

EZEKIEL

R O B E R T W . J E N S O N



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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that Scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that Scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of Scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of Scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of Scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of Scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of Scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jeremiah 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of Scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with Scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as Scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically

fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of Scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of Scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

ABBREVIATIONS

General

- indicates a cross-reference to commentary on an Ezekiel passage
KJV King James Version
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
RSV Revised Standard Version

Biblical

Acts	Acts	Gen.	Genesis
Amos	Amos	Hab.	Habakkuk
1 Chr.	1 Chronicles	Hag.	Haggai
2 Chr.	2 Chronicles	Heb.	Hebrews
Col.	Colossians	Hos.	Hosea
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Isa.	Isaiah
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Jas.	James
Dan.	Daniel	Jer.	Jeremiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes	Joel	Joel
Eph.	Ephesians	John	John
Esth.	Esther	1 John	1 John
Exod.	Exodus	2 John	2 John
Ezek.	Ezekiel	3 John	3 John
Ezra	Ezra	Jonah	Jonah
Gal.	Galatians	Josh.	Joshua

Jude	Jude	Phil.	Philippians
Judg.	Judges	Phlm.	Philemon
1 Kgs.	1 Kings	Prov.	Proverbs
2 Kgs.	2 Kings	Ps.	Psalms
Lam.	Lamentations	Rev.	Revelation
Lev.	Leviticus	Rom.	Romans
Luke	Luke	Ruth	Ruth
Mal.	Malachi	1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Mark	Mark	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Matt.	Matthew	Song	Song of Songs
Mic.	Micah	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Nah.	Nahum	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Neh.	Nehemiah	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Num.	Numbers	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Obad.	Obadiah	Titus	Titus
1 Pet.	1 Peter	Zech.	Zechariah
2 Pet.	2 Peter	Zeph.	Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

The book of the priest and prophet Ezekiel is an astonishment. Its prophecies are either appalling or inordinately auspicious, its visions are stunning apocalyptic theater, its language is absolute, its theology leads into frightening depths, its author is an enigma.

Moreover, the book somehow contrives at once to exercise a powerful grasp on our common imagination and to be the most esoteric book in the Old Testament. What other scenes from the Old Testament are sung in such various milieus as are Ezekiel's visions of "them bones, them bones, them dry bones"¹ or of "the wheel in a wheel"? Ezekiel 33:11 is the comforting text on a Victorian edifying plate that hangs in my dining room: "As I live, saith the Lord God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Yet the old rabbis decreed that of all books of scripture, the book of Ezekiel (along with the Song of Songs) "most pollutes the hands"; that is, it teaches mysteries so deep that probing them is an exposure to deity that may unfit one for ordinary human converse.

Indeed, Ezekiel's opening vision of God's throne (1:4–24) became in Judaism the vehicle of an elite and dangerous mystical practice (for a selection of the literature, see Greenberg 1983: 206). It is said that of four notables who attempted visionary ascent to the throne revealed to Ezekiel, one died, one went mad, one apostatized, and only the famously holy Rabbi Akiba achieved the vision and survived intact (he was killed in the last Jewish revolt against Rome, in 135).

As for Ezekiel himself, he is perhaps the most intellectual of the prophets, a considerable poet, and a prose artist adept at manipulating established oral and literary genres to novel effect. Yet the behaviors the Lord mandates for him—the circumstances of his prophesying and the signs he is commanded to perform—are bizarre and humbling in the extreme. The medieval Jewish philosopher

1. At a break from this writing, I turned on the television and encountered a Cadillac commercial that played on "the hip bone connected to the . . ." with the parts of an engine.

Maimonides denied that some commands that Ezekiel says were laid on him could actually have been given by God, since “God is too exalted . . . [to] turn his prophets into a laughingstock . . . by ordering them to carry out crazy actions” (cited from Greenberg 1983: 122).

Prophets

There were prophets of several sorts through the history of Israel: from the shamanistic “men of God” and/or *neviim*² in the time of settlement and the early monarchy, through the great preachers of the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries, through the later authors of apocalyptic literary works, to the throwback John the Baptist. As we shall see, Ezekiel seems to incorporate the entire history. Like the other preachers, he delivered the word of God in messages that regularly began “thus says the Lord.” But he also endured experiences like those of the old shamans, notably in being transported, “in vision,” from place to place. And he artfully delineated dramatically stylized visions of present and future history, in the style of the apocalyptic writers to come.

Fundamental to Israel’s prophets of all sorts is the claim that God has entrusted his will to them, whether as word or as vision, and has sent them to bring that will to bear in the history of his people: their message is not intended merely to inform about God’s purpose but to effect it. The prophets’ self-understanding is perhaps most bluntly stated in Jeremiah’s account of his commissioning: “The LORD said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down . . . , to build and to plant’” (Jer. 1:9–10).

I will in this commentary offer no general justification of the prophets’ self-understanding. Theological commentary presupposes that scripture tells the truth about God in his history with us; and this supposition includes that the Holy Spirit, the living breath of God that moves all history, does this regularly “by the prophets.” Apologetic theology can provide reasons to think that the prophets are not deluded, but the present volume is not of that genre.

Within their immediate times and places, the prophets met challenges to their sending that were more specific than a priori unbelief. The prophets who appear in scripture were often in contention with a crowd of officially designated³ or self-promoted prophets.⁴ For the most part, society and government recruited

2. נָבִי (*navi*, plural *neviim*) is the word usually translated “prophet.” In some contexts this is misleading, since in its earliest uses it covers ecstasies of all sorts.

3. For a list of the advisers regarded at this time as appropriate to a royal court, see Dan. 2:27: “Daniel answered the king, ‘No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery.’”

