

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

THEMES IN THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL



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Ezekiel and History: The initial fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians took place in 598 BCE and resulted in the first deportations (see 2nd Kings 24:8–17; Jer. 24:1–10; 52:28). When the book of Ezekiel opens, the prophet is purported to be in Babylon, and the implications of 1:1, 33:21 and 40:1 are that he had been among the first group of deportees. This may well indicate he was from an important family and held a significant position within the Jerusalem hierarchy.

In Babylon he appears to have lived at a place called Tel Aviv (3:15), where he had a house. The exact location of Tel Aviv is not known but it is near a river Ezekiel calls the River Chebar, which is generally identified with the canal now called Shatt el-nil. It branches from the Euphrates close to Babylon and re-joins it at Uruk.

According to the date given in 1:1–3, some scholars have argued that Ezekiel received his call to be a prophet near his home in Babylon on 31st July 593 BCE, “the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin” (1:2). Indeed, it may be noted that if Ezekiel’s oracles are accepted at face value in terms the dating included within them, they are arranged in relatively accurate chronological order: only three dates are out of sequence – 29:1 (January 7th 587 BCE), 29:17 (April 26th 571, the latest date given in the book) and 32:1 (March 3rd 585).

In addition to reservations about whether such precise dating is possible, careful study indicates several other difficulties lying beneath a well-organised surface:

1. In 1:1 the year 593 is also described enigmatically as the “thirtieth year”. The meaning of this phrase has been much debated. It may refer to Ezekiel’s age at the time of his call. The reason proposed for this is that according to Numbers 4:23, thirty was the age for taking up priestly/Levitical duties (though Numbers 8:24 gives it as twenty five). If we take Numbers 4:23 as accurate and the “thirtieth year” as a reference to Ezekiel’s age, then the significance of the date is that Ezekiel’s call to prophecy came in the year he would have begun his priestly vocation if he had remained in Jerusalem. Thus at the very beginning of the book, the priestly and the prophetic are brought together. In addition, the importance of the priestly perspective and tradition for Ezekiel and the work which bears his name is indicated.
2. In the first twenty four chapters Ezekiel is represented as speaking to the exiles in Babylon, but the focus of his attention is really on Jerusalem and his Palestinian homeland. The thrust of his message is that further disaster is in store for Jerusalem after 598 BCE. Certainly, Ezekiel appears to have specific and intimate knowledge of what is going on in Palestine and Jerusalem. If we take seriously the geographic distance between Babylon and Jerusalem this is perplexing. It seems credulous to explain it through clairvoyance or, in Ezekiel’s own terminology, to say that God took him by a lock of his hair and spirited him away to Jerusalem (8:1-3). So it has been suggested that Ezekiel never did go to Babylon at all, and that he was really a prophet who lived in Jerusalem during the final years of the kingdom of Judah.

This view is extreme and there is no conclusive or persuasive evidence to doubt that Ezekiel was carried away from Jerusalem in the first deportation and that his call to prophecy occurred there, as described at the beginning of the book. Perhaps some time after this experience he travelled back to Jerusalem, believing that part of his prophetic commission was to warn Judah of the impending doom. This helps explain how he had such good information about Jerusalem during its last days and why he frequently seems to address his message to the people of Palestine rather than Babylon. On this reconstruction, he later returned to Babylon and finished his career among the exiles.

As attractive as this hypothesis is, it raises other issues. The most obvious is that Ezekiel was specifically commissioned to preach to the exiles (Ezek. 3:10-11). Some of the problems connected with Ezekiel's call and activity may be resolved when we remember that he had been brought up in Jerusalem and knew it very well. Furthermore, there was undoubtedly fairly frequent communication back and forth between exiles in Babylon and the residents of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's oracles against Judah and Jerusalem, if given in Babylon, could have been sent by letter (cf. Jer. 29). It is also likely that the exiles in Babylon were kept posted about the latest developments in Jerusalem either by word of mouth or letter.

3. It must be remembered that like other prophetic works Ezekiel was redacted/edited as the traditioning process was developed. In part this may have been begun by Ezekiel himself as he revised his own oracles in light of unfolding events; remember that the date given for his last recorded prophecy is c. 571 BCE (Ezek. 29:17), and that the twenty year span of his prophetic activity included the periods before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. At the end of his career he would have had time to look back and edit. Unquestionably the book of Ezekiel was further revised by later thinkers of the same perspective and school of thought. Some scholars argue for an extensive redaction, others for more limited editing.

