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Introducing this Issue

Most of the articles in this issue have grown out of or are related to the 2018 Preaching Conference held at the RTC. The theme of the conference, “Exploring Ezekiel: Preaching Christ from the Prophets,” ensured that the focus remained practical, experiential, and contemporary. Many of the attendees were pastors, preachers and theological students who were prepared to grapple with this challenging but majestic book in an effort to communicate its message of judgment and hope effectively and powerfully in our own time and context. As the articles began their lives as lectures at the Preaching Conference, readers will appreciate the traces of oral delivery that still remain. The elements of immediacy and urgency, while not always the hallmark of journal articles, have deliberately been preserved.

In the first article, “Ezekiel the Preacher: One of us or one of a kind?” Dr Murray Capill asks what preachers today can learn from the ministry of Ezekiel. When is Ezekiel a model for us and when is he not? When are we to see him as “one of a kind” and when is he effectively “one of us”? On what basis do we sometimes choose to follow in his footsteps, and at other times scorn the idea of doing so? By means of assessing his ministry in the light of the later ministries of Christ and the Apostles, Dr Capill identifies six characteristics of gospel preaching from the ministry of Ezekiel that apply at all times and in all places. While one could more easily distil the same profile from the NT alone, because Ezekiel’s ministry is so graphic and extreme, the enduring profile of a gospel preacher found in the pages of the book of Ezekiel is particularly compelling. From this OT prophet we see this profile in vivid colour, in 3D, in dramatic performance.

In the next article, Rev John de Hoog argues that Ezekiel 20:32 is a hermeneutical key to the book of Ezekiel which can provide a reference point for navigating the rest of the book. The argument has three main steps: The first step of the argument shows that Ezekiel 33 performs the function of a hinge chapter in the book. Chapter 33 brings together three great themes from earlier in Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel begins a new phase of his ministry after Chapter 33. The second step of the argument is a demonstration that the structure of Chapter 20 echoes the structure

of the whole book, and so is usefully seen as a thematic microcosm of the book. Ezekiel 20:32 performs a hinge function in Chapter 20 of Ezekiel. The third step of the argument shows that there are thematic parallels between the hinge verse of Chapter 20 and the hinge chapter of the whole book. The conclusion follows that therefore Ezekiel 20:32 can be considered a hermeneutical key to the book of Ezekiel. The conclusion is further documented by giving three examples of how Ezekiel 20:32 functions as a key to other passages of the book.

The next two articles by Iain Duguid focus on the themes of judgment and hope in the book of Ezekiel. In his first article Dr Duguid observes how Ezekiel appears full of so much bad news—and some of it presented in words that seem entirely unsuitable for church! How do we deal with this awkward prophet who keeps shouting angrily in our face? What is he so upset about? Should we be equally upset? How do we communicate God's righteous wrath and terrifying judgment in an entirely "non-shaming" culture? How do we deliver the bad news to people without sending them running in the opposite direction? Iain Duguid demonstrates how Ezekiel provides a great testing ground for how to preach Christ from challenging passages of condemnation. In his second article, Dr Duguid explores the theme of hope in Ezekiel. Do the prophets provide us with an end-times road map and calendar, from which we can work out the date of Christ's return? Or perhaps their message was to their own day and time and has now become simply a history lesson? Is Ezekiel's temple a blueprint for a future construction project on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem? How do we connect the powerful vision for the future that Ezekiel gives us with the rest of Scripture, and especially with its centre in Jesus Christ, crucified, raised and glorified? How do we show our people how these glorious passages comfort and exhort us in the present, as we await heaven? Once again, the Book of Ezekiel gives us many of the answers to our questions.

The final essay by Stephen Voorwinde is the first of a two-part study on the emotions of Paul in his Letter to the Galatians. Voorwinde notes that the relationship between the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul can often seem like a contested and convoluted field of study. Sometimes the Pauline material seems to fit rather comfortably into the Acts narrative, as

is the case for example with the Thessalonian correspondence. On other occasions, however, the relationship can be quite problematic. Acts hardly seems to account for the complexities in the relationship between Paul's first and second letters to the Corinthians. Do the Prison Epistles fit into the context provided by the account of Paul's imprisonment in Rome in Acts 28? Do the Pastorals belong in the Acts narrative or to a later period? More complicated (and arguably more important) than any of these questions, however, has been the place of the Galatian letter within Acts. The issue was made more difficult by the fact that since patristic times the Galatians to whom Paul was writing were located in North Galatia. This traditional view remained in vogue until it was challenged by Sir William Ramsey late in the nineteenth century. The scholarly debate between the North and South Galatian theories dominated the study of Galatians for much of the twentieth century. Voorwinde contends that a close look at the evidence not only indicates that the South Galatian theory has much to commend it, it also throws light on some dark corners of Paul's early life. A careful harmonisation of key passages in Acts and Galatians illuminates the interpretation of both works.

This edition concludes with a number of book reviews. We trust you enjoy reading this edition and find stimulation here for biblical, theological, missiological and pastoral reflection.

Martin Williams

Ezekiel, The Preacher: One of Us or One of a Kind?

Murray Capill

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Ezekiel's ministry was extreme, bizarre and confronting. Examples of his unusual behaviours and practices are not hard to find and it seems immediately clear they are not intended to be precedents for preachers today.

Few preachers, for example, would aspire to his near starvation diet despite "Ezekiel bread", with its mix of grains and legumes (cf. Ezek 4:9), having become something of a health fad.¹ Ezekiel himself, a priest well acquainted with the Levitical law, protests the initial requirement to bake the bread over human dung. The Lord relented, allowing him to use animal dung instead, but the recipe and the meagre rations, remained. Yet while it stood for him there is no indication this was to be the diet of anyone else, either in the Old Testament or the New.

Preachers are also unlikely to follow his lead in speaking only when he was preaching. As Christopher Wright, commenting on Ezekiel 3:26, explains, "In the ordinary course of everyday life, Ezekiel would be saying nothing to anybody, except when speaking directly in the name of Yahweh, in which case it would be Yahweh, not Ezekiel who was the real speaker anyway." Quoting John Taylor, he then adds, "When he spoke, it was because God had something to say. When he was silent it was because God was silent."² It would undoubtedly make an impact if all preachers were silent except for when they were preaching, but it seems unlikely anyone would seriously consider that to be a precedent to follow.

¹ See, for example, Kris Gunnars, "Why Ezekiel Bread Is the Healthiest Bread You Can Eat", <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/ezekiel-bread> Cited 28/2/19.

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 72.

Again, preachers are unlikely to enact their messages in the bizarre ways Ezekiel did. It is inadequate to take from the sign-acts a precedent for drama or other visual media in worship. “The prophetic sign-acts were more than mere visual aids or attention-getting devices. They were delivered with divine authority and thus functioned as the divine word made visible and sure.”³ Ezekiel enacted judgement, the suffering of God’s people, and the destruction of Jerusalem in the most painful and confronting ways. Lying on his side or building a replica of the siege of Jerusalem was not merely street drama, but a divinely commanded prophetic sign-act. But these were specific requirements of Ezekiel, not general injunctions for preachers to dramatize their messages.

Preachers are also unlikely to imitate Ezekiel’s relationship with his wife. It would seem he did not speak to her for seven years and then, at the Lord’s command, when she died young, he did not mourn for her (Ezek 24:15–18). Her death was one more occasion to enact a message of judgment.

Yet while preachers might readily reject the idea of emulating his ministry in these ways, there are other aspects of his life and preaching we may well relate to, learn from and even imitate. It is not uncommon for commentators to draw lessons from Ezekiel for preachers today. Daniel Block, for example, commenting on Ezekiel’s call and the vision of Ezekiel 1–3, asserts that, “If the account of Ezekiel’s inaugural vision provides the reader with important lessons about God, the commission narrative offers vital information on the relationship between God and those whom he calls into his service.”⁴ He proceeds to outline six lessons preachers and messengers of God today should take to heart from Ezekiel’s experience. Similarly, Douglas Stuart repeatedly applies lessons from Ezekiel’s commission to preachers and messengers of the Word today.⁵

³ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 94–95.

⁴ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 130.

⁵ Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (ed. Lloyd John Ogilvie; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 33–47. In so doing, Stuart and other contemporary commentators follow a line of application with a long history. It seems the church fathers did not hesitate to see preachers and clergy as the equivalents of the OT prophet. Augustine, for example, preaching on Ezekiel’s commission, states: “What does that show, if not that God was speaking through the prophet? Now it is we clergy who were above all terrified by the prophet’s words, that is, the leaders whom

Iain Duguid is careful to highlight points of discontinuity between Ezekiel's ministry and ours, cautioning as regards the same texts that "just as not everyone is called to be a prophet, so not every prophet is called to exercise his ministry in the way Ezekiel did. That means that we will have to be careful in universalizing the principles of Ezekiel's calling."⁶ Yet Duguid himself frequently draws lessons from Ezekiel for preachers today. For example, he contends that, "Like Ezekiel, we need to fall on our faces in God's presence, recognising that we have no strength, no gifts, nothing that we can contribute to the task, and pleading with him to fill us with his Spirit so that we can be faithful servants. Like Ezekiel, we must be willing to die to ourselves and to our desires and comfort to be useful to God."⁷

We face, then, some important questions. When is Ezekiel a model for us and when is he not? When are we to see him as "one of a kind" and when is he effectively "one of us"? On what basis do we sometimes choose to follow in his footsteps, and at other times scorn the idea of doing so? Intuition alone is an insufficient basis for deciding whether we are to imitate him or not. A clear hermeneutical basis is needed for determining when we are to take to heart not only his message but also his model of ministry.

God appointed to speak to his people, and so we begin by seeing our own vices in those words. For as the reader intoned them we had a kind of mirror held up to us in which we could inspect ourselves, and inspect ourselves we did." Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel* (ed. Thomas C. Oden; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 22. Similarly, Puritan and Reformed commentators applied Ezekiel's call and charge to preachers. For example William Greenhill (1591-1671), an Independent minister in England who wrote an extensive commentary on Ezekiel, wrote concerning Ezekiel as a watchman, "There are two sorts of watchmen God has set in his church. Those who were extraordinary: prophets, apostles, evangelists. And those who were ordinary: pastors and teachers. These latter continue to this day and watch for the good of souls (Heb 13:17). Their office is, as the prophets, to learn of Christ and to warn the people." Quoted in Timothy George ed, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 29.

⁶ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 81.

⁷ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 71.

To establish this basis and identify appropriate lessons for preachers today we will focus on Ezekiel's call in chapters 1–3. It should be noted, however, that even if a such a hermeneutical basis can be established, it does not necessarily mean such applications are the primary applications of the text. Preachers who expound these chapters will, in the first place, need to apply the text to their hearers. It was the readers of the book of Ezekiel who needed to hear of his call to ministry, not just Ezekiel himself and any subsequent preachers to whom his experience may apply. But to preach well, we must first apply the text to our own hearts, and so it will be valuable to determine what aspects of Ezekiel's call and ministry all preachers ought to take to heart.

A unique ministry

In considering this we begin by noting the extent to which Ezekiel's ministry was utterly unique. The call narrative in Ezekiel 1–3 records a ministry that was unique both in its setting and focus.

The setting was unique in that Ezekiel was called to preach to apostate Israel in exile. Today a preacher might consider going into a rural ministry, an inner-city ministry, a cross-cultural ministry or a green-fields church plant, but we do not have to consider a Babylonian exile ministry. We also generally minister either to churches in varying conditions of well-being (cf. Rev 2–3), or to unbelievers who have not yet responded to the gospel. Ezekiel, however, was an exile among exiles, not figuratively as we are, but literally. He and his hearers had been exiled because of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Ezekiel would therefore preach to people currently and increasingly experiencing God's judgment for their long-term apostacy and spiritual rebellion.

As such, Ezekiel's call was to a ministry destined to fall on deaf ears. Yahweh told him that it would have been easier if he had to speak to the Gentiles (cf. Ezek 3:5–6). In a striking reversal of terminology, Israel is referred to as a rebellious nation (*gôyim*) and the Gentiles, to whom it would, ironically, be easier to go, are called “a people” (*am*).⁸ So, “Although

⁸ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 68.

Ezekiel finds himself in a foreign land surrounded by Babylonians, his calling is not to a foreign mission field or to a cross-cultural ministry. Had he been, there would have been a great harvest for his work. It is his own people, who know the language of revelation and are familiar with the traditions of Yahweh's saving and covenantal grace, who resist the word of God."⁹

As gospel preaches today, we are called to that "easier" ministry. We are sent to the nations and we anticipate gospel fruit as we proclaim the gospel of Christ in order to make disciples of all nations (cf. Matt 28:18).

The unique setting of Ezekiel's ministry gives rise to his unique message. For the first seven years of his ministry, from 593BC to the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC, he was called to pronounce judgment on Israel. His message, recorded in Ezekiel 1–33, was essentially a declaration that "God is against you". See, for example, the confronting words of Ezekiel 5:7–8 (my italics):

7 Therefore thus says the LORD God: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, 8 therefore thus says the LORD God: *Behold, I, even I, am against you.* And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations.

In saying this, "Yahweh has assumed the posture of an enemy, intent on destroying his own people."¹⁰ Ezekiel is therefore called to repeatedly and relentlessly confront Israel with the reality of God's wrath.

By contrast, the theme-tune of new covenant gospel preaching, while warning of the danger of God being against us, is to declare the very opposite to God's people. This is clearly articulated in Romans 8:32 when Paul proclaims, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" God's people are assured, because of the unbreakable nature of the new covenant, that nothing can separate them from God's love. The theme of judgment must

⁹ Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 129.

¹⁰ Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 202.

not be absent from gospel preaching, as we will see, but neither should it be the hallmark of it.

This predominant theme of judgment was accompanied, as we have already noted, by sign-acts. Sign-acts are not unique to Ezekiel among the OT prophets, but they are both more prevalent and more extreme in his ministry than in any other. Yet there is no equivalent NT charge to preachers to enact their message. Rather, the fundamental charge to NT gospel preachers is that given to Timothy: “Preach the Word” (2 Tim 4:2). We are called to a Word ministry alone, not to personally enacting the message we proclaim.

Ezekiel’s ministry was therefore unique both in its setting and focus. Yet despite this strong discontinuity, there are also significant aspects of continuity between his ministry and ours.

A gospel ministry

Most notably, Ezekiel is “one of us” insofar as he was a gospel preacher. Alongside his proclamation and enactment of judgment, Ezekiel preached the hope of the new covenant. Particularly from Ezekiel 33 onwards he foretells the glory of the new covenant ministry with which we are now entrusted. He prophesies the coming of Christ as the true Shepherd of his people, whose Spirit will bring life to the dead bones of God’s people, proclaiming gospel hope to Israel and to all nations. Wright notes, “The range of material in Ezekiel 34–37 can be appreciated when we see that, in those chapters, God promises to bring Israel out of anarchy (34), into the land (35:1–36.15), back from disgrace (36:16–38), up from the grave (37:1–14) and together out of brokenness (37:15–28). It is, in modern jargon, a truly holistic gospel.”¹¹

Even in the first 33 chapters of Ezekiel, when the prophet is mostly proclaiming judgment, he is still speaking as a gospel preacher. The gospel is always good news on the back of bad news and must always be proclaimed with warnings of the serious repercussions that follow its

¹¹ Wright, *Ezekiel*, 273.

rejection. While the proportion of Ezekiel's ministry focused on judgment was unique, the practice of preaching judgment is fundamental to gospel proclamation.

Ezekiel stands, then, in a grand procession of gospel preachers that moves from the OT prophets, to Christ himself, the greatest prophet, to the Apostles who were sent to speak in Christ's name, to preachers today, who are charged with building on the teaching of the apostles and prophets. While we cannot legitimately leap-frog from Ezekiel to ourselves, drawing direct lines of application or taking him as an immediate model for our ministry, we can move from him, to Christ, to the Apostles, to preachers today, passing his unique ministry through this redemptive-historical filter in order to establish principles and patterns from his ministry that apply to preachers today. Such an approach provides us with a clear and responsible hermeneutic for discerning from his ministry key characteristics of gospel preachers in all ages.

An enduring profile for gospel preachers

By means of assessing his ministry in the light of the later ministries of Christ and the Apostles, we can identify six characteristics of gospel preaching that apply at all times and in all places. We could more easily distil the same profile from the NT alone, but because Ezekiel's ministry is so graphic and extreme, the enduring profile of a gospel preacher found in the pages of the book of Ezekiel is particularly compelling. From this OT prophet we see this profile in vivid colour, in 3D, in dramatic performance.

1. Gospel preachers are to be driven by a passion for the glory of God

Ezekiel is written to a community in shock both culturally and theologically. Deported from their homeland, they now lived in a small town near a large irrigation canal just south of Babylon. These exiles had lost everything: family, homeland, and the very institutions that gave stability to their lives—the covenant, the land, the temple and the kingship.¹² Their grief is well depicted in the lament of Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept... How can sing the songs of Zion while in a foreign land?”

One of the exiles was the young priest, Ezekiel, who, had there been no deportation, would probably have been serving at the temple in Jerusalem, close to the manifest glory of the Lord. But now, in 593BC, after five years in Babylon, he saw a vision of the Lord that shook him even more profoundly than deportation.

The glory of the Lord is “the visible manifestation of his presence among his people.”¹³ The Hebrew word for glory (*kābōwd*), “derives from a root meaning ‘to be heavy,’ but when applied to royalty and divinity it denotes the sheer weight of that person’s majesty, that quality which evokes a response of awe in the observer.”¹⁴ The glory of God is therefore the display of his weighty significance which is displayed as splendid and majestic. He is unapproachably awesome, incomprehensibly magnificent. It is the same glory Moses encountered on Mt. Sinai and Isaiah encountered in his temple vision.

Ezekiel saw this manifestation of the glory of the Lord in the form of an awesome throne-chariot, coming in a storm cloud from the north, invariably the direction from which Israel’s enemies came. The vision is full of sound and fury, with constant noise, motion and “bustling activity”,

¹² Daniel I. Block, “Ezekiel: Theology,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 616.

¹³ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 56.

¹⁴ Block, *Exekiel: 1–24*, 105.

in contrast to the static vision of Isaiah.¹⁵ At the centre of the vision is one seated on a throne, whom Ezekiel describes in the most tentative language (vv. 26–28). He sees the likeness of a man who from the waist up appears as glowing metal, and from the waist down appears as fire. This figure appears in dazzling brightness that appeared as a rainbow.

The entire vision, rich in allusions to creation, to the covenant with Noah, to Mt. Sinai, the glory of God in the temple, and even to the cherubim and gods of Babylon, is beyond words. Ezekiel can barely describe it; he gropes for words because God is more glorious, majestic, powerful, beautiful and terrifying than we can ever grasp. Block attributes the broken Hebrew, consisting of “incomplete sentences, erratic grammar, and incoherent structure”, to Ezekiel’s state as he records the shattering sight he saw.¹⁶

In chapter 10 Ezekiel will again see a vision of the glory of the Lord, but this time, not approaching from the north in Babylon, but departing from the temple in Jerusalem. This glorious God hates sin and brings judgment on the wicked; and judgment begins with the house of God. So having departed from the temple, he has come in judgment to his people in exile. The throne-chariot is his judgment throne. While it is possible to speak of the comfort God’s presence in Babylon might have been for his exiled people, it is more likely that the vision is intended to be ominous, indicative of God having come to his people in judgment.¹⁷ Ezekiel is therefore commissioned to proclaim prophecies of judgment against the people of Israel because of the Lord’s fierce anger at their rebellion.

But while judgment is a dominant motif of the book, Ezekiel will see the Lord’s glory for a third time, not as a storm cloud near the Kebar canal (Ezek 1), nor departing the temple in Jerusalem (Ezek 10) but coming in grace and blessing to his renewed people, at a renewed temple (Ezek 43). That promise generates many prophecies of hope, foretelling restoration, revival, and a renewed presence of God among his people.

¹⁵ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 58.

¹⁶ See Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 91.

¹⁷ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 58.

Fulfillment of that prophecy would not come for many centuries, but in time God did come again in glory, in a more surprising way than Ezekiel ever saw. As John 1:14, declares, “The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us; we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In Christ we have seen the glory of the Lord in an even more remarkable way than Ezekiel saw it. He saw the glory in signs and symbols, in visions and revelations, but we have seen it in the flesh. Of course Jesus’ true glory was often veiled during his earthly ministry, but there were glimpses of it in his miracles, in his transfiguration and, most fully, on the cross, as a new covenant was cut in his shed blood. His resurrection declared his glorious power over sin and death, and his ascension enthroned him as king of kings and Lord of Lords.

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul describes new covenant ministry, contrasting it with the glory of the old covenant. The old covenant came in glory, he says, but the glory of the new covenant is far greater. New covenant ministry brings life not death; it is a ministry of the Spirit not of the letter; it is a ministry that writes God’s law on people’s hearts not merely on tablets of stone. New covenant people behold the Lord’s glory and are being transformed by his glory into his glory (2 Cor 3:18).

Drawing out the implications of that for himself as a minister of the new covenant, Paul says, “we are very bold” (2 Cor 3:12) and “we do not lose heart” (2 Cor 4:1, 16). Apostolic preaching is motivated by the glory of the gospel. It is this that sustains Paul despite constant opposition, just as it motivated and sustained Ezekiel 700 years earlier. Those who minister the new covenant are but jars of clay, yet they carry gospel treasure. The treasure is “the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ,” a phrase not dissimilar to Ezekiel’s description of what he saw: “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek 1:28).

As ministers of the new covenant, having seen a greater glory than Ezekiel saw, we are also to be driven on by a sense of the glory of God. Like Ezekiel, our foremost desire must be for God to be glorified in and through our preaching. The heart of gospel ministry is proclaiming the

glorious Christ, shedding his light abroad so that people might see his glory, be transformed by it, and give glory to God. Block's comment is therefore apt when he draws from Ezekiel 1 this implication: "this vision serves notice that whoever would enter into divine service must have a clear vision of the one into whose service he or she is called."¹⁸ Indeed, without such a vision, what will prevent us from losing heart (cf. 2 Cor 4:1, 16).

2. Gospel preachers are commissioned to speak whether they are welcomed or not

Following the vision of chapter 1 Ezekiel is commissioned to speak for this glorious God. He is immediately informed that he will receive a very poor reception because he will be speaking to stubborn, impudent, rebellious people. "If responsiveness is to be the measure of success, Ezekiel's mission is declared a failure before it even begins."¹⁹ But he is to speak anyway because the goal is not that they will gladly hear him but that "they will know that a prophet has been among them" (Ezek 2:5).

Among the OT prophets, such a commission is not unusual (cf. Is 6:9–10; Jer 20:7–18). Derek Thomas notes that Ezekiel stands in a long line of faithful preachers (including Elijah, Nathan, Amos, Jeremiah and later, John the Baptist) who spoke despite intimidating opposition.²⁰ All foreshadowed the experience of Christ himself. Like Ezekiel, he preached primarily to the lost sheep of Israel. And like him, he was largely rejected, first by his own home town because there, typically, a prophet is not welcome, and then by his own nation who cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:20).

Jesus, in turn, warned that if that is how they treated him it is how they would treat his followers as well. In John 15:18–20 he warns his disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you...

¹⁸ Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 109.

¹⁹ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 68.

²⁰ Derek Thomas, *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), 36.

Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

This, therefore, became the experience of the apostles as well. Paul chronicles almost incessant opposition and hardship (cf. 2 Cor 4:8–12; 6:3–10; 11:23–28). He also makes clear, in passing on the gospel baton to Timothy, that opposition and hardship will be the norm for him as well. Timothy is to join him in suffering for the gospel (2 Tim 1:8) and is to face the reality that, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4). In response, Timothy is to preach the word anyway, with great patience and careful instruction, keeping his head, being faithful to his ministry and doing the work of an evangelist.

Timothy faced what preachers since then have also faced: the demands of preaching to people who may not like us or our message. It is hard to preach when people disapprove of you or do not want to hear you. A person’s hardened gaze while we preach, or their coolness afterwards, not to mention direct words of disapproval, can rob us of freedom and power if we value their opinions too highly.

Ironically, the opposite can also be detrimental to faithful preaching. Ezekiel experienced people who liked the sound of his preaching but never intended to respond personally to it:

“Your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.’ ... And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it” (Ezekiel 33:30–32).

It is not uncommon for people to become sermon connoisseurs who enjoy good preaching and rate it highly, yet never take the message to

heart. The danger for the preacher is the desire to play into their hands, saying that which wins their applause or adopting the style that garners their approval.

What will help us speak faithfully whether people love our preaching or hate it, whether they respond to the message or reject it? Ezekiel 1 has already provided the answer: only a sense of the glory of God; a sense of his weight being greater than anyone else's, his opinion counting more than anyone else's, and his Word being truer than anyone else's.

3. Gospel preachers are to proclaim the bitter-sweet Word they have ingested

In the next scene in Ezekiel's commissioning he is told to eat a scroll. Block describes the scenario well: "Like a child at the table, he is commanded to eat whatever God offers him. But the fare is shocking—the very word of God inscribed on a papyrus scroll."²¹

The scroll is, unusually, inscribed on both sides with words of woe and lament. That is to be his message: God's words of judgment. But he can only proclaim those words if he first absorbs them. He is not merely to sample God's word, but have it fill his stomach. It was to become part of him, nourishing, energising and empowering him.²²

He would therefore be God's mouthpiece, not mechanically, but organically. The words he spoke were words he had inwardly digested and thoroughly internalised. As Stuart quips, scrolls were no more appetising in Bible times than they are today.²³ Similarly, words of judgment have never really been to anyone's taste. Surprisingly, however, the scroll was as sweet to him as honey. The message was not sweet, but the ingestion and internalisation of God's Word was as he "acquiesced in God's commands" and "subscribed to the just judgment of God."²⁴ Taylor argues, "This

²¹ Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 126.

²² Wright, *Ezekiel*, 59.

²³ Stuart, *Ezekiel*, 36.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 130.

sweetness had nothing to do with the nature of the contents, but came simply from the fact that these were the words of God, who makes the bitterest experience of life sweetly satisfying.”²⁵

As we again traverse from Ezekiel to Christ, we find not only similarity but escalation. While it is one thing to eat God’s Word so that it becomes part of you, it is another thing to be God’s Word, to incarnate it. Christ not only absorbs the word of God but fully embodies it. Little wonder he could say to his disciples that he had food to eat they knew nothing about (John 4:32), or that he would stress that “man does live on bread alone” (Matt 4:4). Neither is it surprising that he declared himself to be the bread of life, that a person may eat and never hunger again.

It was that word of God, the bread of life, that subsequently nourished and sustained the ministry of the apostles. As they preached Christ, the living Word, they preached what they themselves had inwardly digested and fed on. John says, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this we proclaim...” (1 John 1:1). The living word they had known, loved, touched and believed was the word they proclaimed. Their preaching was never a detached treatment of religious, moral, ethical or philosophical propositions, but the proclamation of Christ, the living Word, who had transformed their lives.

In turn, they fostered communities that were Word-centred and Word-hungry. The seminal church in Jerusalem was devoted to the Word (Acts 2:42), and the example of the Bereans is held up as noble (Acts 17:11). Paul urges the Colossians to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

²⁵ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 64. Block argues that “the sweet sensation must arise from the personal and direct encounter with the divine word.” Block, *Ezekiel*: 1–24, 126.

Given that all believers are to feed on and be nourished by the Word, both written and incarnate, it is clearly incumbent on preachers to be particularly diligent in ingesting the Word that they are to proclaim to others. Paul specifically reminds Timothy of his exposure to the Scriptures from childhood and urged him to continue in them because they will equip him for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. While 2 Timothy 3:16 is a classic text for the doctrine of inspiration, its immediate intent is to show how the “man of God”, that is, the gospel minister, is equipped for ministry.

Preachers, therefore, should allow ample time to let the word soak into them. It needs to be for them, as it was for Ezekiel, sweeter than honey as they take to heart the word of God. It must feed, nourish, delight and guide them before they endeavour to feed others from it. When this is not the case the preacher is little different from an anorexic nutritionist, who can give the most excellent advice about diet and nutrition but is slowly dying of malnutrition. Few things could be more ironic or tragic.

4. Gospel preachers are empowered for ministry by the Spirit of God

After the vision of the glory of God in Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel fell to the ground, overwhelmed by the majesty of God. In chapter 2, the Spirit entered him and stood him on his feet (Ezek 2:2). The Spirit strengthened him, which is precisely what his name means.²⁶ Later, the Spirit lifts him up and takes him away (3:12), and a week after that does so again (3:24), telling him he will only be able to speak when the Spirit enables him to do so. When the Spirit speaks, he will speak. Ezekiel’s ministry was therefore enabled, empowered and effected by the work of the Holy Spirit. In that, he himself experienced what he would later prophesy concerning Israel: the Spirit coming into dry bones and giving life (cf. Ezek 37:1–14). Indeed, Ezekiel was a model not for preachers but for Israel.²⁷ He modelled the Spirit-enabled responsiveness to God’s glory and God’s word that was meant to be a mark of all Israel.

²⁶ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 69.

²⁷ See Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 68–69.

The prophecy of Ezekiel 37 pointed forward to the coming of the Christ, through whom God would bring his people to new life, implanting in them a new heart in order that they may walk in his ways. Christ himself was anointed by the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom to captives (Luke 4:21), living and preaching by the power of the Spirit. He then breathed out the Spirit of God on his disciples and, after his ascension, poured out his Spirit on all his people, from the least to the greatest, men and women, young and old (cf. Acts 2:1–11).

It was, therefore, by the power and enabling of the Spirit that the Apostles spoke. Paul could say to the Corinthians, “my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4–5), and to the Thessalonians he could insist that “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5).

In view of this biblical-theological theme, it is appropriate to view Ezekiel not only as a model for Israel but for all God’s people, including those who are raised up by God to speak his word in any generation. Hence Block does not hesitate to assert that “whoever would serve as God’s messenger must be empowered by the Spirit of God. Ezekiel was ‘the prophet of the Spirit.’ Animated and energized by the infusion of God’s Holy Spirit, he serves as a model to all who would stand in the Lord’s presence and all who would enter his service.”²⁸

Without the Spirit’s power, preaching is mere words, incapable of achieving what the new covenant is all about: a new heart and spiritual life from spiritual death. But as we preach, something wonderful happens by the Spirit’s enabling, as Calvin, commenting on Ezekiel 2, explains:

This work of the Spirit, then, is joined with the word of God. But a distinction is made, that we may know that the external word is of no avail by itself, unless animated by the power of the Spirit.

²⁸ Block, *Ezekiel: 1–24*, 131.

He continues:

All power of action, then, resides in the Spirit himself, and thus all praise ought to be entirely referred to God alone.²⁹

One implication of this for preachers today is that whenever we see spiritual things happening under the ministry of the Word, we must give all credit to the work of God through his Spirit. Any soul saved, any saints sanctified, any church revived, any dry spell turned to new life is a work of the Spirit for which we should praise God.

A further implication is that we ought to bathe all ministry of the Word in prayer. We must pray much, recognising that conversion, change, revival and times of refreshing are entirely the work of God's Spirit. Such dependence on the Spirit actually gives preachers great hope. If all power is from the Spirit and not from us, then there is hope every time we stand up to preach, no matter how ordinary we are, how much we may have struggled to prepare the sermon, how plain the delivery, or how hard and obstinate the hearts of our hearers. The Spirit continues to be the Spirit of life, who breathes life into dead bones.

5. Gospel preachers are set as watchmen who warn of danger

The imagery of Ezekiel as a watchman is introduced in Ezekiel 3 and recurs in Ezekiel 33. To grasp the power of the metaphor we need to picture an Israelite village or city in time of invasion.³⁰ Sentries, posted day and night on high towers on the city wall or in other elevated places, are charged with watching for any movements of the enemy. If they detect any danger their responsibility is to blow a trumpet or horn, immediately alerting the city to danger. Duguid likens it to an ancient advanced warning system, similar to a WWII air raid siren.³¹ What is disturbing is that the enemy Ezekiel is to warn of is God. He is to warn Israel of the impending

²⁹ Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 108–109.

³⁰ Cf. Wright, *Ezekiel*, 65.

³¹ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 78.

judgment God. If he warns them, then he has discharged his duty, no matter what the response; if he fails to warn them, then he is ultimately responsible for any casualties inflicted.

The book of Ezekiel bears eloquent testimony to how faithfully Ezekiel fulfilled this calling. In chapter after chapter he warns Israel of the imminent danger they are in. Such warning was a hallmark of all the prophets as they prepared for the coming day of the Lord. That day, when it came, ushered in the great and final prophet who also warned, even as he ministered surprising grace and mercy.

Once again, as we pass Ezekiel's ministry through the filter of redemptive history, we come to the ministry of Christ and discover that it is full of warnings about the judgment to come (e.g., Matt 12:39–42; 25:36–51; 25:31–46; Luke 6:24–26; 12:13–21; 2:4–5. Jesus was truly innocent of the blood of all men, and yet his blood was still shed. In an act of astounding grace, he took the punishment he warned of. He poured out his life in the place of sinners who should have died.

That, then, becomes the gospel the Apostles proclaim. They also stood as watchmen, warning of the wrath of God while proclaiming his grace in Christ. Noting the exceptional weight of responsibility on Ezekiel, Brownlee notes that the nearest equivalent to that elsewhere in Scripture is Paul's exclamation, "Woe to me, if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16b).³²

More specifically, Paul takes up the imagery of a watchman as he addresses the Ephesian elders at the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus: "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26–27). F. F. Bruce comments, "Like Ezekiel's faithful watchman, he had sounded the trumpet so that all the province of Asia had heard. If there were any who paid no heed, their blood would be on their own heads: Paul was free of responsibility for their doom."³³ The charge to

³² William Hugh Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (Waco: Word Books, 1994), 50.

