

# INTRODUCTION AND EZEKIEL<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This study draws heavily on Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989).

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## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan scholar William Greenhill characterized the book of Ezekiel as "full of majesty, obscurity, and difficulty" (Block, 89). My hope for this class is that I can convey enough of its majesty, remove enough of its obscurity, and lessen enough of its difficulties to make it worth your time to be here.

In this class, I plan to comment on blocks of text. I'll not always read the sections in the class before commenting, so it might pay for you to read a bit ahead of me each week.

### *I. Historical Setting*

A. Shortly after the death of King Solomon in 931 B.C., the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In 722/21 B.C., the Assyrians completed their conquest of Israel, the northern kingdom, by capturing the capital city of Samaria, and that part of the Promised Land was absorbed into their empire.

B. After the fall of Samaria, the Judean king Hezekiah abolished the worship of Canaanite and Assyrian gods. Around 711 B.C., he joined with Ashdod and the kingdoms of Edom and Moab in an unsuccessful revolt against Assyria. When the Assyrian king Sargon died in 705 B.C., Hezekiah again rebelled against Assyria, this time forming an alliance with Egypt contrary to Isaiah's advice. The new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, invaded Judah in 701 B.C., conquering many of its fortified cities, but God protected Jerusalem from Sennacherib's assault by annihilating his army with a plague (2 Ki. 19:25-26).

C. Hezekiah was succeeded by Manasseh who, despite a late-conversion (2 Chron. 33:10-20), is labeled the worst of the Judean kings (2 Ki. 21:1-18, 24:3-4). He reigned for about 55 years, from around 697 – 642 B.C.,<sup>2</sup> and reversed the reforms of Hezekiah. Daniel Block says of Manasseh (p. 2):

[T]he kingdom of Judah never recovered from the spiritual degradation to which he had brought the nation. After [fifty]-five years of court-sponsored paganism, Judean apostasy was so deeply entrenched that the sweeping reforms of the good king Josiah (640-609) could do no more than scratch the surface, but not for lack of trying.

D. The ancient kingdom of Babylonia began a new rise to prominence with King Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.). In 612 B.C., the Babylonians, assisted by the Medes, destroyed Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. When the Babylonians and their allies took Haran in 610 B.C., the Assyrian Empire was finished. The issue was whether Egypt or Babylonia would rule Palestine and Syria.

E. Josiah was killed near Megiddo in 609 B.C. when he confronted the Egyptians who were in route to assist the Assyrians in their effort to regain Haran (2 Ki. 23:29; also 2 Chron. 35:20). Josiah probably was trying to prevent Pharaoh Neco II from coming to the aid of Assyria, fearing Egypt more than the distant Babylonians.

F. While Pharaoh Neco was campaigning in northern Syria, the people made Josiah's son, Shallum, king of Judah (with the throne-name Jehoahaz) (2 Ki. 23:30; 2 Chron. 36:1; Jer. 22:11). But Jehoahaz ruled for only three months before Neco II, on his return from Syria, deposed him and deported him to Egypt. In 609 or 608 B.C., Neco replaced Jehoahaz with Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, and renamed him Jehoiakim (2 Ki. 23:31-34; 2 Chron. 36:3-4; Jer. 22:10-12).

G. In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, while still crown prince, soundly defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, establishing Babylonia as the undisputed controller of Palestine. That battle is recounted in the Babylonian Chronicle and also is referred to in Jer. 46:2. Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylonia that same year.

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<sup>2</sup> Some conclude that he reigned 45 years, from 687 – 642 B.C.

H. Daniel 1:1-2 informs us that King Nebuchadnezzar (or possibly subordinates acting under his orders) came against Jerusalem in 605 (under one way of reckoning the years of a king's reign), presumably because Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian, and took tribute from Jehoiakim in the form of people and cultic articles. This is when Daniel was deported. (It seems from 2 Chron. 36:5-8 that Jehoiakim himself was either deported to Babylonia or threatened with deportation. If the former, the deportation must have been temporary.)

I. Some years later, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 24:1), which led to a massive invasion in 598/597 B.C. Jehoiakim died probably in 598/597 and was succeeded by his son Jehoiakin (2 Ki. 24:6; also spelled Jehoiachin). Jehoiakin promptly (he reigned only three months) surrendered to the Babylonians without a fight in order to avoid complete annihilation of Jerusalem.

a. Jehoiakin, the royal family, and a large portion of the Judean elite, including Ezekiel, were led into exile (2 Ki. 24:14), and more treasures from the temple and royal palace were carried off.

b. Jehoiakin fared relatively well in Babylon. We've actually found Babylonian chronicles detailing the rations given to him and his family from the royal storehouses. He was freed after 37 years of captivity when Evil-merodach succeeded Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon (2 Ki. 25:27-30) and enjoyed the favor of the king.

c. Despite the exile, the prophets never lost hope in the continuation of the Davidic line, and Jehoiakin remained the critical link (Jer. 23:5-6; Ezek. 34:23-24, 37:24; Hag. 2:23; Zech. 4:6-9, 6:9-15). This is the Jeconiah listed in the genealogy of Christ in Mat. 1:11-12.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 22:28-30 says of Coniah (= Jehoiakin) (ESV): "Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah." The question is how this can be squared with Mat. 1:11-12 which traces the genealogy of Jesus, who has been given David's throne (Lk. 1:32), through Jeconiah (a nickname for Jehoiakin). Here are some possibilities.

a. There is evidence that Jehoiakin repented and that any generational curse subsequently was removed. After the strong words directed toward Jehoiakin in Jer. 22:24-30, the prophet reports in Jer. 52:31-34 (see also 2 Ki. 25:27-30) the special favor that was shown to Jehoiakin after decades in prison. This striking reversal of circumstances suggests a change of Jehoiakin's heart. Further evidence is provided in Hag. 2:20-23 in which God says he will make Zerubbabel, Jehoiakin's grandson, like his *signet ring*. This reverses the language of the curse in which he told Jehoiakin that even if he were a *signet ring* he would be cast off. Based on these texts, Rabbinic literature is filled with references to Jehoiakin's repentance and his subsequent restoration. See, e.g., Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus Vol. 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 100-102.

b. The curse may have applied only to Jehoiakin and his immediate descendants. Here's how Michael Brown argues the point (p. 98):

A command is given (v. 30) in the pl. (*kitbu*, write!) to record that he will be '*ariri*, childless (see Gen. 15:2, and note esp. Lev. 20:20-21, where being '*ariri* is a curse for an unauthorized union), yet v. 28 spoke of his offspring while 1 Ch 3:16-17 states that he had seven sons. The explanation for this is found in the rest of v. 30, which should be understood in light of the presumed ardent hope and desire of the people of Judah -- in their land and in exile -- that this son of David, or one of his sons, would be restored to the throne. God says it will not happen, the emphasis being on "his lifetime" (in which he'll not succeed) and the lifetimes of this sons, none of whom would reign on the throne, making it as if he was

J. When Jehoiakin surrendered to the Babylonians in 598/597 B.C., Josiah's son (Johoiakin's uncle) Mattaniah was installed as a puppet king in Jerusalem and given the throne name Zedekiah. After a number of years, he foolishly initiated a rebellion against the Babylonians, which resulted in a furious retaliation. This culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587/86, following a two-year siege of the city (2 Kings 24:17 - 25:26).

## II. The Prophet

A. Our only information about Ezekiel comes from the book of his prophecies, and it contains very little of a biographical nature. He was the son of a priest named Buzi (1:3), which means he would have been educated as a young man for priestly service. According to Num. 4:30, 30 was the age at which priests qualified for induction into office, which means Ezekiel probably was not yet inducted into the priesthood before he was exiled.

B. His name represents either an affirmation of faith, "God strengthens/toughens," or an appeal of faith, "May God strengthen/toughen." And God does indeed strengthen him in the face of cynicism and rejection of his ministry.

C. If "thirtieth year" in 1:1 refers to Ezekiel's age, as seems likely, he was born in 623 B.C. So he grew up during the last years of relative independence for his home state of Judah, which was constantly threatened with military subjugation by the Babylonian Empire. As I said, eventually he was exiled to Babylon, at around age 25, and it was there that he served as a prophet. He was settled in a Jewish colony near Nippur on the Chebar canal.

D. He had a wife who died in Babylonia during the exile (24:18).

## III. The Book

A. Date of prophecies - The dated prophecies of Ezekiel fall between 593 and 571 B.C., from 4/5 years after his deportation in 598/597 to 15/16 years after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586.

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childless (so NIV). In keeping with this, the divine promises to the line of David are not renewed until the days of Zerubbabel, his grandson (see Hag 2:20-23, and . . . Jer 52:31-34).

c. The curse may refer only to the actual, *biological* descendants of Jehoikhin and not to *legal* descendants who were adopted into his line. Jesus had no human father, but he was a legal descendant of Jehoiakin through his legal father Joseph. This is the approach suggested in Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992) 277.

d. The curse may be restricted to a descendant reigning from a physical throne *in Judah*.

B. Character - Ezekiel communicated the message of God to his contemporaries in a variety of ways. He certainly engaged in "straight" verbal prophesying, but he also recounted visions, used parables and allegories, and took symbolic action. This book is very "visual literature," and one cannot approach it as though it were, for example, a letter.

C. Organization - It is arranged thematically in four major sections, and within these sections the material is almost entirely chronological. The major sections are: Before the Fall of Jerusalem (1-24), Oracles Against the Foreign Nations (25-32), Hope and Danger in the Future (33-39), and Vision of the New Temple and Land (40-48).

## Text

### *I. Before the Fall of Jerusalem – Chaps. 1 – 24*

#### A. Ezek. 1:1-28

#### **1. The Heavens Opened - 1:1-3**

a. Ezekiel was among the captives who lived in Tel Abib (3:15) along the Chebar River. It was actually an irrigation canal that took water from the Euphrates River at the city of Nippur and carried it in a large semicircle through the countryside until it rejoined the Euphrates downstream near the city of Uruk. Since "Tel" can mean "ruined mound," the Judean exiles may have been put here to repopulate a destroyed or abandoned city.

b. One can only imagine how discouraging this was for the Jews living there. Not only were they laboring in a Babylonian wasteland, but the economy and society were alien and they were out of range of ever worshipping at the Jerusalem temple as the law required. The attitude of many is powerfully expressed in Psalm 137, which begins with, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."

c. In this setting of isolation, to these people seemingly cut off from "the action," which focused on Jerusalem, God has a message. He gives revelatory visions to Ezekiel; he chose Ezekiel to be his spokesman. They were neither out of God's sight nor out of his mind.

d. This divine appearance to Ezekiel in Babylon flies in the face of the widespread myth of the day that the influence of gods was limited to their "home turf." Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, appears whenever and wherever he chooses.

