

Day 245

Ezekiel's Vision of Restoration and Return

Ezekiel 37.1 – 39.29

As an earnest of the restoration of Israel and Judah back to the land of promise. Ezekiel is given a vision of what it will be like when the Lord's people are gathered back from their exile – it will be no less than the resurrection of a nation.

Ez.37.1 – 14 Ezekiel's celebrated vision of the valley of dry bones is full of visual impact. The horror of a place filled with human remains, the speaking life to the dead, the noise of bodies coming bone to bone, the filling with the life of the Spirit, all give a clear message of God's ability to bring life from the dead. It is powerful also in terms of its depiction of a God who can overcome death, and points to a day of resurrection in the future, beyond even Israel's redemption from the nations.

The Lord is intent on returning Israel to the land, so that His name can be known as dependable.

Ez. 37.15- 28 The action-prophecy of the two sticks held in Ezekiel's hand, one representing Judah and the other Israel, speaks of the Lord's re-uniting the divided nations into one people again. The Israelites will no longer mean the northern kingdom, it will mean the one people, united under a Davidic king, covenanted to the Lord, with the dwelling place of the Lord restored to them in their midst. This will be a sign to the nations of the uniqueness of Israel as the Lord's people.

Ez.38.1 – 39.29 This section of Ezekiel's prophecy is set in an apocalyptic vein, its scale mystically broad and awesome. In some quarters, particularly in the tradition of Christian dispensationalism, there have been attempts to systematize and analyse the content of such visions, and link them to specific historical events. The nations of Gog and Magog are, in one sense, mythical, not identifiable, the names going back to those descended from Japheth, son of Noah.

Therefore, Ezekiel is using visionary language, not unlike John's Revelation. What is learned from these insights is that God is engaged not only with a tiny fraction of humanity living on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, but with events on a wide scale, covering the nations. The nature of the future is that there will be more invasion, more imperial expeditions like Nebuchadnezzar's; but in the midst of it all, Israel will survive, by the Lord's intervention. The middle east will be a land of intensely fought battles and much carnage – and when we review the history over the centuries, through the times of Alexander, Rome, Byzantium, Islam's advance, the Crusades and up to the establishment of modern Israel in the twentieth century, that such a postage stamp of territory has been the subject of such international contention has borne out Ezekiel's words.

The Lord is intent that He will display His glory (39.21) and that He will release the presence of His Spirit upon Israel (39.29) and be known as the Holy One, the unique,

unrivalled God of the nations. This Ezekiel leaves as his mystical vision of the future for the Israel restored to her land.

Day 246

Ezekiel Laments Over Egypt

Ezekiel 32.1 – 33.20

Ez.32.1 – 16 Egypt will be the object also of attack and devastation. Ezekiel describes the attacker as the King of Babylon (32.11) but in fact, the onslaught comes just after the fall of Babylon, under the Medo-Persian leader Cambyses around 725BC.

This is a lament for the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, who seems powerful and one of the leading nations. But as the other nations around her she will come crashing down before the might of the growing northern Empires.

Ez.32.17 – 32 Egypt's fate will be to be consigned to the grave with the other conquered nations. In the words of Ezekiel here there is a sense of the transience and the futility of the powers of men, the powers that be. All are reduced to dust as the curtain falls.

Ez.33.1 – 9 The Lord lays out the responsibilities of the prophet here, who, when he or she hears from the Lord, is duty-bound to pass on the Lord's word, under pain of retribution of their blood on his or her head. The watchman, the Lord says, is Ezekiel himself, warning the wicked of the danger ahead.

Ez. 33.10-11 The Lord takes no delight in the punishment of sin. It is like the amputation of a gangrenous limb – the body is less for it afterwards. But the Lord is just, and looks for every opportunity to rescue and redeem. The outcome is upon our own heads.

Day 247

Three Friends Will Not Bow Down

Daniel 3.1 – 30

Dan. 3.1 – 7 We left Nebuchadnezzar II after his dream last time,(day 220 above) amazed at the spiritual gifts Daniel is endowed with. However, in case we thought that this meant that Nebuchadnezzar had converted to faith in the God who rules from heaven, he now proceeds to fulfil that dream himself, by making an image of gold, emphasising what he sees as his own power and supremacy over his empire.