³³ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 392.

the elders that follows is, “Watch over yourselves and all the flock.” In the context, this “watching” (*prosechete*) is the careful watchfulness and the readiness to sound warning of the ancient watchman. They are to watch their own souls and warn the flock of anything that might invite the judgment of God. A further echo of the watchman passages is found when Paul tells Timothy that by such careful watching he would save both himself and his hearers (1 Tim 4:16).

These NT applications of the watchman metaphor underscore the weightiness of the responsibility of preachers and pastors. Calvin applies the metaphor to pastors and preachers, stating that, “What Ezekiel heard belongs to all teachers of the Church, namely, that they are Divinely appointed and placed as on watch-towers, that they may keep watch for the common safety of all. It was the duty of those who have been appointed from the beginning ministers of the heavenly doctrine to be watchmen.”³⁴

It is incumbent on gospel preachers to warn of spiritual danger, and when they fail to do so they are negligent; indeed, they potentially have blood on their hands. James rightly said not many should presume to become teachers because of the stricter judgment they face (James 3:1).

This is a particularly weighty task in our day when warning people of spiritual danger, speaking of judgment, and proclaiming the reality of hell, is seen to be culturally inappropriate. But as Wright says, “in real life there is still a recognised place for fire-alarms, early warning systems, smoke detectors, night security guards, motorway hazard signs and anti-virus software. The task of the evangelist and pastor is founded on the conviction that there are dangers equally real and potentially more fatal in the moral and spiritual realm. The watchman’s duty to give warning is based on the reality of the danger, not on the mood of those he has to warn.”³⁵

Preachers must not shy away from lovingly warning of spiritual dangers, caringly proclaiming a day of judgment, earnestly calling people to repent,

³⁴ Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 148.

³⁵ Wright, *Ezekiel*, 68–69.

constantly challenging them about where they are at, and persistently telling them of the only way to be saved. Preachers who do that will save both themselves and their hearers.

6. Gospel preachers are entrusted with signs that enact the message (4:1-5:4)

Perhaps the point at which we most hope Ezekiel is a “one of a kind” and not “one of us” is in his sign-acts. As we noted earlier, these were not mere object lessons, illustrations or visual aids, the equivalent of using drama or video clips in worship. They were the message of God’s judgment enacted with divine authority. In fact Tuell argues that the signs-acts were not only symbolic but actually “accomplished something.”³⁶ “When Ezekiel performs these bizarre actions, he becomes part of what the Lord is doing. So when Ezekiel lies on his left side for 390 days, he is not merely illustrating the period of Israel’s sin. Rather, he has “put the sin of the house of Israel upon [himself]” and, for the duration of this sign, he is said “to bear their sin” (4:4) . . . By his sign-acts, then, Ezekiel not only witnesses to the Lord’s judgment, but he also becomes an agent of judgment.”³⁷

In that, they foreshadowed the greatest sign-acts of all time. Duguid makes this connection, identifying the incarnation as the ultimate sign-act in which “God did not put on a mere costume” but put on human flesh.³⁸ Further, “the culmination of Jesus’ earthly ministry was the profound sign-act of the cross, where God’s wrath and mercy met.”³⁹ There God really enacted judgment even as he most fully displayed his love for sinners.

Christ, and the apostles thereafter, pass on to post-apostolic preachers two sign-acts to portray that reality again and again. Baptism is a sign-act that speaks of the same promise Ezekiel made: “I will sprinkle you with clean water and you shall be cleansed from all your impurities” (Ezek 36:

³⁶ Steven Tuell, *Ezekiel* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 25.

³⁷ Tuell, *Ezekiel*, 24–25.

³⁸ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 95.

³⁹ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 95.

25). The Lord's Supper is a sign-act that speaks of the body and blood of Jesus, shed and given to turn the wrath of God away from us and bring us into new relationship with him.

As visible sermons, the sacraments are gospel sign-acts that accompany the preached word in order to point people graphically to the saving work of Christ. "The cross is an 'in-your-face' message of God's love and his wrath, his justice and his grace."⁴⁰ The sacraments, pointing to that, are "dramatic re-enactments of God's once-for-all sign-act."⁴¹ Pastors and preachers are entrusted with administering these sign-acts alongside the preached word as a means of grace by which the word is not only made visible but also impressed on the heart by the inward work of God's Spirit. The sacraments, to use Tuell's language for the sign-acts, do not only symbolise something but accomplish something.⁴²

Conclusion

Returning to our initial question, "is Ezekiel the preacher one of us, or one of a kind?", we are now in a position to affirm that, while there is much that is utterly unique about his ministry, there is also much that is paradigmatic for all gospel preachers. Determining what is unique and what is enduring, however, cannot be left to our own preferences or intuitions; we cannot be random and arbitrary in choosing whether to follow his lead or not. Rather, by tracing key themes of his initial call through to the ministry of Christ, then to the Apostles, and then to ourselves, we are able to identify aspects of his ministry that are enduring marks of gospel ministry in all generations. This redemptive-historical hermeneutic provides a clear and responsible basis for identifying enduring marks of a gospel preacher.

In Ezekiel's ministry we see depicted in graphic colour that faithful gospel preachers are to be driven by a passion for the glory of God; are called to speak whether people want to hear or not; are to proclaim the Word they have themselves inwardly digested and fed on; are to depend on the

⁴⁰ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 95.

⁴¹ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 95.

⁴² Tuell, *Ezekiel*, 24–25.

enabling power of the Holy Spirit; are to watch diligently over their own and other souls as they warn of sin and judgment; and are to administer the sacraments as visible gospel sermons that accompany the preached Word.

While such emphases may not be the primary application of the initial call passages, we have seen that it is legitimate for preachers to learn from Ezekiel's ministry, observing these key aspects of the profile of all those who are set aside to speak for God.

Of Hinges and Echoes: Ezekiel 20:32 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Book of Ezekiel

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In this paper, I will suggest that Ezekiel 20:32 is a hermeneutical key to the book of Ezekiel. As a hermeneutical key, it can provide a reference point for navigating the rest of the book.

The overall structure of the book of Ezekiel and Ezekiel 33 as a hinge chapter.

Many of Ezekiel's oracles are dated down to the day and month of the year. Based on the work of Freedy and Redford,¹ Hill and Walton suggest the following dates for the oracles:

Chariot vision (1:1-3)	June 593 BCE
Call to be a watchman (3:16)	June 593
Temple vision (8:1)	Aug/Sept 592
Discourse with elders (20:1)	Aug 591
Second siege of Jerusalem (24:1)	Jan 588
Judgment on Tyre (26:1)	Mar/Apr 587/586
Judgment on Egypt (29:1)	Jan 587
Judgment on Egypt (29:17)	Apr 571
Judgment on Egypt (30:20)	Apr 587
Judgment on Egypt (31:1)	June 587

¹ K.S. Freedy and D.B. Redford, "The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian and Egyptian Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 3 (1970). Reference from Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009), 559-560.

Lament over Pharaoh (32:1)	Mar 585
Lament over Egypt (32:17)	Apr 586
Fall of Jerusalem (33:21)	Dec/Jan 586/585
New temple vision (40:1)	Apr 573

With the exception of three that relate to Egypt (29:1, 17; 32:1), the dated oracles are chronologically arranged. The significance of the dating is found in the way they cluster around the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.²

A consideration of the dated oracles together with analysis of the undated oracles suggests that the book of Ezekiel has a very clear structure, which can be summarized in the following way.

² Note that Daniel Block summarizes a complex discussion about dating in Ezekiel, particularly with regard to 24:1 in Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24* (NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 772-774. Block concludes that the siege of Jerusalem began (24:1) on January 5 (modern equivalent) 587 and that the fugitive's announcement (33:21) came on January 8 585 (see Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 28-29.) Whichever calculation methodology is employed, the fact remains that the dates recorded in Ezekiel cluster around the fall of Jerusalem.

The Book of Ezekiel					
Ezekiel the prophet	Judgment		Hinge	Restoration	Eternal hope
Chs 1-3	Chs 4-24	Chs 25-32	Ch 33	Chs 34-39	Chs 40-48
Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of condemnation – a watchman	Sign-actions and oracles of judgment against Israel; Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed	Oracles of judgment on the nations	Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of consolation – a watchman. The news of Jerusalem's fall changes everything.	New shepherd, renewed land, renewed covenant, renewed people, new unity.	The Lord returns to a new temple, new city and new land
				Purpose: for the glory of the LORD's name	
Before Jerusalem's fall		After Jerusalem's fall			

A key feature of this proposal for an overall structure³ is the identification of Ch 33 as a hinge in the book. Can this identification be justified?

A connection between Ezekiel Chs 24 and 33 is evidence to support the suggestion of the hinge nature of Ch 33. An important aspect of the connection between Ezekiel 24 and 33 lies in the “muteness” imposed on Ezekiel by the Lord in 3:26-27.

The exact nature of Ezekiel’s muteness has been a matter of debate.⁴ The section that precedes the imposition of muteness, Ezekiel 2:1-3:15, is characterized by a striking sequence of divine commands followed by divine enabling. In 2:1 The Lord commands Ezekiel to stand on his feet so that he can speak to Ezekiel. Then in 2:2-7, the Spirit, who has animated Ch 1 (1:4, 12, 20, 21) lifts Ezekiel to his feet and the Lord speaks with him. 3:1 sets up the section 3:1-15 with three commands: “Eat, go and speak.” Progressively through this section, Ezekiel is enabled to eat (3:23), to speak (3:5-11) and to go (3:12-15). In the next section (3:16-21) Ezekiel is called to be a “watchman” (הַצֹּפֵה) for Israel and given a message to the wicked (3:18-19) and a message to the righteous (3:20-21). Once again in 3:24 Ezekiel is enabled to stand so that the Lord can speak with him. All these cases demonstrate a close connection between divine command and divine enabling.

The next section 3:24-27 seems at first sight to reverse the tight connection between divine command and divine enabling seen in the previous

³ Note that various commentators, while identifying the separate sections in the same way, allocate them to different overall structures. For example, Daniel Block identifies the end of Ch 24 as the primary division in the book, with Chs 1-24 labelled “Part 1: Messages of Doom and Gloom for Judah/Israel” (see Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, vii.) and Chs 25-48 labelled “Part 2: Messages of Hope and Restoration for Judah/Israel” (see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), vii.) Block regards Chs 25-32 as presenting “negative message of hope” for Judah/Israel in that the oracles against the nations anticipate “the judgment of the enemies of God’s people” (Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 3.) Moshe Greenberg notes that “the ancients” (in the history of rabbinical thought) saw Chs 25-32 as part of the consolation of Judah, but he finds little evidence of that in the text. See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 4-5.

⁴ See Robert R. Wilson, “An Interpretation of Ezekiel’s Dumbness,” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972).

section. Ezekiel’s “incarceration” in his house and his imposed muteness seem to work against his commission to speak to the wicked and the righteous. His incarceration means that he “cannot (or must not) go out among the people” (3:24) (וְלֹא תֵצֵא בְּתוֹכָם). And his muteness (אֶל־חֶבְדָּךָ וְלִשׁוֹנְךָ אֲדַבֵּיק “and your tongue I will make [it] stick to the roof of your mouth” – 3:26a) will prevent him from being a “reprover” to the people (לָהֶם לְאִישׁ מוֹכִיחַ וְנִאֲלַמְתָּ וְלֹא־תִהְיֶה) “and you will be mute and you will not be to them, to each one, a reprover” 3:26b).

Daniel Block argues that the nature of Ezekiel’s muteness depends on an understanding of the word מוֹכִיחַ (*môkîaḥ*). After surveying the options Block argues that in this case the context requires a mediating sense for *môkîaḥ*.⁵ That is, Ezekiel will not be able to perform the prophetic role of mediating for, or even interceding for, Israel. He will only be able to serve as an accuser. But a better understanding appears to lie in the sense of the very next verse, where the Lord says to Ezekiel, “But when (בְּ) + Infinitive Construct = temporal) I speak with you” (וּבִדְבָרֵי אוֹתָךְ) “I will open your mouth” (אֶפְתָּח אֶת־פִּיךָ). In other words, Ezekiel will be mute in some sense (publicly, officially, in his role as a prophet?) except when the Lord speaks and enables him to speak God’s words to Israel (כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה) “thus says the LORD God” 3:27b). Hence Ezekiel’s muteness can be understood not as a reversal of the pattern of divine command and enabling in 3:1-15 but as a continuation of it. Everything that Ezekiel says (in his role as a prophet) is “from the Lord” for he cannot even speak as a prophet unless the Lord opens his mouth. Effectively, it will not be Ezekiel that speaks, but the Lord.⁶ He will be the Lord’s prophet par excellence. The connection between divine command and divine enabling (in this case by partially “disabling” Ezekiel) stands.

The foregoing discussion of Ezekiel’s muteness is aimed at supporting a link between Ezekiel 24 and 33. Ezekiel 24 begins with a date notification, and Ezekiel is commanded to take careful note of the day (אֶת־טַעֲמֵם הַיּוֹם) “the day, this very day” – cf. Gen 7:13) because on that very day

⁵ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 157.

⁶ Cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit* (The Bible Speaks Today. Nottingham, England: IVP, 2001), 72.

Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Jerusalem. As a sign of judgment, Ezekiel's wife, the delight of his eyes, dies (24:16-18). In the last three verses of Ezekiel 24 the Lord promises Ezekiel that at a certain forthcoming moment his muteness will end. A fugitive (פְּלִיט) from the destruction of Jerusalem, which represents the removal of the delight of the eyes of the people, will report the news, and on that very day Ezekiel's mouth will be opened and he will be no longer mute. This change in Ezekiel's status will be a sign to the people, and as a result they will know "that I am the LORD" (כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה).

Two years⁷ later (so forging a connection between Ezekiel 24 and 33), on another carefully recorded date, all that the Lord promised to Ezekiel comes about (Ezekiel 33:21-22). After an eighteen-month siege of Jerusalem the city falls. Someone escaping from the devastation arrives in Babylon six months later with the news that the city has fallen. Ezekiel's mouth is opened; he is no longer mute. The Lord had promised (24:27) that the end of Ezekiel's muteness would be a sign to Israel such that they would know that he is the Lord. It seems very likely that the sign connected with the end of Ezekiel's muteness is the evidence that his prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 4-24 have been fulfilled. When Ezekiel had spoken during his period of muteness, his hearers will now understand that it was as if the Lord had spoken, for Ezekiel was unable to speak anything except the word of the Lord. His prophecies have been fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem, so the people can see in retrospect that the period of Ezekiel's "mute" ministry was indeed characterized by declaration of the Lord's word.

Besides the connection between Chapters 24 and 33, the redactor of Ezekiel has woven very strong connections between Ezekiel 3, 18 and 33. They can be characterized in the following way.

Ezekiel 3:17-19, apart from a small number of additions and subtractions,⁸ reappears word for word in Ezekiel 33:7-9.

⁷ The maths as calculated from the recorded dates says three years, but there are some problems with the dating. See Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 254-255.

⁸ Comparing the Hebrew text shows that 33:7-9 adds only five words to 3:17-19 and leaves out only seven words. None of the changes alters the fundamental meaning of the text.

Ezekiel 3:20-21 is strongly related to Ezekiel 33:10-20, but there are significant differences. The latter passage contains some strong echoes of Ezekiel 18.

Ezekiel 3:22-27 connects to Ezekiel 33:21-22.

The connections between Ezekiel 3 and Ezekiel 33 can be detailed as follows:

Ezekiel 3:17 The Lord has appointed Ezekiel a watchman for the house of Israel	Ezekiel 33:7 The Lord has appointed Ezekiel a watchman for the house of Israel
Ezekiel 3:18-19 The watchman's words against the wicked. Two scenarios: Situation 1: The wicked person is not warned Situation 2: The wicked person is warned but does not turn	Ezekiel 33:8-9 The watchman's words against the wicked. Situations 1 & 2 are repeated.
Ezekiel 3:20-21 The watchman's words to the righteous. Two scenarios: Situation 3: The righteous person turns from righteousness and is not warned Situation 4: The righteous person is warned and does not turn from righteousness	Ezekiel 33:10-20 Situation 3 is repeated, but the sin of the "righteous" man is explained. His sin is "trusting in his own righteousness" (v 13). A new situation (as an echo from Ezekiel 18) is introduced, Situation 5: The wicked person is warned and turns from sin.
Ezekiel 3:22-27 The Lord imposes "incarceration" and muteness upon Ezekiel	Ezekiel 33:21-22 Ezekiel's muteness is brought to an end

In Ezekiel 33:10-20, the situation of Ezekiel's hearers has changed from a hard-headed attitude (הַמָּה וְקָשִׁי-לֵב הַמָּה) "for all the house of Israel is strong of forehead and hard of heart" 3:7), which were the conditions when Ezekiel's muteness was imposed. It has also changed from the "sour grapes" attitude of Ezekiel 18, where Ezekiel's hearers were

essentially portraying themselves as “righteous” persons who were suffering from the sins of a former generation. (Ezekiel 18 is a chapter-length exposition of the principle of individual responsibility before the Lord.) Rather, Ezekiel’s hearers in 33:10-20 now recognize their sinful status before the Lord. But now they regard themselves as without hope because of their sin (v 10). The Lord makes it very plain that they are not without hope; rather they can repent and live (vv 14-16). If only they will understand their hope, they will be much better off than supposed “righteous” people who trust in their own righteousness (v 13).

Not only does Ezekiel 33 echo from Chapter 18 the case of “Situation 5” (the wicked person who is warned and turns from sin), it also reuses the words from the Lord that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked repent and live (compare Ezekiel 18:23; 31-32 and Ezekiel 33:11). In Chapter 18, the principle is first cast as a question: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the LORD God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (33:23). The principle is again repeated in a heightened way as the Lord definitively rejects the idea in vs 32 and closes with two imperatives (כִּי לֹא אֶחְפֹּץ בְּמוֹת) “For I do not take pleasure in the death of the dying, declaration of the LORD God. So turn (imperative) and live (imperative).” Between vv 23 and 31 are urgent calls to repent.

In Ezekiel 18 this basic principle about the Lord’s character is put forward in response to the “sour grapes” principle. Chapter 33 reuses these words, but now in the context of a realization of personal sinfulness and a consequent loss of hope (33:10).

Chapter 33 thus brings together three great themes from earlier in Ezekiel: The theme of Ezekiel’s role as a watchman for Israel from Chapter 3, the theme that the Lord desires that none perish but rather turn from sin and live from Chapter 18, and the question of the imposition and resolution of Ezekiel’s muteness. These are all connected with the news that Jerusalem has fallen, which finally reaches the exiles in 33:21.

Now Ezekiel embarks on a new phase of his ministry, in which he is no longer “mute” and in which he is no longer required to predict the fall of

Jerusalem. It marks a turning point in Ezekiel's relationship to the Lord, to his audience and to his message.⁹

The above argument is designed to support the conclusion that Ezekiel 33 is a hinge chapter in the book as a whole. The quotes collected together in footnote 9 (many more could have been chosen) are designed to show that much of current Ezekiel scholarship takes a similar opinion. So far then, the argument of this paper has justified the inclusion of Chapter 33 as a hinge chapter in the overall structure of Ezekiel.

The chapters that follow point to the beginning of a new world. Through Ezekiel the Lord makes great promises. Daniel Block has helpfully summarized the promises under six headings:¹⁰

⁹ "The disaster vindicated his prophecies concerning Jerusalem and established his credit." Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1997), 681-682. "History was not at an end, but at a new beginning." Wright, *Ezekiel*, 227. "To borrow a phrase from his contemporary Jeremiah (1:10), having uprooted and torn down, destroyed and overthrown, he [Ezekiel] may now turn toward the reconstructive tasks of building and planting." Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 235. "After the judgment oracles of Ezekiel 1-24 and the oracles against the foreign nations in chapters 25-32, we finally get to the good news in chapters 34-48. The turning point in the saga is chapter 33..." Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 382. "We come to a new section of Ezekiel... This time, however, the oracles are hopeful rather than judgmental." Douglas K. Stuart, *Ezekiel* (The Preacher's Commentary 20. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 299. "The fall of Jerusalem is now the great historical proof of Yahweh, which reveals that Ezekiel with his message will not be frustrated and will not have to remain speechless with shame... What in the eyes of the world seems to be the fall and end of Israel is in reality the proof of the efficacy of the call this is proclaimed over Israel." Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2 (Chs 25-48)* (Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. trans. James D. Martin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 194. "The Lord's teaching by way of Ezekiel is that the supposed impasse does not obtain: the future is open." Robert W. Jenson, *Ezekiel* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009), 254. "... once the news that the city of Jerusalem has fallen reaches the prophet, the book shifts by stages from the minor key to the major, and themes of promise and restoration begin to come to the fore." Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Library of Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament Studies 482. London: T & T Clark, 2009), 190. "The sovereign power and holiness of Yahweh God, the reliability of his word, and the veracity of the prophet have all been vindicated by the destruction of the holy city and the nation." Werner E. Lemke, "Life in the Present and Hope for the Future," in *Interpreting the Prophets* (eds. James L. Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 201.

¹⁰ Daniel I. Block, "Ezekiel: Theology," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 624-625.

1. A new exodus. Not exodus from Egypt this time. Now the Lord will regather his people out of the countries to which they have been scattered during the exile (Ezek 11:16-17a; 20:41; 34:11-13a, 16; 36:24a; 37:21a).
2. New life in a cleansed Land. The Lord will bring them back to their homeland, which will have been cleansed of its defilements (Ezek 11:17b-18; 20:42; 34:13b-15; 36:24b; 37:21b).
3. A new spiritual life. The Lord will revitalize his people spiritually, renewing his covenant with them, giving them a new heart, and infusing them with his Spirit, so that they may walk in his ways (Ezek 11:19-20; 16:62; 34:30-31; 36:25-28; 37:23-24).
4. A new Shepherd. The Lord will restore the dynasty of his servant David as an agent of well-being and symbol of unity for the nation (Ezek 34:23-24; 37:22-25).
5. New unity and prosperity. The Lord will bless Israel with unprecedented prosperity and guarantee the security of the whole nation in their own land (Ezek 34:25-29; 36:29-30; 37:26; 38:1-39:29).
6. The LORD will dwell with his people forever. The Lord will permanently reside in their midst and reorder the worship of the nation (Ezek 37:26b-28; 40:1-48:35).

The book of Ezekiel moves in an ordered, structured manner from judgment to salvation for the Lord's glory. In that movement, Chapter 33 represents the turning point.

The single verse Ezekiel 20:32

Attention now turns to the single verse Ezekiel 20:32. The location of this verse in its context in Ezekiel 20 will be a key aspect of what follows.

Translation

וְהָעֹלָה עַל-רִיחֹכְכֶם הִיּוֹ לֹא תִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר | אַתֶּם אֹמְרִים נְהִיָּה כְּגוֹיִם בְּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת
הָאֲרָצוֹת לְשֵׁרֶת עֵץ וְאֲבָן:

A literal translation: “But¹¹ the thing that is going up¹² upon your spirit will never ever¹³ be; that is, you saying: “Let us be¹⁴ like the nations, like the clans of the countries, serving¹⁵ wood and stone.”

A more idiomatic translation: But what is occupying your minds when you think, “Let us be like the nations, like the clans of other countries, and worship wood and stone”; that will never ever be.

¹¹ Waw + not finite-verb is often disjunctive; in this case a Waw + participle (used substantively) together with the context suggests a disjunctive meaning.

¹² Qal fem. sing. participle of עֹלָה. The word in this form is morphologically identical to the word עֹלָה which denotes the “whole burnt offering.” The noun עֹלָה (“whole burnt offering”) is used 20x in Ezekiel, but not occurring at all outside the final vision of Ezekiel 40-48. See also footnote 15. No commentator referred to makes any suggestion about this coincidence. But could the Lord through Ezekiel be suggesting a possible pun on the word? The whole burnt offering was the way in which the worshipper, via the vicarious sacrifice, was symbolically transported into God’s heavenly presence. The aspirations of Israel (represented by the elders in Ezekiel 20) are represented as the polar opposite of that symbolized by the עֹלָה; they think to be like everyone else rather than to live in God’s presence.

¹³ An Infinitive Absolute preceding the negation of a yiqtol of the root הִיָּה suggests a strong emphasis.

¹⁴ A Cohortative sense is suggested by the placement of the verb in its clause.

¹⁵ The root of this word, שֵׁרַת, often has the sense of “worship.” HALOT, 1661-1662. The root is used 17x in Ezekiel; this use in Ezekiel 20 is the only use of the root outside of the final vision of Ezekiel 40-48.

Despair or desire?

Ezekiel 20:32 is cast as an expression of what the exiles to whom Ezekiel is ministering are thinking. Is it an expression of despair or desire? Despair: “There’s no point in being distinctive as God’s people; it’s getting us nowhere and it creates many problems; let’s just give it up and be like everyone else.” Desire: “Here’s our basic mindset: We simply don’t want to be distinctive, we just want to be like everyone else.”

Other reflections of the exiles quoted by Ezekiel suggest the possibility that it is an expression of despair. The “sour grapes” principle quoted in Ezekiel 18:2 appears to represent a proverb that has been adopted in the exilic community: “The fathers have eaten the sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Later in the chapter, in 18:25, the people are saying, “The way of the Lord is not just.” In Chapter 33, the community has another saying in vs 10: “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?” See also 12:22; 37:11. Despair is an emotion that is current amongst Ezekiel’s audience.

But more than simply an expression of despair, the words in vs 32 can also be taken as a statement of positive desire, an “expression of faithless determination; Ezekiel’s compatriots are determined to fit into the family of nations in which they find themselves.”¹⁶ The section that immediately precedes vs 32, verses 30-31 form a climax to the first half of Ezekiel 20, in which Israel is portrayed as a persistently rebellious people, who, in particular, have consistently fallen into idolatry of the worst kind. The sentiment expressed in vs 32 can be seen as a coda to what comes before, explicating how it was possible that the Lord’s people could fall into such idolatry. How could it happen? It could happen because, in the depths of their being, they did not want to be distinctive. They wanted to be like the other nations of the ancient Near East, worshipping idols.

But the Lord says that what they desire (or what they fear) will never, ever happen.

¹⁶ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 649. See also Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 263.

The context of the single verse: Ezekiel 20

Chapter 20¹⁷ comes towards the end of Ezekiel’s ministry of condemnation against Jerusalem. The structure of this chapter can be represented in the following way.

Ezekiel 20				
Ezekiel the prophet	Judgment on Israel	Hinge	Restoration	
20:1-4	20:5-29	20:30-31	20:32	20:33-44
Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of condemnation	A cyclical pattern in Israel’s history	Israel is like the nations	The Lord’s determination: Israel will not be like the nations	New exodus, new wilderness, new entry into the land, renewed worship. Purpose: for the glory of the Lord’s name

Ezekiel 20:1-4. Ezekiel is prepared for the ministry of chapter 20

The first dated oracle since 8:1, which was the temple visionary sequence of Ezekiel 8-11, begins in Ezekiel 20:1. “Certain of the elders of Israel” (מְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַנְשִׁים) had come and sat before Ezekiel once previously in the book (14:1). In Ezekiel 14 the elders are characterized as having “lifted up their idols into their hearts” (הֶעֱלוּ גִלּוּלֵיהֶם עַל-לִבָּם); the use of the root עלה in this characterization may be intended to reinforce the idea that the legitimate worship of the Lord (symbolised by the עלה) has been replaced by worship of idols. In Ezekiel 14 the Lord emphasizes through repetition (14:4, 78), in response to the question “Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?” (הֲאֶדְרִשׁ אֶדְרִשׁ לָהֶם), that he will indeed speak to

¹⁷ Ezekiel 20:45-49 (in English versions, following LXX) are versified as Ezekiel 21:1-5 in the Hebrew text

these idolatrous elders, but only words of clear judgment. In Ezekiel 20, the elders come for the same purpose as in Ezekiel 14 (לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה). On this occasion the Lord expresses his determination that he will not allow himself to be consulted by the elders (חַי־אָנִי אִם־אֲדַרְשׁ לָכֶם) – “as I live, I will not be inquired of by you”).¹⁸ The same determination, stated in the same words, is expressed at the end of the main section in 20:31. What comes in between is a recital of Israel’s history like no other. Block writes that “Ezekiel’s ‘theology of history’ is revisionist in the extreme.”¹⁹ It represents the Lord’s response of judgment against Israel, as in Ezekiel 14. In Ezekiel 14 the word of judgment is based on the current attitudes of the elders who presume to come to inquire of the Lord while “lifting up” idols in their hearts. In Ezekiel 20 those current attitudes of the elders (representing Israel) are historically grounded in the story of Israel’s rebellion from the very beginning of their life as a nation. Even though, unlike in Ezekiel 14, the Lord says he will refuse the request of the elders to be “consulted,” the message given to Ezekiel is a response to their request. Perhaps the “refusal” is a rhetorical device to emphasize the impertinence of the inquiry,²⁰ or to make clear that the Lord knows their supposed “seeking” of the Lord is not wholehearted (cf. Jer 29:13).

The repeated question, “Will you judge them? Will you judge them, O Son of man?” (הֲתִשְׁפֹּט אַתָּם הַתְּשֹׁפֹט בְּן־אָדָם) in 20:4 has been interpreted as meaning “Arraign them! Arraign them!” with the interrogative particle conveying an indignant (or impassioned²¹) affirmation;²² or “Will you (not rather) judge them – judge, son of man”;²³ or as signifying an impatient imperative “set out the case against them.”²⁴ Steven Tuell suggests that unlike the Lord’s interaction with the elders of Israel in Ch

¹⁸ See Williams’ *Syntax*, 456 for use of אִם in oaths and exclamations

¹⁹ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 614. Allen characterizes this section in the same way; Leslie C. Allen, “The Structuring of Ezekiel’s Revisionist History Lesson,” *CBQ* 54 (1994): 448.

²⁰ Cf. John B Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Leicester, England: IVP, 1969), 156.

²¹ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 363.

²² Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 618.

²³ Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1 (Chs 1-24)* (Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. trans. Ronald E. Clements; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 399.

²⁴ Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 156-157.

14, here the Lord calls upon Ezekiel to judge them.²⁵ Even though the word of judgment that follows is from the Lord, Ezekiel is questioned as to whether he is able/willing to declare this word of judgment. Douglas Stuart argues that the repetition of the question is the Lord's way of asking Ezekiel if he is sure he is willing to take up the task.²⁶ If Tuell's and Stuart's observations have merit, the first four verses of Ezekiel 20 can be seen as the Lord's preparation of Ezekiel for the ministry of condemnation that he is about to undertake as represented by the rest of the chapter. As Ezekiel retells the history of Israel in 20:5-29, the rebellion of the represented generations is expressed using the root מרה ("to be recalcitrant, rebellious" vv 8, 13, 21), which recalls the seven-fold use of this root in chapter 2-3 (2:5, 6, 7, 8; 3:9, 26, 27). In chapters 2-3 Ezekiel is being prepared as a watchman for his overall ministry of condemnation which occupies chapters 4-32 of Ezekiel. Hence the preparation of Ezekiel in 20:1-4 for the particular ministry of condemnation he must perform in Ezekiel 20 can be seen as echoing his preparation for his entire ministry of condemnation as laid out in Ezekiel 23.

Ezekiel 20:5-31. A cyclical pattern of rebellion in Israel's history

The Lord outlines, through Ezekiel, Israel's cyclic history of rebellion against him over the last eight centuries of their history from exodus to exile. The cycle works through four "generations" of Israel's past. Over their life as a nation, since the first exodus out of Egypt, the Lord has repeatedly rescued Israel when all seemed lost. Every time he has rescued them, he has done it for a repeated particular reason which is laid in this section.²⁷

²⁵ Stephen S. Tuell, *Ezekiel* (New International Bible Commentary. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 127.

²⁶ Stuart, *Ezekiel*, 168.

²⁷ The following table is modified from Wright, *Ezekiel*, 157.

	Israel in Egypt	First wilderness generation	Second wilderness generation	Israel in the land to exile
God resolves to bless Israel	5-6	10	17	27-28a
His requirements	7	11-12	18-20	
Israel's rebellion	8a	13a	21a	28b-29
God's resolve to punish	8b	13b	21b	[30-31]
Reprieve (for the sake of God's name)	9	14	22	
Yet some punishment		15-17	23-26	

The Lord had thought to destroy the nation in Egypt, because they had become like the nation where they lived, worshipping the detestable idols of Egypt (serving idols of wood and stone). But the Lord relented for the reason outlined in v 9 “But I acted for the sake of my name (לְמַעַן שְׁמִי), that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations...”

The Lord then thought to destroy the first wilderness generation, for they also profaned the Lord. They refused to be distinctive, wanting to be like everyone else (serving idols of wood and stone). But the Lord relented for the same reason as in vs 9.

The story repeats; it feels like an endless cycle. The second wilderness generation is no different from the first (wanting to serve idols of wood and stone), but they are spared for the same reason (vv 18-22) as in vv 9, 17.

