

I 54 48:30-35

THE BOOK of EZEKIEL

Introduction

The prophecy of Ezekiel belongs to the period immediately prior to and during the captivity of the people of Judah in Babylon following the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, was taken captive in 597 BC, at the first siege of Jerusalem by Babylon, along with King Jehoiachin, and all the princes and mighty men of Judah (2 Kings 24:14). In 593 BC, the fifth year of his exile (1:2), and some years before Nebuchadnezzar's final assault on Jerusalem in 587/6, he received his call from God to exercise a prophetic ministry to God's people, both those already in captivity in Babylon and those yet remaining in Jerusalem. Our Daily Bible Readings on 2 Kings (Sep 61 - Mar 62 and Jul - Dec 72), and on Zephaniah, Obadiah and Nahum (May - Jul 65 and Aug - Oct 77) should be consulted for general background information.

I) I:I

The chronology of the period is as follows (the dates are approximate):

Josiah	638-608 BC
Jehoahaz	608 (3 months)
Jehoiakim	608-597
Jehoiachin	597 (3 months)
Zedekiah	597-587/6

Josiah was the last good king of Judah, and with his death at the battle of Megiddo in 608 BC the last hope for God's people was extinguished (see 2 Kings 23:31ff). Following his death, his son Jehoahaz reigned, but only for three months, when Pharaoh of Egypt took him prisoner and put his brother Eliakim (known as Jehoiakim) on the throne. Jehoiakim was succeeded in 597 by his son Jehoiachin, who reigned only three months before being carried captive to Babylon along with the cream of Judah's population. Zedekiah was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar as puppet-king and reigned for 11 years until, rebelling against Babylon in spite of the warning entreaty of Jeremiah, he was subdued, and Jerusalem was razed to the ground in 587/6 BC. The Captivity thus took place in two stages, with a 10-11 year period between them, with the city of Jerusalem still standing after the capture of the princes and nobles of Judah, then the final visitation which saw the devastation and destruction of the city. It is clear that Ezekiel was taken captive with the first contingent, while there were still many in Jerusalem and Judah and the city was still standing. And briefly - if we may anticipate the teaching of the prophecy - Ezekiel's message was to assure the exiles already in Babylon that there was no ground for their false hope, that their stay there would be short and that they would soon be back in their beloved city. 'No', he said, 'the city will fall, and the exile will be long.'

2) 1:1

What was said in the previous Note helps us in formulating an analysis of Ezekiel's prophecy, for in fact it contains a number of specific dates - 1:1, 2; 3:16; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1. Of these, it will be seen that the first five fall within ten years of Ezekiel being taken captive to Babylon, i.e. they belong to the period before the second captivity in 587/6 BC. This means that chapters 1-24 deal with prophecies uttered before Jerusalem finally fell, and this in fact comprises half the book. Just as clearly, chapters 25-32 constitute a section on their own, being a series of prophecies against the heathen nations, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt. The dates of these prophecies are in the main during the time of the siege of Jerusalem which, we should bear in mind, continued for two years.

Finally, chapters 33-48 after the final fall of Jerusalem. In the main these chapters deal with the prospects and hope of restoration, with (i) predictions of new life to be restored by God (33-39), and (ii) descriptions of the new order to be established, with the wonderful vision of the Temple (40-48). We thus have a threefold division, before, during and after the Fall of Jerusalem, full and detailed analysis of which follows in the next Note.

3) I:I

The following more detailed analysis will be useful for reference in our ongoing study:

I DENUNCIATION OF JUDAH	(i-xxiv)
(Prophecies before the Siege of Jerusalem)	
1. <u>The Prophet's Call and Commission.</u>	(i-iii)
(i) The Vision	i
(ii) The Voice	ii-iii
2. <u>Prophecies of Approaching Judgment</u>	(iv-vii)
(i) The Four Signs	iv, v
(ii) The Denunciations	vi, vii
3. <u>The Moral Necessity for Judgment</u>	(viii-xi)
(i) Judah's Guilt and Punishment	viii, ix
(ii) The Vision of the Cherubim	x
(iii) The Death of Pelatiah	xi
4. <u>The Absolute Certainty of Judgment</u>	(xii-xix)
(i) The Captivity Foretold	xii-xiv
(ii) The Exposure of Judah	xv, xvi
(iii) Overthrow and Lament	xvii-xix
5. <u>The Righteousness of the Judgment</u>	(xx-xxiv)
(i) God's Goodness and Judah's Guilt	xx
(ii) The Sword of the Lord	xxi
(iii) The Sin of the People	xxii
(iv) The Degradation	xxiii
(v) The Destruction of the City	xxiv
II VISITATION OF THE NATIONS	(xxv-xxxii)
(Prophecies during the Siege of Jerusalem)	
1. Against Ammon	(xxv. 1-7)
2. Against Moab	(xxv. 8-11)
3. Against Edom	(xxv. 12-14)
4. Against Philistia	(xxv.15-17)
5. Against Tyre	(xxvi-xxviii.19)
6. Against Sidon	(xxviii. 20-26)
7. Against Egypt	(xxix-xxxii)
III RESTORATION OF ISRAEL	(xxxiii-xlviii)
(Prophecies after the Siege of Jerusalem)	
1. <u>The Restored Nation</u>	(xxxiii-xxxix)
(i) The Watchman and the Shepherds	xxxiii-xxxiv
(ii) Restoration of Israel	xxxv-xxxvii
(iii) Judgment of God and Magog	xxxviii-xxxix
2. <u>The Restored Order</u>	xl-xlviii.)
(i) The Vision of the Temple	xl-xliv. 12
(ii) The People and the Temple	xliv.13-xlvi
(iii) The Land and the Temple	xlvii-xlviii

4) 1:1-3

These verses constitute the superscription of the book, introducing the circumstances in which Ezekiel saw the remarkable vision described in the following verses. The 'thirtieth year' in 1 refers, most probably to Ezekiel's age in the fifth year of King Jeoiachin's captivity, i.e. 592 BC. Ezekiel would then have been twenty-five when the captivity took place, which means he was born about 622 BC. Even allowing for the approximateness of these dates this has great significance. King Josiah, who came to the throne about 638 BC (some say 640) began the extensive work of reformation and renewal in the eighth year of his reign (c 632-630), and discovered the book of the law in the Temple ten years later. It was this that led to the widespread spiritual awakening in the land, about the time when Ezekiel was born. To have been born in the midst of a revival, in some of the greatest days of the nation's history, and to have been brought up in Jerusalem at a time when Jeremiah was exercising his mighty ministry there, must surely have meant that Ezekiel's earliest memories were of times when the Spirit of God was abroad in the land and when a great man of God was exercising a tremendous ministry. That is a great time to be born, and it must certainly have shaped his early life in a decisive way. Here, then, was one whose future life and work was fashioned and directed in a time of awakening and renewal - the commentators are quick to point out that Ezekiel's prophecy shows all manner of influences from Jeremiah's writings. It is not difficult, surely, to apply this, and to make us realise that the lives of the children born into our fellowship may well be shaped decisively by the Spirit that is abroad among us at any given time. What a responsibility for any people, and what a challenge to prayer!

5) 1:1-3

The reference in 3 to Ezekiel's genealogy is also significant. He was of a priestly family, and from what we can gather from among the higher echelons of the priestly tradition, and doubtless, by heredity, destined for high office. We know from other parts of the Old Testament that priests began to officiate in the sanctuary at the age of thirty. Ezekiel had come to this age (1), but there was no Temple in which to worship, let alone to serve, for he was a captive by the river Chebar, and the Temple was in Jerusalem. So that, by reason of the captivity and the sins of his people, and through no fault of his own, he was denied his true patrimony. But this is the wonderful thing: what the tragic circumstances of his time robbed him of, and made impossible for him, God fulfilled in another and better way: he became, not a priest, but a prophet. This, surely, is the significance of the reference to his thirtieth year. It is as if Ezekiel were saying 'Here am I in Babylon: by my birth into the family of Buzi I was destined to be a priest in the sanctuary of the Lord, and instead I am languishing by the rivers of Babylon. But God has come to me and said, "I have something different - and better - for you: you are to be My mouthpiece to your fellow exiles, you are going to be a prophet for Me".'

6) 1:4-28

The vision that was given to Ezekiel by the river Chebar was unusual and strange, even bizarre, full of eastern imagery, but nevertheless tremendous on any estimate, and behind and beyond the unfamiliar imagery we sense the majesty and the glory of it. There is much that can be, and indeed needs to be, said about it. First of all, this: what came to Ezekiel was a vision of the glory and sovereignty of God, and of His throne. In this we see the remarkable similarity to the vision given to the Apostle John on the lonely isle of Patmos. Both Ezekiel and Revelation begin with a theophany, because essentially both have the same message. And one of the things that vision is meant to convey is the sensation of constant movement with wheels within wheels going this way and that. The point that is being made is this: when you are a captive under foreign domination you tend to think that everything for you is finished, and that God is dead, and that nothing is happening, or can happen anymore. But the heavens opened, and it was as if God had said to Ezekiel, 'You think nothing is happening? Look then at this. Look at the movement, look at the wheels, look at the machinery of the divine sovereignty working ceaselessly.' This is the general message. The world was trembling under the sovereignty of Nebuchadnezzar, but God was saying, 'there is a bigger sovereignty than that, the real sovereignty in the world is Mine.'

'Thrice blessed is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible'.

7) 1:4-28

Before we look in detail at the vision itself it will be useful for us to look at one or two other references throughout the book. Here in chapter 1 Ezekiel is given a revelation of the glory of God, and this is the theme of his prophecy. Then, in 10:1ff, there is another revelation of the glory of the Lord, but now we see that glory withdrawing itself from the Temple because of the sin of the people (18). Furthermore, in 11:23 we read of the glory of the Lord going up from the midst of the city. First, the Temple is deserted and forsaken, and then the city. Then, finally, in chapter 48, where we have the intricate descriptions of the new Temple and the new Holy City, we are told that the name of the city would be Jehovah-Shammah, 'The Lord is there', and the God of glory has come back to the city and the Temple that He forsook and the wheel has turned full circle. Such is Ezekiel's message of hope. Furthermore - and this is a wonderful thought - the first vision is of the glory of God in the heavens, the final one of the God of glory down in the city among His people. Is not this the message of the Incarnation, and does not Ezekiel thus bear testimony to what was to come: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

8) 1:4-28

The vision given to Ezekiel has a fourfold component, and we must look at it in some detail, but first of all we should see the association of ideas it contains. In 3 we are told that the word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel, but in 4 that word is something he 'saw': the vision was so vivid, and the revelation so acute, that it could be 'seen' to be the word of the Lord. Furthermore, in 28, we are told that out of the vision came a 'voice'. This double association of ideas is significant, for it reminds us that ethereal or mystical visions need to be 'earthed', in the way that one earths an electric current. Visions without a voice are best treated with caution, for they have a great potential for leading people astray, tempting them to attribute more importance to them than they warrant. The vision appears to have emerged from a natural phenomenon, a whirlwind storm building up from the horizon - a common enough sight in eastern, tropical countries. It was only as the prophet's attention was diverted to it that it became the vehicle of the revelation and the context in which God revealed Himself to him, as the whirlwind began to manifest supernatural associations. The word 'amber' used to describe the brightness emerging from the storm is one which refers to shining metal, and in every case where it is used in Scripture, it refers to the dazzling splendour of the glory of God. Ezekiel was not slow to identify what he was seeing.

9) 1:4-28

Out of the midst of the fire there came the appearance of awesome living creatures moving in rhythmic unity, vast in magnitude, and representing in their features all God's main creatures (5-14) - the four different realms, as the commentators say, of God's creation, man as the supreme work of God's creation coming first, then the lion, king of the wild beasts, the ox from among the domestic animals, and the eagle, chief of the birds of the air. The whole created order is represented here as worshipping the living God. Next, in 15-21, we have the sensation of movement, with wheels rotating in harmony with one another and with the movements of the living ones. Then, in 22ff, 'the likeness of the firmament' over-arching the ceaseless activity of the living ones, and above the firmament a voice and the likeness of a throne, and the manifestation of a Person, of the nature of fire, surrounded by a glory like that of a rainbow. Bizarre, and even grotesque to our minds in its eastern symbolism, the message is nevertheless not in doubt: it conveys the 'otherness', the mystery, of God, but not only so, it is the sensation of constant movement that is so unmistakably conveyed. This must surely have been a word of great assurance to Ezekiel. The fact is, in time of crisis and disaster, it often seems as if God were hopelessly inactive, and indifferent to our plight. This vision is a fresh reminder that 'God is on the field when He is most invisible' and that behind the scenes the vast and complex movement of the divine will and purpose is ceaselessly in operation (this is the point of the 'wheels within wheels' idea). This is what Ezekiel saw in relation to his own situation and that of his people, and this is what is unfolded in this prophecy.

10) 1:4-28

The 'fire' in the vision symbolises judgment, and the first twenty-four chapters of the prophecy speak of the judgment of God abroad upon His people. The last verses of the chapter speak of a rainbow, and the rainbow is God's covenant sign. The point that is being made is that the wheel of divine judgment was turning, bringing bitter things for them, but within the context of that judgment the wheel of mercy was also turning, and out of the judgment was to come the divine mercy. Thus, out of the first twenty-four chapters, dark and gloomy as they are, with judgment promised and sealed to a rebellious people, there comes marvellous messages of mercy, with the promise of a renewed people, a new covenant, a new heart and a new spirit, with the glory of the Lord coming down to dwell among His people.

It will be noted that Ezekiel describes the vision as it were from the lower parts upwards, from the living creatures and the wheels up to the throne and the Person Who is upon it. He is the climax of the vision, and to speak of 'the likeness as the appearance of a man' is not mere anthropomorphism (particularly when we have in Revelation 4 such a striking parallel in the vision of the throne and the Lamb slain). One cannot but think that in some way beyond our telling or our understanding what Ezekiel saw was the form of the Son of God - as Daniel saw later, calling Him 'the Ancient of Days'. If this be so, then Ezekiel's vision was of the ultimate promise of God's redemption in the midst of the darkness of the time.

11) 1:4-28

We should notice how it is repeatedly emphasised in the vision of the living creatures that 'they went everyone straight forward ... and they turned not when they went'. There is considerable significance in this. When God reveals Himself to men, for whatever purpose, He has a particular intention in the format of the vision and in the structure of the word that He gives, and is saying something definite even in the incidental details. In giving Ezekiel a vision of His heavenly living ones and of how they work - 'they went every one straight forward' - God was as it were saying to the prophet, 'Ezekiel, that is My prescription for you too, you must go straight forward, there must be no turning back, only unhesitating, unquestioning obedience, turning not as you go'. It is not every believer that could have it said of him at the end of his life that he 'turned not as he went', but this is how it was going to be in Ezekiel's life. And there is a sense in which He does not even allow him to make a protest. We may recall how Moses complained when he was called (Exodus 4:1 ff), as did Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6). But the urgency of the time was such that God would not even let him speak - perhaps He saw the words of protest rising to the prophet's lips, and forestalled him (cf 2:8).

One final word about the chapter: it would be a profitable study all on its own to lay Revelation 1 alongside this to see how many parallels there are. One commentator suggests that over eighty points of contact may be found between the two books. It can hardly be controverted that although the form of the vision is very different in each case, its essentials are surely the same, the man of God being shown the open heavens, and hearing the voice of the Lord, assuring him of His sovereignty and of ultimate covenant mercy in the end.

12) 2:1-10

In this chapter we are given an account of Ezekiel's call and commission. Clearly, the vision he had seen was an overwhelming experience for him, which prostrated him, and this prompts the reflection that we in our day have largely lost sight of the tremendous nature of the divine revelation, in the misconceived notion that we have about angelic beings. We have devalued and emasculated the angels of God by making them pretty pictures on Christmas cards. But the real angels of God are terrible beings, in the classical sense of that word, as Ezekiel discovered in this awesome experience that overtook him. It was small wonder that he fell upon his face, with all strength drained from him, and that God had to infuse a new strength into him (1, 2). The nature of the commission given to him is also significant: it was not so much that God spelt out the message he was to deliver - in fact, nothing is said in this chapter about it - as that he was instructed as to the nature of what he was to say. It was to be 'Thus saith the Lord God' (4), that is, he was to speak God's words to the people, whether or not they would hear (7). It is in this context that we need to understand the divine exhortation not to be afraid (6), and to resist the temptation to disobey and refuse the call because of that fear (8). Nor should we miss the significance of this exhortation: You do not keep on saying to people 'Don't be afraid' unless you see signs of fear in their eyes and on their faces. Ezekiel was doubtless the same as the rest of us when faced with an uncongenial or daunting task, and he would naturally shrink from it, although that shrinking is not recorded for us here, in the way that Jeremiah's was in the first chapter of his prophecy. It is just that God's enabling was such that it kept him as steady as a rock throughout his long ministry. This bears witness to the wonderful truth, that whatever our natural temperament may be, if God calls us to a particular work and promises us His enabling, we will be able to do it, however much our natural trembling. All honour to Ezekiel that he showed himself so firm and unbending in the difficult and unrewarding assignment given him.

13) 2:8-3:3

The last words of the divine commission to Ezekiel were to open his mouth and eat what God gave him. This is amplified in the verses which follow: the hand of God held out to him a roll of a book written within and without with lamentations, mourning and woe. Ezekiel did as he was commanded, and it was in his mouth as honey for sweetness. This is not indicative of a perverse delight on Ezekiel's part in the word of judgment that he was commissioned to proclaim, but rather of the fact that the doing of God's will in obedience, speaking His word to the people however painful the message, is the sweetest thing on earth. This is something that is proved by the servants of God again and again (cf Jeremiah 15:16) and it speaks of the ineffable sweetness of being identified with the sufferings of the Lord. There is another lesson also, however: it is that a true servant of God receives God's word for himself first of all, before it becomes a word for others, and Ezekiel surely took to himself the impact of this stern and devastating word, and felt it in his own heart of hearts before he could be qualified to speak it and administer it to the people. This is a very important consideration: we read later on in this chapter (3:15) that Ezekiel sat where the exiles sat, that is to say, he was identified with them in their woe; and in the same way he was identified with the Lord in His message.

14) 3:4-14

At first glance what is said in 5 might seem to suggest that the commission God had given Ezekiel was not an over-hard one since it was not as if he would have the burden of learning a strange language before communicating his message. But in fact the opposite is the case. The point that is being made is that a heathen nation, of strange language, might well have listened to the message and responded in obedience to it (cf the message of the book of Jonah) whereas Israel, who had had all the privileges of the covenant had so perversely hardened themselves against God that nothing could now penetrate their minds and hearts. This bears witness to the fact that it is often much harder to communicate the gospel to a people who share common interests and common ties and bonds with ourselves than to a people outside, more difficult to speak to our own kith and kin than to strangers. In 7, Israel's unwillingness to listen is again emphasised, but the important thing is not that they should or should not listen, but that they should know that a prophet has been in their midst (cf 2:5). In 8, the language is similar to that in 2:3ff, but whereas the earlier verses speak of Ezekiel's commissioning and call, here it is his equipment for his task by God. We shall see in the chapters that follow how abundantly this word was fulfilled to Ezekiel, because throughout the prophecy we see a man quite unbending and quite unmovable. In 12-14 the prophet is once again caught up in the visionary experience related in the first chapter. We should realise that this also represents the divine enabling for the ongoing task: his ministry is to be understood in terms of being caught up into the divine purposes, and if a man is so caught up in the vision of the power and glory of God, he is going to be able for anything. This is the basic need and requirement of any true prophet of the Lord. But there is something else to be said about these last verses, and it will occupy our thoughts in the next Note.

15) 3:4-14

We are told in 14 that Ezekiel 'went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit'. This may, in some sense, refer to the mixed emotions of the prophet, and in this connection, we should bear in mind the tremendous thing that had happened to him and the stringency of the commission that had been given to him. It would be a queer man in such a situation who was not mixed in his feelings. More probably, however, it may mean that, being caught up into the vision of the glory of the Lord, he entered into sympathy with God in His righteous indignation against His people. This may be more near to the truth; for if a man is in the spirit, and feels the message of God, he cannot just turn on his prophetic proclamation as a kind of performance, and then go away, having delivered his message, without feeling anything. If he is a real man, if he has felt the pressure of the divine hand in his message as he has proclaimed it, that pressure does not leave him when he goes down the pulpit steps. He is still all churned up inside, he still feels like weeping if nobody responds, he still feels the bitterness and the indignation of God against a rebellious people as God feels it. Ezekiel was so caught up into the divine mind and heart that he shared the divine suffering. This also is a true mark of the prophetic spirit.

16) 3:15-21

The overwhelming nature of the visionary experience of the previous verses clearly rendered the prophet speechless (15). One commentator maintains that the word 'astonished' is really much stronger in the original, referring almost to a state of dazedness or ecstasy. A New Testament illustration of this may be seen in the experience of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, in Luke 1:11ff, who having seen the angel of God while ministering in the Temple, was so wrought upon with fear and dread that when he came out of the Temple he was in a daze, and the people perceived that he had seen a vision. In this profound experience, Ezekiel was again given a reminder of his commission and calling (16) in the well-known metaphor of the watchman. The watchman's function was to be on the alert to the situation around him, to hear the word of the Lord when it came to him, and to utter it faithfully and accurately to the people. He was to stand on the walls watching for the approach of the enemy, and everything depended on his vigilance, diligence and clear-sightedness, to watch for any movement of danger and to sound the warning trumpet accordingly. This was the task allotted to Ezekiel. The exiles had been assured by false prophets that their exile would be brief and that they would soon return to their homeland; but God sent Ezekiel to be a watchman to warn the people that it was not to be so, that fearful things would happen to them and that they must pay heed and turn from their sin. 'Warn them to turn before it is too late Ezekiel, for if you do not warn them, they will die and their blood will I require at your hands. Warn them, and whether they return to Me or not you have delivered your soul'. Such was Ezekiel's calling.

17) 3:22-27

Once again, in these verses, Ezekiel experiences a theophany - as if to remind and reassure him that the Divine Presence would be with him in all his exacting tasks, and could reappear at any time to encourage and strengthen him. This encounter with God is deeply significant. Once again Ezekiel is withdrawn from the captive exiles into solitude with God. It is always thus that God speaks and communes with us and reveals Himself. The commission that is given him, however, (24, 26) seems to be in contradiction to the earlier command to speak out as a watchman (17ff), for now he is to be dumb and not speak to the people. Yet, in 27 his mouth is again to be open. Perhaps it is best to take this complicated passage to mean that Ezekiel was to speak only at the express command of God and at no other time. If there were no express revelation or disclosure from God to speak forth, he was to be silent, and not be tempted by the exiles to speak if God had not given him a specific word. If they came to him and asked 'What do you think about this or that situation?', he would not be, like so many of us, prompt to express an opinion, but would speak only when God impressed upon him to speak, and at other times he would be utterly silent.

18) 4:1-8

This chapter begins a new sub-section of the prophecy (see Analysis, in Note on page 6), and with ch 5 records a series of 'signs', which Ezekiel gives to the people. These are acted parables, strange and unfamiliar to our western way of thinking, but in fact a relatively common way for prophets to proclaim the word of the Lord in olden time. God's first word to the prophet, and through him to the exiles in Babylon (1-3), was to command him to make a model of the city on a mud-brick, and draw up battering rams and all the engines of war round about it. 'This', says God, 'will be My word to the exiles'. It was what we might call a 'visual aid'. What we sometimes do in Sunday School with flannelgraphs, Ezekiel was commanded to do with this mud brick, using the device under the guidance of God not only to impress his hearers thus graphically, but also with the conviction that in acting out the word of God in this way as it came to him, God was through it hastening its fulfilment. And, in fact, within a few years Nebuchadnezzar fulfilled this remarkable prophecy, investing Jerusalem and razing it to the ground. The second acted parable (4-8) was designed to indicate the duration of the judgment that was to fall upon the people of God. Ezekiel lies down according to instructions and acts out the parable. Some scholars think the 390 days and the 40 days are to be taken literally, others that they are symbolic numbers, and that Ezekiel in fact used these figures in a symbolic way. The forty days, for example, for the iniquity of the house of Judah may have a reference to Israel's forty years in the wilderness, i.e. the fulfilment of God's appointed judgment upon the Israel of that time. None of the commentators seems to be able to solve the problem and mystery of the 390 days, and no amount of juggling with figures would make them fit into any literal fulfilment. It is surely best to recognise that Ezekiel is simply conveying that the captivity appointed is to be a very long one.

