

INTRODUCTION TO 26TH BIBLEBOOK

EZEKIEL (593-571 B.C.)(13th)

A. The author, date and place of writing	1
B. The recipients and purpose of the book	1
C. The division of the book of Ezekiel	2
D. The explanation of the future salvation of Israel	2
E. The explanation of the name 'Israel'	5
F. The explanation of the new temple, new city and new land of Israel	5
G. The relationship between Ezekiel's prophecies and the New Testament teachings	6
H. The main messages which Ezekiel prophesied	7

A. THE AUTHOR, DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING.

1. The history in Ezekiel's time.

Ezekiel was a member of a priestly family and was one of the exiles taken from Judah to Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar's second invasion in Judah in 597 B.C. He began to prophesy to the Jewish exiles in Babylon 4 years later. Because the prophet Jeremiah is an older contemporary of the prophet Ezekiel, the historical background of both prophets is the same. The only difference is that *Jeremiah was God's prophet to the remnant in Judah, while Ezekiel was God's prophet to the exiles in Babylon*. Jeremiah prophesied mainly during the last 40 years before the final exile of Judah to Babylon (527-586 B.C.), while Ezekiel prophesied for about 22 years between 593 – 571 B.C.

2. The prophet Ezekiel's life.

We know very little about Ezekiel's life. *Ezekiel* means either 'God is strong' or 'God makes strong'. Ezekiel 1:3 and Numbers 4:3 make it clear that Ezekiel was probably called to be a prophet instead of a priest when he became thirty years of age. He lived among the Jewish exiles by the Kebar River. From Babylonian clay tablets we know that the Kebar River was a great water channel that flowed out of the Euphrates River just north of Babylon and flowed in a south easterly direction and back into the Euphrates River close to Ur. Ezekiel possessed his own house (3:24) and he was married (24:16). He must have been a man of education, because he had a good knowledge of the events of history of his time. The way he pictured the Phoenicians shows that he had a good grasp of the world economy (chapter 26-28). The Hebrew language he used shows that he had been much influenced by the Aramean language, which was the trade and political language in the Middle East during that time. The rhythm and pictures he used in his writing show that he had a poetic nature (especially chapters 17, 19, 21, 27). Ezekiel loved his people and it caused him pain when he had to proclaim God's judgement to them (9:8; 11:13).

3. Ezekiel's visions.

Like the prophets before him, Ezekiel received visions of God and was so overwhelmed by what he saw, that he laid on his face for several days. Although the Holy Spirit allowed the prophets to see what others could not see, Ezekiel was fully conscious and maintained his complete personality and balance during the times he received visions. According to Ezekiel 8:1, he received a vision while he was in the presence of the elders, but according to Ezekiel 11:25, they only became aware of that fact after Ezekiel told them of the vision. Also according to Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 1 and Zechariah 1, the prophets who received a vision, continued to see, hear, think, speak, ask and answer questions during the time they received the vision and were later able to remember everything that had happened. Thus, *a vision is simply an out-of-the-ordinary event in which God appears and speaks to a prophet and the prophet knows that he had met God*.

4. The way the book was written.

Several places prove that Ezekiel did not prophesy to people *by writing* his prophecies to them, but *by speaking* directly to them (2:4-7). Ezekiel's prophecies were most probably recorded by himself. This is clear from the fact that the prophet Ezekiel speaks in the first or 'I' form and is the narrator of his own history and prophecies. The only exception is Ezekiel 1:2-3, which must have been added by another person, so that readers may understand that Ezekiel dated all his prophecies from the beginning of the reign of king Jehoiachin in 597 B.C.

5. The date and place the book was written.

According to Ezekiel 1:2 his first recorded prophecy is dated in the fifth year of king Jehoiachin, that is in 593 B.C, and according to Ezekiel 29:17, his last recorded prophecy is dated in the twenty-seventh year of king Jehoiachin, that is in 571 B.C. Thus, the book of Ezekiel must have been written between **593-571 B.C.** in Babylon in modern Iraq.

B. THE RECIPIENTS AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK.

1. The recipients.

Although the contents of Ezekiel's prophecies concern Jerusalem and the inhabitants of Judah, the prophecies are not directed *to the remnant living in Judah*, but are directed *to the exiles living in Babylon* (3:11). Therefore, when the Lord says to him that he must speak to 'the Israelites' or 'the house of Israel', then not the Jews living in Judah are intended, but the Jews living in exile in Babylon are intended (2:3; 3:1,4,17)!