The dreary circle dance between Israel and the Lord continues in the Land of Promise. Over and over the cycle repeats. In this way Ezekiel summarizes the history of the various judges and the kings of Israel and Judah. Finally, the Lord sends Israel into exile, which is where Ezekiel and the exiles find themselves. Note that the exile is portrayed as both punishment and reprieve for Israel. The Lord swore (v 23) to scatter them “among the nations” (בְּגוֹיִם) and to disperse them “through the countries” (בְּאֶרְצוֹת) because they had rebelled against him, even though what they deserved

was to be destroyed. The Lord acts in this way not for the sake of his people's destiny but for the sake of his name, that it not be profaned amongst the nations.

In vv 27-31 Ezekiel brings the history right down to the present time in his day (see "to this day" [עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה] in vv 29, 31). The cyclical pattern seems to break down; in the white heat of God's present anger against the exiles a fresh reprieve seems out of the question.

The stunning conclusion comes in vv 30-31: "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the LORD God: Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your fathers and go whoring after their detestable things (שְׁקוּצִים)?²⁸ When you present your gifts and offer up your children in fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, declares the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you.'" Israel as a nation has become just like the nations, worshipping wood and stone, even to the extent of offering their children up to idols by fire.²⁹ Here is the essence of Israel's sin – a refusal to be distinctive, to be devoted to the One True God. Instead they want to be like the nations, serving wood and stone.

Vss 30-31 suggest a (final) resolve to punish Israel – God will not even be inquired of by elders who come to Ezekiel pretending to desire God's word but who only have idolatry in their hearts. It seems in v 31 that the dreary cycle has come to an end. But in fact, the cycle repeats one last time, for the Lord will continue to act לְמַעַן שְׁמִי ("for the sake of my name" the conclusion in v 44) as becomes clear in what follows.

²⁸ The lemma שְׁקוּץ is used 28x in the Hebrew Bible, most frequently in Ezekiel, and in Ezekiel, most frequently in chapter 20 (vv 7, 8, 30). Its sense is always "abhorrence, abomination" (HALOT, 1640)

²⁹ Christopher Wright comments: "We have no verification of this [child sacrifice], but, given the desperation and trauma of the situation, it is not unthinkable that some exiles may have felt that only such desperate actions could placate the anger of God. Such was the extent of the spiritual and moral darkness that they imagined they might placate Yahweh's anger by doing the thing that was actually arousing that anger more than anything else." Wright, *Ezekiel*, 161-162.

Ezekiel 20:33-44. The promise of restoration

An important background for the Lord acting for the sake of his name is found in the exodus narrative. In both Exodus 32:11-14 and Numbers 14:13-20, through the mediating work of Moses, the Lord relents from destroying Israel for the sake of his name. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the restoration of Israel promised in Ezekiel 20:33-44 is expressed as a new exodus. For example, the repeated language of vv 33-34 “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה) reproduces exactly a phrase found in Deuteronomy 4:34. In the Deuteronomy 4 passage Moses is describing the exodus event to the second generation of Israel, and significantly he does that in the context of upholding the utter incomparability of God (“has any god ever attempted...”). In fact, in Deuteronomy 4:39 he calls upon Israel to know that “the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (אֵין עוֹד). The exodus event demonstrates that God is unique, there is no other god. So how foolish for Israel to desire to be like the nations, serving wood and stone.

The (Ezekiel 20) passage goes on to speak of the testing time of a second wilderness experience, in which God will separate the faithful from transgressors, and a second entry into the land, where all the house of Israel, all of them (כָּל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּלֹהֶ) will serve the Lord and worship him. The Lord will accept their worship (vv 40-41) and they will know the Lord. This will all be possible because, as v 44 concludes, the Lord will deal with Israel not according to their evil ways or corrupt deeds, but for the sake of his name.

The second exodus, the second wilderness experience, the second entry into the land will not be merely physical experiences which would be just as susceptible to failure as the first series. The new exodus events will be the Lord’s definitive actions for the sake of his name. What the Lord will achieve will be a new covenant relationship with his people. In the language of Jeremiah, the Lord’s actions will constitute him establishing a new covenant which will not be like the old covenant, which the fathers broke.

The details of how the Lord will achieve this final work of salvation will be given in the chapters that follow the great turning point of the book in Ezekiel 33. In fact, Chapters 33-48 give the details of how the Lord will work out the promises of Ezekiel 20:33-44.

For example, Ezekiel 36:16-38 has many echoes of Ezekiel 20.

The reason why God poured out his anger (20:8, 21; 36:18):

Because they had profaned his holy name (20:9; 36:21)

by worshipping idols (20:30; 36:18).

And yet God will bring them back from the lands where he scattered them (20:41; 36:19, 24)

for the sake of his holy name (20:41; 36:23)

In turn, the people will repent and loathe themselves for their former evil (20:43; 36:31)

A major link between Chs 20 and 36 is that of threat and fulfilment. In 20:8, 13, 21 God is quoted, "Then I said I would pour out my wrath"; in 36:18 he says, "I did pour out my wrath." In Ezekiel 20:9, 14, 22 God is about to execute judgment for the sake of his name which Israel has defiled; in 36:20 he has completed his judgment for his name's sake.

The program of Ch 36 has two goals: First, to restore the honour and holiness of the divine name by bringing Israel back to its land; and second, to give them a new heart to replace the former idolatrous one condemned in Ch 20.

Ezekiel 20:33-44 provides an introduction to the content of Ezekiel that comes after the hinge chapter of Ezekiel 33. But these verses themselves follow the hinge verse of Ezekiel 20.

Ezekiel 20:32. The hinge of Ezekiel 20

If the above analysis has merit, then it is possible to see Ezekiel 20 as a microcosm of the whole book. The parallels can be represented by displaying the two structures together.

The book of Ezekiel					
Ezekiel the prophet	Judgment	Hinge	Restoration	Eternal hope	
Chs 1-3	Chs 4-24	Chs 25-32	Ch 33	Chs 34-39	Chs 40-48
Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of condemnation – a watchman	Sign-actions and oracles of judgment against Israel; Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed!	Oracles of judgment on the nations	Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of consolation – a watchman. The news of Jerusalem's fall changes everything.	New shepherd, renewed land, renewed covenant, renewed people, new unity.	The Lord returns to a new temple, renewed worship, new city and new land
Before Jerusalem's fall		After Jerusalem's fall			

Ezekiel 20				
Ezekiel the prophet	Judgment on Israel		Hinge	Restoration
20:1-4a	20:4b-29	20:30-31	20:32	20:33-44
Ezekiel is prepared for his ministry of condemnation	A cyclical pattern in Israel's history	Israel is like the nations	The Lord's determination: Israel will not be like the nations	New exodus, new wilderness, new entry into the land, renewed worship. Purpose: for the glory of the Lord's name

The hinge of Chapter 20 is vs 32. It is central to the microcosm of the whole book; it is central to the whole book.

Thematic connections between the hinge verse of Ezekiel 20 and the hinge chapter of the book

To further support the notion that the hinge verse of Ezekiel 20 reflects the hinge chapter of the whole book, note the thematic connections between Ezekiel 20:32 and Ezekiel 33. Ezekiel 3:17 and 33:7 record the Lord's commissioning of Ezekiel as a watchman for Israel in identical words: בְּן־אָדָם צִפָּה נְתַתִּיךָ לְבַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל ("son of man, a watchman I have made you for the house of Israel"). These two acts of commissioning form an *inclusio* around Ezekiel's "mute" ministry of condemnation, largely taken up with his prediction of the fall of Jerusalem. But taking note of the difference in context between the two acts of commissioning in Ezekiel 3 and Ezekiel 33 provides additional insight.

In Ezekiel 3 there is no indication that Ezekiel was to declare his commissioning publicly; the emphasis in Ezekiel 3 is on the preparation of Ezekiel for his painful task of confronting the rebellious house with their hard foreheads and stony hearts (3:7). One day (when Ezekiel's signs and warnings were all vindicated by historic events) the people would know that a prophet had been among them (2:5). In Ezekiel 33 the Lord's commissioning of Ezekiel as a watchman, echoing his private word to Ezekiel in Ch 3, becomes part of Ezekiel's public word to his hearers. That public commissioning is linked to the echo from Ezekiel 18 regarding the Lord's will that his people not perish but that they repent, for "why should you die, O house of Israel?" (33:11) The commissioning in Ezekiel 33:7 is preceded by a parable in which the role of a watchman is laid out, and in the parable the "people of the land" (33:2) appoint the watchman. In other words, the commissioning in Ezekiel 33:7 is surrounded by elements in which Ezekiel's hearers are depicted as or called to be active. Because of historic events the exiles now understand with utmost clarity that a prophet has been among them in the person of Ezekiel. Furthermore, the very first message that this proven prophet, now publicly commissioned watchman, is given is a condemnation of the people who remain in the land of Israel who are acting like the nations, raising their eyes to their idols and shed blood (33:25). Ezekiel warns his hearers that if they ignore him and treat him only as an entertainer (33:32) then new disaster will

come, significantly signalled by a repetition in 33:33 of the words of 2:5 that then they will know that a prophet has been among them (וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי נָבִיא הָיָה בְּתוֹכְכֶם).

Ezekiel's recommissioning in Ch 33 thus lays out in the most stringent way imaginable the two options that face the exiles in the light of historic events: be distinctive or be like the nations. These two options are summarized in a single verse in Ezekiel 20:32. It is true that in 20:32 the two options are not laid out as a choice facing Ezekiel's hearers; rather they are laid out as the Lord's determination regarding the future of Israel. But the Lord's determination in 20:32 forms the background for his public recommissioning of Ezekiel as a proven prophet/watchman. The Lord's determination regarding Israel will bear fruit historically as Ezekiel's hearers heed his warnings. In this way the hinge verse of Ezekiel 20 provides the thematic background for the lessons of history brought together in the hinge chapter of the book, Ezekiel 33.

The place of Ezekiel 20 in the book as a whole

A final piece of evidence supporting the notion that Ezekiel 20:32 can serve as a hermeneutical key to the book of Ezekiel derives from the place of Ezekiel 20 in the book. If the chapter is a microcosm of the book, what is its function here in the text? Why deploy it here and not elsewhere?

Chapter 20 begins with the specification of a date. Approximately a year has passed since the last recorded date in the book (8:1). The date recorded in 8:1 begins the account of Ezekiel's second visionary experience in chapters 8-11, which culminates in a symbolic depiction of the glory of the Lord leaving Jerusalem. The next date to be recorded (24:1), a little over a year later, will mark the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's wife dies and the promises referred to above (which will be fulfilled in chapter 33), conclude the section of the book chronologically located before the fall of Jerusalem. The event referred to in chapter 24, the siege of Jerusalem, is the historical consequence of the symbolic event of chapters 8-11, the departure of the Lord's glory from Jerusalem. Chapter 20, the only dated oracle between Chapters 8-11 and Chapter 24, functions both to explain the reason for the Lord's departure from Jerusalem in Chapters 8-11

and its consequence in Chapter 24. Chronologically it sits almost at the halfway point between the dates recorded in 8:1 and 24:1.

It is likely that the careful recording of dates in 8:1, 20:1 and 24:1 is significant. The account of Israel's history in Ezekiel 20 is, as noted above, "revisionist"; that is, as Craigie puts it, the "facts" are the same as what Ezekiel's hearers are accustomed to, but the perspective is quite different.³⁰ But for the final readers of the book of Ezekiel, this "revisionist history" is told in a carefully recorded historical setting that is chronologically located about halfway between the symbolic vision of chapters 8-11 and its historical outworking in chapter 24. In other words, in the structure of the first half of the book, Ezekiel 20 provides a clear chronological and thematic link between the carefully dated visionary experience of Ezekiel 8-11 and the carefully dated oracle of chapter 24.

To summarize the above discussion, while Ezekiel 33 is rightly considered the most significant hinge chapter in the book, Ezekiel 20 performs an important connecting function in the first half of the book. Ezekiel 20 can be considered a microcosm of the whole book, and the hinge of Chapter 20 is v 32. Furthermore, there are significant thematic connections between the hinge verse of chapter 20 and the hinge chapter of the book.

Ezekiel 20:32 as a hermeneutical key – some examples

This section outlines three examples of the way in which Ezekiel 20:32 can be useful as a hermeneutical key to other sections of Ezekiel.

The juxtaposition of Ezekiel 4-24 and Ezekiel 25-32

The wearying detail of multiple oracles of judgment against Israel in Ezekiel 4-24 demonstrate the persistent desire of Israel to pursue idolatry. Even though the histories of Israel told in both Ezekiel 16 and 20 end with restoration oracles, there is emphasis within these restoration conclusions

³⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *Ezekiel* (The Daily Bible Study Series. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 143.

of the self-loathing Israel will feel when they remember their sins (16:61-63; 20:43). Even the restoration oracle of 11:17-21, which previews Ezekiel 36, ends with the Lord's condemnation of those who continue to pursue "abominations."

As soon as the fall of Jerusalem is previewed in Ezekiel 24, the book progresses to the oracles against the nations in Ezekiel 25-32. It appears that the judgments that are applied to Israel are now applied to the nations. But Christopher Wright has helpfully suggested that the opposite is true. The irony is that what Ezekiel [and other prophets, e.g. Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah all have oracles against the nations] is called to say against the nations he must now declare against Israel. It is as if Yahweh is now treating Israel as his enemy.³¹

In contrast to Israel's apparent determination to be like the nations who are condemned in Ezekiel 25-32, the Lord is determined that, for the sake of the glory of his name, the idolatry of Israel will come to an end. His purpose for the exile is that he might be a sanctuary for Israel a little while as Jerusalem and temple are destroyed (11:16). His purpose for the new exodus outlined in the final verse of chapter 20 and elaborated in Ezekiel 34-37 is that Israel's idolatry and abominations cease for the glory of his name (36:21, 32). Then his name will no longer be profaned among the nations, for Israel's desire to be like the nations, to serve wood and stone, will not finally succeed.

The structure of the oracles against the nations (Ezek. 25-32)

Daniel Block notes that the oracle against the nations contain a central promise in Ezekiel 28:24-26, an oracle of the restoration of Israel which he argues is the key to understanding the import of these chapters. He notes that there are 97 verses before this central section, which address oracles of judgment on six nations: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon. Further, following the central section are 97 verse that declare judgment on one nation: Egypt.³² What the Lord declares against the

³¹ Wright, *Ezekiel*, 231.

³² Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 4-5.

nations Ezekiel must now declare against Israel. But as the central section, Ezekiel 28:24-26 affirms, the Lord has blessing in mind for Israel despite their sinfulness. How crucial it is then, that Israel not be like the nations, serving wood and stone.

Three great visionary sequences of the glory of the Lord

The principle of Ezekiel 20:32 also applies to Ezekiel's visions of the glory of the Lord. There are three great visionary sequences in Ezekiel, in Chs 1-3, 8-11 and 40-48. Each of these is dated. In each case, the "hand of the Lord" is upon Ezekiel (1:3; 3:14; 8:1; 40:1). In a way these three visions define Ezekiel's life as a prophet.

In the first vision (Chs 1-3) it is as if Ezekiel has come to the exiles for the first time; he has indeed come to them for the first time as a prophet. The first vision begins an awesome picture of the glory of the Lord and continues to Ezekiel's commissioning and the imposition of muteness.

In the second vision (Chs 8-11) the glory of the Lord leaves the temple in Jerusalem. The vision provides shocking detail of the way in which Israel has become like the nations, serving wood and stone. Idolatry is happening even within the temple of the Lord; idolatry that will drive the Lord out of the temple. The Lord leaves the temple not as a defeated god who cannot stand up against the gods of the nations, but as the jealous God who simply will not tolerate his people being like the nations, serving wood and stone. By the end of Chapter 11 the Lord has left the temple, and there is nothing left for the temple and Jerusalem but to be destroyed. Without the Lord's presence there is no reason for Jerusalem to exist, and very soon, historically, the city and the temple are obliterated. The Lord's leaving the temple and Jerusalem is thematically connected to his determination that Israel serving wood and stone like the nations will not be tolerated.

But the Lord has not been defeated, and at the end of Chapter 11 the Lord gives Ezekiel some crucial words for people who thought to restrict the Lord's presence to the temple. Ezekiel 11:16 "Thus says the LORD God: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered

them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.” The Lord goes on in Ezekiel 11, to promise that he will draw a faithful remnant from the exiles, bring them back to the Promised Land and make them a distinctive people again. Though the exiles were scattered amongst the nations, they will not simply melt into them and disappear, as was the fate of other ancient Near Eastern nations that were vanquished in battle and deported to foreign lands. But Israel will never, ever be like the nations, who serve wood and stone. Rather, God will show his glory through them, that the world might know that he is the Lord.

Ezekiel records his final visionary experience in Chapters 40-48. The vision comes to Ezekiel in the year 573 BC, when the earthly Jerusalem and the temple are in ruins. Ezekiel sees a new temple, and he sees the glory of the Lord returning to a new temple. In keeping with the finality of what he is doing here, the Lord says twice over that he will dwell with his people forever (43:7, 9). Sandwiched between these two promises of eternal dwelling are sharp words that describe how things will be different now. They will be different, now that the Lord is dwelling with his people in a new and permanent way, because no longer will Israel be like the nations, serving wood and stone.

Conclusion

Ezekiel 20:32 may not be the only hermeneutical key to the book of Ezekiel, but it is a useful one. It connects thematically to the overall structure of the book. Ezekiel 20 performs an important connecting function in the first half of the book. Verse 32 provides the hinge of Ezekiel 20, which itself is a microcosm of the whole book. There are significant thematic connections between Ezekiel 20:32 and Ezekiel 33, which chapter performs a hinge function for the whole book. Finally, Ezekiel 20:32 provides an interpretive grid for significant aspects of the book of Ezekiel, including the juxtaposition of Ezekiel 1-24 and 25-32, the structure of Ezekiel 25-32, and the sequence of visions of the glory of the Lord in Ezekiel 1-3, 8-11 and 40-48.

Preaching Judgment from Ezekiel¹

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The old slogan, “Repent, the end is nigh!” has become distinctly unfashionable in our day and age. It has been so overused as the butt of jokes that it is hard, even for us as Christians, to take its message seriously. It seems old-fashioned and out of date. Nowadays, we are much more likely to say to people that we wish to reach for Christ: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” or “Do you know for sure that you are going to heaven when you die?” We like to focus on the “good news” aspect of the gospel: all the ways in which the gospel contributes to human flourishing. One pastor described the goal of his church’s services like this: “In a non-threatening atmosphere the “seekers” share a delightful, thought-provoking hour in which they are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ”² I’m guessing that he is probably not preaching a series of sermons from the early chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.

Misusing the Prophets

Like many of the prophets, Ezekiel’s calling during the first part of his ministry was to be the bringer of bad news, the news of impending judgment. The covenant people needed to know that God’s patience with them was running out and the axe was about to fall. In the same way, Jeremiah’s calling was “to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish”, as well as “to build and plant” (Jer. 1:10)³ – four negative verbs to go with

¹ Dr Duguid’s article has been through the peer review process, however due to serious health issues at the time he was unable to make the revisions suggested by the reviewer. Nevertheless, we have decided to continue with publication of his article because we believe it will be of great use to the preacher or teacher wishing to gain a greater understanding of this important theme in Ezekiel.

² See Cecil Martens, “The Seeker Service at Fair Haven,” *Reformed Worship* 23 (1992) 10.

³ Bible quotations are taken from the CSB (*The Christian Standard Bible* © 2017 Holman Bible Publishers).

the two positive ones. It is therefore a travesty that the only passage from the book of Jeremiah that most Christians have ever heard preached is Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you – this is the LORD’s declaration – plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

What makes it worse is that this verse from Jeremiah is often preached as if it were a universal truth, equally applicable in all times and places, whereas in context it is plainly a word addressed to a specific group of people: the exiles who had already been taken from Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, even before the city was besieged and destroyed by him in 586 B.C. The point of the oracle in its original context is precisely that God does not have an equally good plan for everyone in Jeremiah’s days. For the exiles in Babylon, the future good plan of God contrasts with his rather miserable plan for their present: most of them would remain far away from their home and temple for their entire lifetimes. Equally, however, the ‘good’ plan for those in exile contrasts with the Lord’s ‘bad’ plan for those who remained behind in Judah. Contrary to the words of some of the false prophets who were operating in Jeremiah’s day, the future of God’s people lay precisely with those who were already in Babylon, who might have seemed to be far away from God, and not with those who are in Jerusalem, even though they still have the temple and the trappings of independent nationhood (cf. Ezek. 11:15-16).

Meanwhile, the Lord also identifies a third group of people in Jeremiah 29, distinct from the exiles and the residents of Judah: this group encompasses people like Shemaiah, the exile who wrote home to complain to the authorities about Jeremiah’s discouraging letter. He was therefore condemned to share in the ‘bad news’ message sent to those back home, not the good plan that God had for those around him in exile. In other words, being an exile is not enough: you have to be an exile with faith in God. On the other hand, the good news of Shemaiah’s separation from the rest of the exiles for his lack of faith was that it suggested that God could similarly single out for salvation those still living in Jerusalem who did have faith.⁴

⁴ In Ezekiel 9:4, the angel in priestly garb is told to mark out for salvation those who “sigh and

So if I were preaching on Jeremiah 29:11 – or more broadly Jeremiah 28-29 – my sermon would have three points:

- 1) God loves some of you and has a wonderful plan for your lives (at least in heaven: you could be in for a rough next seventy years or so).
- 2) God hates some of you and has a terrible plan for your lives. The scenery along the way may not be too bad but you'd better enjoy it while it lasts; it's all you've got.
- 3) the crucial factor is not your location or the destiny of your family and friends: it is determined by your response to the word of the prophet. In other words, come to Christ now or face eternal punishment.

That's still a little rough as a sermon outline, perhaps. We would probably want to expand the bit about Jesus, showing how he took the terrible fate that we all deserve by going into the ultimate exile from the Father's presence on the cross. Because of his suffering in our place, we, who all deserve the bad fate of the unbelieving Jews, may inherit in Christ a gloriously undeserved plan for our welfare and hope. But this brief example does illustrate the reality that when we preach from the prophets, all too often we zero in quickly on their messages of hope, to the exclusion of their messages of judgment.

If we do turn to judgment passages of the prophets at all, I think that many preachers like to cherry-pick famous passages and extract their words out of context. This is especially true of fairly generic appeals in the prophets to do what is right, like Micah 6:8 (“Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the LORD requires of you: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”). From passages like that we can derive a moral lesson, something we can tell people to do – law – which is fairly easy to preach. But we don't as often set the passage in its broader context as part of the Lord's covenant lawsuit against the people of Judah's day, who have bought into “the statutes of Omri and all the practices of Ahab's house”, as Micah 6:16 puts it.

groan” over all the abominations committed in the city. We are not told how many he marked (or even that he marked any), but the assumption seems to be that there are such people.

The result of this tendency is that in our preaching we tend to avoid the more searching passages of judgment. If we were to preach consecutively through the prophetic books – or even preach a substantial series from a prophetic book like Ezekiel – they would challenge us (and our people) to rethink our view of sin, righteousness and judgment, not coincidentally the three things Jesus tells us the Holy Spirit will convict the world of when he comes (John 16:8). As Hebrews 10:31 tells us, it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, not a delightful thought provoking encounter. At least some of the time, our preaching should plainly reflect that reality.

Of course, our seminaries and theological colleges don't generally help us much in our preparation. Our preaching courses typically start out with passages in the Pauline Epistles and the Gospels. Maybe you get some instruction on preaching Old Testament narratives. That makes sense pedagogically since those portions of Scripture are generally easier for beginning preachers to start with. But courses on preaching from the prophets are rare. So how do we preach on passages whose entire focus seems to be judgment in a gospel-centered way? And how does Ezekiel help us?

The Holiness of God

First, the prophets show us who God is. The prophets' call narratives are programmatic for the ministry the Lord has for them. Isaiah sees the Lord, high and exalted in the temple on Mount Zion (Isa. 6). The seraphim cry "Holy, holy, holy" – and it is not coincidental that Isaiah's favorite (and almost unique)⁵ title for God becomes the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah is convicted of the fact that he is a man of unclean lips, and that he is surrounded by a people similarly defiled, which does not make his situation better but worse. How can such an unholy people survive in the presence of an all-holy God? No wonder the prophet pronounces judgment upon himself: "Woe is me! I am sure to be destroyed" (Isa. 6:5). But contrary to all expectation, Isaiah is not destroyed. A seraph is sent with a hot coal from the altar – so hot that this angelic creature has to use

⁵ Twenty six out of the thirty one uses of the phrase in the Bible are on the lips of Isaiah.

tongs to take it from the altar – and he touches it to Isaiah’s lips (6:6-7). You expect Isaiah to flinch with pain as the delicate flesh of his mouth comes in contact with such intense white-heat, silencing his unclean lips forever. But instead his guilt is removed by the encounter, his sin atoned for. Isaiah then responds to God’s rhetorical question “Whom shall we send and who will go for us?” and is called to go his defiled people as God’s ambassador (6:8-9).

Of course, that’s where we typically end our sermon on Isaiah 6, since the occasion is often sending out a missionary and the message of rest of the chapter is too much of a downer. After Isaiah’s response, the Lord says, “Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed. Then I said, “Until when, Lord?” And he replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, and the Lord drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land. Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump” (Isa. 6:10-13).

In other words, the Lord tells Isaiah that there is massive and repeated judgment to come on Israel, with only a teeny tiny flicker of long term hope. No one will listen to you, Isaiah; no one will heed your words. You will be a lone voice crying in the wilderness. But God’s miniscule remnant will endure. Who wants to say that to a missionary? So we miss that part of the passage out. In the process, however, we misrepresent who the God is who has sent Isaiah, the God who likewise sends us, like Zion, to go up on a high mountain and proclaim to the cities of Judah “Behold your God!” We are happy to say to people, “See, the Lord God comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him. He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing” (Isa. 40:10-11). We are not so happy to join the prophet in telling the people, “Your land is desolate, your cities burned down; foreigners devour your fields right in front of you-- a desolation,

like a place demolished by foreigners. Daughter Zion is abandoned like a shelter in a vineyard, like a shack in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. If the Lord of Armies had not left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would resemble Gomorrah. (Isa. 1:7-9). Same God; different message – but we need both parts to do justice to the whole revelation of God.

The Calling to Be Watchmen

Ezekiel's opening vision of God is equally as glorious as Isaiah's but it is different, just as his message was different from Isaiah's. Isaiah saw a static picture of God seated on a throne in his temple, but Ezekiel saw God on the move, away from the temple, seated on his divine chariot, riding on the storm, which is approaching from the north, the traditional direction from which Israel's enemies arrive (Ezek. 1:4). It's easy to get confused by the details in his opening vision, but it is best viewed as an impressionist painting – from a distance. Everywhere you look there is movement: wheels, wings, legs, lightning zapping back and forth. And all of that movement is threatening: the Lord is coming on his war chariot ready to bring immediate judgment on his people. His chariot has intersecting wheels covered with eyes, and its bearers, the cherubim, have four faces so they can look and move in all directions at once without turning: where can you run and where can you hide from this God? The answer, of course, is “Nowhere”. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide before this all-powerful, all-threatening God. The only thing to do is to fall flat on your face when you behold this God, and that is precisely what Ezekiel does: he falls on his face as though he were dead (1:28).

But of course, the dead don't always stay dead in Ezekiel. The Spirit of the Lord enters the prophet, sets him on his feet and commissions him for service (2:1-2), just as the Spirit will later enter the dry bones that represent Israel in Ezekiel 37: it is important to notice that what happens later to the bones, happens first for the prophet. He is himself a kind of first fruits of the new Israel, the prototype of the Spirit-empowered resurrection that he will later proclaim to those who feel cut off from God, dead in their transgressions and sins. Yet, as with Isaiah, the Lord warns Ezekiel that his ministry will not see much success: if the Lord

had sent him to people “deep of lip and heavy of tongue” (3:5) – to the Gentiles – they would have listened, but he is sending him to Israel, the rebellious house, with foreheads of flint and stubborn hearts (3:7). The divinely appointed goal of his ministry is not that his hearers should all be converted – or even that many among them should be converted – but that at the end of his time of ministry “they will know there has been a prophet among them” (2:5).

This reality is stressed when Ezekiel is called to be a watchman for the people (Ezek. 3). The job of a watchman was to shout out a warning of the enemy’s approach so that the people could run to find shelter within the city walls. In this case, the threatening enemy from whom they need shelter is the Lord, who is coming in judgment against his own people. If, knowing what has been revealed to him, the prophet fails to shout out the news of danger, then the peoples’ blood will be on his head. But if he shouts out his warning and they refuse to hear, then the responsibility for their fate will be on them, not on him. It is probably not coincidental that in Acts 20, Paul testifies to the Ephesian elders that he is innocent of the blood of all in that place because he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27). Paul was a watchman who need not be ashamed because he had testified both to the Jews and the Greeks repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – not just repentance without faith (“Repent the end is nigh”), nor faith without repentance (“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”), but repentance and faith together.

Of course, both Isaiah and Ezekiel’s call narratives challenge us in the contemporary church with the reality that we are far too enamored with numbers as a measure of success. This is one reason why we don’t preach these kind of challenging sermons on judgment from the prophets, instead preferring to give people a “delightful thought-provoking hour” (or, better still, forty five minutes) that introduces them to a caricature of Jesus. As I have been preaching through the latter chapters of the Book of Acts, where Paul seems to be endlessly in prison or on trial, I’ve been struck afresh by the reality that God’s agenda is very different from ours. It is a surreal storyline: judge after judge declares Paul not guilty, yet still he languishes in jail. This makes you wonder about the Lord’s

competence: a half-decent lawyer without divine assistance ought surely to have been able to free Paul, yet the apostle to the gentiles and the Lord's most effective church planter lingers in prison, rather than being out and about in the cities of the empire planting new churches. What was God up to?

To be sure, as Luke notes in the very ending of the Book of Acts, “the gospel is not bound” (Acts 28:31). Paul was in chains; he was not able to bring large numbers of people to Christ or plant new churches, but he could nonetheless witness to a few people who would never have attended those churches voluntarily, including, ultimately, Caesar himself. He could write a series of letters that he might otherwise never have had the time or need to write, which now form part of our Scriptures. And he could form a personal model for other persecuted believers of how to rejoice while in chains for the sake of the gospel. God was up to good things in and through Paul's life, even though they weren't the kind of things he would have preferred to be accomplishing, or the kind of things that the world deems “success”. In the same way, it is really important that we grasp the significance of the fact that God's utterly sovereign power in the universe is not always demonstrated in providing his servants with abundant hearers and disciples. Paul knew that, and I suspect he learned it from the prophets.

“Prophetic” Ministry

So Ezekiel started off with a clear and overwhelming vision of God a clear and realistic expectation of the response he would receive, and a clear sense of his own responsibility in that situation: to be a watchman, whose ministry measure would be faithfulness in declaring God's Word, not the size or responsiveness of his audience. His listeners readily dismissed him as a mere “maker of metaphors” (Ezek. 20:49) or “singer of love songs” (33:32) but the message he had for them was, quite literally, one of life or death. It was a message that totally engulfed him: Ezekiel not only had a message from God for the people: he was a message from God to the people. He swallowed a scroll containing words of lamentation and woe during his call vision, internalizing the message he had to communicate from God (3:1). Ezekiel was also struck with dumbness from God for the

first part of his ministry, only able to speak the words of judgment that the Lord gave him to say and nothing else (3:26). He was called to perform a number of bizarre sign acts – lying on his side for days on end, eating siege rations, making threatening gestures at a clay model of Jerusalem (4:1-17), digging a hole through the wall of his own house and packing a bag like someone going into exile (12:1-7), and, perhaps most striking to us, not performing the usual mourning rituals after the sudden death of his wife (24:16-18). We should perhaps clarify that God’s command to the prophet not to mourn over his wife’s death is not a demand by God that he feel nothing in response to that tragedy; it is a command that he avoid the normal outward displays of his grief – similar to the restrictions on priests in general and the High Priest in particular over when and how they might display their grief (Lev. 21:1-11). But all of this still shows us a man who was totally gripped by the word of God: a man who was swept up in his message.

All of these aspects of the prophetic call ratchet up what it means for us as pastors to exercise a “prophetic ministry”. Paul calls Timothy a “man of God” (1 Tim. 6:11), picking up on a clear prophetic title from the Old Testament. In the same way, the Puritan William Perkins entitled his treatise on preaching, *The Art of Prophecy*.⁶ Like the prophets, we are not professionals merely doing a job, trying to entertain and inspire people to live better lives. We are not simply makers of metaphors and singers of sweet love songs. We are called to be men who have swallowed a book whole, and as a result whatever comes out of us is rooted and grounded in that Word. We cry out as watchmen warning of the wrath to come, as well as ambassadors of the invading sovereign king, authorized to offer his exclusive terms of surrender, which are repentance and faith in Christ. We have a message of life and death to deliver to our congregations and to our wider communities. Woe to us if we fail in that task!

