

# Preaching Ezekiel<sup>1</sup>

## THE PROBLEM WITH PREACHING EZEKIEL

MY ASSIGNMENT IN THIS chapter is both enviable and unenviable. It is enviable because when we preach from Ezekiel we preach from one of the most fascinating books in the entire canon. It is unenviable because textbooks on preaching from the Old Testament—whether by homileticians or OT scholars—offer no help in preaching Ezekiel. They abound with references to Genesis, Joshua, the Psalms, Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, but they rarely mention Ezekiel. Could it be that Christians have heeded the counsel of Jewish rabbis who forbade Jews under thirty from reading the beginning and ending of the book? If so, we have extended the prohibition to the whole book, perhaps assuming that there would always be people under thirty in our congregations.

It has not always been this way. Origen (CE 185–254) composed at least fourteen homilies on Ezekiel, which were translated into Latin by Jerome. Gregory the Great (CE 540–604) preached twenty-two homilies on Ezekiel 1–3 and 40 between 595 and 594, expressing delight in clarifying obscure texts. By his time the interpretation of the four living creatures

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in the opening vision as the four evangelists was well established, but he proposed that the four creatures represent all preachers of the word. From the medieval period, Andrew of St. Victor's overriding concern in reading Ezekiel's vision was not only to recapture the picture so he could draw it like he drew the temple, but also to know what it meant for the people for whom Ezekiel recorded it. Of the Reformers, Calvin's expositions of Ezekiel are significant because they represent his last written work. Racked by pain, his emaciated body gave out at the end of chapter 20. Nevertheless, his commentary reflects the vigor of his mind and his high view of all Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Modern American evangelical interest in the book tends to revolve around Ezekiel's eschatological vision, particularly the participation of Gog and Magog in the final battles, and the role of the temple and its cult in the millennium. In my native dispensationalist world, Ezekiel was mentioned exclusively in the contexts of prophecy ("end time") conferences, which now seem to have been quite oblivious to the exilic prophet's lofty theology or the practical nature of his message.

So the daunting task before us is to rehabilitate this prophet and to rediscover the vitality of the book that bears his name. This challenge is much greater today than it was, say, forty years ago. Because of (rightful) increasing sensitivity to issues of gender in recent decades, many are repulsed by the image of God presented in the book, especially in chapters 16 and 23.<sup>3</sup> If in the past Christians *would not* read or preach the book of Ezekiel because they were perplexed by the prophet's visions or the forms of his oracles, today some *cannot* preach it because the book and the God portrayed in it seem irredeemably problematic. According to some interpreters he is devoid of any grace at all. How can pastors today declare its message with authority, vitality, and clarity? I propose to answer the question with a series of propositions that together might yield a strategy for thinking about preaching Ezekiel.

#### FOUR PROPOSITIONS FOR PREACHING FROM EZEKIEL

*Proposition 1: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to understand the prophet—his character (ethos), passion (pathos), and argumentation (logos).*

All we know about Ezekiel we learn from the book that bears his name. Ezekiel's own name ("May God strengthen/toughen") may express the

2. Calvin, *Commentaries on Ezekiel*, 2 vols.

3. For further detail see the essay below, "The God Ezekiel Wants Us to Meet."

optimism of his parents at the time he was born, although it also provides a commentary on his life. The third-person commentary on the superscription (1:3) identifies Ezekiel as the son of Buzi. He was called into priestly ministry in his thirtieth year, on 31 July 593 BCE, which means his birth in 623 BCE coincided with the mid-point of Josiah's reign (640–609 BC), shortly before the rediscovery of the Torah in the temple (2 Kgs 22:3). Despite Josiah's efforts at reform, his untimely death in 609 BCE dashed the prospects for a comprehensive political and spiritual renaissance to the ground. Within the next eleven years three kings would succeed him. Everyone would be judged by the Deuteronomist as “doing evil in the sight of YHWH,” for revitalizing the old apostate ways of Manasseh. In the meantime, the land of Judah, which had been a vassal of Egypt, fell under the control of Nebuchadnezzar. Fed up with Jehoiachin's treasonous behavior, finally, in 597 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar's armies marched into Jerusalem and seized direct control. Nebuchadnezzar deported the royal family and thousands of the nation's foremost citizens (2 Kgs 24:15–16)—including Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's professional office is specified in 1:3. Although some interpret “the priest” as a reference to Buzi, the epithet actually applies to Ezekiel himself. This is critical for understanding the prophet's role. It is true that chapters 1–3 describe Ezekiel's call to prophetic ministry, and he obviously functioned as a prophet. However, the timing of the opening vision and call in his thirtieth year (1:1), when priests were inducted into office (Num 4:50), and the pervasively priestly stamp in the book, suggests that we should view Ezekiel as a prophetic priest, rather than as a priestly prophet.<sup>4</sup> This book portrays Ezekiel serving the exiles, who had no access to temple and altar service, as pastor and prophetic priest. Although he appears to have resisted the call at first,<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel served YHWH and his people faithfully for more than two decades (cf. 29:17).

Apart from his professional role, we know Ezekiel for his eccentric behavior. While prophets were known often to act and speak erratically for rhetorical purposes, in Ezekiel we find a unique concentration of bizarre features: muteness, lying bound and naked, digging holes in the walls of houses, emotional paralysis in the face of his wife's death, images of strange creatures, hearing voices and the sounds of water, his withdrawal

4. Ezekiel's priestly background is reflected in his thorough familiarity with the temple layout, his access to the temple (chs. 8–11; 40–46), his understanding of orthodox and pagan cult forms, his mastery of the spiritual heritage of Israel, specifically levitical/priestly issues, and his concern for a rebuilt temple.

5. See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 11–12.

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symptoms, fascination with feces (4:12–15)<sup>6</sup> and blood,<sup>7</sup> pornographic imagery, an imaginative understanding of Israel's past, etc. Some attribute these features to a pathology arising from early abuse and an Oedipus complex, but this misconstrues the profundity of his message and the sensitivity of his personality. His prophetic experiences, symbolic actions, and oracular pronouncements derived from encounters with God that affected his entire being. What other prophets spoke of, Ezekiel suffered. As one totally possessed by the spirit of YHWH, called, equipped, and gripped by the hand of God, Ezekiel was a מִּזְבֵּחַ, “a sign, a portent” (12:6, 11; 24:24, 27), carrying in his body the oracles he proclaimed and redefining the adage, “The medium was the message.” To preach Ezekiel faithfully, we will need to understand the man.

