

Commentary on Ezekiel

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Introduction to Ezekiel

In the second Babylonian deportation of Judeans, 597 BC, the entourage of King Jehoiachin included a young priest of some means and social stature. His name was Ezekiel. We estimate his age was about 25 then. Dating all his prophecies from the time of this exile, his prophetic ministry begins in the fifth year, his thirtieth, when he normally would have been vested for duty in the Temple. The prophet-statesman Daniel was already a living legend, roughly the same age, while Jeremiah was by this time middle aged.

Ezekiel took up residence in the wide, flat plains of Shinar, near the grand Chebar Canal. There the Jews had a large ghetto outside Nippur. Being called to prophesy will quickly make any man seem strange, were he not already outside the norm. However, his prophecies are rather typical of ancient Hebrew mysticism and prophetic literature. That is, his message is rooted in the Spirit Realm and seldom finds a simple explanation in terms of this world.

The first half of his book comes before the Fall of Jerusalem (and third deportation) in 586 BC, warning his people that they fully deserved their sad fate in exile. The second half seeks to bring hope of a return some day. However, the imagery of that hope is thoroughly mixed with Messianic symbolism. He does not distinguish the application of such imagery for our convenience, because no Hebrew reader would expect it. Modern scholars who insist on ignoring the intellectual culture of the Hebrew people cannot possibly approach this material with any expectation of analyzing it sensibly. Pay no attention to such scholars.

Ezekiel struggles mightily under the burden of a calling we would find hard to imagine. Only the miracle of God touching hearts in his audience gained him any hearing at all. At some point his private home becomes a center for worship in the earliest infancy of the synagogue system. His emphasis on personal holiness is striking. The dramatic presentation, the strange and extreme actions used to symbolize his message, are equally indicative of sterling character and commitment to God's Truth.

Chapter 1

The mystery of God's divine Truth does not hide behind some arcane code language, but symbolism is the language of the ineffable truth of the Spirit Realm. It calls to living spirits, while dead spirits cannot hope to fathom something declaring a spiritual revelation. Deciphering the vision of this chapter starts with the academic pursuit of symbolism in Hebrew intellectual culture, but does not end there. Rather, it is absolutely necessary to see this first as a parabolic indicator to something that cannot have meaning without a spirit born from above. Those with such a spiritual awakening can then offer something useful to those without it by living out the implications.

Ezekiel did not see God in the ordinary sense of the phrase; he received in his spirit a revelation of God. It registers in the heart, which for the Hebrews was the seat of faith. A revelation is not knowledge, but an imperative, a call to commitment. This is Ezekiel's call to the prophetic ministry. In the context of his world, it was imperative that he first knows the Lord into whose service he was called. Vestments of service to a sovereign have no meaning without an audience

with the sovereign, or at least someone known to be the appointed representative to bear his name. In this case, Ezekiel is granted a vision of what he needed to know about his Master.

It was 31 July 593 BC, as near as we can determine. This was Ezekiel's thirtieth year and his king's fifth year of exile. We should not be pedantic about him standing on the banks of the canal; this was simply a description of where he lived at the time. For five years now this select group of Judeans lived in exile in this place. Unlike the Egyptian slavery, it's unlikely this community was forced to do any particular labor except self-maintenance. Rather, the Exiles would form a vassal township required to employ their talents and skills to live as best they could and contribute to the general welfare of the imperial throne. If they were good at viticulture, then they would be taxed in the form of grapes and wine, for example. After some five years of this existence, Jehovah asserted His Lordship over the resources of His domain, calling Ezekiel to serve Him as prophet, a Heavenly court crier.

We could easily get lost in picking over the details of the image, but it matters not whence this or that concept arises. The symbol of a fiery storm out of the north, the symbolic direction of Eden in those parts, meant to Ezekiel that the ultimate authority over Creation had come. For a civilization unacquainted with artificial lighting, anything luminescent was associated with fire. We would be fools to assume this is merely a dramatic device dreamed up by the prophet; nor was it a precise and literal revelation of which he was simply an objective observer. The man was drawn up onto the spiritual plane and could hardly describe in clinical terms what he saw with literal human eyes. His eyes were still in his head on the lower plane; spiritual perception is not precisely a matter of five senses. Rather, it is a wholly other thing.

Into this sad life of exile God asserts something of Himself, for which the people need a reminder if they are to make any progress in recovering what was lost. Did God not know where they were, and their sorrowful estate? The revelation comes to Ezekiel of four creatures in a flying formation. Each has four faces gazing out in every direction; the wheel within a wheel has eyes all over it. You and I would have to turn our heads to move our gaze, but God's watchfulness is fully dispersed in all directions. Thus, no part of this thing turns, but merely goes and sees. Let no one doubt that God knows what is going on at all times in all places in His universe. This is probably the single most important point of this revelation. God knows in ways even those there could not understand, precisely what is happening with each and every person, down to the smallest particle of their being.

His knowledge is matched by His power to act. The noise alone is enough to portray that to Ezekiel's audience, but this flying formation appears beneath the opened heavens. God is nearby, ready to act, should His flying eyes see something calling to His attention. What does He seek? He seeks hearts turned toward Him. He seeks His own people, penitent and ready to know His command for today and tomorrow. The reference to a rainbow is not accidental; for it symbolizes that a renewal of all the covenants of times past is offered here.

In regards to the meaning of the faces on the cherubim, this is not Ezekiel foreshadowing the Four Gospels. Even the early Church scholars disagreed over the symbolism, because their associations were arbitrary and subjective. This is the sort of pedantic stuff that characterized the Pharisees (with their Hellenistic logic). Rather, we need to stick with the record of Hebrew Scripture and understand that each face contributes to our understanding of God's

watchfulness. He sees more than a mere human, because He bears the power of authority like a lion, the patient strength of an ox and the speedy action of an eagle.

Rightly does the chapter end with Ezekiel falling on his face, because that alone is a sufficient response. It is the response required by the whole community of Judah in this foreign exile.

Chapter 2

God referred to Ezekiel as “Son of Man” in the sense of reminding the prophet that he was a mere human. Thus, Ezekiel uses the term for himself in proper humility. The experience of sensing himself in the Divine Presence was enough to make him fall face down, but God raised him up as His appointed emissary. Only by the power of the Spirit of God could he stand.

His commission is to address a nation infamous for rejecting her God’s authority. He was to address the people in the ancient fashion of the prophets they had ignored so far, “Thus saith the Lord!” Whether they listen or not, they would not be able to deny Ezekiel’s prophecy met the test of coming true. However, the Lord warns Ezekiel that it will be a hostile reception. Whatever happens, he must not take part in their rebellion. At any cost, he must obey God’s commands.

The scroll is symbolic of God’s message delivered, recorded in Heaven. Scrolls were only ever written on one side, so having one covered in writing on both sides conveys the fullness of the message, something that can hardly be confined. God had a lot to say to His people, and it was not good news.

Chapter 3

Ezekiel’s vision of calling continues. The Lord directs him to eat this scroll of divine judgment. The expanded emphasis of filling his belly translates to absorbing this message from God and allowing it to permeate his whole being. To those of a mind to obey the Lord, His justice is sweet. To those who resist His revelation, His words are wrath.

The Judean exiles to which God sent Ezekiel would have no excuse for ignoring this message. This was one of their own people prophesying to them. Had God chosen to send Ezekiel to any other nation, as with Noah, that nation would hear and repent. Israel is singled out as God’s own people and the nation most likely to reject His Law. All the granted privileges simply gave them an attitude, making demands of God but offering no gratitude. Just as emery is harder than flint, so Ezekiel’s calling and commitment to God’s message would grind down the willful sin of the people. The prophet was to take comfort in knowing God would eventually make the message heard. So it mattered not whether they appeared to listen; Ezekiel was called to speak.

In symbolic language, Ezekiel tells us that he was lifted above himself, out of the common plane of normal human concerns. His sense of center and authority rested on a higher plane, from where the flying formation of winged beings came. It was as if he was flown back to the town where the Exiles were living. He approached them fully immersed in God’s anger and disappointment with His people. He sat among them in a painful expression of astonishment at their sin and at the price of God’s wrath they soon must pay.

A week later, a specific message came to him. Ezekiel was appointed as a divine watchman. This would be the guard on the city wall or in the tower, watching for the approach of any threat. Upon seeing an enemy coming, he would sound the alarm so the inhabitants could prepare a response. Ezekiel was called to sound the alarm that God's wrath was coming like a storm. God lays out four cases for Ezekiel to consider, showing that while God's justice rolls surely onward, the prophet has his part to play. It didn't matter what Ezekiel knew about the moral state of his hearers, nor what response he could expect from them. His mission was to warn them or he was no better than they were.

God commanded Ezekiel to walk out into the broad flat plain, the center of the Babylonian Empire. This was surely some distance away from normal human traffic. There on the plain he saw and heard the same flying formation as before and fell on his face again. This was a fresh reminder of the context and meaning of his calling and Whom he served. He was warned for the time being that his message was strictly confined. He would not come and go as before, as if his life was still the same. Rather, he would resolutely stay in his quarters. Even if his fellow Exiles thought he was nuts and tried to take him into custody, he was not to engage in the normal discourse of life. Nor would he even so much as open his mouth in standard socializing, but keep it shut until God gave him a specific message. Otherwise, he had nothing to say to anyone. If such strange behavior served to discredit him, that was not his concern. It's not as if they were likely to listen, no matter how Ezekiel presented his prophecies.

Chapter 4

Ezekiel was called upon to produce a prophetic drama. First, he took a fresh clay tablet, the most common material in that part of the world for writing and drawing. On this tablet he drew a likeness of Jerusalem under siege. Perhaps some of it was symbolized with extra bits of material placed physically close to this clay tablet on the floor of his quarters. Then he erected a small iron cooking plate as a wall between himself and the little diorama. He was himself to act as if he was besieging the city, too. This was a direct prophecy of the fate of Jerusalem, contrary to the hopes and dreams of the Exiles for a quick return to normal life.

Ezekiel was to lie on his left side for a number of days matching the years for which the Northern Kingdom was to be punished, and then on his right side for a similar representation for the Southern Kingdom. There is much debate about the numbers, but they weren't meant to be precise. Rather, they were representative. Depending on how one counts the precise starting and ending dates, it was roughly 390 years between the exile of the Northern Kingdom and the Return. From the final destruction of Jerusalem to the Return was roughly forty years. Numerical precision was not often of any real concern in Hebrew prophetic literature. What matters most is that these years of fulfillment of God's wrath had not yet happened. God's wrath was upon His people for defying His Covenant.

Whether we are to see Ezekiel literally unable to move day and night, or merely during the time when his intended audience might come to visit, is also unimportant. What matters is that Ezekiel would spend a little over a year at this task, roughly approximating the length of time the siege of Jerusalem lasted. During that time, he would have no reason to move around much, symbolizing those under siege. He would eat what amounts to siege food, because it was the

sort of thing one might have left over in storage after a while. The ration was small, some 8 ounces (220g), as was the water at about a pint (0.6l). The prophet would waste away as would those under such confinement. We struggle to imagine the sort of military campaign that took months just to deploy, then many months camping around a city before the residents were starved and desperate enough to surrender or be easily taken. The actual work of breaching the walls didn't come until the attacking commander felt the time was right.

Ezekiel balked at cooking over a human dung fire, as might well happen under a long siege. This would violate God's own Laws about defilement. The Lord granted him some wiggle room to use dried cow dung, which is frankly a common cooking fuel to this day in the Middle East. The symbolism was sufficient and we are reminded yet again not to scrabble over the details lest we miss the point. Ezekiel was warning his fellow exiles to settle in for a long stay, because God was not going to bring them home for at least a generation.

Chapter 5

The diorama siege continues. The fate of the population of Jerusalem is declared long before it happens. The Lord uses Ezekiel's hair and beard as the symbol of his wrath on the nation.

The sword was to be sharpened and used as a barber's razor. The war was coming and would cut down the nation. Barring certain limited contexts, shaving someone's head and face exposed them to shame. Israel had shamed God repeatedly, so they would be shamed among nations. The hair was to be weighed with the precision of God's measured wrath. A third would burn in a fire in the symbolic city on the clay tile, to show that a third of the people would die in the siege itself from disease and famine. Another third was to be chopped up with the sword, showing that the actual assault at the end of the siege would take another third of the people. The balance was to be thrown to the wind, lost and dispersed, pursued by the sword. That is, except for a tiny portion saved, and tied up in a corner of his garment, as God would save a tiny remnant. But even those would face the tribulation of purification from their sins.

Who can find words to describe the depth of God's sorrow and justified anger? The nation had the singular blessing of God's clear revelation, something offered to no other people on earth. They had the Covenant and the prophecies, and the guidance of God in selecting what lore and literature constituted His own communication. Having such a grand advantage, one would naturally expect them to take full advantage of the opportunity to stay somewhere in the vicinity of God's favor. Not only did they fail, they could not live up the much lower standards God had for nations with far lesser revelation. Israel was more offensive to God than any nation on earth.

So the result would be Israel and Judah turning into a by-word of taunts and curses: "May God crush you like Judah!" We can hardly imagine how this was received by the Exiles in Babylon.

Chapter 6

The primary crime of Israel against the Covenant had always been idolatry. The Lord commands Ezekiel to remind his audience that this was the central issue. Thus, Ezekiel symbolically declared war on the high places where the pagan shrines typically stood, as well as

the shadows of particularly large trees, places of natural shelter in ravines and so forth. God made them as gifts to fallen man to show His kindness and fallen man chooses to revere the thing itself, while treating God with contempt. That Israel descended into this idiocy, when the clear revelation expressly forbade it, was proof of their obstinacy.