There is another striking difference between Ezekiel and many of us: he will not be polite about sin. In Ezekiel 16 and 23, we have some of the most graphic descriptions of the spiritual adultery of God’s people. Even in our tamed down English translations, his words are graphic and shocking. It

⁶ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996).

is perhaps not surprising that these chapters are rarely preached in our churches. In spite of the conclusion of Douglas Stuart that “those who wish to teach or preach on this chapter...can do so quite successfully and with decorum”,⁷ many would still concur with the assessment of Spurgeon: “A minister can scarcely read it in public”!⁸ While certainly discernment must be exercised – it is understandable, for instance, why this passage is not found in children’s Bible storybooks (which, in any event, largely ignore the prophets) – one wonders if contemporary Christians need to be as shielded from unpleasant realities as we tend to think. These same Christians are regularly bombarded with similarly shocking stories on the nightly news and the internet, let alone in what they watch for entertainment. It’s not as if they are completely unfamiliar with the concepts of rampant adultery and prostitution. Moreover, is it possible to teach these passages “with decorum” and not lose an essential element of the message? There are no new facts in these chapters about Israel’s history, and if we read them simply as a dispassionate historical catalog of crime like 2 Kings 17, we lose everything that these passages distinctively contribute to the message of Scripture. The whole point is precisely the lack of decorum in Ezekiel’s manner. He will not “be polite” about Israel’s history of sin: instead, he is instructed to expose it in its full ugliness in the most graphic manner possible. Only thus can he get the point across to his reluctant audience.

Preaching Judgment Without Being Judgmental

So perhaps I have convinced you of the need to preach these judgment passages. But the significant challenge remains of how to do so in a way that does justice to them and still focuses our attention on the central message of the Old Testament, which is the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow – the gospel? How can we preach passages of judgment without being judgmental?

⁷ *Ezekiel* (Mastering the Old Testament 18; Dallas: Word, 1988), 141. The desire to downplay the shocking aspects of the chapter is not merely a modern phenomenon. The Aramaic Targum already exhibits the same tendency (see J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* [Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990], 77).

⁸ Cited in Derek Thomas, *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained* (Welwyn Commentary; Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1993), 108.

To begin with, I think we may make the point that most correct application – from whatever passage of Scripture – functions by way of building an analogy. The Bible was not in general written as a personal letter from God to me, though some are certainly tempted to read it that way. It is a collection of stories, songs, oracles, letters and apocalypses that were written for particular people in particular places and at particular times. Nevertheless, those ancient messages, being inspired by God, do have continuing relevance to direct the life of the believer. Paul does not hesitate to tell the Gentile Corinthians “These things [the stories of Israel’s wilderness wanderings] happened to them as examples, and they were written for our instruction ” (1 Cor. 10:11) – even though, strictly speaking, the stories were written down as a warning for a Jewish audience long before the Corinthians were even born. The reason they could continue to speak to Paul’s day is that there is a fundamental analogy between the experiences of the wilderness generation of Israel, delivered out of the bondage of Egypt but not yet having entered into the Promised Land, and the Christian life that the Corinthians were called to live. Both audiences are part of the larger people of God, the Israel of God. The epistle to the Hebrews is constructed around that same analogy: its theme is, as one commentator put it, “the wandering people of God”.⁹ And of course Paul’s words to the Corinthians also speak to us because there is an analogy between their situation as early believers in Christ and ours as contemporary believers in Christ.

Every analogy implies similarities and differences between two objects. Proper understanding of analogies always implies making the right comparisons and ignoring the wrong ones. “Your sneeze is like the sound of a trumpet” creates an analogy. Presumably, it means that you sneeze loudly, like trumpets do, not that your sneeze can play a fanfare, like trumpets do. Interpreting and applying Biblical texts involves recognizing where the right analogies are, and rejecting the wrong ones. For example, in the earlier illustration from Jeremiah 29:11, the problem was that people are drawing the wrong analogy: they assume Jeremiah’s words are addressed to everyone, and therefore may be directly addressed to

⁹ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. Roy Harrisville & Irving Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

us as a kind of “timeless truth,” without consideration of the fact that they originally addressed only the exiles among God’s people. So an important question in making proper application of that verse to the contemporary context becomes “Who are the equivalent in our setting to the exiles in the original context?” The answer is that this promise may be appropriately applied to those who are in Christ – for as 1 Peter 2:11 reminds us, Christians are in a profound sense strangers and exiles in this world. Jeremiah 29:11 is in some respects the functional equivalent of Romans 8:35-39, which asks “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” – once again, a text that is addressed to believers, not universally.

On the other hand, the wider context of Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us that not everybody who is part of the people of God outwardly is necessarily truly part of the people of God. Those living in Judah thought they were the people of God, and therefore the recipients of God’s blessing. But they were deceived: actually, they were the subject of God’s curse. So too there may be people listening to us preach, Sunday after Sunday, who do not have true faith. Like Shemaiah, they may expose their true nature by resisting the full-orbed proclamation of Biblical truth. Again, notice how we are building analogies between the original audience(s) and our own situation.

So there is a multistage process in the interpretation of Old Testament texts. We first need to understand the text within its original historical and literary context: to whom was it originally addressed and what did it say to them? That is the grounding that gives us confidence that we are not simply free-associating the passage with some broad Biblical truth but are drawing a legitimate message from this particular text, a message that God intended that text to communicate. People should not walk away saying, “I would never in a million years have imagined that that text was about that subject.” They should go away wondering how they previously missed what the passage is so obviously about.

Taking Account of Redemptive History

But we not only need to explore the meaning of the text for its original hearers; we also need to ask how that message and audience translates

over into our contemporary context. This is where preaching the Old Testament is significantly harder than preaching the New Testament. The analogy between us and the Corinthians is relatively straightforward – we all live as believers in God in a post-Pentecost, pre-return of Christ era of redemptive history. There may be important historical and cultural factors of difference between their situation and ours to consider, but these are relatively straightforward compared with passages from a different time in redemptive history.

This will come to bear immediately in terms of two obvious differences between the prophetic era and ours: the law of God and the people of God. Let's start with the law of God. The prophets repeatedly indict the people for covenant unfaithfulness, and wherever they descend into details it is clear that it is the Sinai covenant that is the standard of righteousness in view. For example, in Ezekiel 18, the prophet describes a righteous man in these terms: "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual impurity. He doesn't oppress anyone but returns his collateral to the debtor. He does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing. He doesn't lend at interest or for profit but keeps his hand from injustice and carries out true justice between men. He follows my statutes and keeps my ordinances, acting faithfully. Such a person is righteous; he will certainly live" (Ezek. 18:6-9). These are not random timeless virtues that are revealed in creation. Rather, they are all based on the requirements of the Book of Leviticus (see chapters 18-20). So to apply them to a contemporary audience we have to understand how Old Testament law from the Mosaic economy applies to us.

In order to be able to deal rightly with Old Testament law, we first of all need to distinguish between the three different aspects of Old Testament law – the moral, civil and ceremonial law.¹⁰ What I mean by moral, civil

¹⁰ I recognize that there are a number of fine New Testament scholars who resist these categories since they are not directly found anywhere in Scripture. Nevertheless, if we reject these terms, we are forced to recreate their functions, since most Christians acknowledge that some Old Testament laws apply unchanged in all times and situations, others point forward to Christ and have now fulfilled their purpose, while other laws applied to Israel during their tenure of

and ceremonial law is the fact that there are three ways in which Old Testament laws guide contemporary believers. Some Old Testament laws (moral laws) are of enduring significance for all times and all places. An example of “moral law” that is binding in all times and places would be “You shall not kill.” These laws apply equally to all people everywhere, regardless of their culture or place in history.

Other laws –ceremonial laws – were specifically designed to point forward to Christ and were completely fulfilled in him. Because Jesus Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), we Christians no longer celebrate the Passover (even though the Old Testament commands God’s people to do so, and threatens excommunication if they fail to keep the feast). It would be wrong for us to slaughter a lamb and offer it to God, because the whole purpose of this law was to point us forward to God’s ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The third category, the civil laws, were designed as specific applications of God’s wisdom for the Old Testament state of Israel during their occupation of the Promised Land and have therefore now expired, though the general principles that they embody continue to be relevant – what the Westminster Confession calls the general equity.¹¹ An example of civil law would be the requirement that when the Israelites were harvesting, they were not to cut the grain all the way to the edges of the field but were to leave some for the poor (Deut. 24:19-21). That law doesn’t apply to us today (even if we are farmers) because it was intended for national Israel during the period when they occupied the Promised Land. Nonetheless, the “general equity” of the law still has applications for us. A lawyer or a nurse who sets aside a portion of his or her time for volunteer work for the poor is fulfilling the motivation behind the law of Deuteronomy 24, even though the details have changed.

the land and still have lessons for us, even though they don’t apply directly. If you eliminate these categories, as some popular evangelical authors have sought to do, it is difficult to explain why the Old Testament laws on homosexual behavior are still relevant, while those that forbid wearing a garment with mixed fibres does not prevent you from wearing a polyester/cotton blend shirt (Deut. 22:11). Sometimes, those who dislike the terminology end up recreating the same categories under a different name.

¹¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.4.

Now that is not to say that it is always easy to distinguish how a particular law addresses us as New Testament believers, nor to deny that more than one of these aspects may be relevant for any specific law. The practice of interpreting Old Testament law may not be easy, but the fundamental questions that we need to ask the text flow exactly from these three categories:

- 1) In what ways do these practices have enduring and universal implications for God's people in all times and all places (moral law)?
- 2) In what ways do these practices point us forward to Christ, and find their complete fulfillment in him (ceremonial law)?
- 3) In what ways do these practices reflect purely cultural and local practices, given to ethnic Israel, which do not govern us directly but more broadly in "their general equity" (civil law)?

Translating Contexts

Returning to Ezekiel 18, it is clear that not all of the laws listed there are of the same sort. Some are moral laws: not robbing people, not defiling your neighbor's wife or looking to idols are injunctions that apply relatively straightforwardly for modern people too. Some of the behaviors that are forbidden are ceremonial: the laws about emissions of life fluids such as menstruation do not bind us directly. They are not meaningless, however: they remind us (as they did the original audience) of our continual contact with the realm of death, even in the most life-giving activities, from which the blood of Christ alone can deliver us. Other prescriptions are civil laws, such as the laws about lending at interest or for profit. They bind us to the principle of not taking advantage of our neighbor through extortionate loans (and in Israel, your neighbor was virtually the only person from whom you could borrow or to whom you could lend), but the law does not forbid taking out a mortgage on a house or borrowing to expand a business. These are fundamentally different kinds of transactions.

Even moral laws may need some translation in our preaching to make them sharp arrows to convict people's hearts. For example, in Ezekiel 18, the prophet rules out eating at the mountaintop pagan shrines and

bowing down to idols. In Ezekiel 8, he likewise describes a number of idolatrous activities that are forbidden, including bowing down to the sun, offering incense to a wall of carved deities, and erecting a statue that provokes jealousy, probably representing the goddess Asherah. Unless your congregational context is a lot wilder than mine, it's unlikely that any of those precise practices were a temptation to your listeners last week.

However, once we probe deeper and ask what idol worship promised ancient people, we can hit closer to the mark. The analogy still connects. In antiquity, the heavenly bodies such as the stars and the sun were thought to exercise control over people's fates, while fertility deities like Asherah promised security and significance through the acquisition of many children (especially sons), who could continue your line and provide for you in old age. Ezekiel himself gives us a potent bridge in Ezekiel 14, where he talks about the idols of the heart that the elders of Israel have set up: even in their context, idolatry was not merely bowing down to objects of wood and stone, though it includes that.¹² It also covers everything that we value that prevents us serving the Lord wholeheartedly. What are the things that we moderns look to, that promise to give us security and significance if we will just bow down and worship them? Our careers, our relationships, our perfect families, our retirement portfolios, our houses, our sexual identity, even the cars that we drive become means of measuring our personal significance and value, and the secure refuge that will protect us against life's storms. We don't even have to ascend a mountain to join in the sacred ceremonies of these idols: they are right there in our hearts all along. As John Calvin put it, our hearts are factories that turn out a whole succession of idols, one after the other.¹³ These become our stumbling blocks that get in the way of serving and pursuing God. Even when outwardly we are seeking God, we are often deeply compromised in our loyalties.

Of course, in order for the analogy to work well and convict us of our sins, the people we are speaking to have to provide an apt analogy to those the

¹² See David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair'", *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13 (1995) 35-50.

¹³ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.8.

prophet was addressing. Ezekiel spoke to a number of different audiences, but he was never simply speaking out into a vacuum. He addressed the exiles as a group, the elders of the exiles, the inhabitants of Judah, Jerusalem itself, even inanimate objects like the mountains of Israel, and so on. He also penned a sequence of oracles against seven surrounding nations, though as far as we know, he never visited these locations or mailed the oracles to them. In fact, the real audience for these oracles against the nations was actually his own exilic context.

How do we build that analogy properly? Clearly, as with the example from Jeremiah, there are sub-groupings within God's people in Ezekiel's day. There are the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, who are outwardly part of God's people – indeed, they are the leaders of God's people – yet they are condemned for their rebellion against the Lord and are destined for destruction by the Babylonians. Then there are the exiles, who are regarded by the Jerusalemites as being far away from God as well as the land. Even though they too are a rebellious house, reluctant to listen to the prophet, God still has a positive plan for them: he will be a sanctuary for them in exile for a little while. That may not sound like a big deal for us, with our cavalier view whereby we can worship God anywhere we choose, but would have been a bombshell concept in the ancient world with its tight connection between deity, people and land.¹⁴

What is more, it is clear that neither of these groups is monolithic: the elders among the exiles are castigated almost as much as those left behind at home, though the crimes of which they are accused are more subtle. Meanwhile, there are those in Jerusalem who sigh and mourn over the abominations going on all around them, who are specially marked out for salvation by an angelic messenger before the destruction of the city begins (9:4).

How do these categories map onto our context? The broad analogy I work with – one that constantly informs the New Testament use of the Old Testament, is that Israel = the church. That is, there is only one people of God in all times and places; in the past, it was largely, though not exclusively,

¹⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Ezekiel 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 7.

limited to descendants of Abraham and their offspring, the inhabitants of the land. Now it incorporates Gentiles along with descendants of Abraham and their offspring, as Peter notes on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:39). God's people is fundamentally a unitary category, which is what makes it legitimate to apply words originally written to God's Old Testament people to his New Testament people (as Peter does with Exodus 19:6 in 1 Peter 2:9). The sub-categories now are not defined by location (exiles vs Jerusalemites); from a Biblical-Theological perspective, we can regard all Christians as exiles, which enables us potentially to appropriate the words of comfort spoken to the exiles as addressing us too. Yet it is possible for people who find themselves among the exiles geographically to act like – or actually to be – Jerusalemites: people having the form of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5). Even real Christians often act like idolaters, and some in our midst may actually be true idolaters, whose hearts are given over fully to the worship of other gods.

What is more, there doesn't need to be an identical situation between initial hearers and modern audience for conviction to happen. Sometime the sins are sufficiently similar as to be recognizable, even when the contexts are completely different. Ezekiel addresses the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, and condemns him for breaking his covenant commitment of political submission to Babylon, while at the same time pursuing relationships with Egypt (Ezek. 17). It is unlikely that anyone in our audience will directly relate to Zedekiah, even if they work in the diplomatic corps. But the underlying story of Zedekiah's persistent refusal to trust God in the face of a crisis, in spite of the Lord's long history of faithfulness to his people is one that we can all relate to. If we think in terms of the tendency to trust in human strategies and the world's methods – to look to Egypt, in other words, rather than to believe God and take him at his Word – well, now you are talking my language. I know what it looks like in my own life to trust in human strategies rather than in faithfully obeying God, and so, since my behaviour and motivations map onto Zedekiah's, I can recognize that the outcome I deserve matches his. The wages of his sin is death, as the siege, fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. makes abundantly clear. The wages that my sin deserves is death also, whether or not the Lord works that deserved judgment out in my present

experience. Covenant breakers deserve covenant curse: in that regard, I am thoroughly condemned by Ezekiel's prophecy every bit as much as his original audience(s).

This is particularly the case since the fall of Jerusalem and Israel's exile from the land where God promised to dwell with them serve as profound foreshadowings in redemptive history of the judgment that is yet to come. The language that the prophets use to describe both events overlap and merge, just as is the case with the Flood (Gen. 6-8), or the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). These historical events provide built-in patterns and analogies that are designed to enable us to think clearly about the world-shattering crisis that is coming at the end of cosmic history. We each face our own personal judgment after death, of course (Heb. 9:27), and the entire world faces a season of judgment at the end of all things (2 Pet. 3:10-12). The One who was a sanctuary for the exiles during the terrible events of Judean history can be a refuge for us in that dreadful day; but there is no other refuge that will endure the day of his coming in judgment, as should be vividly clear from the opening vision of Ezekiel.

Preaching Good News

But how do we get to good news from these messages of doom and destruction? Are we condemned to spend weeks on a row convicting people of their sin, without offering them the hope of the gospel? Not at all! The key lies in recognizing how the identification Israel = the church comes about. It is not that the church has displaced or replaced Israel, as some imagine the Reformed view to teach. Rather, it is that Israel finds its ultimate embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the true Israel of God, the chosen firstborn son, as Matthew makes abundantly clear in the opening chapters of his gospel. He gives us Jesus' genealogy: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile and fourteen from the exile to the Christ (Matt. 1:1-17). As a child, Jesus goes down into Egypt, while a king tries to eliminate him by killing all of the baby boys (2:14-18). When the Father brings him up from there, Matthew cites Hosea 11: "Out of Egypt, I called my son", making an explicit analogy between Jesus and Israel (Matt. 2:15). After his baptism (Matt. 3), which corresponds to the parting of the Red Sea, Jesus goes into the wilderness

for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4), just as Israel went there for forty years. While there he experiences exactly the same temptations that Israel faced in the wilderness: hunger, putting God to the test and false worship, but he succeeds each time where the original Israel failed. Then he goes up on a mountain and delivers his law to his new community (Matt. 5-7). The same analogy is operating in John's gospel when Jesus describes himself as a vine (John 15), a key image for Israel in the Old Testament (see Ps. 80:8-14).

How do we Christians become part of the vine? We are branches that are ingrafted in by the vinedresser. The same is true for Israelites after the flesh now that Christ has come: they too must be added to the true Israel through faith in Christ. Those who by their fruitlessness demonstrate that they are not truly connected to the vine are cut off by the vinedresser.

This reality reshapes and refines our fundamental analogy. The goal of Old Testament Israel is Christ: he is the fulfilment of its calling to be the firstborn Son of God (Exod. 4:22; cf. Rom. 8:29). He perfectly kept the Sinai covenant in all of its detailed ramifications, from the heart, not merely externally (Gal. 4:4-5). That means that he merits the long list of blessings laid out in Leviticus 28 for obedient Israel. He is the obedient servant of God in Ezekiel 18, who should live and not die. He is the godly man of Psalm 1, who should flourish like a tree planted beside irrigation canals of water, experiencing the Lord's blessing (Ps. 1:3).

But here the mismatch in the analogy becomes apparent. This righteous servant of the Lord, who should experience the Lord's richest blessing because of his faithfulness, turns out to be a root out of dry ground (Isa. 53:2). He is like the chaff that the wind blows away (Ps. 1:4), experiencing the punishment reserved for covenant breakers who are under God's curse: being hung on a tree, his body exposed to ridicule and condemnation (Deut. 21:23). How can this be? The answer is that Christ as the new Israel has taken into himself the covenant curses that Israel earned through their rebellious disobedience. The holocaust of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C. is one potential outcome of their sins. But the holocaust of the cross is another, alternative reality. The sheep have sinned but the good shepherd pays the price: he was pierced for our transgressions; he was

crushed for our iniquities; the punishment for our peace was on him – but as a result, by his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5-6). A remnant of Israel could look forward by faith to the Christ who would come and bring about their deliverance, by grace through faith.

But since our salvation in Christ is by grace through faith, it is no longer limited to the physical descendants of Abraham. Now it goes out to gentiles as well, as we become the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith in him (see Rom. 4). It is as we are united to Christ by faith that we become the new Israel: the church is only the new Israel because Christ is the new Israel, and it is his body.

What this means is that every passage of condemnation in the prophets points us to the cross. The destruction of Jerusalem points us to the cross. Israel's sin had to be paid for – and at the cross the sin of the remnant of God's people was paid in full. The same analogy connects us with them. The prophet's condemnation falls on us as well. We are all guilty, with real guilt that deserves real condemnation. But if anyone is in Christ they are new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), their sin and guilt is nailed to the cross, paid for by him (Col. 2:14), while the promise of every spiritual blessing that he earned through his righteousness is now ours in him. The gospel of cross is the powerful linkage that connects the condemnation of the Old Testament prophets with the “no condemnation” of the New Testament believer (Rom. 8:1).

Of course, having heard that word of no condemnation, the law continues to guide and shape the life of gratitude of the believer in Christ. But the centerpiece of our preaching ought to be, as it was for Paul and the other apostles, the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow (Acts 17:3; 1 Pet. 4:13). The more precisely and powerfully you can convict your hearers of their sin, the more beautifully Christ's perfect righteousness in this specific area will shine, a comfort to the broken and a light to those wandering in deep darkness. Throughout the prophets, the judgment of God leads us by the hand and points us to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, time and time again.

Preaching Hope from Ezekiel¹

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In the first article, we looked at how to preach judgment from the prophets in a way that still focuses on Christ. Now we will turn to the more positive side, proclaiming the prophet's ancient words of hope to a contemporary audience. Once again, we will use the Book of Ezekiel as our primary example. After you have waded through the first 24 (or really 32) chapters of Ezekiel, with all of the words of condemnation, both for Judah and the surrounding nations, what do you do with the rest?

Essentially, there are three sections to Ezekiel's oracles of hope: chapters 33-37, which are fairly straightforward oracles of hope, chapters 38-39, which focus our attention on a final, climactic, cosmic battle, and then chapters 40-48, which show a visionary picture of what a return to the promised land might look like – not merely a return by the people but, more importantly, a return by the Lord to their midst. What would it mean for the Lord to return to a rebuilt and reimagined temple, protected against a recurrence of the sins of the past? The judgments of the earlier passages will be reversed, but not in a way that just ignores their existence. They will be atoned for, and the people who are brought back to that land will be transformed by an outpouring of God's Spirit – not merely brought from death to life, but enabled to live that life in service to God a whole new way.

¹ A fuller exposition of these themes is found in Dr Duguid's commentary, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

² N.B.: Dr Duguid's article has been through the peer review process, however due to serious health issues at the time he was unable to make the revisions suggested by the reviewer. Nevertheless, we have decided to continue with publication of his article because we believe it will be of great use to the preacher or teacher wishing to gain a greater understanding of this important theme in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33-37

The oracles of hope begin in chapter 33 with a reprise of Ezekiel's call to be a watchman from chapter 3, only this time the emphasis is more on the obligation of the people to heed Ezekiel's message than it is on his obligation to deliver it. With the Fall of Jerusalem now a historical reality, it should be evident to everyone that a prophet has indeed been among them (see 2:5; 33:33). Ezekiel did faithfully warn the people of the wrath to come, yet there are many among the rebellious house of Israel, even among the exiles, who still regard him merely as a "singer of songs" (33:32) and a "maker of metaphors" (20:49).³ The human ability to stick our head in the sand in the face of harsh realities is remarkable. You would think that Ezekiel's messages would have been fully authenticated by now – but of course it was not so. Unless the Lord opens the blind eyes and deaf ears, the watchman will shout in vain. This doesn't excuse us from the responsibility of shouting (as watchmen, compulsion is laid upon us in that regard, as Ezekiel 3 made clear), but it does sober us as to the popularity we should expect for our messages. People often would prefer us to declare the message of "peace, peace", which the false prophets proclaim (see Jer. 6:14), but if that is our message when there is no peace then we ourselves are found to be false prophets, proclaiming lies that serve ourselves. We are whitewashing a tottering wall that will quickly collapse in the face of the Lord's judgment (see Ezek. 13:1-16).

Chapter 34 moves on to address the shepherds of Israel – the kings and princes and leaders of God's people, who are so roundly condemned in the first part of the book.⁴ The Lord will remove these bad shepherds and replace them with good shepherds – indeed, the Lord himself will be their shepherd (Ezek. 34:8-16). There is no conflict between these two promises: the Lord will provide his people with a new David, a messianic shepherd to guard and guide his sheep (34:23), and the Lord himself will be his people's shepherd (34:15). Here we see once again how clearly the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are picked up and applied to

³ The phrase is Carol Newsom's: "A Maker of Metaphors – Ezekiel's Oracles Against Tyre," *Interpretation* 38 (1984) 151-164.

⁴ See Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

the church in the New Testament. Jesus comes to be that Good Shepherd, taking care of his flock (John 10:11-14), which is now no longer a nation – for Christ’s kingdom is not of this world – but a spiritual kingdom (John 18:36). It is in this kingdom that he provides under-shepherds to care for his flock, protecting the weak sheep from the strong and caring for them, rather than serving and feeding themselves as the former shepherds did, allowing the strong sheep to run rampant over the weaker members of the flock (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

Ezekiel 34 therefore addresses our role as pastors in God’s church. We are not merely to be watchmen, trumpeting truth from a safe distance. We are also called to be shepherds, alongside our sheep in the mess and muck of daily life, feeding them, helping them give birth, protecting them from dangers of all sorts, getting in the middle of flock fights, breaking them up (even at the cost of numerous sheep bites), protecting the weak against the strong, and generally laying down our lives for the sheep. This is the kind of incarnational shepherding ministry that Jesus himself exemplified as the chief Shepherd.

Ezekiel 35 and 36 show us a tale of two mountains: Mount Seir was the home of Edom, Esau’s offspring, while the mountains of Israel formed Jacob’s homeland. Edom thought that the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. meant an undoing of the Lord’s covenant commitment to his people and his land, an opportunity for them to regain the birthright that Jacob stole from them and get revenge for their ancient enmity (Ezek. 35:5). They were wrong. The mountain heartland of Israel had become a toxic place to live because of Israel’s sins. Under the Sinai covenant, that was inevitable: the sins of the people must lead to their judgment under the curses of that covenant. But in Ezekiel 36, the Lord anticipates a time when he would reverse that curse, and the land would once again become a place of blessing instead (36:8-11). The reason for this transformation was the Lord’s concern for his own name (36:23). That concern worked its way out in two stages of history: first, judging his rebellious people for their sin before the eyes of the watching world (36:17-20), and then, second, restoring his undeserving people by grace, again in front of the eyes of the watching world (36:23-29). The Lord will not just restore his people but change them. In place of their stony hearts and rebellious

spirits, the Lord would give them a new heart and a new spirit (36:24-28). His people's sanctification would accompany and flow out of their justification, fulfilling the deepest promise of the Sinai covenant: "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Deut. 29:13).

As Ezekiel 37 demonstrates, this transformation will be nothing less than life from the dead. To a people in exile saying "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off" (37:11), the Lord shows a vision of bones that are not merely dry but very dry. The scene depicts not merely corpses but disconnected and disordered bones that are very dry, with no flicker of life left within them (37:1-2). Into that situation of death, the Lord can bring life, by the advent of his Spirit, who accompanies the prophesying of the Word, and creates the promised new spirit in the Lord's people, bringing them from death to life, but raising them on their feet ready to serve, a mighty army (37:3-10). That newly raised Israel will encompass north and south together in the one new people of God, as the latter part of chapter 37 makes clear (37:15-28). Jews and Samaritans will come together in worship to the new sanctuary that the Lord will build in their midst, when the Lord comes to dwell with them forever (37:27-28). Not coincidentally, that is the topic of discussion between Jesus and the woman of Samaria in John 4. She thinks of an unbridgeable gap between Jews and Samaritans, based on a disagreement about the location of worship – Jerusalem or Mount Gerazim (John 4:20). The Old Testament challenge to the Samaritans is "Forget Mount Gerazim! Come to Jerusalem" (see Isa. 2:2-4). But Jesus picks up on Ezekiel's anticipation of a resolution in the age old squabble and gives an answer that would have sounded strange to Old Testament ears (though not to Ezekiel): "Forget Mount Gerazim and Jerusalem" (John 4:21-24). In effect, Jesus says, "The day is coming and is now here when a new temple will be here – me! For I am God come to dwell in the midst of his people, and those who come to worship God from now on are not tied to a particular location but worship in spirit and in truth". That is, they will have received the promised Spirit from above whom Ezekiel prophesied, and of whom Jesus had been speaking in John 3.

Ezekiel 38-39

But chapters 33-37 are relatively straightforward to preach on, provided you draw the right lines of analogy between the Old testament people of God, Israel, and the New Testament people of God, the church. For that reason, I'm going to focus my attention on chapters 38-39 and 40-48. These oracles are not unconnected with what has gone before, of course. Ezekiel 37 ends with the Lord promising "my sanctuary will be in their midst evermore" (37:27), which subject is the focus of 40-48. Before we get there, however, first there is the little matter of Ezekiel 38-39 to get past. Ezekiel 38 and 39 form a single unit made up of two symmetrical panels – so typical of Ezekiel's style – which describe the defeat of Gog (38:1-23) and the disposal of Gog (39:1-29).⁵ The purpose of the oracle is explained in Ezekiel 39:21-29; it is intended as a word of reassurance to God's people that the new order of existence promised in 34-37 is not reversible. God will never again turn his face away from his people and abandon them to their enemies. Now he is with them forever. If your sermon on these chapters doesn't focus on that reality, you have missed what God says this passage is about.

That may seem an obvious point, but it is remarkable how often prophetic visions come with divinely inspired interpretations, which are then routinely ignored by preachers in their expositions. Daniel 7 would be a good example. The interpretation given to Daniel by the angel in 7:17-18 makes no attempt to identify the four kings (or kingdoms); that information is not necessary for Daniel to understand the vision. Yet preachers often invest great significance in their own (often tenuous) identification of the kingdoms involved!

The oracle in Ezekiel 38 opens with a summons to Gog and his allies to arm themselves and to prepare an assault against God's people dwelling peacefully upon the mountains of Israel (Ezek. 38:2-9). Gog has frequently been identified by commentators with a 7th century B.C. king of Lydia, who appears under the name *gûgu* in the Annals of Ashurbanipal, also

⁵ Daniel I. Block, *Ezekiel 25-48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 431-432.

known as Gyges by Herodotus.⁶ However, in neither instance do the supposed comparisons shed much light on the Biblical Gog: gûgu is merely one more in a line of minor kings who initially assisted the Assyrians, then rebelled and was destroyed by the steamroller of the Assyrian army, mere roadkill on the highway of empire. Herodotus, on the other hand, seems more interested in how Gyges acquired his throne than what he did when he gained it. He records in detail how Candaules, the king of Lydia forced the unwilling Gyges to view his Queen in a state of undress, in order to convince him of her outstanding beauty. The Queen, when she became aware of this, was naturally distressed by her husband's unseemly behavior and so required Gyges to kill his master, accomplishing the deed fittingly by hiding in the very same spot where he saw her naked.⁷

This might make a great Shakespearean play but doesn't help us much with our understanding of Gog. In neither of those cases does the figure seem to justify the language of "a great figure of the past...as we might speak fearfully of a new Hitler".⁸ For Ezekiel, however, Gog transcends historical categories and takes on almost mythical proportions. The Biblical "Gog" is the commander-in-chief⁹ of a coalition of forces gathered from seven nations, from the uttermost parts of the world known to the prophet: Meshech, Tubal, Gomer and Beth Togarmah come from the North, Put (North-West Egypt) and Cush (Southern Egypt) from the South and West, while Persia is to the East. In a kind of cosmic reversal of Isaiah 2, the prophet foresees the nations in the latter days streaming towards God's holy land, not to turn their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, but to take them up one last time in battle against the Sovereign Lord and his people. But even this rebellion is instigated by the work of God. Though Gog and his friends are far from unwilling

⁶ W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 2.301.

⁷ See Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.8-13.

⁸ L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (WBC; Waco, TX; Word, 1990), 204.

⁹ This phrase has frequently been translated as "The Prince of Rosh", where Rosh is understood as a place name, since at least the time of the Septuagint. This translation is grammatically possible, but in the absence of any Biblical evidence for such a place name, it is better to see it as a hierarchical title. In that case, Gog rules over a seven nation coalition, which underlines the symbolic completeness of the forces arrayed against Israel while if rōš is a place name, that symbolism is lost.

participants, yet the controlling force is the Lord, who directs them by “hooks in your jaws” (38:4).

Once the unholy alliance was prepared, they would be summoned at the time of God’s choosing against his restored people. Israel is depicted in terms borrowed directly from chapters 34-37: they have been regathered from the nations to the mountains of Israel; they live in safety, a peaceful, unsuspecting and undefended people, grown rich in livestock and goods, experiencing God’s favor. The significance of this description is that it underlines the motives of the evil alliance. There is no justification for their assault in Israel’s behavior. Israel is trusting in the Lord, not in alliances with foreign nations. Yet trust in the Lord does not eliminate the possibility of conflict. The ungodly, who dwell in “the uttermost parts of the North”¹⁰ cast greedy eyes in Israel’s direction, and advance against them like an overshadowing cloud (38:9, 16).

But in so doing, Gog has entirely misread the match up. It is not a matter, as he supposes, of his vast and well equipped army against a defenceless nation. Rather, by tangling with Israel he is taking on Israel’s God; this is “my people” and “my land” which he is assaulting (38:16). Indeed, the precise reason for which Gog and his allies are brought against Israel in this final assault is so that the Lord may demonstrate his greatness and holiness in defeating this monstrous alliance.