Introducing Ezekiel: The book of Ezekiel is primarily concerned with the crisis of 587 BCE in Jerusalem and the consequent experience of displacement and chaos in the exile. Ezekiel thus shares this focus with the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, which precede it in the canon of the Latter Prophets. All three great prophetic books:

- (a) share a preoccupation with this crisis;
- (b) relate the crisis to God as the determining reality of life;
- (c) understand the crisis to be the result of God's judgment;
- (d) articulate the belief that God's faithfulness makes possible a hope for the future of Israel beyond exile.

With this commonality noted, it should be observed that Ezekiel was different and distinctive. Modern readers are likely to find the book at least unfamiliar, if not peculiar and difficult to follow. It presents familiar themes in unfamiliar ways and so imagines Israel's sense of faith in crisis in strange ways.

In part, the strangeness may be because of the traumatic events that form the context of the book, when all the established securities and stabilities of life are taken away from the community; truly, things had fallen apart for Israel. In part also, the radical strangeness may be related to the peculiar personality of Ezekiel, and this offers an interesting way to capture the attention of students.

So consider that a great deal of serious scholarship has been devoted to what is viewed as Ezekiel's disordered personality, which has been the subject of numerous psycho-analytical studies. While prophets were known to act and speak erratically for rhetorical purposes, Ezekiel is in a league of his own. The concentration of so many bizarre features in one individual is without precedent: his muteness; lying bound and naked; digging holes in the walls of houses; emotional paralysis in the face of his wife's death; mysterious and mystical spiritual travels; images of strange creatures, eyes and creeping things; hearing voices and the sounds of water; withdrawal symptoms; fascination with faeces and blood; wild literary imagination; pornographic imagery; an unreal if not surreal understanding of Israel's past. The list of the bizarre and even repulsive goes on and on as Ezekiel is depicted as an ecstatic, who has elaborate but strange visions that are recorded with extraordinary power.

One scholar – Karl Jaspers, in an important article from 1947 – finds in Ezekiel an unparalleled case for psychological analysis but argues against all attempts to detect pathological states of mind in Ezekiel. Another – E. C. Broome – goes much further and concludes that Ezekiel was a true psychotic, capable of great religious insight but exhibiting a series of diagnostic characteristics: catatonia, narcissistic-masochistic conflict, hallucinations,

schizophrenic withdrawal, delusions of grandeur and persecution. The assessment is that Ezekiel suffered from a paranoid condition common in many great spiritual leaders.

In the after-life of the text, also consider that on account of his extravagant visions, Ezekiel has become a sort of patron saint for visionary poets. These include John Milton and William Blake (who actually claimed to have dined with Ezekiel and Isaiah!). The opening of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland" alludes to Ezekiel's call narrative.

While all of this is immensely intriguing, finally it has to be stressed that the distinctiveness of Ezekiel's prophetic articulation is grounded in an identifiable interpretive approach that is found across the Old Testament: the Priestly tradition. It viewed the faith of Israel through the lens of God's holiness and has a strong interest in the language of cleanness/uncleanness. Intense anxiety and trouble arose when it was perceived that a Holy God could no longer be present in the midst of an impure, profane people. This resulted in what may be termed a crisis of presence/absence. Such a concern is not unknown in the traditions of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but it does not occupy the same importance there as in the book of Ezekiel.

Although, from a modern view-point there are many elements of the bizarre both in Ezekiel's behaviour and in the way he expresses his message, it should be underlined that the content of that message is substantially rational. If the book at all represents his mind, the prophet was a powerful, profound and, according to his lights, a courageous thinker, whose influence in reshaping traditional Israelite religion to meet the needs of the post-exilic age was immensely strong and important. It ought to be pondered whether it is plausible that such influence could have been exercised by a person of deranged mind. While Ezekiel comes across, on any assessment, as a striking and extraordinary figure, in the context of the ancient world and what that world expected of an inspired religious figure, he may have appeared much less strange and remarkable than he seems to a twenty-first century reader.