*Proposition 2: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to understand his audience.*

The purpose of prophetic preaching is to transform the audience's thinking about historical and theological realities, particularly their own spiritual condition, and to bring about change in disposition and action. In Ezekiel's case we identify two audiences: the hypothetical audience and the real rhetorical audience. Many of Ezekiel's oracles are formally addressed to outsiders, hypothetical target audiences often introduced with the hostile orientation formula, “set your face toward,” and a stronger variant, “fix your face toward” (4:3). These idioms reflect the common gesture of turning towards the person one is addressing. Although the oracles following the formula tend to be cast in the second person of direct address, it is unlikely that the purported addressee ever heard or read the pronouncements.<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel's (and God's) real audience is his fellow exiles; it is *their* minds and actions he seeks to change. But we never see him preaching in public or to the exiles as a whole. For the first eight years of his ministry he is locked up in his house (3:22–27), which means that if people want to hear him they must come to him. And they do. On three occasions we read of the people's representatives, the elders, sitting before him waiting for a word from YHWH (8:1; 14:1; 20:1–3), although 33:30–33 suggests that ordinary people would come to his house for entertainment as well.

6. Also his reference to idols as גְּלוּלִים, “dung pellets.”

7. The word דָּם, “blood, bloodshed,” occurs fifty-five times.

8. See especially the oracles against foreign nations (25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 38:2) and insentient entities (6:2; 21:1–4[20:45–48]; 35:2).

The book paints a picture of a hardened audience, characterized as “a rebellious house” (2:5–8; 3:9, 26–27; 12:2–4, 9, 25; 24:3) with obstinate face (2:4), stubborn heart/mind (2:4), stubborn of forehead (3:7, 8), obstinate of heart/mind (3:7), and resistant to messages from God (3:5–11). Indeed, YHWH tells Ezekiel that if he intended him to see fruit for his labors, he would send him to a foreign nation where people would listen to him. The book offers no hint of any softening during Ezekiel’s life, nor any indication that the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s announcements of judgment on Jerusalem (33:21–22) had any effect on the audience. Their hardness plays a significant role in determining the content and shape of his proclamation.

The people’s rebellious actions, particularly idolatry (14:1–11), provide the most obvious sign of their hardened condition. But their disposition towards YHWH was actually ambivalent. On the one hand, they were embittered and cynical towards him for having betrayed them and letting Nebuchadnezzar’s armies enter Jerusalem and drag them off into exile. On the other hand, they continued to bank on YHWH’s covenant commitments to them. Until the news came that Jerusalem had fallen, they staked their security on YHWH’s eternal covenant promises—his grant of the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants as an eternal possession; his irrevocable covenant with Israel at Sinai; his promise to David and his descendants of eternal title to the throne of Israel; and his election of Jerusalem/Zion as his eternal residence. But their sense of security in YHWH was delusional: they forgot that enjoyment of covenant blessings is contingent upon grateful and wholehearted obedience to the covenant Lord. Until 586 BCE, Ezekiel’s rhetorical aim was to destroy this false sense of security by demolishing the pillars on which it was based. However, once the city had fallen his goal was to rebuild the structure, for these were in fact eternal promises.

*Proposition 3: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to understand the nature and structure of the book.*

The book displays several features that set it apart from other prophetic books. First, if we can get past the first chapter, we discover this book to be the most intentionally structured of prophetic books. It consists of forty-eight chapters, divided evenly into two major sections, oracles of woe for Judah and Jerusalem (chs. 1–24) and oracles of weal for Judah and Jerusalem (chs. 25–48; see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The Structure of the Book of Ezekiel

Messages of Judgment Against Israel			Messages of Hope For Israel		
The Call 1-3	Signs and Visions 4-11	Oracles of Judgment 12-24	Oracles against the Nations 25-32	The Restoration of Israel 33-39	The Reconstitution of Israel 40-48

Within these sections there is further evidence of deliberate planning. The form and structure of the collection of oracles against foreign nations are obviously governed by the number seven. Seven nations/states are addressed: Ammon (25:1-7), Moab (25:8-11), Edom (25:12-14), Philistia (25:15-17), Tyre (26:1-28:19), Sidon (28:20-23), and Egypt (29:1-32:32). Seven mini-oracles are incorporated into the first half,<sup>9</sup> and seven oracles against Egypt are preserved in 29:1-32:32, signaled by the sevenfold occurrence of the word event formula (29:1, 17; 30:1, 20; 31:1; 32:1, 17). And seven date notices break up the oracles (26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17). But there is more. On the basis of the Hebrew verse division, these indirect oracles of hope divide into two virtually equal parts: oracles of judgment against the six (25:1; 28:23) and oracles of judgment against Egypt (29:1-32:32), both made up of ninety-seven verses. But the significance of these oracles against the nations is highlighted by 28:24-26, placed at the precise mid-point and functioning as a fulcrum on which the surrounding oracles balance (see Fig. 2).

Moshe Greenberg noticed some time ago that individual oracles are often deliberately “halved.” This feature is most striking in the oracle against Gog, which consists of two panels consisting of 38:1-23 (365 words) and 39:1-29 (357 words). Although the word event formula in 38:1 serves as a general heading for both chapters, the intentionality of this division is confirmed by a remarkable correspondence between the respective introductions to each part (38:2-4a; 39:1-2a) (see Fig. 3). These

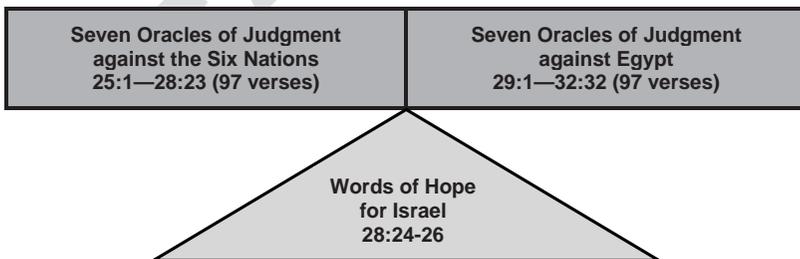
9. Egypt is dropped, but compensated for by doubling the oracle(s) against Ammon (25:1-5 and 6-7).

structural features suggest the book is the product of deliberate design, reflecting a concern for precision that many believe characterized priestly scribes.

