalem, lie on your side as bearing their sin, eat only spelt bread.
5. Shave and disperse your hair in thirds: famine, sword, scattering of Jerusalem.
6. Israel will fall, through famine, sword and plague.
7. Israel's end has come because detestable idols and practices.
8. E. is taken in vision to Jerusalem, shown idolatry of elders and women. God will deal with them.
9. Glory in temple. Mark those who lament the idolatry; angels sent to kill most of the others.
10. Ichabod: the Glory leaves the Temple by the chariot of ch. 1.
11. God will exile them *but later return them with new heart and spirit*. E. is returned to Babylon.
12. E. to pack and leave home via hole in wall: // king will leave and be taken, blind, to Babylon.
13. Woe to false prophets and female magicians. *God will save his people from them.*
14. To idolaters asking God's guidance: repent! Noah, Daniel and Job combined could not prevent judgement on the nation now.
15. Jerusalem is a useless vine.
16. (Vivid) Jerusalem, I found and clothed you but now you are a promiscuous prostitute. I'll strip you naked; *yet later will remake covenant.*

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<sup>1</sup> For divisions A to F see p. 19.

17. Two eagles (Babylon, Egypt) carry off cedar (king); *yet later, Messiah = sheltering tree*<sup>2</sup>.
18. Three generations, establishing it is the soul that sins that dies. But God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.
19. Mother Judah = (1) lioness w two cubs → Babylon, (2) vine broken and taken to desert.
20. Don't ask Me for a word: in every generation you have chosen idols and broken my laws. I will exile you; *yet later, restore you*.
21. Lament, Ezekiel. I am going to kill righteous and wicked alike, using Babylon, because of your sins. Ammon too.
22. (useful list of) Jerusalem's sins. I will scatter and furnace them. Sins of leaders, priests, the wealthy.
23. (vivid) Prostitutes Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem): Babylon and Assyria will strip and abduct you.
24. Babylon besieges Jerusalem // cooking pot. E's wife dies but he must not mourn, for the same will happen to Judah in regard to the temple and Jerusalem and they must not mourn.

## **II. Ch. 25-32. *Around the time Jerusalem fell.* Providence. Prophecies around 587 BC**

### **C. Oracles against the nations; care for Israel (25-32)**

25. Oracles against Ammon, Moab, Edom & Philistia for hating Israel.
- 26 & 27. Tyre will be destroyed for hating Israel. Her funeral song.
28. Oracles against Tyre for sin against God, and against Sidon. *But I will return and restore Israel.*
- 29 & 30. I will make Egypt a waste, through Nebuchadnezzar, for letting Israel down; *and strengthen Israel.*
- 31 & 32. I will cut Egypt down like a cedar tree. They will go to the world of the dead.

## **III. Ch. 33-48. *After Jerusalem fell.* Promise. Prophecies of 587 to ca. 570 BC**

### **D. Salvation for God's people (33-37)**

33. Ezekiel to be a watchman to warn Israel. God reopens E's mouth (3.26). News of Jerusalem's fall → people will know you are a prophet.

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<sup>2</sup> Matt. 13.32

34. (Important) Rulers of Israel are bad shepherds. → *God will shepherd his people, placing David over them.*
35. God will devastate Edom for her enmity against Israel.
36. (v. important) *Later God will bless Israel with a new heart, mind and spirit and restore her, to the honour of His Name.*
37. (v. important) Dry bones, prophesied to, become bodies, *come to life. Judah + Israel will be reunited, one kingdom with David as king.*

### **E. Final victory over God's enemies (38, 39)**

38. I will bring Gog here, tell him to invade Israel; *and be angry when he does.*
39. Gog's doom to God's glory v.21. *For Israel: mercy and return to home and to me, to my glory.*

### **F. Visions of a new temple, Torah and Eden (40-48)**

40. E. is taken in vision to Jerusalem. A man shows him the outer and inner three gates of temple area.
41. Holy and most holy places, external rooms, temple dimensions, wooden altar near MHP.
42. Two buildings near temple; temple area.
43. Vision: the glory returns to the temple. The people are to repent. The altar and its consecration with sacrifices.
44. East gate not to be used because glory returned through it. Who may enter. Regulations for Levites and priests: clothes, teaching, purity, possessions.
45. The Lord's portion in the land. The prince's, & his offerings. Three festivals: New Year, Passover, Tabernacles.
46. Prince, festivals, people's exits and entrances, daily offering, prince and land, temple kitchens.
47. Deepening stream from temple to Dead Sea. Boundaries of the land.
48. Division of the land. The Lord's portion. Twelve gates of Jerusalem. To be called *The Lord is there.*

That is where God is taking history. There shall be one flock  
and one shepherd, Jesus our Davidic king,  
with God in the midst.

Ezek. 34.22-24, 37.24-26; John 10.11-16; Eph. 2.11-22; Rev. 7.17

## Why preach through Ezekiel?

“No-one preaches on Ezekiel; why would a person preach on Ezekiel?”

*Ezekiel is a key book in Scripture.* Uniquely as link-man and scholar<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel draws on the thoughts and theologies of earlier OT writers and weaves them into a vision for the on-going political and religious life of God’s people. His themes are taken up by the rest of Scripture all the way to the book of Revelation. As a theologian in his own right he contributes insights of his own such as

- The solemnity of being a watchman in ch. 3 and 33;
- His theodicy, vindicating God and his providence, in ch. 18;
- His portrayal of the final conflict between good and evil in ch. 38 and 39, the pre-apocalyptic prophecy about Gog and Magog<sup>4</sup>;
- Ezekiel 40-48 is the only body of legislation in the OT which is not placed in the mouth of Moses.

‘By his visions, he stands at the source of the apocalyptic tradition; for his spiritual penetration, he has been called ‘the father of Judaism’<sup>5</sup>.

*Ezekiel wrote at a key moment in history:* before, at and after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 or 586BC<sup>6</sup>. His first section speaks before the fall of Jerusalem, justifying it and warning of it. His second speaks mostly around the time of her fall, addressing the question how God would deal with the nations who were his and their enemies. His third speaks after Jerusalem fell, promising the second exodus from captivity and the renewal and messianic era that were to come.

*Exile is a seminal theme in scripture and Ezekiel is the only exilic prophet.* If you want to make sense of the Babylonian exile, the prophet who deals with it is Ezekiel. (Daniel lived at the same time but is not typical. His book is narrative followed by apocalyptic. The Hebrew Bible places him among the Writings.) Ezekiel writes as an exile about God’s reasons for the exile and his promises of rescue. More than that, we too are ‘exiles scattered

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<sup>3</sup> See section on this below: p. 21

<sup>4</sup> I have drawn on Gordon McConville *Exploring the OT Vol 4 The Prophets* London SPCK 2002 p. 86 & 105 for the material in this paragraph. For my term ‘pre-apocalyptic’ see the discussion on apocalyptic below.

<sup>5</sup> Jerusalem Bible, Introduction to Ezekiel.

<sup>6</sup> Probably connected with the fact that Ezekiel used the Babylonian calendar in which new year starts in the spring while the Israelite one starts in the autumn, but the debate is ongoing.



to the four winds:<sup>7</sup> banished from Eden. “The exile was the watershed moment of the Israelites’ history on which the entire Bible gains its significance.”<sup>8</sup>

*Ezekiel is key in the OT’s portrayal of the Messianic kingdom.* The tree that provides shelter; the Spirit who brings life to the dead bones of a nation and renews heart, mind and spirit; the reconciliation to be one flock and the one shepherd who will be a prince like David; the river with trees both sides bearing fruit every month and making the salt water fresh, are all Ezekiel contributions.

*Ezekiel contains great treasures.* The terrible radiance of God in ch. 1 → Rev. 1 & 4. The scroll written on both sides (= the completeness of God’s plans) in ch. 2, → Rev. 5. The tree in which the birds of the air find shelter in ch. 17, → Matt. 13.32. The theodicy of ‘it is the soul that sins, that dies’ in ch. 18, → Rom.3.19-31. ‘You were in Eden, the garden of God → I expelled you, O guardian cherub’ in ch. 28. ‘I will remove from you your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh’ (36.26), → Heb.8.10-13. The valley of dry bones, and the two sticks becoming one under a new Davidic reign, in ch. 37 → ‘And there shall be one flock, one shepherd’ (John 10.16). The Glory departing from the idolatrous temple in ch. 10 and returning to the renewed temple in ch. 43, → 2 Cor.3.18, Rev.22-1-5.

*Ezekiel is a model of gripping communication.* The prostrating vision of the chariot of God’s presence; the valley of dry bones; making a model of Jerusalem with siege works round it; cutting his hair off and throwing it in thirds into the breeze; calling the people a prostitute and speaking in biological detail about her birth, puberty and promiscuity: you might not have enjoyed Ezekiel’s preaching but you sure didn’t sleep through it.

*The NT quotes or draws directly from Ezekiel 141 times.* The largest number is in Revelation but there are some 28 in the Gospels, the rest dispersed through Acts and the epistles. The Bible is one coherent Book, the product of one astonishing Mind.

