

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL

by Robert C. Walton

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL I

Introduction and Background; Ezekiel 1

Today we begin a series of studies taken from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Because of the length of the book, we certainly will not be able to cover it in any acceptable fashion in thirteen weeks. Consequently, we will instead look at excerpts from the book, concentrating on passages of particular significance for the ministry of Ezekiel and attempting through examining a variety of prophetic deliverances to get a taste of the book's content and message. Today we will lay the groundwork for our study by looking at background information that will help us understand the book of Ezekiel more easily, then look briefly at the vision with which the book opens.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book of Ezekiel was written during the Babylonian Captivity. The prophet was born during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC), the great reformer who restored the nation of Judah to the worship of the true God after the fearsome idolatry that dominated the country during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. During this time a major power shift occurred in the Ancient Near East. The Assyrians, who had been dominant, were challenged by the rising Neo-Babylonian Empire under Nabopolassar. In 612, the Babylonians destroyed Nineveh, the chief Assyrian city. The Egyptians, trying to keep Babylon from gaining complete control of the region, moved northward to confront their army. Josiah tried to stop the Egyptians and was killed in battle in 609. Four years later, Babylonian hegemony became complete with the defeat of the Egyptians by crown prince Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605. He swept rapidly through the Middle East demanding tribute from the newly-subjected states and taking captives back to Babylon to be incorporated into the imperial civil service, among them Daniel and his three friends.

Meanwhile, the situation back in Jerusalem was chaotic. Under Josiah's leadership, the pro-Babylonian party had gained influence, and after his death they succeeded in placing his second son, Jehoahaz (called "Shallum" in Jeremiah) on the throne. But Pharaoh Necho, who had defeated Josiah, removed Jehoahaz and replaced him with his pro-Egyptian brother Eliakim. Jehoahaz, after reigning only three months, was imprisoned at Riblah in Syria, then taken to Egypt, where he died. When Necho placed Eliakim on the throne, he changed his name to Jehoiakim. When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Necho at Carchemish, he returned to Palestine and captured Jehoiakim, clapping him in irons for deportation to Babylon. It was at this point that Nebuchadnezzar found out that his father had died and he had inherited the throne. He hurried back to Babylon, giving Jehoiakim a temporary reprieve. Jehoiakim, meanwhile, had succeeded in making himself enormously unpopular. He had imposed a heavy tax to raise tribute for Necho, then built himself a new palace using public funds. He killed a prophet named Uriah, twice imprisoned Jeremiah, and even cut up and burned a written prophecy sent to him by that same prophet. In his final act of folly, Jehoiakim ignored Jeremiah's warning and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian king sent troops from Syria, Ammon, and Moab against him, and it appears that Jehoiakim was killed during one of these raids, for, as Jeremiah predicted, he was buried "with the burial of an ass" (Jeremiah 22:19).

In reality, Jehoiakim died just in time - Nebuchadnezzar himself was on the way westward to put down the rebellion. Jehoiakim was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah

or Coniah), who, like his uncle Jehoahaz, only reigned three months. When Jehoiachin was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, ten thousand capable men were carried off with him (including a young priest named Ezekiel). Jehoiachin himself was imprisoned in Babylon, where he lived out the rest of his life, eventually being given a large measure of liberty and privilege by Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Belshazzar (Evil-merodach). He was replaced on the throne of Judah by his uncle Mattaniah, the third son of Josiah to reign in Jerusalem.

Mattaniah was renamed Zedekiah ("the Lord is righteous") by Nebuchadnezzar and forced to swear an oath of loyalty in the Lord's name. Zedekiah was not recognized as king by the exiles, who continued to date events by the reign of the imprisoned Jehoiachin. In fact, the only ones who recognized Zedekiah were the leaders of the pro-Egyptian party in Jerusalem, made up of noblemen, false prophets, and many priests (these are the same men who consistently accused Jeremiah of treason when he advised submission to Babylon). When Nebuchadnezzar faced a revolt in his own army in 594, these men were sure the captivity of their countrymen was about to end. Against Jeremiah's advice, they turned to Egypt for help and rebelled against Babylon. Eventually (588), Nebuchadnezzar retaliated and besieged Jerusalem. After a two-year siege that brought horrible hardships to the inhabitants, the city fell in 586 BC. Tens of thousands were deported; Zedekiah was forced to witness the executions of his own sons, then had his eyes put out and was taken to Babylon. Nebuzaradan was given the responsibility of destroying the city, which he did with great thoroughness. Meanwhile, Nebuchadnezzar appointed the honorable Gedaliah (a friend of Jeremiah and thus pro-Babylonian) as governor of the new Babylonian province. Gedaliah, however, was murdered within months by a group of pro-Egyptian nobles who had avoided the siege by hiding in the wilderness.

AUTHORSHIP (Ezekiel 1:1-3)

The entire book of Ezekiel is written in the first person, and the coherence of the structure is such that few have denied either its unity or its authenticity. Exceptions do exist, of course - for some critical scholars, it would be considered un scholarly to admit that *anything* in the Bible was authentic. Of Ezekiel himself, however, we know relatively little. He was a young priest, born in 623 BC in Jerusalem and raised in the Temple culture. He was carried into exile by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC and lived with a community of Jewish captives in Tel Aviv (not the modern Israeli city), on the Kebar canal not far from the city of Babylon and the Euphrates River. He began his prophetic ministry at the age of thirty (the age at which priests could begin to serve in the Temple) in the fifth year of Jehoiakim's captivity (593 BC); thus God gives him a new ministry to replace the priestly task of which he had been deprived by the Captivity. The prophecy of Ezekiel contains more dated visions than any other prophetic work; the last date given is 571 BC (29:17), when Ezekiel would have been 52 years old.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the book is relatively simple. Chapters 1-24 speak of God's judgment against Israel and Judah, while chapters 25-32 give His judgment of the nations and chapters 33-48 speak of God's blessing and restoration of His people in fulfillment of His covenant with them. We will be looking at passages from each of these three major sections as we go through our study of the book.

MAJOR THEMES

The major divisions of the book bring out its major themes. In Ezekiel, we see the sins of His people, the righteous judgment that He pours out against them, and the sovereign mercy with which He restores them to their former glory. All of this is narrated in the context of the book's overriding theme, that of the glory of God. We see the glory of God pictured in the call of the prophet, we see it leaving the Temple and the city of Jerusalem as God's final judgment is being poured out, and we see it returning to the midst of His people in the glorious Temple vision with which the book ends. The prophecies of Ezekiel also emphasize to an unusual degree for an Old Testament book the concept of individual responsibility, both that of the prophet, who is called to serve as a watchman who warns the people of impending judgment, and that of the people, who will be destroyed or preserved according to their response to the warning that is given.

THE VISION OF THE GLORY OF GOD (Ezekiel 1:4-28)

The vision of Ezekiel 1 is a theophany, a visible appearance of God to man. Similar visions were given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), to Isaiah in the Temple (Isaiah 6), and to John on the island of Patmos (Revelation 4). Such visions are associated with prophetic calls or commissions and are intended to impress the chosen prophet with the holiness and majesty of God. In Ezekiel's case, he needed to understand God's holiness because of the judgment he was going to be called upon to proclaim, God's omnipotence in the face of the coming crushing defeat at the hands of Babylon and the destruction of the Holy City and its Temple, and God's omnipresence as an assurance that God was still with His people, even in exile. Since Ezekiel, like all those privileged to see theophanies, was seeking to describe the indescribable, we should not be surprised if his description draws on images that would have been familiar to him from his experience. Furthermore, we should not get bogged down in trying to explain the details of the vision, but concentrate on what is clear about it. Note the following:

Verse 4 - The vision begins with a fierce desert thunderstorm; whether the storm was real or merely the early stages of the vision cannot be known.

Verses 5-9,11 - Ezekiel first sees four living creatures (we find out in chapter 10 that these living creatures were cherubim - angels who guarded the throne of God). The angels appeared in human form and stood upright, but each had four faces, four wings, two hands, and feet like those of a calf. One faced in each direction. Two wings were used to cover themselves, while two were spread out, touching one another at the tips, as they supported the platform on which the throne of God stood (note the similarities and differences between this vision of the throne of God and those found in Isaiah and Revelation).

Verse 10 - Much has been made of the four faces (cf. the four creatures in Revelation 4). Were they simply Ezekiel's version of the composite creatures often pictured as guarding thrones of gods or kings (e.g., the Sphinx)? Do they represent the four elements, the four winds, the four seasons, the four world kingdoms seen by Daniel, or the four categories of beings created by God (man, domesticated animals, wild animals, birds)? One of the most common interpretations is that they represent the four Gospels. Interestingly, different Early Church commentators matched the faces to the Gospels in different ways. The one that became most popular, and the basis for artistic

representations of the Gospel writers for many centuries, was devised by Jerome, matching Matthew to the man, Mark to the lion, Luke to the ox, and John to the eagle (another attempted correspondence is based on the portrayals of Christ in the four Gospels, pairing Matthew with the lion because he pictures Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, Lion of the tribe of Judah, Mark with the ox because he pictures Jesus as the Servant, Luke with the man because Jesus so often refers to Himself as the Son of Man in Luke's Gospel, and John with the eagle because he portrays Jesus as the Son of God). No definitive interpretation is possible, though the picture here certainly contradicts the portrayal of cherubim as chubby little naked babies with wings so prevalent in the art of the Baroque period. Is this what the cherubim on top of the mercy seat over the Ark of the Covenant looked like?

Verses 12-14 - The chariot glowed with the fire of light and holiness and moved wherever the Spirit of God led it.

Verses 15-18 - The chariot moved on wheels within wheels (no, Ezekiel did not see an alien spaceship!), allowing it to move in any direction without the wheels having to turn.

Verses 19-21 - The chariot didn't need wheels to move because it could also fly.

