

**Israel As a Hardened Repeater,
Is Facing YHWH's Burning Destruction from the North--
Her Only Hope Lies in YHWH's Nature (Chapter 20)**

20:1 And it happened in the seventh year, in the fifth (month), on (the) tenth (day) to the month, men came from Israel's elders / officials, to seek / inquire of YHWH, and they sat before me. 20:2 And the word of YHWH was / came to me, saying: 20:3 Son of a human, speak to Israel's elders / officials; and you shall say to them, In this way my Lord YHWH spoke: Are you coming to seek / inquire of Me? As I live, I will not be sought by you (plural)--(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH! 20:4 Will you pronounce judgment on them / be their judge, will you pronounce judgment / be a judge, Son of Humanity? (The) abominations of their fathers, make known to them! 20:5 And you shall say to them, In this was my Lord YHWH spoke: On (the) day of My choosing Israel--and I lifted My hand to (the) descendant(s) of Jacob's house; and I was made known to them in Egypt-land. And I lifted My hand to them, saying, I (am) YHWH your God! 20:6 On that day I raised My hand to them, to bring them forth from Egypt-land, to a land which I searched / spied out for them, flowing milk and honey--it is a beauty to all the lands / countries! 20:7 And I said to them, each one, (the) detested things of his eyes, throw away! And by Egypt's idols, do not make yourselves unclean! I (am) YHWH your God! 20:8 And they rebelled against Me, and were not willing to listen to Me. Each one did not throw away his eyes' detestable things; and they did not forsake Egypt's idols. And I said / determined to pour out My wrath upon them, to finish My anger on them in (the) midst of Egypt-land. 20:9 And I acted on behalf of My name, to not be profaned in (the) eyes of the nations; whose midst they were in--so that I was made known to them before their eyes, to bring them forth from Egypt-land. 20:10 And I brought them forth from Egypt-land, and I brought them into the desert / wilderness. 20:11 And I gave to them My statutes (feminine plural), and My commandments I made known to them, which the human / man shall do, and he will live by them. 20:12 And also My sabbath-rests I gave to them, to be for a sign between Me and them--to know that I, YHWH am setting them apart. 20:13 And Israel's household rebelled against Me in the desert / wilderness. By My statutes (feminine plural) they did not walk, and My commandments they rejected / refused, which a human / man will do, and he will live by them. And My sabbaths they polluted / profaned exceedingly. And I said / determined to pour out My wrath over / against them in the desert / wilderness, to finish them off! 20:14 And I acted on behalf of My name, so as not to profane (it) in (the) eyes of the nations, when I brought them forth in their eyes. 20:15 And also I, I lifted My Hand to them in the desert / wilderness, to not bring them to the land which I gave (them)--flowing (with) milk and honey--it (is) a beauty, to all the lands / countries. 20:16 On account of they rejected My commandments and My statutes (feminine plural); they did not walk by / in them. And My sabbaths they polluted / profaned. Because after their idols their heart (was) walking / going! 20:17 And My eye pitied / spared them (to keep Me) from destroying them; and I did not make them an annihilation in the desert / wilderness. 20:18 And I said to their children in the desert / wilderness, By your fathers' statutes (masculine plural) you shall not walk; and their commandments you shall not keep; and by their idols you shall not make yourselves unclean! 20:19 I (am) YHWH your God--by My statutes (feminine plural) walk! And My commandments, keep! And do them! 20:20 And My sabbaths--keep set-apart! And they will be for a sign between Me and (between) you, to know that I (am) YHWH your God. 20:21 And the

children / sons rebelled against Me. By My statutes (feminine plural) they did not walk, and My commandments they did not keep, to do them—which the human / man will do them, and he will live by them. My sabbaths they polluted / profaned. And I said / determined to pour out My wrath upon them, to finish off My anger against them in the desert / wilderness. 20:22 And I returned / held back My hand, and I acted on behalf of My name, so as to not to be profaned in (the) eyes of the nations who—I brought them forth (from Egypt-land) in their eyes. 20:23 Also, I, I raised My hand to them in the desert / wilderness, to scatter them among the nations, to disperse (synonym) them among the lands / countries. 20:24 On account of My commandments they did not do, and My statutes (feminine plural) they rejected / refused; and My sabbaths they profaned / polluted, and their eyes were (following) after their fathers' idols. 20:25 And also I, I gave to them statutes, not good ones, and commandments—you will not live by them! 20:26 And I made them unclean / defiled them by their gifts, in causing to pass through [the fire] every (child) first opening a womb. I appalled them, so that they might know that I (am) YHWH. 20:27 Therefore speak to Israel's house, son of Adam / Humanity--and say to them, In this way my Lord YHWH spoke: Again (in) this (way) your fathers reviled / blasphemed Me, by their acting faithlessly against Me, he was / they were unfaithful. 20:28 And I brought them to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand [swearing] to give it to them. And they saw every high hill, and every leafy tree--and they sacrificed there their sacrifices; and they gave there (the) provocation of their offering. And they placed there their quieting / soothing smell, and they poured out there their drink offerings. 20:29 And I said to them, What (is) the high place, where you (plural) (are) the ones coming / going? And its name was called High Place until this day. 20:30 Therefore, say to Israel's house(hold), In this way my Lord YHWH spoke: Are you not becoming unclean in (the) way of your fathers? And (following) after their abominations, (are you not) prostituting yourselves? 20:31 And when your lift up your gifts, when causing your children / sons to pass through the fire, you are defiling yourselves by all your idols, until today! And I, will I be sought by you, house(hold) of Israel? As I live--(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH--I will not be sought by you! 20:32 And the offering-up of your (plural) spirit, shall surely not be--of which you are saying We will be like the nations, like clans of the lands, serving wood and stone! 20:33 As I live--(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH--With a strong Hand and outstretched Arm and with wrath poured out I will Reign / be King over you! 20:34 And I will bring you forth from the peoples, and I will gather you from the lands in which you were scattered, with a strong Hand and with an outstretched Arm and with wrath poured out! 20:35 And I will bring you (plural) to a desert / wilderness of the peoples. And I will enter into judgment with you there, Faces to faces / Face to face--20:36 just as I entered into judgment with your fathers in a desert / wilderness of Egypt-land. In this way I will be judged with you (plural)--(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH! 20:37 And I will cause you (plural) to cross over beneath the (Shepherd's) rod! And I will bring you into (the) bond of the covenant. 20:38 And I will purge out the rebels from you, and the ones transgressing against Me from (the) land of their temporary residence, I will bring them forth; but / and into (the) land of Israel he will not come / enter. And you (plural) will know that I (am) YHWH! 20:39 And you (plural), House of Israel, in this way my Lord YHWH spoke: Each one, go, serve his idols! And afterwards, if you (plural) are not listening to Me, but / and My set-apart Name you will still not pollute / profane, with your gifts and with your idols. 20:40 Because on My set-apart mountain, on a mountain of height of Israel--(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH--there all of Israel's household will serve Me, all of it, in the land. There I will accept / be pleased with them; and there I will seek your offer-

ings, and (the) first-fruit of your liftings-up, in / with all your set-apart things. 20:41 With a quieting / soothing smell I will accept you (plural), when I bring you forth from the peoples; and I will gather you from the lands where you were scattered. And I will be set-apart among you (plural), in (the) eyes of the nations 20:42 And you will know that I (am) YHWH, when I bring you (plural) to (the) land of Israel, to the land concerning which I lifted up My hand [in swearing] to give it to your fathers. 20:43 And you shall remember there your ways, and all your deeds / practices with which you defiled yourselves. And you will feel a loathing at yourselves in / for all your evils which you did / practiced. 20:44 And you will know that I (am) YHWH, when I do to / make you for the sake of My name—not according to your evil ways, and according to your corrupting deeds / practices O house of Israel! (It is) a saying of my Lord YHWH!

**Israel As a Hardened Repeater,
Is Facing YHWH's Burning Destruction from the North--
Her Only Hope Lies in YHWH's Nature (Chapter 20)⁸⁷²**

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Rabbi Fisch entitles **chapter 20** “An Inquiry About Jerusalem’s Fate.” He comments that “The discourse in this chapter is a reply to some of the elders who came to the prophet to inquire about the ultimate fate of Jerusalem, and perhaps also to request that he might invoke [YHWH’s] mercy to annul His decree regarding the impending destruction of the state. On Divine authority Ezekiel replies that the tragic fate of Jerusalem is irrevocable, because the same stubbornness and disobedience to the law of [YHWH] which characterized their ancestors in Egypt, the wilderness and the holy land are still prevalent among their contemporaries...

“Yet the destruction of the temple and the fall of the state will not mean the end of the covenant which [YHWH] had made with Israel. Any attempt on their part to terminate that covenant and to assimilate themselves to other nations will be frustrated by His intervention. The wicked who persisted in eliminating [YHWH] from their lives will perish, and only the righteous remnant will return to a reborn and purified Zion, and there dedicate themselves to the service of [YHWH].” (P. 120)

Matties states that in chapter 20, “Ezekiel offers a surprising twist on history to the exilic community, which aims to convince them both that Jerusalem’s judgment is inevitable and justified.” (P. 1182)

Eichrodt entitles **chapter 20** “Israel’s History a History of Sin.” He entitles **verses 1-4** “An Inquiry by the Elders of Israel and the Refusal of an Answer.” He comments that “The reason which the prophet gives for [YHWH’s] refusal of an answer consists in a powerful pro-clamation of judgment which throws an unexpected light on the history of the chosen people. Israel was accustomed to look back proudly over the past, and point out the glory of the old heroic days...(Psalms 80:8ff.; 105:8ff.; 132; 136:10ff.)...

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"But now all this disappears, and Israel's history from its first beginnings down to the present day [591 B.C.E.] shows itself defiled and deformed by the abominations of unfaithfulness and rebelliousness against [YHWH's] gracious will. There is nothing here of which the chosen people can boast, but all is dominated by the Divine patience and faithfulness which looks down upon this history of sin.

"Upon that Divine patience and faithfulness the existence of Israel depends, in so far as it has any hope whatsoever of continuance. So this address goes very deep in its analysis of Israelite self-appraisal. It shows how the present generation not only passively inherits, but also actively carries on, the process of transforming [YHWH's] history of salvation into a history of sin because they pollute themselves over again with the same sins as their fathers. There is only one parallel in the **Bible** to this declaration of judgment, Stephen's speech in **Acts 7**." (Pp. 262-63)

Chapter 20 includes Northern Israel along with Judah, calling the combined nation the "House of Jacob." The whole nation had come into existence by YHWH's action alone. "He had emerged from his hiddenness to make himself by an oath the Lord, the only Lord Israel can have, who is bound to him by an indissoluble oath and has given him freedom from Egyptian slavery and the basis of a new life in a delightful land selected from all other lands as a gift of special favor." (**Ibid.**, p. 265-66)

"The reaction of the people thus favored is all the more shocking from its contrast to the rich generosity of the Divine love...The unbelieving perversity in **verse 8**, which ignores Yahweh's word, sums up their whole inward attitude towards [YHWH]. It is related to the stories that keep recurring in **Exodus** of the people's unbelief and their resistance towards Moses...Nevertheless, the love revealed in election, and thus distinguished from any capricious momentary outburst of emotion, now shows itself as fidelity in continuing the course once it has begun...Having given Himself to be Israel's own as 'Yahweh your God,' He never ceases from endeavors to arouse a response of love and trust. But by His revelation in Egypt He has bound Himself not only before Israel but before the world...The wonder of His sparing a sinful people is brought into the context of His revelation to the whole world, which aims at becoming known not only to Israel but to the nations.

"Thus even the beginnings of the national history of Israel are emptied of all ideas of merit, and based entirely on [YHWH's] determination to be true to Himself. Thanks to that, the first meeting between Israel and [YHWH] did not end in rejection but led on to a new Divine act of revelation." (**Ibid.**, pp. 266-67)

Darr, in an "overview" of **chapter 20**, states that "As in **chapter 16**, in **chapter 20** Ezekiel constructs a narrative of Israel's history intended to justify God's impending judgment. But while **chapter 16** sought to destroy confidence grounded in Jerusalem's unique place within Yahwistic religion, **chapter 20** reveals the folly of hope rooted in Israel's 'salvation history'—its exodus from Egypt, the covenant forged at Sinai, and the gift of land. Beginning with the nation's origin in Egypt, the prophet-priest re-

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casts its past as a story of persistent and enduring rebellion and apostasy. Turning from past to present, he accuses his exilic audience of perpetuating the sins of their ancestors. At this very moment, they think that they shall be ‘like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, (worshipping) wood and stone (20:32), as if they could abort the Lord’s plan for this people. But that, Ezekiel insists, can never happen. Israel’s future lies in God’s Hands, and ‘no action on the exiles’ part can ever interfere with God’s determination to see that plan fulfilled, the rebellious purged, cultic purity enforced, and human willfulness quelled in a morass [complicated or confused situation] of shame and contrition’...

“Readers familiar with pentateuchal and other biblical accounts of these periods in Israel’s history will find the prophet interspersing traditional details with new and shocking ones. On the one hand, he speaks of the people’s deliverance from Egypt, of lawgiving in the wilderness, and of judgment against the wilderness generation, none of whom is permitted to enter the land of Canaan. Yet he crafts these familiar themes very precisely in order that they best serve his goal, while suppressing those features detrimental to its fulfillment. Hence, we do well to read texts listening not only for words, but also for silences. On the other hand, one searches in vain for biblical evidence to support Ezekiel’s claim that, already in Egypt, the Israelites rebelled against Yahweh by worshiping Egyptian Deities or that God punished them by deliberately giving them ‘not good,’ death-dealing laws—an idea that impels one flatly to declare: ‘This time, Ezekiel went too far!’” P. 160) We disagree. We think Ezekiel is telling the truth.

Reimer entitles **20:1-44** “Learning from History.” He comments that “A deputation of elders is the occasion for an oracle. The end of this section is marked by a chapter division in the **Hebrew Bible** (20:45 is 21:1 in the Masoretic Text), because the episode triggered by the visit is completed by **20:44**...The sprawling oracle is comprised of two main phases: a review of Israel’s history is the vehicle for the oracle in **verses 1-31**, and one of the rare restoration passages in the first half of **Ezekiel** builds on it in **verses 33-44** (**verse 32** seems to stand apart from this structure). Shared vocabulary and themes provide an overall unity for the section. Thus the pattern of the whole—diagnosis of behavior offensive to [YHWH], plus an appeal to look to a renewed future—is consistent with both **chapters 17 and 18.**” (P. 1526)

Reimer entitles **20:1-31** “Looking to the Past.” He comments that “This recital of Israel’s history is unique in the **Bible**, involving a very different interpretation of both the nature of the exodus experience and [YHWH’s] dealings with His people. Although some perceive tension between this presentation of the generations and that of **chapter 18**, still throughout **chapter 20** each generation experiences [YHWH’s] wrath for its own actions and Divine forbearance is related solely to [YHWH’s] Own reputation...

“Significantly the narration focuses entirely on life outside the promised land—an important consideration for an audience of exiles. Absentees are also significant. There is no room for Moses or

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20:1 וַיְהִי בַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית בַּחֲמִשִּׁי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ

And it happened in the seventh year, in the fifth (month), on (the) tenth (day) to the month,⁸⁷³

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Joshua here, pointing to Ezekiel's '[YHWH]-centeredness.' Nor are any neighbors mentioned who tempted Israel to sin. Their rebellion was their own...

“Literary structure proves difficult. Varied analyses of the passage have been offered; none commands universal agreement. The complicating factor appears to be the repetition of phrases compounded by the cyclical nature of Ezekiel's story: Divine actions are both initiating and responding, but a ‘response’ also may prove to be an ‘initiative.’” (P. 1526)

Reimer comments on **20:1-4** that “This is the third occasion on which elders seek an oracle (see also **8:1; 14:1**). Their inquiry is to be denied. Justification for this ‘silence’ comes in the form of historical recital. The narrative frame begun in **20:1-4** finds its conclusion in **verses 27-31**.” (P. 1526)

Matties comments on **20:1-4** that “On August 14, 591 B.C.E., a year after the date in **Ezekiel 8:1**, the elders among the exiles approach Ezekiel...to consult [YHWH] (see also **Deuteronomy 4:29**). Rather than the expected positive response, the elders' request is denied and Ezekiel is told to judge them.” (P. 1182)

Darr entitles **20:1-4** “To Inquire of Yahweh.” She comments that “As in **14:1**, certain of Israel's elders come to Ezekiel to ‘inquire of the Lord’ (see also **8:1**). The text says nothing of their precise motivation for seeking a Divine oracle, but that has not deterred critics from attempting to ferret it out ...Now Yahweh conveys through Ezekiel and by oath a second, absolute refusal to submit to inquiry (**verse 3**). How dare they come? Instead, the prophet must arraign them with the abominations of their ancestors—rooting God's rebuff in a four-phase historical retrospective saturated with sin.” (Pp. 162-63)

Reimer comments on **20:1-3** that “About a year has passed since the temple vision (see **8:1**). The command to speak is renewed in **20:27**.” (P. 1526)

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It is an ominous day—the seventh year of Jehoiachin's captivity, 590 B.C.E., four years before the destruction of the temple; more than that, it occurs on the same day of the month that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the fifth month, the tenth day of the month Ab.

Hilmer notes that this was August 14, 591 B.C.E., the third date [given in the **Scroll of Ezekiel**] (see **1:2** and **8:1**). He comments that “Since Ezekiel had received many revelations before this (see opening verses of **chapters 12-18**), the date must emphasize the importance of this chapter. Like
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בָּאוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה

men came from Israel's elders / officials, to seek / inquire of YHWH,⁸⁷⁴

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לִפְנָי:

and they sat before me.

20:2 וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:

And the word of YHWH was / came to me, saying:

20:3 בֶּן־אָדָם דַּבֵּר אֶת־זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Son of a human, speak to Israel's elders / officials;

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם

and you shall say to them,

כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

In this way my Lord YHWH spoke:

הֲלֹדַרְשׁ אֶתִּי אַתֶּם בָּאִים

Are you coming to seek / inquire of Me?

חַי־אֲנִי אִם־אֲדַרְשׁ לְכֶם

As I live,⁸⁷⁵ I will not be sought by you (plural)--⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷³(...continued)

chapters 16 and 23, it presents a negative view of Israel's history; unlike them, it does not employ allegory." (P. 1251)

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Rabbi Fisch notes that the elders of Judah came to Ezekiel to inquire from God, that is, "to seek enlightenment from the prophet about the future of Jerusalem and Judea. The nature of the inquiry is not specified and must be gathered from the context." (P. 120)

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For this phrase "As I live" in the mouth of YHWH, see footnote 461. It is a "Divine oath."

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(continued...)