*Ezekiel’s writing keys in with the formation of the modern state of Israel.* The quintessential Jewish toast ‘next year in Jerusalem’ is an Ezekiel 33-48 vision. The golden gate to the temple mount was closed in 1187AD by Saladin; that action flowed from the command of God through Ezekiel in about 570BC (44.1-3). Israel’s national anthem expresses Ezekiel’s hope (34.13, 36.24, 37.14&25, 40-48):

‘Our hope is not yet lost, the hope of two thousand years,  
to be a free people in our land, in the land of Zion and Jerusalem’<sup>9</sup>

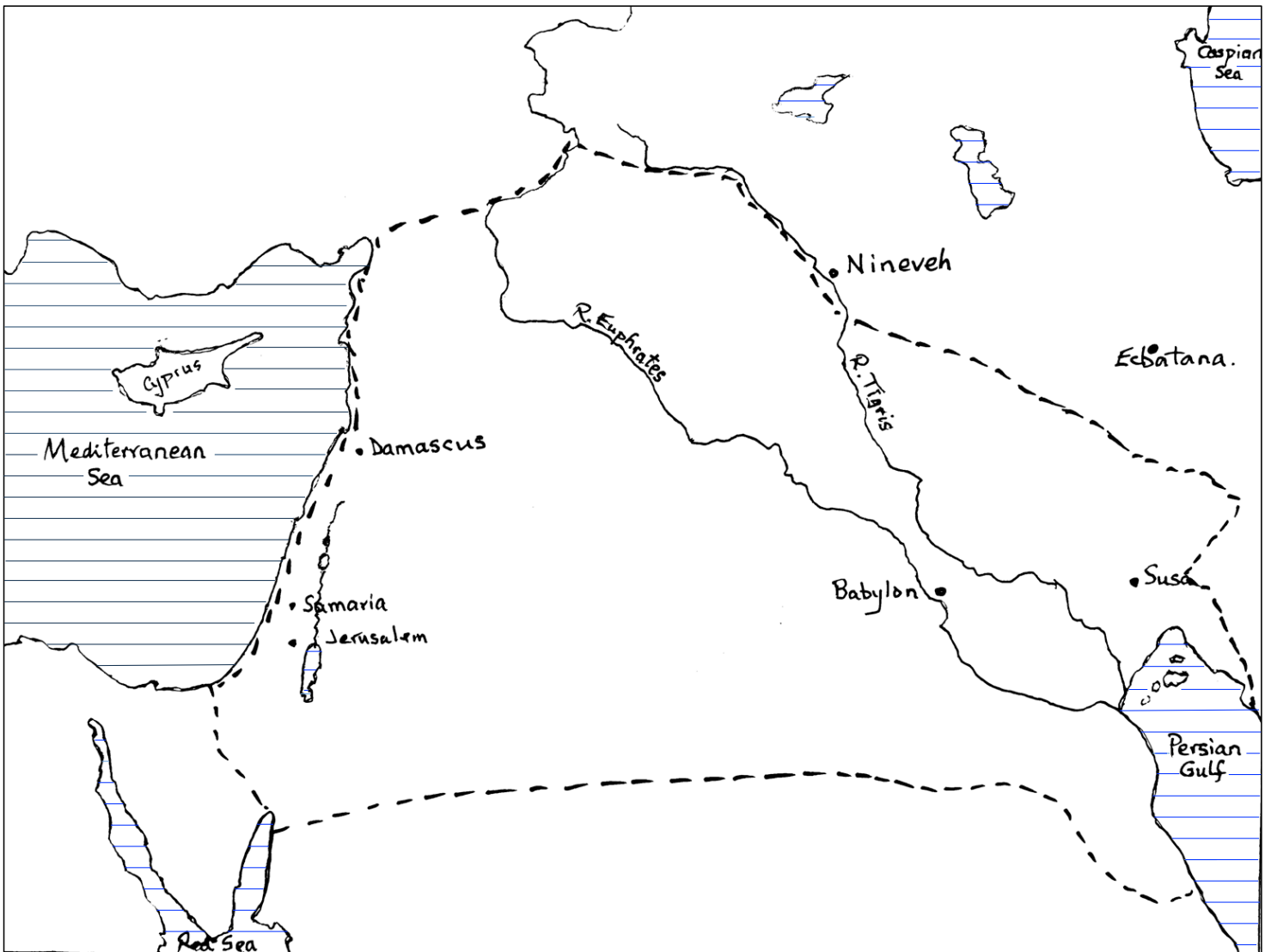
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<sup>7</sup> *The Message* on 1 Peter 1.1

<sup>8</sup> The Bible Project: introduction to article on exile as a Biblical theme

<sup>9</sup> I owe the point about the Israeli national anthem to Peter Craigie: Daily Study Bible, *Ezekiel*, Edinburgh St Andrew Press 1983 p.2

# Sketch Map



Key: - - - - = Extent of Babylonian Empire during Ezekiel's life

## The Historical Setting

The story of the Hebrew people in the years 950 – 500 BC is one of immense drama, steadily increasing as the time came for Jerusalem to fall (587 or 586BC). The first act in the drama was that the kingdom that had been united under David and Solomon split in two: the ten tribes of Israel in the north, the two tribes constituting the Judah kingdom in the south.

Decline followed, first in the northern kingdom, with evil king after evil king choosing other gods than YHWH and wicked practices ranging from corruption and oppression of the poor to child sacrifice and cult prostitution. See the chart *'Dates and contexts of the writing prophets'* (p. 42-43). In vain the northern prophets Amos, Hosea (and Isaiah) protest, appeal and warn. The decline continued. Israel reached the point of no return and in 722 Samaria the northern capital fell to the Assyrians. The population was largely deported lest it become a threat again. It seems they were assimilated into the lives and religions of the countries to which they were exiled: to this day their fate is unknown, their identity as God's people lost.

Would Judah learn the lesson from Israel's fall? Was this to be the end of the Israel experiment? As the date chart shows, initially they walked with YHWH but then they followed the same trajectory as Israel. Steadily they declined in faith and morals despite the pleas of the southern prophets Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah and Jeremiah (see chart). Scripture assesses five of the last six kings of Judah as evil. Following partial deportations in 605 (Daniel and friends) and 597 (King Jehoiakim, Ezekiel and contemporaries), in 588 Nebuchadnezzar blockaded Jerusalem and in 586 he broke through its wall, took king and people captive, razed the city wall and torched the Jerusalem temple. The closing chapters (in every sense) of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell the shaming and demoralising story.

By then Ezekiel was already in Babylon. Nearly two years earlier 15<sup>th</sup> January 588 was a date he would never forget. YHWH gave him two messages. Nebuchadnezzar would initiate his final siege of Jerusalem, the *'delight of their eyes.'* And Ezekiel's wife, the *'delight of his eyes,'* was to die but he was not go into mourning for her<sup>10</sup>: a message from God to the people about their response to defeat and exile. Both events came true that very day. When Jerusalem fell two years later, king and people were taken to captivity 1400 road miles away in Jewish ghetto colonies in Babylonia, leaving only the 'poor of the land' (*dallat ha'aretz: the dallim = the poor*) in the Promised Land. Had Bel conquered YHWH? In one devastation God's people lost everything that had

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<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 24. 1,2,15-24

bolstered their faith and evidenced God's favour: the land<sup>11</sup>, the privileges of being his chosen people<sup>12</sup>, Jerusalem<sup>13</sup>, the Temple<sup>14</sup> and their Davidic king<sup>15</sup>.

The catastrophe and its psychological and emotional impact were crushing. As had happened to the northern kingdom, it could have been the end of the children of Israel as a distinct people and religious community. That it was not is thanks in large measure to the ministry of Ezekiel during the years of exile. His teaching made sense of their experience and so changed their spirit that many returned to the holy land, rebuilt God's work and came to sit under the ministry of God's Word<sup>16</sup>. All of that can be laid, humanly speaking, at his door.

What were conditions like for the POWs? 2 Kings 24.14,16 say they were fed, but not whether on small or generous rations. Jeremiah wrote to them telling them to settle and work for the prosperity of Babylon until God brought them home (Jer.29.1-14). The picture Ezekiel gives is of reasonable freedom, with settlements in Jewish communities, either working for their Babylonian overlords or simply engaged in normal agricultural life. Presumably they married, ordered their own affairs and lived with a measure of prosperity. It was not however congenial. 'By the waters of Babylon we wept; how can we sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land?'<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel ch. 4 and 37 reflect the shame and distress of living in what they regarded as the graves of Israel. Ezekiel's fellow countrymen were free to visit him<sup>18</sup>. There is some evidence from Qumran that things may have got worse for them later in the exile<sup>19</sup>. It is often said that this was the time when synagogue worship started but there is no evidence for this<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 12.7, 15.18, 17.8; Ex. 6.4, 13.5; Lev. 20.24, 25.38; Num. 15.2, 33.53; Deut.1.8; Jos.1.6; etc

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 7.7-9

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 48.1-3 & 12-14

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 84.10

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 2.7, 45, 72, 110.1, 2 Sam.7.13f

<sup>16</sup> Neh.8.1-8

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 137

<sup>18</sup> Ezek. 8.1, 14.1, 20.1

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Wilkie, *Nabonidus and the later Jewish exiles*, JTS 2 (1951) p. 34-44 quoted in Peter R Ackroyd *Exile and Restoration* London SCM 1968 p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> I owe much in this paragraph to Ackroyd p. 31-35.

I don't see this in the literature but the exiles from Israel in 722 were taken to approximately the same part of the world as the exiles from Judah 130 years later, although further north. Is it possible that some of them met and some from the former Israel returned along with those who had come from Judah? The genealogies of those who returned with Ezra and Nehemiah do not identify them fully enough to know.

Ezekiel is an example to us of ministry that restores and edifies God's people well into the mid-term future. Let us be in no doubt that – especially in these days of widespread dearth in the church in Scotland – Ezekiel has much to teach us who are called to minister to God's sometimes demoralised and frozen people.

# Introduction to Ezekiel

## Authorship and Unity

The author presents his book in the first person (I, me) in forty-three of the forty-eight chapters and implicitly so in the remaining five (ch. 5, 19, 39, 45, 48). Integrity being a core value in Ezekiel, you need good grounds before doubting its self-description as autobiography.

Three main arguments have been adduced against this presumption.

1. *Historical criticism* (analysis of the date and place of the event and of the composition) notes that some of the material is set in Jerusalem, some in Babylon. In ch. 8-11 there is detail about the religious practices in the Jerusalem temple. Therefore, the argument goes, Ezekiel must have been there. However he says the Spirit took him there in a vision of God (8.3); and the message is addressed to the exiles (11.14f). The argument is empty.
2. *Form criticism* (analysis of the type of literature) notes that while Ezekiel is mostly prose, some is poetry: eg parts of ch. 18, 19, 21, 23. Also that most of Ezekiel is prophetic while some is priestly. It is argued that these represent different authors. There is however no need to infer this. Many people combine prose and poetry; think of Tolkien. Ezekiel states he is a priest (1.3), something we could have guessed from ch. 40 and 45, and promptly launches into sustained prophecy. The argument is empty.
3. *Redaction criticism* (analysis of how an author uses his material) assumes a core derived from Ezekiel which an editor or 'Ezekiel School' expanded into the current text. Walther Zimmerli proposes two processes: the prophet's speeches are given narrative additions (eg 11.25), and the speeches themselves were developed (eg 17.11ff explains 17.2-10). Zimmerli acknowledges that the expansions are so consistent with Ezekiel's thought that maybe he did much of the editing himself<sup>21</sup>. That makes the assumption of an Ezekiel School unnecessary; there is no evidence for it anyway. The simplest solution is often the most elegant and compelling: that Ezekiel was author and quite possibly editor, or at the least involved in the editing process.