19) 4:9-17

The third of the acted parables occupies the remainder of the chapter. The prophet was to limit himself to a stringent diet, which was meant to signify the famine that was to come upon Jerusalem: the people were to live on famine rations (9-11), and their diet was to be unclean and defiled (12-17). It is not quite clear whether we are meant to take the earlier verses as referring to the siege conditions within Jerusalem, and the latter to the conditions they would experience in exile. This is probably the simplest way of taking the 'sign'. Ezekiel seems to have accepted without comment the former, but his whole soul protested at the latter, and it is a measure of the extremity of the conditions that were to come upon the exiles that he should have done so. In point of fact, however, it would be impossible for them to maintain and observe any of the Levitical requirements in an alien culture such as Babylon, and this was one of the grim consequences of their sinfulness and departure from God, that they should have to abandon practices that had become so much a part of their own religious culture. Part of the price of sin is that, once you commit it, it compels you to go on in it more and more.

20) 5:1-4

The fourth acted parable is designed to illustrate the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The first stage of the action Ezekiel is commanded to perform is described in 1, 2, consisting of the dividing up of his hair into three parts, and disposed of in the manner described in 2. Next, he is told to take a few of the hairs and first preserve them in his garments (3), and then later cast them into the fire. The symbolism in all this is clear, and in fact is given an explanation in 12 (which see): a third of Jerusalem's inhabitants would be destroyed within the city by pestilence and famine, a third killed by the sword in fighting around the city, and a third scattered among the nations. It is not clear whether the 'few in number' referred to in 3 are those who will escape the holocaust and form the nucleus of those ultimately to return to the land after the exile, or whether it simply means that some who at first seemed to escape were later consumed: the interpretation would depend on whether the fire in 4 is to be regarded as a fire of judgment or of purification. The general tenor, however, of the 'sign' is grim and graphic and it does not take much imagination to gauge the impact that it might have had on those who saw it acted out. Lurid and gruesome it must certainly have been, but it may be that this was the only way that the word of the Lord could now get through to a sin-hardened people.

21) 5:5-17

The remainder of the chapter serves to explain the four 'acted parables' in the previous verses and gives a justification of God's stern dealings with His people. What a shattering word this must have been to the exiles in Babylon, who were, even then, beginning to be optimistic - through the influence of the false prophets who had gone out with them - that their exile would be short-lived! Ezekiel's message must have been like a thunderbolt to them, as if he had said 'The worst is yet to be, far worse than you anticipate, because God has appointed dark judgment upon His people. Do not build up false hopes, listen to the word of the Lord'. In the last few verses (13ff) there is something very significant: the judgment upon Jerusalem was to be an instruction to the surrounding nations, that is to say, even though in their sin the people of God have refused to fulfil their calling to be a light to the Gentiles, rebelling against their true destiny, they were still to be used by Him as an instrument of His purposes through the very judgment that their rebellion had brought upon them. This is a tremendously significant thought, enshrining a perennial principle that has persisted down the centuries to the present day. We should bear in mind the extraordinary history of persecution and oppression that has been the lot of the Jewish people down the ages in their revolt and rebellion against God and their refusal of His Christ; they refused to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, but in spite of themselves and even in their judgment they have remained as a signpost in the world to the workings of God in history. The testimony of Scripture is that what happens to the Jews is always of world importance in the purposes of God.

22) 5:5-17

Ezekiel's message is that the Holy Land and the Holy City must pay the price for Israel's failure to be true to her covenant with God. This is his basic thesis in the first 24 chapters of his prophecy, and we will see as we read them, the monotonous regularity of the awful thunder of doom and judgment. But we know that the second half of his prophecy is very different, and it is not for nothing that he is spoken of as a prophet of hope. This bears a very important and significant message for us today. For, paradoxically, Ezekiel's function, as was Jeremiah's, was to restore to Israel her true faith in God and her belief in her own destiny. And the consensus of Old Testament scholarship is that these prophets did just that, and that it was through their ministry that this people, brought into captivity, did not go completely down and become lost in despair and hopelessness, but on the contrary came back in the fullness of the time, when God's disciplines were worked out in their corporate life. We have only to look on to the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, with their record of the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, to see the fruit of Ezekiel's ministry - to see also that his word of doom in the earlier chapters was necessary, however unsparing and indeed unpopular it might have been, and that his word of promise in the later chapters was an authentic word from God. Is not this also a twofold word in times of declension and barrenness in the Church's life today? What if, in the providence of God, hard and unsparing denunciation is a necessary preliminary to a word of renewal and hope for our time? And is there any sign that we today might be prepared to countenance the one, in our longing for the other?

23) 6:1-14

This chapter is one of many that we shall be reading in the next week or two which is filled with gloom and doom, and one has only to ask what Ezekiel's hearers would, or could, have made of his words as he poured out this denunciation upon them to make us realise how stark and grim it all is. No one likes to read chapter after chapter of such thunderings of doom and judgment, destruction and desolation, and we might be forgiven for wanting to ask 'Where is the spiritual nourishment for us in such dark and terrible words?' The answer is, there is none, unless we look at such passages in the context of the word of hope and renewal that was to follow them. The fact is, by this dark and devastating ministry, which was essentially a preparatory one, the prophet prepared the way for the reception of the divine word of hope; it was in, and out of, the crucible of judgment that the new thing was born for Israel. One commentator puts it like this: Ezekiel by his ministry, especially in these early years, dug up the old beliefs in the subconscious, collective mind of Israel, and brought the Israelites to rediscover their loyalty to God, and to share his hopes that God had greater things for them than they had ever dreamed. When we see Ezekiel's word in this light, it begins to make some sense, and we see gleams of light even in the midst of so great a darkness.

24) 6:1-14

Ezekiel's words are so plain in their flow that not a great deal of comment is necessary in order to understand them. There are, however, some points to note. In 2 the prophet is commanded to set his face toward the mountains of Israel and prophesy against them. The significance of this is that it was generally on the mountains that the 'high places' were found and idolatries practised. The history of these high places was that in the earlier days, before Solomon's temple was built, the tendency was for the worship of Jehovah to take place, here, there, and anywhere, throughout Israel. In the pre-Solomon era they were generally regarded as innocuous and harmless - after all, the people had to worship God somewhere - although many of them had originally been Canaanite places of idolatrous worship. But when the Temple was built, worship was centralised at Jerusalem and forbidden anywhere else. And after this time, when the high places were used, they were not only not innocuous, but became places of terrible idolatry, quickly reverting to the heathenish practices and losing all semblance of the true worship of Jehovah. It was against these no longer innocuous but highly dangerous and idolatrous places that Ezekiel was bidden to prophesy. One cannot help thinking there is a message here for the Church in our time, with the proliferation of splinter groups meeting in houses and other places and drawing away people from the central worship of the Church. This is always fraught with peril in spiritual life. It is one thing when little groups gather together to worship and to pray when the Church is dead and barren and there is no ministry or spiritual food for the people; but it is quite another matter for such groups to form or to persist when there is life in the Church and true ministry and substantial spiritual food. It is here that dangers can and do arise, for the whole question of motive comes in. Which would we rather be, a little fish in a big pool, or a big fish in a little pool? When such groups become an end in themselves instead of a means to an end, trouble always follows.

25) 6:1-14

It is significant to realise that Ezekiel's sole concern here was with the religious sin of the nation, its idolatry. This was not a uniform emphasis in the prophets of God. In pre-exilic times the predominant concern was with the moral and social outrages, the dishonesty and heartlessness of society, the affliction of the poor by the rich. But Ezekiel the priest is concerned with the religious defection. The one, of course, leads to the other: it is when the vertical relationship between man and God is broken that the horizontal, between man and man, goes awry. It will be noted that there is an almost monotonous repetition in this chapter and the next of the phrase 'ye shall know that I am the Lord' (7, 10, 13, 14; 7:4, 9, 27). This is the purpose of the judgment, to make known the Lord's great name. His first will is that it should be known in grace and love, but when men refuse to know Him thus God has to do His 'strange work'. But judgment is also itself a means of revelation: 'they shall know ...', the 'they' referred to being, of course, His own people. It is not true to say that when the world is under the judgment of God it recognises God's hand upon it: men do not ordinarily say 'This is God speaking to us, we must listen', for their eyes are blinded. But God's people can and do recognise His hand. Israel did, as we have learned from our reading of Lamentations, and it is when this recognition was made that they were made ready for the words of restoration and hope.

26) 7:1-27

This chapter belongs in thought to the previous one, and the message of both is one in the sense that the points we underline are as true of the one as of the other. For example, one of the things that will often be said about such passages is that they represent God as a harsh, unrelenting, bloodthirsty Deity. This is a very facile and unthinking point of view. The Old Testament is just as full of the compassion and mercy of God as it is of His judgment; furthermore, we must realise, even in the context of judgment, God is love. It is hardly possible, for example, not to sense the pain in the heart of God in 6:9, 'I am broken with their whorish heart'. It is true that the RSV reads 'I have broken with ...', with the meaning that God had broken off relations with His people, but there is at least some justification for taking the AV as it stands even if the RSV is right. However, the agony is implied throughout, for God is a covenant Father, and for Him to break off relations with His people must have cost infinitely. For Him, therefore, to say 'Mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity' (7:9) must have been to tear out His heart. Our proverbial saying 'This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you' has assumed almost humorous connotations, but it is utterly true so far as God is concerned. Ian Maclaren in his book 'Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush' says, 'God is the chief Sufferer in the universe' and what we must try to understand in these judgment passages is the pain to the heart of God as He resisted pity for His unerring, sinning people until the grief of punishment had done its needed work in their hearts.

27) 7:1-27

We should note the repeated insistence throughout the chapter of the imminence of the doom that was to come (3, 6, 10, 12). This has to be understood against the background of the assurances the false prophets were giving the exiles in Babylon that it would all be over in a matter of months and they would soon be back in their home in Jerusalem. In addition to this, of course, there is always something unrealistic about prophecies of judgment uttered by men of God, and people tend to think, if not say, 'Ah yes, they speak of judgment, but that is something in the remote future and not something we need to worry about at the moment'. 'Not so', says Ezekiel, 'it is upon us now, and the end has come'. In point of fact, in less than five years his words literally came to pass, and the parable enacted in ch 4 was fulfilled to the letter, when Jerusalem was besieged and broken down. There comes a time when the patience of God is exhausted with His people. That time had come for Ezekiel's generation, and the Holy City, proverbially inviolate and inviolable so far as the Jews were concerned, was to be crushed to rubble. They could not understand it, they could not believe it; they never thought that God could do it. But He did. And that is a salutary warning to all who have an ingrained conviction that 'It could never happen to us'. It could, it could, for God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.

28) 8:1-18

This chapter begins a new section of the prophecy which we have entitled in the analysis 'The Moral Necessity for Judgment' (chs 8-11). It unfolds a vision which concerns the national shrine of the Jews, the Temple in Jerusalem, and we are shown terrible idolatries and blasphemies that corrupted and polluted the whole people. One point of significance must be noted at the outset. We see from the dating in 1 that some 14 months had elapsed since the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry, and the elders of Judah are now sitting at Ezekiel's feet. This man, whom they thought at first was on the lunatic fringe and not to be taken seriously, has prophesied and spoken with such an impressive holy unction upon him that, doom and judgment though his message may have been, there has been a ring about it that the elders of Judah have recognised, however unwillingly, to be of God. And they are now sitting at his feet, waiting for him to speak. This is very striking and impressive, and it says this to us: let a man but speak the Word of God faithfully, without fear or favour, and the time will come when men will at last recognise that he speaks from God, and will listen to him, however unwilling they be to admit that his message is from God. Here, then, they were waiting, perhaps shaken in their placid and complacent confidence that the exile would be over in a few months, no longer savouring the false prophets' ministry quite so much as they had done before, and thinking that perhaps there was more to this man Ezekiel than they had at first thought. They came to him, and said in effect, 'Ezekiel, is there any word from the Lord?' It is in answer to this implied question that the vision in this chapter is given.

29) 8:1-18

The nature of Ezekiel's unusual experience here has been the subject of much discussion and very varied interpretation. There are, it seems to us, two opposite dangers: one is to dismiss the supernatural completely from the incident, and maintain that Ezekiel paid a literal visit to Jerusalem with the permission of the authorities; a highly unlikely eventuality, in our view - the other is to 'go overboard' in interpreting it in modern psychological terms, such as extra-sensory perception, psychic phenomena or whatever. What we can say in the way of balanced interpretation is that Ezekiel went in to a supernatural trance while sitting with the elders of the people, and that in this trance God revealed to him the things that were happening at that moment in Jerusalem, so that he was able to relate them to the elders as he sat with them. On this interpretation the command in 11:4ff to prophesy was a command to him to prophesy against the evil in Jerusalem in the hearing of the elders; and that while he prophesied in their hearing, Pelatiah died in Jerusalem. And when news came later to the exiles of Pelatiah's death, they would realise this was an authentication of Ezekiel's prophecy and ministry. In other words, what is recorded in this chapter is not only something that Ezekiel saw in a vision; it actually happened, and no interpretation we put upon the strange and unusual experience can alter that fact.

30) 8:1-18

The vision describes four evidences of corruption in Jerusalem which invited the judgment of God. In 5 it is the 'image of jealousy'. This refers to the image of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess, which Manasseh had put in the Temple (2 Kings 21:7). It was later removed by him (2 Chronicles 33:15), but must have re-appeared later, for Josiah removed and burned it (2 Kings 23:6). Another must have been made subsequently, and it is this later image that Ezekiel refers to here. In 6-12 the reference is to idolatries like the serpent deities of Egypt, Canaan and Babylon, bearing witness to the widespread influence of foreign cults on Israel's worship. In 12-14, the reference is to Tammuz, who was a Sumerian god of vegetation, who became the god of the underworld, with a strong association with fertility rites. In 15-18 it is sun worship, with the priests turning their backs on the living God and committing this blasphemy. If we were to look for modern parallels in which these idolatries are repeated today, we would have to think of things such as spiritualistic influences, the idolatrous veneration of relics, the hotch-potch of idolatrous associations in the composite god of freemasonry indulged in by so many Church members and ministers, representing the introduction of alien things into the true worship of God, not to mention the intrusion of merely secular interests and entertainments into the life of congregations where the real interest in the church for so many lies in the weeknight secular activities rather than in divine worship on Sundays. In view of all this, it is little wonder that the Church has so substantially lost its credibility in the land today.

31) 8:1-18

One of the saddest and most tragic factors in the history of God's people is to see the way in which this nation, which was purified by the disciplines of God in the wilderness wanderings, and which entered into the Promised Land a chastened and purified people with a simple faith and trust in the living God, as evidenced in the book of Joshua, slowly and steadily degenerating, and adulterating its faith, gradually absorbing influences from the surrounding heathen nations of Canaan, against the express command and warning of God. One reads in the earlier historical books such as Numbers and Deuteronomy, how God warned His people - 'See that thou absorb not these alien influences', He said; but the warning apparently fell on deaf ears, and when we come to this stage of the story in Ezekiel, it is the influence of Canaanite religion and idolatry, with all the attendant immoralities and bestialities, that was the hallmark of the people of God at the time God forsook them in the judgment of the captivity. Such is the story we are dealing with in this chapter, and it was Ezekiel's unpleasant duty to tell the captives, who were patting themselves on the back and promising themselves in their complacency that they would soon be back in Jerusalem, that it was much, much worse than they appeared to realise. 'Look at what God sees is going on', he says, 'not merely in Jerusalem, but in the very temple itself'. It is perhaps salutary for us today to realise that the living God does see what goes on in His House, even though people say 'The Lord seeth us not, the Lord has forsaken the earth'.

32) 9:1-11

This chapter continues the vision of the previous one, and the judgment promised in 18 is now in vision executed. It is a very awesome passage, couched in apocalyptic language, such as we find in the Revelation (cf also Amos 9:1ff; and Exodus 12:7ff, where the idea of marking for divine protection corresponds to 4). The 'six men' in 2 are the Lord's executioners, appointed by Him to fulfil the judgment that was to come upon the city, and the 'one man among them' seems to fulfil the function of the recording angel, who was to administer the protective mark upon those who remained faithful to God (4). The reference in 3 to the glory of God going up is significant. One recalls how in Exodus we are told that the Shekinah glory rested above the cherubim in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The 'going up' of the glory signifies the impending departure of the Lord's presence from His people: first the glory moves from the cherubim to the threshold of the Temple, then later (11:23) departs from the Temple and the city itself. The Word of God having been despised, the Lord was 'on the way out'. What a lesson there is here: the loss of the Word leads to the loss of fellowship with God (for it was there, at the mercy seat, that He promised to commune with His people, Exodus 29:43), and to the loss of His presence and glory. It is Ichabod all over again (1 Samuel 4:21), and the significance of the symbolism could not have been lost upon the minds of the exiles by the river Chebar. It is small wonder that the prophet cried out (8) in his distress!

33) 9:1-11

God is selective and discriminating, however, in His judgment, as we gather from the marking of the faithful in 4, and we are told that those who had a burden for the evil of the situation and a passionate concern about the tragedy that had come upon God's people were exempt from it. It should be noticed, for all that, that it was not those who merely disagreed with what was going on who were spared, but those who sighed and cried for the abominations. It was no intellectual or theoretical disagreement, for that would not pass muster with God: 'That is not good enough for Me', He says. This is very telling. Lots of things happen in a community that decent folk object to or disagree with, and that even might make them put up their hands in horror, but God says 'That will not do; it is the people who sigh and cry over the abominations'. Who are they today? They are those who are so concerned that they make prayer a priority in their lives, and who express their burden about the tragedy of moral declension in the prayers they offer before God in private and in public. God does not think much of theoretical or formal disapproval, but He does take very seriously those who are so concerned that they will weep before His throne of grace.

So the command was given for the judgment to proceed (6), with the addition of the fateful words 'begin at My sanctuary'. There can be little doubt that this is the basis of the Apostle Peter's words that 'judgment must begin at the house of God' (1 Peter 4:17). Ezekiel is deeply disturbed by the awful thoroughness of the judgment, and intercedes with the Lord for a remnant at least to be spared. We should compare this intercession with Abraham's in Genesis 18:23ff and Amos's in Amos 7:1-6. In common with them, Ezekiel's heart was tender towards his own people. His message, though hard, was delivered out of a heart that felt deeply the tragedy of Israel.

34) 10:1-22

In chapter 10 we have a further description of the judgment spoken of in ch 9. The apocalyptic symbolism is very similar to that in the vision recorded in 1:13-25 (which see). The man clothed in linen (2) is the same as in 9:3, but whereas in the earlier vision he was the agent of protection for the faithful, here he is the agent of divine judgment. The coals of fire (2) to be scattered over the city represent the fires of judgment, whereas in Isaiah 6:6 they are for cleansing and renewal. As the Tyndale commentary puts it, 'In Ezekiel's mind, Jerusalem was going to be treated in the same way as Sodom and Gomorrah' (Genesis 19:24). The latter verses of the chapter record the movement of the glory of the Lord away from Jerusalem. The Tyndale Commentary's note on these verses is helpful: 'At last the glory of the Lord came out from the Temple doorway (by which we must assume that the destroying angel had reported back once again), and stood over the cherubim. This was the signal for the chariot-throne to rise up and move off in the direction of the east gate (19) en route for the mountain east of Jerusalem (11:23) and thence away. But as if to delay the final departing, the episode described in 11:1-21 is inserted at this point.'

35) 11:1-13

This chapter divides into two sections, 1-13 and 14-25, the first a message of judgment for the Jerusalem sinners, the second a word of hope for the Babylonian exiles. The first section (1-13) culminates in the death of Pelatiah, reference to which has already been made (see Note on page 33). Ezekiel sees a group of twenty-five men 'at the door of the gate' (1). These have no connection with the other group of twenty-five in 8:16, but are a political pressure group who are advocating policies harmful to Jerusalem. Their wicked counsel is described in 3. There are several possible interpretations of the reference to 'building houses'. If the AV is followed, the meaning would be: 'The time of judgment is not near; let us build ...', i.e. an expression of confidence that all will be well, and therefore the threat of further Babylonian invasion can safely be ignored. Another possibility is to render the words thus: 'Is not the time near to build houses?' i.e. 'we are quite safe now, let us therefore carry on our usual occupations'. The RSV rendering, however, is more probably the right one: 'The time is not near to build houses' i.e. it is inappropriate to be building for peace when danger threatens. The only right policy is to prepare for war, in the assurance that the city's defences will remain impregnable. The inhabitants of the city will be as safe from the fires of war as meat is in the cauldron that protects it from the flames. In other words, this reveals the measure of their false and misplaced complacency, and Ezekiel was commanded to condemn it as utter folly. For it ignored and contradicted Jeremiah's earlier warning (cf Jeremiah 21:8-10) that resistance to Babylon would bring greater disaster than submission to it. There is a further evidence of their complacency, however, to be noted, and this will occupy our thoughts in the next reading.

36) 11:1-13

The people of Jerusalem, in their crass self-confidence, were claiming that they, who had remained in Jerusalem, were the worthy part of the nation ('we be the flesh', 3), as against those who had gone into exile. But the prophet disabuses them of this idea also. The real 'flesh', those of true worth in God's sight, were the many innocent who had been slain (7). As for those remaining in Jerusalem, they would be taken out of the cauldron, out of their supposed place of protection, and exposed to the fiery judgment of God. On the utterance of this prophecy by Ezekiel, spoken before the elders of the exile in Babylon, Pelatiah died in Jerusalem (a circumstance which must subsequently have been reported to the exiles in Babylon, and which must have served to confirm the authenticity of Ezekiel's vision before his fellows). The sense of this happening was so acute in Ezekiel's consciousness and spirit, however, that it moved him again to intercession for his people - a further evidence of the depths of the prophet's anguish at the fate of the city. And from this prayer, we are led into the second section of the chapter, and the vision of hope for the exiles at Chebar.

37) 11:14-25

The prophecy of hope emerges from the attitude the people in Jerusalem held and expressed about those who had been taken into exile. The exiles, they maintained, had left Jerusalem, and were in a foreign land, and this was therefore the mark of their God-forsakenness. God's blessing and favour - this was a deeply ingrained belief in the Jewish mind - could rest only on those who remained in Jerusalem. But Ezekiel tells them differently. The exiles were the ones with whom and through whom God would continue to work. This assurance is given (16, 17) in words full of wonderful promise and comfort, not only in terms of blessing to them during their exile, but also in the promise of future rehabilitation in restoration to the land. It is almost a repetition of the promise to the people of old of being brought out of the land of bondage and through the wilderness to the land of rest. Not only so, accompanying this promise of geographical restoration is that of moral and spiritual restoration also (18-20). This statement is a foretaste of the great 'new covenant' passages in chapters 36 and 37, in the promise of a new heart and a new spirit to the people, and is some indication, in the midst of the dark passages of Ezekiel's prophecy, of the long-term goal of his ministry to them. A wonderful word indeed, and one which we will study in greater detail when we come to these later chapters.

The remaining verses of the chapter (22-25) speak of the departure of the glory of the Lord from the city - in an eastward direction, as if towards the exile. We may be meant to infer from this that the presence of the Lord was now being transferred, as it were, to the camp of the exiles by the river Chebar, to do a work in them against the day when they returned to the land. Finally, in 24, 25, we are told that Ezekiel is restored to his normal state (the vision began, it will be remembered, at 8:1) and he communicates the visions he has had to the captives in Babylon.