Therefore, war was to come upon the whole land. Wherever a son of Israel built a shrine, or used a shrine from the Canaanites before them, that would be a place of war and slaughter. Naturally, such total devastation would spread to the cities and towns and no place would escape. Like an adulterous wife, Israel had angered God with her profligate abuse of the Covenant.

But the Lord promised to save a remnant, so there would be a witness to His righteous wrath. This is proof He intended to save the nation, though as by fire. Whether as a nation, or within the life of an individual, whatever part has been sold into sin will be destroyed. What He preserves will remain useful to Him. We note a solid majority of the population of Judah perished under Babylon's conquest and reign. The returning Remnant was a tiny portion, indeed.

Then Ezekiel was instructed to celebrate (or mourn; it is ambiguous) and mark well in advance the day of destruction. He was to chant a warning song: There is no escape from God's wrath. If an idolatrous Jew flees the land, he will be pursued by pestilence. If he hides within the land, he will die by the sword. If he hides in the city, in the Temple grounds itself, he will die by famine during the siege.

What was the point of all this? Let no one mistake: God is sovereign. Whether the nation would prefer to renege on the Covenant or not, there is no option. They will serve Him or be destroyed. From the southern border to the northern reaches, the whole land of Palestine would be desolate to match the moral desolation of a nation who rejects her own God.

Chapter 7

This chapter is a dramatic recitation of the destruction decreed for the Nation of Israel, in the guise of the surviving Kingdom of Judah. It is loaded with puns and figures of speech that sometimes elude us today. Yet the tone and message are unmistakable.

Fundamental is the use of the term, The Day of the Lord. While it was typically a sign of God's wrath against the enemies of Judah, it was always more about His wrath against sin. Since the nation had become their own worst enemy, they were the objects of this wrath. So, we have the image of God returning all their sins upon their heads. Only when the price of sin is fully acknowledged can one truly understand God's revelation, for His justice is all we can know of His character.

There is also the image of disaster upon disaster. One singular disaster unlike anything before: God rejects His own people and takes from them the Promised Land. In this there will be no mercy. They sowed their sins and will reap a harvest of rods for beating them. With such a high portion perishing, there would be none left to wail for the dead. The few escapees would be too busy fleeing and staying out of sight to conduct a proper mourning.

In the customs of the nation, someone selling their inherited land would do so mournfully, while the buyer would rejoice in God's generous provision. In the next Jubilee, the land would revert to the clan that originally held it. However, before this next Jubilee comes, the Babylonian army would come and no one would repossess anything, because no one would be in the land. Nor would there be any point to mustering the forces and preparing for war, since God had already decreed their defeat. Few would escape with their lives, hiding in the mountains like wild birds, refugees in their own land. They would have no heart for recovering what was lost, fortunate to find even sackcloth and ashes for the duration of the Exile.

No earthly treasure would be sufficient to buy their way out of this. Actual silver and gold would be useless burdens, since there would be nothing to exchange for it. God's blessing upon their material needs had turned to curses. Though He had established the Temple as a glorious symbol of His power and majesty on the earth, they had so defiled it that He could no longer bear it standing. We cannot forget the half-century of Manasseh's profligate idolatry, turning every aspect of the Temple facility into unspeakable insults to God. It was so defiled that it might as well be plundered and destroyed.

The crimes of the nation had forged chains for their captivity. The glory of Jerusalem, the place kings came to visit, would become a campground for the most depraved of nations. This echoes how bringing Israel into the Land had offered little improvement over the filth of the Canaanites before them. When surrounded by invaders, there would be no fresh word of prophecy and the priests would be unable to even remember the Law they worked so hard to ignore. The rulers would be completely unable to lead. Instead, from king to peasant to the lowest slave, there was only terror and dread at the hand of God's wrath.

Chapter 8

Ezekiel sets a fairly precise date for us, translating to 17 September 592 BC. It's just a few more years until the Fall of Jerusalem. In the presence of the elders of the Exiles, the prophet is granted a vision. The person before Him is a figure of Christ, the Revealer. In the spirit He carries Ezekiel back to Jerusalem, and shows him the idolatrous abominations. Because the experience itself is non-literal, we need not see each element as something the prophet sees in real time and space. Rather, it is God allowing Ezekiel to see what He sees in the Spirit.

The first thing we notice is the Image of Jealousy, or Ashtarte (Ishtar, Astarte, etc.). The north gate of the inner court would be on the right-hand side of the Temple proper as we face the entrance, where a wall separated the Court of Israel from the Court of Women. At that time, this was the entrance used by most people, since the east and south gates took one through the palace, and there was no western entrance behind the Temple. The narrative is imprecise by Western standards, but the meaning is not. The presence of pagan images anywhere in the Land defiles it and makes God feel unwelcome in His own house.

Again, we cannot quite picture what happens as Ezekiel is told to dig through a hole in the wall near this doorway to find a hidden door. Upon opening and entering this door, Ezekiel saw the high council of Elders (predecessor to the Sanhedrin) bowing to what amounts to the pantheon of Egyptian nature deities. Each of these Elders also kept such images in their private quarters.

They reasoned to themselves that God was not aware because He had abandoned them. Of course, we know that He left them because they were unfaithful in the first place.

Back out near this northern doorway between the Court of Israel and Court of Women, we find Judean women ritually weeping for Tammuz. This is a common deity found in many Ancient Near Eastern civilizations – starting earliest with the Dumuzi of Sumeria, the Egyptian Osiris, one of the Canaanite Baals, and the Syrian Adonis. These symbolized the annual rite of fall weeping for the god of vegetation dying. In the spring they would then celebrate his rebirth, often with unspeakable sexual acts. It's hard to imagine reviving such a cult in the very courts of the Temple.

But it gets worse. Inside the Court of Israel, on the raised porch of the Temple, the elevated area between the Altar and doors of the Temple itself, were twenty-five men worshipping the sun. This was the number of chief priests plus the High Priest. They turned their backs on God's Temple, which is ritually forbidden – they were to exit the inner Temple and Court of Priests walking backwards while facing the Temple. But they stood facing the sun, in flagrant violation, as ritual leaders of the whole nation.

Obviously, the idolatrous corruption had left nothing untouched. Not just the people slipping into idolatry, but openly led into it by the leaders of the nation, those with power over everyone else. It's not enough that they had violated God's justice in every possible way – the Land was "filled with violence" – but flaunted their infidelity with the boldness of a woman committing adultery in the street outside the door of her home while her husband watched. Would any man tolerate such a thing? It would be justice to stone her with her lover on that very spot; so God intended to punish without mercy.

Chapter 9

The Lord had presented His evidence to Ezekiel in the Spirit Realm. Now He demonstrates His justice still in that higher reality. The wrath and judgment were established in Heaven before they were manifested on the earth some years later.

Having seen these incredible scenes of idolatry, Ezekiel hears the Lord cry out in fury, calling for the angels of wrath. What our prophet sees resembles six men. There was one other dressed as a High Priest, symbolic of one who serves in the very presence of God Almighty. This seventh wore at his side something translated as "inkhorn" or "writing kit" – an Egyptian loan word signifying a mobile inkstand. This would be a case with scribe's reeds and related tools with a container of ink attached. He approached with the others as the one who would ensure justice. His mission was to place a "mark" – the Hebrew word for the last letter of their alphabet, *tawv* – which would appear in their script as our sign of the cross.

There is strong symbolism in the place these seven angels stood near the altar. The luminescent Presence of the Lord rose up off the flying formation of the cherubim seen in the first chapter and hovered on the threshold of the Temple doorway, as the One who commanded those prepared to make a grand sacrifice. That sacrifice would be the lives of those who sinned, the guilty parties not marked by the divine Scribe. He was to mark those who wept over the gross sins of the nation. This Scribe was sent out first, to be followed by the destroyers. They were to

make no exceptions, even for the Temple precinct, but to spill blood without mercy. We note that God told Jeremiah that he and a few others were marked for mercy when Babylon came and destroyed the city.

When Ezekiel asked for God to explain the utter absence of mercy and the intent to leave no remnant, it indicates Ezekiel knew that the Scribe would not use up much ink. We also note the Lord responded that the city was already filled with blood. The people were acting as if there was no God, as if there was no one to see or care about what they did. The point was that only those who sinned would suffer. A recurrent theme in Ezekiel's book is the individual responsibility before the Lord. Indeed, in the narrative it took only a few minutes for the Scribe to return, having marked the few who were righteous.

Chapter 10

The Hebrew language does not lend itself well to literal precision, but carries a vast burden of truth when used symbolically. So, we see in the first few verses here Ezekiel says far more than is apparent from the narrative alone.

The Lord did not travel, nor bring Ezekiel to the Temple, without His divine chariot. He rode above the four cherubim, each with four faces always moving in tight formation. His throne above them appeared as a single large sapphire to Ezekiel, the color of the sky (heaven), and the symbolic domain of the Lord. Jehovah was seated on His throne at that moment. He called to the Scribe to take some coals of fire from the middle of the cherub formation. Fire cleanses, burning away what was not meant to last. The fire of God's wrath will consume whatever is anchored to this fallen plane, but what is eternal, reflecting Him and His Word, will be purified and hardened. The Scribe was commanded to cast these coals upon the city; in the literal sense, we know the Babylonians burned Jerusalem with fire. The Scribe went to where the cherubim stood on the south side of the Temple and was handed coals by the cherub nearest his approach.

Meanwhile, the inner court nearest the Temple structure was filled with the smoke of God's Presence. He rose up from His throne above the cherubim and paused over the threshold of the entrance. His Presence filled the Temple and His glory blazed in the inner courtyard. The powerful sound of the cherubim's wings was audible across the Temple Mount.

Ezekiel doesn't tell us about the fire being scattered across the city, because his whole attention was drawn to the cherubim formation again. They had hands, which is a little unusual in the symbolism. While Ezekiel says this is the same as the vision on the plain near his house on the Chebar Canal, this time he replaces the face of the ox with the face of a cherub. This explains why we believe a cherub is simply a symbolic creature, typically depicted as an ox with a human head. In this case, it would be an ox body with four faces, apparently on one head. This is exceedingly hard to picture, because literal rendering was not the point.

Ezekiel treats us to yet another extended description of this flying formation carrying the Lord's Sky Throne. There were spinning wheels within wheels, yet they had nothing to do with rolling, because the name given them – *galgal* – is ambiguous, sometimes meaning "whirlwind." The whole thing was rather free floating, unattached, yet always moving together as a single unit.

The glory of the Lord resealed itself upon this living chariot. They rose, and then hovered a moment over the eastern gate of the Temple court.

Chapter 11

When Josiah was killed in battle and Pharaoh became lord over Judah, there was an element within the noble and royal houses that welcomed this subjugation. The Pro-Egypt Party had been around for quite some time, at least as far back as Isaiah under King Hezekiah. They also had no argument with syncretism, because for them religion was more about politics than absolute truth. This cynical agnosticism remained a strong element up through the time of Jesus, treating the Law of Moses as simply their peculiar national heritage, not to be taken too seriously. What mattered most was their vast worldly wisdom and statecraft, which was their true god.

Ezekiel was moved in his vision to the outer eastern gate of the Temple Plaza, where the elders – chief nobles and princes – sat in the seats of judgment. This is where the civil courts were held; Ezekiel sees twenty-five such men, two of whom he recognizes by name. In their private councils, they devised a political strategy, a campaign with slogans to justify their rejection of prophetic messages warning them to surrender and obey Babylon's rule. The language in these verses is ambiguous, but their purpose is not.

Their plan is to tell everyone to ignore such prophecies and get on with life. Nothing was going to happen to them; they were untouchable to Babylon. The image of meat in a cauldron in this context refers to something too hot to handle, or ritually forbidden. Either way, however much there was an actual God, He had given them this land and His House was in the city, so He was obliged to protect them. In other words, God was their hostage and He could not afford to let Babylon destroy the city.

With such an open insult, God's Spirit fell upon Ezekiel forcefully and the prophecy burst out of him. Their evil schemes were not hidden from God. Their injustice as judges was nauseating to God. He turned their little slogan on its head – the city was indeed a cauldron, fired by Hell and the cooked flesh in it was the destroyed innocent lives. They were not safe, for God would drag them out. In their hearts they feared the sword, so the sword would come upon them. In literal truth, they were hauled to the northern reaches of Israel's former borderlands, where Nebuchadnezzar had his field headquarters. He found them in rebellion; they had violated their oaths to him and were executed there. Their meat was cooked, said the Lord. In their dying moments, they would realize Jehovah was their God and meant what He said in His Word. They were bound to the Covenant, not free to choose their own way like the Gentiles.

At the words of this prophecy, one of the princes fell dead. Ezekiel was distraught. Was this the end of Israel? God reminded Ezekiel that the vast majority of the nation, including the exiled northern tribes scattered wherever they were, had all committed a grave offense against their God and His Covenant. First, in the Northern Kingdom, the rulers had forbidden their subjects to worship in Jerusalem. But once that bunch was gone, the Kings of Judah perverted Temple worship and no one could get to God by going there, anyway. They felt God was powerless to discipline them, so they could do as they pleased. The Pro-Egypt Party was even making plans

to reclaim Samaria from the imported Samaritans. They sought to do all of this in their own power and wisdom, as if God had no say and could not enforce His Covenant against them.

