



# Book of Ezekiel

## Chapter 20

*Theme: Review of Israel's long history of sins;  
future judgment and restoration*

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**Theme:** Review of Israel's long history of sins; future judgment and restoration

We are going to discover that the history of all created things is the history of rebellion. Under every facet and circumstance, man has sought to be rebellious and to go any way other than that which the Lord had ordained. In Chapter 20, we are going to be reading about how the history of Israel is seen from God's point of view.

Ezekiel reviews the history of the people of Israel whom the Lord kept alive out of regard for his own name (20:1-44). But now regard for his name requires that his avenging sword smite Jerusalem (20:45–21:23 = MT 21:1-37). Moreover, Jerusalem's abominations, like dross, must experience the smelting fires of judgment upon the classes and masses alike (ch. 22). In an allegory reminiscent of that in chapter 16, the Lord dilates upon the infidelity and harlotry of two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem), to their divine spouse, and the punishment consequent upon their adultery (ch. 23). On the day of the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (Jer 39:1), Ezekiel relates the allegory of the rusted caldron set on the fire for purging. And by his abstention from mourning at the death of his wife, he becomes a symbol of the people's despair at the fate of their city (ch. 24).<sup>1</sup>

To the elders of the Jewish community in Babylonia seeking a divine oracle (vv. 1-4), Ezekiel reviews Israel's history, with its recurring rebellions (vv. 8, 13, 16, 21, 28), and its preservation by the Lord because of his regard for his own name (vv. 9, 14, 17, 22, 41-44). Israel sinned both in Egypt (vv. 5-9) and on the journey from Egypt to Kadesh-barnea (vv. 10-17). The second generation in the wilderness rebelled against God (vv. 18-26), and the people who entered Canaan were continually faithless to Him (vv. 27-29). The prophet's own generation was as idolatrous as the preceding generations (vv. 30-32). However, God's purpose for His people in the future would involve judgment and hope (vv. 33-44). Israel would be brought into the wilderness a second time, for the purpose of judgment (vv. 33-39). Then, after idolatry had been rooted out and true worship made possible, the Lord would be acknowledged by the nations and by an Israel that loathed her past (vv. 40-44).<sup>2</sup>

These prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem focus on Judah's history. Ezekiel had presented that history in a parable (chap. 16), but in this section he gave a more direct presentation, especially in chapters 20 and 23. Chapter 21 contains a series of four messages on the sword that would smite Jerusalem, and chapter 22 has three additional prophecies of judgment on Jerusalem. The entire section closes in chapter 24 with two prophecies about the city's fall.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:1). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>2</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>3</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 19:12–14). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

**McGee Introduction:** Chapters 20–24 contain the final predictions concerning the judgment of Jerusalem. There are two things to which I would like to call your attention in this section. First, notice how long and drawn out is God’s message to these people. Right down to the very day that Nebuchadnezzar besieged the city, God was willing to spare them. God would have removed Nebuchadnezzar from the city as He had done previously to the Assyrians and would not have permitted him to destroy it. However, the people did not turn to God, and the judgment came. Right down to the last moment there was mercy extended to them. Second, the very day that the siege of Jerusalem began, the wife of Ezekiel died, and God told him not to mourn or weep for her at all. I consider this man Ezekiel a sharp contrast to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had a woman’s heart, and he wept; the message he gave broke his own heart. Because He wept, the Lord Jesus was compared to Jeremiah. I’ll be honest with you though; Ezekiel is almost like an actor playing a part. He goes through his part, but he is not moved by it. He seems to be pretty hardboiled all the way through. Ezekiel was simply a mouthpiece for God.

In chapter 20 we have a retrospect of the nation’s sins. Again, it is Ezekiel giving not his word, but God’s Word. He was very much like a Western Union boy who brings you a message. It may be a message of joy, it may be a message of sorrow, but the Western Union boy just delivers the message—you are the one who is moved by it.<sup>4</sup>

The chronological note suggests a date of July-August 591 B.C. and the start of a new section and series of messages (see 8:1, which was eleven months earlier). The political context of this prophecy was Zedekiah’s foolish and sinful alignment with Egypt against Babylon in hopes of deliverance from Nebuchadnezzar’s attacks. The social context was that of exiled elders coming to Ezekiel to obtain a divine explanation of current events. They wanted to know if Egypt would save Judah from the Babylonians.<sup>5</sup>

**ESV:** Learning from History. 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 MT), 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 vv. 1–31, and one of the rare restoration passages in the first half of Ezekiel builds on it in vv. 33–44 (v. 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 God, plus an appeal to look to a renewed future—is consistent with both chs. 17 and 18.