## **2. Creatures in the Wind - 1:4-14**

a. The raging storm and great cloud approaching from the north suggests the appearance of God. On occasion God's abode was symbolically depicted as in the north (Ps. 48:2; Isa. 14:13), and storms and clouds were often associated with divine appearances (e.g., Isa. 29:6; Job. 38:1; Ps. 29:3-9; 104:3).

b. The four living creatures that appear from within this glowing cloud fit the general description of cherubim, and 10:1-22 makes this identification certain. They are supernatural creatures that are often depicted as the creatures that bear God's throne or chariot (Ex. 37:7-9; 1 Sam. 4:4; Ps. 18:10, 80:1, 99:1). As the following verses make clear, in this instance they are bearing the divine chariot. Just as we associate the president with a black limousine, ancient Israelites associated the "presence" of God with cherubim.

c. These creatures certainly reflect the glory of their position, glowing and having the faces of the most impressive of earthly creatures (lion – strength and majesty; eagle – swiftness and mobility; bull – procreative power; human – wisdom and reason), but the key point about them in this vision are that they are oriented to all directions. They did not need to turn to face the intended direction of their flight because they were already facing every direction. They simply moved at the will of God.

d. Thus far, the vision makes two things clear: Something that is supernatural and that involves God on the move is about to happen, and it is of importance to the exiles who saw themselves as out of God's presence and program.

## **3. Wheels in Wheels - 1:15-21**

a. The cherubim are stationed at the four sides of the divine chariot, each able to see and move in all directions.

b. The wheels of the chariot were actually four pairs of wheels that intersected at right angles. Thus, no turning was necessary to go in any of the four directions.

c. Being right next to the cherubim, there was no lack of response to the cherubim's leading. In fact, the spirit of the cherubim was in the wheels so the response was instantaneous; the chariot was, in essence, an extension of the cherubim that directed it.

d. God is not confined to any particular locale. As symbolized by this supernatural vehicle, he can go anywhere anytime. He travels the whole earth and is control of it all. His being "on the move" is a cause for encouragement for all who truly worship him.

#### 4. Firmament and Throne - 1:22-28

a. The cherubim are pictured as supporting a gemlike firmament (something extensive and spread out) that functions as a platform for God's throne. The "likeness" on the throne was that of God. He could not really be seen except in general shape, and his most "visible" feature was his glorious shining brightness. The entire vision proclaims through its profound imagery the glory, holiness, and sovereignty of God.

b. Ezekiel naturally (for that culture) fell on his face. That was standard practice when appearing before an earthly monarch, let alone the Almighty.

c. The fact God appeared in this way to Ezekiel raises the expectation that God is going to reveal what he is about to do.

d. As awesome as this glory is, God's most direct self-manifestation has been his arrival as a human being. He came in remarkably humble circumstances, living and dying in a rather obscure part of the world, but Jn. 1:14 tells us that in Christ we beheld God's glory.

e. As awesome as this glory is, it is something we are to reflect as a result of God's indwelling Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

#### B. Ezek. 2:1 – 3:27

##### 1. Commissioned as a Prophet to Rebels - 2:1-7

a. Ezekiel is here (and about 90 times throughout the book) addressed by God as "son of man." This emphasizes his humanity, his mortality, as over against God's supernatural greatness and power. Later, the term "son of man" took on the symbolism of *The Human* and became a Messianic term (as it is when applied to Jesus).

b. God tells Ezekiel that he is sending him to speak his words to the children of Israel. He makes clear that this will not be a "cushy" assignment:

(1) He describes the Israelites as rebels, transgressors, impudent, and stubborn.

(2) He instructs Ezekiel not to be afraid of them or to be afraid of their words.

(3) The Israelites are pictured as briars and thorns and as scorpions, things that wound and sting.

c. Ezekiel's assignment is to speak God's words to them, not his own, and to do so regardless of their opposition and regardless of their refusal to heed that word. His call is to be a faithful proclaimer of God's message.

## **2. Ezekiel's Relationship to the Message Symbolized - 2:8 – 3:3**

a. Unlike rebellious Israel, Ezekiel is to heed the word of the Lord. He is to be a faithful servant, one who can be trusted to faithfully discharge his assignment.

b. The scroll represents God's message for Israel. The fact it has writing on both sides suggests that God is calling him to communicate a great deal (since scrolls normally had writing on only one side). The message Ezekiel is to preach is in large part going to be bad news to the Israelites, one that will produce lamentations, mourning, and woe.

c. The action of eating the scroll says several things:

(1) Obedience to this unusual command shows Ezekiel's willingness to be the faithful servant God is calling him to be. He is saying "yes" to that call, "yes" to doing whatever God asks of him.

(2) It symbolizes the importance Ezekiel is to attach to the message of God. It is to be as his food; it is to be essential for his life. When Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn. 4:34), he was indicating the priority of God's will in his life. In Ezekiel, the message he is called to deliver is to be his "food," his top priority.

(3) The fact he is to *fill* his stomach with the scroll suggests that it is to be all that he delivers. In other words, he is to have nothing to preach except the Lord's message.

(4) The fact this nasty looking scroll actually tasted as sweet as honey allows Ezekiel to experience that faithfulness with regard to God's word is the path of blessing even when it may not appear so. It also generally testifies to the goodness of God's word (e.g., Ps. 119:103).

## **3. Divine Strengthening Promised - 3:4-9**

a. Though God is sending him to his own people, to people who speak his language, they will not listen to him because they do not listen to God, and they do not listen to God because they are impudent and hard-hearted. The resistance Ezekiel meets as a faithful spokesman for God will not be personally directed, though it may appear so.

b. God encourages him with the statement that he has given him the strength to face their hostility, symbolically expressed as making his face strong and hard against them. It is not going to be easy to be faithful in proclamation, but God will give him courage. What he cannot do is alter the message!

#### **4. Divine Delivery to the Audience - 3:10-15**

a. God tells him, "receive into your heart all My words that I speak to you, and hear with your ears." The point is that Ezekiel is to be accurate in transmission. He is not to misunderstand or forget the message God calls him to deliver.

b. He is miraculously transported from his position at the Chebar River to Tel Abib proper, to the exiles to whom he is to prophesy.

c. His being taken up is accompanied by "bitterness" and "agitation." This is understandable. One minute he was a non-descript exile; the next minute he was under a divine calling that promised difficulty, rejection, and hostility. The hand of the Lord was strong on him, meaning he was under God's direction, which is precisely why he was distressed. He knew that faithfulness did not mean easy living.

d. The visions, conversations, and experience of miraculous transport overwhelmed Ezekiel. He was in "spiritual shock" for a week, undoubtedly trying to grasp what had happened and its implications.

#### **5. Responsibility of the Watchman - 3:16-21**

a. After his week-long recuperation, God tells Ezekiel that he has made him a watchman or sentinel for the house of Israel. God has given him the responsibility of delivering God's warnings.

b. As one who sounds God's warnings, his role as watchman is really one of mercy, but it will not be perceived that way by those who do not want to hear. They will blame him rather than appreciate his warning.

c. Regarding the wicked, if Ezekiel fails to deliver God's warning to them so that they might repent and be spared, he will share responsibility for their condemnation. If, however, he warns them and they do not repent, Ezekiel will not have any responsibility for their condemnation.

d. Regarding the righteous, if Ezekiel fails to warn them when they turn to sin, he will share responsibility for their condemnation. If, however, he warns the righteous and they avoid sin (either do not begin or repent), they will avoid condemnation, and Ezekiel will have discharged his duty.

e. As Christians, we all have responsibility for maturing the body of Christ by sharing the warnings we know (Eph. 4:11-16). If a brother or sister is in danger, it is our duty to tell them. We are not responsible for their reaction; our duty is limited to sounding the warning.

## **6. The Final Stage of the Commissioning - 3:22-27**

a. Ezekiel is told to go to the plain (or valley), and there he again sees the glory of the Lord that he saw by the river. God reinforces his awesome splendor in Ezekiel's mind.

b. Ezekiel is commanded to take his first symbolic action, but its message is directed to himself rather than to the Israelites. He is to be tied up (by friends or family) in his house so that he could not go out, and he is to be deprived of speech by God. This symbolizes two important things about his role:

(1) When and where he prophesies is not his decision. He has no freedom in that regard; he can only go when released.

(2) What he prophesies is not to be his own words. He is only to say what the Lord gives him to say; he is not to invent anything or take his message from anyone else.

c. Again, God indicates that the response to the message is not the prophet's responsibility; his duty is to faithfully proclaim the message.

### **C. Ezek. 4:1 - 7:27**

## **1. Symbolic Portrayals of Jerusalem's Coming Siege - 4:1 - 5:17**

### ***a. Ezekiel builds a model of Jerusalem - 4:1-3***

(1) God instructs Ezekiel to portray Jerusalem on a clay brick or tablet and then to lay siege to it.

(a) This involved making models of the instruments of siege: siege-wall (possibly protection for archers), earthen ramp or siege mound (necessary for use of the battering ram), battering ram, and military encampments.

(b) This indicated to the inhabitants of Tel Abib that, contrary to their expectations, Jerusalem would again be attacked by the Babylonians. The worst was not over for that city.

(2) In addition, Ezekiel set an iron plate (a cooking pan) between himself and the besieged city, as he continued to stare toward it. This symbolized God's rejection of the city; he was separated from it and was executing its judgment.

(3) The message for the exiles was that God's blessings and fellowship are conditioned on faithfulness. The fact God had blessed Jerusalem and established his Temple there did not mean that its inhabitants could sin with impunity. The wickedness of the people continued unabated under the reign of Zedekiah (2 Ki. 24:19-20), and God will not be mocked.

(4) The message for us is that we cannot be deceived into thinking that being a Christian is a license to sin. As Paul says in Gal. 6:7-9:

<sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, this also he will reap. <sup>8</sup>For the one who sows to his own flesh, from the flesh shall reap destruction, but the one who sows to the Spirit, from the Spirit shall reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup>So let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we shall reap a harvest if we do not give up.

### ***b. Punishment compared to that of northern kingdom - 4:4-8***

(1) With Jerusalem symbolically under siege, Ezekiel lies on his left side for 390 days (not continuously - e.g., "he preached on Ephesians for two months"), representing 390 years of Israel's punishment for wickedness, and on his right side 40 days, representing 40 years punishment for Judah's wickedness.

(2) The point seems to be that, contrary to the expectations of the exiles, Judah will suffer the same kind of punishment as Israel. In other words, its capital will also be destroyed and its existence as a nation ended. The only difference will be the length of that punishment.

(3) The years of punishment are best understood as symbolizing captivity. 430 years spoke to the Jew of Egyptian bondage (Ex. 12:40-41). They are divided 390/40 because 40 years was the length of time the Jews wandered in the wilderness as punishment

for unbelief and disobedience and because Israel's years of exile would be significantly longer than those of Judah (from 722/21 B.C. to 539 B.C.).