2. The purpose of the book of Ezekiel.

The remnant living in Judah believed that Judah, Jerusalem and the temple would not be destroyed and that they would not go into exile. Thus, the task of *the prophet Jeremiah* was to convince the remnant in Judah that they were ‘a basket full of rotten figs’, that they should not depend on king Zedekiah and the nationalist party, and that the fall of Jerusalem and the temple was imminent¹.

The exiles living in Babylon also believed that the temple would not be destroyed and that they would soon return back to Judah. Thus, the task of *the prophet Ezekiel* was to convince the exiles in Babylon that they should drop every hope on king Zedekiah and on a speedy return to Judah. He prophesied through the spoken word, through prophetic actions and through his very life and suffering that the Lord would destroy Jerusalem, the temple and Judah and that the Lord would build up a new Israel in Babylon. His task was to direct Israel’s attention to the future, in which the Lord would again reveal his mercy to Israel.

C. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK EZEKIEL.

The theme of the book of Ezekiel is:

“Prophecies concerning the destruction and renewal of Israel.”

The book may be divided into three parts as follows:

1. Ezekiel 1 to 24. The coming destruction of Israel.

Part 1 consists of 5 sections:

- Ezekiel 1:1 to 3:21. Ezekiel’s calling and task.
- Ezekiel 3:22 to 7:27. First series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.
- Ezekiel 8:1 to 11:25. Vision of Jerusalem’s sin and rejection.
- Ezekiel 12:1 to 19:14. Second series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.
- Ezekiel 20:1 to 24:27. Third series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.

2. Ezekiel 25 to 32. Prophecies against nations.

Part 2 consists of 3 sections:

- Ezekiel 25. Prophecies against Israel’s close neighbours: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia.
- Ezekiel 26 to 28. Prophecies against Tyre and Sidon.
- Ezekiel 29 to 32. Prophecies against Egypt.

3. Ezekiel 33 to 48. The coming reconstruction of Israel.

Part 3 consists of 2 sections:

- Ezekiel 33-39. The future salvation of Israel. Israel’s return, rebuilding and renewal.
- Ezekiel 40-48. The new temple, city and land: the kingdom of God realised in ‘*the new Israel*’.

D. THE EXPLANATION OF THE FUTURE SALVATION OF ISRAEL.

Ezekiel chapters 33-39 prophesy the future salvation of Israel. Ezekiel prophesied the return of Israel from exile, the restoration of the land to Israel, the renewal of the people of Israel and the final defeat of their enemies.

1. Ezekiel 33. The turning point in Ezekiel’s ministry.

As long as the temple stood, Ezekiel’s task was to proclaim the coming destruction of Israel. Now that it had become a reality, his task was to proclaim the rebuilding of Israel. Now, the Lord’s mercy would triumph over his judgement²! Because *the Lord’s absolute condition for rebuilding and renewal is conversion*, Ezekiel’s task was to proclaim that everyone must turn from his sin and do what is just and right (33:10-20).

2. Ezekiel 34. Prophecies concerning the Lord as the Shepherd of Israel.

Ezekiel prophesied against the evil *shepherds* of Israel (34:1-10). They included the kings, princes, officials, tribal elders and family heads, who had not taken care of God’s flock, but had ruled harshly and brutally over God’s sheep (the believers). Ezekiel prophesied that the Lord himself through the Messiah would be their Shepherd (34:11-16) and he would care for the weak, but judge *the rams and goats* that oppress the sheep through their violence and injustice (34:17-22).

3. Ezekiel 35 and 36. Prophecies concerning the land of Israel restored by the Lord.

Ezekiel prophesied that the land of Israel would be replanted and rebuilt *before* the exiles returned to Israel. Never again would they be deprived from their inheritance (36:1-15).

He prophesied that the former profaned land and its people would be cleansed, not because of anything Israel was or did, but only as a result of God vindicating his own holy name. The restoration and renewal of Israel would be based only on God’s sovereign purpose and grace! That is why *Israel is reminded of their sins, how they profaned God’s holy name among the nations.*

¹ Jeremiah 24

² James 2:13

The Lord would nevertheless accomplish his purpose through deeds that neither the nations nor the masses of Jews believed he would do: He would bring them back to the land Israel (36:24), cleanse them so that they might again come into his presence (36:25), give them a new heart and cause the Holy Spirit to live in their spirit (36:26), so that they would willingly follow God's will (36:27). *Only when this renewal has happened, - and only then (36:33; 37:13-14) - would the new Israel be fit to live in the new land and would God's original purpose be realised, namely that Israel would be the Lord's people and the Lord would be Israel's God (36:28)*³. Then the former ruins would be rebuilt and the former desolate land would be cultivated and the land would become like the garden of Eden (36:33-35)! And the people of Israel would again be numerous (36:37-38).