Structure and Language: If the character of Ezekiel is complex, the structure of the book of Ezekiel is straightforward, being almost systematically arranged in two parts. The first part, chapters 1–24, broadly concerns impending judgment on Jerusalem; the second, chapters 25–48, concerns anticipated restoration for Jerusalem,

especially after the oracles against the nations in chapters 25–32. The book thus unfolds in the following way:

- A. Prophecies given before the final fall of Jerusalem (593–587 BCE).
 1. Chapters 1–3 – Ezekiel's opening vision and call narrative.
 2. Chapters 4–24 – Oracles of doom against Judah and Jerusalem.
- B. Chapters 25–32 – Oracles against the neighbouring nations.
- C. Prophecies given after the fall of Jerusalem (587–573 BCE).
 1. Chapters 33–39 – Oracles of promise.
 2. Chapters 40–48 – Vision of Jerusalem and the land restored

The development of the two overarching themes in the book is not simple but to begin with note should be taken that Ezekiel is organized around the twofold message of judgment and hope.

One of the book's most distinctive features is the particular kind of language it uses. This language is strongly reminiscent of the priestly sections of the Pentateuch, and is full of characteristic and idiosyncratic phrases. Some of the more striking or frequent of these are worth noting and knowing:

- The prophet is often addressed by God as "son of man". This occurs nearly 100 times in the book. This form of address is not used elsewhere in the Old Testament, except in a very different kind of context, in Daniel.
- God is characteristically addressed in the double phrase *adonay yhw* (often translated "Lord God" but more literally "Lord Yahweh"). This double title is not unique to Ezekiel; other prophets use it, but much less extensively. By comparison, it occurs only about a dozen times in Jeremiah, but more than 200 times in Ezekiel.
- "Rebellious House" is a phrase applied to the prophet's own people, and in this form is peculiar to Ezekiel.
- "Behold, I am against..." usually "Behold I am against you". This expression is not confined to Ezekiel but it is typical of him (it is found quite commonly in Jeremiah too).

- “I, Yahweh, have spoken it”, sometimes followed by “and I have done it” or “and I will do it”. This occurs characteristically as a concluding formula at the end of an oracle.
- A very characteristic formula of Ezekiel’s, also generally found at the end of prophecies, is “And they shall know that I am the Lord”.
- In his prophesying, the prophet is on a number of occasions told to “Set your face against...” or “Set your face towards...”
- It is very characteristic of Ezekiel’s style that he introduces a subject by means of a question, usually put into the mouth of God. So in 8:6, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing...?” (cf. 8:12, 15, 17).

This distinctive vocabulary and usage further contributes to the distinctiveness of the book of Ezekiel.

The Call of Ezekiel: The initial vision of God reported in chapter 1 is extremely enigmatic. It very likely intends to signal that God is not confined or limited to the Jerusalem temple but can come and go in a way that allows the divine presence to be among even exiles in a foreign and impure land. It is evident that Ezekiel is preoccupied with the issue of God’s presence in Israel. This is resolved in 1:28 and 3:23 with an appearance “like the glory”, a phrase which echoes a Priestly concern resolved in Exodus 40:34. This first encounter, however, does not dwell excessively on divine presence, but focuses on the call of Ezekiel, the command to “eat this scroll” (3:1) and to be “a watchperson for the house of Israel” (3:16-21). The effect of the opening chapters is to authorize and dispatch this strange voice of witness in Israel in the midst of its deep crisis.

Ezekiel’s Condemnation: The call of chapters 1–3 is followed by chapters 4–10, which underline that judgment is the primary theme of the first half of the book. Chapters 4–6 report on the prophet’s peculiar actions that portend impending judgment on Jerusalem; chapter 8 characterizes the “abomination” that has been committed in the Jerusalem temple that elicits God’s anger and, subsequently, God’s absence. It is characteristic that the offence to God in this Priestly tradition is a violation of the holiness of the temple; it is thus stressed that the horizon of Ezekiel is singularly sacerdotal/sacrificial. The culmination of these narratives of denunciation is that in chapter 9

the idolaters are marked for destruction because of the “abominations” they have committed, and then in 10:15-19 the prophet envisions the glory of the Lord – that is, the sign of God’s presence in the temple – departing from the temple, thereby making it a place of absence. The material that follows in chapters 11-24 is essentially a reiteration of condemnation of Israel as abomination and the harsh judgment that must flow from such scandalous disobedience to God.

