

## Lesson 19: The Revelations to Ezekiel (Ezekiel)

### Ezekiel and His Mission

Whereas Daniel was brought to Babylon in the first exile at the time of Jehoiakim (605 BC), Ezekiel goes in the second deportation eight years later along with Jehoiachin and 10,000 leading citizens of Judea. This period is one of the most critical times in the history of Israel, which saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of a large part of its population to Babylon. Regarding Ezekiel personally, he is a young man around twenty-five years old when taken from his homeland to Babylon. He was a married Levite with his own home, who lived in a colony of transported Judeans in Tel Abib, a city on a canal of the Euphrates.<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel first begins preaching in Babylon around 593 BC (several years before the destruction of the Temple and the third deportation). The fact that the book opens with the words “in the thirtieth year,” could be a way of connecting the mission of Ezekiel to the future prophet and Messiah, Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

The book of Ezekiel is comprised of forty-eight chapters and may be broken down into three parts. The first is a condemnation of Israel, both in Jerusalem and in Babylon, and recognition of the justice of God’s punishment for their sin.<sup>3</sup> The second division may be broadly characterized as prophecies against the pride and radical autonomy of the neighboring gentile nations. Ezekiel’s words call the non-Jews to proper humility lest they think their present prosperity and political dominion is due to their own power and wisdom, when in fact God has allowed these nations to conquer Jerusalem so that He might use them as a means of disciplining Israel.<sup>4</sup> The last section of the book proclaims hope and envisions a return from exile, the establishment of a New Temple, the return of Yahweh’s glory, and the transformation of the world.<sup>5</sup> While the book begins with condemnation, it finishes on a hopeful note that serves to uplift the spirits of the people.

The action begins with a remarkable vision of God’s glory personified and enthroned in heaven.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the vision takes place in Babylon, outside the land of Israel. Therefore, it is clear that the Lord remains with his people even when they are living among the Gentiles in a foreign and pagan land. Yahweh is not bound to His presence in the Temple only, which will be important when the Temple is destroyed. In

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 24:15-18; 3:24; 8:1.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Gregory the Great wrote: “When he was thirty years old, the heavens were opened and Ezekiel the prophet saw visions of God on the banks of the river Chebar. When he was thirty years old, our Lord traveled to the Jordan; the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and a voice cried out from heaven, saying : *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” (*Homiliae in Ezechielem prophetam*, 1, 2, 5)

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 1-24

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 25-32

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 33-48

<sup>6</sup> As part of this first vision there is the image of four men with faces of different creatures (1:5-11). These creatures would later be understood by the early Christians as symbols for the four Gospels. Saint Gregory the Great wrote: “Because he begins his Gospel with an account of the human genealogy [of the Lord], Matthew is symbolized by the man; Mark is symbolized by the lion because he begins with a loud cry in the desert; Luke is symbolized by the bull because his book begins with a sacrifice; John is the eagle because his first focus is on the divinity of the Word...in trying to see into the heart of the divine he is like the eagle that stares into the sun.” (*Homiliae in Ezechielem prophetam*, 1, 4, 1)

the vision Ezekiel receives his mission to call the rebellious Israelites in Babylon back to fidelity to the law and to Yahweh. Ezekiel is to serve as Yahweh's "watchman" over Israel.<sup>7</sup> Yet in order to do this, Ezekiel must meditate on the word of God, taking it in, allowing it to transform him at the most fundamental level. This is very graphically expressed by the following image, in which God tells Ezekiel: "But you, son of man, hear what I say to you... open your mouth and eat what I give you.' And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and lo, a written scroll was in it... And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.' Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey."<sup>8</sup>

The prophet can only fulfill the divine mission with which he is entrusted if he fully absorbs God's word, for he give to others what he does not possess himself. The prophet does what he is asked and eagerly takes in the word given to him by God. In the same way, our own personal vocations must be sustained by a continual assimilation of divine truth, that is to say that we too must "eat the scroll." How do we allow God's Word to enter into us, to transform us from within? Quite simply, by continuous and prayerful meditation on what the Holy Spirit reveals to us in the Sacred Scriptures, in Church teaching, and in our own personal reflections and experience. Only then will the Word of God take root in our everyday lives, and we will be given the grace, strength and insight necessary to perform our own duties in accordance with Yahweh's will. This is how Ezekiel fulfilled his mission, and it is just as important for us today to follow his example.