This section of the book is the final collection of prophecies that deal with the fall of Judah and Jerusalem. In these messages the prophet clarified further Yahweh’s motivation in bringing this judgment. One of the hardest tasks of Christian leaders today is to keep our churches true to the Word of God so that people don’t follow every religious celebrity whose ideas run contrary to Scripture.

The structure of this passage is quite clear. It consists of a review of Israel’s history with an introduction and a concluding application. The chapter is remarkable in that it

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<sup>4</sup> McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Eze 19:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>5</sup> The Nelson Study Bible

shows a uniform moral plane sustained by the nation throughout its history. Other important themes in this chapter include God's faithful grace in spite of Israel's persistent rebelliousness, the repetition of a wilderness experience for Israel for her disobedience, and Yahweh's concern for His own reputation (name).

### **Ezekiel 20:1**

**And it came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth *month*, the tenth *day* of the month, *that* certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and sat before me.**

**Missler:** “Me” is Ezekiel. These men were the elders of Israel, what we would view as orthodox Jews, obviously very formal in their approach. In their minds they felt they had the right and the expectation to come to this Prophet of God who had been trained as a priest, for a word from the Lord. That was his office, his job. We are going to discover a surprising thing; God refused to respond to their inquiries. We think of God as always being open, and of always hearing us and responding. Yet, there can come a time when God says, “Ok, guys, no more.”<sup>6</sup>

Now this evidently was their custom. We read earlier last week where the elders came to sit before Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord.

**Dake:** [seventh year] Seventh year of the captivity of Jehoiachin (note Ezekiel 8:1).<sup>7</sup>

**Dake:** [the elders of Israel] These elders were of Judah, hence further proof that Judah was representative of all Israel at this time.

**Clarke:** In the seventh year—Of the captivity of Jeconiah, (see 8:1), and the seventh of the reign of Zedekiah.<sup>8</sup>

**McGee:** More and more they are beginning to turn to this man Ezekiel—they come now to get a word. This occurred in approximately 590 B.C. The destruction of Jerusalem took place shortly after, somewhere around 588-586 B.C. I do not think we can be dogmatic about these dates.

**Clarke:** Certain of the elders of Israel—What these came to inquire about is not known. They were doubtless hypocrites and deceivers, from the manner in which God commands the prophet to treat them. It seems to have been such a deputation of elders as those mentioned 8:1; 14:1.

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<sup>6</sup> Chuck Missler, Notes on Ezekiel, khouse.org

<sup>7</sup> Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

<sup>8</sup> Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Old Testament

**LAN:** Here Ezekiel gives a panoramic view of Israel's history of rebellion. The emphasis is on God's attempts to bring the nation back to himself and on God's mercy for his constantly rebellious and disobedient people. Ezekiel gives the message that the people alone are responsible for the troubles and judgments they have experienced. Those who persist in rebellion God will "purge" (Ezekiel 20:38), while he will bring the faithful "into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers." The reason: that "you will know that I am the LORD" (Ezekiel 20:42).<sup>9</sup>

**In the seventh year.** July–August 590 (591) B.C., eleven months after the last date mentioned (8:1). The elders. Cf. 8:1. 3. I will not be enquired of. Cf. verse 31; 14:3; 36:37. Rather than answering their question relative to the present, God rehearses the relevant lesson of Israel's past. 4. Judge them (cf. 22:2; 23:6) by letting them know the abominations of their fathers.<sup>10</sup>

**1-4.** This prophecy was given in the seventh year, in the fifth month on the 10th day. This was August 14, 591 B.C., almost 11 months after the last date given by Ezekiel (8:1). As in chapters 8 and 14, the message was given to Ezekiel when some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD. They again visited him to see if God had any new word for the nation.