נֹאם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה:

(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH!

20:4 הֲתִשְׁפֹּט אֹתָם

Will you pronounce judgment on them / be their judge,

הֲתִשְׁפֹּט בֶן־אָדָם

will you pronounce judgment / be a judge, Son of Humanity?⁸⁷⁷

אֶת־תּוֹעֵבֹת אֲבוֹתָם הוֹדִיעֵם:

(The) abominations of their fathers, make known to them!⁸⁷⁸

20:5⁸⁷⁹

⁸⁷⁶(...continued)

YHWH's response to the inquiry is negative. He takes an oath: "I will not be inquired of by you people!" Compare 18:3 with its footnote.

Rabbi Fisch notes that "In **36:37** the opposite is stated: 'I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel.' Commenting on this contradiction, the Midrash observes that this is one of the passages which teach that God does, as it were, change His mind so as to annul His decrees (**Canticles Rabba 7:8**)." (P. 120)

We ask, Is it a contradiction if YHWH says at one time He will not be inquired of, and at another time He says He will be inquired of? We think not. And even here, when He says He will not be inquired of, He goes ahead and in fact answers the inquiry in the remainder of this chapter.

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Rabbi Fisch states that "The purport of the question is: will you act as champion, or advocate, on their behalf [i.e., act like a judge in the **Scroll of Judges**]? The answer is: the present is not the time for you to assume that role. Your task is to *cause them to know* the reason of their dangerous plight which will be evident to them when they survey the national past." (Pp. 120-21)

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No, it is not the time for Ezekiel to act as their judge, their champion. Rather, it is time to continue to play his role as a prophet of doom, declaring to Israel its sins that call for Divine visitation in punishment.

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וַאֲמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם

And you shall say to them,

⁸⁷⁹(...continued)

Reimer comments on **verses 5-26** “Israel’s story is told in five broad movements: the author describes the exodus generation first in Egypt (**verses 5-8**), then in the exodus itself (**verses 9-13**), and then in the wilderness (**verses 14-17**). The story of the wilderness generation follows in two phases (**verses 18-21, 22-26**)...

“This outline is at best an approximation, as the narrative is fluid. Locating Israel’s rebellion in Egypt itself marks out Ezekiel’s interpretation of Israel’s history from any other in the **Bible**. Likewise, although rebellion in the wilderness is known elsewhere (e.g. **Psalms 106**), there is nowhere the sort of ‘alluring’ that Hosea describes (**Hosea 2**). In Ezekiel’s view, there were no ‘good old days.’” (P. 1526)

Rabbi Fisch entitles **verses 5-9** “Israel’s Sinfulness in Egypt.”

Darr comments on **verses 5-9** that “One should never presume that the **Hebrew Bible** includes all of Israel’s traditions about any aspect of its experience.” We say, Of course not. We long ago learned from Alfred Korzybski and his followers that “The map is not the terrain.” If it were, you couldn’t begin to get the map in your car, let alone the glove compartment! And no “written history” can tell “all the facts.” The history writer picks out from a plethora of so-called “facts” those that seem most important. You can’t “tell it all.” If you could the world’s libraries could not contain your tellings. Darr adds, “Therefore, we should always temper the claim that Ezekiel (or any other biblical writer) has created a new thing by acknowledging the limitations of our resources.” (P. 162)

Nonetheless, Darr asks, “Whence derives (Ezekiel’s) accusation that the people already were apostate in Egypt (**verses 7-8**)?...One searches in vain for pentateuchal confirmation of this charge...The reader notes the absence of Moses (and Aaron) in Ezekiel’s scenario...Ezekiel’s Israelites in Egypt know neither God’s emissaries nor faith-buttrussing miracles...(In addition, Ezekiel) asserts that the Israelites owe their survival not to Yahweh’s care and compassion, but to Divine Self-interest, since destroying Israel would imperil (profane) God’s Name (reputation) among the nations who have witnessed the exodus from Egypt...And Ezekiel is by no means the first to cite concern for God’s reputation among the nations as a motivation for not punishing this people.” (P. 163)

Reimer comments on **verses 5-8** that “Although reference to Jacob (**verse 5**) makes clear there is a prehistory, Ezekiel’s narrative begins in Egypt. The pattern, repeated with variations in the successive sections, sees Divine initiative (**verses 5-6**) that requires action on Israel’s part (**verse 7**), then [YHWH their God] being spurned (**verses 8a**), which in turn brings Divine judgment (**verse 8b**).” (P. 1526)

Matties comments on **verse 5** that “The verb chose, reflecting Israel’s election theology, is used only here in **Ezekiel** (see also **Deuteronomy 7:6-10**).” (P. 1182)

כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה

In this was my Lord YHWH spoke:

בַּיּוֹם בָּחַרְתִּי בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

On (the) day of My choosing Israel—⁸⁸⁰

וְאָשָׂא יָדִי לְזֶרַע בֵּית יַעֲקֹב

and I lifted My hand⁸⁸¹ to (the) descendant(s) of Jacob’s house;

וְאֶנְדַּע לָהֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

and I was made known to them in Egypt-land.⁸⁸²

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Rabbi Fisch comments that “The choice of Israel began in Egypt on the day when God sent Moses and Aaron to them.” (P. 121) What do you think? We think the choice of Israel began when Jacob (later named Israel) fled from Esau, and was given the Divine promise at Bethel, according to **Genesis 28**. Has Ezekiel overlooked this? Or is this a matter of the choice beginning with Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, continuing, being renewed, narrowed down to Jacob / Israel and his descendants?

Rabbi Fisch answers our question, stating that “In **Exodus 6:8** the promise is said to have been made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Since the first two had other sons, Ishmael and Esau respectively, it is explained that the fulfilment was to be restricted to the seed of Jacob.” (P. 121)

Hilmer comments that this is “The only occurrence of the word ‘choose’ (election vocabulary) in **Ezekiel**...

“**Verses 5-26** present Israel’s history in three acts (**verses 5-9**, Egypt; **verses 10-17**, Desert, Part 1; **verses 18-26**, Desert, part 2)...Each act has four scenes: (1) revelation, (2) rebellion, (3) wrath, (4) reconsideration.” (P. 1251)

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Hilmer notes that the phrase “with uplifted hand” is “a symbolic act accompanying the swearing of an oath (see **verses 15, 23** and **42**).” (P. 1251)

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Ezekiel is referring to the story of Moses and the burning bush told in Exodus 3, where YHWH reveals His name to Moses as He sends him to deliver His people from Egyptian bondage.

וַאֲשָׁא יָדִי לָהֶם לֵאמֹר

And I lifted My hand to them, saying,

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

I (am) YHWH your God!⁸⁸³

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See **Exodus 3:6**,

וַיֹּאמֶר

And He said,

אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב

I (am) God of your father, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.

וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו

And Moses hid his face,

כִּי יִרָא מִהַבַּיִת אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים:

because he was afraid to look at the God.

Exodus 3:14-15.

14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

And God said to Moses,

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

I will be that which I will be.

וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

And He said, In this way you will speak to Israel's children,

אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

I Will Be sent me to you people.

15 וַיֹּאמֶר עֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

And God said again to Moses,

כֹּה־תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

In this way you will speak to Israel's children,

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב

YHWH, God of your fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob,

שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם

sent me to you people.

(continued...)

20:6 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נִשְׂאתִי יָדַי לָהֶם

On that day I raised My hand to them,

לְהוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

to bring them forth from Egypt-land,

אֶל-אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-תַּרְתִּי לָהֶם

to a land which I searched / spied out for them,⁸⁸⁴

זֹבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ

flowing milk and honey--⁸⁸⁵

צְבִי הִיא לְכָל-הָאָרְצוֹת:

it is a beauty to / for all the lands / countries!⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸³(...continued)

זֶה-שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם

This (is) My name for long-lasting time;

זֶה זְכָרִי לְדָר דָּר:

and this (is) My memorial, to generation(s), generation(s).

⁸⁸⁴

See **Numbers 10:33**, which states that the chest / ark of the covenant was going before the children of Israel, seeking out a resting-place for them, using the same root verb as here לְתַוֵּר, “to seek out, spy out, explore,” the same verb that used for the twelve Israelites sent into the land of Canaan to spy it out.

⁸⁸⁵

See **Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13:27; 14:8; 16:13, 14; Deuteronomy 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20; Joshua 5:6; 11:5; 32:22; Ezekiel 20:6, 15**, in all of which this same exact phrase occurs.

⁸⁸⁶

Translation of this last line of **verse 20** vary:

King James, “which *is* the glory of all lands”;

Tanakh, “the fairest of all lands”;

(continued...)

⁸⁸⁶(...continued)

New Revised Standard, “the most glorious of all lands”;

New International, “the most beautiful of all lands”;

New Jerusalem, “and the loveliest of them all”;

Rahlfs, καὶ μέλι κηρίου ἐστὶν παρὰ πᾶσαν τῆν γῆν, “and a honey-comb beyond all the earth / all the land.”

What do you think? If you have visited Israel, would you concur that it is the loveliest / most beautiful land in all the world? It certainly has some beautiful areas, but there are many areas in the world that rival it for beauty. Is this statement in **Ezekiel 20:6**, repeated in **verse 21**, truly the Divine estimation of Israel’s beauty? Or is this Ezekiel’s home-sick view that he has read into YHWH’s statement? See:

Deuteronomy 8:7-10,

- 7 כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְבִיאֲךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה
Because YHWH your God (is) bringing you into a good land,
אֶרֶץ נַחְלֵי מַיִם עֵינַת וְתַהֲמוֹת
a land (with) wadis of water, springs, and ocean-depths,
יֵצְאוּ בְּבִקְעָה וּבְהָרִים
going forth in the valley(s) and on the mountain(s);
- 8:8 אֶרֶץ חִטָּה וְשֵׁעֶרָה וְגִבְעוֹן
a land of wheat and barley and vine(s)
וְתַאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן
and fig-tree(s) and pomegranate(s),
אֶרֶץ-זֵית וְדַבְשׁ
a land of oil and honey;
- 8:9 אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא בְּמִסְכַּנְתָּ תֹאכַל-בֶּהּ לֶחֶם
a land where you will not eat bread in it with scarcity;
לֹא-תִחְסַר כָּל בָּהּ
you will not lack anything in it;
אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲבָנֶיהָ בְּרִזָּל
a land whose stones (are) iron,
וּמִהַרְרֵיהָ תִּחְצֹב נְחֹשֶׁת:
and from its mountains you will dig out copper / bronze.
- 8:10 וְאִכַּלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ
And you shall eat, and you will be filled / satisfied;
וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
and you will bless YHWH your God

(continued...)

⁸⁸⁶(...continued)

עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לָךְ:
for the good land which He gave to you.

Jeremiah 3:19,

וְאַנְכִי אֶמְרֵתִי אֵיךְ אֲשִׁיתֶךָ בְּבָנִים

And I, I said, How I would place you among the children,

וְאֶתֶן־לָךְ אֶרֶץ חֶמְדָּה נַחֲלַת צְבִי צְבָאוֹת גּוֹיִם

and I would give to you a land of delight, a beautiful inheritance—beauty of nations!

וְאִמַּר אָבִי (תִּקְרְאוּ) [תִּקְרְאוּ] לִי

And I said, You will call to Me, my Father;

וּמֵאַחֲרַי לֹא (תָּשׁוּבוּ) [תָּשׁוּבוּ]:

and afterwards, you will not turn back!

Rabbi Fisch, a Jewish rabbi, states that Israel’s “geographical features and climate make it the most beautiful of all lands. Compare **Psalms 48:3**^{Heb} / **2**^{Eng}, speaking of Jerusalem:

יִפֶּה נוֹף

beautiful of elevation / height,

מְשׁוֹשׁ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ

rejoicing / exultation of all the land / earth--

הַר־צִיּוֹן יִרְכָּתִי צָפוֹן

Mount Zion, far-reaches of (the) north,

קְרִיַת מֶלֶךְ רָב:

city of a great king!”

Rabbi Fisch quotes A. P. Stanley, a 19th century English churchman: “Palestine, therefore, not merely by its situation, but by its comparative fertility, might well be considered the prize of the Eastern world, the possession of which was the mark of [YHWH’s] peculiar favor...and a land of which the blessings were so evidently the gift of God.” (P. 121)

Many would say, Yes...but have you ever been to my homeland, the Shenandoah Valley, or...etc. etc. What do you think? Are there not numerous places on earth that are evidently the gift of [YHWH]?

Hilmer comments that “Its real beauty lay in being selected as [YHWH’s] dwelling place.” (P. 1251)

20:7 וְאָמַר אֱלֹהִים אִישׁ

And I said to them, each one,

שְׂקוּצֵי עֵינָיו הַשְּׁלִיכוּ

(the) detested things of his eyes, throw away!

וּבְגִלּוֹלֵי מִצְרַיִם אַל-תִּטְמְאוּ

And by Egypt's idols, do not make yourselves unclean!⁸⁸⁷

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

I (am) YHWH your God!

20:8⁸⁸⁸

887

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The implication is that the Israelites followed some of the religious practices of their Egyptian neighbors, a fact attested by **Joshua 24:14**.” (P. 122)

14 וְעַתָּה יִרְאוּ אֶת-יְהוָה

And now, fear / tremble in awe before YHWH,

וְעִבְדוּ אֹתוֹ בְּתָמִים וּבְאֵמֶת

and serve Him with completeness / wholeness and with true faithfulness;

וְהִסִּירוּ אֶת-אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עִבְדוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם

and put away (the) Gods which your (plural) fathers served

בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר וּבְמִצְרַיִם

on the other side of the River (Euphrates) and in Egypt;

וְעִבְדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה:

and serve YHWH!

See **Ezekiel 6:4**.

888

Rabbi Fisch comments on **verse 8** that “What is here narrated is not recorded in the **Pentateuch [Five Scrolls of Moses]**. It may well be believed that while the Israelites were in Egypt, the pure faith inherited from the patriarchs was contaminated by local heathenish ideas and practices.” (P. 122)

וַיִּמְרוּ-בִי

And they rebelled against Me,⁸⁸⁹

וְלֹא אָבוּ לִשְׁמָע אֵלַי

and were not willing to listen to Me.

אִישׁ אֶת-שְׁקוּצֵי עֵינֵיהֶם לֹא הִשְׁלִיכוּ

Each one did not throw away his eyes' detestable things;

וְאֶת-גְּלוּלֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ

and they did not forsake Egypt's idols.

וְאָמַר לִשְׁפֹךְ חַמָּתִי עֲלֵיהֶם

And I said / determined⁸⁹⁰ to pour out My wrath upon them,⁸⁹¹

לְכַלּוֹת אַפִּי בָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

to finish My anger on them⁸⁹² in (the) midst of Egypt-land.⁸⁹³

889

See **verses 13** and **21**.

890

Rabbi Fisch comments that the phrase *I said* means “I intended.” He comments that “On the strict principle of justice, the Israelites should have perished in Egypt. Only for the sake of the honor of His name God spared and redeemed them from bondage.” (P. 122)

We say, YHWH does not operate on “the strict principle of justice,” but rather on the basis of His character of steadfast-love and mercy and forgiveness, as well as visiting with punishment—see the basic passage in **Exodus 34:6-7**. This is a far cry from “the principle of strict justice,” and it needs to inform our reading of the entire **Hebrew Bible**. Yahweh’s steadfast-love reaches out to thousands of generations, while His visitation for punishment reaches out to only 3 or 4 generations. That is, God’s steadfast-love is thousands of time greater than His punishment!

891

Hilmer states that this is “an internal refrain (see **verses 13** and **21**); see also **7:8**.” (P. 1252)

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(continued...)

⁸⁹²(...continued)

See **5:13**.

893

Rabbi Fisch comments that “What is here [verse 8] narrated is not recorded in the **Penta-teuch [Genesis-Deuteronomy]**. It may well be believed that while the Israelites were in Egypt, the pure faith inherited from the patriarchs was contaminated by local heathenish ideas and practices. According to the **Midrash Rabba, Exodus 4:3**, the wicked among the Israelites perished and were buried during the plague of darkness, so that the Egyptians should not say that an epidemic had been inflicted by God on His people.” (P. 122)

Matties comments that “No romantic notions of Israel’s original goodness or of an idealized wilderness experience remain here.” (P. 1182)

See, for such “romantic notions, **Jeremiah 2:2-3**,

- 2 הָלַךְ וְקָרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לְאָמֹר
(Get) going--and you will cry out in Jerusalem’s ears, saying,
כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה
In this way YHWH spoke:
זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ
I remembered for you, (the) steadfast love of your youth,
אֲהַבַת כָּלֹּלְתֶיךָ
(the) love of your engagement period (to me),
לְכַתֹּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר
your following after Me in the wilderness,
בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זָרְעָה:
in a land not sown.
- 3 קָדַשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַיהוָה
Israel’s set-apartness belonged to YHWH--
רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָהּ
(the) first-fruit of his harvest;
כָּל-אֹכְלֵיוּ יֵאָשְׁמוּ
everyone eating it would be guilty;
רָעָה תָּבֵא אֲלֵיהֶם
evil would come to them--

(continued...)

⁸⁹³(...continued)

נֹאמַי־יְהוָה:

(It is) a saying of YHWH!

894

Reimer entitles **20:9-13** “But I Acted for the Sake of My Name.” See **verse 9**; and compare **verses 14** and **22** and **44**. This “strikes one of the insistent notes in **Ezekiel**, that [YHWH’s] reputation, not Israel’s merit, is the basis for forbearance and grace. This phase includes the law-giving at Sinai (**verse 10**). **Verse 11** (compare **verses 13, 21**) echoes **Leviticus 18:5**,

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי

And you shall keep My statutes, and My judicial-decisions—

אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם הָאָדָם

which, the human being who will do them—

וַיֵּחִי בָהֶם

and he will live by them!

אֲנִי יְהוָה:

I (am) YHWH!

“The emphasis on Sabbaths (**Ezekiel 20:12**) is another distinctive of the recital (see also **verses 13, 16, 20, 21, 24**).” (Pp. 1526-27) We have seen a similar emphasis on observance of Sabbaths in **Isaiah 56, 58, 66** and **Jeremiah 17**. See elsewhere in **Ezekiel** at **chapters 22, 23, 44, 45, and 46**.

Hilmer comments that “Name and person are closely connected in the **Bible**. [YHWH’s] name is His identity and reputation—that by which He is known.” (P. 1252)

YHWH is depicted as wanting Israel, and all the world—especially Israel’s enemies—to know YHWH in truth, as He really is. He is a God Who dares to punish His Own people; but at the same time, He is a God Who loves, and forgives, and offers hope to the hopeless. Both sides of His character are important, and neither side is to be neglected.