(4) During these 430 days, or perhaps just during the final 40, Ezekiel was required to stare toward the model and was bound so that he could not turn his back to it, thus symbolizing God's determination to execute his judgment. At the same time, he prophesied against the city with a bared arm, thereby verbally announcing its fate and symbolizing God's readiness to bring it about (see, Isa. 52:10).

(5) The implicit message of hope was that the days of Judah's exile would end, just as the 430 years of Egyptian bondage had ended.

### ***c. Famine in siege and defilement in exile - 4:9-17***

(1) Ezekiel's daily diet, at least his public diet, during the 390 days consisted of rationed portions of a "make-do" type bread (about 8 ozs.) and water (just over a pint). This symbolized the famine that would accompany the long siege of Jerusalem, a fact God makes plain in vv. 16-17.

(2) God first directed Ezekiel to bake this mixture over dried human excrement, which would make the food ritually unclean (probably because human excrement was to be buried - Deut. 23:12-14). The point was that those exiled from Jerusalem would eat defiled foods in captivity, because of both restricted selection and preparation options (see, Dan. 1:8; Hos. 9:3-4). In kindness to Ezekiel, whose priestly sensitivities revolted against eating defiled food, God blunted the symbolism and allowed him to cook over dried animal dung, which was a common fuel and not in violation of cleanliness regulations.

(3) The end of v. 17 specifies that this is all due to the iniquity of the people.

### ***d. Fate portrayed through shaving of head and beard - 5:1-17***

(1) God commands Ezekiel to shave his head and beard, a humiliating act for a Jew, and then to carefully divide the hair into thirds. When the 430 days of the siege were over, Ezekiel burned the first pile, chopped up the second with a sword, and scattered the third pile to the wind, chasing after it with his sword. He then recovered a few hairs and tucked them in the folds of his garment, only to take some of those out and throw them in the fire.

(2) This symbolized the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a result of the siege. According to v. 12, one-third would die from the "fire" of disease and famine during and after the siege; one-third would be killed in the battle for the city and by angry

conquering soldiers; and one-third will flee the city, many of whom will be cut down in the attempt. Even some of the relatively small group that survived would perish in exile. The horror of Jerusalem's destruction is described in some detail in Lamentations (e.g., Lam. 1:7-14, 2:20-22, 4:4-10).

(3) God declares that the horrible judgment on Jerusalem is because it rejected him. God had placed it in the center of the nations and established his Temple there so that it would be a beacon of holiness, a light to the Gentiles. Instead of fulfilling its special place in God's plan, its inhabitants spurned his will and lived worse than the surrounding pagan nations! God makes it clear that he is going to be vindicated and rebellious Jerusalem is going to be humiliated before the world.

(4) As Christians, you and I have been blessed more than Jerusalem. We are children of God and heirs of eternal life. God calls us to live holy lives (1 Pet. 1:14-15), to let our light shine in this sin-drenched world that he might be glorified (Mat. 5:14-16). If we, having been given so much, turn our backs on God, there is a terrible judgment in store (Heb. 10:26-31; 2 Pet. 2:17-22).

## **2. The Coming Judgment Predicted - 6:1 - 7:27**

a. Ezekiel repeatedly preached the annihilation of Judah so the message would have a chance to get through to a stubborn people. These two chapters are relatively straightforward predictions of doom and disaster.

b. Chapter 6 is a judgment on idolatrous Israel (understood to be Judah, what remained of old Israel).

(1) Idolatry was the standard way of worship in the ancient world. In fact, all religions everywhere were idolatrous except Judaism. Non-idolatry was so out of step with prevailing beliefs, that sticking to it was very hard. Douglas Stuart in his commentary on Exodus (NAC, 450-452) summarizes the strong appeal of idolatry as follows:

(a) It was believed that by making a likeness of a god or goddess, the essence of that divinity could be brought close to a group of humans. Idols were believed to represent a god, similar to the way a voodoo doll represents a person. What is done to the idol will be done to the god represented by it.

(b) This was compounded by the fact idolatrous religions made no ethical demands and often included ritual sex. Orthodoxy became a minority view in Israel and idolatry prevailed during most of the nation's history.

(3) The fact it was the majority view did not alter the fact it was an outrageous affront to God, spiritual adultery, and required punishment. God promises to bring this abomination to an end with the wholesale destruction and slaughter wrought by the Babylonians.

(4) But even in the midst of this destruction, a remnant will survive and in captivity come to realize the horror of what they had done to God. They will realize who God is, that he cannot be mocked and treated as irrelevant, and they will recognize just how serious he is about covenant loyalty.

c. In Chapter 7 God announces that the disaster is imminent. His wrath is coming in punishment of their wickedness. All things in which they trusted for security would fail to protect them.

(1) Their own strength would not stop the disaster (v.14).

(2) Their wealth would not stop the disaster (v. 19). In fact, the love of wealth had lured them to iniquity and thus to judgment.

(3) Their religious environment would not stop the disaster. The Temple, which gave them a false sense of security, will itself be destroyed (v. 20-22).

#### D. Ezek. 8:1 – 11:25

### 1. A Tour of the Temple - 8:1-18

a. Fourteen months after his initial vision, Ezekiel is given a vision while sitting in his home in Tel Abib with the community leaders who had undoubtedly come to inquire of the Lord. He has a vision in which he is taken to Jerusalem.

b. Outside the north gate of the inner court that surrounds the temple, Ezekiel sees an idol, quite possibly an image of Asherah, the mother-goddess of the Canaanite pantheon (having reappeared after Josiah's reformation - see, 2 Ki. 21:7). Though God's glory was still present in the Temple, he tells Ezekiel (v. 6) that this idolatry is driving him away.

(1) There is only room for one God in God's temple. He will not share his place of worship with anything. Faith in God is exclusive, an all or nothing proposition.

(2) In the N.T., both the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:6) and individual Christians (1 Cor. 6:19) are referred to as the temple of God. If we want God to remain with us, we cannot worship anything in addition to him. God can have no rivalries for our devotion. As Jesus said in Mat. 6:24, "No one can serve two masters."

c. Ezekiel is then shown the leaders of Judah engaging in full blown pantheistic idolatry in a hidden chamber in the temple. They were worshipping the "divine" as expressed in the life of animals.

(1) This blatant rebellion was being rationalized with the claim that God had abandoned the land and no longer "saw" (cared) what went on there (v. 12; see also, 9:9). They reasoned from their hardship that God was not there and concluded that their sin would go unpunished.

(2) However much it may appear that God does not exist or does not care or does not have power to bring to judgment, do not be deceived; he knows your sin and will hold you accountable.

d. Ezekiel is shown women in the outer court of the temple weeping over the death of Tammuz, the Sumerian-Babylonian god of plant life, who was thought to die each fall and return to life each spring. At the very door to the temple, a group of men, almost certainly priests, were literally turning their backs on God to worship the sun!

e. God promises to judge the people for these abominations.

## **2. Divine Executioners - 9:1-11**

a. God summons his executioners, and six of them appear at the temple, accompanied by a seventh who is dressed in white and carrying a writing kit. He then instructs the man in white to put a mark on the foreheads of those who mourn over the sin of the city.

b. After demonstrating his readiness to judge by moving his glory to the threshold of the temple, God commands the executioners to follow behind the marking angel, slaughtering everyone in the city except those with the mark. They do so, beginning with the elders in front of the temple.

c. The vision makes or reinforces several points:

(1) The coming destruction represented God's judgment, not simply a Babylonian military success.

(2) There are so few (any?) within the city who are righteous that the bodies being piled up in the temple courts prompt Ezekiel to cry out to God in fear that all would be killed. God's response is simply that the slaughter is in proportion to their sin, which suggests that the point of the vision is the amazing extent of the city's wickedness.

(3) V. 11 may indicate that some in fact were marked (though not necessarily). The additional point in that case is that despite the magnitude of the slaughter, it would not be complete; God would preserve a righteous remnant. (If so, 21:3-4 indicates that the vision is not to be taken literally; some righteous people were killed along with the wicked, and probably some wicked people survived.)

### **3. The Throne Chariot at the Temple - 10:1-22**

a. The throne chariot of chapter 1 appears, and the Lord commands the "man" in white linen to fill his hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and to scatter them over the city. This symbolizes God's holy wrath. These coals are part of God's glory and purity, and they consume all that is not holy.

b. God's glory is in the process of departing the temple, a movement which accelerates in chapter 11. In v. 18 his glory moves from the threshold of the temple to the east gate, poised to leave the city (which it does in 11:23).

c. As a footnote, the ox face of the cherubim (1:10) is said in 10:14 to be that of a cherub. This probably means that cherubim were commonly depicted with an ox or bull face (e.g., statues of winged bulls and lions were stationed at the entrances to public buildings in Assyria and Babylonia for protection - ISBE, 1:643). 10:20-22 make clear that the faces were the same in the two appearances.

### **4. Judgment on Jerusalem's Evil Leaders - 11:1-13**

a. At the east gate Ezekiel observes an assembly of twenty-five city officials. God declares that they plot evil and give wicked advice, saying "Is it not nearly time to build houses? This city is the pot, and we are the meat!"

(1) As leaders they were claiming that the threat of further Babylonian deportation was about taken care of, probably crediting their diplomacy and fortification strategy. In other words, they were falsely preaching that security was all but achieved, despite their continuing wickedness and contrary to God's prophetic word.

(2) Being the meat in the pot means they saw those left in Jerusalem as the desirable part that is kept, as opposed to undesirable parts that are discarded (as the deportees had been).

b. Ezekiel prophesies about this state of affairs.

(1) God knows their thoughts, that secretly they fear the sword (vv. 5-6, 8), and well they should. They had murdered many in Jerusalem, and it was those they murdered who were the "meat," the choicest parts of the citizenry.

(2) The leaders, on the other hand, were going to be driven from the city, captured, and executed by the Babylonians. Rather than being the meat, they would be thrown out as unfit to eat. This is precisely what happened in 2 Ki. 25:18-21.

(3) God again makes clear that this judgment is the result of their refusing to follow his decrees and laws; instead, they conformed to the standards of the nations around them (v. 12).

c. As he was prophesying, he saw Pelatiah, one of the leaders, drop dead. This present death brings home to Ezekiel the reality of the promised judgment, prompting him to cry out again on behalf of his people. He fears that Israel will be ended.

## **5. The Future of Israel Passes to the Exiles - 11:14-25**

a. Those in Jerusalem (and probably a good number in Babylon) had deceived themselves into believing that the exiles were God's unclean castaways. They saw themselves as the true heirs of the holy city, and encouraged the exiles to "stay away." Rather than accepting God's clear and obvious revelation, they falsely read a message of blessing from their circumstances.

b. God tells the exiles that, contrary to conventional wisdom, it is they who are the future of Israel, not those left in Jerusalem!

