PARALLEL GUIDE 30
Ezekiel

Summary: While considerable controversy surrounds the life of Ezekiel, his mes sage seems to reflect the spirit of the time. His gloomy oracles predict destruction by famine, sword, and pestilence. He introduces the revolutionary concept of individual responsibility and concludes with the ultimate hope that YHWH, "the Good Shepherd," will restore the nation.

Learning Objectives

• Read Ezekiel

• State Ezekiel's notion of individual responsibility

• State the meaning of the vision of the "dry bones"

• State two features of the restored Jerusalem which Ezekiel envisions

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. By now you should be thoroughly familiar with the four-source model for theological reflection. Using this model take the passage in Ezekiel 37:1-14 and analyze the sources Ezekiel uses to develop his vision.

2. Read Ezekiel carefully and identify the messianic symbols or motifs which occur again in the New Testament. What comes from each of the four sources: Tradition, Culture, Position, and Action?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Ezekiel used "enacted symbols" to prophesy. Make up an enacted symbol to convey a message to the members of your seminar group about your life together.

Additional Sources

Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation Series (John Knox Press, 1990).

Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, The Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1983).

Carl G. Howie, *The Book of Ezekiel*, The Layman's Bible Commentary, vol. 13 (John Knox Press, 1961).

Herbert G. May and E. L. Allen, *The Book of Ezekiel*,The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 6 (Abingdon Press, 1956).

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Chapter 30
EZEKIEL

After the first fall of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, the prophet Ezekiel warned from Babylon of the disaster yet to befall the city. When Jerusalem fell the second time in 587 BCE, fulfilling his dire predictions, the tone of his message changed. He began to speak of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, of the care that God as the

“Good Shepherd” would extend to the flock, and of renewed worship of YHWH in a rebuilt temple with a revised Law.

Ezekiel: The Man and the Book

Ezekiel’s visions and the style of his prophecies are among the most remarkable in the Old Testament. So strange are they that speculations about both the book and its author have ranged from a denial that Ezekiel ever really existed—the book seen as a fanciful composition made up long after the events it describes—to the suggestion that Ezekiel was visited by beings from outer space in a “flying saucer.” This lesson cannot ignore the entire range of speculation about the Book of Ezekiel, but it avoids at least these extremes and generally considers the book as a product of the period it describes, written by a man whose spiritual experiences, while extraordinary, were consistent with the spirit of the time.

The passages we have selected for study show the main features of Ezekiel’s message. Please read them in conjunction with the lesson’s commentary.

Date and Place of Authorship

Although the title verses of the book (1:1-3) are somewhat confusing (see the commentary below), it is generally accepted that Ezekiel received his call in 593 BCE, the fifth year of the captivity of the exiles. It is also generally agreed that Ezekiel was a priest, but whether or not he was a member of the first group of exiles taken to Babylon in 597 BCE still remains open to question. From the time of his call in 593 BCE until the news of the second fall of Jerusalem reached him in 587 BCE, Ezekiel prophesied against the sinfulness of Jerusalem and predicted its final destruction. If he was in Babylon during this entire time—the traditional interpretation—then he either returned to Jerusalem on several occasions or was transported there by the Spirit.

It has seemed fantastic to many to claim that the oracles against Jerusalem were uttered by someone who was physically in Babylon and was present in Jerusalem only by some sort of ecstatic transportation. A few have doubted whether Ezekiel actually existed at all: it has been argued that the book was a post-exilic production with a fictitious hero. No such alternative interpretation has won general approval, and the current trend in biblical scholarship is to accept, as simplest and most coherent, the traditional interpretation—allowing that Ezekiel may have remained in Palestine until the siege of Jerusalem in 588 BCE and taking into account that the book has been edited by one who had not only edited but also written parts of the book and who had editorial reasons for presenting the prophet as he is finally presented. Whether he came to Babylon in 597 or 588 BCE, Ezekiel lived during his time in exile in the town of Tel-Abib near Babylon on the banks of the Chebar River. The

river, more accurately a canal, branches off from the Euphrates just above Babylon and flows near Nippur, then rejoins it near Erech. Ezekiel had his own house and a wife and seemed to be relatively free from physical discomfort during his exile.

When Ezekiel’s predictions came true with the second fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, he turned his attention to the problem of the reconstruction of Judah, for he was convinced that God would lead the people back to their homeland.

Outline of the Book

The Book of Ezekiel in its present form falls into three major sections: chapters 1-24, visions and prophecies against Jerusalem; chapters 25-32, oracles against foreign nations; and chapters 33-48, oracles of hope for a

return to a reconstructed Jerusalem. Within the last section, chapters 40-48 present a detailed description of the rebuilt temple, instructions for the redistribution of the land among the reunited tribes of the north and south, and a code of law for the renewed life of the new Israel.

Ezekiel 1:1-3:27 Visions and Prophecies against Jerusalem

The precise stating of dates in these verses shows a characteristic feature of this book. No other collection of prophetic oracles is as carefully dated. Whether Ezekiel or his editor has assigned the dates we cannot know. For the most part, the oracles are presented in chronological order beginning with the first entry of July 31, 593 BCE. The last dated oracle took place on April 26, 571 BCE. The date of the call itself is clear. It occurred in the fifth year of the captivity, which would be 593 BCE by our reckoning.

Ezekiel 1:4-28 The Vision of the Chariot of YHWH

Ezekiel's vision at its simplest level is one of four cherubim, each at the corner of a square, each with four wings and four faces. Beside these are four wheels with eyes in their rims. In their midst is a flaming fire with flashes of lightning. Above them is something resembling a firmament and above that the likeness of a throne upon which sits the glory of YHWH. But the simplest level hardly exhausts the vision. Indeed, it doesn't really help us understand what Ezekiel intends to do, for what the prophet attempts in these verses is to describe the indescribable—the "glory of the LORD" himself (v. 28). He seems aware of the impossibility of his task—note the use of terms such as "the likeness of," "the appearance of," and "as it were." Ezekiel cannot convey with any precision the content of his vision to his readers. He can only strain the capacity of words to describe it and invite readers to stretch their imaginations to sense the awesomeness of the vision.