Hilmer goes on to say that “The phrase used here is equivalent to ‘for My Own sake’ (compare **Isaiah 37:35; 43:25**; also **Ezekiel 36:22**). [YHWH’s] acts of deliverance—past and future—identify Him, revealing His true nature.” (P. 1252) We add that YHWH’s acts of punishment—past and future—identify Him as well.

וְאַעַשׂ לְמַעַן שְׁמִי

And I acted on behalf of My name,⁸⁹⁵

לְבַלְתִּי הַחֵל לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם

to not be profaned in (the) eyes of the nations;⁸⁹⁶

895

We think YHWH's acting "on behalf of His Name" means acting in terms of **Exodus 34:6-7**, where He declares His Name and His Nature. To act simply on the basis of strict justice would be to go against His Name and Nature—in which steadfast-love and forgiveness of all manner of sin is fundamental! What do you think?

896

Rabbi Fisch comments that "Were the Israelites not liberated from Egypt, the nations would not attribute it to Divine retribution but to His lack of power." Compare:

Numbers 14:16,

מִבְּלִי יִכָּלֵת יְהוָה

Because of YHWH's not being able

לְהַבִּיא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה

to bring this people

אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם

to / into the land which He swore to them—

וַיִּשְׁחָטֵם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

and He destroyed them in the wilderness!

Deuteronomy 9:28,

פֶּן־יֹאמְרוּ הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָנוּ מִשָּׁם

For fear that the land('s people) from which You brought us forth will say,

מִבְּלִי יִכָּלֵת יְהוָה לְהַבִּיאָם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּר לָהֶם

From lack of YHWH's being able to bring them into the land which He spoke to them,

וּמִשְׂנֵאתוֹ אוֹתָם

and from His hating them,

הוֹצִיאָם לְהַמָּתָם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

He brought them forth to kill them in the wilderness!

In both of these passages, Moses is arguing with YHWH concerning His reputation among the nations who are watching what happens to Israel—were YHWH to simply destroy them because of their sinfulness, it would give the wrong impression to the nations—it would give the appearance of His

(continued...)

אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה בְּתוֹכָם

whose midst they were in–

אֲשֶׁר נִדְרַעְתִּי אֲלֵיהֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם

so that I was made known to them before their eyes,

לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

to bring them forth from Egypt-land.⁸⁹⁷

20:10⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁶(...continued)

weakness, His inability, and even His hating Israel. But the truth about YHWH is that He is a God of infinite love and kindness, a God Whose nature it is to forgive, even though He dares to punish disobedience. What would you say to Moses?

⁸⁹⁷

Rabbi Fisch comments that “God had revealed Himself to Israel and conveyed to them His intention to liberate them. All this was well known to the Egyptians. Failure to carry out the proclaimed redemption would have caused a profanation of the name of God.” (P. 122)

Do you agree with Rabbi Fisch? We are uneasy with his conclusions, which appear to be concerned only with Divine power and ability, not including the Divine nature of steadfast-love and forgiveness. Surely YHWH wants the nations to learn of His Nature, not just of His power!

⁸⁹⁸

Rabbi Fisch entitles **verses 10-17** “Israel’s Conduct in the Wilderness.” He quotes Lofthouse as commenting on **verse 10** that “Ezekiel here makes no reference to the Red Sea; his thought of [YHWH’s] wrath and Israel’s disobedience obscures what was to the Hebrew [YHWH’s] crowning mercy.” (P. 123) We agree with Lofthouse. The discussions in **Ezekiel** and by Rabbi Fisch obscure the Divine Nature of mercy and forgiveness, not taking these all-important elements into consideration. It is not simply a matter of either strict justice or Divine weakness! It is a matter of a loving Father caring for and disciplining His wayward children—Who doesn’t want the nations to get the wrong impression, but rather, to be drawn to Him—not an egotistical God Who doesn’t want His reputation tarnished. Do you agree? Why? Why not?

Matties comments on **20:10-17** that “In addition to themes common to **verses 5-9**, this first profile of the wilderness generation highlights the life-giving instructions of [YHWH] (**verses 11, 13**)...and the Sabbath as sign of [YHWH’s] sanctifying Presence (see also **Ezekiel 22:8, 26: 23:38**), both
(continued...)

⁸⁹⁸(...continued)

of which Israel rejected. The mention of [YHWH's] *Eye* in **verse 17** contrasts with *their eyes* in **verse 8**. This is the only occasion in **Ezekiel** in which [YHWH's] *Eye* is said to spare anything." (P. 1183)

Eichrodt entitles these verse "The First Generation in the Wilderness." He comments that "this new saving act by [YHWH] consists in His giving of the law...The law is divided into statutes and judgments...The value set on the law makes it clear that it constitutes the actual Divine gift of life. The categorical statement that man finds life in these commandments goes much further than the Deuteronomic formula 'that you may live long'...[YHWH's] law as a new order of society takes man out of the cursed sphere of sin and remoteness from [YHWH], and gives him his place in the living [YHWH's] sphere of blessing, where the powers of death cannot lay hold on him. This seems to characterize the law of the covenant as the great gift of life and deliverance which sets Israel's life on a new foundation. Here is not a set of severe demands made by an arbitrary and alien will, narrowing down life, and subjecting it to a rigid regime of reward and punishment. It is the will of a God Who is keenly interested in the life of His people, and Who takes them into fellowship so as to open the door to life and place them under His protection. So here following the law means reaching out spontaneously and taking an inestimable gift which makes possible a life full of strength and joy.

[Eichrodt states that "**Verse 12**, which takes the sabbath commandment, clothing it in the words of **Exodus 31:13**, as if it were the core and essence of the whole law, has to be excluded as a priestly elaboration." (P. 268) We think our beloved **Old Testament** theologian / teacher is mistaken at this point, and see the sabbath commandment as in fact also an inestimable gift which makes possible a life full of strength and joy—giving all of [YHWH's] people a weekly time of rest, including slaves and animals—and rescuing them from "workaholism," a life without regular times of rest and enjoyment—and instead giving them a weekly taste of YHWH's final rest awaiting them beyond this life! This is one of the themes of my doctoral dissertation entitled "Rebellion, Rest, and the Word of God."]

Eichrodt continues: "For these reasons Israel's opposition to the will of [YHWH] revealed to him is in itself a rejection of life, the natural result of which should be to be annihilated by the wrath of [YHWH]...But [YHWH's] faithfulness shows itself once more towards His plan of love and salvation, in accordance with His act of election. He restrains His wrath and lets the disobedient live." (Pp. 267-68) Yes!

Darr comments on **verses 10-17** that "Here also, the reader misses any reference to Israel's great intercessor, Moses. He is not permitted to glimpse the Israelites gathered at Sinai and proclaiming with one voice, 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do' (**Exodus 19:9a**). Where is the acknowledgment of the genuine hardships of desert existence (**Ezekiel 19:13; Deuteronomy 8:15; 32:10; Isaiah 21:1; Jeremiah 2:6**? Ezekiel devotes not a single word to traditions bespeaking Yahweh's gracious provision for the people's physical needs...Law makes life possible; nothing is said of food or water. All such elements are stripped away as extraneous to Ezekiel's larger purpose of depicting this people as idolatrous and defiant of Yahweh's *Torah*." (P. 165)

וְאוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

And I brought them forth from Egypt-land,

וְאָבֵאתִם אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר:

and I brought them into the desert / wilderness.

20:11 וְאֶתֵּן לָהֶם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי

And I gave to them My statutes (feminine plural),

וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי הַיְדֻעֹתַי אֹתָם

and My commandments I made known to them,⁸⁹⁹

אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם

which the human / man shall do,

וְחַי בָּהֶם:

and he will live by them.⁹⁰⁰

899

The reference in the first two lines of **verse 11** is, as Rabbi Fisch notes, “to the revelation on Mount Sinai.” (P. 123)

900

Rabbi Fisch notes that the phrase *which if a man do, he shall live by them*, is “a quotation from **Leviticus 18:5**.” (P. 123) He goes on to state that “Obedience to the Divine laws, both those relating to the duties of man towards God and those dealing with his duties towards his fellow-men, leads to social and national happiness and stability.” (P. 123)

In fact, the entire phrase is only found elsewhere at **Ezekiel 20:21**. The last two words of the phrase, *he shall live by them*, is found four times in the **Hebrew Bible**, at **Leviticus 18:5**, **Ezekiel 20:11**, **13** and **21**. The two-word phrase, וְחַי בָּהֶם, “and he will live in / by them,” is translated into Greek (**Rahlfs**) by ζῆσαι ἐν αὐτοῖς, and this phrase is found in Paul’s writings at **Romans 10:5** and **Galatians 3:12**, where Paul denies that this is the truth—claiming that living by them is impossible and only results in a Divine curse and death, quoting **Deuteronomy 27:26**,

אָרוּר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָקִים אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה-הַזֹּאת

Cursed (is) anyone who will not cause (the) words of this **Torah** / teaching to stand,

(continued...)

20:12 וְגַם אֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם

And also My sabbath-rests I gave to them,⁹⁰¹

⁹⁰⁰(...continued)

לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם

to do them!

וְאָמַר כָּל־הָעָם אָמֵן:

And all the people will say, Amen!

We think this whole matter needs to be revisited. The **Hebrew Bible** clearly teaches that those who keep the *Torah* of YHWH will live. See, beyond these passages, **Deuteronomy 30:11-20**, which promises life to those keeping the *Torah*, and the great *Torah Psalms*, **Psalm 19** and **Psalm 119**. None of these passages from the **Hebrew Bible** assume that human beings can keep the *Torah* perfectly apart from YHWH's grace and forgiveness (**Psalm 119:176** confesses "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant").

And the fact is that when Paul is not arguing with Jewish opponents, he again and again quotes from the *Torah* as binding on Christians. He does not at all teach that Christians can do whatever they please, disobeying Divine statutes and commandments. See **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**, **Galatians 5:19-21**, **Colossians 3:5-9**, and **Ephesians 6:1-2**—where 9 of the 10 commandments (all but the fourth, Sabbath commandment) are said by Paul to be binding on Christians. According to the **Scroll of Acts**, Paul himself observed the Sabbath as he went on his missionary journeys, but in **Romans 14** he rejects a legalistic demand for observance of special days, indicating that Christians have the freedom to do what they think best in regard to setting-apart special days. See on the Internet, "The Apple of [YHWH's] Eye."

901

Rabbi Fisch observes that the Hebrew שַׁבְּתוֹתַי, *shabbethothay* is plural, "My sabbaths." He states that "The plural includes festivals which are given in the **Pentateuch** the designation of **sabbath**." (P. 123) Compare **Leviticus 23:24**,

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר

Speak to Israel's children, saying

חֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month

יְהִיָּה לָכֶם שַׁבְּתוֹן

there will be for you people a resting, a remembrance

זְכָרוֹן תְּרוּהָ מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ:

a shout of joy, a set-apart convocation.

(continued...)

⁹⁰¹(...continued)

Leviticus 23:39,

אֲדָבָר בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי

Surely on the fifteenth day of the seventh month,

בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת־תְּבוּאֹת הָאָרֶץ

when you people gather the earth's produce,

תִּחְגְּגוּ אֶת־חַג־יְהוָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים

you shall go on a pilgrimage festival, a pilgrimage-festival of YHWH (for) seven days;

בְּיוֹם הַרְאִשׁוֹן שַׁבָּתוֹן

on the first day a complete resting;

וּבְיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שַׁבָּתוֹן׃

and on the eighth day a complete resting.

(Note that the word “sabbath” does not occur in either of these passages; it is the noun שַׁבָּתוֹן, **shabbathon**, which we understand to mean “a complete resting.”)

The fourth commandment was truly a Divine gift and blessing to Israel and to the world. It is the first time in world history that a day of rest was commanded for all people, including slaves—1 day of rest in 7. Unfortunately, the sabbath commandment easily became distorted by legalistic treatment; but the command for both human beings and work animals (and fields as well) to observe “rest” has been a genuine blessing for the world. When human beings fail to take regular times to “rest,” their lives fall apart; they become workaholics; both they and their workers and their fields suffer from the lack of rest. What do you think?

Hilmer comments that “Israel’s observance of the Sabbath as to serve as a sign that she was [YHWH’s] holy people. See **Exodus 31:13-17**

31.13 וְאַתָּה דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר

And you, you speak to Israel’s children saying,

אֲדָבָר אֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ

Surely you people shall observe My days-of-rest;

כִּי אֹת הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם

because it is a sign between Me and you for your generations,

לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם׃

to know that I YHWH am setting you apart.

31.14 וְשִׁמְרֹתֶם אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת

And you people shall observe the day-of-rest,

(continued...)

⁹⁰¹(...continued)

כִּי קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לָכֶם

because it is set-apart for you.

מִחַלְלֶיהָ מוֹת יוּמָת

The one profaning it shall surely be put to death,

כִּי כָל־הָעֹשֶׂה בָּהּ מְלָאכָה

because everyone doing work on it—

וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב עַמִּיהָ:

and that innermost being shall be cut off from its peoples' midst.

31.15 שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים יַעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה

Six days work shall be done;

וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת

and on the seventh day, a day of rest—

שְׁבַתוֹן קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה

a time of ceasing / resting set-apart for the YHWH;

כָּל־הָעֹשֶׂה מְלָאכָה בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבַת

everyone doing work on the day of the rest,

מוֹת יוּמָת:

dying shall be put to death!

31.16 וְשָׁמְרוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשְּׁבַת

And Israel's children shall observe the day-of-rest,

לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשְּׁבַת לְדֹרֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם:

to make the day-of-rest for their generations, a long-lasting covenant

31.17 בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

between me and (between) Israel--

אוֹת הוּא לְעוֹלָם

it is a sign for long-lasting time;

כִּי־שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ.

because YHWH made the heavens and the earth (in) six days;

וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפֵשׁ:

and on the seventh day He rested and He was refreshed.

(continued...)

⁹⁰¹(...continued)

Ezekiel highlights the Sabbath (see **22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24; 45:17; 46:3**), as did Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 17:19-27**; compare **Nehemiah 13:17-18**). Jewish legalism later corrupted the Sabbath law.” (P. 1252) See **Matthew 12:1-14**,

- 1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath.
His disciples were hungry,
and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.
- 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him,
Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.
- 3 He said to them,
Have you not read what David did when he was hungry,
and those who were with him:
4 how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence,
which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him,
but only for the priests?
5 Or have you not read in the Law
how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath
and are guiltless?
6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.
7 And if you had known what this means,
I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,
you would not have condemned the guiltless.
- 8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.
9 He went on from there and entered their synagogue.
10 And a man was there with a withered hand.
And they asked him,
Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?
--so that they might accuse him.
- 11 He said to them,
Which one of you who has a sheep,
if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath,
will not take hold of it and lift it out?
12 Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!
So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.
- 13 Then he said to the man,
Stretch out your hand.
And the man stretched it out,
and it was restored, healthy like the other.
- 14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him,
how to destroy him. (**English Standard Version**) (P. 1252)

לְהִיּוֹת לְאוֹת בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיהֶם

to be for a sign between Me and them—⁹⁰²

לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מִקִּדְשָׁם:

to know that I, YHWH am setting them apart.

20:13 וַיִּמְרוּ-בִי בֵּית-יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר

And Israel's household rebelled against Me in the desert / wilderness.

בְּחֻקוֹתַי לֹא-הָלְכוּ

By My statutes (feminine plural) they did not walk,⁹⁰³

וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי מָאָסוּ

and My commandments they rejected / refused,

אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם הָאָדָם

which a human / man will do,

וְחַי בָּהֶם

and he will live by them.

וְאֶת-שַׁבְּתוֹתַי חָלְלוּ מְאֹד

And My sabbaths they polluted / profaned exceedingly.⁹⁰⁴

902

Rabbi Fisch quotes J. H. Hertz, a former chief rabbi, as commenting that “The sabbath was more than a day of rest. Its observance by the Israelite was a constantly recurring acknowledgment of God as the Creator of the universe. It would be an open denial of God for an Israelite to desecrate the sabbath.” (P. 123)

903

Rabbi Fisch comments that “During their sojourn in the wilderness, they worshiped the golden calf, left of the manna until the morning (**Exodus 16:20**), tried God in Rephidim (**Exodus 17**) and committed other acts of disobedience.” (P. 123)

904

(continued...)

⁹⁰⁴(...continued)

Rabbi Fisch notes that instances of profanation of the sabbath by Israel in the wilderness “are recorded in **Exodus 16:27-28** and **Numbers 14:32-33**.” (P. 123)

16:27 וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי

And it happened on the seventh day,

יֵצְאוּ מִן־הָעָם לְלֶקֶט

some of the people went out to gather (*mahn*);

וְלֹא מָצְאוּ:

and they did not find (any *mahn*).

28 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

And YHWH said to Moses,

עַד־אַנְהוּ מֵאַנְתֶּם לְשֹׁמֵר מִצְוֹתַי וְתוֹרָתִי:

How long you people refused to keep My commandments and My *Torah* / teaching!

14:32 וַיְהִיו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר

And Israel’s children were in the wilderness;

וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

And they found a man gathering up sticks on the sabbath day.

33 וַיִּקְרִיבוּ אֹתוֹ הַמְּצֹאִים אֹתוֹ מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים

And the ones finding him gathering sticks brought him near

אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־הָעֵדָה:

to Moses and to Aharon, and to all the congregation.

34 וַיַּנִּיחוּ אֹתוֹ בַּמִּשְׁמֶר

And they caused him to rest in the place of confinement,

כִּי לֹא פִרַשׁ מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ:

because it was not made clear what (was) to be done to him.

35 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

And YHWH said to Moses,

מוֹת יוּמָת הָאִישׁ

The man shall surely be put to death--

רְגֹם אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים כָּל־הָעֵדָה

stoning him with the stones, all the congregation,

מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה:

outside the camp!

(continued...)

⁹⁰⁴(...continued)

- 36 וַיֵּצִיאוּ אֹתוֹ כָּל־הָעֵדָה אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה
And all the congregation brought him forth to outside the camp;
וַיִּרְגְּמוּ אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וַיָּמָת
and they stoned him with the stones—and he died,

כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:
just as YHWH commanded Moses.

(Anyone reading a text like this can understand where Jewish legalism has come from. No trial, no defense attorney, no appeals—just swift and sudden justice, as in the “Old West.” Where is the Divine mercy? The man has picked up sticks on the sabbath day—put him to death! What do you think? One thing I am sure of--I certainly hope YHWH shows more mercy to us than He did to this man! Notice that within the **Hebrew Bible** there are stories of merciful forgiveness, such as YHWH’s forgiveness of David, the adulterer and murderer, and there are also stories like this, stories of no mercy. What do you make of this? Which is worse, adultery and murder, or picking up sticks on the sabbath? We say this story is a prime example of “bad laws” given by YHWH to Israel—see **verse 25**.)