(1) Despite how unlikely it appears, God is going to bring the scattered and powerless exiles back home, and they will rid Judah of its idolatry and rebellion. They will return a penitent people, a people serious about their faith.

(2) This is precisely what happened historically. Beginning with Zerrubabel's return in 538 B.C., down through Ezra and Nehemiah (458 - 433 B.C.), Jews returning from exile were correcting abuses and reestablishing righteous religion in obedience to Mosaic Law. (The language of 11:19-20 probably looks ahead to the spiritual renewal under the new covenant; see discussion of 36:16-38.)

c. The glory of the Lord proceeds out of the city, symbolizing that God's rejection of wicked Judah had come to pass. Ezekiel feels himself brought back to Mesopotamia, the vision ends, and he tells the exiles what the Lord had showed him.

## E. Ezek. 12:1 - 15:8

### 1. Judah's Exile Enacted - 12:1-16

a. Those in exile, the future of Israel, are again described as a rebellious house, who do not see or hear Ezekiel's message. The truth of national destruction was so hard for them to swallow that they continued to doubt God's clear word through Ezekiel. God gives them another chance to understand. (Application: We become so obtuse when God has an unpleasant message for us.)

b. Ezekiel prepares an exile's bag and carries it to another location during the day. At dusk, he digs through "the wall," which symbolizes the breach in the city's defenses, and then carries the bag out like an exile, with his face covered in sorrow and shame.

c. Because some still did not understand, Ezekiel spells out that this symbolized exile for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (v. 10- 11), including Zedekiah, whose escape attempt and capture is elaborated on in vv. 12-14. Note the fulfillment of v. 13.

d. God would permit some to survive and go into exile so that they may tell of their wickedness and thus confirm that the exile was a demonstration of God's greatness, a fulfillment of covenant punishment, not some failure on his part. (Application: When we doubt God, we need to adjust our perspective.)

### 2. The Time Is at Hand - 12:17-28

a. Ezekiel acts out eating and drinking in fear. This depicts the fear and anxiety the besieged inhabitants will experience in the last days before the conquest. Again, it is coming because of their wrongdoing.

b. God is going to put an end to the proverb, "The days are prolonged, and every vision comes to nothing."

(1) The people of Jerusalem had come to ignore prophecies about the destruction of their city because such prophecies had circulated for so long without coming to pass. They belittled warnings of doom as something people were always claiming but which never occurred. (Prophecies of doom for Judah and Jerusalem had been around since the 8th century B.C., e.g., Amos 2:4-50; Hosea 5:10-14; Micah 1:8-9; Isa. 22:1-14.) Ezekiel is to tell them the reverse of their proverb: The days are at hand, and the fulfillment of every vision!

(2) They mistook God's mercy and patience for inability or disinterest. People do the same thing today. See, 2 Pet. 3:3-10. For centuries skeptics have mocked

the return of Christ as something always talked about but never occurring. Do not mistake God's forbearance for nonexistence or impotence. As surely as God judged Judah, "that day" will come.

c. Those who minimize Ezekiel's prophecy by claiming it is for the distant future are to be flatly corrected. His words will be postponed no more. (Application: There is no end to the excuses people can come up with for not taking God's word seriously.)

### **3. Prophecy Against False Prophets and Prophetesses - 13:1-23**

a. Ezekiel prophesies against those who claim to speak for the Lord but really do not; they are simply making things up and attributing them to God.

b. Typically, they prophesy what the people want to hear. Rather than preach the coming judgment, so people will wake up and repent, they proclaim that all is well. Instead of helping the people avoid destruction by sounding the alarm, they lure them into believing there is no danger (v. 22).

(1) Thus, they are like "jackals in the ruins" (v. 4) in that they do nothing to shore up the people's vulnerability to judgment; they "whitewash" unsound walls (vv. 10-12), thus masking their inability to protect from the flood of judgment; they hunt the lives of God's people (v. 18).

(2) Today many are unwilling to sound the alarm to those living in sin. It sounds so unloving, so intolerant, to tell the homosexual, the drug abuser, the drunk, the adulterer, the liar, the thief, the fornicator that a judgment is coming on them. But we do no one any favors by deceiving them.

(3) As Paul told the Galatian Christians (Gal. 6:7-8): "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

c. They tickle ears instead of preaching the truth because it benefits them to do so (v. 19). It is the same today. People compromise the truth because they get "paid" with public acceptance or praise.

d. Such people, then (v. 9) and now (Jude 4), will be condemned.

### **4. The Idolater's False Comfort to Be Taken - 14:1-11**

a. Certain leaders come to Ezekiel inquiring of the Lord, and God informs him that they are idol worshippers at heart, i.e., they are devoted to other gods. (Note: a comparison with 20:1-5, 30-32 suggests that they may have been secretly practicing.)

(1) God instructs Ezekiel to announce to them that he, rather than the prophet, will answer such people who inquire of him, and he will do so in accordance with their idolatry. In other words, he will, in some fashion, bring about their deaths (v. 8). Ezekiel, on the other hand, is to generally call the house of Israel to repent of their idolatry (v. 6).

(2) God's purpose in this is to seize the hearts of the people, to turn the people from their inner idolatry (v. 5), by preventing them from finding false comfort in bogus prophets.

b. Toward that end, prophets who are enticed to disobey, enticed to give false answers to such inquiries, will meet the same fate. Thus, God will have snared them in their own wickedness.

## **5. A Lie Dispelled - 14:12-23**

a. It seems that one of the lies on which the false prophets built their prophecies of peace was that Jerusalem would be spared because of the righteous few within it (e.g., Jeremiah, Habakkuk).

b. It is true that in his mercy God was willing to spare Sodom if there were just ten righteous persons there (Gen. 18:32), but that was no guarantee of Jerusalem's safety. God is not precluded from judging a city in which righteous people live.

c. In fact, when he decides to bring a particular judgment, even the presence of such paragons of virtue as Noah, Daniel, and Job will not spare a city. How much more will the presence of a few righteous people in Jerusalem fail to spare it, a city so wicked that it deserves multiple forms of judgment (sword, famine, wild animals, and disease)? (Application: Whatever form it takes, the claim that one can sin without consequences is a lie.)

d. To vindicate his justice before the exiles, God will even spare some impenitent Jews and send them into exile. The exiles will see firsthand why God destroyed the nation (v. 22-23). (Note: This shows that the vision of ch. 9 is not literal.)

## **6. Jerusalem: The Vine to Be Burned - 15:1-8**

a. Israel is often compared to a grapevine in the O.T. It was God's grapevine, taken from Egypt and planted in the promised land (e.g., Ps. 80:8-11).

b. But a vine is only good for one thing: producing grapes for its owner. As far as its wood goes, it is not useful for anything but burning, and this does not change after it is partially burned up. So if it ceases to produce fruit, the only thing to do is to cut it down and burn it. And if it is partially burned up, as Judah figuratively was in 598/97 B.C., the only thing to do is burn what is left!

c. In Jn. 15:9-17 Jesus humbly refers to himself as the vine, portraying himself as God's servant who produces what God desires. We, on the other hand, are the branches of that vine, and we must remain attached to the Vine to bear the fruit God desires. Those who remain in him will produce good fruit (Gal. 5:22-23); those who do not will produce no fruit and, for lack of faith, be discarded.

## F. Ezek. 16:1 - 19:14

### 1. Jerusalem's Tragic Life - 16:1-63

a. Jerusalem was founded by the pagan peoples of Canaan, the Amorites and the Hittites (see, Gen. 10:16, 15:16; Num. 13:29; Josh. 1:4, 5:1, 7:7, 24:15, 24:18; Amos 2:10). Yet, for generations it was neglected, barely surviving as a city. Jerusalem had a long history, going back at least 4000 years B.C. (according to carbon-14 dating), so the allegory has a vast historical sweep (vv. 1-5).

b. But God determined that this struggling city should "live," and at least by Abraham's time it had grown and developed into an independent city-state (Gen. 14:18-20) (vv. 6-7).

c. Following David's capture of the fortified part of the city (2 Sam. 5:6-9), he made it the nation's capital, moved the ark there (2 Sam. 6:15), and prepared for construction of the temple (2 Sam. 24:18-25; 1 Chron. 28:1 - 29:9). Jerusalem thereafter had a special status as God's chosen place (see, Deut. 12:5, 11, 14; 2 Chron. 6:6) (v. 8).

d. During Solomon's reign, God made Jerusalem a magnificent city. It was exceedingly wealthy and the site of God's beautiful temple. The fame of Jerusalem spread throughout the world (vv. 9-14).

e. Jerusalem did not remember that everything she had was a gift from God (v. 22). Instead, she became self confident (v. 15) and, as the city became more cosmopolitan (famous), began accommodating and embracing foreign gods, even to the point of offering child sacrifices (vv. 16-21)! (See, 1 Ki. 11:1-8).

f. Jerusalem multiplied its infidelity by pursuing spiritually illicit political relations with Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. Rather than trust the Lord for security, she sold herself to foreign nations (which for Assyria and Babylonia normally included some demand to worship their gods). She was even worse than a whore because she paid to secure intimate relations with her neighbors (vv. 23-34).

g. God promises to judge Jerusalem for its flagrant infidelity. Through the surrounding nations, God is going to destroy the city; he is going to return it to the naked condition it was in when he first rescued it (v. 35-43). Just like an unfaithful wife, she will be humiliatingly executed.

h. Jerusalem is just like her mother, the pagan Hittites, and just like her sisters, Samaria and Sodom. In fact, her sins have been so outrageous that she makes Samaria and Sodom appear righteous by comparison (vv. 44-52)! Note that Sodom's prosperity gave rise to its sense of independence from God and thus to its sin (vv. 49-50).

i. God stings Jerusalem by saying he will change the fortune of Sodom and Samaria, by consoling them, through changing Jerusalem's fortune (i.e., by destroying it and exiling its inhabitants). They will be restored to their former circumstances in the sense they will lose their distinction of wickedness (Ezek. 37:22 shows that God is not talking about literally restoring Samaria; see also, Jude 7), and Jerusalem will be restored to its former circumstances in that it will again be naked and despised (vv. 53-58).

j. Despite Israel's (Jerusalem's) covenant disloyalty, God promises to remember his commitment to the Jewish people and to establish with them a new, everlasting covenant. Jerusalem will be elevated above all her sisters (no longer just Sodom and Samaria), the older ones and the younger ones, as the most blessed city/nation (see, Rev. 21:1-4, 22-27). (Re last clause of v. 61: God's new covenant was not legally required of him; Israel had broken its covenant obligations. The new covenant is purely of God's grace.)

## **2. Two Eagles, the Cedar, and the Vine - 17:1-24**

a. Ezekiel delivers a riddle to the house of Israel and then explains it to highlight Israel's lack of wisdom.

