

Article of the Month – December 2011

Missions & Eschatology (3) – Ezekiel

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Ezekiel's book is fascinating because of its extremities. He prophesies to the exiles in Babylon among whom he lived. He spoke God's word to uprooted people who were grieving and bereaved and this is one extremity: misery. The other is the number of apocalyptic visions he received which declare jubilantly that a new era, one of complete restoration, will come.

In our days we see that a large part of the Church, living under persecution, nevertheless performs cross-cultural missions to the unreached. The Chinese Church is a point in case: they work towards the sending of 100,000 missionaries all through the 10'-40' window, with the express purpose to reach all the unreached on their way.¹

Ezekiel's *mission*, especially in the beginning, is to the Israelite exiles,² *not* to the nations.³ He was made watchman for the house of Israel.⁴ Yet, later we read so many prophecies addressing the nations that we cannot deny Ezekiel's important missiological value.

Two *characteristic formulas* in the book are *firstly* Ezekiel's ministry name: God frequently addressed him almost 100 times as 'son of man', a title that Jesus later often used for Himself. The *second* is 'Then they will know that I am the Lord' (occurring over 60 times). Missiologically significant is, that this expression applied to Israel as well as to the nations; after all, missions work out that very assignment: all must know that there is no god but God.

The book can be *divided by themes* rather than by groups of chapters. The simplest way is: messages for Israel;⁵ messages for the nations⁶ and messages of restoration after the exile with important eschatological aspects, referring to the New Jerusalem.⁷

Looking at the current apathy among many churches with regard to world missions, chapter 37:1-14 seems to be quite appropriate. Anyone who has tried to interest churches that are not task-involved with regard to cross-cultural missions, knows the desperate feeling of 'Can these dead bones live?' Motivating compliant, introspective churches for missions seems at times as impossible as a valley of dead bones to come alive. Then, they may have come alive to a certain extent (v. 8) but the Spirit is lacking. These churches may do all sorts of things, but the Spirit that drove missionaries to the far corners of the earth for centuries is largely

¹ This is called the 'Back to Jerusalem Movement'; see also a book with that title by Brother Yun

² Ez. 1:1; 2:3-5; 3:4,5,11,15

³ 3:6

⁴ 33:7

⁵ Ez. 1-24; 33; 34; 36; 37

⁶ 25-32; 35; 38; 39

⁷ 40-48

absent. In 2002 there was a missionary task force of about 200,000 people.⁸ Worldwide Christianity (all-inclusive) is roughly counting 2 billion people. This translates to 1 missionary sent out per 10,000 believers. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves and pray for a new outpouring of the Missionary Spirit!

Then we read about the Day of the Lord,⁹ a term we also see in other prophets,¹⁰ referring to judgment on the Gentiles as well as on unfaithful Israel.¹¹ It is our responsibility as missionaries to warn all people that the Day of the Lord comes, with its judgment.

One of the characteristics of the Day of the Lord is that the heavenly bodies no longer function normally.¹² It also reminds us of the Plagues of Egypt¹³ as was argued earlier.¹⁴ A number of *Messianic references* ('My servant David'; 'one nation under one King') speak also about restoration for Israel, in the coming Millennium of peace.¹⁵ More cryptic descriptions seem to refer to the same happening.¹⁶ In a wider, more spiritual sense, these passages may also well refer to the Church. Some of the *revelationary aspects* of Ezekiel can be seen once comparisons are drawn with the book of Revelation. For instance:

Ezekiel	Topic described	Revelation
1:28	The Rainbow	4: 3
1: 5-10; 10	Four living Creatures, full of eyes	4: 6- 9
2: 9 – 3: 3	The scroll to be eaten	10: 2, 8-10
8: 2	A Man, with an appearance like glowing metal	1:13,15
38 & 39	Gog and Magog	20: 1-10
40 – 48	Plans for the New Jerusalem	21 & 22

The message of the Gospel, *including its eschatological aspects*, i.e. the Return of Christ and the promises of His Millennial rule on earth and then the New Heavens and the New Earth should always form part and parcel of the missionary's approach of any people group: in the present misery there is hope for the future, for all who call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved. This NT message is well-illustrated in the prophets of the OT.

⁸ Johnstone , *Operation World*, 2001:752

⁹ Ez. 30:2

¹⁰ E.g. Is. 2:12-17; Joel 1:15; 2:1,2; Am. 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:7,14-18

¹¹ Taylor, Tyndale Commentaries, *Ezekiel*, 1976:202

¹² Ez. 32:6-8; is. 13:10; Joel 2:30,31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Matt. 24:29,30; Rev. 6:12,13

¹³ Ex. 7:20-24; 10:21-23; Taylor, 1976:209

¹⁴ See my article 'Missions & Eschatology' of May 2011

¹⁵ Ez. 34:23,24; 37:22-28

¹⁶ 17:22-24; 21:25-27; 34:25-30