Verses 22-25 - The wings of the cherubim supported a crystalline platform. When the platform moved, the wings of the cherubim made a mighty noise, and from the throne on top of the platform issued the voice of God.

Verses 26-28a - On top of the platform was a throne made of something like lapis lazuli, above which stood a burning and flaming figure like that of a man. As in the other visions, the description of God Himself is very limited indeed.

Verse 28b - Ezekiel's response is like that of the other prophets who saw such visions - he is humbled to the dust and falls on his face before the Almighty. In this posture of humility, he is prepared to hear what the Lord has to say to him.

Only when one experiences the holiness of God is one fully prepared to hear His voice. The more we forget who God really is, the more deaf we become to the words He brings to us. To what extent do our responses to God and His Word demonstrate what we really think of Him?

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL II

Ezekiel 2:1-3:15

Today's passage narrates Ezekiel's call to prophetic ministry. The prophetic call in Scripture typically contains certain standard elements - an encounter with God, a call to ministry, objections on the part of the prophet, God's reassurance and empowerment, and the basic content of the message to be delivered. All of these elements are found in this passage as God calls, prepares, and equips Ezekiel for the work He has for him to do.

GOD ADDRESSES THE MESSENGER (2:1-2)

Ezekiel had fallen prostrate before the vision of the throne of God, but God raises him up. Those who humble themselves before God will be lifted up, and those who have been chosen and cleansed by God (see Isaiah 6:6-7) are able to stand boldly in His presence. Note that the title "Son of Man" here simply means "human being" - Ezekiel is being reminded (as if he needed reminding!) that he, a mere human, stands in the presence of the Almighty God; Ezekiel uses the term to describe himself more than ninety times in the book. The phrase does not take on Messianic connotations until its use in Daniel 7:13-14. When Jesus uses the term to describe Himself in the Gospels, it carries both meanings.

RECIPIENTS OF THE MESSAGE (2:3-5)

This part of Ezekiel's commission is not in the least encouraging. He is told from the very beginning that the character of the people to whom he will be preaching is such that they are unlikely to listen to the message (cf. Isaiah 6:9-13, which is even worse, and Jeremiah 1:14-19). The picture of the Israelites in Ezekiel is unfailingly negative, both with regard to their character and their history. Yet it is this very people that God chooses to redeem. Note, too, the goal of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry - he is to speak in the name of the Lord so that the people will know that a prophet has been among them. Nothing at all is said about change or repentance.

ENCOURAGING THE MESSENGER (2:6-8)

God forestalls the usual objections by encouraging Ezekiel immediately in the face of this dismal picture. Ezekiel will face hardships. His prophetic ministry will be carried out in an environment that is like being surrounded by thorns and thistles and attacked by scorpions; the people's rejection of his message will sting like crazy. Yet Ezekiel must remain strong; he cannot stoop to the level of the people among whom he preaches. One might find it very easy in such an environment to adapt to the prevailing mood, but one who has seen the living God cannot do so. The fear of God must overcome the fear of man (cf. Jeremiah 1:17).

THE NATURE OF THE MESSAGE (2:9-10)

The scroll God gives to Ezekiel represents the message he is to preach. The scroll is somewhat unusual because it has writing on both sides; some have suggested that this indicates that Ezekiel was to be given much to say, or that no room was left for the prophet to add anything to God's words. In any case, the message is unremittingly negative - Ezekiel will be given the task of

prophesying the departure of God's presence from the Holy Land and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple within it. Indeed, this is the message of the first half of the book. Only after the destruction of Jerusalem takes place will Ezekiel have words of comfort and restoration to give to God's people.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE (3:1-3)

The basic idea of eating the scroll is that the prophet must internalize the message he is to speak. He is not merely a mouthpiece, reading words that are not his own, like some divinely-appointed press secretary, but must speak from his heart the words given him by God. The scroll tastes sweet to the prophet, not because of the words written on it, but because it is the Word of God (cf. Jeremiah 15:16; Psalm 19:10).

THE DIFFICULTY OF THE TASK (3:4-7)

This section of Ezekiel's commission contains an ironic twist. When God tells him that he is being sent to a people with whom he shares a common language, one would think that such common ground would pave the way for the reception of the message and make communication easier. The catch, however, is that Ezekiel would have found his task easier and the people more receptive had these common bonds *not* existed (cf. Jonah 3). Like Jesus, Ezekiel was to discover that a prophet is given honor everywhere but among his own countrymen. But Ezekiel must understand that the rejection he is to experience is not to be taken personally, because it is a rejection of God, not of the prophet.

Note that the "house of Israel" to whom Ezekiel is being sent consists of the citizens of Judah who are in exile in Babylon. No evidence exists that the prophet ever traveled elsewhere, though the words he spoke may have been communicated to those who still remained in Jerusalem. Though he preached of God's judgment and restoring mercy on Israel and Judah (and the pagan nations, for that matter), we need not assume that he ever addressed those peoples directly.

EQUIPPING THE MESSENGER (3:8-11)

One usually thinks of the preacher of the Gospel as needing a soft heart for the people to whom he speaks, but such tenderness must be accompanied by a certain measure of toughness as well. One who undertakes a task as difficult as that presented to Ezekiel must be thick-skinned, not susceptible to the taunts, barbs, and even physical dangers to which he is exposing himself. God thus promises to equip him by making him hard-headed, able to withstand the hardness of the people among whom he preaches. He is to speak the Word of God no matter what the response may be.

THE RESPONSE OF THE MESSENGER (3:12-15)

At this point the chariot-throne of God starts into motion again and leaves Ezekiel to be transported back to the Jewish settlement where he lives. He is now prepared to preach in the sense that he has been given the words he is to speak, but he is not yet prepared emotionally for the magnitude of the task. He is bitter and angry, but about what? Is he angry with the Lord for giving him such a hard and thankless task? Nowhere in Ezekiel do we find the psychological struggles

reflected so often in Jeremiah; instead, he seems more than willing to communicate the message he has been given. More likely, we should understand his anger and bitterness as being directed against the people because of their rebelliousness against God. The wrath here is the same wrath that Jesus felt while cleansing the Temple, a jealousy for the glory of God that he had just been privileged to witness. When he gets back home, he sits in silence for seven days, overwhelmed by the experience and the difficulty of the task to which he has been called. The seven days signify the time of mourning for one who has died (cf. Genesis 50:10; Numbers 19:11; Job 2:13), but also the time of purification required for one entering into the priesthood (Leviticus 8:33). Ezekiel the priest was preparing himself to be God's prophet, but was also mourning the death and destruction he was being called upon to prophesy.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL III

Ezekiel 4-5

One of the things that sets the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel apart is the number of symbolic actions he is called on to perform. Today we will look at four of those symbolic actions, all of which are designed to illustrate his prophecies against the city of Jerusalem and foretell its destruction.

THE SIEGE OF THE CITY (4:1-3)

After seven days of silence on the part of Ezekiel, the captives in Tel Aviv must have been expecting something unusual to happen. What occurred was a piece of street theater that lasted for over a year.

4:1-2 - Ezekiel began by making a model of the city of Jerusalem, inscribing a diagram of the city on a clay tablet and surrounding it with miniature siege works. The siege techniques described were common in the Ancient Near East. One of the best surviving examples is the remains of the siege of Masada conducted by the Roman army in 73 AD.

4:3 - The significance of the iron pan is disputed among commentators. The pan was used for cooking, and was thus a common implement. Did it represent the unbreakable nature of the siege? More likely it indicated the implacability of God's determination to bring destruction on the inhabitants of Jerusalem. There would be no help from the Lord, who was the real agent of the siege. Note that this interpretation places Ezekiel, who was to besiege the city, in the role of Yahweh, which is an appropriate role for God's prophet.

THE DURATION OF THE PUNISHMENT (4:4-8)

The basic idea here is clear, but the numbers are sufficiently confusing that no certain interpretation can be given. Are the two numbers consecutive or concurrent? Do the 390 years represent the years since the original rebellion of the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam? Do the forty years represent the duration of the Babylonian Captivity of the Southern Kingdom? Note that the numbers don't work very well in either of these interpretations. Another suggestion is that the total of 430 years represents the time from the beginning of the Babylonian Captivity to the Maccabean Revolt (the numbers work out better here, but the division into Israel and Judah then makes no sense). Perhaps the 430 years are intended to parallel the time of captivity in Egypt? In short, no one really knows what the numbers indicate.

4:4-5 - Ezekiel was to lie on his left side (assuming his head was pointed westward toward Jerusalem, this would leave him facing north) for 390 days to symbolize the years of Israel's sin (or, alternatively, the years of punishment meted out against the Northern Kingdom of Israel).

4:6 - He then was to lie for forty days on his right side, facing south, picturing the sin and/or judgment against the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

4:7 - During this time he was to prophecy against the city of Jerusalem. He is thus illustrating both the siege and God's punishment in association with the disobedience of the people.

4:8 - While all this was going on, he was to be bound with ropes, showing the helplessness of the people against the siege and against God's judgment. Given the fact that he was also told to cook his food and do a demonstration with his hair, one may conclude that Ezekiel's symbolic actions were not being performed twenty-four hours per day, but during a designated period each day.

THE CONDITIONS UNDER THE SIEGE (4:9-17)

The descriptions of Ezekiel's diet during the time of his demonstration relate both to the conditions in Jerusalem during the siege and the conditions faced by the people while in exile.

4:9-11 - Some of the grains are common for baking bread, while others are more often used for soup - the idea is that the people in Jerusalem would have to scrape together whatever they could find in order to feed themselves.

4:10-11 - This is a starvation diet. Ezekiel only ate eight ounces of bread and drank a pint of water each day.