So, while the Northern Tribes were scattered, far away from the Temple, they could find God if they turned to Him in their hearts. Meanwhile, those who had the Temple had no God. Anyone who remained faithful could expect to take part in the Restoration promised for the future. Those who had stayed behind in Judah were so deeply perverted that there was nothing left to save. But on that future day of return, the faithful would come and cleanse away the broken idols and other defilements and rebuild the city and Temple. This would be the symbolism for a new Realm of God in the hearts of men, men who would be truly changed. But those who cling to their own ways will be forgotten.

Thus, the Presence of the Lord moved away from the Temple in Ezekiel's vision. Instead, it stood over the Mount of Olives, the symbolic point of departure whence Jesus later would Ascend. Then Ezekiel returned in spirit to his real time location and related the vision to the elders there in his house in Babylon.

Chapter 12

The rightful king of Judah was among the Exiles. In his place was a regent, someone referred to as a "prince" – of the royal family, but not normally in line for the throne. Thus, Ezekiel did not call Zedekiah "king" so long as Jehoiachin lived. Zedekiah was largely under the control of the Pro-Egypt Party of nobles and eventually broke his oath to the imperial throne of Babylon. This was contrary to the direct command of God, who warned Judah to accept the imperial yoke of Babylon. The Lord refers to them as people who can't be bothered to pay attention.

The Lord commanded Ezekiel to perform another enigmatic drama. He was to pack the bare minimum for survival, as one who plans an escape. He set this baggage in order in his house in the sight of the elders of the Exiles. As evening fell, Ezekiel dug through the mud brick and plaster wall of his house and prepared to escape by night. He covered his face, a disguise that would hinder his vision below his normal line of sight. He made sure the elders observed this whole drama.

The next morning, the Lord again spoke to Ezekiel. He was to explain to the elders that this symbolism was about Zedekiah. Because of his rebellion against God's command, the city would be destroyed and Zedekiah would try to flee to avoid capture. As we know from other passages of Scripture, Zedekiah did attempt to escape at night through a small hole in the wall obscured by his private garden. He and his closest supporters slipped out with what they could carry, Zedekiah wearing a disguise that required someone to guide him. He was caught as God promised. There was the ominous warning that he would not see Babylon, yet would die there. Of course, as part of his sentence when brought to Nebuchadnezzar, he was blinded and taken to Babylon in chains.

Zedekiah's escort would be scattered and some killed. As they fled to distant lands, they would carry the sure knowledge that Jehovah is God. Those few who survived the siege, the war and the captivity would then be compelled to declare in those foreign lands their sins, and to give God glory for His power.

Then came yet another dramatic symbol for the elders. Ezekiel was commanded to eat a meal as though deeply anxious, trembling in fear, a nervous wreck jumping at every sound. The message was that the people left in the cities of Judah would soon find themselves eating each of their meals as though it might be the last peaceful food they would have for a very long time. Babylon was going to invade in force and destroy all the cities.

Naturally, everyone was telling themselves that this was all in the distant future, that they would hardly live to see it. This common refrain would never be spoken again, said the Lord. He would silence the pretty poetry of the false prophets who taught them to chant such nonsense. Instead, it would happen very soon, well before anyone among the elders would die. None of this was in the remote future, but was on their very doorstep.

Chapter 13

The Law of Moses made clear that the penalty for false prophecy was execution. If the prediction were near term, then it would be easy to test a prophet's words. If it was long term, or he waffled in any way, it might be hard to catch him in a lie. How were those caught in a dispute between two prophets supposed to know which one to support? Had the hearers been faithful to God, it would not be so hard for them to guess. Unfortunately, so few in Judah were faithful that they wouldn't figure it out until too late. You can be sure the prophets involved would know. Thus, Ezekiel addresses himself to the false prophets themselves, who made it their mission to confuse the people.

The Lord says these false prophets were dressing up their personal political agendas in traditional prophetic formats. The Lord warns people listening that such political "prophets" were like wilderness scavengers. They wander along neglected walls, looking for an opportunity to slip inside and raid the food supply. A real prophet would be looking to rebuild those broken down walls. These fakes were weakening the nation against tribulation because their messages assuredly did not come from God.

God's plan for these false prophets was to ensure they don't survive. In the coming siege and warfare, these prophets would not be found, their names would not appear on the lists of those still alive for deportation. As far as God is concerned, they were foreigners all along. They spoke for a god that didn't exist to a nation refusing to abide by the Covenant. They predicted peace when war was just down the road. They taught the people to relax and not worry about God's wrath. It was like advising them to take shortcuts, like building a quick and dirty wall of hastily piled rocks, coated with simple mud and painted with whitewash. Who would know? It's not as if there was anything they really needed to secure. Was not God's own Temple in their midst?

It won't be long; the first time it storms the rain and hailstones of difficult testing would knock it down. Instead of building up their obedience to the Covenant, which God promised would protect them from evil, they offered no resistance at all. The whole thing would collapse on someone who trusted in the lies of such prophets. In the end, the false prophets would know beyond all doubt the depth of their folly. They would not survive the time of testing, but would live long enough to be terrorized.

It gets worse, because there were false prophetesses. They had developed their own peculiar style, suckering the people with symbolic magic, of all things. While it's not hard to figure out what is meant by the stylish charms and magic symbols on the sleeves of their robes, we can't be too sure of the significance of headbands (some translations use "veils"). The headgear was paired with some form of symbolic ritual, as if they could steal the battle spirit of the enemy. God said the only thing captured was the wearer, bound by false hopes.

This silly stuff was no more effective than the hasty walls previously mentioned. God was not impressed with these heathen rituals and there would be no other god to respond when they called. Teaching the people to believe in these vanities was highly destructive. A critical element was the fees these false prophetesses would charge for all this silly stuff. They were selling the people to demons for bread, capturing their hearts for the enemies of God. They gave support to the paganized noble families, while accusing as traitors those truly noble that refused to support this evil charms industry. Their end would be no different from the other false prophets.

Chapter 14

This chapter goes to the very heart of our own modern failure to understand God. The very meaning of the term Old Testament or Old Covenant indicates the portion of Scripture that came before the final revelation in Jesus Christ. It's not as if God had never offered eternal life or spiritual birth before the Cross; it was always there. Rather, it was never directly referenced. To whom the Lord granted it, they could always understand the spiritual plane, but there was hardly any means to speak of it. Jesus Himself spoke of the necessity of using parables to indicate things about the Kingdom of Heaven. The difference between the Old and New is how all those parables as indirect references, as symbolic renderings, were finally declared fully by giving them a tangible reality in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Rightly do we say Jesus obeyed those ancient Law Covenants to perfection. Wrongly do we understand them if we do not keep that statement within the frame of reference whence it comes to us. Obedience to the Law was not a matter of objective performance, but a personal commitment to a living God as expressed by a desire to please Him. His Laws were the obvious guideline. That there were sacrifices for unintentional sins should remove the notion that objective evaluation was ever a consideration. The standard of the Law was never objective perfection. Rather, it was about the personal commitment to God as Lord, a living relationship.

When the elders of the Exile came to sit with Ezekiel that day, the issue brought to everyone's attention was the failure of this personal commitment. They were going through the motions; that had never been acceptable. The problem was in their hearts, which is a Hebrew symbolic reference to the commitment of one's will. They weren't committed to Jehovah and Ezekiel called them on it. Their loyalties were divided. It didn't matter whether they had heathen idols in their homes; they had them in their hearts. That was the standard of the Law.

The promises of the Law were not expressed in terms of eternal life, but pointed to it symbolically. Instead, those promises were expressed in terms summed up in the word *shalom* – reasonable material prosperity, security from threats, and social stability. Humans instinctively pursue these things. God provides them to those who obey His Laws and it still applies today.

His Laws are not confined to the specific Covenant of Moses, which applied singularly to that Nation of Israel during that time and in that place. That particular covenant was closed at the Cross, but Moses was a contextual example of the more fundamental Covenant of Noah that still informs us how God operates on the human level in the fallen world of fallen flesh.

Today, through Jesus Christ we understand that God always offered that higher shalom of Life in the Spirit Realm. The necessary path to that higher realm was through the Law of the lower realm; it still is today. If we fail the human duty to the Law Covenants, we cannot begin to understand the spiritual obligations of grace. The call from Ezekiel that day was to repent, to fulfill the imperatives of the applicable covenant. Failure not only invited the wrath of God on this level of existence – sword, famine, disease and collapse of civilization – but it prevented any hope of avoiding His eternal wrath.

The three shining examples of morally blameless living before the Laws were Noah himself, along with Daniel and Job. These men were also spiritual giants, but that was not directly stated. It was indicated by the symbolism of their commitment. Where they stood with God was first a matter of their commitment to His Laws. In a very real sense, their eternal standing was not the immediate issue, in that it was necessary to pass through Laws first. This matter must be settled before greater things came into play. Sure, their eternity was secure in Heaven, but their lives could have been destroyed if they forgot the necessity of right living on the earth.

However, their morally righteous observance of the Laws was good enough to save only their individual lives. The broader effects of their testimony would not help anyone else simply because these men stood in the midst. It was not their physical presence, as if Laws were a matter of magic and ritual. It was a matter of their personal commitment to the Lord. The few who were truly morally pure could not turn back the wrath of God saved up for the Judean people. So, while God would save these three personally on the human level on the basis of their individual commitment to His Laws, even their literal children would be required to embrace the Laws, too, or risk facing God's earthly wrath.

Chapter 15

A profound parable makes for a very short chapter. Israel is the vine. When the vine is unfruitful, what can you do with it? Nothing. The wood itself is utterly useless if it grows no fruit. You can't even use it for a simple peg, because it lacks the strength to support anything people commonly used. The wood is too fragile; fire won't harden it any. It's barely useful as firewood.

What can the Lord do with Judah in her current state? Nothing. She can't even serve as a bad object lesson. What sort of failure makes God regret choosing someone? This had nothing to do with the higher spiritual reality, but the truth of a nation that could not even maintain the Law. With all the extravagant miracles and very nearly face-to-face encounter with God, they still could not keep their own commitments. Ezekiel himself wrote how God revealed that there was not another nation on earth that would have acted so wicked, had He chosen it.

Chapter 16

This chapter is a marvelous adaptation of symbolic mythology from pagan sources. Hebrew Scripture seldom employs the imagery of marriage for the Covenant of Moses, but it was quite common in pagan literature. This is the whole point: Judah had become so totally heathen that it was necessary to address her in pagan literary terms so she would understand her dire situation.

Staying with the pagan theme, we see the Nation of Israel was treated poorly at birth, as was common among the wilder nations of that part of the world. God refers to her parents as Hittites and Amorites, not in the literal sense, but as symbols of something civilized nations hated. The Hittites were brutal warriors who destroyed works of art and lacked the cultural depth themselves to maintain dominance over the lands they conquered. The Amorites were seen as smelly, thieving nomads. Thus, the infant girl Israel was exposed to the elements, abandoned at birth as those nations did with some of their own children.

But God protected her and kept her alive. She lived in Egypt until she was actually a nation. Then she was brought out from her slavery, only to show incredible immaturity until the last of the slave generation died. At that point, she was a lovely nation, worthy of taking as the Lord's bride. Her nakedness was a figure of speech for any unmarried lass.

The Lord raised her up from the worst background, making her queen of all His Creation. The language describes the most expensive garments available in ancient times. Even her sandals are described as the ancient equivalent of snakeskin leather. Nothing was too good for her. Indeed, the promises of the Mosaic Covenant, in terms of earthly blessings, were more extravagant than was hinted at in the Noahic Covenant for other nations. Moreover, she was the one nation granted His full revelation on the earth, which no other nation had.

She threw it all away in harlotry. Indeed, she wasn't even a good whore, because instead of selling herself, she paid to be abused. Could she have done any worse? Israel chased every idol of every nation God delivered into her hands in battle, and then rummaged around for even more idols, finally making up some new ones. That she deserved her punishment is impossible to state more strongly. If that weren't enough, Ezekiel compares her to Sodom and Samaria, as if they hadn't been quite so evil.

So it is that He promised yet somewhere in the future to restore her, but only on terms that would allow restoration of the likes of Sodom and Samaria, whom Judah had arrogantly used as a byword for God's wrath. We know now this refers to the terms of coming to Christ. No longer would any earthly nation have any privilege, but all humanity must come as individuals into a new Nation of Heaven. National identity would mean nothing under His New Covenant.

Chapter 17

It comes first as a riddle, but its purpose is parabolic. Ezekiel receives from the Lord a story that serves to warn the government back in Jerusalem.

The Lord compares Jehoiachin to the tender sprig of cedar taken from the top of the tree by a great eagle, Nebuchadnezzar. God had granted Babylon the authority to do pretty much what

she pleased. The King of Judah had ruled but a few months in Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar's troops took him into custody and back to Babylon. He was fine. Meanwhile, in his place, the emperor had planted Zedekiah like local stock willow near good water. Not as noble as the cedar, but he was in a very good place. Zedekiah was not under crushing tribute and he had every reason to do well and be fruitful.

But we broke his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar, sworn before Jehovah, and began reaching out to Pharaoh. In the Hebrew language, Ezekiel points out that the best Pharaoh can offer is ditch water, compared to the vast flow of Babylon's protection. But Zedekiah is a fool and believes Pharaoh's big talk about how much he would be willing to invest in defending Judah from Babylon's wrath. The Lord warns that Pharaoh cannot deliver. He can't bring enough troops, nor can he actually build good battlements to divert the Babylonian army by much. History records that Egypt did fail that way sometime later.