Condemnation Confirmed: In chapter 13 the prophet delivers a sharp condemnation of prophets who “whitewash” reality and falsely proclaim “Peace” (*shalom*) over the city of Jerusalem (13:10). This indictment calls to mind similar strictures by Jeremiah against false assurances (see Jer. 6:13–15; 8:10–12; 23:9–22; 28:1–17). It seems most likely that these false prophets were those who believed that Jerusalem was forever protected because of God’s promises and presence; their view reflects a high Zion theology. It is remarkable that Ezekiel, so accustomed to and deeply rooted in the pattern of temple worship, was able to reject such a powerful belief in the role of the temple. He evidently does so because he intuits that God’s sovereignty, of which he has a sweeping sense, cannot be reduced to nor contained within the temple.

Ezekiel’s View of Israel’s History: In three extensive and remarkable chapters, Ezekiel traces the history of Israel with God as a history of failure and obscene violation of trust (16; 20; 23). These are astounding re-readings of that long history, not only because it is presented as a history of failure from the beginning, but also because the relationship of God and Israel is depicted as an intimate relationship. The relationship is envisaged as becoming erotic and then obscene in ways that display all of the distortions and betrayals of which a close relationship is capable. This is explicit, stunning and challenging material. The impression given is that the prophet is trying to find the most extreme and offensive imagery possible in order to portray what he believes to be the most offensive and extreme distortion of a relationship that began in generosity and compassion. The negation of the relationship is unspeakable in its abhorrence, so Ezekiel struggles to speak the unspeakable (see 16:26–29; 23:17–21). Note that the affront against God is not moral as such, but springs from emotions and passions that are well beneath any morality and that engender in God the rage befitting a betrayed, humiliated, jealous husband (see 16:39–43).

It is remarkable that a priestly-prophetic tradition so interested in symmetry and right ordering should express such elemental and seemingly uncontrollable passion. The reason given for the immensely hostile reaction from God is that God's holy name has been profaned, and God must act decisively to recover God's reputation in "the sight of the nations" (5:8, 14).

Anticipation of Restoration and Its Purpose:

Given the force of Israel's condemnation in general, and the power of the imagery through which God's relationship to Israel is imagined in particular, readers are not prepared for the anticipations of restoration found already in the first half of the book. These anticipations – see 11:14–21; 16:60–63; and 17:22–24 – look beyond the certain devastation to come and promise God's restorative activity.

Such promises in the context of harsh judgment may be the result of careless editing/redaction. In a literary-canonical perspective they indicate that even the harshest condemnation and fullest judgments against Jerusalem that can be uttered are penultimate in the final form of the text. Harsh judgment is inescapable, but it is not the last word. Thus these promissory passages connect the harshness of chapters 1–24 to the visions of restoration that follow in chapters 33–48. In these harbingers of restoration it is clear that the theological shape of the book of Ezekiel is parallel to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah. In all three the final form of the text is shaped by voices of prophetic hope and anticipation. This became the normative prophetic pattern in emerging Judaism.

The Ending of the First Half: The first half of the book of Ezekiel ends with a notice (24:25–27) that is as enigmatic in a different way as the opening vision of chapter 1. The prophet's awareness of the impending doom of Jerusalem has reduced him to silence, a traumatic personal manifestation of the public trauma to come upon Jerusalem in its final days: as Ezekiel has lost his wife, so the inhabitants of Jerusalem will lose "their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their heart's affection, as well as their sons and daughters" (24:25).

In this way the extended text of judgment concludes in silence, but the silence itself is an eloquent and unmistakable indication of the depth of loss, alienation and abandonment felt by the prophet at a personal and public level. Characteristically, however, the prophetic tradition cannot finish at the dismal end of verse 25. Instead, the formulation in verse 26, "on that day", begins a process that moves beyond the devastation foreshadowed in

verse 25. The new day sure to come is the day when Ezekiel receives "the news" that Jerusalem has been destroyed. But there is a redemptive significance in Jerusalem's impending fall and the beginning of hope for the future: God's holiness will have been vindicated and Ezekiel's condemnatory oracles will have been confirmed; the nadir of despair will have been reached and a radical reversal is in prospect.

Thus when the city falls the prophet is ready to turn to newness. He can do this, however, only because God can now turn to newness because God's holy name has been vindicated by the destruction of that which caused the profanation of the name – the distorted and polluted temple. The first half of the book of Ezekiel ends with a decisive and ringing declaration from God: "I am the Lord" (24:27). The newness from God and God's prophet is explicit. Implicit in this assertion and carefully left unsaid, is that when God and God's prophet move on, it also becomes possible to envisage and articulate Israel's rescue. So 24:25–27 is a major turning point in the book of Ezekiel that signals the possibility of moving away from condemnation.