4. Amos’s famous denial that he was a *navi* (Amos 7:14) was a denial that he was either a professional or a volunteer; he was, he insisted, a conscript.

prophets to speak of victory and prosperity, to put God on Israel's side, a message regularly contradicted by the prophets whose work survives in the canon.⁵ In the contestation between prophets and would-be prophets or charlatans, all a prophet could do was tell of his call and commission—which Ezekiel does at length—and leave confirmation to God. By including Ezekiel's book in the canon, Judaism and the church judge that God verifies Ezekiel's calling.

I will sometimes write as if Ezekiel simply reported visions God showed him and delivered messages God mandated; and I will at other times comment on Ezekiel's style or rhetorical art or literary dependence, as if he were an ordinary preacher and author. Whether I do the one or the other will depend entirely on the sort of point to be made. This is not inconsistent. It is one of the phenomena we must get used to in dealing with the prophets: the distinction that moderns automatically make between what we are given and what we create does not apply to them, since the one who gives them a word or a vision is their Creator, in whose intention their created talents, knowledge, and historical relations in any case rest. Between revelation and authorship—even when authorship encompasses research or literary borrowing or self-correction—there is with prophets no zero-sum balance.

History

Since a prophet is sent to bring God's intentions to bear in God's history with his people, no prophet can be well understood apart from his location in that history. For our purposes, we can distinguish between Israel's history as remembered by those of Ezekiel's time and the history of Ezekiel's own time.

Given the genre of this commentary, we do not need to construct a version of Israel's earlier history; indeed, doing so would be a distraction. Thus, for example, Ezekiel's supposition that all twelve tribes of Israel emerged together out of Egypt is important for our understanding of some of his prophecies; whether it indeed happened that way is not. In this book, we therefore do not take up the latter question. Those interested in such matters in other contexts—a group that includes the present commentator—may be directed to the vast literature,⁶ if with a recommendation to carry a few grains of salt against the more long-spun or “new and radical” hypotheses. Here I will without prejudice write as if the earlier history of Israel had been more or less as Ezekiel and his hearers or initial readers supposed.

5. Thus Jeremiah's mocking advice to self-appointed prophets: prophesy disaster, that way you'll be right more often (Jer. 28:7–9).

6. The classic studies are by German scholars of the later twentieth century. I will mention the two by which I was nurtured in these matters: Martin Noth, *Geschichte Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959); and Siegfried Herrmann, *Geschichte Israels in Alttestamentlicher Zeit* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973). There is again turmoil among the specialists in Israel's early history; so far as I can make out, it does not impinge seriously on the present assignment.

On the other hand, it will be essential to have in mind a sketch of Ezekiel's more immediate historical context, the later centuries of the monarchical Israelite states. And not to leave the reader hanging, I will carry the account to the end of that history.

At the beginning of Ezekiel's book an editor tells us (1:2) that Ezekiel was called to prophesy on the fifth day of the fourth month⁷ of the fifth year "of the exile of King Jehoiachin,"⁸ and there seems to be no good reason to doubt this dating (see Zimmerli 1979: 9–16)—though of course some scholars have managed it. This works out in our calendar to the end of June 593 BC (Zimmerli 1979: 115). Therewith we are set within a reasonably well-documented period of history.

The Israelite monarchies—a northern kingdom usually called Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, centered around Jerusalem—were with other states located in the region sometimes called Syria-Palestine.⁹ This region forms the western arm of the Fertile Crescent, so-called because it is an arc of fertile land wrapped around the northern bulge of agriculturally inhospitable Arabia. The arch and eastern arm of the crescent are made by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Thus when great powers arose in the land made prosperous by these rivers—Mesopotamia, "The Land between the Rivers"—their path for feasible expansion led west¹⁰ over the top of the arch and then south through Syria-Palestine. And since Syria-Palestine also made a bridge of welcoming land between North Africa and Asia, Egyptian expansions into Asia followed the same path in the opposite direction.¹¹

The first Mesopotamian power to expand into Syria-Palestine during the time of the Israelite states, Assyria, subjugated the northern kingdom in 732. As punishment for quickly ensuing rebellion, Assyria then did away with this state in 721: her political and military institutions were disbanded, the elites were killed or scattered into exile, and foreigners were put in their places. The Israelite tribes of the north did not simply vanish because their state and elites did; the general

7. The number of the month is here carried over from 1:1, as the editor presumed readers would do.

8. Ezekiel himself, in 1:1, dates his call "in the thirtieth year." But thirtieth year from what? Either Ezekiel expects readers to know without being told—which we do not—or a piece of the text is missing. Eichrodt 1970: 52 proposes that Ezekiel's dating is from his birth, which would mean he was taken into exile when he was twenty-five, the year he should have begun actual priestly service, and builds a good bit of speculation about Ezekiel's psychological state on this disappointment.

9. Roughly embracing modern Israel, the Palestinian territories, the fertile parts of Jordan, Lebanon, and the westerly parts of present-day Syria.

10. The Mesopotamian empires regarded the territories to the east, the rugged Iranian highlands, chiefly as barbarian territories to be raided for slaves and horses—until the Medes and Persians got themselves together, and their horsemen and archers created an empire that rewrote the geopolitical map.

11. Indeed, during much of the time before the period we are describing, Syria-Palestine was under firm Egyptian control.

population seems to have absorbed the imposed overclass and still appears in the New Testament as the Samaritans.

From Assyria's appearance in Syria-Palestine until the empire's collapse in the mid-seventh century, also Judah was in varying degree subservient to Assyria. Josiah, who reigned in Jerusalem from 639 to 609, took advantage of Assyria's retreat to reassert Judah's full independence and even to reconquer much of the realm of David and Solomon. Josiah accompanied political resurgence with religious reform, aimed at eliminating polytheistic elements from the practices of the people. It could not last: first Egypt pushed northward, and then Babylon arose to replace Assyria as the great Mesopotamian power. Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish (in the arch of the crescent) in 605, and Babylon followed Assyria's path to become overlord of Syria-Palestine.