Hilmer’s translation has “desecrated,” and he comments that they did this “by not observing the Sabbath-rest. See **Jeremiah 17:21-23**,

- 21 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה
In this way YHWH spoke:
הִשְׁמְרוּ בְּנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם
Guard yourselves with your innermost-beings,
וְאַל־תִּשְׂאוּ מִשָּׂא בְיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
and you people shall not lift up a burden on the Sabbath day,
וְהֵבֵאתֶם בְּשַׁעְרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם:
and bring them through (the) gates of Jerusalem!
22 וְלֹא־תוֹצִיאוּ מִשָּׂא מִבֵּיתֵיכֶם בְּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
And you shall not bring forth a burden from your houses on the Sabbath day;
וְכָל־מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ
and all work you shall not do;
וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם:
and you shall set-apart the Sabbath day, just as I commanded your fathers!
23 וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ וְלֹא הִטּוּ אֶת־אָזְנָם
And they did not listen, and they did not bend their ear;

(continued...)

וְאָמַר לְשַׁפֵּךְ חֲמָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם

And I said / determined to pour out My wrath over / against them

בְּמִדְבָּר לְכַלּוֹתָם:

in the desert / wilderness, to finish them off!

20:14 וְאַעֲשֶׂה לְמַעַן שְׁמִי

And I acted on behalf of My name,

לְבַלְתִּי הַחֵל לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם

so as not to profane (it) in (the) eyes of the nations,

⁹⁰⁴(...continued)

וַיִּקְשׁוּ אֶת־עַרְפֹּתָם לְבַלְתִּי (שׁוֹמְעַ) [שְׁמוֹעַ]

and they hardened their neck, so as not to listen;

וּלְבַלְתִּי קַחַת מוֹסֵר:

and so as to not take correction.

or by not observing it in the manner and spirit [YHWH] intended—see **Amos 8:5**,

לְאָמֹר

saying:

מָתִי יַעֲבֹר הַחֹדֶשׁ

When will the New Moon (festival) be over,

וְנִשְׁבְּרָה שֶׁבֶר

and we will be able to sell seed?

וְהַשְּׁבֹת

And the Rest-Day (be over),

וְנִפְתַּח־הַבָּר

and we will open up (the) grain(-bags),

לְהַקְטִין אֵיפָה

making the measure (of quantity) small,

וּלְהַגְדִּיל שֶׁקֶל

and making the price great,

וְלַעֲוֹת מֵאֲזֵנֵי מִרְמָה:

and twisting (the truth with) deceitful scales.” (P. 1252)

אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִים לְעֵינֵיהֶם:

when I brought them forth in their eyes.

20:15 וְגַם־אֲנִי נִשְׂאתִי יָדִי לָהֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר

And also I, I lifted My hand to them in the desert / wilderness,

לְבַלְתִּי הָבִיא אוֹתָם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי

to not bring them to the land which I gave (them)--⁹⁰⁵

זֶבֶת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ

flowing (with) milk and honey--

905

Rabbi Fisch comments that this was “on account of the sin of the spies.” (P. 124) Compare **Numbers 14:29-30**,

14:29 בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פְגָרֵיכֶם

In this wilderness you dead bodies will fall,

וְכָל־פְּקָדֵיכֶם לְכָל־מִסְפָּרְכֶם

and all your persons numbered according to all your census,

מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה

from a son of twenty year(s) and upwards,

אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶם עָלַי:

who grumbled against Me.

14:30 אִם־אַתֶּם תָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ

You shall not come into the land

אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאתִי אֶת־יָדִי לְשֹׁכֵן אֹתְכֶם בָּהּ

where I lifted up My hand to cause you people to dwell in it--

כִּי אִם־כָּלֵב בֶּן־יִפְנֶה

except for Caleb, son of Yephunneh,

וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נֹון:

and Joshua, son of Nun.

צְבִי הִיא לְכָל־הָאֲרָצוֹת:

it (is) a beauty, to / for all the lands / countries.⁹⁰⁶

20:16 יָעַן בְּמִשְׁפָּטַי מָאֲסוּ וְאֶת־חֻקֹּתַי

On account of they rejected My commandments and My statutes (feminine plural);

לֹא־הֵלְכוּ בָהֶם

they did not walk by / in them.

וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי חָלְלוּ

And My sabbaths they polluted / profaned.

כִּי אַחֲרַי גִּלּוּלֵיהֶם לֵבָם הֵלֵךְ:

Because after their idols their heart (was) walking / going!

20:17 וַתַּחַס עֵינַי עֲלֵיהֶם מִשְׁחַתֵּם

And My eye pitied / spared them (to keep Me) from destroying them;

וְלֹא־עָשִׂיתִי אוֹתָם כְּלָה בַּמִּדְבָּר:

and I did not make them an annihilation in the desert / wilderness.⁹⁰⁷

20:18⁹⁰⁸

906

Compare **verse 6**.

907

Rabbi Fisch comments that “Though the generation which left Egypt perished in the wilderness, their children entered the promised land.” (P. 124)

908

Rabbi Fisch entitles **verses 18-26** “Sinfulness of the Succeeding Generation.”

Matties comments on **verses 18-26** that “In spite of the warning, the second wilderness generation demonstrates its similarity to their parents (echoes of **chapters 18** and **19**). The tone here is harsh, as the text introduces three ideas: the notion that [YHWH] already determined to scatter Israel (continued...) ”

⁹⁰⁸(...continued)

among the nations (**verse 23**), the reversal of the life-giving character of the Law by introducing instructions that were *not good* and were not life-giving (**verse 25**), and the Divine endorsement of child sacrifice (**verse 26**)...

“In attempts to answer the question, ‘How can Ezekiel depict [YHWH] as having given bad laws?’ **verses 25-26** have been cited, from the time of the early church fathers, as part of an anti-legal or anti-Jewish polemic...

“The answer probably lies in Ezekiel’s theological intent and rhetorical method. Since the **Pentateuch** records no laws that were actually given to the second wilderness generation, Ezekiel is offering an interpretation of history that intends to shock rather than depict an actual historical occasion. He implies that, since Israel was by character disposed to such actions (becoming like the nations, **verse 32**), [YHWH] sees to it that their desires are given Divine sanction (see also Paul’s similar rhetoric in **Romans 1:23-25** concerning idolatry).” (P. 1183)

Darr comments on **verses 18-26**, which she entitles “Like Parents, Like Children.” She states that “Yahweh’s first words to this new generation of Israelites are a warning, cast as a negative imperative (**verse 18**): ‘Do not follow the statutes...of your parents, nor observe their ordinances, nor defile yourselves with their [dung] idols’ (i.e. the idols their parents were already worshiping in Egypt; see **verses 7-8**). **Verse 19** omits notice of the life-giving nature of Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances...**Verse 23** inserts a troubling element into Ezekiel’s account of the second desert generation—God’s oath to ‘scatter them among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries’...Yahweh’s oath (**verses 23-24** bears directly on the circumstances of Ezekiel’s fellow exiles. It functions, in one sense, to undercut popular questioning of Divine justice (theodicy), for how can his community protest an exile already thoroughly justified before Israel ever entered its land? In another sense, however, its implications threaten to undermine Ezekiel’s own argument (in **chapter 18**) that Yahweh does not punish one generation for the sins of previous ones. If in the desert, Israel’s iniquity already justified God’s determination to impose the punishment of exile, what chance had subsequent generations to undo the damage and / or change God’s Mind? In the face of this apparent contradiction [we see no contradiction here; any subsequent generation could have annulled the Divine decision by repentance], we must remember that Ezekiel is no systematic theologian. With each oracle, he constructs an argument and utilizes those rhetorical strategies best suited to advance it...

“With **verses 25-26**, we arrive at ideas that have consternated commentators and pastors for centuries. First, how can (even) Ezekiel say that Yahweh gave ‘not good’ statutes...and death-dealing ordinances to the second generation as punishment for their sins? Second (and inextricable from the first), how can he claim that God polluted them through their gifts, by ‘making them pass through fire every Israelite woman’s firstborn child...in order that the Lord might desolate them and force their acknowledgment of Yahweh’s sovereignty and power?

(continued...)

וְאָמַר אֶל־בְּנֵיהֶם בְּמִדְבָּר

And I said to their children⁹⁰⁹ in the desert / wilderness,⁹¹⁰

בְּחֻקֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אַל־תֵּלְכוּ

By your fathers' statutes (masculine plural) you shall not walk;⁹¹¹

⁹⁰⁸(...continued)

“Only with **verses 25-26** can we speak of a *second* giving of the law. This law-giving is the antithesis of the first (**verses 11-12**)...In the first imposition of the law (**verse 11**), Yahweh gave Israel ‘My statutes’ and ‘My ordinances,’ both of which were life-bestowing. In the second imposition of the law (**verse 25**), ‘My statutes’ is replaced by ‘not good statutes,’ and ‘My ordinances’ is replaced by ‘not good statutes,’ and ‘My ordinances’ is replaced by ‘ordinances by which they could not live’...In the second giving of the law, Yahweh ‘defiles them’ rather than ‘gives to them,’ and ‘their very gifts’—child sacrifice—are singled out as exemplary of Yahweh’s negative disposition toward the people...Shocking though his statement be, the reader knows that sacrifice of the firstborn—human and animal—has some bases in Israelite law...Ezekiel’s use of ‘to cause to pass over’ says nothing of the redemption of Israel’s offspring. The following phrase confirms that he is speaking of child sacrifice. **Verse 26b (NRSV)** reads, ‘In order that I might horrify them’...The Israelites would not be ‘horrified’ by causing their firstborn to ‘pass over’ if substitution were in view...

“Ezekiel’s claim that Yahweh gave the Israelites ‘not good’ statutes and deadly ordinances must be interpreted as the antithesis of the first lawgiving in the desert (**verses 11-12**). God’s demand for child sacrifice functions as the opposite of Sabbath observance and illustrated the depth of the people’s depravity...The reader’s last glimpse of Israel in the desert is of the people practicing *religiously* Yahweh’s punitive laws. Rebellious Israel is obedient in all the wrong ways.” (Pp. 165-168)

Reimer comments on **verses 18-21**, “Passing on to their children (**verse 18**), that is, the wilderness generation, gives another opportunity for faithful covenant living (**verses 19-20**), which is again spurned.” (P. 1527)

⁹⁰⁹

Rabbi Fisch notes that this means “the offspring of the adults who left Egypt.” (P. 124)

⁹¹⁰

Hilmer notes that “[YHWH] began anew with the second generation in the desert (see **Numbers 14:26-35**).” (P. 1252)

⁹¹¹

Rabbi Fisch states that this is referring to “the Egyptian practices which they had acquired while living in their land.” (P. 124)

וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטֵיהֶם אַל־תִּשְׁמְרוּ

and their commandments you shall not keep;

וּבַגְלוֹלֵיהֶם אַל־תִּטְמְאוּ:

and by their idols you shall not make yourselves unclean!

20:19 אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

I (am) YHWH your God–

בְּחֻקוֹתַי לֵכּוּ

by My statutes (feminine plural) walk!

וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי שְׁמְרוּ

And My commandments, keep!

וַעֲשׂוּ אֹתָם:

And do them!⁹¹²

20:20 וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי קִדְּשׁוּ

And My sabbaths–keep set-apart!

וְהָיוּ לְאוֹת בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם

And they will be for a sign between Me and (between) you,

לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

to know that I (am) YHWH your God.

912

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The younger generation were not only exhorted to avoid the sins of their fathers, but to accept the way of God as that alone in which they should walk, if they were to enjoy a secure national existence.” (P. 125)

Rabbi Fisch notes that “The Jewish commentators quote as a case of rebellion against God the incident of the Baal of Peor (**Numbers 25:1-9**).” (P. 126)

1 וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשִׁטִּיִּם

And Israel settled down in the Shittiyim.

וַיִּחַל הָעָם לְזָנוֹת אֶל-בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב:

And the people began to be sexually immoral to / with the daughters of Moab.

2 וַתִּקְרְאוּן לָעָם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן

And they called to the people to (share) in (the) sacrifices of their Gods.

וַיֹּאכַל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן:

And the people ate, and bowed in worship to their Gods.

3 וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר

And Israel was joined to the Baal Peor.

וַיַּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

And YHWH's anger burned against Israel.

4 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה

And YHWH said to Moses,

קַח אֶת-כָּל-רָאשֵׁי הָעָם

Take all the heads / chiefs of the people,

וְהוֹקַע אוֹתָם לִיהוָה נֶגֶד הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ

and execute them / hang them for the YHWH in the sun(light),

וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אַף-יְהוָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:

and (the) heat of YHWH's anger will turn from Israel.

5 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

And Moses said to the judges of Israel,

הֲרֹגוּ אִישׁ אֶנְשָׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר:

Each one kill his men, the ones who have been joined to the Baal Peor!

6 וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

And look--a man from the people of Israel--

בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל-אֶחָיו אֶת-הַמִּדְיָנִית

he came, and he drew near to his tent the Midianitess,

(continued...)

בַּחֲקוֹתַי לֹא־הָלְכוּ

By My statutes (feminine plural) they did not walk,

וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי לֹא־שָׁמְרוּ

and My commandments they did not keep,

לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם

to do them—

⁹¹³(...continued)

לְעֵינַי מֹשֶׁה וּלְעֵינַי כָּל־עֵדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

in the eyes of Moses, and in the eyes of all (the) congregation of Israel's people.

וְהִמָּהּ בְּכִים פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:

And they were weeping (beside the) door of the Tent of Meeting.

7 וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן

And Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw (it)--

וַיָּקָם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה

and he arose from the middle of the congregation,

וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ:

and he took a spear in his hand.

8 וַיָּבֹא אַחַר אִישׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַקֶּבֶה

And he came behind (the) Israelite man, into the large tent,

וַיִּדְקַר אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה

and he pierced through the two of them, the Israelite man and the woman,

אֶל־קִבְתָּהּ

(all the way through) to her belly!

וַתֵּעָצֵר הַמִּגַּפָּה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And the plague was stopped from (spreading) over the people of Israel.

9 וַיְהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה

And those who died by the plague—

אַרְבַּעַת וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף:

twenty-four thousand!

אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם

which the human / man will do them,

וְחַי בָּהֶם

and he will live by them.

אֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי חָלְלוּ

My sabbaths they polluted / profaned.

וְאָמַר לְשַׁפֵּךְ חַמְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם

And I said / determined to pour out My wrath upon them,

לְכַלּוֹת אַפִּי בָם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

to finish off My anger against them in the desert / wilderness.

20:22⁹¹⁴

914

Reimer comments on **verses 22-26** that “The final phase in the history includes a passage notoriously difficult to understand. Although the giving of laws in **verse 11** held out the possibility of life, in **verse 25** [YHWH] asserts that He gave Israel statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life...

“The Mosaic laws were in fact good and were the means by which the people could enjoy [YHWH’s] Presence and blessing among them. The laws that were ‘not good’ refer rather to the infiltration of pagan customs of the surrounding nations, with which the people of Israel increasingly aligned their understanding of their own law [this denies what the text says, ‘YHWH gave Israel statutes that were not good’]. **Verse 26**, offering up all their firstborn (compare **verse 31**) points this way. This phase is analogous to [YHWH] giving up people to their own idolatrous desires and the consequences thereof (**Numbers 11:4-6, 31-35, Romans 1:24, 26, 28**; compare **Acts 7:42**).” (P. 1527)

And so Reimer effectively denies what the text of **Ezekiel** says, that YHWH gave Israel statutes that were “not good.” For Reimer (along with others) to hold that all of the Mosaic laws were in fact good, is a very naive statement, refusing to admit the existence of murderous statutes and exclusivist racist laws that are in fact bad statutes, and had to later be rejected! See Matties’ statement concerning this passage in the footnote on **verse 18**.

וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי אֶת־יָדִי

And I returned / held back My Hand,⁹¹⁵

וְאָעַשׂ לְמַעַן שְׁמִי

and I acted on behalf of My name,

לְבַלְתִּי הַחֲלֹל לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם

so as to not to be profaned in (the) eyes of the nations

אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם לְעֵינֵיהֶם:

who—I brought them forth (from Egypt-land) in their eyes.

20:23 גַּם־אֲנִי נִשְׂאתִי אֶת־יָדִי לָהֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר

Also, I, I raised My Hand to them in the desert / wilderness,

לְהַפְיֵץ אֹתָם בְּגוֹיִם

to scatter them among the nations,

וּלְזַרְוֹת אוֹתָם בְּאֶרְצוֹת:

to disperse (synonym) them among the lands / countries.⁹¹⁶

915

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The Divine hand was outstretched to make an end of the sinful generation, but He withdrew it and spared the people.” (P. 125)

916

Rabbi Fisch comments that “While they were still in the wilderness, God decreed that their descendants, after being settled in the holy land, would be exiled and dispersed among the nations, because they were yet in need of purification in the furnace of national suffering. Compare:

Deuteronomy 4:27-31,

4:27 וְהַפְיֵץ יְהוָה אֹתְכֶם בְּעַמִּים

And YHWH will scatter you among the peoples;

וְנִשְׁאַרְתֶּם מְתֵי מִסְפָּר בְּגוֹיִם

and you shall be left remaining few in number among the nations

אֲשֶׁר יְנַהֵג יְהוָה אֹתְכֶם שָׁמָּה:

where YHWH will drive you people!

(continued...)

⁹¹⁶(...continued)

4:28 וְעַבַדְתֶּם־שָׁם אֱלֹהִים

And there you will serve / be enslaved by Gods,

מֵעֵשָׂה יְדֵי אָדָם עֵץ וָאֶבֶן

(the) product of human hands—wood and stone—

אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִרְאוּן וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּן

which do not see and do not hear,

וְלֹא יֹאכְלוּן וְלֹא יִרְיַחוּן:

and do not eat and do not smell.

4:29 וּבִקְשֶׁתֶם מִשָּׁם אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ

And from there you people will seek YHWH your God;

וּמְצֹאתָ

and you (singular) will find (Him),

כִּי תִדְרֹשֶׁנּוּ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ

if you search with all your (singular) heart

וּבְכָל־נַפְשֶׁךָ:

and with all your innermost being!

4:30 בְּצַר לְךָ וּמְצֹאוֹךָ כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה

And all these things will find you, in your distress,

בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים

in (the) later part of the days--

וּשְׁבַתָּ עַד־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ

and you will return to YHWH your God,

וּשְׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ:

and you will listen to His voice.