From Judgment to Restoration: The second half of the book of Ezekiel consists of a rich variety of expressions of hope for the future of Jerusalem. These chapters then constitute a balancing counterpoint to the judgment of the first half of the book, and make clear the twofold movement in prophetic imagination of judgment and hope as they swirl around the defining crisis of Jerusalem.

Before specifically turning to the oracles of hope and restoration, notice should be taken of 33:21. This message comes from Jerusalem in the twelfth year of the exile of Jehoiachin, that is, 586 BCE. The messenger had escaped the city as it suffered its final destruction at the hands of Babylon, and brought succinct news of the battle to the exilic community in Babylon: "The city has fallen!" This utterance is a usual type of battle report (see also Jeremiah 50:2 concerning Babylon).

The news of the destruction of Jerusalem is devastating: the Holy City has been captured. In the thought world of Ezekiel, however, this news that is otherwise devastating is actually a great release. The devastation indicates the reassertion of God's holiness for all to see. At the same time, it represents the vindication of Ezekiel's long pronouncement of woe. More specifically, it ends Ezekiel's silence, imposed by God. Ezekiel is now free to speak. While that speech contains left over traces of judgment, it is primarily a visionary anticipation of restoration.

A Good Shepherd, a New Heart and No More Dry

Bones: Chapters 33–37 constitute some of the most interesting and moving passages of promise in the Ezekiel tradition. This section of texts is introduced in chapter 33 by a disputatious announcement that perhaps reflects the disputatious context of exilic Israel. The judgment on the disobedient continues in 34:1-10 with a harsh condemnation of kings in Israel, for whom the metaphor of “shepherd” is used. The thrust of the passage is that self-aggrandizing kings have caused the “scattering” (i.e., exile) of Judah. By 34:11 however, the oracle of judgment against the king turns to hope. The remainder of the chapter portrays God’s willingness to be the “good shepherd”, that is, the good king who compassionately governs in the interests of all members of society. In this way the prophet indicates a radical turn in the prospects of Israel that is to be brought about by God’s own resolve and self-announcement.

Still focusing on a new future, the tradition offers a remarkable statement in 36:22–32. In this text, God promises a radically new future for Israel, the content of which is found in 36:24–28. The passage asserts that God has the capacity to work a transformative newness on behalf of God’s people. But note: it is astonishing that this new resolve of God is framed in verses 22 and 32 with a decisive denial of God’s concern for Israel. Initially, God says “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act.” This is reinforced with “It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God.” In some other traditions (especially Hosea and Jeremiah) such newness from God is grounded in God’s compassion for and faithfulness to Israel: but not here. Here the newness is not because God loves Israel. Instead, in this tradition God is preoccupied with how God appears to others and God’s reputation among the nations. So God’s actions are intended to enhance God: God’s motivation is to vindicate the divine name, the primary content of which is not God’s reputation as compassionate, forgiving or just, but rather God’s reputation as a powerful deity. The case has been made that in Ezekiel God acts out of “divine self-interest.” One scholar suggests God’s actions are rooted in vanity. In this perspective, the rescue of Israel is a happy by-product of God’s self-vindication, but nonetheless only a by-product (see also 39:26-29). This exploration of motivation is significant because it shows that in the Ezekiel tradition hope for Israel’s future is grounded not in love but in holiness. This is very different from other traditions.

A remarkable text in this section of the book of Ezekiel is 37:1–14. In this passage, the “Valley of

Dry Bones” is a metaphor for Israel in exile with no prospect for the future. After an intense verbal exchange between God and God’s prophet, the text ends in a divine oracle promising new life and restoration in the land (37:12–13). Note that his reassurance is totally God-centred. The future of Israel is dependent on a fresh decree by God, who will commit an act of life-giving power. The force of the passage arises from the interplay between the concrete concern about re-entry into the land and the image of the resurrection of the dead. It is important that the divine announcement moves between these two ideas so that any thought concerning resurrection of the dead (a topic open to all sorts of abstract speculation) is not divorced from the down to earth issue of land. This interplay assures that, whatever other dimensions it may have, the Bible’s understanding of the future is intensely practical and this worldly. In Israel’s expectation, the old promises of land continue to be powerfully at work among the landless exiles in the sixth century.