*The new Israel symbolises the New Testament Community, that would eventually fill the new earth*⁴. *The new Israel would not be natural Israel*⁵, *but the Israel of God*⁶. *They would be circumcised of heart, that is born-again by the Holy Spirit*⁷. *They would be a new creation and boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the sinful world has been crucified to them and they to the world*⁸. *They would inherit the world through the righteousness that comes by faith*⁹ *and finally inherit the new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness*¹⁰.

4. Ezekiel 37. Prophecies concerning the people of Israel renewed by the Lord.

Ezekiel does not give an Old Testament teaching about the resurrection from the dead, but he proclaims good news, showing how God would renew Israel. The valley full of dead bones *symbolises* the whole house of Israel, destroyed and scattered among the nations, without life or hope (37:11). The graves *symbolise*, not literal graves, but the places to which Israel had been scattered and where they were living in exile, just as dead bodies were living in the graves (37:12-13). In this hopeless condition in exile, when Israel was convinced that God had left it permanently, God's grace would be revealed (37:11-12). God says that he himself would open their graves and bring them up from their graves, that is, *bring them out of the countries to which they had been exiled (a symbol of where they lived as unbelievers). He would put his Holy Spirit in them (a symbol of regeneration at Pentecost). And he would resettle them in their own land (a symbol of Israel's continuation and extension into the worldwide Church and the Kingdom of God). Only a born-again Israel would live in a born-again land (36:33).* Ezekiel prophesied that the exiles from the former northern kingdom of Israel and former southern kingdom of Judah would be re-united in the restored land (37:15-22)¹¹ (a symbol of abrogation of the internal divisions among God's people). He prophesied that the glorious future of Israel would be under the rule of the true king David (a reference to the Coming Messiah, Jesus Christ) (37:23-28).

*The new Israel would be spiritually resurrected by hearing his word and believing in him*¹². *They would be rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Jesus Christ*¹³. *Through their baptism in the Spirit they would share in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*¹⁴. *They would submit to Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord*¹⁵.

5. Ezekiel 38 and 39. The final defeat of the enemies of Israel by the Lord.

Israel's recreation and simultaneous return would not be complete without answering the question concerning the opposing nations. From early times, Israel has been harassed by 'the nations' from all sides. First from the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites, then from the Philistines and Canaanites, after that from the Arameans and finally from the Assyrians and Babylonians, who attacked Israel from the north. More and more Israel began to regard 'the Gentile nations' as the inimical powers against God. The Gentile nations thus *symbolise* all the people on earth who oppose the living God and his people. Ezekiel prophesied that the last trial of the new Israel would be that the opposing nations would attack the new Israel in order to try to rob it of its peace and riches. But God would protect his people and destroy the opposing nations!

According to Ezekiel 38:17 this prophecy concerning Gog and his hordes was also prophesied before by other prophets. The north has always been the great unknown to Israel, from where the inimical powers against God's people was expected to come¹⁶.

³ Exodus 6:7

⁴ cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:1-2

⁵ Romans 9:6a; 1 Corinthians 10:18 ("Israel according to the flesh")

⁶ Romans 9:6b; Galatians 6:16 ("Israel of God")

⁷ Romans 2:28-29

⁸ Galatians 3:14-15

⁹ Romans 4:13

¹⁰ 2 Peter 3:13

¹¹ The re-unification of Israel with Judah is also prophesied by the other prophets! Hosea 1:11; 3:5; Amos 9:11 + Acts 15:14-17; Micha 2:12; 5:2; Isaiah 11:12-13; Jeremiah 3:6-18; 13:11; 31:1; Zachariah 9:10 (a reference to the extension of peace to all nations); 9:13; 10:6.

¹² John 5:24

¹³ Colossians 1:13

¹⁴ Romans 6:3-4

¹⁵ Romans 10:9-13

¹⁶ Isaiah 14:31; Jeremiah 1:15; 6:1,22

In the book of Ezekiel, these northern nations were great hordes of horsemen, and Israel knew them as *Scythians*, who since 630 B.C. were notorious in the whole of western Asia and also devastated the fruitful Plain of Sharon and Philistia. Although the names of the attacking nations change and sometimes was Assur, and sometimes was Babel, there would come a time when the opposing nations together would attack Jerusalem¹⁷. Although the name 'Gog' is not mentioned by the other prophets, they all refer to the same end-time event.