4:31 כִּי אֵל רַחוּם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ

Because YHWH your God (is) compassionate / merciful;

לֹא יִרְפֹּךָ

He will not abandon you (singular),

וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתֶךָ

and He will not ruin you;

וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח אֶת־בְּרִית אֲבוֹתֶיךָ

and He will not forget the covenant of your fathers

אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם:

which He swore to them.

(continued...)

⁹¹⁶(...continued)

Deuteronomy 28:64-68,

- 64 וַהֲפִיצֶךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־הָעַמִּים
And YHWH will scatter you among all the peoples,
מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעַד־קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ
from the earth's end and as far as the earth's (other) end;
וְעַבַּדְתָּ שָׁם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
and you will serve there other Gods,
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתָּ
Whom you did not know,
אֶתְּךָ וְאֶבְתֶּיךָ
you and your fathers—
עֵץ וְאֶבֶן:
wood and stone (Gods).
- 65 וּבְגוֹיִם הָהֵם לֹא תִרְגָּיעַ
And among those nations, you will not find rest / respite,
וְלֹא־יְהִיָּה מְנוּחַ לְכַף־רַגְלֶךָ
and there will not be rest for (the) sole of your foot;
וְנָתַן יְהוָה לְךָ שָׁם
and YHWH will give to you there,
לֵב רָגַז וְכַלְיוֹן עֵינַיִם
a quivering heart and failing eyes
וְדַאֲבוֹן נַפְשׁ:
and faintness of innermost being.
- 66 וְהָיוּ חַיֶּיךָ תְּלֵאִים לְךָ מִנְּגַד
And your lives will be hung for you, in front (of you);
וּפְחָדְתָּ לַיְלָה וַיּוֹמָם
and you will be filled with dread by night and by day;
וְלֹא תֵאֱמִין בְּחַיֶּיךָ:
and you will not have confidence in your lives.
- 67 בַּבֹּקֶר תֹּאמַר מִי־יַתֵּן עֶרֶב
In the morning you will say, Who will make it evening?
וּבְעֶרֶב תֹּאמַר מִי־יַתֵּן בֹּקֶר
And in the evening you will say, Who will make it morning?

(continued...)

20:24 יֵעַן מִשְׁפָּטַי לֹא־עָשׂוּ

On account of My commandments they did not do,

וְחֻקוֹתַי מָאָסוּ

and My statutes (feminine plural) they rejected / refused;

וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי חָלְלוּ

and My sabbaths they profaned / polluted,

⁹¹⁶(...continued)

מִפֶּחַד לְבַבְךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּפְחָד

–from your heart’s fear, which will be afraid,

וּמִמְרֵאָה עֵינֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה:

and from your eyes’ sight which you will see.

68 וְהָשִׁיבְךָ יְהוָה | מִצְרַיִם בְּאֲנִיּוֹת

And YHWH will return you (to) Egypt in ships,

בְּדֶרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ לֹא־תִסִּיף עוֹד לִרְאֹתָהּ

by the way which I said to you, You will not again see it.

וְהִתְמַכְרְתֶם שָׁם לְאִיבֵיךָ

And you will sell yourselves there to your enemies,

לְעִבְדִים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת

for male slaves and for female slaves–

וְאֵין קֹנֵה:

and there is no one buying.

Psalm 106:26-27,

26 וַיִּשָּׂא יְדוֹ לָהֶם

And He raised His Hand at them,

לְהַפִּיל אוֹתָם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

To cause them to fall in the desert,

27 וּלְהַפִּיל זֶרְעָם בְּגוֹיִם

and to cause their descendant(s) to fall among nations,

וּלְזַרְוֹתָם בְּאַרְצוֹת:

and to scatter them among the lands.

Rabbi Fisch comments that ‘All such threats were conditional, and the meaning is that the unrighteous spirit which was evinced [revealed the presence of] in the wilderness, if persisted in when the nation was established in its land, would lead to captivity and dispersion.’ (P 125)

וְאַחֲרַי גָּלוּ לִי אֲבוֹתָם הֵיוּ עֵינֵיהֶם:

and their eyes were (following) after their fathers' idols.

20:25⁹¹⁷

917

Hilmer comments on **verses 25-26**, “Compare the principle of Divine working in **Romans 1:24-32.**” (P. 1252)

- 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,
to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,
25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie
and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,
who is blessed forever! Amen.
26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.
For their women exchanged natural relations
for those that are contrary to nature;
27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women
and were consumed with passion for one another,
men committing shameless acts with men
and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.
28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God,
God gave them up to a debased mind
to do what ought not to be done.
29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.
They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.
They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent,
haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,
31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.
32 Though they know God's righteous decree
that those who practice such things deserve to die,
they not only do them
but give approval to those who practice them. (**English Standard Version**)
(P. 1252)

Notice that Paul says over and over “God gave them up to...”, but never says what Ezekiel says, “YHWH gave them statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by.” We say to Hilmer and those who adopt this way of interpreting **Ezekiel 20:25**, No–this is not the principle of Divine working that Paul is depicting in **Romans 1:24-32!** Rather, this is your way of getting around what **Ezekiel 20:25** clearly says!

וְגַם־אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם חֻקִּים

And also I, I gave to them statutes,⁹¹⁸

לֹא טוֹבִים

not good ones,⁹¹⁹

918

Whereas previously in this chapter the feminine plural of “statutes” has been used (with one exception (**verse 18**, where it is a matter of “their fathers’ statutes”), here the masculine plural of statutes, חֻקִּים, **chuqqiym**, is used. Whether this has any significance is difficult to tell.

H. Ringgren’s article on חֻק, in **Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament**, pp. 139-47, shows how both the masculine חֻק, **choq**, with its plural חֻקִּים, **chuqqiym**, and the feminine, חֻקָּה, **chuqqah**, with its plural חֻקֹּת, **chuqqoth**, are used interchangeably throughout the **Hebrew Bible**, with no distinction being made between them. “Most of the occurrences in the prophetic scrolls are found in **Ezekiel**. Here the feminine form חֻקָּה, **chuqqah**, predominates (22 occurrences), usually with the plural of *mishpot*, referring to statutes of Yahweh’s covenant. The form חֻק, **choq** (masculine), appears only once (**36:27**) with reference to Yahweh’s law...**Ezekiel 16:27**,

וְאֶת־רוּחִי אֶתֵּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם

And My Spirit I will give / place in your (plural) midst;

וְעָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־בְּחֻקֵי תֵלְכוּ

and I will make / cause so that in My statutes (masculine) you (plural) will walk,

וּמִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם:

and My commandments you will keep and you will do / observe!

and with reference to unjust statutes (**20:25**).” (P. 145)

919

The statement here in Hebrew is:

וְגַם־אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים

and also I, I gave to them statutes (masculine plural), not good ones

Compare the statement in **Nehemiah 9:13**:

(continued...)

וּמִשְׁפָּטִים

and commandments—

לֹא יַחֲיוּ בָהֶם:

you will not live by them!⁹²⁰

⁹¹⁹(...continued)

וַתֵּתֵן לָהֶם...חֻקִּים וּמִצְוֹת טוֹבִים:

and You gave to them...statutes (masculine plural) and commandments, good ones.

It should be observed that both passages use the masculine plural for “statutes.”

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The thought that God could actually give the Israelites *statutes that were not good* was repugnant to the Jewish mind. Accordingly, Rashi explains that, since they rejected the discipline of the *Torah*, God allowed the evil dictates of their heart to have unrestricted sway over them. Kimchi and others interpret that, as a punishment for rejecting the Divine statutes, God delivers them to their enemies who impose upon them exacting and rigorous statutes (*not good*). Because they discarded those laws *which if a man do, he shall live by them*, they would become subject to laws which signify death. The verb *I gave* therefore has the meaning of ‘I caused to give’...

“Rashi’s explanation seems to come nearer to biblical doctrine which ascribes to God the inevitable consequence of man’s choice of action. Thus He is said to have hardened Pharaoh’s heart where the intention is that He let the king harden his heart. See...the phrase *I the Lord have enticed that prophet (Ezekiel 4:9)*.” (P. 126) See the next footnote.

920

Walter Eichrodt states, "We meet here with one of Ezekiel's most uniquely characteristic statements in regard to the law of Yahweh. Seen in the light of the Divine will to chastise, that law seems to him a direct incitement to evil, leading Israel astray into the folly of child sacrifice. [See **Exodus 34:19-20**,

19 כָּל-פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם לִי

Every first-opener of a womb belongs to Me;

וְכָל-מִקְנֶךָ תִּזְכָּר

and all your cattle—it shall be remembered,

פֶּטֶר שׁוֹר וְשֶׂה:

first-opener (of a womb), cattle and sheep;

(continued...)

⁹²⁰(...continued)

20 וּפְתַר חֲמוֹר
and first-opener (of a womb) of a donkey,
תַּפְדֶּה בֶּשֶׂה
you shall redeem with a sheep;
וְאִם-לֹא תַפְדֶּה
and if you will not redeem (it),
וְעִרְפֹתוֹ
and you shall break its neck.
כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּנֵיךָ תַפְדֶּה
Every first-born of your sons you shall redeem!
וְלֹא-יֵרָאוּ פָנַי רִיקִים:
And you (plural) shall not appear before Me empty!]

"The chief regulation about the offering of the first-born, such as that in **Exodus 22:28**, ...'the first of your sons you shall give to me,' has an absolute sound, and is not further limited by any definition, so it was likely to call for an absolute interpretation, when certain definite conditions seemed to demand the giving of the first-born as a human sacrifice...

"Under the heavy pressure of spoliation by heathen overlords and the state of misery to which most of the peasantry were reduced, it was possible for the human sacrifice of first-born sons to appear to be the most effectual means by which to purchase mercy from a wrathful Deity. The best-known testimony to this attitude of mind is **Micah 6:6-7**...[See also **2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; Jeremiah 2:34; 3:24; 26:31; and 32:35**.]

"Such a misinterpretation of the law seems to have been known to Ezekiel. But the remarkable thing is that he not only does not oppose this misinterpretation but attributes it to the will of his God to execute punishment by deliberately giving his law a form calculated to cause his people to fall. Here a manifestation well known to Israel, that of [YHWH] Himself hardening the heart of the unrepentant sinner, is carried to its very climax. As [YHWH], according to **Psalms 18:26**, reveals Himself in His purity to the pure, but gives a perverted revelation to the perverse, thus punishing sin by sin...[Compare **Isaiah 6:10; 1 Kings 22:22ff.**]...He lays down in His Own law a stumbling-block, by means of which a perverted mind may come to believe in the goodness and devoutness of a sacrifice which is nevertheless a frightful abomination. The unmerciful death-dealing commandment with which Israel insists on tormenting herself in her state of error, and which reveals all the hostility to life in her nature-worship, is therefore a product of the will of [YHWH] in the same way as His life-giving law. And whoever appeals to that commandment cannot but suffer the consequences, which [YHWH's] retribution must take in the shape of a command such as a disobedient people deserves...The purpose of all this is 'that they might
(continued...)

⁹²⁰(...continued)

know that I am Yahweh'...Israel's faith in [YHWH], unable as it was to accept either the seriousness of the demand for a decision or the life-giving kindness of her God, had to experience the shock of finding herself wrong in her over-confident assumption of how [YHWH] would behave, before she could be touched by any awareness of the mysterious holiness of [YHWH]." (Pp. 271-72)

The Greek translation of this passage (20:25) is:

καὶ ἐγὼ ἔδωκα αὐτοῖς προστάγματα οὐ καλὰ
And I, I gave to them commandments / injunctions, not good ones,
καὶ δικαιώματα ἐν οἷς οὐ ζήσονται ἐν αὐτοῖς
and regulations / commandments in / by which they will not live in / by them.

English translations of the Hebrew text of this passage vary:

King James, "Wherefore I gave them also statutes *that were* not good, and judgments whereby they should not live."

(Matthew Henry, in a lengthy comment first suggests understanding the statutes and judgments that were not good as God's commandments to punish Israel for its sins in the wilderness wanderings—the plagues, the fiery serpent (compare **Numbers 25:4**), but this is a unique, indefensible way of understanding "statutes and judgments." Henry goes on to explain the statement like **New International** does. "The statutes and judgments which the heathen observed in the worship of their idols were not good, and in practicing them they could not live; and [YHWH] gave them up to those." That is, instead of the text's statement that [YHWH] gave them statutes and judgments that were not good, he explains it to mean "[YHWH] gave them up to" those statutes and judgments of the heathen. He then identifies the specific way this happened, "when they *caused their children*, especially their first-born," concerning which the law said "*the first-born of thy sons shalt thou give unto me*," which they took to mean cause their first-born sons "to pass *through the fire*." It seems apparent that Henry is attempting to get around what the text actually says, which goes against his basic beliefs.)

Tanakh, "Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live";

New Revised Standard, "Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live";

New International, "I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by." (Here, the **New International** translator feels free to change the text from "I gave them" to "I gave them over to" as does Matthew Henry, since he and they disagree with what the text says.)

New Jerusalem, "And for this reason I gave them laws that were not good and judgements by which they could never live." (The footnote on this verse states, "Primitive theology ascribed to Yahweh customs and practices which were purely human in origin. Here Ezekiel seems to have
(continued...)

⁹²⁰(...continued)

in mind the commandment to offer the newly born [**Exodus 22:28-29**], often so grossly miscon-structed by the Israelites--compare Matthew Henry's comments." The annotator feels free to change what the text ascribes to YHWH to "primitive theology." But Ezekiel is hardly what we would call a "primitive theologian"!)

English Standard, "Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life."

Reimer comments that "The Mosaic laws were in fact good and were the means by which the people could enjoy [YHWH's] presence and blessing among them. The laws that were 'not good' refer rather to the infiltration of pagan customs of the surrounding nations, with which the people of Israel increasingly aligned their understanding of their own law." (P. 1527)

Here Reimer feels free to change the meaning of the text from "YHWH gave them statutes that were not good" to "they let pagan customs from surrounding nations infiltrate into their midst, to which they aligned their understanding of their own [good, [YHWH]-given] law."

What do you think? If the entirety of the Law of Moses came directly from YHWH, is it the fact that there are only good laws, no bad laws within it? What about the law to murder / execute the rebellious son? Or the law to kill the homosexual? Or the law to fight unending war against the Amalekites? Or the command to exterminate entire peoples, including men, women, children and animals, as contained in the **Scroll of Joshua**? Or the law to exclude men with crushed testicles from YHWH's assembly, including foreigners (**Deuteronomy 23:1-6**^{Eng}? These examples can be multiplied.

YHWH's statutes and laws have been given, as is often stated, so that a human being "may live by them." But here are commandments given by YHWH by which a human being will not live! And as a result, if we take this passage seriously, we will always have to ask, Is this commandment truly from YHWH, and is it truly good? Will it bring life, or will it bring death? In fact, doesn't YHWH expect His creatures to use their minds, to seek for wisdom, and to not mindlessly follow any and every commandment, just because it is attributed to Him?

Isn't this what the **New Testament** depicts Jesus as doing, for example, with reference to the kosher food laws of Judaism, and in his reaching out to those considered unclean and unacceptable?

My wife and I have just finished reading through the **Five Books of Moses**, which both of us from our childhood have been taught are "the Word of God," and all their laws, the laws of Yahweh / God, and we have been amazed at a number of laws that seem barbaric at best. One example must suffice. It is "Ordeal of Bitter Water" given in **Numbers 5:11-31**:

¹¹ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³ if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from
(continued...)

⁹²⁰(...continued)

her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; ¹⁴ if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself; ¹⁵ then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance. ¹⁶ Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the LORD; ¹⁷ the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸ The priest shall set the woman before the LORD, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. ¹⁹ Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband's authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you," ²¹ -- let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman-- "the LORD make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; ²² now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!" And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen." ²³ Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain. ²⁵ The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand, and shall elevate the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar; ²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and turn it into smoke on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the woman shall become an execration among her people. ²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children. ²⁹ This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, while under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, ³⁰ or when a spirit of jealousy comes on a man and he is jealous of his wife; then he shall set the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall apply this entire law to her. ³¹ The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity. (NRS)

What do you think of this law? Is it an example of the just law of Yahweh? We think it is not, and that it is instead an example of unjust, male chauvinistic laws. What to you think?

Yes, we say, YHWH expects His people to use their minds, to seek for wisdom, and to not mindlessly follow any and every commandment, even if they are attributed to YHWH. And in fact, isn't this what the **New Testament** depicts Jesus as doing, when a woman accused of adultery was brought to him? Did he take her to a priest, sweep up dust from the floor of the holy place, and make her drink it, (continued...)

20:26 וְאַטְמַא אֹתָם בְּמִתְּנוּתָם

And I made them unclean / defiled them by their gifts,

בְּהַעֲבִיר כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם

in causing to pass through [the fire] every (child) first opening a womb.⁹²¹

אֲשַׁמָּם

I appalled them,

לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵדְעוּ

so that they might know

אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יְהוָה:

that I (am) YHWH.

20:27⁹²²

⁹²⁰(...continued)

to prove whether or not she had committed adultery? No—he forgave her, and told her to go, and sin no more! Thanks be to God!

⁹²¹

Rabbi Fisch quotes Davidson [a Christian Hebraist] as writing “‘The penalty of sin is further delusion and worse sin, the end of which is death.’ God had ordained that the firstborn, all that opens the womb, should be ‘sanctified’ to Him (**Exodus 13:2**). So far as the children were concerned, this was a law which preserved them alive since nowhere does He command child-sacrifice. They rejected this law, and God allowed them to turn an act of ‘sanctification’ into an act of ‘pollution’ when they burnt their children to Molech.” (P. 126)

We say, Nowhere? What about YHWH’s commandment to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in **Genesis 22**? Could it be that this story in **Genesis** was intended to correct the belief in Israel that YHWH truly wanted the sacrifice of first-born sons?

⁹²²

Rabbi Fisch entitles **verses 27-29** ‘Israel’s Sinfulness in the Holy Land.’