4:12-15 - The food was to be baked into cakes of bread and cooked over a dung fire. God tells Ezekiel to use human excrement to show the defiled food the captives would have to eat (after all, in captivity they could not be certain that the food they purchased had been prepared according to the dietary laws), but when he balks at using unclean means of food preparation, God mercifully allows him to use cow dung instead (contra. Acts 10:13-15), which was a common form of fuel.

4:16-17 - Here we see that the prophet's food is intended to demonstrate the diet in Jerusalem under siege conditions as well as the diet forced on those in captivity. The result, which surely showed on Ezekiel's countenance and in his appearance after more than a year, was that the people would waste away to nothing but skin and bones.

THE FATE OF THE PEOPLE (5:1-4)

The fourth symbolic action involved Ezekiel's hair. The prophet was to shave his head and beard with a sharp blade, which was a sign of mourning or humiliation. He then carefully weighed the hair and divided it into thirds. One-third of the hair was to be burned inside the model city to depict those who died inside during the siege. One-third was to be cut into tiny pieces outside the city, representing those who would die by the sword when the siege was broken. The final third was to be scattered to the winds, representing those who were sent into exile. Even among these, some would die by fire and the sword, leaving only a bare remnant to be protected by being tucked into a fold of Ezekiel's garment (remember, the prophet was playing the role of Yahweh as well as that of the people in this rather long performance).

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR GOD'S JUDGMENT (5:5-17)

God now gives His justification for visiting these horrors upon His chosen people.

5:5-6 - Jerusalem is not only at the center of the siege with enemies all around her, but is also at the center of God's favor and His plan for mankind. When a nation given such privileges rebels against

the very Giver of those privileges, severe punishment must result. [NOTE: The idea that Jerusalem is the center of the earth carried over into medieval cartography and even appears in the last poem written by seventeenth-century English poet John Donne - see *Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness.*]

5:7 - Jerusalem's disobedience has been so bad that they have been worse than the pagan nations around them, not even living up to the minimal moral standards by which the heathen conduct their affairs.

5:8-9 - The people should have no illusions as to the source of the calamity that is to fall upon them. They are being destroyed, not by the Babylonians, but by their covenant-keeping God. Even as Ezekiel is being publicly humiliated and starved half to death, so the people of God will suffer in full view of all those who have mocked their God.

5:10 - Cannibalism was often the extreme to which people in a besieged city were reduced.

5:11-12 - The chief cause of this public humiliation is idolatry, and in response to this a jealous God will show no pity.

5:13 - When God has exacted the full measure of suffering from His wayward people, they will know that He is the Lord. After all, a faithful, covenant-keeping God can neither withhold blessings nor refrain from punishing disobedience.

5:14-15 - The punishment of Jerusalem will also be a lesson to the surrounding nations concerning the character of God. If He would do such a thing to His own people, what would He do to the heathen nations that refuse to acknowledge Him at all?

5:16-17 - The judgments of famine, wild beasts, plague, and bloodshed are in fulfillment of the covenant God made with His people; these were the things God promised would happen if they disobeyed Him. Note also the similarity to the judgments of Revelation 6:1-8.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL IV

Ezekiel 9-10

Chapters 8-11 of the book of Ezekiel involve an extended vision in which the prophet is transported to Jerusalem to see the conditions there. In chapter 8, he sees the wickedness done by the people and their leaders in secret, as they worship idols and think that God does not see them. Chapter 11 tells of God's special judgment against the leaders who lead the people astray and rule for their own self-aggrandizement. Today, we will concentrate our attention on chapters 9-10, which depict the removal of God's presence from His Temple and Holy City.

ANGELS EXECUTING GOD'S JUDGMENT (Ezekiel 9)

In this segment of the vision, God orders angels to execute His judgment against Jerusalem and its inhabitants. The parallels with the Exodus account are impossible to miss.

9:1-2 - Ezekiel is by this time in the inner court of the Temple. The Lord, who is his guide throughout the vision (8:1-5), summons seven angels - six executioners bearing deadly weapons and a scribe carrying the tools of his trade.

9:3 - Here we find the first step in the departure of the presence of God from among His people. The Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies was the throne of God in the Temple, and here we see God's glory moving from that place to the threshold.

9:4 - God's first command is given to the angelic scribe, who is told to put a protective mark on all the righteous in Jerusalem. Several points should be noted here. First of all, the mark, like the blood on the doorposts of the houses in Egypt, protected the bearer from the angels bringing death and destruction. Secondly, the mark mentioned here is the Taw, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which was commonly used as a signature on documents or to mark annotations on manuscripts (like an asterisk today). Christian commentators have been quick to note that, like the blood on the doorposts and lintel, the Taw was cruciform - a foreshadowing, perhaps, of the shed blood of Christ as the only real protection from death. Thirdly, those who receive the mark are not those who perform designated rituals, but those who have hearts for God - they grieve over the sin of Jerusalem and the abominations being performed in the Temple. [NOTE: This incident also stands in stark contrast to the description in Revelation 13:16-17, where those who do not bear the mark of the Beast are subject to destruction.]

9:5-7 - God then orders the destroying angels to execute all who do not bear the protective mark, with no consideration being given to age or gender. As in Egypt, God separates the righteous from the unrighteous, sparing those who truly belonged to Him. Appropriately enough, judgment begins in the Temple itself (cf. I Peter 4:17) with the destruction of the elders who were practicing idolatry and leading the people to do the same (8:9-12). Despite the fact that this bloodshed defiled the Temple, God orders it done; after all, the Temple had long been defiled by the idolatry of the people. Passing beyond the Temple, the angels then go out into the city at large to continue their rampage.

9:8-11 - Ezekiel at this point pleads with God to refrain from destroying His people altogether. He may have been given a forehead of stone (2:9), but he still had a soft heart, and like Moses in the

wilderness and Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he pleads with God to show mercy. The time for mercy has passed, however (though it will be time for mercy in the future), and God insists that judgment be carried out with no pity. The angelic scribe then returns to report that he has carried out the Lord's command.

GOD'S GLORY DEPARTS FROM THE TEMPLE (Ezekiel 10)

The vision of chapters 1-3 returns, and Ezekiel witnesses the departure of God's presence.

10:1-2 - The angelic scribe is now ordered to take burning coals from the base of the chariot-throne of the Lord. Hot coals could be used for purification (cf. Isaiah 6:6-7) or for judgment. In this case, Jerusalem was to be treated like Sodom and Gomorrah; after its people had been killed or taken into captivity, the city was to be burned to the ground.

10:3-5 - The four living creatures in the vision here are identified as cherubim - angels who guard and protect. Cherubim appear in the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the Tree of Life after Adam and Eve are cast out and also sit atop the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant - a function very similar to what they fulfill in Ezekiel's vision.

10:6-8 - An interesting little explanatory note is given here. The angelic scribe was told to take hot coals from the chariot, but these coals are handed to him by one of the cherubim, which, as explained in the original description of the vision, had hands.

10:9-17 - This description of the chariot-throne is virtually identical to that found in chapter 1. The only significant difference is that the face of an ox is replaced by the face of a cherub. Some commentators have suggested a scribal error here, while others have noted that depictions of cherubim in the ancient world pictured composite figures with parts from various animals along with human features. One Jewish rabbi postulated that Ezekiel didn't like the ox face, so God changed it into a cherub in response to his prayer!

10:18-22 - The chariot-throne now moves from the threshold of the Temple (the entrance to the Holy Place) to the gate of the Temple enclosure. Eventually God's glory leaves the city altogether, leaving it to its fate, with the implication that God will then go to be with His people in exile (11:22-24). God had written Ichabod - the glory has departed - over His Holy City and the Temple that marked His presence among His people (cf. I Samuel 4:21-22). The glory did not depart forever, however; God fully intended to redeem and restore His wayward people.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL V

Ezekiel 12

Ezekiel's earlier symbolic actions had spoken of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and dispersion and death among the people. He is now called upon to perform two more symbolic actions, these specifically directed toward the coming exile into which those who survive the destruction of Jerusalem will be taken.

THE FIRST SIGN - GOING INTO EXILE (verses 1-7)

In the same way that Ezekiel's first vision of God was followed by a series of symbolic actions and a message to the people addressing the content of the vision, so we find with the second one.

Verses 1-2 - The first series of signs and messages apparently hadn't made a dent in the consciousness of the exiles, so it was now time to try again.

Verses 3-4 - Though God had already told Ezekiel that the people would be unresponsive to his message, the hope remains that a few will listen. By this time, after more than a year of demonstrations, Ezekiel had no doubt become a source of popular street theater, and gathering a crowd should have been no challenge at all. The newest symbolic action involves dramatizing going into exile. Ezekiel's compatriots should have recognized the point easily, since all had experienced it. He was to gather his belongings and put them in a sack as if preparing for a journey. This was to be done in the view of all the people.

Verses 5-7 - After his belongings had been packed up, Ezekiel was to wait until evening, dig a hole in the wall of his house (with houses of sun-baked brick, this would have been possible, though by no means easy), and sneak out through the wall under cover of darkness, covering his face as he went.

EXPLAINING THE FIRST SIGN (verses 8-16)

Verses 8-9 - A blind and deaf people need explanations, so God tells the prophet to provide them the next morning.

Verses 10-11 - The significance of this sign was for the ruling king, Zedekiah (called "the prince" here because he was not the rightful king, that title belonging to Jehoiachin, who was living under house arrest in Babylon), and the people who remained in Jerusalem. The meaning is a simple one - those who remain will follow their brothers into exile. For the captives who were watching Ezekiel's demonstration, there could be no hope for a quick end to their ordeal.