Zedekiah made this covenant, this oath, before the Lord. It was God's idea, not Nebuchadnezzar's. No empire can come and go without God's notice or His permit. This was not merely some rebellion against an earthly lord, but against God Himself. Zedekiah would end with more sorrow than he could imagine if he doesn't do what's right and obey the Lord by remaining faithful to Babylon.

Ezekiel then reminds us that God has a final Master Plan. He Himself will one day pluck the youngest sprout from the same tree Israel could have been and will plant Him on a high mountain. He would grow greater and fruitful, offering His protection to anyone who comes to Him. Where no tree should even be able to grow, the Lord will make Him greater than all others. We know this to be His own Son.

Chapter 18

Without the cultural context, the Hebrew Scriptures are often incomprehensible. Without the historical context, those Scriptures also seem self-contradictory.

It was well established under the Covenant of Moses that the sins of previous generations could handicap the blessings of their descendants. This was not absolute, but noticeable as a general statement of how things go on this fallen plane. It was specifically stated as the prophetic warning regarding the sins of Manasseh as the reason God had delivered Judah into the hands of Babylon. The generation under Zedekiah knew they were not quite so profligate as those who were under Manasseh, but that was not the point. They whined that those previous sins had put them in a bad fix and there was no point trying to make up for it. They overstated the case.

In so doing, they offered a popular proverb about how sour grapes would cause your teeth to have a high friction. In this case, they complained their forefathers had eaten the sour grapes of idolatry, but it was they who had to deal with sticky teeth of God's wrath. Ezekiel declared that they were missing the point. In so doing, he brings things down to the simplest level. What he describes are the most basic matters of individual morality, covered in Moses, but also universally applicable under Noah.

He mentions first the injustice of idolatry as the primary sin of Judah, notwithstanding it was not so extravagant as under Manasseh. Any straying at all is unjustified, since He was their only national God. Feasting at the pagan mountain shrines could not be harmless under the Covenant. The same goes for resurrecting the filthy idols Samaria promoted before her exile some centuries before. Then he notes lack of sexual restraint as no better, nor the petty greed that seeks every excuse to take things from others, as if it were somehow better than outright robbery. Instead, we should look for ways to help the less fortunate and be prepared to forgive debts by making them love gifts. Indeed, in every situation we seek de-escalation of tension and the broader peace and harmony of human communities. By such things God is pleased and will seek ways to bring life, never mind what everyone else is doing or has done.

Obviously, the expectation is more than simply rote obedience to the Law, but embracing the higher demands of wishing others well whenever possible. Lacking such a desire brings men to destruction, particularly those directly guilty. So an unjust son cannot inherit much life from his father's justice, and a later generation of justice will purchase his own blessings. Moreover, one who turns from such idiocy can have his previous sins forgotten. Repentance means something to God, just as turning from justice to evil means death creeps in where life once breathed.

God tips the balance in favor of justice through repentance. Does it seem unfair to your nit-picking absolutism? You have no comprehension of God, the living definition of justice. If those in Exile with Ezekiel would turn to the simplest level of Noahic justice, they would forestall much wrath, just as those back home in Judah could do. However, this whining about Babylon must stop. There was plenty of room for Judah to repent, walk justly and reap a harvest of God's favor, but she had to accept the limits He has placed on her. That was the real problem.

Chapter 19

This chapter is written in the dirge form. It is truly a lament from God over how things turned out. It was not what He wished, but it was what justice demanded. We have two parables using common symbols for Hebrew history.

In the first parable, we have the nation, but specifically the royal dynasties of Judah depicted as a pride of lions. The royal household is the lioness and her whelps are various royal sons. One of them, Jehoahaz, was taken hostage to Egypt by Pharaoh Necho. Another, Jehoiachin, was taken hostage to Babylon. These things need not have happened. They were not what God had planned for the nation, but results from the nation standing under God's wrath by choosing to disobey the Law and the prophets God sent.

The second parable depicts the nation as God's vine. The best grapevines grew stretched along a framework supported by wooden staves holding it off the ground. In this case, the rods were the kings who should have kept the kingdom strong, kept her in a condition to be fruitful. Zedekiah, so long as he was obedient to his Lord and his emperor, was in good shape, as was the nation. By his unfaithfulness, Zedekiah brought down the wrath of Babylon – the east wind – on his nation. As the last rod standing, his own punishment destroyed the nation. Now the

only surviving root was planted in the spiritually barren land of Babylon. That is, only those who survived in Exile would keep the national identity alive.

This is indeed a tragedy worthy of a dirge.

Chapter 20

Ezekiel offers a date we regard as mid-August 591 BC, referring to the seventh year of exile. The elders of the Exile came to inquire of Ezekiel, but the Lord rejected their inquiry. The Lord asked Ezekiel if he was ready to play judge on God's behalf.

The Lord comes instead as a prosecuting witness against the elders, who represent their nation. He chose the nation and raised His hand in their presence, swearing an oath to faithfully draw Israel out of slavery and out Egypt. He promised to take them to their own land, the best country reserved just for them. He also swore to execute the Law of Moses generously in their favor.

They rebelled from the very first word of Moses regarding their deliverance, and at every step along the way. During the Exodus, during the Wandering, during the Conquest, and ever after when they had settled in the Land, the nation as a whole preferred the pagan deities, any deity except their own God.

Every time they turned from Him, He came very near to destroying them. Only because He wished to protect His own reputation among the Gentile nations did He withhold justice against their sins. Did it gain Him anything? Was His kindness and patience repaid? No, His own people had continued to embarrass His name among the nations. Over and over again, He reminded them, and yet again in the presence of Ezekiel: If people would simply embrace the most basic requirements of His Laws, their lives would be as good as it gets on this earth.

So the Lord rebuked the elders and told them to go away, stop bugging His prophets. Let them go and inquire of their pagan idols. Apparently the portion of the nation willing to obey Him was a tiny, slender minority. The nation as a whole would lose their place and He would simply restrict His blessings to only the faithful. Some day, He would restore those faithful few to the Land and hear their prayers, receive their offerings and answer their inquiries.

This promise came on two levels. In the literal sense, this would have been hyperbole, since the Returnees never quite rose to this level of commitment again. However, by seeing it as a parable, we realize He promises to make a New Israel, one that would not stray again because it would not be possible – it would be a spirit nation composed of only those spiritually alive. Those who join the New Israel must do so in the Spirit. They would be drawn from every Gentile nation, not based on DNA or the Law.

This becomes an issue when Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy of destruction arising from the scrub forest in the Negev. Those who face the south will have their faces scorched. Among other things, this is a warning not to turn toward Egypt, expecting some good thing to come from there, as it would only embarrass them. At this, the people whined that Ezekiel was using a parable and they couldn't understand. It's because they didn't accept the message in the first place. The Hebrew literature and language had been parabolic from the start, as was most of

God's revelation from the very beginning. It wasn't out of reach; everyone spoke in parables to each other every day. That was Hebrew. Complaints of non-literal language were just an excuse to disobey.

Chapter 21

The Lord commands Ezekiel to face Jerusalem and prophesy of her doom. He had drawn His own sword to join battle on the side of Babylon against the city. Her sins were so great that the Lord would not save the few who were righteous. Furthermore, He would not sheath His sword again (until some final event mentioned later).

This is followed by what scholars call the Song of the Sword. In those days, a scepter was more like an ornate shepherd's staff, made of wood. The sword would cut the scepter down. The tragic song wove the tale of sparing no man, hunting down every one. Until the wrath of God had removed all their sins, it would continue to strike.

There were two roads the emperor's troops would take in the land, to Jerusalem and then to Rabbah of Ammon. Using all the various means of divination highly developed by the Babylonians, all of them would send Nebuchadnezzar first to Jerusalem, and then Rabbah later. Both had broken their oaths and rebelled. There was no rescue and no respite. The Lord ordered the High Priest to remove his turban and the King his crown. The trappings and privileges of office had been forfeited. However, eventually there would come One who was sent by God to wear both, to take up both offices: the Messiah.

But just because there was a delay, let not the Ammonites think they had escaped. Their fate would be worse yet.

Chapter 22

We have here a triple indictment as Ezekiel continues in his role as God's appointed judge. The Lord describes the condition of the city of Jerusalem and her inhabitants in about 591 BC.

The city is bloody, an abomination to God. The one place where you would expect any number of powerful officials to quickly intervene in a violent situation, the officials themselves are guilty. This was just begging for God's wrath. The families are weakened with internal strife, the powerful take advantage of everyone else and no one remembers God and His Law. There are all sorts of idolatry and utter lack of restraint. Hedonism is king in the city of Jerusalem. As they have defiled themselves ritually, so they will soil themselves when they see what's coming.

What should have been God's treasure on the earth had become the worst impurity that cheapens His Word. Israel was meant to be God's own pure nation to show the world how to live righteously, but they were so foul that they were a stain on humanity greater than any of the Gentile nations. Thus, the city would become a kiln and the Lord would fire this oven to melt the nation down so He could pour off what little precious truth floats to the top.

Much of this can be laid at the feet of the prophets and priests. The prophets would make up prophecies just to get money, saying it was from God. The priests no longer even knew how to separate between ceremonially clean and defiled objects, nor the underlying principles of what

made a thing ritually holy for use in the Temple. Instead, the priests were too busy dreaming up new corruptions and ways to embezzle the offerings. No one in the city understood holiness, nor wanted to know. The city's doom was sure.

Chapter 23

It is quite possible the modern man cannot imagine the depth of insult and pain God feels over idolatry. It may well be that a modern man might not sense the gravity of watching one's wife flaunting herself with harlotry, bringing her customers home to use her body in his bed. Yet this is as close as we can come to understanding just how awful Israel and Judah had acted.

Calling on Ezekiel yet again to play the judge, the Lord proposes a parable of sorts, describing how He went to such great expense taking two sisters as his brides. They were showered with every possible advantage as queens over all the earth. He names them according to their final insults to Him. Israel is *Oholah* – “Her Own Temple” – who insulted God by claiming His ritual worship while rejecting His chosen Temple. She wandered far from Him in her adultery. Judah is called *Oholibah* – “My Temple Is in Her” – in that her sins took place in God's face.

So while God allowed Israel to be taken away and slaughtered, Judah was even more insulting in her brassy lustful pursuit of everything in pants. Try to picture going in the morning to a sunrise sacrifice of your own child to Molech, the bronze oven god, and then in the evening coming to sacrifice with the worshipers at the Temple. In the end, it's hard to imagine He wouldn't give her a greater punishment.

In His justice, He would deliver her to the plundering contempt of those with whom Judah whored. Is a prostitute utterly surprised when some of her customers, after paying for her favors, come back and rob her when the last customer is done? So it will be with Judah, says Ezekiel. In the end, God expresses some surprise that she was able to attract anyone at all, since everyone has had her one time or another and she really has no charms left. She is compared to an aging hag trying to make one more sale. It will be her last.

Chapter 24

In many English translations, this chapter is hard to follow. Ezekiel sits in his home in Babylon; the date given is mid-January 588 BC. The Lord brings to him two very bad pieces of news.

First, the Lord announces to Ezekiel that very day begins the siege of Jerusalem. In those ancient times, even the most extravagant pony express relay system would not see news travel from Palestine to Babylon in less than several weeks. As it was, the official means of that day typically took months. Routine traffic was closer to a year. But Ezekiel recorded the day and date, which was confirmed much later.

On that date, the Lord decreed His wrath upon the City of Jerusalem. It comes in the parable of the boiling pot. We are given the picture of meaty stew, with big chunks including the bones. It is boiled with all the spices and when done, the meat is removed at random. The pot is allowed to boil dry. The fat dissolved or floating on top is allowed to crust on the pot. The bones are pulled out and dropped into the fire itself, which is heaped up and burning hot enough to make the pot glow red. The residue is allowed to dry and burn off inside the pot. So the Lord would

allow the inhabitants of the city to experience a long and deadly siege, with a near total loss of life.

On that same day, the Lord decrees Ezekiel's beloved wife must die. Yet he is not permitted to engage in the typical rituals of mourning. Permitted only to sigh within himself, he will not be allowed to bare his head or put on dust and ashes. He is not allowed to wail loudly, or eat the ritual food prepared for mourners. He is not allowed to go barefoot as mourners do. Instead, he must continue business as usual. When the people who visit ask why he refuses to engage in ritual mourning, he must relate the parable of the boiling pot and explain the hideous meaning of the city whose sins are exposed. Like blood splattered on a polished stone, even the texture of the rock will not hide any measure of their sins. So the people would be bereaved of the beloved symbol of their national identity, Temple and all.

Thus, Ezekiel must be silent and not mourn, because the people would likely not believe his story about Jerusalem until the official news comes three years later that she was taken in battle and destroyed. When that news arrives, then Ezekiel will be permitted to mourn his wife.

Chapter 25

We begin a section where Ezekiel prophesies against seven nations around Judah. This is not some vindictive Jewish fussing, as some allege, but Ezekiel addresses sins against the Covenant of Noah. So long as there are rainbows in the sky of this earth, all nations are held accountable under those Laws. We begin with the four smallest neighbors of Judah.