Reimer comments on **verses 27-31** that “As Ezekiel turns from recitation to application, life on the land itself is in view for the first time. On worship on the high places (**verses 28-29**) see **Ezekiel 6:3** (continued...) ”

לִכֵּן דַבֵּר אֶל-בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּן-אָדָם

Therefore speak to Israel's house, son of Adam / Humanity--

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

and say to them, In this way my Lord YHWH spoke:

עוֹד זֹאת נִדְפְּוּ אוֹתִי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם

Again (in) this (way) your fathers reviled / blasphemed Me,⁹²³

⁹²²(...continued)

(with its footnote). The appeal of **20:30** to be morally distinct from preceding generations resonates with **18:30-31**, although the consistent rebellion is overtly the reason for [YHWH's] refusing inquiry (**20:31b**). Still, the story of rebellion outside the land holds within it multiple instances of Divine forbearance. This grace contains the seed from which the next section grows." (Pp. 1527-28)

Darr comments on **verses 27-29** that "Though the Lord fulfilled the oath to bring Israel into the land (**verse 6**; compare **verse 15**), once there the people carried out their repertoire of cultic abominations: sacrifices, offerings, pleasing odors (incense), and drink offerings upon every high hill and under every leafy tree (**verse 28**). This verse presupposes that the Deuteronomic mandate for cult centralization was already in force—a historical anachronism likely shared by the reader, despite evidence to the contrary in **1-2 Samuel**...

"Greenberg [**Ezekiel 1-20**, p. 385] suggests that Ezekiel's constellation of thoughts derives from **Deuteronomy 12**, itself an attack on the religious practices of Judah's late monarchical period:

'You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their Gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree...You shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways. But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as His habitation to put His Name there...Take care that you do not offer your offerings up at any place you happen to see...When the Lord your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them...take care that you are not snared into imitating them...They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their Gods.' (**Verses 2, 4-5, 13, 29, 30, 31, NRS**).'" (Pp. 168-169)

⁹²³

Rabbi Fisch comments that "In addition to their wickedness in Egypt and the wilderness, they continued their sinning when they were in their own land. The verb 'blaspheme' [גִּדְּפִי, **giddephu**, 'they reviled / cut / wounded / blasphemed'] signifies, in a wider sense, committing a cardinal sin. The
(continued...)

בְּמַעַלְמָם בִּי מַעַל:

by their acting faithlessly against Me, he was / they were unfaithful.

20:28 וַאֲבִיָּאִם אֶל-הָאָרֶץ

And I brought them to the land,

אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת-יָדִי

concerning which I lifted up My Hand [swearing]

לָתֵת אוֹתָהּ לָהֶם

to give it to them.

וַיִּרְאוּ כָל-גְּבוּעָה רָמָה

And they saw every high hill,

וְכָל-עֵץ עֹבֵת

and every leafy tree--

וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-שָׁם אֶת-זִבְחֵיהֶם

and they sacrificed there their sacrifices;

וַיִּתְּנוּ-שָׁם כְּעֵס קְרִבָּנִם

and they gave there (the) provocation of their offering.⁹²⁴

וַיִּשְׂימוּ שָׁם רִיחַ נִיחֻחֵיהֶם

And they placed there their quieting / soothing smell,⁹²⁵

⁹²³(...continued)

phrase, *the same blasphemes the Lord (Numbers 15:30)*, is interpreted in the Talmud of idolatry (**Kerithoth 7b**).” (P. 126)

⁹²⁴

Rabbi Fisch comments that “By their idolatrous offerings they provoked God to anger.” (P. 127)

⁹²⁵

(continued...)

וַיִּסְכוּ שָׁם אֶת־נִסְכֵיהֶם:

and they poured out there their drink offerings.⁹²⁶

20:29 וַאֲמַר אֲלֵהֶם

And I said to them,

מָה הַבִּמֶה

What (is) the high place,

אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם הַבָּאִים שָׁם

where you (plural) (are) the ones coming / going?

וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמָהּ בִּמֶה

And its name was called High Place

עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

until this day.⁹²⁷

⁹²⁵(...continued)

Rabbi Fisch notes that this “quieting / soothing smell,” or “sweet savor,” is a “term used of the odor of flesh, fat, meal-offering or incense burnt upon the altar for the worship of God or an idol.” (P. 127)

⁹²⁶

Rabbi Fisch comments that “On entering the promised land, they adopted the forms of worship practiced by the Canaanites. Shrines were set up on hill-tops and under leafy trees.” (P. 127) See **Ezekiel 6:13**. Here, in **Ezekiel 20:28**, the phrase for “leafy trees” is עֵץ עֹבֵת, but usually a different phrase is used, עֵץ רִעֲנָן, as is true in **Ezekiel 6:13** and **Deuteronomy 12:2; 1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 16:4; 17:10; 2 Chronicles 28:4; Isaiah 57:5; Jeremiah 2:20; 3:6, 13** and **17:2**.

⁹²⁷

Rabbi Fisch comments that “Ezekiel apparently gives the Hebrew term *bamah* a contemptuous derivation as a compound of *ba* (go) and *mah* (what)...The term *bamah*, borrowed from heathendom, was later applied to the structure even when used for the worship of God.” (P. 127)

(continued...)

⁹²⁷(...continued)

The Greek translation (**Rahlfs**), not recognizing the meaning of the Hebrew noun בָּמֹת, bamah, transliterates as Αβαμα, Abama.

Brown-Driver-Briggs supplies the following information: “*Bamoth, high places*, as places of worship, at first on hills and mountains, later on artificial mounds or platforms, under green trees, and in cities; still later for the chapels erected thereon, and once apparently for a portable sanctuary (decked with diverse colours) **Ezekiel 16:16**. The ancient worship of Israel was conducted on these high places. In the times of Samuel and David they ascended to them, descended from them, and offered sacrifices on them, **1 Samuel 9:12-25, 10:5, 10:13**. The custom continued in the reign of Solomon, but Gibeon was ‘the great high place’—**1 Kings 3:2-4; 1 Chronicles 16:39, 21:29; 2 Chronicles 1:3, 13**. High places of Baal were also used—**Numbers 22:41; Jeremiah 19:5; 32:35**; of Moab, **Isaiah 15:2; 16:12; Jeremiah 48:35**; these must be demolished **Numbers 33:52**. Solomon built בָּמֹת (platforms or chapels) to Chemosh and Milkom on the Mountain of Evil Counsel opposite Jerusalem, **1 Kings 11:7**; Jeroboam made temples on the ancient high places of Dan and Bethel, **1 Kings 12:31, 32; 2 Chronicles 11:15**; they are called בָּמֹת אֵוֶן, ‘high places of evil,’ **Hosea 10:8**, בָּמֹת יִשְׁחָק, ‘high places of laughter / Isaac,’ **Amos 7:9**: the kings of Israel built בָּמֹת and בְּתֵי הַבָּמֹת, ‘houses of the high places’ in all their cities **2 Kings 17:9**, and the people worshiped there **2 Kings 17:11**; these were also used by the mixed population after the exile of Israel, **2 Kings 17:29, 32**. These various idolatrous high places were first destroyed by Josiah, **1 Kings 13:2, 32, 38; 2 Kings 23:5-20; 2 Chronicles 34:3**. The worship of Yahweh on high places continued in Judah until the exile **1 Kings 22:44; 2 Kings 15:35**; the sanctity / holiness code predicts that Yahweh will destroy them, **Leviticus 26:30**; they were regarded as the reason for the rejection of Shiloh, **Psalms 78:58**. The compiler of **Kings**, writing from the point of view of the Deuteronomic code, complains לֹא סָרוּ רַק הַבָּמֹת, ‘they did not turn aside the high places,’ **2 Kings 12:4; 14:4; 15:4, 35** compare **2 Chronicles 15:17; 20:33**, and praises the few pious kings who destroyed them.

a. Rehoboam built בָּמֹת, ‘high places,’ with מַצְבֹּת, ‘pillars,’ & אֲשֵׁרִים, Asherahs, on every high hill and under every green tree, **1 Kings 14:23**.

b. Asa did not remove the high places **1 Kings 15:14** (**2 Chronicles 14:2, 4** is incorrect unless בָּמֹת בַּעַל, ‘high places of Baal’).

c. Jehoshaphat in his reform on the basis of the covenant code did not remove them, **1 Kings 22:44**; Jehoram, his son, made high places in the cities of Judah **2 Chronicles 21:11**; and Ahaz sacrificed on high places on the hills and under every green tree and in every city of Judah, **2 Kings 16:4; 2 Chronicles 28:4, 25**.

d. Hezekiah removed them, **2 Kings 18:4, 22; 2 Chronicles 31:1; 32:12; Is 36:7**; but Manasseh rebuilt them, **2 Kings 21:3; 2 Ch 33:3, 19**, and the people continued to sacrifice thereon to Yahweh, **2 Chronicles 33:17**.

(continued...)

20:30⁹²⁸ לֵּינָן אֲמַר | אֶל-בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל

Therefore, say to Israel's house(hold),

כֹּה אֲמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

In this way my Lord YHWH spoke:

הַבְּרִיךְ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אַתֶּם נִטְמָאִים

Are you not becoming unclean in (the) way of your fathers?⁹²⁹

⁹²⁷(...continued)

e. Josiah, in his reform, based on the Deuteronomic code, defiled them and broke them down from Geba to Beersheba, **2 Kings 23:5, 8, 9**; but subsequently there were **בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ**, 'high places of the topheth' in the valley of Ben Hinnom, **Jeremiah 7:31**, and **בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ**, 'high places' throughout Judah, **Jeremiah 17:3**; compare **Ezekiel 6:3, 6; 20:29** (here).

928

Darr entitles **verses 30-32** "Idolatry and Defiance in Exile." She comments that "Two rhetorical questions, introduced by yet another command that Ezekiel address the house of Israel and by the messenger formula, demand that the exiles reassess their understanding of reality. They have defiled *themselves*, and so cannot blame previous generations for their situation. Moreover, they, too, have 'whored' after other Gods... Their defiling apostasy is exemplified by their offering of their 'gifts' by causing their children to pass through fire as sacrifices to other Gods. The reader cannot miss how closely **verse 31** in particular echoes **verse 26**...

"Surely, Yahweh's rhetorical question ('Shall I be consulted by you, O house of Israel?') admits nothing except a negative response; and God supplies it here, as in **verse 3**, emphatically in an oath...

"**Verse 32**...reflects their rebellious impulse to abandon the God with Whom they have shared so negative a history." (Pp. 169-170)

Rabbi Fisch entitles **verses 30-44** "As in the Past So in the Future God Will Have Regard for the Honor of His Name."

He comments that "In reply to the inquiry of the elders of Israel, Ezekiel reviewed the past of the nation; now he applies the teaching to the future." (P. 127)

929

Rabbi Fisch notes that "This **verse [30]** and the first half of the next **verse [31]** are antecedents to the clause, *shall I then be inquired of by you?* The meaning is, if you still indulge in the abominable
(continued...)

וְאַחֲרֵי שְׁקֻצֵיהֶם

And (following) after their abominations,

אַתֶּם זֹנִים:

(are you not) prostituting yourselves?⁹³⁰

20:31 וּבִשְׂאֵת מִתְּנִיתֶכֶם

And when you lift up your gifts,⁹³¹

בְּהַעֲבִיר בְּנֵיכֶם בְּאֵשׁ

when causing your children / sons to pass through the fire,

אַתֶּם נֹשְׂמֵאִים לְכָל־גִּלּוּלֵיכֶם

you are defiling yourselves⁹³² by all your idols,

עַד־הַיּוֹם

until today!

⁹²⁹(...continued)

practices of idolatry, how can you expect a Divine revelation?" (P. 127)

⁹³⁰

Hilmer states that the question YHWH asks in this verse is "the point of this chapter: How will you act?" (P. 1253) I.e., "Are you going to act like your fathers did, or will you instead listen and respond to My teaching?"

⁹³¹

Rabbi Fisch comments that "As an act of worship, the gifts taking the form of the sacrifice of their children." (P. 127)

⁹³²

Rabbi Fisch's translation has "pollute yourselves," and he comments that "Such 'pollution' creates a barrier between them and God which makes impossible the achievement of their desire, viz. enlightenment from Him on what the immediate future holds in store." (P. 128)

וְאֲנִי אֶדְרָשׁ לְכֶם בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל

And I, will I be sought by you, house(hold) of Israel?

חַי־אֲנִי נָאִם אֶדְרָנִי יְהוָה

As I live⁹³³—(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH—

אִם-אֶדְרָשׁ לְכֶם:

I will not be sought by you!

20:32⁹³⁴

933

For this phrase “As I live” in the mouth of YHWH, see footnote 461. It is a “Divine oath.”

934

Eichrodt entitles **verses 32-44** “Judgment and Renewal.” He comments that “Evidently the exiles’ plans have reached maturity. We are now shown how, looked on from another side, they are dangerous and hostile to God, and a threat of judgment is added to [YHWH’s] refusal to listen to their inquiry.” (P. 276)

Eichrodt entitles **verses 32-38** “The Purgative Judgment in the Wilderness.” He comments that “The rebelliousness of the chosen people, which we have glimpsed at four periods of its history, is threatening to revive. This is seen in the inclinations felt by the elders, which they have so far kept secret, but which the prophet has somehow come to know. They intend to organize regular sacrificial worship in Babylon, in order to regain the meeting with [YHWH] in the sacrament of sacrifice, to be deprived of which has caused them such pain. Yet to carry out such plans will be to commit the very same act of unfaithfulness as their fathers, setting up a place of worship according to their own self-assertive wishes, without asking as to [YHWH’s] will. Once more we see men self-assertively and defiantly claim as a right what can only be granted as an undeserved gift of grace by the [YHWH] Who gave the covenant...”

“The conduct of the elders is described as assimilating Israel to the surrounding heathenism. To express this, Ezekiel puts directly into the elders’ mouths the wicked words: ‘He [Israel] will be like the nations, the tribes of other countries.’ The elders, of course, did not say any such thing in their discussion with the prophet. It is a classic formula expressing the mutiny against [YHWH] implicit in the plan formed by the leaders of the exiles, which has met such a prompt rejection. Here we find an unmistakable allusion to the story of the choice of the first king in **1 Samuel 8**, where the elders of the people state to Samuel their desire to have a king in the very same words: ‘We also wish to be like all the nations.’ The author of **1 Samuel 8** tries to capture in a single phrase how Israel repudiates the special
(continued...)

וְהֶעֱלָה עַל־רוּחְכֶם

And the offering-up of your (plural) spirit,

הִיוּ לֹא תִהְיֶה

shall surely not be--

⁹³⁴(...continued)

position ordained for her by [YHWH], and wishes to assimilate her own sacral constitution to the profane constitution of the states in the heathen world around her..

“To replace that temple [in Jerusalem] by a sanctuary in a heathen land is to give up all hope of a return to home, and to give oneself a form of religious life in a heathen land, by which one’s faith is degraded so as to become merely one religion among many...The setting up of Yahweh-worship in Babylon would have rendered it impossible for the history of the people of [YHWH] to begin afresh in any real sense. That would mean a return to the old ways and a total ignoring of the special guidance and purpose of Yahweh, and the process of gradual assimilation to the heathen environment would have gone on without a break. But Yahweh is not a God Who is content to let His worship figure as an optional extra tolerated alongside other cults. He is the Lord without bounds to His dominion, Whose will it is to be Lord over a people set apart from other peoples to be His, and so He sets up among that people a sign of His (and their) otherness. There can be no legitimate cultic worship of Him that does not take the form that He Himself has prepared.” (Pp. 277-78)

Reimer entitles **verse 32** “Unthinkable Idolatry.” He comments that “This isolated verse acts as a pivot between the history of the preceding passage and the future orientation that follows. It is encouragement to heed the warning of **Deuteronomy 28:64**,

וְהִפִּיצְךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־הָעַמִּים

And YHWH will scatter you among all the peoples,

מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעַד־קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ

from the earth’s end and as far as the earth’s (other) end;

וְעַבַדְתָּ שָׁם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים

and you will serve there other Gods,

אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתָּ

Whom you did not know,

אֶתְּךָ וְאֶבְתֶּיךָ

you and your fathers—

עֵץ וְאֶבֶן:

wood and stone (Gods).

אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם אֹמְרִים

of which you are saying

נְהִיָּה כַּגּוֹיִם

We will be like the nations,⁹³⁵

כַּמְשִׁפְחוֹת הָאָרְצוֹת

like clans of the lands,

לְשֵׁרֵת עֵץ וָאֶבֶן:

serving wood and stone!

20:33⁹³⁶

935

Rabbi Fisch comments that “Apparently a wave of assimilation swept over the exiles in Babylon or over the remnant in Jerusalem. Humiliated, subject to foreign domination and driven from their soil, they regarded the covenant between them and God as ended. They were free to discard His service and adopt the form of worship practiced by other nations. But that intention, declares God, shall not be at all.” (P. 128)

Hilmer comments that “The temptation to lose its uniqueness was always present for Israel (see **1 Samuel 8:5** [where the leaders of ancient Israel ask Samuel to appoint a king for them like the nations]).” (P. 1253)

936

Darr entitles **verses 33-38** “Back to the Future: Israel’s Second Exodus.” She comments that “Ezekiel’s adoption of two phrases, ‘with a mighty Hand,’ and ‘with an outstretched Arm,’ spurs positive thoughts of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery (e.g., **Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8**). But with the third phrase, ‘with wrath poured out,’ Yahweh’s Kingship takes on sinister associations, for it echoes not only **verses 8, 13, and 21**, but also God’s threats against Jerusalem (**7:8; 9:8; 14:19; 22:22**) and Jeremiah’s prediction that Yahweh will join with the Babylonian forces to fight against Zedekiah ‘with outstretched Hand and mighty Arm, in fury, and in great wrath’ (**Jeremiah 21:5**)... The repetition of ‘with wrath poured out’ suggests that this exodus will be a fearsome, not a joyous, event... There, away from the nations’ stares, Yahweh will enter into judgment with the people Face to face, even as God entered into judgment with their ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt—hardly a positive prospect...

(continued...)

חַי־אֲנִי

As I live—⁹³⁷

נֶאֱמַר אֲדַבְרֵי יְהוָה

(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH—

אִם-לֹא בְיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה

With a strong hand and outstretched arm

וּבַחֲמָה שְׂפֹכָה

and with wrath poured out

⁹³⁶(...continued)

“The purpose of the encounter is judgment, and no mediator stands between the people and their wrathful Deity. When, in **verse 37**, Yahweh appears in the metaphorical guise of Shepherd forcing the flock to pass ‘under the staff,’ the image is not of a concerned shepherd who counts the sheep to see that none is missing (**Jeremiah 33:3**), but of a process for distinguishing between those to be brought under the bond of covenant and those who continue to rebel against Yahweh. The latter will participate in the new exodus, only to be purged from the community...Then the survivors will acknowledge that Yahweh alone is God. With these events, Yahweh’s purpose is, in large part, fulfilled. The people will at last be bound by God’s covenant. But the story does not end in the wilderness. God’s plan extends beyond judgment to include Israel living faithfully in its homeland.” (Pp. 170-171)

Reimer entitles **verses 33-44** “Looking to the Future.” He comments that “The structure of two phases in the wilderness finds its mirror image in two phases of restoration: **verses 33-38** use exodus / wilderness motifs as the community is purified; **verses 39-44** focus on worship, in a reversal of ritual behavior in the land (**verses 28-31**). Both movements here parallel the ‘bringing out’ in the historical recital (**verses 5, 22** and **34, 41**).” (P. 1528)

Reimer comments on **verses 33-38** that “The history recited in **verses 5-26** is now compressed into a symbolic future for the exilic community, although with wrath poured out (**verses 33, 34**) and judgment expressed (**verses 35, 36**) it is not yet the idealized future of **11:14-20** or even **17:22-24**.

