

A Message of Hope

But - and what a 'but' - in stark contrast, in amazing contrast to that solemn commission, and of much greater importance, both short term and long, in spite of the catalogue of their sins and rebellion, God did have a message of hope for Judah through the prophet. Indeed, hard on the heels of his pronouncement of judgment, God went on to say:

As I live, declares the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord God. I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord (Ezek. 20:33-38).

And so on. God would purify the people, removing the rebels from among them, and do a new thing for the nation, something almost beyond imagination. He would restore Judah to their land. He would ensure the rebuilding of the temple. He would reinstate the kingdom. And all in triumphant glory. This is the message Ezekiel was commissioned to deliver to the people.

But such is only the bare bones of the message. Ezekiel's prophecy is taken up with the nation's restoration, the prophet expanding and expounding his message of hope. God would give the people, by the Spirit, a new heart, mind and will to obey him, turning them to him in submission to his law. Moreover, God would bring about the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem - a glorious temple, at that - with all that went with it: the reinstatement of the priesthood and sacrifices, the festivals, the kingship, with the people living in perfect harmony and order under the law. Ezekiel's majestic message of hope, culminating in chapters 40 to 48, rises to its climax with its resounding final verse of glorious triumph; Jerusalem

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would be given a new name: 'THE LORD IS THERE' (Ezek. 48:35).³

And, make no mistake, Ezekiel was predicting the nation's amazing return in splendid triumph. We have a yardstick ready at hand by which we can catch a glimmer of the staggering extent of Ezekiel's prophecy, how far-reaching the restoration was to be. I am talking about Solomon's kingdom and temple, which, of course, was still very much painfully alive in the memory of the older Jews during the weary days of their captivity. With grief in their hearts over their loss, they recalled the departed splendour of Solomon's court, and the magnificence of the temple which he built. They had not forgotten the unsolicited testimony of the Queen of Sheba, after her visit to Jerusalem and all she had seen and heard there:

When the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more breath in her. And she said to the king: 'The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report that I heard. Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness' (1 Kings 10:4-9).

This was no accident. David, having a fitting sense of the importance of the work he had in mind, had long before ensured that everything would be in place for his son Solomon to build a worthy temple when the time came. He took all necessary steps to guarantee that there would be no lack of

³ Actually, this final message of hope opens in Ezek. 39:25-29.

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material, nothing to hinder the work when Solomon was ready to build a temple - a sanctuary of immense magnificence, an appropriate reflection of the glory and honour of the LORD whose house it was to be:

Solomon my son is young and inexperienced, and the house that is to be built for the Lord must be exceedingly magnificent, of fame and glory throughout all lands. I will therefore make preparation for it (1 Chron. 22:5).

And so it was. And not only the temple. Solomon's kingdom in every respect was indescribably splendid. But, at its heart, the temple he built for God was 'exceedingly magnificent'. A magnificent temple for the great God himself, God dwelling in all his glory among his people. It is impossible to overstate the importance that God and Israel attached to the temple (2 Chron. 6:12 - 7:22).⁴ It was not merely the gold, the carved cedar and the splendour of all its fittings; it was, above all, the presence of God that made the temple glorious.

But with the Babylonian captivity, that temple, Solomon's temple, set in motion by king David himself, had been smashed to smithereens, stripped of its wealth, and its treasures carted away at pagan pleasure. The city lay in utter ruin, and the kingdom had come to an ignominious end. All was now desolate. Nothing but heaps of rubble and charred timber remained in what had once been the city of David, God's dwelling place (Neh. 2:3,13,17).

Thus it was that in those very circumstances Ezekiel delivered his message of hope.

And, let us not forget, Ezekiel was promising a regime that would rise to greater heights of glory than that of Solomon's day. The release of the Jews from Babylonian slavery, their return to their land, the rebuilding of the temple, the restoration of the kingdom, and that at a far higher level of grandeur than even that of Solomon in all his glory, making that pale to nothing - what a message, what a prospect! What

⁴ See my 'The Place of "Place" in the New Covenant'.

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relief, what joy, what delight it must have given to the wretched captives, to hear God's glorious predictions and promises of hope through the prophet, even as they, miserably huddled together by the river in Babylon, were being taunted by their captors!

So, while the city lay in ruins, and the Jews languished in captivity in Babylon, Ezekiel delivered his message of hope: God would re-gather Judah to their land, bring about a new temple in a re-constituted kingdom, and all with a glory that exceeded that of Solomon's time.

How Are We to Understand this Message of Hope?

Ezekiel, living in the days of the old covenant, spoke in old-covenant language. What else could he do? So, how are we going to interpret his prophecy? That's the question! Surely as we interpret all the prophets. And that means, as always, the first interpretation must be its application to the Jews of Ezekiel's time.

Hope for the Jews of the Prophet's Time

Ezekiel was, in the first instance, a preacher to the Jews of his own day. And God, through the prophet, was encouraging his people to look forward to the time when he would end their captivity and restore them to their land. As Ezekiel's fellow-prophet, Jeremiah, predicted, he would do this for them after seventy years in Babylon (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10). Daniel based his prayers upon the promise, arguing it out before the LORD (Dan. 9:2). While Ezekiel was not so precise as to timing, nevertheless, he also went on holding out hope to the Jews in their captivity, exhorting them to look forward to that better day, spelling it all out in detail. The promised day of restoration would surely come. This is the first layer of interpretation: hope for the Jews in Babylon. And, after the predicted seventy years, the day of restoration dawned, and Judah returned to their homeland (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-5).