38) 12:1-20

We come with this chapter to the next subsection of Ezekiel's prophecy, which is entitled in the analysis 'The Absolute Certainty of Judgment'. It is a long section, stretching to the end of ch 19 and is in three parts. First of all, in chapters 12-14, the captivity is foretold and its impending certainty is underlined. One commentator says that the force of these three chapters is to deal with objections that people would raise to the horrifying prospect that the prophet has unfolded in the previous chapters: e.g. 'We have heard all these threats before, and nothing has ever come of them'. Then there were the false prophets who were prophesying peace, with the assurance that everything was going to be all right. The idea that was so deeply entrenched in their minds was that 'it is impossible for the Lord to cast away His people', for what else does the covenant mean? Ezekiel deals with these false attitudes one by one in the chapters which follow. In the verses before us we have two further symbolic messages enacted by the prophet, similar to those in chapters 4 and 5. It is interesting, as one commentator points out, to see the first vision of the glory of the Lord in chapters 1, 2 was followed by the enacted messages in chapters 4, 5, and the second vision of the glory of the Lord (in chapters 8-11) is now followed likewise by two similarly enacted messages. We shall look at these messages in detail in the next Note.

39) 12:1-20

The first of the enacted messages (1-16) is a fairly simple and clear-cut one, and has to do with the forthcoming captivity. Ezekiel is commanded by God to act the part of someone who is making a hasty flight with his belongings from Jerusalem, and he has to dig a hole in the wall of his house and creep through it surreptitiously by night, as a kind of symbol of how the beleaguered people in Jerusalem would scramble through holes in the wall of the city in their attempt to escape from the enemy. By day, he prepared for his journey, ostentatiously and in their sight, and one can readily imagine how his hearers among the captives by the river Chebar would be asking themselves, 'What does this mean?' Then at eventide, he dug a hole in the wall of his house, removed one or two of the mud bricks and crept through it, keeping his eyes on the ground and not looking up, a picture of abject misery. And God says to them, as it were, 'Do you get the message?' Doubtless they got the message fairly clearly, but they nevertheless asked Ezekiel what it all meant. We should notice what is said in 3 - 'From thy place to another place in their sight: it may be they will consider.' There is still grace, then, God is still not closing the door upon repentance. He is warning them, even though they may be a rebellious house, and it may be that they will pay heed, take stock of themselves, and repent of their sins. Such was the hope in God's heart, reaching out for His people in spite of everything.

40) 12:8-16

The explanation of the symbolic actions is now given in these verses. The reference to 'the prince' in 10ff is interesting. Who is this prince, and what do the words at the end of 13 mean, 'yet shall he not see it though he shall die there'? We need to bear in mind the situation in Jerusalem at this time. After Jehoiakim had been taken into captivity with the first batch of exiles, Nebuchadnezzar placed a puppet king upon the throne, Zedekiah, and it is he that is referred to here as the prince. A glance at 2 Kings 25 will show exactly what happened; and it is all the more dramatic when we see how literally this prophecy of Ezekiel's was fulfilled within a matter of two or three years. For the city was besieged and brought to surrender, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between two walls, just in the way that Ezekiel prophesied. And the army of the Chaldeans pursued after the fleeing king, overtaking him in the plains of Jericho, and brought him to the king of Babylon, in Riblah, and they gave judgment upon him, slaying his sons before his eyes, and then putting out his eyes and, binding him with fetters of brass, carried him to Babylon, just as Ezekiel had prophesied. Thus, though he was brought to Babylon and died there, he did not see the place of his captivity. Such, then, is the first enacted parable, and it came so grimly to pass, within three short years. This short space of time is important, since later on in the chapter (22ff) the people were saying, 'The days are prolonged and every vision faileth', as if to say 'We have heard all that before. You keep on uttering doom, you prophets, but it has never happened'. In three years, this one was fulfilled to the letter.

41) 12:17-20

The second enacted word of the Lord is recorded in these verses, in the command to eat and drink with trembling and carefulness (referring to the famine rations that were spoken of in chapters 3 and 4, in the other enacted parables). It is as if God said to Ezekiel, 'Ezekiel, make a show of fearfulness and terror, symbolic of the frightful violence and destruction that is going to come upon My people in Jerusalem; act it out, so that they may see it.' One has only to read some of the later chapters of 2 Kings to realise the fearfulness, confusion, terror and turmoil that came upon Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar's hosts crushed it to the ground. Such was Ezekiel's prophesying to these complacent exiles, as they settled down comfortably in Babylon, with their houses and their interests, and as they were beginning to feel that captivity was not so bad after all, and that in any case they would soon be back to their lovely Jerusalem once more. They were to learn, the hard way, that God was the Lord (20).

42) 12:21-28

The final verses of the chapter deal with the correction of two popular sayings that were prevalent among the exiles. The first of these (22), 'The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth', is answered in 23-25. In point of fact, this judgment had been prophesied for generations, by Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, but it still had not seemed to come. The mills of God grind slowly, and because they grind slowly people tend to say, 'God has forgotten, or it is not going to happen'. Gloomy, dismal Jeremiahs, the lot of them - this is what they thought and said of God's servants, and it had been said so often it had almost become proverbial. But God said, 'I will make this proverb to cease, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel'. For the days were at hand for the fulfilment of the vision. There was to be no tarrying now. The second saying (27) 'The vision is for many days, for times that are far off', is answered in 28. The answer of the Lord here is not quite the same as in the other. In the first proverb it was a question of unbelief, they just did not believe that the vision would be fulfilled at all; whereas in the second, they accepted in principle that the vision was from the Lord, but believed that it belonged to the far future. One sees the same kind of pattern in people's attitudes and reactions to the Second Coming of Christ, which the New Testament teaches so plainly. There are those, for example, who pooh-pooh the whole idea, and just do not believe in any such thing. On the other hand, there are those who believe it in principle, but they project it into the far distance. Both attitudes are condemned in the New Testament. We know not the day nor the hour when the Son of Man comes, and it behoves us to be watchful, and to be ready for that coming at any time. This is the kind of corrective that God brings here, a corrective to that terrible complacency, by which they postponed the day of reckoning. God says 'It will not be prolonged any more, but the word which I have spoken shall be done'. And within three years it came grimly to pass.

43) 13:1-7

This chapter contains prophecies against the false prophets. It divides naturally into three sections. In 1-7, Ezekiel brings against them the charge of undermining the security of the nation. The comparison in 4 of the prophets with 'the foxes in the desert' is the key to our interpretation. What is in view is the habit of foxes to burrow indiscriminately to make lairs for themselves, careless and indifferent to any damage they may do to the landscape. The prophets are burrowing into the foundations of the nation's security without any regard for what they are doing, intent on making a den for themselves, and undermining the nation's stability. It is the insidious nature of this burrowing that is in view, and we can hardly think of a better comment upon this than a passage quoted in 'The New Morality' by Arnold Lunn and Garth Lean, in the flyleaf of that book: 'The truth is that civilisation collapses when the essential reverence for absolute values which religion gives disappears. Rome had discovered that in the days of her decadence. Men live on the accumulated faith of the past as well as on its accumulated self-discipline. Overthrow these and nothing seems missing at first, a few sexual taboos, a little of the prejudice of a Cato, a few rhapsodical impulses - comprehensible, we are told, only in the literature of folklore - these have gone by the board. But something else has gone as well, the mortar which held society together, the integrity of the individual soul; then the rats come out of their holes and begin burrowing under the foundations and there is nothing to withstand them.' Such is Ezekiel's word here. He is saying 'In a time of crisis what was needed was to give a moral and spiritual lead to the people, to enable them to close their ranks against the approaching enemy. This is what you have not done. You have not gone up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle of the day of the Lord' (5).

44) 13:8-16

Next, in these verses, comes the charge against the prophets for encouraging a false security. Ezekiel's words are very stern and grim; God was against these men, and they were to be totally disinherited. The reference in 9 about not being written in the writing of the house of Israel means, according to the scholars, being 'struck off from the civil register of full citizens, so losing one of the most cherished rights of any adult Israelite male'. But, relating to our own day, we could well paraphrase this to mean that when the moral and spiritual history of the 20th century is written, these false 'way-out' men will not figure in it, for the Lord will not permit their names to be recorded. In 10ff we are told that under the influence of the false prophets the people built flimsy walls and daubed them with untempered mortar; and in time of stress, down they went. This is a spiritual picture, and the metaphor in what Ezekiel is saying is this: These false prophets had their following, they had their work, they were doing their work, and to the undiscerning eye, it seemed as if things were being built. People were listening to Ezekiel and saying, 'Surely, Ezekiel, you are being too critical, you are being too hard on these men; they are doing their work, look at the houses they are building'. But Ezekiel says, 'Wait until God's storms blow, and you will see what sort of building they have been building in people's lives'. This surely provides a dramatic illustration of both our Lord's parable about the house built on the rock and the house built on sand (Matthew 7:24ff), and Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 3 about building wood, hay and stubble instead of gold, silver and precious stones. The great test, both in Ezekiel's day, and in New Testament times, as indeed today also, is whether the building will stand in time of stress and storm, or whether it will crumble.

45) 13:17-23

The final section of the chapter makes a charge against the so-called prophetesses - 'so-called', because in fact it seems they were not so much prophetesses, as those that were dabbling in the black arts. The precise meaning of the 'pillows' and 'arm-holes' in 18 is in question: the probable reference is to some sort of 'amulets' attached to the hands or arms as magic charms, and used in incantations in the hunt for souls - i.e. in the corrupting and destroying of men's souls. It is this that the Lord was against. The nearest analogy, one supposes, is the kind of practice that witch doctors, for example, in primitive tribes indulge in, to bring people into their power, by arts of ju-ju. We know as a matter of fact that the people of God descended to this kind of Satanism several times in their history, as for example, in the time of the Judges, and certainly in these last days of declension, immediately prior to the captivity. If the emergence of Satanism is one of the significant marks of a decadent and dying civilisation in any age, then what are we to say of the undoubted marks of a demonic influence in our own land, in the growing practice of black magic rites, and the increasing emphasis on the occult and on the satanic in the pop-culture of our day? Are we able to discern the signs of the times?

46) 14:1-11

Once again the elders of Israel are gathered in Ezekiel's house (1). Ezekiel is becoming well known as the man to whom God is speaking, and they are listening to him, as if to say, 'Is there any word from the Lord?' That word is now given in the verses that follow. The AV rendering of 5 does not read very clearly, and the RSV is better, 'That I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are all estranged from Me through their idols'. God's purpose is a pastoral purpose, even in judging His people, and His concern is to win them back to Himself, when they have strayed away so terribly from Him. The meaning of the prophecy is not immediately clear, but with a little patience we may see exactly what is being said. In 3 the reference to setting up idols in their heart is a significant one. They had been snatched away from Jerusalem by the aggressor, and snatched away, therefore, from their idols and idol worship in Jerusalem; but the idolatry was still in their hearts. They had not really repented, and they were still a rebellious house, not having yet learned their lesson. Outwardly separated though they had been from their idolatry, it was still within them; and because of this, God felt He could not be enquired of by them, and the only word He could possibly speak to them would be, 'Repent, before it is too late'. There is, in fact, no other word from the Lord to a rebellious people, except the summons to repent, and therefore it is really improper for men to come asking 'Is there a word from the Lord?' This enshrines a very important spiritual truth, and it may serve to explain why it is that sometimes, when we are desperately seeking a word from the Lord, nothing seems to come. What if, in such a situation, what the Lord is really saying is that until we repent and turn to Him nothing can really be said to us? Have you been looking to the Lord for some word in your particular situation? And if nothing seems to be coming to you, could it be that the Lord is first waiting for you to get right with Him?

47) 14:1-11

The force of the point made at the end of the previous reading is made clearer in 7, which repeats the same idea, that is to say, there will be no prophecy for such people. God will answer them by action: 'I will set My face against that man ...'. No oracle from the Lord shall be given to such people for they have no right to be coming to Him enquiring for a word. God has nothing more to say to them, but will do something to them. This is God's answer to the boldness and the temerity with which hypocrites come before Him, and it is a very frightening word. The Psalmist once said, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me' - that is true in the realm of our prayer life, but here is something deeper and even more solemn. If we regard iniquity in our heart, and have the temerity to come to the throne of God, with no intention of putting away that iniquity, then instead of finding an answer to our prayers, we will find judgment for our pains. This is Ezekiel's message. Furthermore, if a 'prophet' does give an answer to such hypocrisy, claiming it to be from the Lord, this will prove that that prophet is false. The test in such circumstances, whether the prophet is a prophet of God or a false prophet, would be whether he speaks or not. If he is like Ezekiel, he will keep his mouth shut and will have nothing to say; if he is a false prophet, he will concoct something out of his mind and hand it out, and by that very act prove himself false. And he will share in the judgment that comes upon the people.

48) 14:12-23

The final section of the chapter completes the grim message of judgment. The emphasis here is deeply interesting. It seems that some were saying that God would not be as ruthless in judgment as Ezekiel was prophesying, and that He would not, could not, ignore the righteousness of the remnant, and would save the nation because of them. Ezekiel speedily disabused them of this false hope and confidence. Even the presence of such saintly people as Noah, Daniel and Job could not act as an 'insurance' for the evil city of Jerusalem. When judgment came, these men could only save themselves, not others. This goes against the known tradition of scriptural precedent, of course: the people would have been thinking of incidents such as Abraham's intercession for Sodom, when the presence of even a few righteous would have been sufficient to preserve the city from judgment by fire. But Ezekiel's point is that Jerusalem is now too far gone in her sin for even that provision to be made in her case. There was no hope left for the city. And if any survivors were left (22) and spared, it would not be that they were righteous and had thus saved themselves; rather they would be allowed to go into exile 'that those already there may see their ways and their doings, and realise how utterly justified God was in His judgments' (Tyndale). Such was Ezekiel's message, a grim and dark one indeed! But it is only against the backcloth of such grimness that his later words of hope can properly be understood.

49) 15:1-8

The metaphor of the vine, used in these verses, is a very common one in Scripture, (cf Psalm 80:8-13; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1; Matthew 21:33-41; John 15), and the imagery is uniform throughout, whether on the lips of the prophets or on the lips of our Lord Himself. The vine, bringing forth its appointed fruit, was among the most precious of the earth's provisions, but when it failed to do so, it was utterly worthless for anything except firewood. This is the point made in 2 and 3. You can take wood from the oak tree and make furniture with it, but you cannot even make a peg with the wood of the vine to hang anything on. The point that Ezekiel is making is that the fact that Israel did not yield the fruit expected of her meant there was no other function for her to perform in the world; when she failed here, she failed in everything. Israel had failed in her only true and proper function, and in the only real reason for her existence. Her calling was to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and when she failed to be this, she was ready for being cast off. As long as ever she was prepared to be this, her existence was secured, and her prosperity guaranteed, but inasmuch and insofar as she failed to bear this fruit, she lost the only justification for her continued existence. This is as true of the Church and of individuals among God's people as it was with Israel. If we fail in our appointed tasks, God will see to it we will not succeed in any other. This is why backsliders are often such useless and feckless members of society. God spoils them for anything else, except fruit-bearing. This is a very sobering thought but it is the lesson that the metaphor of the vine teaches us. There are no alternative functions for those called of God, and if we fail in those appointed for us we cannot be used for anything else.

50) 16:1-14

This chapter stands in complete contrast, in many ways, to the previous one: length-wise it is one of the longest in the prophecy, with 63 long verses as opposed to the 8 brief verses of ch 15. For all that, however, the message is essentially the same, a message of judgment because God's people had failed and become unfaithful to Him and to His calling. This is the common factor in both chapters, although expressed in very different metaphors. Ezekiel exposes Judah's faithlessness and sin in terms which make it clear not only that judgment is certain, but that it is also just and righteous of God to send it upon His people. What the prophet does is to relate the whole of Judah's long history, particularly Jerusalem's - Jerusalem is the bride here - from the beginning, when God took up His people, until the time He established them in the promised land and made her great. He does this in what could worthily be called a 'nuptial metaphor', something that more than one prophet has had recourse to, as we have seen in previous studies, as for example in Hosea. This is a remarkable passage, on any estimate, giving a very deeply moving picture. Here is an unwanted and abandoned child, left to die in the open and in exposure, being discovered by a passing traveller, rescued and cared for and nourished and brought up by him, and finally wedded to him. It is the story of the foundling baby that becomes a queen, and it is a dramatic portrayal. The emphasis is that she owed everything, even life itself, to her rescuer and benefactor. It can hardly be doubted that the picture is a very relevant one in the context of these ancient days, when female children were despised and little esteemed, and male children were what every Hebrew mother longed for. This particular rescue presents a marvellous picture of the grace of God in the gospel and we will do well to give it some further thought in the next Note.

51) 16:1-14

A marvellous picture of the grace of God - yes, and a picture in the last analysis true of every one of us who names the Name of Christ; we owe everything to God and to His grace in precisely this way. It is certainly not by accident that some of the loveliest hymns of the gospel echo words, thoughts and phrases from this passage:

I delivered thee when bound,
And when bleeding, healed thy wound;
Sought thee wandering, set thee right;
Turned thy darkness into light.

Can a woman's tender care
Cease towards the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee.

It is difficult not to think that William Cowper had this passage in mind when he wrote these beautiful words. And what of the old hymn:

In tenderness He sought me
Weary and sick with sin,
And on His shoulders brought me
Back to His fold again.

He washed the bleeding sin-wounds,
And poured in oil and wine;
He whispered to assure me,
'I've found thee, thou art Mine'.

Rescue and restoration indeed, and it is a wonderful picture! Blessed be His Name.

52) 16:1-14

It is all the more surprising, therefore, to see the attitude of some commentators in finding a certain crudity in the passage. One says, 'The Christian reader may not surprisingly feel nauseated at the indelicate realism of Ezekiel's language'. Another says, 'The allegory is developed with a candour that tends to shock the Western mind, but it is normal to the oriental outlook'. Surely this is misplaced 'gentility'. To be sure, the language is of a certain kind, but is it indelicate? We recall the first time we ever read this passage, and how it arrested heart and spirit, evoking the response, 'I am that foundling child, and that is what God has done for me'. If we have ever been in the place of desolation expressed by the Psalmist (Psalm 142:4) when he said 'No man careth for my soul', we will certainly know what this passage means, for it is the gospel in all its wonder and glory: He passed by one day, and saw us in our abject need and misery, in our lost and dying state, and He said 'Live, live'. That is what the gospel is about, that is what preaching is about. When a man stands and proclaims the message of God's riches in Christ, the living God passes by and says to those that are dead in trespasses and sin, 'live' and a life emerges that owes absolutely everything to God.

53) 16:15-43

One recalls Hosea's 'marriage' metaphor, in considering this passage, but here we have a bigger canvas, and a bigger metaphor, for it goes right back to the beginning of life. One thinks of Israel's history - their deliverance from Egypt, the gift of leadership within the congregation in Moses and Joshua, the giving of the law, the establishing of the church in the wilderness, the priesthood and the sacrifices, the land of promise, the constituting of Israel as a nation in that land, the prospering of the people, the prophet Samuel, David, the man after God's own heart, the kingdom reaching greatness so that the Queen of Sheba could come and say 'I have heard with mine ears, now I have seen with mine eyes, and the half was not told me' – this is what God had done for them. The lesson was plain, they owed everything to God, all that they had and all that they were, all their beauty and adornment. They were dressed in borrowed robes; and because of this the sin of unfaithfulness and infidelity was a terrible sin indeed. It is this that Ezekiel now proceeds to unfold.

54) 16:15-43

The whoredoms that are spoken of in these verses may be literal, in that the people of Jerusalem were committing gross immorality and impurity, but it may also refer to spiritual infidelity. Idol worship, for example, is regarded in the Scriptures as spiritual whoredom; and we cannot always separate the two things since, in fact, idolatry was almost invariably accompanied by literal immorality. It is this that tells out the lesson of the passage, if we bear in mind that the relationship of a believer to the Lord is a nuptial one, that is to say, the covenant between them is like the covenant of marriage. To be a backslider is to commit spiritual whoredom, and it is in this light that God looks upon the sins of His people. When we slip away, when we grow cold, it is like the love of a wife or a husband growing cold, it is like a wife becoming unfaithful to the bridegroom to whom she has plighted her troth. This is one of the ways in which the Old Testament underlines the serious, and indeed terrible, nature of sin: it is like infidelity within the marriage bond.

55) 16:44-63

But it never goes well with those who prove unfaithful to the Lord, He sees to that, and for this reason: when we become unfaithful, we withdraw ourselves from the range of His protecting grace. As long as we are abiding in Him, we are safe and secure, and no harm can come to us; but once venture beyond that circle of grace, then we can hardly complain if we come to grief, for we have moved from the divine protection. This is what is witnessed to in the second half of this chapter. It is a terrible picture. When the people of God fall away, they generally become worse than the ungodly themselves, they sink further down and become more deeply immersed in sin than the godless themselves (47). The reference in 45 to 'Hittite' and 'Amorite' is not so much geographical or ethnic, as moral (cf, for example, the more general use of the word 'Sodomite' - it is in this morally derogatory sense that Ezekiel uses these words to describe the people of God). The descriptions throughout are very graphic and telling, as for example, in 49 - here is the description of an affluent society, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness. This is the classic combination that generally is the ruin of nations, and this is why the preoccupation, not to say obsession, of modern politicians in our land with the economics of recovery strikes such an ominous note today, from the moral and spiritual standpoint.

56) 16:44-63

The force of the statement in 53ff is not to give a promise of restoration, but rather an announcement of the impossibility of it. What Ezekiel means is that Sodom and Gomorrah are more likely to be restored (and Sodom and the cities of the plain had long ago been destroyed) than Judah, at that stage in her sinful existence. Yet, in 60, there is the promise that God would remember His covenant with His people. This is not so much a contradiction, as a reference to the remnant among the exiles, whom God would then have dealings with, after the final doom of Jerusalem. Reference was made in an earlier Note about the glory of the Lord leaving the city of Jerusalem and moving eastwards, as if towards the captives at Chebar, indicating that it was with them that God would have dealings in the future, rather than with those in Jerusalem, who were now doomed.

One final word before we leave the chapter: the picture it gives us is of a God whose love has been violated and insulted by the sin and infidelity of His people, a God with a broken heart. This is what makes sin so terrible. We sometimes speak of Paul's 'law-court' metaphor (Romans 3) which speaks of the guilt of sin being removed by the divine acquittal. But, wonderful as that picture is, it is not sufficient in itself to convey the whole idea of God's grace and mercy in the gospel. The judge in the law court is an impersonal figure, it is his job to pass sentence on criminals, and it is all in a day's work to him. He is not personally involved with the prisoner. But in the divine situation, the divine lawgiver is not an impartial figure, He is also our God, and the Lover of our souls. This is why we must always remember that the divine/human relationship is never merely one in which guilt is put away, but one that is spoken of here in nuptial terms. Sin not only incurs guilt, it breaks the heart of God, and spits in the face of a lover. This is why sin is such a terrible thing.

57) 17:1-10

This chapter is a chapter of parable, 1-10 unfold the parable itself, and 11-21 give the interpretation of it, while 22-24 give another parabolic prophecy in which God promises better things in the future. The great eagle in 3 is, of course, Nebuchadnezzar, who comes to Judah, represented here in the parable as Lebanon, and snatches away the king and its nobility (the top of the cedar), and removes them to Babylon. This had happened a few years previously, in 597 BC. The seed of the land (5), which became a spreading vine (6) refers to Nebuchadnezzar's action in appointing Zedekiah as a puppet king in Judah. Jehoiachin had been taken captive to Babylon and was languishing in captivity when Ezekiel spoke these words, with Zedekiah appointed as vassal king in his place. Nebuchadnezzar had entered into a covenant with Zedekiah, saying, 'Obey the orders and all will be well with you'. Zedekiah's vassaldom is indicated by the image of the low-spreading vine. The second great eagle (7) is Egypt, and the vine, Zedekiah, gave its roots a twist towards Pharaoh. This also is a matter of history: a few years after Zedekiah's appointment, he and some of the other vassal kingdoms were tempted and incited to rebel, and he foolishly entered an alliance with Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar and attempted an uprising. This brought Nebuchadnezzar's armies again to Jerusalem, and the city was razed to the ground and Zedekiah taken into captivity. Ezekiel is prophesying in a period between the first and second parts of the captivity, i.e. before Zedekiah had rebelled against Babylon or, it may be, even when the revolt was in progress, and was interpreting from the divine standpoint the foolishness of Zedekiah's attitude. Hence the question in 9, 'Shall it prosper?'

