

THE FUNCTION OF THE SALVATION ORACLES IN EZEKIEL 33 to 37

by

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The Search for Ezekiel's Salvation Oracles

Modern study of the Book of Ezekiel has gradually shifted away from a highly skeptical position prevalent in the first half of this century which understood the words of the original prophet to be few, and the expansions and theological developments of a priestly school of redactors to be numerous.¹ In the two decades from 1950 to 1970, the works of Howie, Eichrodt and Zimmerli, in particular, moved to a moderating position that saw a considerable history of development in the text past the actual words of the prophet, but postulated far fewer additions than had the earlier critics, and asserted a much closer connection of these enlargements of the text to the thinking and ideas expressed by Ezekiel himself.² In the last two decades, several students of the text are moving even closer to the view that most of the current book reflects the actual preaching and "program" of Ezekiel himself, and that most of the additions are relatively small adaptations to changing situations late in

1. See Gustav Hölscher, *Hesekiel, der Dichter und das Buch* (BZAW 39; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1924); William A. Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1943); while C. C. Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy* (New Haven: Yale University, 1930), denies that any authentic material comes from Ezekiel, and sees the entire book as a creation of the second century B.C.E.; B. Lang, *Ezechiel: Der Prophet und das Buch* (Erträge der Forschung, 1953; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981) 1-18, provides a handy survey of the major proponents of this and the next position (fn. 2).

2. See Georg Fohrer and Kurt Galling, *Ezechiel* (HAT 13; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1955; second edition); Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); C. G. Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel* (JBLMS 4; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1950); and Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979; German Original, 1969).

the Exile itself, or are a natural part of the redaction process of combining Ezekiel's material together and/or rendering largely oral remembrances into written form.³

It is this last possibility that prompts me to look again at the unity and organization of the so-called "salvation oracles" in Ezekiel 33–37 to see if they can be considered part of a definite plan that directs the whole book of Ezekiel and largely reflects the prophet's thought; or are to be considered more a loose gathering of Ezekiel's words of hope uttered by the prophet at different times and places that have been juxtaposed at a fitting place in the redacted whole. If these oracles are judged to be such a looser collection, do they also betray signs of additions and expansions which reflect an agenda that points to a school of thought different from, and later than, that of the prophet Ezekiel? Even successful efforts to establish a definite "plan" or redacted shape for this prophetic book, however, do not necessarily answer the underlying question of who is responsible for this order or way of presenting the message. It could stem from the prophet himself; or from the school of disciples who want to organize and clarify the master's teaching; or from a later body of priests, teachers or the like who impose on the original thoughts of Ezekiel a slightly different and fuller "program" that they wish to propose, and who view this prophet as a vehicle of authority by which to establish these views.⁴

3. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (Anchor Bible 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983) 20–27, discusses the integrity of authorship and assumes it as a working principle for the entire book in general. However, he recognizes in a number of passages likely enlargements and additions to the original work of Ezekiel (cf. pp. 52, 219–20), and occasionally leaves the question open (p. 305). See also B. Lang, *Keim Aufstand in Jerusalem. Die Politik des Propheten Ezechiel* (Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge; Stuttgart, 1978) 125–27; M. Nobile, *Una Lettura simbolico-strutturalistica di Ezechiele* (Rome: dissertation at Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1982); L. Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32* (Biblica et Orientalia 37; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1980).

4. To some extent, this is the reason followed by Zimmerli and earlier commentators. The most extreme examples have been Torrey's suggestion that the entire book was an ideological statement of the second century B.C.E. (See fn. 1), and James Smith, *The Book of Ezekiel: A New Interpretation* (London: S.P.C.K., 1931), who proposed a pre-exilic written program. A carefully argued version of how redactors take over a prophet's core to become a vehicle for a movement is found in Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), and his later commentary, *Jeremiah* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) which argues for a thorough deuteronomistic editing of Jeremiah. In contrast, Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) asserts the exact opposite: Jeremiah is responsible for the Deuteronomistic History in its entirety (pp. 136–49).

Naturally, such an investigation of just one section of a work of 48 chapters cannot be done in isolation from the structures and overall purpose of the book as a whole. Since space permits the detailed study of just the one grouping in 33–37, a few preliminary remarks about the macrostructure are needed.

Overall Structures in Ezekiel for Placing Salvation Oracles

There is nearly unanimous agreement among scholars on the grand framework of the book of Ezekiel. It is divided into three large bodies of oracles and texts, each with a separate purpose. Chapters 1–24 contain oracles and narratives of judgment against Israel, chapters 25–32 contain oracles delivered against foreign nations, and chapters 33–48 contain narratives and oracles aimed at rebuilding in the future.⁵ Many commentators would cut off chapters 40–48 from this last grouping as a separate and later body of texts, only minimally connected to Ezekiel's own prophesying.⁶ However, in terms of the total schema, even this program for the temple and the land belongs with the larger vision for future restoration that commences in chapter 33.

This organization of the book has the purpose of giving direction to the many different oracles which it contains within the framework of the events from 593 (when Ezekiel begins his preaching) down to 571 or so (when his final word is recorded in 29:17–21). It begins with the word of God in judgment and warning to Israel that consumes the prophet up to the moment of Jerusalem's fall (24:25–27). This makes up fully one half of the book, i.e., chapters 1–24, and establishes the causes of Israel's guilt, the justice of God's impending action, and the grounds for any future hope in the seriousness with which God takes the covenant and in the lessons of the past which reveal the constant divine fidelity. Because of this underlying concern with the covenantal bond between Israel and its God, and its balance between the exile as righteous punishment for Israel's infidelity and the enduring promise that God will be with Israel, there is no reason to exclude a priori the oracles of hope that conclude some of the most threatening words of judgment (11:14–21; 16:53–63; 17:22–24; 20:39–44). These are positioned only after the glory of the Lord leaves the temple at the end of chapter 10, and do not occur at all in final warnings of destruction in chaps. 21–24 that form an appendix

5. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, pp. 3–6.