Ammon was the son of Lot and one of his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Ammonites held territory east of Israel, south of Syria, north of Moab, and out into the desert up against the Arabian and Nabatean tribes. Ammon had frequently raided and plundered Israel when the opportunity came and David settled the score rather forcefully. When Nebuchadnezzar headed that way in about 590 BC, he used divination to decide to attack Jerusalem first. The Ammonites must have sneered in relief at the fate of Judah. But their time came; after Babylon humbled them, those tribes to their east overran the territory. The nation fades from history at that point.

Moab was the nation born from Lot's other daughter in the same incident after their escape from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This was perhaps the most arrogant nation in rejecting Israel's status as the chosen people of Jehovah, despite a series of divine revelations attesting that fact beginning with Balaam. The Moabites helped Babylon subdue the rebellions Jehoiakim, itself no sin, but their attitude was what made it wrong. They couldn't wait for any excuse to destroy the nation any way they could, as if they had no other mission in the world. So the Lord handed them over to the same desert raiders as their brothers, the Ammonites.

Edom was a close kin of Israel and God protected them from the Conquest. For this favor, they often fought against Israel, even to the point of selling whole cities of their cousins into slavery to pagan Gentile nations. This was a grave violation against God's favor. For this they were also overrun by the Nabateans and eventually driven into southern Judah. God finally subdued them once and for all under Judah. They were absorbed by force into the Covenant of Moses by

one of the Maccabees (John Hyrcanus). During the Roman Era, while keeping their national identity for a time, they finally merged with Judah.

The Lord had never granted the Philistines land in Palestine, but they took that and anything else they could, always picking at Israel. They arrogantly rejected Jehovah's claim over the Promised Land. By the time Ezekiel discusses them, they were already in bad shape. Two of their five cities had been depopulated, and then repopulated by foreigners under Assyria. They continued fighting but were subdued by turns under just about every imperial power passing through the area. Eventually they simply disappear completely as a people during the Maccabean period.

Chapter 26

We begin three chapters of prophecy regarding Tyre. Skeptics love to attack this chapter because they assume it has to be taken literally, word for word. The prophecies of God seldom work that way; Hebrew language is loaded with figures of speech.

What is Tyre's sin? For centuries she was an ally and helper of Israel, but shortly after the kingdom divided between Jeroboam and Rehoboam, the old alliance shifted to the north. At about the same time, the Sidonian center of gravity shifted to Tyre and the religion went very dark. Ahab married the daughter of Tyre's ruler Ethbaal, and they began to share religious worship of Melkart. While Tyre was never actually an enemy of Judah, she viewed Zion as a competitor. It was all about the money. All the more so when you consider that a great many very wealthy folks were seeking refuge from the many wars and police actions so common in those times. Egypt and Assyria had already been quite active, so any city that became a refuge for the wealthy would benefit from the mere presence of wealthy spenders. Besides, Tyre of all places knew how to invest in future profits. So when they saw Jerusalem humbled in 586 BC, the folks in Tyre regarded it as good for business. Thus, they dismissed the notion that it had anything to do with Jehovah.

Sadly for Tyre, Nebuchadnezzar turned his attention to her next. Ezekiel dates his prophecy at the beginning of the same year Jerusalem fell, so he could not know these things on a human level, since the news had not arrived. Thus, his prophecy shows God reveals far distant events as they come about, years before men would learn of them in the normal fashion.

Nebuchadnezzar knew that Tyre had tried to engage Zedekiah in a rebel alliance and he came upon the city when the palace and primary business was a half-mile off shore on a rocky island. However, the city also had a very fine natural harbor on the shore and a considerable investment in facilities there. This was the primary means to feeding the island portion of the city, because all around the harbor was decent farming land and roads to bring exotic goods from afar. It was this shore facility that Babylon engaged in a thirteen-year siege, because he had only land forces and could not blockade the port. Still, cut off from the land trade, the little kingdom took a massive economic loss.

Ezekiel jumps back and forth here. He warns that the city would see a series of attacks from several different nations. Nebuchadnezzar ("he") would get things rolling, slaughtering a great many of Tyre's peasantry and destroying her lands and port facilities. However, Ezekiel refers to a "they" who would keep coming, wave upon wave, until Alexander builds his causeway

from the rubble of the port city and successfully takes the island fortress apart. Turning it into a bare rock for the spreading of nets was a figure of speech, but we can be sure Alexander was pretty thorough.

Meanwhile, the various allied seagoing nations who traded with Tyre would be troubled by Nebuchadnezzar's partial success. It would make them all nervous. Thus, we are treated to more figures of speech about dragging them all down to a symbolic hell below the surface of the earth. What did happen was the ruler of Tyre was taken hostage to Babylon, while the offshore city became a rather loosely connected imperial tributary. In his place, the city was ruled by a commission whose members were called "judges" (loose translation) – in some ways similar to the Judges who led Israel shortly after the Conquest.

Chapter 27

The Lord chose Israel, among other things, to be a nation of priests. Their mission was to mediate the message of God to the rest of humanity. The Lord had long established a covenant with mankind under Noah, but humanity had long forgotten that covenant. Israel revived the knowledge of that covenant, in part by embracing and adhering to a specific example of that covenant, in the form of the Covenant of Moses. Israel never promoted Moses; that was their unique covenant with Jehovah. They were granted closeness and a fullness of revelation denied the rest of the world. They promoted Noah among the Gentile nations. Held to a higher standard, Israel was to live in such a way that anyone else in the world seeking truth would be touched, drawn, moved by the special power of mercy which overshadowed Israel when she obeyed the Lord.

As we know, Israel wasted no time in diluting her obedience, seeking to emulate every foreign influence under the sun. Other nations were held to account for knowingly seeking to corrupt Israel's unique calling. Tyre was one such nation. No longer the second house of the Sidonians, she had become a mixture of educated and wealthy nobles and merchants from all over the region. Tyre had a long opportunity to study Israel, to read her body of Scripture and to understand the full implications of that literature. Tyre chose scheming deceit, undermining the demands of Scripture enticing Israel away from faithful obedience.

There is nothing inherently wrong with trading. To facilitate an exchange between distant lands and their unique collection of products is a service worthy of hire. Making a profit from this trade was not evil, since it entailed such great risk in those days when Phoenicians were the only ones willing to sail out of sight of land to shorten sea voyages. The evil was in trying to sell the notion of usury. During their long history together as allies, Tyre seduced Israel into credit, as a direct rejection of faith and trust in Jehovah Jireh, the Lord Provider. Scripture takes a dim view of usury specifically, and condemns credit-based business in general. You can grow an economy without credit; it's just a little slower that way and less fragile. But Scripture bluntly says that the borrower is a slave to the lender. If your master is pagan, he will surely require you to bow down to his gods. Jehovah did not take this lightly, which is why He provided the means to avoid being enslaved. Israel rejected that path, in part due to the knowing enticement of Tyre.

The people of Tyre were not simply materialistic. Their primary deity was Melkart, often associated with certain Baals of the Canaanites, as well as Heracles of the Greeks. His worship included a major annual ritual symbolizing the same sort of death and rebirth associated with some underworld deities elsewhere. It was a common theme from much of pagan mythology in ancient times. The problem here is Tyre's utter contempt for the God of Israel as Israel's God. Even when Israel dominated other nations, they compelled no one to give up their pagan gods, except those who lived among them. It was the lack of reciprocal respect that prophets condemn in the other nations. Gentiles weren't under Moses, so they weren't expected to serve Jehovah, but they were obliged to acknowledge Him as the God of Israel. A major element in prophetic condemnations of other nations was arrogant disrespect for something they didn't understand. The fundamental sin of humanity is assuming we can ignore the divine when it suits us. If one cannot be reverent before the mysteries of the supernatural, then superstition was an acceptable substitute. The people of Tyre were at times arrogantly dismissive of Jehovah, particularly guilty of undercutting the clear revelation of the Law of Moses.

So the quintessential image of Tyre as a sailing ship is laid out in this chapter. What a fine ship she was, made of the finest materials and craftsmanship! What a grand job she did mediating the trade between all the nations listed there. Ezekiel offers a quick rundown of the chief products of various nations who traded via Tyre. But the ship is wrecked by the greatest threat to Mediterranean shipping, an easterly wind. In that part of the world, easterlies were always stormy and cold. This was, of course, a symbol of Babylon to the east. The destruction of the on-shore harbor cost Tyre dearly and greatly diminished the flow of goods. Thus, the other nations weep. The sins of Tyre afflicted most of the known world at that time.

Chapter 28

It is perverse to imagine Ezekiel was not a highly educated scholar in his own right. It is perverse to deny that he could write with all the same literary genius acknowledged in other men of his age. On the one hand, it should be obvious Ezekiel knows that the people of Tyre were Phoenician and was well aware of their mythology, which was shared among their many colonies.

On the other hand, it is equally perverse to presume he wasn't aware of the full implications of what he wrote. More than a simple ancient printer spitting out whatever came over the invisible wire from Heaven, he was fully involved in the process, as God would naturally have used the fullness of his human talents, since it is the same God who gave those talents. Ezekiel was surely aware of the mystical ambiguity common with all Hebrew literature. He was among those with a full spiritual awareness and would know full well that his writing would confuse some of those lacking such enlightenment. He knew penetrating the parabolic symbolism is in part a matter of knowing Hebrew literary and intellectual culture, and partly a sensitivity to what the Spirit of God wants to say to each reader who brings to this prophecy his own living spirit.

There are three items in this chapter. First is a direct accusation against the human ruler of Tyre. Second is a broader accusation against the throne of Tyre and all those who have sat upon it,

because Satan used them. Third, Ezekiel mourns the coming devastation for Sidon, the sister city to Tyre just 20 miles (32km) to the north and previous capital of the little kingdom.

The ruler of Tyre at that time was Ethbaal II (AKA Ittobaal). He fancied himself one of the greatest rulers of all time. Had he not more gold than most rulers with far larger domains? Was he not a lender to many great men? He fancied himself wiser than Daniel, who by that time was a famous wise vizier in the Babylonian imperial court. Jehovah said Ethbaal's greatness was quite fragile. He would face invaders who would eventually execute him. Where then would be his claim to divinity?

Part of the mythology of Tyre was that the kings were so connected to their god Melkart that others should consider them as him. This sort of arrogance was common in that part of the world. Ironically, there was a Phoenician legend about that very thing, of a man who made so much of himself he imagined he was genuinely divine, but his fall was even greater than his pride. Ezekiel skillfully weaves this into his prophecy, even as he adds uniquely Hebrew touches. Thus, he accuses the institution of the royal family and its religion of exhibiting a satanic level of pride. Who could fail to see the associations with God's "Covering Cherub" who fell because he felt all that glory passing through him should in part be due him? Yet to make too much of this as entirely about Satan would be to miss the fine writing, the delightful mystical ambiguities. Moreover, such a narrow approach would offer no meaning to the royal court at Tyre, to whom this is addressed.

Sidon was the northern port and Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it. It had been famous for the worship of Astarte and infamous for breathing fresh life into her defiling practices in Israel. As Jehovah would see the Tyrians defiling their own temples, so He would make the city of Sidon a place people avoided for the high disease rate she would suffer during the Babylonian siege. Most of all, Sidon symbolized the numerous sharp afflictions of all the nations surrounding Judah for injecting their poisonous pagan religions. The Phoenicians in Tyre and Sidon were particularly zealous to steal God's sheep and enslave them to demon gods simply because it was profitable for their trade. In the future, those nations would not arise again, while Israel would be allowed to return and rebuild. This time, she would not have the siren songs of pagan invitations.

More to the point, all would know that Jehovah was the God of all Creation, not just some tribal deity like any other.

Chapter 29

Ezekiel now turns his attention to Egypt. In this chapter we have two prophecies separated by some 16 years or so. The first is January 586 BC, six months before the Fall of Jerusalem. It is exceptionally difficult to pin down precise identities as the chronology of Egypt remains in dispute to this day. Scripture refers to this Pharaoh as Hophre.

This Pharaoh claims divinity. He styles himself as a crocodile and claims that he made the Nile. While we are used to hyperbole and symbolic statements from those times, this is still quite audacious. The Lord warns that this crocodile and his subjects (fishes clinging to his scales) would be driven from the land and die in some wilderness. It was bad enough that Pharaoh

kept enticing Judah to trust him when he consistently failed. Like a dry reed that looks and feels strong but has invisible cracks, he let Judah fall. Again, the image of destruction is symbolic and was never meant literally. The point is that Pharaoh already had no excuse for ignoring Jehovah's claims as Creator of Heaven and Earth, given the Exodus; after this business with Babylon, he would not rise again.

The number of forty years is symbolic, representing half a lifetime. The Egyptian court would be driven from their best possessions on the Lower Nile in the north, but nothing indicates where they would flee. Records of this time in Egypt are almost non-existent and there really isn't much from Babylon about them. In the absence of external evidence, only a rejection of faith justifies denying anything happened as prophesied here. On the other hand, taking all this with legalistic literalism ignores everything we know of Hebrew literature and culture.

Then Ezekiel tells us that a related message came again to him in 570 BC. The long siege of Tyre was partly successful in terms of harming the little kingdom, but there wasn't much plunder. The Lord was granting Nebuchadnezzar the plunder of Egypt for his wages in working so long and hard at Tyre. Again, we have no external records to support this prophecy, but some scholars suggest Pharaoh's court was driven south, into Upper Egypt. We know Nebuchadnezzar left a garrison in Lower Egypt, but little else. A major Egyptian temple was destroyed sometime in this period. In the minds of Pharaoh's court, with so little control over that region, it didn't matter how many of his subjects may have infiltrated back into the Babylonian controlled area; he got little benefit from it. For him, it might as well be a wasteland. The Persian conquest of Babylon offered Egypt relief, but seems too little too late. What we do know for sure was that Egypt remained forever after a backwater kingdom of no political importance.

