

**“The LORD is There”**  
**The City of God in Ezekiel**

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“To this day, at a place called Al-Kifl, near the ancient ruins of Babylon in Iraq, there lies what is claimed to be the burial tomb of Ezekiel. The book of Ezekiel may as well lie buried with him, for few Christians read it, and fewer still find it profitable reading.”<sup>1</sup> Thus begins Derek Thomas’s commentary on the book of Ezekiel. Many Christians find the opacity and seeming irrelevance of this prophet’s work challenging, and hesitate to take up the book; but there is great hope to be found for the believer, particularly in its view of the blessings of Heaven and of the heart transformation of God’s people. Ezekiel’s vision of the city “The LORD is There” in chapters 47 and 48 draws on language from the Pentateuch to point to God’s ultimate restoration of his people in the last day, revealing Heaven via the New Jerusalem, which is inaugurated in the church and in Immanuel -- “God With Us.”

### **Structure of the Text**

Ezekiel’s guided tour of the city in the closing chapters of his book is divided into three sections emphasizing God’s renewal of His people in various ways. In the three concluding sections, Ezekiel sees three main figurations: a life-giving river flowing from the previously-described temple; the division and arrangement of the land of Israel; and the arrangement of the gates of the city. In these three final images, Ezekiel reveals much about the Lord’s future work among His people.

The vision of the life-giving river begins at the threshold of the temple, located where the basin of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:17-21) and the sea of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:23-26) would have stood. Both of these furnishings were intended as cleansing pools for those who

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Thomas, *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained* (Darlington: EP Books (Evangelical Press), 1993), 11.

ministered in the house of the Lord. In Ezekiel's vision, the water is not contained in a basin or pool, but spills out of the temple, running more than a mile outside of the temple mount. This river gradually increases in flow from a trickle, rising to the ankles, then the knees, then the waist, and climaxes in a river "deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through" (Eze. 47:5, English Standard Version). At that point, Ezekiel observes the geography around him, surveying the healing of the Dead Sea Valley. This fresh water produces teeming life and ever-green fruit trees.

The next section of Ezekiel's vision looks to the expansive land Israel will occupy, followed by equal division of land among the tribes of the sons of Israel. The first half of this vision draws the boundaries of Israel. The land is divided into 13 equal bands from North to South, each of the tribes of Israel being given a band, with a central band dedicated to the Lord as a Holy Portion, in which people from all tribes shall serve, inhabiting the city of the prince and tilling its ground for food.

In the closing passage of Ezekiel's book, we read of the twelve gates of the city of the prince, arranged clockwise from the north, each gate named after one of the twelve tribes of Israel (Joseph and Levi replacing Manasseh and Ephraim).

Ezekiel closes this passage by telling the reader "the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There."

### **History of Interpretation**

With the book's high quantity of symbolic prophecies and allusions, it is no wonder that interpreting Ezekiel has been a difficult endeavor for even the greatest of scholars. These final three sections of his closing vision have proven exceptionally difficult, as they appear to be

apocalyptic in nature. Most commentators through history have placed a heavy emphasis on interpreting the water of the stream, and remained relatively silent on the remainder of the book, due to its relative density and opacity.

From the early days of the church, the variety of interpretations has abounded. Even in the Antiochian school, the allegorization of the passage was not fully avoided. Theodoret of Antioch (393-458) was one of the first to style the river as the grace of Christ. For him, the fourth measure of the river, described as deep and swimmable, alludes to the depth of the Gospel of John over and above the remaining evangelists. His interpretation also held that the fruit of the trees along the banks of the river corresponded to good works in the life of the believer, while the healing leaves were the joy that these good works wrought in the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Jerome, too, equated the stream-become-torrent to the Gospel, but quickly draws connections to almost every other spring in the Bible, saying that the waters are for cleansing like the pools of Siloam; that the waters will cry out in rejoicing, as in Psalm 92; that the waters are good and not bitter, unlike the waters of Massah and Meribah; among others.<sup>3</sup> He does not apply each of these correlations, but only mentions them in passing, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions.