6. See John Wevers, *Ezekiel* (New Century Bible; London: Nelson, 1969; reprinted W. B. Eerdmans, 1982) 206–09; G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) 425–27.

to the basic whole made up of chapters 1–20. Chapters 1–20 also develop numerous themes, such as the sacredness of the mountains of Israel, the suddenness of the day of the Lord, the vision of the divine throne chariot that abandons the temple, and the unreliability of the kingship, that will become important again in the last part of the book.

Altogether the twenty-four chapters that make up the collection usually characterized as Ezekiel's judgment oracles contain an elaborate sub-grouping of oracles and visions whose linking creates a strong internal structure. There are six such subgroups in all: chaps. 1–3, 4–7, 8–11, 12–14, 15–19 and 20–24. In this last unit, it appears that chapter 20 both concludes the previous nineteen and begins the appendix. But since I have dealt with this question in an earlier treatment,⁷ it will be best to pass over the details of chaps. 1–24 for now, and move on to the next major bloc.

The foreign oracles in chapters 25–32 are likewise strongly structured within themselves to serve a function. Since seven nations are named in all, and divine judgment is pronounced against them in turn, we are reminded of the command of Deuteronomy 7:1 that God will bring Israel into the land and clear away seven nations greater and stronger than themselves. These oracles are a transition to a new word of hope for Israel by establishing that God indeed controls the deeds and fates of all peoples, and has the power to reverse the loss of Israel's land and bring the neighboring hostile powers to heel. In some ways, these are part of a word of salvation to Israel by redirecting divine wrath against those nations that have helped humiliate the chosen people, and by preparing for the final decisive step: the promised return of Israel itself from exile.⁸

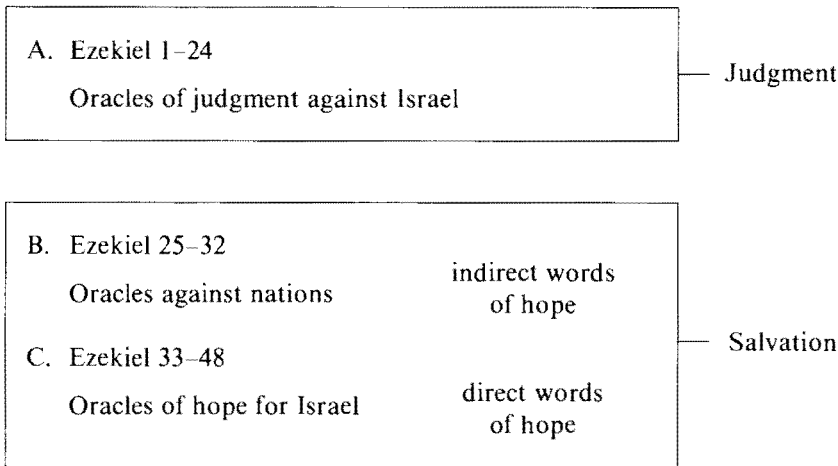
Chapters 33–48 form a third bloc of materials that serve as the promise to Israel of its own restoration to the land and a future life of blessing. The fact that the second bloc of oracles against the nations has been interjected between the words of judgment in chapters 1–24 and these words of hope creates not only a gap in the literary construction, but highlights the break that the new life will represent from the past ways of Israel in the land. The reader of the book of Ezekiel is led to expect a future that will be quite different from the actions and attitudes condemned by the prophet in the first part of the book. And yet, there will be continuity as well. The three-part division of the book highlights

7. Lawrence Boadt, "Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment," *BETL* LXXIV (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986) 182–200.

8. See B. Margulis, *Studies in the Oracles against Nations* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967); and L. Boadt, *The Oracles Against Egypt*, 7–8.

that continuity by emphasizing the sovereign control of God over the course of events: (1) the oracles of judgment in chaps. 1–24 explain the justice in Israel’s subjection to domination and exile by its enemies; (2) the oracles against nations in chaps. 25–32 reestablish the divine mastery over the arrogant pride of these nations who do not merely punish but want to possess God’s chosen people and their land; (3) the oracles of hope and visions of the future aimed at Israel in chaps. 33–48 will restore the special relationship of blessing that God had promised in the covenant.

Oracles against foreign nations actually serve as preliminary words of hope and salvation to Israel, so that a simpler pattern also emerges in which the book is designed so that it has exactly two halves. It can be described thus:



The message of chapters 33–48 therefore makes a sharp break with that of chapters 1–24 both in content and in structural order. However, it is necessary to examine closely the individual units from chapter 33 on to discover how they both relate to what was said in the first twenty-four chapters and how they propose a different course for the future.

But even from the start, this body of texts appears to be in a fragmented state. Not only have serious doubts been raised about the place of 40–48 within the corpus of Ezekiel’s oracles,⁹ but the oracles against

9. Some scholars have denied all of chapters 40–48 to the prophet Ezekiel himself (see fn. 1). More commonly, studies in the last fifty years have emphasized rather that a basic core, perhaps one-third or less of the entire section, stems from the prophet himself, and

Gog in chapters 38–39 have frequently been considered to be a later apocalyptic intrusion into the original plan of the book.¹⁰ In a slightly less dramatic fashion, the material that now makes up chapter 33 has generally been interpreted as editorial to serve as a transition from 1–24, and to balance the opening call narratives of the prophet in chapter 3.¹¹ This leaves a central core of chapters 34–37 (with 33 as its introduction) that represents a commonly agreed upon basis from which to fathom the original message of hope of the prophet. The following investigation of these chapters alone will hopefully show how closely tied they are to an overall plan, and how that relates to the central themes of chapters 1–24, especially to the interpretation of history presented in chapter 20.