In 37:14 the ultimate promise of God is to give life by the divine gift of the spirit (which may also be translated as “breath”). The news of the book of Ezekiel is that God wills life and has the power to grant it (see 33:11). Finally, however, the gift of new life is for the enhancement of God, who thereby establishes God’s own prestige and credibility: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord” (37:14). In the valley of bones, God animates the bones not so that they can live, but so that they can know that the Lord is God. God acts principally for the sake of God’s name.

Thus chapters 34–37 are a strong and active promise for the future of Israel, taking full account of present dire circumstances and referring the future to the power of God.

The Restoration of the Temple and Renewal of

Creation: The final, quite extended unit of hope in Ezekiel is chapters 40–48. It is a vision of the restoration of the temple and the restored presence of God in the Jerusalem temple. From this, the renewal of creation flows. The rebuilt temple is the pivotal vision of loss and return. Already talked about in the Isaiah and Jeremiah traditions, in Ezekiel it is closely informed by priestly expertise. In this way, for Ezekiel, it is grounded in known reality but projected into the future. Consequently, the vision is very precise about construction, reflecting the kind of carefulness associated with the priestly tradition, which pays close attention to sacerdotal detail.

In this vision, the text has two pivot points. First, in 43:1–5 the glory of the Lord returns to Jerusalem and takes up residence in the newly purified temple envisaged in this priestly tradition. This return, a decisive element of priestly hope, is made possible by the careful reordering of cultic life through a series of provisions and regulated practices outlined in chapters 40–42 (and 45). This priestly vision of the newly given divine presence is deeply instructed by what is known and remembered of the past so that the renewed temple is an important continuity with the past. The dramatic return of God's glory (43:1–5; a glory permanently secured for the temple in 44:1–3), is the decisive antidote to the departure of God's glory in chapters 9 and 10. In the priestly perspective, the supreme punishment of God is divine absence; the supreme resolution of the crisis is restored cultic presence.

The priestly tradition to which Ezekiel bears witness places immense importance on the temple. This is especially evident in chapter 47, in which the rivers of life flow “from below the threshold of the temple” (47:1): thus the renewal of creation is dependent on the restoration of the temple. It is clear that in priestly imagination, the rivers of Eden in Genesis 2:10–14 have now been placed in a liturgical-worship context so that the anticipated temple guarantees not only the presence of God but life-giving sustenance for all creation. For the Ezekiel tradition, the temple is crucial: it is the epicentre of the new creation and its importance cannot be exaggerated. This tradition therefore holds a very high view of the temple. Indeed, it can be said that the temple itself is the entry point for newness in the Ezekiel tradition.

So the temple is also the entry point for the recovered and re-entered land. Thus the second pivot point in this series of chapters envisioning restoration begins in 47:13: “Thus says the Lord God: These are the boundaries by which you shall divide the land for inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph shall have two portions.” This form of words parallels what is found in Joshua 13–19; so the Ezekiel tradition redeploys the old promises of land, tribe by tribe, in an exile-ending reapportionment.

A Summary Reflection: The book of Ezekiel is a demanding extended exploration of the crisis precipitated by loss and the prospect of renewal in ancient Jerusalem. According to priestly thought, the loss is because of ritual contamination. The future is rooted in the will of the Holy God to be present in restored Israel. In a sovereign way – that

is, in and of and by itself – this will create the conditions that make renewed presence possible. The tradition of Ezekiel proceeds in a rigorous, substantially austere way without much offer of generosity or graciousness on God's part. The gift of newness in this tradition is very sure because it is grounded in nothing short of God's self-regard: Israel is the beneficiary of God's own intention to be well regarded, sovereign and present.