During Egypt's brief moment of renewed power in Syria-Palestine, Pharaoh Neco had killed Josiah, deposed Josiah's son and immediate successor, Jehoahaz, taking him captive to Egypt, and installed another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim, in his place. Jehoiakim pursued a foreign policy of rebellion against Babylon's overlordship and pleas to Egypt for help. An exasperated Nebuchadnezzar came in force, sacked Jerusalem, and in 598 carried much of Judah's political, military, and religious elite to exile in Babylonia. Among them was luckless King Jehoiachin, who had succeeded his father just three months before.

Babylon's policy differed from Assyria's in that she settled exiles together in Babylonia rather than scattering them and apparently treated them with some respect. Though it has been disputed, the priest Ezekiel was probably among those taken in 598 (so also Gregory 1986–90: 1.46). In any case, he was in Babylonia¹² when five years later he was called to prophesy.

Despite the prophet Jeremiah's urgent expostulations, Zedekiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar installed in Jerusalem, revolted in his turn, with the same futile appeal to Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar decided to put an end to this turbulent dependency: after a terrible siege, Jerusalem with temple and palace was in 587–586 leveled and burned, and no new king or regent was installed. Zedekiah, captured while fleeing Jerusalem, was blinded; and the remains of the Judean elite were added to the exilic community in Babylon. In Judah as earlier in Israel, most of the population remained in place, now bereft of native government, city, and temple. The Davidic monarchy was finished, as a phenomenon of what we moderns call history.

For a true historical placement of Ezekiel, the above bland recital of political events will not do by itself. Before proceeding to the commentary, readers may wish to expose themselves to something of the spiritual disaster that the exile and the agony of Jerusalem meant for Israel; I suggest reading the Lamentations of Ezekiel's near-contemporary, the Jerusalem prophet Jeremiah.

12. This has been disputed, by sheer lack of imagination. The book says that Ezekiel prophesied to all Israel and to Tyre, Egypt, etc., from Babylonia. That is impossible, pedants have said.

Under the next overlord of the Fertile Crescent, Persia, there was a general release (legally proclaimed in 538) and return of exiles, though the Jewish exilic community had so prospered in Babylon that many remained. Jerusalem was more or less restored, and a new temple was built. The Jews of Palestine, Babylon, and Egypt,¹³ with refugees and émigrés elsewhere, emerged as an international ethnic-religious community centered on the sacrificial cult of this Second Temple—note the catalogue in Acts 2:9–11 of nations from which pilgrims had come to Jerusalem.

The further political history of this community's center at Jerusalem—within geopolitical constellations shaped in succession by Persia, Alexander of Macedon, the empires succeeding Alexander's conquests, and Rome—is extraordinarily complicated. Fortunately we may for our purposes fast-forward through the centuries to AD 70, when Rome crushed a Jewish revolt¹⁴ and again destroyed the temple, this time leaving little prospect of rebuilding. The loss of the temple deprived international Judaism of her cultic center and compelled yet another transformation of Judaism, into the rabbinic Judaism we know today, centered on Torah rather than cult and so led by rabbis rather than priests.¹⁵ In AD 135 Rome put down a last Jewish uprising, with terrible destruction and loss of life. On the site of Jerusalem, Rome then built a properly Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, which Jews were forbidden to enter.

A Few Points about Method

I do not belong to the guild of Old Testament scholars; my work has mostly been as a systematic theologian and analyst of culture. If this commentary were in another series, this acknowledgment might be a confession or a provocation; here it simply notes my place within the series. The preface to the series states its general aims and principles, and these need not be repeated here. Each author in the series is, however, allowed considerable latitude in achieving the series' aims.

One question left free is this: are historical-critical methods and results important for the kind of theological exegesis here to be pursued, and are they to be instanced in the commentaries? For my part, I consider that the text for theological interpretation is the canonical text presented by the church and not a putatively original or earlier text constructed by a scholar—though determining what may

13. During a period of benevolent Egyptian overlordship of postexilic Judah, an important Jewish community grew up there.

14. The Romans regarded the taking of Jerusalem as no mean feat of Roman arms; in Rome, the triumphal arch of Titus still commemorates it.

15. Second Temple Judaism had been a congeries of denominations. Those groups survived the loss of the temple who could if necessary do without it: the Judaism of the Pharisees, centered on Torah study and ritual purity, which could be pursued anywhere, and the Christian movement, which had in the sacramental body of the risen Christ a sort of ubiquitous temple (John 2:21).

be a plausibly canonical text sometimes requires considerable critical thought. I consider also that the account of events provided by the canonical text may not for theological reading be simply replaced by a scholar's construction of what "really" happened—what the relation may then be between these two sorts of history is a now much controverted question, the theoretical resolution of which is again beyond the scope of a commentary. Nor will I treat passages or editorial groupings that plainly come from other persons than Ezekiel as therefore of lesser theological interest; the providential action by which God gives his people their scripture—in most theology called "inspiration"¹⁶—encompasses the whole history of the canonical text's emergence.

But I also find that critical investigation of a text or of events to which a text refers is often important in understanding precisely the canonical text—and this sort of inquiry is as old as Christian biblical scholarship itself. Of such work, I am at best a dabbler. Therefore in writing this commentary I have for such matters often relied on classic historical-critical commentaries, especially the painstaking and comprehensive volumes of Walther Zimmerli, which I will frequently reference. I will nevertheless venture a few of my own critical judgments.

Ezekiel's book does indeed show unmistakable signs of additions and reworkings, and somebody of course collected Ezekiel's prophesyings and made a book of them. I am, however, skeptical about attempts to reconstruct in much detail the history by which an ancient text arrived at its present form. To make my own and readers' way through this book's often bewilderingly assembled pieces, I will need to refer to editors and interpolators; but, except with respect to a few basic structures of the book, I will not often claim knowledge of their identities or predilections, which in my judgment is usually unattainable.