The first bit of imagery the prophet uses is that of a great storm, with wind, cloud, and flashing fire (v. 4). This image is common to theophanies (thee-OFF-an-ee, an appearance or manifestation of a god) in ancient religions. As the fiery cloud draws closer, Ezekiel sees four cherubim emerging from it (vv. 5-11). Cherubim, winged creatures part human and part animal, were thought of as guardians of gods and sacred places and also as beasts of burden who carried the god upon their back. Genesis 3:24 states that cherubim were placed at the gate of the garden of Eden to prevent humankind from returning after being expelled. The inner sanctuary of the temple contained wooden images of cherubim with wings stretched over the ark on which YHWH sat invisibly enthroned. In Ezekiel's vision the cherubim are no longer

made of wood, but are heavenly beings, each with four faces—those of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. These faces "represent the major areas of created life. Man is God's ultimate creation commissioned to subdue the earth; the lion is the king of wild beasts; the ox is the strongest of domesticated animals; and the eagle rules the air" (Ezekiel, p. 2). The cherubim guide and possibly provide the moving power of the throne of YHWH's glory (vv. 12, 14). It is important to the vision that the chariot does move.

The wheels of the chariot—wheels within wheels—are made of a substance whose gleaming appearance indicates a heavenly origin (v. 16). Their rims—or perhaps hubs—are filled with eyes, representing the all-seeing vision of God (v. 18). God beholds the works of humans wherever they are. Not only does God see all, the wheels of the chariot are capable of moving in any direction (v. 17). The God who according to the official theology had come to occupy a throne set in the Jerusalem temple and according to popular conception had become limited to Palestine moves over and rules over all of the creation.

Over the cherubim is spread out the likeness of the celestial firmament (vv. 22-25), and above the firmament rests the "likeness of a throne" upon which is seated "something that seemed like a human form" (v. 26). This figure, made doubly figurative by qualifying it with the word "likeness" is described in terms of fire and rainbow. (Interestingly, the rainbow appears elsewhere in the Old Testament only in the story of Noah—

where it is the sign of the covenant God makes with Noah after the Flood.) “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD”—it is not YHWH himself, seen face to face, nor even the “glory” itself, but a likeness of the glory. The “glory” of YHWH is only the aura, the visible phenomenon that is seen when YHWH is present.

Ezekiel 2:1- 3:15 Ezekiel’s Commission to Address “Israel”

Ezekiel has fallen on his face, overcome by the vision, when a voice calls to him saying, “Mortal, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you” (2:1). The expression “mortal” here means simply “man,” though it has an intensifying effect, “you who are but human.” In later centuries, apocalyptic literature, following the use of the expression in Daniel 7:13, employed the same word as a title for the Messiah. Daniel 7:13 says that “one like a son of man” (or mortal) came to the throne of God and was given dominion over all the world. The phrase in Daniel simply means a human figure—representing the faithful remnant of Israel—but its association with the messianic age caused it to become synonymous with the name of the Messiah. In the New Testament the phrase is often used with this messianic meaning.

The Spirit enters into Ezekiel and lifts him to his feet. The prophet is commissioned by the voice of YHWH to speak dire words to “the people of Israel” (2:3). In Ezekiel, the word “Israel” may refer to the people of Judah, the northern kingdom, the people of God as a whole, or the exiles. In this case, it seems to mean the entire people of God, though with special reference to the exiles in Babylon. As is so often the case with the prophets, Ezekiel is not to expect Israel to respond to his word, “for they are a rebellious house” (v. 7). Ezekiel is not to be rebellious himself, but to speak the words which are given him (2:8).

A hand reaches out and gives Ezekiel a scroll on which “words of lamentation and mourning and woe” are written on both sides (2:9-10). He is told to eat the scroll. He does and finds that it tastes “as sweet as honey” (3:1-3). This is probably intended simply as an indication of the scroll’s divine origin—its taste recalls the taste of manna—but it has been interpreted to mean that Ezekiel, unlike Jeremiah, does not find the message that he has to deliver unpalatable. Ezekiel does not tell us his reactions to his task, and so we cannot compare his emotional responses to those of any other prophet.

Ezekiel is taken up by the spirit as the chariot roars with the sound of its departure. When the vision is over, he rests with his fellow exiles at Tel-Abib, overcome with the strain of his experience (3:15).

Ezekiel 3:16-21 Ezekiel the “Watchman” (see also 33:1-20)

It is also part of Ezekiel’s commission that he be appointed as a watchman for Israel. A watchman is supposed to look for signs of an enemy’s advance and give warning to the people. In this case, the “enemy” is YHWH himself, though it is the same YHWH who appoints Ezekiel to give warning. Once again we are presented with the paradox that the prophets saw in YHWH’s relation to Israel: on the one hand, God’s wrath over the sins of the people, which means their utter destruction; on the other hand, God’s hopes for their repentance so that the destruction will not be necessary.

There is a difference, between the role of the prophet as Ezekiel experiences it here and as it has been described in the writings of the other prophets. Ezekiel, the watchman, is responsible for his people. The wicked who persist in their ways will die; but if the watchman fails to warn them so that they might repent, he will be guilty for their deaths. If the righteous turn to wickedness, they will die; but if the watchman has not warned them, the watchman will be guilty for their deaths. If warning is given, however, the watchman is free from guilt. In these verses we find the beginnings of what is now called a “pastoral” responsibility on the part of an agent of God. Ezekiel as prophet is made more than a mouthpiece for YHWH; he is also given a burden of pastoral responsibility for God’s people.