The elders' question is not recorded, but it must have been inappropriate because God refused to respond: I will not let you inquire of Me. The answer God then gave was not a response to their question but a review of their history. To find an answer the people only needed to look into their past. The repetition of God's question Will you judge them? (20:4) conveyed His impatience with the people, and it has the force of a command, "Judge these people!" Ezekiel was to confront them regarding the detestable practices of their fathers. The court was to be opened and the evidence presented. Ezekiel was to act as the prosecuting attorney and present the evidence against the accused (cf. 22:2b).<sup>11</sup>

**1-32** Ezekiel reviews the different periods in the history of Israel and the preservation of the people for the Lord's name's sake in spite of their repeated rebellion. They rebelled in Egypt (vv. 5-9), on the journey from Egypt to Kadesh-barnea (vv. 10-17), in the wilderness (vv. 18-26), and even when they came into Canaan (vv. 27-29). Ezekiel's own generation was equally unfaithful (vv. 30-32).<sup>12</sup>

**ESV 1–4:** 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 vv. 27–31.

**ESV 1–31:** Looking to the Past. This recital of Israel's history by the inspired prophet is unique in the Bible, involving a very different interpretation of both the nature of the exodus experience and God's dealings with his people. Although some perceive tension

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<sup>9</sup> Notes from Life Application Bible

<sup>10</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>11</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:1–4). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>12</sup> The Ryrie Study Bible

between this presentation of the generations and that of ch. 18, still throughout ch. 20 each generation experiences God's wrath for its own actions, and divine forbearance is related solely to God'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 Joshua here, pointing to Ezekiel's "God-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."

**Constable:** Certain elders of the Jewish exiles came to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord (cf. 14:1-11). Inquiring of the Lord meant securing a divine revelation concerning a particular event (cf. 1 Kings 14:5-18; 22:7-28; 2 Kings 8:8-15; 22:13-20; Jer. 21:2-14; 37:7-10). In view of the historical context of their request, the event that they wanted information about was probably King Zedekiah's attempt to secure Egypt's help in defeating the Babylonians.

In the late summer of 591 B.C., the news of Egypt's victory in the Sudan reached the remnant of Judeans at Tel Abib. Rumors also indicated that [Pharaoh] Psammetik II would make a triumphal conquest of Palestine. The exiles' expectations were most certainly heightened as they hoped that Egypt would prove to be the redeemer to free them from Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah had foolishly shared the same dream when he revolted from Babylonian rule and placed his confidence in Egypt's strength somewhere between the end of 591 and 589 B.C. Such a move was illtimed; for the Pharaoh soon became ill, and the potential might of Egypt never materialized.

These elders probably wanted to know if Zedekiah's overtures to Egypt would be successful, if the Egyptians would help them defeat the Babylonians, and if the exiles could expect to return home soon.

This event happened in the seventh year of Jehoiachin's captivity, namely, 591 B.C. The tenth day of the fifth month would have been August 14. Eleven months had passed since Ezekiel began the preceding series of messages (cf. 8:1). The dating of the prophecy indicates a new section of the book and a new series of messages.<sup>13</sup>

## **Ezekiel 20:2**

**Then came the word of the LORD unto me, saying,**

**Dake:** [Then came the word of the LORD unto me, saying ...] Then—when the elders of Israel came to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord (Ezekiel 19:1-2). They were perhaps inquiring about the captivity and its length. God used the occasion to accuse them again of a long history of sinning and final apostasy (Ezekiel 19:2-32). He then gave them a message of final restoration—not one about immediate return from captivity (Ezekiel 19:33-44).

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Thomas Constable, Notes on Ezekiel, 2010

He is not giving his word; he is giving God's Word.

**Nelson 2-4:** God explains to Ezekiel that the elders of Israel (v. 1) had forfeited any right to inquire of Him due to the abominations of their fathers. All people are responsible for their own sins, and this does not mean that these Hebrews were paying for sins their ancestors had committed. Instead, the present generation of Hebrews in exile had clearly shown their failure to learn practical lessons from history, and thus had condemned themselves to repeat many mistakes. These leaders came to God with questions, but the questions were foolish and demonstrated the people's sinfulness. They showed that they were oblivious to the inconsistencies between what they were asking, their past practices, and God's revealed promises and principles. In this chapter God gives a remedial review of their past.