Positively there are cogent reasons for assuming Ezekiel wrote his book.

1. The most compelling to me is the exquisite coherence of the whole book with the narrative being in the first person. Both its structure and its message have this internal coherence. Before Jerusalem fell Ezekiel was warning them 'worse is to come: and here's why' (ch. 1-24). He reassures

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<sup>21</sup> Walther Zimmerli *Ezekiel* vol.1 Philadelphia Fortress 1979 p. 71

them that God has plans for the enemies who have been and are against them (ch. 25-32). When Jerusalem does fall he comforts them with assurance of a hope and a future (ch. 33-39), even to producing a kind of White Paper<sup>22</sup> on arrangements for the new Jerusalem, temple, cultus and land (ch. 40-48). The arrangement is logical from beginning to end. Its message has an inner consistency, from the warnings about the imminent fall of Jerusalem (ch. 1-24) to comforts about the future once it has taken place (ch. 33-48)<sup>23</sup>.

2. Subtle connections abound. The glory of God departs from the temple prior to its destruction and returns with the prophecy of a new temple after it (1.1f → 11.22f → 43.1f). Ezekiel's seal of approval – 'whether they listen or not they will know that a prophet has been among them' – is repeated after Jerusalem's fall: 'when all this comes true (those left will fall by the sword), they will know that a prophet has been among them' (2.5 → 33.33). The call to be a watchman before Jerusalem fell, is repeated after its fall (3.16-21 → 33.1-9). His dumbness, imposed before its fall, is removed once the news of that fall comes (3.25-27, 24.27 → 33.21f)<sup>24</sup>. The mountains' desolation is foreseen beforehand; their new hope, afterwards (6.1-7 → 36.8-15). The whole book is irresistibly one vibrant, organic unit.

3. Even in translation Ezekiel's literary style shines through as consistent. Unlike Isaiah he mostly writes in prose. The title 'son of man' is used nearly a hundred times right through the book; the combination 'Adonai YHWH' more than two hundred. Characteristic wordings abound: 'Behold I am against you, says YHWH'; 'I YHWH have spoken it'; 'and they will know that I am YHWH' (seventy times). Most distinctive of all is his title *nasi*' (Prince / ruler / leader) rather than '*melek*' (king) for the coming One. His visions are described in great detail, often surreal, at much greater length than in other writers<sup>25</sup>. Several times he is supernaturally transported.

4. Ezekiel is unique in providing a clear, double dating sequence to his messages, forming a backbone to the whole book. The first series is chronological, each marker followed by the text on what took place on that date, followed again by a longer discursion. The second series is thematic, arranged by subject matter: Egypt, Tyre and so on. The dates – except for his age in 1.1 – are given according to the number of years after the deportation of

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<sup>22</sup> McKeating's term: Henry McKeating, *Ezekiel*, Sheffield Academic Press 1993 p.99-104

<sup>23</sup> See also J.B.Taylor *Ezekiel* London Tyndale Press 1969 p. 14-16; Daniel I. Block *Ezekiel 1-24* Grand Rapids Eerdmans 1997 p. 20-23.

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to McKeating p. 15-21 for these examples.

<sup>25</sup> Block p. 23-41 identifies Ezekiel's style in great detail.

Jehoiachin and himself from Jerusalem to Babylonia in 597BC<sup>26</sup>. Other prophets did not do this except that Haggai follows his example.

This is not to say all is easy and straightforward. Ezekiel has more textual difficulties than most of the OT, and (depending on your expert) evidence of quite a bit of editing. E.g. Block is certain that ch. 33 affirms the current continuity of the old covenant and should precede ch. 25-32. 'The effect of this editorial decision on the interpretation of the chapter is drastic.'<sup>27</sup>

My conviction is that the unity of Ezekiel, with Ezekiel as its author and very likely its main editor, is beyond doubt. Block, writing as an historian requiring concrete evidence for his conclusions, is more circumspect. He lists seven 'discreet' (sic) phases and on eight grounds supports 'at least ... the possibility of the prophet's own hand in the book's composition'<sup>28</sup>. But you can tell when an editor has been at work. Dick Francis's books have an excitement all their own. As soon as his son and he shared in the authorship of a novel, even though the *sitz im leben* was the same (horse racing) and the plot had the same basic style, immediately you know you are reading a different author. The text simply does not grip as the authentic Dick Francis does. Read Ezekiel, on the other hand, and the voice and hand are unmistakably Ezekiel's throughout.

Whether Ezekiel used an amanuensis is a different question. Jeremiah did (Jer. Ch. 36). Was Ezekiel's dumbness, whether partial or total, given partly so that he would write his messages? 'In my view there is no reason to doubt that many of Ezekiel's oracles were recorded immediately,' says Block. 'Indeed the autobiographical narrative (as opposed to poetic) style suggests that the prophet probably recorded them himself.'<sup>29</sup>

But the point is, our study is the book itself. Alister McGrath, in his recent biography of C.S. Lewis, comments, 'As Lewis emphasised throughout the 1930s, the important thing about authors is the *texts* that they write. What really matters is what those texts themselves say. Authors should not themselves be a 'spectacle'; they are rather the 'set of spectacles' through which we as readers see ourselves, the world, and the greater scheme of things of which we are a part.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This double dating is beautifully explored by McKeating, p. 62-71; tables of dates on p. 64 and 70-71.

<sup>27</sup> Block I p. 235

<sup>28</sup> Block I p. 17-23; quotation from p.20.

<sup>29</sup> Block I p. 21, 22

<sup>30</sup> Alister McGrath *C.S.Lewis: A life* London H&S 2013 p. xv.



## Date

We first hear Ezekiel's voice in 593, the fifth year of his exile (1.2). On the basis of dates given in the book, Ezekiel's span of prophecies occurred over the course of about 22 years. His last dated words (29.17) 'date to April 570'<sup>31</sup> (on McConville's chronology, 571; he takes the date of the exile as 587<sup>32</sup>). He tells us he was thirty in 593, so his dated writing lasted 22 years which makes him fifty-two years old at the time of his last dated prophecy. How much longer he prophesied and lived after that is not known.

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<sup>31</sup> Walther Eichrodt *Ezekiel: A Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press 2003 p. 407, quoted by Wikipedia.

<sup>32</sup> McConville: table on p. 83

## Ezekiel the Man

A priest, son of Buzi, Ezekiel was 26 when along with King Jehoiakim and others he was taken away to exile in 597BC. At the age of thirty he experienced his shattering vision of God and call to faithful testimony. Soon afterwards he was struck dumb (3.25). Five years later, the day before a messenger arrived to say that Jerusalem had fallen, God gave him his voice back (33.21f). Whether or not he was speechless the whole of that time, he seems to have been confined to his house much of the time.

If you find your calling lonely (who doesn't?) and feel it makes you an outsider and a bit odd, you ain't got nothing on Ezekiel. He had to spend fourteen *months* lying on his side, living on starvation rations. For food he had to bake poor bread in public over a dung fire; as a concession to his priestly sensitivities he was allowed to use cow pats in place of human faeces for fuel (4.14f). Given how willing he was to live a totally bizarre lifestyle for the Lord, that protest is revealing and moving. He had to shave his head and throw the hair into the wind in portions. He had to knock a hole in the wall of his house, pack and leave by it as a picture of what was about to happen to the king 1400 road miles away in his native land. He had to inform the distant part of his congregation that as a body they were about to be stripped naked by an enemy army for spiritual prostitution. Repeatedly he experienced prostrating visions. God gave him less than 24 hours' notice of his wife's death and as a lesson to his people forbade him from mourning for her.

Because of his ecstatic personality and dramatic style of prophecy, 2,600 years later people are still discussing his mental and emotional stability. It is true that he was, like many a lawyer, particularly wordy; as a priest, very alert to issues of cleanness and uncleanness. But the content of his message is rational and has a unity and coherence throughout the 48 chapters. What an interesting character; what costs he was prepared to pay for God's sake.

# Structure

The book has three main sections: Those sections divide themselves again by theme. This gives, on the simplest analysis, six sections. Throughout the two booklets I label them **A – F**<sup>33</sup>:

	<b>I Before Jerusalem fell (1-24)</b>	
<b>A</b>	Visions of God and call (ch. 1-3)	] Messages of warning
<b>B</b>	Woe to Israel and Judah (ch. 4-24)	
	<b>II Around the time Jerusalem fell (25-32)</b>	
<b>C</b>	Oracles against the nations (ch. 25-32)	] Messages of providence
	<b>III After Jerusalem fell (33-48)</b>	
<b>D</b>	Salvation for God's people (ch. 33-37)	] Messages of promise
<b>E</b>	Victory over the enemies of God & his people (38 & 39)	
<b>F</b>	Visions of a new temple, Torah and Eden (ch. 40-48)	

This structure subdivides much as follows

## **I. Prophecies of warning *before* Jerusalem fell (1-24)**

### **A. Ezekiel's 'visions of God' and call (chapters 1-3)**

- His visions of God, ch. 1
- His call, ch. 2 & 3

### **B. Woe to Israel/Judah (ch 4-24)**

- Judgement against the nation, 4-7
  - Departure from the temple, 8-11
- Judgement against the nation, 12.1 – 24.14
  - Destruction of the temple, 24.15-27

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<sup>33</sup> Ezekiel is finely interwoven and nearly every commentary analyses Ezekiel differently; I was relieved to discover that mine agrees with the massive commentary by Walther Zimmerli, except that he divides the first section into Vision and Call, making seven sections: Zimmerli I p. viii.

## **II Oracles against the nations, mostly about the time Jerusalem fell (25-32)**

This section is exquisitely designed with passages of exactly equal length (97 verses in English versions) either side of a central section of three verses consisting of hope for Israel: 28.24-26. Before it there are seven oracles against nations; after it, seven oracles about Egypt. Repeatedly God states his purpose: ‘then they will know that I am the Lord.’