Figure 2: The Structure of Ezekiel’s Oracles against the Nations

7 Mini Oracles							7 Oracles against Egypt						
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A. Ammon A 25:1–2							A. 29:1–16						
B. Ammon B 25:6–7							B. 29:17–21						
C. Moab 25:8–11							C. 30:1–19						
D. Edom 25:12–14							D. 30:20–26						
E. Philistia 25:15–17							E. 31:1–18						
F. Tyre 26:1–28:19							F. 32:1–16						
G. Sidon 28:20–23							G. 32:17–32						

Figure 3: The Place of 28:24–26 in Ezekiel’s Oracles against the Nations



The second distinctive feature of the book—for which preachers should be grateful—is its clear demarcation of literary units. These are usually signaled by the word event formula, “The word of YHWH happened to me, saying, . . .” variations of which occur fifty times in the book. This formula perceives the divine word as an almost objective, concrete reality that emanates from YHWH and confronts the prophet. The boundaries between oracles are seldom blurred.

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Figure 4: Ezekiel's Dated Oracles in Historical Context

Year BCE	Biblical Text	Historical Event	Ezekiel's Experience	Cited Date# Yr/mo/day	Modern Equivalent
640	2 Kings 22:1	Accession of Josiah			
627	Ezekiel 1:1		Birth of Ezekiel (623?)		
626		Nabopolassar wins Babylon			
614		Ashur falls to the Medes			
612		Nineveh falls			
609	2 Kings 23:29-30	Death of Josiah at Megiddo; Accession of Jehoahaz			
609/8		Accession of Jehoiakim			
605		Battle of Carchemish; Accession of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon			
604	Daniel 1:1	Daniel and friends are taken to Babylon			
597	2 Kings 24:10-17	Accession of Jehoiachin; Exile of Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, and nobility Accession of Zedekiah			
593	1:1—3:21  3:22-27	Anti-Babylonian vassals meet in Jerusalem (Jer 27:1-3) Hananiah's prophecies imminent return of exiles (Jer 28:1-4); Zedekiah visits Babylon (Jer 51:59)	Ezekiel is called to prophetic ministry  Ezekiel is inducted into the prophetic ministry; Ezekiel's mouth is closed	5.4.5  One week later	July 31  August 7
592	8:1	Unknown	First temple vision	6.6.5	September 18

Year BCE	Biblical Text	Historical Event	Ezekiel's Experience	Cited Date# Yr/mo/day	Modern Equivalent
591	20:1	End of Hananiah's two-year prophecy (Jer 28:1-4)	Elders visit Ezekiel oracle of Israel's abominations	7.5.10	August 14
587	24:1	Siege of Jerusalem begins	Ezekiel records the day	9[10].10.10	January 5
	29:1	Pharaoh Hophra attempts to relieve the pressure on Jerusalem	Ezekiel's wife dies (?) Oracle of Egypt's Doom	10.10.12	January 7
586	30:20	See previous note.	Oracle of Egypt's doom	11.1.7	April 29
	31:1	See previous note.	Oracle of Egypt's doom	11.3.1	June 21
585	33:21	Fugitive announces to Ezekiel, "The city has fallen!" Ezekiel's mouth is opened	Oracle of Tyre's doom	12.10.5	January 8
	26:1	Nebuchadnezzar begins thirteen year siege of Tyre	Oracle of Egypt's doom	12.11.1*	February 3
			Oracle of Egypt's doom	12.12.1	March 3
	32:1 32:17	Unknown Unknown	Oracle of Egypt's doom	12.12.15	March 18
573	40:1	Babylonian New Years Festival	The second temple vision	25.1.10	April 28
571	29:17	Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Tyre ends	Oracle of Egypt's doom	27.1.1	April 26
562		Death of Nebuchadnezzar			
539	Ezra 1:1-4	Cyrus issues decree authorizing the exiles to return to Jerusalem			

# Based on Jehoiachin's Exile.

A third distinctive feature of the book is the care with which many of the oracles are dated.<sup>10</sup> Apart from 1:1, which is enigmatic and general, and 3:16, which is linked to 1:2-3, fourteen oracles are introduced by date notices that tend to be variations of the stereotypical pattern found in 8:1, "It happened in the sixth year in the sixth [month] on the [day] of the

10. Ezekiel's precision is observable elsewhere only in Zechariah (1:7; 7:1; cf. 1:1) and Haggai (1:1, 15a, 15b; 2:10, 20), undoubtedly under his influence.

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month” (1:2–3; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 29:17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1; 32:17; 33:21; 40:1). Although a special clustering is evident in the collection of oracles against Egypt (29:1—32:32), these date notices are distributed throughout the book, providing a clear chronological and historical framework for Ezekiel’s ministry (see Fig. 4).

This interest in chronological precision seems to reflect his awareness of the significance of the events of which he is a part. Israel’s history as the nation has known it has come to an end; God must start over again.<sup>11</sup> But the date notices also have an authenticating function. As he edits his oracles, Ezekiel marks the evidence, documenting the fact that YHWH had given his word long in advance of the events, and even though no one had paid attention, his word had been fulfilled (12:25, 28; 17:24; 22:14; 36:36; 37:14). These notes invite readers of every age to acknowledge the veracity and power of the divine word, and to recognize in Ezekiel a true prophet of YHWH (2:5; 12:26–28; 33:33).

