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“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”
Romans 1:16

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A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF EZEKIEL

For a long time the book of Ezekiel completely mystified me, although I grew up in a Christian environment with a strong teaching tradition. We sang songs in Sunday School about Ezekiel's "wheel within a wheel a' turnin' way in the middle of the air," but what did it all mean? And what relevance did it have for us today? After fifteen years of faithful attendance at church services, I finally heard my first sermon on Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) and it only added to the fog and mist in my thinking rather than helping to clear them away.

Opening vision

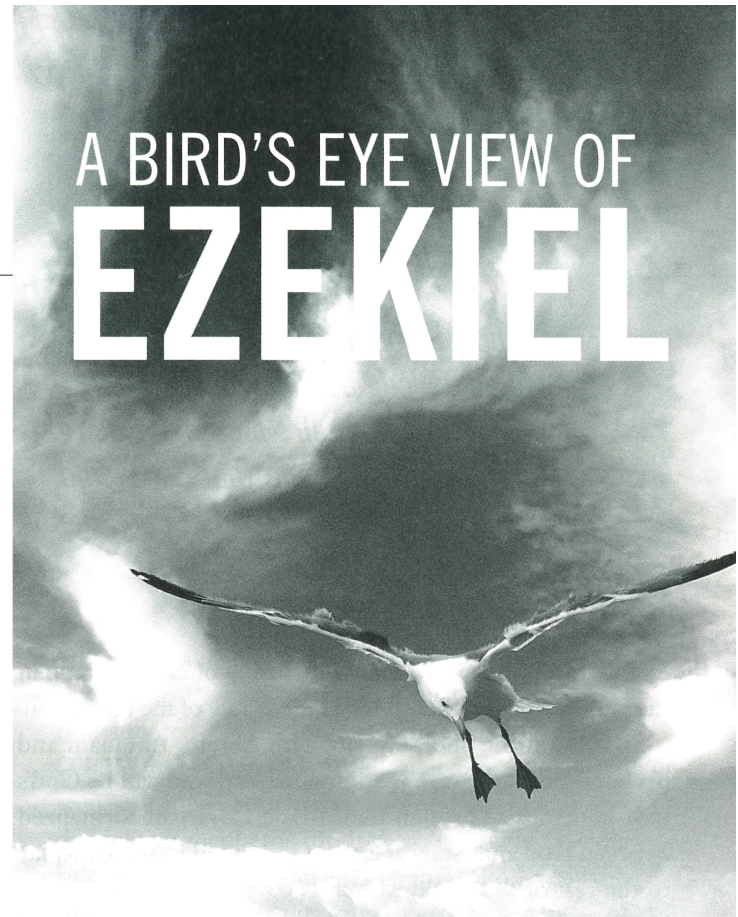
The book opens by introducing the reader to Ezekiel, a priest living among the exiles from Judah in Babylon, who is given a vision of the glory of the Lord (Ezekiel 1:1,28). In an awesome thunderhead cloud surrounded by bright light and punctuated by flashes of lightning he sees a bizarre vehicle. Above a platform is a sapphire throne held by a human figure like glowing metal from the waist up and fiery from the waist down. Under the platform are four strange guardian creatures, each of them having four faces and four wings. On the ground beside each creature are four sets of intersecting wheels that can make the throne move in any direction. Movies produced during the last five years based on comic books (e.g. *Fantastic Four*) have nothing on Ezekiel's vision!

Ezekiel is called by God as a sentry to warn the people of approaching judgement. He is addressed as "Son of Man" to emphasize that he belongs to the class of human beings characterized by weakness and requiring the breath and spirit of God for empowerment.