### **C Oracles against the nations (ch. 25-32)**

- Seven oracles: against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre (2), Sidon, 25.1-28.23
- Hope for the people of Israel, 28.24-26
- Seven oracles against Egypt, 29-32.

## **III Prophecies of promise *after* Jerusalem fell (33-48)**

### **D. The salvation of God’s people (ch 33-37)**

- The watchman and the shepherds, 33 & 34
- The restoration of Israel, 35-37

### **E. Final victory over the enemies of God’s people (ch 38 & 39)**

- The defeat of Gog, 38
- The disposal of Gog, 39

### **F. Visions of the future temple, Torah and Eden (ch 40-48)<sup>34</sup>**

- A new temple and the return of God’s glory, 40.1 – 43.11
- A new Torah, 43.12 – 46.24 (Torah: instruction about the life and worship of the new community)
- A new Eden, ch 47 and 48

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<sup>34</sup> The structure within ch. 40-48 looks untidy. See more detailed analysis in ‘Sequence of Ezekiel’s thought’ below.

## Ezekiel as scholar: the Bible's link-man

I said above ('Why preach Ezekiel') that it is a key book because to a unique extent Ezekiel takes up earlier scriptures, weaving them into his own message and theology, embodying the unity of Scripture. In turn later writers and the NT learn from him. He shows a substantial familiarity with the Bible from Genesis to Jeremiah<sup>35</sup>. Some examples of this linking:

- The strongest connections are between Ezekiel and Jeremiah. They might have met in Jerusalem before Ezekiel's exile. Smend (*Ezekiel* Leipzig 1880) lists 62 passages utilising Jeremiah. It seems certain that Ezekiel was familiar with his preaching. The heart of stone (Ezk.11.19f) reflects Jer. 31.33, 32.39f. The watchman theme (Ezk.3 and 33) echoes Jer.6.17. The Shepherd-Messiah of Ezk. 34 echoes that of Jer. 23. The valley of dead bones chapter (ch. 37 esp v. 1,11,12) notes the fulfilment of Jeremiah's warning in Jer. 34. 17-20. They have a shared mind on submitting to Babylon.
- Gen.2.7 with Ezek. 37 dry bones: God breathes, they live.
- Genesis 2 Eden river, and significant tree →Ezk. 47, and 17 & 31.
- God's election through the patriarchs appears in 20.5, 28.25, 33.24, 37.25
- The exodus dominates the theology of Ezk. 20 and is reworked in Ezk. 23
- The similarity of spirit and language in regard to holiness between the holiness code of Lev. 17-26 and Ezekiel's language about holiness, is so close that it led Graf (of Graf-Wellhausen fame) to believe that Ezekiel was the author of Lev. 18-23.
- Ezekiel is so familiar with the Torah laws, Klosterman comments that his dependence is simply unconscious. He instances the striking similarity of Ezk.14.1-11 to the first four cases of Lev. 17. Compare Lev.21, 22 on becoming unclean on touching the dead → Ezk.44.25, and the thematic connection between the Lev.23 festivals and Ezk. 45 and 46. Zimmerli concludes 'it cannot be denied that Ezekiel has been influenced by the holiness code' (p. 52)
- Ezk. 6 anger at the high places shows sympathy with Exodus and Deuteronomy
- The Davidic promises (2 Sam 7) are the way Ezekiel spells out God's purposes in 17.22ff, ch. 34 and 37.

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<sup>35</sup> Zimmerli takes 12 pages of dense two-column text to spell this out: I p. 41-52; McKeating, the seven pages of his ch. 9 (p. 92-98)

- 1 Kings 18.46 the hand of the Lord on Elijah empowers him to outrun the king's chariot from Carmel to Samaria, and on Elisha inspires the prophecy of the dry valley filling with water (2 Kings 3.15); the hand of the Lord comes on Ezekiel seven times, eg transporting him from Babylon to Jerusalem<sup>36</sup> (Ezk.8).
- He mentions Noah, Daniel and Job in 14.14 and the heroes of old in 32.27.
- The earlier writing prophets mostly avoid the term 'the Spirit' (+ or – 'of the Lord') but His ministry is witnessed to in eg the Elijah narratives and freely by Ezekiel eg 3.12, 14, 8.3, 11.24, 43.5.
- Vision 'while the elders were before him' was shared by Elisha (2 Kings 6.32) and Ezekiel (8.1, 14.1, 20.1)
- The proof-saying ('that you may know a prophet is among you') is shared between 1 Kings 20.3, 2 Kings 5 and Ezk. 2.5, 33.33, ch. 25
- Amos and Ezekiel share the catchphrase 'the end has come' (*ba' haqets*): Am.8.2, Ezk. 7.2
- The 'full description of YHWH's gift to his bride' is shared by Hos. 2 and Ezk.16 but not by Jeremiah when dealing with the same analogy: this 'makes probable Ezekiel's familiarity with Hosea's preaching' (Zimmerli p. 44).
- Zephaniah 1.18, 3.3, 3.8 → Ezk. 7.19 22.23ff, 22.31 seem to indicate Ezekiel knew Zephaniah.

The links go from Genesis – Jeremiah to Ezekiel, and then from Ezekiel into the rest of Scripture. No one before him dated his prophecies as Ezekiel did (almost certainly as authenticating evidence); Haggai copies him in this. We have already pointed out (Why preach Ezekiel) that the UBS Greek NT cites 141 quotations from Ezekiel. He gives us one Bible as no other OT author does.

## Sequence of Thought

Each section of Ezekiel provides us with its own pastoral contribution and preaching responsibility.

In what follows I try to capture the substance of those six sections so as to nourish the sermons chosen in booklet 2, indicating ministries they offer to our hearers.

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<sup>36</sup> McKeating p. 93

## A. Ch. 1-3: Ezekiel's vision of God and call to service.

**Message:** 'Our God is Someone Else Altogether: a living Person of flaming fire, enthroned, terrible to meet, all-seeing, goes where he wills, overwhelming. I'm preaching as I do because he told me to.' (2 sermons suggested: *God's Glory and Ezekiel's Call*).

Ezekiel saw ('visions'), heard ('word') and felt *the hand of God*: an expression he uses seven times in the book to indicate the overwhelming pressure God exerted on him. We see something of that power in 1 Kings 18.46: the hand of the Lord on Elijah enabled him to outrace a chariot all the way from Carmel to Samaria in pouring rain. The language Ezekiel uses for his vision makes it clear he had a very emotional experience. The creatures with human form yet wings, feet like calves' feet but gleaming, four faces each, high sparkling wheels full of eyes, the awesome platform, the Voice and throne above that, then – enthroned – a figure like a human's, glowing, brilliant. It was too much for him. 'His whole ministry was virtually framed on the one hand by the awful sight of this glory of YHWH departing from the temple (ch. 8-10), and on the other hand by the joy of its returning there in his final vision.'

Block on the four faces: the *lion* (strength, ferocity, courage): symbol of royalty; *eagle* the most swift and stately of birds; *ox* symbolised fertility and divinity (Psalm 106.19f); *human* the image of God – together expressing God's transcendent omnipotence and omniscience<sup>37</sup>. He adds on the theology implied: God's transcendent glory; his holiness; his sovereignty; his interest in his people; his presence among the exiles; his judgement. 'Whoever would enter into divine service must have a clear vision of the one into whose service he or she is called'<sup>38</sup>.

The commentaries have their own divisions in the account of Ezekiel's call. Mine would be the commission, the appropriation, the (dreadful) responsibility, the initiation.

### Lessons for preachers:

- Be sure our commission is from God. The conversation in ch. 2 & 3 is all one way: God does all the talking, Ezekiel notably 'listened carefully' (2.2). 'I'd like to do it' is admirable but might not survive the miseries of opposition and apparent unsuccess.

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<sup>37</sup> Block p.96

<sup>38</sup> Block p. 106-109

- Appropriate God’s word till it is our own: take possession of it, digest it till we see things God’s way, that is how we think: ‘till our very blood is bibline’ (Eric Alexander). The responsibility to make sure it is *God’s* word we minister comes at least ten times: 2.4,7,8 (twice); 3.1,3,4,10 (twice),11. ‘Merely hearing that message is not enough: it must be digested, internalised, embodied and lived ... it derives not from private reasoning or mystical reflection but from revelation ... even so it does not cancel out or overwhelm natural abilities and qualities – it uplifts and quickens them<sup>39</sup>.
- Be ready for what people are like (2.6-3.9). We are to be unlike them in some things, like them in others. See God’s language here: thorns, briars, scorpions, scowls, rebels. Ezekiel is not to be like that (2.6-8). Also hard-hearted and stubborn; Ezekiel *is* to be like them in that regard (3.7-9). Ministry is not a career. It is a vocation.
- The responsibility to be as alert as a sentry (watchman, 3.16-21) is stated very formally in language that copies the Torah (‘Whenever’ is like Lev. 1.2 and 2.1 ... and the case according to good response or bad reflective of case law later in Leviticus), emphasising how momentous is this calling. It shows rebels as under God’s judgement; it reflects that the wages of sin is death; it shows that our calling to reach out is an act of God’s grace!
- The initiation (3.22-27) is astonishing. The binding with ropes and the sticking of tongue: Ezekiel bears in his body the signs of his calling. To be detached about our ministry is a cop-out; it must be incarnational. But given that we are not on our own. ‘I am with you.’

*Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel.*

1. *In his book ‘God in the wasteland’ David Wells wrote of the weightlessness of God in our day. In Ezekiel ch. 1 we must have the most dramatic display of God’s glory, kavod, weightiness in all Scripture. After one of McCheyne’s sermons a hearer commented ‘I think even hell would be a relief compared with knowing the wrath of God.’ We shall find no greater opportunity to silence our people before his terrible majesty than Ezekiel’s vision.*
2. *‘The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible, they ain’t necessarily so’ has mastered our generation. Ch.2 and 3 provide the right set of circumstances to further our respect for Scripture, faithfully unleashed, as the very Word of the God to whom we shall render account.*

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<sup>39</sup> Block I p. 131, slightly edited



## B. Woe to Israel/Judah (4-24)

**Message:** ‘Our national nadir isn’t because YHWH has been defeated. He is punishing us for our sin and idolatry: they disgust him. Jerusalem will fall, our nation will be exiled, and he’s quite right.’ (*basically one theme; one sermon suggested*)

Chapter 4 starts Ezekiel’s messages for his fellow exiles. Ch. 4-24 is the first main section and contains a whole range of sign-acts, visions and oracles. As can be seen from ‘Ezekiel at a glance’ above, it is a combination of denunciation for sins, sentence and warning. Different commentators offer different structures which is enough for us to sit light to the issue of structure. Block offers, ‘They are messages of doom intended to dismantle official Jerusalem theology by undermining the four pillars on which Judah’s false sense of security was built: YHWH’s covenants with Israel **(1)** and with David **(2)**, and His commitments to the promised land **(3)** and to Jerusalem **(4)** ... Since Israel is a house in revolt against Yahweh, he is absolved of all patronly obligations’<sup>40</sup>.

Yes, Ezekiel is dismantling their false security: but not to absolve YHWH of his obligations, but to draw the people’s attention to them. He is denying their presumption that YHWH is obligated to defend them right or wrong. The covenant stipulations are two-edged. Disobeying them carries sanctions just as living by them brings blessings. They have agreed to both. Thus in the rehearsal of the covenant in Deut. Ch. 5-9 the emphasis is on blessing following on obedience; but the sanctions are part of the deal too:

- Deut.6.14,15 Do not worship foreign gods, for YHWH is a jealous god. His anger will flare up against you and wipe you from the face of the earth.
- Deut. 7.9,10 he is the faithful God who loves those who love and obey him; but he does not hesitate to punish and destroy those who hate him.
- Deut. 8.19,20 If you forget YHWH and follow other gods, you will certainly be destroyed for disobedience.

When the people met on Mts. Gerizim and Ebal to ratify their consent to the covenant (Deut.27 and 28) they affirmed both blessing and curse. It is not that YHWH is absolved of patronly obligations, far from it. The exile was

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<sup>40</sup> Block **I** p. 162 & 163. On the theology of ch. 4-24 he offers the reference M. Fishbane, ‘Sin and Judgement in the prophecies of Ezekiel, *Interpretation* **38** 1984 p. 131-50.

precisely his staying faithful to them, 'strange work' though it be to him (Isaiah 28.21). How much it must have meant to them, therefore, to hear of God's glory leaving Jerusalem and coming to them in Babylon. They were in the centre of his will for them in exile accepting discipline.

### *Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel*

1. *Presumption among God's people didn't cease with the return from exile in 538BC. It is alive and kicking. We see it historically in Ananias and Sapphira (Acts ch. 5). Some in Corinth had abused the Lords' body at his supper and become ill; some had died (1 Cor.11). God still disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12). The cuddly Jesus who only hugs us and never says no is not the Christ of Scripture: no one warned more often or more terribly. The reality is, a covenant relationship with God brings responsibilities as well as privileges, and carries sanctions as well as blessings: Matt.7 'I never knew you – depart.'* Passages to compare for NT congregations: 1 Peter 4.17 judgement starts with us. Rev. 2 & 3 you make me sick; I'll spew you out. Luke 10=Matt11 those given most light will be liable to greater judgement. Cp John 15.1-6 on the fate of the branch that does not remain in him. Therefore, Heb.2, pay all the closer attention.
2. *Does our perception of God include his emotional state about our spirituality? He is grieved (6.9). He is furious: 'I will crush them, then they will know that I am YHWH' (6.14). Yet he is never capricious; his dealings accord with justice (ch. 18).*
3. *Straying from God leads to social decay: to violence (8.17), oppression of the weak (22.1-7), to injustice, lewd activity, rape and extortion (22.8-12), because God is the only foundation of the right morality. The modern atheists may scorn but we lose God at our peril.*
4. *God remains gracious to those who repent. See the phrases in italics in 'Ezekiel at a glance' (p. 5-7 above).*
5. *The responsibility of leaders to teach and live holy (22.23-31). The tone of the leadership sets the tone of the body; and those who teach will be judged more severely (James 3.1).*

## **C. Oracles against the nations (25-32)**

**Message:** 'You ask, what about our enemies. Don't worry, God will deal with them as righteously as he is dealing with us.' (*One theme, oracles against the nations. One sermon suggested*)

It is characteristic of the prophets to turn from God's dealings with his people to his dealings with the nations. Isaiah (ch. 13-23) and Jeremiah (ch.46-51) did the same. Not so as to address the nations, but to edify Israel/Judah. The whole section is beautifully structured: 97 verses either side of the hope given in 28.24-26, each concluding with 'and they will know that I am YHWH'. The first six nations are given in geographical order clockwise from east round to north:

1. Ammon (25.1-7)
2. Moab (25.8-11)
3. Edom (25.12-14)
4. Philistia (25.15-17)
5. Tyre (26.1 – 28.19)
6. Sidon (28.20-23)

Central assurance of hope: the restoration of Israel (28.24-26)

7. Egypt (29-32)

The oracle against Egypt is as long as the other six put together, and each of those two halves has seven sections.

John L Mackay's introduction to 25-32 is full of insight<sup>41</sup>: These nations, although conventional opponents of Israel, had been represented at a conference organised by Zedekiah, presumably to plan united action against Babylon (Jer.27.3). The Lord indicts them for opposing his purposes. The central assurance (28.24-26) is the key: God's purpose in his dealing with the nations is 'the establishment and recognition of his universal rule and his provision for those who serve him' (p. 11). Judgement has been pronounced first on God's household (ch. 4 – 24 = 1 Peter 4.17f) but the other nations are not exempt. They learn of God's impartial justice; they learn not to envy the wealthy unbeliever; they are assured of God's control limiting the power of their and his enemies, and that his covenant faithfulness lies at the centre of all this. Why no mention of Babylon? She is God's instrument at this time for the punishment of his people. Perhaps the prophecy of Gog's downfall, coming later as it did, is a coded promise that Babylon's time will come once her usefulness is over.

### *Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel*

1. *We too live in troubled times. I remember an unconverted acquaintance coming early one morning unannounced, weeping at the imminence of nuclear war. If it does not distress us that we are contaminating our planet and helpless before the wickedness of Boko Haram and IS, it should. But the message for my friend stands: God truly is sovereign and acts in justice, slow though it often seems. He gives leadership in the nations to whom, and when, he pleases, (Jer. 27.5; Dan.2.20ff, 4.34f). It doesn't absolve us from responsibility, but it can give us peace as we each play the part God has given us and put our lives into his hands.*
2. *Tyre's king was due for Sheol (28.8) and even it has its lowest parts (32.23). Those who live in pride and oppress others will meet their due reward in the hereafter. YHWH holds the key to when we go there and our fate after arrival; cf Is.14.9-20 where we observe the king of Babylon being cruelly taunted there. We live in a just universe.*

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<sup>41</sup> John L. Mackay *Ezekiel II* Fearn Christian Focus 2018 p. 11-15

*Ch. 33 – 48 consist of more than one major section. I have chosen to recognise three<sup>42</sup> which I have labelled D, E & F.*

## **D. Salvation for God's people (33-37)**

*The section prophesies an altogether new era which was initiated with very limited success on return from exile. Its fulfilment came with Jesus as he pointed out that he was the good shepherd predicted in 34.11ff (John 10.11), the Davidic ruler (34.24f) bringing a covenant of peace (34.25-29; 37.26-28), giving a new heart and spirit by the work of the Holy Spirit (ch. 36), raising the dead and initiating the resurrection of a new Israel (ch. 37).*

**Message:** 'Beyond the exile there will be a new kind of covenant. The kingdom of God will be one of inner transformation and shepherding by a prince of David's line.' (2 sermons suggested covering the inner change, the life-giving work of the Spirit and the shepherding by a prince of David's line)

Block's comment is stimulating: 'The focus is on Yahweh's restorative actions, for the glory of his name, according to the grand apologetic scheme:

1. Restoring Yahweh's role as divine shepherd/king of Israel (34)
2. Restoring Yahweh's land (35.1 – 36.15)
3. Restoring Yahweh's honour (36.16-38: *new heart and spirit*)
4. Restoring Yahweh's people (37.1-14: *new life (valley of dry bones)*)
5. Restoring Yahweh's covenant (37.15-28: *new unity, new king*)
6. Restoring Yahweh's supremacy (38 & 39)
7. Restoring Yahweh's presence among his people (40.1 – 46.24)
8. Restoring Yahweh's presence in the land (47 & 48)<sup>43</sup>

Ch. 33-37 begins the third and final major section of the prophecy. It contains salvation oracles spoken after the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6. It prophesies the restoration of the nation and shows the compassion in God's heart for his people. The eternal covenant he has with them (*berit 'olam*) is a covenant of peace (*berit shalom*). He will take over the shepherding of them (34), back in the land (35.1-36.15), back from disgrace with a new heart and spirit (36.16-38), up from the grave (37.1-14), together under Messiah (37.15-28). 'There were political, economic, agricultural, social, judicial, religious, personal, relational and spiritual dimensions to their sin and suffering. And God intended to tackle every aspect of that need. Such is the breadth and depth of the Biblical gospel'<sup>44</sup>.

'The restoration of Israel is expressed in several theological ways. It is a story of ritual defilement (36.16-21) and cleansing (36.23-25). Israel's sin is seen in

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<sup>42</sup> As does W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, p. viii.

<sup>43</sup> Block II p. 272. Wording in italics is mine.

<sup>44</sup> Wright p. 273

'holiness' terms as we might expect from Ezekiel the priest. Sin defiled people and land, which vomited them out (Lev.18.24-30). Restoration involves cleansing (36.23-25). But the renewed salvation is also a new creation like the garden of Eden (36.35), and like the new covenant (36.26-28; cf 11.19,20; Jer. 31.31-34). The story of salvation is told as a contrast to the former judgement, to emphasize the grace of God<sup>45</sup>.

**The influence of Ezekiel ch. 37 on the NT<sup>46</sup>.** The original sense of Ezk. 37 is usually seen as concerning the regeneration of a new Israel after the exile. The midrashim however (ancient Jewish commentary) interpret it as being about the final Resurrection, as do Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian.