Ezekiel 3:22-27 Ezekiel is Bound up and made Mute

The commission to speak the words of judgment comes again, this time accompanied by an enacted symbol. Ezekiel is bound up and rendered dumb. He can neither do nor say anything except when YHWH gives him a message to deliver. This probably signifies the compelling nature of his call, but it may also mean that he can speak words of comfort only after God has released him from the commission to speak condemnation. When word comes to Ezekiel that Jerusalem has fallen the second time, he is freed from his "dumbness" and begins to speak of future hope for Israel (33:21-22).

Oracles of Doom Chapters 4, 7, 9

These three oracles are representative of the first section of the Book of Ezekiel, which consists primarily of oracles against Jerusalem. We are reminded in these chapters once again of the practice of the prophets to proclaim the word of YHWH by action as well as by word. Thus, as we have seen, Isaiah walked naked through the streets to dramatize the fact that Egypt would be led into slavery by Assyria (Isa. 20:1-2).

Ezekiel's shaving his hair in chapter 5 is an oracle of similar intent. Jeremiah breaks a pot as a symbol of YHWH's intentions for Jerusalem (Jer. 19). While some of their "hearers" may have understood the dramatic action to have helped the prediction come to pass, this does not seem to have been the thinking of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel. For them the signs were largely illustrative. The power to bring to pass does not lie in the actions but in the word of YHWH which they represent. As Ezekiel does in the following sign-actions, so will "the inhabitants of Jerusalem do, but not because Ezekiel did it, but because it was the oracle of YHWH, the word of God, which was powerful because of him who uttered it" (May and Allen, The Book of Ezekiel, p. 86).

Ezekiel 4:1-17 Enacted Symbols

YHWH commands Ezekiel to engrave a sketch of the city of Jerusalem on a clay brick and construct a model of a siege being laid against it (4:1-3). The power of the word of YHWH will bring about that of which it speaks, so the toylike model of a siege—as far as it is God's word against Jerusalem—carries with it a force that will bring about the actual siege of the city. The "iron plate" (v. 3) was probably an ordinary household utensil used in baking, but in the prophet's hands it is made to speak. It represents the actual participation of YHWH in the siege of Jerusalem. YHWH has set up fortifications against the city comparable to those of the enemy. The picture recalls the words of Jeremiah: "I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm . . ." (Jer. 21:5).

As another symbolic action, Ezekiel is told to lie on his left side for three hundred and ninety days and on his right side for forty days to express the lengths of time during which Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah will remain in their exiles (4:4-6). Each day represents a year: Israel is to be in exile for three hundred and ninety years and Judah for forty years. These times do not coincide with the actual period of the Babylonian Exile; indeed, the northern tribes never would return from their dispersion. The significance lies not so much in the accuracy of the time span as in the power of the enacted symbol of YHWH's word and in the prophet's obligation to share the pain of the two kingdoms by remaining for such a long time in these uncomfortable positions (vv. 4, 5).

Next, Ezekiel is told to prepare a scanty mixture of grains, such as could be gleaned in a time of scarcity, and to cook them into bread over an unclean fire. He is to eat the bread in small rations day by day while lying in the positions which symbolize the years of the Exile. Ezekiel's protest (4:14) that he has never eaten food that was ritually unclean causes YHWH to relent from this requirement (v. 15), though Hosea had also

predicted that Israel would eat unclean food in Assyria (Hos. 9:3). Still, the meager rations of food and measured amounts of water are to be all that he can take for nourishment. This symbolizes the scarcity of provisions that would occur during the siege of Jerusalem (v. 16).

Ezekiel 7:1-27 The Day of YHWH is a Day of Doom

Amos had said that the day of YHWH would be a day of darkness rather than of light, a day of judgment and defeat for Israel rather than a day of victory. This became a recurring motif in the prophets, and Ezekiel expresses it in this chapter. The day of YHWH is "an end" for the land of Israel (7:2, 6). "See the day! See it comes! Your doom has gone out . . ." (v. 10). The afflictions of "the day" are described in lurid

detail—indeed, the description is placed in the present tense to give it immediacy (vv. 15-19). Destruction comes by famine, sword, and pestilence. The people dress in sackcloth, and their heads are shaved by those who enslave them. Their money is worthless, since there is nothing to buy. Indeed, they are robbed of all that is precious. Judah's profanation of the temple—"their beautiful ornament" and YHWH's "treasured place"—is but one cause of the judgment against her, though an important one in view of the official theology. No doubt there remained those who viewed the temple as a continued guarantee of YHWH's presence. Not so, says Ezekiel:

Judah's punishment reaches its climax in the withdrawal of YHWH's protection of the temple and its profanation by the enemies of Judah (vv. 20-23).

When these terrible times come, there will be no one to whom the people can turn. "They shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet, but instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders" (v. 26). Political leaders are as useless as the religious teachers. The king, the "prince" (the nobility of the court), and the "people of the land"—three sources of political leadership—are all immobilized by terror and despair. All this comes about, as is stated repeatedly throughout Ezekiel's oracles, so that "they shall know that I am the LORD" (7:27).

Many scholars have seen a tension, even a contradiction, between the roles Ezekiel plays as prophet and as priest. Probably whatever distinction may have been made between these two offices was not present in the mind of Ezekiel. He speaks prophetic words out of a priestly concern for the desecration of cultic worship—in this regard, Ezekiel is in the tradition of Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—and he casts his priestly teaching of torah in a prophetic mold. In v. 26, where Ezekiel could have marked a clear distinction among the roles of prophets, priests, and elders, the distinction is blurred rather than sharpened. All three have roles of leadership and guidance; on the day of YHWH, none will have a vision to reveal.