Fourth, unlike any other prophetic books, the consistently autobiographical first-person cast of Ezekiel’s oracles creates the impression of private memoirs, perhaps his *memorable*. The I-form is abandoned in favor of the third person only in 1:2–3.<sup>12</sup> Although the oracles are presented in autobiographical narrative style, rarely does the prophet actually admit the reader into his mind. He records his reaction only six times, venting revulsion at what he sees or acknowledging the incomprehensibility of YHWH’s actions (4:14; 9:8; 11:13; 21:5[20:49]; 24:20; 37:3). In spite of the autobiographic form, one wonders if the real Ezekiel is ever exposed. What we see is a man totally under the control of the spirit of YHWH; only what God says and does matters.

*Proposition 4: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to understand the message that Ezekiel proclaims.*

Ezekiel’s proclamations represent direct responses to the people’s theological delusions. Economically and socially, the Judean exiles flourished in Babylon. Probably thanks to the intervention of Daniel, they were settled as a community in favorable circumstances at Tel Abib near the river Kebar (Ezek 1:1; 3:15), where they were able to maintain their own ethnic

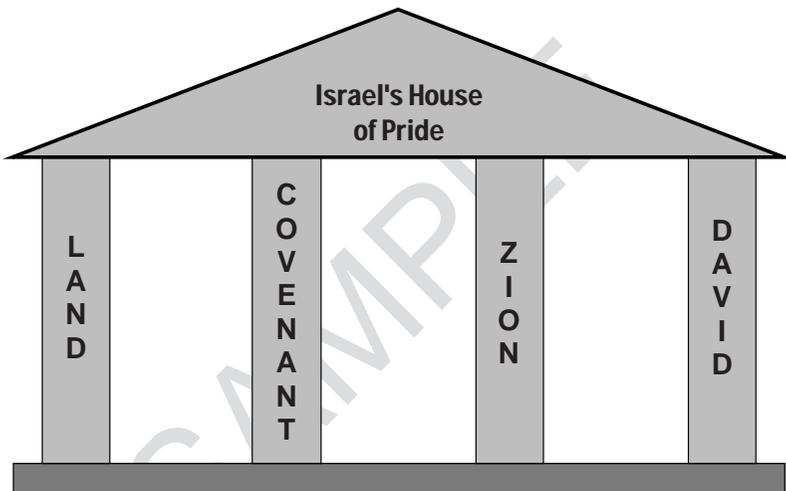
11. The only date notice in the salvation oracles (40:1) designates the new beginning as ראש השנה (rōš haššānā), “the head of the year.” Cf. Exod 12:1.

12. Other prophets rarely use the first person autobiographical form. But see Amos 7:1–8; 8:1–12; 9:1–4; Hos 3; Isa 6; Jeremiah (1:4, 11, 13; 2:1; etc.) and Zechariah (4:8; 6:9) use the word event formula in the first person.

identity and social cohesion. Although the exiles from Judah were humiliated by their deportation, in exile they flourished, so that when Cyrus issued his decree in 539 BCE permitting the Judeans to return to Jerusalem, many apparently preferred not to go.<sup>13</sup>

The crises to which Ezekiel responded were not social or economic, but theological. The first half of the book consists of oracles of judgment deliberately aimed at demolishing the pillars on which the exiles' security rested. The theological system may be represented graphically as in Figure 5.

Figure 5: A House of Pride: The Foundations of Israel's Security



Most of the pronouncements address one or more of the four pillars on which their security rested. However, once the city had fallen, Ezekiel's tactic changed. Thereafter he systematically reconstructed the covenantal pillars, demonstrating that YHWH's promises were indeed eternal. The judgment could not be the last word. On the relationship between specific oracles and the promises, see Figure 6.

13. Ezra 2 tallies more than 42,000 returners, but the majority must have remained behind.

Figure 6: The Relationship between Ezekiel’s Judgment and Salvation Oracles

The Pillar of Orthodox Theology	The Demolition Pronouncements	The Reconstruction Pronouncements
YHWH, the divine patron of Israel, has entered into an eternal covenant with his people.	3:16–21; 5:4, 16–17; 6:11–14; 14:1–23; 15:1–8; 16:1–60; 18:1–32; 20:1– 44; 23:1–49; 33:1–20; 33:23–29	34:1–31; 36:16–32, 37– 38; 37:1–14; 37:15–21; 37:25–28; 39:21–29
YHWH, the divine patron of Israel, has given the nation the land of Canaan as their eternal territorial possession.	4:1–3; 4:9–17; 5:5–15; 6:1–7, 11–14; 7:1–27; 11:1–21; 12:17–20; 14:12–23; 15:1–8; 16:1–63; 21:6–22[1–17]; 21:23–32[18–27]; 22:1– 31; 23:1–49; 24:1–15	34:25–29; 35:1–36:16; 36:33–36; 38:1–39:20; 47:1–48:7, 23–29
YHWH, the divine patron of Israel, has chosen Jerusalem as his eternal residence, from which he exercises sovereignty over his people.	7:20–24; 8:1–10:22; 11:22–25; 24:16–27	37:26–27; 40:1–46:24; 48:8–22, 30–35
YHWH, the divine patron of Israel, has promised the Davidic house eternal title to and occupancy of the throne of Israel.	12:1–16; 17:1–24; 19:1– 14; 21:30–32[25–27]	34:23–24; 37:22–25

While Ezekiel’s preaching was firmly grounded in the Scriptures and the traditions of Israel, the goal of his preaching was to change the people’s thinking about YHWH and their disposition towards themselves. The universalism of Isaiah stands in sharpest contrast to the parochialism of Ezekiel. From beginning to end, the God who confronts the reader in this book is the God of Israel, not only passionate about his relationship with his people, but willing to stake his reputation on their fate or fortune. He does indeed sit on his throne in the heavens as cosmic king, and his rule extends to the furthest corners of the earth (1:1–28), but his chosen residence is in Jerusalem,<sup>14</sup> in the land of Canaan/Israel (chs. 40–48),

14. Compare the departure of YHWH from the temple in Jerusalem as described in chapters 8–11 with his return to the temple in chapters 40–43.

among his own people (48:35). Even in the exercise of his sovereignty over the nations, his agenda is focused on Israel. To Ezekiel, Nebuchadnezzar's place in history is determined by his role as wielder of the divine sword directed at Judah and Jerusalem (21:5–37[1–32]), and as protector of the remnant, so that when the holocaust is over a population (11:14–21) and a scion of David (17:3–4, 22–24) will have survived. While the oracles against the nations (chs. 25–32) reflect YHWH's universal sovereignty, the rise and fall of foreign powers have historical significance primarily as these events affect the fate of YHWH's people (28:24–26). Gog and his hordes, the archetypical enemies of Israel gathered from the four corners of the earth (chs. 38–39), are puppets brought in by YHWH himself to prove his enduring commitment to his people. By eliminating them he magnifies himself (38:23), makes himself known (38:23) and sets his glory (39:21) among the nations. He is indeed concerned that the whole world recognizes his person and his presence in their affairs, but his agenda is always focused on Israel. Ezekiel's vision of restored Israel has room for non-Israelites, but only as they are integrated into Israelite society and culture (47:21–23).