58) 17:11-21

The interesting point that arises here - and these verses make the interpretation very clear - is that life could have gone on in Jerusalem under Zedekiah, if only he had behaved himself, and observed and honoured the covenant (14). Significantly, this dependant relationship imposed by Nebuchadnezzar amounted to a solemn covenant which the vassal-king would break at his peril. And what the Lord is saying is this: 'You have broken covenant with Me'. How can God say this? The implication is that a covenant entered into by God's people with anybody else is as binding as if the covenant had been made with God Himself. A promise is a promise, to whomsoever it is made, even if it is made to the most ungodly of men, and to break that promise - and it is the promise itself that is the important thing - is to do so in the sight of God. This is how God looked upon the situation: Zedekiah had made light of the oath he had taken, he had sworn by the name of the Lord to Nebuchadnezzar, and had violated the covenant, therefore retribution would come upon him (20, 21). He broke faith with God in breaking faith with Nebuchadnezzar. We can take this right out of its context and see the principle involved: when we break faith with anybody, we are breaking faith with God. If we let somebody down, that we promised to help, we are letting God down. God regards it in this personal way. Solemn thought indeed!

59) 17:22-24

In these last three verses, we have the promise of better days. The prophet had spoken about the two eagles, Babylon and Egypt, and now God says, 'I too will take a slip from the lofty crown of the cedar, and set it in the soil; I will pluck a tender shoot from the topmost branch and plant it. This is a word of promise and hope to the captives by the river Chebar, if only they have ears to hear it and eyes to see it'. Ezekiel has repeatedly said, 'The future of our people rests with you in exile, not with those in Jerusalem'. It is these that are referred to in these verses. The slip from the lofty crown of the cedar is the remnant - the remnant within that remnant, since only a minority of the exiles returned, under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. They were the shoot that God was to plant - and indeed the tender shoot from the topmost branch has a shadowy reference to the coming Messiah. One recalls how Isaiah speaks of a 'root out of the dry ground' in his wonderful 53rd chapter, and how Jesus Himself spoke of the kingdom of heaven being 'like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field: which is indeed the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof'. Was Jesus thinking of Ezekiel's words here in 23, when He spoke that parable? Such, then, is the parable of the eagles and of what God will do. Perhaps the most important lesson for us here is that over against the two great eagles, God comes and says 'I too will do something'. And it is very significant that God's 'doing' is so much less ostentatious than Nebuchadnezzar's or Pharaoh's. When God works, His is almost an unobtrusive action. He chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.

60) 18:1-4

This chapter has as its subject the law of individual responsibility. First of all, in 1-4, there is a statement of the teaching and the principle involved. Then, in 5-20, Ezekiel gives three cases to illustrate the point. Finally, in 21-32, it is the case of a changed life. In these verses, then, we have a statement of the teaching and the principle. God challenges people's use of the proverb in 2. The meaning is simply that they had assumed as a working principle that the sufferings and misfortunes of one generation were due to the misdeeds of their forebears. And Ezekiel disabuses them of this mistaken idea, saying, 'No: every man bears his own responsibility. The soul that sinneth, it shall die'. The implications in this are considerable and important. The issue is not a simple one, for in fact the Scriptures do teach the reality of collective and corporate responsibility: Exodus 20:5 speaks of God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation. Ezekiel, however, can hardly be supposed to be contradicting Scripture. Rather, what he is doing is to check and contradict distortion or misapplication of this teaching, for it was being used to excuse responsibility for sin, and it was this that Ezekiel was challenging. The exiles were hiding themselves behind an unbalanced view of their national responsibility in order to avoid the prophetic demand for repentance and a new way of life. That all this has relevance for today is surely obvious, and we shall examine this in the next Note.

61) 18:1-4

The principle of corporate, collective responsibility, as unfolded in the proverb in these verses is, of course, a valid biblical idea, and it is true to say that many of the social evils that we are suffering from in our day are the fruit of the convulsions of the early years of the 20th century. This can hardly be controverted: we are living in a disturbed age, and the disturbance and the moral breakdown that we see in our time are the fruit and consequence of what happened decades ago. To give a specific illustration of the point, the children that were born in the turbulent and convulsive war years of 1939-45 constitute the age group that experienced so many problems of disturbance and breakdown in the 80s, and there can be little doubt that there is a link between the circumstances of these earlier years and the present malaise. But we cannot, from that position, go on to say, 'It is not our fault, we cannot be expected to assume responsibility'. There is more than a little tendency today to hide behind our psychological history of disorder and disturbance and excuse our behaviour on that account, refusing to assume responsibility for it: 'It is not my fault that I am as I am, it is the fault of other people and other circumstances, 20, 30 years ago, and I am not to be held responsible'. But God says, 'Not so, responsibility lies fairly and squarely upon every man'. To be sure, it is not a simple equation that is involved here. The psychological interpretation of the situation is valid, and please God it will give us a great deal of compassion for people who are disturbed and bent, and twisted and broken in their lives. But that is one thing; it is quite another, and something quite inadmissible, to go from that position and say 'Therefore they are not responsible for their actions'. The psychological interpretation must not be made an excuse for absolving any one from responsibility, and it is all too possible to be too sold on such an attitude.

62) 18:5-20

Such is the point that Ezekiel is making in this chapter, and he illustrates it well in the three examples he cites in these verses. They make his point perfectly, and bring home the inescapable reality of personal responsibility for actions, whether good or bad. And, in fact, most people know in their deepest hearts, when they are utterly honest with themselves and with God, that notwithstanding all their possible background, and the influences that have conditioned their lives from the past, they are indeed responsible for their own actions. But such is the deceitfulness of the heart, that we are always liable to deceive ourselves into believing that it is not our fault. Ezekiel came (cf Jeremiah 15:4) to the exiles who were hiding behind this unbalanced view of national responsibility in order to avoid the prophetic demands for repentance and a new way of life. As long as they were saying, 'It is not our fault, it is our fathers' fault, it is Manasseh's fault that all this has happened to us', and as long as this was their attitude, their minds were not amenable to the summons to repentance, and Ezekiel knew that his mandate from God was to go to them and charge home to their hearts and consciousness the responsibility for the plight that had come upon them.

63) 18:21-32

In this moving passage Ezekiel sums up the Lord's message to His people. The contrasts between the righteous and the wicked are stated with great starkness and plainness of speech, leaving his readers in no doubt as to the issues involved. One possible misunderstanding, however, of his words might be to suppose that he is preaching a doctrine of salvation by works: if you do well you shall live, if do evilly, you die. But this is a superficial reading of the passage, and there is no such thought in Ezekiel's mind as the appeal in 31 should surely make plain: it is the grace of repentance unto life that is here in view, and that in the context of 'a new heart and a new spirit'. It is from this alone that right actions can spring, and all along this has been the prophet's - and the Lord's - concern with His people. We would do well to read the message along with another in the New Testament, Romans 2:6-16, where a similar emphasis is made, and a similar misunderstanding is possible. What Paul has in view in his words is not the beginning, but the end, of Christian life. Entrance into the kingdom of God is by grace through faith alone; but judgment at the end is ever on the basis of works. This is what lies at the heart of Ezekiel's words also. It is the time of reckoning that is in view throughout, not the basis of acceptance with the Lord.

64) 19:1-14

This chapter is a lament for the overthrow of Israel, couched in the form of a poem (as RSV indicates) or, more accurately, a lament over the fall of the royal family. It falls naturally into three parts, 1-4, 5-9, and 10-14, each part referring to a different king. The prophet depicts a particular part of the nation's history, using the allegory of a lion and her whelps. This allegorical poem is really very plain in its reference. The 'lioness' mother is not so much the mother of any of the kings, as Israel herself, the nation that mothered all of them. The first whelp, which became a young lion (3), and learned to catch its prey, can only refer to Jehoahaz, the son of good king Josiah. We see, from 2 Kings 23:31, the history of this king and his eventual fate at the hands of the king of Egypt. Clearly, this is the reference that Ezekiel is making. The next section (5-9) refers not to the king who immediately succeeded Jehoahaz, but to the next one. Reading again in 2 Kings 23:24ff, we see that Jehoahaz was succeeded by Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, and the brother of Jehoahaz. Pharaoh changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. It is not Jehoiakim of whom Ezekiel speaks here in 5-9, but his son and successor, Jehoiachin. It was he who was brought into captivity in Babylon (see 2 Kings 24:8-15).

65) 19:1-14

The metaphor changes in 10 and the figure of the lioness is replaced by that of the vine, which is the regular Old Testament metaphor used to depict Israel. The picture in 10, 11 is of Israel in her strength, when God prospered her, and His blessing rested upon her, when He took her from nothing, prospered her ways, and made her a great nation. Then, when she sinned, she was cast down to the ground, dried up, broken and withered, and planted in the wilderness in the dry and thirsty ground. The 'rod of her branches' refers to a specific king, Zedekiah. It was in his time that final destruction took place, when he wilfully, and against the express instructions of Jeremiah, made alliance with Egypt against Babylon. Jeremiah had said, 'Serve the king of Babylon and live, Zedekiah, your safety and the safety of Jerusalem lie in your submitting to Nebuchadnezzar'. But the rash and foolish king would up and rebel against Babylon, so Nebuchadnezzar's war machine came rumbling against Jerusalem, and in a two years' siege the city was reduced to a heap of rubble, the walls breached and razed to the ground and the Temple burned, and captives taken away to Babylon in 586 BC.

66) 19:1-14

These last few verses about Zedekiah must also be regarded as a prophecy, indeed we are forced to this conclusion, if we take the chronology of the opening chapters of Ezekiel as correct. At the beginning of chapter 20, for example, it speaks of the seventh year in the fifth month, i.e. 590 BC, seven years after the first part of the captivity in 597, and if this poem was written before then, it must be regarded as a prophecy. Ezekiel, in other words, is prophesying to the exiles by the river Chebar that this is what Zedekiah is going to do. In this connection we should bear in mind that all through the first half of Ezekiel's prophecy, his concern is to convince the exiles that there is no hope of going back to Jerusalem 'in a matter of months'. He insists that the exile will be long, and Jerusalem will no longer be sacrosanct, but destroyed by the judgment of God. And he utters this lament, giving them a picture of the last agonising years, the death-throes of the kingdom and the dynasty of Israel. The picture of the 'burnt-out' vine in 14, with life disappearing from it, is a graphic picture of the tragic end of Zedekiah. This, says Ezekiel, to the exiles in Chebar, is how it is going to be.

67) 19:1-14

We should note how the chapter ends: 'This is a lamentation and shall be for a lamentation'. The NEB puts it, 'This is the lament, and as a lament passed into use'. Probably what the translators mean by that is that it came to pass and therefore the lament was not forgotten, but became a reality. But what we need to notice is Ezekiel's distress in the whole matter. Sometimes we are given the impression by scholars and others, who perhaps should know better, that some of the old Hebrew prophets were blood-thirsty men, who delighted in mouthing fearful and frightful denunciations against God's people, and were almost pathological and paranoiac in their hatred and in their exultation in the judgment of God. But the real story is very different. Ezekiel took no pleasure in saying these things; he also was a son of Israel, and he felt for the woe and the tragedy of his people. He wept, and this is the measure of the weeping of his heart. It would do us good to remember this from time to time: here is a prophet uttering this prophecy of the final doom of Jerusalem and he says in effect to the people, 'It is something that I weep over, my brethren, not something I exult in, and something that we should all weep over'. Such, then, is the lament for the end of the dynasty of Israel.

68) 20:1-4

The date given in 1 refers to the seventh year from the time of the first captivity (in 597 BC) i.e. 590, and still a few years before the final movement to Babylon in 586. The elders of Israel came once again to Ezekiel (as they had done in 14:1) seeking a word from the Lord. The word they are given is one of judgment, and one that asserts the righteousness of that judgment by rehearsing the entire history of the people of God from the beginning. Ezekiel is commanded to state the Lord's case against them - which is done in the remainder of the chapter - and it is in view of this that the Lord says, 'Therefore they have no right to come and consult Me. I will not be enquired of by such a people, with such a history, who are confirming the previous history of their forefathers in their own attitudes today'. We are not told the nature of the elders' enquiry - perhaps it was a question such as we have seen in chapter 18, when people were saying, 'Is it fair of God to deal thus with us, the way of the Lord is not equal?' If so, it is little wonder that God is angry with them, for to speak thus was surely an evidence of the blindness in their hearts to the enormity of their sin. It is in this context that we must understand the interpretation of Israel's history that now follows.

69) 20:5-26

The whole chapter is a remarkable summing up of Israel's history. There are five fairly unequal sections: in 5-9 we have the Egyptian captivity in the time of the Exodus; in 10-17 from the Passover and the emergence from Egypt up to Kadesh-Barnea; in 18-26 it is the forty years wilderness wandering; in 27-29 a brief summing up of the period from Joshua to Josiah; then in 30, 31, the reference is to those to whom Ezekiel was speaking at the time. Here is one of the notable chapters of the Old Testament from the point of view of historical summary, and it is paralleled by a number of similar chapters, such as Nehemiah 9, Psalm 78, Acts 7, to name but a few, which gives an inspired interpretation and commentary, in brief précis form of the entire history of Israel. The particular value of such a chapter lies in the fact that the history of Israel is such a vast canvas that it would be very easy for us not to see the wood for the trees, and we should be grateful for such passages which give a running commentary on the entire panoramic history of the people of God in the compass of a few verses. It is of enormous spiritual significance to be able to look at the bewildering variety of material which constitutes Old Testament history and to see a coherent thread running right through it from beginning to end. It is something that not everyone can do and, as we see at the end of the chapter, it is something that not everyone can understand either. In addition also to the panoramic view given us, there are particular insights given us here, and inspired interpretations, which are not readily apparent in the ordinary reading of that history, and we shall look at one or two instances of this in the next Note.

70) 20:5-26

We should not miss, for example, the implication in 7 that Israel was involved in idolatrous practices while in captivity in Egypt and that they had absorbed much of Egyptian idolatry. When it was put like this, we begin to see something that perhaps might otherwise have been passed over in the reading of Exodus, and we ask ourselves. how did they think up the golden calf at Mount Sinai? Where did they get that idea from? Ideas do not simply materialise 'out of the blue', without relation to anything that has gone before. There was idolatry in their hearts, that is why they made the golden calf; and the idolatry was in their hearts because it had been in their practice in Egypt, although we are not told about it in Exodus. This is indeed inspired insight into the sacred record, comparable to the insights given us in Hebrews 11 which constitute an inspired commentary on the lives of the heroes of faith in Old Testament times. One thinks, for example, of what is said there about the story of Jacob: 'By faith Jacob when he was dying blessed both the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff' (Hebrews 11:21). One's reaction to this verse must first of all surely be, 'Is this all that the writer has to say about that wonderful story? What of Bethel, and what of Peniel, to mention but two of the great crisis points of the patriarch's experience?' Yet from the Apostle's particular standpoint, that of faith, the most significant thing in Jacob's life took place when he was dying, for it was then that he passed on the blessing and the promise to his posterity. It took God all that time to make Jacob useable for that purpose. This is one of the supreme values of such a chapter.

71) 20:5-26

The ongoing dealings of God with His people are further underlined, for example, in 10-17. It is in relation to the disciplines of grace that the law was given at Sinai. We can surely link this up with Paul's teaching about the law in Romans 7. The giving of the law, seen against this background, is surely significant, for it represents God's gracious dealings with His people, this rebellious, fractious, idolatrous people who would not listen to His voice. This is why He thrust the law at them. We should notice in passing what is said about the Sabbath. Here is a statement which should deliver us from any legalistic thinking. It is far from the mark to think of the Lord's Day in Sabbatarian terms. Keeping the Sabbath is not a question of craven observance, the strict puritanical observance of an outdated law, nor is it a legalistic anachronism, but a sign of the covenant between God and man. Keeping the Sabbath is therefore an assent on our part that the Lord is hallowing us, a bearing witness to God and to man that we belong to Him. If the Lord is hallowing me unto Himself, and if I want to bear witness that I am glad of that hallowing, then I shall want to be in God's house on the Sabbath as a testimony that I am on the Lord's side. It is this that transforms the Sabbath day and makes it a joy and a delight, not a craven, irksome duty. God does not want our reluctant worship, but the glad response and outgoing of our hearts, and when this is given, God comes in all His grace and power in response to it. It is this that 'makes' true worship, and makes it the very gate of heaven to our souls.

72) 20:5-26

The reference in 18 is to Israel's wilderness wanderings, up to the time of Kadesh-barnea, where they refused to enter into the land, and God turned them back and swore in His wrath that He would not allow them to enter into His rest. And none of that generation did enter, for they died off in the wilderness. It was their sons that went in, but even they rebelled against the Lord, failing to conform to His statutes or observe His laws. The statement in 25, 26 is very striking, and indeed frightening, for it bears witness to an unalterable principle in God's dealings with men. Paul expresses it very graphically in Romans 1:24, 26, 28: 'Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind ...'. God pleaded with His people for long enough, and when they kept refusing to heed His voice He delivered them up to Satan, giving them laws and statutes that were not good and lifting the restraints of grace from them, with terrible consequences (26). This is the judicial action of God: they turned from Him, and therefore He finally turned from them, withholding all His protection, and the restraints of His grace. It is a terrible thought, but there can hardly be doubt but that this is what Ezekiel means.

73) 20:27-44

When Israel finally settled in the land, the pattern of the past repeated itself. One thinks of Stephen's summing up of the situation in Acts 7:51: 'Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost'. This is the point that Ezekiel is making; 'Look at what has happened down all your history', he says to the elders at Chebar, 'You have repeated in your lives what your forefathers have done. And do you suppose that it will be any different with you than with them? God turned His face from them, and would not hear them. Is He likely to hear you?' Such is Ezekiel's word here: and far from hearing them, God would on the contrary bring them into the wilderness, as He had done with their forefathers, and confront them there, stating His case against them (33-39). It is not very clear what precisely Ezekiel means here, whether it is that God will bring them out of captivity into the wilderness (i.e. out of Babylon) and then meet with them in mercy (i.e. in the wilderness on the way back to the land), or that He is speaking of Babylon as the wilderness. The general meaning is surely plain however, and in 37ff we certainly have the idea of a remnant being purified of all its unbelieving and rebellious elements. The prophet is looking to the future (39-44), and is saying that after Jerusalem is broken down and destroyed, and after the captivity is ended, God will yet have dealings in mercy with this purified remnant.

74) 20:45-49

The chapter concludes with a parabolic statement of divine judgment. What Ezekiel means is this: he has given them the word of the Lord, surveying the whole history of His people so clearly and simply that one would have thought that anybody would have understood what he was saying. Yet they could not - perhaps would not - understand the message, because their eyes were blinded by their sins, and they had become incapable of seeing the plain lessons of history. This is where Ezekiel's word becomes highly relevant for us. One of the tasks the Church has today is surely to interpret history in the light of the Word of God. Look at the 21st century and see what God is saying to our nation, look at the change in the fortunes of our people in the past few decades! Yet, when someone makes bold to stand up and say 'We have lost our greatness because we have forgotten God' - as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said - he is immediately dubbed as fanatical, and as belonging to the 'lunatic fringe'. This was Ezekiel's plaint, and his distress and sense of desolation, that the word that God had given him to speak was not getting through to men, they were refusing it and incapable of understanding it. Their eyes were blinded that they could not see the plain truth before their eyes. This is so often the way, when the judgments of God are abroad upon the earth: men are bemused, and lacking in perception, and however plainly and starkly the message is held forth, they think that we speak in riddles, that we are off-centre, eccentric and odd. This is the force of Ezekiel's words in 49, 'Ah, Lord God! They say of me, Doth he not speak parables?' What a commentary, and what a relevance for our day.

75) 21:1-17

This chapter is given in the analysis (see Note on page 6) the title 'The Sword of the Lord' and, as we shall see, it is a very apt one. In the Hebrew Bible, chapter 21 begins at 20:45ff which, as we have seen, contained the prophecy of the final destruction of Jerusalem. In 49, we saw the people's refusal or inability to grasp the meaning of Ezekiel's words. Now in 21:1-7, the 'parabolic' nature of these words is explained in clear, simple terms. The 'south' in 20:46 becomes, first Jerusalem, then the sanctuaries (holy places), then the land of Israel (2); while the 'fire' becomes a 'sword' which will devour righteous and wicked alike (3). The burden on Ezekiel's spirit (6, 7) is unmistakable, and underlines his identification with the people in the woe that is to come upon them, as well as his identification with the suffering of God over His erring people. The AV rendering of 9-11 is difficult to follow, and the RSV is probably more accurate in its translation, especially 10b, 11, 'Or do we make mirth? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood. So the sword is given to be polished, that it may be handled; it is sharpened and polished to be given into the hand of the slayer'. It is as if God were saying, 'Do you think I am joking, when I speak about a sword?' This, in fact, is what the people to whom Ezekiel spoke did think, and they were simply not prepared to accept what he was saying about the destruction of Jerusalem. And God says, 'You have despised the rod, along with everything of wood that I have used against you (i.e. the rod of correction). You will now have the taste of steel.' The sword, then, was for judgment, not discipline; the time for discipline and correction was past.

76) 21:1-17

The clapping of hands in 14, 17, attributed at first to the prophet and then to the Lord, might seem on the surface to suggest gloating over the prospect of the sword of the Lord being let loose among the people, but this is far from the real truth. What is meant is this: Ezekiel claps his hands in the way that the Lord claps His in 17, not in the sense of gloating over the judgment, but rather approving it, which is a very different matter. The idea corresponds to that expressed in Psalm 2, in the words, 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh ...'. Approval of the divine judgment may sound harsh to the modern ear, but we should consider the alternative. If God approves of judgment: and we do not, are we not setting ourselves up against God, and judging Him? And is not this a dangerous thing to do? We need not be afraid to approve of divine judgment, since to approve it does not mean to gloat over it. It was possible for Ezekiel to sigh and weep over the desolations of his people (6, 7) and also clap his hands in approval of judgment, at one and the same time, without any sense of contradiction. There is an important point here that we need to give due regard to since there is often much confusion and emotional thinking in matters of this nature. We tend to fall over backwards, lest we be thought to be gloating over the judgment of God or approving it in any malicious or self-righteous or censorious way; but it is at least as dangerous to fall over backwards in that sense as to fall over to the other extreme. If we recognised this more, we might begin to think very differently about many things. One that comes readily to mind is the whole concept of punishment as such, and this is so important that we shall devote the next reading to the consideration of it.

77) 21:1-17

The only concept of punishment that seems to be accepted as ethically honourable or allowable today is that of punishment as remedial or corrective. If it cannot be shown to be either of these, it is turned down as ethically improper and inadmissible. This, basically, is the reasoning which abolished capital punishment; for of course, capital punishment is not corrective or remedial. When a man dies, no more correction is possible, and no more remedial treatment either. This is all very high-sounding, and very progressive and advanced, and to many is very Christian - except for one thing: when we turn to the Scriptures we find ourselves in a different world. The Bible is not afraid to speak of punishment as retributive, and as desert for wrongdoing, nor is this merely an Old Testament concept, for it is found just as much in the New Testament as in the Old, and on the lips of Jesus as much as on the lips of Ezekiel and the other prophets. One fatal flaw in the corrective or remedial theory is this: what right has any government, or any individual, to impose remedial or corrective measures upon anyone, unless he deserves them. What right has any government, or any prison service or any judiciary to try to correct anybody's life, unless he deserves to be corrected? The moment we introduce the idea and concept of desert, we cut the feet away from the arguments that have been used to abolish capital punishment, and to introduce so much of the penal legislation that we suffer from today, when crime is made to pay. The truth of the matter is that the concept of desert is the only thing that provides any link between punishment and justice. As C.S. Lewis points out, 'It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust'.