The leader of the attacking hordes, called 'Gog', was a historical person, but became the *personification* of the inimical powers opposed to God and his people. Ezekiel did not need to explain to the Israelites who Gog was and where the land of Magog was, because these were known facts to the exiles. Gog is described as the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, which was located in the north in Asia Minor. He was most probably the known Gyges of the Lydians, who was a fierce king in Asia Minor in about 660 B.C. Most likely Ezekiel took this Gog or Gyges from Asia Minor as representative of the alliance of nations attacking Israel from the north. 'Gog' becomes a symbol of the *Old Testament Antichrist, the last enemy who must be defeated before the kingdom of God would be completely established*.

The opposing nations are named as Meshech, Tubal, Magog and Beth-Togarmah. They were Phrygians and Cappadocians living in Asia Minor in the north. Persia and Gomer were Iranian people originally living in the east. Cush and Put were North African people living in the south. It is noteworthy that the traditional enemies of Israel are *not* mentioned among these nations attacking Israel, because in Ezekiel chapter 24-32 they had already come to know the power of the God of the Bible and no longer dared to attack the people of the God of the Bible (36:36).

Ezekiel prophesied that this attack would happen "after many days, in future years" (38:8), "in days to come" (38:16; 39:8). With all the prophets, this expression means 'the end-time' in the sense of the time when the glory of the Messiah would shine over the new Israel and God's purpose with the new Israel would have been fully realised¹⁸.

It is noteworthy that according to Ezekiel 38:3-9, God would sovereignly bring Gog and his hordes out against Israel. This means that Gog would only be *an instrument* in the Lord's hands¹⁹. Although Gog would be fully responsible for his actions, his actions would be determined and controlled by God²⁰. This shows that the God of the Bible is the sovereign Ruler of all the nations on earth and of all events that take place in history²¹. Therefore, this attack by Gog and his hordes would be no surprise to God.

In Ezekiel 38:19-23 and 39:1-20, Ezekiel prophesied how God would sovereignly break the power of these opposing nations (a symbol of the world of unbelievers). Through a mighty earthquake, hailstorms and burning sulphur, possibly by volcanic actions, God would destroy these opposing nations. The vast armies, their officers and their horses would become a great sacrificial meal, not for the gods, but for the wild animals²². *During this attack and destruction of the opposing nations, Israel would not have to fight, but would only be spectators of God's mighty acts of salvation*. In Ezekiel 39:21-24, Ezekiel stated the reason of this last confrontation between God and the opposing nations as God vindicating his holy name by displaying his glory. From that day onwards, Israel would know that the God of the Bible is really their God. And the nations would know the real reason why the God of the Bible had previously punished Israel, Jerusalem and the temple with destruction.

In this passage, Ezekiel's prophecy returns from the future to the present suffering of Israel. The destroyers are no longer Gog and his hordes, but the Babylonians (39:23). Thus, the picture of the last days serves to comfort Israel in their present situation of exile and assures them of the certainty of their coming deliverance. Also *Israel must learn to live by faith, to believe God's prophetic word, even when it might take a long time before it is fulfilled, and to submit to God's sovereign guidance in their present lives*.

In Ezekiel 39:25-29, Ezekiel gave a summary of God's end-time actions. *He prophesied that a new period in Israel's history was about to begin: The three great end-time actions from the Old Testament perspective were:*

- The return of Israel from exile (this happened in 536 B.C.)
- God revealing himself holy in the sight of many nations (this happened before the first coming of the Messiah, Christ. He destroyed the opposing nations: the new Babylonian Empire (626-539 B.C.), the Medo-Persian Empire (539-331 B.C.) the Greek-Syrian Empire (312-56 B.C.) and the Roman Empire (31 B.C. onwards).
- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit (39:29)²³ (this happened in 30 A.D.).
- Ultimately God would destroy Gog and Magog, representing the unbelieving nations gathered for battle against the camp of God's people, the New Testament Church²⁴.

¹⁷ Joel 3:1-16; Jeremiah 6:22-23; 25:15-33; 30:23-24; Zephaniah 1:14-18; 3:8-9; Zechariah 12:2-9; 14:1-21; cf. Revelation 20:7-10

¹⁸ Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 23:20; Hosea 3:5

¹⁹ Proverbs 16:4

²⁰ Genesis 45:5,8; Isaiah 5:26; 7:18-20; 10:5

²¹ Isaiah 41:4,22-29; 43:9-13; 44:8; 45:21

²² Revelation 19:17-21

²³ Isaiah 32:15-20; 44:3-5; Joel 2:28-32; Zechariah 12:10-14

²⁴ Revelation 20:7-10

E. THE EXPLANATION OF THE NAME 'ISRAEL'.

There are Jews and Christians today, who regard 'Israel' only in nationalistic terms. They believe that the physical nation of Israel is still the people of God and that God has a different plan of salvation for the physical nation of Israel than for all the other nations in the world.