Verses 12-14 - This portion of the prophecy applies specifically to Zedekiah, who attempted to flee with his officers from the besieged city of Jerusalem through a hole in the wall in the middle of the night (II Kings 25:4-7). They were soon caught by the Babylonian army. Most of the officers were killed, though some were scattered and survived, while Zedekiah was forced to witness the execution of his sons and his nobles before having his own eyes put out. He was then led, a pathetic blind man,

into captivity in Babylon. Through Ezekiel, God makes it obvious to the people that these events were brought about by God Himself, who would set the snare into which the usurper was to fall.

Verses 15-16 - God even gives His reason for sparing a few members of Zedekiah's staff and army. They are permitted to survive so they can spread the word wherever they go in exile that the destruction of Jerusalem had not occurred because God was weak or didn't care about His people, but was actually brought about by Him because of their idolatry and disobedience.

THE SECOND SIGN - EATING IN FEAR (verses 17-18)

The second sign is a simple one. Ezekiel, while eating the starvation rations that had been appointed to him as a sign of conditions in Judah, is to tremble and look fearful, always looking over his shoulder as he takes his meals.

EXPLAINING THE SECOND SIGN (verses 19-20)

He is here picturing the plight of those who remain after the Babylonians have wreaked their destruction on the land. While anyone of value either died or was taken into exile, some of the peasant population remained. Even for them, life was to be horrible. The land was to be stripped bare, so they had little to eat and lived in constant fear of a return by the Babylonians. They, too, will have reason to know that the Lord is God.

THE FIRST EXCUSE - PROPHECIES ARE UNRELIABLE (verses 21-25)

Chapters 12-19 of Ezekiel contain the prophet's answers to arguments that the people proposed against his prophecies of judgment. Many of these are similar to the ones heard by Jeremiah as he lived through the events described by Ezekiel inside the besieged city of Jerusalem. The first two of these arguments are found at the end of the present chapter.

The first argument to which God responds through the mouth of Ezekiel is that prophecies may be safely ignored because they never come to pass anyway. The Israelites had heard prophecies of doom from the lips of many of God's spokesmen for more than a century, and Jerusalem was still standing. Furthermore, men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel represented but a few voices among many, most of them self-aggrandizing false prophets who spoke messages of comfort and assurance (cf. 13:10). With so many contradictory voices, people had learned to ignore them. After all, how could one sort out the true from the false, especially when the criteria of Deuteronomy 13 and 18 could not be effectively applied? God's answer is a simple one - the time of fulfillment has come. Do not think, because God delays His judgment as an act of mercy, that He will refrain forever.

THE SECOND EXCUSE - PROPHECIES ARE REMOTE (verses 26-28)

The second excuse is that, even if Ezekiel's message is a true one, it will not be fulfilled for many years, so it is not really relevant to the listeners. God's answer is the same - the time of delay is over and fulfillment of the predicted judgment is imminent.

Note that these excuses are equally relevant to the unfulfilled prophecy that remains before us in the present day. When Christians speak of the Second Coming of Christ, do we not hear the same excuses? Date-setters in the past have given prophecy a bad name, so many scoff at the very idea of predictive prophecy. Others consider such thought irrelevant even if they believe them in theory. Peter warns against such presumption in II Peter 3:3-13.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL VI

Ezekiel 16

Having examined a number of symbolic actions performed by Ezekiel in the course of his prophetic ministry, we now look at another form of communication - the allegory. Ezekiel 16 contains an extended allegory outlining the history of God's relationship with His people. While it focuses its attention on Judah's unfaithfulness, it begins and ends with reminders of the faithfulness and goodness of God. The allegory has much in common with the symbolic action of Hosea in Hosea 1-3 in that the relationship between God and His people is pictured in terms of the covenant of marriage.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD (verses 1-5)

The most important thing to notice as Ezekiel begins his allegory is that it is addressed specifically to the city of Jerusalem. Though it has implications for the nation as a whole, the capital city, the symbol of God's presence among His people, is the focal point of the story.

Verses 1-2 - The presentation problem here is that God's people simply did not recognize the extent of their wickedness. Their excuse seems to have been, "Sure, we've been bad, but nowhere near as bad as the nations around us." The allegory is intended to demonstrate the falsity of this statement.

Verse 3 - Jerusalem was originally a pagan city, successively controlled by Hittites and Amorites. At the time of the Conquest it was a Jebusite town and a member of the Amorite League.

Verses 4-5 - These actions were typically performed by a midwife. In the case of Jerusalem, however, she had no midwife to care for her, but instead was exposed as an unwanted child, left in the field to die. The significance of the statement in the history of Jerusalem is that she was not subdued during the Conquest, but was ignored and left in her idolatry.

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE (verses 6-14)

Like a good romance, Ezekiel's allegory is a rags-to-riches tale. The poor waif left to die is adopted and eventually married by a great lord. Sadly, this romance is not a happy story, nor does it end well.

Verses 6-7 - The outcast city was rescued by David when he conquered it from the Jebusites and made it his capital (II Samuel 5:6-10). In a sense, the city reached puberty during the early years of David's reign.

Verse 8 - The marriage here is symbolic of the entrance of God's presence into the city when David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6). Note the image of the spreading of the man's garment as indicative of claiming a bride and offering protection (cf. Ruth 3:9). The covenant mentioned here is the covenant with David, in which God promised to build from him an everlasting kingdom.

Verses 9-14 - The gifts described here were the provisions that a husband could be expected to shower on a new bride. Symbolically, they speak of the United Monarchy period - the reigns of David and Solomon, during which Jerusalem reached the height of its splendor, power, and influence.

FALL INTO PROSTITUTION (verses 15-34)

Pride goes before a fall, and Jerusalem is pictured as valuing the Lord's gifts more than she valued the Giver. She considered them hers by right, and began using them as she saw fit rather than gratefully acknowledging the source of all the good things she possessed.

Verse 15 - The turning point was the latter part of Solomon's reign. Israel was the prominent power in the region, and Solomon formed marital alliances and incorporated the worship of pagan gods to satisfy his many wives (I Kings 11:1-13).

Verses 16-19 - God's good gifts were used in the worship of pagan deities. The reference to garments in verse 16 has a double meaning, signifying both the rich cloths that prostitutes used to adorn their beds and the gaudy tents set up for the worship of pagan gods on the high places.

Verses 20-22 - The height of depravity came with the practice of human sacrifice, common in the pagan world and introduced into Israelite worship by Ahaz (II Kings 16:3) and Manasseh (II Kings 21:6).

Verses 23-25 - Not only was the worship in the Temple prostituted, but shrines were erected throughout the city for the use of the common people. The leaders are most culpable, but the people cannot claim innocence either.

Verses 26-29 - Here Judah's idolatry is associated with political alliances. Throughout the Divided Monarchy period, Judah had dallied with the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. Such alliances required the acceptance of the gods of the dominant nation by its political subordinates. Jerusalem's behavior was so blatant that even the Philistines, the traditional enemy in the time of David, marveled at such excesses.

Verses 30-34 - Here the allegory breaks down. After all, prostitutes are paid for their services, but Judah sought the favors of the nations around her, in effect paying them for the privilege of being debauched. Jerusalem had thus become even lower than a prostitute.

JUDGMENT AND DESTRUCTION (verses 35-43)

The covenant curses of Deuteronomy are here pronounced against a disobedient city and nation.

Verses 35-36 - The transgressions have already been enumerated in the previous verses.

Verse 37 - The nations with whom Jerusalem fornicated will now become the agents of God's punishment against her.

Verses 38-40 - The impure woman was to be stripped, stoned, and burned. The nations whose gods Judah had worshiped would be the ones who would seize her goods, destroy her people, and burn her city; if not actual participants, they would watch in horror as God brought judgment on His own.

Verses 41-43 - The result would be that idolatry would come to an end. This did not occur simply because of the destruction of the city and the end of the nation. When Israel returned from the captivity in Babylon, they struggled with many sins, but idolatry was not one of them.

EXTENT OF CORRUPTION (verses 44-58)

In order to cement the argument that Judah did indeed deserve such harsh treatment, Ezekiel now compares them to those nations to whom they considered themselves superior despite their sin.

Verses 44-45 - The story of the origin of Jerusalem is now being turned in a slightly different direction. Jerusalem was not the only city that came from Canaanite beginnings.

Verse 46 - Jerusalem is now pictured as having two sisters, the larger and more powerful Samaria (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) to the north and the smaller, yet notorious, city of Sodom in the south.

Verses 47-48 - Ezekiel here undermines the argument that Judah may have been bad, but not *that* bad. Everyone in Jerusalem knew of the wickedness of the Northern Kingdom for which God had destroyed them over two centuries before, and the wickedness of Sodom was proverbial. Yet God here clearly states that Judah was worse than either. Why could such a thing be said? Part of the reason has to do with the rejection of clear light; neither Samaria nor Sodom enjoyed the privileges enjoyed by Judah, yet the Southern Kingdom actively sought what her sisters fell into by nature. And who would really argue that the perversions under Manasseh were really less vile than those of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Verse 49-50 - The treatment of Sodom's sins here is instructive. Materialism is seen as the root of the perversions for which she was eventually destroyed. A society with too much wealth and too much leisure time is vulnerable to excesses, as modern American society clearly demonstrates. Note also that verse 49 is used by apologists for homosexuality to argue that Sodom was not punished for homosexual behavior, but for lack of concern for the poor. Ezekiel does not present an either/or situation here; the perversions for which Sodom was destroyed (verse 50) were the result of a materialistic outlook on life.

Verse 51 - Instead of Jerusalem justifying herself by comparison with Samaria, Ezekiel argues that Jerusalem's behavior makes Samaria look good!

Verse 52 - Ezekiel, in essence, is saying that if God did not destroy Jerusalem, He would owe Sodom and Gomorrah an apology (Billy Graham's wife Ruth, when reading the first draft of one of his books where he addressed the immorality of American society, is said to have remarked, "If God doesn't punish America, He'll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah" - an allusion to this passage).