On that same day when Persia released Egypt, though, Israel had a chance to recover some of her greatness. The new mission would be to provide the setting for Messiah, the Horn of David, to return. He would open His mouth and teach from Ezekiel's prophecies.

Chapter 30

Ezekiel continues with several more warnings related to Babylon's eventual thrust into Egypt. First, he draws the image of a storm on the horizon. It would be unlike any previous storm, because it would destroy the entire collection of alliances Egypt held at that time. Next, we see the scene of devastation after the storm has swept through. The Nile is described as one long battlefield, strewn with dead Egyptian troops and the cities in smoking ruins. Messengers will sail with the bad news, leaving the upriver portion of the ancient empire trembling in fear as Nebuchadnezzar's army approaches.

Then follows a list of the major forts and cities along the Nile that will be destroyed. As noted before, we have no significant record of this outside Scripture. What we see is sometime later a very much-weakened Egypt that somehow had lost tremendous wealth. Only Ezekiel's prophecy indicates Babylon plundered it. That most of Egypt's treasures were at that time in the lower Nile region is highly probable from what we know of things. Again, none of this should be taken as baldly literal, but as parabolic language.

Then Ezekiel dates a prophecy a few months before Jerusalem falls in 586 BC. The Lord declares that He has broken one of Pharaoh's arms. This is a reference to Egypt's rather lame attempt to relieve Jerusalem during the long Babylonian siege. The nobles in Jerusalem misread the brief respite, cheering that God had saved them. Instead, Nebuchadnezzar made rather short work of Pharaoh's advance, and then came back and finished off Jerusalem. The Lord promises this broken arm would not heal and that He would eventually send Babylon to break the other arm. Egypt's doom was sealed. That the Lord had Ezekiel date this prophecy would be the proof later for all to see. They will read this, written at the time that they lived it, by a prophet of Jehovah who was very far away and could not have known these things in the flesh. The Lord told them to him. The Egyptians would be forced to acknowledge that Jehovah is God.

Chapter 31

The issue remains the arrogance of Egypt. After the Exodus, the official records in Egypt never mentioned their great defeat. We can suggest something similar for the silence regarding Babylon's attack, because Egyptian imperial records never admitted any defeats. In particular, though, is Egypt's refusal to even acknowledge that there was a God of Israel, never mind God of all Creation.

About a month before Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 BC, the Lord instructed Ezekiel to record a prophecy for the Egyptians. Would they compare themselves with some other great empire of times past? How about Assyria? By anyone's estimation, it was greater by far than Egypt. How great was Assyria?

Ezekiel launches into a parable of some unimaginably huge Lebanon Cedar. He echoes all the nice things people might say to an Assyrian Emperor to curry his favor, referring to greatness, how everyone in the world does better in the shadow of the vast Assyrian Empire. Is it not a blessing to live under such a great imperial power?

God brought it down and its fall was greater than its rise. Though it had been pretty enough to stand as a tree in the Garden of God, it was destroyed. Why? It was because of the arrogance. Assyria treated with contempt the God who allowed it to exist. Nothing will ever again reach such glory and power on the earth, even in God's own estimation.

And how great was its fall, from the heights of the clouds to the pits of Hell. Does Pharaoh think Egypt is that great? His fall is next on God's agenda.

Chapter 32

Almost two years after the Fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel receives a fresh lamentation from God over Egypt. Lamentation is a literary form and in some cases a duty in public ritual. It may well be Ezekiel was quite happy with the idea of Egypt's doom, but that was not the point. It's not about the messenger, but the message.

Pharaoh is compared to a mighty lion or some huge sea monster. But his power was nothing against God's power. Instead of stirring up the water of the seas, he would no longer so much as muddy the water of the Nile. He would be caught and given as a feast for carrion eaters and his blood would water the earth. He was a great power during his reign and a huge mess in

death. Yes, his end would be an omen like dramatic changes in the night sky. Other nations would be terrified at what a tremendous change this signals in the world order. And so it was, for Babylon would come and plunder, and leave vast fields of slain soldiers. No one will sneer at the God of Israel again.

A couple of weeks later, the Lord again commanded Ezekiel to lament the destruction of Egypt. There is dramatic imagery of the other nations she would meet in the metaphorical grave of kingdoms. Six are named: Assyria, Elam, Meschech and Tubal (nations on the northern edge of Assyria), Sidon and Edom. Oddly, though Edom practiced circumcision, their unconscionable hatred for Israel earned them a place in the grave of uncircumcised nations. Thus, Pharaoh will find a vast welcoming committee of nations that mocked the God of Israel.

Chapter 33

This is a busy chapter. During the time between the closing of his mouth and notice of Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel has carried on a silent, written prophetic ministry. He has finished the ministry of warning before the fall of the city, and his warnings to the other nations near Judah. Now the Lord renews the call to Ezekiel as he prophesies looking forward to a renewal and return. It is a new calling as the Lord and Judah enters a new period in the Covenant. He begins what amounts to Messianic prophecies and the calling is quite similar to the previous. Ezekiel is a watchman who is obliged to sound the warning of God's wrath, regardless how they respond.

He also reminds us God still operates by the Covenant of Moses. Under the Law, one was called to a life of penitence. If the sinner repents, he will receive the blessings of the Law. If an observant man begins too much to trust his human power to obey the Law, he will turn to sin. His righteous past will be forgotten. That's how the Law works; it is not grace, though it is a path that can bring you to grace. This Law is the message of Ezekiel, explaining and defending God's justice.

Some months after the capture of Jerusalem, a messenger arrives in Babylon with the news. Ezekiel had spent the previous evening fully conscious of the Lord's power and Presence, and knew his time of silence was at an end. The next morning, upon hearing the message, his tongue was loosed again to speak. His first oral message is a warning to the remnant still hugging the ruins of the City. What he describes sets the pattern for the future of the Jewish nation: They claim the promises of God without obeying the full obligations of His Law. We saw how this was the trend already before the Fall of Jerusalem, thinking they had God over a barrel, as if He was bound, not them. Thus, Ezekiel promised that they would be pulled out of the ruins, most of them to execution and a few to join one final wave of exiles some five years after the destruction of the City.

The Exiles already in Babylon were no better. Sure, they loved to hear Ezekiel prophesy of the restoration and Messianic promises, but they were unable to hear in his words the necessity of repentance. Sometime during the years of rebellion against Babylon, the Jewish people had simply assumed they were the Chosen irrevocably. The notion that they were obliged to offer a sincere devotion to God's justice was incomprehensible. They were Chosen; that was that. Ezekiel's prophecies were mere entertainment, a cultural observance.

Chapter 34

What happens when the protector becomes a predator? Or when the biggest threat is your neighbor? Ezekiel shares a condemnation from God against the rulers, priests and upper classes of Israel.

First is the matter of the kings and priests, the two halves of God's government of Judah. It's one thing to tax the people to free the rulers from mundane concerns and fund troops for defense, or to keep the Temple supplied and maintained. However, the reason God permits rulers to tax is so they can provide for the needs of the nation that they lead, not to consume it upon themselves. It's not an unconditional grant from God. The Lord condemns the kings, nobles and priests for failing to consider the actual needs of the people, taking the proper steps God had commanded through the Law and the prophets.

As always, the prophetic message works on two levels. There is the obvious literal meaning, the moral code behind governments and laws. For example, Zedekiah refused to submit to Babylon as commanded by God. His failure meant the destruction of the city and Temple; the nation was exiled. The priests also failed in teaching the people. By their cynical abuse of their position, they allowed the people to commit idolatry on the side, so long as they got their tithes and offerings. It doesn't take much even on the human level to realize the utter failure of sincerity in their service as rulers of the people. They could have failed much in the mechanics of things and still found mercy for genuine penitence before the Lord. They couldn't be bothered with even the fake version of that.

They failed even worse on the spiritual level. The rulers had encouraged compromises that removed the divine covering for the nation. Their greatest sin was pushing the spiritual meaning of things far away, making the people slaves to their lesser human needs. They saw themselves so very wise in human terms that they simply didn't need to worry about what they viewed as fairy tales of God's miraculous protection of the nation. The sheep of God's fold were scattered far across the spiritual landscape.

The obvious punishment is that the royal family lost their power. Historically, their authority weakened until they no longer mattered, sometime during the Maccabean Period. The priests became a mere secular government and were secularized in themselves. In the end, they lost their power as Rome drove the Jews out of Jerusalem. God proclaimed that He would search out better shepherds. In this, the literal fulfillment was Jesus born King of the Jews, of the literal royal family. More importantly, this is a Messianic promise on the spiritual level.

A similar condemnation was leveled against the higher-class peasants. While merely sheep themselves, they were like overly aggressive rams, jumping to the front of the herd, taking the best of everything and destroying what was left. It's one thing to chomp the finest grass because you arrive first, but another to stomp down what you can't or won't eat for yourself, as if to starve anyone coming behind you. This spiteful abuse of the poor infuriated God. Again, it's on two levels. The wealthy abused the poor in a literal sense, a moral crime against the Laws of Moses. It was more than greed, but a contempt for which there was simply no excuse. But in the process, they also participated in destroying the mystical outlook by wallowing in material prosperity as if nothing else mattered. People with an otherworldly outlook could tolerate

poverty, but even that was taken from them. Spiritual truth was hidden, made unpalatable. This was the greater crime.

The chapter closes with a much fuller Messianic promise, that someone would come to reclaim the throne of David. Not just the literal vestments of earthly kings, though Jesus could have had that. No, it was aimed at pointing them to the spiritual plane, where all this would be forgotten in the spiritual freedom of redemption from the Cross. They would no longer be bound under the Law to seek God's face, but could approach Him directly by making peace through His own Son.

Chapter 35

Mount Seir was the location of Edom's capital. We can scarcely discern the depth of insult Edom offered to Jehovah. This was the nation born from Esau, the brother of Jacob. It seems they never forgot, much less forgave the Lord for taking from their filthy hands the divine birthright. Had Isaac done the right thing, he would not have striven so hard against God's own revealed judgment. It's not that Jacob was such a nice guy, but that Esau was hopeless and did everything he could to prove it. Jacob eventually did turn to righteousness and God gave him the new name Israel for it.

Nor can we easily discern the utter scandal of Edom's bitter greedy envy against their brothers, Israel. God protected Edom's land and would not permit Israel so much as a handprint-sized portion of it. And in honor of God's demand, Israel went out into the eastern desert wastes to avoid having to fight them. Only when Edom encroached in God's gifts to Israel did the latter go to war. For all this, Edom never ceased to exhibit an obscene lust to take Israel's Promised Land. So much so that we see Edom was willing to commit any depraved act to harm Israel at every opportunity. Things no nation on earth would do to another, Edom willingly did to her own kin.

Edom pretended an alliance with Judah against Babylon. When the siege began, Edom sold the Judean refugees as slaves to other nations. Then she licked her lips and begged permission to help with the siege against Jerusalem. After the captives were removed, Edom proclaimed herself the default inheritor of the Promised Land and began colonizing. The Edomites got as far as Hebron, completely against the command of Nebuchadnezzar, before they were laid waste some three years later. The Lord promised through Ezekiel that their own cities, so carefully protected up to this time, would be destroyed and they would lose their inheritance, made homeless. Yet they would most certainly not enjoy ownership of Palestine.

It's a parabolic statement that when the entire world was in party mode, it would be Edom who was burying their dead. She would feel the burning shame of her evil ways, her insulting taunts against Jehovah Himself. The only way Edom survived under Rome as a tiny little nation, a mere thin slice of her former hordes, was by marrying into the priestly family ruling Judah at that time. Thus, we see Herod raised up as the despicable symbol of evil forever after, something worthy of all hatred. During Rome's dominance, Edom fades from human memory, absorbed completely into Judah.

Chapter 36

Does the earth itself not rejoice when the inhabitants upon it live justly? The Lord sends a message for the land of Judah itself, a promise that sometime soon, she will be returned to her former joy and comfort from the days when Israel lived righteously upon her. For when people live by the Laws of God, Creation itself works mightily to bring the blessings of *shalom*. And when people engage in idolatry, the land mourns and seeks to spit them out.

So the Land was somewhat concerned, we see, at the encroachment of Edom. These foul heathens were about to defile the Land. Worse yet, the fate of Judah in Exile causes the rest of the nations to blaspheme. Insulting the name of Jehovah burns the very ground with indignation. Thus, for the sake of His own Name, He promises to return to the Land a people disciplined by their sorrows and they will return and fill the land with justice again. No longer will the nations around slander the Land as one that devours the children of its residents. Instead, the Land will be blessed and become fertile, a builder of nations.

The Lord shifts the focus of the prophetic thread here. It was to the sorrow of the Land Israel once defiled. So He drove her out and left the land desolate and alone. Now the time of His wrath was spent. Not for the sake of Judah, but for His own sake would He restore her to the Land. She would be cleansed of idolatry by His own sovereign power. This much came true in later times. We know the Jews never again drifted off into gross idolatry as in the past.