Ezekiel 9:1-11 The "Mark" of the Innocent and Punishment of the Guilty

Six executioners and one "man clothed in linen"—a material which is ritually clean—appear. The man clothed in linen is told to go through the city of Jerusalem marking the foreheads of any "who sigh and groan over the abominations that are committed" in the city (v. 4). Then the six executioners are to go through killing all the inhabitants, beginning with the elders, old men and young men, even women and children, all except those with "the mark." This is reminiscent of the passover night in Egypt when the "angel of death" passed over those houses marked with the blood of the sacrificial animal. But on that occasion simply being an Israelite was sufficient to ensure deliverance; this time, only innocent individuals within Israel are spared.

We return to the matter of Judah's punishment shortly, but first we need to look in more detail at the sin that is provoking YHWH.

Chapters 8, 16, 20, 23 The Sins of Israel

The spirit of YHWH comes in "looking like a human being" and lifts Ezekiel, who has been sitting in his house with "the elders of Judah" by a lock of his hair, taking him to the entrance of the temple in Jerusalem (vv. 1-4). Though the transportation may imply an actual physical journey to Jerusalem, it seems more likely that

Ezekiel went into a trance and saw the visions that follow in an "altered state of consciousness."

Ezekiel 8:1-18 The Abominations of the Temple

Verses 3 and 5 speak of an "image of jealousy" which Ezekiel sees north of the altar gate in the entrance to the temple. This refers to a pagan image, probably some form of the god Baal-Hadad who was thought to dwell in the north. The image is "of jealousy"—YHWH is the sole deity for Israel and will tolerate no other god "before him."

Verses 7-12 are somewhat puzzling, but if Ezekiel is reporting a "vision," we cannot expect it to be completely consistent. The meaning is clear. The prophet is told to dig a hole through a wall by the door to the inner court. When he does so, he finds himself in a secret chamber containing "all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel" painted on its walls. Seventy of the elders of Israel are there, burning incense to these pictures.

The vision implies that although the elders remain publicly loyal to YHWH, in secret, perhaps within an actual secret sanctuary, these leaders of Israel worship the animal-like gods of Egypt. After all, they reason, YHWH has left the land and cannot see that they are worshiping the gods of Egypt. This scene has also been interpreted to describe a filth within the minds of the elders of Israel. The "room of pictures" is the interior imagination of each of the elders, in which all kinds of filth and abomination can be found. So, when (v. 12b) they say, "the LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land"—they mean that YHWH cannot see into their inner imaginations. As Ezekiel is able to see into their hearts, so can YHWH. And YHWH sees that the heart of Israelite religion is corrupted and defiled.

Verses 14-15 depict women "weeping for Tammuz." Tammuz was a Mesopotamian fertility god—the equivalent of the Canaanite Baal—who died each winter with the death of the crops and went to the underworld. His death was mourned by his female consort, Ishtar—called Ashtoreth in the Bible—until he rose from the underworld of death to bring fertility back to the land. The women "weeping for Tammuz" are performing a liturgy in which they imitate the grief of Ishtar for Tammuz.

Verses 16-18 speak of worship of the sun-god. The reference in v. 17 to the people putting "the branch to their nose" may mean that they were performing a cultic act in a fertility rite. Isaiah 17:10 speaks of "slips of an alien god" taken from a plant. Perhaps the two—"branches" and "slips"—are the same, and putting them "to the nose" is a ritual act.

Difficult as it is for us with our limited knowledge of the precise practices of ancient cults to understand the details of these passages, the overall meaning is clear. Jerusalem has sunk into many forms of idolatrous worship. For Ezekiel the priest, this may well be the main sin of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's prophetic wrath is directed against cultic abominations. In his concentration on this, he is closer to Elijah of the ninth century than he is to Amos of the eighth, or to Isaiah and Micah of the seventh century. But there is in Ezekiel relatively little mention of ethical abominations—oppression

of the poor and the failure of the leaders to mete out justice. This is not to say that Ezekiel was unmindful or uncaring about such matters—see his reference to them in 18:7-9—but he lays them at the feet of those who seduced YHWH's people from their faithfulness to YHWH.

Ezekiel 16:1-63 Jerusalem as an Unfaithful Wife

Ezekiel may be borrowing from Hosea the image of Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife, but he develops this image by means of a parable. In the parable, Jerusalem is portrayed as the foundling daughter of a racially "impure" mixture. She has an Amorite father and a non-semitic mother. In ancient cultures a female child was not infrequently abandoned by its parents, left to die of starvation and exposure. Jerusalem is such an unwanted girl-child (vv. 4-5). YHWH sees the abandoned baby and cares for her (vv. 6-7). Then when the girl reaches maturity, YHWH marries her. YHWH covers her nakedness and adorns her with fine clothing and jewelry, and she becomes famous for her beauty and splendor (vv. 6-14).

In this way Ezekiel reminds the citizens of Jerusalem that they came into the covenant late in the scheme of salvation-history, and can claim no right by race or ancestry to the promises that YHWH had made to the patriarchs. He also seems to be saying that national pride does not become a city who has reached her status as the center of Jewish life solely by the grace of YHWH. Her wealth and splendor, acquired under the kings of the house of David, are gifts from YHWH to the beloved bride.

Jerusalem has from the outset made no faithful response to YHWH. The D historian acknowledges some moments of faithfulness in the history of Jerusalem, but Ezekiel admits to none. She has played the harlot from the beginning (v. 15). This harlotry, a symbol of idolatry for Ezekiel as for Hosea, has taken many forms. Shrines for the performance of fertility rites have been constructed from the YHWH's gifts (v. 16). Idols in human form have been worshiped (v. 17), and the offerings to YHWH have been given to them (vv. 18-19). Children have been sacrificed to the Baals, "to be devoured (by flames)" (vv. 20-21). (Ezekiel mentions this practice often, indicating that it may have become common practice in the debased religion of Jerusalem.) Idolatrous shrines have been scattered through the city, with sacred prostitutes available to "every passerby" (vv. 24-25).