The Salvation Oracles in Chapters 33–37

If Ezekiel's message throughout the first half of the book has established that Israel was rebellious from its origins in the desert (see esp. 20:8–18; 23:3–4); and that only God's power and will can effectively restore this people to the land again (the import of chapters 25–32); then we would expect that the oracles of salvation will deal with the question of how that restoration will make possible a faithful observance of the covenant in the future. Chapters 33–37 lay out that scenario in detail.

the rest has grown through a process of development and later sixth century priestly additions that largely reflect the post-exilic reestablishment of the community in the period between 539 and 458 B.C.E. See especially the detailed treatment of Hartmut Gese, *Der Verfassungsentwurf des Ezechiel (Kap. 40–48) traditionsgeschichtlich untersucht* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 25; Tübingen, 1957), and the attempt of W. Zimmerli to summarize the "literary prehistory of chapters 40–48" in his *Ezekiel 2*, 547–53. Similar positions that presuppose a core with extensive development can be found in J. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 206–33; G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, 425–29; and Keith Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 267.

10. Alfred Bertholet and Kurt Galling, *Hesekiel* (HAT 13; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1936) generally see a core of Ezekiel's words elaborated towards an apocalyptic understanding of the text; this is followed by Wevers, *Ezekiel*, and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, in their comments upon these chapters. On the other hand, G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, pp. 406–8, following several older commentators, denies that any of the Gog material comes from Ezekiel. In his recent commentary, *Ezekiel* (Old Testament Message 11; Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984) 183–90, Aelred Cody expresses a qualified doubt whether Ezekiel could be the author of a literary unity that so interrupts the connections between 33–37 and 40–48.

11. See further discussion of these two chapters in any of the major commentaries, e.g., Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, pp. 143–46; *Ezekiel 2* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 183–184. Most hold that similarities indicate chapter 3 has been constructed after chapter 33, and not vice-versa.

The emphasis will consistently fall on how the community is to be conceived in terms of divine faithfulness, covenant loyalty and right treatment of the land. Only when this has been dealt with in full can the role of the great conflict with Gog in 38–39 be properly understood, and the way prepared for presentation of what the purified land will look like in the final nine chapters of the book.

(a) *Chapter 33*

If we break down the individual units in chapter 33, we find that all five of the units specifically echo theological themes that have been adumbrated in key passages in chapters 1–24:

- 1) 33:1–9 echoes 3:19–21 which restates the motif that Ezekiel is to be a watchman over Israel but that all must share the responsibility for listening to the divine word.
- 2) 33:10–20 summarizes the lengthy legal case for personal accountability that are dealt with in 18:1–32.
- 3) 33:21–22 records the arrival of the messenger from Jerusalem with the news of the Fall of the city as foretold in 24:25–27; this in turn marks the end of the prophet's enforced silence as reported in 3:22–27.
- 4) 33:23–29 summarizes key charges raised against the people in chapters 5 and 6 (and elsewhere) about idolatry and the committing of abominations on the mountains of Israel. The sword and pestilence (*hereb w^edeber*) echo in part 5:12, 16–17; 6:11–12; the abominations (*to^cābōt*) echo 5:9; 6:9, 11; and the land as a desolation and waste in 33:29 (*šēmāmā ûmēšammā*) quotes from 6:14. This same passage in vv. 23–29 alludes to the small words of promise in 11:14–21 but in an ironic twist. In 11:15, the Judeans who are left in the land claim it as their entire inheritance (*lēmōrāšā*), but the prophet warns them that God plans to give it back to the exiles when they return; in chapter 33, the prophet again warns the people who had been left behind that they will not take permanent possession of the land because they, not the exiles, have committed abominations and defiled the land. They even have the ironical hubris to claim their possession in the name of Abraham, the ideal of faithful observance in the land!
- 5) 33:30–33 represents a unique passage in the prophetic writings in which the prophet is compared to a singer of love songs that will sway the hearts of the hearers, presumably during the singing, but will have no lasting effects on their wills. Although it cannot be established as absolutely certain, this passage, too, probably reflects an earlier and important text, 20:1–3 (with 20:31). The theme is whether God will allow those who *come* with no intention to obey the word to even

receive it. In both 20:1–3 and 33:30–31, the verb *bāʾā* for their coming is given great stress; also in both passages (as well as in 20:31) the main reason for God's refusal to be consulted is that the people are in fact loyal to idols (*gillūlim*).

These five topics set the overall theme for the series of salvation oracles that are to follow in chapters 34–37 by laying accountability for the disaster at the feet of the people themselves, and establishing that none can escape responsibility for the consequences of their actions that brought about the disaster that had occurred. At the same time, the emphasis on the different possible responses open to the people provide some foundation for a change of heart.

By reiterating the warnings made to both prophet and people in chapters 1–24, chapter 33 underscores the effective power of the divine word that had been uttered through Ezekiel which will take its course no matter what. This is the import of the announcement of the fall of the city in 33:21–22. At the same time it has the second purpose of affirming that the prophet's role as watchman over the people was not terminated by the loss of Jerusalem, but is valid also in exile in a new way. The same covenant demands that Ezekiel announced before 586 still remain in force for those who live in exile even though they are being punished for their earlier failure to heed God's word. But the continuation of this announcement in an oracle directed against the people left in the land (33:23–29) opens up the possibility that Ezekiel's new words, now to be spoken freely after his dumbness is removed in vs. 22, will be aimed primarily to those in exile. But even they appear blind to what God will announce through the prophet (vss. 30–33).

This parallels the program outlined already in chapter 20, in which a history of disobedience (20:8–31) will be followed by exile from the land as a judgment on evildoers and a purging of their guilt (20:33–38), and finally by restoration for the sake of God's name (20:40–44). This three-stage outline of the divine plan closely resembles the nearly identical pattern in Leviticus 26:14–32, 33–39, and 40–46. The final verses of Ezekiel 33:30–33 surely hint that this lesson is still to be learned by Israel in exile.

Chapter 33 serves then not only as a transition from oracles of judgment to salvation by means of the recommissioning of the prophet as watchman, the ending of his dumbness in fulfillment of 3:27 and the coming of the news of the fall as predicted in 24:26–27, but it is on a far vaster scale the crucial first step in the implementation of the divine plan for restoration, namely, the call to the people to acknowledge that the exile is deserved and just, and must be accepted, just as proposed by Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 20.