**Constable 2-4:** In response to the request of these elders, God gave His prophet a message for them. He told Ezekiel to say that He would not satisfy their curiosity about the matters that concerned them. However, Ezekiel was to communicate another message to these elders, a message that included judgment because of the Israelites' abominable idolatry throughout their history. The Lord's repeated question has the effect of an emotional imperative: you must pass judgment on them.

### **Ezekiel 20:3**

**Son of man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye come to inquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you.**

**Missler:** That had to be a very heavy trip for those Jews. Suppose that you were praying to the Lord and you got the message back, "Forget it, I'm not hearing you." Are there times when your prayers are not heard? Why?

From time to time, Ezekiel reminded them that there would be restoration, and that the Messiah would be coming. In Chapter 20 he indicated that the Lord was not about to respond to their inquiry.

One of the interesting things about his prophecies in general, was that they were not collective calls to repentance. Quite the contrary! The whole burden of Ezekiel's prophecy, up to about Chapter 33, had to do with the certainty of God's judgment that was coming, and why it had to come.

You've come to get My advice? You've come to get My counsel? I'm not gonna counsel you.

**Dake:** [I will not be enquired of by you] I will not answer your inquiry. This He did not do, but predicted restoration from final dispersion among the nations (Ezekiel 20:33-44).

**Clarke:** I will not be inquired of by you—I will not hear you. I will have nothing to do with you.

These people are coming to complain and to criticize God. They say He is unfair to judge them and unfair to destroy Jerusalem. It is beginning to penetrate their thinking that it is really going to happen. Ezekiel is going to go over this ground again with them, because God does not mind stating His charge or reviewing His reasons for the judgment He is to bring.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:4**

**Wilt thou judge them, son of man, wilt thou judge *them*? cause them to know the abominations of their fathers:**

**Missler:** “Judge them” - is a little confusing. God was really presenting His Judicial Case to them. This was not judging in the sense of weighing them especially, although He does that, too. God was going to judicially lay before them the whole case He had against Israel.

“Abominations” focuses on idolatry, false worship. The first point God starts right off with and establishes, is that He chose them. That is what underlies His whole package. As we see it all unfold, do not fall into the trap of saying, “Were they ever stiffnecked! Boy, if that had been me back then, and I had that deliverance from Egypt, and had gone through the Red Sea...” We are in the very same boat! We are, incidentally, in a sense, on the same basis. He chose us before the foundations of the world.

The basis here is God’s sovereign choice. Ex 6:1-4; Deut 7:6; Jer 33:24; Isa 40-46; Gen 15:17-21. [For a discussion on this topic, see our briefing package, *The Sovereignty of Man*.]

Now He goes back, "Cause them to know their history. Rehearse their history for them. Go back to when they were in Egypt."

**Clarke: Wilt thou judge them**—If thou wilt enter into any discussion with them, show them the abomination of their fathers. The whole chapter is a consecutive history of the unfaithfulness ingratitude, rebellion, and idolatry of the Jews, from the earliest times to that day; and vindicates the sentence which God had pronounced against them, and which he was about to execute more fully in delivering them and the city into the hands of the Chaldeans.

**Creation, Evil**—Ezekiel insisted to his audience that God does not arbitrarily bring judgment upon people. When they sin, He acts. To ignore sin would violate God’s insistence for justice. He demands that His created beings practice justice toward one another and acknowledge Him in worship as the only God. He creates evil only in the sense that He allows the consequences of sin to occur. Moral choices in God’s universe always have consequences. Our choices determine the type of future we shall experience. God will ultimately redeem His people and vindicate His reputation.

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<sup>14</sup> McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Eze 20:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

### **Constable: Israel's rebellion in Egypt and God's grace 20:5-9**

The Lord's history lesson for these elders described Israel in four successive periods: in Egypt (vv. 5-9), in the wilderness (vv. 10-26), in the Promised Land (vv. 27-29), and in the present time (vv. 30-38). What the Lord said about Israel's history in each of these four periods is quite similar. God had been good to His people, but they had rebelled against Him. Consequently judgment followed, but God had also extended His grace. The Lord then repeated the last two points in His summary of each historical period. Psalm 106 contains a similar review of Israel's history, and Ezekiel 16 and 23 describe Israel's history metaphorically.