⁹³⁷

For this phrase “As I live” in the mouth of YHWH, see footnote 461. It is a “Divine oath.”

אֶמְלֹךְ עֲלֵיכֶם:

I will Reign / be King over you!⁹³⁸

20:34 וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָעַמִּים

And I will bring you forth from the peoples,⁹³⁹

938

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The delusion which had seized hold of them will be dispelled by the severest measures. [YHWH’s] mighty hand and outstretched arm, revealed in the past for their protection, will soon become manifest in drastic fashion to remind them of their distinctiveness as His people.” (P. 128)

Hilmer states that the mighty hand and outstretched arm is “terminology of the exodus (compare **Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8**).” (P. 1253)

Eichrodt comments that “**Verse 33** tells how Yahweh meets the menace of the exiles’ plans by revealing His Lordly might and by making known the unique dignity of His Kingship which they have now presumed to infringe: ‘I will be King over you,’ He says. Those words carry with them a fresh approach by [YHWH] to His people...

“But the present state of affairs makes it impossible for this approach to be made save in and through judgment. The bright sun of the Divine grace must still go on hiding behind that black cloud. A purgative [bowel-cleansing] judgment must take place in order at last to rid the people of Yahweh of those rebellious ones who refuse under the judgment of the exile to repent and be converted.

“In this Ezekiel takes up words used in the accustomed liturgical language to express the first saving demonstration of [YHWH’s] Lordship in the exodus from Egypt ‘by a mighty hand and outstretched arm’ (compare **Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 26:8**). Then he combines them with ‘out-poured wrath,’ an expression peculiar to him alone, and, in a prophetic and paradoxical manner, transforms the boastful cultic invocation of [YHWH] into a threat by [YHWH] to come not to show His power to save but to chastise as a wrathful Judge.” (P. 279)

939

Rabbi Fisch comments that “As against the hope of the Judeans to lose their identity among their neighbors, God tells them that by mighty acts He will remove them from their present environment and ultimately restore their distinctive character.” (P. 128)

וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָאֲרָצוֹת

and I will gather you from the lands

אֲשֶׁר נִפְּצַתֶם בָּם

in which you were scattered,⁹⁴⁰

בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה

with a strong Hand and with an outstretched Arm

וּבַחֲמָה שְׁפוּכָה:

and with wrath poured out!

20:35 וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־מִדְבַר הָעַמִּים

And I will bring you (plural) to a desert / wilderness of the peoples.⁹⁴¹

940

Eichrodt comments on **verse 34** that “the range of the visitation is extended so as to include not only the exiles in Babylonia but the Jews scattered among all nations; they, too, like those once made bond-slaves in Egypt, must be led into the wilderness, in order there to be subjected to the Kingly judgment, in which [YHWH] in person comes face to face with His people. But this new sojourn by Israel in the wilderness is given a depth and earnestness through this act of judgment which distinguishes it from similar pictures of the future to be found in **Hosea** and **Deutero-Isaiah**...

“**Hosea**, the first of these, thinks of Israel’s new sojourn in the desert as a tenderly loving visitation, by which [YHWH] will associate once more with His people as in the early days (**Hosea 2:16-17**). In **Deutero-Isaiah**, the frequent pictures of the wanderings in the wilderness serve as material to set up a permanent memorial to the triumph of [YHWH] the Redeemer. The dry ground is transformed into a garden of Paradise...In **Ezekiel** the recollection of the ‘wilderness of the land of Egypt’ leads rather to thought of the sentence which [YHWH] executed there upon His rebellious people.” (P. 279)

941

Rabbi Fisch states that “the wilderness of the peoples” is “the desert which bordered on the land where they were dwelling, viz. between Syria and Babylon. As in the wilderness of Egypt they were constituted the people of God, so in the desert, cut off from intercourse with heathen nations, they will be made again into His people. There God will *plead*, i.e. remonstrate [make a forcefully reproachful protest] and reason with them, *face to face* with none to distract their attention from Him.” (P. 129)

(continued...)

וְנִשְׁפָּטִי אִתְּכֶם שָׁם

And I will enter into judgment with you there,

פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים:

Faces to faces / Face to face--

20:36 כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁפָּטִי אֶת-אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם

just as I entered into judgment with your fathers

בְּמִדְבַר אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

in a desert / wilderness of Egypt-land.⁹⁴²

כֵּן אֲשַׁפֵּט אִתְּכֶם

In this way I will be judged with you (plural)--

נֵאֻם אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה:

(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH!

⁹⁴¹(...continued)

Hilmer holds that the “desert of the nations” means “exile among the nations,” which “would be for Israel like a return to the desert through which she journeyed on the way to the promised land.” (P. 1253) See **Hosea 2:16**^{Heb} / **14**^{Eng} (where return to the desert is a very positive occurrence),

לִכֵּן הִנֵּה אֲנִכִּי מִפְתִּיָּהּ

Therefore, look—I am enticing / seducing her;

וְהִלַּכְתִּיהָ הַמִּדְבָּר

and I will lead her (into) the wilderness;

וְדַבַּרְתִּי עַל-לִבָּהּ:

and I will speak upon her heart.

⁹⁴²

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The experience of the remote past, in the infancy of the nation, will be repeated in its rebirth.” (P. 129)

20:37 וְהֵעֵבַרְתִּי אֹתְכֶם תַּחַת הַשֶּׁבֶט

And I will cause you (plural) to cross over beneath the (Shepherd's) rod!⁹⁴³

943

Rabbi Fisch comments that “In separating the tithe of herd of flock, it was the practice to make the animals pass one by one under the rod and the tenth was separated and declared holy. Compare **Leviticus 27:32**,

וְכָל-מֵעֶשֶׂר בְּקָרֹ וּצֹאֵן

And every tithe of cattle and sheep

כָּל אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲבֹר תַּחַת הַשֶּׁבֶט

everything which passes over beneath the staff--

הָעֲשִׂירִי יִהְיֶה-קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה:

the tenth one will be set-apart for the YHWH.

“Similarly, the Judeans, before their deliverance from exile, will be scrutinized by their Shepherd; the wicked will perish and the righteous will be saved.” (P. 129)

Hilmer states that this is “the way a shepherd counts or separates his flock.” See **Jeremiah 33:13**,

בְּעָרֵי הַהָר וּבְעָרֵי הַשְּׁפֵלָה

In cities of the mountain, in cities of the shephelah / lowland,

וּבְעָרֵי הַנֶּגֶב וּבְאֶרֶץ בְּנֵימִן

and in cities of the Negebh / southland, and in (the) land of Benjamin,

וּבְסָבִיבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם וּבְעָרֵי יְהוּדָה

and in surroundings of Jerusalem, and in cities of Judah,

עַד תַּעֲבֹרְנָה הַצֹּאֵן עַל-יְדֵי מוֹנֵה

again the flock(s) will pass by (the) hands of one counting (them),

אָמַר יְהוָה:

said YHWH!

Matthew 25:32-33,

32 Before Him will be gathered all the nations,
and He will separate people one from another
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

33 And He will place the sheep on His right,
but the goats on the left. (**English Standard Version**)” (P. 1253)

וְהֵבֵאתִי אִתְּכֶם בְּמִסְרֵת הַבְּרִית:

And I will bring you into (the) bond⁹⁴⁴ of the covenant.⁹⁴⁵

20:38 וּבְרוֹתֵי מִזְּמַם הַמְּרֹדִים

And I will purge out the rebels from you,

וְהַפּוֹשְׁעִים בִּי

and the ones transgressing against Me

מֵאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵיהֶם

from (the) land of their temporary residence,

אוֹצִיא אוֹתָם

I will bring them forth;

וְאֶל-אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָבֹא

but / and into (the) land of Israel he will not come / enter.⁹⁴⁶

944

The Hebrew noun **מִסְרֵת**, **masoreth**, occurs only here in the **Hebrew Bible**, and that means there is really no way to determine its meaning. However, **Brown-Driver-Briggs** holds that the root of this noun is **אסר**, “tie,” “bind,” “imprison,” and there is the closely related noun **מוֹסֵר**, **moser**, which occurs numerous times, with the meaning “band” or “bond.”

YHWH, instead of wiping Israel out because of her continual sinfulness and rejection of His **Torah**, states, according to Ezekiel, that He is coming in judgment, to enter into a new covenant with sinful Israel, remaking the old Israel into a new Israel, forgiven and cleansed by His grace, thereby making Himself known to Israel as their Savior God, the God of all grace!

945

Hilmer comments that this means “As [YHWH] had in the Sinai desert.” (P. 1253)

946

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The rebels [whom YHWH will purify or purge from Israel] will perish in the wilderness of the peoples as once the rebellious generation perished in the wilderness of Egypt.” (P. 129)

(continued...)

⁹⁴⁶(...continued)

Hilmer notes that “As in the first desert experience, many were not allowed to enter the [promised] land. See **Numbers 14:26-35.**” (P. 1253)

Eichrodt comments on **verses 37-38**, “How every way of escape from the final reckoning that is to follow is to be blocked is shown by the allegory of the shepherd, who makes each animal in his flock pass under his rod, in order to count out and set together those of them which he intends to get rid of. So the new sojourn in the wilderness is like sifting with a sieve, which catches up all the dirt, so that the nation may be completely purged of all its disloyal members before it can be allowed to find its way back to its old home.

“Here Ezekiel’s conception of judgment has attained a profundity never yet seen. He has come to look for a third type of judgment. Along with the initiatory act of judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple, and along with the ever-repeated judicial retribution which enters into the individual lives of those who make up the nation, we find also the purgative judgment in store for all who have been spared during the national catastrophe by which they are to pass through into a new age...

“What previous prophets have said of [YHWH] and His judgment is radicalized in a way never seen before. Here the whole history of Israel from its very beginnings is not a history of salvation in the old traditional sense but a history of sin. All Yahweh’s intimations of salvation, of which the liturgical hymns loved to boast, and in the rays of which men so loved to bask, seem inscrutable miracles of Divine patience, wasted on an absolutely unreceptive people, who make an evil use of every fresh manifestation of grace, turning their backs on [YHWH] and refusing obedience to His Lordship in an even more decided way than before. The whole traditional account of salvation thus undergoes a strange transformation; one might say that it is transposed into a story of the handing down of damnation, and of how the Divine will is constantly crossed by a nation which is completely good for nothing.

“No judgment could be severer...Ezekiel’s conception of history is not altogether new ...Isaiah, too, knew enough to speak of Yahweh’s strange work, which is the savage destruction of His Own people...Jeremiah had revealed with a profundity never attained before man’s incapacity of doing good...Unexampled as is Ezekiel’s criticism of Israel’s past, he is standing on their shoulders.

“The dark shadow provided by by the history of this people’s sin only serves to intensify the dazzling purity of the light that shines upon their [YHWH]. It is He Whose ever-enduring mercy and patience and faithfulness make the impossible into the possible again and again for His name’s sake. So through all the destructive criticism there rings a hymn to the glory of [YHWH] which one cannot but hear...The purgative judgment, despite all its horrors, proves beyond all shadow of doubt that Yahweh stands by His people still and will have His way with them in the end...That also is why the last section of this chapter is not an irrelevant postscript but an integral part of the whole without which it is incomplete.” (Pp. 280-81)

יִדְעֶתֶם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה:

And you (plural) will know that I (am) YHWH!⁹⁴⁷

20:39⁹⁴⁸

947

Eichrodt comments that "This curt statement that the time for half-measures has ended, and that after this there is no fate for the man who stops his ears but final separation from the God of Israel, is followed by verses which declare the absolute certainty that [YHWH's] will to create a new Israel will reach fulfillment even in spite of the apostasy of those now addressed ...

"Thus for the first time in the preaching of Ezekiel we see emerge an overwhelming expectancy of a new outpouring of grace...the offer of a new future, which is to take shape as the result of a mighty act of [YHWH]. We see the dawning glories of a new temple in which [YHWH] will look favorably upon His Own, and be well pleased to accept their offerings." (Pp. 281-82)

"Such a humiliating experience, too, is the surest antidote against the unbounded pride which has again and again led Israel to reel against [YHWH's] ordering of salvation and which finally led her to miss that for which she was destined...He is the God Who acts for His name's sake, i.e. out of faithfulness to His Own Being, once revealed, in which Israel's salvation is comprised; His forgiveness is not weakness which overlooks or ignores the guilt of the breaking of the covenant, but a creative act reshaping His people out of the depth of His unalterable will for fellowship with His elect, in which all the wonder of His Being makes Itself known.

"As a result of Ezekiel's method of showing his people's guilt, there comes to view a new dimension of sacred history, not as yet attained by other prophets with their moralizing applications of past events. It is not found in the people's love for [YHWH], which exists for a while but quickly vanishes, and which by its disappointing fickleness made the insoluble enigma of the human heart a tormenting problem to Jeremiah. It is the faithfulness of the love of [YHWH], which does not let itself ever be exhausted, even in face of the most unspeakable treachery on the part of men, but again and again restores the broken chain and imparts to past events the qualities which make them into sacred history...It has instruction to give, leading to that knowledge of the mystery of [YHWH] out of which there grows a certainty about the meaning and goal of history, even though it may also show up the bankruptcy of human natures and human wills..." (Pp. 283-84)

What do you think? Is Eichrodt, the great German biblical theologian, correct in his understanding of this chapter of **Ezekiel**? How important is this chapter for our own understanding of biblical theology?

948

Rabbi Fisch comments that "The **verse [39]** has been understood in two ways. First, as
(continued...)

⁹⁴⁸(...continued)

addressed to the contemporary generation as distinguished from those who, spoken of in the preceding verses, were to share in the future restoration. Since they refuse to obey God, let them completely abandon themselves to the worship of their idols...

“Alternatively, it is interpreted as ironical advice: ‘Go, you people, serve every one his idols; but afterwards (I swear that) you shall hearken unto Me and no more profane My holy name with your (abominable) gifts (which you are now offering) and with your idols (which you are now worshipping).’ The latter is preferable.” (Pp. 129-30)

Reimer comments on **verses 39-44** that “With gathering complete, the worship life of the renewed community comes into focus. The contrast with the defiling practices of **verses 26** and **28** is complete. The lingering shame (**verse 43**) is consistent with the restoration picture in **16:54, 61**. [YHWH’s] Own reputation is supremely the reason for the restoration of [YHWH’s] people (**20:44**).” (P. 1528)

Darr entitles **verses 29-44** “Worship on Yahweh’s Holy Mountain.” She comments that “**Verse 39** begins with bitter irony. The injunction, ‘As for you...Go serve your idols’ recalls Amos’s ‘Come to Bethel—and transgress; / to Gilgal—and multiply transgression’ (**Amos 4:4 NRSV**) and Jeremiah’s ‘By all means, keep your vows and make your libations (to the Queen of Heaven; **Jeremiah 44:25 NRSV**)... With **verse 40**, Ezekiel again looks beyond the present to speak of Israel’s future life in its land. In his prospect, by contrast, he focuses on the house of Israel, serving Yahweh ‘on My holy mountain.’ This phrase, which appears nowhere else in the Scroll but is common outside it (see, e.g., **Psalm 2:6; Isaiah 11:9; 56:7; 57:13; 65:11, 25; 66:20; Joel 2:1; 4:17**; compare **Ezekiel 17:23; 28:14, 16**) refers to Zion (though Ezekiel nowhere uses that epithet). ‘There’ appears three times in **verse 40**. *All* the house of Israel, *all* of them, will serve Yahweh, and God will accept them and ‘seek’ (in the sense of ‘require’) their contributions, choicest gifts, and *all* their sacred things...The regathered Israelites will themselves be a ‘pleasing odor’ to God. Yahweh’s holy Name will no longer be profaned...

“Here, then, is the fulfillment of Yahweh’s plan begun in Egypt and defied by every generation, including Ezekiel’s own. The people will acknowledge the power and sovereignty of their Lord when they are restored to their land. In the face of that utterly unmerited gift, they will remember (see **16:6**) their past, polluting deeds and loathe themselves (see **6:9; 16:61-63**) for all their sins. Israel will come to recognize that Yahweh has not dealt with it according to its evil ways and corrupt deeds (compare **16:43**), but mercifully ‘for My Name’s sake.’ At last, the nation has become an occasion for the glorification of Yahweh’s Name, rather than a perpetual threat to God’s reputation.” (Pp. 171-72)

As Darr reflects on **chapter 20**, she states that “**Ezekiel 20:1-44** is one of the **Bible’s** most troubling texts. What are we to make of an oracle that intentionally portrays a people’s history in the most
(continued...)

⁹⁴⁸(...continued)

pejorative [expressing contempt or disapproval] of terms, in order utterly to erode any sense of integrity, any basis for hope? A contemporary analogous ‘history’ of any ethnic group would certainly lead to charges of bigotry and well-publicized lawsuits. What, indeed, are they to think of the prophet’s assertion that Yahweh deliberately gave the Israelites deadly laws, including child sacrifice? Ellen Davis correctly asserts that **verse 26** ‘resists all attempts at domestication’ and cannot be conformed to human reason.’ Who would wish to worship, much less trust, such a Deity? How can they conceive of a God Whose principal motivation in dealing with human beings is neither love nor mercy, but concern for Yahweh’s Own reputation?...

“Ezekiel’s intention lies at the opposite extreme of presenting a fair and balanced account of Israel’s past—its pinnacles of achievement as well as its failures. Relentlessly, he pursues his goal: the defense of God’s impending and horrific dealing with this people. Toward this end, he resorts to any means, sacrificing every positive appraisal of Israel as Yahweh’s covenant partner and casting God in a role that confounds theological expectations and hopes. Even when he turns toward the future, Ezekiel will not allow his audience (and readers) a glimpse of joy. Beyond judgment lies further judgment—death for all who fail to live up to God’s standards and overwhelming guilt and shame for those who survive the journey home...For Ezekiel, *everything* hangs on securing Yahweh’s sovereignty and control over history...

