

Preachers' Gatherings 2018

Preaching Ezekiel

Part 1: Introduction

with

Part 2: Sermon Resources

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‘Get a new heart and a new spirit’

Ezekiel 18.31



‘I will give you a new heart
and put a new spirit in you;

I will remove your heart of stone from you
and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my Spirit in you’

Ezekiel 36. 26, 27

Preaching Ezekiel Part 1, Introduction

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The Vision

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

The Remit

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

The Resource

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Ezekiel at a glance: summary of chapters

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

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

A¹. Ezekiel's visions of God and call (1-3)

1. Storm, chariot vision, radiant figure. Ezekiel heard voice, fell.
2. He told me to speak, + or – welcome, to Israel. Scroll written both sides. Lament.

Ate scroll. H.S. took E. to Tel Abib to warn both wicked and righteous. E. is to be bound and dumb until God opens his mouth again (33.22).

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

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

¹ For divisions **A** to **F** see p. 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

² Matt. 13.32

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why preach through Ezekiel?

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

Ezekiel is a key book in Scripture. Uniquely as link-man and scholar³ Ezekiel draws on the thoughts and theologies of earlier OT writers and weaves them into a vision for the on-going political and religious life of God’s people. His themes are taken up by the rest of Scripture all the way to the book of Revelation. As a theologian in his own right he contributes insights of his own such as

- The solemnity of being a watchman in ch. 3 and 33;
- His theodicy, vindicating God and his providence, in ch. 18;
- His portrayal of the final conflict between good and evil in ch. 38 and 39, the pre-apocalyptic prophecy about Gog and Magog⁴;
- Ezekiel 40-48 is the only body of legislation in the OT which is not placed in the mouth of Moses.

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

Ezekiel wrote at a key moment in history: before, at and after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 or 586BC⁶. His first section speaks before the fall of Jerusalem, justifying it and warning of it. His second speaks mostly around the time of her fall, addressing the question how God would deal with the nations who were his and their enemies. His third speaks after Jerusalem fell, promising the second exodus from captivity and the renewal and messianic era that were to come.

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

³ See section on this below: p. 21

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

⁵ Jerusalem Bible, Introduction to Ezekiel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

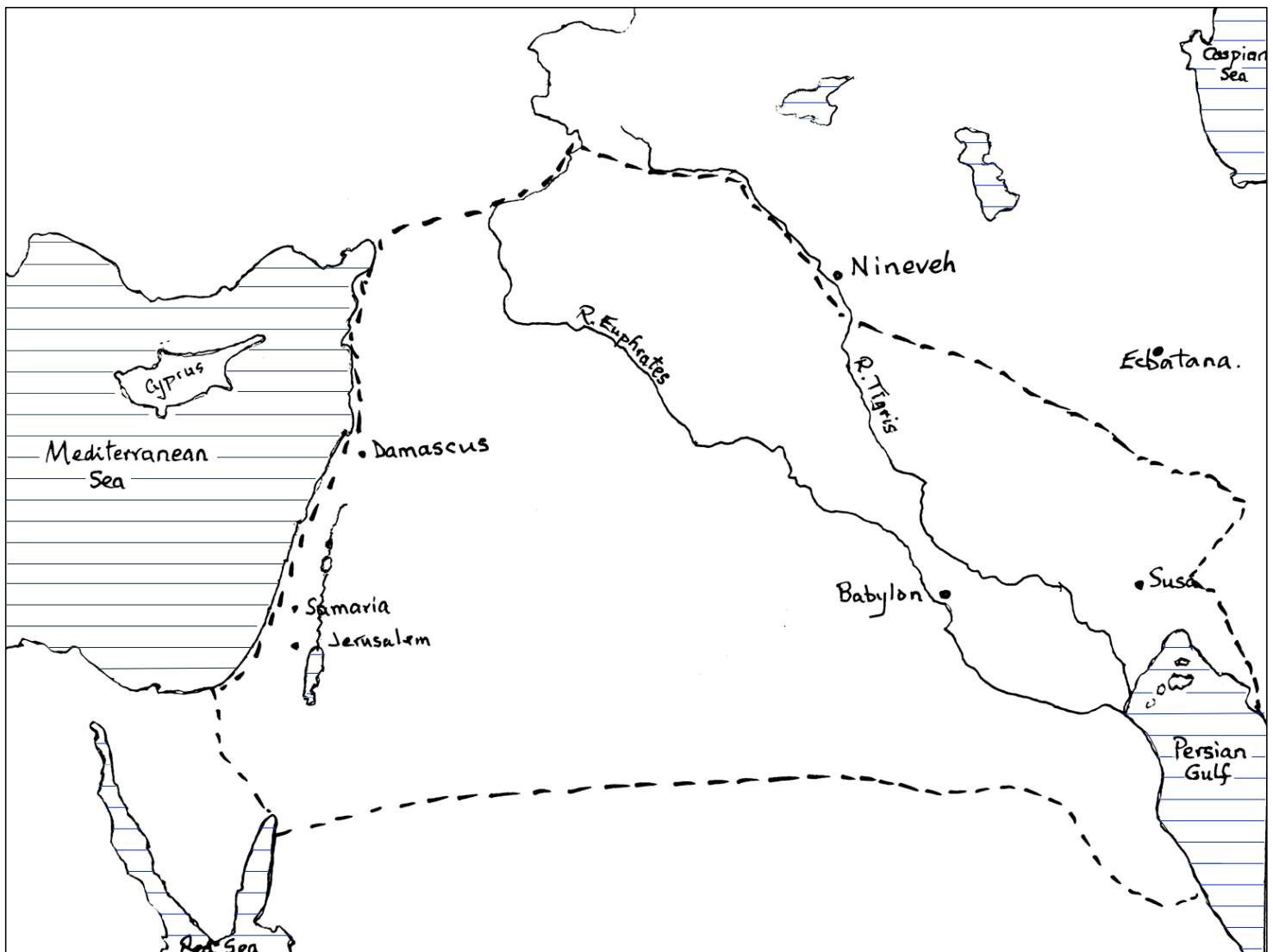
‘Our hope is not yet lost, the hope of two thousand years,
to be a free people in our land, in the land of Zion and Jerusalem’⁹

⁷ *The Message* on 1 Peter 1.1

⁸ The Bible Project: introduction to article on exile as a Biblical theme

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

Sketch Map



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

The Historical Setting

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

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

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

By then Ezekiel was already in Babylon. Nearly two years earlier 15th January 588 was a date he would never forget. YHWH gave him two messages. Nebuchadnezzar would initiate his final siege of Jerusalem, the '*delight of their eyes.*' And Ezekiel's wife, the '*delight of his eyes,*' was to die but he was not go into mourning for her¹⁰: a message from God to the people about their response to defeat and exile. Both events came true that very day. When Jerusalem fell two years later, king and people were taken to captivity 1400 road miles away in Jewish ghetto colonies in Babylonia, leaving only the 'poor of the land' (*dallat ha'aretz*: *the dallim = the poor*) in the Promised Land. Had Bel conquered YHWH? In one devastation God's people lost everything that had

¹⁰ Ezekiel 24. 1,2,15-24

bolstered their faith and evidenced God's favour: the land¹¹, the privileges of being his chosen people¹², Jerusalem¹³, the Temple¹⁴ and their Davidic king¹⁵. The catastrophe and its psychological and emotional impact were crushing. As had happened to the northern kingdom, it could have been the end of the children of Israel as a distinct people and religious community. That it was not is thanks in large measure to the ministry of Ezekiel during the years of exile. His teaching made sense of their experience and so changed their spirit that many returned to the holy land, rebuilt God's work and came to sit under the ministry of God's Word¹⁶. All of that can be laid, humanly speaking, at his door.

What were conditions like for the POWs? 2 Kings 24.14,16 say they were fed, but not whether on small or generous rations. Jeremiah wrote to them telling them to settle and work for the prosperity of Babylon until God brought them home (Jer.29.1-14). The picture Ezekiel gives is of reasonable freedom, with settlements in Jewish communities, either working for their Babylonian overlords or simply engaged in normal agricultural life. Presumably they married, ordered their own affairs and lived with a measure of prosperity. It was not however congenial. 'By the waters of Babylon we wept; how can we sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land?'¹⁷ Ezekiel ch. 4 and 37 reflect the shame and distress of living in what they regarded as the graves of Israel. Ezekiel's fellow countrymen were free to visit him¹⁸. There is some evidence from Qumran that things may have got worse for them later in the exile¹⁹. It is often said that this was the time when synagogue worship started but there is no evidence for this²⁰.

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

¹² Deuteronomy 7.7-9

¹³ Psalm 48.1-3 & 12-14

¹⁴ Psalm 84.10

¹⁵ Psalm 2.7, 45, 72, 110.1, 2 Sam.7.13f

¹⁶ Neh.8.1-8

¹⁷ Psalm 137

¹⁸ Ezek. 8.1, 14.1, 20.1

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

²⁰ I owe much in this paragraph to Ackroyd p. 31-35.

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

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

Introduction to Ezekiel

Authorship and Unity

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

Three main arguments have been adduced against this presumption.

1. *Historical criticism* (analysis of the date and place of the event and of the composition) notes that some of the material is set in Jerusalem, some in Babylon. In ch. 8-11 there is detail about the religious practices in the Jerusalem temple. Therefore, the argument goes, Ezekiel must have been there. However he says the Spirit took him there in a vision of God (8.3); and the message is addressed to the exiles (11.14f). The argument is empty.
2. *Form criticism* (analysis of the type of literature) notes that while Ezekiel is mostly prose, some is poetry: eg parts of ch. 18, 19, 21, 23. Also that most of Ezekiel is prophetic while some is priestly. It is argued that these represent different authors. There is however no need to infer this. Many people combine prose and poetry; think of Tolkien. Ezekiel states he is a priest (1.3), something we could have guessed from ch. 40 and 45, and promptly launches into sustained prophecy. The argument is empty.
3. *Redaction criticism* (analysis of how an author uses his material) assumes a core derived from Ezekiel which an editor or 'Ezekiel School' expanded into the current text. Walther Zimmerli proposes two processes: the prophet's speeches are given narrative additions (eg 11.25), and the speeches themselves were developed (eg 17.11ff explains 17.2-10). Zimmerli acknowledges that the expansions are so consistent with Ezekiel's thought that maybe he did much of the editing himself²¹. That makes the assumption of an Ezekiel School unnecessary; there is no evidence for it anyway. The simplest solution is often the most elegant and compelling: that Ezekiel was author and quite possibly editor, or at the least involved in the editing process.