Verse 53-58 - Though God promises restoration, not only to Jerusalem but also to the surrounding peoples, she will have to experience the humiliation due to her because of her infidelities first. In fact, even her restoration will provide an opportunity for shame as she looks back on the evils she has committed.

ULTIMATE RESTORATION (verses 59-63)

The covenant cuts two ways. Jerusalem has been unfaithful and must be punished, but God is faithful and will redeem and restore His people.

Verses 59-60 - The covenant curses must be carried out, but God will restore Jerusalem by issuing a new covenant, an everlasting one (cf. Jeremiah 33).

Verses 61-62 - Jerusalem will have a place of prominence above that of her sisters.

Verse 63 - This can only be accomplished if atonement is made for the sins of the people, and we know that such a thing could only be accomplished by God Himself, in the person of His Son.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL VII

Ezekiel 24

Ezekiel 24 is the last of Ezekiel's prophecies against the people of God. In the chapters that follow, he turns to the surrounding nations and God's judgment against them. This week we will consider two more symbolic actions associated with the fall of Jerusalem. One of them is perhaps the most difficult thing a prophet of God was ever asked to do.

THE COOKING POT (verses 1-14)

Ezekiel had for years now been predicting the fall of Jerusalem. Now the event itself occurs, and Ezekiel's actions communicate the totality of God's judgment against His people and His holy city.

Verses 1-2 - The date of this prophecy is the very day on which the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar began, in January of 588 BC.

Verses 3-5 - These verses constitute a song, and may even have been a folk song familiar to the captives. The picture is one of boiling meat in a cauldron. Such utensils were usually ceramic, but the one here appears to have been of copper (verse 11). Whether Ezekiel simply sang the song as a parable for the people (verse 3) or actually carried out its words as a symbolic action is unclear, though the interpretation given in the verses that follow favors the latter.

Verse 6 - The pot is Jerusalem and the meat is its people. The pot is rusty with deposits that cannot be scrubbed away, and the meat will be taken out piece by piece, indicating God's sovereign disposal of the city's inhabitants.

Verses 7-8 - Blood that was poured out in a sacrifice or when an animal was being slain was to be covered with earth to avoid impurity. Blood that was left uncovered cried out for vengeance (cf. Genesis 4:10). The blood shed by the people of Jerusalem included the sacrifices they offered to idols, even including the children who were offered to pagan gods. Other prophets speak of the bloodshed associated with the injustice and oppression of the poor. This blood will not be covered until God Himself has avenged it.

Verses 9-12 - Here Ezekiel pictures the thoroughness of God's judgment. The fire is made hot by heaping the wood high. After the meat is removed, the bones are cooked down to carbon so the residue can easily be scattered. But God is not yet finished. The now-empty pot is placed back in the fire and is heated until it is red hot, but even this does not get rid of its impurities; it must be melted down completely. The city of Jerusalem must therefore be completely destroyed along with its people.

Verse 13 - The people of Judah have not responded to earlier efforts on the part of God to cleanse them. He has sent prophet after prophet, and their words have been ignored. He has brought upon them two waves of captivity, and they still sought their own solutions and put hope in other nations rather than in the Lord. Now cleansing will only come by means of utter destruction.

Verse 14 - God has often relented in the past in the face of repentance, but there will be no turning back this time. Ezekiel's words are not a plea for repentance, but a declaration of inevitable judgment.

EZEKIEL'S WIFE (verses 15-27)

Prophets were often asked by God to suffer for the sake of their ministries. Ezekiel himself had been required to lie on his side in the street for over a year, Jeremiah had been imprisoned, and Isaiah had walked the streets naked. But such suffering pales beside having to see someone you love suffer and being able to do nothing about it.

Verses 15-16a - Ezekiel is told by God that his wife is going to die suddenly and without any normal signs of illness. The closeness of the prophet and his wife is shown by the language used here - "the delight of your eyes."

Verses 16b-17 - The difficulty of what Ezekiel is told to do is compounded by the order not to mourn in any way. He must keep his feelings to himself and not do any of the customary things mourners did in that culture - loud moaning, shedding of turban and sandals, the covering of the face, and fasting.

Verse 18 - That morning Ezekiel speaks to the people as usual (how hard this must have been!), and that night Ezekiel's wife dies; the prophet quietly does what God tells him to do.

Verse 19 - The people's response is interesting. Should someone act the way Ezekiel acted today, he would be accused of being callous and unfeeling. But the people are so accustomed to God speaking through Ezekiel's actions that they immediately assume that this tragedy and its aftermath, too, contain a message for them. On the other hand, they don't exactly earn high marks on the sensitivity scale. Instead of seeking to comfort the prophet, they immediately think of themselves.

Verses 20-21 - Ezekiel's wife, the person he loves best in the whole world, here serves as a twofold symbol. She represents both the Temple, which is to be destroyed, and the sons and daughters of Ezekiel's fellow captives who remain in Jerusalem, who are to be slaughtered. The captives, too, will lose what is most precious to them. Remember that the existence of the Temple had been one of the main arguments used by the false prophets when they predicted that God would never let Jerusalem fall.

Verses 22-23 - When word comes of the destruction of the city and the Temple, the people will respond as Ezekiel has done - no outward mourning, but inward grief beyond description. Why will they not mourn? Is this simply because God commands them not to? Unlikely, since they have done little else that God commanded. Is it because they are so cold and hard that the destruction of the city and Temple matters little to them? Again, this is doubtful. Most likely the people's response is because they are numbed by the long-anticipated fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. They simply have no tears left when they receive word of the full consequences of their sins.

Verse 24 - Ezekiel again is a sign to the people. As predicted in God's original call, the people will now be convinced that the Lord is God.

Verses 25-26 - Ezekiel's message would be confirmed by the arrival of a fugitive from Jerusalem who would bring word of the fall of the city.

Verse 27 - Ezekiel had, since the beginning of his ministry, only been able to speak selectively (cf. 3:25-27). Now, when the great burden of his message comes to pass, his tongue will be loosed and he will be able to interact with people normally rather than speaking only when God gave him a prophetic message. Not only that, but his words will now be a message of hope and restoration rather than one of judgment.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL VIII

Ezekiel 28:1-19

Ezekiel 25-32 contains prophecies against the nations. We will look at one of those prophecies before moving on in our remaining time to the prophecies of restoration and blessing directed toward Israel. This particular prophecy is directed against the king of Tyre, and is of interest primarily because of the frequent connection commentators make between this chapter and the fall of Satan (cf. Isaiah's prophecy against Babylon in Isaiah 14).

THE PROPHECY AGAINST TYRE - THE CONTEXT

Today's passage is part of a larger prophecy against the city of Tyre and its environs. Tyre was a prosperous maritime city on the northeastern shore of the Mediterranean. Hiram, the king of Tyre in David's day, had been a major ally and supplier of materials for the Temple and David's other building projects. The city was known for its shipbuilding, and its trading empire reached from the coast of Spain to eastern Asia Minor and southward to northern Africa.

Ezekiel 26 contains a prophecy against the city, singling out its pride and materialism as well as its desire to profit from the coming destruction of Jerusalem by gaining greater access to the trade routes that the kings of Judah had controlled. The city of Tyre, in fact, had little chance to benefit from the destruction of Jerusalem, since Nebuchadnezzar next turned his armies against them. After a thirteen-year siege (586-573), the city fell, but not for the last time. After each conquest, Tyre would rise up and assert its independence when the conqueror weakened. It was taken again by the Persians in 525 and thoroughly destroyed by Alexander the Great, who built a causeway out to the island fortress and demolished it so that the island was nothing more than bare rock. The city was rebuilt, and later subdued by the Seleucids, the Romans, and finally the Saracens (fifteenth century), after which Tyre never again rose to prominence.

Ezekiel 27 contains a lament for the city of Tyre. The poem uses the image of Tyre as a great trading ship - certainly an appropriate metaphor for a maritime empire. The descriptions of the ship as being built from the best materials and manned by the most skilled sailors from all over the known world fit the kingdom as it existed in Ezekiel's day. When the ship sinks to the bottom of the sea, all the other nations mourn because of the wealth Tyre brought to them through its trade and because they fear that the same fate awaits them, as in fact it did before the juggernaut of Nebuchadnezzar's army.

THE PROPHECY AGAINST THE KING OF TYRE (verses 1-10)

In the same way that chapters 26 and 27 contain a prophecy against the city and a lament bewailing its fall, so chapter 28 contains a prophecy against its king and a lament for his destruction.

Verses 1-2 - After the usual introduction associated with a prophetic deliverance, we are told the reason for the king of Tyre's judgment by God. The major reason is pride, associated with his economic power and the wisdom he displayed in building his trading empire. Kings in the ancient world often identified themselves with patron deities, and the king of Tyre appears to have claimed to be an incarnation of the god Melkart, the patron deity of Tyre.

Verse 3 - Daniel is also mentioned in Ezekiel 14:14, 20. The spelling here is slightly different from that used in the book of Daniel, so scholars are uncertain whether or not the same person is being cited. Certainly Ezekiel was aware of Daniel, who by this time had been in Babylon for almost twenty years and had risen to a position of prominence where he was noted for his wisdom. The connection with Job and Noah in chapter 14 has led some to suspect that the reference is to some unknown wise man of the distant past, though Daniel's reputation for wisdom certainly would make a reference to him appropriate here; after all, he had prophesied to Nebuchadnezzar of the great kingdom he was to build, the building of which included the conquest and destruction of Tyre.

Verses 4-5 - Pride here is associated with material wealth and the cleverness displayed in building the city's great trading empire.

Verses 6-10 - The consequence of the king's pride will be the loss of his empire accompanied by his ignominious death. The Babylonians will prove that he is a man, and not a god, and his kingdom will be conquered.