Space constraints preclude discussion of other theological themes,<sup>15</sup> but we may summarize some of these. First, although Ezekiel avoids the expression “Holy One of Israel,” the opening vision and the visions of the temple (chs. 8–11, 40–46) declare his transcendent holiness and cosmic sovereignty. Second, YHWH is the gracious covenant-making and covenant-keeping God of Israel (cf. ch. 16). Indeed, both judgment and restoration oracles are based on past covenantal warnings (Lev 26; Deut 28) and commitments. Third, more than any other prophet, Ezekiel is a prophet of the Spirit. But he not only spoke of the power of the Spirit, he also embodied the Spirit's power in his own person. Finally, despite the morbid tone of much of Ezekiel's preaching, God is on the side of life, not death. Not only does Ezekiel have a remarkably extensive vocabulary of death, the God who speaks through him has at his disposal a wide range of death-dealing agents—famine, wild animals, pestilence, bloodshed, sword, fire—but through his breath/Spirit he brings to life those who have languished under the curse (37:1–14).

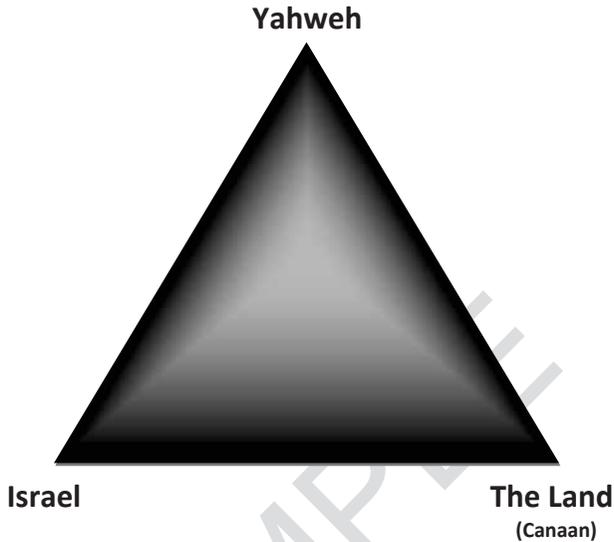
If Ezekiel's God is glorious in his transcendence and immanence, his vision of his own people is realistic and sober. His people prided themselves on descent from Abraham and banked on the permanence of the

15. For fuller discussion, see Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 46–60; “Ezekiel: Theology of,” 615–28, reprinted below as “The Theology of Ezekiel.”

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triangular covenantal relationships involving YHWH, his people, and his land (see Fig. 7).

Figure 7: The Israelite Covenantal Triangle



But Ezekiel paints a picture of persistent rebellion, from the beginning of the nation's history to the present. In his revisionist histories (chs. 16, 20, 23) he recalls the abominations of the past. But his view of the people's present is no better. Although his countrymen complain about being punished for sins committed by their predecessors, Ezekiel responds that every generation stands before the divine Judge on its own merits/demerits; no innocent person is punished for the sins of the fathers (18:1–32). But however wicked God's people have been, and however horrendous the judgment—based upon the covenant curses (Lev 26:14–39 and Deut 4:25–28; 28:15–68; 29:14–29)—also certain is Ezekiel's vision of restoration based on the covenant promises (Lev 26:40–46; Deut 4:30–31; 30:1–10). Indeed, Ezekiel envisions a future when the covenantal triangle that is demolished by the judgment will be completely restored, and the pillars of Israel's security will be restored. YHWH himself will guarantee the nation's peace and security, with the agency of the David shepherd he installs over his people (34:23–24; 37:24–28). But the restoration presupposes a fundamental transformation of the people themselves, as YHWH removes their heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh, responsive to his will and resulting in unreserved obedience (36:22–32).

*Proposition 5: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to understand Ezekiel's rhetorical and homiletical strategy.*

Rhetoric involves communicative strategies employed to break down resistance to the message in the audience and to render the message more persuasive. According to classical definitions, rhetoric involved five elements,<sup>16</sup> each of which is relevant for understanding Ezekiel.

1. Invention—the discovery of relevant materials. Ezekiel received his speeches directly from God by divine inspiration, although consistently in response to the circumstances facing the prophet. I noted earlier that Ezekiel's preaching was firmly grounded in the Scriptures and the traditions of Israel. This is most evident in the links between his pronouncements of judgment and the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 (and to a lesser extent Deuteronomy 28), and his vision of Israel's restoration in 34:25–30 and the covenant blessings in Leviticus 26:4–13. But sometimes Ezekiel's pronouncements go against the grain of Israel's tradition, as in his identification of Jerusalem's/ Israel's ancestry in the Amorites and Hittites of Canaan (16:3) rather than Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, his characterization of YHWH's ordinances (חֻקֵי) as “not good” and his laws (מִשְׁפָּטִים) as not yielding life (20:25), and his introduction of Nebuchadnezzar as the royal figure to whom Genesis 49:10 alludes. But here and elsewhere Ezekiel functions primarily as a rhetorician rather than as a dogmatic theologian or interpreter governed by modern rules of grammatical historical exegesis.
2. Arrangement—the organization of the material into sound structural form. Like the proclamations of other prophets, Ezekiel's pronouncements were crafted according to well-known rhetorical conventions. Based on form-critical considerations alone, this book incorporates a great variety of rhetorical forms: vision reports, dramatic sign acts, disputation speeches, parables, and riddles, etc. This variety is evident in both the judgment oracles and the restoration pronouncements.
3. Style—the appropriate manner for the matter communicated and the occasion. Ezekiel's daring style is widely recognized. In chapter 16 alone we find shocking imagery,<sup>17</sup> rare vocabulary, obscure forms

16. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 794.