(b) *Chapter 34*

The first concrete step of restoration is a reorientation of community leadership and a rekindling of the sense of responsibility of membership among the people. The chapter can be divided into four sections: 1–10 on bad leadership; 11–16 on the divine leadership; 17–22 on the principle of individual moral responsibility that will lead to judgment against rapacious leaders; and 23–31 on the promise of the idyllic age that will include an ideal leader and a people in complete harmony.

Ezekiel begins by repeating the basic message of his predecessor Jeremiah now found in Jer 23:1–4 against bad shepherds. But the Book of Ezekiel goes far beyond the Jeremiah passage. First, it downplays the prominence of a new Davidic king who will be a good shepherd which follows immediately in Jer 23:5–6 by placing any mention of David far down in the last of the four sections of the chapter (34:23–24). Secondly, it emphasizes the role of God as the true shepherd of Israel. Thirdly, it builds upon a special priestly tradition that has already been explicated in chapter 20 and is found also in Leviticus 26. This can be traced through each of the four sections of the chapter.

The initial unit of vv. 1–10 is a particularly harsh condemnation of the role of kings and princes in the past. It finds an echo in a later unit in 43:6–12. But such a rejection is lacking in earlier passages in chapters 16, 20 and 23 where Ezekiel recites the history of Israel's past transgressions. Among those, no mention is made of bad rulers. However, both elders (8:7–15) and princes (11:1–3) are condemned explicitly, and apparently the lessons in the allegories of chapters 17 and 19 were directed towards the king and his policy.

Nevertheless, such judgment on the leaders in the past merely sets the stage for the positive correction and solution given in vss. 11–16. God alone will reassert leadership of the flock as its only shepherd. The vocabulary again hearkens back to the promise of restoration in chapter 20, since God will “bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the foreign lands” (*hōṣēʿtîm min-hāʿammîm wəqibbāštîm min-hā ʿārāṣôt*; Ezek 34:13; 20:41), and “bring them to the land of Israel” (*hābî ʿōtîm ʿel-ʿādāmât yiśrāʿēl*; 20:42, 34:13), to “the mountain height of Israel” (*bēhar mērôm yiśrāʿēl*; 20:40; 34:14). Remotely, too, the imagery of Leviticus 26 is invoked in the description of rich pasture and the secure rest (Lev 26:6; Ezek 34:15).

Vss. 17–22 address the problem of the cruelty of people to one another in taking advantage of the powerless. Although Ezekiel speaks of sheep against sheep, the lesson seems to echo through metaphor the condemnation of those who violate the rights of the weak found in Leviticus 25.

The final unit in 34:23–31 has often been judged a redactional expansion,¹² but it too should be related closely to Leviticus 26, and somewhat less directly to Ezekiel 20. The promise of bounty in the land stands out in both this chapter and Lev 26:3–13. The people will dwell securely (Lev 26:6 = Ezek 34:28), God will give the rain (Lev 26:4 = Ezek 34:26), and break the bars of the yoke over them (Lev 26:13 = Ezek 34:27), and will make for them a covenant of peace and deliver them from ravenous beasts (Lev 26:6 = Ezek 34:25).

In Ezek 34:30, God speaks in a variant of the covenant formulary, “they shall know that I the Lord their God am with them and they, the house of Israel, are my people.” V. 31 repeats the same thought in the metaphor of the chapter, “And you are my sheep . . . and I am your God.” Lev 26:12 gives the more standard formula, found frequently in the Bible, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”¹³ Ezekiel is surely echoing the Leviticus passage here, but combines the covenant formula with his own distinctive “Erkenntnisformel,” with which he ends the vast majority of his oracles throughout the book.¹⁴

Ezekiel goes on to say that God will be with the people (34:30), but does not fill out the full reference from Lev 26:11, where the text says that “I will set my *dwelling* among you.” This omission may well be an intentional withholding of the promise of a new temple until chapter 40 in order to first establish the purification and preparation of the land and the renewal of the covenant, much the same pattern that prevails in the ordering of events in the Book of Exodus itself.

Ezekiel also introduces the role of the new king David in 34:23–24, who will be reduced to being a chief, (*nāšîʿ*) and completely subject to Yahweh. In this chapter alone, God has been identified as the only true shepherd (34:15), judge (34:17) and now the absolute ruler over the king (34:24). Chapter 20 of Ezekiel has also hinted at some of these themes: God will be king over them with power (20:33), and all the people will serve God on the mountain heights of Israel (20:40), after God has judged them and purged out the evildoers (20:35–37).

12. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, pp. 218–21.

13. This formula occurs in Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22, 35; 31:1; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:1; 36:28; 37:23, 27. The distribution of cases shows it is particularly a development of the late pre-exilic period’s thinking on the covenant, found in the priestly traditions of P, H, and the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

14. Walther Zimmerli, *Erkenntnis Gottes nach dem Buche Ezechiel* (ATANT 27 [Zürich: Zwingli, 1954]; reprinted in *Gottes Offenbarung*; Munich: Kaiser, 1963, 41–119). Now in English as “The Knowledge of God according to the Book of Ezekiel,” in *I am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 29–98.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, we can reasonably conclude that a major purpose of chapter 34 is to establish God's kingship over a restored Israel according to the program of chapter 20. Through a series of concrete steps, God will effect that divine rule by reinstating justice and right relationships in the social order among the covenant people, and between the covenant people and their God.

(c) *Chapters 35:1-36:15*

The next stage in the divine strategy of restoration is to focus attention on the land itself as holy. This requires a three step movement: first, the land of the oppressor peoples is condemned to judgment in 35:1-15; then the land of Israel itself undergoes purification from its oppressors (36:1-7), and finally, the land of Israel receives blessing (36:8-15).