“In a sermon titled ‘Job’s Joke’—theologian Robert C. Neville has explored the consequences of the ages-old belief that God so rules the world that good people are rewarded, while the wicked are felled by cosmic law or direct Divine intervention. This notion, which permeates much of both the **Old** and **New Testaments**, conceives of God s a ‘Big Person’ [we say, ‘the Man Upstairs’] Who controls events according to a purpose that humans are able to comprehend. We reveal our anthropomorphic understanding of God when we attempt ‘to read our lives as if they were dictated by some Divine purpose, asking God to guide us here or there, to reward us if we are good, to look the other way when we are not.’ In so doing, we attempt to domesticate life’s ambiguities by domesticating our idea of God.’ Like Job, however, we discover that a domesticated [tamed and kept as a pet] God cannot make sense of suffering and death, or of a ‘fair’ reading of history, where the wicked flourish and the good too often suffer. Therein lies the problem with attempting to justify God’s ways in human terms—an insoluble dilemma that puts us ‘in bondage to an unrealistic view of life, destroying faith and betraying religion (as) we stick to the anthropomorphic conception of God as the Big Guy in the Sky Who tries to run the world like a just king and fails.’ In **chapter 20**, Ezekiel’s ‘Big Guy in the Sky’ ultimately succeeds in bringing to fulfillment the plan formulated already when Israel was in Egypt. But his portrayal of God as One Who orders the deaths of innocent children, pronounces judgment, and then exacts punishment on future generations and rules with wrath, horrifies and desolates us. The **Scroll of Job** testifies to a God Who transcends our attempts to make of the Creator a character in the human drama—one whose motivations and deeds can be explained (contained) in ways that conform to the exigencies of the plot, be it comedy or tragedy.

(continued...)

וְאַתֶּם בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל

And you (plural), House of Israel,

⁹⁴⁸(...continued)

“**Ezekiel 20** attempts to make sense of a people’s ongoing history first by distorting its story, and then by encapsulating it within an overriding plot of God’s utter determination to fulfill a Divine plan, despite every human effort to derail it. And it attempts to make sense of God’s way in the world by ascribing to the Lord the role of a Monarch Who is, at the same time, just *and* ruthless, forbearing *and* wrathful, life-giving *and* death-dealing, Sovereign of history *and* incapable of controlling rebellious subjects. (In truth, some of history’s human kings may have fit that profile, but God cannot be forced into it.) Both attempts fail, because each entails containing the Transcendent God in theological vessels shaped by human hands.

“Writing this Reflection, I am reminded of a scene in Lewis Carroll’s wonderful book **Alice in Wonderland**. Sometime after falling down the rabbit hole, Alice finds herself at a tea party with the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and a pitiful little Dormouse. Carroll creates the following conversation:

The Hatter was the first to break the silence. What day of the month is it? he said, turning to Alice; he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear. Alice considered a little, and then said, The fourth. Two days wrong! sighed the Hatter. I told you butter wouldn’t suit the works! he added, looking angrily at the March Hare. It was the *best* butter, the March Hare meekly replied.

“The March Hare’s defense is ludicrous precisely because it does not matter that it was the best butter; butter does not belong in watches. By the same token, it matters not that people attempt to contain God within their ‘best’ vessels—systematic theologies, creedal statements, doctrines—because God does not belong in containers.

“Is there, then, no ‘good news’ in **chapter 20**? Careful reading reveals that Ezekiel himself knows that Yahweh cannot be contained by the ‘rules of the game.’ Even as he portrays Israel and God locked in scenarios of human sin and Divine punishment, he proclaims the Lord’s freedom not to deal with people according to the tenets of retributive justice. According to that doctrine (good for good; evil for evil), rebellious Israel should already have perished in Egypt. Ezekiel grounds its survival in God’s concern for the Divine reputation among the nations—a motivation that accords well with his unwillingness to relieve the grim caricature he places before his exilic audience. Yet Divine Self-interest cannot fully account for God’s attempt—not once or twice, but thrice—to gift this obdurate people with laws leading not only to life, but to abundant life and knowledge of their God. Even Ezekiel’s carefully crafted narrative vessel cannot contain God’s grace.” (Pp. 172-174)

כֹּה־אָמַר | אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה

in this way my Lord YHWH spoke:

אִישׁ גִּלּוּלָיו לְכוּ עִבְדוּ

Each one, go, serve his idols!⁹⁴⁹

וְאַחֲרַי אִם־אֵינְכֶם שֹׁמְעִים אֵלַי

And afterwards, if you (plural) are not listening to Me,

949

Hilmer states that the phrase “Go and serve your idols” is spoken in irony. “The opposite is meant.” (P. 1253) Compare:

1 Kings 22:15, where Micaiah tells Ahab and Jehoshaphat to “go up to Ramoth-Gilead and triumph!”, but where Ahab knows the words are not meant, and they are immediately followed by Micaiah’s saying he saw all Israel scattered in defeat.

Amos 4:4-5,

4 בָּאוּ בֵּית־אֱלֹהִים וּפְשָׁעוּ

Come to House of God, and go astray!

הַגִּלְגָּל הַרְבּוּ לַפֶּשַׁע

(At) the Sacred Circle, multiply your going-astray!

וְהָבִיאוּ לְבֹקֶר זִבְחֵיכֶם

And bring your (animal) sacrifices for the morning (worship);

לְשִׁלֶּשֶׁת יָמִים מֵעֲשֶׂרְתֵיכֶם:

and your ten-percent (offerings) for the third days!

5 וּקְטֹרֶט מִחֶמֶץ תֹּדֶה

And make sacrifices from leavened-bread—a thank-offering!

וּקְרָאוּ נְדָבוֹת הַשְּׂמִיעוּ

And proclaim free-will offerings—

כִּי כֵן אָהַבְתֶּם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Because you love (it) this way, you Children of Israel!

נֵאֻם אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה:

(It is) a saying of my Lord YHWH!

Sometimes it is very difficult to determine whether or not a saying is meant ironically; but in these passages we have quoted it seems very certain that irony is intended, just as it does in this verse from **Ezekiel**. YHWH does not really want worship of idols!

וְאֶת־שֵׁם קִדְשִׁי לֹא תַחַלְלוּ-עוֹד

but / and My set-apart Name you will still not pollute / profane,

בְּמִתְנֻחֹתֵיכֶם וּבְגִלוּלֵיכֶם:

with your gifts and with your idols.

20:40 כִּי בְהַר־קִדְשִׁי

Because on My set-apart mountain,⁹⁵⁰

950

Hilmer comments that the phrase “My holy / set-apart mountain” is “mentioned only here is **Ezekiel**. It refers to Jerusalem or Zion.” (P. 1253) See **Psalm 2:6; 3:4; 15:1**; see also **Isaiah 11:9; 56:7; 57:13; 65:11; Obadiah 16; Zephaniah 3:11**.

See the article by Shemaryahu Talmon (professor of **Bible** in Hebrew University in Jerusalem for many years—a survivor of Buchenwald—and leader in the study of the **Dead Sea Scrolls**; died in 2010), in **Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament**, Volume III, pp. 427-47, who states that

“The **Old Testament** speaks of the mountains of Canaan as being well watered. Since they are close to the heavens, the peaks get the first benefit of rain (**Psalm 104:13**, etc.). At the same time, brooks and springs flow from and between the mountains (**Psalm 104:10-11; Deuteronomy 8:7**). These facts are reflected in the description of the last days, when ‘upon every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water’ (**Isaiah 30:25**)...

“Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, and the temple mountain are the focal points of eschatological scenes: ‘A fountain shall come forth from the house of Yahweh’ (**Joel 4:18^{Heb} / 3:18^{Eng}**); ‘On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea [i.e., the Dead Sea] and half of them to the western sea [i.e., the Mediterranean]; it shall continue in summer as in winter’ (**Zechariah 14:8**), so that the drought of summer is miraculously overcome. The abundance of water will produce a luxuriant growth of fruit trees (**Ezekiel 36:8**). ‘The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk’ (**Joel 4:18^{Heb} / 3:18^{Eng}**); compare **Amos 9:13**: ‘All the hills will be fertile’). This symbolizes the future restoration of Israel’s ancient fortunes (**Amos 9:14-15**). The mountain (Zion) will once more be the pride of the Davidic ruler, whom Yahweh ‘will plant on the mountain height of Israel’ (**Ezekiel 17:22-23**)...

“Restoration of Israel’s political fortunes is associated with the day of judgment. On the mountains of Israel the final battle against Gog will be fought (**Ezekiel 38-39**). Then—as in the past—Yahweh will defeat the nations upon the Mount of Olives. ‘Then Yahweh will go forth and fight
(continued...)

בְּתֵרֵן מְרוֹם יִשְׂרָאֵל

on a mountain of height of Israel--

נֹאם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

(it is) a saying of my Lord YHWH--

שָׁם יַעֲבֹדֵנִי כָּל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

there all of Israel's household will serve Me,

כֹּלָה בְּאֶרֶץ

all of it, in the land.⁹⁵¹

⁹⁵⁰(...continued)

against those nations as when He fights on a day of battle. On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east' (**Zechariah 14:3ff.**; compare **Joel 4:1-17^{Heb} / 3:1-17^{Eng}...**

“In these battle scenes, where the wrath of [YHWH] is turned against the nations, ‘the mountains shall flow with their blood’ (**Isaiah 34:2ff.**), an antithesis to the ancient image of the ‘hills that flow with milk.’ On this canvas of the eschatological events is portrayed as well the great banquet that [YHWH] will prepare upon His mountain for all nations, ‘a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow’ [we add, a feast at which death will be swallowed up forever, and all human tears wiped away!] (**Isaiah 25:6-8; Ezekiel 39:17-20** [a terribly gruesome feast, in which the birds and wild animals will eat the flesh and drink the blood of Israel's enemies])...

“In these themes we catch an echo of the banquet on Mouth Zaphon [‘North’] given by El and by Baal after His victory over His enemies, or after building His temple. From a mountaintop the liberation of Israel is proclaimed (**Isaiah 25:9ff.; 52:7ff.**). All this prepares the way for the final reconciliation, which in cosmic dimensions has as its focal point the temple mountain of Israel's God, the biblical ‘holy mountain’ par excellence (**Isaiah 2:1-4 [=Micah 4:1-4]; Isaiah 11:6-9 [=65:25]; Jeremiah 31:6; Zechariah 14:16.**)” (Pp. 446-47)

⁹⁵¹

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The present worship, contaminated with idolatry, will be discarded; and the true service, acceptable to God, will come into its own when the scattered house of Israel is regathered...in the land of Israel.” (P. 130)

Hilmer notes that this means “the entire house of Israel, including the northern kingdom, which fell in 722-721 B.C.E.” (P. 1253)

שָׁם אֲרָצִים

There I will accept / be pleased with them;

וְשָׁם אֲדַרְוֹשׁ אֶת־תְּרוּמַתְיֶכֶם

and there I will seek your offerings,⁹⁵²

וְאֶת־רֵאשִׁית מִשְׂאוֹתֵיכֶם

and (the) first-fruit of your liftings-up,⁹⁵³

בְּכָל־קִדְשֵׁיכֶם:

in / with all your set-apart things.⁹⁵⁴

952

Hilmer notes that the “offerings” mentioned here, “possibly refers to a prescribed contribution. The other 19 occurrences in **Ezekiel** of the Hebrew for this word [תְּרוּמָה, **terumah**] are confined to **chapters 44-48**, where the reference is to the land set aside for the temple and priests (see **45:1; 48:8-10**, translated ‘portion’), or to the special gifts for the priests (see **44:30**).” (P. 1253)

953

Rabbi Fisch comments that *the first of your gifts* “include the first-ripe fruit which had to be carried to Jerusalem and presented to the priest (**Deuteronomy 26:2-4** [notice the early creedal statement that follows in **verses 5-10**], the first born of the cattle and the redemption fee of the firstborn male child paid to the priest (**Exodus 13:2, 12-14**), and the first portion of the dough (**Numbers 15:20-21**).” (P. 130)

954

Rabbi Fisch comments that “When they are restored to the holy land, God will not only accept, but even *require*, their offerings. The term *terumah* usually signifies the dues of the priests or gifts for religious purposes. Here it is more generally used of the temple offerings.” (P. 130)

Reimer comments on **verse 40** that “The holy mountain as the place of [YHWH’s] renewed Presence with His people is especially prominent in the latter chapters of **Isaiah**:

Isaiah 56:7, where it is said to those that have been rejected as unacceptable, especially eunuchs and foreign youths:

וְהִבֵּיאֹתִים אֶל־הַר קִדְשִׁי

and I will bring them to (the) mountain of My set-apartness;

(continued...)

⁹⁵⁴(...continued)

וְשִׂמְחֹתֵימִּ בְּבַיִת תְּפִלָּתִי

and I will cause them to rejoice in a house of My prayer;

עֹלֹתֵיהֶם וּזְבָחֵיהֶם

their offerings-up and their sacrifices

לְרִצּוֹן עַל-מִזְבְּחִי

(will be) for acceptance upon My altar--

כִּי בֵּיתִי בֵּית-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא

because My house will be called A house of prayer

לְכָל-הָעַמִּים:

for all the peoples!

Isaiah 66:20,

וְהֵבִיאוּ אֶת-כָּל-אֶחָיִכֶם מִכָּל-הַגּוֹיִם

And they will bring all your brothers from all the nations,

מִנְחָה לַיהוָה

a gift to the YHWH,

בְּסוּסִים וּבְרִכְבּוֹ

on the horses and in the chariot(s),

וּבַצְבִּיִּים וּבַפָּרָדִים וּבַכְּרָרוֹת

and on the litters and on the mules and on the dromedary camels,

עַל הַר קָדְשִׁי יְרוּשָׁלַם

upon / to My set-apart mountain, Jerusalem

אָמַר יְהוָה

--said YHWH--

כַּאֲשֶׁר יָבִיאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַמִּנְחָה

just as Israel's children will bring the gift(s)

בְּכֵלִי טָהוֹר בֵּית יְהוָה:

in a clean vessel (to the) house of YHWH.

Reimer adds that “and the mountain’s height is celebrated in the **Psalms of Zion** (compare **Psalms** **48:2**^{Heb} / **1b**^{Eng},

גָּדוֹל יְהוָה וּמְהֻלָּל מְאֹד

Great (is) YHWH, and exceedingly praised,

(continued...)

20:41 בְּרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ אֶרְצָה אֶתְכֶם

With a quieting / soothing smell⁹⁵⁵ I will accept you (plural),

בְּהוֹצִיאִי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָעַמִּים

when I bring you forth from the peoples;

וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הָאֲרָצוֹת

and I will gather you from the lands

⁹⁵⁴(...continued)

בְּעִיר אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַר־קֹדֶשׁ:

in our God's city, mountain of His set-apartness!--

³Heb / ²Eng

יִפֶּה נוֹף

beautiful of elevation / height,

מְשׁוֹשׁ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ

rejoicing / exultation of all the land / earth--

הַר־צִיּוֹן יִרְכָּתִי צָפוֹן

Mount Zion, far-reaches of (the) north,

קְרִיַת מֶלֶךְ רָב:

city of a great king! (P. 1528)

This sounds very much like a prediction that Israel's worship services will be restored to the former kind of worship that the nation had known before her rebellion.

⁹⁵⁵

The phrase here, רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ, **reyach niychoach**, “a soothing / pleasing smell,” is found some 21 times in the **Hebrew Bible**. All of its occurrences are found in **Leviticus** and **Numbers**, except for this occurrence in **Ezekiel 20:41**. And all of these occurrences in the **Pentateuch / Five Scrolls of Moses** have to do with the “smell” associated with the burning of sacrifices and spices on the altar in the temple. Ezekiel, the priest, long separated from the worship which he loved so much in the Jerusalem temple, sees a vision of the restoration of Israel to its home—and Ezekiel envisions YHWH accepting the returning people of Israel with their sacrifices as just such a soothing, pleasing smell in His nostrils!

אֲשֶׁר נִפְצַתֶם בָּם

where you were scattered.

וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְכֶם

And I will be set-apart among you (plural),⁹⁵⁶

לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם:

in (the) eyes of the nations.

20:42⁹⁵⁷ וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה

And you will know that I (am) YHWH,

בְּהֵבִיאִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל

When I bring you (plural) to (the) land of Israel,

אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת־יָדִי

to the land concerning which I lifted up My Hand [in swearing]

לָתֵת אוֹתָהּ לְאֲבוֹתֵיכֶם:

to give it to your fathers.⁹⁵⁸

956

Rabbi Fisch states that “In contradistinction to the profanation of [YHWH’s] Name wrought by the captivity of His people in the eyes of the nations of the world, the restoration of Israel to his land will serve as a means to make the Divine Name holy in their sight.” (P. 131)

957

Matties comments on **verses 42-44** that “Through return to the land, renewed memory, and shamed acknowledgment of wayward conduct (compare **16:61**), Israel will come intimately to know that [YHWH’s] actions are ultimately not motivated by a desire to avenge human conduct but to safeguard the Divine reputation that longs for transformation and restored relationship (**verses 38, 42, 44**).” (P. 1185)

958

Rabbi Fisch comments that “It will be evident beyond all doubt that the might of God had restored them to their land, and they will have to acknowledge that He, and none other, is God.” (P. 131)

20:43 וְזָכַרְתֶּם־שָׁם אֶת־דַּרְכֵיכֶם

And you shall remember there your ways

וְאֵת כָּל־עֲלִילוֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר נִטְמַאתֶם בָּם

And all your deeds / practices with which you defiled yourselves.

וְנִקְטַתֶּם בְּפָנֵיכֶם

And you will feel a loathing at yourselves

בְּכָל־רָעוֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם:

in / for all your evils which you did / practiced.⁹⁵⁹

20:44 וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה

And you will know that I (am) YHWH,

בַּעֲשׂוֹתֵי אֲתֶכֶם

when I do to / make you

לְמַעַן שְׁמִי

for the sake of My Name--

לֹא כְּדַרְכֵיכֶם הָרָעִים

Not according to your evil ways,

וְכַעֲלִילוֹתֵיכֶם הַנִּשְׁחָתוֹת

and according to your corrupting deeds / practices

959

Rabbi Fisch comments that “The manifestation of [YHWH’s] mercy will make them ashamed of their evil past and reform their hearts.” (P. 131)

Hilmer notes that such a remembering and loathing of themselves is “a thorough repentance.” (P. 1253) See **Ezekiel 6:9; 16:63; 36:31; Luke 15:17-19** (the statement of the “prodigal son” concerning his self-understanding after being forgiven by his father).

בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

O house of Israel!⁹⁶⁰

נֶאֱמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה:

(It is) a saying of my Lord YHWH!

960

Rabbi Fisch comments that “Their self-loathing will be the deeper when they realize that the transformation of their fortunes is not due to their merits. They really deserved to perish because of their evil ways; if they have escaped that fate it is for the reason that God is jealous for His good name. May they take the lesson to heart and refrain from doing anything which can cause His name to be profaned!” (P. 131)