However, a closer study of *both the Old Testament and the New Testament will show that the prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus and the apostles of the New Testament did not see Israel primarily as a nationalistic entity, but as a religious entity: 'Israel' is the community of those who have the God of the Bible as their God.*

While the majority of the physical nation of Israel would perish, the remnant of Israel or true spiritual Israel would be saved, and thus God would fulfil his promises to Israel²⁵. Isaiah 10:20-22 says, "Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant (of chosen believers) will return to the Mighty God (=Jesus Christ)²⁶. These "survivors will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel." "Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous" for the rest. And in the New Testament the apostle Paul says, "Not all who are descended from (natural) Israel²⁷, are (spiritual / the new) Israel"²⁸.

F. THE EXPLANATION OF THE NEW TEMPLE, NEW CITY AND NEW LAND OF ISRAEL.

Ezekiel chapters 40-48 prophesy the time of the new temple, the new city and the new land of Israel. Ezekiel prophesied the final glorious time in which the kingdom of God finds its fulfilment in the new Israel.

1. The agreement between the inner renewal and outer forms.

Ezekiel proclaims that *'the display of God's glory' (39:21) and 'the outpouring of God's Spirit' (39:29) must find expression in the new life in the new land! God's glory is not only exalted above the earth, but descends in the forms of new life on earth. God wants to share his completeness to his new creation!* In the prophetic picture of Ezekiel, the new forms of life find expression in the new redeemed people of God (whose sins have been atoned for), the new temple, the new temple service and the new land and new city²⁹.

It is noteworthy that Ezekiel 40-48 does not speak of *the creation of new forms* of life in Israel, but rather of *a reformation of the old forms* of life in Israel! The forms that Moses received in the Ceremonial Law (the priests, the temple, the festivals, the sacrifices, etc.) remain the foundation for the new forms of life in the new Israel. But these new forms of life will be permeated by the Holy Spirit and will therefore change the old forms of life in several ways.

Ezekiel not only prophesied the inner renewal through a new heart and new spirit, but also the necessity that this inner renewal will have a new outer form. His message is that a new body belongs to a new spirit. Only when the whole world becomes the reflection of God's glory, then God's honour is upheld. Ezekiel prophesied that this future revelation of God's glory would happen *in and through the new Israel*, that is, in and through God's chosen believers.

By comparing Ezekiel 1 with Ezekiel 40-48, we see that the glory of God, which the cherubim represented transcendently, will go in and through Israel forth into the whole world. This is represented by the cherubim going 'straight ahead' (1:9,12) and the new people of Israel likewise going 'straight ahead' when they come to worship the Lord on the great festival days (46:9). *The new Israel will be on earth what the cherubim are in heaven!* Just as the cherubim are the bearers of the divine life, likewise in the new Israel there will be a river of life (47:1-12). The throne of God, which hovered above the heads of the cherubim (1:26) has made its place in the new temple (43:7). The new name of the new city will be "the Lord is there" (48:35).

Just as the throne vehicle had the form of a square (1:5-9), likewise the new temple area (42:15-20), the new city (48:15-17) and the entire sacred area (48:20) that will be the new centre of the new Israel will have the form of squares.³⁰ In this way, *every outward form on earth is filled with new inner and holy life. 'Measuring' the squares is symbolic for 'separating the holy from the common' (42:20). It symbolises separating the remnant of chosen believers from the rest of the natural nation.*

In the new temple, the people, priests and prince come in and out, to bring the new sacrifices and to celebrate the new festivals. The new city is shared by all tribes and the names on the gates at the four points of the compass signify complete equality among the believers (48:30-34)³¹. Each tribe has an equal inheritance in the new land. Thus, Ezekiel's vision concerning what he saw of the LORD himself in chapter 1 results in his vision concerning what the new temple, the new city and the new land in chapter 40-48 will look like.

²⁵ Romans 9:25-29

²⁶ Isaiah 9:6-7

²⁷ Natural Israel is called 'Israel according to the flesh' (Greek: Israél kata sarx)(1 Corinthians 10:18) and spiritual Israel is called 'the Israel of God' (Greek: Israél tou theou) (Galatians 6:16).

²⁸ Romans 9:6

²⁹ cf. Isaiah 11:1-9; Revelation 21 – 22.