Therefore, the judgment of God falls upon Gog in Ezekiel 38:17-22. The question of Ezekiel 38:17, “Are you the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel?” asks whether Gog is the “foe from the north” depicted in passages such as Jeremiah 4-6. The answer to that question is now “No”: this foe, though geographically from the uttermost parts of the north, is not coming to bring the Lord’s judgment on his rebellious people but rather himself to be judged. That judgment for their sins is past and over. “It is finished,” we might say (John 19:30). Instead, precisely the same judgments that earlier in the book fell upon Israel for

¹⁰ This too is a theological rather than geographical description. The *yarketê*, which can also be translated the “heights of [Mt.] Zaphon”, is a description of the mythological cosmic mountain, the home of the gods. See Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, HSM 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 148.

their sins now fall upon their enemies: God's hot anger, zeal and fiery wrath are now turned against Gog. The sword, plague, bloodshed, flooding rain – all judgments experienced first by Israel – are now experienced by her enemies (38:21-22). Now God will make himself known to the nations not by the destruction of his unholy people but by the protection of his restored people (38:23).

As we move into Ezekiel 39, the focus shifts from the Lord's emotions to his actions, from the protection of his people to the utter destruction of his enemies. Like Goliath before him, Gog's seemingly invincible power will be broken and then his body left exposed for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field (39:4; cf. 1 Sam. 17:46). Only after God has decisively dealt with Gog as a threat is Israel called to act. She plays no part in winning the victory; she merely carries out the mopping up operation of spoiling the corpses and disposing of the remains (Ezek. 39:9-16). The Israelites collect seven kinds of weapons, which for seven years will serve them for fuel (39:9). Ironically, these flammable materials seem to have been the only things not harmed by the descent of God's fiery wrath, which highlights the metaphorical rather than literal nature of this passage! In addition to plundering the fallen, Israel will also be active in purifying the land by burying the corpses. The holy land must not be defiled by the ongoing presence of death. For seven months, the whole house of Israel will be engaged in this burial process (39:12), followed by a further period of seven months in which two squads of professional morticians will pass through the land, the first squad tagging human remains for the second squad to bury (39:15), until the whole of Gog's army is safely laid to rest in the Valley of the Horde of Gog. It is tempting to see in this army reduced to a valley of bones through the death-dealing activity of the Lord a reversal of Ezekiel 37, where the Lord's life-giving Spirit turned a valley of dry bones into a living army.

As we said earlier, the lesson which Israel is to draw from these chapters is explicitly laid out in Ezekiel 39:21-29. The Lord is sovereign in history, but that sovereignty is displayed before the nations in two separate movements. In the first movement, God demonstrated his sovereignty by sending Israel and Judah into exile because of their sin and unfaithfulness (39:23). God hid his face from them and they became easy prey for all

their enemies. But in the days to come a new period in Israel's history is beginning. God's people will return from exile; he will have compassion on them. This change in their fortunes will cause them to "bear their shame" (39:26), that is, take responsibility for their past actions when they are restored to their land and dwell in safety. Then they will know that it is the Lord their God who sent them into exile, and the Lord their God who returned them from exile (39:28). The tragic events of 586 B.C. will never repeat themselves, for the covenant keeping God will pour out his Spirit on his people, and he will never again hide his face from them (39:29).

So how should we preach this passage? Perhaps few Old Testament passages have seen so many attempts to interpret them in the light of current events as Ezekiel 38-39. This is hardly a new phenomenon. William Greenhill, writing in the seventeenth century, records the opinion of some contemporaries who identified Gog as the Roman emperor, the Pope or the Turks.¹¹ In the nineteenth century, against the background of the tensions in Europe and Asia Minor which led to the Crimean War, Wilhelm Gesenius identified Rosh as Russia,¹² a view later popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, along with the idea taken from other sources that "Meshech" and "Tubal" are the Russian cities of Moscow and Tobolsk.¹³ During the First World War, Arno Gabelein argued that Gomer was Germany.¹⁴ More recently, in response to the rise of Communism, these ideas have become the staples of popular dispensational end-times literature. Apocalyptic (or more precisely, proto-apocalyptic) literature such as Ezekiel 38-39 lends itself to a flexible application to whatever the contemporary dangers to world peace are perceived to be. In a world of much tribulation, there will always be a plausible explanation of why these times in particular fit the description of the Biblical "end-times".

¹¹ William Greenhill, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994 reprint), 754.

¹² *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, trans. S.P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949 reprint of 1857 original).

¹³ (New York: Oxford Univ., 1909). The view that Rosh is Russia is maintained in *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1967), though Moscow and Tobolsk are no longer mentioned.

¹⁴ *The Prophet Ezekiel*, 2nd ed. (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1972 reprint of 1918 original) 259.

There are numerous flaws in these identifications. The earliest attestation of the name “Rus” dates back to the mid-9th century A.D. and is thought to have been brought to the area around Kiev by the Vikings. It is etymologically unrelated to the Hebrew term and modern lexicons have universally rejected Gesenius’ claim. Nor can Meshech and Tubal be linked with Moscow and Tobolsk; rather, they are to be linked with the Mushku and Tabal peoples of central and eastern Anatolia, well-known in cuneiform texts from the first half of the First Millennium B.C.¹⁵ Gomer is similarly known to us from cuneiform texts as the warlike gimirrai (known from Greek sources as “Cimmerians”). This people originated in the Crimea, but were pushed southwards across the Caucasus by the Scythians at the end of the 8th century B.C. Their name may etymologically be related equally well to the Welsh (cymri) as to the proto-Germanic tribes,¹⁶ yet one may observe that the Welsh have not thus far typically played a significant role in the descriptions of the last days events (even though their flag bears a prominent red dragon!).

However, even if correct identifications were made on the basis of sound linguistic and archaeological data, attempts to isolate particular nations as “Israel’s last enemies” fly in the face of what the text is saying. The point of Ezekiel 38-39 is not that these particular nations are opposed to Israel, while others (America? Britain?) rally to her aid. Rather, these seven nations from the ends of the earth, from all four points of the compass, represent a final attempt of the united forces of evil to crush the peace of God’s people. This, not coincidentally, is the interpretation given to “Gog and Magog” in Revelation 20:8: they represent “the nations in the four corners of the earth” whom Satan gathers for the final battle against the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. Their defeat in Revelation is the pre-requisite for the establishment of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city of Revelation 21, which itself has many points of contact with Ezekiel’s visionary temple.

¹⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, “Meshech Tubal and Company: a Review Article”, *JETS* 19 (1976) 243-5.

¹⁶ See Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis*, (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 66.

In fact, even identifying Ezekiel 38-39 as proto-apocalyptic may be leading us down the wrong interpretative path. Though Ezekiel 38-39 shares a number of features with apocalyptic, it also has a great deal in common with the Psalms of Zion's security, where the nations gather together against Jerusalem, only to be repulsed by the Lord (Pss. 2; 46; 48; 76).¹⁷ This motif of the attack by the nations against the Lord's dwelling place, the center of the earth, has been transferred from Jerusalem itself to the mountains of Israel and from the timeless context of the psalm to the eschatological context of "after many days" (Ezek. 38:8), but the essential message remains unchanged. The conclusion of Psalm 46 would sum up Ezekiel 38-39 equally well:

Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress (Psalm 46:8-11).

The significance in this correlation lies in the fact that the "Last Battle", as depicted in Ezekiel 38-39, is not qualitatively different from the everyday battles which face us. The "mother of all battles" differs only in terms of size from the ongoing battles that we as believers face from day to day, not in terms of kind. Just as "the Antichrist" is merely the last and greatest in a constant stream of "antichrists" (1 John 2:18), so also Gog and his allies who seek to destroy the restored Israel are simply the ultimate expression of a continual struggle in which Satan seeks to destroy the people of God (cf. Rev. 12:17).

Therefore, the message of Ezekiel 38-39 is not a coded message for those who live in "The Last Days", who by carefully unlocking its secrets will be able to determine the symbolic identity of the key participants in the final struggle, but rather a word of encouragement to saints of all times

¹⁷ Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism. The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 88-96.

and places that no matter what the forces of evil may do, God's purpose and victory stands secure. If God can defeat the combined forces of Gog and his allies and turn them into fodder for the crows and carrion eaters, how much more can he take care of us, whatever historical manifestation of the enmity of Satan we face?

Indeed, Christians have, historically, suffered a great deal for their faith. From the time of Nero, when they were dipped in pitch and set alight to illumine the emperor's pleasure gardens down to the present, when believers continue to be tortured and killed for their faith in Nigeria, Syria and elsewhere, the spiritual forces of opposition are very real. Often those forces are institutional rather than individual, an organized and orchestrated attempt to destroy the church. For those enduring such times of persecution, Ezekiel 38-39 provides a powerful message of hope.

First, though this world is a place of tribulation, God is in control. Gog has his own evil reasons for acting but even his wickedly motivated plans can achieve nothing other than what God purposes. Gog comes intent on plunder, but he does so only because God's plan and purpose is to bring him. This is a perspective on persecution and martyrdom that we are not used to thinking about. We tend to assume that martyrdom is an unfortunate but necessary by-product of man's free will, a sign that the world is out of order. Not so. It is not merely by our love that the world will know that Christians are Christ's disciples but by our blood. The disciples are not greater than their master. Martyrdom is a central part of God's strategy for bringing glory to himself through the church.

Thus, in Revelation 6:9, the martyrs under the altar cry out "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" You might expect the answer "Until the salvation of the full number of the elect. There must be more time for the evangelization of the world". That is not a wrong answer; as Peter says concerning the second coming, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance." (1 Pet. 3:9). But it is not the answer given to the martyred saints: they are told that they must wait until the full number of the martyrs have been completed.

Ezekiel 38-39 likewise shows that even the restored, renewed people of God can expect tribulation, not because the world is out of control but precisely because the world is in God's control.

Second, God is going to win. This may seem a simple, even simplistic, point but it is central to the thrust of the Gog narrative. No matter how big the opposition, no matter how well organized they are, how powerful their weaponry, how paltry the resources of the people, ultimately their plans will come to nothing. As in Psalm 2, the nations may conspire together and the kings of the earth take a stand against God, but all their posturing causes mirth rather than worry in the heart of the Most High.

Third, God's victory means the ultimate destruction of all those who oppose him. Gog and his army end up as a massive array of corpses, scattered on the face of the earth. Their weaponry is useless against God's cosmic arsenal of fire and earthquake, hailstones and burning sulfur. Those who came to plunder end up themselves plundered. Once again adopting the language of Psalm 2, Gog will be terrified by God's wrath, dashed in pieces like pottery, destroyed along the way. It is foolish to oppose God, and all who do so will come to a sticky end. Those who turn away from God and refuse the sacrifice of Christ have nothing to expect except certain judgment and the raging fire which will consume the enemies of God (Heb. 10:27). We need to take seriously the admonition: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Fourth, God's victory means the ultimate security of those who trust in him. In Ezekiel 38-39, Israel does not have to lift a finger in her own defence. Those who take refuge in the Lord find blessing and security (Ps. 2:12); God is their refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble (Ps. 46:1). The certainty of God's victory is a source of confidence for the believer as he or she faces an uncertain world. As the apostle Paul puts it: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31-32). Your confidence rests in this: that Almighty God has committed himself to those who trust in him and he will never give them up. The God who will defeat the evil empire of Gog can take care of you also.

This last point is the central thrust of Ezekiel 38-39, as the final verses of chapter 39 make clear. Why was Ezekiel 38-39 good news for Ezekiel's original audience? Because it made clear the fact that the events of 586 B.C. could never be repeated. Israel had once been exiled because her sin so polluted the land that it had become totally unfit for divine habitation. But when God reversed that situation and regathered his people, he would pour out his Spirit in the same measure that he once poured out his wrath. This would bring about a radical change in the hearts of his people and in the security of his presence with them, such that he would never again hide his face from them. Though tribulations, such as the assault by Gog, would continue, they would no longer be marks of God's wrath but opportunities for God to uncover his power to the world. God was for his people and no longer against them.

This is the relationship with God in which we as Christians stand. Once we too were objects of God's wrath because of our sins. Our hearts were too polluted to receive his presence. But now, because of the work of Christ on the cross, we too have been gathered into God's people. We are no longer under condemnation, but have received the Spirit, by whom we have been adopted into God's family. Therefore we have the settled assurance that God will never leave us nor forsake us. Troubles may and will come. But to Christians, troubles come not as visitations of God's wrath upon us but as opportunities for God to uncover his power to the world. That power may be uncovered by remarkable deliverances, whereby we are rescued from the midst of our trials, as when Daniel was kept safe in the lion's den, or Peter set free from prison. Alternatively, God's power may be uncovered by enabling us to withstand tribulation firmly until the end, as when Stephen was given a vision of the ascended Jesus to strengthen him as the murderous stones pounded his body. Either way, as we endure suffering for the sake of King Jesus, we find out for ourselves and demonstrate to the world the truth of the Lord's statement: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Ezekiel 40-48

It is customary for commentators to apologize for Ezekiel 40-48. After the heady excitement of the re-creation of the dry bones of Israel in Ezekiel 37 and the apocalyptic battle of Ezekiel 38-39, the description of the dimensions of the new temple and the regulations for what kinds of sacrifices the prince can offer may seem at first sight tame stuff. Many commentators treat this portion of Ezekiel's prophecy as if it were the work of a harmless eccentric. Ezekiel, being a priest, was into temples just as some people are into classical music, fly fishing or motorcycles, and so when it came time to express his vision for the future he lapsed into the most accessible form of description. This is normally regarded as an unfortunate mode of self-expression – for who today is into temples? – but one through which we must necessarily wade.

Others view these details as the necessary ground plan for the future millennial temple that will be built in Jerusalem. It is usually maintained that a competent architect could construct a building from Ezekiel's description. This is probably true, though the architect would have to use a consecrated imagination to supply the many details which are lacking (notably the height dimensions for everything except the outer wall), and the present temple site in Jerusalem would need to have its topography radically revised. In addition, we should note that according to Ezekiel 48, the site of this restored temple will have moved some sixty miles north, nearer to Shechem than Jerusalem, to preserve the equal tribal portions on which the vision insists. However, on this interpretation, it appears inevitable that Christian believers, who will by then (*ex hypothesi*) have been raptured, can find little of edification here.

Neither approach, it seems to me, has captured the sense of what Ezekiel is trying to do in these chapters. What we have in Ezekiel 40-48 is nothing less than the visionary reordering of an entire new world, following on the creation of the new people of God in Ezekiel 37 and the birth pangs of Ezekiel 38-39. It communicates theological truth in the form of a vision, as elsewhere in Ezekiel. In these chapters, we have *theology as architecture* in the design plan of the temple, *theology as legislation* in the revised sacrifices and responsibilities for the officials in the temple, and *theology*

as geography in the river of life and the redistribution of the land. But it is essentially the same message that the prophet relays in each of the different formats.

Like Genesis 1-3, the account progresses from a description of the formation of the various spaces, to a description of their filling. Here, the formation of the different spaces in Ezekiel 40-42 is followed by their filling in 43-46. The restored temple is made to be occupied. The logic of the description starts from the outside and works its way in, describing the spaces, and then starts from the centre and works its way out when describing the filling. The central point of these chapters is the filling of the Most Holy Place, with the return of the glory of the Lord to the sanctuary (43:1-9).

The first detail Ezekiel that sees in his vision is a wall, surrounding the whole temple area that is some 10 ½ feet tall (the only vertical dimension in the entire account) and 10 ½ feet thick, providing a solid dividing line between the “holy”, the area of the temple itself, and the “profane”, the area outside. The three sides which permit access to the temple are dominated by massive fortress-style gatehouses, almost forty five feet wide and ninety feet deep (Ezek. 40:13, 15). To add to the sense of inaccessibility, there is a flight of seven steps to be surmounted before the worshipper even reached the gates (40:6, 22, 26). There is no doubt as to the initial impression which Ezekiel’s temple was intended to have: it is a mighty fortress which clearly separates the sacred from the rest of the world. The walls must be clearly established, with a place for everyone and everyone in their place, so that the Lord can return to his place at the centre of his people.

This ordering in terms of physical structure is also reflected in the ordering of the people. Uncircumcised foreigners must no longer be allowed access to do the menial work of the temple; instead, it is to be done once again by the Levites (44:7-14). Only the faithful Zadokite priests are allowed access into the Inner Courtyard and no one – not even the high priest on the Day of Atonement, nor Ezekiel himself (the angel leaves the prophet outside while he goes in to measure it) – is allowed access to the Holy of Holies. Removal of sinners to a safe distance is only one aspect of maintaining

the holiness of the temple area; the other, more positive, aspect is through the re-establishment of the whole sacrificial system. For this reason, the description of Ezekiel's temple pays particular attention to the altar of burnt offering, the central piece of furniture in his plan. Whereas the tabernacle had the ark of the covenant as its geometric center, Ezekiel's temple centers around the altar of sacrifice.

In a similar way, in sharp and irreconcilable contrast to the program established by Moses at Mount Sinai, Ezekiel's sacrifices are more numerous and more focused on the concept of purification. This is another way of conveying the same message as the temple building itself, which is larger and more restricted in access than the former temple. God is doing something greater than the former things, a greatness that shows itself in the dimensions of the holy space and the vast number of the sacrifices. God is also doing something which will prevent any repetition of the contamination of the past which drove him from the land, through erecting high walls and buffer zones and inaugurating these additional rites of purification.

In chapter 47, Ezekiel's vision is turned outwards to the rest of the land and the influence which the thorough restoration of the temple as the place of God's dwelling will have upon it. That influence is a total transformation from death to life, expressed in the visionary form of a life-giving river which flows from the temple throughout the entire land. The image of a life-giving stream flowing from the sanctuary is common in the Scriptures, from the opening chapters of Genesis, with the river that flows from Eden to water the whole earth (Gen. 2:10-14) to the closing chapter of Revelation, with the river of life that flows from God's throne. Yet Ezekiel's river is in some significant ways not like these other "rivers of life". For example, Ezekiel's river starts out as an insignificant trickle and only ends up as a thunderous torrent after a distance. It is this growth from insignificant beginnings which the prophet is instructed to observe, measuring it with his own body, rather than the standard measuring rod he uses elsewhere. In the language of his later prophetic colleague, Zechariah, the lesson is that he should not despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). Though the work of God starts out in tiny, seemingly insignificant ways, it will ultimately accomplish God's goals

with unstoppable power. Another aspect to which Ezekiel's river gives prominence is the theme of transformation. The other rivers of life are eternal, fertility-inducing streams. In contrast, Ezekiel's river brings not merely life but life-from-the-dead. It not only provides fresh, living water, but "heals" the dead, salt-contaminated water of the Dead Sea, enabling it to support its own vibrant fishing industry (47:10). The echoes of Ezekiel 37 should be obvious.

Third, Ezekiel's river runs opposite to the general trend in this vision to separate sharply the holy from the profane. The river bridges the gap between the temple and the world, demonstrating the fact that the presence of God in the midst of his people will have very visible and tangible effects of blessing for the people (compare Hag. 2).

The final section of Ezekiel's book records the delineation and distribution of the renewed land, continuing the trend of the vision to move outward from the temple. The passage opens with the description of the boundaries of the new Promised Land (Ezek. 47:13-20), which follow the lines of the original Promised Land, but excludes the Transjordanian lands originally occupied by two and a half of Israel's tribes, who stopped short of the Promised Land proper. This underlines the fact that the people are receiving the fulfillment of the original promise to Abraham. The land itself is now divided into even strips running east and west, rather than the patchwork quilt division under Joshua.

This is not merely a fairer way of dividing up a country whose main geographic features run north and south; it is far more fundamentally a way of orienting the whole land along the sacred east-west axis of the temple. The centre of the land is a new, sacred portion, which houses not only the temple but the land for the privileged groups, the Zadokites, Levites and the prince. It also contains the city, which is a perfect square like the temple itself, yet not an end in itself: unusually, the city is oriented northward, so that it too can face toward the temple. It is given a new name: "The Lord is there" stressing the effectiveness of the Lord's sanctification program which has taken the defiled city of the earlier chapters of the prophecy and made it into a place fit for God's dwelling with his people. Notably, since all of the tribal strips of land are equal in width, the city

ends up about 60 miles north of Jerusalem, closer to the centre of Israel and further away from its defiled past.

When the Jews returned from exile and rebuilt the temple under Zerubbabel, what they constructed (in Jerusalem!) did not resemble Ezekiel's ground plan at all. Even in terms of the regulations and perspectives which could easily have been adopted, Ezekiel's plan was not viewed as a blueprint by those who constructed the second temple, nor are they ever condemned by Haggai and Zechariah for their failure to do so. Should we now look to a future millennial temple to see these provisions fulfilled therefore? I don't think so. Rather, we should do what it seems to me the New Testament does and see how the goal of Ezekiel's temple finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

For Christ himself is the new temple. He is the dwelling of God among men, the glory of God made manifest in our midst (John 1:14). In Jesus Christ, the solid walls of the temple once again became flimsy material for the sake of portability, just like the tabernacle. But the walls also needed to be flimsy so that they could be torn down in a final act of cleansing, achieved through the breaking of Jesus' body on the cross. Jesus' body was the "temple" of whose destruction Jesus spoke in John 2:19, when he said "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days". In this way, the radical focus on purifying sacrifice that is expressed in Ezekiel's temple found its full expression at the cross, as the new temple in Christ's body was itself torn apart for sin, by which it was cleansed once and for all.

But Jesus is not only the temple that embodies the ultimate purifying sacrifice towards which Ezekiel looked. In Christ, the radical separation of the holy from the profane of Ezekiel's temple also found its expression. Just as Ezekiel's temple would stand in the midst of the people yet would no longer be able to be defiled by them, so also the Son of God dwelt in the midst of a sinful world undefiled. In him the light shone out clearly in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it (John 1:5).

Jesus is also the reality to which the river of life that flows from Ezekiel's temple points. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at a well, he told her that the water he gives would become a spring of water welling up

to eternal life (John 4:14). More explicitly still, Jesus stood up on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles and called the thirsty to come and drink from him. He promised that “streams of living water will flow from within him”, and John adds the interpretive note “By this he meant the Spirit” (John 7:38-39).

Yet Ezekiel 47 reminds us that the work of God often starts out from small beginnings and progresses slowly. The mighty river of life, which at the end is too deep to cross, begins with the barest trickle. The church of Jesus Christ will ultimately be made up of multitudes who will flock in from north and south and east and west to sit down at table in the kingdom of God, but it often exists in the present as a trickle, not as a flood. Our task, whether we are seeing the work of God progress like a mighty river or more like a dripping tap, is to seek to be faithful in centring our lives on Jesus Christ, our temple.

But there are also differences between our position as Christians and that of Ezekiel’s temple. Most notably, the walls have been moved. While we are still to build a wall of separation between us and sin, now the walls between Christians have been torn down. Now there are no privileged classes of priests who have closer access to God, while ordinary Christians are stuck in the outer court. We are all part of a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5). Now the greatest wall of all, the wall separating Jew and Gentile, has been torn down: by God’s grace through faith, both are on the inside of the new temple (Eph. 2:14-22).

These similarities and differences find striking focus in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21, the final, eschatological vision of Biblical revelation. That this visionary “Holy City” is modeled on Ezekiel 40-48 is indisputable: like Ezekiel, John is carried away to a great and high mountain to see this city (Rev. 21:10) and once there, he is accompanied by an angel with a measuring rod (21:15). The city is square, with a great high wall around it and prominent gates, while a river of life flows from its centre (22:1). Yet the differences from Ezekiel’s vision are equally striking. The city has no temple (21:22), there are twelve gates around the perimeter, not three, and they stand perpetually wide open to the nations (21:12, 25).

What has John done with his predecessor's vision? What he has done is to show how the same themes (separation of the holy from profane and sacrifice) look when they are viewed through the lens of fulfillment in Christ. There is still the same radical separation between the holy and the unholy on which Ezekiel insisted. The wall around paradise has not been knocked down but raised even higher and made even thicker (21:17). But now, in place of Ezekiel's multiplicity of walls, there is only one wall. The final separation has taken place between the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous, those "whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27) and "who wash their robes" (22:14), have completely free access through the gates of the city to its very heart, the tree of life before the throne of God (22:2, 14). The unrighteous, the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars (Rev. 21:8, 27; 22:15) – all these are permanently on the outside (22:15).

The reason why there is no temple and there are no walls inside the city is because the entire city has become a giant Most Holy Place, a perfect cube in shape (21:16) and covered with pure gold (21:18), just like the original tabernacle. The place to which no one had access in Ezekiel's temple, not even Ezekiel himself, has become the place to which all Christians have access in the new Jerusalem. Unlike Ezekiel's temple, there is no altar in this "new world" because the sacrifice has been accomplished once and for all on the cross. The Lamb has been slain, and, risen from the dead, is at the heart of heavenly worship. Thus, Ezekiel's temple points forward clearly and unequivocally to the salvation which God would accomplish in Christ. As on every page of the Old Testament, the central message of Ezekiel is the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow, as the gospel goes to all nations.

Acts and Galatians: The Perfect Dovetail?¹

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Between its first account of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19a) and the first missionary journey (Acts 13:14), the book of Acts devotes no more than sixteen verses to the life of the apostle (Acts 9:19b-30; 11:25, 26, 30; 12:25). Compare this to the sixteen chapters (Acts 13-28) that follow his missionary career from this point on. Our knowledge of Paul's early years as a Christian can be reconstructed from a careful comparison of Acts and his epistles, especially Galatians. According to David deSilva, "Galatians gives us more first-hand information about Paul's early career as a Christian missionary than any other text."² On the basis of the following assumptions a clear picture begins to emerge:

1. Galatians 1:11-24 = Acts 9:1-30

1. Paul confesses to the Galatians how he "used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it," adding "and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Gal 1:13). His religious zeal expressed itself in his murderous persecution of the infant church (Gal 1:23; Phil 3:6). This corresponds well with the Acts account which reports that "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

¹ This article sets out some biographical insights into Paul's life from Acts and Galatians. It thus lays the historical groundwork for the next article, which looks in detail at Paul's expression of emotions in Galatians.

² David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 493.

2. God called Paul through his grace (Gal 1:15), no doubt a reference to his conversion experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-9).
3. Paul was specifically called to preach Christ to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16). This was precisely the message that the Lord told Ananias to convey to Paul: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15).
4. Hence Paul can tell the Galatians that the gospel he preached was received through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-12).
5. After his conversion he was with the disciples in Damascus for some days (Acts 9:19). From there he “went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus” (Gal. 1:17).
6. In Damascus he confounded the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ, and so they plotted to do away with him (Acts 9:22-23), but he got wind of their plot and was let down the city walls by night in a basket (Acts 9:23-25). This is probably the same incident to which Paul refers in 2 Cor 11:32-33.
7. Three years later (probably after his conversion) he went up to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18). These three years may well correspond to the “many days” that had elapsed before the Jews tried to kill him in Damascus (Acts 9:23). In seeking to reconcile the two accounts at this point, however, it is wise to be cautious. Here, says Alan Cole, “we are faced with unsolved and insoluble questions of chronology. The *three years*, for instance, may be counted either from the date of Paul’s conversion, or from his return from Arabia to Damascus. On first reading, the account in Acts sounds as if all these events took place in a few weeks. But we can tell from the speed at which events move in Acts that this is a highly compressed account. If we had the full history of Paul’s movements in early years, we might well find that they present a far more complex pattern than that found in either Galatians or Acts.”³

³ Alan Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (London: Tyndale, 1965), 54.

8. In Jerusalem the disciples were afraid of him, fearing that he was not genuine. But “Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles” (Acts 9:27). At this point there seems to be a serious discrepancy with Paul’s own recollection of events. He tells the Galatians that he “went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:18-19). Perhaps the best way to harmonise the accounts is by understanding “see” in the sense of “becoming acquainted and staying with,” as in the previous verse. The Greek verb *ὁράω* (*horaō*) that is used here can sometimes carry the meaning “visit” (as in Heb 13:23). Taking the evidence of both passages, we can conclude that although he met the other apostles Paul had in-depth visits with only two of them, namely Peter and James.⁴ He is rather adamant on this point. He seems to confirm it with an oath in Gal 1:20: “Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.” As an aside, it is probably worth noting that Paul consulted with Peter and James who would have been treasure troves of information about the historical Jesus. Although Paul had been preaching in Damascus that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God (Acts 9:20-22), and although he knew the gospel (Gal 1:11, 12, 16), he may well have wanted to know more details about the earthly ministry of Jesus. Who better to ask than Peter and James!

9. In Jerusalem, as in Damascus, he was “speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:27-28). Once again he encounters opposition, this time from the Hellenistic Jews, who try to put him to death (Acts 9:29). Paul’s fellow-Christians hear of it, and

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: Acts to Revelation, An Introduction and Survey* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 124, offers a different solution to the problem: “Galatians 1:22-23 initially poses a problem because Acts 9:26-30 suggests that Paul would have become well-known in and around Jerusalem. On more careful inspection, however, this latter passage never delineates how many apostles Paul saw, and what he did in Jerusalem was to talk and debate with the Hellenistic Jews (v. 29).” This approach overlooks the fact that in Acts 9:27 Luke states quite specifically that “Barnabas took hold of him [Paul] and brought him to the apostles.” The wording of this verse does not give the impression that he met only Peter and James.

for his own safety they take him down to Caesarea and ship him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). This harmonises with Paul's own claim: "Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal 1:21). He makes no mention of the fact that he probably had no say in this move. Nor does he mention that after his departure "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace" (Acts 9:31). It was probably not only for his own safety that the brothers escorted Paul to Caesarea. Even so, the churches of Judea who had not met Paul face to face were glorifying God because of him (Gal 1:24).

2. Galatians 2:1-10 = Acts 11:27-30

1. When Barnabas had encouraged the church at Antioch in their initiative to evangelize Greeks (Acts 11:19-23), he went to Tarsus to look for Paul (Acts 11:24). When he found him, he took him to Antioch and they stayed there for an entire year (Acts 11:25; cf. Gal 1:21).
2. In response to Agabus' prophecy that there would be a worldwide famine, the Christians in Antioch decide to send famine relief to the brothers living in Judea. They send their contribution to the elders in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:27-30).
3. Although this visit is only briefly mentioned in Acts, it would appear that Paul gives the "inside story" in Gal 2:1-10.
4. Paul claims that it was because of a revelation that he went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas (Gal 2:2). This could be interpreted as a revelation from the Lord to him, or it could be related to the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11:28.⁵
5. The purpose of the visit was to deliver aid to the brothers in Judea (Acts 11:29-30), a focus which is not lost in the report on the visit

⁵ Thus Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 118, who notes that in Gal 2:2 "Paul explains how he went to Jerusalem 'in response to a revelation' – meshing nicely with Agabus' prophecy in Acts 11:27-28."

in Galatians: “They only asked us to remember the poor – the very thing I was also eager to do” (Gal 2:10).

6. Paul makes it clear that in Gal 2:1-10 the meeting is between Barnabas, Titus and himself on the one hand and the “pillars”, James, Cephas and John on the other. From Acts 11:30 we know that Paul and Barnabas made the visit to Judea. No mention is made of Titus, but then his name never appears in Acts. He is introduced as a Greek and Paul emphasizes that he was not compelled to be circumcised (Gal 2:3). This fits the context of Acts 11 remarkably well, as this chapter records the early evangelization of Greeks in Antioch (Acts 11:20). It is not difficult to imagine that Paul and Barnabas took Titus with them as a “test case” of a Greek convert and they wanted to check with “those who were of reputation” in Jerusalem (Gal 2:2) whether Titus should be circumcised. In Acts 11:30 Paul and Barnabas bring Antioch’s relief package to the elders. This could well be a fitting description of Peter, James (the Lord’s brother) and John. Even though they are elsewhere called apostles, it would also be appropriate to refer to them as elders (cf. 1 Pet 5:1). Hence there need be no contradiction between these passages on this score.
7. The upshot of the meeting in Jerusalem in Acts 11:27-30 was that those who were of reputation made no difference to Paul or his message (Gal 2:6). His preaching of the gospel remained unchanged and there was no need to circumcise Gentiles. Again, this meeting would fit in well with the early evangelization of Gentiles in Antioch. Moreover, it was the church in Jerusalem that had sent Barnabas to check up on the new situation that had developed in Antioch (Acts 11:22). He encouraged the church there, and after fetching Paul from Tarsus had ministered there a further twelve months. Now was a good time to report back to the church in Jerusalem.

8. Placing Gal 2:1-10 in this context makes more sense than assigning a later date when the Gentile mission would have been much further advanced.⁶

3. Galatians Written before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

1. The setting for Galatians seems to be the time Paul and Barnabas spent in Antioch after the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14).⁷ At the end of Acts 14 we are told that they returned to Antioch, reported on their mission and spent a long time with the disciples (Acts 14:26-28).⁸
2. The main issue addressed in Galatians is circumcision, which is precisely the issue that is introduced in Acts 15:1-5. When Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch some men come from Judea insisting: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This resulted in great dissension and debate with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:2). As a result, the church decided that they should all go to Jerusalem to bring this matter before the apostles and elders. This resulted in the Council of Jerusalem which handed down a compromise decision, but one that essentially favoured Paul’s “no circumcision for the Gentiles” policy (Acts 15:6-29).

⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* 2nd ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 464, conclude that “Paul’s two visits to Jerusalem are those of Acts 9 and 11 (Gal. 2 will refer to private contacts on the famine visit on this view; it is hard to date Peter’s vacillation after Acts 15).”

⁷ Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2: 150, “Galatians 2:9 reads like a statement of agreement on respective spheres of missionary service, on the strength of which Paul and Barnabas made ready to evangelize the pagan peoples of Galatia.”