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

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

²¹ Walther Zimmerli *Ezekiel* vol.1 Philadelphia Fortress 1979 p. 71

them that God has plans for the enemies who have been and are against them (ch. 25-32). When Jerusalem does fall he comforts them with assurance of a hope and a future (ch. 33-39), even to producing a kind of White Paper²² on arrangements for the new Jerusalem, temple, cultus and land (ch. 40-48). The arrangement is logical from beginning to end. Its message has an inner consistency, from the warnings about the imminent fall of Jerusalem (ch. 1-24) to comforts about the future once it has taken place (ch. 33-48)²³.

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

3. Even in translation Ezekiel's literary style shines through as consistent. Unlike Isaiah he mostly writes in prose. The title 'son of man' is used nearly a hundred times right through the book; the combination 'Adonai YHWH' more than two hundred. Characteristic wordings abound: 'Behold I am against you, says YHWH'; 'I YHWH have spoken it'; 'and they will know that I am YHWH' (seventy times). Most distinctive of all is his title *nasi* (Prince / ruler / leader) rather than '*melek*' (king) for the coming One. His visions are described in great detail, often surreal, at much greater length than in other writers²⁵. Several times he is supernaturally transported.

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

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

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

²⁴ I am indebted to McKeating p. 15-21 for these examples.

²⁵ Block p. 23-41 identifies Ezekiel's style in great detail.

Jehoiachin and himself from Jerusalem to Babylonia in 597BC²⁶. Other prophets did not do this except that Haggai follows his example.

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

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

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

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

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

²⁷ Block I p. 235

²⁸ Block I p. 17-23; quotation from p.20.

²⁹ Block I p. 21, 22

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

Date

We first hear Ezekiel's voice in 593, the fifth year of his exile (1.2). On the basis of dates given in the book, Ezekiel's span of prophecies occurred over the course of about 22 years. His last dated words (29.17) 'date to April 570'³¹ (on McConville's chronology, 571; he takes the date of the exile as 587³²). He tells us he was thirty in 593, so his dated writing lasted 22 years which makes him fifty-two years old at the time of his last dated prophecy. How much longer he prophesied and lived after that is not known.

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

³² McConville: table on p. 83

Ezekiel the Man

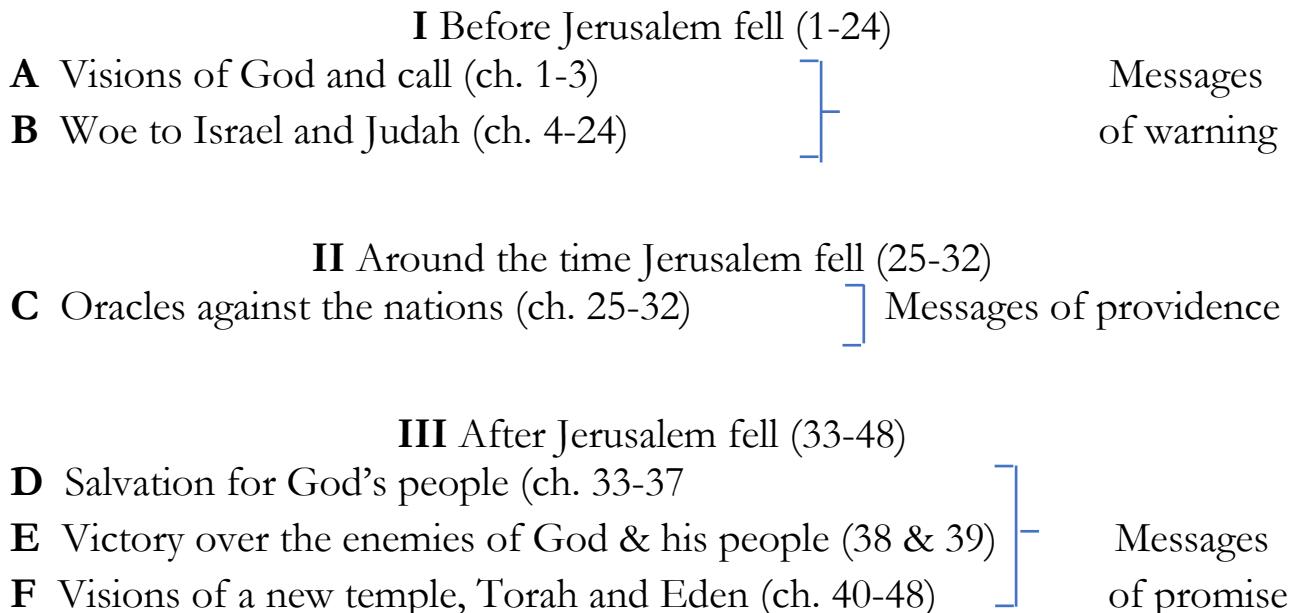
A priest, son of Buzi, Ezekiel was 26 when along with King Jehoiakim and others he was taken away to exile in 597BC. At the age of thirty he experienced his shattering vision of God and call to faithful testimony. Soon afterwards he was struck dumb (3.25). Five years later, the day before a messenger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

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

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

Structure

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



This structure subdivides much as follows

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

F. Visions of the future temple, Torah and Eden (ch 40-48)³⁴

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

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

Ezekiel as scholar: the Bible's link-man

I said above ('Why preach Ezekiel') that it is a key book because to a unique extent Ezekiel takes up earlier scriptures, weaving them into his own message and theology, embodying the unity of Scripture. In turn later writers and the NT learn from him. He shows a substantial familiarity with the Bible from Genesis to Jeremiah³⁵. Some examples of this linking:

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

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

- 1 Kings 18.46 the hand of the Lord on Elijah empowers him to outrun the king's chariot from Carmel to Samaria, and on Elisha inspires the prophecy of the dry valley filling with water (2 Kings 3.15); the hand of the Lord comes on Ezekiel seven times, eg transporting him from Babylon to Jerusalem³⁶ (Ezk.8).
- He mentions Noah, Daniel and Job in 14.14 and the heroes of old in 32.27.
- The earlier writing prophets mostly avoid the term 'the Spirit' (+ or – 'of the Lord') but His ministry is witnessed to in eg the Elijah narratives and freely by Ezekiel eg 3.12, 14, 8.3, 11.24, 43.5.
- Vision 'while the elders were before him' was shared by Elisha (2 Kings 6.32) and Ezekiel (8.1, 14.1, 20.1)
- The proof-saying ('that you may know a prophet is among you') is shared between 1 Kings 20.3, 2 Kings 5 and Ezk. 2.5, 33.33, ch. 25
- Amos and Ezekiel share the catchphrase 'the end has come' (*ba' haqets*): Am.8.2, Ezk. 7.2
- The 'full description of YHWH's gift to his bride' is shared by Hos. 2 and Ezk.16 but not by Jeremiah when dealing with the same analogy: this 'makes probable Ezekiel's familiarity with Hosea's preaching' (Zimmerli p. 44).
- Zephaniah 1.18, 3.3, 3.8 → Ezk. 7.19 22.23ff, 22.31 seem to indicate Ezekiel knew Zephaniah.

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

Sequence of Thought

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

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

³⁶ McKeating p. 93

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

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

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

Block on the four faces: the **lion** (strength, ferocity, courage): symbol of royalty; **eagle** the most swift and stately of birds; **ox** symbolised fertility and divinity (Psalm 106.19f); **human** the image of God – together expressing God's transcendent omnipotence and omniscience³⁷. He adds on the theology implied: God's transcendent glory; his holiness; his sovereignty; his interest in his people; his presence among the exiles; his judgement. 'Whoever would enter into divine service must have a clear vision of the one into whose service he or she is called'³⁸.

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

Lessons for preachers:

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

³⁷ Block p.96

³⁸ Block p. 106-109

- Appropriate God's word till it is our own: take possession of it, digest it till we see things God's way, that is how we think: 'till our very blood is bibline' (Eric Alexander). The responsibility to make sure it is *God's* word we minister comes at least ten times: 2.4,7,8 (twice); 3.1,3,4,10 (twice),11. 'Merely hearing that message is not enough: it must be digested, internalised, embodied and lived ... it derives not from private reasoning or mystical reflection but from revelation ... even so it does not cancel out or overwhelm natural abilities and qualities – it uplifts and quickens them³⁹.
- Be ready for what people are like (2.6-3.9). We are to be unlike them in some things, like them in others. See God's language here: thorns, briars, scorpions, scowls, rebels. Ezekiel is not to be like that (2.6-8). Also hard-hearted and stubborn; Ezekiel *is* to be like them in that regard (3.7-9). Ministry is not a career. It is a vocation.
- The responsibility to be as alert as a sentry (watchman, 3.16-21) is stated very formally in language that copies the Torah ('Whenever' is like Lev. 1.2 and 2.1 ... and the case according to good response or bad reflective of case law later in Leviticus), emphasising how momentous is this calling. It shows rebels as under God's judgement; it reflects that the wages of sin is death; it shows that our calling to reach out is an act of God's grace!
- The initiation (3.22-27) is astonishing. The binding with ropes and the sticking of tongue: Ezekiel bears in his body the signs of his calling. To be detached about our ministry is a cop-out; it must be incarnational. But given that we are not on our own. 'I am with you.'

Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel.

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

³⁹ Block I p. 131, slightly edited

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel

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

C. Oracles against the nations (25-32)

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

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

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

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

7. Egypt (29-32)

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

John L Mackay's introduction to 25-32 is full of insight⁴¹: These nations, although conventional opponents of Israel, had been represented at a conference organised by Zedekiah, presumably to plan united action against Babylon (Jer.27.3). The Lord indicts them for opposing his purposes. The central assurance (28.24-26) is the key: God's purpose in his dealing with the nations is 'the establishment and recognition of his universal rule and his provision for those who serve him' (p. 11). Judgement has been pronounced first on God's household (ch. 4 – 24 = 1 Peter 4.17f) but the other nations are not exempt. They learn of God's impartial justice; they learn not to envy the wealthy unbeliever; they are assured of God's control limiting the power of their and his enemies, and that his covenant faithfulness lies at the centre of all this. Why no mention of Babylon? She is God's instrument at this time for the punishment of his people. Perhaps the prophecy of Gog's downfall, coming later as it did, is a coded promise that Babylon's time will come once her usefulness is over.

Ministry opportunities in this section of Ezekiel

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

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

Ch. 33 – 48 consist of more than one major section. I have chosen to recognise three⁴² which I have labelled D, E & F.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴² As does W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, p. viii.

⁴³ Block **II** p. 272. Wording in italics is mine.

⁴⁴ Wright p. 273

‘holiness’ terms as we might expect from Ezekiel the priest. Sin defiled people and land, which vomited them out (Lev.18.24-30). Restoration involves cleansing 36.23-25). But the renewed salvation is also a new creation like the garden of Eden (36.35), and like the new covenant (36.26-28; cf 11.19,20; Jer. 31.31-34). The story of salvation is told as a contrast to the former judgement, to emphasize the grace of God⁴⁵.