THE LAMENT FOR THE KING OF TYRE (verses 11-19)

This is a difficult passage, filled with unusual Hebrew words of uncertain origin and meaning and using mixed imagery that has confused commentators for centuries. The lament here is not one of genuine mourning, but a satiric mockery of the pretensions to deity of a mere human being.

Verses 11-15 - These verses describe the original state of the king of Tyre. Note the following:

- Verses 12-13 - These verses have caused many to see in the king of Tyre a type of Satan, and they have proposed that through his human manifestation, Ezekiel is giving us an insight into the fall of Lucifer (cf. the description of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14). Certainly Satan was at one time perfect, and he was clearly in the Garden of Eden, though this only occurred after his fall. The precious stones listed are problematic, and not only because some of the words are difficult to identify. Satan certainly was not clothed in precious stones in Eden, though some have argued that the skin of the serpent shone like precious stones, contributing to Eve's fascination with the beast.

An alternative explanation is that the paradise being described is not actually Eden, nor is the god being described the Lord. Instead, some commentators see this as a continuation of the description of the pretensions to deity of the king of Tyre, so that he passed himself off as perfectly wise as the incarnation of Melkart, and ensconced himself in the beautiful gardens surrounding the temple to Melkart in Tyre. Certainly wealthy monarchs of that day commonly wore garments inlaid with precious stones, as archaeological evidence from the period indicates.

- Verses 14-15 - The analogy with Satan here becomes problematic, since Satan is never described as a cherub, and certainly was not one of the cherubim left to guard the way to the Tree of Life in Eden. The holy mount of God is usually understood to mean Jerusalem, with which Satan had no connection, nor can one find in Scripture any association between Satan and fiery stones. Verse 15, on the other hand, can easily be imagined to speak of Satan, his original perfection and eventual fall.

References to the king of Tyre would render the verses very differently. We have already seen that cherub-like figures were often set up as guardians of pagan temples and gods. The king may have presented himself to the people as the living guardian of the temple of Melkart, and thus a “cherub” in that sense. Did he visit Jerusalem after its fall to seek plunder, when the stones were still hot from Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of the city? Verse 15 would then be reduced to a statement that Ethbaal III had been a good king until his pride got the better of him.

Verses 16-19 - These verses describe the judgment against the king of Tyre, and we face the same dilemmas:

- Verses 16-17 - Is the king of Tyre, with his vast trading empire, being cast out of Jerusalem without the plunder he sought and destroyed by the might of Babylon, or is this Satan being cast out of heaven and away from the presence of God?
- Verses 18-19 - The imagery now switches from king to city, and we find Tyre being destroyed by fire from within its gates. Note that this section can in no way be connected to Satan, even in an eschatological context.

What are we then to conclude about this confusing passage? Certainly the direct reference is to the king of Tyre who ruled in Ezekiel’s day. God’s judgment against him is being further justified by drawing on a variety of images, including that of Satan. We should also note that people in Old Testament times had very little knowledge of Satan (he is never mentioned in Genesis 3), and therefore could not have drawn on the more extensive imagery and information provided in the New Testament concerning him. We should therefore not look to this passage for insight into Satan and his fall, as if God were somehow giving us knowledge of that event before the dawn of time of which the rest of the Bible says little. Instead, we should recognize that the pride that brought down the mighty king of Tyre is the same pride that Satan possessed and the same pride with which he seeks to bring down people today, who are subject to the same temptations that beset the king of Tyre.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL IX

Ezekiel 33

The words of the book of Ezekiel are often repetitive, as the prophet is asked to repeat the same message often to a people hard of hearing. Today we see the repetition of a message to the prophet himself. He had already been told by the Lord that he was to be a watchman over the house of Israel in Ezekiel 3:16-21. In today's passage, God repeats the same charge and expands on its significance.

THE TASK OF THE WATCHMAN (verses 1-6)

A watchman served as the early warning system against attack for a walled city. He stood on the highest point of the wall and kept watch, warning of an approaching army so that those working in the fields during the day could come inside the city for safety, or so that those who were sleeping at night could get up to defend the fortifications.

Verses 1-3 - The watchman's responsibility was great. His warning was usually given by voice or through the use of a shofar (ram's horn).

Verses 4-5 - One who heard the warning and didn't respond was responsible for the consequences. Had he responded, he could have saved himself, but because he ignored the warning, his death was his own fault.

Verse 6 - On the other hand, if the watchman fails to sound the warning, he also bears responsibility for the blood of any who die. This does not absolve the sinner of his own guilt, however (the metaphor here anticipates the spiritual application that follows).

EZEKIEL RECOMMISSIONED (verses 7-9)

Ezekiel's original commission (chapter 3) was to speak words of judgment to God's people. His message contained no call for repentance because the fall of Jerusalem was inevitable. Here, however, he receives a second call because God has given him a second message. Now he has a message of hope - the restoration spoken of in the chapters that follow. But this message also contains a warning - those who refuse to turn from their sin will not benefit from this restoration, but will die. Ezekiel, like the watchman on the city walls, bears responsibility for the consequences should he fail to deliver the message faithfully, but the people are accountable as individuals for their response to the prophet's words.

SIGNS OF GUILT (verses 10-11)

This is the first time in the book of Ezekiel that his listeners show any signs of guilt before God. Before, they had done nothing but make excuses. The exiles are weighed down by consciousness of their sin, but Ezekiel brings a message of hope. The message is that God does not desire the death of the wicked, but calls all to repent and be delivered (cf. II Peter 3:9). God through His prophet pleads with the people to turn from their evil ways and repent.

THE CALL TO REPENTANCE (verses 12-16)

Ezekiel now explains more specifically the nature of the repentance that is required.

Verse 12 - Repentance is an issue to be addressed in the present. One whose past is full of wicked behavior can still be delivered if he turns from his sin, while one who has a history of righteous deeds cannot rest on his laurels, but must repent if he lapses into sin.

Verse 13 - The righteous cannot take his history of good deeds for granted; they mean nothing if he turns from them and sins.

Verses 14-16 - The wicked man always has the door of repentance and forgiveness open before him, no matter what his sins may have been.

Note that these verses do not precisely parallel the New Testament teachings about salvation. Remember that we are here dealing with the nation of Israel in the context of God's covenant. These words are addressed to God's people, and the New Testament parallel would involve discipline within the church. We need not conclude from these verses that someone can lose his salvation. The same is true with the watchman passage that precedes these verses. Far too many over the years have drawn from the watchman passage the application that those who refuse to preach the Gospel are responsible for causing unbelievers to go to hell, but we know from the New Testament that salvation is the sovereign work of God, and that those who suffer eternal separation from Him do so because of their own sin.

THE JUSTICE OF GOD (verses 17-20)

One of the complaints of the exiles was that God seemed to be judging them for the deeds of their fathers. Ezekiel has already made it clear that their own sins are sufficient justification for God's actions, but now they introduce another complaint: if God visits the sins of fathers on the children, why shouldn't their past good deeds be enough to excuse them from God's judgment now, despite their evident wickedness in the present? Ezekiel here reiterates that God's judgment will fall on individuals on the basis of their deeds, and that He judges justly.

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM FULFILLED (verses 21-29)

Ezekiel had long been prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, and the event finally takes place in 586 BC. A messenger from the city comes to the exiles to bring the news (verse 21), but the night before his arrival Ezekiel has another message for the people (verse 22).

Verses 23-24 - Those who remain in the land after the destruction of the city still do not get it. They are still convinced that the land is theirs and that God would never take it away.

Verses 25-26 - God points to their open sins and asks why He should let them possess His land.

Verses 27-29 - In no uncertain terms, God declares that those who remain will also be destroyed, either by the Babylonians or by wild animals or disease. The land will become a desolate wilderness.

THE RECEPTION OF THE EXILES (verses 30-33)

This message, as usual, is delivered to the exiles even though it concerns the people remaining in the land.

Verse 30 - The exiles had by now become accustomed to gathering outside Ezekiel's house to hear the latest message from the Lord.

Verses 31-32 - Sadly, the exiles look to Ezekiel for entertainment rather than edification. They view his prophecies as if they were attending a concert, but they do nothing to alter their lives despite his warnings.

Verse 33 - God anticipates that the arrival of the messenger with the news of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecies will make a difference in the attitude of the people because they will see that Ezekiel is indeed a prophet sent by God.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL X

Ezekiel 34

While the previous chapter used the image of the watchman to describe Ezekiel, who as a prophet had responsibility for God's people, today's chapter speaks of the leaders of the nation as shepherds who are supposed to watch over the sheep entrusted to their care. While Ezekiel is a faithful watchman, the kings and priests have not been faithful shepherds. The contrast in this chapter, which contains the promise of a faithful Shepherd to come, is probably the basis of the metaphor used by Christ in John 10. Note the two parallel cycles of sin, judgment, and redemption found in the structure of the chapter.

The image of leader as shepherd is a common one, both in the Bible and in the extrabiblical literature of the Ancient Near East. Moses (Isaiah 63:11) and David (Psalm 78:70-72) are called shepherds, and both were in fact tending sheep when God called them to their tasks. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Zechariah use this language to describe Israel's kings, and similar metaphors appear in the writings of Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, and even in reference to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

THE SINS OF THE SHEPHERDS (verses 1-6)

Judah's failure reflected the failure of its leaders. Both the kings and the priests were culpable for the idolatry and injustice that brought God's judgment on the land, but the metaphor is primarily directed toward the kings.

Verses 1-2 - The fundamental problem is self-aggrandizement. Those who were to care for others were concerned only for themselves; they were selfish and greedy.

Verse 3 - Rulers do have certain privileges, but with these privileges come heavy responsibilities. Tax money was not to be spent on luxurious lifestyles, but was to be used to benefit the people.