78) 21:18-32

The tenor of the words in 18ff seems to suggest that Ezekiel is to engage once again in a parabolic action, but it is not clear whether he is constructing a model, or tracing it on the ground in front of him. What it represents is the road from the north, southwards to Jerusalem on the one hand, and to Rabbath of the Ammonites on the other, like an inverted letter 'Y', with the two forks pointing downwards, the right-hand fork in the road to Jerusalem, the other to Rabbath. Nebuchadnezzar comes down from the north with his army, comes to this fork on the road (21), and uses divination to decide which direction he will take. Jerusalem, of course, is the choice, since the Lord had ordained judgment for the city; the disposal of the lot was in His hands. The actual divination itself as described here is an interesting phenomenon: use was made of arrows, marked with the names of the two places, and put in the quiver and shaken, then one was withdrawn. Also, images or 'teraphim' were used, whether in some spiritistic way or otherwise. Thirdly, the reference to 'liver' in 21 indicates the use of the entrails of animals and the markings on them – a common practice in the ancient east. We may think these to be extraordinary, even fantastic practices, but they are no more so than the palmistry and horoscopes of the present time; all alike are unhallowed and forbidden in the Scripture. What we need to see here is the Lord's overruling in the use of them. He saw to it that the lot would work out in a particular way, and in line with His sovereign purposes. This could never justify the use of such expedients by men, for they are an abomination to the Lord, but He can sovereignly make use of them without in any way having complicity in them.

79) 21:18-32

We must look at one or two further points in this passage before leaving it. First of all, there is the question of the meaning of 23. It is perhaps best to take it as referring to the exiles by the river Chebar. Ezekiel had drawn out before them a diagram of the two forks on the road, and indicated that the lot would fall on Jerusalem, saying 'This is the word of the Lord, and this is what is going to happen'. But the elders of the people, blind as ever, assume that must be a false divination, for they cannot conceive that Jerusalem could ever be destroyed. In 25, there is a clear reference to Zedekiah, the last of the kings - and as a matter of simple history, he has indeed proved to have been the last king of Israel, for after the captivity there were no further kings, nor will there be, 'until He comes whose right it is' - a remarkable and impressive reference to the promised Messiah, to whom the sceptre, the crown and the diadem alone rightfully belong. In 28-32 the doom of Ammon is prophesied, in the same kind of language as that used earlier to describe the doom of Jerusalem. The significant difference, however, is that they were to be judged in their own land, whereas the people of God were to be taken into captivity, to be purged, purified and cleansed then returned to Israel, a chastened and holier people. Ammon, however, had no such future; for them it was to be utter, final judgment and extinction. They were to be no more remembered. And, historically, the Ammonites are no more, and they never will be any more, whereas Israel still exists today as a corporate entity in the economy and purposes of God.

80) 22:1-16

This chapter contains three prophecies about the sin, degradation and defilement of Jerusalem. In the first, in these verses, we are given a grim and ugly picture of the moral declension of the city. We should note the almost monotonous repetition of the words 'in thee', in 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12. The force of the emphasis is that these things had been happening in Jerusalem of all places, the holy city of God, and all these abominations were violations of the express command and will of God as given in Exodus and Leviticus. They portray a state of moral collapse and disintegration. What is very striking in this passage is the startling similarity in what is recorded to conditions in our own day. This should not really surprise us: history shows that the breakdown of societies generally follows the same pattern in any age. It is always in this way that the collapse comes. The fact that we are for the most part unaware of our own declension is simply an evidence of the parochialness of our thinking, and of how enclosed we are in our national complacency. We are not, on the whole, aware of what other nations think of us, and it would be very salutary for us to read more of the world Press and its comments on the relative insignificance of 'Great' Britain. This would do more than most things to bring home to our startled consciousness the unpalatable truth of our decline. The words in 4, 'I will make thee a reproach unto the heathen, and a mocking to all countries' would then be seen to be the simple truth about a nation that has left God out of its reckoning, and become divorced from its truest traditions. This is what God does to nations that have been privileged by His blessing.

81) 22:17-31

The second prophecy (17-22) speaks in terms of a furnace of affliction appointed for the sinning people, in which they would be purged and purified of their iniquity. The metaphor of the smelting of silver is surely a reference, in the context of what we have been saying, to the long and painful experience that the people of God were about to enter. 'No short, insignificant captivity for you, my brethren', says Ezekiel, 'this is going to be a long process, just as metal takes a long time to be melted down and smelted and purified. You will be in Babylon for long and weary years'. In the final prophecy (23-31) Ezekiel gives a grim catalogue of the sins of all classes of society. Prophets, priests, princes, chief men, people of the land, all alike have become corrupt, and all alike have failed. Against this sombre background, the Lord's words in 30, 31 are seen in all their seriousness. The curse of such a society is that it produces no men of stature. Is not this one of the disquieting things of our time, that with the passing of the years the leaders of our political life have tended to become smaller and smaller in stature, until there is hardly a single figure to whom people can look for a moral lead in the nation? One does not need to be much of a prophet to forecast that a mere change of government (this is being written in the time of build-up to a General Election) is not going to spell salvation to the land. No political party is going to achieve this; only one thing can help Britain, and that is a moral regeneration. More of this in the next Note.

82) 22:17-31

When one thinks of the rumblings throughout society, the dark threats of industrial blackmail, general strikes, anarchy, one begins to wonder whether we in this country realise how near the edge of disaster we are, with the seemingly imminent breakdown of law and order. Northern Ireland is but one small sector of the situation, and the danger is articulate and on the surface there, but it is rumbling throughout the whole nation in all manner of ways. A report on piracy in the video-cassette industry said that the incidence of illegality in this practice was more widespread and extensive in Britain than anywhere else in Europe. What a tragedy, for a nation of whom it used to be said that the label 'British' was a guarantee of integrity and honour in industry! In view of all this, the words 'And I sought for a man among them' seem very poignant and moving. Should we not, then, be much in prayer for the emergence of a man with courage, and with moral integrity, a man who is not afraid to say outspoken things, if the need of the hour requires him to? That is surely our need, and that is our hope in the land, whatever our political persuasion and colour. And if we think we discern a man of stature, whichever party he may belong to, then that is our cue for prayer, never mind politics, never mind parties. We need to pay heed to basic and fundamental issues, like law and order, public and private morality - in these things no party has a monopoly. That is how we should pray, that is how we need to pray, because if a true leadership does not soon emerge, that will give a fresh moral direction to the nation, the outlook is very grim indeed.

There is much here to stimulate our thought, and to cause us to apply the Scriptures to our own day and generation. Please God, we will have the vision and the clear-sightedness to do so, that we might see where we are going, and see our task in this day to be in prayer, that God would raise up men after his own heart. Please God let it be so!

83) 23:1-35

This chapter makes very grim, indeed gruesome, reading in many ways. It describes in lurid and brutally frank language the utter degradation of the people. Ezekiel continues for us in a rather different form the allegory of Israel's history that we saw in chapter 16, and this earlier picture of the raising of a foundling child to royalty should be borne in mind as we study what is said here. The meaning of the allegory is clear and plain: Aholah and Aholibah represent Israel, the northern kingdom with its capital Samaria, and Judah, the southern kingdom, with its capital Jerusalem, respectively. The message is of course addressed to Judah, the northern kingdom having long since been taken into captivity by Assyria (721 BC), and the point that is being made is that although Judah was aware of the fate that had overtaken her northern neighbour because of her sins, they themselves were persisting in the same abominations, and could therefore expect a similar doom to overtake them. Just as Israel flirted with the Assyrians, made alliances and leagues with them, with the inevitable consequences, so also the same inevitable judgment would overtake Judah in the fullness of the time. Such was the message that Ezekiel gave to the elders of Israel by the river Chebar. 'You saw the fate that overtook Israel', he says, 'Why have you not learned from that warning?' The impressive and ominous thing is that with the terrible and terrifying example of the northern kingdom's judgment and destruction before their eyes, those in the south paid absolutely no heed, and they refused to read the signs of the times. Some people will never learn. This is a melancholy fact in the history of nations; empire after empire, kingdom after kingdom, has fallen and been broken through its godlessness and depravity, and yet not one of them has learned from its predecessors, all alike have gone the same way. What could underline more graphically than this the blindness of sin?

84) 23:1-35

A word needs to be said about the nature of Ezekiel's metaphor, and of the language and descriptions he uses. It is true that they make embarrassing reading, and we might perhaps feel we could have been spared the gruesome details, because they are so horrible. But the point is that Ezekiel perceived, as other prophets also did, the true nature of Israel's sin, and was simply calling it by its proper name, with the express purpose of charging home the enormity of it to the people. In fact, we know from the history of Kings and Chronicles, as well as from the prophetic writings, that the people of God seemed constitutionally blind to the enormity of what they had done in the sight of God and against Him, in following evil idols. It is the shame, and the shamelessness, of their sins that Ezekiel is underlining. The nuptial metaphor, and the use of the idea of marital relations, is integral to both the Old Testament Scriptures and the New, in describing the relationship between God and His people. Israel is the wife of Jehovah. In Scripture, metaphors are not used carelessly or inconsequentially, and it is probably true to say that metaphor in general, and particularly this metaphor, means more than it does in our conversation. This is why the sin of idolatry is described as marital infidelity. For God's people to sin is, in His sight, like a woman going to stay with another man who is not her husband. This is the point that Ezekiel makes, and he does so with brutal and embarrassing frankness. We may therefore assume that he needed to be thus frank; he needed, in such desperately plain and ugly - and we may say - revolting language, to speak in this way to the people, in order that they might see the ugliness and awfulness of their sins, as a betrayal and violation of the sanctity of their relationship with God.

85) 23:36-49

The nuptial metaphor continues in these verses. We should not miss the tremendous thrust in 38, 'This they have done unto Me'. Not merely had they committed lewdness and whoredom with idols and heathen gods, but they had, in doing so, violated and outraged the heart of their God, and desecrated His temple by trailing their lewdness into His house with them. It is rather as if a woman who had gone off the rails with false lovers had then the audacity to take them back to her house, when her husband was still there, and have them in the house with him. This is the extent of their abomination, this was how unspeakable a thing it was.

86) 23:36-49

The significance of the closing verses of the chapter (42-49) lies in the nature of the judgment that was pronounced upon Jerusalem: 'The company shall stone them with stones, and despatch them with their swords' (47). In this connection we should recall the incident in John 8, when the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman taken in adultery. Death by stoning was the penalty imposed by the law; and therefore, since Jerusalem had been an adulteress, she was going to have the penalty of the law fulfilled upon her. And in the fullness of the time, Nebuchadnezzar's catapults rained boulders and stones upon the beleaguered city so that it was 'stoned' to death. One can readily understand the impact this word would have upon these elders of Judah, who knew the law, although they had not kept it, and how devastatingly Ezekiel's message must have shattered their complacent confidence that Jerusalem was inviolable in the eyes of the Lord, and that He would never destroy it. 'Ah, but the penalty for adultery is stoning to death, and stoned to death Jerusalem will be, for she is guilty of adultery in the sight of God'. Let us not be over-preoccupied with the language or imagery, but see beyond it to what Ezekiel is saying. Our relationship to God is a marital one, He is the lover of our souls, and sins against love are very, very serious indeed. That is the great incentive to God's people to be faithful. We are being faithful, not to an idea or to a code, but to a Lover, and to a Husband.

87) 24:1-14

The date of this prophecy given in 1 refers to the ninth year after the first captivity, in 597 BC, when Ezekiel and the elders of Israel with the king were taken to Babylon. This brings us to 588 BC, which was the year that Zedekiah in Jerusalem rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, in league with Egypt and the confederacy of peoples round about. It was this that provoked Nebuchadnezzar's attack upon Jerusalem. There is considerable drama in the statement in 2, as the divine intimation comes to the prophet of the siege of Jerusalem at the precise moment that it began, and it must have been an impressive, indeed shattering, announcement to the people that even as the prophet spoke, Jerusalem was meeting its doom. It may be that what is recorded in 3ff is once again an acted parable, but whether or not this is the case, the message is quite clear, and the imagery not in doubt. The rusty cauldron represents Jerusalem, the fire under it is the siege they were undergoing at that precise moment, and the pieces of flesh are the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The reference to the scum in 6 is taken by one commentator to mean that with the pot boiling up, the impurities in the pot itself begin to come out, forming as a filthy scum at the top. Ezekiel's metaphor is very graphic: 'That is what it is like in Jerusalem', he says. If this is the meaning, then the message is surely clear: when an abandoned people are put 'in the cauldron' like this, and put under pressure, all the scum does come to the surface, and all the ugly characteristics that may have been hidden from public gaze come right out into the open, and the filth and degradation of the city is exposed to view.

88) 24:1-14

The precise meaning of 6ff may not be clear, but what seems to be in view is that, great as the pressure has been upon Jerusalem, and in spite of it, the blood-guiltiness of the people of God has still not been purged, it was still crying out to heaven, and there was still no adequate repentance. Zedekiah was still truculent in face of impending doom. Jeremiah had said to him, 'Serve the king of Babylon and live', and to have heeded this counsel would have been a sign of his repentance; but no, he rebelled against Babylon, and this meant that the sin of the people was therefore still there, and still crying out to God. Their sin had, in fact, become so deeply ingrained in them that not even the pressure of judgment was sufficing to purge it out of them. Hence the terrible pronouncement in 13 about the divine fury being vented to the full upon them. There is a very solemn lesson here: we must learn to beware lest sin become so ingrained in us that we are no longer amenable to the ordinary processes of sanctification, i.e. the discipline of God's Word and Spirit - which are God's normal way of cleansing and renewing us - and we need the fire of God's stern judgment upon our lives to burn it out of us. There does come a time when the heart becomes impervious to the Word and Spirit in their gracious work of renewal, and when that time comes, there is nothing left for God to do but to kindle the fires of judgment to burn the sin out of us.

89) 24:15-27

The final lesson of the chapter is a stark, even frightening, one. Ezekiel suffers a deep bereavement, and his wife, the dear companion of his lonely and costly testimony, is taken away at a stroke. But he is commanded not to mourn her, but to go on as if nothing had happened. Next morning he did as he was commanded. Word got round that Ezekiel's wife was dead, and that the prophet did not fulfil the ritual of mourning, the normal and natural thing for him to have done. It was so striking a thing that people said to one another, 'There must be something that God is saying to us in this, let us ask him about it'. And Ezekiel gave answer, in 21ff: his bereavement was a 'sign' to Judah. Just as he had lost the desire of his eyes at a stroke, so they were to lose Jerusalem. Our reaction is that this was surely a hard and severe way of dealing with Ezekiel. Yes, but it is not without precedent, for one thinks of Hosea's experience, and how God ordained his family tragedy, and brought forth from the heartbreak that he suffered, through the unfaithfulness of his wife, the message of divine heartbreak about the sin of the people. And just as Hosea's grief became his gospel, so here Ezekiel's sorrow became the vehicle of the divine word to his sinning people. A hard and terrible experience, to be sure, but it is significant that Ezekiel obeyed the Lord's command without demur: if there were no other way for the Lord's message to get home to the people except in such costly fashion, Ezekiel was prepared even for this.

90) 24:15-27

There is another problem, however, in this stark episode, and it lies in the forbidding of mourning to the prophet. There are two ways of taking this: some have thought that Ezekiel's lack of mourning was meant to jolt the captives in Babylon to an awareness of their lack of sorrow at what was going on in Jerusalem. That is a possible way of looking at it; but it is more likely to mean that this catastrophe was too great and too terrible for outward expressions of mourning; and stupefaction would be the word to describe the situation. This is true to human psychology; sometimes when sudden grief and shock and sorrow come, people are in a daze, they cannot take it in, they do not mourn or weep, no tears will come, for they are simply stupefied. It is in the inward places that the desolation is known. Ezekiel must have felt this supremely, and his pain was too terrible even for outward grief to be expressed. In the same way, God was saying, 'This disaster that you always thought was unthinkable, now that it has taken place, is too terrible for ordinary grief. Stupefaction will lay hold upon you, and you will pine away.'

The 'dumbness' mentioned in 27 can be interpreted in two ways. Some think it refers back to chapter 2, where God said He would make the prophet dumb. If this be so, we must assume that from that point to this all the communication that Ezekiel gave to the captives at Chebar was written down, and not spoken by word of mouth, and that his dumbness was a testimony. Others think that it refers to the period from this moment in 588 BC, through to 586, two years later, when Jerusalem finally fell, and that during these two years Ezekiel spoke no word at all, and then at the end of that time his lips were opened. At all events, it was when Jerusalem was destroyed, and all human hope taken away from the captives, that Ezekiel began to speak words of hope to them, proclaiming the promise of a new covenant, and new life (ch 33 onwards).

91) 25:1-17

We come, in this chapter, to the second of the major sections of Ezekiel's prophecy (see II in Note on page 6). Here is a series of prophecies made during the siege of Jerusalem, and uttered against the surrounding nations. They were uttered as if to assert that every true prophet of God has a word, not only for God's people, but also for God's world. One wonders if one of the immediate purposes in their being uttered and being gathered together in this form, and at this point in Ezekiel's ministry, was to imply that Israel need not hope to get any help from any of the surrounding nations against Babylon, for one and all were going to be judged and destroyed. It is true that the people of God had an almost incredible aptitude for turning to foreign nations for help against the oppressor, instead of turning to the Lord. This is what spelt the downfall of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. His persistent attempts to get help from other nations was a source of distress to the prophets and to the Lord Himself. It was as if God were saying in effect, 'Spare yourself further trouble, because all these nations you are seeking help from are coming under My judgment'. Furthermore, it was to be seen that the judgment coming upon them was from God, because we have the reiterated refrain 'They shall know that I am the Lord' (7, 11, 14, 17).

Four nations are brought before us in this chapter, Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia, and we shall look at what is said about them in some detail in the next Note.

92) 25:1-17

The prophecy against Ammon is straightforward. Because in the time of Israel's misfortune Ammon had gloated over them, God was to punish them. This is something one sees again and again in the prophetic literature. God may punish His people, but woe betide anyone who mocks them in their distress, for God will not tolerate that. And God does not change in this; the principle is just as true in the 21st Century as it was in Ezekiel's time. The judgment pronounced on Moab (8-11) was that they, with Ammon, would be possessed by the 'men of the East', i.e. Bedouin tribesmen. This, as a matter of history, was fulfilled, and they are now no longer peoples, but forgotten about and out of existence. For a detailed description of the wickedness and remorseless cruelty of Edom (12-14), we need to read the small prophecy of Obadiah, which belongs to the period immediately preceding this. The reference in 14 is thought by scholars to have been fulfilled in the Maccabean period, when the Maccabees visited judgment upon Edom, and subjugated them as a people. Next is Philistia (15-17), up on the Mediterranean coast. History shows that 'after Maccabean times the Philistines completely vanished from sight as a people and only the names of their cities remained' (Taylor).

93) 26:1-21

The prophecies of doom against the nations mentioned in chapter 25 are brief and much to the point, but that against Tyre is much more extensive, reaching almost to the end of chapter 28. There are in fact four prophecies in all, the first in this chapter, against Tyre itself, the second, in chapter 27, a lament for the city of Tyre, then in 28:1-19 a prophecy against the king of Tyre, and a lament for his downfall. Tyre was a great mercantile city of the ancient world in those days, and indeed for a considerable time afterwards, renowned for its prosperity and its materialistic spirit. It was an extremely wealthy place, and merchants flocked to it with their ships from all over the world in a brisk and prosperous trading enterprise. We may recall the reference in Acts to the purple dye from Thyatira, which originated in Tyre and became part of its export drive. History books of ancient times tell us that Tyre was built in two parts, the landward city, and another on an island about three-quarters of a mile off-shore, the island at one time being joined to the mainland by a causeway. Ancient records indicate that when Nebuchadnezzar attacked Tyre, he built a ramp over to the island and managed to subdue it by this means. Much later, in the time of the Greek dynasty, Alexander the Great sacked the city, building a more effective ramp. After that terrible assault, the city prospered yet again, but gradually, through ongoing attacks and conquests, the city of Tyre went by default and is now no more.

94) 26:1-21

Today the island part of the city, which was linked to the mainland by ramp, and had the causeway gradually built over by sand, is a peninsula, with a long beach sweeping round the bay; but the landward part of the city of Tyre is now so completely obscured that not even archaeologists know for certain where its actual site was. And all that remains in modern time of the once famous and fabulous Tyre is a little straggling village of some three thousand inhabitants whose only occupation seems to be fishing and whose characteristic activity is the spreading of nets on the sands to dry. The prophecy in 5 has been literally fulfilled. The 'Fact and Faith' film, entitled 'The Stones Cry Out' deals, among others, with the prophecies of Ezekiel about Tyre, and has some shots in which this practice of spreading the nets is shown. Well might we say, 'How are the mighty fallen', for this is all that is left of great and magnificent sea-port and empire city of Tyre, and it is so because God said this is how it would be. Ezekiel's prophecy was very literally fulfilled.

95) 27:1-36

The picture we are given, in this lamentation for Tyre, is of a great merchant ship in full sail, beautifully equipped and up-to-date as it sails the seas, but coming to grief and foundering in the storms and being wrecked, broken and sunk. To read the chapter right through gives us a real impression of this magnificent grandeur. It is tremendous writing. What a picture of bustle, activity and enterprise, of the wealth and commerce of the whole ancient world. We are given a graphic insight into the vastness of this commercial, mercantile port in the eastern Mediterranean. The description of the storm that causes the ships to founder, in 26ff, is one of complete and utter disaster and destruction, designed to convey the message that Tyre would come to a ruin that was irrevocable and final. Ezekiel's words are echoed in Revelation 18, where the Apostle John borrows very substantially from the imagery of this terrible passage. Perhaps the metaphor of a ship on the sea is meant to convey the truth that human life does not exist in its own right, but is dependent on other contingencies, that storms do come which jeopardise life and put it in peril. Tyre was living as if she would live forever, as if she had a right per se to life, and Ezekiel is saying, 'O no, it is not like that at all. Tyre is just a ship, on a sea belonging to someone else, and at any moment that sea may break her back and send her plunging to the depths'. At the time Ezekiel wrote, Tyre was still flourishing with no sign of the storms to come, nor did the final storm come in Nebuchadnezzar's time, or even in Alexander's, because there was still a Tyre flourishing in some measure in our Lord's Day. But though the mills of God grind slowly, they grind exceeding small, and however long Ezekiel's word took to be fulfilled, fulfilled it was to the letter. Sic transit gloria mundi!

96) 28:1-10

This passage contains first a prophecy against the king of Tyre (1-10), then a lament for him (11-19). What Ezekiel is saying is that the might and prosperity, the wealth and godlessness, of Tyre is focused and summed up in the arrogance of her king. He is the figurehead, and the spirit behind all the wealth. It was made very clear in the previous chapter that in all the prosperity and enterprise God was not in all their thoughts. It was a godless empire, and the trouble with godless power is that it tends to corrupt, and the more powerful it is the more likely it is to corrupt. If there is any message for our own time in this terrible section of doom and judgment, it is that the perils of materialism are very great and very grave, for nations and for men. The kind of society that this begets is one in which phrases such as 'you've never had it so good' are bandied about, and this means that a people are already a great way into danger and into the peril that comes upon godlessness and materialism. And this is far truer of our own time than it could ever have been of Ezekiel's, because ours is the generation that has made such gigantic strides in technological achievement, and by this fact is tempted to feelings of god-like power. It is not wrong, of course, to explore the universe, or to land space-capsules on the moon and the planets, but the pride of life which can so easily attend such achievements is not only terribly wrong but disastrously and fatally so, and it is easy to hear in these verses the voice of God warning our generation, 'Remember, you are but men, not God'.