The influence of Ezekiel ch. 37 on the NT⁴⁶. The original sense of Ezk. 37 is usually seen as concerning the regeneration of a new Israel after the exile. The midrashim however (ancient Jewish commentary) interpret it as being about the final Resurrection, as do Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁵ McConville p. 95 slightly reworded

⁴⁶ Summary of J. Grassi ‘Ezekiel 37 and the NT’ NTS 11 1964 p.162-164

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

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

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

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

⁴⁷ My summary of these 5 points from Block **II** p. 423. 'Jesus' is my addition.

Ch. 39 goes on, they will all die and become food for birds and animals. Their weapons will be used for seven years as fuel. Their bodies will take seven months for the animals and birds to eat them. God's people will come to a new acceptance of their responsibility for the exile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Ch. 38 & 39 are ‘word pictures of spiritual truth regarding the security of the people of God, to whom these chapters extend the guarantee of (God’s) protection⁴⁸. Rev. 19.17-21 show that their consummation will come as God wins his final victory over all opposition, a prelude to the last judgement. God is Lord of history and will keep his covenant.
2. In the contrast between the victory against God’s enemies of 38.1-39.24 and the relief and security of his people in 39.25-29 lies for us a double encouragement.
 - a. Jesus really will make a separation at the end. Tyrants will meet their due doom, all wrongs will be righted and nothing evil will be allowed to enter the city (Matt.25.31-46; Rev.21.27).
 - b. But will the blessing really include you and me? How, when we know our hearts? I will bring them home’ says our Lord (Ezek.39.27). By some unimaginable miracle ‘we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3.2).
3. It is a star to steer by: ‘All who believe this will keep themselves pure (1 John 3.3). For all that we are a million miles from deserving it, we would like a welcome; and if he can do that we really will know that he is the LORD (Ezek. 39.28).

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

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

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

NOTE ON STRUCTURE OF CH. 40 – 48.

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

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

⁴⁸ Mackay **II** p. 300

⁴⁹ Mackay **II** p. 351-358; the quotation is from p. 351

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERPRETATION OF CH. 40-48

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

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

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

⁵⁰ *ibid* p. 356

⁵¹ modified from *ibid* p. 354

giving stream thus renewed”⁵². Even the architecture of Zion is a public testimony to the nature of God⁵³. Use of the word *nasi’* (prince over the tribes under God’s kingship) rather than *melek* (king over his kingdom) for the ruler at this time indicates that the rule of Jesus Messiah will be not imperialistic or abusive but shepherd-like (ch. 34 and 37.21-28, cp John ch. 10): his kingship is not rejected but reinterpreted. It is interesting that in the modern State of Israel, *nasi’* is used not of the Prime Minister but of the ceremonial President. Messiah’s rule will be just and compassionate; he will be God’s viceroy, fixing the flaws of history, renewing the Covenant. The historical monarchy will be fulfilled in the eschatological theocracy.

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

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

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

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

⁵² J.D. Levenson ‘Theology of the program of restoration of Ezekiel ch. 40-48,’ Missoula, Scholars Press, 1976 p. 13.

⁵³ Ibid p. 16.

⁵⁴ Paragraph dependent on Levenson p. 163.

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

2. *The new Torah we suggest exploring in sermon 8 says, let us be sure to run every part of life under our Lord's reign. Inclusion of even the design of the kitchens says, God invites us to eat at his table.*
3. *The miracle of the river of life bespeaks God's desire to bless his people. Up to this point God's reputation and holiness have dominated. Now Ezekiel shows us the abundant life and fullness of blessing which flow from God's grace. Our wellbeing is God's passion.*
4. *Full salvation embraces the earth, the environment as well as ourselves (47.1-12). We are back in Eden, but with gratitude at salvation added to its perfections.*
5. *47.13-48.29, the delineation and apportioning of the land with the centre reserved for God, shows that all belongs to him and he is central (// the tabernacle at the centre of the camp during the exodus). All we have comes by his gift.*
6. *The equal distribution between the tribes, with space explicitly made for foreigners who join God's people (47.47.21-23), prevents the injustices that now plague human society. In the next life it will be 'each like his brother' (47.14 literally; cp Lev.7.10).*
7. *The city will no longer be called Jerusalem but YHWH-Shammah (the Lord is there. Is the similar sound significant? Yerushalaim/Yahwehshammah). In Jesus the Messiah, the glory of YHWH, has descended and dwells among us, God with us⁵⁶*

Theology

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

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

⁵⁶ Block **II** p.746: almost his closing words

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

would he allow his people to experience defeat and catastrophe? How were they to come to terms with such a drastic collapse? From within the community of Judean exiles in Babylon Ezekiel answers, it is YHWH's good punishment. At the start of his ministry in 593 Jerusalem was still safe and most of Judah still in the land; Ezekiel warns 'worse is to come.' It did. In 586⁵⁹ most of the population lost everything but what they could carry. The nation lost their king, their capital, their land, their temple and their independence. Yet all this, says Ezekiel, is but the culmination of what they had always been like. We were idolaters and Sabbath-breakers even in Egypt (20.6-13). The exodus story is actually one of disobedience (20.18-21). Once in the holy land, we turned to Baal and child sacrifice (20.27-31). The only reason we are not destroyed is for the sake of God's Name. In fact why did the Lord choose us at all? Ezekiel does not answer. And yet we have a future and a hope, via a second exodus (20.33-44). Our existence, our continuation and our future flow solely from the grace of God. This is what defines us: grace that will not let us go.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apocalyptic. Some of Ezekiel's visions are bizarre and have what one commentator calls a dream-like quality. According to Hitzig the features of apocalyptic are a heightened use of symbol and imagery along with visionary experiences⁶¹. Ch. 38 and 39 for example, the Gog from Magog prophecy, has these features along with a fair amount of unreality and imaginative description, the number seven in abundance, an enigmatic approach to the names of people and places: there is something apocalyptic here. However the standard definition offered by J.J.Collins is

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

Ezekiel 38 and 39, by contrast,

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

⁶⁰ McKeating p. 129.

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

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

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

Was Ezekiel successful? His impact on Judaism

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

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

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

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

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

⁶² Block p.428

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

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

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

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

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

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

We are not bound by our yesterdays. Ezekiel is against resignation. God is on the side of life (18.23, 32). 'Today the freedom to turn round stands open,' he was saying⁶⁴.

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

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⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 155-157 have guided these three paragraphs.

⁶⁵ Ibid p. 157

Chart: Dates and Contexts of the Writing Prophets

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

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

Preaching Ezekiel, Part 2, Sermon Resources

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Ezekiel at a glance: summary of chapters, showing possible nine-sermon series in Bold.

I Before the fall of Jerusalem: denunciation and warning. Prophecies of 593-587 BC

A. Ezekiel's visions of God, and call (1-3)

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

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

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

17. Two eagles (Babylon, Egypt) carry off cedar (king); yet later, Messiah = sheltering tree¹.
18. Three generations, establishing it is the soul that sins that dies. But God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.
19. Mother Judah = (1) lioness w two cubs -> Babylon, (2) vine broken and taken to desert.
20. Don't ask Me for a word: in every generation you have chosen idols and broken my laws. I will exile you; yet later, restore you.
21. Lament, Ezekiel. I am going to kill righteous and wicked alike, using Babylon, because of your sins. Ammon too.
22. (useful list of) Jerusalem's sins. I will scatter and furnace them. Sins of leaders, priests, the wealthy.
23. (vivid) Prostitutes Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem): Babylon and Assyria will strip and abduct you.
24. Babylon besieges Jerusalem // cooking pot. E's wife dies but he must not mourn, for the same will happen to Judah in regard to the temple and Jerusalem and they must not mourn.

II. Around the time Jerusalem fell: concerning the nations. Prophecies around 587 BC

C. Oracles against the nations (25-32)

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

III. After Jerusalem fell: promises of a new order. Prophecies of 587 to ca. 570 BC

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

33. Ezekiel to be a watchman to warn Israel. God reopens E's mouth (3.26). News of Jerusalem's fall -> people will know you are a prophet.
34. (Important) Rulers of Israel are bad shepherds. -> God will shepherd his people, placing David over them.

35. God will devastate Edom for her enmity against Israel.
36. **Later God will bless Israel with a new heart, mind and spirit and restore her, to the honour of His Name.**
37. **Dry bones, prophesied to, become bodies, come to life. Judah + Israel will be reunited, one kingdom with David as king.**

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

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

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

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

***Note.** Occasionally in the sermon resources I write 'wee exp.' or 'lively exp'. It means, 'relax and explain in a brief, lively way.'*

I have offered rather fuller notes on the first two sermons and more bullet-point-ish comments thereafter.

CPW

Two possible Preaching Series

Ezekiel is such a creative, startling communicator, the task in selecting a series is to embody his message while also representing the variety and shock of his messages.

A. 9 sermons

1. Ch. 1 The Vision of God
2. Ch. 2&3 Ezekiel's call; the vocation of watchman
3. Ch. 4 Ministry that engages (the model of Jerusalem)
4. Ch. 28. 1-19 Judge of all the earth (the doom of Tyre)
5. Ch. 36 A new heart and spirit
6. Ch. 37 Everlasting life, a united people and their Prince (valley of dry bones chapter)
7. Ch. 39 The end of evil (Gog's doom to God's glory)
8. Ch. 45 Land, Prince and festivals: life in the Messianic kingdom
9. Ch. 47 The new Eden our true home

If you had to omit two, perhaps Nos. 7 & 8 would be the ones to choose.

B. 2 x 7 Sermons

1. Ch. 1 The Vision of God
2. Ch. 3 The Vocation of watchman; Ezekiel's call
3. Ch. 4 Ministry that engages: the model of Jerusalem
4. Ch. 11 Punishment, hope and the departure of God's glory
5. Ch. 18 The justice of God: Ezekiel's main theodicy chapter
6. Ch. 19 The lioness and the vine: a political poem
7. Ch. 24 Siege of Jerusalem, death of Ezekiel's wife.

8. Ch. 28. 1-19 Judge of all the earth (the doom of Tyre)
9. Ch. 36 A new heart and spirit
10. Ch. 37 Everlasting life, a united people and their Prince (valley of dry bones chapter)
11. Ch. 39 The end of evil (Gog's doom to God's glory)
12. Ch. 43 Return of the Glory, renewal of worship
13. Ch. 45 Land, Prince and festivals: life in the Messianic kingdom
14. Ch. 47 The new Eden our true home

Sermon notes for series A, nine sermons

Fundamental to the benefits Ezekiel can bring us are:

- his disclosure of God's glory (ch. 1), and
- the place of preaching: exactly and only God's word (2.4,7; 3.4,10,11).