However, the promise to give them a new and just heart cannot be taken literally. That is, it was made available, but never taken. The Returnees wasted little time in misinterpreting the prophecies of the Messiah, insisting that they were somehow virtuous regardless of their empty ritual observances. It was not long before the Hellenizing influence under Alexander the Great turned them into something even more idolatrous than they had ever been before. No, not of the grosser sort, but this was a subtle idolatry that made God not the same God at all, an idolatry of the intellect. Thus, blended within this vision is a Messianic Promise that His Son would come and change the very hearts of men who would repent and follow His teaching.

So while the nation would return and build up the ruins and give the Land back her identity as the place where God is revealed, it would not be by the righteous choice of the nation, but by the iron hand of God's sovereign will. They would give birth to the Messiah in spite of themselves.

Chapter 37

Many popular and fanciful interpretations are drawn from this chapter. It is necessary to note one thing immediately: Nothing here can be taken literally. There would surely be certain implications visible in literal elements, but what is described is symbolic in meaning, not least because the prophet was in the Spirit. He was not in the flesh when the vision came.

Israel began with the one primary purpose of carrying God's revelation to the entire world. Under the Covenant of Moses, that included first the gift of God's true Scripture to Moses during those many long days on the Mountain of God. All the fiction was edited out of the ancient oral legends and the real narrative was explained. It shows up in Genesis, mostly. The thread of this narrative shows how God intended to rescue humanity from the curse of the Fall,

revealed in part through this nation bearing His truth in how they lived according to the Covenant. There were promises of blessing and warnings of curses. By her actions, Israel chose the curses.

But the mission was incomplete. Thus, what follows in this chapter is a parabolic statement of how God will not be thwarted by the sins of men, not even His Chosen Nation. On yet another level, He reveals that the final fulfillment of their mission will be in changing the identity of who "Israel" is. The Valley of Dry Bones shows how Israel has died as a nation and there is only some vague memory of what she once could have been by this vast stretch of a bone-yard. After walking around it, Ezekiel is asked if he thinks the bones could be restored to life. Was the mission a failure? He answers that it is not for him to say, but God alone.

So he is commanded to prophesy, to speak God's Word over these bones, which once framed the people who should have borne that prophetic word in themselves. But reassembling the bones and covering them with flesh was not enough. Man without God is dead, even though he lives on this earth. So the Lord commands Ezekiel to speak the prophetic word to the winds, representing the Spirit of God. Only the animating power of the Lord can make man alive. Without God, there is nothing of value on this earth. So the winds animated these bodies, turning them into a mighty army of God's living revelation. This was how God planned to do it. Israel had turned themselves into useless, dead bones. Upon the framework of revelation they once held, the Lord would build new bodies from some other source. Then He would breathe His own power into them, an army of His Heavenly Realm that no man could count. It would not happen until His Son came to bring that life through the Jews and Gentiles together in His Kingdom.

In the second message, the Lord has Ezekiel cut two sticks of wood and label them Judah and the Southern Tribes, and the other Ephraim and the Northern Tribes. Their animosity and warfare were not such a distant memory, but now both kingdoms were exiled from the Land. The Lord indicates He would reunite them under one Davidic ruler. The primary message is the unity of this New Kingdom that He would create under His Messiah. Whatever had separated Israel and Judah would essentially be forgotten. Again, literal fulfillment is not possible, but the mission of God's revelation was not frustrated by the failures of mankind. God would make it happen despite the truculence of His own Chosen People. He would raise up a new chosen people to live on the bones of the dead nation to serve His purpose under a Davidic Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Chapter 38

This and the following chapter raise the subject of Gog, who appears to be the ruler of Magog. He is confederated with a large number of other nations, all of them somewhere far to the north of Palestine, perhaps beyond the northern reaches of the old Hittite Empire. However, it continues the same time line from the previous chapter. This is hardly the first mention of this ancient theme in Hebrew prophecy. For the people of Ezekiel's time, this is a promise of what could be if they would simply obey the Covenant. Yes, it's going to be hard at times, but man cannot frustrate God's promises.

At the same time, Ezekiel reveals eternal principles. God's plans will not be frustrated even if Judah continues in rejecting the original meaning of Moses. He'll use someone else. First comes the Messianic Age, when New Israel will be a name with no geographic meaning, but a symbol of the eternal Kingdom of Heaven manifested throughout the earth. In this timeline, near the end of the Messianic Age upon the earth, all the nations gather to attack the followers of Christ. They seek to attack God Himself, but for all their combined arms and tactics, they are unable to harm the Kingdom of Heaven.

Foolish is the reader who struggles to make this represent some singular event; the entire thing is symbolic. Wherever His love is manifest among fallen humanity, there comes a time when Satan will stir others to attack those who dare to defy the Darkness. While there will surely be a final human event reflecting this satanic urge, that is not the point here or anywhere else in Scripture. The point is to warn His New Nation of the Messiah that opposition in this life is the norm. The other point is to warn Satan and his servants they can't win under any circumstances.

We have no way of knowing exactly what the labels mean to Ezekiel. Scholars are all over the map, literally. The ancient symbol of northern barbarian raiders goes too far back into Hebrew history to pin it down precisely. These warlike nations were always a problem, and often hired out their troops to others. We understand that they were proud of warfare as a noble profession, almost a divine calling. Scripture matches these names to various descendants of Japheth, a son of Noah. They represent the essence of worldly fallen mankind, hostile to anything peaceful, especially the peace that God promised to those who obeyed His Laws. Thus, any such reference is generally equivalent to that portion of humanity that embraces the lies of Satan against the civilizing influence of God's revelation. However, coming on the tail of a description of a valley of Hebrew bones turned into a Messianic nation, it's obviously for us a reference to any force opposing the gospel.

At some point, the Lord's long-suffering patience wears thin and He provokes the enemies of truth to attack. Here Ezekiel draws a picture of unwalled villages and towns, such easy pickings for the raider forces. But the tables will be turned. The invading force will be utterly shaken by the earth itself, because Creation cannot bear the lawlessness. They will be driven mad and turn on each other. In the end, God will exalt His Name as the unquestioned ruler of Creation.

Chapter 39

This chapter parallels the previous in terms of general content. Ezekiel harps on the thoroughness of the defeat of Gog and his vast hordes, and indicates something of just how many there would be. When the dropped weapons of your enemy serve as firewood for seven years, that is more than enough stuff to cover the entire land itself with a carpet of weapons. To require seven months to bury the remains means enough bodies to do almost the same. We can hardly estimate what it means in literal numbers of troops, but this represents enough people to cover the entire land of Palestine with only a few paces in any direction between each of the soldiers.

This would be the literal meaning of the passage. God did indeed promise under Moses that He would defend the nation Himself if they were faithful. What this suggests is a level of

faithfulness Israel seldom achieved, but we have already been shown that such a level of obedience would be common in that future Messianic Age. However, this is still hyperbole, since Christians seldom understand the Law Covenants, much less adhere so closely to them. What Ezekiel describes here is not meant literally, but a way of painting an image of God's power working in His People. Not the Old Israel, this is the New Israel. Nothing on this planet, even the whole population of earth itself, can stand against the power of God working in His obedient servants.

Ezekiel also describes the return of the full Nation of Israel. We know for a fact of history that this did not happen literally. Again, there was no intention that anyone should take this fantastic image that way. The original people of Israel forfeited their rights to the name. In the New Covenant, the name "Israel" is the Israel that should have been, the Israel that does fulfill God's Laws through the Blood of His Son. Israel was meant to be God's revelation by demonstration of a godly life, showing His power and righteousness. Literal Israel failed and the Covenant came to an end at the Cross; the veil was torn in two. The way into His Presence is now through Christ alone. Thus, God offers here an image of His New People living in safety, so that no earthly power can harm us.

But this is not an image of His People going to war. They remain secure without lifting a finger, but bowing the knee to God. This is an image of God making sure no one can harm His revelation.

Chapter 40

Some time passes before Ezekiel writes this portion. On the 25th anniversary of his exile (573 BC), he was taken up in the Spirit of the Lord to visit the long ruined Jerusalem. Bluntly, Ezekiel tells us this is a vision. What follows could not be a literal description of anything. It does not match very well to the known geography of Palestine, but approximates it, including a high mountain just north of the New City. He encounters a being resembling a man, but with skin like brass or bronze. In ritual uses, this metal could take the heat and often glowed. The simplest meaning is that this person emitted light, an angelic being. This angel instructs him to memorize what he sees and report it to the Exiles. These final chapters of the prophecy are taken up with this single vision.

The angel carries a measuring rod, and Ezekiel notes it's length in terms of the Temple cubit, something a bit longer than normal. The rod is just over ten feet (3 meters), or six Temple cubits. This rod or reed pole is used to measure the exterior of the Temple. What Ezekiel describes is more or less of the pattern of Solomon's Temple, but much larger. Popular drawings abound and most of them agree on the essentials. The gates are deep with alcoves and windows, forming a short hallway that extends into the courtyard. We are given a lot of detail on the Eastern Gate, and then told the gates are precisely equal on all four sides of the structure.

The Temple was always God's House, the place to meet with Him. Significantly, we are told there is only one outer court and one inner court. There are gates between the two courts. Gone are the Courts of Gentiles, of Women, Men and Priests. Along the outer wall of this Outer Court are various chambers and kitchens where people can prepare sacrifices and other ritual functions. There are tall gates to the Inner Court with places to slaughter and prepare sacrifices.

The Inner Court is fairly large, with only an altar in the center. There were chambers for the priests, Levites and singers (cantors).

Aside from the larger dimensions so far, we are given a different type of temple layout. Some elements are the same, with the structure oriented in the literal sense of the word “orient” – facing east. Such was the symbolism of the Ancient Near East. But the simplification of elements signifies a totally different ritual use. People coming into the Temple will be either in or out, but not graded into levels of acceptance and approach to God. There is clearly a place for numerous sacrifices, but far less rigmarole in making them. There is no place for the priests to wash either themselves or the sacrifices. Again, these things are prominent in their absence. This will not be the old ritual Temple under the Law of Moses. As a priest, Ezekiel would notice all this.

Chapter 41

Ezekiel’s tour of the New Temple continues. The description of this sanctuary is starkly simple. There is a Holy Place, an outer chamber that is vacant. No table of bread, no incense, no menorah, nothing. Only a framed opening separates the inner chamber, or Most Holy Place. No veil, there is nothing inside and it faces toward the entrance, with no alcove for the Mercy Seat, hidden from direct view off to one side.

The description seems to place the priest’s chambers on the outer walls of the Temple, facing outward on the sides where there is no entrance. There are three stories of them, apparently ten to a side, making thirty on each level in total. The walls get thinner with each succeeding higher story, so that the chambers increase in size as one goes up. There is some additional structure described behind the Temple, but as with everything else, there is no explanation.

Then the Temple courtyard is described with all the decorations. Of final note, and highly significant, is the Altar. It’s made of wood. Nothing would be burned on that altar.

It would be hard for us from our place these centuries later to grasp what all these differences symbolize. We can be sure it all had significance to Ezekiel, but we are at a loss for most of it. However, some things seem rather plain in retrospect as we look back through the lens of Christ.

In this Messianic Temple, there is neither Gentile nor Jew, male nor female. While there are places for slaughtering, we can safely assume this is for the death of self, the sinful flesh to be killed. The wooden Altar, the Lord’s Table, is for the living sacrifice of each believer’s life. The open Temple chambers signify there are requirements – self-sacrifice – but the way is open to see God face to face. He would be His own light. The whole thing is as much an ornate palace as a temple. Already we are shown how things would have to be entirely different for this Messianic Temple to have any meaning.

Chapter 42

Here we have a brief description of some additional structures standing in the larger courtyard, toward the rear and on both north and south sides of the Temple. They had three stories of rooms with stairways and landings that trimmed the upper floors so that they were smaller

than the lower floors. These two buildings were designated as places to store the priests' share of the offerings and where it would be consumed.

In this, the priests are eating "before the Lord" and not in the casual sense of taking it home. Thus, we are shown in symbolism the necessity of spending time alone with God. We must all enter our prayer closets and commune with God as He fills us with what we need. He does this so that we may be empowered to serve Him in the presence of others.

There is here a clear distinction between sacred and common. The priests must remove their priestly worship robes as they depart the inner court, and wear only their common clothing when among the common people. This reminds us of the difference between roles and persons. In this case, the priest is just another man until he takes up his role serving as priest. The person of the man is hardly sacred in himself; it is the office, the role. Respected he may be for honorably carrying out his duties, but he remains just another member of the nation. Each of us who serves Our Lord can only participate in holiness as He provides His robe of righteousness to us.

Chapter 43

In clinical psychology, it has been known for quite some time that dreams are seldom consistent internally. Some of the most improbable things enter the experience and the narrative morphs impossibly. That's because dreams, insofar as they have any meaning, are symbolic. Only the conscious mind requires literal consistency to operate normally. In these final chapters of Ezekiel, the vision is not a literal event, but follows the same basic rules as the dream world, a non-literal spiritual experience. Granted, it's possible some things have been lost or altered in transmission from ancient hands to ours. Some things are surely lost in translation, not merely between languages, but vastly different cultures with different intellectual expectations. The expectations of Hebrew seldom cater to mere intellectual consistency, as Truth is entirely beyond understanding in that way.