The notion of "theological exegesis" derives in part from the paradigm of the church's and Judaism's premodern exegesis. A second question left free for individual authors in this series is this: in what ways are we to conform to that paradigm? I am committed to premodern Christian exegetes' aim, to read the Bible as a single dramatically coherent narrative of the coming of Christ and his kingdom.¹⁷ But I am not necessarily committed to their exact procedures or results. To display the dramatic continuity of the biblical narrative, the church fathers and medievals, in the train of the New Testament itself, read earlier events in this narrative as "figures" of later culminating events.¹⁸ This way of reading is rightly renewed in some volumes of this series. Discerning the way in which earlier events prefigure—as we still say—later ones is, after all, the way we naturally read

16. The early Protestant Scholastics who most carefully developed the notion did *not* mean dictation to an author.

17. For the church fathers' fundamental conviction, see Gregory the Great's comment on 40:6: "See how when we want to clarify the meaning of a passage in Ezekiel, we settle the matter at issue from one of the Gospels" (1986–90: 2.126).

18. The founding modern study of the older exegesis is Henri de Lubac, *Exègèse Médiévale* (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64).

dramatically coherent narratives, especially those whose outcome we know. But with prophets, or anyway with Ezekiel, a systematic practice of figural exegesis in the fathers' own style would too much gild the lily. In primal Christian understanding, Israel's prophecy points forward christologically and ecclesially without need for specifically figural discernment: "All the prophets . . . from Samuel and those after him . . . predicted these days" (Acts 3:24).

I have recently been provided a slogan for the way in which I do then construe the christological import of prophecy:¹⁹ I will seek to discern a "christological plain sense." On the supposition that both the biblical text and the church's trinitarian and christological teachings are *true*,²⁰ what must Ezekiel's text—just as he and editors and interpolators formulated it and as it appears on the page—say? What indeed is its historically "original" meaning, given the church's trinitarian and christological construal of historical reality?²¹ I will not at this point further develop this hermeneutic; that will best be done by its display in the course of exegesis.

Of premodern exegesis itself, I will therefore provide samples only. Among the church fathers from whom I might have drawn, I choose the homilies of Origen of Alexandria, the third-century father of the church's scholarly biblical study, and those of the sixth-century Pope Gregory the Great.²² Among premodern Jewish exegetes, I will regularly reference the very interesting Targum, a late-antique Aramaic²³ paraphrase for Jews with little Hebrew, that verges toward commentary—or indeed rewriting—and will sometimes cite the readings of the eleventh-century scholar commonly known as Rashi, who has a certain normative status in rabbinic Judaism.²⁴

I will make no room for the supposed contributions of the various critical theories currently on offer in academia and sometimes invoked to guide biblical and other exegesis—each projected from the viewpoint of a class, a gender, a race, and so on. Critique in the relevant late-modern sense is the effort to discern what a text²⁵ "really" says, as against what it may to unsuspecting eyes seem to say; and a labeled critical theory (e.g., feminist theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory) is a

19. This phrase comes from Jason Byassee's work on Augustine's exegesis of the psalms: *Praise Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), esp. 205–19.

20. "True" in the simple sense we all suppose when we are not being deliberately sophisticated.

21. Even at the date of this writing, it remains hard for us to remember that the positivistic construal of historical reality is itself only one among many, and far from the most plausible.

22. The Ezekiel homilies of both fathers come and go in Ezekiel's text, those of Origen because of the vicissitudes suffered by his book, those of Gregory because he regularly had to leave off teaching to negotiate with the Lombards who were threatening Rome. Indeed, in his second volume, Gregory begins with Ezek. 40 and gets no further.

23. I do not read Aramaic and am therefore dependent on the English translation in Levey 1990.

24. Rashi is much occupied with what we would now call historical-critical interpretation and little given to allegorical interpretation.

25. For these theories, anything can be a text.

specific set of instructions for achieving such discernment. There is indeed a critical theory at work in this commentary, and it might be called “Nicene theory.”

I will not provide surveys of alternative interpretations, nor indeed often specify the reading that may have helped or hindered me to an interpretation, so long as I am not actually borrowing. I am solely responsible for the interpretations presented.

What then did the assignment to write a theological commentary come to mean, as I went to work? It of course meant trying to clarify textual phenomena whose clarification seemed needed, either in the next and for us decisive connection or merely to find our way in the text. It meant a specific attention to the text, looking for what it has to say about God, his people, and their history together, as the church presupposes these realities, rather than for what can be gleaned about other interesting matters. In the theology of Ezekiel, the historical relation of the Lord with his people is decisively determined by the fact of prophecy itself, so that the structure of such phenomena as “the word of the Lord,” as these appear in the text, demand our attention. And finally, it therefore often came to mean explicit invocation of points of Christian doctrine that either (in the one direction) are raised by the text or (in the other) demand to shape interpretation of the text. So we will encounter the doctrine of the Trinity, the question of an end of history, election, and other such matters.

The proposition that exegesis of the Old Testament might call up points of Christian doctrine of course offends the modern exegetical academy’s chief dogma. That, vice versa, Christian doctrine should shape interpretation of Old Testament passages offends it even more deeply. But the exclusion of the church’s doctrine from interpretation of the church’s scripture is after all a very odd rule on its face; and it is indeed as Christian scripture that the church reads what she calls the Old Testament.²⁶ How the academic community came to be committed to an antidoctrinal, and thus in this case ironically ahistorical mode of exegesis, is an often told tale that need not be repeated here.