Sermon 1 Ch. 1 Ezekiel's vision of God

The issues. The glory which prostrated him, which departed from the temple during his ministry (ch. 10) and whose return in the Messianic age he foresaw (43.1-5), became Ezekiel's master and framed his ministry. Not a series of theoretical formulae but a vivid, mighty, stupefying Person.

Rationale for inclusion: Ezekiel's encounter with God transformed his whole life. Our perception of God determines our lives and our ministries

Glowing heart: God's prostrating glory, royalty and omniscience

Objective for our hearers' lives: reverence for God. That their (our) sense of 'Thou God seest me' might be as real as if they could *see* him near them.

'Recognition of the master's prerogative is the mark of the true servant'
(David Evans on 1 Kings 17.1).

The sermon

The day Ezekiel records in his first chapter was a day he would never forget. He, King Jehoiachin and some others had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar's army. They must have felt forsaken by God. Ezekiel was 30, the age at which he could have taken up his duties as a priest in the Jerusalem temple. His career had been brought to an end before it started. 'Can I still be of any use in God's service?' It is a heartache many of us face time and again.

Into that insecurity the barrier between heaven and this world was broken open, as in Rev. ch. 4. God gave him a vision.

It started by way of a windstorm – cloud, lightning, brilliant light coming from the north: the direction they'd come from when being brought here from Jerusalem. They hadn't been removed from God's care and interest. He was coming here too. And He wanted to show Ezekiel, and us, things about himself.

The storm revealed four creatures with human form but each with four faces, four wings, shining bright. Beside each, the wheel by which they travelled. The wheels were awesomely high, with eyes all round the rims.

Above the creatures and wheels, a sparkling platform. Then from above the platform, a voice. God was drawing aside that veil. Above the platform, a throne; and high above, on the throne, the 'likeness of a human form' (Ezekiel is writing with great care). From the waist and up, glowing splendour. Below the waist, fire. Surrounding Him: rainbow radiance. Ezekiel was being shown the 'likeness of the appearance of God's glory' and it prostrated him. He fell, face down.

What was it that God was showing Ezekiel about Himself? Think of the four angelic creatures each with four faces serving the forward movement of his chariot. They represented:

- The human face: the most exalted of God's creatures
- Eagle: king of the birds
- Ox: most exalted of the domestic animals
- Lion: king of the wild beasts

= He is Lord and Master of every creature. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, and these who have been given greatness and dominion serve the advance of his purposes. The one on the throne is a consuming fire, yet also surrounded by rainbow brightness: he is judge of all the earth, yet always a God of mercy.

Notice how many eyes. Four creatures each with four faces: that's 32 eyes. The wheel rims were full of eyes. There is nothing God doesn't see. Not a sparrow falls anywhere in the world without his knowing and permitting it; it's mind-blowing.

You know when I sit and when I rise
You perceive my thoughts from afar
Before a word is on my tongue you know it ...

You know, this vision of God answers the greatest issue facing the Christian faith in our day: what David Wells calls the 'weightlessness of God.'

- In science Richard Dawkins etc. -> 'there is probably no God'
- In the media Dara O'Briain etc. mock the very idea of him

Their influence permeates the whole of UK culture: morality, media, politics, education: all are dominated by the weightlessness of God.

The same probably seemed so to Ezekiel and his fellow exiles. Has the god of Babylon conquered Yahweh? And this vision shows the thought is laughable. No, He had brought them there. He was with them to change the future of Judaism through Ezekiel's ministry.

And this is our God: reigning, watching over his people and his work. For the rest of Ezekiel's life the central issue was not whether he lived in Babylon or the holy land, or whether his vocation to be a priest was fulfilled or

disappointed. The central truth was the existence in heaven of a throne, and on the throne the Lord God omnipotent.

Christian people need this perspective. Persecuted Christians need it (illustration given). You and I need it in our day most urgently, in order to see our lives, the world's life, the church's life from the vantage point of the sovereign kingship of God.

Looking back, here is the glowing heart of Ezekiel ch. 1: in exile, under God's judgement as a POW, Ezekiel saw such visions of God that he fell face down, overwhelmed. God wasn't absent or inactive. He was very much present and moving his purposes straight forward without deviation or diminution, and he is absolutely glorious.

And the objective for the lives of those who read this chapter or hear it preached? Awe of and confidence in God. We can be proud of him. How about you: is God weighty in our hearts and daily conversation?

Sermon 2 2.1 - 3.21 Ezekiel's call to service

The issues Authentic ministry combines two things: a certain kind of person, and faithfulness to the message we are given.

Rationale for inclusion: ch. 3 combines the criteria for being a preacher with the particular call to be a watchman (a sentry alert to warn of danger) that is developed in ch.33.

Glowing heart: the responsibility of the servant

Objective for our hearers' lives: courage to share God's word with all the faithfulness it requires, all the fraughtness that it contains.

Outline of chapter. Block proposes:

- Vision of scroll, 2.8-3.3
- Commissioning, 4-11
- Preparation, 12-15
- Induction speech, 16-21
- Initiation, 22-27.

The Sermon: Ezekiel ch. 2.1 – 3.21

[On first sight the passage is difficult to grasp. I suggest you indicate its structure during the reading of the passage:

Ezk starts with his commissioning

(At 1.28b): The HS lifts him to his feet

(At 2.3) The first speech

(At 2.8) the vision of a scroll

(At 3.4) the second speech

(At 3.12) Ezekiel's spiritual preparation

(At 3.16) Ezekiel's induction: the special function or task of his calling, to be a watchman]

Last week we opened our hearts to Ezekiel's experience of God's glory from ch. 1. God isn't an impersonal doctrine. He is a Person, all creatures doing his bidding. His glory, his splendour is so overwhelming that it prostrated Ezekiel. In the next two chapters he explained how God took that moment to call him to be his spokesman.

You remember the historical situation. Seven years before Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonian army, Ezekiel was among a group of people the Babylonians exiled to deportation camps near Babylon. Ezekiel's message at this time was to be that Jerusalem will indeed fall because of the vileness of their sins. Ch. 8 records some of the detail of that. Here he puts on record how God called him to be something like his ambassador, conveying God's policy to his people.

Week after week for most of the year we sit under the ministry of a person who has likewise been called by God himself to be His ambassador to this village. The relevance of this for us, therefore, is twofold.

1. It is useful to see just what are the core issues for the Pastor in that call, and to consider our responsibilities as the people God is addressing through them. What is the agreement between our minister and us in this matter of preaching?
2. But also we have promised, all of us who are members here, to confess or profess Christ before people. This matter of witnessing is about keeping *our* promises too.

Let us then notice what Ezekiel ch. 2 & 3 say, about the calling to be a prophet or witness or messenger.

When you try reading Ezk 2 & 3, it seems repetitive. Ezekiel was a lawyer and priest, and that's the kind of way he wrote. In fact there are three stages here: the commissioning, the spiritual preparation and the induction.

To illustrate: my own progress to the ministry took a similar course. On 29th July 1972 the Presbytery of Glasgow commissioned me to be a minister. They handed me a copy of the Bible inscribed with the words 'Peter White was licensed to preach the Gospel.' I was then an assistant minister for a year. Then St David's Broomhouse in Edinburgh called me to be their minister and I was inducted into that charge. There are three stages: commissioning, being handed God's Word, preparation, and induction into the work. That's what is going on in Ezk 2 & 3.

As I've said, there is some repetition in Ezk's writing and rather than go through the (quite long) passage bit by bit in order, I'd like to draw attention to three special matters that speak directly to us – both as the objects of the Pastor's ministry, and as people commanded to confess Christ to an unusually unbelieving generation.

Notice

1. The problem witnessing faces
2. The firmness witnessing requires
3. The destinies witnessing affects.

1. The problem that witnessing faces was writ particularly large in Ezekiel's day:

v.3 I'm sending you to a *rebellious* nation that has rebelled against me: they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day

v.4 The people to whom I'm sending you are *obstinate and stubborn*

v.5 they are a *rebellious* house

v.6 do not be afraid though they are *like briars and thorns* all around you and you live among *scorpions*. Do not be afraid, though they are rebellious

v.7 do not rebel, like that *rebellious* house

ch.3v.7 the house of Israel is not willing to listen to *you* because they are *not willing to listen to me*, for they are *hardened and obstinate*.

Is that the pastor's problem with us? Well, sin is not totally rooted out of us nor rendered impotent at any stage in this life. If part of our calling is to mortify sin, theirs is to *call* us to mortify it. Paul did that: '*Since you have been raised with Christ, put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, evil desires, greed, anger, ill will; do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and put on the new self*' (Col.3).

That's not all that (in our case) Nigel is called to preach, of course. He is to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. He is to preach the whole will of God.

Nor is the problem of sinfulness the only or even the main truth about us who are Nigel's congregation. We are new people in Christ who love Scripture and he has the joy of reminding us of the loveliness of our Saviour and the greatness of our salvation.

Nonetheless, if we ask in what way Ezek. 2 & 3 is relevant in our circumstances, the fact of hearers' sinfulness is the problem Nigel and we face. His

responsibility is not to modify his message. Ours is to respect his calling, to be receptive to his preaching and to be committed to obeying the Lord's voice.

Similarly, as we profess Christ among our unconverted families and friends and at our work, sin and unbelief is the problem we face. It makes some people mock God in sheer rebellion. It draws men and women into different kinds of sin: sometimes respectable, and in some people obvious and degrading. But the core is true of all of them: sinfulness. That is what makes them blind and deaf to Christ and the Gospel.

So that's the first point. The *problem* that witnessing faces – Nigel does with us, and we do with unconverted acquaintances – is the problem of sin in the human heart.

2. The firmness that preaching and witnessing requires.

You can see that so clearly in our passage. 'Do not be afraid of them ... You must speak my words whether they listen or fail to ... I will make you as unyielding and hard as they are ... Say to them, "This is what the sovereign Lord says" ... If you do not warn them, I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn, you will have saved yourself.'

As for how Ezekiel's call works out for *Christian preachers*, look at Acts 20.19-27: 'Although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews, I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you ... I have declared that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus ... I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.'

With regard to *our own witnessing*, don't you think that we are a quietist generation of Christians? In our men's group one of us said,

'my neighbours know I go to church, they know I'm a nice person, they know I'd help them if they needed it – but is that enough?'