Verse 4 - The focus here is not so much on the treatment of the people as a whole as it is on the ways in which the rulers ignored the weakest of their people. The poor and needy have been oppressed rather than succored. Note the similarity of the message given here to the one that so concerned the prophet Amos in his words to the Northern Kingdom.

Verses 5-6 - This failure on the part of the kings was one of the causes of the exile, and they didn't seem to care apart from their desires to save their own skins.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE SHEPHERDS (verses 7-10)

In the same way that Jesus excoriates the religious leaders of His day and tells them that their authority will soon be removed (Matthew 21:33-46), Ezekiel speaks judgment against the kings of Judah. Because they cared only for themselves, they will be left to themselves with no people left to plunder. The final sentence of the paragraph suggests that the so-called shepherds were really wolves who fed on the flock rather than caring for them.

THE LORD AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD (verses 11-16)

When God removes the faithless shepherds, He will not leave His flock without a leader. Instead, He will step in and become the Shepherd for His people.

Verses 11-13 - The first aspect of God's shepherding ministry will be to bring His people home from captivity. The scattering judgment will be reversed and God's chosen people will be brought home again.

Verses 14-15 - When the people return, they will come home to a prosperous and peaceful place (cf. Psalm 23).

Verse 16 - The weak in particular will be the objects of the Lord's care (cf. Luke 15:3-7). The last part of the verse serves as a transition to the following paragraph.

THE SINS OF THE FLOCK (verses 17-19)

The leaders were not the only ones responsible for the conditions under which judgment became inevitable. God also is angry with the sheep who eat the best grass and trample the rest so that others have nothing, and who drink clear water, then muddy the stream before they leave. The targets of God's wrath here are the nobles and merchants who enriched themselves at the expense of the poor. Again, the similarity with Amos is obvious.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE FLOCK (verses 20-22)

Another image is presented here to describe the sheep who are to be subject to judgment. They are like strong animals who push their way to the manger and eat everything before the weaker ones get a chance to feed. Though the metaphor used by Ezekiel here is in some ways similar to that used by Jesus in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46, the latter has more to do with the way others treat God's people (sheep care for the poor while goats do not) instead of contrasting the rich and greedy with the poor and needy among God's people.

THE MESSIAH AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD (verses 23-24)

Here the promise of redemption is couched in explicitly Messianic terms. The means by which the Lord is to shepherd His people is the Davidic ruler who is to come. When Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10, this is surely the passage to which He was alluding.

A NEW COVENANT (verses 25-31)

The reference here is to the same covenant found in Jeremiah 31:31-34, though Ezekiel speaks more of the material conditions of the people, while Jeremiah addresses the conditions of their hearts.

Verse 25 - The wild beasts here probably refer to the surrounding nations who for generations had threatened the safety of the Israelites (contra. Isaiah 11:6-9). Such threats will no longer exist.

Verses 26-27a - The promises of prosperity are reminiscent of the blessings in Deuteronomy associated with obedience to God's law. Having experienced the curses connected with disobedience, they now will enjoy the rest of the righteous.

Verses 27b-29 - The very conditions that had plagued them in the years immediately preceding the Captivity would be taken away - invasion, enslavement, famine, ignominy.

Verses 30-31 - The New Covenant is actually a continuation of the old one, fulfilling the same fundamental relationship - "I will be your God and you will be My people." God will be their faithful Shepherd and watch over them forever. This will be a testimony to them as well as to the surrounding nations.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL XI

Ezekiel 37

This chapter is probably the best-known portion of the book of Ezekiel and contains God's promise of restoration for His ruined and discouraged people. The chapter is full of hope for the future, but also contains controversial passages over which commentators have differed mightily, as is true with most biblical passages referring to the future. The chapter falls neatly into two parts, the first involving a vision and the second a sign.

THE VISION OF THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES (verses 1-14)

This vision is not only the basis for a popular spiritual ("the hip bone's connected to the thigh bone . . ."), but also gives a picture of the stages by which God is going to restore His people.

Verse 1 - The word used here for the place of the vision is the same as the one in chapters 1-3; Ezekiel appears to have been taken back to the same place where he had seen the vision of the glory of God recorded at the beginning of the book. The glory of God is thus revealed, not only by looking at Him, but also by looking at His work of redemption and restoration.

Verse 2-3 - The valley is strewn with the bones of dead men, as if after a great battle. Little imagination is required to see the bones as symbolizing the nation of Israel, now apparently dead with no hope of revival. When God asks Ezekiel if revival is a possibility, the prophet is wise enough to decline to answer. He knows that God can do anything, but lacks sufficient faith to expect what seems impossible.

Verses 4-6 - Ezekiel is told to do what he must have felt like he had been doing for years - preach to dry bones that had no hope of responding to his words. But God promises that He will bring these bones together to form skeletons, put flesh upon them, then fill them with the breath of life and bring them together to form a great and mighty army.

Verses 7-8 - Like the story of the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, the body is formed before the breath is introduced.

Verses 9-10 - Ezekiel speaks again and the winds blow from the four corners of the earth, filling the inanimate bodies with the breath of life [note that the same Hebrew word is translated variously as *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit* in this passage; the same is true of the Greek word *pneuma*, used in a similar fashion in John 3:8].

Verse 11 - God now explains the meaning of the vision to Ezekiel. The bones represent the nation of Israel, and the deadness and dryness of the bones pictures well their lack of hope for the future. As far as they are concerned, their nation is dead and might as well be buried.

Verses 12-13 - Ezekiel is to proclaim to the people God's intention to restore the nation. The first stage will involve a return to the land. The purpose again, as so often in this book, is to demonstrate to the people that the Lord is God.

Verse 14 - Spiritual renewal is also promised. While the vision distinguished between the two restorations chronologically, this verse seems not to do so. The permanence of God's restoration, as seen in the sign that follows, along with the ensuing history of Israel, indicates that the promised restoration will indeed occur in two stages. Paul speaks of the same concept in Romans 11:22-32.

THE SIGN OF THE TWO STICKS (verses 15-28)

The next symbolic action that Ezekiel is told to perform is quite clear in its meaning, though less clear in its specific application.

Verses 15-17 - Ezekiel is to take two sticks and mark them as representing the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. He is then to join the two sticks together, perhaps by holding them end to end in one hand. [We should note as a matter of interest that these verses are a key prophecy used by the Mormons. They claim that the word translated *stick* really means *scroll* (the word is the common one for *piece of wood*), therefore the sign refers to two books, which they identify as the Bible and the Book of Mormon, arguing that Ezekiel here was predicting the existence of the latter work and saying that the two would be joined as equal sources of divine authority. Sadly for the Mormons, God goes on to explain the meaning of the sign in the next few verses.]

Verses 18-19 - God again explains the required action - it is to symbolize the reuniting of the divided kingdoms.

Verses 20-23 - Return from captivity is the first part of this promise, but it also includes being reunited into one nation, living under one king, and serving God with no more recourse to idols. At first glance this seems to be a reference to the return under Cyrus after the fall of the Babylonian Empire, but that return can have been no more than the coming together of the dry bones in the vision. The Northern Kingdom completely disappeared, its people assimilated into the far reaches of the Assyrian Empire; only a few stragglers fled southward and lived in Judah until its fall to the Babylonians. Furthermore, Israel never regained an independent monarchy (the Hasmoneans hardly count). In addition, the nation Jesus encountered during His public ministry would certainly not be characterized as free from "sinful backsliding." The fulfillment of this promise must therefore be in the future.

Verses 24-25 - The king is to be the Messiah, and the people will be at peace in their land and dwell there forever. Here is the spiritual restoration spoken of in the vision of dry bones, the same restoration that Paul envisioned as still being in the future in Romans 11. As Paul had hope for the eventual conversion of his ethnic brothers, so must we.

Verses 26-28 - God will establish a covenant that will never be broken and will again dwell among them. Observers will be able to see clearly that Israel is again holy, not because of their own virtue, but because God has made them holy. This prophecy sets the stage for the Temple vision with which the book of Ezekiel concludes.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL XII

Ezekiel 38-39

Ezekiel 37 ends with a description of God's people restored to their land, living under God's renewed covenant, and at peace. The vision that follows describes a great invasion through which God demonstrates once and for all that the exile had not resulted from His weakness, but from His strength. He is, indeed, able to protect His people. The eschatological context of the vision has led to a variety of interpretations, largely involving the identity of the invaders and the specific time frame within which the invasion occurs. Such speculations are all too common with regard to future prophecies found in the Scriptures.

IDENTIFYING THE PLAYERS (38:1-6)

Much of the speculation associated with this section of Ezekiel has surrounded the identities of the invaders. For instance, the Scofield Reference Bible famously identified Rosh with Russia, Meshech with Moscow, and Tubal with Tobolsk, then proceeded to affirm that Israel would be invaded by a last-days coalition led by the Soviet Union. The problem here is that the name Russia was not in use until the eleventh century and the cities of Moscow and Tobolsk did not exist until the late Middle Ages. What, then, *can* we conclude about the identity of the invaders?

38:1-3 - Gog here is a person, sometimes identified with the king of Lydia about a century before the time of Ezekiel. Some believe the name became a title of the kings of the region. Whoever he is, he is the leader of the invading coalition. Magog, Meshech, and Tubal are all sons of Japheth (Genesis 10:2). The region in question is Anatolia, the area between the Mediterranean, Black, and Caspian Seas (now Eastern Turkey and Northern Iran), where Lydia was also located. [NOTE: Meshech was the land of Midas, the king who according to Greek mythology possessed the Golden Touch.]

38:4 - It may seem strange to see God moving against Gog by placing him at the head of an invading army, but the picture here is one usually associated with captives. The Assyrians typically led their captives away with hooks in their jaws - a tactic both painful and humiliating. Here, God drags Gog and his people *into* battle in the same way.