More than 1000 years later, in the 17th Century, John Trapp explains the waters as:

the gospel of grace, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost thereby conveyed into the hearts of believers, and poured out upon the world by the death of Christ. The prophet seems to allude to those waters, which by conduits were conveyed to the altar to

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 864.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome, "St. Jerome on Ezekiel Pt. 2," *Patristic Bible Commentary*, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/ezekiel/st-jerome-on-ezekiel-pt-2>.

wash away the blood of the sacrifices and filth of the temple, which else would have been very offensive and noisome.<sup>4</sup>

Matthew Henry disagrees with Trapp, stating that it cannot refer to waters that cleanse the temple of filth, otherwise the stream itself would become polluted, issuing from the city as a “common sewer.” He does equate the river to the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, ultimately allegorizing the river’s depth in saying “if we search into the things of God, we shall find some things very plain and easy to be understood, as the waters that were but to the ankles... and some quite beyond our reach, which we cannot penetrate into, or account for, but, despairing to find the bottom, must, as St. Paul, sit down at the brink, and adore the depth, Rom. 11:33.”<sup>5</sup>

Spurgeon preached a new take on the river: the river is symbolic of the Christian life and it can be applied by looking to the abundance of the river (the abundance of God’s grace and provision), the depth of the river (the increasing understanding of the depth of the Gospel throughout the life of the believer), and “waters to swim in” (the enjoining of faith and works in the Christian life).<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, a literalistic interpretation has found favor among non-Reformed Evangelicals. In his commentary on Ezekiel, Ralph Alexander notes that his map of the boundaries of Israel “are only estimated since the Scripture is clear that major topographical

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<sup>4</sup> John Trapp, “Ezekiel 47 - Trapp's Complete Commentary,” StudyLight.org, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/jtc/ezekiel-47.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, “Ezekiel 48:1-30,” in Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 1126-1127.

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, ““Waters to Swim In,”” The Spurgeon Center (The Spurgeon Center, April 25, 1872), <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/waters-to-swim-in/#flipbook/>.

changes will transpire prior to the Millennium.”<sup>7</sup> His interpretation of a literal river flowing out of a new version of Jerusalem requires a geographical rearrangement of the region, and so he says it will miraculously occur. Other modern commentators disagree: “No amount of exegetical finesse or insistence on ‘what the Bible plainly says’ can transform the poetry of this passage into a topographically and ecologically realistic account of an event in time.”<sup>8</sup>

### The River of Life

As regards the river, recent Reformed theologians have employed a more culturally-minded interpretation. Derek Thomas mentions a ceremonial feature of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The key to understanding the river that flows from beneath the temple is found in John 7:37-39, where Jesus, on the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, stands up and proclaims: “‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive...” Every day of the Feast of Tabernacles, a priest took a golden flask holding about four and a half pints of water from the Pool of Siloam near Jerusalem, carried through the Water Gate, went up the ramp to the altar, and poured it out. It is thought that the pilgrims who watched this ceremony would have thought of Ezekiel 47. In this understanding, Jesus quite deliberately identifies himself as the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

Iain Duguid makes the same equation in his commentary, citing the scene with the woman at the well in John 4 as an additional confirmation for this interpretation.<sup>10</sup> This also seems to be validated by Block’s observation on the word “trickle”: “He describes the trickling action of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 152.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 378.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Ezekiel*, 292.

<sup>10</sup> Iain M. Duguid, in *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 786.

water with a hapax, *měpakkîm*, an onomatopoeic formation from *pak*, 'bottle,' conveying the sound of liquid gurgling out of a flask."<sup>11</sup>

Keeping in mind that Revelation 21 and 22 gives us a similar view of the City of the Lord, Beale comments that "John does not see a physical temple in the new creation, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev. 21:22).<sup>12</sup> The consequence of this identification echoes in the orthodox summary of the Godhead as regards the Spirit: "the Holy Ghost eternally proceed[s] from the Father and the Son."<sup>13</sup> In the City of God, the temple of God the Father and God the Son eternally issues the river of the Holy Spirit.

If the assertion is correct that John 7 and Revelation 21-22 explain the river as the Holy Spirit, it follows that Pentecost and the constant growth of the church are further iterations of the Lord's outpouring of His Spirit like water (cf. Eze. 36:26-29, Isa. 44:3, and John 4:14). The Spirit's work in the church is growing in the same way the river grows exponentially, with no other contributing sources of water. Titus 3:5-7 tells us that "he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the *washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (emphasis added). The Spirit's work of regeneration — cleansing the hearts of sinners — is seen in every believer and in the growth of the church from Christ's death until the end of the age.

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<sup>11</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 853.

<sup>12</sup> G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *The Story Retold: A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 489.