Well, see God's command to Ezekiel:

v.4 SAY to them what the sovereign Lord says

v. 6,7 do not be afraid: you must speak my words to them, whether they listen or not

ch.3 v.4 go to the house of Israel and speak my words to them

v. 7-9 they are hardened and obstinate; I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint.

That isn't quietism. Think what the first Christians were like:

Acts 8.1ff: Persecution broke out against the church ... all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria ... those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Acts 4.23ff: (After being beaten for proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead), Peter and John went back to their own people and raised their voices in prayer: 'Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to *speak your word with great boldness.*'

Full of the Spirit, the early church knew that they were called to bear witness; and that witnessing calls for firmness.

Could we pray that we will take an opportunity this week to speak to someone about the Saviour?

Then, how are we going to resource ourselves for this? The vision in 2.8 – 3.4 guides us. A hand stretches out and gives Ezekiel a scroll, containing God's words, to eat and digest. Let us read, mark, learn and inwardly digest holy Scripture so that, more and more, our thinking, our very blood is **Biblical**.

- So we've thought about the problem that witnessing faces .. the firmness that it requires .. and finally:

3. The destinies at stake

Look at 3.17-21.

'I've given you as a watchman' – Ezekiel's ministry was a *gift* to Israel – 'for the house of Israel. So hear the word I speak and give them warning from Me. When I say to a wicked man 'you will surely die' and you don't warn him or try to dissuade him from his evil ways, he will die for his sin (that's thought to mean, be liable to an early or violent death) BUT I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn him, you will save yourself.'

I'm sure the Day of Judgment isn't going to be comfortable for many of us. You know what St Paul says about that:

'The foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on that foundation using gold, silver, precious stones .. OR wood, hay or straw The Day will reveal it. The fire will show the quality of each person's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will be saved; but only as one escaping through the flames.'

Do you know Amy Carmichael's vision 'The Cry of the Blood?' She was a missionary in India running a kind of retreat centre but here is the vision she had about our call to be 'watchmen,' or sentries, or lookouts:

(read Cry of the Blood, selections)

Looking back, we have seen that Ezekiel ch. 2 + 3 speak to us of:

1. *The problem witnessing faces:* the sinfulness of the human heart
2. *The firmness witnessing requires.* The hardening caused by sin calls for boldness, openness and clarity from us. 'Enable your servants to speak your message with great boldness,' prayed the first Christians.
3. *The destinies witnessing affects.* If we saw a neighbour's house burning and they hadn't realised, wouldn't we alert them and do all we could to rescue them from the flames? Friends I don't know what is the reality corresponding to 'the worm that does not die' and 'eternal punishment' and 'thrown into the lake of fire' but we disserve our families and friends if we fail to tell them there is a hell to flee and a heaven to gain at the last.

Pray

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

How to embody 21 chapters of vivid denunciation, appeal and warning, often acted out and sometimes almost pornographic, in one sermon? I have chosen this chapter as representing dramatic prophetic action. And what for our lives? Does God still discipline? What is shown here of God's heart?

Sermon 3 Ch. 4 Ezekiel makes a model of Jerusalem under siege

The issues. It took the ministry of ch. 4-24 in order for the truth about their sinfulness to sink home. It was that painfully achieved change of heart about the reasons for the exile, that gave Israel a future and a heart. The chapters are hard reading. Including the note of judgement makes hard preaching (if you don't find it so, avoid it and seek God for a tender heart till you do). But we are disobedient if we do not include it.

In our preaching, do we not owe it to our people to intrigue them? Is there any more important matter on which to do so, than the danger of judgement? Is not a hard heart that likes the idea of judgement, the worst kind of spirit for preaching it? I'm sure this acted sermon attracted people's curiosity and that they got the message. And so simple! But demanding on the preacher ...

Rationale for inclusion: If we are to 'cover' Ezekiel in 9 sermons, this one on ch. 4 has to bear the weight of the whole of ch.4-24. Their message is, God was

quite right to exile them and destroy all they stood for; they must be brought to the point of accepting responsibility, taking on board their disgusting sinfulness (see note on *to'ebah* in Booklet 1, theology, on sin).

If our series is to embody the variety of Ezekiel's ministry, moreover, it must include an example of dramatic prophetic action: what the Bible Project calls 'sign acts.' How relevant is this one, for the spirit of our age surely reflects the attitude in Jerusalem then: 'God won't act in judgement.'

Glowing heart: God means what he says when he warns of judgement, and he wants people to know that.

Objective for our hearers' lives: to take on board that God acts to discipline and punish as surely as he has acted in salvation. To see this passage in the framework of both the Cross and Heb. 12.5-13.

The Sermon

Introduction. All Judah – those still in Jerusalem *and* those in exile – were hoping against hope that Jerusalem would not fall. YHWH was stronger than Bel, wasn't he? It was treason to think otherwise. Jehoiakim and then Jehoiachin had bought Babylon off at the cost of their own deportation (2 Chron. 36.5-10); perhaps they would get away with it.

Brief content. In Babylon, the people were intrigued. There was the priest Ezekiel making a clay model of Jerusalem – with siege works round it. Lying on his side there bearing 390 + 40 years of Jewish sin??? Baking poor man's bread + lentil buns on a cow-dung fire as his diet: duh?

Divisions.

- The model of Jerusalem's siege
- The diagnosis of Jerusalem's sin
- The warning of Jerusalem's starvation
- The cost of faithful witness

Conclusions.

1. God meant his warning. Worse *was* to come. Jerusalem did starve and fall. It *was* because of their sin (see e.g. 2 Chron. 36.11-16). It is not popular to speak of God's judgement. But Acts 17.31 is true: God has set a day for judging the world by the Man he has appointed. He warned of it then, and warns of it now, looking for a change of heart among people.
2. It is not easy to bear this witness; it was costly for Ezekiel. But we are 'careful to warn of wrath to come lest we participate by silence in their guilt' (Don Carson on 3.16-23); lest we leave folk unwarned.

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

'The Lord might be disciplining us but what about the cruel tyrants he's using for the purpose: isn't he going to deal with them?' Ezekiel's oracles against the nations assure his people that he really is Lord of Lords and king of kings, and the destiny of nations is as much under his say-so as their own.

Sermon 4 28.1-19 Ezekiel predicts the fall of proud Tyre

The issues. 25.1 marked a major break. Till then the fate of Jerusalem was the issue. Ch. 25-32 consist of judgement oracles against the nations. This brings hope to Israel and forms the transition to the promises of salvation in ch. 33-48. But God's people should not think themselves better than the nations. The reasons for judgement (social sins, pride, idolatry), and the punishment, are common to believer and unbeliever.

Ch. 25-32 are carefully structured. The two halves either side of 28.24-26 are almost identical in length (and given 97 verses each) with seven 'mini-oracles'⁶⁶ before it and seven oracles against Egypt after it. The arrangement is geographical.

Rationale for inclusion: Do the impenitent wicked get away with it indefinitely? Is there a sanction to being God's settled enemy?

Glowing heart: We live in a just universe. God's justice often seems slow by our standards but 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

Objective for our hearers' lives: confidence in God in the face of injustice, tyranny and evil.

The Sermon

Context. This chapter brings us to a new section of Ezekiel. Up till now he has been warning that Jerusalem will fall because of the sins of God's people; the climax is in 24.25-27, Jerusalem's imminent fall. Ch. 25-32 form a series of messages promising that God will also judge the nations who are their and his enemies. The oracle (a weighty burden of a message warning of punishment) against Tyre takes three chapters, of which this is the final section.

Content. The ruler of Tyre's great pride – the sin called hubris – has led him to regard himself as one of the gods. This is to tilt not just at Israel but at God, and Tyre will be brought to a horrible end. A prophecy that came true, as we shall see.

Relevance. Has any age been so characterised by hubris as ours? Think of the scorn of God in the media and among the new atheists and comedians.

⁶⁶ Block vol. 2 p. 5. The oracles are short before the divide.

Think of the God-negating pride of so many of the leaders of the nations.
Think of our own hearts.

Proposition. It is so important to open up our consciences as well as our world view to what God teaches here.

Divisions. The passage's structure is:

1-10 Judgement on the prince of Tyre

- Preamble and accusation (1-5)
- Sentence (6-10)

11-19 Lament over his fall

- Preamble; his wealth and exaltation, 11-14
- His hubris, and the Lord's sentence, alternated x 3, 15-18
- The impact of his end, 19

Conclusions

1. Pride goes before a fall
2. Our God truly is Lord of all history
3. Ezekiel used a story all his hearers will have been familiar with. The Jews will hear echoes of Gen.1-3 in these verses; in the fall of Tyre and the nations round about, echoes of the Gilgamesh epic. When we are preaching or gossiping the gospel, use people's language, use stories they can identify with.
4. There is evidence for the existence of God in the fulfilment of these three chapters about Tyre. Ezekiel prophesied:
 - a. Nebuchadnezzar will destroy the mainland city (26.8): *he did.*
 - b. 'Many nations will come against her' (26.3): from Alexander the Great and for 1600 years till her final fall in 1291, that happened.
 - c. 'Make her a bare rock' (26.4): Alexander made a causeway out to the island and left it as bare rock.
 - d. 'Fishermen will spread nets over the site' (26.5): to this day fishermen dry their nets on the rocks that once formed her foundation.
 - e. 'They will dump your stones and timbers into the sea' (26.12): Alexander's engineers built the mole out to the city using the remains of the ancient land city of Tyre, laying them in the water.
 - f. Never to be rebuilt (26.14): remarkable given the abundant water supply nearby, yet true, it never has been.

The challenge a god must meet is, 'if you are gods, tell what will occur in the days ahead.' (Is.41.23). God did that in respect of the city of Tyre. He alone has done that: the promise of Tyre's fall is but one example out of many.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a verdict*, Vol.1. San Bernardino, Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972, p. 285-91 and 332.

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

Once God's warnings came true and the people were in exile under discipline, he speaks to them in quite a different spirit. There will be a second exodus from captivity to the promised land. A new order of things is promised, the core of which is the change of heart that must happen if God's new society is to come about. It is heartening to explore the heart-replacement and additional inner resources promised in the Gospel according to Ezekiel.

Sermon 5 Ch. 36 A new heart and a new spirit

The issues. *Alert!* This glorious, seminal passage demands homework. What are the assurances about the land referring to: a land for the ethnic people Israel? Or shall we spiritualise them? What relationship with the modern state of Israel? Is the passage about the covenant (the word is not mentioned, although it is in ch. 34 which introduces the theme and in ch. 37 which develops it) and if so, is it the old one reinstated or the new covenant initiated? How to break down a passage so full of promises and allusions into a digestible sermon (less is more)? First grasp ch. 34-37 as a unit, especially the covenant of peace (*berit shalom*) in 34.23-31.