38:5-6 - The coalition in effect surrounds Israel. The Persians come from the east, Cush (Ethiopia) and Put (Cyrenaica - modern Libya) from the south, and Gomer and Togarmah (also sons of Japheth - see Genesis 10:3) from the north. While scholars have tried to identify this invasion with some historical event, no such connection is possible. The invasion of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC did not approach this magnitude. The closest thing to such an invasion from all sides was the attack that occurred immediately after the granting of independence to the nation of Israel in 1948, though even that did not bring enemies from as wide a geographical range as the one described here.

THE PLANNED INVASION (38:7-16)

God plans the whole thing, but Gog thinks it is his own idea. As we see elsewhere in Scripture, God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are complementary rather than contradictory.

38:7-9 - The only time reference we have in the passage is the phrase “after many days.” The context, however, following the prophecy of chapter 37, places the events in the eschaton.

38:10-12 - God’s people are at peace under the rule of the Messiah, and the invaders hope to find easy pickings in a nation with unwalled towns.

38:13 - Sheba and Dedan were trading colonies in the Arabian peninsula; the Phoenician merchants of Tarshish traded there. These peaceful traders cannot fathom the brutality of those who would launch an unprovoked assault against a defenseless neighbor.

38:14-16 - The invasion is really the work of God, the intention of which is to demonstrate His power and holiness before the peoples of the earth.

THE DEFEAT OF THE INVADERS (38:17-39:8)

This passage shares some characteristics of Hebrew poetry. One that sometimes confuses interpreters is the use of repetition. If one looks at this section of the vision as chronological, it seems to contain contradictions, but if seen as repeating and expanding on precious ideas, the pattern is easily discernible.

38:17 - Ezekiel’s vision is nothing new. Other prophets had spoken of an invasion in the last days.

38:18-22 - The victory will be entirely the Lord’s doing - through earthquake, flood, hail, and fiery eruptions. One of the consequences will be that, in the panic generated by these natural catastrophes, the frightened invaders will turn on one another (cf. Judges 7:22). Israel is not required to lift a finger in its own defense.

38:23 - The result will be that not just Israel, but all the nations, will know that the Lord is God.

39:1-8 - Largely a repetition of what has gone before with some variation in terminology, this section introduces for the first time the image of the vanquished becoming food for birds of prey. The judgments in the early part of Ezekiel were intended to stop God’s people from blaspheming His name; now this climactic judgment will keep the heathen nations from doing so. The closing words of the paragraph emphasize the certainty of what is here predicted, though the time may be in the distant future, even for modern readers.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE (39:9-20)

This section of the vision accomplishes two things: it indicates that God’s people, who were supposed to be threatened by the invasion, will benefit from it, and it also shows the magnitude of the slaughter of God’s enemies.

39:9-10 - The weapons left by the invaders will be sufficiently numerous to provide fuel for God’s people for seven years (in a land where wood was scarce, this was a meaningful benefit). The significance of this statement for a battle yet to come is difficult to imagine, though this has not

stopped speculators from trying to guess what it might mean. Perhaps the Israelites will have free access to the oil fields of the invaders???

39:11-16 - The burial of the dead invaders will be a major project. A huge burial ground will be established east of the Dead Sea so that the land can be cleansed; the task of burying the dead will require seven months, and even after that a regular patrol will need to be established to locate and dispose of any unburied remains.

39:17-20 - The slaughter of the invaders is here pictured as a sacrifice at which the carrion birds and scavengers are invited to feast. The language of the passage is picked up by John in his description of the final battle of the forces of evil against God and His people in Revelation 19:17-21 (note also the reference to Gog and Magog in Revelation 20:7-9). This connection confirms the eschatological setting of Ezekiel's vision.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BATTLE (39:21-29)

The concluding portion of the vision connects it with the earlier parts of Ezekiel's prophecy. What God is doing through the destruction of the forces of evil who threaten His people is the same as what He has been trying to do all along.

39:21-22 - God will display His glory, both among the nations and among His own people.

39:23-24 - Israel went into exile because of their own sin, not because of God's weakness.

39:25-29 - Israel will be a permanent display of the holiness, power, mercy, and faithfulness of the Living God.

STUDIES IN EZEKIEL XIII

Ezekiel 40-48

The book of Ezekiel closes with a long vision of a Temple. In this vision, we find the culmination of many of the themes central to the book. As we complete our study, we will first look at the main interpretive approaches to this closing vision that have been proposed by various commentators, then sample key sections of the passage in order to bring out its central themes.

MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS OF THE VISION

Scholars over the years have approached this final section of Ezekiel's prophecy both literally and figuratively, with numerous variations on each. The following is a sampling of those approaches, all of which have strengths and weaknesses.

LITERAL - THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON

The basic idea here is that the vision is one of the glorious past when God was pouring out His blessings on His people and they were at the height of their glory. While many of the details of the vision correspond to Solomon's Temple, the vast majority do not. While the glory that is promised is linked to that of the past, it will be better, not the same. The Golden Age is not something to which the people are to look back, but is instead something yet to come.

LITERAL - THE RESTORATION TEMPLE

Some have suggested that the plans found here were intended to be used by those who returned from captivity to rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. If so, they missed by a long shot (cf. Haggai 2:3). Besides, the descriptions of the size of the Temple precincts, the size of the rebuilt city, and the distribution of the land among tribes, most of whom no longer existed, present practical impossibilities if taken literally.

LITERAL - THE MILLENNIAL TEMPLE

This interpretation is popular among dispensationalists and takes the vision to refer to a Temple built during the literal reign of Christ on earth. The practical difficulties may theoretically be overcome by the miraculous power of a reigning Christ and the geographical changes inevitably associated with the calamities of the Tribulation period, though the problem of the land distribution among the twelve tribes remains, as is the case for those who try to explain the 144,000 mentioned in the book of Revelation in a literal sense. The significance of the Zadokite priesthood is also difficult to explain in literal terms. The biggest problem with this interpretation, however, is the idea of a restored sacrificial system following the death of Christ, since the book of Hebrews clearly indicates that such sacrifices are no longer necessary. Dispensationalists respond by arguing that the sacrifices are memorial in nature, as is the case with the Lord's Supper now.

FIGURATIVE - APOCALYPTIC

Apocalyptic language often makes use of numerical symbolism and symmetry and hyperbolic size. The point of such language is the principles it is intended to illustrate rather than the details of the picture that is being portrayed. As with all the figurative interpretations, this one tends to minimize the details and suggest that the numbers used and the description given could have been anything as long as the basic point was being conveyed. This one at least has the advantage of applying the vision to the people to whom it was delivered, since it sees the Temple description as communicating to the Israelites of Ezekiel's day the fulfillment of the promises of divine restoration.

FIGURATIVE - THE CHURCH AGE

This approach "spiritualizes" the passage and sees it as referring to the Church, the New Israel. This one not only minimizes the significance of the details in the description, but opens the door to applications that are founded in nothing more substantial than the imagination of the interpreter. The passage thus winds up being divorced from both its grammatical and historical contexts. This is, nonetheless, a very popular approach among Reformed commentators.

FIGURATIVE - THE ETERNAL STATE

In my opinion, this is the best of the available interpretations simply because it has clear biblical warrant. The language of Revelation 21-22 borrows heavily from Ezekiel's vision and seems to be a fulfillment of it, though some differences in details exist. Ezekiel, as we have seen in our last few lessons, is pointing toward the age of the Messiah as the time of Israel's final restoration. It is therefore appropriate that his last vision speak of the eternal kingdom in which all of God's people will be joined together in the presence of their Lord. The fulfillment of Israel's hope is seen in Revelation to be the fulfillment of the hope of Jews and Gentiles alike who are united in Christ, the Redeemer.

We will now look at a few sections of the vision and note the thematic elements that relate to our earlier studies.

INTRODUCTION (40:1-4)

Ezekiel received this vision in the year 572 BC, thus making it the last vision in the book chronologically with the exception of the brief message in 29:17-21. He is transported in the vision to the top of Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where he is met by an angelic figure with measuring instruments in his hand. The next four chapters are filled with measurements indicating the dimensions of the Temple that is to be built.

THE GLORY OF GOD RETURNS (43:1-7)

God here reverses the judgment of Ezekiel 10. The prophet beholds the same vision that he had seen twice before, only this time the chariot throne of the Lord is returning to the Temple that God had earlier abandoned to judgment. God then promises that there will be no future departures - this time His presence in the midst of His people is permanent. The details in chapters 44-46 are

difficult to explain if one takes them literally, and even more difficult to account for as figures of speech or spiritual images. They deal with Temple officials, divisions of land surrounding the Temple, and worship.

LIVING WATER (47:1-12)

The image here both harks back to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10) and looks forward to the picture in Revelation 22:1-2. The river of pure water flows from the Temple eastward, growing deeper and deeper as it goes. Ultimately it reaches the Dead Sea, which it purifies, supporting plentiful varieties of fish while watering fruitful trees on its banks (Genesis 2:9; Revelation 22:2). The scene is also reminiscent of the living water promised by Jesus to the Samaritan woman (John 4:10-14 cf. John 7:37-39). The remainder of the vision speaks of the boundaries and the division of the land.

THE NAME OF THE CITY (48:35)

The ultimate point of the vision, whether one focuses on the Temple, the city, or the land of Israel, is the presence of God in the midst of His people. Jerusalem was to be the city where God would place His name (I Kings 8:14-21); now the name of the city corresponds to its original purpose. It is now *Yahweh Shammah* - "The Lord is There." The presence of God in the midst of His people is an ongoing theme in the New Testament as well, whether in exhortations concerning prayer (Matthew 18:20), the Great Commission (Matthew 28:20), the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer (I Corinthians 6:19) and in the Church (I Corinthians 3:16), or the climactic vision of God in the midst of His people for all eternity in Revelation 22:1-6.