### **Transportation to Jerusalem**

Ezekiel's mission begins when God mystically brings him back to Jerusalem: "He put forth the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem."<sup>9</sup> Here God gives Ezekiel an understanding of the reason for the deportations, that is, the grave immorality of the nation, which he is then to proclaim to his fellow exiles in Babylon. Here, Ezekiel is given a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> In the vision Ezekiel sees the Lord instruct a soldier and say to him, "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it."<sup>11</sup> Then the Lord instructs other soldiers, "Pass through the city after him, and smite; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity...but touch no one upon whom is the mark."<sup>12</sup>

This mark ("Tau" or τ) is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and has a very rich symbolism. In its immediate context, it refers to the mark of righteousness, and it distinguishes those who place their trust in the Lord and are faithful. These may suffer a purification with the rest of the nation, yet they will also experience the providential care

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<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 3:17-21

<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel 2:8-3:3

<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 8:3

<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 9:1-11

<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel 9:4

<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel 9:5-6

of the Father of Mercies (e.g., Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech, who are spared the Babylonian captivity).

Yet since the Tau is the sign of the Cross, this symbolism also prefigures the future destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when not one Christian – that is, one signed by the Cross of Christ in baptism – loses his life in the siege of the city. On yet a deeper level, this imagery anticipates the end times, when Christ will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and those marked with this seal will be preserved from the second death.<sup>13</sup> As Christians, if we are in the state of grace then we bear this seal which will mark us as God’s, for “it is God who establishes us with in Christ and has commissioned us; he has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”<sup>14</sup> “This seal of the Holy Spirit marks our total belonging to Christ, our enrollment in his service for ever, as well as the promise of divine protection in the great trial at the end of time.”<sup>15</sup>

Returning to Ezekiel’s revelation, why is it that God punishes the peoples of Israel with the destruction of the Temple and the Exile? The answer is set forth clearly: “Then he said to me, ‘The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great: the land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice... As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity, but I will requite their deeds upon their heads.’”<sup>16</sup> The material desolation of Israel is not even the greatest tragedy that befalls them as the result of their sin, for Ezekiel narrates a far worse evil. The prophet beholds the Glory [or “Spirit] of the Lord departing from the Temple.<sup>17</sup>

To fully appreciate the overwhelming implications of this account, we must draw an analogy from the case of individuals. Consider how Saint Paul tells us that our bodies are to be temples of the Holy Spirit. Remember too that the first sin of Adam and Eve cast out God’s Spirit from within them, which brought about spiritual and physical death. Therefore, when the Spirit of the Lord departs from the Temple, it indicates the mortal sin of the nation as a whole, as well as its impending death, for nothing can live if it is not supported by God’s life and love. This is precisely what happens in the Babylonian conquest. Israel, which has only been in existence approximately five hundred years, is now destroyed. Nonetheless, this dismal vision is followed with a message of hope, a reassurance that God will spare a remnant. This remnant will be spiritually renewed, so that they will be God’s obedient people, whose sanctified hearts shall be in union with the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Proclamation to the Jews in Babylon**

Ezekiel then recounts how he is brought back to Babylon: “And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles...and I told the exiles all the things that the Lord had showed me.”<sup>19</sup> He must preach to his fellow

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<sup>13</sup> Revelation 7:2-3