Ezekiel, the Contemporary World and

Synoptic Assessment: Although in many ways the book of Ezekiel is alien to us in its outlook and understanding of religious experience, it still resonates strongly with aspects of the contemporary world. Among these we can identify:

1. The theme of where God is experienced is central to Ezekiel. Initially Ezekiel the Jerusalem priest believed that God could only be encountered in the cultic-worship practices of the Jerusalem temple. But through the displacement of exile he learnt that God's presence could also be experienced in Babylon. However, notice should also be taken that by the end of the book the central and defining role of the Jerusalem temple is reasserted. In the modern world this may be related to questions of where God is encountered and whether it is necessary to go to church (the equivalent of “temple”) to be religious and know God; with declining church numbers in the West the question arises about whether the church will ever have the central position it once had in society (the equivalent of Ezekiel's restored temple), and indeed whether it should ever have had such a position. The issue of legitimate or valid religious experiences may also be discussed – for example, are impromptu religious type shrines established when a celebrity dies expressions of authentic religious feeling (think of David Bowie, Lady Diana Spencer, flowers placed where someone has died in a road accident etc.)?
2. In Ezekiel's priestly perspective, the temple fell because it had become impure and corrupted – an abomination; this observation may act as a bridge to exploration of the impact of scandal in the modern church.
3. Purity is vitally important for Ezekiel; how important is it for religious experience in the modern world? For example, is the debate about whether openly gay people should be welcomed into the church a variation of the purity concern? Is the priestly-purity tradition the only one in the Bible? How do these traditions relate?

4. It is not difficult to find examples of extreme religious language in the book of Ezekiel; this may be related to issues of free speech and hate speech. Do sacred texts have a special status, even when for many they contain offensive material? This raises the subject of hermeneutics and how texts are used.
5. The book of Ezekiel is replete with strange religious experiences; this offers an opportunity to explore and examine the variety and validity of different religious experiences in Christianity and other world religions.
6. The Ezekiel tradition was precipitated by the fall of Jerusalem and Judah to Babylon, understood in the Bible as an imperial power. This tradition therefore emerges from the reality of exile, deportation, displacement, refugee status, the tension between those who left the homeland and those who stayed behind (known in the Bible as “the people of the land”). These are all elements in the contemporary world, as is the concept of imperially powerful nations intervening in the affairs of smaller countries. This may be related to the concept of “structural sin” and may lead to exploration of how an ancient text can contribute to an ethical understanding of a modern context.

Concept Deepening – The Priestly Tradition:

In Ezekiel 22:26 priests in particular are singled out for condemnation: God announces that the “priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.” This condemnation reflects Ezekiel’s commitment to the priestly tradition, in which it is precisely mixing what must be kept apart that causes confusion and therefore threat. The function of priests, according to this teaching, is to protect holy things, for the maintenance of holy things makes possible the abiding presence of God. This attentive sorting out and maintenance of distinctions is a primary preoccupation of the priestly tradition reflected in Leviticus, with which Ezekiel has strong affinities: he would have had strong empathy with the primitive teaching of Leviticus 19:19. In this tradition the coming crisis in Jerusalem arises from the failure of the leadership to create a cultic environment hospitable to the reliable residence of God.

The concept of the priestly tradition was developed by Protestant (mainly German) biblical scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With a bias towards the ethical emphasis of the prophetic tradition, they tended to use the term “priestly” in a pejorative way. Overall, they revealed a deep antipathy towards all matters cultic, which were considered ritualistic, primitive and magical. In this view, the priestly tradition was understood as an expression of late and “degenerate” Judaism, with a rigid focus on obeying rules and regulations. This attitude, so crucial and influential in the history of scholarship, helped create a common Christian stereotype of Judaism and thus, it may be argued, played a part in antisemitism. It may also be noted that this Protestant scholarship contains an element of secondary polemic against Roman Catholicism, which was viewed as equally priestly in its devotion to punctilious ritual practices that were seen as primitive and magical.

Modern scholarship recognizes that the priestly tradition articulates a lively, thoughtful approach to faith that both underlines the importance of symbolism in religion and sustains ethical practice as part of a passionate vision of reality. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist and Bible scholar, has proposed that an emphasis on “purity” (and associated cultic matters) is characteristic of a community under deep social threat: so the creation of a cultic world of imagination is a serious offer of an ordered world of well-being as an alternative to an exilic world perceived as hostile and chaotic. In the exile, profoundly displaced people no doubt experienced the world around them as chaotic and hostile: the priestly tradition provided a different world to live in and thereby helped maintain a distinct and confident faith identity in a profoundly alien environment. Note, however, that this tradition, which was finally shaped in exile, drew upon and valued much older traditions, for a focus on purity and cultic identity had undoubtedly been a part of faith at all stages of Israel’s life. The cultic agenda of purity was not simply a reactive or defensive measure in the exilic faith of Israel; an active cultic life related to ensuring the presence of God had always played an important part in Israel’s experience and understanding of faith.