³⁰ cf. Revelation 21:15-16

³¹ cf. Revelation 21:12-13

*Ezekiel shows that when God imparts his life in the inner man, then it will find expression in outer forms, which are in agreement with the inner reality! That is, when the Heavenly Jerusalem descends as the New Jerusalem onto the new earth, then people and all creation are renewed*³². He shows that God's method is not from outer conformity to inner new life, but rather from inner renewal to outer renewal! The (born-again) new life and power present in the new people will always press for similar new forms in their outward life. In New Testament language: regeneration (by God's Spirit) will lead to justification (by faith). Justification will lead to sanctification (of life). And sanctification will lead to glorification (in the resurrected believer and in the renewal of the earth)³³.

2. The new society is no longer living under the dominion of sin.

Although the new Israel³⁴ would be living on earth, Ezekiel describes the new Israel as no longer subject to the destroying power of sin³⁵. The rights and duties of the prince are very limited: it is not said that he must maintain justice in the land or defend it against attacks or promote its material welfare, but only that he must provide for the offerings of the great festivals (45:9-17). The same is true of the people: all they must do is bring sacrifices (46:19-24)³⁶. The prince is satisfied with his small task, the Levites accept that they may no longer serve as priests, and the priests teach and judge without anyone resisting. The financial contributions flow without trouble. Lies and deceit no longer exist in merchandise or industry. The poor no longer fear the rich. The festivals are celebrated automatically. There is absolutely no sign of the intervention of a government. *The prophetic picture is of a society no longer living under the kingdom of sin.* Sin has been robbed of its dominion.³⁷ This is an Old Testament prophetic description of the New Jerusalem on the new earth!

G. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EZEKIEL'S PROPHECIES AND THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS.

Ezekiel is a prophet of the Old Testament period, but *prophesies about the New Testament period in terms of the Old Testament realities.*

1. The Old Testament prophets saw all future events only in prophetic perspective.

Ezekiel described all these end-time (eschatological) events as happening close to his own time. This is because he could only see things in *prophetic perspective*, that is, *he saw all future events as one whole picture in which the relationships of the distinct parts were in reality different than what they seemed.* It was as if he stood in a lane of trees, in which he could clearly distinguish the trees closest to him, but the further the trees were separated from him, the more they flowed into one another. He could see the mountain ranges in the distant future, but could not see the long distances between the closest and furthest mountain range. He could see the coming of the Messiah-King, but could not see the long New Testament period between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. He could see *that* certain end-time (eschatological) events would happen, but he could not distinguish clearly *when* they would happen. For the prophets of the Old Testament, all these end-time events would happen together 'in the last days', 'in the time coming.'

For example, the prophets of the Old Testament prophesied that the return of Israel from exile in Babylon and the restoration of the land to Israel would be immediately followed by the coming of the Messiah King and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and these events would be immediately followed by the final judgement of the godless nations and the renewal of the whole earth. They prophesied that all these end-time events belonged together 'in the last days'. But the Bible clearly shows that these events were in fact separated from one another by centuries!

The coming of the Messiah and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place *more than 5 centuries after* the return of Israel from the Babylonian exile and the restoration of the land to Israel! God did *not* reveal to the prophets that there would be great lengths of time between these events.

The prophetic perspective of the prophets also explains why Ezekiel described what he saw in his visions without taking the factual proportions into consideration. The temple mountain is 'a very high mountain', something mount Zion was not (40:2). The new temple buildings are separated from the new city (48:15), which was not the case during the times of the kings. The new land of Canaan is seen as a long rectangle, the coastal area of the Philistines is now included, while the part of Israel on the eastern side of the Jordan is left out of consideration, all facts which were never the case during the time of the kings (chapter 48). Finally, each tribe gets the same size of inheritance, all in parallel strips of land stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan and in a different area than it had before.

³² cf. Revelation 21:1 – 22:5

³³ Romans 8:29-30

³⁴ The new Israel is continued in the New Testament Church and enlarged to include the believers from all the other nations.