<sup>14</sup> II Corinthians 1:21-22

<sup>15</sup> CCC, #1296

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel 9:9-10

<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel 10:18

<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel 11:17-20

<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 11:24-25

expatriates, since (as we saw in the book of Daniel) the people still refuse to repent even though they are plunged into the experience of slavery and exile. They must be forewarned about the complete destruction of the kingdom of Judah, and explain to them their responsibility for their exile, due to their apostasy, idolatry and grave immorality.<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel makes it clear that each man is to take responsibility for the Exile, and in so doing he reminds us that we all need to repent and accept the consequences of our sin in a spirit of reparation, love and obedience. Jerusalem and the Temple will soon be destroyed as a punishment for the sins of the people.<sup>21</sup> Ezekiel is unambiguous in his message: the people are punished for their own sins, not for those of their parents.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, each generation is responsible for its own actions and must bear the responsibility and consequences. Like Jeremiah and others who preceded him, Ezekiel is telling the people something they do not want to hear. It would have been much easier for Ezekiel to keep to himself as a peaceful member of the culture. And yet, without his voice, the people would have remained set in their ways, without any challenge to their infidelity.

The prophet's words are not limited to condemnation and prediction of calamity. The book of Ezekiel ends with a declaration of the good things, which await the chosen people. God only punishes in order to teach and to heal his wayward children. Ezekiel envisions a return from exile, a symbol of the transformed world, and the return of Yahweh's glory.<sup>23</sup> This positive interpretation of the Exile is a feature of Ezekiel. These happy revelations refer to the three returns of the Jews to Jerusalem beginning in 537 BC. Yet on another level Ezekiel is speaking about the final return from exile that began in the Garden of Eden and the gates of heaven were barred against us. Ezekiel prophesies nothing less than a return from the exile of original sin to the Father and the Promised Land of heaven that is brought about by the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Characteristics of the New Covenant**

Seeking to raise His people out of their dejection, the Lord renews His promise and announces a new stage of salvation history comparable only to that which began in Egypt. Far from blotting His people out, Yahweh will rehabilitate them in a definitive way, and the new message of hope is to inspire conversion back to the one, true God. First of all, new leaders must be appointed since the current shepherds of Israel are neglecting the people and serving themselves only. Therefore, the Lord states through the prophet, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice."<sup>24</sup> The fulfillment of this promise is of course when God comes down to earth as the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> John Paul II said, "The figure of Jesus Christ as shepherd of the Church, his flock, takes up and represents in new and

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<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel 11:24-15:8

<sup>21</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem takes place in 587 BC.

<sup>22</sup> The prophet addresses individual guilt and the destruction of Jerusalem in chapters 14-23.

<sup>23</sup> Ezekiel 34-48

<sup>24</sup> Ezekiel 34:15-16

<sup>25</sup> CCC, #754

more evocative terms the same content as that of Jesus Christ as head and servant. Fulfilling the prophetic proclamation of the Messiah and savior joyfully announced by the psalmist and the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Psalm 22-23; Ezekiel 34:11ff), Jesus presents himself as ‘the good shepherd’ (John 10:11, 14), not only of Israel but of all humanity (cf. John 10:16). His whole life is a continual manifestation of his ‘pastoral charity.’”<sup>26</sup>

Our Lord also enlists other shepherds as well, namely the Apostles, telling them to “go rather to the lost sheep of Israel,”<sup>27</sup> for he has “had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>28</sup> The Apostles are the coworkers through whom Christ shepherds his flock, as is evident when he tells them “He who hears you hears me.”<sup>29</sup> The former shepherds have been supplanted; now God shepherds his people through the pope and bishops (Magisterium).

When God institutes this new covenant, He declares, “I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you to your own land... You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers.”<sup>30</sup> Again, this is fulfilled both during the return and covenantal renewal which we will see in the Book of Ezra, but it also points us to the New and eternal Covenant that will be forged in the blood of Christ. The passage concludes with the covenantal formula for the exchange of persons: “You shall be my people, and I will be your God.”<sup>31</sup>

God tells Ezekiel: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you... and I will put my spirit in you...”<sup>32</sup> The sprinkling of clean water calls to mind the sacrament of Baptism. It is Christian belief that baptism causes the Holy Spirit to enter the soul of the new Christian, filling it with the sanctifying grace that was lost at Eden. In other words, the human race is given back that original blessing of being God’s children through water and the spirit. This is further suggested by the promise that those who behold this transformation will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden.”<sup>33</sup> Our desolate souls will be restored and brought back to that first holiness of Adam and Eve.