17. In chapter 16, flailing about in blood, engaging in harlotry with male images, slaughtering children as food, spreading the legs for every passer-by, pouring out “your juice,” Egypt's swollen member, a bloody victim of wrath and jealousy, hacking in pieces with swords, paying clients to receive her sexual favors.

and usages, anomalous grammatical forms. YHWH had warned the prophet at the outset that he will be dealing with a hardened audience, so he pulls no punches in trying to break down that resistance. The abhorrence with which he views the syncretistic ways of his country folk is reflected in the strong sexual and fecal language (e.g., chs. 6, 16, 23), which translators tend to soften to accommodate the sensitivities of modern bearers. In fact, no other prophet presses the margins of literary propriety as severely as Ezekiel.

4. Memory—guidance on how to remember speeches. While the forms Ezekiel used in the rhetorical situation are striking, his penchant for the number “seven” (as in the oracles against the nations, chs. 25–32) and the “halving” of texts into panels of roughly equal length will have made his utterances more memorable.
5. Delivery—the technique employed in actually making the speech. For all YHWH’s commands to speak and to act, on only four occasions does he report his rhetorical actions (11:13; 11:25; 24:18–19; 37:7, 10). Ezekiel 12:7 represents the fullest report of actual prophetic performance: “And I did as I was commanded. I brought out my baggage by day, as baggage for exile, and in the evening I dug through the wall with my own hands. I brought out my baggage at dusk, carrying it on my shoulder in their sight” (ESV). YHWH’s instructions concerning the sign act involving two sticks (37:16–23) anticipate the people asking for clarification, and then prescribe Ezekiel’s answer, but all this is contained within the speech. The text does not say he performed the act, let alone interpreted it. Ezekiel 21:5 [20:49] and 33:30–33 suggest that the audience’s response varied between annoyance with and being entertained by Ezekiel’s performances.

*Proposition 6: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity, we need to plan carefully.*

If a person devoted a sermon to each literary unit in Ezekiel, preaching through the book would take two years. While some congregations would tolerate this strategy for the Gospel of Mark or Paul’s epistle to the Romans, none would have the patience for this kind of series on Ezekiel. How then should we proceed?

First, a series on Ezekiel must recognize the pervasive ignorance of Christians with reference to the OT as a whole and this book in particular. People will not recognize the immediate relevance of such a series and

they will need a lot of practical guidance along the way. In reality, once we get beyond the first chapter, the book of Ezekiel is no more difficult than Isaiah or Jeremiah or Hosea. But with sound pedagogical wisdom we must move from the known to the unknown. Unless congregations already have great confidence in their pastors, no series on Ezekiel should last longer than twenty-five or thirty weeks. But there should be enough theological and literary variety in this book to sustain interest this long. Through our preaching we should inspire hearers to dare to read obscure texts, and provide guidance in reading those texts.

Second, the selection of texts for a sermon series on Ezekiel should be based on several complementary principles.

6. Include texts with which people are moderately familiar: the opening vision and call (1–3), the sermon on sour grapes (18), the good shepherd text (34), the heart transplant text (36:22–32), the resuscitation of the dry bones text (37:1–14).
7. Include texts from every part of the book—not simply the “good news” texts of chapters 34, 36, and 37.
8. Include texts representing a variety of literary and rhetorical forms. Having selected representative texts from a variety of forms, by explaining typical structures and vocabulary we may encourage the congregation to transfer this information to similar texts and interpret them on their own. (For a classification of texts according to form, see Fig. 8.)

Figure 8: The Message and Method of Ezekiel

(Texts may appear in more than one category)

Type of Text	Prophecy of Judgment	Prophecy of Restoration
Ezekiel: Call and Commission of the Prophetic Priest	1:1-28a; 1:28b-3:15	
Ezekiel: Watchman	3:16-21; 6:1-14; 7:1-27; 33:1-9	
Ezekiel: True Prophet	12:21-28; 13:1-23; 14:1-11; 22:23-31; 33:21-22	
Ezekiel: Message Incarnate	3:22-27; 24:15-27; 33:21-22; 33:30-33	
Ezekiel: Visionary	8:1-10:22; 11:22-25; 37:1-14	37:1-14; 40:1-48:35; 43:1-14
Ezekiel: Dramatist	4:1-5:17; 12:1-20; 21:23-32[18-27]	37:15-28
Ezekiel: Spinner of Parables, Metaphors and Riddles	17:1-24; 19:1-14; 21:1-22[20:45-21:17]; 22:17-22; 27:1-36; 29:1-21	34:1-31; 36:16-38
Ezekiel: Debater	11:1-13; 11:14-21; 12:21-25; 12:26-28; 18:1-32; 24:1-14; 31:10-20; 31:23-33	33:10-20; 33:23-29
Ezekiel: Prosecutor	14:12-15:8; 16:1-63; 20:1-44; 22:1-16; 23:1-49	
Ezekiel: Judge of the Nations	25:1-17; 26:1-21; 27:1-36; 28:1-10; 28:11-19; 28:20-23; 29:1-16; 29:17-21; 30:20-26; 31:1-18; 32:1-16; 31:1-18; 35:1-15	30:1-19; 32:17-32
Ezekiel: Messenger of Woe	13:1-16; 13:17-23; 34:1-10	
Ezekiel: Lamentor	19:1-14; 26:1-21; 27:1-36; 28:11-19; 30:1-19; 32:1-16; 32:17-32	

Type of Text	Prophecy of Judgment	Prophecy of Restoration
Ezekiel: Miscellaneous Forms	12:17–20; 25:1–7; 25:8–9; 25:12–14; 25:15–17; 28:1–10; 28:20–23; 29:20–26	36:1–15
Ezekiel: Herald of Good News	6:8–10; 11:14–21; 16:60–63; 28:24–26	34:1–31; 35:1–36:15; 36:16–38; 37:1–14
Ezekiel: Literary Cartoonist	38:1–39:29	38:1–39:29
Ezekiel: A New Moses		40:1–48:35