(1) A great eagle takes the very top of a cedar of Lebanon back to a land of merchants and then plants a native seed in favorable circumstances. The seed became an established vine.

(2) But the vine turns its roots toward another great eagle, seeking water from it, and ignores the abundant water by which it was initially planted. This pursuit leads only to the withering of the vine and to its ultimate destruction.

b. Vv. 11-21 explain the riddle. It is about Judah's diplomacy from the exile of 598/97 B.C. to the coming exile of 587/86 B.C.

(1) Nebuchadnezzar took Judah's top leadership back to Babylon but placed Zedekiah, a descendant of David, on the throne as his puppet king. For a while Zedekiah was loyal to Nebuchadnezzar, but eventually he got ideas of rebelling and turned to Egypt for aid. This was suicide; Zedekiah's rebellion would be crushed, and he himself would be exiled.

(2) Note that ultimately this was punishment for Zedekiah's rebellion against the Lord (v. 19).

c. Vv. 22-24 speak of God's intention to install one of David's descendants as the Messiah, as the ideal ruler of Israel. It will be a kingdom of unparalleled splendor. Despite the upcoming disaster on Judah, God has no intention to renege on his promise to David (Ps. 89; 2 Samuel 7).

### **3. The Principle of Individual Responsibility - 18:1-32**

a. The hardships coming on the land of Judah were being rationalized by the proverb "The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge." In other words, rather than recognize that they were being punished for their own iniquity, they blamed the prior generation. God says this must stop. It avoids guilt and obviates repentance. The truth is that one generation is not condemned for the sins of another; rather, judgment comes only on the deserving.

b. For instance, if a man does what is right, thereby indicating he is a man of genuine faith, he will live (not be condemned). If, on the other hand, his son is wicked, that son will be condemned by God, regardless of his father's righteousness. Then again, if the grandson does what is right, he too will live, regardless of his father's wickedness. Justification and condemnation are not inherited.

(1) This does not mean that when God punishes a *group* no righteous people will suffer. Rather, it means that no "righteous group" will be punished. The righteous who suffer as part of a wicked group are not being punished (i.e., they are not suffering for purposes of retribution). They retain God's favor throughout their suffering and into eternal glory.

(2) This also does not mean that sin can affect only one generation. God "visits the sin" of one generation upon another in the sense he allows sin to harm subsequent generations, but that is different than actually punishing subsequent generations. This helps expose the horror of sin.

(3) Notice that environment is not omnipotent. The son of the righteous can turn wicked, and the son of the wicked can turn righteous.

c. A person (and by analogy a nation) can change one's status from wicked to righteous and vice versa. The wicked who repent will live (not be condemned); their prior rebellion will not be remembered. On the other hand, the righteous who turn to iniquity will be condemned; their prior righteous deeds will be forgotten.

(1) Notice that habit is not omnipotent. People can choose to turn to God despite having lived evil lives.

(2) Some will object to this as being unfair (v. 25) because it is not a balance sheet accounting, but God declares that it would be unfair to accept rebels and condemn the penitent. He is interested in present hearts, not past lives.

(3) So the judgment God brings on Israel will be according to its ways. His desire is that they repent and avoid national death. He has no pleasure in the death of anyone.

#### **4. Lamentable Leadership - 19:1-14**

a. Ezekiel delivers these stories in standard lament cadence. Vv. 1-9 tell of the rise and exile of two Judean kings, Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin. They are the two lions who arise from the lioness Judah. Jehoahaz, who was disobedient to the Lord, was exiled to Egypt after reigning only a few months in 609 B.C. (2 Ki. 23:21-34). Jehoiachin, who also reigned only a few months in 598/97, was taken into exile by the Babylonians (2 Ki. 24:8-16).

b. Vv. 10-14 speak of the coming uprooting of the nation that will most immediately be triggered by Zedekiah's foolish rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. Judah will be left with no one fit to be king. Thus, any confidence placed in Zedekiah is misplaced.

G. Ezek. 20:1 – 22:31

#### **1. Rebuke of Inquiring Elders - 20:1-32**

a. Elders of Israel come to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord. They want to be able to engage in idolatrous worship like the other nations (v. 32), so God will not permit them to inquire of him. Instead, he tells Ezekiel to rebuke them. (It is not mentioned whether God "cut them off" as promised in 14:8. It is possible that there is a distinction between their idolatry and that referenced in 14:4, 7; the latter may have been a secret practice rather than simply in the heart.)

b. Ezekiel rebukes them by rehearsing Israel's dismal love affair with idols.

(1) They did not forsake their idols when God promised to bring them out of Egypt (vv. 7-8). The O.T. does not elsewhere record that the Israelites were commanded to forsake Egypt's idols while still in Egypt, but it is clear that they had adopted Egyptian worship practices (e.g., Ex. 20:4-5, 23, 32:1-8; Josh. 24:14). Rather than destroy them in Egypt for their rebellion, God brought them out to keep his name from being profaned among the nations. God did not want their bondage to be misconstrued as a demonstration of his inadequacies.

(2) After the exodus and the establishment of God's covenant at Mt. Sinai, the people rebelled against God's laws because their hearts were devoted to their idols (v. 16b). This was a fountainhead of disobedience because it relativized the supremacy of God. God could rightfully have destroyed them all, but he decided out of pity and for the sake of his name simply to prevent the first generation from entering the Promised Land.

(3) The second generation also rebelled, which included setting their eyes on their ancestors' idols (v. 24; see, Numbers 25), and God again chose not to destroy them for the sake of his name. He did, however, swear to them in the wilderness that after bringing them into the land he would scatter them among the nations (Deut. 4:25-28). He brought them into the land and then gave them opportunity to fill up the cup of their sin in the form of immoral ordinances and practices brought to them by pagans.

(4) In Canaan they went idol crazy (vv. 28-29).

c. God shames them by asking if they (house of Israel) will go on defiling themselves in the manner of their ancestors. He flat tells them that he will not be consulted by such people, and he will never relent by permitting idolatrous worship (vv. 30-32).

## **2. A New Exodus: Restoration After Exile - 20:33-44**

a. By his power, God is going to free the captives from their bondage and lead them through the Syro-Arabian wilderness back to Canaan. Those who return will be those of true faith, those who have been affected enough by their chastisement to endure the pain of relocation and the hardship of rebuilding the nation. (Note the reference to "covenant" in v. 37 is debatable - see RSV, REB, Zimmerli.)

b. Vv. 39-40 are a call to choose. If they will not listen to God, then go and serve idols from now on, for God is weary of their idolatry.

c. He is going to reestablish the nation of Israel, and on Mt. Zion they will worship him properly, not idolatrously. The mercy of God's restoration will profoundly humble them.

### **3. Forest Fire and Sword - 20:45 - 21:7**

a. Ezekiel preaches against the forest of the South, declaring that God will totally consume it by fire. His audience apparently accused him of preaching in a way that was too obscure or complicated to be understood (20:45-49). God then supplements the revelation to make the allegory plain.

b. The Babylonians will attack Judah from north to south, following the roads of the Fertile Crescent. Throughout the entire land, from north to south, the righteous and the wicked will be killed and exiled (21:1-5). This will be a *total* conquest and exile. As we said regarding chapter 18, righteous members of wicked groups are not exempt from suffering when God judges the group. Though God is not punishing them, and their eternal lives are secure, they are still affected by the judgment.

c. Ezekiel is to groan and sigh, and when people ask what he is doing, he is to tell them that they will groan in this fashion when the terrible news of Jerusalem's destruction arrives.

### **4. The Sword - 21:8-32**

a. These oracles, along with the explanatory revelation of vv. 1-7, are grouped together because they all involve a sword. Vv. 8-17 speak of God's sharp, polished sword and make clear that warfare is coming on the Judah, and it will result in widespread bloodshed for the nation.

b. In vv. 18-27 Ezekiel depicts a road going from Babylon to Canaan with a marked fork: one road leads to Jerusalem and the other to Rabbah (the Ammonites conspired with Judah against Babylonia).

(1) He does this because it symbolizes the king of Babylon deciding which city to attack first. He engages several common means of divination, and Jerusalem is selected. V. 24 again makes clear that this is judgment for Israel's constant and severe sins against the Lord.

(2) Verses 25-27 indicate that Zedekiah will be stripped of his kingship. The status quo in Jerusalem will be turned upside down, and the city will be reduced to rubble. The kingship removed in this invasion will be restored only when Israel's rightful king is

given the crown by God himself. This king, further portrayed in chapter 37ff., is the Davidic Messiah, not merely another Judean monarch.

c. Verses 28-32 are a prophecy against Ammonites. Though Nebuchadnezzar will first come against Judah, Israel's longtime enemy will not escape his wrath. Ammon will be invaded and conquered, which occurred in 581 B.C. Unlike Israel, they have no promise of restoration; their fate is to fade from world history, which is what happened.

## **5. Jerusalem the Bloody - 22:1-31**

a. Verses 1-16 catalog the city's sins for which God is going to disperse them. They include shedding innocent blood, idolatry, abuse of power by the leaders, dishonoring parents, oppression of aliens, mistreatment of the fatherless and the widow, usury, and a variety of cultic and sexual sins. They "forgot the Lord" (v. 12c), meaning they rejected him, and now he will reject them.

b. In verses 17-22 Ezekiel employs the metaphorical language of a metal refining furnace to indicate the destruction coming on them in Jerusalem. Because they have become like worthless metals, they are going to be treated like metal; they will be gathered in Jerusalem, the furnace, and melted by the Babylonians withering siege. God's people cannot cling to false hopes (in this case of Jerusalem surviving).

c. Judah is destined for cursing (drought) on the day of its judgment (v. 24), and its leaders are guilty for helping it along the path.

(1) The kings have devoured the people in their quest for wealth (v. 25). This is probably a reference to excessive taxes. The king would foreclose on those unable to pay, putting the heads of households in debtors' prisons where they died, leaving their wives widowed.

(2) The priests have failed to teach the people what the Law required and thus failed to keep the nation culturally and ethically pure (v. 26).

(3) The government officials have become corrupt, seeking to make money for themselves rather than to administer justice (v. 27).

(4) The reputed prophets have covered up such sins with false prophecies rather than condemning them (v. 28).

(5) The prominent landowners have acted like the kings and officials. They used their power to help themselves at the expense of the poor and needy (v. 29).

(6) God searched for someone to fortify the city, someone to stand in the way of his entering to destroy it, but he found none (v. 30). This is hyperbole; after all, Jeremiah and Baruch were there. It means that the righteous were so few that the net effect on the city was as if no one cared about God's will. Therefore, God's judgment is coming (v. 31).