One of the most powerful descriptions of this miraculous grace occurs when God brings Ezekiel to the valley of bones (the valley next to Jerusalem was filled with the skeletons of those slain by the Babylonians in Zedekiah’s time).<sup>34</sup> The Lord instructs Ezekiel: “Prophesy to these bones... Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live;

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<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, #22

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 10:6

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 9:36

<sup>29</sup> Luke 10:16

<sup>30</sup> Ezekiel 36:24, 28

<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel 36:28

<sup>32</sup> Ezekiel 36:25-27; cf. CCC, ##368, 1432

<sup>33</sup> Ezekiel 36:35

<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-14

and you shall know that I am the Lord.”<sup>35</sup> Ezekiel obeys, and God places his breath into the dead, and they come to life.<sup>36</sup> Here the word for “breath,” (*ruah*) is the term for “Spirit,” which God breathed into Adam and Eve, and which signifies the sanctifying grace, which is His life in our souls.<sup>37</sup> Sin has cast this gift out of the souls of the human race and out of the Temple, bringing death on the individual and to society. However, Christ breathes upon the Apostles after the Resurrection and sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, giving the Spirit again and fulfilling the words of Ezekiel, winning for us life in the Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

Two final prophetic illustrations in the book of Ezekiel are worth noting. The first involves the foretelling of the new Temple and its consecration when the Glory of the Lord enters.<sup>39</sup> There is a new Temple built by 515 BC by those Judeans who are permitted to return from Babylon, as we will see in our analysis of the Book of Ezra (next lesson). Remember, the Holy Spirit departed from the first Temple.<sup>40</sup> The rebuilt Temple is dedicated but never consecrated, and yet the prophet says the glory of the Lord enters the Temple.<sup>41</sup> It is in consecration that the Spirit comes down on the Temple with the indwelling of the presence of Yahweh. The lack of consecration might seem to be a minor detail, but it is central to the story of the New Testament. What Temple is the prophet referring to when he says the glory of the Lord enters the Temple? The Father will send His Spirit upon another Temple, that is, the Temple of Christ’s body at the Baptism of Jesus.<sup>42</sup> In the present age, the Glory of the Lord dwells in the Body of Christ, which is present to us in the Most Holy Eucharist.

Finally, Ezekiel envisions a river flowing from the Temple, the water bringing life wherever it goes. The Catechism provides a profound understanding of this image, “For the Body of the risen Christ is the spiritual temple from which the source of living waters springs forth: incorporated into Christ by the Holy Spirit, ‘we are the temple of the living God.’”<sup>43</sup> Through Christ, the faithful enter into the new life of the Spirit that once resided in the Temple but now is offered to every soul through the work of Christ in the sacraments.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Ezekiel makes it clear that as the land is divided among the Israelites and the Gentiles the new outpouring of the Spirit is offered to all provided they worship the one true God.<sup>45</sup>

So we see that Ezekiel is the prophet who most clearly explains the cleansing effects of the Exile. The Exile was not to punish, but to convert the hearts of the people so that they might become living temples of the Holy Spirit. As Origen wrote, “And if our faith

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<sup>35</sup> Ezekiel 37:4-6

<sup>36</sup> Ezekiel 37:10

<sup>37</sup> cf. CCC, #703

<sup>38</sup> John 20:22; Acts of the Apostles 2:17

<sup>39</sup> Ezekiel 40-43

<sup>40</sup> Ezekiel 10

<sup>41</sup> Ezekiel 43:4-5

<sup>42</sup> Mark 1:9-11

<sup>43</sup> CCC, #1179

<sup>44</sup> cf. John 7:37; Revelation 7:17; 22:1-5

<sup>45</sup> Ezekiel 47:13-23; Saint Jerome, *Commentarii in Ezechielem*, 47, 21ff

is put to the test – for just as gold is tried in a furnace, the mettle of our souls is tested through temptations and persecutions – may the occasion find us prepared for battle...for by our preparation and our struggle we prove the love we have for God in Christ Jesus.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Origen, *Homiliae in Ezechielem*, 10, 5; see also James 1:2-15