Grassi suggests ch. 37 informed Matthew's and John's teaching that Jesus' resurrection opened up the Messianic eschatological era; and that Paul based 1 Thes.4.8 (God gives his Holy Spirit to you) on Ezk. 37 on this basis.

- Matthew 27.51-54 reflect the fulfilment of 37.7 the *seismos* (rattling / earthquake) and 37.12 (open graves). Matt.27.51 tells of an earthquake and tombs opening, followed by 27.53 the Lord lead the dead from their tombs.
- John 5.28 records Jesus foretelling 'all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out to the resurrection' of either the just or the unjust: a fulfilment of Ezk 37.12 'I will raise you from your graves.' Ezk.37.9 tells how Ezekiel prophesied 'come from the four winds, O *ruach*, and breathe on those corpses that they may live'; John 20.22 records how in fulfilment Jesus breathed on the disciples and said 'receive the Holy Spirit.'
- Golgotha (cranion): like the dry bones of Ezk 37.

In other words, early Christian tradition described Christ's death and resurrection in the language of Ezk 37.1-14 used as doctrine. His resurrection opened up the Messianic era, whose great sign was to be the resurrection of a new Israel. Jesus' resurrection was the first fruits of that.

*Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel (Section D, ch. 33-37).*

1. *The eternal covenant stands. God's promises to Abraham and David stand. Israel will live securely, be ruled by great David's greater Son, choose and acknowledge him as their Saviour and Lord, and enjoy the Shalom of God's presence and grace.*  
Romans ch. 9-11 deal with the same theme.
2. *Messiah will come from David's line and function as Servant of the Lord.*

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<sup>45</sup> McConville p. 95 slightly reworded

<sup>46</sup> Summary of J. Grassi 'Ezekiel 37 and the NT' NTS 11 1964 p.162-164

3. *Ch. 34 stands as a model for pastors; let us read it regularly, perhaps diarise an annual time in it. The flock we serve is God's, not ours. We are not employees of a congregation but servants of God. Even Messiah comes not to be served but to seek, save and serve that which was lost; let us never exploit them for personal advantage.*
4. *The world, it is true, will always hate God's people (35) and we are not called to like that; but 35.1-36.15 tells us that God is indignant at it and watches over his own.*
5. *God's great vision for his saving work is concern for his holy name among the nations. From 36.22-38 alone, the core salvation oracle, he says it five times: v. 22, 23 (twice), 36, 38. Are we clear what we are for?*
6. *The only way to the welfare of humankind is the radical change of heart and spirit provided in the Gospel and nowhere else: a point I make in the notes on sermon 5.*
7. *You cannot manufacture revival. The real thing occurs when God breathes his spirit and makes us new.*
8. *God is a resurrecting God, with power both to give life to the dead (ch.37 → Eph. 2.1-10) and empty the grave (37.12 → 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thes.4.13-5.10)*
9. *The eternal covenant (berit 'olam) or covenant of peace (berit shalom, 37.26) is designed to save and bring the worldwide healing, wholeness and harmony adumbrated in Is.2.1-5. Its mediator is Messiah; Ezekiel certainly means this even though the word is not used. We may insert his name, Jesus:*
  - *As David (37.24) Jesus is heir to the promises made to David*
  - *As 'My Servant' (37.25) Jesus has a special relationship with YHWH, exercises His ministries, radiates His glory (John 1) and achieves His purposes. Surely implying the Servant of the Lord passages in Isaiah.*
  - *As prince (nasi', 37.25) Jesus heads his people not as tyrannical ruler but as one of them*
  - *As king (melek, 37.24) Jesus is royalty, a symbol of his people's unity*
  - *As shepherd (37.24) Jesus nurtures, protects and ensures the true welfare of his people.<sup>47</sup>*

## **E. Final victory over the enemies of God and his people (38, 39)**

**Message:** 'And the final defeat of evil, hurrah' (one sermon suggested)

Ezekiel describes a time after Israel has been peacefully resettled in the promised land. He pictures an invasion by a vast army. Gog, prince of Magog, will lead a huge alliance of armies against unsuspecting Israel living peacefully in their own land. But God will act massively against them: earthquake, sword, plague, blood, rainstorm, hail and burning sulphur, so he's not holding back. He brings the enemy to utter defeat. That's ch. 38. Ch. 39

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<sup>47</sup> My summary of these 5 points from Block II p. 423. 'Jesus' is my addition.

goes on, they will all die and become food for birds and animals. Their weapons will be used for seven years as fuel. Their bodies will take seven months for the animals and birds to eat them. God's people will come to a new acceptance of their responsibility for the exile.

Sevens abound. There are 7 "Thus says the Lord", God has 7 impressive weapons, there are 7 words for the enemy's weapons. Those will take 7 years to burn for fuel. It will take 7 months to bury the corpses and we are told 7 times "Then they will know" – 6 of the times, that he is Lord; once, the nations will know that the exile happened because his people were unfaithful to him.

How to understand this? To what event(s) does it refer?

- Dispensationalists understand it as the final war after the second coming of Christ and the rapture (snatching) of the Church to glory.
- The reformed position has tended to understand it as symbolising the repeated assaults of evil against the Church

The number of sevens, the 'dreamlike' feel of the narrative (Wright) and the horrific imagery give a hint that the Gog oracle represents more than one event: that it is foretelling repeated times of assault – against:

- (1) God's people Israel such as the times of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Roman slaughter of 70-73AD from Rome to Masada;
- (2) God's new Israel the church (Jew and Gentile) in the last days in which we live;
- (3) Climactically the final showdown between the forces of evil and the Israel of God, and their final defeat: the fulfilment which Rev. 19 and 20 refer to, and whose language is self-evidently drawn from these chapters.

There has been much discussion why the passage is placed at this point in the book. Most commentators say it interrupts the flow of thought between the salvation promised in ch. 34-37 and its further exposition in ch. 40-48. But it seems to me to be in exactly the right place, i.e. when the events were due to occur in human history. Putting ch. 38 & 39 here correctly places these assaults historically between the restoration of Jews to Israel followed by the Messianic salvation (thus ch. 34-37), and the perfect temple, new Eden and unopposed reign of great David's greater son which ch. 40-48 promise. Ch. 38 & 39 are placed where they belong.

*Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel (Section E, ch. 38-39).*

1. *Ch. 38 & 39 are 'word pictures of spiritual truth regarding the security of the people of God, to whom these chapters extend the guarantee of (God's) protection'<sup>48</sup>. Rev. 19.17-21 show that their consummation will come as God wins his final victory over all opposition, a prelude to the last judgement. God is Lord of history and will keep his covenant.*
2. *In the contrast between the victory against God's enemies of 38.1-39.24 and the relief and security of his people in 39.25-29 lies for us a double encouragement.*
  - a. *Jesus really will make a separation at the end. Tyrants will meet their due doom, all wrongs will be righted and nothing evil will be allowed to enter the city (Matt.25.31-46; Rev.21.27).*
  - b. *But will the blessing really include you and me? How, when we know our hearts? 'I will bring them home' says our Lord (Ezek.39.27). By some unimaginable miracle 'we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3.2).*
3. *It is a star to steer by: 'All who believe this will keep themselves pure' (1 John 3.3). For all that we are a million miles from deserving it, we would like a welcome; and if he can do that we really will know that he is the LORD (Ezek. 39.28).*

## **F. Visions of a new temple, Torah and Eden (40-48)**

**Message:** 'All God's purposes will come true: a river of the water of life, God at the centre of his people's lives, perfect worship and service with its distinguishing feature YHWH-shammah: 'The-Lord-is-there.' (2 sermons suggested: orderly life in the new world, and the water of life bringing healing and equality)

Mackay nicely humanises the tension the section addresses. 'Will there ever be liberation from Babylon? Into this gloom the Lord shines light to drooping spirits by giving Ezekiel a vision of the totally new dispensation he had for his people'<sup>49</sup>.

### **NOTE ON STRUCTURE OF CH. 40 – 48.**

The apparent untidiness of Ezekiel's arrangement explains why every commentary gives a different analysis to ch. 40-48. The structure below is my simplification of McKeatings's analysis (p.99-104), with my suggested section titles

- A new temple and the return of God's glory, 40.1 – 43.11
  - Circumstances of the vision (40.1-4)

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<sup>48</sup> Mackay II p. 300

<sup>49</sup> Mackay II p. 351-358; the quotation is from p. 351



- Measurements of temple area (40.6 – 42.20)
- God's glory returns to his temple (43.1-12)
- A new Torah, 43.12 – 46.24 (Torah: instruction about the life and worship of the new community)
  - Details of the altar (43.13-27)
  - Close the golden gate: Glory entered there (44.1-3)
  - Who may enter the sanctuary. Their functions & stipends (44.4-37)
  - Land to set aside for support of priests and Prince (45.1-9)
  - Sacrifices (45.10-25)
  - Organisation of worship (46.1-15)
  - Property of the Prince (46.16-18)
  - Kitchen area of the temple (46.19-24)
- A new Eden, 47 & 48.
  - The river flowing, ever wider, from the temple (47.1-12)
  - Boundaries of the land and how divided between the twelve tribes (47.13-48.29)
  - The size and gates of the city now called 'THE LORD IS THERE' (48.30-35)

On first reading ch. 40-48 seems a surprising addendum. Ezekiel has finished his book up to this point with two visions. The first is the vision of great David's greater Son shepherding and reigning over his people: a people with new hearts, minds and Spirit, to the honour of YHWH (ch. 34-37). The second is a vision of God's final victory over all evil (ch. 38, 39). What can follow those?

What we need to remember is that Ezekiel as a priest sees sin as disgusting God and needing to be wiped out in expiation (see note on *to'ebah* in theology section). That makes ch.40-48, the vision of Eden restored, the exactly appropriate climax to his book.

- It balances the account in ch. 8-11 of the gross sin in the temple and the consequent departure of God's glory. Now all is resolved the Glory returns (43.1-4)
- It predicts the fulfilment of the promise in ch. 20 of a new Exodus and a people again offering sacrifices on Mount Zion.
- It restores the Temple and worship that were lost in 586.