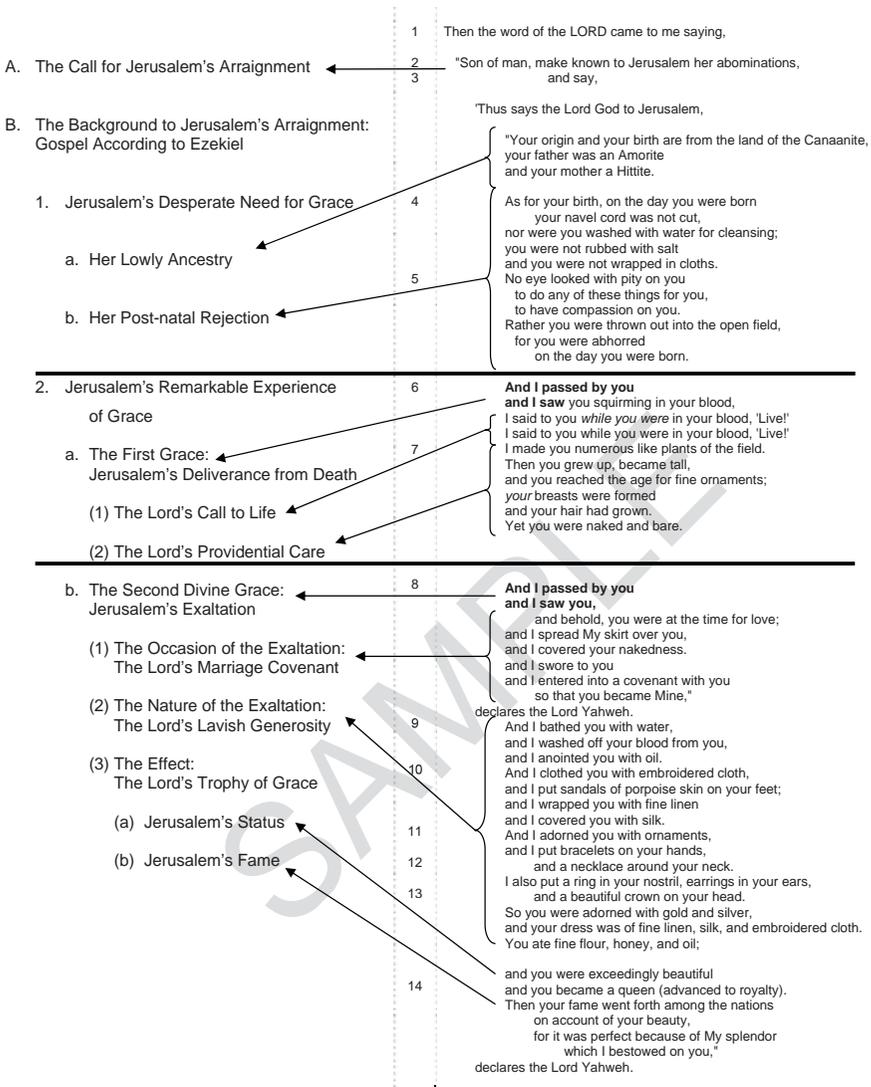
9. Include judgment and restoration texts that deal with each of the four pillars on which the Israelites based their security (see Fig. 6 above).
10. Be sure that every sermon offers grace to the congregation. Not all texts in the book include notes of grace, but they all assume Israel's past experience of grace and/or anticipate a future work of grace.

Third, prepare the people well for the series and for individual sermons. Invite them during the week to read aloud repeatedly the text to be considered the following Sunday, and introduce them to related texts. Provide helpful notes, explanations, and diagrams in church publications.

Fourth, carefully analyze the specific passage selected as the basis for the sermon. This may begin by exploring the genre of the passage and the degree to which it fits idealized genres. Often the distinctive message is discovered in recognizing the deviations from the norm. It will also be helpful to examine inductively the vocabulary and discourse structure of the passage before moving to homiletical considerations, to ensure that the text speaks its message, rather than the message we impose on it (see Fig. 9).

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## Figure 9: The Structure of Ezekiel 16:1–14



Fifth, in the delivery let the people hear the voice of God by reading entire literary units, not just selected verses, and then develop the theology of the passage. Remind the people often that sermon texts have come to them complete, and then read expositively, with clarity, appropriate emotion and emphasis, so that in the reading the people hear the voice of God.

Sixth, make appropriate application. Recognize that Ezekiel was not preaching evangelistically to the world, trying to win outsiders to Yahwism;

he was preaching to his own people, those who claimed to be the people of God. Herein lies the relevance of his message for our time. Israel was called to be a light to the nations, to embody righteousness and declare by her well-being the glory and the grace of her Redeemer and covenant Lord. In so doing she was to play a paradigmatic role, representing to all nations and peoples the treasure of divine grace and responding with righteous living. Israel was called to bear his name with honor. The message of this prophetic priest was addressed to people who had besmirched the reputation of God, first by their unrighteous living, and second by being in exile. Underlying Ezekiel's preaching is a profound theology that is continuous with the theology of the OT as a whole and the NT as well. Our task as preachers is to establish that theology and translate it into forms that are understandable and relevant in our context. We may do this by asking of each text what it tells us about:

11. God.
12. The world and society in general.
13. The human condition, the nature of sin, the destiny of humankind.
14. The way God relates to his creation in general and human beings in particular.
15. An appropriate ethical and spiritual response to God's work of grace in our lives.