H. Ezek. 23:1 - 24:27

## 1. Two Adulterous Sisters - 23:1-49

a. Two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem), engaged in prostitution in Egypt (vv. 1-4). As we noted last week, the Israelites worshipped Egyptian idols, both in Egypt and afterward.

b. By the mid-eighth century B.C., Samaria (Israel) pursued relations with the Assyrians (Hos. 5:13). King Menahem, for example, thought that submitting to the powerful Assyrians was the best way to protect his nation and to insure his own rulership (2 Ki. 15:19-20), and the people acquiesced because they were impressed by the Assyrians' wealth, culture, and religion. Therefore, God gave them over to their Assyrian lover, who brutalized them (vv. 5-10).

c. Jerusalem (Judah) was not fazed by Israel's fate (vv. 11-35).

(1) Under King Ahaz, it too sold itself to the Assyrians in hope of gaining their favor (2 Ki. 16:7-8). Naturally, the religion of their new masters proliferated (e.g., 2 Ki. 16:10-18).

(2) As the Babylonians were rising in power, Judah was impressed and sent envoys to win her favor. Perhaps this is why Josiah fought to prevent the Egyptians from joining forces with the Assyrians against the Babylonians in 609 B.C. As foretold by Isaiah nearly a century earlier, the attempt to win Babylonia as an ally would not deliver them (2 Ki. 20:12-18; Isaiah 39). After Babylonia "responded" to Judah's overtures, Judah became disgusted with her (since she wasn't what Judah had in mind - 2 Ki. 24:1, 10-17). She then turned to Egypt for deliverance!

(3) God is going to hand Judah over to all her lovers, except they will come as rapists, invading and conquering the land. Jerusalem is going to face the ruin and desolation of her sister Samaria.

d. The crimes and judgment of the cities are restated in vv. 36-49.

e. Applications

(1) The history of Israel and Judah was characterized by a willingness to "sell out" or to compromise in order to win the favor of those nations that appeared most able to benefit them. They were more willing to trust what they could see. We are tempted to compromise to win or to maintain the favor of our employer, our peer group, or even our families.

(2) Note v. 39. We have an amazing capacity for hypocrisy. We can cheat or steal all day at work or spend the day watching porno movies and then come sing praises to the Lord. This is disgusting to the Lord (see, Prov. 15:8; Amos 5:21-24).

(3) Note v. 35. To reject God is to ensure disaster. You may fool yourself into thinking that you can do so without consequences, but when the storm of judgment comes, you will know otherwise (see, Mat. 7:24-27).

## **2. The Parable of the Cooking Pot - 24:1-14**

a. On the day Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem (January 588 B.C.), Ezekiel is told to take a pot, fill it with water, throw in choice pieces of meat, and bring it to a boil (vv. 1-5). Verses 9-10 indicate that the fire is to be large and the meat is to be cooked so well that the bones are charred. According to v. 6, he is to empty the pot piece by piece, without casting lots for them. He is then to put the empty pot back on the fire until it glows red hot.

b. This is obviously about what God has begun to do with the siege of Nebuchadnezzar. The pot, which has so far resisted purification, is Jerusalem, the city of bloodshed. The choice meat represents the inhabitants who saw themselves as the desirable part, the part that would not be thrown out (i.e., that would remain in Jerusalem - see, 11:3-12). They will be charred by the heat of God's wrath, and the survivors will indeed be removed indiscriminately (vv. 10, 6). The city itself will continue to "suffer" after the exile (being decimated) as God seeks to burn off its impurities.

c. Application - We must guard against the false notion that our favor with God will immunize us from judgment if we rebel. If we rebel, if we reject God, we will lose his favor. As indicated in Ezek. 18:24, when the righteous/faithful cease to be so, their prior righteousness will not save them. See, Heb. 10:26-31.

## **3. Ezekiel's Wife Dies - 24:15-27**

a. God informs Ezekiel that he is going to take his beloved wife's life and commands Ezekiel not to engage in any of the customary actions of mourning. That day Ezekiel spoke to the people, either about his wife's impending death or as though nothing was amiss, and that night his wife died.

b. Ezekiel complied with God's command not to publicly mourn his wife's death, and the people naturally wanted to know the significance of this very unusual action.

c. The meaning is that God is about to destroy his holy city, the pride of the exiles, and to put to death many of its inhabitants. Just as Ezekiel did not publicly mourn his wife's passing, neither will the exiles publicly mourn Jerusalem's destruction, lest it expose the depth of their sympathy for Babylonia's enemy (note that they will pine away and groan to one another). Fulfillment of this prophecy will be another sign that the One for whom Ezekiel speaks is the Sovereign Lord.

d. God lets Ezekiel know that he will be rendered unable to speak for some period of time until a messenger arrives from Jerusalem with news of the city's fall. This silence is to be a sign to the exiles that the matter is closed, that God is now carrying out his promised destruction. This was fulfilled in 33:21-22.

## *II. Oracles Against the Nations - 25:1 - 32:32*

### *General Comments*

Chapters 25-32 form the second major division of the book. The first 24 chapters were concerned primarily with prophecies about the fall of Jerusalem. These eight chapters are oracles against foreign nations. God is not some local deity whose power is geographically limited. He is the Lord of all!

The fact God is judging Judah does not mean that he has taken up the cause of her enemies. He is not judging Judah in order to bless Ammon or Moab or Edom. On the contrary, these countries that hated Israel and her God are likewise going to feel his wrath. The very fact their hostility toward Israel is a key reason for their condemnation shows that, despite her outrageous rebellion, God has not given up on Israel; he is still her defender (see, Gen. 12:3). This divine commitment points to a promising future, a hope made explicit in 28:25-26.

Babylonia is noticeably absent from those slated for wrath, but this is probably due to the fact the nations discussed are limited to those who will experience God's wrath at the hands of the Babylonians. Other prophets (e.g., Hab. 2:6 - 3:15) make clear that Babylonia will also suffer God's wrath.

#### **A. Ezek. 25:1-17 – Prophecies Against Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia**

B. Ezek. 26:1 - 28:26 – Prophecies Against Phoenicia represented by Tyre and Sidon.

The bulk of this (26:1 - 28:19) is directed toward Tyre.

C. Ezek. 29:1 - 32:32 – Prophecies Against Egypt

### *III. Hope and Danger in the Future - Chaps. 33 – 39*

A. Ezek. 33:1 - 36:15

#### **1. The Watchman Revisited - 33:1-20**

a. In vv. 1-6 Ezekiel is told to remind his countrymen of the role of a watchman. His duty is to sound the alarm; what happens thereafter is the responsibility of the hearers. The prior words about the role of the watchman were directed to Ezekiel (3:16-21). Here God wants the exiles to understand that Ezekiel has not cursed Judah; rather, he has faithfully fulfilled the role of watchman.

b. In vv. 7-9 God reminds Ezekiel that he has made him a watchman for the house of Israel and that his job is not finished.

c. In vv. 10-16 Ezekiel is instructed to console the wicked with the hope of repentance and to warn the righteous of the danger of rebellion.

(1) The wicked, despite their feeling of hopelessness, can find life in God through repentance (vv. 10-11). No sin is beyond God's mercy, if the prodigal will just "come home" (vv. 14-16).

(2) The righteous, if they turn against the Lord, will be condemned for their rebellion. Their prior loyalty will not save them (vv. 12-13).

d. Contrary to what some of Ezekiel's countrymen said, God's way is not unjust. He is concerned with one's existing relationship with him, not with one's history.

#### **2. Jerusalem's Fall and Some Consequences - 33:21-33**

a. In vv. 21-22 news of the city's fall reaches Ezekiel and, as prophesied, he is again enabled to speak. It is not clear whether 33:1-20 was delivered before he was silenced or after his speech was restored.

b. Vv. 23-29 reveal that the small number of people left in Jerusalem, those so worthless that the Babylonians left them to work the fields (see, 2 Ki. 25:12), had begun thinking of themselves as the rightful heirs of Jerusalem, entitled to take over the homes and land of the exiles. But they were as faithless as the exiles. God promises that there is further punishment in store for them, in the form of further military action (which happened after the murder of Gedaliah, Nebuchadnezzar's appointed authority - Jer. 40:7-43:13) and the suffering attendant to the desolation of the city.

c. Following the vindication of Ezekiel's seven-year prophetic ministry, he became quite popular. Many people would come to hear him, but they would not put his words into practice. His words no more penetrated the dull ears of his people in popularity than they did in unpopularity (vv. 30-32). It would take the fulfillment of the further miseries prophesied for Judah before the people would really take to heart Ezekiel's words (v. 33).

### **3. Shepherd and Sheep Allegory - 34:1-31**

#### ***a. Prophecy against Israel's irresponsible shepherds (34:1-10)***

(1) The Israelites are referred to as God's flock, and the focus of the allegory is on the kingship (the "shepherds") in Israel. With few exceptions, the kings of Israel ruled for their own advantage rather than for that of the flock. The result of their not having a responsible shepherd was disaster; the people were scattered among the nations and prey to enemies (vv. 1-6).

(2) Because of the failure of the kings, God is not only going to hold them accountable but is also going to reject the historical monarchy. The old kingship will be abolished (vv. 7-10).

#### ***b. God promises to gather his sheep and to destroy their oppressors (34:11-16)***

God, the owner of the flock, promises to serve directly as their shepherd. He will gather them from their scattered and vulnerable state and return them to the pasture of Israel. In other words, God is bringing them home. At the same time, he is going to destroy those leaders who exploited them.

### ***c. Return and judgment repeated (34:17-22)***

The oppressed sheep will be saved, led back to their pasture (no longer prey), but the "fat sheep," those leaders who abused their power and exploited the people, will be condemned.

### ***d. Future Messianic blessings (34:23-31)***

(1) At some point after the return from exile, God will place his servant David as Shepherd/King over his flock. Recall Jn. 10:11-15 where Jesus several times refers to himself as "the good shepherd." Recall Mat. 27:11 where Jesus acknowledges before Pilate that he is King of the Jews.

(2) God's flock, those shepherded by the Messiah, will be under a covenant that produces peace, meaning that they will dwell in the land in complete freedom and security. This is symbolized by the sheep being able to live in the wild and sleep in the woods without danger and by the bars of their yoke being broken. The Messianic blessings are further portrayed in terms of agricultural abundance. I think this is the glory of the Messianic Kingdom, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2), painted in colors that were meaningful to people of the day.

## **4. Mount Seir and the Mountains of Israel - 35:1 - 36:15**

### ***a. Judgment on Mount Seir (35:1-15)***

(1) Mount Seir is Edom's main mountain range. We know from Obad. 10, 14 that Edom, Judah's neighbor state to the southeast, slaughtered Judeans fleeing the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. After the fall of Jerusalem, Edom, with Babylonian approval, took advantage of the situation and forcibly moved into Judean territory. So at this time, Edom is in ascendancy as a nation, and Judah has hit bottom.

(2) God declares that he is against Edom and will desolate it (vv. 1-4). Edom will become desolate because of its historical hatred for Israel, which has led to bloodshed (vv. 5-9), and because it has annexed Israelite land (vv. 10-15).