³⁵ Romans 6:5-10

³⁶ Romans 12:1-2

³⁷ Romans 6:6-7

2. The Old Testament prophets did *not* know the mystery that God's future plan included the Gentile nations.

According to Ephesians 3:4-6, the prophets of the Old Testament were not enlightened about the *mystery*, namely, that through the gospel the Gentiles would be heirs together with Israel³⁸, that believing Jews and Gentiles would be members of the same body, which is the Church³⁹, and that believing Jews and Gentiles would be sharers together in God's promises made to Israel⁴⁰. The prophets in the Old Testament did not know the mystery or plan of God that the Gentile nations would become heirs of this future glory together with Israel and that on equal footing with Israel.⁴¹

2 Corinthians 1:20 says that all the promises God has made in the Bible are 'Yes' and 'Amen' in Jesus the Messiah. This means that *all the promises God has made to his chosen believing people in Israel as 'his people' during the Old Testament period, are promises to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ since the beginning of the New Testament period!*

Although the prophets in the Old Testament did not know this truth, the apostles in the New Testament did know this truth! For example, in Romans 9:25-26, the apostle Paul quoted two promises that God made to *Israel* during the Old Testament period, but understood them as also applying to the *Gentiles* in the New Testament period! He quoted Hosea 2:23 and Hosea 1:10, in which the rejection of natural Israel and the restoration of the remnant of Israel during the Old Testament period has its parallel in the exclusion of the Gentiles from God's covenant favour in the beginning and the acceptance of the believing remnant of Gentiles into that favour later⁴²!

Because the Old Testament prophets did not know this mystery or plan of God, Ezekiel could only see the future glory of God as happening in and through Israel. Ezekiel's picture of the future glory of God's kingdom does not break through the boundaries of God's Old Testament people. Because Ezekiel lived before the time of fulfilment, which arrived with the first coming of Jesus Christ, he could only describe this future worship of God in terms of what people could understand in his time, that is, in terms of the Old Testament temple and its ceremonies (chapter 40-48), and not yet in terms of the New Testament "worship of God in spirit and in truth"⁴³! Ezekiel could only picture the future revelation of God's glory in terms of the Old Testament forms, like the people of Israel, the temple and its sacrifices and priests, and the land of Israel and not yet in terms of the New Testament forms, like the Church, the priesthood of believers and the new earth. God gave Ezekiel a revelation of the future glory of all his future people, but only with words and pictures which the Jews in his day would be able to understand.

3. The prophets of the Old Testament *must* be interpreted in the light of the New Testament revelation.

2 Corinthians 3:14 says, "To this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. ... Only in Christ is it taken away!" Thus, whoever tries to understand the Old Testament prophecies without the new and complete revelation that Jesus Christ has brought, will be like a person having his mind and heart covered with a veil! It is not possible to interpret the Old Testament prophecies correctly without the New Testament revelation!

Colossians 2:17 and Hebrews 10:1 say that the Old Testament Law and its forms are "a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Therefore, *the Old Testament revelation must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament revelation! The 'shadows' of the Old Testament revelation must always be interpreted in the light of the 'realities' of the New Testament revelation!* The Old Testament teaching concerning the end-time (eschatology) pictures the glorious future of God's people only in terms of *the new Israel*.

But the New Testament teaching concerning the end-time (eschatology) unfolds the Old Testament teaching concerning the end-time much further and shows that it not only includes the believers from Israel (like the 12 apostles, the 120 believers, the 3000 converts at Pentecost, etc) but also the believers from the Gentile nations⁴⁴. The New Testament revelation teaches that God's end-time plan involves all the people of God, whether they are believers in Christ from the Jews or believers in Christ from the Gentiles! Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this (Jewish) sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one Shepherd"⁴⁵.

H. THE MAIN MESSAGES WHICH EZEKIEL PROPHESED.

1. Ezekiel prophesied messages of judgement.

In chapters 1 to 24, Ezekiel prophesied the judgement of God on the depraved remnant of Jews living in Jerusalem and Judah in order to cause the Jews living in exile in Babylon no longer to put their hope on king Zedekiah and also no longer to expect that they would soon return from exile to Judah. He prophesied against the sinful ways of the Israelites, especially against their gross idolatry and their unfaithfulness to the Lord. He prophesied against the corrupt leaders of

³⁸ Romans 8:16-17

³⁹ Ephesians 2:15-16

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:20-22

⁴¹ Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 1:10-12

⁴² Ephesians 2:11-22

⁴³ John 4:23-24

⁴⁴ Matthew 28:19; Revelation 5:9-10; Revelation 7:9

⁴⁵ John 10:16

Israel: the evil kings, the corrupt priests and the false prophets. Ezekiel's prophecies of judgement against the evil leaders of Israel is summarised very well in chapter 22:23-31. The princes are like lions robbing their own people of their possessions and killing them.

The priests do violence to God's law by teaching that there is no difference between the holy and the common or between the clean and the unclean. The government officials are like wolves tearing the people apart in order to make unjust gain. And the prophets whitewash all the corrupt deeds of the leaders for them by false visions and lying divinations. And finally, the people of the land practise extortion, commit robbery, oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien by denying him justice.