Where Ezekiel fits in the larger story

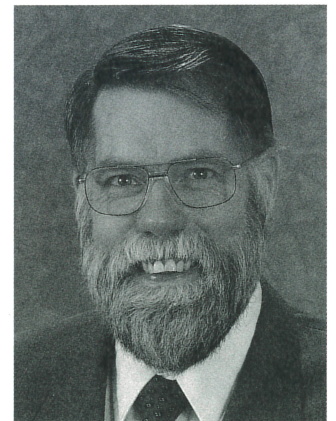
This strange vision and indeed the book as a whole can only be understood by placing Ezekiel's work within the larger story of Scripture.

When God created the heavens and the earth, an entire paragraph is devoted to the description of making humans in the image of God. Mankind, both men and women together, are created so that their very being and existence entails a covenant relationship with God on the one hand and with the creation as a whole on the other hand. The former can be encapsulated by the notion of divine sonship and the latter by the concept of servant kingship. While the term covenant is not actually used in Genesis 1 and 2,¹ the



relationship is, nonetheless, of the same nature and order as all covenant relationships described later in Scripture: it entails committed devotion and loyalty in a relationship characterized by faithfulness and loyal love (*hesed* and *emet*). On the first page of Scripture, then, we see its central theme: kingdom through covenant. God intends to establish His rule in the world through covenantal relationship, with mankind as the apex of His creation. Obedient sonship would result in a dominion by mankind that would represent the rule of God, especially in the manner and way God intended.

The bond in Eden, however, was violated by Adam's distrust of the word of God and disobedience of the express will of God. At every level in the created order, chaos, discord and death resulted. The destructive path chosen by the first humans led to increasing corruption until divine intervention was required. God used a flood to judge the entire human race and afterwards made a new beginning with Noah and his family. Noah is presented in the biblical text as a new Adam—he is given Adam's commission or mandate (Genesis 9:1,7).



BY PETER J. GENTRY



The people thought they would always be protected as long as God was dwelling among them. Jeremiah's message was that covenant violation meant that God would be true to His threats and bring upon His people the curse of exile.

Eventually, however, at Babel, the family of Noah end up in the same chaos and corruption as the family of the first Adam.

So, God made another start with Abram. Abraham and his family, called Israel, is another Adam, who will be God's true humanity. Through the Mosaic Covenant formalized between God and Israel at Sinai, God called Israel to display to the rest of the world within its covenant community the kind of relationships, first to God and then to one another, that God intended originally for all of humanity. In fact, through Abraham's family, God plans to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. In this way, through the family of Abraham—through Israel, his last Adam—He will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam.

At the heart of establishing God's kingship in the world is worship. This is indicated by Genesis 2, which depicts Adam and Eve placed in a garden sanctuary. Only as they spend time in the presence of God will they be equipped to implement His rule in the world in the way that God Himself would relate to His creation. Israel inherited the Adamic role of son of God at the Exodus (Exodus 4:22) and the priority of worship becomes evident right away with the instructions to build the Tabernacle. When the construction of this portable tent for worship was complete, a bright cloud, symbolic of the divine presence, settled on the tent to show that the Creator God was dwelling in the midst of His people as king (Exodus 25:8; 40:34).

This is where prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel fit into the story. The people of God had repeatedly violated the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. Love of God and love of one's neighbour has been replaced by idolatry and corruption of social justice in every way. As a result, Israel's worship had become hollow and hypocritical. Jeremiah is the first of the major prophets in the Hebrew Canon. In Jeremiah 7 to 10 we have his famous 'Temple Sermon': Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of

the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (NIV). The threefold repetition is the strongest form of emphasis possible. Jeremiah is saying, "You can't live as you please and then treat the temple like a good luck charm or a rabbit's foot." The people thought they would always be protected as long as God was dwelling among them. Jeremiah's message was that covenant violation meant that God would be true to His threats and bring upon His people the curse of exile (Deuteronomy 28). Most importantly, He could no longer live among them as their behaviour and lifestyle contradicted His own character as expressed in the Torah.