⁸ If this does indeed provide the most likely setting for the epistle, Paul’s readers live in South Galatia and are not the Galatians of Celtic origin further to the North. According to Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 353, “Paul addresses his first letter to the churches in South Galatia just after the first missionary journey but before the Jerusalem Council.” Although the North Galatian theory held sway for most of church history, many scholars today prefer the South Galatian theory, largely due to the significant and influential work by Sir William M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893).

3. If members of the circumcision party, who not surprisingly included ex-Pharisees (Acts 15:5), had made it from Judea as far as Antioch, it is not difficult to assume that they could also have infiltrated Antioch's daughter churches in Cilicia and South Galatia. Hence, they may well have retraced Paul's steps and begun to influence his Gentile converts.⁹
4. If these Judaizers¹⁰ had indeed managed to sway and unsettle those churches that had been established during the first missionary journey, then this provides ample reason for the fiery nature of this Epistle. This is understandable when we remember that these churches have just recently been founded at great personal cost.
5. If Paul wrote to the Galatians after the Jerusalem Council he could simply have cited the decisions of the Council, but there is no hint of that in this epistle.¹¹ The Council endorsed his no circumcision policy – a policy which he practiced on his missionary travels and had now defended in this letter.¹²

⁹ DeSilva, *Introduction*, 498, refers to their efforts as “a cleanup mission.” These “teachers followed along Paul's tracks trying to bring Gentile Christians into conformity with Torah and circumcision. In effect, they wanted to preserve fully the Jewishness of the new Christian movement and keep it firmly anchored within Judaism.”

¹⁰ On the use of this term Greg W. Forbes, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (eds.), *All Things to All Peoples: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 248-49, writes that “the opponents would appear to be Jewish Christian evangelists active in the Greek speaking world. They are of the same mentality as those described in Acts 15:1-5, with the law being central in their doctrine of salvation. Hence the commonly ascribed term Judaizers is apt.”

¹¹ According to Forbes, “Letter to the Galatians,” 246, “Failure to mention the apostolic decree in Galatians is a significant issue . . . Considering the fact that the Galatian Christians appear to have been so easily persuaded by an ultra-conservative Jewish Christianity, knowledge that the Jerusalem leaders themselves supported a law-free gospel could hardly have done Paul's argument much harm!” Likewise, Gundry, *Survey*, 353, writes: “An argument in favour of the South Galatian address and early date is that if Paul wrote the letter after the Jerusalem Council, he would probably have capitalized on that council's decree favouring Gentile Christian freedom from the Mosaic law, the main topic under discussion in Galatians.”

¹² DeSilva, *Introduction*, 495, concludes: “The events in Galatians (let alone Paul's activities prior to Galatians) must logically predate any such decision that was reached in the meeting narrated in Acts 15, since that ruling would have direct bearing both on the question of circumcision raised in Galatia and the question of table fellowship with the Gentile Christians raised in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14).”

4. Galatians in the Context of Acts 13-14

On the basis of the above observations Acts 13-14 provide the most compelling background to Paul's letter to the Galatians. These chapters begin and end in Syrian Antioch, the city from which the first missionary journey was launched and to which Paul and Barnabas returned when it was completed. Of particular significance for our purposes is the work that they undertook in the South Galatian cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13:14-14:23). It is into this context that the epistle seems to fit most comfortably. The following features stand out:

1. *The Prominence of the Gentiles:* As the first missionary journey was the Church's first organised mission to the Gentiles, it is not surprising that they are a strong focus in Acts 13-14. There are in fact more references to the Gentiles in these chapters than in all the preceding chapters of Acts. It was in Pisidian Antioch that Paul and Barnabas first declare to the Jews that they are turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46), a declaration that Paul will repeat to the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18:6) and Rome (Acts 28:28). For this they find scriptural warrant in one of Isaiah's Servant Songs: "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth" (Acts 13:47; cf. Isa 49:6). To this message the Gentiles respond in joy and faith (Acts 13:48). Not all Gentiles react so positively, however. In Iconium some are incited by unbelieving Jews against the apostles (Acts 14:2, 5). In Lystra it seems that the Jews have enough support from the Gentile crowds to stone Paul and drag him out of the city (Acts 14:19). Nevertheless, the overall response of the Gentiles was such that when Paul and Barnabas return to their sending church they can report that God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27; cf. vv. 1, 21). It is this theme that Paul further develops in Galatians.¹³ He reminds them that he was called to preach Christ among the Gentiles (1:16), a calling

¹³ In Paul's correspondence there are more references to the Gentiles here than in any other letter except Romans.

that was later confirmed by Peter, James and John (Gal 2:2, 8, 9). An essential feature of his message is that Gentiles as well as Jews are justified by faith and not by works of the law (2:15-16; 3:8, 14). More than either Peter or Barnabas, Paul understood that one of the implications of this was that there was now no barrier to table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles (2:11-14). These emphases in Galatians flow naturally out of the proclamation of the gospel as reported in Acts 13-14.

2. *The Mention of Barnabas:* Barnabas was Paul's main companion throughout the first missionary journey. His name occurs nine times in Acts 13-14, but he disappears completely from the Acts narrative after chapter 15. He is, however, mentioned three times in Galatians (Gal 2:1, 9, 13), which is more frequently than in all of Paul's other epistles combined (cf. 1 Cor 9:6; Col 4:10). Donald Guthrie explains that "this is more natural if he were known to the readers, which could be so only if the churches in mind are the southern churches. It was only on the first journey that he accompanied Paul."¹⁴
3. *Preaching the Gospel:* Another feature of the Acts account is the fact that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in each of the centres visited. This is indicated either directly by the missionaries themselves (Acts 13:32; 14:15) or by way of editorial comment by Luke (Acts 14:7, 21). In Galatians Paul reminds his readers quite emphatically of the gospel he had preached to them (Gal 1:6-11; 4:13). The very reason that God had set him apart and called him was that he might preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16), a calling that would later be confirmed by the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:2, 5, 7).
4. *Old Testament Quotations:* The only sermon where Paul quotes directly from the Old Testament is in the "word of exhortation" (Acts 13:15) that he delivered in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). According to UBS⁵ he does

¹⁴ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: Tyndale, 1970), 455.

so five times: v. 22 = Psa 89:20 + 1 Sam 13:14; v. 33 = Psa 2:7; v. 34 = Isa 55:3; v. 35 = Psa 16:10; v. 41 = Hab 1:5. Of further significance is Paul and Barnabas' citation of Isa 49:6 in v. 47, when they tell the Jews they are turning to the Gentiles. All of these quotations agree either exactly or substantially with the LXX. A similar use of the Old Testament is found in Galatians, where there are ten quotations. In three of these there is verbatim agreement with the LXX (3:16 = Gen 12:7; 4:57 = Isa 54:1; 5:14 = Lev 19:18). In five there is substantial agreement (3:6 = Gen 15:6; 3:11 = Hab 2:4; 3:12 = Lev 18:5; 3:13 = Deut 21:23; 4:30 = Gen 21:10), while two of the citations read more like paraphrases of the LXX (3:8 = Gen 12: 3; 18:18; 3:10 = Deut 27:26). It is not surprising that Paul should quote from the LXX in a Diaspora synagogue, and it follows that he should continue such usage in his epistle to the Galatians. However, it is not only the form of the quotations that stands out. The overlap in content is equally remarkable. In fact, both Acts 13 and Gal 3-4 make the same point, namely that believing Gentiles are included among the people of God. In his sermon in the Antioch synagogue Paul argues from the terms of the Davidic covenant, while in Galatians he argues from the Abrahamic.¹⁵ In many ways the epistle also unpacks the implications of Isa 49:6.

5. *The Grace of God:* Before the first missionary journey was launched, the church in Syrian Antioch had commended the missionaries to the grace of God (Acts 14:26). In Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas urged their listeners "to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43). In Iconium the Lord "was bearing witness to the word of His grace" (Acts 14:3). Like all of Paul's other epistles, Galatians both begins and ends with the grace of the Lord (Gal 1:3; 6:18). So this is nothing unusual. The intervening references to God's grace, however, are telling. Both the Galatians and Paul have been called by

¹⁵ Cf. E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 124: "The starting-point of his thought is the story of Abraham; the citations from the prophets appear to be interpreted in the light of the Genesis narrative, and *vice versa*, the Torah is understood in the light of its interpretation by the prophets."

grace (Gal 1:6, 15). James, Cephas and John recognised the grace that had been given to Paul (Gal 2:9). By teaching justification by faith and living out this doctrine Paul does not nullify the grace of God (Gal 2:21). On the other hand, those Galatians who are seeking to be justified by law “have fallen from grace” (Gal 5:4). Paul’s references to grace encapsulate the core message of Galatians.

6. *The Emphasis on Faith:* Throughout Acts 13-14 there is a strong emphasis on the faith of those who heard the word. In Pisidian Antioch as many Gentiles “as had been appointed to eternal life *believed*” (Acts 13:48). In Iconium “a great multitude *believed*, both of Jews and of Greeks” (Acts 14:1). The lame man at Lystra “had *faith* to be made well” (Acts 14:9). On their follow up visit to these three cities Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples “to continue in the *faith*” (Acts 14:22) and commended the newly appointed elders “to the Lord in whom they had *believed*” (Acts 14:23). The noun “faith” (πίστις, *pistis*) and the verb “believe” (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*) which are used in these chapters are well represented in Galatians (22x and 3x respectively). Most critical for our purposes, however, is a declaration that Paul made towards the end of his sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:38-39). Literally translated it reads: “Therefore let it be known to you, men and brothers, that through him [whom God raised from the dead] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and that in him everyone who *believes* is justified from all the things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses.” Much of Galatians reads like an exposition of these verses. In Gal 2:16 Paul emphatically repeats the latter part of this declaration: “knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law but through *faith* in Christ Jesus, even we have *believed* in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by *faith* in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.” The contrast between justification by faith in Christ and the impossibility of justification through the Law of Moses, first adumbrated in Paul’s sermon, is then developed in fine detail (Gal 2:19-21; 3:1-14, 22-26; 5:1-6).

Particularly impressive in Paul's argument is his quotation from the prophet Habakkuk, "The righteous man shall live by *faith*" (Gal 3:11; Hab 2:4). This was the very prophet he had quoted so effectively at the end of his sermon in Antioch (Acts 13:41; Hab 1:5).

7. *Miracles*: In Gal 3:5 Paul asks his readers, "Does He then who provides you with the Spirit and work miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" Paul's ministry among the Galatians had not been without miracles. In Iconium the Lord granted Paul and Barnabas "that signs and wonders be done by their hands" (Acts 14:3). Even more dramatically, the healing of the lame man at Lystra forms the centrepiece in the report of their ministry in that city (Acts 14:8-18). There were miraculous events to which Paul could readily appeal in his letter.
8. *The Intensification of Persecution*: Towards the end of his life Paul would remind Timothy, who originally hailed from Lystra (Acts 16:1-2), of the persecutions and sufferings "such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra" (2 Tim 3:11). As it turned out, at each successive location these persecutions became more intense. At Antioch it started at a verbal level, "when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming" (Acts 13:45). This initial opposition soon escalated, however, when the Jews "instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district" (Acts 13:50). In Iconium the persecution became even more intense. There "the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren" (Acts 14:2), so much so that "an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them" (Acts 14:5). What the persecutors merely attempted in Iconium, they succeeded in carrying out in Lystra: "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead" (Acts 14:19). Their

earlier threats had become fully realised – or so they thought. When they had left, Paul “arose and entered the city” (Acts 14:20), perhaps under cover of darkness.¹⁶ The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe about 100 km away – an escape which Paul later attributes to divine intervention (2 Tim 3:11; cf. 2 Cor 11:25). After a successful mission in that town, the apostles very courageously retraced their steps to do follow up work in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch by encouraging the new converts and appointing elders in each of the recently established churches (Acts 14:21-23). Paul, however, never forgot the persecutions he endured. In his letter to the Galatians persecution is a recurring theme. In the opening chapter he reminds his readers that he had himself persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy the faith (Gal 1:13, 23).¹⁷ Then he recalls from the days of Abraham that just as Ishmael, the son born “according to the flesh,” persecuted Isaac, the son “born according to the Spirit” (Gal 4:29; cf. Gen 21:9), the same still holds true today. As “children of promise” (Gal 4:28), his readers should expect to be persecuted.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thus F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 296.

¹⁷ Echoing Gal 1:23, a famous tombstone reads: “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and *appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy*” (italics mine).

¹⁸ There is subtle irony here. In Antioch, Iconium and Lystra it was the Jews who repeatedly instigated the persecution of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19). If Paul is still being persecuted because he refuses to preach circumcision (Gal 5:11), the persecution would again appear to be coming from a Jewish direction. By citing the case of Isaac and Ishmael from Gen 21:9, he is identifying the Jewish persecutors with Ishmael and himself and his Gentile converts with Isaac. He is reversing the traditional interpretation of an ancient text. Now believing Gentiles are the children of promise born according to the Spirit, while unbelieving, persecuting Jews are those “born according to the flesh” (Gal 4:29).

9. It was certainly so in his own case. Because he preached the cross, and refused to preach circumcision, he was still persecuted (Gal 5:11). His detractors, on the other hand, “try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal 6:12).¹⁹ Finally, immediately before his closing farewell, Paul states quite climactically, “I bear on my body the brand-marks (τὰ στίγματα, *ta stigmata*) of Jesus” (Gal 6:17), which is quite possibly a reference to the scars from the stoning he suffered in Lystra (Acts 14:19).²⁰

10. *The Expression of Intense Emotion*: The overt emotions that Paul expresses in writing this letter – his amazement (Gal 1:6),²¹ his fear (Gal 4:11)²² and his perplexity (Gal 4:20)²³ – are nothing if not intense. Equally strong was his former zeal for Judaism. In Gal 1:14 he confessed to having been “more extremely (περισσοτέρως, *perissoterōs*)²⁴ zealous for my ancestral traditions” than many of his contemporaries among his countrymen. So intense was his zeal that he “used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13). That Paul was a man of strong emotions should have come as no surprise to the Galatians. In Lystra, after the healing of the man who had been lame

¹⁹ Cf. deSilva, *Introduction*, 502, “Where the word of the cross causes persecution while the preaching of circumcision relieves persecution, only Jews could be doing the persecuting, and the rival teachers would certainly alleviate pressures from that quarter.” Martin, *Foundations*, 2: 155, traces this back to “the renewed activity of the Jewish Zealots in Palestine in the late 40s and early 50s. Jewish Christians were subjected to pressure to declare themselves loyal Jews at a time of fierce nationalistic upsurge.”

²⁰ Thus David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 412; cf. BDAG, 945: “Paul is most likely alluding to the wounds and scars which he received in the service of Jesus.”

²¹ This is the only occasion in the NT where Paul is described as being amazed.

²² The only other church to whom Paul admits his fears are the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 7:5; 11:3; 12:20).

²³ This is another strong emotion that Paul uses of himself only here and in the Corinthian correspondence (2 Cor 4:8).

²⁴ There are other occasions where Paul uses this comparative adverb to underscore the strength of an emotion (2 Cor 2:4; 7:13, 15; 12:15).

from birth, the priest of Zeus “wanted to offer sacrifice” (Acts 14:13). When Paul and Barnabas “heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd” (Acts 14:14). It was a dramatic gesture probably signifying their horror at what was happening (cf. Num 14:6; 2 Kings 5:7, 8; 6:30; 2 Chron 23:13).²⁵ No doubt all the Galatian churches, and not only the fledgling church at Lystra, would have been aware of the missionaries’ emotional outburst at being mistaken for pagan gods. The horror Paul expressed over the paganism at Lystra is psychologically not far removed from the amazement, fear and perplexity he felt at the Galatians’ threatening defection to another gospel (Gal 1:6-9; 4:8-21). They wanted to be enslaved all over again to “the weak and worthless elemental things” (Gal 4:9), such as their observing “days and months and seasons and years” (Gal 4:10). Circumcision was merely the thin edge of the wedge. If the Galatians received it, it would be tantamount to reverting to paganism (Gal 4:9). Paul’s zeal, horror, amazement, fear and perplexity are all of a piece. The portrait of Paul in Acts and Galatians is a consistent one. He has little sympathy for opposing religious views. When he was a Pharisee, his zeal drove him to persecute the infant church. When he was a missionary he was horrified by expressions of pagan worship. As the apostle to the Galatians he is amazed, afraid and perplexed that they are reverting back so quickly to a gospel of salvation by works.²⁶ It is not difficult to see what he was passionate about.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this incident, see Stephen Voorwinde, “Paul’s Emotions in Acts,” *RTR* 73 (2014): 78-79.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 156, understands Paul’s emotions in this letter slightly differently. He claims that Paul “would be *shocked* at how easily they, or some of them, had succumbed to the teaching of whoever it was who was ‘troubling’ them. He would be personally *hurt* (this comes through at various points in the letter) that they would be disloyal to him after all they had seen him go through on their behalf” (italics mine).

Conclusion

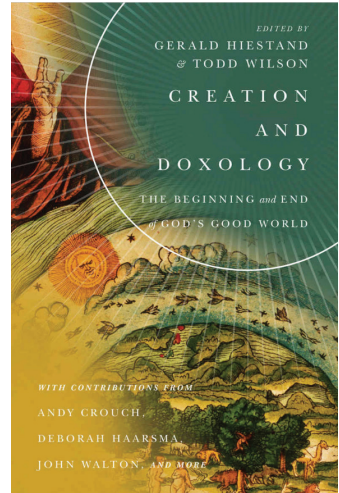
If Paul's letter to the Galatians was indeed his earliest surviving correspondence, it fits well into the historical context provided by Luke in the book of Acts. As Paul Barnett has noted, "Paul's letter to the Galatians was written in the late forties, soon after his return from the regions described in Acts 13-14. The primary consideration here is that the book of Acts has a detailed and lengthy account of Paul's visit to these cities of the Anatolian plateau, which he later revisited and strengthened (Acts 16:6; 18:23)."²⁷ Acts and Galatians are therefore mutually illuminating. Galatians fills out some of the details omitted by the book of Acts, while Acts provides the broader narrative within which the epistle can be placed. If Paul did indeed write when he was still fresh from his return to Syrian Antioch after the first missionary journey, it is understandable that he should say, "I am amazed that you are *so quickly* deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). The intensity of his recent sufferings in Galatia helps to explain the rawness of his emotions as he writes to the churches. The book of Acts in general and chapters 13-14 in particular set the stage for what was to be one of Paul's most personal and influential epistles. Seen in this light the letter provides us with unparalleled insights into what made the apostle tick. To gain these insights we need to look carefully at Paul's overtly expressed emotions. It is to a detailed examination of these that the next article is dedicated.

²⁷ Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 293.

Book Reviews

Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson (eds.), *Creation and Doxology: The Beginning and End of God's Good World*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2018.

Hiestand and Wilson have edited a book which derives from a conference of the “Center for Pastor Theologians (CPT).” The date of the conference is not given, but presumably the chapters in this book reflect the papers given at the conference. As is often a feature of edited books, the authors of the chapters do not agree on every aspect of their topic, which in this case is the doctrine of creation and its relationship with post-Darwin science. This feature is especially prominent in the chapter by one of the editors, Todd Wilson, “Mere Creation: Ten Theses (Most) Evangelicals Can (Mostly) Agree On.” Wilson is the pastor of a church which not long before his tenure embraced six-day, young-earth creationism as its (unofficial) teaching position, and then hired Wilson, who holds to a version of evolutionary creation (45). Wilson’s negotiation of the resultant tension reflected in this chapter is a helpful “bottom line” when Christians disagree about the early chapters of Genesis. The idea of the connection between creation and doxology in the title of the book is reflected in the position that however one thinks about origins, the proper posture of the creature before the Creator is one of praise and thanksgiving (4).



The book consists of twelve articles divided into three sections: (1) The Doctrine of Creation Expressed; (2) The Doctrine of Creation Explored; and (3) The Doctrine of Creation Practiced.

The opening chapter in the book is by Michael Lefebvre, the pastor of a Reformed Presbyterian church in Indiana who is well-known for his writings on the Psalms as the songs of Jesus. The chapter, “Reading

Genesis 1 with the Fourth Commandment: The Creation Week as a Calendar Narrative” is an article written from a perspective “congruent with ‘analogical day,’ ‘literary day,’ or ‘framework’ views” (20). Lefebvre adds that his reading “cautions against both young-earth and old-earth efforts to read Genesis 1 as a chronology of original creation events” (20). His conclusion is based on a study of other “calendar narratives” in the Pentateuch. For example, he argues that the flood narrative in Genesis 6-9 is “an agricultural and festival calendar in narrative form: a calendar narrative” (12). Its purpose is not “journalistic” (to record events) but “legal” (to shape Israelite life in the Land). Likewise, the Exodus narrative is shaped in such a way that does not preserve the timescale and order of the events, but “their recounting has been mapped to the harvest calendar of Israel in order to inform the people’s seasonal labors and worship” (15). Regarding the account in Genesis 1, his conclusion is that “the text is not a lofty description about galaxy formation and other phenomena of little use to the average Israelite scraping together a living from the land. It is a practical calendar of weekly food production and communion with God” (20).

Lefebvre’s article renders a good service in highlighting the climactic nature of the seventh day in the Genesis narrative. The Sabbath day commandment is clearly connected with the account of creation (Exod 20:8-11). But the connection is one which begins in Genesis. That is, because of the way God created the universe, now, Israel, obey the fourth commandment. Lefebvre rather argues for a reversed relationship: the creation narrative was written in order to support the fourth commandment. His hermeneutical presupposition is that the main import of the Genesis narratives is to serve the daily needs of the average Israelite, and therefore the meaning of the narratives and even the nature of the narratives must be primarily understood in that light. His approach hinges for its effectiveness on a correct identification of those needs. It seems doubtful that calendar needs are primary. The creation account in Genesis 1 is a marvel of simple historical narrative that at the same time evokes worship and wonder. There was surely little the “average Israelite scraping together a living” needed more than an account of how the all-powerful God of the Universe, who is also the covenant Lord of Israel,

created everything, including the land on which the Israelites are seeking to survive. Lefebvre assumes that the main purpose of the Genesis narratives was to serve as calendars for daily life in the Land, but that assumption appears to limit their God-given purpose.

The chapter by Hans Madueme is of special interest. Madueme teaches at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia; he is a young-earth creationist who is nevertheless unimpressed (and perhaps embarrassed) by most of the “scientific” arguments that many young-earth creationists press forward. His chapter is entitled “All Truth is God’s Truth: A Defense of Dogmatic Creationism.” He argues that there are good “dogmatic” reasons for thinking that better empirically rooted models of creation are available, even if we do not currently know what they might be (76). He clearly states a prior judgment about the nature of Scripture which sees Scripture as the Word of God, the canon of the church (69). He states that current scientific insights do not support young-earth creationism, but neither do they supply sufficient warrant for abandoning this view.

He argues that current popular scientific models are potentially susceptible to error for five main reasons:

1. The doctrine of God. Madueme believes that God reveals young-earth creationism in Scripture. Part of a dogmatic commitment to the nature of Scripture as the Word of God necessarily involves the nature of God as trustworthy. To abandon young-earth creationism is to take up a different view of God.
2. The fallibility of science. Thomas Kuhn and others have demonstrated that in the history of science even the most strongly held theories have been based on assumptions that later were discredited.
3. The noetic effects of sin. Sin has affected our intellectual capacities. Both Scripture and nature are revelatory, but (a) the revelation of Scripture comes to us from God as infallible, and (b) God promises that his Holy Spirit will guide believers as they interpret Scripture. These two features of Scripture are not true of scientific study. While all interpretation is fallible, the tendency to constantly stress the

interpretive dimension of understanding Scripture as if it were on a par with scientific reasoning threatens the clarity of Scripture and invites exegetical scepticism.

4. The role of demonic powers. Scripture attests that there are demonic powers at work in the world, and that they are especially active in conflicts that harm Christian faith and witness. Madueme argues that while Scripture does not provide great detail about the nature of this opposition, nevertheless its presence must be recognized by those who affirm the teaching of Scripture.
5. The problem of methodological naturalism. The worldview on which modern scientific theories are based inevitably limits the evidence base from which scientists can draw. Moreover, the further away from the evidence base a theory moves the more likely it is that error intrudes. Madueme believes that evolution and old-earth creationism rely on auxiliary scientific theories, and do not overthrow a dogmatic warrant for young-earth creationism.

Madueme's article is a model of humble insistence that there is theological warrant for a young-earth creationist view even when (in his opinion) empirical evidence is not strong.

One of the editors of the book, Gerald Hiestand, contributes a fascinating chapter from church history entitled "Irenaeus, the Devil, and the Goodness of Creation; How Irenaeus's Account of the Devil Reshapes the Christian Narrative in a Pro-terrestrial Direction." Hiestand is a pastor-scholar in a church in Illinois. He provides a lively account of Irenaeus of Lyons' (ca. 130-200) account of the devil's temptation of Adam and Eve. Irenaeus, among other things, is famous for his disputation with the Gnostic heresy. The latter adopted Platonic and Stoic Greek philosophy to argue for the superiority of the celestial (heavenly) over the terrestrial (earthly). Irenaeus affirmed the goodness of God's creation of the earth and of God's appointment of humanity to rule over the earth. In his account, the devil is opposed to God not so much to usurp God's throne as to replace humanity as the ruler of the earth. Irenaeus argued that the devil was envious of humanity's appointment to rule the earth (111).

The devil successfully tempted Adam and Eve to sin, but God cast Satan out of Paradise as well and sent Christ as the second Adam to reclaim the earth's throne on behalf of mankind. In emphasizing the goodness of creation, Irenaeus avoided idolizing creation by insisting that human beings must give thanks to God for the good gift the earth represents. In Hiestand's estimation, the link between creation and doxology owes much to Irenaeus (116).

The final section of the book contains a thought-provoking chapter by Paige Comstock Cunningham entitled "It All Begins in Genesis: Thinking Theologically About Medicine, Technology and the Christian Life." Comstock seeks to provide biblical perspectives about what it means for Western Christians to live in a "digitally mediated, technologically sophisticated, medically advanced and scientifically awe-inspiring world" (165). She particularly reflects on the "medicalization" of our lives, by which she means the use of pharmaceuticals to enhance cognitive and behavioural function. She notes that technology is seductive when it offers to meet our human vulnerabilities. The danger she diagnoses is that Christians become more influenced by their culture than by their Christian worldview. She advocates for the development of biblical wisdom for ethical decisions about medically and technologically complex issues (169). She compares the rich resources of biblical wisdom with what she describes as either "biblicism" (literalism, proof texting, moving straight from a verse in Scripture to an ethical issue) or "ethical absolutism" (applying ethical principles in an absolutist fashion motivated by a fear of uncertainty). She then thinks about how the early chapters of Genesis provide fundamental doctrine about such issues as God's sovereignty, providence, the goodness of creation, the *imago Dei*, and the contingent, finite and limited nature of humanity. She gives several examples from narratives in Genesis to show how they inform a range of the kinds of ethical issues pastors might face in this complex world.

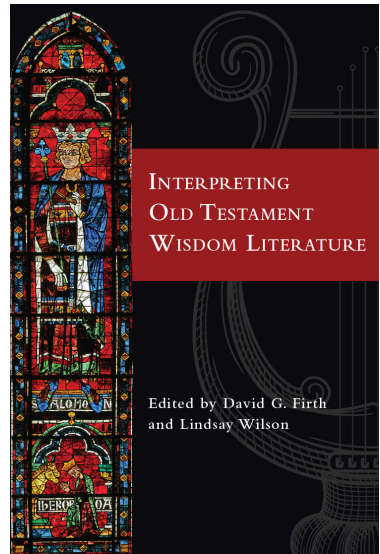
The collection of chapters gathered for this volume is "uneven," but that is one of its merits. It provides perspectives for a wide range of readers on the links between creation and doxology.

John de Hoog

David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (eds.), *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2017.

This volume is a useful collection of articles on Old Testament wisdom literature contributed by several well-known evangelical scholars. It is divided into three parts: Part 1: The Study of Wisdom Today, which is a single chapter by Craig Bartholomew; Part 2: The Wisdom Literature, with articles on Proverbs (Ernest Lucas), Job (Lindsay Wilson), Ecclesiastes (Katherine Dell) and Song of Songs (Rosalind Clarke); and Part 3: Themes, six articles on some diverse topics of much interest like the connection between wisdom and biblical theology (Christopher Ansberry) and the voicing of wisdom in the Psalms (Simon Stocks). This review will highlight one article from each of the three sections.

Craig G. Bartholomew's introductory chapter on the study of OT wisdom today is a brilliant tour of the history of recent scholarship on wisdom by a scholar whose knowledge of this area appears to be encyclopaedic. He traces the study of OT wisdom literature through a series of turns in scholarship – historical criticism, the literary turn from the 1970s, the postmodern turn with its emphasis on ideological critique of metanarrative through to the theological turn emphasizing reading the Bible as scripture for the church (4).



Some features from Bartholomew's account: The fragmentation of OT wisdom books by historical criticism did not lend itself to rich theological work. A “wonderful exception” is Gerhard von Rad's book and writings on wisdom (13).

The literary turn enabled scholars to move from a focus on the composition of books to close attention to the literary shape of the books as we have received them (14). Aspects of wisdom books that were seen

as contradictory could now be analysed by understanding such methods as irony, paradox, contradictory juxtaposition, ambiguity and so on. Contrary to earlier understandings, Proverbs as a whole does not present a mechanical act-consequence understanding of retribution – see Van Leeuwen on wealth and poverty in Proverbs (18). In any case the great focus of Proverbs is not with concrete acts and their consequences but rather a “character-consequence nexus” (19). It is long-term character and direction that determines life consequences. Proverbs are by their very nature partial utterances; the overall picture of life in Proverbs is a complex one. In discussing comparisons of OT wisdom and other Ancient Near Eastern wisdom, Bartholomew insists that genuine comparative work requires the OT wisdom books to be treated as literary wholes. The worldview of OT wisdom literature is a crucial component in any comparisons (22).

Many scholars have treated wisdom literature as separated from the legal tradition of Israel, but Bartholomew reviews recent work which suggests that wisdom appears to presuppose Torah (25).

Bartholomew suggests that intertextuality between the OT wisdom books and the New Testament is an area where much work remains to be done. Wisdom motifs play a large role in Jesus’ ministry (26).

The postmodern “turn” rejects autonomous reason but does not reinstate tradition or religion. Rather it leads to a “cheerful nihilism and a wild pluralism of methodologies, like the days of the judges.” Bartholomew feels that Ecclesiastes provides us with a profound critique of postmodernism (29).

There has been a recent renaissance of theological interpretation; it seeks to read the Bible for the church as Scripture. Both Job and Ecclesiastes are important sources for pastoral theology (30).

Bartholomew concludes that useful emphases for further work on biblical wisdom should include intertextuality, biblical theology, the individual theology of wisdom books, wisdom and preaching, wisdom and spirituality, and the public dimensions of wisdom (33).

The second section of the book contains a chapter on Job by Lindsay Wilson from Ridley College in Melbourne; this chapter alone is a good reason to buy the book (along with the other excellent contributions). Wilson describes Job as a “problematic book” in the sense that even though God affirms Job, he seems to utter words not appropriate to a person of faith (60). Wilson’s exploration of the problems suggest that Job contains valuable pastoral resources. He surveys two main problems: Is Job’s use of lament consistent with him being faithful? And what about Job’s pursuit of litigation (62)? What follows is a rather detailed summary of Wilson, who writes with great sensitivity and “wisdom.”

Lament and complaint

Wilson points to some examples and remarks that these do not sound like after-church comments. But Job always assumes that God is in absolute control of what happens in his world. God is the one to turn to in life’s struggles. Job wishes he had never been born – one of many times where Job explores hypothetical possibilities (9:14-20; 13:15; 14:13-17; 19:25-27). None of these are realistic possibilities, but Job explores them as he is backed into one corner after another (63).

Lament is found throughout the book, but always, even in the darkest times, he laments and complains to God. His friends talk about God. Job talks to God. A lament is not first of all about venting feelings but is inherently a petition for change. Job does not want an intellectual solution; he wants his relationship with God restored (64).

God’s verdict should control our readings of Job’s laments. Not only was Job blameless and upright at the start, also what he said about God during the debate was right. God will never be blown away by the strength of our language; we can use honest language in conversing with God (65).

James 5:11 says that Job persevered. There are things he did not do which would have been a failure of faith: (a) He resisted the temptation of going through the motions of repenting so that God would “have to” ease his sufferings. (b) He nowhere contemplates suicide. (c) He does not curse God. (d) He does not take time out from his relationship with God.

His deepest longing is not for God's absence but for a restored presence (14:15) (65).

Job is useful for pastoral care, giving useful perspectives on how to care for others in crisis. The friends respond so quickly to Job's outbursts, wanting to protect God's honour, that they don't take the time to work out the nature of his dilemma. They have moved from caring about Job as a person to correcting his defective theology. They may say true words, but these are not the words Job needs to hear. He longs for the presence of a seemingly absent God, but the friends never address that longing (66). There is increasing defensiveness as the debate progresses. The repeated use of rhetorical questions shuts down any real conversation. In the third cycle, even Eliphaz, the most moderate of the friends, brings out a long list of Job's offences (22:5-9).