97) 28:11-19

Here is a passage remarkable in its implications. It is a lament for the king of Tyre; but the extraordinary thing is that there are so many echoes in it of other things, particularly the reference to the Garden of Eden. It is obvious, surely, that Ezekiel has Genesis 3 in mind, and some old commentators have seemed to see here a picture of a dark and sinister figure, the power of evil itself, Satan, adumbrated in what the prophet says. One commentator thinks that there is a mythological legend that Ezekiel has taken and made use of, and incorporated into his prophecy, the story of a fall of supernatural beings. What are we to make of this? Well, there is a similar passage in Isaiah 14:12ff, where that prophet speaks of Babylon, significantly enough in a section of his prophecy in which, like Ezekiel, he lists a series of judgments against surrounding nations. Isaiah's reference is to the king of Babylon, yet he calls him 'Lucifer, son of the morning', and one senses there, as here, the sinister overtones and suggestion of a deeper dimension than the merely human. It will not do to dismiss this in a cavalier fashion, as some commentators tend to do, by saying that there is no reference to any other than to the king of Tyre. Why should his fall be described in terms that plainly reflect the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, if there is no connection between the two? In fact, the fall of the king of Tyre symbolises the tragedy of humanity, fallen through pride; and Ezekiel is seeing in this man, in all his pride, arrogance and godlessness, and in his crashing down to ruin, a reflection of mankind's story. We will continue a consideration of this in the next Note.

98) 28:11-26

If what we said in the previous Note is a correct interpretation, we may say that Ezekiel is relating the fate of the king of Tyre not only to the fall of man, but also to something even deeper, the fall of Satan himself, called in the reference in Isaiah 14 'Lucifer, son of the morning'. The phrase in 14, 'the anointed cherub that covereth' ('guardian cherub' NIV) seems to suggest some tutelary responsibility, and this is in line with the Old Testament idea that angelic beings were set over individuals and nations by God to be their protectors. It may be, as has been suggested, that Lucifer was appointed originally by God as the tutelary angel for the earth, and that he fell through pride. It can hardly be accidental that both Ezekiel and Isaiah write in this same mysterious way, and that indeed the Apostle John does so also in Revelation. It is clear that all three were able to see behind the 'seen and temporal' godless powers of their day and discern the dark and sinister demonic forces that activated and controlled them. It is not without significance either, surely, that in the emphasis on demonic evil it is not the low and the ugly and the disgusting, but on the contrary the high and the beautiful and the bright, to which the prophet draws our attention. It is in this guise as 'an angel of light' that Satan is at his most devastating.

The final section of the passage (20-26) deals with the doom of Zidon, which is distinguished here from Tyre, although close by it. Zidon had been peculiarly the source of corrupting idolatrous influences upon Israel. Jezebel, wife of king Ahab was the daughter of the king of Zidon and high priest of Baal, and was responsible for so much Baal worship in Israel. The last two verses of the chapter (25, 26) give a promise of restoration to Israel when all the judgments on her enemies will have been accomplished. They give a foretaste of what is to follow in chs 33ff; but before this can be, another pronouncement of doom must be made - upon Egypt, and to this we come in the next Note.

99) 29:1-21

The prophecies of doom upon Egypt occupy the remainder of this section of the book (chs 29-32). One reason why the prophet paid so much attention to Egypt may be that Egypt was the nation in particular that God's people were tempted to appeal to for help. We have seen both in Isaiah and Jeremiah how they were warned against this, and Ezekiel is also intent on showing how fatal, as well as foolish, it was to expect help from such a source. Nebuchadnezzar was to be the instrument of God by which Egypt would be brought down to ignominy. Two reasons are adduced for Egypt's judgment and doom, first pride (3), and secondly their attitude to Israel (6, 7). Pride in nations is always something that God finally deals with; He will not give His glory to another. It is striking to see the almost monotonous insistence on this throughout the Old Testament. One recalls Nebuchadnezzar's words in Daniel 4, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built ... by the might of my power ...?' and sees their echo in Egypt's words in 3. This teaches a very solemn, indeed frightening lesson to the nations of the world today, in their arrogant assumption of prideful attitudes. One has only to think of the decline of the once-great British Empire to see the reality of the nemesis that can come upon nations that do not do right by God. This is how it was also with Egypt, and she was reduced in a way that was so striking that we will need to spend time in the next Note discussing it.

100)29:1-21

The judgment to be visited on Egypt was different from that which befell Tyre. Tyre was destroyed forever, but Egypt was not to be destroyed without remedy, and 13ff speaks of a restoration. This, however, was something very limited: they were to be 'a base kingdom' (14, 15). This has also surely been fulfilled in a remarkable and impressive way. From being a proud and considerable empire in those days, Egypt became increasingly, and has continued till the present day, an insignificant people politically, militarily, financially and economically - a broken reed indeed. One has only to think of the humiliation it has suffered in modern times at the hands of present-day Israel to see the dramatic truth and fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy. In 17ff, the point of the reference with regard to Tyre is that Nebuchadnezzar waged a war of attrition for about 13 years, and in the end won little spoil. As 18 puts it, neither he nor his army received wages for their trouble. In contrast, however, Egypt was to be given to Nebuchadnezzar as spoil and as 'wages', because, as 20 puts it 'they wrought for me, saith the Lord God'. This is surely an impressive testimony to the fact of the divine sovereignty at work among the nations. It was His will that was being worked out and fulfilled in these movements in the balance of power in the ancient world.

101)30:1-26

The first part of this chapter (1-19) contains an undated prophecy, but it probably belongs to the same time as the previous chapter, since in 20, in the prophecy which follows, there is a reference to the 11th year, i.e. the 11th year after the first captivity, in 597 BC (compare the reference to the 10th year in 29:1). It continues the oracle of doom upon the hapless land of Egypt, and upon all those who supported her (6). That this doom was imminent when the prophet spoke is clear from what follows in 20ff, which clearly refer to the time of the fall of Jerusalem, and to the ill-fated decision made by Zedekiah to enlist Egypt's help against Nebuchadnezzar, against all the warning advice of Jeremiah. It was this that brought Babylon's swift and ruthless reaction, in which 'the arm of Pharaoh' was broken and Jerusalem destroyed. All these detailed references in 13ff to communities being destroyed speak, of course, of these ancient days, but it is impressive to realise that they are also the areas of Egypt that were so much in the news during the 1967/1973 wars between Egypt and Israel. If we recognise that what we are dealing with in these chapters are principles of judgment, then we see that the prophetic word has a grim up-to-date relevance, reminding us that taking sides against Israel in the Middle East today is a very hazardous occupation. It would be well for powers and super-powers in the modern world to pay some heed to such principles unfolded so starkly in Holy Writ.

102)31:1-18

This prophecy, dated two months after the previous one (30:20), is addressed to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. The reference to the Assyrian in 3 raises difficulties. The RSV omits it altogether, assuming it to be a mistake, and no part of the original text, but the NEB follows the AV here, recognizing that Ezekiel is using the Assyrians as an illustration: as it was with Assyria, he means, so it will be with Egypt, and with every great power that raises its head in pride. One sees immediately the similarity of the vision to that concerning Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, the principle and the message being the same in both cases. Assyria, the empire and world-power preceding Babylon, Egypt and Babylon were all alike, and the same nemesis was to overtake each. God always deals with the proud nations of the world in this way (see Note on 29:1-21). The imagery continues in 15ff, where the trees of the field, representing the smaller surrounding nations, are struck with consternation and mourning, not to say fear, when they see great and proud Egypt come crashing down in ruins under the judgment of God, as if to say, 'If this happens to the greatest and most impregnable of nations, what will come upon lesser nations like ourselves?' We should not miss the contrast between the splendour and magnificence of Egypt, represented by the fair image of the cedars of Lebanon, and the final doom of being cast down into the pit, into the lowliest place of hell. As Jesus said, 'The first shall be last, and the last shall be first'. It is the idea of total reversal that is in view. It is, as the hymn says, 'the day in whose clear, shining light all wrong shall stand revealed' - as wrong, and put in its proper place.

103)32:1-32

This chapter begins with a lamentation for Pharaoh (1-16). Little in the way of comment is needed, since the message is clear, plain and unequivocal. One point, however, should be noted, namely the similarity between the visitations mentioned here and those that came on Egypt in a much earlier age, at the time of the Exodus. There is a kind of echo here of these times. The reason for this is surely that, just as sin is almost monotonous in its repetitiveness, in the history of nations and of men, so is the divine judgment that comes upon it (cf Joel 2:30, 31). The final oracle against Egypt follows in 17ff. It is a remarkably graphic passage, gathering together all the surrounding nations that have reared their heads in pride against the Lord, Assyria (22), Elam (24), Meshech and Tubal (26), Edom (29), Zidon (30) - all are there, and all alike consigned to the pit. The strange and unexpected reference to Pharaoh being 'comforted' (31) requires to be understood not in our familiar sense of that word but (following an Old Testament scholar of great prominence) in the sense that new facts are brought to bear on a situation in such a way that the hearer's attitude of mind is changed. That is to say, Pharaoh will then see as God sees, and realise the rightness of the divine judgment on these nations, and upon himself, and will agree with the justice of God in so dealing with them. This is one of the things Ezekiel means in his oft-repeated statement, 'They shall know that I am the Lord'. It does not mean that they will be converted, but that they shall acknowledge Him as rightful Lord in what He does in His world: 'How right you are, O Lord, to judge evil like this'. God obliges men to agree with the rightness and justice of the punishment that He inflicts upon men. In that sense Pharaoh would be 'convinced'.

104)32:1-32

One final word may be usefully added, as an epilogue to these eight chapters of judgments upon the nations. We pointed out that these oracles were uttered between the time when Ezekiel announced that the siege of Jerusalem had begun and the time when word came that the walls of the city had fallen and the temple was desolate, a period of two years. This was all the word that God gave through Ezekiel during that period, and this means that, within the context of the structure of this prophecy, the whole message is heightened in tension. Ezekiel has been uttering these messages, one by one, against the heathen nations, while the exiles in Babylon are waiting for a word from the Lord and all that they hear is this monotonous pronouncement of doom against them. And, as it were, they keep on saying, 'When is He going to speak a word to us?' And it was when word came that the city was broken and fallen (33:1ff) that God could speak through the prophet's words of promise and hope and restoration, of a new covenant, a new temple, and a new people. But this word could not come until they were brought to a complete end of themselves. This is God's pattern with His people in every age. We sometimes ask, 'Why doesn't God speak to us the kind of word that we want and need?' but it may well be that He cannot speak that word until we reach the very lowest point of despair and nothingness. 'God made the world out of nothing', said Martin Luther, 'and not until we are nothing can He do anything with us'. The exiles by the river Chebar had to have the news of Jerusalem's fall first, because there was still in them a residual belief that this could not happen to their Jerusalem. But happen it did, and only when the bottom thus fell out of their world was God able to speak the new word of hope to them. To this word we now come, in the next reading.

105)33:1-20

This chapter begins the third and final major section of Ezekiel's prophecy. It will be seen from the Analysis (cf Note on page 6) that in Section I (1-24) we had prophecies uttered by the prophet before the final siege of Jerusalem, i.e. between 597 and 588 BC. In Section II (25-32) we had prophecies given in the main during the siege of Jerusalem, 588/587 BC, against the surrounding nations. Now, in the third and final Section (33-48), we have prophecies spoken after the fall of the city, i.e. from 587/586 BC onwards to the close of this particular prophetic period. As indicated earlier, this point marks the great division in Ezekiel's ministry. Hitherto, and in chs 1-24, the prophet has been intent on convincing the first exiles in Babylon that the exile would be a long-drawn-out affair and not a short and brief matter of a few months, and that Jerusalem, far from remaining inviolable, as they fondly believed, would in fact be destroyed. Now, after the destruction of the city (21), Ezekiel can go on to minister more positively, and speak of the future; and this he does, dealing first of all, in chs 33-39 with the restored nation, and secondly, in chs 40-48, with the restored order. These are the two divisions of the last section of the book. This new ministry, signalled by the news of the fall of Jerusalem (21), is prefaced by a passage on the subject of the prophet as a watchman, very similar to that in 3:16-21, and this we shall look at in the next Note.

106)33:1-20

Not only is this passage similar to 3:16-21, but also, in 12ff to 18:21-29, with its emphasis on the law of individual responsibility, we have already seen (see Notes on ch 3) how faithfully Ezekiel fulfilled his remit as a watchman, and how actively he discharged his burden, even when the people were not at all disposed to listen to him. But we also saw that the very consistency of his message won a gradual respect among the elders of the people, so that towards the end of the first part of his ministry we see them respectfully listening to him, sitting at his feet and asking, 'Is there a word from the Lord?'. This is the reward of faithfulness; it does not come overnight, and in any given situation a man need not expect to be listened to, in an age in which godliness and righteousness are at a discount. But if he goes on preaching faithfully, sooner or later men in spite of themselves will recognize the validity and authority of his message, and will pay respect to it, however grudgingly. In 3:16-21 the commission to be a watchman was followed by a marvellous theophany, a manifestation of the glory of God, as if to assure Ezekiel that God would be with him in this lonely and exacting task. Here, however, there is no such manifestation; nor was it necessary, and for this reason: when the commission came a second time, a train of thought would surely be started up in Ezekiel's mind, and he would inevitably think of that earlier occasion, and its associations would come flooding back to him, and the sweet and precious assurances that God gave him then would come to him once more. After all, is He not the same yesterday, today, and forever?

107)33:1-20

Something else must also be said: Ezekiel's ministry as a watchman was one, before the fall of Jerusalem and after it alike; yet there were two different emphases within that one ministry: before, his word was full of foreboding, judgment and doom, but after, it took a completely different and positive turn. There is no inconsistency in this, of course. Nor is it a mark of inconsistency that any man's ministry should change, it is simply a question of the ongoing, unfolding purpose of God, in a changing situation, that at one time it should be necessary for a particular word to be given, and at another time another, which might be quite in contrast to the first. In 10ff we see something of the nature of the new note that was to come in the prophet's ministry. It is the proclamation of pardon and forgiveness. The AV rendering of 10 is somewhat misleading, and the 'if' is better taken, as in the RV margin, 'truly'. It is in answer to this despairing utterance by the people that God speaks the word of assurance in 11, and it is this that figures so largely in the chapters that follow. In 12ff we have an echo of the teaching in 18:21-29 about individual responsibility. The significance of this re-emphasis seems to be to admonish the people that, even though now they were in the depths of despair they must still beware of the temptation to excuse themselves and put responsibility for their sins elsewhere. God has proclaimed the word of pardon (11), but they must not forget that He had also said 'Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die?' Ezekiel is saying, in effect, 'God's grace is there, but your responsibility is inescapable: it is now over to you. He requires truth in the inward parts, and is looking for an attitude of repentance in His people.' This indeed is the note that rings throughout the new phase of the prophet's ministry.

108)33:21-33

During the 21 months or so of the siege of Jerusalem there was no further word from the Lord following the announcement that the siege had begun, and the people were kept waiting, as it were, with bated breath. The silence is broken, and news comes from Jerusalem to say that the city is ruined. But, as we see from 22, the night before this news came Ezekiel had a strange experience. The hand of the Lord was upon him and his mouth was opened. He therefore knew that something decisive had happened (in 3:26 Ezekiel was told he would be dumb, but that the day would come when God would open his mouth - this, as we see in 24:26, 27, would be when the news of the fall of the city came). Here, then, we have the fulfilment of that word, in the strange and unusual spiritual awareness that came upon him, the night before the news of the city's destruction came. This kind of awareness is something that God sometimes gives; we do not think it is something that we should always have, or that we can always have, in prayer; but sometimes it is given. It is not something weird, but belongs to authentic spiritual experience. And in that experience Ezekiel was conscious of the restraint upon his lips being removed, and he knew that a messenger would come in the morning to say that the city was in ruins. Such is the meaning here.

109)33:21-33

After the news of the fall of the city, a twofold message is given to the prophet, 22-29, and 30-33. First of all there is a word for those remaining in Judah after the captives had been taken away by Nebuchadnezzar. The dregs of the people had been left, as being of no importance and no significance, and they were now saying 'The land is now ours, we are the only ones left'. But this appropriation of the land in this way was challenged by Ezekiel in the Lord's name, saying 'The inheritance has to do with righteousness, and you are not fit to inherit the land. Look at how you live, there is no sign of repentance in you, in spite of all that has come upon you. You will not inherit the land'. God's strategic purposes with His people would be continued, not through them, but through the captives. In 11:22 we saw how the 'glory of the Lord' was looking eastwards to Babylon, as if to say 'That is where God's interest now lies, and these are the people with whom He is going to continue to have dealings, not those left in Jerusalem.' We know from subsequent history that when the exiles returned from Babylon, those that had remained in the land, like Sanballat and Tobiah (cf Nehemiah 2), became the enemies of God's work. The second word (30-33) relates to the exiles' reaction to Ezekiel's words. 'Against' in 30 should read 'of' or 'about'. There was clearly a tremendous surge of interest in what he was saying, and people flocked to hear him; to them his preaching was like listening to a lovely song. We should not, however, misunderstand this: they loved the preaching, it is true, but they were not as yet allowing it to touch their deepest hearts and lives. As one commentator puts it 'This speaks of the danger of treating God's prophets as if they were public entertainers'. It is as if the Lord were saying, 'Ezekiel, although the pattern of your ministry has now changed, although this is a new word I have given you to speak, do not imagine that everything in the garden will now be lovely. It is going to be a long, uphill task before My will is accomplished in this people'.

110)34:1-10

Ezekiel now gets into his stride with his new word and his new message. At first glance, it might be thought that there is not much new about it, because it is a thunderous denunciation of the shepherds of Israel, but one thing that stands out in these verses is the note of compassion in the heart of God for His people. One feels the pulse of His distress that the shepherds whom he had appointed over them did not in fact shepherd them, but let them be scattered and go astray. The shepherds here are the leaders of the people, and the reference is to the kings of Israel rather than to the religious hierarchy. This is important for us to realise, not only in Ezekiel, but in the prophetic literature in general, and we should bear this in mind as we study the chapter. There is a threefold indictment made: first of all the cruel exploitation of the people under their care; secondly the absence of the pastoral quality required to care for the weak and the defenceless; and thirdly, instead of keeping the flock together they allow them to be scattered. It was on this threefold indictment that the flock was to be taken from them (10). It is very striking to realise how literally this word was fulfilled. The rulers were deposed from office, and kingly rule was no more in Israel after this time. Zedekiah was the last king of Israel, and since then there has been no king, nor will there be, until He comes, whose right it is to reign, King of kings and Lord of lords. From this time on, the care of Israel was committed and entrusted to other kinds of leaders, priests, prophets, and military generals, such as Ezra and Nehemiah, and later, the Maccabees. This was indeed the end of an era.

III)34:11-22

In these verses God Himself undertakes to shepherd His people. When one thinks of all the darkness and declension of the years from Solomon to Zedekiah, we realise what a marvellous picture this is. It is not difficult to detect the resemblance of the language here to that of the Lord Jesus, in His wonderful parable of the lost sheep, in Luke 15, and of the good Shepherd in John 10. It is impressive to realise how our Lord's mind and thinking were saturated with Ezekiel's prophecy, as if He were in effect saying, 'Yes, I am the One who will fulfil these words, and this is how I will do it: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep'. In 12 the reference to the cloudy and dark day is taken by some to be eschatological, i.e. pointing away to the end-time. If so, it is the future kingdom of God in Christ that is in view, and who shall complain about such an interpretation. The RSV and NEB translate 16b very differently from the AV - the RSV says 'watch over' instead of 'destroy', and the NEB has 'leave them to play'. The NIV, however, follows the AV and this reading seems to be borne out by what Ezekiel goes on to say in 17-22, where judgment among the flock is spoken of. The point being made is that the flock is to be purged not only of its bad leadership, but also of its bad members, who were involved in the social injustice and oppression of the time.

112)34:23-31

We are given in these verses a picture of the Messianic Shepherd, and a description of the new covenant. The reference in 23 to David is neither to be taken literally - i.e. the historical David resurrected and re-appointed as king, as some take it to mean - nor to a descendant of David's royal line. Rather, it is the Messiah Himself who is in view. A brief glance at 37:25 will show that this is the necessary and inevitable interpretation, since what is said there is something that one could not properly say of a merely human David. It is David's greater Son that Ezekiel sees. David was the man after God's own heart, by whose genius the nation extended its borders in all directions and the whole nation was united. This ideal is what Ezekiel has in mind. An ordinary king is excluded as a possibility by the judgment spoken of in 1-10. Also, it is surely not without significance that Ezekiel carefully avoids using the word 'king' in 24. This was to be something quite different from the monarchy. What is said in 25 serves to confirm this interpretation, for the language used to describe the conditions obtaining during the 'covenant of peace' is all eschatological in tone, speaking of the rejuvenation of the physical universe 'in the times of restitution of all things' (Acts 3:21). Just as we are told in Genesis 3 that the ground was cursed for man's sake, because of his sin, so also the whole creation will be brought into a new experience of liberation when man's redemption is completed in the coming of Christ. It is this idea that Ezekiel is touching upon.

113)35:1-15

This chapter really belongs in thought to the earlier part of the book. Mount Seir is in Edom, and this is another prophecy against Edom and the Edomites who, it will be remembered, were mentioned briefly in 25:12-14. The reason for its position here, immediately following the news of the fall of Jerusalem, is probably due, as the commentators point out, to the fact that the Edomites were known to have plundered the land at the moment of Jerusalem's collapse. They were, so to speak, standing by waiting for the final denouement. It may well be that Ezekiel has this in mind as he thinks of Edom here. The charge made against them was their perpetual hatred against Israel (5), and the desire to annex her territories (10) - perhaps they supported Nebuchadnezzar for the promise of getting parts of Judah and Israel as spoil - and their arrogant boasting and cruel gloating over Jerusalem's downfall; and for this, Edom is spoken of as being brought to a perpetual end. One thinks of how these very phrases are used today in the Arabs' hatred of Israel and their determination to destroy them utterly as a people; and it is hardly surprising that modern Israelis should find comfort and assurance in a passage like this, with its promises and assurances that God will do despite to those who thus arrogantly seek the destruction of His chosen people.

114)36:1-15

Here is a word to the mountains of Israel, in contrast to the word against Mount Seir. There it was judgment, and here it is mercy. It begins with a word about the ownership of the land. Edom wanted to annex the territories, saying that the ancient high places were theirs; but here God says that it is His land, and He gives it to whomsoever He will. One feels the sense of outrage and hot passion in Ezekiel's heart as he rehearses again and again the injustice of the surrounding nations in their assault upon Israel in their time of trouble. But now that the city has fallen and the judgment-stroke is complete, the triumph of mercy over wrath is very evident. Before, God had said, 'Behold, I am against you', but now He says 'Behold, I am for you' (9). Here is a land that has known the devastation of the enemy, that has known oppression, and desolation upon desolation, and now God is to move in might and power, breathing His Spirit upon that land, and Ezekiel is able to speak of it as being tilled and sown, and men being multiplied in it, with the cities being inhabited, and the waste places being rebuilt. We know that at the time of the restoration and return from exile this is what in fact happened - not without toil, and blood and tears and sweat, it is true, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah; but it happened, and the prophets of that post-exilic period were able to say, 'The glory of the latter house shall be greater than the glory of the former'. And what was true in those days is assuredly true today and has been literally fulfilled in our generation, for the land has been tilled and sown in a way that had never been done for centuries, and men have multiplied and Israel's economy become buoyant and prosperous - and all because God's hand has been upon the events of the Middle East in our time.

115)36:1-15

It is hardly possible to read this passage without wanting to 'spiritualise' its message - which we may surely legitimately do, since it contains abiding spiritual principles - to make it apply to our own present-day situation. Those who have eyes to see recognize only too well the underlying reasons for our national decline, and the parlous situation we face in the world today as being the hand of God upon us in judgment and reproof. Events proclaim very loudly that God is saying to us, 'Behold, I am against you', but it may well be that God will yet say to us, 'Behold, I am for you', and if He does, then in the spiritual sense the land will be tilled and sown. The history of every revival movement is a history like this. In the 19th century, God said to our land, 'Behold I am for you', and He raised up an army of saints for Himself and for His glory, peopling the pulpits of Scotland with men after His own heart, and the mission fields of the world with dedicated and inspired men of vision. Please God the 21st century will yet see a like visitation, and witness great days of the Son of man.