The present commentary, like the others in the series, thus offers alternatives to the modern academy’s prejudices. I will not often argue theoretically the legitimacy of christological or trinitarian or ecclesiological readings I present, but will mostly

26. It should not be necessary to recount the following piece of well-known history, but in the present situation it probably is. Rabbinic Judaism and the church have equal and parallel claims to obey the Tanakh/Old Testament as scripture. Neither is a direct continuation of old Israel. In the long run, each could obey old Israel’s scripture only by adding a second volume: the rabbis added the Mishnah, and the Christians the New Testament. These second volumes quite properly control each community’s way of reading Tanakh/Old Testament. The Mishnah is a legal complex; and rabbinic Judaism reads the Tanakh fundamentally as Torah, given narrative context by the narrative and other nonlegal genres. The New Testament tells and comments on a story that claims to continue one told by the Old Testament; and the church reads the Old Testament fundamentally as narrative with a *telos*, given its moral structure by Torah. The fashion among Christian scholars of calling the Old Testament “the Hebrew scripture” is merely jejune—this being a title meaningless in both communions.

allow them to convince readers by their own sense and appropriateness to the text at hand—or not. I do ask for suspension of a priori incredulity—who knows, the church might be right about how to read her own scripture.

Two Technical Matters

A verse-by-verse commentary on this long book would exceed any normal attention span, including mine. I will instead divide by the text's own units. These can usually be identified with some certainty: a book of prophecy is put together of distinct messages or visions delivered and recorded on different occasions, and the discourse of Ezekiel and his editors and interpolators abounds with formulas that mark beginnings and endings, both of prophecies as delivered or visions as reported and of editorial units of the book.

Some natural units are too long or too theologically or otherwise loaded to make manageable units of commentary, and I will divide them. Thus, for an immediately intruding example, 1:1–28b is clearly a narrative unit and in turn is part of a larger complex that runs through 3:15. But for comment I will separate 1:1–28b from the larger complex; and I will further give 1:1–3 and 1:25–28b separate comment, on account of the number and weight of the theological issues these early verses raise for the whole book.

I will presuppose the text of the New Revised Standard Version unless I see compelling reason to do otherwise.²⁷ NRSV usually translates the Hebrew text stabilized by late-antique and early-medieval Jewish scholars known as Masoretes. I will from time to time instance the Hebrew; readers who have some Hebrew will very occasionally have a slight advantage in judging the worth of a comment, but no knowledge of Hebrew is needed to understand the comments themselves. I will deviate from NRSV when its translation is seriously bent by the translators' ideology; or when NRSV follows the Masoretes and I am persuaded by the experts that a more plausible Hebrew text can be discerned; or when a more crudely literal representation of the Hebrew is needed to display the thunder of Ezekiel's rhetoric—this last is sometimes important in presenting Ezekiel. I will refer to "ancient versions," translations made before the Masoretes' time, the most important of which is the Septuagint²⁸—again, no knowledge of Greek is needed to understand comments that rely on this version.

27. I greatly prefer the original RSV, but must recognize that it is being replaced in use.

28. There is a good argument, urged on me by an editor of the series, that the Septuagint, by way of *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), should be the text for theological interpretation, rather than the Hebrew and the English versions based on it, since the Septuagint was effectively the church's Old Testament in the apostolic period and for some time thereafter. But counterarguments are persuasive: the Latin Vulgate's Old Testament was nevertheless translated—except for the Psalter—from the Hebrew and not from the Greek and was the Western church's Old Testament

To Be Noted in Advance

Since the historical situation and basic message of a prophet do not change every day, longer books of prophecy are very repetitious: however possessed by revelation, no preacher or visionary creates a new set of usages for each discourse, and there are only so many sorts of doom or blessing that can be invoked upon Israel or her enemies. Thus in Ezekiel, usages like “the word of the Lord came to me” or “then they shall know” or “their abominations” recur again and again. I use two devices to cope with this.

One is a liberal use of cross-referencing (using →) to direct readers of one commentary unit to another commentary unit where needed discussion will be found. This has the effect that as we go through the book, the commentary units tend to become shorter or cover more text, since more and more matters are dealt with by referring to previous discussion.

A few phrases and turns of diction are so ubiquitous that cross-referencing them at each occurrence would be extremely tedious. I will therefore discuss them here, once and for all; before turning to the commentary readers should study the following rather carefully.

“*The word of the Lord came to me.*” This clause, which introduces many passages in Ezekiel, is more theologically loaded than one might at first suppose. That the Lord’s word comes to a prophet does not simply mean that the Lord comes and speaks to him—remarkable though that also would be. Rather, “the word of the Lord” is a reality in some way *related to* the Lord and so identifiable in and as itself (for the scholarship, see Zimmerli 1979: 144), yet not separable in being from the Lord. The word of the Lord is at once the Lord speaking and identifiable as another than the Lord.

The phenomenon thus has the same trinitarian structure as some other Old Testament phenomena: most notably “the glory of the Lord” (→1:25–28b), “the name of the Lord” (e.g., 1 Kgs. 3:2–5:5), and “the angel of the Lord” (e.g., Gen. 16:7–12; 22:9–18; or most remarkably of all, Judg. 13:2–23). Each of these realities is *related to* the Lord by the genitive construction, yet as each narrative proceeds turns out also to *be* the Lord.

The rabbis generalized this structure as “the Shekinah.” Exodus calls the wilderness temple-tent God’s “dwelling place” (מִשְׁכָּן, *mishkan*) amidst his people (Exod. 40:34); the rabbis then used a word from the same root for the indwelling itself and extended the word to cover various phenomena of the Lord’s dwelling in Israel.

Thus Christian theology could gloss John 1:14 with “the Shekinah became flesh”; the Jewish-Christian disagreement is only(!) about whether this in fact happened. Indeed, by original Christian understanding, the word that came to

through most of her history; modern translations in churchly use are of the Hebrew; and theological education has for centuries referred future preachers and teachers to the Hebrew.

the prophets was in fact Christ acting in anticipation of his incarnate coming, and we might even gloss our clause as “Christ came to me” (for this Christology, →1:25–28b).