A TEST CASE—EZEKIEL 16:1–14: “THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EZEKIEL”

How does this strategy work in specific cases? For an example I have selected Ezekiel 16:1–14. This is the opening section of the longest single literary unit in the book. At around 850 words, this chapter alone is longer than half the Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai) and only slightly shorter than Malachi. Within the constraints that govern most pastoral preaching, it is too difficult to treat the entire chapter in one sermon, especially if one would read the entire text. Minimally one should treat this text in two or three sessions. The first would involve a dramatic and expository reading of the entire text, concluding with some synthetic comments on the overall theme: “Trampling under Foot the Grace of God.” The second might focus on verses 1–14, which presents one of the most profound portrayals of the boundless

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and undeserved love of God in all of Scripture. With this strategy we will confront the congregation with many of the big questions of Scripture: the nature of grace, the innate human condition and our propensity to ingratitude and rebellion, the cause and nature of divine fury, and ultimately the triumph of grace. Beyond these normal theological questions, Ezekiel 16 poses unique hermeneutical, sociological, and ethical challenges: What are the boundaries of appropriate rhetoric? What does this text say about gender relations? What are we to make of its portrayal of God? These questions are not easily answered,<sup>18</sup> but texts like this demonstrate that spiritual and theological realities cannot be reduced to formulas, and God himself will not be domesticated.

Genetically and structurally, as one of four *rib* oracles in the book, Ezekiel 16 has a strong legal flavor, as the following broad outline illustrates:

- A. The Call for Jerusalem's Arraignment (vv. 1-3a)
- B. The Indictment of Jerusalem (vv. 3b-34)
  - 1. Jerusalem's Lowly Origins (vv. 3b-5)
  - 2. Jerusalem's Exaltation (vv. 6-14)
  - 3. Jerusalem's Shamelessness: Her Response to Grace (vv. 15-34)
    - a. Her Religious Promiscuity (vv. 15-22)
    - b. Her Political Promiscuity (vv. 23-34)
- C. The Sentencing of Jerusalem (vv. 35-43)
  - 1. A Summary of the Charges (vv. 35-36)
  - 2. YHWH's Response (vv. 37-42)
  - 3. A Concluding Summary (v. 43)
- D. The Analysis of Jerusalem's Problem (vv. 44-52)
  - 1. The Indicting Proverb (v. 44)
  - 2. Jerusalem's Family Portrait (vv. 45-46)
  - 3. Jerusalem's Shameful Personality (vv. 47-52)
- E. The Double Ray of Hope for Jerusalem (vv. 53-63)
  - 1. The Bad Good News: The Qualification for Grace (vv. 53-58)
  - 2. The Good Good News: The Triumph of Grace (vv. 59-63)

Our text represents the first half of Jerusalem's indictment in which Ezekiel describes her conduct against the backdrop of divine grace extended to an utterly hopeless city. Jerusalem's roots are in the general human

18. For a brief consideration of factors to consider in dealing with the troubling aspects of texts like Ezekiel 16, see Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 467-70.

population, represented by her Amorite father and Hittite mother. As a child rejected by mother and father, her doom was certain. But YHWH came by just in time, rescued her from certain death at the jaws of jackals and beaks of vultures, and caused her to flourish and grow up—that is, survive as a common human being. But then she became vulnerable to human predators, and just in time YHWH passed by again. With obvious allusions to Sinai, he married her, entering into covenant relationship with her, lavishing on her all his resources and elevating her to the status of his queen.

Although Ezekiel 16 is framed by good news (vv. 1–14 and 60–63), three-fourths of the chapter is taken up with relentless accusation and disturbing pronouncements of the divine response. Not many congregations will endure such proportions in our preaching. I was invited once to preach a four-part series on this text—that was the request. I broke it down into its four constituent parts and delivered four messages with all the enthusiasm I could muster.

- A. The Impassioned Love of God (vv. 1–14)
- B. The Spurned Love of God (vv. 15–34)
- C. The Tough Love of God (vv. 35–43)
- D. The Triumphant Love of God (vv. 44–63)

By the time I had finished the third sermon, some had had enough of this brutal image of judgment and did not return for the gospel with which the passage ends.

Like the dry bones in chapter 37, in this text Jerusalem functions paradigmatically. At the literal level this text concerns the fate and fortune of Israel, but at another level the way God deals with his chosen people mirrors the way he deals with humanity. In recounting the OT version of the gospel, Ezekiel has announced all the elements of the gospel that Christians proclaim.

1. God's perspective on the history of his people—including the church universal and local congregations—probably looks quite different from the idealized histories we write. This chapter is not written to the world out there; it is written to those who claim to be God's people. It forces us to ask, "If God were writing our story, what would it look like?" Have we, like Israel, trampled underfoot his grace, and used all that he has lavished on us for selfish purposes and wicked ends?
2. Like Jerusalem, apart from the intervention of divine grace, all humanity is morally destitute and doomed (Rom 3:23; Eph 2:1–3).

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3. Apart from common grace, the sentence of physical death hangs over all humanity.<sup>19</sup>
4. Survival does not mean our problems are solved. It is possible to live physically, but still to lack spiritual life, which is possible only through covenant relationship with God.
5. God's grace is the only hope for a lost humanity. By nature destitute, this is the only solution for the human condition.
6. Covenant relationship with God is the highest privilege imaginable.
7. As the objects of God's saving and covenant grace, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:14).
8. As the undeserving recipients of God's grace, we are called to joyful and faithful living, as trophies of his grace proclaiming the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (Deut 26:19; 1 Pet 2:9–10).

*Proposition 7: In order to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity for the church, we need to link his message with that of the New Testament responsibly.*

There is no need to resort to allegorical methods of interpretation to recognize the Christian gospel in Ezekiel 16. Jerusalem/Judah/Israel does indeed function paradigmatically for all humanity in its lost condition and the church in particular as the object of divine grace. However, we need to remind our people that YHWH, the God who rescued Israel from her hopeless condition (in Egypt), is incarnate in Jesus the Christ, who saves us from our sin and through whom God the Father lavishes his blessings on us.

## CONCLUSION

It is high time that the church rediscovered the book of Ezekiel and claimed its message as her own. We too have grown complacent, mouthing profound creedal statements and for our security banking on the promises of God, when in reality we have abandoned him for all kinds of competing idolatries. For this reason the book is as relevant today as it ever was. May the Lord rekindle in our hearts the passion for God and his people exhibited by Ezekiel, and may he open our eyes to the covenantal faithlessness we demonstrate every day.

19. YHWH's first call to Jerusalem to "Live" holds off the sentence of the fall.