Ezekiel carries the 'Temple Sermon' of Jeremiah one step further. The opening vision shows the bright cloud (the glory of the Lord) in motion and the divine throne with wheels. *Why?* Because God is getting ready to move out! God is surrounded by social injustice and idolatry and the temple has lost its "five-star hotel" status—He can no longer live there. This message must have come as an awful shock to the people of Judah. In Ezekiel 8 to 11 the opening vision is developed further and the glory cloud actually begins to move from the temple to the Eastern Gate. Finally, the glory of the Lord departs from the City of God. I express it in these terms to show that the City of God can no longer be the City of God when God is no longer there.² A brief consideration of the structure and shape of Ezekiel's book shows the development and resolution of this problem.

The structure and shape of Ezekiel's book

Outline of Ezekiel

1. Opening vision and call of Ezekiel	1:1-3:15
2. Ezekiel's role and message	3:16-7:27
3. The glory of the Lord leaves the Temple	8-11
4. The Exile symbolized	12-24
5. Oracles against the foreign nations	25-32
6. Divine leadership and restoration	33-36
7. The Valley of Dry Bones	37-39
8. The New Temple	40-48

As already noted the opening vision portrays the glory of the Lord in motion because God is getting ready to move out. The second section (3:16-7:27) presents Ezekiel's message and role. Like all the prophets, he employs every means and method of communication to get through to the people: because of idolatry in relation to God and social injustice in relation to others they have broken the covenant and the curse of exile is upon them. This is communicated through preaching, but also through symbolic dramas. In Ezekiel 4:1-3, Ezekiel is commanded to draw a diagram of the coming siege of Jerusalem on a brick and

act out the attack of the Babylonians. He holds an iron pan between himself and the city to show that the prayers of the people will not get through to God. Again, in Ezekiel 4:4-8 he is commanded to lie on one side for 390 days for the sins of Israel and on the other side for 40 days for the sins of Judah. The sum is 430 days which represents the period of bondage in Egypt. Just as prophets like Isaiah had foretold a future salvation describing it as a “new Exodus,” so Ezekiel indicates another “Egyptian bondage” *before* the new Exodus occurs. This is similar to Daniel’s vision of Seventy Weeks (Daniel 9:24). The exile may be over in seventy years according to the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:1-11) but it will take a lot longer to deal effectively with sin and restore the covenant relationship with God that has been broken. Unfortunately, the people did not heed Ezekiel’s message. According to Ezekiel 33:32 the prophet was viewed only as an entertainer singing songs with a beautiful voice.

Chapters 8-11 constitute a second vision in which the glory of the Lord departs from the Temple. This is followed by further messages to Judah (chapters 12-23), largely via symbolic dramas, to communicate the coming judgement and exile.

Chapters 25-32 constitute oracles against foreign nations. Such oracles are included in all the major prophets because of the programme laid out in Deuteronomy 32. The covenant violation of Israel will bring the curse of exile. At first God plans to completely erase His people (Deuteronomy 32:26) but He fears the taunts of foreign nations (Deuteronomy 32:27). The foreign nations will conclude that they have defeated Israel by their own gods and prowess instead of realizing that God allowed them to conquer Israel only because of her sins. So the nations must be punished for their arrogance and idolatrous worldview and for their harsh treatment of the people of God.

Then in Chapters 33-36 Israel will be given new leadership in the form of a new David—the Messiah. The messianic theme is summarized well by Professor Stephen Dempster:

Even the divided kingdom of exiles is reunited under a new leader, who is said to be ‘my servant David’ (Ezekiel 37:24-25; cf. 34:23-24). But he is also described as one who will come to power through relative obscurity. In a remarkable allegorical passage, a Davidic descendent is compared to a tender shoot (*yoneqet*) plucked from a tall tree, taken to Mount Zion and planted there to grow into a huge tree, bearing fruit and providing shade for all the birds of the forest (17:22-24). Thus all the trees of the forest (peoples of the world) will know that ‘I the LORD lower the tall tree and raise the low tree. I dry up the