There is yet another linguistic-theological subtlety in our phrase: the word customarily translated “came” does not mean quite what the English might suggest. The verb *hayab* (הָיָא) does not necessarily specify arrival at one place *from* some place else.²⁹ By itself, it is closer to “happens to/at. . . .” When in prophetic discourse it is used in the past tense with “the word of God” and takes a preposition with a name or pronoun, we might clumsily translate “the word of the Lord happened, and it happened to. . . .”

“*Thus says the Lord.*” This is the formula with which Ezekiel begins verbal prophecies of the most usual form. In the jargon of form critics,³⁰ it begins a “messenger-word,” and I will use this term throughout the commentary. “Thus says the Lord” makes the claim that the prophet has been sent by the Lord to bring the message that follows, as an official might bring the decree of a monarch to some more distant part of the realm. Thus a messenger-word is not a mere report of the Lord’s will; it is the enforcement of it among those to whom the message is brought.

“*The hand of the Lord was . . . upon me.*” This is Ezekiel’s invariable way of referring to the onset of a vision, as distinct from a coming of the word. “The hand of the Lord” is a key notion through much of the Old Testament, where it evokes the Lord’s *impact* on the course of events (Zimmerli 1979: 117; see also Greenberg 1983: 41–42). Thus Rashi’s excellent gloss: “The strength of His might, to lead me against my will” (Rosenberg 2000: 243). In Ezekiel’s use, the impact is both on Ezekiel personally and on the swirling history around him; Ezekiel regards the occurrence of vision as itself an act of the Lord in history. More about vision as such will appear in the commentary.

“*Son of a man.*” The Lord always addresses Ezekiel as בֶּן־אָדָם (*ben-adam*). I will throughout translate this phrase as above. The usual translation, “son of man” with no article before “man,” carries associations from special uses elsewhere³¹ that could be misleading here.³² NRSV’s attempt to avoid this by translating “mortal” is far too polite (and probably too ideologically motivated); moreover, since other

29. Thus the Targum (e.g., Levey 1990: 30) invariably translates “the word . . . was with me.”

30. Form criticism sorts out the genres—particularly oral genres—that appear in scripture and attempts to reconstruct the life situation—the famous *Sitz im Leben*—within which an identified genre will have had its preliterary currency. Or vice versa.

31. “One like a son of man” is in some apocalyptic literature a heavenly being; in the canon, see Dan. 7:13. Blessedly, the endless controversy about the identity of beings so named in apocalyptic is irrelevant here. And of course “son of man” is in the Gospels a still not fully clarified designation of the Christ.

32. “Son of man” in fact misled Christianity’s first great scholarly exegete, who took Ezekiel himself, because he is called “son of man,” to be the presence of Christ in Ezekiel’s prophesying (Origen 1989: 59). Christ is indeed present in Ezekiel’s prophecy and book, but not as the person of Ezekiel.

creatures are also mortal, it obliterates part of the point, which is identification of the particular sort of creature addressed. Since this is the only way the Lord addresses him, Ezekiel in his own book loses even his name and is identified merely as someone who is not God or one of the heavenly host, but was “born . . . of the will of [a] man” (John 1:13).

“*The Lord/the Lord God.*” Where “the Lord” appears in English translations of the Old Testament, it usually does not straightforwardly translate anything in Hebrew. What is in the Masoretic Text is the personal name—יהוה (*yhwh*)—of Israel’s God, with an orthographic device to warn readers against speaking it aloud even when reading scripture.³³ The divine name is marked to alert the reader³⁴ to pronounce and even to think Hebrew *adonai*—which translates into English as “the Lord”—instead of the name itself.

Despite great scholarly efforts, we do not know where the name יהוה came from or what if anything it might once have meant.³⁵ In its biblical use it is anyway a true personal name, and that indeed is the whole point (see von Rad 1962–66: 1.179–87). “I am *yhwh*, your God” is God’s self-introduction to Israel, accomplished by his name and a following identification, as an incumbent candidate might say to a prospective supporter, “I am John Jones, your representative.” By this God’s self-introduction with his name, through Moses (Exod. 3) and in the preface of his fundamental Torah at Sinai (20:2), the relation of *this* God to *this* people was established.

Instead of “the Lord” Ezekiel often has—in the usual English—“the Lord God.” The Hebrew locution so represented is *adonai yhwh*. When *adonai* is translated in its own character—as it has to be here—it comes into English as “lord.” Keeping the divine name in Hebrew, we would have “the Lord יהוה.” The double appellation carries some semantic weight: as in the discourse of aristocracy one might refer to “the Lord Buckingham” so here the lordship of יהוה is honored.

If we followed the ordinary rule for avoiding God’s name and substituted *adonai* for *yhwh*, or in English “the Lord,” and read or translated *adonai* directly, we would have in Hebrew *adonai adonai*, and in English “the Lord the Lord.” To avoid this pileup, while not ignoring the fact of a modified phrase (as the Septuagint perhaps wisely did), English translators devised another cover: “the Lord” is now allowed to be the translation of its own Hebrew equivalent and “God” is

33. Christian preachers’ and scholars’ recent habit of throwing “Jahweh” around out loud is what Ezekiel would call an “abomination.”

34. The vowel points in the Masoretic Text are those that represent the vowels in *adonai* (“lord”) and are there to remind readers to say *adonai* or, if translating into English, “the Lord.” Thus “Jehovah,” which is the result of pronouncing the consonants of *yhwh* with the vowels of *adonai*, represents unfamiliarity with this device and is a name that never existed until unwitting translators created it.

35. The authors and tradents of the Pentateuch also did not know where the name יהוה came from or what it meant; the etymology—or what *we* would call etymology—at Exod. 3:14 is plainly ad hoc for the occasion. Ancient exegetes loved this kind of philological play. In modern scholarship, guesses of course abound.

assigned to cover the divine name. This is not a lucky device, since it no longer contains a signal for the underlying presence of the personal name.