We're not told what the image he made represented; the Aramaic word here, *tzelem* (Aram. תְּצֵלֶם) is the same as the Hebrew word used in Genesis 1 for image, but that may just mean a symbol of power. It would not have been solid gold, but most likely a gilded wooden obelisk – there is some suggestion that it could have stood on a base of earth like one found in that vicinity, although no remains have been found of it.

Nebuchadnezzar is full of his own pride and ability; he sneers at any God's ability to rescue people from him.

Dan.3.8 – 12 When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to obey the king's megalomaniac command, they are informed on by what are called in the Aramaic 'Chasda'in', (Aram. ܫܕܪܚܘܨܐ) which can mean Babylonians, but it has been used in chapter 2 of a section of the spiritual advisors of Nebuchadnezzar. It could well be that these are aristocratic Babylonian priests or shamans, jealous of the Jews' promotion in their place. So they inform on the provincial officials, Shadrach Meshach and Abednego, who are dealt with summarily by an angry King.

We can be quite naïve about our own generation and its governing ideology. We are not here to endorse other beliefs, but to model faith in Jesus Christ. We are living in a time which has again taken up some of the ideas of the Nazis, and is veering toward more of them – eugenics, abortion, euthanasia - - yet somehow we accommodate them in the 21st century.

Dan 3.13-18 The confession of the three friends of Daniel is brave and uncompromising. They will not give up trust in God, even in the face of death. They know a God who can save them, but even if He does not, they will not acknowledge any other. It is this clear witness that impacts Nebuchadnezzar so much, trusting God who walks with them into the fire.

Dan.3.19 – 30 We see that Nebuchadnezzar uses his political power to protect faith at the end of the chapter. That may be a good thing – God gets the upper hand in the end, the empire steps in to defend God's reputation. Yet the history of that mix of political power and faith is fraught with violence, hatred and unChristlike actions which don't help. Jeroboam, Nebuchadnezzar, Judas, Constantine, Crusades, Wars of religion, Jihad, all of these recruited religion to their own cause.

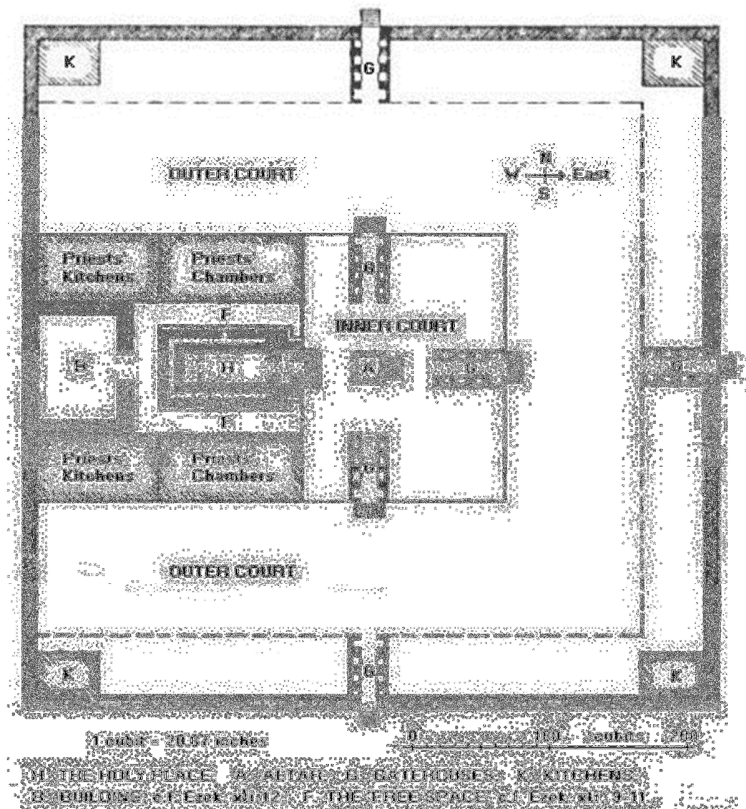
Day 248

Ezekiel's Vision of the New Temple (c.572BC)

Ezekiel 40.1 – 44.3

The vision the Lord gives Ezekiel of the new temple is full of mystical symbolism; this is not just a replacement temple for the Jews, this is a vision of something more, something futuristic as well. In great detail, Ezekiel is guided around the visionary sanctuary by a man of bronze.