116)36:16-22

Ezekiel now gives us an historical interlude, in which he surveys the past experience of his people. The reason, we are told, why they had been scattered and dispersed into captivity was that they had sinned in God's sight, and forfeited the right to be called His people. The heathen nations spoke contemptuously of the God of Israel because of their profaning of His Name. It is for this reason that God now says, 'I had pity for mine holy name ... I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake ...' (21, 22). This may sound somewhat harsh or unfamiliar to us - and, indeed, if it were a human being speaking, it would be open to misunderstanding; but for God to be concerned with His own glory is the rightest thing in the whole universe. The fact that we think this strange is a measure of how man-centred we are in our thinking. The greatest thing in the world is the glory of God's great name, it is literally the only thing that matters, and the only ultimately justifiable cause for doing anything. There is something very amazing and mysterious about the fact that God acts in mercy towards men, not because there is anything in them that calls it out, but because of His great name. That is how God acts: He brings glory to His name in manifesting His mercy towards those who have forfeited the right to mercy. Nor does this militate against any idea of the divine love, for His love is not in question here, and not under discussion. His judgment of His people had reflected on His name, causing the heathen to think lightly of a God who allowed them to be treated so; therefore, to rehabilitate His name among the heathen, He now proceeded to rescue and restore them, renewing His covenant with them.

117)36:23-38

The nature of the divine vindication of the people of Israel is indicated in 23ff. The words in 23b are most impressive: '... the heathen shall know that I am the Lord ... when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes'. This is an unchanging principle, true in every age. The transforming work of the Spirit in God's people is ever the most potent evangelistic appeal in the world. In the early church, men's lives were set ablaze with the gospel, and 'great grace was upon them all', and this is unquestionably what drew multitudes into the kingdom of God. The existence of transformed lives always makes an impact on society. In 24-26 we have a threefold promise given to the people: first of all, their regathering to the land (24), then cleansing from all sin (25), and finally regeneration by the Spirit (26). Such are the terms of the new covenant. It is true that the word 'covenant' is not in fact mentioned here, but it is presupposed, and it is explicitly stated, in similar language, in Jeremiah 31:31ff. It is a wonderful passage, moving the heart to tears with the very glory and sweetness of the prospect it holds out, and it must have been particularly sweet to the exiles by the river Chebar to hear such an utterance, in the desolation of spirit that had come to them in the news of the destruction of their beloved Jerusalem. Much earlier, the prophet Hosea had promised that 'the valley of Achor (weeping)' would become 'a door of hope' for God's people. Surely that prophecy finds its fulfilment in Ezekiel's words.

118)36:23-38

We cannot leave this passage, wonderful as it is, without saying something about the questions that it inevitably raises with regard to its interpretation. Are we to spiritualise it, and apply it to the Church? Are we to say that these words were fulfilled in the first advent of Christ, as Peter, quoting Joel, seems to suggest in Acts 2? They must surely have had application to the Jews of Ezekiel's day, in reference to their return to the land, but can it really be said that the new covenant was instituted then, in that return? And is there any application to the Jews of our own day, as some schools of prophetic teaching maintain? Has Paul's teaching in Romans 11 about the place of Israel as a nation in the economy of God anything to say in our understanding of these words? It is clear that a whole host of questions arise here, that must be looked at. There are two diametrically opposed views held on this issue: one is the classical view, held within the Reformed faith, in which all the promises of renewal are referred to the Church, as the new Israel of God; the other is the 'dispensational' view, by which everything said here is referred literally to the Jews, and therefore, since these promises were not fulfilled when the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon to the land, the passage must be regarded as futuristic, and as yet to be fulfilled in the end-time. We shall look at these opposing interpretations in more detail in the next Note.

119)36:23-38

Our own view is that there is truth and error in both the positions mentioned in the previous Note. As to the first, we must recognize that the real fulfilment of 26, which is the promise of the new covenant, takes place in relation to Christ (cf His words in the Upper Room, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood'). That covenant was initiated and instituted in the death that He died upon the cross. In this sense, therefore, the Reformers were right when they said that Ezekiel's words necessarily referred to the Church as the new Israel of God. One might think therefore that that is all there is to be said, but this is not so, and for this reason: the words in 24 about the gathering of Israel back to their own land have no point of application either in our Lord's words about the new covenant spoken in the Upper Room, or in any other references to it in the New Testament. So that we must either say that 24 must be taken literally to refer to the return of the Jews under Ezra and Nehemiah, and the rest of the prophecy spiritualised and referred to our Lord's teaching (but are we justified in spiritualising one bit and literalising another, simply to make it fit into a preconceived interpretation?), or look for a further fulfilment of the 'return to the land' prophecy in the future. It is this latter idea that the dispensational view maintains, asserting that the passage has reference to a future that God has for and with His people, the Jews. The problem, however - and this in our estimation is the fatal objection to such a view - is that they speak of this 'future' as being after the Church of Christ is redeemed and taken to glory. This is a manifest impossibility, since the final redemption of the Church is the end of history and the beginning of the eternal state, and it is a misunderstanding of both Scripture and history to suppose it possible for such a thing to happen. As C.S. Lewis puts it, 'When the Author walks on to the stage, the play is over'. We shall continue to look at this in the next Note.

120)36:23-38

Although the dispensationalist's view has fatal objections to it, as indicated in the previous Note, there is nevertheless a valid point in their insistence that the Jews as a people still have a significance in the economy of God; and the fact that modern Israel exists as a state today, after nearly two thousand years of wandering in exile in the world, is something that only the blindest and most perverse prejudice can dismiss as of no real significance. The extraordinary fact is that although Israel is geographically and numerically a tiny and insignificant nation, everything that happens in and around it is fraught with worldwide repercussions. History has seen great empires rise and fall and pass into extinction, yet this insignificant people are invariably in the forefront of world events, because - in spite of everything - God has willed them to remain in ignorance. True, they rejected their Messiah, and God finally rejected them from His favour, yet even in their rejection they remain His people. Down the ages they have been God's rejected people, not just any rejected people; and even in their rejection, God wills to use them - in spite of themselves - as instruments of His purposes, and as 'signposts' to these purposes in the world. They refused their calling to be a light to lighten the Gentiles; but even in their refusal they are nevertheless still - however unwillingly, however unconsciously - used of God as instruments of His purposes. This is what Paul expounds in such marvellous terms in Romans 11:12, 15, when he says, 'If the fall of them be the riches of the world ... how much more their fullness? ... And if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead?' The reconciling of the world? Was not that accomplished in the death of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19)? Ah, yes! But, suppose what we have here is the 'negative' of the photograph, whose 'positive' print is - the Cross?

121)37:1-14

On any estimate and interpretation, the vision of the valley of dry bones contained in these verses is a tremendous one. Even to read it through cursorily is to sense the pulse of the Spirit of God in it. Indeed, it is full of God, and its subject-matter - the reviving of the dry bones of Israel - comes out at one with considerable force. In order, however, to understand its significance, and what it has to say to us today, we need to expound it in its context. Indeed, we are obliged to do so, if we are to retain any kind of integrity in handling the word of God, and avoid the charge of handling it deceitfully. It is possible to make this passage say things it does not say, and mean things it does not mean, by reading into it what is not there, instead of drawing out the meaning that is there. It is much better to let it speak for itself, so that we may establish its primary meaning - that is, its meaning as given to Ezekiel, and by Ezekiel, to his day; and after establishing this, to see whether it unfolds any principle of general validity and therefore of general application. This involves looking at the passage in its context within the prophecy. We have already seen how, in the past few chapters, Ezekiel has spoken of a new leadership that would come to the people of God (34:1-31); (ii) of a renewed land, with the favour of the Lord upon it (35:1-13); and (iii) of a renewed people, who would be cleansed from idolatry, and given a new heart and spirit (36:22-38). The thought of this chapter (37) is similar, and refers to the same spiritual rebirth of the nation referred to in 36:25ff, in the words 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean ... a new heart also will I give you'. What we read here, therefore, is a comment, if not a commentary, on what Ezekiel has already spoken.

122)37:1-14

As was indicated in the previous Note, the basic principle of interpretation must be that this was a word given first to the exiles in Babylon, as a comment on the new covenant spoken of in the previous chapter. That word was given to a people for whom all hope had apparently disappeared, who were saying, 'Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts'. But it was precisely to this point of despair that God had finally brought them, and only now were they able even to hear the word of restoration. And so, to their exclamation that such a new covenant (36:25ff) was impossible, and that they could not see how it could ever be, this vision was given, to show them how God was to fulfil it. As to the vision itself, there are two movements in it. There was first of all the prophesying to the bones, saying to them, 'O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord'; and when this was done, there was an earthquake, and the bones came together, but there was no breath in them. Then, secondly, there was the prophesying to the wind, 'Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain so that they may live', and when this was done, the breath came into them. Perhaps this is meant to indicate not so much two separate actions, as two different aspects of the same action. We must be careful, therefore, not to read too much into this twofold action. It should be noticed that in the explanatory verses in 11-14 these two stages are ignored, and instead a new metaphor is invoked, that of resurrection of the dead from their places of burial. This means that the figures of speech do not have validity in their own right: they merely illustrate what God is going to do.

123)37:1-14

Before we go further in interpretation, however, we should note that the word 'valley' in 1 is the same word as 'plain' in 3:22, the place where Ezekiel had seen the glory of the Lord. There is a wonderful association of ideas here, because it means that God takes the prophet out to the same place where he once saw the glory, only this time he sees the dry bones. It is as if God had said, 'Ezekiel, do not concentrate too much on the dry bones, remember rather the glory you once saw here, for this is the same place'. If this be so, it bears a wonderful message and significance for us, because if we have seen the glory and majesty of God, then no valley of dry bones, however many and however dry, will ultimately make us cast down, or put us in despair. Here is an important lesson at the outset - our thoughts are directed away from the dry bones to the God of glory. We should recall the remarkable vision at the beginning of the prophecy of the 'wheels-within-wheels', symbolising the incredibly potent activity of God 'behind the scenes', invisible, yet ever present. The point being made is that if that immense potency were to brood upon the dry bones, then of course they would live. God is the one great Circumstance. With Him all things are possible. Ezekiel, then, is made to relate the two visions together, and not take the one without the other. What a word of hope this is! In face of the dry bones, Ezekiel, you are to think of the God of glory, and prophesy and pray. This is the heart of the message, for Ezekiel and for us alike, as we shall see in our continuing comments in the Notes that follow.

124)37:1-14

We should note two further at points at this juncture. The first is that Ezekiel's words here seem to owe a good deal to the account of the creation of man in Genesis 2:7, where it is said that God made man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of Life. If so, then the point that is being made is that this is an act of new creation, a creative act in which men are made new - as, in fact, 36:26 had promised. The second thing is that the two parts of the miracle indicate the differences of direction in Ezekiel's task: one was to prophesy to the bones telling them to hear the word of the Lord; the other was to prophesy to the wind, to the 'ruach', the Spirit of God, to breathe on those slain - that is, both a manward and a Godward reference. The indication is, therefore, as has been said, not so much two separate actions, as two aspects of the same action. But the implications of this are considerable. This double emphasis by which the miracle was to take place is surely preaching (hear the word of the Lord) and prayer (for the quickening Spirit). The word of God and the intercession of man! It was for this that Ezekiel stood: and his presence among the exiles of Chebar was the symbol and token that God was going to work, in this way, through his instrumentality. Is not this a word for our time? Men are saying, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost. You are speaking of a covenant, of a new day dawning, it is impossible.' But God says, 'Nothing is impossible. Preach and pray.'

125)37:1-14

This brings us to the application of the passage as a principle for Christian work in any age, and it prompts this observation: However obvious the answer, 'No' may be to the question, 'Can these bones live?', we must nevertheless hold on in faith, nothing doubting, for we have contact with the Word and Spirit of God. When Ezekiel said, 'O Lord, Thou knowest', he himself may have been expressing grave doubts, and this may well have been in the first instance a message of reassurance to the prophet, before it became a message to the people. Perhaps the prophet himself, the recipient of the wonderful message about the new covenant in chapter 36, was asking how on earth it could possibly happen, and perhaps God gave him this vision to show him how! Is this a word from God about the Church today? Is He saying, 'I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live'? What a promise! Let us lay hold upon it, for it is food for the soul, and comfort, encouragement, and everything else we need. It does not matter how hard and unresponsive a situation may be. One does not need a point of contact, when the living God is present. He creates the point of contact. The letting loose of the Word of the Lord in society, and its proclamation, formally in pulpit, or informally in personal witness and testimony, with the energy of prayer giving it thrust and cutting edge and life-giving properties, this is the Church's mandate - preaching and prayer - and this is how God works the miracle of renewal.

126)37:1-14

But did the vision work, so far as Ezekiel and his people were concerned? Did the dry bones live? Ah yes! Work it did, and two things may be said to substantiate this claim. On the one hand, it was during the exile that synagogue worship was instituted among the people - since they could no longer go to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship - and there, in the synagogues, preaching as we know it today was born. Before the exile there was so little exposition of the Word. In the long tortuous history of the people of God, from Solomon to Zedekiah, even in the reigns which were good, and which saw reform and renewal, there was little emphasis on the Word, as such - it was mostly on ritual, and on the great feasts - and only in one or two cases, as for example in the reigns of Jehoshaphat and Josiah, was there any real concern for the exposition of the Law. But during the exile, preaching came into its own, and - and this is the second thing - following the exile, when the people returned to Jerusalem, we find the Word of God and prayer coming into prominence. One has only to read passages like Nehemiah 8:5-8, for example, to see the immense change and transformation that had taken place from the earlier, pre-exilic days. There was a point, indeed, in those days, when the people became dispirited and discouraged, and God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to minister among them. And two things happened: one was that a new spirit was born in them, a spirit of hope and resolution; the other was that things began to work in their favour in the international world-scene, as the then powers that be moderated their attitude to the returned exiles and permitted this work of rebuilding to continue unhindered. Yes, it did work in Ezekiel's day: the dry bones were resurrected, and the exiles returned, a living people, purged from idolatry and made a spiritual people, with a spiritual destiny.

127)37:15-28

The intention of the second section of the chapter is clear: the two sticks in 16ff represent the two separated kingdoms, Israel and Judah that had remained so from Solomon's time to the time of the captivities, in 732 and 586 respectively. Now, God says, the two will become one and shall be no more parted. There is a sense in which one could say that this was at least partially fulfilled in the return to the land under Zerubbabel, because the people were a unity from that time onwards. But the reference to David in 24, which echoes and parallels that in 34:23, must surely mean that the prophecy cannot be tied up with the return of the captives in 586. For one thing, they did not have a king at that time; nor has there been, as we have already pointed out, a king in Israel since Zedekiah. The words must therefore have an eschatological reference, whatever we may make of them, and since this is so, the vision of the dry bones may well be said to have some reference to, and significance for, the Jews in Palestine in our own day. It is not surprising, then, that there are those who see in this twofold movement of the dry bones a reflection of what has been happening in our time. In 1948 the State of Israel was constituted by the United Nations, and it would be true to say that sinews and flesh and skin have been put upon the dry bones of the Jewish people. Is not this a fair description of what has happened since that time, when Jews from all over the world have converged on Israel? The dry bones have come together; but as yet, there is no breath, no spirit in them. But who shall say categorically that that will never happen, so far as the Jews today are concerned? Have we not in this chapter a commentary on the emergence of modern Israel, the dry bones having been shaken and gathered together in this most remarkable phenomenon of our modern world?

128)38:1-23

The prophecy about Gog and Magog, which occupies this and the next chapter, is from one point of view simple and straightforward. It recounts a great and terrible confrontation between the enemies of God and God's people, Israel, and as such needs little in the way of comment or direct exposition. The two chapters clearly belong together, constituting one prophecy with seven sections, each introduced by the words, 'Thus saith the Lord' (38:3, 10, 14, 17; 39:1, 17, 25). It is the significance and the interpretation to be placed upon it that is important and indeed problematic, for the questions that arise are: To what does this refer? When is this supposed to happen or to have happened? What is its relation to what is spoken of in chapter 37? Is it a prophecy relating to the end-time? And is it to be taken literally, symbolically, allegorically or apocalyptically, or in any other way? These are questions that must be taken in relation to the general pattern we have sought to unfold in previous chapters. The following breakdown of the prophecy will prove helpful in our study of it:

a. Invasion of the armies of God (38:1-16)

3-9 The army musters

10-13 Gog's evil intent

14-16 The invasion

b. The Massacre (38:17 - 39:24)

17-23 God rises up in anger

39:1-16 The destruction of the invaders

17-24 The great sacrificial feast

c. God's final purposes for Israel (39:25-29) (Chapter 39 repeats the message of chapter 38 but in greater and different detail. So also 39:17-24 elaborates 39:4).

129)38:1-23

We have already indicated in previous Notes what we think are the deficiencies of interpretation in both the dispensationalists and the classical Reformed view, the one referring these words to a period after our Lord's Second Coming, and the other referring all to the Church of Christ, equating Israel here with the Church. What we must try to do is to draw the truth from both views (for both contain some truth) and hold it in such a way as to see what is the dynamic message of the Scriptures. In our study of the dry bones passage and also of the promise of the new covenant, we saw that we could very legitimately refer Ezekiel's words both to the Church and to Israel, and that present-day Israel has a significant place in the economy of God. In this light, let us make some general observations, so as to elicit guidelines to interpretation. If for example we compare the statement in 38:17 (referring to Gog) and 39:8, we see that the implication of these two verses is that Ezekiel is not speaking of something new, but something that earlier prophets had also spoken about. Almost all of them, and some in particular, laid a tremendous emphasis on the idea of a final, cataclysmic, head-on clash between God and the powers of evil. We find it in Joel, who speaks of the great and terrible day of the Lord; in Zechariah, who prophesied later than Ezekiel; in Amos, in Isaiah, with hints and sometimes outright statements; in Jeremiah too, who speaks of the 'time of Jacob's trouble'. Clearly, what is in view, in all of them, is the eschatological battle of the end time, in which the forces of evil and the power of God meet in headlong clash, in the final climacteric of history. This is the theme of so much of the book of Revelation also, as for example Revelation 11:3ff, which describes the same confrontation as that referred to by Ezekiel, but in different language, and a different pictorial image to describe it (cf also Revelation 16:14, 19:19 and 20:7-10). In this last reference Magog almost seems to be a person, not a land, but certainly in Ezekiel Magog is the land of which Gog is the prince. Gog and Magog are therefore to be taken as symbols of the powers of evil and of darkness, rather than literal powers.

130)39:1-29

It is true that Ezekiel speaks of Gog and Magog in relation to Israel, while John in the Apocalypse speaks of them in relation to the Church, and that this seems to suggest that the Reformers were right in spiritualising the teaching of the prophet. But this is to over-simplify the situation, for it raises problems just as great in other directions. How, for example, on the Reformers' view does one explain the prophecy in Zechariah 14:1ff? The emphasis there on Jerusalem and the people of God seems so categorical that we immediately land in difficulties if we assert that, since Revelation 20 speaks of Gog and Magog in relation to the Church, we must also spiritualize all other Old Testament prophecies in the same way. How can we spiritualize Zechariah's words, and what can we make them mean if we do? We must, of course, beware of the danger of over-literalisation; this is apocalyptic language and it is what it symbolises that is important. Horses and chariots in a nuclear age seem infantile, and modern technology would make short shrift of the horrendous crawling insects in the Book of Revelation. But to say that symbolism is present does not mean that it is nothing. And we must be careful of error in both directions, and recognise that there is reference in these prophecies both to the Church and to Israel. We have to keep coming back to Paul's emphasis in Romans 11 on the continuing place of Israel as a people in the unfolding purposes of God for the world's redemption; and no interpretation that fails to do justice to his teaching there can hope to come to an adequate understanding of these complex Old Testament prophecies.

131)39:1-29

The reason we were able to apply the marvellous vision of the valley of dry bones to both the Church and to the Jews - of Ezekiel's day and of our own - was that we unearthed principles that are timeless in their validity; and it is when we get hold of the principles that everything becomes much clearer. Now, why does Ezekiel speak of Armageddon in terms of a confrontation between the powers of evil and the Jews? And why does Zechariah in his prophecy speak of Armageddon as taking place in Jerusalem, and the Son of man coming to the Mount of Olives? Is it simply because these men were Israel-centred, and that they thought that God's purposes centred upon the Jews? This is a point of view, but we suggest that it completely misses the real issue. It is true that Ezekiel is speaking in terms of his own people (how could he do otherwise?); but it is interesting to remember that no confrontation of this cataclysmic kind took place in the post-exilic period. Certainly there were oppositions from Sanballat and Tobiah, but nothing remotely approaching anything of such crisis proportions, so that on this ground alone we must necessarily look for a farther fulfilment. Some might say it was fulfilled in the later history of the Jews in the time of the Macabbees and Antiochus Epiphanes. There is some truth in this, but then we must remember how Jesus took the story of Antiochus and the 'abomination of desolation' that took place in 165 BC, and deliberately indicated that this referred also to something still to come in the future. Obviously, therefore, the prophecy could not have been exhausted by its partial fulfilment at that time. If then, the prophecy about the 'abomination of desolation' in Daniel could refer both to the time of Antiochus, and to the time of the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and also to a future time in the mind of Jesus, it may also refer to a future time in respect of ourselves, namely the end time. When we put it like this, we uncover the real heart of the message, and see that it is a principle we are dealing with which expresses itself again and again. What Ezekiel saw has been fulfilled at several different times in history; and not even the terrible Nazi holocaust, appalling as it was, has finally exhausted its meaning.

132)39:1-29

What we need to grasp is this: when Zechariah speaks of Jerusalem being surrounded, and of the battles taking place there, it will not do for us to say that this is simply parochialism on the part of the prophet. The real issue is that Jerusalem is central, precisely because Jerusalem symbolises God, and the attack is not against the Jews as Jews, but against the Jews as the people of God. This is why any representative of God will inevitably be involved in the crisis. Armageddon therefore has to do both with the Church of God, and with the people of God called the Jews, not because of any inherent thing in themselves, but because they both alike stand for God, and remind godlessness and godless powers of Him. It is God they are against and every people, every community, and every individual that stands for God - whether Christian or Jew - will necessarily and inevitably be involved in the conflict of Armageddon. This is why it just will not do for the Reformers to discount the Jews' involvement. Just as it certainly will not do for dispensationalists to discount the Church's involvement. Both are wrong, and both have missed the point, which is that Armageddon is a conflict between God and the representatives of God on the one hand, and the powers of evil and of darkness on the other. This, it seems to us, is infinitely more important to recognise than the ability to untangle the literal minutiae of the prophetic statements.

133)39:1-2.9

In the light of what has been said in previous Notes, it becomes clear that wherever godlessness is on the increase, there we will ultimately witness an eruption of anti-Semitism and anti-Christian persecution. This will ultimately come to a climax, in an awesome climacteric of evil, symbolised here in Gog and Magog. We must beware, however, of over-literalisation of these prophecies, too readily identifying them with present-day world powers. Of course China is today a godless power, but there have been similar godless powers down history, and doubtless will be in years to come. It may be true that communist pressures are widespread in today's world, but then fascist pressures were rife in yesterday's, and who can tell what tomorrow's will be? One has only to remember that Arab anti-Semitism is so major a factor in the Middle East at the present time to realise that there are many, many expressions of the anti-God attitude. Every new crisis on the world scene is another evidence of the principle of Armageddon, and every new evil manifestation in human form is an evidence of Anti-Christ. As the Apostle John makes clear in his epistle, there are many anti-Christ's in the world, which have been and are adumbrations and expressions of the one Anti-Christ who will appear at the end.

134)40:1-49

We come with this chapter to the final section of Ezekiel's prophecy (chs 40-48), which is given in the Analysis (see Note on page 6), the title 'The Restored Order', with a threefold division -

The Vision of the Temple 40:1-43:12

The People and the Temple 43:13-46:24

The Land and the Temple 47:1-48:35

We may make two general comments at this point, before going on to detail. One is that Ezekiel's prophecy begins with a vision of God, and it also ends with a vision of God. In chs 1-3, we have the vision of God visiting His people in exile; in 40-48, it is the vision of God returning to dwell with His people. Also, in 8:1-11:25 we read of the departure of the glory of the Lord from Jerusalem in Israel; and now, 43:1-12, we have the glory of the Lord returning. Secondly, Ezekiel's vision of the final glory stands in parallel with the biblical story of creation. In Genesis 2:10 we read that paradise was watered by a four-streamed river, and here the new creation also has its rivers and trees. Thus, in a double sense the message is of restoration and 'the restitution of all things'.