Many questions have been raised over why such a decisive oracle against Edom stands outside the collection in chapters 25-32.¹⁵ One oracle against Edom is already included in a short form in 25:12-14. Edom, however, plays a symbolic role here representing all oppressor nations, partly because of the traditional ambivalence in the relations between Edom and Israel, already long recognized by means of the ancient conflict stories centered on Jacob and Esau. But more importantly, historical factors at the time of the Exile determined the decision to select Edom as the primary recipient of the divine wrath against those who had defiled the land of Israel. During the Babylonian invasion, it was Edom who moved in on the southern part of Judean territory to stay, rather than merely join in the attack and then withdraw.

Here, Ezekiel goes beyond the traditional theology that a foreign nation served as an instrument of the divine punishment when it did limited damage to the chosen land in one of the frequent border skirmishes and partial wars of the past. In those battles Israel's neighbors had not sought to permanently replace the existing order within Israel itself. But here, Edom's move to wrest a large section of the land from Judah is portrayed in a similar way to the charges once leveled against the Assyrians by Isaiah, namely that hubris has tempted them to overstep their role as a divine scourge and made them seek to play God

15. Thus almost every commentator in recent years has attributed 35:1-15 to editorial redaction. See John Wevers, *Ezekiel* (The New Century Bible Commentary; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1969) 186-88, and also W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 234. Already J. Herrmann proposed that chapter 35 was secondary since the balancing oracles for the mountains of Israel in 36:1-15 seem to more properly belong as a counter-weight to the oracles against the mountains of Israel in chapter 6. See his *Ezechielstudien* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament 2 [Leipzig, 1908] 36-37.

themselves (cf. Isa 10:5–15 and 14:24–27). Edom now joins Tyre and Egypt in Ezekiel's condemnation as symbols of opposition to God's plan, i.e., creatures guilty of divine pretensions. The punishment is nothing less than a total humbling of the aggressor country to reveal that Yahweh indeed has control over the affairs of nations.

This explains the extreme mythological language of chapters 26–32 dealing with Tyre and Egypt, and suggests that Edom, too, is understood as a major challenge to Yahweh's rule. As Zimmerli has put it, there may be a logic of conquerors that they have title to the lands they conquer, but God will not respect that logic because it contradicts both his sovereignty and the honor of his name.¹⁶ Edom must be punished for this before God's honor can be restored. The theme of mocking God in 35:13–15 can only be interpreted as a charge of blaspheming the divine name, a capital offense.¹⁷

In the next section, 36:1–7, Ezekiel emphasizes the "mountains of Israel" in vss. 1, 4 (cf. 35:12, 36:8) in contrast to the language of the previous section where Edom is not named as such, but called "Mount Seir" (35:2, 7, 15). The contrast is sharpened if we note that "the hills, valleys and ravines" (*gib^cḏitēkā, gē^cḏitēkā, ʾāpīqēkā*) of Edom were to be filled with Edom's slain in 35:8, but when the same phrase is repeated in 36:4 and 6, it is as a blessing on the land of Israel (with the important addition of *wēhārīm*). Thus it becomes a promise of divine blessing on the "(mountains and) hills, valleys and ravines" of Israel.

The emphasis on the mountains in all of these passages (Mount Seir, mountains of Israel, mountains and hills, etc.) is deliberately chosen to balance the condemnation of the mountains of Israel in chapter 6 (6:2, 6:3; 6:13). There is a careful progression from condemnation of the mountains of Israel in chapter 6, to their restoration in chapter 36 to their full blessing in the later sections of chapters 38–39 and 40–48. Significantly, outside of Ezekiel 35–36, the only other occurrence of this particular expression, "the mountains, hills, valleys and ravines," in any kind of sequence is found in 6:3.

The final unit of the section, 36:8–15, foresees a new restoration of the mountains to bountifulness by the repopulation of the land by the exiles. It will be a sign that God is not powerless, but powerful, and contradict

16. See the discussion in M. Nobile, "Beziehung zwischen Ez 32, 17–32 und der Gog-Perikope (Ez 38–39) im Lichte der Endredaktion," *BETL LXXIV* (Leuven: University Press, 1986) 255–59.

17. Cf. Lev 24:16.

the reproach uttered by the nations (including Edom) and deeply felt by the exiled Judeans, that God was too weak to save them (cf. 6:9).¹⁸

(d) *Chapter 36:16–38*

Chapters 34 to 36:15 have announced a reversal of the disordered structures such as kingship and possession of the land. The strategy now moves to a new level: the reversal of the history of infidelity recounted in chapter 20. Chapter 20 has lain in the background of the previous sections as well, since one could hardly fail to allude to the emphasis on the mountains of Israel and not recall the promise of God to return to the mountain height of Israel in 20:40. But in 36:16–38, the connections are brought to the surface and made explicit. Chief among these are the reasons why God poured out his anger on the people (20:8, 21; 36:18), i.e., because they had profaned his holy name (20:9; 36:21), by worshipping idols (20:30; 36:18); and yet God will bring them back from the lands where he had scattered them (20:41; 36:19, 24), for the sake of his holiness (20:31; 36:23); and in turn, the people will repent and loathe themselves for their former evil (20:43; 36:31).

The program of chapter 36 establishes two goals: first to restore the honor and holiness of the divine name by bringing Israel to its land despite their evil; and secondly, to give them a new heart to replace the former idolatrous one condemned in chapter 20. Chapter 36 goes beyond chapter 20 in some ways. The first part (vss. 1–31) of the earlier chapter stresses the people's defilement through false worship and by profaning the Sabbath, neither of which is highlighted in chapter 36. But the second part of chapter 20, vss. 32–44, states the theme that God will rule over Israel in order to end the profanation of his name and to manifest his holiness on "the mountain of the Lord," the mountain heights of Israel (20:39–41). This forms the background to 36:16–25.

The promise of the new heart in 36:26–32 is usually associated with the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:31–34 because both mention the heart and use the priestly formula of the covenant, "I will be your God and you will be my people."¹⁹ Although, as in chapter 34, the

18. Some connection may also be drawn with 17:22–24 which promises a new flowering of a tree on the mountain heights of Israel: a prediction that foreshadows both 36:8–15 and the appointment of a *nāšī* (prince) in chaps. 34 and 37.