**Dake: [cause them to know the abominations of their fathers]** See list of their abominations in the notes in Ezekiel 20:8.

### **Ezekiel 20:5**

**And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; In the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up mine hand unto the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up mine hand unto them, saying, I am the LORD your God;**

**I chose Israel:** Here is the only use of this elective verb in Ezekiel. It signifies Israel's sovereign selection for God's eternal and temporal purposes. raised My hand: This image refers to the unconditional vows made by God to Abraham and later renewed with the nation He formed in Egypt from Abraham's descendants (v. 9). That God "raised His hand" reveals His determination to maintain His covenant promise.

**Dake: [and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up mine hand unto them, saying, I am the LORD your God]** Twenty-seven things God did regarding Israel:

1. God chose them (Ezekiel 20:5).
2. God lifted up His hand to them.
3. God made Himself known to them.
4. God introduced Himself as Jehovah.
5. God agreed to bring them out of Egypt (Ezekiel 20:6).
6. God found the good land for them.
7. God commanded them to cast away all idols and all abominations (Ezekiel 20:7).
8. God punished them in Egypt (Ezekiel 20:8).
9. God worked to spare them and save His own name from being polluted before the heathen in Egypt (Ezekiel 20:9).
10. God made Himself known to them in bringing them out of Egypt.
11. God caused them to go forth from Egypt (Ezekiel 20:10).
12. God brought them into the wilderness.
13. God gave them statutes (Ezekiel 20:11).
14. God showed them His judgments.
15. God gave them sabbaths to be a sign between Him and them, so that they might know Him (Ezekiel 20:12).

16. God punished them in the wilderness (Ezekiel 20:13).
17. God worked to spare His name from being polluted before the heathen in the wilderness (Ezekiel 20:14).
18. God lifted up His hand to them in the wilderness to bring them into the land of Canaan (Ezekiel 20:15).
19. God spared them again from being destroyed in the wilderness (Ezekiel 20:17).
20. God spoke to their children in the wilderness telling them to walk in His ways (Ezekiel 20:18-20).
21. God punished them again, but withdrew His hand of judgment again, to spare them (Ezekiel 20:21-22).
22. God vowed to scatter them among the heathen when they went into sin (Ezekiel 20:23-24).
23. God permitted captors to give them laws that were not good (Ezekiel 20:25-26).
24. God gave them the land of Canaan (Ezekiel 20:28).
25. God rebuked them for their idolatry (Ezekiel 20:29).
26. God refused to be inquired of by the captives to Babylon (Ezekiel 20:31).
27. God made predictions of the last days (Ezekiel 20:33-44).<sup>15</sup>

**I chose Israel**—They did not choose me for their God, till I had chosen them to be my people.

**Clarke: I lifted up mine hand**—I bound myself in a covenant to them to continue to be their God, if they should be faithful, and continue to be my people. Among the Jews the juror lifted up his right hand to heaven; which explains Psalm 144:8: “Their right hand is a right hand of falsehood.” This is a form used in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

**5-9. Israel’s rebellion in Egypt.** 5. God’s choice of Israel is mentioned only here in Ezekiel. It is mentioned first in Deut 4:37; 7:7, 8; 10:15; 14:2; once in Jer 33:24; often in Isa 40–66, e.g., 41:8, 9. Lifted up mine hand, in taking an oath (see also vv. 6, 15, 23, 28, 42; 36:7; 44:12; 47:14). Made myself known. Cf. Ex 3:6ff.; 4:28ff.; 6:3. 6. Flowing with milk and honey. In the Pentateuch this expression occurs fifteen times, e.g., Ex 3:8. Elsewhere it occurs only in Ezk 20:15; Jer 11:5; 32:22. On the beauty of Israel, see Jer 3:19; Dan 8:9. 7, 8. The charge of Israel’s idolatry in Egypt (cf. 23:3; Josh 24:14; Lev 18:3) is not alluded to in the Exodus account. 9. I wrought for my name’s sake. This refrain occurs also in verses 14, 22. Cf. Jer 14:7, 21; Isa 43:25; 48:9, 11. The name stands for what God is and has shown himself to be. If he had not led his people out of Egypt, the nations would have charged him with weakness (Num 14:13-16; Deut 9:28). His name is profaned when men harbor thoughts of him or attribute deeds to him inconsistent with his character as holy and unique (cf. v. 39; 36:20-22). The opposite of “to profane” is “to sanctify.” It is to recognize the Lord as the one true God in every area of life, and to live in a manner befitting him.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Dake Study Notes, Dake’s Study Bible