In this chapter, Ezekiel describes first the coming of the Lord to occupy His House. It is a reverse of the earlier chapters, where the glory of the Lord departed the City among the cherubim in flying formation. The voice of the Lord declares that He will live among a purified people who will not stray again. We all know that this never came literally true. In Jesus' day, Jews served Mammon, not the Lord. Rather, it represents more about changing the nature of what will be called "Israel" in that Messianic Age. It will be a people so utterly changed that the sins of earthly Israel in the past would be forgotten. This New Israel is the final residence of God and nothing can ever separate them from Him again. Ezekiel is commanded to describe all this so that the meaning of the symbols will shame the old nation of Israel.

Then we are told of the Altar and the sacrificial system. This is where a literal reading would offer discontinuity. A wooden altar would not survive the first use for burnt offerings, but chasing that detail misses the whole point. A Hebrew mind associates the price of blood, not with purchasing salvation, but with memorializing the cost of sin. The whole point of the ritual sacrificial system was emphasizing that fallen man can find the Presence of the Lord only in the Land of Penitence. So the sacrifices are prescribed and an altar that has wide ledges upon which the priests stand, halfway up to take the offering up from the worshipers. These would then

hand offerings up to priests on higher ledges, who will then present the sacrifices to the consuming fire of God's wrath. The Altar would be rather like the Burning Bush that was aglow but not consumed. All the other details are common symbolic references easily recognized from the Law.

Chapter 44

In the Old Kingdom of Israel, God still enforced His Law long after those He appointed failed to enforce provisions placed in their hands. As time went on, the nation became less and less effective at policing itself. The people weren't treating God as holy, as different from the other non-existent deities, and this destroyed their testimony. They ended up being no different at all and God will not tolerate unfaithfulness that destroys His witness. The Old Israel was destroyed, step-by-step. Even during the Restoration, when God sent very talented and committed heroes of the faith, it was never quite enough to restore any part of what they once were, or should have been. The testimony continued to decline until, seemingly too late in the game, the Final Testimony in His Son was revealed.

In this chapter, Ezekiel is calling out for refreshing holiness. We know the nation itself never quite got it, but this whole vision takes place in the Spirit Realm. It points out what is true in Heaven, not some wishful thinking about what could be here on earth. The message to Ezekiel's fellow Exiles is that they have a very high calling, and if they hope to be restored to the blessings of the Covenant, they'll have to do a whole lot better than in the past.

The first symbol of holiness is the Eastern Gate. Once the Lord Himself enters His Temple, they look for no other. That gate shall be closed. So the Messiah came through it in the literal sense in the Triumphal Entry, a ritual act that proclaimed the end of the waiting. Don't seek the symbol of the rising sun, because the Son has risen upon His throne for eternity. The righteous rulers of the people will be allowed to celebrate the ritual meal of peace in God's Presence only by using the porch of that gate as a dining area. It's no longer considered a passage, because that purpose has ended.

And indeed, the vision continues with Ezekiel walking around to the north entrance. Upon entering, he sees that the glory of the Lord has returned to His Temple. He is told that there won't be any slack in this New Temple, no long suffering. God will enforce His Laws quickly. Those who form His New Israel will not be able to defile this Temple as Old Israel had done the old one. For example, they had used uncircumcised slaves to haul the offerings into the Temple and that was wrong. Things got so bad that they hired Gentiles to serve as doorkeepers and other attendant positions. In the Realm of the Spirit, this will simply be impossible. Those not circumcised of heart cannot enter the New Temple in the Spirit Realm, because their spirits will be dead.

Whose hearts are not pure toward Him will be demoted. As some scholars explain, they lose their office, but not all the benefits of service. This symbolizes how those who are not spiritually renewed can still reap the blessings of the rituals, primarily because they stand among those whose hearts are true. Obey God's Laws in the company of the saints and you will receive the promises of the Laws, whether your spirit is alive or dead. Even today, Israel could recover the earthly blessings of the Covenant of Moses if they simply obeyed that covenant, but they cling

to their perverted Talmud and see none of those blessings. Those who repent from sin and cling to the truth of God's Laws will find it a path to the higher calling and truth of His Spiritual Realm. They will see God's face.

The curse of the Fall included living by the sweat of the brow. It was far more than what the words alone imply, in that fallen man must not expect the richness and long life of Eden, but despair of significant blessings on this fallen plane. This life is hard work and the work must be done, but it's not what He had planned for us. We dismiss this life as a grievous burden to be shed and we can't wait to move on from here to Heaven. So those who serve in the New Temple will not sweat, but wear light and airy garments of His righteousness to cover their sins. The righteousness is not in their persons, but in the provision of God. Otherwise, they are no different from anyone else in this world. We all participate in the fall and need a covering in this world that protects us from the elements. Nature became hostile by His wrath on sin.

There are several symbols of personal holiness, none of which are a significant departure from the priestly code from Moses. The business of hair was to avoid pagan practices, the extremes of neglect or ostentation and cutting it too short for braiding or tying. Sobriety is not about literal wine, but symbolizes that what's fun on earth seldom has any place in God's divine Presence. Obeying the strict codes of marriage is denying the flesh in regards to sexual appetite. You don't play to your lusts, but to the purpose of marriage in the first place. Together, this forms an image of something far more than merely reforming and renewing Levitical Law, but showing we are called to higher, austere life that expects no significant pleasure in this fallen realm. If we get lost in seeking the joys of this life, we fail to grasp the nature of sin in teaching others. We must point the way in maintaining holiness.

It's not as if we can't be a blessing to those who are spiritually dead, as Jesus did by hanging out with them. Rather, we cannot cling to them as we would those spiritually alive. The symbolism of not touching the dead is to avoid entanglement. With your blood kin, it's not that simple, thus the symbolism of priests permitted to prepare the bodies of their own family for burial. However, we cannot entangle ourselves too deeply in this world's affairs. We take from His hand what He provides. It may look like a waste when we bypass opportunities we stumble upon, but our resolute refusal to seek our own comfort is a necessity.

Chapter 45

Ezekiel describes God's idea of fairness. The Temple plaza will be large enough to accommodate the facility with a buffer zone. A few miles north and south, and a wide band stretching east and west, would be dedicated to the priests and Levites for their livelihood. On either end of this band would be the neutral land belonging to the whole nation. The Prince would occupy this for his livelihood.

The King is Our God and His earthly executive will now be a Prince, someone of lesser stature than a king. The rough equivalent in the ancient Hebrew culture would be a sheikh, someone rather like Abraham. This is the head of the family versus some civil ruler. His authority would be curtailed, with the emphasis on executing justice on God's behalf for the people. The princes are warned they will cease taxing according to their whims and grand plans for glory. Their allotment from the hand of the people is prescribed. From this, they must fund the standard

rotation of Temple offerings and festival celebrations. They will have sufficient lands as their permanent possession and whatever is left after taking care of the ritual offerings and feasts.

This is a direct slam against civil rulers and their tendency to excess. In God's Messianic Realm, the Spirit places a distinct limit on human authority over the sheep of His pasture. To mimic the political behavior of a secular government is unacceptable. God's leaders should not run churches as businesses or little kingdoms. Serving as a ruling elder is a high privilege and God will hold such to a very high standard.

The taxation and offering scheme is quite bearable. While the people are to give a percentage of their gains, whatever it may be the Lord grants them in prosperity, the Prince is held accountable for a set amount that would hardly strain his budget. In the context of these last few chapters, it seems God asks embarrassingly little. The offerings and festivals are few.

While it is taken for granted in our theology that the Lord owns it all, and nothing would we withhold from His whims, we note that He offers a warning here to those who would institute church governments. Develop order and organization, indeed, but by no means take after the fallen ways of mankind in doing it. In principle, it remains in the hands of each member to honestly report and contribute what they will and the church leadership makes no plans that can't be covered by that. If the teaching and spiritual welfare of the church is empty, you can't make up for it with a fat budget and huge facilities.

Chapter 46

We note that there are several changes between the Old Covenant ritual laws and those for this New Temple in Heaven. There is now no evening offering, only a daily morning offering. The requirements for the Prince's Sabbath and New Moon offerings are larger than would be under the Torah. There is a strong voluntary element. No one – not even the Prince – enters the inner court, but he stands at the opening of the entrance where he can see the altar. The people range behind him. This inner doorway is closed except on Sabbath and New Moon worship days.

The Law of Moses was always more important for what it indicated in the Spirit Realm than for its literal requirements. Thus, we see here that the indicators are simplified, as they have been throughout this vision. Jesus died at the time of the evening offering, so that is covered. But the rules here for worship carry a strong meaning for daily life in His service. We've already noted spiritual leadership makes the bigger sacrifice because privilege means a greater self-denial. There is a distinct separation of labor here, as the Prince avoids the inner court. He is simply one of the people and is not permitted a separate entrance. Let there be no reverence of organizational government as something holy. It's simply a role with heavier responsibilities and a burden to pay attention to the necessity of sacrifice.

The Laws of God reflect divine imperatives for sacrifice manifested in actions. There is a regularity and habit that forms the basic structure of our conduct, but we can never forget the necessity of coming into God's Presence, then going away to think it over. The requirement for the people to enter one door and exit the other forces them to come before the view of the altar, then take the long way back whence they came. Normal people would then consider and discuss what they experienced when taking a long walk.

There is an underlying theme to the discussion of the Prince and bequests. The Kingdom of Heaven is all about kinship, though not necessarily in the literal sense. The Prince in this narrative represents how elders should rule: Work with whatever household God grants them. An elder makes only light demands upon his household; he can't externalize his costs by taxing others on a long-term basis. Any outsider involvement must be temporary, meeting a specific short-term need. There was no other reason for a Prince to give land to a mere servant. This is not like contracts and hiring, but was meant to be organic and familial. Let an elder be content with treading his own grain and consuming whatever that offers.

Meanwhile, there are cloistered kitchens for the priests to take their holy meals and larger kitchens where the Levites serve the people their ritual meals. The service of divine calling in spiritual leadership really is a thing unto itself. While it's still just people vested with a role, it necessitates a difference in viewpoint and experience. Holiness here is not being higher, but simply having an altogether different focus. The Apostles gave themselves to pursuits not shared by the elders in Jerusalem. It's not as if the elders didn't study the Bible and pray, but the nature of their devotions were different, serving a different purpose. Everyone sacrifices; everyone is fed. Hanging out with truly spiritual ministers of the gospel is not supposed to be a comfortable experience. Their gut reactions are different, because their calling is unique.

Chapter 47

From this Messianic Temple will issue the River of Life. We follow its course eastward across the Temple plaza, out the gate and into the Kidron Valley. This takes a winding course where it drops over the cliffs on the western shore, into the Dead Sea a ways north of En-gedi. We follow the course for just about one mile (1.6km) to find the depth too great for wading. Where it touches the Dead Sea, it brings life to the toxic waters. From at least the famous resort town of En-gedi down to the far end of the southern shore, every kind of edible fish will be found. From ancient times, any fish unfortunate enough to reach the Dead Sea died quickly, but this would change. And while this healing water won't change the southern swampy marshes, the water itself would be clean. Further, all along the banks of this New Kidron would be trees of all kinds, never having an off-season, bearing fruit year round. The leaves will be uniformly medicinal.

The symbolism is painfully obvious. The cleansing power of the Holy Spirit washes like a flooding tide, bringing healing, power and life to all it touches. There are places He won't go, but where He does go, His life will overpower death just as fresh water displaces even the nastiest stinking dead water hole of those times.

We are then introduced to a description of the borders of New Israel, roughly equivalent to what was promised Abraham, but somewhat less extensive than what King David held. We notice, for example, that the lands held by conquest east of the Jordan are not included, because the Jordan River is the eastern boundary. That is, God will keep His original promise, going back to the Call of Abraham, the first man in Scripture to have a covenant of personal salvation with God. We are told the inheritance will be equally shared among all.

Those who are not true believers, but choose to live among the Redeemed, will be granted equal treatment under the Laws of God. That's because the basis for recognizing a fellow Christian is

not something magical, but simply the choice to conduct themselves according to our best understanding of God's demands. We aren't permitted to know if another's name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, only whether they exhibit some measure of the Fruit of the Spirit. On this basis alone, we will make room in our spiritual families for those who don't seem to meet all the normal requirements, but who do what it takes to live peacefully with us as allies.

Chapter 48

The land is apportioned among the tribes. Because Jerusalem is not moved, there are seven tribes on the north side, five on the south. The order of placement is based on Jacob's favor of his sons, as expressed by his dying wishes. Thus, Judah and Benjamin are closest to the Holy District of the Prince and the city. The outermost tribes were born to the handmaidens of Jacob's wives.

So we have exactly what was required under the tribal customs of the Ancient Hebrew people. Jacob made it plain that he favored Joseph for the double portion of property, which was divided between the two grandsons. Yet he chose Judah as the elder, the titular head of the clan. Only the Covenant choice for Levi departed from the customs of the people, as the Levites took their living from the offerings and the Temple lands.

On the one hand, this symbolizes the ancient idyllic ways of the Nation of Israel while they were still just a single household. Ezekiel describes what should have been. This is no accident. Mankind was meant to live in a tribal setting, where the patriarch's word was law. For all the flaws in this, it turns out far better for human life than anything dreamed up since then. God wants to ensure that we don't forget this. The government of fallen mankind revealed by God requires a tribal social structure and the matching form of government.

In the church, this is still the expectation of God for the human organizational manifestation of His Kingdom on earth. Churches that use any other structure are falling short. Your church is your spiritual family, your clan, and your tribe. Whatever blessings God has for us on this earth are found in full measure only there. Thus, in the end, Ezekiel says the city isn't named "Jerusalem," but *Yahweh Shammah* – **The Lord is There**.