In chapters 25 to 32, Ezekiel prophesied the judgement of God on the nations surrounding Judah during the time of Nebuchadnezzar's invasions.

2. Ezekiel prophesied messages of salvation.

After the destruction of the old Israel, that is, of Judah, Jerusalem and its temple, Ezekiel began to prophesy the rebuilding of the new Israel⁴⁶. He prophesied the return from exile, the restoration of the land to Israel, the rebuilding of the land of Israel, the renewal of the people of Israel and the final defeat of the Gentile nations opposing the new Israel.

But *this change from the old Israel to the new Israel will not take place without the coming of the Messiah*, the One who will be the King of new Israel and who will shepherd the new Israel for ever and ever. This change from the old Israel to the new Israel will not take place without repentance, conversion, renewal of heart and without the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this change from the old Israel to the new Israel will not take place because of anything the Jews are or do, but will happen only because of whom the Lord is and what he does! This glorious future of the new Israel will be based, not on works of the law, but on God's grace! Therefore, Ezekiel prophesied the coming of the Messiah, whom he calls 'the Lord's Servant, David'.

3. Ezekiel proclaimed the solidarity and individual responsibility of people.

Ezekiel 18 tells that the people who opposed Ezekiel used a proverb saying, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." They blamed their ancestors for all the evil that was happening to them in their day.

The Bible teaches both the solidarity of people together with their nation, church or family as well as the individual responsibility of every person.

The solidarity of all the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 says that God would punish the children for the sin of their fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God, but he would show love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. The Ten Commandments emphasise the bad and good influence fathers can have on their children, in order to warn them not to disobey God and to encourage them to obey God. The Ten Commandments warn against evil that has not yet been committed and make people aware that their personal sins affect not only their own destinies, but also the destinies of the generations after them.

The individual responsibility of everyone in Israel. In contrast, Ezekiel warns against evil that has already been committed and makes people aware that God holds them personally responsible for their sins. He emphasises that every individual will be held responsible for the kind of life he lived on earth. Ezekiel 18:21-22 says, "If a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offences he has committed will be remembered against him." But Ezekiel 18:23-24 says, "If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, ... he will die. None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered." Thus, Ezekiel teaches that *the principle of solidarity between fathers and children does not abolish the principle of individual responsibility.*

4. Ezekiel proclaimed conversion and renewal of heart.

In Ezekiel 18:30-31, the prophet proclaimed the need to repent and turn away from sin. This conversion is connected with rebirth of which Ezekiel also speaks. Only when people turn away from their life of sin and are being born again by God's Spirit, will they really be God's people and will God really be their God (11:18-20)! The work of God is not only negative in the sense that *he saves people out of their degenerate life*, but it is also positive in the sense that *he saves them to be his renewed people.*

5. Ezekiel prophesied the coming Messiah.

In Ezekiel 17:22-24 the coming Messiah is pictured as a tender sprig taken from the very top of a cedar tree, which represents the house of David, and is planted on a high mountain of Israel, where it will become a splendid cedar tree, in which birds of every kind will nest and find shelter in the shade of its branches. All other trees, that is, all other nations will know that God sovereignly destroyed the kings of Judah, but raised up the Messiah King. God will re-unite the former divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, when he brings them back from exile to Assyria and Babylon to their land

⁴⁶ The new or spiritual Israel consists of the remnant of chosen believers from the old Israel that is continued in the New Testament in the chosen believers from the old Israel and enlarged to include the chosen believers from the Gentile nations. The new Israel is the New Testament Church.

(34:20-31; 37:21-28). There God will save them from all their sinful backsliding and cleanse them. There they will be God's people and he will be their God. And there his servant David will be King as well as Shepherd over them. There they will live in complete safety and peace *forever*, with God's sanctuary in their midst *forever* and with the Messiah King as their king *forever*.

It is very clear that Ezekiel is *not describing a limited future period of prosperity for the nation of Israel* under the Messiah King, but *an everlasting new condition, which can only be compared with the new heaven and the new earth of the New Testament!*

Because Ezekiel still belonged to the Old Testament revelation, he could only describe this glorious future of the new Israel in terms people of old Israel could understand, that is, in terms of a new temple and its new worship, a new city and a new land, and a new people living in the new land.

*The Lord did not reveal to Ezekiel his future plan that the Gentiles would be heirs of this glorious future together and on equal footing with Israel. That plan was only revealed at the first coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament!*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ephesians 3:2-6