19. See the list of occurrences in fn. 12. Jeremiah Untermann, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah's Thought in Transition* (JSOTS 54; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 89–109, has studied Jer 31:31–34 as inseparable from the larger unity of Jer 31:27–37 and concludes that it stems from the time of the Babylonian siege in the tenth year of Zedekiah

preaching of Jeremiah is used as a starting point for Ezekiel's theology, the differences should always be kept in mind. Ezekiel does not note a "new" covenant at this point. Instead, he combines a new heart with a new spirit, a chosen pairing that he has already used in 11:19–20 and 18:31. This is central to Ezekiel's message of hope. It will not be a new covenant, but a new manifestation of the same covenant from of old. In contrast to the hearts that dwelt in idolatry in the desert (20:16), the new hearts will benefit from an outpouring of the divine spirit of God which will make their obedience effective. This theme has already been prophetically inserted in 11:14–21 to prepare for chapter 36,²⁰ and it has found an echo in another expression inserted within the oracles of judgment in 16:59–63, which uses the terminology of the "eternal covenant" (*bērît 'ôlām*). This small unit has often been judged to be an expansion to the preceding allegory of the unfaithful daughter/wife in 16:1–58.²¹ But in any case, it is particularly apt for Ezekiel's overall theme of the new heart. An "eternal covenant" reflects the P language of Gen 9:16 and 17:7, 13; and the phrase "to establish again the covenant" in 16:62 echoes P's Exodus narrative of the covenant promise found in Exod 6:4–5.

Thus Ezekiel differs from Jeremiah by rejecting any suggestion of a "new" covenant, and by returning instead to an important tradition reflected in the Priestly schools of an eternal covenant, but one which will be reestablished by the divine spirit. Interestingly, Jeremiah had often mentioned the "new heart" (24:7, 31:33, 32:39) but had never linked it to the concept of the divine spirit.

(see also Jer 32:1), and refers to God beginning the entire covenant process over again from scratch after restoration to the land. But it will no longer involve Israel's active obedience and cooperation, rather God will effect it in their hearts. Thomas Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 178–80, takes essentially the same position, but accents that the covenant will be eternal, and all retribution is irrevocably past.

20. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile*, 115–18, 181–82 identifies 11:17–21 with Ezek 36:22–32 as two of the authentic salvation oracles in Ezekiel which stand closest to the message of Jeremiah's authentic salvation oracles in stressing deliverance and promise only after judgment has been completed. Both in turn are closely connected to the thought of Jer 31:31–34, although Ezekiel reinterprets Jeremiah's total transformation into a heart transplant, as he calls it. I am in agreement with Raitt in seeing Ezek 11:17–21 as indeed a genuine early oracle of the prophet pronounced about the time of Jer 31:31–34.

21. So Raitt, *A Theology of Exile*, 109–10; Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 103; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 353.

(e) *Chapter 37:1–14*

The vision of the dead bones come back to life plays a central role in carrying forward the program of restoration. The question is whether the divine spirit that accompanies the new heart can indeed give new life to these exiles. The prophet presents the people's doubts in the course of the dialogue whether they can ever hope for a change from death to life. The answer comes that only God knows how to do this, and only the divine spirit can accomplish it, and only the prophetic word has the power to initiate it.

The absence of any mention of the land of Israel in the description of the great plain, or of a king, or of a temple setting, suggests yet once again that restoration will not depend on where the exiles are—the power of God can act anywhere, it even comes from the four winds (37:9). The entire vision sequence follows from the promise of a new heart joined with the promise of re peopling the land in 36:26–32 and 33–38. Significantly as well, what were just bones, and then bones covered with flesh, are now identified intimately and personally in 37:12–14 at the climax of the scene as “my people.” Thus is fulfilled what the prophet foresaw in the last chapter: “You shall be my people!” (36:28).

(f) *Chapter 37:15–28*

There are two parts to this unit, vss. 15–22 and 23–28. The first part represents a companion vision of the future to the preceding scene of the resurrection of the dead bones. The exiles are alive, but still in exile in the plain, and one step remains: to restore the nation as in the ideal days of David's empire. The joining of the two kingdoms therefore does not envision merely the return of Judah to its pre-exilic condition, but encompasses the full nation as it was one under David and Solomon. By repeating the promise that all this will take place on the mountains of Israel under a single prince (37:22), the passage strengthens the conviction that God intends to inaugurate a return to an older and more glorious time when fidelity prevailed. Ezekiel, or at least the editors of this unit, viewed the divided monarchy as a mark of disobedience and a time of idolatry for both kingdoms.

The second part in vss. 23–38 recapitulates the major themes of the preceding four chapters. It clearly is a closing. It combines the promise of purification of the people with restoration to the land, under a new David, in a covenant of peace, when God's dwelling is reestablished in their midst. It sums up the various stages outlined in chapters 34–37,

and at the same time looks ahead to the new order described in chapters 40–48.²²

The Unity of Chapters 34–37

The development of the salvation oracles in chapters 34 to 37 has focused on questions pertaining to the reconstitution of major covenant elements that lay broken in the wake of Israel's past behavior and the destructive results of the Babylonian conquest and exile. These are in order, (1) the sovereignty of God as ruler over Israel, and the proper role of Israel's leadership under that God; (2) the proper possession of the land and its need for purification from oppressors and return to Yahweh's care; (3) to purify the land profaned by Israel's sin and to restore the divine holiness to the land and its people by a new outpouring of the divine spirit; (4) a revitalization of the people by bringing them back from exile, filled with the divine spirit and forgiven and once again called "my people!"; (5) a return to the full blessing of the days of king David when northern and southern kingdoms were one under a faithful ruler, and all from king to commoner acknowledged God's holiness and the glory of the divine name on Mt. Zion. As the preceding analysis of each chapter has sought to demonstrate, this is the program set forth in Ezekiel 20. It is a program that justifies the divine wrath manifested in the destruction and exile, but at the same time it reveals the divine purpose to effect repentance and change in a rebellious people (cf. just this charge given to Ezekiel in his call in 2:1–8).