Thus far, harlotry has referred to cultic impurity, but in vv. 26-29 foreign alliances are also seen as a way of "playing the whore." Political alliances with Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon are understood as acts of infidelity to YHWH. Isaiah and Jeremiah had condemned these alliances as demonstrations of a lack of faith in YHWH (Isa. 7:1-25; Jer. 2:18), but such faithlessness, in the face of overwhelming threats to the safety of the city, was understandable, even if inexcusable. Ezekiel's judgment is more harsh: Jerusalem has not been forced by events into these alliances; she has sought them out. She has not done so even for gain, as a prostitute who receives pay for her acts. Israel has paid—even bribed—her lovers to come to her. Thus, she was different from other prostitutes, for "no one solicited you to play the harlot; and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you" (v. 34).

As the betrayed husband, YHWH will divorce Jerusalem. He will turn her over to her former lovers, each of whom she has in turn betrayed, and they will destroy her (vv. 35-43).

The parable of vv. 1-43 is expanded in the remaining verses of chapter 16 by reference to the parable, "Like mother, like daughter" (v. 44). Jerusalem's pagan origins have never been rejected by a true acceptance of the covenant with YHWH; they show through in her continuing idolatry and faithlessness. And not only is she the daughter of her Hittite mother, she is the sister of her two sisters, cities regarded by Jews as the lowest examples of filth—Samaria and Sodom (v. 46). Moreover, Jerusalem has exceeded even these cities

in abominations—she has made her sisters appear righteous by comparison (vv. 47-53).

Verses 53-63 may strike us at first as a surprising, if not inconsistent, afterthought. In spite of all Jerusalem's disloyalty, YHWH will make an "everlasting covenant" with her (v. 60). Ezekiel cannot bring himself to see the Davidic covenant utterly lost and defeated. But the new covenant with Jerusalem will be solely by YHWH's decision—Jerusalem can make no claim to it, either by ancestry or by faithfulness. It will come about so that "you shall know that I am the LORD, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done" (v. 62-63).

Perhaps the training and mentality of the Jerusalem priest show through in this parable. Ezekiel is so much the priest that he sees the ritual pollution in Jerusalem as just cause for the punishment that YHWH is bringing upon the city. He is also so much the Jerusalem priest that he cannot believe that the "everlasting covenant" made with David can come completely to an end. The "everlasting covenant" will stand, but only after Jerusalem learns that it rests on YHWH's will alone.

Ezekiel 20:1-44 The Epic History Retold

In these forty-four verses Ezekiel rehearses the ancient tradition of the Exodus. This story had already been written down from the "oral tradition" by the JE source; eventually it would be edited into the form we now have in the Pentateuch books. The main moments in that epic are here, but Ezekiel's interpretation differs from that given in the Pentateuch.

The prophet delivers this account to the elders of Israel who have come to him to "consult the LORD"—that is, to ask for an oracle. He is to tell the elders that they may not inquire of YHWH because of their constant history of infidelity (vv. 1-4). From the beginning, when YHWH revealed the sacred name to them while they were still in Egypt, they refused to turn from their idolatry (vv. 5-8a). YHWH had intended to destroy them then and there, but did not do so "for the sake of [his] name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived" (vv. 8b-9).

3Led into the wilderness and given the statutes and ordinances—most especially the laws of the Sabbath by which their covenant loyalty to YHWH would be expressed (cf. Exod. 31:13-17)—they still rebelled (vv. 10-13b). They broke the commandments and profaned the Sabbath.

Ezekiel's concern for the sabbath observance is significantly greater than that of the other prophets. Perhaps this stems from his priestly office, or perhaps the Sabbath grew more important during the Exile than it had been when the temple was available. Many scholars believe that the sabbath observance, the rules about diet, and the rite of circumcision gained special emphasis during the Babylonian Exile as the means of maintaining Jewish identity in a foreign land. Ezekiel provides no direct evidence for this view, but the frequent references in the Book of Ezekiel to the Sabbath support the theory.

Once again, for the sake of the divine name, YHWH drew back from destroying the Israelites. YHWH denied them the privilege of entering the promised land (vv. 13b-17). The second generation of those who were in the wilderness was commanded anew to keep the statutes and ordinances and "hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you," but like their forebears, they too rebelled and profaned the Sabbath (v. 20).

At this point, Ezekiel departs from the traditional epic story. Though YHWH—for the third time—withholds judgment upon Israel for his name's sake, YHWH now gives them "statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live; and [He] defiled them through their very gifts . . . in their . . . offering up all their firstborn, that [he] might horrify them" (vv. 24-26). This is quite at variance with the old

epic narrative in which YHWH is never portrayed as giving laws which were contrary to his true will, though the story of Micaiah ben Imlah can be read to include deliberate deception on YHWH's part. On the other hand, as Herbert G. May points out, "Jeremiah's biographer seems deliberately to deny that YHWH gave such commands regarding human sacrifice (Jer. 7:31; 19:5)" (Ezekiel, p. 172).

What question the elders have come with to "consult the LORD" may be indicated in vv. 30-31. The problem of worshiping in a foreign land may have prompted them to ask about the possibility of some form of syncretism with the religions of Babylon. Such an inquiry spurs YHWH's anger; he says, "Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your ancestors . . .?" (v. 30) "As I live . . . I will not be consulted by you" (v. 31).