<sup>16</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:5). Chicago: Moody Press.

**5-9.** When God sovereignly selected Israel to be His people He bound Himself to them as their God and Protector. The first evidence of His faithfulness was His self-revelation to them. He revealed Himself to them in Egypt and with uplifted hand He said to them, I am the LORD your God. This incident was at the burning bush when God appointed the people's deliverer (cf. Ex. 3:1-10). The uplifted hand (Ezek. 20:5 [twice], 15, 23, 42) was apparently a gesture used when one made an oath (cf. Ex. 6:8; Neh. 9:15; Ps. 106:26; Ezek. 36:7; 44:12; 47:14).

Why did God trace His selection of Israel only to the time of Moses? Was Ezekiel contradicting Genesis, which clearly indicates that God selected Israel when He made His covenant with Abraham? (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 15; 17:1-8) No, Ezekiel was speaking of God's selection of Israel *as a nation*. When God made His covenant with Abraham, the patriarch did not even have an heir as the next recipient of the covenant. When the family of Joseph went into Egypt, they were only a small clan of nomadic herdsman (cf. Gen. 46:1-27, 31-34). But in Moses' time Abraham's descendants had grown into a nation.

God also promised deliverance from bondage and provision for blessing. He assured Israel He would take her out of Egypt into a land ... flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands.

In His grace God asked the nation only to be faithful to Him, and to turn from the vile images and idols of Egypt. The Book of Exodus did not detail Israel's religious life before the Exodus, but Ezekiel implied that it was a time of apostasy.

But Israel refused to heed God's command. They did not remove the vile images ... nor ... forsake the idols of Egypt. This rebellion deserved judgment, so God was ready to pour out His wrath on them ... in Egypt. Yet the wrath did not come; Israel was spared.

Israel's being spared from God's wrath was not because of any goodness on her part. It was only because of God's grace and mercy: for the sake of His name (cf. Ezek. 20:14, 22). The "name" of God expressed His revealed character. God's reputation among the nations was at stake in His covenant faithfulness to His people. Instead of giving them judgment, which they deserved, God gave deliverance.<sup>17</sup>

God goes back to the very beginning when He called these people out of the land of Egypt, delivered them out of their slavery there, and brought them into the wilderness.

*Israel in Egypt (20:5-9).* In the land of Egypt many centuries earlier God had chosen Israel as his own people. He bound himself to them by an oath. He made himself known to them in mighty ways. He pledged himself to bring them out of Egyptian bondage to a glorious land, one which was "flowing with milk and honey." In view of his commitment to them, he asked them to commit themselves to him. He appealed to each of them to "cast away the detestable things of his eyes," i.e., the idols which he venerated. Since he was their God, he asked them not to defile themselves with the idols of Egypt (20:5-7).

There in Egypt Israel "rebelled" against God. They refused to listen to him, refused to abandon their idols. The Lord resolved to pour out his wrath upon them right there. Grace, however, prevailed. God declared, "I acted for the sake of my name." He did not wish for his holy name to be "profaned in the sight of the nations" among whom his people dwelled. Had Yahweh failed to keep his word and bring his people out of Egypt as

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<sup>17</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:5-9). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

he announced that he would do, the heathen would have mocked the God of Israel. Therefore, God kept his word. He brought his people out of Egypt even though they had done nothing to deserve this favor (20:8f.).<sup>18</sup>