Introduction. Now we are in the fourth main section of Ezekiel, written after Jerusalem fell, foretelling the salvation to come. The theology in v.16-38 is so rich and concentrated, most preachers will probably opt to focus on those verses (Wright starts a new section of his book here⁶⁸). Taking the whole chapter, on the other hand, would have the advantage of a wider perspective on Ezekiel's grand message, God's reversal of previous judgements and restoration of his honour.

v. 16-38 'contain the essence of Ezekiel's theology'⁶⁹; the passage is 'unmatched for its theological intensity and spiritual depth⁷⁰.

Rationale for inclusion: Having warned his people in both Judah and Babylon that worse is to come and Jerusalem will be destroyed (ch. 1-24), having assured them that God will deal with his and their enemies (ch. 25-32), Ezekiel spells out in wonderful Gospel detail the salvation that will come on the far side of the Jewish captivity. In ch. 36 he focuses on the change in the human heart.

⁶⁸ Wright p. 287.

⁶⁹ Craigie ad loc

⁷⁰ Block p. 365

Glowing heart: ‘I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you.’ (36.26, 27)

Objective for our hearers’ lives: conversion, renewal, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, confidence in the Gospel, appreciation and appropriation of its many-sided benefits.

The Sermon: on v. 16-38

Introduction. This is a very exciting passage. It represents the core of Ezekiel’s good news after 24 chapters of denunciation. The people are in exile, remember; Jerusalem has just fallen, as he had warned. What demoralisation. Ezekiel comforts and assures the people by prophesying the new stage in God’s salvation of people that will attend the Messianic age.

Brief Content. Ezekiel foretells a new kind of covenant. The kingdom of God will no longer be in the form of a nation state but of a radical inner transformation of men and women: a worldwide, international kingdom among the nations. Ezekiel ‘anticipates the day when the boundaries of physical Israel will be coterminous with the borders of the spiritual people of God’⁷¹.

Relevance. It is hugely encouraging to appreciate the immensity of the newness that is ours in Christ, under God’s new covenant. But also a challenge to our behaviour and motivation: what are we living *for*? (read Ezek.36.27)

Divisions. Notice, in the Gospel according to Ezekiel:

- *The change it produces.* -> expound ‘I will replace your stony hearts with a new heart and spirit’, tender and responsive, ‘and put my Spirit in you.’ ‘I’ll be yours and you’ll be Mine’. On our newness compare eg Eph.4.22-24 which should be translated in the indicative not the imperative!; Col.3.9b-11; Rom.6.6-11.
- *The behaviour it inspires.* -> expound ‘I’ll cleanse you’; ‘you will live My way’; ‘you’ll hate your sins’
- *The honour it serves.* -> expound ‘previously my people tarnished my reputation; it is only for my reputation that I am going to act; it’s all so that, 36 & 38, ‘then the nations will know that I am the Lord; then my people will *know* that I am the Lord.’ Are you quite clear what you are *for*?
- *What it offers humankind.* Here truly is the only solution for the fallen human race: the fundamental cleansing, heart transplant and infusion of the Holy Spirit which God offers us in Christ. Social programs are good

⁷¹ Block p. 361

but you cannot heal humankind's ills with economic, social and educational programs. The answer is in God alone. Only he can remove hearts of stone and give hearts of flesh: tender, alive, responsive hearts.⁷²

- [could explore: land rights for Israel are predicated on personal and national spiritual renewal]

Conclusion. Pause and consider the boundlessness of the 'Gospel according to Ezekiel'. What God has done in your heart. What behaviour strategy you are committed to in Christ. What is your great motive in life now.

Sermon 6 Ch. 37 A new life, a united people and their Prince (The Valley of dry bones)

The issues. Ch. 34-48 is a beautifully constructed unit. Ezekiel first prophesies the work of the Spirit in the messianic age (37.1-14), then prophesies about the reconciliation that will result (37.15-15-23) and the reign of the coming Messiah, developing what he has already written about that in ch. 34.

Rationale for inclusion: Ezekiel makes a limited number of Messianic promises and it is essential to include one of them. This is a truly great chapter, immense alike in its power to grip and its threefold message.

Glowing heart: The Spirit can bring the dead to life; Jesus covenants to shepherd them.

Objective for our hearers' lives: to choose the fullness of the Spirit (1-14), the new unity between people (15-23) and the Prince of Peace as shepherd (24-28) which the Gospel according to Ezekiel offers in this fabulous chapter.

The Sermon

Introduction. This famous and powerful passage about the valley of dry bones inspired, of course, the American spiritual, 'Dem bones, dem bones dem dry bones, Hear the Word of the Lord'. Just what we do Sunday by Sunday.

Context. The situation in life of the Jewish people then (*show map*) was that they were POWs in Babylon, gathered into a series of ghetto deportation colonies in Mesopotamia 600-1,000 miles from their homeland. They had lost everything due to their sin: land, temple, Jerusalem the delight of their eyes, the Davidic king. They were miserable and ashamed (Ps.137.1ff). They had caused the death of the Jewish nation and they were living in its graves (v. 11 & 12).

⁷² paragraph depends on Block p.365-367.

Brief Content. God gave Ezekiel this overwhelming vision, a promise about the reunification of God's long-divided people, and reassured them that the Davidic promise would come more true than they had ever imagined.

Divisions.

The Valley of dry bones, 1-15. Lively exp the gruesome sight: bits of skeletons, clearly long-dead, 'Can these bones live?' -> Lord, you know (they can't). First command (4-8): Prophesy to them (?! - silly to: impossible; but do what God says). Lively exp them moving, clicking, joining, sinews and skin – many, many corpses. Second command: Prophesy to the four winds / Spirit (Gen.2.7), 9b,c: see how it is a prayer. The way God appointed for his spiritually dead people to come to life was to proclaim God's message to them even while they were dead, and to call on the H.S. to beget life in them as he preached.

Notice God's work requires both things: obediently preaching to the dead (do I trust the power of the Gospel?), and calling the H.S. in through prayer.

Result: 11, 12, 14a came true. The next emperor (Cyrus) gave them permission to return to the holy land and encouraged them to rebuild the temple so they could pray for him; and you only have to skim-read Ezra and Nehemiah to see how under Ezekiel's preaching they had come to life as a nation. A great army of them returned to rebuild the Jewish people and the Jewish faith, and we read there of them hungry for God's teaching (Neh.8.8) and radically, with tears, putting their lives right. See the *power* and potential of preaching God's word.

The point for us is, this is God's pattern for spiritual awakening. For, when do we next read of demoralised and broken people, spiritually dead, being brought to life by a Word from God and the H.S.? – John 20.19 &22 read:

'The doors being locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came, stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.' And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them 'Receive the H.S.'

The next time? – Day of Pentecost.

Another time? Here this morning

This is what distinguishes true Christians from all else: not just an outward connection with the church or a profession of faith, but knowing the power of Christ at work in their daily life. 'You ask me how I know he lives – He lives within my heart.'

This is about *more* than simply coming alive to Jesus, as we see from the effect of Ezekiel's preaching and praying:

They went back to the land of Israel, built up the spiritual community, amended their lives where that was needed

About *our* deadness and spiritual struggles. I bring you good news. The H.S. can bring renewal, give victory over those besetting sins, bring the dead to life through your witness. All it takes is to be willing; to ask for the Holy Spirit in each regard: and to get on with that newness that he gives. How about you?

1. *The reuniting of the two sticks, 15-23.* Lively exp the dramatic prophetic action. Surely Jesus had this in mind when he spoke of one flock, one shepherd (John 10)? If Eph.2.1-10 speaks of the fulfilment of v. 1-14, the Eph. 2.11-22 shows the fulfilment of *these* verses: Gentiles and Jews in Jesus' fold, the uniting power of the Gospel.
2. *The shepherding ministry of God's Davidic king servant, 24-28.* Plenty of pastoral work for this part of the sermon to do. Block p.423 is quite brilliant on the way 'this oracle reinforces Ezekiel's complex view of the Messiah' as David, My Servant, Prince/chieftain (*nasi*), King, One Shepherd. For detail see 'Messiah' in theology section of booklet 1.

Conclusion. Don't miss the opportunity this chapter provides, wee exp.

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

“(Not) tied down to particular dates or events. Rather they are word pictures of spiritual truth regarding the security of the people of God, to whom these chapters extend the guarantee of divine protection ... the spirit of Gog is evident in many persecutors of the church over the centuries ... many aspects of it foreshadow the final cataclysm as foretold by John in Revelation” (Mackay pp. 300, 303).

Notice the great outcome and intention: seven times in these two chapters, ‘then they will know that I am the Lord.’

Sermon 7 Ch. 39 The end of all evil

The issues. Chapters 38 & 39 are something else. Some of the imagery is horrific and exegetical difficulties abound. See the discussion of Apocalyptic in Booklet 1.

Rationale for inclusion: Quite a bit of Ezekiel's imagery is extreme, and if we are to embody his ministry in a few representative sermons we must include some of it. This chapter provides it, in prophesying 'a final great showdown between good and evil' (probably!) in which 'God will give victory and

salvation to his faithful people' (McConville, *Exploring*, p. 96). It draws on themes from other prophets (eg v.9,10 reflect Isaiah 2.2-4) and Revelation in turn draws on it (Rev. 20.7-10). Maybe Paul did too (2 Thes. 1.8,9; 1 Cor. 15.24). In view of popular attitudes to the existence of both God and evil (eg Stephen Fry's words about a God who allows a child to suffer), it is happy to have Scripture giving us reasons for trusting that God will rid the universe of evil in a way that all will agree is just.

Glowing heart: 'Christ executes the office of a king in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies' (Shr Catechism qu. 26).

Objective for our hearers' lives: the peace of heart that flows from trusting God's promise that the lives and impact of the wicked are limited by God and that he will in his time rid the universe of all evil.

The Sermon

Intro. We come today to a passage of extraordinary, even bizarre vividness and drama. Gog and Magog are the stuff of legend (and sometimes the happy hunting ground of nutters) yet it has a tremendous message for God's embattled people, OT and New.

Context. For 2 weeks we have explored aspects of our great salvation; now we face the fact that it will repeatedly be assaulted in this world. Ch. 38 has prophesied that Gog, prince of Magog, will lead a huge alliance of armies against unsuspecting Israel as they live peacefully in their land; but that God will act massively against them to their utter defeat.

Content. Ch. 39 foretells such a slaughter of these enemies that it will take *seven* years to burn the weapons, *seven* months to bury the bodies; and God inviting the birds and animals to feast on their flesh and blood at his table(!). That will show his glory to the nations. His people's captivity will finally end and he will never turn his back on them again.