“*Then you/they shall know that. . .*” This promise or threat provides the conclusion of many of Ezekiel’s prophecies.³⁶ Its paradigmatic version is “then you/they shall know that I am *yhwh* [אֲנִי יְהוָה]”; other resolutions of the ellipse shown above depend on the paradigm. In the case of prophecies so concluded, when what is prophesied happens, or sometimes when the event of prophecy itself happens, the intended outcome is experience of the Lord’s personal identity, of the personal import of the one thus self-identified. The modality of this knowledge varies with the prophecy: it may be knowledge that the Lord is the one who did or will do what is prophesied; or knowledge that he is the one who has given the prophecy; or knowledge simply that there is this person or that he is God; or some more participatory relation to this God’s identity.

A Warning

The purpose of a commentary is to assist readers’ involvement with the text. Perhaps readers should therefore take warning before going further. Attention to a text can turn into experience of its matter, and the judgments and promises of God as given through Ezekiel are so extreme that they can easily undo ordinary religiosity—to say nothing of the disastrous spiritual adventures that might be ignited by his visions.

36. Walther Zimmerli’s *I Am Jahweh*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) is devoted to this formula.

EZEKIEL 1:1–3

A DOUBLE CALL

There was always the problem: someone could simply announce that he was a prophet or be appointed to a staff of temple or palace prophets and then “prophesy” by his own judgment of the situation or from self-induced trance states, usually saying what would please his sponsors. “The prophets prophesy falsely, and . . . my people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:31). Of such sycophants the Lord said by this same Jeremiah, “I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them” (14:14). Ultimately, to be sure, sorting out true from false prophets could be done only by God himself, in the course of history (see the whole of Jer. 27)—and Jeremiah’s opponents doubtless returned the accusation. But prophets and their literary executors were nevertheless often concerned to claim and where possible recount a divine call and sending. Ezekiel’s book provides amply for this, with a narrative complex stretching from Ezek. 1:4 through 3:15.

Ezekiel 1:1–3 introduces this complex, and so the whole book. Indeed, this is done twice. The first introduction, 1:1, is in the first person: “I saw visions of God.” The second, 1:2–3a, is the only place in the book where a report of revelation is in the third person, or Ezekiel is referred to by name as the prophet of the book: “The word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel.”¹ This obviously suggests that the second introduction was provided by an editor. Moreover, the two introductions are of different genres, one tells of an inaugural vision, the other of an inaugural advent of God’s word. If either 1:1 or 1:2–3a stood alone, each could be the introduction to a prophetic work of corresponding and different type.

1. Ezek. 1:3 is one of only two places where the name Ezekiel appears at all; the other is in a wholly different context (24:24).

In 1:1, Ezekiel writes in the first person of the heavens “opening” to reveal “visions of God” (מַרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים). This is in the style of the “apocalyptic” writings that would shortly become the dominant form of prophecy. For exemplification of their general character, we need look no further than to the apocalypse that concludes the Christian Bible: “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice . . . said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne” (Rev. 4:1–2). The English for Greek *apokalypsis* is “revelation”; what is revealed is God’s rule and history as it will unfold under his rule. This mode of prophecy will be essentially literary—throughout the revelation given him, John stands ready with pen in hand.

Corresponding to this sort of revelation is “vision” as a mode of apprehension. The possessive in our text, “visions of God,” must be both objective and subjective: God is both the one who is—somehow—seen and the one who gives us such seeing, of himself and other mysteries. In Ezekiel, visionary experience as revelation of God and his future both tends forward to the apocalyptic writings (in the canon see Zech. 1:7 and Dan. 10:7) and harks back to the old seers (e.g., 2 Chr. 9:29), who flourished in Israel before the time of the preachers whom we tend to call “*the* prophets.”

Ezekiel 1:3b presents a textual problem, of a sort we cannot pass over. NRSV, following the Masoretic Text, has the pronoun in the third person: “The hand of the Lord was on him.” But ancient versions² translate a first person, and in the narrative context this seems a far more likely text. In the rest of the book “the hand of the Lord” is invoked only in connection with the impact of visions, never with the coming of the word. If that holds also here, then 1:3b belongs with the narrative of 1:1, 4, rather than with that of 1:2–3a. Ezekiel 1:1 and 1:4 are in the first person. It therefore seems likely that we should read, with the Septuagint, “The hand of the Lord was upon me.”

Ezekiel 1:3b thus continues the editorially interrupted first introduction and is Ezekiel’s own description of his initial experience of vision. Ezekiel experiences the onset of vision as something like the blow of a hand and feels the impact of the vision also in the history of Israel. In the language of a dominant biblical theology of the previous century, the call of Ezekiel is itself one of the “acts of God in history”—and indeed many of the church fathers understood “the hand of the Lord” as a reference to Christ, who is the agent and content of God’s works. Gregory the Great comments on our passage: “The Son is called the hand or arm of the Lord, because all [the Lord’s works] are done through him” (1986–90: 1.92).

In 1:2–3a, an editor introduces Ezekiel a second time, as one to whom the *word* of the Lord came. Thus the editor corrects an existing account of the same event, without, however, replacing it.³ The outcome is that in the canonical text,

2. Including, decisively, the Septuagint: καὶ ἐγένετο ἐπ’ ἐμὲ χεὶρ κυρίου.

3. The same combination appears at Zech. 1:7–8, where it seems more forced.

seeing and recording visions of God and hearing and speaking God's word are somehow identified.⁴

Either of the introductions would by itself give us much to think about. What is heaven? What does one see when one sees a vision? What is the word of God, and how does it come to someone? But interwoven as they are in our text, the two introductions pose an additional and theologically intriguing question: How are vision of God and word of God one?