The Relation of Chapters 34–37 with Chapters 38–48

The prophetic message suggested above proposes a certain possibility of moral change in a people who have become discouraged and doubtful about the power of God to act, and even about God's real intentions. In prophesying such a call for renewed confidence in divine control over

22. In Greek papyrus 967 and in one other late textual witness, the text order places all of chapter 37 after the Gog oracles of chapters 38–39. It thus becomes directly linked to the restoration of the temple and land in 40–48. If one assumes this is the more original ordering of the text, one must explain also why this particular papyrus (the oldest we now have) lacks all of 36:23c–38. It is thus missing the important lead-in to the vision of the dry bones provided by the passage on the new heart and the new spirit. At this stage, I am not prepared to accept this as a better arrangement. However, if one did then propose that the new spirit passage of 36:23c–38 were an expansion built on chapters 11, 16 and Jer 31:31–34, then the present concluding summary in 39:25–9 which also mentions the outpouring of the divine spirit would serve the same purpose as an introduction to the vision of the bones in chapter 37:1–14 which would now follow it.

world events and the promise of divine action on their behalf, there is still needed a vast vision of the coming order that will correspond to the great proclamation of divine help and faithfulness to the covenant relationship known in the past. To achieve this, the prophetic text turns in chapters 38–39 and 40–48 to one of the oldest and most powerful of the religious traditions of Israel: the mythological pattern of God as a divine warrior.

(a) *Chapters 38–39*

It is not necessary to comment on why the majority of commentators have seen these two chapters as additions to the text of Ezekiel. They are adequately rehearsed in Zimmerli.²³ Our question is rather, “What function do they now play in the whole schema of the book?” The answer can be generally given that they describe a radical final contest between God and the forces of opposition that would challenge divine control over the earth and in particular over the land of Israel. It is in turn a preparation and purification of the land for a return of the divine holiness to dwell permanently in the temple.

There are a number of resemblances or echoes in these two chapters to earlier traditions. These include allusions to Jeremiah 4–6 about the “Foe from the North,” to Isaiah 10:23–27 and 14:24–27 on the destruction of God’s enemies in the land of Israel, and to the royal Zion Psalms 46, 48 and 76 which depict the divine defeat of those who attack Mount Zion. Thus I understand the identity of Gog to be a mythological foe, derived from Gen 10:2–3 as the (archetypal) “Foe from the North.”²⁴ The purpose of this extended Gog unit is to employ the mythopoetic pattern to show how God will destroy the hubris of a world power.²⁵ It is fitted into a divine warrior scheme that contains three stages: (1) the divine theophany; (2) the battle against the forces of chaos; (3) the establishment of the divine palace.²⁶ God’s appearance in chapters 1, 8–11 initiate the theophany; 38–39 represent the climactic battle of the

23. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 281–324.

24. See my observations on the mythological nature of Ezekiel’s texts in “Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel’s Oracles of Judgment,” pp. 190–200.

25. The same mythological theme is found in Ezek 28:11–19 on the king of Tyre and his hubris, and in Ezek 31:1–10 and 32:17–32 on Egypt’s pharaoh as a mighty cedar and as descending into Sheol as punishment for his hubris. The same pattern also occurs in Isaiah 14:1–23 on the king of Babylon and his hubris.

26. See M. Nobile, “Beziehung zwischen Ez 32,17–32 und der Perikope im Lichte der Endredaktion,” 255–56.

god against chaos;²⁷ and 40–48 describes the building of the temple (palace).

If we look again at the theme of the mountains of Israel that recurs throughout Ezekiel, a similar staged progression has developed: in chapter 6, the mountain heights are condemned for the idolatry and evil that defiles the land; in 17:22–24 and 20–40, there is a proleptic promise of God's return to the holy mountain; in chapters 28 and 31, the hubris of Tyre and Egypt is condemned from mountain height down to Sheol; in chapters 35–36, as explained above, the mountains are prepared for restoration; in 38–39, the battle makes it definite, and in 40:1–3, the possession of the mountain height by God is made official. This sequencing would be incomplete if either 38–39 or 40–48 were omitted.

R. Ahroni has argued that chapters 38–39 must be secondary to the book because they are so unrealistic.²⁸ This objection has much less force when the language of mythology is not just present, but is a necessary element! I have argued in previous work that mythopoetic allusions and patterns are essential to Ezekiel's thinking. He asserts a "Yahweh myth" if you will as normative over against the standard Ancient Near Eastern cosmic battle myths of Baal, Marduk and other storm deities who represent divine kingship over the earth. If he has employed this language in both the Oracles of Judgment in chapters 1–24,²⁹ and in the Oracles against Nations in 25–32,³⁰ there is no reason for any less mythopoetic language at his climactic point.

(b) *Chapters 40–48*

While these chapters have received the least acceptance by scholars in the past as original to the prophet, there has been a definite movement toward acceptance of their unity (and possibly even original authenticity) in recent articles.³¹ One notable effort to understand the overall plan in 40–48 has been sketched by Susan Niditch.³² Building on echoes of the Genesis creation accounts present throughout these chapters, she sees a

27. See for further development, Susan Niditch, "Ezekiel 40–48 in a Visionary Context," *CBQ* 48 (1986) 208–22.

28. See R. Ahroni, "The Gog Prophecy and the Book of Ezekiel," *Hebrew Annual Review* 1 (1977) 1–27.

29. C. F. Boadt, "Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment," 199–200.

30. Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles Against Egypt*, 99–106, 169–77 and *passim*.

31. Thus, Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," *Interpretation* 38 (1984) 181–208; Jon Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 10; Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1976).