(3) Edom's desolation occurred as prophesied. It declined steadily under Babylonian, then Persian, then Greek, then Roman rule (in the latter empire as the region of "Idumea"). Its former strongholds are now merely deserted curiosities in southern Jordan.

### ***b. Hope for the mountains of Israel (36:1-15)***

(1) The mountains of Israel are assured that Israel's enemies, those who participated and/or rejoiced in her fall, will be punished (vv. 1-7). Those gloating in pride at Israel's humiliation will find themselves bearing shame.

(2) The mountains of Israel are assured that they are about to be inhabited again by Israelites (vv. 8-15). The land will again feed God's people, the people will rebuild the ruins, and the scorn of the surrounding nations shall be removed. This happened, of course, beginning in 538 B.C. after Cyrus the Persian issued a decree ordering the restoration of the Jewish community and cult in Palestine (Ezra 1:2-4, 6:3-5).

## B. Ezek. 36:16 - 37:28

### 1. Restoration For the Sake of His Glory - 36:16-38

a. God dispersed Israel from the land because of its evil conduct. Despite being well deserved, this exile was also an invitation for scoffers from other nations to conclude that God was a loser, unable to protect his people. God informs the exiles that he is going to bring them back, not because they deserve it but because such an act will glorify himself, making known his saving power to all people (vv. 16-24).

b. The promise of a glorious future for Israel involves a return to the promised land (their own home), a spiritual transformation of the people, the rulership of the Messiah, and the richest blessings of God on their existence.

(1) This is all part of the one work of restoration, so the events are prophetically "telescoped," meaning the prophet speaks of what is distant as though it were near. As J. Barton Payne writes in his book *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (p. 137), "Biblical prophecy may leap from one prominent peak in predictive topography to another, without notice of the valley between, which may involve no inconsiderable lapse in chronology." Robert Shank says in his book *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (p. 364), "The prophetic perspective is a 'foreshortened perspective' . . . whereby future events are seen as near at hand or already present, though in fulfillment they may prove to be centuries removed from the prophet's day." This makes it difficult at times to determine which aspect of restoration is being spoken of.

(2) The telescoping does not render the message irrelevant for the exiles, however, because the promise of a glorious future for Israel would fill them with hope, regardless of the timing. After all, most of the original exiles would die even before the return, but no one doubts that the promise of return would encourage them.

c. Israel will return to the land and experience a spiritual transformation. God is going to give them a new heart and put his Spirit within them so that they will live as obedient children (vv. 25-27).

(1) Certainly those who returned were, for the most part, penitent and serious about their faith. As noted in the discussion of 11:17-20, from Zerrubabel's return in 538 B.C. through Ezra and Nehemiah (458 - 433 B.C.), Jews returning from exile were correcting abuses and reestablishing righteous religion in obedience to Mosaic Law. But as the years rolled by they recognized that this promised radical renewal was yet to be fulfilled. They continued to struggle with rebellion and half-heartedness.

(2) As Jeremiah 31:31-34 makes clear (see, Heb. 8:7-13), this giving of a new heart is part of a new covenant between God and his people. That new covenant was not put into effect until the death of Christ (Heb. 9:13-23). This radical renewal is inextricably linked to God's giving the Messiah as a Shepherd.

(3) This is why the outpouring of God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost was such a momentous event; it was the fulfillment of this restoration promise. Instead of occasionally being given to some people, often times temporarily, God's Spirit would now indwell all who are converted.

d. Israel will also experience God's richest blessings in this restoration existence (vv. 28-38), painted in the colors of that day.

(1) There will be such an agricultural abundance that people will say it was like the garden of Eden (vv. 29-30, 35). There will be a complete absence of famine (vv. 29-30), a burgeoning population (vv. 37-38), and fortified cities (vv. 35). This is how an ancient Israelite would conceive supreme blessing.

(2) McGuiggan uses the illustration of a father in the horse-and- buggy days who wanted to reward his young son and to give him an incentive to continue to be well behaved. He tells his son, "If you continue to be good, when you are grown I will give you your own horse and buggy." The son remains well behaved, but when he is grown the mode of transport is an automobile, so the father gives him a car. Has the father broken his promise? Not at all. He fulfilled the intention of the promise. If he had told his young son, "I will give you an automobile," it would have meant nothing to him.

## **2. Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones - 37:1-14**

a. Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley full of dry bones. He is commanded to prophesy to the bones that God will give them life. He preaches to them, and they assemble, get fleshed out, and receive the breath of life (vv. 1-10).

b. In vv. 11-14 God explains how this vision symbolizes the resurrection of Israel. From a human standpoint, their situation is as hopeless as that of those who have long been dead. God is going to give the nation of Israel new life in its homeland. (Note: I think "spirit" in v. 14 refers to the breath of life which comes from God - see, Gen. 6:3 [NRSV]; Job. 27:3).

### **3. Enactment Prophecy Involving Two Sticks - 37:15-28**

a. Ezekiel, pursuant to command, writes on two sticks so that one represents the northern kingdom and the other the southern kingdom. He then holds them in his hand as though they were one stick.

b. The meaning Ezekiel is to explain to inquiring exiles is that God is going to restore scattered Israel as one nation. The old division of north and south with separate kings over each will never again exist. There will be one nation and one king.

c. This one king is identified in vv. 24-25 as the Davidic Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

d. The people will be spiritually renewed, cleansed and no longer defiling themselves with transgressions. This is the new heart of the New Covenant.

e. They will live under an everlasting covenant of peace in an existence of unparalleled blessing. God's dwelling place shall be with them forevermore. See, Rev. 21:1-4.

f. This is Israel's glorious future, a future that awaits the consummation of the kingdom inaugurated by the initial coming of Christ. Of course, we know today that the Israel of eternal bliss will include more than just ethnic Israelites; it is "new Israel."

### **C. Ezek. 38:1 - 39:29**

#### Introductory Remarks

The final nine chapters of the book, 40-48, are a great vision of the future Jerusalem and Judah. They are a symbolic elaboration on the eschatological city, the New Jerusalem, alluded to in 37:26-27. These chapters are an extended vision designed to teach the truth of Israel's glorious future.

Chapters 38-39 are apocalyptic material, which by its nature is figurative and symbolic. They are stuck between the reference to God's eternal dwelling place among the Israelites (37:26-27) and the elaboration on that state (ch. 40-48) to suggest that before the final glorified state there will be a massive end time assault by evil forces on the people of God.

My understanding of this material differs from that of "dispensational premillennialists." I want to tell you how they understand it and then explain why I reject that view.

### The dispensational premillennial view

Dispensational premillennialists read such passages as Ezekiel 40-48 literally and conclude that God promised the physical Jews that they would dwell in Palestine in the most glorious of earthly kingdoms under the Messiah. This is the kingdom Jesus offered them, but when they rejected him, the fulfillment of that promise was postponed until his return.

According to them, the Jews will be living in physical Palestine. Jesus will first return (invisibly) and spirit away all believers from the planet, including resurrected believers. The Holy Spirit will also be removed as "the restrainer of sin." This will mark the beginning of a seven year period called the Tribulation (derived from Dan. 9:24-27 - the 70th week separated from the first 69 by the Church Age).

The first 3 1/2 years of the Tribulation period will be marked by relative peace and prosperity in Israel under a covenant with Antichrist. At that time, Antichrist will attack Israel which will mark the beginning of 3 1/2 years of unprecedented horror. These years will be brought to an end by the return of Christ, at which time the nations will be judged.

Christ's return marks the beginning of the Millennium, a thousand-year reign by Christ on earth. This is when they think the O.T. promises to Israel will be literally fulfilled. God will enter into the New Covenant with Israel under which the temple, the priesthood, the law, and animal sacrifices will all be restored. Christ will rule as king in Jerusalem, and Israel will be the supreme nation of the world.

At the end of this 1000 years, Satan will be released and lead a massive assault against the people of God. He is defeated, the ungodly are resurrected, and then the final judgment occurs, followed by the eternal state.

### My disagreement with that view

Restoration of the temple, the priesthood, the law, and sacrifices for sin is ruled out by Hebrews. Jesus has a permanent priesthood (Heb. 7:24), but he cannot be a priest if the Mosaic Law is binding because that law specifies that only descendants of Aaron can serve as priests.

That's the point of Heb. 7:11-14; the change in the priesthood from sons of Aaron to Christ (one like Melchizedek) required a change of the law. The two priesthoods cannot coexist, which would be the case if the priesthood of the Mosaic Law returned.

According to Heb. 10:17-18, the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus forever eliminated sacrifices for sin. Therefore, the vision of such sacrifices occurring in a restored Israel of the future (e.g., Ezek. 43:18-27; 45:15-17) cannot be taken literally. (Note: To say that the Millennial sacrifices will be simply a memorial does not help. Ezekiel says they will be "sin offerings" and will be for "atonement," precisely the type of sacrifices precluded by Hebrews.)

Jesus' claim in Mk. 1:15 that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" [NRSV] means that the prophetic timetable for the establishment of the kingdom was the first century. The prophets were not speaking of a kingdom that was not due to be established more than 20 centuries after Jesus.

Many O.T. promises to Israel are applied to the church in the N.T. (e.g., Acts 2:16-17, 13:32-34, 15:16-18; Heb. 8:6-13, 9:15), so there is inspired precedent for this procedure.

The New Covenant is currently in existence (Lk. 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:15). It is not something to be entered into at some future date.

For a number of reasons I do not buy the whole scheme of the rapture, two resurrections separated by 1000 years, and a massive assault on the people of God *after* Christ's return.

- The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds in Matthew 13 indicates that Christ's second coming will end the present age in which the kingdom of God coexists with evil and will usher in the evil-free final state. There is no room for a final outbreak of evil after his return.
- Other passages connect the final judgment with Christ's second coming (2 Thess. 1:7-10; see also, Rev. 22:12; Mat. 16:27, 25:31-46; Jude 14-15). They do not separate the two by 1000 years and by a final revolt against God.
- Several Scriptures suggest that there is one bodily resurrection of believers and unbelievers (e.g., Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). There is no room for 1000-year separation between the resurrection of the two groups.
- Several passages in Revelation make it clear to me that God's *final* wrath is poured out at the time of Antichrist in the battle of Harmageddon (Rev. 15:1, 16:12-17), so there cannot be another punishment of earthly enemies 1000 years later.
- It is hard to imagine that after the destruction of all opponents of Christ in the defeat of Antichrist and after 1000 years of perfect rule by the Lord that Satan will so easily and quickly raise a massive revolt against him.

## 1. The Final Elimination of Evil - 38:1 - 39:20

a. These two chapters are apocalyptic-style oracles against Gog, who is described as being of the land of Magog and the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.