In the theological tradition, heaven is the part of creation that the Creator has made as his own place within his creation. Apart from creation, God is not *in* any place but simply *is* his own place;⁵ therefore for him the creation is merely a single other place.⁶ But if he is not only to create others than himself, but to live with these creatures, he must have a place within the place made for them, from which to come and go with them.⁷ "Heaven" is that part of creation. And what is *in* heaven besides God is the present reality with God of the future that his history with creatures intends, the divine present tense of "the kingdom of God" and of what "must come before" it. Ezekiel's report fits very well with this tradition.

What sort of event is a prophetic vision? For the one who experiences it, such a vision is evidently much like a dream; the wisdom tradition can speak of prophetic "visions of the night" (Job 4:13), and in a passage from the prophet Joel that became central for Christianity, dreaming dreams and seeing visions are paralleled for the prophetic gift of the last time (Joel 2:28). We must not, however, be misled by modern usage: we think of dreams as natural phenomena, but the dreams/visions of seers or apocalyptic visionaries require—in Ezekiel's language—the hand of the Lord. Moreover, they inform about reality and not just about the dreamer's inner reality; they are a kind of looking *at* something (Ezek. 1:4; Rev. 4:1). Perhaps the link between dreams and such waking visions as Ezekiel's is that bystanders behold neither dreams nor visions.⁸ Just so the cognitive status of visions is, to be sure, debatable, and has been debated also within theology.

At this point I should note the theological importance of the way in which prophetic books often date and geographically place the advent of word or vision; in the case of Ezekiel, both he and the editor tell us the year, month, day, and place of his call, and someone continues to provide dates through the book. Gregory the Great takes note of this and gives the reason: "In order for the truth to be more firmly displayed, [the prophet] first sinks root in history" (1986–90: 1.83). The opening of heaven in vision does not, like the visions of some mystical

4. The phenomenon is not unique to Ezekiel; see Zimmerli 1979: 98.

5. Established for all subsequent theology by John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 13.11.

6. God's omnipresence does not mean that he is spread out through creation; rather all creation is present to him at its one place with him.

7. For my exposition of this, including the vexed question of where—having regard to Copernicus—heaven might be, see Jenson 1997–99: 1.119–24.

8. Dan. 10:7: "I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; the people who were with me did not see the vision."

practice, take Ezekiel out of history. The prophet does not see what is always and everywhere true; instead, the vision—like the word—seems rather to press him more firmly into a time and a place.

Vision becomes especially problematic when the object is supposed to be God.⁹ Can one see God? The doctrine of the Trinity says that we can, in that the second person of God is a particular man, Jesus the Christ, who can of course be seen: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). But without the identification of God as triune, the matter becomes highly problematic. Thus the Targum glosses “visions of God” with “a vision of the glory of the Shekinah of the Lord” (Levey 1990: 20), putting not one but two intermediaries between God himself and what is seen. We will, to be sure, shortly (1:25–28b) need to consider just what sort of intermediary each is.

Thus prophets of a certain kind “see things” and take what they see as real, despite its not being seen by others; moreover what they see is supposed to be a reality inhabited also by those who do not see. The claim to see reality in this fashion may of course be a delusion, and modernity has generally presupposed that it must be—though in fact late modernity is all too ready to embrace plainly superstitious forms of visionary practice. But what warrant, after all, did we have for prejudice against vision as such? If there is the God of scripture, he sees himself and his creation, including heaven, as they truly are; and if we are the fallen creatures that Christian theology describes, we on both counts do not. If then we are to see things rightly, this can happen only if God shows it to us and in such fashion as to penetrate our dim sight.

We must suppose that there are many ways in which God can do this: the “we” who according to Paul now do “see,” even if “darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12), certainly included many faithful who lacked overt visionary experience and saw divine truth in other ways. But if for certain purposes or times God employs visions, we must allow him that choice—which still of course leaves the question of how to tell when he has done this.

Finally, we must consider that remarkable identification-in-difference of word and vision that an editor created. The duality of word and vision, hearing and seeing, runs all through scripture, and there are great differences in the way the poles are balanced. Israel at Sinai must not climb the mountain, since “no one shall see [God] and live” (Exod. 33:20), while they are commanded to approach and hear him speak (19:9). But when that same word of God comes in his own person, it is in order that we may *see* his glory (John 1:1–14).

It is something deep in the reality of God that appears in these phenomena. Both in scripture and doctrine, the second person of the triune God is sometimes “Son” and sometimes Word. As Son he is the “image” of the Father (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), so that one who has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:9). As

9. For the deep patristic discussion of this, with specific reference to Ezekiel, see Christman 2005.

Word, he is the message from the Father, the “gospel” of which he is at once the messenger and the content.

This duality carries into the tradition of developed trinitarian doctrine. In one strand—of which Origen of Alexandria¹⁰ is perhaps the great teacher—the Father *sees* himself in the Son, whose being is to reflect the Father’s glory. In another—which we may find in Martin Luther¹¹—the Logos is so perfect an *expression* of the Father that he in turn is a speaker who answers the Father, to establish the Trinity as a conversation, even a community.

Seeing and hearing are with creatures and in this age two very different modes of perception: we objectify what we look at, but when we hear are ourselves the objects of the one who addresses us. Thus we do not know how to describe the reconciliation of seeing and hearing, nor then how to speak of the second triune person as at once Son/image and Logos. But it is an ancient maxim of theology: God is identical with his attributes, so that these also are identical with each other. Thus we must suppose that “God speaks” and “God shows” name the same reality, as do “God hears” and “God sees,” even though we can form no notion of this unity. We may even suppose that when we have been taken into God we too will see by hearing and hear by seeing. Perhaps we may say that prophets are those given to anticipate such wholeness of perception; consider the usage: “The words of Amos . . . which he saw” (Amos 1:1).

10. Origen flourished around AD 225 and was the founder both of my home discipline—systematic theology—and of disciplined biblical exegesis.

11. And of course others, e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979).