Job's words come from a deep but anguished relationship with God, but God is big enough to field our accusations and complaints. God's response shows that Job's deepest need is not to have an intellectual answer to his many problems (67). He does not need to know how God runs the world, just that he can be trusted to run the world. There is a danger in pastoral ministry to respond with advice (backed up with Bible verses) to every question asked by someone in pain or confusion. But it may be important to look beyond the presenting question to the more fundamental issue that needs to be addressed to bring about lasting healing or change (68).

Complaining to God is better than the path of silent submission. The friends misread Job's complaints as "armchair questions" when they were really "wheelchair questions" (C. Ash). Even true words may be thin medicine for someone in the depths.

The pursuit of litigation

The book has two streams of the litigation motif: Job's use of forensic categories such as taking God to court (not surprising in the light of the prologue); and Job's calling on a legal figure, variously described as an arbiter (9:33), witness (16:19), redeemer (19:25) and hearer (31:35). Job wants justice, and he accepts the retribution principle. But the book

disowns a simplistic mathematically precise application of the principle. The book affirms the flexible and partial perspective of retribution which is found in Proverbs, but which had been calcified over the years to become a weapon to use on sufferers like Job.

On several occasions Job floats the possibility of litigation, then lets it go. It's the imaginative exploration of a possibility rather than a realistic proposal (69).

Job asks for a legal figure on three occasions in Chs 3-27 using three different terms. These are not three separate identities but the one "hope" who is variously described (70). Job asks not only for vindication; he looks forward to seeing God (19:26-27). Job's deepest desire is for a renewed relationship. Pursuing a legal figure is presented as part of genuine piety.

Elihu attempts to prove to the "court" that Job's demand for a trial is empty and meaningless (35:13-14). The transcendence of God (35:5-8) implies that God's will is to be discerned through life and nature (35:10-11), not through direct contact. Job's pursuit of litigation has been a result of his rebellion, not his faith. But Elihu's human verdict is overturned by the appearance of Yahweh.

The Yahweh speeches make it clear that God's justice is not the only principle on which he runs the world; God's purposes are wider than justice. In the light of God's broader purposes, litigation seems futile. Yahweh's goal is not to win the argument, but to restore a proper relationship. He does not want to crush Job into submission but to invite him to withdraw his claim. Job moves in a new direction (42:6). His longings have been satisfied; he does not need a litigation process to force God to be present.

Job acknowledges that he spoke about what he did not fully understand (42:3). Job thought a narrow view of human retributive justice could bind God. But the fact Job took both honesty and justice seriously speaks of a genuine, humble submission to God. Job refuses to reject God or to reduce his view of God. He is confused, but he still perseveres in faith. Job's faith is being stretched and tested, rather than broken. Job retained his faith while seeking further understanding (71).

Wilson follows his reflections on the two problems the book of Job pursues with a wonderfully warm account of the relationship between Job and God (72-80). Wilson provides a moving portrait of the book's presentation of God as the God of cosmic justice and wisdom who is nonetheless compassionately committed to Job.

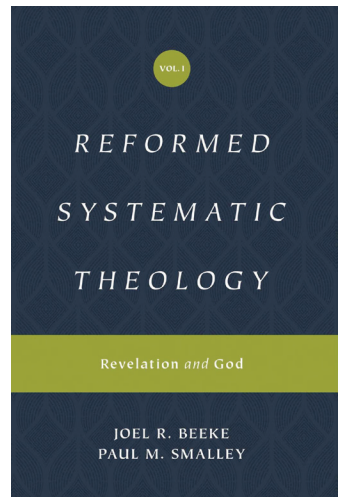
A highlight of the third section of the book is the chapter by Christopher B. Ansberry on wisdom and biblical theology (BT). Since the late nineteenth century OT wisdom literature has been regarded as “an orphan in the biblical household” (Clements), a view that has been perpetuated in some recent works (174). It is said that she (wisdom) does not participate in salvation-historical approaches to BT and has too many affinities to the wisdom literature of the ANE. Ansberry effectively counters this position in three sections on the way wisdom contributes to BT in terms of worldview, anthropology and ethics. Throughout this chapter Ansberry provides extensive documentation of the intertextual links between the OT wisdom literature and the rest of the OT, and extends the discussion into the NT. His documentation is particularly full in the section on ethics, but even what he presents is just the tip of the iceberg (191). He more than justifies his conclusion that wisdom literature is not an alien body in the biblical theology of the Scriptures.

This book has more rich chapters that provide much benefit. A book to recommend highly.

John de Hoog

Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Vol 1, Revelation and God*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2019. 1309 pages.

Every pastor and every Christian needs to make the study systematic theology a lifelong pursuit. When the study of systemic theology is carried out in prayerful communion with the Triune God of grace and glory it deepens our knowledge of him, sweetens our communion with him, enlivens our worship, strengthens our faith, comforts our hearts, and matures our lives. Sadly, many systematic theologies today only tend to engage the intellect and not the whole heart, the mind and not the emotions, the rational and not the relational, the seminary and not the church. Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley have admirably filled that gap with the publication of the first volume of their Reformed Systematic Theology. “How might Reformed Systematic Theology strengthen the church?” they ask. “We hope that this work will help prepare God’s servants to nurture spiritual knowledge and saving faith in God’s people according to the riches of Christ. We aim not only to educate you as the reader, but also to edify you and to equip you to tell others about the wonders of our God” (1:17).



Dr. Joel R. Beeke (PhD Westminster Theological Seminary) is President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, editor of Puritan Reformed Journal and Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth, editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books, president of Inheritance Publishers, and vice-president of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. He has written and co-authored over one hundred books (most recently, *Reformed Preaching, A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life; Prepared by Grace, for Grace: The Puritans on God’s Ordinary Way of Leading Sinners to Christ; and Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*). Paul M. Smalley (ThM, Puritan Reformed

Theological Seminary) is faculty teaching assistant to Joel Beeke at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

The book had its genesis many years earlier in Beeke's lectures in systematic theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. "In 2016, I [Joel Beeke] asked Paul [Smalley] to upgrade my lectures on the doctrine of salvation (soteriology), filling in gaps, footnoting sources, and addressing issues not previously covered in class. I was so pleased with the results that I asked him to do the same for my other lectures in systematic theology—a massive task requiring years of labour, but only that he gladly undertook. From this root, Reformed Systematic Theology has grown" (20-21). Beeke and Smalley plan to realise future volumes every eighteen months (volume two is already with the publisher and volume three is almost completed) and I can hardly wait! When completed, these volumes will explore eight broad themes:

- Vol. 1: theology/revelation (prolegomena and God (theology proper)
- Vol. 2: man (anthropology) and Christ (Christology)
- Vol. 3: the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and salvation (soteriology)
- Vol. 4: the church (ecclesiology) and the last things (eschatology)

With so many systematic theologies on the market, what is distinct about Reformed Systematic Theology? According to Beeke and Smalley: "This systematic theology explores the classic teachings of the Reformed Christian faith from a perspective that is biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical. Today's churches need theology that engages the head, heart, and hands. Too often, we have compartmentalized these aspects of life (as if we could cut ourselves into pieces). The result has been academics for the sake of academics, spiritual experience without roots deep in God's Word, and superficial pragmatism that chases after the will-o'-the-wisp of short-term results" (18). Standing on the shoulders of the Reformers, the British Puritans, and the Dutch Further Reformation divines, Beeke and Smalley have written a systematic theology that "combines thoughtful exegesis of Holy Scriptures, rich exploration of classic Augustinian and Reformed theology, an experiential tone that brings truth into the heart, and practical applications for life" (18). Hence, "after each major doctrine is opened up exegetically and biblically, we also aim to open up each

doctrine historically and then apply it experientially and practically—sometimes throughout the chapter but sometimes at the end” (18-19).

An excellent example of this approach can be seen in the three chapters devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity. Beeke and Smalley’s discussion of the Trinity is divided into three chapters and four major parts:

- Ch. 45: Part 1: [i] Biblical Teaching
- Ch. 46: Part 2: [ii] Historical Development
- Ch. 47: Part 3: [iii] Theological and [iv] Practical Considerations

Chapter 45 (“biblical Teaching”) begins with an excellent discussion on the Trinitarian shape of the gospel, demonstrating how “[t]he good news is inseparably bound up with the doctrine of the Trinity...Every aspect of salvation involves the direct agency of the God, yet the three divine persons act in distinct ways.” (877). “The Father is the initiator of salvation and the sender of the Son and the Spirit (877). The Son is the Spirit-empowered mediator who, through his obedience and sufferings, accomplished our redemption (878-79). “The one Spirit ‘proceeds’ or comes forth from both the Father and the Son. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the sum of all the blessings promised in the Gospel and purchased by Christ” (878). “Furthermore, whereas it belonged to the Son to accomplish our redemption and adoption objectively, it pertains to the Spirit to apply that redemption and adoption in human experience” (878). Thus, “[w]ithout the Trinity, the gospel disappears” (879). The authors conclude this section with a lovely experiential/practical challenge: “How fervently we should love the doctrine of the Trinity! To often it is consigned to the dust shelves of confessed but neglected doctrines—regarded as abstract dogma without practical, implications. In reality, however, the triune God is the only Savior. We should cherish this doctrine, study it in the Holy Scriptures, meditate on it until it inflames our hearts, and teach and defend it with all the resources of the church” (879).

The remainder of the chapter unfolds the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old and New Testaments under the following headings: “The Oneness and Uniqueness of the True God” (880-82); “The Plurality of the Divine Persons” (882-885); “The Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit” (885-88); “The Personal Distinctions and Relations” (889-92); “The Essential Oneness of the Trinity” (893-98); “The Biblical trinity: One God in Three Persons” (898-99). These sections are richly grounded in Scripture. I went through and highlighted every scripture reference in this section and found copious references on every page (20 on 886; 28 on 887; 29 on 888, and so on). The authors do not simply resort to proof texting, but also to exegeting, exposing and applying Scripture. There is a nice discussion on the relationships between Deut 6:4 and 1 Cor 8:6 on pp. 880-882; John 1:1 on 886; Hebrews 1:3 on p. 887; and an excellent discussion of John 5:17-30 on 893-98. Quotations from the Church Fathers, Reformers, Puritans, Modern Commentators and Theologians, and Creeds and Confessions further add to the richness and usefulness of this chapter.

Chapter 46 traces the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity through the following stages: (1) The Ante-Nicene Church (Ante-Nicene meaning “before Nicaea,” covers the period following the Apostolic Age of the 1st century down to the Council of Nicaea in 325); (2) The Nicene Church (this section focuses on the time between the formulation of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and its expansion at the Council of Constantinople in 381 as well as a number of key thinkers in-between such as Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Hilary of Poitiers); (3) An extended discussion on St. Augustine and his just famous work *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity); (4) The Western Medieval Church (which covers the years 476-799 [early Middle Ages], 800-1300 [High Middle Ages], and 1300-1499 [Late Middle Ages]); (5) The Eastern Medieval Church (beginning 410); (6) The Reformation and Reformed Orthodoxy; and (7) The Modern Church. While this chapter seeks to cover a vast period of church history, it never gets overly bogged down in details but keeps its focus on tracing the antecedents of Reformed Trinitarianism. The chapter is succinct, readable, and so keeps the readers interest, while at the same time whetting their appetite for more.

Chapters 47 discusses some very theological and practical considerations relating to the doctrine of the Trinity. One of the most helpful sections was a discussion on the meaning of the term “person” when applied to

the three “persons” of the Trinity. The authors suggest a number of helpful terms that explain the concept of person when applied to the Triune God: (1) Relational (e.g., Father-Son, Son-Father); (2) Rational and Volitional (here, the authors point out, it is important to remember that because God is one God the three persons of the Trinity share one divine consciousness and will); and (3) Unique Identity (that is, each persons is peculiar and special, i.e., the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, etc.). So, what is it that distinguishes the Son from Father and the Spirit as a unique person? Answer: “When theologians speak of the Son’s uniqueness as a person, they historically have distinguished him from the Father and the Spirit by his eternal generation, that is, the Father’s begetting of the Son before time began” (933). The next section (pp. 933-940) contains a useful discussion on the doctrine of “the Son’s eternal generation.” The authors then ask: “If the Father’s relation to the Son is one of eternal generation, then what may we say about the Spirit’s relation to the Father and the Son?” (940). The answer is found in the Western form of the Nicene Creed which confesses faith in “the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son” (94). So the Son is to be distinguished from the Father and the Spirit by eternal generation and the Spirit is to be distinguished from the Father and the Son by eternal procession.

Chapter 47, taking its cue from the Puritan John Owen’s *Of Communion with God*, then concludes with a very rich section on “Trinitarian Spirituality: Communion with the Triune God.” This section examines the elements of this communion as they relate to the Triune nature of and character of the One God who is father, Son, and Spirit: (1) “Evangelical Communion with the Father through the Son in the Spirit” (945-946); (2) “Distinct Communion with Each person of the Trinity” (946-50); and (3) “Overflowing Communion with the One God in trinity (950-52). This is a lovely section overflowing with many warm and rich applications. However, I think that more varied applications could have been made such as the implications of the Trinity for communion with other believers, the worship of the church (e.g., what does Trinitarian worship look like?), the mission of the church (i.e., our participation in the Son’s mission from the Father in the Spirit), and so on.

Each chapter concludes with a relevant hymn, and then “Questions for Meditation and Discussion” and a further section of “Questions for Deeper Reflection.” The authors explain the purpose of this final section: “We have attached to each chapter a two-part list of study questions—the first set of questions suited for ordinary people and the second set suited for more advanced students in seminary. Usually the answers to the questions in the first set can be found in the chapter itself, while the answers to those in the second set require thinking beyond what the chapter has said. We also include a psalm or hymn suitable for you or your study group to sing as a worshipful response to each chapter’s content” (18).

This book is now my first go to in systematic theology and will be my text of choice (along with Berkhof which is much more succinct) for students here at the RTC. It is theologically reliable, well-written, thoroughly researched, eminently readable, easily understood, and profoundly experiential. This book will be warmly welcomed and greatly appreciated by pastors, students, and laypeople alike as a treasure trove of biblical, doctrinal, experiential and practical Reformed theology.

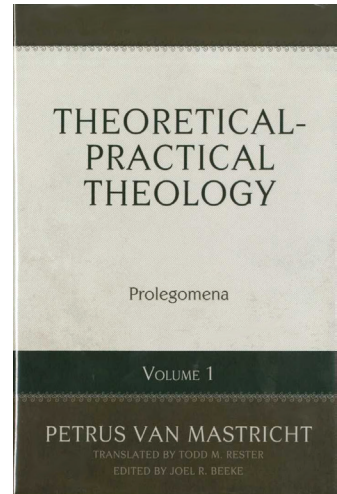
Martin Williams

Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 1, Prolegomena*. Translated by Todd M. Rester. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018. 238 pages.

I love systematic theology. My addiction to systematic theology began at theological college with R. L. Dabney’s *Systematic Theology* and Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. I then went on to read Calvin, Berkhof, and Warfield. Recently I have been working my way through Bavinck’s 4 volume *Reformed Dogmatics* and Morton Smith’s 2 volume *Systematic Theology*. For as long as I can remember it has been my practice, no matter what else I am reading at the time, to always be working my way through at least one major systematic theology. I plan on immersing myself in it for the rest of my life. I especially hope that pastors will make the study of systematic theology a lifelong pursuit. I hear you ask, “Well, what systematic theology would you recommend?” I have always

recommended Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion (which is not strictly a systematic theology) due to its readable, biblical, and devotional nature, Berkoff's Systematic Theology for its order, precision, and even coverage of topics, Turretin's Institutes (for the more adventurous) for its comprehensiveness, and... and.... I have always struggled to recommend only one author as a one stop shop for theology.

Jonathan Edwards, however, neither struggled nor hesitated to answer that question. In a letter to Joseph Bellamy dated January 15, 1747 he wrote: "As to the books you speak of: [Petrus Van] Mastricht is sometimes in one volume... sometimes in two... [Francis] Turretin is in three volumes...and would probably be about the same price... But take Mastricht for divinity in general, doctrine, practice & controversy, or as an universal system of divinity; & it is much better than Turretin or any other book in the world, excepting the Bible, in my opinion." With that recommendation I decided to make Van Mastricht's Theoretical-Practical Theology my theology text for 2018 and I haven't been disappointed. I am grateful to Reformation Heritage Books for making Van Mastricht's magnum opus available in English, for up until this year it has only been available in Latin.



This first volume provides an introduction to doing systematic theology, its proper method, subject matter and definition. Van Mastricht then discusses the doctrine of Scripture as the proper rule for doing theology. This volume also contains a biographical sketch of Van Mastricht's life as well as his homiletical aid "The Best Method of Preaching." Six further volumes will be added over the coming years to complete this valuable work.

What I love most about Van Mastricht's Theoretical-Practical Theology, and why I will now be singing his praises along with Jonathan Edwards, is that his theology is eminently scriptural as well as doctrinal, practical as

well as experiential, affecting the heart as well as the mind. Taking his cue from 1 Timothy 6:2-3, Van Mastricht defines theology as “the doctrine of living for God through Christ” (p. 64). Therefore, he maintains, “a Christian theology is required that embraces Christ (John 17:3; Isa 53:11) and is theoretical-practical (p. 78). That is to say, “Christian theology unites theory with practice” (p. 78) and therefore “this theoretical-practical Christian theology is nothing less than the doctrine of living for God through Christ, in other words, the doctrine that is according to godliness (1 Tim 6:3), and likewise the knowledge of truth that is according to godliness (Titus 1:1)” (p. 98). Theology, he argues, should therefore deeply and fundamentally impact your whole life:

The object with which theological precepts should be occupied, namely, first, the forming of the intellect, so that worship becomes “reasonable” (Rom. 12:1), and second, the forming of the will, or heart (Matt. 15:19; Prov. 4:4, 23; 23:26), and finally, the forming of the whole life, in each and every one of its human acts, that they be directed to God as much as possible. For skill in theology is the habit of the whole person, by which he is brought to possess God and to act according to his will and for his glory. (p. 104)

Those who are “devoted to theology” (that should be all Christians) are not those who simply try to fill their minds with as much knowledge as possible, but those who strive for this: “that we live for God alone through Christ” (p. 109). What does it mean to live for God? Van Mastricht sets out four requirements: “(1) We should establish God as the sole object of this spiritual life (Ps. 16:8), that is, in every part of our life and with a singular focus we should endeavour to serve and to please God (Gal. 1:10; 2 Cor. 5:9). ... (2) We should make the will of God the sole norm of our life (1 Peter 4:2,6). ... (3) We should set God before us as the goal of our whole life (Phil. 1:20-21; 2 Cor. 5:9). Finally, (4) we should endeavour and do all of this by the power of God. So then, as we taught above, living for God, at least generally, is nothing other than directing every act, our natural, civil, and spiritual life according to the precept of the divine Word, for the glory of God, by the power of God that is in us while we act” (p. 109).

This, then, leads into the second major section of the book, the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Having set out the definition of theoretical-practical theology as “the doctrine of living for God through Christ,” Van Mastricht goes on to discuss the norm for this living: “The skill of living for God is not a natural power, one to which we are not taught but made; it is instead an acquired faculty, and therefore it certainly demands a rule to direct it, and in fact one that has been prescribed by God...this rule is the Word of God, or Scripture...it is the norm for living” (p. 113). Thus, “by Holy Scripture” he writes, “we understand nothing other than ‘the doctrine of living for God insofar as that the doctrine, once written down, is preserved in book.’” (p. 119). Like the previous section, this one is divided into four parts: (1) The Exegetical Part; (2) The Dogmatic Part; (3) The Elenctic part; and (4) The Practical Part.

The origin of Scripture, Van Mastricht rightly points out, is the Triune God: “The author of Scripture is God the Father, who in the Scriptures ‘spoke at many times and in many ways’ (Heb 1:1); the Son, who not only sent the apostles to teach, undoubtedly, as the occasion arose, but also ordered them to write (Rev. 1:19), and the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), and who for this reason is said to testify and speak in them (Heb. 10:15)” (p. 125). As to its content, “God not only inspired the matters themselves, but he also dictated the individual words” (p. 126). As to their goal, “the end and use of this God-breathed inspiration and canonisation [is] that it might supply the rule of living for God—the rule of believing (John 20:31 and also of doing (Rom. 15:3-4)—for the universal church and for each of its members” (p. 126). Van Mastricht then goes on to set out the properties of Scriptures in terms of (1) Its authority; (2) Its truth; (3) Its integrity; (4) Its sanctity; (5) Its perspicuity; (6) Its perfection; (7) Its necessity and (8) Its efficacy.

The chapter on Scripture is then rounded off with a very rich “Practical Part” which sets out nine “uses.” I found this to be one of the most valuable sections of Van Mastricht’s chapter of Scripture because it is something that is rarely covered in systematic theologies. The nine practical uses that are discussed are: (1) Impressing the authority of Scripture upon its hearers; (2) the love of the divine word (covering the motives, manner and means for kindling a deeper love of Scripture); (3) concerning

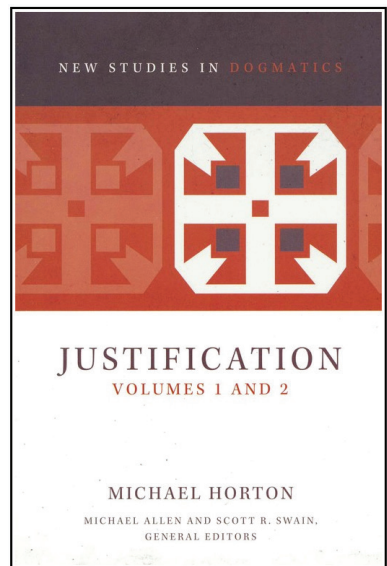
contempt or hatred for the divine Word; (4) the study of the divine Word; (5) the reading of the divine Word; (6) the hearing of the Word; (7) the interpretation of Scripture (van Mastricht divides this section into two parts: [a] The means of interpreting the Scriptures: For those educated in letters [i.e., the original languages] and [b]) The means of interpreting for everyone); (8) meditation on Scriptures; and (9) conversations about the Scriptures. Most of the topics are broken up into at least three parts explaining (1) That we should do it; (2) Why we should do it; and (3) How we should do it.

What you will find in this volume is rich, warm, and deeply edifying doctrine with the pastoral aim of preparing you to live for the glory of God through Christ by the power of the Spirit. Highly recommended!

Martin Williams

Michael Horton, *Justification. 2 volumes. New Studies in Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018. 928 pages.

Michael Horton's *Justification* (2 volumes) is the latest entry in Zondervan's New Studies in Dogmatics series and it does the series proud! Following in the esteemed tradition of G. C. Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics* (14 volumes), New Studies in Dogmatics is a major 15-volume project in constructive theology. The series is edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (both professors at the Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida). These volumes will explore vital theological topics of Christian doctrine, expressing their biblical, creedal, and confessional shape. "We are excited about the New Studies in Dogmatics series," Allen says, "because we believe that the way to renewal is through



retrieval of our catholic and Reformational heritage.” Michael Horton is J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California. He is the author of many excellent books including *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* and *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples*.

I have read a lot of books on the doctrine of justification (I try to read every major work on the topic; I have two large shelves containing books on justification—not including systematic theologies and Puritan works) and I never get tired of readings books on that topic. It is almost impossible to understate the importance of this doctrine. Exegetically, it occupies a prominent place in several of Paul’s epistles. Moreover, justification is central to his exposition of the gospel in those places. Theologically, it is inseparably linked to other key doctrines such as the Trinity, the attributes of God, creation, fall, the imputation of the guilt of Adam’s sin, covenant theology, the atonement, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Historically, it has shaped the last 500 years of the Western church in crucial ways since the Protestant Reformation. Experientially, justification is crucial for the Christian assurance and obedience.

Michael Horton’s two volume work (375 pp and 493 pp) is ambitious and far-ranging as it seeks to address the doctrine of justification in its historical, biblical, exegetical, theological, and contemporary dimensions. Volume one traces the historical development of the doctrine of justification. After an introductory chapter (chapter 1), Horton, in chapter 2, examines the patristic teaching on justification through the lens of “the ‘great exchange between Christ and the believer” (1:39). The second-century Epistle to Diognetus calls it a “sweet exchange” between the “one righteous person” and “many sinners.” The Epistle is worth quoting at some length (1:45):

So then, having already planned everything in his mind together with his Son . . . he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless

and ungodly; to be justified, except in the Son of God alone?
O sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O
the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should
be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of
one should justify many sinners!

Horton provides a rich selection of quotations from the early church fathers which locate justification in the context of this “sweet” or “great exchange” including Ignatius (martyred c. 107), Polycarp (c. 69-155), Irenaeus (c. 130-202), Cyprian (c. 200/210-258), Origen of Alexandria (184-253), John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), Athanasius (296-373), Augustine (354-430). John Chrysostom rhapsodizes on the great exchange referring to it as a grace that “has allowed Him that did no wrong to be punished for those who had done wrong. ...Him that was righteousness itself, ‘He made sin,’ that is, allowed him to be condemned as a sinner, as one cursed to die” so that we might be not just “righteous,’ but ‘righteousness,’ indeed ‘the righteousness of God’” (1:48). The remainder of the chapter surveys patristic engagement with Paul’s letter to the Romans (1:54-74).

Having broadly surveyed patristic comments on the “great exchange” more generally and patristic interpretation of Paul’s Letter to the Romans more narrowly in chapter 2, Horton turns to specific remarks by patristic writers on the topic of justification itself in chapter 3. Horton goes on to track the development of the doctrine of justification through the medieval period. In chapter 4 we are introduced to the Peter Lombard (c. 1096-1160) and the emergence of the sacrament of penance, and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and the interpretation of justification in the categories of Aristotelian physics which lead to a view of justification as a motion from injustice to rectitude through infused grace. Chapter 5 rounds off Horton’s discussion of the medieval church by introducing us to the works of John Duns Scotus (1265-1308), William of Ockham (1285-1347) and Gabriel Biel (1420-95) and the rise of the celebrated medieval axiom *facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam* (“God does not deny grace to those who do their best”) (1:151). The problem, of course, was: “But how do you know when you have done ‘your very best?’” (1:161).

With chapter 6 we arrive at the eve of the Reformation. It has been a fascinating tour so far, but, more importantly, Horton has provided the reader with the essential background for understanding what it in fact was that the Reformers were protesting against: i.e., a semi-Pelagian doctrine of justification wedded to the doctrine of infused grace coupled with the sacrament of penance. In fact, it was the medieval sacramental system of penance that provoked Luther's initial protest (1:166-173). Furthermore, the notion of infused grace as the essence of justification was also challenged by Luther who came to understand justification as God's gift of Christ's alien righteousness imputed or reckoned to the believer (1:173-82). Chapter 7, "The Reformers and the Great Exchange," demonstrates the Reformers continuity with the Scriptures and the Early Church Fathers in setting the doctrine of justification squarely within the context of union with Christ and the law/gospel distinction. On the other hand, it was the Roman Catholic theologians who continued the tradition of Ockham and Biel thus ensuring that the medieval axiom that God will not deny grace to the one who does his best would become an "all-controlling thesis" (1:350). Horton concludes his survey in chapter 12 by responding to the criticism that the Reformation doctrine of justification leads to antinomianism. On the contrary, he contends, while justification and sanctification are distinct, they are certainly not separate: "In the Reformers understanding, Justification is not the alternative to, but the basis for, sanctification" (3:364).

In volume two Horton shifts his focus from historical description to theological articulation as he attempts to construct a positive, biblical, exegetical, and dogmatic account of the doctrine of justification, particularly in response to recent New Testament studies (specifically the New Perspective on Paul [see 2:20-26] and Apocalyptic School [26-34]). In chapter 1, Horton paints with broad brush strokes as he sets the doctrine of justification within its native biblical-theological-covenantal framework. A bi-covenantal context, the covenant of creation (also known as the covenant of works) (law) and the covenant of grace (gospel), leads to a law/gospel distinction. The first covenant was "(a) based on law, (b) federal or representative of all humanity 'in Adam,' (c) with the reward of conformation in everlasting life, immortality, and righteousness" (2:61).

Because Adam functioned as a representative of all humanity, when he sinned and fell “the entire human race was...present covenantally in and with Adam in that fatal act” (2:65). And so, when Paul says in Romans 5:12 that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned,” means “because all sinned in Adam” (pp. 64-65). Just as Adam functioned as the representative of all humanity in the covenant of works, so Christ functioned as a representative for all his people in the covenant of grace (2:64). Therefore, just as Adam’s disobedience lead to condemnation for all humanity, so Christ’s obedience leads to justification for his people (2:86). As Paul says in Rom 5:17: “For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.”

Later in volume 2 Horton turns to “the free gift of righteousness” (chapters 7 and 8): “[T]he heart of the gospel is that justification is a gift only because it is the righteousness of Christ credited or imputed to the believer” (2:283). Horton correctly points out that “the verb [to justify] does not mean ‘to make just’ but ‘to declare just.’ To be justified in Christ is to ‘stand before God’s tribunal acquitted or vindicated, that they might stand before him as righteous persons’ [Fitzmyer]” (2:291). But the question is: On what basis does God declare us righteous and acquit us before his tribunal? For the simple fact is, we are not righteous. Horton writes: “I interpret Paul as saying [in 1 Cor 5:21] that in justification those who are ungodly become righteous judicially by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness” (2:294).

Chapter 8, “Imputation: The Mechanism of Justification,” provides an excellent exposition and important defence of the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Horton begins by showing that the ideas of merit, imputation, and solidarity are not an anachronism read back into early Judaism by the Reformers (as claimed by New Perspective authors), but rather were well-known categories in ancient Judaism (2:322-32). The need for imputation is grounded in at least five things:

1. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to believing sinners is clearly taught in Scripture (e.g., Zech 3:1-5; Isa 61:10-11; Rom 4:4-5, 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:19-21; Phil 3:9 (e.g., 2:358-66). As Horton says, "the first question is whether Scripture teaches imputation" (2:351).
2. The imputation of Adam's sin leading to condemnation requires the imputation of Christ's righteousness leading to life (Rom 5:12-21) (3:330-31). Moreover, "[i]f in principle Christ's righteousness cannot be imputed to believers, then the believer's sins cannot be imputed to Christ. Furthermore, Adam's guilt cannot be imputed to humanity, which strikes at the heart of the doctrine of original sin" (2:331). As Horton demonstrates, the two stand or fall together.
3. Our union with Christ means we get the whole Christ and not just a part, which must therefore include his righteousness: "Union with Christ (or Christ as the ground of our being) is the umbrella-term for the gifts (election, redemption, calling, justification, sanctification, glorification), not a substitute for any one of them, including justification" (cf. 1 Cor 1:30) (2:246-47). Chapter 11, *Union with Christ: Justification and the Great Exchange*, is an important chapter which correctly understands union with Christ as the context within which the sinners receives all of Christ's benefits (noted above).
4. God's demand of righteousness from his creatures means that we are either saved on the basis our own righteous or the righteousness of another. As Horton says: "Paul upholds God's law in the most inflexible manner. It is not an arbitrary list of rules but the covenantal revelation of his essential Character as righteous, living, holy, and good. If God saves he must do so justly—the law cannot be set aside" (2:332). Because we do not have the required righteousness demanded by God, someone one else must offer that up for us, and that someone else is Jesus Christ in his active and passive obedience. In this context, Horton's defence of the traditional understanding of Paul's expression "works of the law" (chapter 2) over against New Perspective readings is excellent (2:97-148). However, while on the topic of the law, I wasn't convinced by Horton's insistence that the Mosaic Covenant represents a republication of the Covenant of Works (1:76-95). This is problematic

for at least four reasons: (1) The context for the Mosaic Covenant is the Covenant of Grace (Gal 3:15-29); (2) the 10 commandments make redemption the context and basis for the giving of the law and not vice-versa (Exod 20:1-2); (3) at Sinai the law is given to a sinful and fallen people, whereas God's original command was given to innocent and unfallen Adam; and (4) In Galatians 3:19 and Romans 5:20, the law was given to increase sin not merit salvation. I was frustrated that Horton did not alert the reader to the fact that his view is not representative of all Reformed Covenant theologians (like myself).

5. Finally, if justification is to avoid the charge of being a legal fiction (as Roman Catholic theologians charge the Reformation doctrine of being), then our righteousness must not just be a pretence. As Horton says, "for God to reckon, impute consider, or count us as righteous for Christ's sake is not to pretend that we are righteous but for him to acknowledge what is true about us when Christ is our righteousness" (2:352). As Horton goes on to point out, it is the denial of imputation (by authors such as N. T. Wright and Robert Gundry, who are discussed in this chapter) that leaves one "one to the charge of a doctrine of justification that is a legal fiction. If Christ's righteousness is not made my righteousness by some glorious exchange, then any declaration is either going to be based on inner transformation or an arbitrary decree contrary to fact" (2:356). Horton concludes (2:360-61):

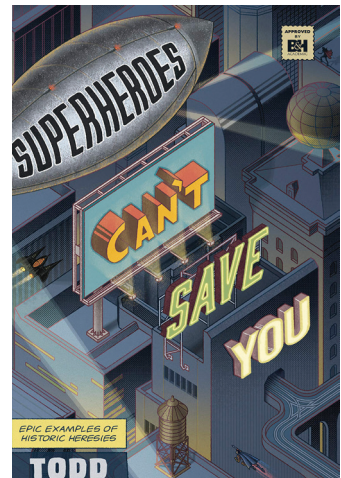
It becomes clear that the case for justification rests on the case for imputation, for without the latter the former is indeed an arbitrary decree, a legal fiction, and, even more, an impossibility since God cannot justify without being just. Yahweh "will by no means clear the guilty" (Nah 1:3). Justification cannot therefore be a mere exoneration or pardon over against the law but must be accomplished with the concurrence of the law. God's righteous law—the norm by which we are judged covenantally faithful—must declare whether one is righteous. But only with imputation is this law upheld rather than circumvented.