Ez.40.1- 42.20 The account of the measurement of the Temple Ezekiel sees has something of the quality of the vision of Moses concerning the Tabernacle, the Tent in the desert. It is very precise, and almost three-dimensional in its nature. Below is a representation of the Temple of Ezekiel to scale (can be seen at <http://homepages.luc.edu/~avandell/jerusalem/views/ezekielsTemple.htm>)



Ez.43.1-5 Ezekiel sees the ‘mobile glory of the Lord’ which he witnessed in chapter 1 entering the building, and taking up residence there. It is a graphic description of the sight.

Ez. 43.6 – 12 The Lord will sanctify this new temple area, as a reply to the idolatry of the Israelites of the past, and He will live in it again . There is a reminder here of the reason why the first temple was destroyed and this one envisioned in its place.

Ez. 43.13 – 27 There will be a new altar in the new temple. There are a number of items missing from the description of the new temple, which Ezekiel describes. There is no ark of the covenant mentioned, nor lampstand, presence table and, most significantly, no veil.

However, a great altar would exist, with special offerings to be made at it. This is undoubtedly a great reform envisaged in the worship life of the Lord’s people.

44.1-3 Another major change envisaged by Ezekiel is that the prince will be the one who goes into the presence of the Lord rather than the High Priest. There are Levite priests, descendants of Zadok, the priest who anointed Solomon, but the prince will take a greater role.

It is perhaps of significance that Ezekiel does not call this ruler the King (Heb הַמֶּלֶךְ *ha-melekh*) but the prince, (Heb הַנָּשִׂיא *Ha-Nasi*), literally, the exalted one. There seems to be a deliberate break between what was and what will be.

The Temple of Ezekiel has never been built, since its dimensions are larger than could be accommodated on the Temple area in Zion. There are those, Jews and Christians, who believe that this will come about in the time of the return of the Messiah.

Day 249

Ezekiel's Temple Vision Continues

Ezekiel 44.4 – 48.35

Ez.44.4-9 The Lord makes it clear that He is finished with the idol worship in previous times; nothing unclean may come into this new Temple.

Ez.44.10 – 16 The Lord is putting new regulations on the priesthood. Because the Levites sinned so deeply in co-operating with the idolatrous worship of the Temple, they are allowed now only to serve. The priests who are seen as holy and qualified to come into the most holy place are the descendants of Zadok, who remained faithful to the Lord.

Ez.44.17 – 19 The priests are to wear only linen, since that is cooling, and the Lord does not want anyone sweating in His service in the holy place. There is something mystical in this injunction – the Lord will not permit man's labour in His most holy place.

Ez.44.20 – 27 & 31 This new priesthood is to take on a stricter set of regulations than the former one. They are not to shave, drink alcohol nor marry any other than virgin women. They must also not be defiled by corpses. The priests will become also the judges for legal cases.

Ez. 44.28-30 The priests are not to have any inheritance in the land, but will be maintained by offerings from the people.

Ez.45.1-8a There will be also a reassigning of the land, in which there will be space for the new Temple and for the Levites to live, as well as for the new Jerusalem and land for the prince.

Ez.45.8b – 12 The new prince will not be corrupt like the Kings before. In particular, royal weights and measures will be in place which will be binding for all. This is to prevent the corruption of the previous regime.

Ez.45.13 – 20 There is a list of the offerings which will be made, some of which will be provided by the prince himself.

Ez.45.21-25 Passover will be celebrated and kept as in the old order, but the prince will provide sin offerings for himself.

Ez.46.1-8 On Sabbaths and new moon festivals, the prince will come and worship before the Lord in the holy place, bringing offerings. Again, he seems to be combining the role of national leader and high priest.