<sup>13</sup> Westminster Divines, "Chapter 2: Of God, and of the Holy Trinity," *Reformed Theology at A Puritan's Mind* (Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics), accessed February 12, 2022, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/chapter-2/>.

The effect of the river upon the surrounding landscape is also illuminated by this interpretation. Just like the Valley of Dry Bones Ezekiel saw in chapter 37, the water of the Holy Spirit revives the dead of the Dead Sea and breathes new life into it. The water's renewal of the lands in verse 9, "wherever the river goes, *every living creature that swarms* will live," (emphasis added) is reminiscent of creation language from Genesis 1 and 2, and reflects the antitypical Eden God will make for His people. This is further emphasized by the growth of "all kinds of trees for food." "The description of the transformation of the land in terminology reminiscent of paradise emphasizes the divine source of the new creation, commensurate with Israel's resurrection from the dead."<sup>14</sup>

In verse 12 the "leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month." This is reminiscent not only of the Garden of Eden, but also of the blessed man of Psalm 1:3 — "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither." Thus it is the collective people of God, the men and women blessed with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who bear fruit every month and do not wither. These are the people who are strengthened by the streams of the Holy Spirit, and in verse 12, "their leaves [will be] for healing." "The growth is not merely individual. Like that stream here in Ezekiel that became a rushing river that could not be crossed, the Holy Spirit causes the whole church to grow and spread as the kingdom of God expands in all of its glory and God again dwells in his people through his Spirit (Eph. 2:22)."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brevard Springs Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Pr., 1987), 367.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Lawrence, *Ezekiel: A 12-Week Study* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2018), 86.

The apostle John expounds upon this in a vision of the New Jerusalem: the river of Revelation 22:1-5 was “flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” The temple of Ezekiel’s vision is translated as the throne of God and of the Lamb. The leaves are more fully understood to be for healing “of the nations.” If John has united the trees of Ezekiel into the Tree of Life, or, as Beale suggests, “the singular tree... is likely a collective reference to trees”;<sup>16</sup> then the Church is grown, both individually and collectively, by the work of the Spirit in the hearts of believers, which causes them to bear fruit and to bear leaves which are for the healing of the nations. The fruit of the trees, though, require special consideration, as they are fruit which believers bear as they grow, having been planted beside this growing stream of the Holy Spirit. What is this fruit? As Paul puts it in Galatians 5:22-23, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” in contrast to the wicked fruit of unrepentant sinners.

In light of this, both the vision of Ezekiel and the vision of John point forward to a day in which the Spirit of God has renewed the people of God, causing them to bear fruit and to bring healing to the nations. This is not strictly an eschatological vision (it is not even necessarily an eschatological one): it is a sign of the church in every age as the people of God show forth His Word to all nations and, bit by bit, minister God’s restoring grace to a world dead in sin. This is made all the more evident by the land apportioned to Israel in the vision.

#### The Allotment of the Land

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<sup>16</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 489.



Figure 1. Map of the Promised Land of Ezekiel 48 vs. Numbers 34. (Taken from John D. Currid and David P. Barrett, *ESV Bible Atlas* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 137.)



Figure 2. Map of the Kingdom of Israel at its greatest expansion. (Taken from Currid and Barrett, *Atlas*, 88.)

The second part of the vision, that of the borders of Israel and the tribal allotments within, serves two primary purposes: first, that the promises of God will be completely fulfilled in the last day, regardless of their degree of fulfillment now; second, that God's promises will be fulfilled to all people, regardless of their heritage.

The first half of this part of the vision draws the boundaries of Israel (Figure 1, green shaded portion), which are drawn from the promised boundaries of Israel prior to the occupation of Canaan in Numbers 34 (Figure 1, red outline). This land was the land promised to Israel by God, but which was never conquered, not even by the greatest of the kings of Israel: David and Solomon (Figure 2). As noted in Figures 1 and 2, the land Ezekiel describes not only meets the

boundaries of the land God promised to Israel, but it far exceeds His promise in Numbers 34! As the Babylonian exiles would reminisce of the expanse of the kingdom in days gone by, they doubtless would have wondered who would conquer a land mass greater than that of David or Solomon. What king could utterly fulfill and surpass God's promises? The answer, of course: the coming Christ.