Understanding these chapters. The sheer number of sevens indicates that we are dealing with something symbolic: not that there will be no literal fulfilments of this prophecy but that there will be many through history, culminating in a final and total one. There are 7 'Thus says the Lord', 7 'so that the nations (or Israel) will know that I am the Lord', 7 terrible weapons in God's armoury (just note them: earthquake, sword, plague, bloodshed, torrents of rain, hail and burning sulphur); 7 words for enemy weapons, 7 years are required to burn all their weapons (providing fuel) and 7 months to bury the dead (and feed all the birds and animals). History is littered with Gogs aiming for the 'final solution' to Jew and Christian. The wickedness has been terrible but none has succeeded and Ezekiel 38/39 promises none ever will. God wins, to his people's final safety and his final honour.

Chapter outline

Gog and his ilk will be defeated and destroyed, 1-16. Whether it be Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes (the Maccabean revolt), Nero, Adolf Hitler or the final Armageddon, God will judge and conquer our and his enemies.

All nature will feast on their flesh and blood at God's table, 17-24. The impenitent wicked who persist in enmity to God and his people will ultimately experience exclusion from their presence and destruction.

Every captivity of God's people will end, 25-29. No more captivities, inhibitions, prison or persecution for the sake of the Gospel. No one will make them afraid. God will leave none behind: 'all that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away' (John 7.37). He had turned his back on them in sending them to captivity; 'I will never again turn my back on them, for I will pour out my Spirit on them,' says the Lord (v. 29). The saints will persevere.

All for his glory: 38.16b, 23; 39.6b, 7 & 8, 22, 28. Shorter Catechism 1 to glorify God and enjoy him for ever. (as explored in ch. 40-48...)

Conclusion. Be confident: God really is Lord of history, stands by his covenant, is God of grace. That wicked person at your place of work, that tyrant who oppresses the church in x country: if they do not repent their time will come. What a God we have: Romans 11.33-36.

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

What is ch. 40-48? It is a vision (40.1-4) of what life in the restored and renewed Israel will look like, put in terms meaningful to Ezekiel. His ministry started with a vision (1.1-4); it finishes with one. He told of God's glory departing from the Jerusalem temple (ch. 9); he promises the return of the glory. He has already prophesied the two great miracles of the age to come: God's people made new and God in their midst. Now he spells out aspects of the new age. Block calls it a 'glimpse of spiritual possibilities based on the reality revealed in ch. 1 and answering the abuse exposed in ch. 8-11'⁷³.

This section of Ezekiel is detailed to an extent many will find a bit odd, eg in the exact measurements of parts of the future Temple's outbuildings. The dimensions of the temple and the city are dominated by multiples of five, implying that this is a scheme of spiritual principles rather than an architectural and urban plan to be literally fulfilled. It spells out the principles by which God's kingdom would be run: God at the centre of their lives, their

⁷³ Block **II** p. 497

Prince providing the offerings, upright business practice, the grace of God flowing from his presence in an ever-deepening flow, incomers as welcome as insiders. Rev. ch. 21-22 speak of its final fulfilment.

Is it then eschatological? There are features which militate against such an interpretation. It lacks terms like ‘in that day’; the Prince has children and has to present a sin-offering for himself; the new temple is portrayed as a fact rather than as something requiring construction. Perhaps bifocal is the best word.

- It is an idea, ‘a theological constitution for the new Israel. YHWH announces the righting of all wrongs and the establishment of permanent, healthy God-Nation-Land relationships ... Where God is, there is Zion ... Ezekiel lays the foundation for the Pauline spiritualisation of the temple’⁷⁴.

- It is also eschatological. Things promised here await heavenly consummation. The mountain (40.2) is Zion and also a new Sinai, and the Prince (*nasi*) is Messiah: both king and priest. Ch. 40-48 prophesy the reconstituted nation functioning as a genuine theocracy. The present era is an in-between period sandwiched between two temple epochs⁷⁵.

See Part 1 on this section, especially the quotation from Levenson p. 13.

Sermon 8 Ch. 45 Life in the Messianic kingdom

The issues. In ch.40 Ezekiel has introduced the third ‘visions of God’ (40.2). The first were his overwhelming encounter visions (1.1), the second were the airlift to see the Jerusalem atrocities cause God’s departure (8.3). The third visions promise that the Lord will return to a renewed temple and make his home among his people. All that went wrong will be put right:

Back then: the temple was desecrated, the Lord departed and Jerusalem fell.

In the new age: the temple will be consecrated, the Lord will return and God’s people will be renewed with Jerusalem at the centre.

Rationale for inclusion: ch. 40-48, as we have shown in booklet 1, is no appendix but integral to and the climax of the book. They foretell the resolving of issues that Ezekiel has raised earlier, and the blessings of the Messianic age. Some of 40-48 is fairly exhaustive, even exhausting; I have suggested this chapter in preference to others so as to beget hope rather than lose it!

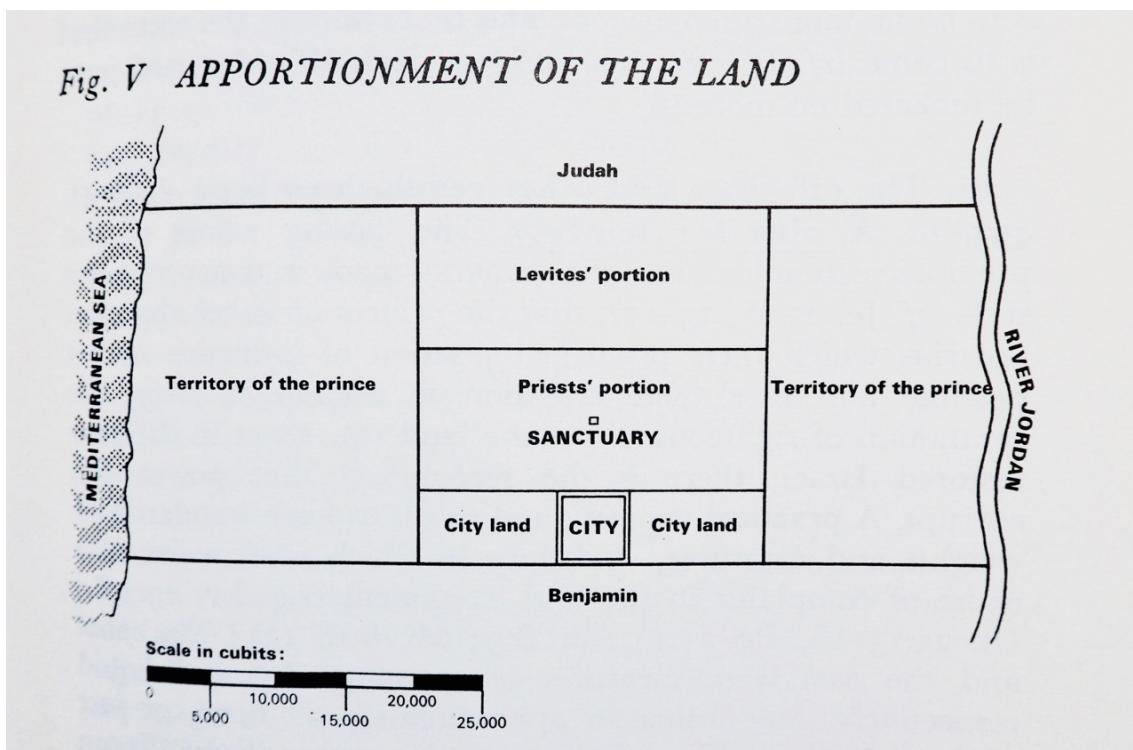
Understanding ch. 40-48. It was given to Ezekiel to provide three visions in one document: a new society after the exile; a new age; and a transcendent order beyond history. See Part 1.

⁷⁴ ibid p. 506

⁷⁵ ibid p. 504.

Glowing heart: Where God reigns, all manner of things shall be well.

Objective for our hearers' lives: to live by the values of God's kingdom, their eyes on the next life.



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The Sermon. Is the Christian faith adequate for the ills of human society?

Context. Ezekiel is forecasting life in a restored Israel after the exile. To this point he has predicted a new temple, the return of God's glory and regulations for sacrifices and priesthood.

Content. Now he moves our attention to part of the restored holy land: the portion which will be reserved for the Lord and contain the new Jerusalem and the new Temple: which to our surprise will be in different places.

Outline of chapter

1. The central area of the new holy land, 1-8a.
2. Good government in the new holy land, 8b-17.
3. The worship festivals in the new holy land, 18-25.

Development

1. *God's centrality in the life of believers, 1-8a.* See diagram. Ezekiel's vision sets seven tribes north and five tribes south of the central area reserved for Jerusalem, temple, priests, Levites and prince. The prince's area is to west and east of a central area within the central area. It is a perfect square with the city to the south surrounded by a green belt, an area for the priests that contains

the temple, and the land set aside for the Levites. This is ‘theological geography’ – land allocation with a message to it. Nothing less than perfection for God, hence the perfect square; and God is to be absolutely central to the life of his people. Obviously it calls us to put God at the centre of our lives, both individually and as a worshipping people. But it does more than that. Just as tithing is a statement not merely that God gets the first tenth but also that all our money is his, so the centrality of space reserved for God’s home is to be a symbol that the whole land – the whole of life – is God’s, and his people belong to him.

2. Justice and righteousness in the life of believers, 8b-17. Previous kings had laid hard burdens on the ordinary people (8,9). This was not to happen in the new Israel. The king has become a ‘prince,’ one who serves rather than dominates, and who lives by the Sinai covenant and God’s laws. The germ of a whole polity is found in 8-17. The prince must give a lead in justice, even to regulations for standard weights and measures so as to prevent fraud (10-12). As tax collector he receives the people’s offerings and is responsible for the provision and maintenance of all that enables worship in the sanctuary (13-17).

3. Cycles of worship in the life of believers, 18-25. Twice a year the temple is to be purified (18-20). Passover gives opportunity so the people may ever remember they are a redeemed people and how much that required of God: his mighty hand and outstretched arm (21-24). Christian believers likewise regularly remember their redemption and its cost in the Lord’s supper, and in glory will still call Jesus the Lamb and marvel at the marks in his hands and side. Finally the Feast of Shelters, the regular tribute to the Lord who provides, is to be celebrated each autumn at the time of ingathering of crops; a time of rejoicing, and a reminder (by the shelters) of their redemption and pilgrimage. Christians likewise do well to make times, such as harvest festival, to praise the Lord for his bounty.

Conclusion. Let us, guided by Ezekiel’s vision, ensure that God is at the heart of our lives; submit to the reign of our Prince of peace who will never abuse his people; under that reign conduct our affairs honestly without business trickery or exploitation; give ourselves to worship God as his redeemed people (Passover); be glad and grateful as represented by the feast of ingathering. Let our lives be as holistically his as is portrayed in this symbolic chapter.