There is much detail in the measurements of the temple and the apportioning of the land, yet it is not sufficient: an architect could not construct the new temple on the information Ezekiel provides. It makes ch. 40-46 difficult reading for the modern reader. Why did he do that? It is what Ezekiel, priest and Torah lawyer, is like. McKeating likens it to a government White Paper, a plan in outline offered for scrutiny and development. Or perhaps its

incomplete nature is an indication that this is not a literal prediction of what will be built but a symbolic promise. The Day will come when ‘The dwelling place of God is with man ... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him’ (Rev. 21.3, 22.3).

## **INTERPRETATION OF CH. 40-48**

How are we to understand ch. 40-48? The returning exiles seem not to have used it as a blueprint: the second temple bore no similarity to its design. The dispensationalists understand it as literal future for the Millennium (even G.R. Beasley-Murray in NBCR) but apart from the problems with that approach indicated in section **E** above, 40-48 speak of renewing the Levitical sacrifices, something the cross of Christ rules out (Mark 15.38; Heb. 10.18). The passage is:

1. Symbolic, ‘providing a meaningful reference structure for the prophet and his audience through which (they can be taught) how the covenant community should function. This is an ideal portrait of what true holiness involves’<sup>50</sup>, in terms familiar to him and his audience. It provides a star for us to steer by: having God at the centre of our lives, the Prince graciously reigning over us, each person with an equitable distribution of territory to enjoy and steward, drinking from the stream of his grace brought to us by the Holy Spirit.
2. Prophetic. The sequence leading to ch. 40-48 is adopted in Revelation to set out the development of the end times:
  - a. The resurrection of God’s people (37.1-14 // Rev. 20.4a)
  - b. The Messianic kingdom (37.15-28 // Rev. 20.4b-6)
  - c. The battle against Gog (ch. 38 & 39 // Rev. 20.7-10)
  - d. The new temple and Jerusalem with resemblances to Eden and located on a high mountain (ch. 40-48 // Rev. 21.1 – 22.5)<sup>51</sup>.

Ch. 40-48, therefore, tells of life after redemption. ‘Nature has been healed, giving forth its best at every moment. The economic conditions which call forth human abuses have been eliminated. The serenity of Zion has, through the ever-growing stream, spread throughout the Land. Zion has become the source of redemption; the Temple is the mechanism for the disbursal of abundant grace for the whole population. When the presence of God has returned to the navel of the world, the Land is transformed through the life-

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid* p. 356

<sup>51</sup> modified from *ibid* p. 354

giving stream thus renewed<sup>52</sup>. Even the architecture of Zion is a public testimony to the nature of God<sup>53</sup>. Use of the word *nasi'* (prince over the tribes under God's kingship) rather than *melek* (king over his kingdom) for the ruler at this time indicates that the rule of Jesus Messiah will be not imperialistic or abusive but shepherd-like (ch. 34 and 37.21-28, cp John ch. 10): his kingship is not rejected but reinterpreted. It is interesting that in the modern State of Israel, *nasi'* is used not of the Prime Minister but of the ceremonial President. Messiah's rule will be just and compassionate; he will be God's viceroy, fixing the flaws of history, renewing the Covenant. The historical monarchy will be fulfilled in the eschatological theocracy.

That theocracy will fulfil the promises in the history of redemption. The Prince provides the sacrifice! (44.1-3, 46.1-3, 8-10, 12) and the land is allocated to the tribes in perfect fairness fulfilling the original intention, but with a welcome for all from whatever nation who join them (47.21-23) – and all west of the Jordan this time, i.e. with wilfulness and second-best excluded via the change of heart (36.26) characteristic of the new age. For the same reason the Prince's rule is non-political and the judicial apparatus not developed in detail: that will not be needed when we all have hearts of flesh. It is a constitution for a 'kingdom of priests, a holy people', fulfilling Ex.19.6.

Ezekiel 40-48 thus stands as a judgement on all history and a beacon to all who hope for what it promises and work for what it mandates. Thanks to the grace of God we expect to stand on that very high mountain (40.2 and Isaiah 2.1-5), see the city whose name is 'The Lord is there' (48.35)<sup>54</sup>, and for the Lamb to lead us (Rev.7.17).

#### *Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel (Section F, ch. 40-48)*

1. *The enormous care preparing God's house leads to the return of his glory. The designed impact of that return upon his people is shame at their sins (43.10f). How holy is God; how merciful to choose our friendship; how important it is that we have a godly attitude to sin. For we are called to hasten the eschatological era by our deeds: 'it is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you to desist from it'<sup>55</sup>. Compare Acts 3.19f; 2 Peter 3.11-14.*

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<sup>52</sup> J.D.Levenson 'Theology of the program of restoration of Ezekiel ch. 40-48,' Missoula, Scholars Press, 1976 p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Paragraph dependent on Levenson p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> Rabbi Tarfon, early second century AD, Mishnaic Pirkei Avoth ('Ethics [literally chapters] of the Fathers') ii.17, quoted by Levenson p. 48.

2. *The new Torah we suggest exploring in sermon 8 says, let us be sure to run every part of life under our Lord's reign. Inclusion of even the design of the kitchens says, God invites us to eat at his table.*
3. *The miracle of the river of life bespeaks God's desire to bless his people. Up to this point God's reputation and holiness have dominated. Now Ezekiel shows us the abundant life and fullness of blessing which flow from God's grace. Our wellbeing is God's passion.*
4. *Full salvation embraces the earth, the environment as well as ourselves (47.1-12). We are back in Eden, but with gratitude at salvation added to its perfections.*
5. *47.13-48.29, the delineation and apportioning of the land with the centre reserved for God, shows that all belongs to him and he is central (| | the tabernacle at the centre of the camp during the exodus). All we have comes by his gift.*
6. *The equal distribution between the tribes, with space explicitly made for foreigners who join God's people (47.47.21-23), prevents the injustices that now plague human society. In the next life it will be 'each like his brother' (47.14 literally; cp Lev.7.10).*
7. *The city will no longer be called Jerusalem but YHWH-Shammah (the Lord is there. Is the similar sound significant? Yerushalaim/Yahwehshammah). 'In Jesus the Messiah, the glory of YHWH, has descended and dwells among us, God with us'<sup>56</sup>*

## Theology

**God**, to Ezekiel, is absolutely not a doctrine. He is terrifying, personal, charismatic, prostratingly overwhelming, fixated on Israel, jealous when she turns to idols, emotional, enthroned, radiant, a flaming fire i.e. radically disciplinary. In his faithfulness he is committed to Israel's future even when he removes her from her land, her city, her king and his own reputation. In one word God is OTHER. He is so holy he leaves his own special home the Jerusalem temple, disgusted with the idolatry there (ch. 10). Some particular features:

- *The bright radiance of his glory*, ch. 1. Too bright to look at, cp Hebrews 12.18-29: 'a blazing fire and a tempest ... our God is a consuming fire.'
- *His omniscience*. Between them the creatures bearing his throne have 32 eyes but still the wheels-within-wheels of his chariot are full of eyes. God sees all.
- *Lord of history*. Israel will fall by famine, sword and plague (ch. 5&6), the nations be judged for hating his people and him (ch. 25-32).
- *His justice*. The people complain they are being punished for previous generations' sins. No, says Ezekiel in the finest passage of theodicy in

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<sup>56</sup> Block II p.746: almost his closing words

the Bible, your punishment is for your sins. Nobody, no generation gets punished because of their father's sins (ch. 18). Cf ch. 9: God marks those who *lament* the rampant idolatry; they will be treated differently.

- *His grace.* Even amidst 21 chapters of unremitting denunciation (ch. 4-24) his commitment to subsequent restoration bubbles up. See italics passages in 'Ezekiel at a glance' above.
- *He is the reason why there is history at all.* No other prophet is so utterly God-centred. All history is about his honour: 'in order that Israel, and the nations, may know that I am YHWH' – 70 times.

**Sin.** Ezekiel describes the same wrong actions as other prophets but being a priest he uses two characteristic words in categorising them.

a. He repeatedly calls them *to'ebot* (42 times): abominations, acts which fill you with disgust. It is peculiarly typical of Ezekiel. Here is an insight which can get forgotten in the more familiar diagnosis of sin as a falling short or transgression flowing from a twistedness in character, bringing judgement that requires a just solution. Those are legal categories; Ezekiel's perspective reminds us that when we sin it disgusts God.

b. Ezekiel's second word is to profane: the Sabbath, God, his Name.

These categories – abomination and profaning – are not in the law court justice category. They require cleansing, expiation: this is Ezekiel the priest talking, and explains the vision of a new temple and a renewed cultus.

Does this not have pastoral value for us? We are used, I guess, to using different categories when speaking of sin and salvation: law-court guilt before God, and justification; slavery to sin and redemption; enmity against God and reconciliation; the wrath of God and propitiation; perhaps also the language of *Christus Victor*<sup>57</sup>. But if our people see that our sin disgusts God, that is something else again: a fresh revulsion against sin and motive not to, a fresh cause for gratitude that God gave the sacrifices – Christ's Sacrifice – to reconcile himself to us.

**Severe Grace.** Here, it seems to me, lies Ezekiel's chief theological contribution: the way he gave of understanding the cataclysmic events over the 25 years or so from 593. Was YHWH weaker than Bel?<sup>58</sup> If not, why

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<sup>57</sup> Gustaf Aulen *Christus Victor* London SPCK 1970 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1931). Aulen calls his category 'dramatic'. Christ fought against and triumphed over the evil powers of the world and so brought a new relation of reconciliation between himself and the world.

<sup>58</sup> The chief god of Babylon was Marduk. As the national god he was simply called Bel, or Lord.

would he allow his people to experience defeat and catastrophe? How were they to come to terms with such a drastic collapse? From within the community of Judean exiles in Babylon Ezekiel answers, it is YHWH's good punishment. At the start of his ministry in 593 Jerusalem was still safe and most of Judah still in the land; Ezekiel warns 'worse is to come.' It did. In 586<sup>59</sup> most of the population lost everything but what they could carry. The nation lost their king, their capital, their land, their temple and their independence. Yet all this, says Ezekiel, is but the culmination of what they had always been like. We were idolaters and Sabbath-breakers even in Egypt (20.6-13). The exodus story is actually one of disobedience (20.18-21). Once in the holy land, we turned to Baal and child sacrifice (20.27-31). The only reason we are not destroyed is for the sake of God's Name. In fact why did the Lord choose us at all? Ezekiel does not answer. And yet we have a future and a hope, via a second exodus (20.33-44). Our existence, our continuation and our future flow solely from the grace of God. This is what defines us: grace that will not let us go.