Ez.46.9-10 A special feature of worship at this new Temple is the crossing through the Temple of the worshippers. If they come in one gate, they are to exit by an opposite gate. This includes the prince when he worships.

Ez.46.11 – 15, 19 – 24 There are regulations for the various offerings of grain and meat, which are to be prepared by the priests in the rooms provided for the purpose.

Ez.46.16 – 18 There is a distinction made between property and gifts made to sons and to servants. The son may keep and hand on his property in perpetuity, but the servant or slave must return it at the jubilee. However, the prince is not permitted to land-grab from the people's property, thus they are protected from corrupt and greedy leaders.

Ez. 47.1 – 12 The River from the Temple

Ezekiel now sees a mystical vision of a river flowing from the threshold of the Temple, becoming deeper as it progresses. The water flows through the desert, and down into the Dead Sea plain. As it flows, trees grow on either side. The barren land is producing fruit. What is more, when this living water reaches the Dead Sea, so heavy with salt, one floats on its waters, it turns the salt water fresh, and life comes back, with fish like those found in the Mediterranean (the Great Sea). It is a vision of a complete resurrection of the land and sea, the power of God's life flowing out.

Ez.47.13 – 48.34 There will be a new division of the land among the tribes, since the Lord has promised to give the land to His people. It will be according to tribes, but it may be noted (47.21-23) there will be an allocation for those aliens who have settled in the land – those who were forcibly imported, perhaps, or those who return with the Jews at the repatriation which is coming.

The prince also has an allocation, a new development. (48.21-22)

Ez.48.35 The Prophet even envisages the city where the Temple receives a new name, *Adonai (YHWH) shammah* (Heb. אֲדֹנָי שָׁמָּה) The Lord is there. This is a completely new dispensation.

Day 250

Nebuchadnezzar Overreaches Himself

Ezekiel 29.17-21; Dan.4.1- 37; Jer.52.31-34

Ez.29.17-21 As Ezekiel's ministry passes into history, there is a last word concerning Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian emperor has sought around 583BC to besiege and destroy the coastal stronghold, and has managed to bring down the mainland part of the city, but the island port some half-mile off the coast has held out for thirteen years, presumably being able to receive supplies by sea.

In a strange message, Ezekiel says that the Babylonians will be given the plunder of Egypt as a thank-you from the Lord and as an alternative to the Tyrean city! The word finishes with a cryptic reference to the strengthening of Israel in Nebuchadnezzar's day,

with his mouth being opened among them. In what follows, from the book of Daniel, it is possible to see a link, as Nebuchadnezzar is brought low by the God of Israel, but restored to sanity by the word of the Jew, Daniel.

Ezekiel's ministry of twenty five years is now at an end. The question remains whether, as an old man, he would have witnessed the return to Jerusalem, but this story is untold in Scripture.

Dan.4.1-37 Daniel 4 is a unique chapter in Scripture –it's a letter sent by a pagan king, who is not a Jew nor a Christian, giving testimony to his encounters with the living God. In fact, it's clear his god is Bel, and he says so. Written in Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian empire, it tells of another of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, and the outcome of it.

It is a graphic demonstration of God's rule over all humanity, and a sobering account of God's intervention. Through His experience, this great emperor is brought low.

In Nebuchadnezzar, we see a success story – peace, prosperity, even an ability to take advice and listen to others. Yet he falls into the trap of pride which is such a huge human temptation. As he looks over his city, he takes to himself the glory of his empire – (4v30) – 'just look at this wonderful capital city I have built by my own power and for my own glory.' He prays, not 'Thy Kingdom come', but 'My kingdom come'.

The city of Babylon was a wonder of the world, with its Hanging Gardens, built for his Median wife, Amytis, and with palaces and amazing architecture. In one sense, you'd think that Nebuchadnezzar had a right to be proud. But he has reckoned without the Most High God.

One thing we see clearly from this chapter is that God is at work beyond the Jewish people. It's interesting that Nebuchadnezzar senses that dreams are doorways into the spiritual, and have significance. His advisers, however, don't have a clue what he's talking about. (4.18)

Daniel points out that God lifts up the humble and demotes the proud. (4.17) Nebuchadnezzar's self-congratulation puts in motion this sobering series of events, and brings him rapidly to his knees, literally, eating grass like an animal.