There are different ways of studying this section of the prophecy: one would be to go into a great deal of detail in looking at the various measurements laid down in these verses, and this has its own value, and with the help of diagrams in a good Bible dictionary will prove a fascinating exercise. But there is also value in taking a more panoramic view, reading sizeable sections then standing back to see the general pattern, and trying to draw lessons from this. This we have found useful in the present study of the prophecy, and we shall continue to do this now.

135)40:1-49

However intriguing the intricate details may be to us we must not forget that Ezekiel is writing not as an architect, but as a prophet of the Lord. This is a salutary reminder to us when we begin to ask how we are to interpret this section of the prophecy. There have been, in the main, four differing schools of thought. The first of these places a literal, prophetic interpretation upon the passage, that is to say, what we have here is a blueprint of a temple that Ezekiel intended should be built when the exiles returned to Jerusalem. But, although 43:10ff seem to confirm this, a completely literal application is ruled out by a number of symbolic considerations, as for example, the siting of the temple on a high mountain, which doubtless from an architectural point of view would raise its own particular problems. As someone has cogently pointed out, what we read here is not so much an architect's specification as a prophet's delineation of a word from the Lord, and the two things are not necessarily the same. And, in point of fact, we should remember that this is not the kind of temple that the returned exiles built, as we see from Ezra and Nehemiah. We shall look at the other possible interpretations in what follows. (These Notes really relate to the whole of the section, 40:1-43:12, and the chapter references given for each day do not necessarily correspond to what is said in them. The comments belong to the section as a whole.)

136)41:1-26

Another school of interpretation - the symbolic Christian - holds that the vision of the temple finds its symbolic fulfilment in the Christian church. There is, of course, truth in this as there is in fact in the literal prophetic interpretation, since in regard to the latter, Ezekiel was commanded to bring these things before the people and therefore provided a pattern for the exiles, though there were symbolic overtones in it. In the same way, there is truth also in the idea that the temple vision finds its fulfilment symbolically in the Christian Church. One has only to think of how deeply the Apostle John borrowed from this vision in his description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation to realise that this is so. But this cannot be the whole truth either for the very obvious reason that Ezekiel was ministering to the exiles in Babylon, and was speaking a word to them, and a vision about the Christian Church in the consummation of the end-time could have had little to say directly in their particular situation. It follows basic principles of interpretation to say that when the Lord gave a word to a prophet to speak to the people, that word should have something to say to them relevant to their situation - this is always the primary meaning of prophecy. Thus, the symbolic Christian interpretation, although containing real truth, is not fully satisfactory either.

137)41:1-26

Two other interpretations may be mentioned. One is the dispensational view, according to which what Ezekiel writes here is literal, but has an entirely future reference, speaking of the glorious future that God has for Israel as a nation after His dealings with His Church are over. We have spent a good deal of time in these Notes and elsewhere pointing out the error of this idea, which destroys a truly biblical emphasis, putting the cart before the horse and making Israel, the people of God, of more importance than the Church of Jesus Christ, an attitude which, from the New Testament point of view, is quite unthinkable. For the reasons we gave in our study of chs 36, 37, we reject this view.

A fourth interpretation is that what Ezekiel gives us here is not so much prophecy as apocalypse, and that this is a pattern for the messianic age to come, which lay in the future, yet grew out of the present. If this be the right way to look at the passage, we can gather some general lessons from it. One is that this 'diagram' of a completely symmetrical temple speaks to us of the perfection of God's plan for His restored people, and that that perfection is symbolically expressed in the immaculate symmetry of the building. What Ezekiel is saying is that God's plan is perfect in every respect, and this statement is a timeless and permanently valid one in all situations. It should be an enormous encouragement to anyone who reads it - as indeed it must have been to the exiles by the river Chebar - to have such an assurance that God's blueprint for our future is perfected in every detail. For the exiles that 'future' was not to unfold for many years, yet God was assuring them thus early that His plans for them were even then laid down and settled.

138)42:1-20

Another lesson we may gather from these chapters relates to the centrality of worship in the new age. The ultimate goal of all God's dealings with His people is worship and the more God's plans and purposes are fulfilled in us and for us, as individuals or as a fellowship, the more worship will be the key note. A deepening spirit of worship is one glorious sign that God's purposes are being fulfilled in a people. What we need to ask ourselves, in the light of this, is 'are our Sundays becoming more worshipful, is a deeper sense of the divine Presence brooding upon us, is there a deeper sense of the divine joy pervading our hearts?' If the answer to these questions is 'yes', it means that God's purposes are being fulfilled more and more among us and, as a corollary to this, the abiding presence of the Lord in the midst of His people; the Lord is there - Jehovah Shammah - this is the note with which Ezekiel concludes his prophecy (48:35). Furthermore - and this follows from what has been said - there are the blessings that will flow from the Presence of the Lord to the barren places of the earth (as we shall see later in the vision of the river of living water in ch 47). And finally, both in the allocation of the many duties in the temple worship and the sacrificial system, and in the allocation and apportionment of the land to the tribes of Israel, we have the idea of everyone having his due task and responsibility to fulfil, and his due privilege in sharing in the service of God. These are rich and fruitful lessons that we do well to ponder deeply, day by day.

139)42:1-20

To interpret in the way we have done is more important from a spiritual and indeed practical point of view than preoccupation with details and minutiae. For the glory of the apocalyptic is that it can apply not only to the consummation, but also to intermediate fulfilment, and this is why Ezekiel's words would have a meaning and message for his own age and for ours, as well as for the end-time, when all this will be perfectly fulfilled. For example, the vision of the glory of the Lord returning to the temple was in measure fulfilled when the exiles returned to Palestine. In Ezra and Nehemiah's time the spirit of God surely came upon His people. In the same way it is entirely relevant for us to speak in terms of the return of the glory of the Lord to the Church and to the land in our day. This is a word that enables us also to hope. And it is precisely when we are engaged in the rebuilding of the temple, however partially, that the glory of the Lord is brought back. Ezekiel was speaking in a time when the old order had collapsed, and God had written 'Ichabod' over it and set it on one side; and now God speaks of a new order, a 'new thing' to which He was calling His people, and to this He promised His Spirit and His glory. And that surely is just as much a word to us in our time: we have had the 'Ichabod' in the history of 20th century Christianity; and may it not also, in the light of this prophecy, look to a return of that Spirit, and that glory in the renewal and revival of the Church, even at this late hour?

140)43:1-12

One of the things that must necessarily strike us in reading these chapters is the sheer size of the building. This is wonderfully reinforced when we read the parallel passages in Revelation. What comes over so very clearly is the idea of spaciousness, and this applies not only to the glory to come, but to the glory here and now, when God in His grace and power, envelopes His people in His mighty Spirit. Even now, in measure, when we know His grace, there is a liberation from the crampedness and the straitening of life, and men are brought out into a large open plateau in the divine mercy, and feel as if they are able to stretch themselves to their full height. Here is a comment from earlier Notes on Revelation 21:9-27, about the spaciousness of the life that awaits us. It is as if we were meant to learn that the saints in glory will enter into a fullness and completeness of experience that knows no bounds, and there will be, as someone has put it, 'room for blessings of mind and heart that human frailty, the exigencies of life, the claims of vocation, denied them here; room for capacities which found no outlet here, for such things as friendships that life would not let us begin ...'. This is very wonderful. In the glory, the inevitable limitations that fallen nature places upon the best of God's children, and the voluntary restrictions that the law of love brings upon the liberty of the believer, restrictions that are gladly accepted, at whatever cost to the crucified heart, for Christ's sake, will no longer cramp or hinder, and we shall be able to stretch to our full height in the wide-open spaces of God's fullness, and to our fullest and truest destiny. Then, and only then, will we know what it really means to live. And the wonderful thing is that, even on earth, before the consummation, something of that glory can touch our lives. This is the relevance of Ezekiel's vision.

141)43:13-27

This passage brings us to the second of the three parts into which the last section of Ezekiel's prophecy naturally divides (43:13-46:24), with the general theme of 'The People and the Temple'. The description of all the ordinances and the sacrifices relating to the altar, the law of the offerings and the festivals, tends to bewilder us just a little, and it may be wiser to take a general sweep through the section, rather than study it in detail, in order to appreciate the significance of what is said. We must try to extract from the welter of regulations, which to us have no immediate application or indeed practical concern, some principles of interpretation which will help us. We have already seen that worship is the ultimate reality, and that the creation of a worshipping people is always a sign of the Lord's presence (in 1-12 we saw the glory of the Lord returning to His people). Here, at the outset, we have the establishment of the altar, as the centrepiece, so to speak, in the worshipping community, and its setting apart for its holy function through being cleansed from all taint of the secular, a process taking seven days. 'The Lord is coming to His holy temple and before He will have fellowship with us and even accept our offer of ourselves for His devotion, there must be a complete and perfect "week" of sin offering in which we take our place with Him outside the camp, as He bears His holy blood into the sanctuary on our behalf' (W. Still, Gilcomston Record). This has considerable implications for the spiritual life, and we shall spend some time in the next Note discussing them.

142)43:13-27

A useful illustration of the point made in the previous Note may be found in the incident belonging to the earlier days of King David's reign (2 Samuel 6) which tells of the return of the Ark to Jerusalem, from the house of Obed-edom, where it had remained for twenty years. The king, in restoring the nation to its proper destiny as a worshipping people, was intent on bringing back the Ark, the symbol of the divine Presence - a right and proper concern indeed. It was, however, the casual, and almost cavalier, way in which this was done that invoked the anger of God. God was not prepared to have fellowship with His people on these terms, resuming the relationship as if nothing had happened, as if there had been no estrangement. In such a context, easy familiarity with holy things amounts to not much less than blasphemy, and angers the holy law of God. In the same way, Ezekiel was saying to the captives, 'Remember, it is you who have been in the wrong, not God, and you cannot just come back to Him casually, as if nothing had happened. The whole situation must be purged and cleansed.' This underlines the reality of the holiness of God and it is a lesson that has constant and continuing relevance for the people of God in days when there has been spiritual barrenness, and then God is pleased to return to His people. It ill befits us to treat the Presence casually, and take it as a matter of course. We may not lightly assume that all we have to do is to beckon to the Lord, and He will come at the trot. Not so, says Ezekiel, not so, says God. Our God is a consuming fire.

143)44:1-16

The gate referred to in 3 was that by which the glory of the Lord had returned to Jerusalem and the Temple (43:4), and was therefore to be sacrosanct from human profanation, and only the prince was to be allowed to enter it. It is hardly surprising that Jewish commentators have referred this to the Messiah, and that tradition has associated it with the present golden gate in the East Wall of Old Jerusalem, which is thought to stand on the site of the closed gate of the first temple. In 4-9 the note of separation that sounds out very clearly can hardly be taken literally, for this would contradict the message of the New Testament. The real message here is the idea of the pollution of the house of God by profane things and people. It is when the Church of God today introduces alien things into its worship and service that the principle and heart of this word is violated. In our Lord's own day religious life had become so adulterated by such profanities that Jesus made a scourge of small cords and drove them out of the Temple. In 10-16, what is described is the downgrading and demotion of the Levites, brought about because of their unfaithfulness and idolatrous behaviour in the past. In the reconstituted temple their place is given to others, who are more worthy of it, the sons of Zadok. This is the principle echoed in more than one place in the New Testament, where disqualification is solemnly warned about (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, 9:25-27; Matthew 21:43). It is a solemn warning that it is not all the same in the end whether or not we live faithfully to God and His service.

144)44:17-31

The operative phrase in this passage is found in 23, 'and they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the profane ...'. Ezekiel indicates in 18 that to wear woollen garments in the sanctuary would tend to make the wearers sweat, whereas linen garments would keep them much more cool. This may be purely a hygienic matter, though even on that level one can see its force, namely that there should be nothing unseemly in the sight of God. But there may be, as is pointed out in the Gilcomston Bible Notes, a deeper meaning, namely that in the spiritual sense 'human sweat' in Christian service is neither pleasing nor profitable to the Lord, i.e. there is such a thing as the works of the flesh in Christian service, and that it is possible to 'work oneself into a sweat' in spiritual work, with all of it being done in the energy of the flesh, and therefore not pleasing to God. In evangelism, for example, it is very easy to whip up an atmosphere, and put emotional pressure on people, in a way that is fleshly and carnal; but God says, 'No, no, it must be linen garments. Play it cool, literally and spiritually'. Is there a message here for us today?

145)45:1-25

The point that is being made in 1-8 in the allotment of a portion of the land to be kept sacrosanct to the Lord (on which the Temple was to stand) is that it is meant to be a symbolical token for all the land belongs to God. It is the same principle that operates in the idea of the tithing of one's income: to give a tenth of one's income to the Lord is a token that all that we have belongs, as of right, to Him. As the hymn says, 'We give thee but thine own, what e'er the gift may be'. It is all His, nevertheless it is needful for us to set apart that particular portion of it, and make it sacrosanct unto the Lord, as a token that the other 9/10ths belong to Him also. In the same way, this particular belt of land was sacrosanct unto the Lord as a token that all of it belonged to Him. In 9-12 the emphasis on honesty and justice, and standardised weights and measures represents a plea for integrity in public life. One has only to mention this to recall how, in pre-exilic days, the prophets of the Lord thundered against the social injustices of Israelite society. Now in the time of restoration Ezekiel says there must be no more of that, since it was what led the people into bondage and corruption. The princes of the people are now challenged to establish an honest and equitable society. The remaining verses of the chapter (13-25) deal with various offerings, and sundry regulations about the observance of the festivals.

146)46:1-15

It is clear in 1-8 that Ezekiel is deeply concerned with the duties of the 'prince' or ruler. This is hardly surprising, since in the economy of Israel the ruler was a strategic figure. It was when the rulers of Israel went off the rails that they dragged the people down with them. The modern parallel here applies both to the constitutional rulers - the Royal House - and the government, and what Ezekiel says bears witness to the need for rulers who will pay heed to the things of God, and have a conscience about giving an example to the nation. A royal house cannot please itself, and has no liberty to do so, any more than a government has, however lawfully constituted, since it is by God that kings reign and princes decree justice. Those set in authority are least of all free agents. This is something that appears at times to have escaped their notice, but there can be no doubt of the biblical doctrines in this matter. This is why such a passage has a timely relevance for today: it is men of public integrity that are required by God to bear rule in public life, men who will pay due heed to the standards of the divine laws (cf 2 Samuel 23:3-5).

147)46:16-24

The regulations about property in 16-18 call to mind the story of Naboth's vineyard, and what Ahab and Jezebel did to Naboth in order to seize by force the delectable property on which an evil king set his heart. 'In the new time coming', Ezekiel says, 'there will be no more of that'. There was to be no more alienation of property and no more unlawful appropriation. Again it is a plea for the restoration of divine justice - and integrity - in public life. The chapter ends with an interesting footnote (19-24) about the kitchen arrangements in the Temple. Those involved in the work of the kitchen are not forgotten by the Lord, and that work has to be ordered in accordance with the divine word just as much as the other parts of the Temple. Those involved in it had just as integral a part to play as those offering the sacrifices. It is the emphasis made so clearly in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 about 'members in particular' of the body of Christ, with each contributing his distinctive share in the whole, and no member would be able to do without the others. It is the fine distinction between the equality in dignity and status of God's people and the difference in function that each has in His purposes that is in view. Differentiation of function, not superiority or inferiority, is the point. And if we serve God with all our might in ways that we can, He will not hold it against us for not serving Him in ways that we cannot.

148)46:16-24

There is a good deal in these past four chapters that is in a sense almost alien to our thinking, belonging to a world that has passed away, and as such not very applicable to us; but the point of it all is surely clear and certainly valid, namely that in the true worship of God, everything must be 'just right'; anything will not do, for it is the spirit of worship that is important. It is all too easy, in a Christian fellowship and in Christian service, to be tempted into the assumption that, so long as we are doing something, in some way it will do. And God says to us, through Ezekiel, 'Not so'. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 14:40, 'All things are to be done decently and in order', and the counterpart of these elaborate and somewhat unfamiliar instructions about the new Temple in these chapters is to be found in the Pauline instructions about proper behaviour in the house of God which we find particularly in the pastoral epistles (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:15). There can often be so much that is not 'in order' in a Christian fellowship, and we need to be constantly concerned to bring our attitudes to the judgment of the divine Word. As we see from these chapters, everything begins with the centrality of the altar - not any literal altar, but that on which we offer spiritual sacrifices to God as a chosen, peculiar people. When that is central, our worship will be spiritual and well-pleasing in His sight.

149)47:1-12

We come with this passage to the beginning of the final part of Ezekiel's prophecy, which deals with 'the land and the temple'. It divides readily into two parts, the first, 47:1-12, with the vision of the life-giving waters, and the second, 47:13-48:35, which gives us the division of the land among the twelve tribes. Even a cursory reading of today's verses, which speak of the healing properties of the waters of the river and the leaves of the trees, brings to mind other parts of Scripture, as for example, Joel 3:18; Zechariah 14:4-9, and also, most particularly, Revelation 22:1ff, whose marvellous picture owes a great deal, as we can immediately see, to Ezekiel's language. This vision of the final glory unfolded by the prophet also stands in parallel with the biblical story of creation. In Genesis 2:10 we read that paradise was watered by the four-streamed river, and here, in the vision of the new creation, the river of God brings fertility, blessing and fruitfulness wherever it goes. We have also seen that Ezekiel's prophecy begins with a vision of God, and ends with a vision of God - Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there - so that in a double sense the final message of Ezekiel is a message of restoration, and of the restitution of all things. This is the key to an understanding of the passage, and its basic message. The climax of Ezekiel's ministry is the assurance that in the latter days - whatever that phrase may mean - God will return to His people. We shall seek to open up the meaning and significance of this in the Notes which follow.

150)47:1-12

The passage before us now is clearly an idealisation of God's abundant blessings. This is a thought echoed frequently in the Old Testament. In Psalm 46:4 for example, we read, 'There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God.' It is perhaps significant that these words occur in the context of cataclysmic upheaval and therefore bear witness to the ultimate triumph of God. Similarly, Psalm 65:9 speaks of the river of God that is full of water. Blessings, fertility, water are almost interchangeable ideas in the Old Testament. Here, in Ezekiel, it is because the Lord is there that blessings flow. It is He who is the source and the fountain of all benison and benediction (cf also Isaiah 33:22ff). The parallel references in Revelation must surely be clear that this refers to the consummation in Christ at His coming. Therefore, in line with what we have said earlier about prophetic interpretations, there is an application both to Christ's first coming and to His second. And significantly, in both there are references to living waters. One thinks, for example, of our Lord's words in John 7:37, 38, 'He that believeth on Me ... out of his inmost being shall flow rivers of living water This spake He of the Spirit ...', the reference being to God the Holy Spirit, Who was to come and dwell in His people. This is exactly Ezekiel's imagery: where the Lord is, in a human life, there is a river of living water. If we are indwelt by the Spirit of God there must be an overflow to others. And - to change the metaphor slightly - it is from the presence of the Lord that we can go forth to be a blessing to others.

151)47:1-12

We should notice particularly that it was from the south side of the altar that the river flowed out. This has a deep symbolic significance, for the south side of the altar is the place of sacrifice. It is always the place of sacrifice that is the source of blessing. In the parallel passage in the book of Revelation, we see that the river proceeds from the throne of God and of the Lamb - a Lamb as it had been slain (22:1). The fountainhead of all blessing in spiritual life is the cross: it is when Christ is uplifted on the cross that blessing flows to men (John 12:32), and it is when we, as believers and servants of God, have been in the place of sacrifice that blessing begins to flow. In this connection one recalls something Andrew Bonar once said about the need for a minister of the gospel, when he goes into the pulpit on a Sunday, not so much to try to bring people into the presence of the Lord as himself to go out from that Presence to the people, and bring them back in. And if we go out from the place of sacrifice to meet with men, it cannot but be that that presence will be vitally communicated to them and they will be brought into living contact with the blessing of God. This is a word that is applicable not only to ministers, but surely to all who seek to serve the Lord in Christian witness and testimony. Is this how we live, and is this the kind of impact we make?

152)47:1-12

A word must now be said about the 'degrees' of water spoken of in the vision. The first thing this teaches us is that the Lord means His power in us to increase until it becomes 'waters to swim in'. The history of the Church has shown that there have been lives from which there has flowed such tremendous streams of blessing that multitudes have been engulfed in them. We must, however, beware of misconceptions here: in one sense, when we have the Spirit we have all that there is of Him; He is not divided, and He is not to be quantified. But at the same time we can say that the Spirit can assume more and more control of our lives. One commentator, referring to 5, in the phrase 'it was a river that I could not pass over', underlines the 'I', as if to suggest that self is lost in the fullness of the Spirit. A river in which that capital 'I' is overwhelmed, is not this a wonderful thought? Let us ask ourselves where we are in God's river. Are we at all, or are we simply spectating? Are we in up to the ankles, paddling only in the shallows of divine blessing? Are we in up to the knees, or up to the loins, or out of our depth and swept off our feet? Theodore Monod's hymn, 'O the bitter shame and sorrow' represents the possibilities very graphically: 'All of self, and none of Thee'; 'Some of self, and some of Thee'; 'Less of self, and more of Thee'; 'None of self, and all of Thee'. There can come a time when we are completely in the power of the Spirit, and carried on irresistibly by the glorious river of God. Yet, paradoxically, it is when we are more truly overwhelmed and controlled in this way that we become ourselves most truly. This is the miracle of divine grace.

153)47:13 - 48:29

The remainder of this section, and of the book, is devoted to the description of the apportionment of the land to the various tribes. We need not go into this in detail, but rather ask ourselves what is the message that comes through from the passage. And first of all we can say this, that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. What He has promised, that He will perform. God gave the land to His people in ancient times, although in fact the tribes never really possessed their possessions in the fullest sense, and now He was promising that that gift would be truly implemented. Clearly, in the context of Ezekiel's particular situation, with the Jews in captivity in Babylon, any restoration worthy of the name would have to speak of a return to the land. But it is the spiritual lesson that we must extract from this, since we as Gentile believers do not inherit the land. It is here that the New Testament idea of 'inheritance' is important. Paul speaks in Ephesians 1:11 of the fact that we all have an inheritance in Christ, and the words he uses in the Greek means 'an allotted part'; and this is one of the spiritual lessons here. In God's restoration nobody is missed out among His people. Each man has his allotted part, both here and hereafter. What we must think of as Christians is our part in the stewardship given by Christ to His redeemed children (cf the parable of the talents). Each of us is given work to do, and present quality of stewardship will condition the measure of responsibility in stewardship in the life to come.

154)48:30-35

We should compare these last verses of the prophecy with Revelation 21:9-16 to see the use that John makes of Ezekiel's vision, and to note that the names of the twelve tribes are linked with those of the twelve apostles, uniting the old and new in the unity of the Spirit. The closing passage of the Tyndale Commentary on Ezekiel provides a fitting end to our study of this great prophecy: 'Ezekiel's closing words gave to the city its new name: Yahweh Shammah, The Lord is there (35). This was a grand Finale to his book and to his ministry. In his twenty-five years of exile and in the forty-eight chapters of his book, Ezekiel had seen the Lord withdraw from His temple because of the sins that were being committed there, he had met with Him by the waters of Babylon in the vision of the chariot-throne, he had promised the exiles that there would be a new covenant when God would be with His people as their God for ever, he had seen in symbolic vision the temple and the Israel of the future. Now at last the Lord would be there, with His people, forever. For Ezekiel, the climax had been reached: but it was still only a vision. John, the exile in Patmos, who saw Ezekiel's words fulfilled in the coming of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us, also looked forward to the day when a great voice would be heard from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people" (Revelation 21:3). The glory of heaven is the ultimate fulfilment of it all.

'It is to that great culmination that all Ezekiel's readers should be led.'