Still, vv. 33-44 express a picture of hope for the future. The pattern is similar to that of chapter 16. YHWH vows, "As I live . . . I will be king over you" (v. 33). This stands as a declaration of YHWH's will and intent. Once again, the hopeful picture that follows is due to YHWH's will; Israel is not to take, cannot take, the credit for it. The deliverance that YHWH will accomplish for the people is described after the pattern of the epic history which Ezekiel has just finished rehearsing. A new exodus into a new wilderness will occur, and in that wilderness the faithless ones will be purged from Israel (vv. 33-38). The people will pass under the rod of YHWH just as sheep pass under the rod of their shepherd; so they will go in by number. Those who are left will go back to Jerusalem to a new time of service to YHWH. But the remembrance of guilt will remain with them always as a warning against future infidelity (vv. 40-44).

These last four verses state the main charter for the Jewish community that would return to Jerusalem from exile. A penitential mood unknown in pre-exilic times would come into the worship of YHWH. The tone of jubilation and celebration, which characterized pre-exilic worship at its best, would turn more somber. Scrupulous concern for atonement for sin and pollution would characterize much of post-exilic Judaism. Indeed, the detailed prescriptions for the sin-offering and the guilt-offering in Leviticus come from the Priestly concerns of post-exilic Judaism and have contributed much to the notion that "sacrifice" involves pain and loss rather than feasting and celebration.

Ezekiel 23:1-49 The Parable of the Two Sisters

Once again Ezekiel uses allegory to describe the sins of Jerusalem. The two sisters, Oholah ("she who has a tent") and Oholibah ("my tent is in her"), stand for Samaria and Jerusalem respectively. Even though Ezekiel will roundly condemn Jerusalem, his choice of names for the sisters may show his bias for her: Samaria only "has a tent"—that is, a temple—but Jerusalem is the city in which YHWH's one "tent" stands. This is one interpretation of the names. Others are possible. One, in fact, suggests that the tents have no reference to YHWH's presence in the cities. "The symbolic names are almost surely designed to call attention to the tents set up for sacred prostitution at Baal shrines, and as such refer again to the basic infidelity of Judah's life" (Howie, The Book of Ezekiel, p. 54).

The point of the story is the infidelity of both kingdoms—we are reminded of the parable of Jerusalem as an abandoned child. Ezekiel spares no detail in picturing first Samaria (Oholah) as a promiscuous prostitute, lusting after Assyrian soldiers. Of course, Samaria was by this time long since in ruins. "Already her people were an ethnic mixture who were held in contempt by the Jews. Her record of infidelity was thought to be the worst possible" (Howie, p. 55). But, Ezekiel proclaims, Jerusalem—Oholibah—exceeds even Samaria in vileness, for she has gone after the Babylonians in her quest for lewdness (vv. 14-17). The first part of chapter 23—vv. 1-35—has "political harlotry" as its theme. Like Hosea and Isaiah, Ezekiel sees the making of foreign alliances as disloyal to YHWH. Perhaps because these foreign alliances have spiritual as well as political ramifications, the prophet returns in the second part of the chapter—vv. 39-49—to the condemnation of pagan worship. Oholah and Oholibah are depicted as having profaned YHWH's sanctuary

and Sabbath and having offered their children as sacrifices to the Baals. For their adultery, each will suffer the fate of an adulteress—to be stoned (vv. 45-47).

Ezekiel's concentration on political and, more particularly, cultic sins does not mean that he is blind to ethical matters, as 18:7-9 demonstrate. He sees a necessity for an ordered and systematic religious base for ethical life. Take away this base, weaken the religious symbolism by which the people are constantly reminded of the reality of YHWH and of God's righteousness, and morality will inevitably sink to the low level that prevails in the other nations. Cultic observances, religious symbolism, holy times, places, and things—all are essential for the uprightness of YHWH's people. Ezekiel's concerns as a priest and those which he demonstrates as a prophet are the same. None of the earlier prophets condemned the temple cultus more completely, but in Ezekiel it is made clear that he condemns it precisely because he realizes its importance.

The Individualism of Ezekiel

In ancient times, the family, tribe, clan, or nation was seen as the basic unity of humanity. Individuals experienced their worth and followed out their destiny only as members of such corporate organisms. This close identification of individual and community also meant that actions of an individual affected the social group. The guilt of an individual could become the corporate guilt of the nation. Thus, Achan's sin in violating the rules of the cherem resulted in the defeat of the Israelite armies at the outset of the invasion of Canaan, and his death was required to purify the whole community of Israel.

Abraham had pleaded with YHWH for a reversal of the idea of corporate guilt when he asked that the righteousness of a few be allowed to work for the deliverance of the whole people of Sodom and Gomorrah —but his argument was still based on the idea of corporate humanity.

The Book of Ezekiel marks a shift in this understanding of the relationship between the individual and the corporate group. While the community as a whole is either blessed or condemned according to its faithfulness or its transgressions, individuals within it are held accountable for their own actions. No one can count on membership in the community to save him or her if he or she sins. On the other hand, the punishment of the present generation is for the sins of that generation, not the sins of their forebears. This concept is developed in the following passages.

Ezekiel 14:12-20 Noah, Daniel, and Job can Save only Themselves

This passage is developed in the style of Priestly judgments: four different "cases" are presented, all of which lead to the same conclusion that is thus established as a general principle which can apply to similar cases.

In each of four disasters—famine, wild beasts, sword, and pestilence—even the righteous such as Noah, Daniel, and Job are able to save only themselves. Neither their sons nor their daughters can be saved by the righteousness of the three. Instead, each person is to be judged on the basis of his or her own sin or righteousness. If being a member of the family of one of these particularly holy men has no effect, then claiming to be an Israelite or a Jerusalemite cannot result in deliverance either. The three examples—Noah, Daniel, and Job—probably were chosen because of their righteousness and because they were known as deliverers. But who chose them? The inclusion of Daniel and Job in the list has led many scholars to attribute this passage—and with it the other passages in Ezekiel having to do with individual responsibility—not to Ezekiel himself but to the post-exilic editor who gave the book its present shape. While the J epic in which Noah appears had been written during or soon after the reign of David, the books of Job and Daniel were not composed until long after the return from exile. A person named Daniel does appear in an ancient Canaanite legend as a righteous judge, but there is no extant reference to Job prior to Ezekiel. It is possible, however,

that the legends of Daniel and Job were known to the prophet.