There is a famous painting by William Blake of Nebuchadnezzar in his madness. It's very powerful, giving an impression of the state of the emperor in his debased state. He is no longer the great monarch, strutting on the roof of the palace. He is broken and alone.

In Nebuchadnezzar's testimony, we see the Babylonian King restored to his throne, but with a very different perception of his own role. This is why he says, Praise and honor the King who rules from heaven! Everything he does is honest and fair, and he can shatter the power of those who are proud. (4.37) His period of suffering has changed his view of life completely; He now realizes the fragility of human power and the source of his rule in God.

Jer.52.31-34 (mirrored in 2 Kgs 25.27 – 30) **A Postscript in Jeremiah c.561BC**

After thirty-seven years since the initial exile, Nebuchadnezzar is succeeded by Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk in Babylonian.) The new emperor rehabilitates the Judean king, Jehoiachin, who has been in Babylon all this time. Whether Zedekiah is still around or not is unclear, but Evil-Merodach obviously regards Jehoiachin as the rightful Judean king, and honours him as such.

Day 251

The Book of Job

Job.1.1 – 3.26

Job is a story, a parable about suffering and character. It is appropriate for it to be studied at this point in the story, a time when the people of God are utterly disjoined from their covenant calling, and it seems as though the plan of God has come off the rails.

We cannot place Job easily in history. Some would suggest this is an ancient book, more ancient perhaps than Abraham, going back to the flood or before. Perhaps this is not the point; we need to see why Job is included in the story rather than when.

The story moves through four stages;

- Job's prosperity and uprightness is described, and challenged by satan
- Job questions God about his suffering, and is offered suggested answers by his friends
- A theodicy follows in the mouth of Elihu, the youngest of the friends, putting God's case
- The Lord Himself intervenes and puts everything into the perspective of the universe, and restores Job's prosperity.

Job 1.1-22 Job, an upright man of God, is presented to us. He is prosperous and pious, and careful to direct his family well.

The whole point of this story is presented at 1.8; the Lord presents Job to satan as an example of the Godly life lived well. Satan however, suggest that Job only loves the Lord because of what he can get out of Him – hence the question, 'Does Job love God for nothing?' (Heb. **חִנָּם** *Ha-chinnam*, meaning 'without cause')

This is the pivot on which the whole of Job turns, satan's claim that Job only loves God because He does good things for him, and he has to appease God. The Lord thus invites satan to put Job to the test, and see whether Job will give up on his walk with God when all he has is taken from him. What is astounding about this, is that the Lord trusts Job enough to know that nothing will shake him from his relationship with the Eternal. This is a risk on the part of God the adventurer. But the Lord *knows* Job and his heart.

Thus, everything Job has is stripped away – his family, his livestock, his livelihood. Yet, in 1.20-22, his reaction is to fall down prostrate and worship the one who is the source of all, saying

יְהוָה נָתַן, וַיִּהְיֶה לְקָחָהּ; יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה, מְבֹרָךְ׃

Adonai natan, v'Adonai laqach; yehi shem Adonai mebhorakh

Lord gave, and Lord took; let be name of Lord blessed.

This is a man who knows God!

2.1 – 10 Satan now claims that Job will give up on God if his health is broken. Thus, the Lord permits Satan to afflict Job with sores. Yet, even when his wife wants him to give up on the Lord, Job accuses her of foolishness, saying that both hard times and good times are to be received from the Lord. Job does not offend God in what he does.

2.11 – 13. Job's friends turn up to be with him. They are Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. What is striking is that they do not tell him to cheer up and be happy. Rather, they weep with him, sharing emotion and expressing horror at the circumstances. They also sit in silence for seven days, just being close to their friend. In this much, they are an example of how to be with the bereaved and afflicted.

3. 1 – 26 While not cursing the Lord, Job does curse his own birth, a deep and painful despair gripping him. He questions why life would even be granted to him, for it just to lead to such agony and loss. He sees as death as a welcome relief. This is an eloquent and very human cry for help; 'What I feared has come upon me, what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no rest, no quietness, only turmoil'