The conclusion of the book is extremely powerful: THE LORD IS THERE. The glory of the Lord has returned to the temple. God is once more dwelling in the midst of His people as King.

green tree and make the dry tree flourish’ (17:24). Later, this ‘David’ who will come to power is remembered for his humble origins as a shepherd (34:23); he will provide true leadership, as opposed to past leaders, who are symbolized as corrupt and destructive shepherds. Both these motifs of Davidic rule (a tender shoot and a shepherd) echo Jeremiah’s prediction of a ‘plant growth’ from the line of David, which will bring good shepherds—justice for the nation (Jeremiah 23:1-8).³

Then there will be a new covenant to renew the relationship with God and His people that will deal effectively with hearts stubbornly bent on sin (Ezekiel 36:24-32). This is followed by an announcement of return from exile described in terms of resurrection from the dead. The vision of the Valley of Dry Bones shows the people of God miraculously restored to life and given victory over enemies.

The book concludes in chapters 40-48 with a vision of a renewed temple and God dwelling in the midst of His people once more in a healed land. The conclusion of the book is extremely powerful: THE LORD IS THERE. The glory of the Lord has returned to the temple. God is once more dwelling in the midst of His people as King. Thus restoration involves the rebuilding of the Davidic house in both its meanings in 2 Samuel 7—the dynasty of David and the temple.

The vision of future restoration for Israel

Outline of Ezekiel’s vision of the future temple ⁴

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. Yahweh establishes His residence
in the Temple | 40:1-43:27 |
| 2. Israel’s response to His presence
in their midst | 44:1-46:24 |
| 3. The apportionment of the healed
land to the 12 tribes | 47:1-48:35 |

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How to interpret the final section of Ezekiel has been hotly debated among Christians. Some think that this is a blueprint for a future temple to be built in the city of Jerusalem. Such an interpretation is not at all likely. Space permits only a couple of key observations.

First, note that this section is described as “visions of God” in Ezekiel 40:2. This heading is used elsewhere *only* of the visions of chapter 1 and chapters 8-11. If we interpret chapter 1 and chapters 8-11 as symbolic visions, we must be consistent and interpret 40-48 the same way. This also fits with the fact that much of Ezekiel’s communication is via symbolic dramas and the description of the restoration of Israel in the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is also symbolic.

Second, note the use of the terms ‘length’, ‘width’, and ‘height’ in the Old Testament. Careful examination of all instances show that 80 per cent of all references occur in three texts:

- (1) the building of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-40)
- (2) the building of the Temple (1 Kings 6-7)
- (3) the future Temple of Ezekiel

Note, however, that the accounts of building the Tabernacle and Temple contain instances of length, width, and height whereas the description in Ezekiel contains length and width, but no height. The vision is two dimensional because unlike the cases of the Tabernacle in Exodus and the Temple in Kings, Ezekiel’s Temple is not a blueprint for a real building. It is a symbolic portrayal of the restoration of God dwelling in the midst of His people as king and of a renewed covenant relationship. This is clearly the interpretation of Jesus who identified Himself as the true Temple (John 2:19). Both Paul (1 Corinthians 3:16) and Peter (1 Peter 2:4-5) understand the church, those who are joined to Christ, to constitute the final Temple. This is also the picture in Revelation 21. We must follow Jesus and the apostles in their interpretation of the Old Testament. **BW**

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1 A covenant in terms of a relationship formalised by oath may be a confirmation for relationships appropriate only in a fallen world. Before the Fall and after the New Covenant, one’s “yes” or “no” is enough. See John H. Stek, “Covenant Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 29 (1994), 12-41.

2 The departure of God from Jerusalem is not entirely negative. It has a positive side in that God will be a sanctuary for His people in exile (11:16).

3 Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 170-171.

4 I am indebted for the outline to Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) and *idem.*, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).