Sermon 9 Ch. 47 The new Eden our true home

The issues. The vision of the river is surely a symbolic image, a picture with a message; it does not seem right to me to take it literally. ‘No amount of exegetical finesse or insistence on “what the Bible literally says” can transform the poetry of this passage into a ... realistic account of an event in time’⁷⁶. The amount of water coming from the sanctuary is only as much as can pour out of a jar. The river starts well above the water table. It multiplies in volume in a short distance without contribution from tributaries. As Ezekiel and his tour guide returned, suddenly many trees were now growing where there were none before: and bearing fruit every month. The water made the Dead Sea non-salty rather than the other way about. But that is not to say that what *is* promised is untrue. Here is a tremendous message.

Rationale for inclusion: I have chosen the passage about the river that grows miraculously as it flows from the temple, turning the Dead Sea into the Sea of Life, because ‘When God’s presence is established at the centre, the blessing of that presence flows out to transform the wilderness with life-giving waters’⁷⁷. As I see it the message has application in different eras:

- Those returning from exile experienced rivers of God’s grace as they built the second temple and listened to the word of God being explained (Ezra-Nehemiah).
- Jesus used the image to speak of the effect of his ministry on believers and *their* ministries (John 7.37).
- John used the prophecy in Revelation’s picture of the river of the water of life (Rev. ch. 22).

We perceive repeated fulfilments of the whole chapter: as the Jews returned home, as Jesus came, and in the next life.

Glowing heart: God in his grace can turn our spiritual barrenness into rivers of blessing.

Objectives for our hearers’ lives: That they may drink of Jesus, ever more and more; and may look to the consummation of this prophecy in the life to come as Revelation encourages. ‘Before their eyes will be that day when the Lord will receive his faithful people into the peace of his kingdom, will wipe away every tear from their eyes, will clothe them with a robe of glory and

⁷⁶ J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Louisville John Knox 1990 p.231 quoted in Wright p. 356. I owe the points that follow to Wright, *ibid* (and he to Block p.700f!), although I have put them in my own words.

⁷⁷ Peter C Craigie *The Daily Study Bible: Ezekiel* Edinburgh St Andrews Press 1983 p.313

rejoicing, will feed them with the unspeakable sweetness of his delights, will elevate them to his sublime fellowship – in short, will deign to make them sharers in his happiness⁷⁸

The Sermon

Context. We are in a section that tells of ‘visions of God’ (40.2) that he gave Ezekiel promising waves of renewal after the return from exile that would soon take place.

Content. Two visions occupy this chapter:

- a *river* flowing from the temple, cleansing the land and making it flourishing and fruitful;
- the *territory* that would be theirs and its allocation equally to all, Jew and foreigner alike.

Relevance. We are reading promises that will meet our needs, empower our service and bless our future in God’s purposes. It deserves careful and hopeful attention.

Chapter divisions.

1. The river flowing from God’s mercy, 1-12.
2. The home promised to God’s people, 13-23.

Development.

1. *The river flowing from God’s mercy, 1-12.* Ezekiel’s tour guide shows him a wee trickle of water from under the south side of the temple and altar, flowing east ... 500m it is ankle deep. Another 500: knee deep. Another: waist deep. By a fourth Ezekiel would have had to swim: he’d have been out of his depth (!) in it. (modern versions hide the fact that there are three ‘beholds’ as well as the ‘do you see this?’ – it was startling, made him think).

Back to the river bank – hey, lots of trees now! All the way to the Dead Sea and makes that dead water fresh! Lots of fish – in the Dead Sea!!! Fishermen spreading their nets everywhere. Fruit trees of all kinds bearing fruit every month, never withering, *because the water comes from God’s presence v.12.*

Evocative points: the river starts at altar i.e. place where God provided for atonement. Ps. 46.4 the river of God’s presence and grace makes glad the city of God; Ps.65.9, Joel 3.18, Zech.14.4-9, Gen.2.10 hence my choice of ‘A new Eden’: a new creation. River of God’s grace healed the land.

For Ezekiel’s audience: = promise of renewing people and land thanks to God’s mercy. Relationship with God flowing from altar, opens the door to healing of the land. Note: till now, new temple and ritual protect God’s

⁷⁸ J. Calvin *Institutes 3.9.6*, McNeill edition vol.1 p. 718.

holiness; now He shows his determination to bless his people with wellbeing and abundant life. (Block p. 702)

NT: (a) Messiah's day: Feast of Tabernacles was seen as symbol of outpouring of HS in Messianic era fulfilling various scriptures incl. our passage. Zech ch. 14 was read at the beginning of the feast of Tabs. See what Jesus made of this truth, John 7.37f. 'The beginning of all true Christianity is to discover we are empty, guilty sinners. There is a full supply of pardon, mercy and grace for all penitent believers. In him we find peace, hope, comfort: grace according to our need, satisfaction.' (Ryle on Jn 7.37). Increasing depth – the Spirit can assume more and more control of our lives.

(b) Next life: Healing of nations (Rev.22.1-5): river reverses the curse, life-giving abundance.

2. *The home promised to God's people, 13-23.* For Ezekiel's time there were the principles of equality and inclusivity as they returned from exile. For ours: there is room for all in the Messianic kingdom. Is 56.3-8 let not the Gentile or the eunuch say there's no space for me. There is a home for all who choose: security, belonging to God and each other. More: the land belongs to God, and the equality prevents social injustice.

Looking back, what attitudes will grow in our people?

- From ch. 1-24, a sense of his majesty and that God really is the God with whom we have to do -
 - The awareness that besetting sin grieves his spirit and that, however competent the service we render him, the glory departs from it.
 - The awareness that lamenting over sin, and courageous faithfulness, gladden his heart.
- From ch. 25-32, that God's hand really is over the nuclear button, global warming, all history. Possibly we will fry; but if we do it will be because it is the right thing to happen in the justice of God. The earth might warm until both Norfolk and the western isles are under 3 metres of water; but that happens it is because God has called time on them. The safe place to be is in the hands of God.
- From ch. 33-48, that the Lord God has given us a tremendous saviour and a holistic salvation. Worldwide he has begotten, in the church, an international nation with new hearts, minds and the Holy Spirit and a wonderful Shepherd as their Prince; there are riches to explore and his love for us to trust all our lives; even that is as nothing compared to the unblemished joys of the life to come, in which each chapter is better than the one before.

Friends, our God is too small. Think of Ezekiel's first vision. Frighteningly bright, flaming fire, glowing halo, King of kings, all creation at his service, living, active, going where he sovereignly pleases, Saviour among his people even in their sin-incurred exile. This is our God.

Bibliography

- If only buying one book: **John B. Taylor** *Ezekiel* London Tyndale Press 1969
- For exposition, my favourite is **Peter C Craigie**, *Daily Study Bible: Ezekiel* Edinburgh St Andrews Press 1983. It covers the whole book in order and in equal detail throughout. It's reminiscent of Jim Philip's notes: spiritually discerning, reasonably detailed without losing sensible overview. **C.J.H. Wright** *The Message of Ezekiel* in the 'Bible Speaks Today' series, Leicester, IVP, 2001, is extremely helpful on the passages he covers. He took the unusual step of going through Ezekiel not in order but by theme. This involved omitting some passages. Most are briefly treated in two appendices; a third appendix was omitted and I can forward it if interested. Great exposition of the passages he deals with, not so easy if looking for help on individual verses especially ones he omits. If you use a 'go through Ezekiel in order' series such as I have chosen, it involves constant use of the Contents page to find the next passage.
- For an introduction and overview full of information, questions and summaries I found **Gordon McConville** *Exploring the Old Testament vol 4 The Prophets* London SPCK 2002 stimulating and useful. He covers all the writing prophets, Ezekiel on p. 83-107
- For academic detail: **Daniel Block** *Ezekiel* 2 volumes 1997 and 1998 in the NICOT series Grand Rapids Eerdmans. Mentor (Christian Focus, Fearn) published **John L Mackay**'s two volumes this year, 2018. Block is a bit more open, enlightening, dealing with exactly the text; I would find it more useful in sermon preparation. Mackay is a bit more difficult to read both as to style and the appearance of the text but is more Christian-committed and points out Christian/NT connections in the 'Reflection' sections which follow each passage. Both are excellent. If you have the time and money, buy both.
- Online **James Philip**'s Daily Bible Reading notes are excellent and available at thethron.org under Resources.
- The **Bible Project** provides some materials in addition to the two videos on Ezekiel. Its video on Exile as a theme in Scripture, all the way from Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, meshes with Ezekiel. See also pp 34,35 below.

Additional reading list

P.R. Ackroyd *Exile and Restoration* London SCM 1968. 'Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century BC.' Ground-breaking. He gives a great overview of the period, the social and thought life of the Hebrew people during the Babylonian exile and of Ezekiel's contribution. Time and again, later writers lift his material. Some discernment needed inasmuch as he accepts eg the documentary hypothesis.

Don Carson's four talks on Ezekiel at the Crieff Fellowship January 2014 are a great example of powerful preaching on Ezekiel.

J. Grassi *Ezekiel 37 and the NT* NTS **11** 1964 p.162-164 is a stimulating brief paper suggesting how Matthew, John and Paul used Ezek. Ch. 37 when saying Jesus' resurrection opened up the Messianic eschatological era.

P. Joyce *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* Sheffield Academic Press 1989. An enlightening exposition of key theological issues such as the theodicy of ch. 18 and especially the need for a new heart, God's promises of the same and the need for our response.

J.D. Levenson *Theology of the programme of restoration of Ezek. 40-48*. Missoula Scholars Press 1976. Mind-stretching exploration of motifs: the stream, the architecture, the garden of Eden, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Abarim, Torah, the Nasi (Prince), the society of the end time, priesthood in the liturgical kingdom, the program (sic) in the restoration period.

H. McKeating *Ezekiel* Sheffield Academic Press 1993. Full of help on the structure of Ezekiel, Ezekiel the man, his dating series, his theology, the vision in ch. 40-48 and his messianism.

W. Zimmerli *The Message of the Prophet Ezekiel* Interpretation **23** 1969 p. 131-157. A shorter way into his contribution than his enormous two volume commentary. He really takes the text seriously. Concludes 'this isn't yet the message of the Son of God who went to death so that people, via turning in faith, turn to life. But he is a messenger on the way to the Son.' A good intro to Ezekiel's thought.

For an Overview movie with commentary that builds up to an A4 page, (downloadable) see The Bible Project on line. Pages 34-35 give lo-res image.

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