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Ezekiel 18:1-32 "The soul that sins shall die"

The message of individual responsibility is again developed in relation to the proverb, cited in Jeremiah 31:27-30. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (v. 2). The legal format of describing a series of cases in order to establish a general principle is also followed here. "If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right. . . he shall surely live," but his righteousness shall produce no guarantees for his children: indeed, the wicked son of a righteous father shall die. If he, a wicked man, "has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise . . . he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live" (18:5-17). These cases argue logically the principle of individual responsibility: "The person who sins shall die. The child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own" (v. 20).

Up to this point, the issue has been the transmission of guilt or righteousness from one generation to another. In the next few verses, attention shifts to carrying guilt or righteousness from one's own past life into the future. Verses 21-24 state that someone who has been righteous but who turns from righteousness into sin shall die, and one who has been sinful but turns from the sin to practice righteousness shall live. Neither sin nor righteousness will be measured on a cumulative basis, but the changes in the direction of a life will determine one's judgment.

It is important to notice the setting in which this principle of individual responsibility is developed. (Whether it was developed by Ezekiel himself or put into his mouth by a later editor, the situation to which it speaks is the same.) On the one hand, some of those in the city of Jerusalem who have not been taken into exile are still clinging to the belief that the favored status held by previous generations held before God will guarantee their own safety. Ezekiel tells such as these that the quality of their own lives will determine their end. On the other hand, some of those who are in exile are complaining that God has been unjust in punishing them for what their ancestors did. To them he says that they should look to their own lives so that they might live. The passage ends on a note of grace, a call for repentance and acquisition of a new heart. This new heart is to be sought by the individual, but it is to be given by YHWH the merciful (see 11:19). Finally, the word of YHWH comes to Israel with a plea: "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the LORD God; turn then and live" (vv. 31-32). For the future, God desires not death but life, not misery but hope. We turn now to the shape of that hope.

Ezekiel 34:1-24, 37:1-14 Oracles of Hope

Most of the oracles of hope in the Book of Ezekiel are found in chapters 33-39, after the news has been carried to Ezekiel that Jerusalem has fallen (33:21-22). But the prediction of a reconstruction of the human heart and the creation of a new spirit within us appears not only in chapter 36 but also in chapter 11. The message is fundamentally the same in each passage: at the time when the exiles are allowed to return to Jerusalem, YHWH will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them. The settings of the two passages, however, are different.

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Ezekiel 11:14-21 and 36:16-32 A New Heart and a New Spirit

In chapter 11, the people who are left in the land after the leaders of Jerusalem have been deported are saying that the land now belongs to them. Because the exiles are no longer in the land but have "gone far from the LORD" (11:15), they have been removed from the sphere of the promise; only those left behind will inherit.

To this claim Ezekiel brings the message that YHWH has been with the exiles—"I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone" (v. 16). The theological implications of this statement are striking. YHWH has acted as temple for those who have not been able to attend the temple of Jerusalem. And now YHWH promises to bring the exiles together from the lands of their exile and give to them the land of Israel. Indeed, those who return will receive the new heart and the new spirit that they may walk in YHWH's statutes and ordinances. We are reminded of Jeremiah 31:33, where YHWH promises to write the law upon the hearts of the people. But here those who continue in their idolatry—perhaps the boasting Judahites who remained in the land—will be punished (v. 21).

In chapter 36, the exiles are not so favorably described. They were sent into exile because of the sins they had committed in Jerusalem. Now in exile—indeed by virtue of being in exile—they continue to profane YHWH's name. Foreigners say of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land" (v. 20). To them it is a sign of YHWH's failure—and therefore a profanation of God's name—that God's own people could not retain their land.

The people will return from exile, but the return from exile will not be due to any righteousness on their part. It will occur so that YHWH can "sanctify [his] great name . . . and the nations will know that [he] is the LORD" (v. 23). The new heart and new spirit, along with a cleansing from the pollution of their idolatry, will be given to them so that they can keep YHWH's statutes and ordinances. Abundant crops will accompany the blessing of the land. In all this there is to be no simple return to the status that prevailed before—they will remember their evil ways and will loathe themselves for their sins (v. 31). It is solely to vindicate YHWH that the people are to be blessed—for them, shame is their most pronounced inheritance (v. 32).

This passage is also reminiscent of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Ezekiel does not directly speak of a "new covenant" as does Jeremiah, but 36:28 implies a covenant relationship. The terms, "you shall be my people, and I will be your God," are couched in words familiar to us from the work of the Deuteronomist. The "heart of stone" which YHWH will take from the people and the "heart of flesh" which YHWH will give them make a different figure of speech from that used by Jeremiah, but there is a continuity of symbol nonetheless. Again, Jeremiah speaks of YHWH writing the Law, which had formerly been written on tablets of stone, upon people's hearts. Ezekiel calls the hearts of the people stone and promises that YHWH will give them hearts of flesh and a spirit which will lead them to obey the Law (Jer. 31:33 and Ezek. 36:36).

Ezekiel 34:1-24 The Good Shepherd

In 34:1-10, Ezekiel follows the great prophets before him in chastising the "shepherds of Israel"—the leaders of the people (cf. Hos. 4:4-6). They have failed utterly in their assigned task of watching over YHWH's flock. They have fed themselves instead

of the sheep, taking from them without feeding them, and they have not cared for the weak or the lost. The sheep have become scattered. YHWH—who has declared himself "sanctuary" for the exiles—will be their shepherd. YHWH personally will take over care of the sheep, and that care for the sheep will stand at every point in contrast to that which Israel has received from its leaders.