**History, National**—See note on Isa 1:24-26. From Israel’s perspective history was the narrative of rebellion, of seeking to be like the nations rather than to serve God. Thus their history became a history under God’s judgment. From God’s perspective history was His work to establish His holy reputation among all the nations of the world by working through Israel. Thus history became a narrative of anger, pity, discipline, and renewed deliverance. History pointed to a time of purging when rebels and idolaters would be weeded out of the exiled community so a new faithful community could be established. Then God’s holy purpose would be established. His people would be related to Him in faithful, intimate trust. History would cause them shame and teach them obedience.<sup>19</sup>

**Election, Israel**—By a special act of love, God chose Israel (Ex 3:6-15:21). The covenant carried obligations on Israel’s part (Lev 18:24). The people deserved to perish, but for God’s name sake He spared them. The election of Israel cannot be explained with human logic. God’s love and commitment to the human race He created is the only explanation. Election is God’s plan to make His name known among all people so He can create a true people devoted to and blessed by Him.

**The Church, Covenant People**—God’s people become God’s own through His grace. He chose to call out and develop a holy people dedicated to Him. He promised to be God for His people. He keeps His promises and expects us to do the same. See note on Dt 7:6-8.

**ESV 5–8:** Although reference to Jacob (v. 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 (vv. 5–6) that requires action on Israel’s part (v. 7), then God being spurned (v. 8a), which in turn brings divine judgment (v. 8b).

**ESV 5–26:** Israel’s story is told in five broad movements: the author describes the exodus generation first in Egypt (vv. 5–8), then in the exodus itself (vv. 9–13), and then in the wilderness (vv. 14–17). The story of the wilderness generation follows in two phases (vv. 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., Psalm 106), there is nowhere the sort of “alluring” that Hosea describes (Hosea 2). In Ezekiel’s view, there were no “good old days.”

**Constable 5-6:** The Lord reminded these elders that He had chosen the Israelites, made

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:5–29). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

<sup>19</sup> Disciple’s Study Bible

Himself known to them, and made promises to them when they were slaves in Egypt (Exod. 6:2-8; Deut. 7:6-11). Leslie Allen observed that this is Ezekiel's only reference to God's election of Israel (cf. Deut. 7:7; 14:2). The prophet began this historical review with Israel's history as a nation in Exodus, not with her earlier history as the family of Abraham in Genesis. Yahweh had promised to be the Israelites' God and to bring them out of Egypt and into the very best of lands, which He had selected for them to occupy (Gen. 12:7; Exod. 3:8, 13-18).

### **Ezekiel 20:6**

**In the day *that* I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had espied for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands:**

**Missler:** “The land flowing with milk and honey” first appeared in Scripture in Exodus 3:8. It is interesting how that idiom of the land became a proverb immediately. It is a proverb in our day, too. It is an example of the Principle of First Mention. The first occasion that something shows up in Scripture is very relevant structurally.

**Dake: [flowing with milk and honey]** See Exodus 3:8,17; Exodus 13:5; Exodus 33:3; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13:27; Numbers 14:8; Numbers 16:13-14; Deut. 6:3; Deut. 11:9; Deut. 26:9,15; Deut. 27:3; Deut. 31:20.

**Dake: [the glory of all lands]** God, who sees the whole earth from heaven and knows all lands and their possibilities, saw fit to choose Palestine and call it "the glory of all lands" (Ezekiel 20:6,15). It has been in ruins for many centuries because of His curse upon it, but it will again be one of the most fruitful of all places under the Messiah.

**Clarke: A land that I had espied for them**—God represents himself as having gone over different countries in order to find a comfortable residence for these people, whom he considered as his children.

**Clarke: Flowing with milk and honey**—These were the characteristics of a happy and fruitful country, producing without intense labor all the necessities and comforts of life. Of the happiest state and happiest place, a fine poet gives the following description:—

On flowers unsown soft Zephyr spreads his wing,  
And time itself was one eternal spring;  
Ensuing years the yellow harvest crowned,  
The bearded blade sprang from the untilled ground,  
And laden unrenewed the fields were found.  
Floods were with milk, and floods with nectar filled,  
And honey from the sweating oaks distilled.

In the flourishing state of Judea every mountain was cultivated as well as the valleys. Among the very rocks the vines grew luxuriantly.