**The Prince (*nasi'*).** The word occurs 36 times. It is especially used of the future ruler of the restored Israel. Why this word in preference to *melek* (king)? 'King' by now carried overtones of abuse by domination, excessive taxation, theft of a citizen's vineyard, conscription into the army or labour force; even, God's second best as a political process (1 Sam. 8). *Nasi'* by contrast was used of the leaders of the twelve tribes, the leader from a less corrupt period in their history. It is a non-political term expressing a more personal rule or leadership. In the OT as a whole it means leader or ruler, whether or not royal. Ezekiel uses it of leaders or the king and gives it overtones of selfless shepherding such as you would want from God's viceroy. Important occurrences are 34.24 and 37.25: 'I YHWH will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them ... They will dwell in the land, and David my servant shall be their prince for ever.' A host of scriptures will have sprung to mind. The servant passages of Isaiah. Isaiah 9.6f on the light due to dawn after a dark time: 'the government will be on his shoulder, and he will be called prince of peace; of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.'

**The work of salvation.** It is characteristic of Ezekiel to take up and develop themes he has started earlier. In 11.19 right in the middle of denunciation he says, 'I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.' In

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<sup>59</sup> The discussion whether Jerusalem fell in 587 or 586 is not resolved. Most dates in this era are uncertain to within a year or two.

36.26f he repeats the promise, adding 'I will put my Spirit within you' as the means by which he will bring this about. If we are to *know* He is YHWH (final point re God, above) we need help.

- The heart is our thinking and moral centre. In Ezekiel's time, the hearts of the people were stony (2.4,3.7). God promises to replace them with hearts of flesh: sensitive, responsive.
- The spirit is the term for our understanding, our emotional and moral mind-set. God promises a new capacity to respond to him: newness of conscience and the will-power to act accordingly.

Each text (11.19, 36.26f) says 'and I will be *their* God': a promise of awakening for the whole nation. This is the Gospel according to Ezekiel. If there is to be a perfect state, there will have to be a change in human nature. God commands us to get a new heart and spirit (18.31). But that is beyond us. He comes to us in the Gospel and replaces our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God and his people will belong to each other, all by sheer undeserved gift. 'Ezekiel's major contribution is the fact that everything rests on the mysterious nature of God, who acts in order that it be known that He is YHWH'<sup>60</sup>.

**Apocalyptic.** Some of Ezekiel's visions are bizarre and have what one commentator calls a dream-like quality. According to Hitzig the features of apocalyptic are a heightened use of symbol and imagery along with visionary experiences<sup>61</sup>. Ch. 38 and 39 for example, the Gog from Magog prophecy, has these features along with a fair amount of unreality and imaginative description, the number seven in abundance, an enigmatic approach to the names of people and places: there is something apocalyptic here. However the standard definition offered by J.J.Collins is

'A genre of revelatory literature with narrative framework in which the revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal (envisaging eschatological salvation) and spatial (another supernatural world).'

Ezekiel 38 and 39, by contrast,

- Do not have a revelation from an otherworldly being;
- Share with non-apocalyptic prophecies features like the conflict between YHWH and his enemies.

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<sup>60</sup> McKeating p. 129.

<sup>61</sup> F. Hitzig *Der Prophet Ezechiel* Leipzig 1847 xiv-xiv quoted Block II p.427; my summary.

- ‘Are a far cry from the elaborate symbolism of Daniel or the NT book Revelation’<sup>62</sup>.

Because the Gog oracle does not include the disintegration of all things and their consummation in an eschatological salvation, it is not quite apocalyptic. But there is wild and impossible imagery there, which is why I have called it pre-apocalyptic (p. 8).

## Was Ezekiel successful? His impact on Judaism

As soon as the exiles returned home they started building, first the altar and then the second temple (Ezra ch. 3). They persevered despite repeated opposition (Ezra ch. 4 -6: 536 and 486 BC respectively). As a popular movement they gathered in the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem and it was the people who told Ezra to bring out the Scriptures (Neh. 8.1). They listened attentively for four hours, mourning the difference between God’s standards and their lives (Neh. 8.3-9), making confession and entering into a fresh agreement with God (Neh. 9 & 10).

They became examples of 2 Cor.7.11: ‘*See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.*’

‘One can only describe Israel’s future (after captivity) as an awakening from death.’ God used Ezekiel’s preaching ch. 37: ‘it took His creative authority to create new life from those graves (37.14). All honour must go to God for that<sup>63</sup>.’ But it also required Ezekiel to preach it from inside an obedient life.

They were not perfect. Nehemiah and the post-exilic prophets had to keep the reform going (Neh. Ch. 5 & 13; Haggai; Malachi). But under God Ezekiel’s ministry had broken the hold of idolatry, the abuses of the monarchy and the unrepentant oppression of the poor. He had paved the way to synagogue worship, to a democratisation of the political process and to reverence for scripture as the word of God. It was an immense achievement; he might well be called the father of Judaism.

What was his method? For seven years from his call in 593 till the fall of Jerusalem in 586, as recorded in ch. 1-24, he taught and taught ‘*whatsoever a*

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<sup>62</sup> Block p.428

<sup>63</sup> W. Zimmerli *The message of the prophet Ezekiel*. Interpretation **23** 1969 p. 131-157; quotation from p. 153



*man soweth, that shall he also reap*: that their sins and idolatry disgusted God, his judgement was now inevitable and it would result in the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. By sheer persistence, confirmed by God's providence, he broke the grip of impenitence.

How the people would take that punishment would be crucial, said Ezekiel.

- It was no good consoling themselves that all would be well (33.24).
- Resentment, complaining that God was being unjust punishing them for their parents' sins, would not wash (18.2,25,29).
- Pious despair would be of no benefit to them (33.10; compare 2 Cor. 7.10b).

No, each generation is responsible for its own behaviour and receives life or death accordingly (18.4-20).

What Ezekiel taught them was that Providence was centred on the welfare of God's people and the furtherance of God's purposes (ch. 25-32 centres exactly on 28.24-26). God was acting to give them a hope and a future. Then in ch. 33-37 he spelt out that future: a new covenant with God, a new heart and spirit, the gift of the Holy Spirit and God among them, shepherding them through a promised Prince in the line of David.

We are not bound by our yesterdays. Ezekiel is against resignation. God is on the side of life (18.23, 32). 'Today the freedom to turn round stands open,' he was saying<sup>64</sup>.

This was more than a vague call to individual conversion. It involved turning from idolatry, oppressing no-one, feeding the hungry. 'Ezekiel is the OT prophet who proclaims more radically than any other that no righteousness of the people called by God can stand up before God. And yet there **is** a new future after the captivity. It is not yet the message of the Son of God who went to death in order that people, by turning to faith, turn to life. But he is a messenger on the way to the Son'<sup>65</sup>.

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18<sup>th</sup> October 2018

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 155-157 have guided these three paragraphs.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid p. 157

# Chart: Dates and Contexts of the Writing Prophets

Date BC	Dominant world power	Kings of Israel
750	<b>800-626 ASSYRIA</b> Capital: Nineveh. Fell in 612 (750-732 <b>Damascus</b> was a minor power in area) 744-727 Tiglath-Pileser III	Capital: Samaria 793-753 Jeroboam II      evil 753-2 Zechariah; Shallum      evil? 752-742 Menahem      evil 742-740 Pekahiah      evil 740-732 Pekah      evil 732-722 Hoshea      evil
	726-722 Shalmanezar → 704-681 Sennacherib	<b>722 Samaria fell to Assyria</b> People of Israel (ten northern tribes) deported to Assyria
600	<b>626-538 BABYLONIA</b> Capital: Babylon. Fell in 538 (read how, in Daniel ch. 5) 605-562 Nebuchadnezzar	<i>Exile &amp; Captivity</i>
	Belshazzar (Daniel 5)	
500	<b>538-331 MEDO-PERSIA</b> Main capital: Susa 559-530 Cyrus (prob.= 'Darius the Mede' Dan.5:31, 6:28) 522-486 Darius the Great 486-465 Xerxes = Ahasuerus 465-424 Artaxerxes	
	<b>331 GREECE:</b> Alexander the Great of Macedon	

Date BC	Kings of Judah	Prophets	
750	Capital: Jerusalem	??date <b>Jonah:</b> to Nineveh* ??date <b>Obadiah:</b> vs Edom ??date <b>Joel:</b> Jerusalem / Last Days	
	792-740 Uzziah( Azariah) good	775-755 <b>Amos</b> (esp N; from S) 755-725 <b>Hosea</b> (esp N) 740-690 <b>Isaiah</b> (esp S) 740-690 <b>Micah</b> (esp S) *(?730ish <b>Jonah</b> warns Nineveh) ?635 <b>Zephaniah</b> (S) 627-585 <b>Jeremiah</b> (S) 620ish <b>Nahum</b> (vs Nineveh) ?610-600 <b>Habakkuk</b> (personal/S)	
	740-735 Jotham good		
	735-716 Ahaz evil		
	716-687 Hezekiah good		
	687-642 Manasseh evil, repented		
	642-640 Amon evil		
	640-609 Josiah good		
	700		609 Jehoahaz evil
			609-598 Jehoiakim evil
597 Jehoiachin evil			
597-586 Zedekiah evil			
600	<b>586 Jerusalem fell to Babylonia.</b> People of Judah (two southern tribes) deported to Babylonia 586-538.  <i>Babylonian captivity/exile</i>	(586ish <b>Lamentations</b> ) 605-530 <b>Daniel</b> in Babylon's court then in Persia's (exiled in 605 with King Jehoiakim)  593-570 <b>Ezekiel</b> in Babylon (exiled in 597 with King Jehoiachin)	
	538 Cyrus encouraged the exiles to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1.1)	Isaiah had predicted this: 44:28 - 45:6	
500		520 <b>Haggai</b> 520-470 <b>Zechariah</b>	
331		?430s <b>Malachi</b>	

For sermon resources and Bibliography, see  
**Preaching Ezekiel Booklet 2.**

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