The picture of YHWH as the "Good Shepherd" figures prominently in the interpretation of Jesus in the New Testament (cf. John 10:1-18; Heb. 13:20; I Pet. 2:25). As a result of this imagery, the shepherd, another word for which is "pastor," has become an important symbol for Christian ministry and the pastoral role of a minister has often been seen in terms of the description of the "Good Shepherd" given in 34:11-16.

Another dimension of the role of a shepherd is given in vv. 17-22. The shepherd will "judge between sheep and sheep, rams and goats . . . the fat sheep and the lean sheep." Here the New Testament picture is of Jesus

as last judge (cf. Matt. 25:31-32). Note that the judgment here is consonant with the prophet's notion of individual responsibility; it is judgment among individuals, between the good and those so evil that they deliberately foul what they cannot use, so that others cannot use it either. The flock must be protected not only from the wild beast without, but also from the greedy and unjust sheep within.

Though YHWH is the "Good Shepherd," that role will be carried out by a messianic king: "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them . . . and be their shepherd" (v. 23). It is not David himself, of course, who is promised, but a successor to the throne of Israel from the house of David.

Under the influence of the "hand" and the "Spirit" of YHWH—in a visionary state—Ezekiel sees a valley in which are strewn the bones of countless dead Israelites. As verse 11 reveals, the vision is an allegory—the bones stand for the nation. Taken into exile, its national identity as a people of God erased by the destruction of the temple and the final removal of the heir to the Davidic monarchy, Israel is like a corpse. The nation is completely lifeless, so far dead that its bones have become dry. At least so it appears to the despairing Jews, whose saying YHWH quotes: "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (v. 11).

Ezekiel 37:1-14 The Valley of the Dry Bones

YHWH also raises the question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" (v. 3) The force of this question is lost if one thinks, in Christian terms, that what is asked of Ezekiel is whether he believes in the resurrection of the dead. The question has to do with the resurrection, the restoration, of a dead community. Still, among a people whose common belief was that death is final, the obvious answer to the question "Can these bones live?" is "No."

Ezekiel's response is not negative; it allows room for hope: "O LORD God, you know" (v. 3). The answer to YHWH's question is in YHWH's power. And the power of YHWH, through the prophetic word which Ezekiel is commanded to utter, brings the bones together, attaches sinew to bone, covers bone and sinew with flesh and skin,

and, finally, breathes life into the reconstructed bodies. The vision tells Ezekiel that YHWH is capable of the seemingly impossible. Within the historical circumstances of Israel YHWH will perform a miracle equivalent to bringing the dead back to life: YHWH will restore the nation. The graves that will be opened (vv. 12-13) will not be those of individuals but the "graves" of despair into which the nation has sunk.

Chapters 40-48 The Restored Temple and Its Law

Chapters 40-42 describe in almost overwhelming detail the plan of the temple which is to be rebuilt when the captivity is ended and the nation is restored. For most people today this description is neither interesting nor rewarding to read, but during the Exile it held up to the Jews the hope of a renewed relationship to YHWH.

The legal code in chapters 43-48 contains prescriptions which seem to us utterly impracticable. For example, the division of the land among the tribes (chapter 48) appears to lack any realistic possibility of implementation. The code does describe a national life of complete obedience to YHWH and some unprecedented blessings for the people. From the very beginning, when Eve correctly saw the fruit of the forbidden tree as the Lord had created it, humanity has been tempted to put a higher value on logic or "reasonableness" than on faithfulness to YHWH.

Years later, when the exiles returned to Jerusalem, the temple was indeed rebuilt—but the rebuilding

program simply amounted to repairing the old temple, not building the visionary one Ezekiel describes. A legal code was read to the people to restore the covenant relationship with YHWH—but it was not the code which Ezekiel offered. Nevertheless, the visionary picture held up by the prophet to the exiles contributed significantly to the eventual reconstruction of the life of Judah.

A Final Note on the History of Ezekiel's Book

At the beginning of this lesson we noted some of the scholarly controversy surrounding the Book of Ezekiel. The controversy is hardly modern. "As early as the time of the formation of the canon of the Old Testament, Jewish scholars raised questions about the book of Ezekiel" (May, p. 41). The major problem was that Ezekiel seemed to differ at a number of points from the norm of the Torah. So, though it was accepted into the canon of the Jewish scriptures, it continued to present considerable difficulty.

From the Talmud we learn that Hananiah ben Hezekiah, head of the school of Shammai, commissioned three hundred jars of oil, and, in modern idiom, he 'burned the midnight oil,' sitting in his upper chamber until he finally succeeded in harmonizing Ezekiel with the Pentateuch. . . . The Talmud tells us moreover that when Elijah comes . . . the discrepancies between Ezekiel and the Pentateuch will be explained. (May, p. 41)

Jewish scholars of the time were also concerned with the beginning of the book, lest its visionary imagery give rise to esoteric doctrines concerning God. A kind of accepted censorship resulted. The first chapter was to be part of the canon of scripture, but was not to be read in the synagogue. Moreover, according to Jerome, there was a regulation forbidding anyone under thirty years of age to read the whole book at all.

End of chapter

Children have been sacrificed back

A practice that famously continued in the Phoenician colony of Carthage.

YHWH now gives them back

Nice!

Punishment back

OK, but what about the consequences of what previous generations did?

Why will you die? back

Still not what we would call a merciful god.

Extraordinary back

Actually I feel better about a prophet who is pretty crazy. Isn't that how they mostly were in biblical times?

Seemed fantastic back

I don't see the problem. If he knew the geography of Jerusalem, he didn't need to be there in order to draw a map.