(1) We know nothing of the land of Magog, and Ezekiel's audience probably did not either. For them, Magog would be equivalent to our "Timbuktu," a distant land of presumably strange ways.

(2) Meshech and Tubal had a reputation for being especially warlike (see, Ezek. 32:26-27 and Ps. 120:5-7). So Gog is portrayed as the leader of distant and fierce people.

b. At some distant time (38:8), Gog and a great alliance of peoples from all over the known world of that day will attack "Israel," pictured as dwelling securely in the land of Palestine.

(1) I take this secure dwelling in the land to be a figurative reference to the church, the new Israel, dwelling securely in the world. Dwelling securely does not mean it will not be attacked; it means that it is protected by the Lord. It has no need of human defenses and will not be defeated.

(2) This figurative understanding is born out by Revelation. In Rev. 20:8-9 Gog and Magog symbolize the final enemies of Christ duped by Satan into attacking the church in the end time.

c. Though Gog and his allies are attacking Israel out of self interest and animosity, God is in fact gathering them together for destruction. It is the same way Rev. 16:12-14 depicts God as preparing the way for his enemies to gather at Harmageddon for the final battle against him.

d. God will crush Gog's forces, once again, and most definitively, showing himself to be the only true God, superior to all the powers of darkness and evil.

(1) The author of Revelation alludes to Gog's destruction in Ezek. 39:17-20 when referring to the defeat of Antichrist and his forces in the end time battle of Harmageddon (Rev. 16:16, 19:17-20).

(2) This battle culminates in the destruction of all enemies of God and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. At that time, the dead will be raised and judged and the eternal state, purged of all evil, will ensue.

(3) The eternal state, the consummated kingdom, is beautifully summarized in Rev. 21:1-4. Just as Revelation symbolically elaborates on that existence in 21:9 - 22:5 (e.g., city of pure gold with 200-foot-thick walls of jasper), Ezekiel closes with a similar appendix.

## **2. The Glorious Future Begins With Their Return - 39:21-29**

a. The point for exiled Israel is that God is sovereign over history, and he has a glorious future in store for Israel. That future begins with their return from exile, a miracle he will soon perform.

b. As he will in the distant future defeat Gog, the ultimate foe, he will soon take care of Nebuchadnezzar.

## ***IV. Vision of the New Temple and Land - Chaps. 40 – 48***

### **Introductory Remarks**

This is the longest vision account in the Bible outside the Book of Revelation. It contains a lengthy description of Jerusalem, its temple, the holy land, and related regulations for proper worship and membership in God's people.

The vision was given in 573 B.C. when the temple and all of Jerusalem was in ruins. It was designed to give the people hope in the face of their depressing realities, hope that in the future God was going to bring his people into a new age of blessing and close relationship to himself. It depicted an ideal existence of true religion, a state of pure worship and intimate fellowship with God. It was, for the ancient Jew, a symbolic portrayal of the consummated kingdom of God.

The vision can be divided into three sections: Ch. 40-43 describe the new house of worship; ch. 44-46 describe the nature and role of those who live in the New Jerusalem; ch. 47-48 describe the promised land and its tribal allotments.

### **A. Ezek. 40:1 - 43:27**

Ezekiel has a visionary experience in which he is taken by the Lord to the land of Israel and given an angelic tour of a future Jerusalem. Unlike the historical Jerusalem, this Jerusalem is situated on "a very high mountain," suggesting that it is the eschatological New Jerusalem.

## **1. Outer Court of the New Temple and Its Gates - 40:1-27**

a. The entire temple complex is surrounded by a wall which the angel measures to be 10 1/2 feet high and 10 1/2 feet thick.

b. There are three identical gates into the outer court, one on the north, one on the south, and one on the east. Each gate has three sets of guards and various windows through which approaching persons could be observed.

(1) This elaborate gate structure symbolizes that access to worship in the new age will be firmly controlled. God's people must be pure, and those corrupted by sin will be kept out.

(2) On this side of the cross, we can see more clearly what this is pointing toward. Only those who are pure before God by reason of the blood shed by his Son will be eligible to enter this new temple. This visionary temple signifies the true relationship to God enjoyed by his church and the dwelling with God that heaven will provide.

c. The angel's measurements make it clear that this temple was built with extraordinary care and symmetry. This temple, or more accurately, the state represented by it, has been carefully planned by God and is a done deal.

## **2. Inner Court and Its Gates - 40:28-49**

a. The three gateways to the inner court are identical to those to the outer court except the vestibules are at the start of the gateway rather than at the end.

b. The inner court has rooms containing all that is needed to prepare sacrifices for offering on the altar. It also has rooms for the priests to prepare themselves for their work in the temple. The priests are restricted to the sons of Zadok, the only priests authorized to make sacrifices at the time of the exile.

c. The attention paid to the gateways again emphasizes the notion of controlled access to worship and fellowship. The emphasis on the equipment and room necessary for proper sacrifice indicates that the new age will be one of fitting and proper worship. All that is needed for such worship will be provided.

## **3. Sanctuary Proper - 41:1-26**

a. Its symmetry and beauty indicate care in preparation; all is in order, perfectly ready for God to dwell among his people. To the Jew, the temple speaks of the special presence of the Almighty, the Holy One of Israel.

b. Note that in Rev. 21:22 the presence of God and Christ in the New Jerusalem is in lieu of the temple. It is the same truth symbolized differently for a different time and audience. The temple was a most powerful symbol of God's presence to the Jews in exile whose temple had been destroyed. The church at the end of the first century was predominantly Gentile.

#### **4. Rooms in Outer Court and Size of Complex - 42:1-20**

Verses 1-14 describe rooms in the outer court in which the priests eat the portions of sacrifices allotted to them and change out of their priestly garments. Verses 15-20 put the size of the entire complex at about 18 acres.

#### **5. Vision of God's Residence within Vision of Temple - 43:1-12**

a. Note that in vv. 7 & 9 God states that this temple is where he will live among the Israelites forever. This cannot be an earthly temple because all such temples will be destroyed in the process of creating the new earth (see, Rev. 21:1-4, 22:3-5; 2 Pet. 3:10-13).

b. Ezekiel is to describe God's "final temple" that its message of holiness might convict the people of their sin. If it does, he is to make the temple known to them in detail, including its regulations and laws. He is to record these things that the people might heed the design (and thus absorb its message of holiness) and follow all the regulations (in spirit by honoring the Lord's supreme holiness).

#### **6. Future Altar and Rules for Consecration - 43:13-27**

a. This altar symbolizes the communion with God that is only possible through sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. It represents for the ancient Jew what we know to be the real doorway of communion, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

b. The week-long consecration procedure speaks to the Jew of the specialness of the altar, the God-ordained site of reconciliation. It is no casual thing to approach God at the altar of his forgiveness; it is an extraordinary privilege.

c. This consecration procedure also points out that God defines the acts by which he imparts holiness to things or people. People cannot by themselves make anything holy.

Holiness must be bestowed by God, and he does so on his own terms. On this side of the cross, we know that God bestows holiness on mankind by participation in the sacrifice of his Son.

## **B. Ezek. 44:1 - 46:24**

### **1. Desecrations Absent in New Age - 44:1-14**

These verses indicate that the desecrations of the temple that were common over the centuries (note Ezekiel 8-9) will not occur in the new age. In this temple, the king will respect the demands of holiness, foreigners (equivalent to unbelievers because they believed in a plurality of gods) will be excluded, and the Levites will be restricted to their proper duties. In the holiness of the new age, God's standards will be kept and his sanctity honored.

### **2. Idealized Picture of O.T. Priesthood - 44:15-31**

These verses provide an idealized picture of the O.T. priesthood. This priesthood shall not fail in its ministry before God, which symbolizes the perfection and efficacy of Christ's eternal priesthood.

### **3. Center Portion of Ezekiel's Visionary Palestine - 45:1-12**

a. That this description is symbolic is suggested by the its size, its shape (rectangles and squares), and the fact the temple is outside of Jerusalem proper.

b. God's holy temple is located in the center of the land, in a holy section that is 25,000 cubits (8.3 miles) square. The northern 2/5 of this square is allocated to the Levites; the southern 1/5 is allocated to the city proper.

c. The king has property on both sides of the holy section and thus has no need to gain wealth by oppressive government taxes and controls. The kingship of this age will rule in complete justice. This, of course, pictures God's perfect government in the consummated kingdom.

### **4. Picture of Sacrificial Calendar Being Kept in New Age - 45:13-25**

a. The people give the things to be offered to the king, who uses them on behalf of the people to provide the daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal temple offerings. Thus, the king is seen as properly performing both his civil and religious obligations.

b. The symbolic nature of the portrayal of sacrifices seems clear from the fact that New Moon and Sabbath observances are mandatory. Col. 2:16-17 indicate that Christ did away with any such requirement. I believe the vision of sacrifices is to symbolize the priority of God in the new age. He continues to come first and to have a rightful claim on the best of what we have.

## **5. Expanded Image of King as Observer of Religious Duty - 46:1-15**

These verses expand on the image of the king as a devout observer of religious duty.

## **6. Depiction of King as Insuring Fair Distribution of Land - 46:16-18**

These verses depict the king as preserving social justice by insuring the fair distribution of land throughout the generations. In the consummated kingdom, God will be rightly worshiped and we will never be deprived of our home.

## **7. Vision of Kitchens of the Temple - 46:19-24**

These verses are a vision of the kitchens of the temple. The complex was completely furnished for proper worship.

### **C. Ezek. 47:1 - 48:35**

## **1. Vision of Life-giving River - 47:1-12**

These verses clearly suggest the symbolic nature of this vision. Ezekiel sees a life-giving river flowing from the temple. This concept is paralleled in Rev. 22:1-2, a passage clearly speaking of the consummated kingdom. It depicts the coming age of abundance; great blessing, shown as flowing water, pours out from God.

## **2. Eschatological Promised Land Described in Terms of Deut. 34 – 47:13-23**

These verses describe this eschatological Promised Land in terms of the Promised Land of Deut. 34:1-12. The vision for the ancient Jew in exile could not get any better: his people fully occupying their prized homeland and living under the Lord's control. This is where their eyes were fixed in exile. Notice (vv. 22-23) that Gentiles are included in the inheritance of the land right along with the various tribes. They too will share in the blessings of the consummated kingdom.

## **3. Picture of Orderliness and Equity of Coming Age - 48:1-29**

These verses picture a symmetrical tribal allocation of the land, which symbolizes the orderliness and equity of the coming age. There are seven horizontal tracts of land to the north of the holy area and five horizontal tracts to the south.

## **4. The New Jerusalem - 48:30-35**

These verses describe the city itself, the New Jerusalem, as having three gates on each side, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This same imagery is used in Rev. 21:10-13 regarding the Jerusalem from heaven; it has three gates on each side, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The name of this city is "The Lord is There!" It is the eternal home of all who love the Lord