32. Niditch, "Ezekiel 40–48 in a Visionary Context."

deliberate attempt to use the creation myth patterns for talking about setting boundaries to the worlds of the profane and the sacred. It employs the same divine warrior myth pattern that has been suggested by Nobile for 38 to 48. While Niditch discusses only 40–48, I would extend her analysis to 38–39, which will only strengthen her insight because it will bring into prominence the actual challenge to divine control and the battle, which are only presupposed in 40–48.

Also the combination of 38–39 with 40–48 needs to be looked at very carefully with an eye to Psalm 46 and its royal Zion pattern. This psalm links several key thematic blocs found also in Ezekiel 38 to 48. The psalm has four movements: (1) God helps when Israel is in trouble (v. 2); (2) Israel will not fear the cosmic upheaval for God is with them (vv. 3–4); (3) a river runs through the dwelling place of God to give it peace (vv. 5–7); and (4) God shows his power by destroying Israel's enemies and ending war (vv. 9–10). Each division ends with a refrain, "The Lord of Hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob." This phrase, so prominent in the Psalm, seems to echo the closing line of the Book of Ezekiel, and its climax: "The name of the city shall be from now on, 'The Lord is There!'" It seems more than likely that the Zion ideology of Psalm 46 has at least partially inspired the vision of Ezekiel 40–48.

A Final Note on the Relation of Chapters 33–37 and 40–48 to Chapter 20

Brevard Childs has suggested that chapter 20 is important for understanding chapters 40–48.³³ As outlined above, it is even more important for understanding chapters 33–37. Rolf Rendtorff connects chapter 20 to chapter 36 as threat and fulfillment of the threat. In 20:8, 13, 21, God is quoted, "I thought to pour out (*ʿōmar lišpōk*) my wrath," while in 36:18 it is stated, "I did pour out my wrath" (*wāʿešpōk*). In 20:9, 14, 22 God is about to execute judgment for the sake of the divine name which Israel has defiled; but in 36:20, God has completed his judgment for "his name's sake." Rendtorff concludes that 36:16–28 (plus vv. 29–32) is part of the completion of the program laid out in chapter 20, and not an independent addition to the book.³⁴

Dieter Baltzer suggests that Ezekiel 20 represents a counter-theology to the prevailing David-Zion theology of the Jerusalem establishment.³⁵

33. Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 165.

34. Rolf Rendtorff, "Ez und 36, 16ff im Rahmen der Komposition des Buches Ezechiel," *BETL LXXIV* (Leuven: University Press, 1986) 260–65.

35. D. Baltzer, "Literarkritische und literarhistorische Anmerkungen zur Heilsprophetie im Ezechiel-Buch," *BETL LXXIV* (Leuven: University Press, 1986) 166–81.

Ezekiel rejects the name “Zion” for God’s holy mountain. This is reflected preliminarily in 17:22–24, and carried out completely in 40:2, 43:12 which are silent on Zion. Further, the prophet seems reluctant to speak of any major role for a king, eschewing the title *melek* in favor of a mere *nāšî*, “leader” or “prince,” in 34:23–24, 37:24–25, 43:6–12. By doing this, Ezekiel modifies the existing royal theology of the Davidic covenant as known in pre-exilic Judah in favor of a fuller integration of the northern tradition of the Mosaic covenant, reflected already in Hosea, Jeremiah and to some extent in Deuteronomy. Baltzer sees this theology of chapter 20 rooted in the same thinking as is found in Leviticus 26, which caps the Holiness Code. There are striking similarities between Ezekiel 20 as a program and Leviticus 26. It is not clear whether the book of Ezekiel borrowed the priestly program of Leviticus, or whether Leviticus 26 is based on Ezekiel.

What stands out strongly, however, is a common pattern in six steps in Leviticus 26 that is also reflected in Ezekiel 20, and in turn has been worked out in detail in Ezekiel 33–37: (1) strict command to avoid all idolatry; (2) promise of blessing on the land if Israel obeys; (3) threat of punishment if they do not obey; (4) resulting exile that shall lead to humbling of their pride and recognition of their guilt; (5) restoration of the covenant and the land; (6) a concluding reason: “So that I the Lord might be their God.” While this pattern reappears in Ezekiel 20 strongly, in 33–37 it is more diffusely directed towards the historical situation of Israel itself after 587.

More work will need to be done on the possible links between Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 20. Zimmerli has already investigated the connections between the Holiness Code and Ezekiel as a whole, and the results are impressive.³⁶ But there is a special programmatic quality to both Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 20 which needs to be drawn out in more detail. Certainly the vision reflected in Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 20 controls the development of chapters 33 to 37, and probably of all of 33 to 48 in Ezekiel.

Conclusion

There seems to be no good reason to doubt that many of Ezekiel’s oracles are controlled by the needs of the moment. He responded with a divine word to a particular problem on a particular occasion. But as it stands now, the Book of Ezekiel does not represent a loosely connected

36. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 46–52.

series of words spoken by the prophet plus extensive later adaptations to an entirely new priestly program. This is the dead end to which an overreliance on form critical methods has led. Zimmerli's commentary, for example, is magisterial but still inadequate in this regard. The unique style and use of structuring devices (especially the recognition formula) so permeate the book from chapters 1 to 37 that it cries out for the commentator to discern an overarching theological conception behind it. Thematic patterns such as use of the mountains of Israel as a primary symbol for God's rule over the land, and the introduction of divine warrior myth patterns, as well as the learned and priestly program of purification proposed in 33 to 37, all play significant roles in the transfer from divine judgment in chapters 1–24 to a schema of hope and restoration with reform in chapters 33 to 48.

Chapters 33 to 37 show many connective links to each other and to the larger schematic program put forth in chapter 20. This in turn connects to a wider priestly reformation program tied into the Holiness Code and especially Leviticus 26. Further links are still to be drawn, but the end result is coming into view: there is a close unity among the three parts of the Book of Ezekiel, 1–24, 25–32, and 33–48. There is also a real possibility that this unitive vision was very close to the thinking of the prophet himself.