As for the arrangement of the tribal allotments within the land of Israel, most commentators are purely baffled. Even Block, who ventures to comment on the pattern, sees few implications to be derived from Ezekiel's map. He does note that the sons of the wives of Jacob have their allotments nearer to the holy territory than the sons of the concubines. He also notes that some allotment positions resemble that of the Numbers/Joshua allocations: Judah and Benjamin remain close to the temple, and Dan remains far off north, away from the temple (perhaps due to their early adoption of idolatry).<sup>17</sup> Also of note is the fact that Judah and Benjamin made up the Southern tribes of Judah, whose marginally greater faithfulness to the worship of God resulted in a later and shorter captivity and exile. Here, God also blesses them by situating them closer to the temple.

There are some key points to note in this section. Every tribe is given an ostensibly equal allocation — 25,000 cubits in breadth — with a holy territory in the middle of the 12 tribes. This territory shall be for the prince, for the priests, for the Levites, and for the city and its common areas. The city measures in a perfect square (reminiscent of the Holy of Holies, cf. Ex. 26, 1 Kings 6), and it shall be inhabited by “workers of the city, from all the tribes of Israel” (48:19).

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<sup>17</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 911.

The tribes themselves will be inhabited by sojourners who are characterized by the phrase “as native-born children of Israel” (47:22).

Here we see that the city and its temple are the antitype of Israel’s camp, which surrounded the tabernacle. Two differences ought to be attended: people of all tribes now minister in the city, and people from all nations are to inhabit and serve as though they were natural citizens, not foreigners. This is a fulfillment of Paul’s logic in Romans 11:17 “you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree.” In this, we see believers from all nations bearing fruit and receiving the promised blessings of God’s Covenant, which included a land for His people, a posterity, and that they would be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 17:4-8). All of these now find their fulfillment in the land of Ezekiel’s vision, as all of God’s people have eternal access to His throne.

#### The Gates of the City

The City of God is accessible to His people by twelve gates to the city are named for each of the sons of Jacob, naming Levi and Joseph instead of Manasseh and Ephraim. Block indicates that

City walls were usually designed intentionally with only one gate, though the Jerusalem Ezekiel knew had at least six. A remarkable extrabiblical analogue to the present design is found in the Babylonian temple tower of Marduk, Etemenanki, whose sacred precinct was also laid out as a square, accessible through twelve gates... If the naming of Babylon’s gates after divinities reflects a perception of the sanctity of the city, by ascribing tribal names to this city Ezekiel gives concrete witness to this as “the people’s city,” accessible to citizens from every part of the nation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 910.

He continues, emphasizing the remarkable name that Ezekiel assigns to the new city, “The LORD is There,” saying, “Under the new order, where the people are, there is Yahweh. He does not only invite them to himself in the temple; he has come to them!”<sup>19</sup>

In this last remarkable statement to Ezekiel’s puzzling book, there is nothing but clarity: here we see God in Christ. As Matthew 1:23 states, “‘they shall call his name Immanuel,’ (which means, God with us.)” Christ is certainly the fulfillment of God coming to His people, but in light of the rest of the vision, Christ is also the inauguration of the Church Age and of Heaven itself. He is not only God With Us, but also a sign and seal of believers dwelling with God in Heaven.

Christ is the reason that believers can grow up by the Spirit’s work and bear fruit. Christ is the reason that believers can be seen dwelling with God Himself in Heaven in Revelation 22. Christ is the reason we have hope!

From the middle of [Ezekiel], we know from John 2, 4, and 7 that Jesus claimed to be that temple, and that he was the source of the true water of life, which is the Spirit. Does this mean that God did not keep his promise to Ezekiel and the exiles, implied in the vision that concludes the book? Not at all. It simply means that the promise was even better than they imagined, and that its fulfillment was greater than they knew, for they “did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us” (Heb. 11:39-40) — and that “something better” is found in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

Far from being esoteric or opaque, Ezekiel holds out a vision of Heaven that is glorious beyond any earthly imagining, and this is the inheritance of the Christian. It is this inheritance of which Christ is the sign and seal of what is to come. “God With Us” is built upon by the sight of

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<sup>19</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 914.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence, *Ezekiel*, 87.

believers surrounding the throne in worship, both on earth and in Heaven: “The LORD is There.”

We can rejoice in the Spirit’s work in applying Christ to believers, for it is His work alone that brings us to the throne. It cannot be summarized better than the psalmist sings in Psalm 42:4-7:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;...  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

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