There is so much more that could be said about these wonderful volumes (at 868 combined pages). In summary, Horton's *Justification* is a thorough and wide-ranging survey, expert exposition and defence, and robust articulation of the Reformation doctrine of justification. Along the way he helpfully and charitably interacts with Roman Catholic, New Perspective, Liberal, Apocalyptic and other critiques of the Reformation formulation. This will be a valuable work for years to come. Every now and then a minister needs to read a book that stretches and challenges him academically—this is such a book. It won't always be easy, but it will reward the careful and persevering reader.

Martin Williams

Todd Miles, *Superheroes Can't Save You: Epic Example of Historic Heresies*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2018. 208 pages.

My family and I just love Marvel and DC movies. I also love theology and church history. Most of all I love the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, Todd Miles has combined all of things I really enjoy in the most brilliantly creative, insightful and engaging Christological text I have ever read. It combines deep theology with insightful creativity to produce a fun and accessible book that clearly and compellingly communicates a knowledge of our beautiful and glorious Saviour in a way that is culturally relevant, theologically astute and solidly biblical.



This is a book I wish I had written! In it Todd Miles has taken familiar characters (Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Ant Man, Thor, Hulk, and Green Lantern) and skilfully used them to help us better understand who Jesus is—and who he isn't. By comparing and contrasting these heroes from the Marvel and DC universe with the Christological heresies of the early and modern church (such as Docetism, Modalism, Arianism,

Apollinarism, Adoptionism, Eutychianism and Liberalism), the reader is given a clear, compelling and memorable picture of the biblical Christ. Miles explains: “Each chapter takes on a different bad idea (or heresy) about Jesus, and each one of these heresies is embodied in a different superhero. I suppose you could look at it as a series of battles: Jesus versus Batman, or Jesus versus Ant-Man.’ So the chapters will provide an explanation of each superhero; they will examine how each superhero represents a deficient view of Jesus; and they will demonstrate how Jesus is much better than the idea embodied in each superhero” (p. 7).

This is important because only the biblical Christ can save you. Superman can’t save you because he is not human; he appears to be human (the ancient heresy of Docetism), but he is really a Kryptonian: “Your name is Kal-El. You are the only survivor of the planet Krypton. Even though you’ve been raised as a human, you are not one of them. You have great powers...” (Jor -El in the motion picture Superman [1978]) (p. 9). As Miles points out:

The early church was quick to recognize the deity of Jesus. But it was not long before the question arose, how can Jesus be both human and divine at the same time? Obviously, one very easy way to answer that is to deny that such a combination is even possible. Eliminate either the true humanity or true deity of Jesus and there is no more difficulty. And if you are committed to the deity of Christ, then you really only have one option: deny that Jesus was ever actually human. Oh, sure, Jesus might have looked like a human, but he wasn’t really. Jesus only seemed to be human. Much like the way Clark Kent wore glasses, a suit, and a tie, his human disguise, so Jesus wore the first-century garb and disguise of humanity. The church eventually called this way of thinking Docetism, from the Greek word *dokein*, meaning “to seem.”

The opposite heresy is the claim that Jesus was simply a remarkable human being and no more. “It is almost comical in comparison [you will know that if you have seen the 2016 movie Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice!]. Superman can fly faster than a speeding bullet. Batman has to run

to his car (and always takes the time to fasten the seatbelt). Superman has X-ray vision. Batman has a belt and rope. (Holy unfair fights, Batman!)” (p. 30). Despite this, who doesn’t like Batman? Batman is cool. Moreover, he is much more relatable than Superman. Not only is his character more developed than Superman’s, “Batman is so human we can actually relate to his dark and tortured world” (p. 30). And who doesn’t love the colour cast of villainous characters he fights—the Joker, the Riddler, the Penguin, Catwoman? And who cannot help but feel impressed with all his handy gadgets and high-speed vehicles? Bruce Wayne, the billionaire businessman, has all of the financial resources and fighting skills, and technological advances at his disposal (this could also be called the “Iron-Man heresy”). But none of these are superpowers. There is not hint that Batman is anything other than a very remarkable human being. Miles writes (p. 31):

And some people feel the same about Jesus. To these folk, Jesus is a remarkable human being, possessed of enormous charisma, wisdom, compassion, leadership qualities, and teaching ability. Jesus may be, and probably is, the most incredible human being who ever lived. It is entirely likely that there has never been, nor will there ever be, another man like Jesus. But in the final analysis, he was just a man. He is worthy of respect, but not reverence; admiration, but not adoration; emulation, but not exaltation. He is not divine in any unique way. He is a human being, and that is all.

Miles calls “the belief that Jesus was just a human being and nothing more, the ‘Batman heresy.’ It has been around for a long time. As we will see, a merely human Jesus might seem cool and inspirational, but he cannot save you” (p. 31). Historically this heresy has been associated with the Ebionites in the second century, the so-called Christian Liberalism of the nineteenth century and the Jesus Seminar in the twentieth century. Batman is lonely a man, and not God, and that is why he cannot save you.

Well, how about Thor, he is a god isn’t he? Can Thor save you? “I am Thor Odinson of the Vikings, giant. I am not the god of reason and understanding. I am the god of Thunder and Lightning!!!” (Thor in

Hulk, no. 26 [December 2010]) (p. 75). According to Marvel, Thor is the son of Odin, the god and king of Asgard. Odin and his brothers created earth (what they called Midgard), and above it they created a world for themselves called Asgard (which can now be found on Earth as New Asgard since its destruction by Surtur in Thor Ragnarok!). Thor, being the son of Odin and Gaia (a primary earth goddess), is himself a god. Possessing incredible strength and armed with his mighty hammer, Mjolnir, he can fly, summon lightning, and save worlds (after becoming one of the Avengers, he saved earth on a number of occasions). But as Miles reminds us, “for all Thor’s greatness, he is neither omnipotent nor omniscience. He is incredible, but not preeminent. He is the Son of the creator of earth, Odin, but because he was born, there was a time when Thor did not exist. He is a god, but he is not the God.” (pp. 77-8). And as Miles goes on to point out, “some people think the same of Jesus. He is the Son of God, a god, but not the God. The historical name of this bad idea is Arianism, but I call it the Thor heresy, and it has been around for a long time” (p. 78). The Thor heresy continues to be peddled today, most prominently through the Jehovah’s witnesses. Because he is only a god and not the God, Thor cannot save you either.

Using other DC and Marvel heroes as examples, Miles goes on to expose and refute other Christological heresies: The Ant-Man heresy: the menace of Modalism (Jesus was only one of three “costumes” of the One God); The Green Lantern heresy: the agonies of Adoptionism (Jesus was a good man adopted by God); The Hulk heresy: the perils of Apollinarianism (Jesus has a divine mind and a human body; though since Avengers: Endgame Hulk is simply a mixture of both of these and now falls into the next category); and, finally, Spider-Man can’t save you: the tyranny of Eutychianism (Jesus was part man and part God). The Jesus of the Bible, however, remains truly and fully human and truly and fully divine in the one person, and therefore only Jesus can save you.

Each chapter is clearly laid out with the following divisions: (1) a description of the relevant superhero from the comic books, (2) an analysis of the correlated Christological heresy from church history, (3) a discussion of who commits this heresy today, (4) an exposition of the relevant biblical teaching, (5) an explanation of why this is important,

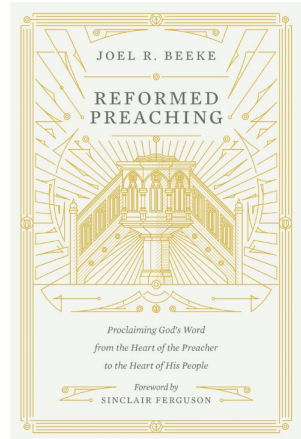
(6) discussion questions for personal reflection and group study, and (7) resources for future study.

This book will engage and inform and delight a broad spectrum of readers and could be used in a variety of settings (from youth groups to home groups to theological colleges). The writing style is lucid, accessible, engaging and most of all fun! I will be using it as the textbook for my Christology course here at the RTC.

Martin Williams

Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*. Crossway: Wheaton: 2018. 504pp.

Dr Joel Beeke, President of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, provides in *Reformed Preaching*, a tremendously rich resource that draws on a lifetime of reading, research, writing, preaching and lecturing. Beeke's knowledge of the Reformed experiential tradition is impressive and the book presents readers with a wealth of material.



In Part 1, Beeke clarifies what he means by Reformed experiential preaching, and experiential Calvinism, arguing for “experiential” being a more useful word today than “experimental”, though both words were used interchangeably by Calvin and highlight different aspects of Reformed preaching that is directed at the heart. Experimental preaching tests us by the Bible, bringing “truth to the heart to illuminate who we are, where we stand with God, how we need to be healed and where we need to be headed” (25). Experiential preaching “explains how things ought to go in the Christian life (the ideal of Romans 8), how they actually go in Christian struggles (the reality of Romans 7), and the ultimate goal in the kingdom of glory (the optimism of Revelation 21-22)” (25). In these opening chapters he unfolds the essential elements of Reformed experiential preaching, including its Word-focus and Christ-centredness, its concern with the sovereignty of God and the emphases of Reformed spirituality. A further chapter describes the life of the experiential preacher.

In Part 3, Beeke applies what he has written to preaching and preachers today. These final chapters are a fine challenge to preachers to preach biblical truth to the heart. Beeke models exactly what he advocates, frequently moving from teaching to exhortation, from clarifying doctrine to pressing in on preachers. He deals with the need for balance in addressing the objective and the subjective, in speaking of God's sovereignty and human responsibility, and in holding together the biblical, doctrinal, experiential

and practical dimensions of preaching. He again addresses the life of the preacher, as well as diversity in application, preaching the gospel and preaching about God and man.

The middle section of the book showcases Reformed experiential preaching from history. Beginning with the Reformers and then moving through the succeeding centuries, he gives multiple brief sketches of keynote preachers who have modelled various aspects of an experiential approach. His exemplars include sixteenth century Reformers like Zwingli, Calvin and Beza; Puritans like Perkins, Sibbes and Bunyan; Dutch preachers including à Brakel and Frelinghuysen; eighteenth and nineteenth century preachers including Edwards, M'Cheyne and Ryle; and finally two twentieth century preachers, Gerard Wisse and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Beeke frequently takes a sample sermon from these preachers to demonstrate how they preached experientially; at other times he gives an overview of their approach. Alongside these biographical sketches are other chapters that introduce key eras in preaching. For example, he provides a superb overview of the key elements of Puritan preaching and another on the Westminster Directory's guidelines for preaching. I found immense value in reading the entire 440-page work (to which are added an extensive bibliography and indices) and heartily commend it to all preachers in the Reformed tradition. Let me outline four distinct benefits of reading this surprisingly accessible work.

First, it provides excellent instruction and training in an approach to preaching that is rich and compelling. Preaching that is biblically grounded, doctrinally rich and experientially applied is not merely an historic curiosity but a wonderful way to preach today and a great need of the contemporary church. The book challenges preachers to be serious about God's Word and to be theologically robust, yet to do so in a way that connects deeply with the actual experience of the truth. It is apparent that at every point in this tradition there has been a great commitment to consecutive expository preaching. This is preaching that preaches the Word. But it is also clear that preaching the Word is to be both doctrinal and practical. From the Word, rich doctrine is expounded and then applied to people's hearts.

Second, as Beeke unfolds this approach to preaching, he necessarily challenges the reader personally. One cannot preach experientially if one has not personally experienced the truth. Beeke constantly presses on preachers the great necessity of personal godliness deep love of the Word, prayerfulness and attentiveness to one's own heart as well as pastoral diligence and care for the souls of others.

Third, Reformed Preaching gives a helpful overview of the history of Reformed preaching. Many preachers standing in the Reformed tradition have only a scant knowledge of those who have gone before them, perhaps having had some exposure to the likes of Calvin, Edwards and Spurgeon, but few others. Beeke shows that such men stood in a long line of preachers who adopted not only the same theology but essentially the same approach to preaching. If one has had little exposure to some of the lesser known Reformers, or to the Puritans, or to the Dutch Further Reformation, or the experiential Calvinists of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, this is an excellent brief tour of the history of Reformed preaching.

Fourth, the book provides a remarkable collection of choice quotations from an impressive array of preachers in the Reformed tradition. Beeke's knowledge of Reformed and Puritan preachers and writers is prodigious and the book is laden with insights and perspectives from multiple sources. I am likely to return to the book many a time simply to lay my hands on a great quotation from one of the Reformers or the Puritans.

Reformed preachers today should read this book. Those already familiar with this rich tradition will find their hearts warmed again, and those new to it will find material that is both instructive and inspiring. The challenge remains, however, to apply the principles of this approach in a contemporary way today. It is, I believe, a mistake when people who love this tradition preach in a way that sounds as if they had just stepped out of the sixteenth century. Reformed experiential preaching today should sound contemporary, be highly accessible and interact with the issues of people hearts and lives here and now, not in the past. Interestingly, many of the historic proponents of this approach advocated "concealing one's knowledge" and minimising reference to past scholars. So Reformed experiential preaching today ought not be full of Reformed and Puritan

quotations or old English. Rather, it ought to embody in today's language and culture the principles that drove such preaching in the past. If more preachers learn how to do that today, the church and many individuals will be the richer for it.

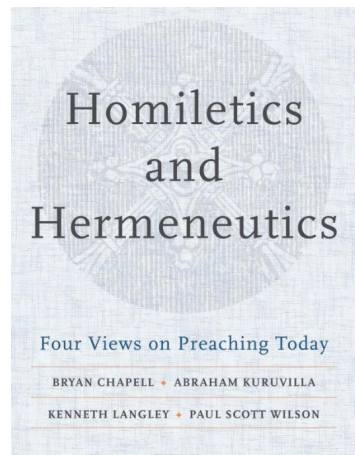
Murray Capill

Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (eds.), *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views of Preaching Today*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. 177pp.

Expository preachers want to let God's Word speak. We seek to open up the text of Scripture and let it speak for itself. But, unavoidably, we do more than that. We inevitably read every text from a particular perspective, bringing to exegesis and to preaching a theological framework and prior theological commitments. Our homiletics is shaped by our hermeneutics.

That is abundantly clear in this book as four current homilicians explain the hermeneutics that shapes their preaching, and then interact with each other. All claim to deal faithfully with the biblical text – more faithfully, they believe, than the others do – but faithfulness depends on approaching the text in a certain way. The four ways discussed are the redemptive-historical view, presented by by Bryan Chapell; the Christiconic view, by Abraham Kuruvilla; the theocentric view, by Kenneth Langlely, and the Law-Gospel view, by Paul Scott Wilson.

The opening chapter on redemptive historical preaching is a superb summary of the approach I, and many other reformed preachers, am committed to. Chapell covers similar ground to that presented in his key homiletic text, *Christ-centered Preaching*, arguing for each text to be interpreted in terms of its place in the overall biblical narrative which



is a redemptive narrative culminating in the coming of Christ. While avoiding contrived readings that seek to find Christ in every text, Chapell maintains that “all passages in their context serve our understanding of his [Christ’s] nature and/or necessity” (9). Texts may be predictive of, preparatory for, resultant from or reflective of the work of Christ (12). Chapell emphasises that the greatest impact of a truly Christ-centred approach to preaching is in the area of application, and specifically the motivations given for godly living. He convincingly advocates greater love for God as the supreme motivation and empowerment for obedience. “This is the bottom line of all Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to a redeeming God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical” (29).

Chapel discusses some of the variations within the redemptive-historical school, namely the historical approach of exemplars like Gerhardus Vos and Sidney Greidanus; the doctrinal approach, represented by Don Carson and John Piper, and the literary approach, modelled by people like Tim Keller and Edmund Clowney.

Abraham Kuruvilla, by contrast, presents what he calls “Christiconic” preaching. In this approach he strongly advocates letting each text speak for itself, in its own immediate context. In the words of the title of his 2013 book, we are to “privilege the text.” His concern, however, is not only with the semantics of the text (what the words say), but the “pragmatics” of the text (what the author is doing with those words). He then advocates identifying “the world in front of the text” which is a projection of the ideal world that God, in the text, is inviting us to inhabit. This, he says, is the theology of each text – the “pericopal theology” that is to be applied to life. As it is applied, Christ is presented as the ideal, the one who alone perfectly fulfils the ideal of the text. “Jesus Christ alone has comprehensively abided by the theology of every pericope of Scripture” (59). The goal of preaching is that people are progressively conformed to his image. They are to be transformed by the Word into the image of Christ, hence the designation, Christ-ionic/image preaching. Under God’s Word, as the message of each text is preached and the ideal presented, people are progressively transformed by God’s Word and Spirit

into the likeness of Christ, every text providing a small portrait, image, of Christ, the ideal human.

While Kuruville is careful to stress that this is not some kind of do-it-yourself sanctification, transformation being a work of God's grace, it is insufficient to focus on Christ as example and not as saviour and substitute. It also seems somewhat ironic that in advocating a careful listening to the text as opposed to imposing a broader redemptive-historical framework, he nonetheless develops a broader framework for all application, and a way of preaching Christ from texts that do not specifically speak of him. The danger, though, is that his approach more easily moves toward a moralistic reading of Scripture as "divine guidelines for life" are brought to bear from each pericope.

The third perspective is the theocentric view presented by Kenneth Langley. He argues compellingly that "preaching should be God centred because God is God centred and wants us to be God centred in everything we do" (81). He concurs with Christopher Wright, who emphasises that the Old Testament points to Christ but is not always about Christ. It is, however, always about God, and the gospel itself is the gospel of God.

Langley again stresses the importance of letting each text speak for itself, urging preachers to not make it somehow speak of Christ when it does not overtly do so. He advocates the value of having sermon points that have God as the subject, thus avoiding any tendency toward anthropocentric applications. But preachers ought not to be afraid of exhorting their congregations or setting forth biblical characters as models and examples we are to learn from, contrary to some redemptive historical preachers who, wrongly I might say, avoid such approaches at all costs.

Some of the specific biblical examples he provides, however, while being compellingly theocentric, seem to be almost contrived in their avoidance of preaching Christ. To not preach Christ from 1 Samuel 17 (David and Goliath) or Psalm 72, seems to fall short of where the text naturally takes us.

The final view is the Law-Gospel perspective of Paul Scott Wilson, author of *The Four Pages of the Sermon*. Building on the historic theology of the gospel being law/grace (not law vs grace), he views law more broadly as indications in the text of trouble, difficulties and things that are burdensome, while grace are the indications of the good news of God's work in our world. This leads to his four pages approach, in which the sermon is conceived as containing four main elements (pages): trouble in the text, connected to trouble in our world; followed by grace in the text and grace in our world. This, he argues, moves the sermon in the right direction, from law to grace, and ensures a healthy balance of time in the text and time in application.

While the basic law-grace paradigm is very valuable, there is a problem, as the other authors highlight, in reducing the category of law to trouble. Also, while Wilson lays out in some detail a helpful approach to sermon construction, it seems overly prescriptive and predictable to handle each text in terms of the proposed four pages

Following the presentation of each view, the other three authors interact with the hermeneutic employed. Some of their observations and critiques are most insightful, though often the space is used to re-articulate their own preferred approach.

The value of the book is found not only in clarifying some of the prominent approaches to preaching today, but in demonstrating very clearly that, as the editors observe at the end, "Hermeneutics drives preaching" (158). Preachers need to be deeply aware of how they are approaching the text, and cognisant of the strengths and weaknesses of their chosen approach. Each of the four views presented brings something vital to the table. While I am personally persuaded of the Christ-centred, redemptive historical approach, it was helpful to be urged by Kuruivilla to let the text speak on its own terms, to be reminded by Langley that preaching must be God-centred, and to remember, as Wilson advocates, the law-grace structure of the gospel that has shaped so much preaching of the past.

While in the details of each homiletic approach there is considerable divergence, polarisation and disagreement, at the broadest level the four

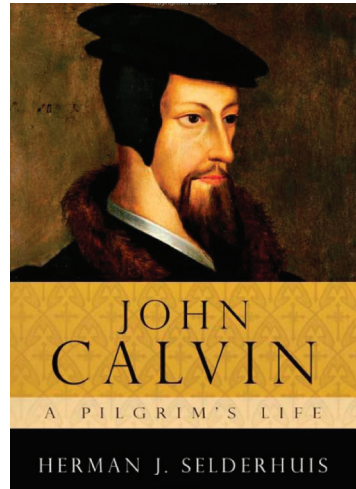
approaches are highly compatible. I cannot see why one cannot be serious about the text and the theology of each pericope (Kuruivilla), while being be thoroughly theocentric in the reading of the text (Langley), and preaching both law and grace as the two great dimensions of the gospel (Wilson), all the while reading the text in terms of its place in the redemptive narrative of Scripture that climaxes in the person and work of Christ (Chapell). In this regard, the redemptive-historical approach is capable of embracing the key emphasis of the other perspectives, while rejecting the specific schemes advocated by the other views.

Whatever approach one adopts, this is a unique and helpful book, bringing to the surface a discussion that all serious preachers inevitably grapple with week by week.

Murray Capill

Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009, 287 pages.

It is very hard to remain neutral about the life and legacy of John Calvin (1509-1564). Those of us in the Reformed camp obviously rank him among the greatest of Christian theologians but we would have to be blind not to recognise that there are many that take a rather dimmer view of his life and legacy. Many of the resulting debates between Calvin's admirers and detractors take place on the 'battlefield of biography'.



Admirers and detractors of Calvin regularly analyse key events of his life and come to radically different conclusions. The use/misuse of Calvin's biography in order to score theological points has a very long history. In fact, the very first biography of Calvin (written by a former priest Jerome Bolsec whom he had exiled from Geneva) was little more than an exercise in character assassination in order to undermine Calvin's theological positions.

In his book *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, Herman Selderhuis, one of the foremost modern Calvin scholars, reminds us of the dangers of 'weaponised history'. It is a mistake he argues, to simply look for ammunition in Calvin's life story before doing our best to get to know him as a human being within his historical context.

Selderhuis argues that the best way in which the latter objective can be achieved is through studying someone's personal correspondence. This is exactly what he did with *A Pilgrim's Life*. It is unique as far as biographies of Calvin goes in the sense that it prioritises Calvin's letters above all other sources.

The resultant picture of Calvin is rich, sympathetic and a world away from the caricature that is sometimes drawn by his detractors. Selderhuis starts

out by stating that he ‘writes as neither friend nor foe’ but I think it is clear towards the end that his studies of Calvin, in his own words, had a profound effect on the author.

This eminently readable biography certainly gave me a new insight into Calvin’s life and ideas. I reread it regularly as I prepare to teach my ‘Continental Reformation’ unit to remind me of ‘Calvin the Man’ before I spend time explaining his theological legacy to students.

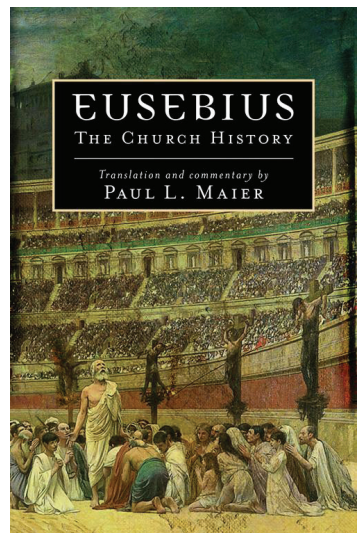
Phillip Scheepers

Eusebius, *The Church History* (tr. Paul L. Maier). Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2007. 386 pages.

One of my constant challenges to our church history students is to spend as much time as possible in encountering the periods we are studying through primary sources. For the earliest history of the church this means reading Eusebius!

Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340 AD) is, with justice, often called ‘The Father of Church History’. This is because he was the first person that we know of who attempted to write a systematic narrative of the progress of Christianity from the earliest ages (in fact, he begins before creation with the pre-existent Christ!) right up to his own time. In the process he became one of the most important sources (in some cases the only source) for reconstructing a picture of our forebears in the faith.

Readers of *The Church History* often come away with a deep sense of respect and gratitude towards those who paid such a high price for their commitment to Christ. We are also reminded that there is indeed



‘nothing new under the sun.’ Many of the issues and challenges that the early church had to contend with are still with us today. In summary, reading this hugely influential work can be a very fulfilling experience for any serious Christian.

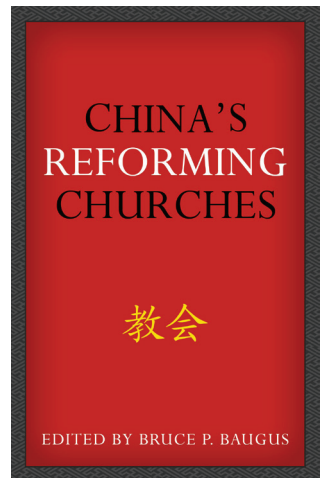
There is often a problem, however. Many people who try to read Eusebius are put off by the fact that his works are often found within larger collections. Where it is available in single volumes the translations are often archaic with very little contextual information to guide the reader. Enter Paul Maier, Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University. Maier’s translation of Eusebius is fresh and vivid. He also provides just the right amount of explanatory notes to ensure that the reader does not get lost in trying to figure out some of the historical intricacies.

You may not currently have an encounter with the early church on your reading list. May I suggest that you get to know our predecessors in the faith a bit better, and that you use Maier’s translation of Eusebius as your guide?

Phillip Scheepers

Bruce P. Baugus (ed.) *China’s Reforming Churches*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014. 320 pages.

One of the most challenging, and yet confronting, stories to emerge from 20th century church history was the explosive growth of the Chinese church, growth that occurred despite the concerted efforts of the post-1949 Communist regime to stifle all forms of religious expression. The emergence of Chinese Christianity from the shadows after the period of ‘Reform and Opening’ has been well-documented. What is less well known is that there are many Chinese churches and believers who proudly identify as Reformed



and who seek to minister and worship in ways that are consistent with their understanding of the doctrines of grace. Perhaps this should not be surprising as one of the very first missionaries to China, Robert Morrison, came from a Presbyterian background and wrote a Chinese catechism that reflected his theological convictions. Still, the survival of a strong Reformed witness despite the nearly genocidal fury unleashed against the church during the Cultural Revolution is nothing short of miraculous.

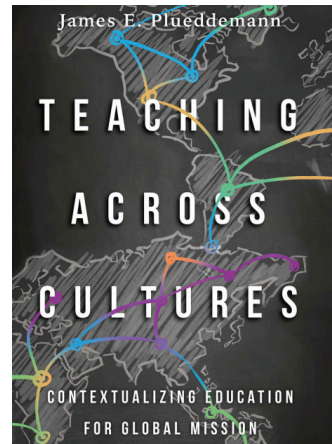
China's Reforming Churches grew out of a conference during which the history and needs of Chinese Reformed Churches were discussed. It, therefore, contains chapters by several of the speakers at the conference. The chapters deal with issues as diverse as early theological education, Korean Presbyterian missions into China and the developing of strategies for future fruitful ministry. As with all titles made up of the contributions of different authors the quality varies somewhat between chapters, but in general I found this to be an extremely useful guide in helping me to understand the current state of Reformed Christianity in China.

Chinese Christianity has been much in the news lately, given renewed efforts by the government to crack down on overt expressions of religious faith. Several of the churches targeted in this latest bout of persecution are mentioned in *China's Reforming Churches* and this helped me to pray for them in a much more informed way. This is part of the value of a work such as this. By reading about brothers and sisters whom we are unlikely to ever meet in person (this side of eternity at least) we can more fully take our place in the global Body of Christ as we pray for them and seek to support them in practical ways.

Phillip Scheepers

James E. Plueddemann, *Teaching Across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018. 168 pages.

This is a book that I wish I had early in my missionary career! Especially since the bulk of my time was spent teaching people who came from very different cultural backgrounds to my own. Thankfully I can now incorporate some of its insights into my ongoing cross-cultural teaching endeavours. James Plueddemann is eminently qualified to author a work like this. He taught for many years in Nigeria before becoming the international director of SIM. He was, in fact, in this role when I served as a SIM missionary in South Africa.



Plueddemann begins by outlining different models and conceptions of education in different cultures around the world. This raises the key question of how one gets from content to context when teacher and participants come from different cultural backgrounds. This question is unpacked throughout the rest of the book where the interplay between communication of truths and people's individual experiences are discussed. It also contains several insightful strategies for effective communication and for gauging how people are responding to these strategies.

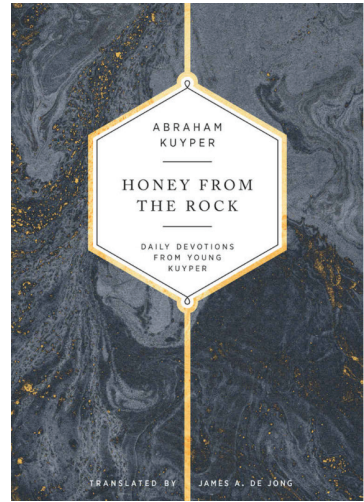
Perhaps one of the most helpful insights is the idea that the cross-cultural learning journey is a kind of pilgrimage. This means that both those who teach and those who are being taught should be journeying together to discern God's truth and its applications in different cultural contexts.

I would recommend this title to anyone who regularly teaches or preaches to people from different cultural backgrounds. I certainly look forward to using some of the insights that I have gained from it as I participate in future overseas teaching opportunities.

Phillip Scheepers

Abraham Kuyper, *Honey from the Rock: Daily Devotions from Young Kuyper*. Translated by James A. De Jong. Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018, 600 pages.

Most people in the Reformed tradition, especially those from a Dutch or South African background have some very specific views of the contribution of Abraham Kuyper. They remember him as a journalist, university founder, great thinker and ultimately the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Thus, his contribution to modern Reformed thought is often sought in the areas of philosophy, politics and especially worldview studies. He was, of course, a giant in all these areas. Who can, for example, forget his stirring reminder that there is not a square inch of human

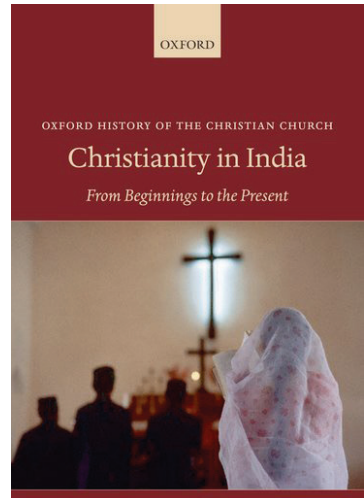


existence that is excluded from the Lordship of Christ. We tend to forget, however, that Kuyper started his adult life as something entirely different – a local church pastor. Everything he did subsequently flowed from his deep personal faith and his desire to love and serve God with heart, mind, body and soul. This wonderful volume reminds us of this ‘forgotten Kuyper’. As a collection of daily devotions, written by Kuyper early in his ministry career, it calls us as readers back to Him who should be our ‘first love’. We owe James de Jong a great debt of gratitude for undertaking this translation. In doing so he provided English readers with a spiritually rich and very accessible collection of never-before translated Kuyperian writings. This is, of course, not a text to read through at one sitting. It is, however, eminently suited to be savoured and meditated on as we explore the depths of our faith with one of the giants of the 20th century church as our guide.

Phillip Scheepers

Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*. Oxford University Press, 2008, 600 pages.

It is not easy to be a Christian in modern India. The current ruling party explicitly bases its platform on a hard-line interpretation of India as an essentially Hindu entity. This means that those who do not identify as Hindus are often suspected of being something ‘less than Indian’. Sadly, sentiments such as these are often not confined to words. Far too many Christians can testify to the fact that Hindu-nationalist rhetoric can sometimes tip over into violent acts against churches or individual believers.



A book such as this shows just how wrong-headed attempts to portray Christianity as a recent arrival in India are. There are, in fact, Christians in the south of India who glory in the belief that the apostle Thomas himself brought the faith to Indian shores. While Thomas’ personal involvement cannot be definitively proved, it is incontestably the case that Christians associated with the ‘Thomas tradition’ that flourished around the city of Edessa (now in eastern Turkey) were some of the first Christian believers who brought their faith to India. This fact is eloquently testified to by the many stone ‘Thomas crosses’ from the 2nd and 3rd centuries that were found all across southern India. There are, in fact, still many Christians who trace the origins of their church back to these Syriac pioneers. From that point onwards attempts to bring Indians to Christ have not ceased. This history is beautifully told in Frykenberg’s master work. It is majestic in its scope, taking in the efforts of the ‘Church of the East’, the Portuguese missions centred on Goa, the work of Danish missionaries at Tranquebar and, of course, the ministry of the ‘Father of Protestant Missions’, William Carey. *Christianity in India* is, however, much more than a history of overseas missionary involvement in India. One of the great strengths of this book, in my opinion, is the constant attention Frykenberg pays to the

ways in which Indians made the message their own and their efforts to take the good news to their compatriots.

As a regular visitor to India to help train Indian church planters I found this book immensely useful in helping me to understand the broader history of Indian Christianity. It especially helped me to banish any idea that I'm bringing something new and alien to India (as the Hindu fundamentalists would have it) from my mind!

Phillip Scheepers

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