**Chuck Smith:** Now you go to Israel today and you see a tremendous work of restoration, they have planted millions of trees all over the land. And as the result of the planting of all of these trees, they have been able to change the climate in Israel. And creating a lot more humidity, and thus a lot more rain. And the land is again becoming a land of streams and a land of greenery as they are getting more and more rains all the time as the result of this reforestation program that they have had. And, of course, they have been able to, through drainage canals and planting of eucalyptus trees and all, been able to take a lot of the marshes, the areas that were just swampy, and they've been able to make them very productive as far as the growing of fruit and all. The Sharon plain that used to be nothing but marshland is now beautiful citrus orchards. The same with the valley of Megiddo that was marshland, is now just so verdant and beautiful and green with all of the agriculture that is there. Of course, by their planting and all and bringing water down to Beersheba there, they're really creating now a whole new look to this land.

Now, when God first brought the children of Israel into the land, it was a land of heavy forest. A land of beautiful streams and forest, a land that flowed with milk and honey. They sort of sneer now, because it is a rocky land. And they make jokes out of the rocks, you know. Like when God was creating the earth He sent two angels out with baskets of rocks to distribute around the world. And one of the angels took and distributed his rocks over half the world, but the other angel was lazy and just dumped all of his rocks on Israel. And it is true, that is a rocky land now, but it wasn't always so.

When the Turks took the land, they deliberately cut down all of the forest to just denude the land. And without the trees and all, the topsoil all washed away and the land became a barren desert, wilderness. But, of course, except in the valleys, they became marshlands because of all of the silt that plugged up the streams and so forth. And so it developed these marshlands, plus the rocky mountains, the barren rocky mountains. Now, the Jews started planting pine trees on these rocky mountains, because the pine tree roots are able to go down in the crevasses and are able to... actually, as they go down and they swell, they begin to crack the rocks and break them up creating new topsoil. And all of the planting was done on a scientific basis. And extremely educational and valuable lessons can be learned agriculturally in going over and studying. They've really done the whole thing from a scientific base. Because eucalyptus trees drink up so much water, they planted eucalyptus trees in these marsh areas so that they would drink up gallons of water every day. And, of course, they drained the marshes and drained the rivers and all, and allowed them to flow on out again to the Mediterranean so that you don't have the marshland. And they are really restoring this land in a marvelous way. It's an exciting thing to see.

But when God first brought them into the land out of Egypt, it was a beautiful verdant land of forest and streams and all throughout the entire land. It was, according to the Word of God, one of the most beautiful places in the world. And as you see where they are restoring it, where the rain has been restored and all, there are some beautiful, beautiful areas. That Sea of Galilee and the areas around the Sea of Galilee. Up at Tel Dan, one of the most beautiful places, the water in the springs and all, it is just lovely, beautiful. The whole countryside is being restored, and as it is, it's again becoming a place of great beauty.

But the land, God said, I spied out this land for them. It was flowing with milk and honey. It was the glory of all of the lands.<sup>20</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:7**

**Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I *am* the LORD your God.**

**Missler:** This verse is one of the definitive verses that highlights the fact that Israel was deeply into idolatry in Egypt. We all emphasize the whole notion that they were slaves and that God was going to redeem them. But the notion that they were defiling themselves with idol worship of Egypt is here emphasized.

It is hinted at in other verses: Lev 17:7, 18:3; Josh 24:14, etc. And, of course, the golden calf incident in Ex 32. Israel did not invent the golden calf, they were falling back to a practice that they had observed in Egypt.

When God surveys the history, He does not dwell on some of the aspects you and I associate with that period. His focus was on the fact that He had chosen them. He sought them out. He also admonished them to cast away their idols. We are going to see all the way through this that the Lord is very jealous, very frustrated by their not following that which He had ordained.

Some people get the impression that the tragedy of worshiping images is only that they were not following God. There is also the deception that they think those carved figures were worthless.

What is missed by most commentators is that those idols were not “worthless images.” It was not just a case of ignorance and superstition. The idols were really dangerous spiritually. People who study this subject call them “entries.”

On the one hand, God was dealing with this rebellious people where, again and again, He would have been justified to just wipe them out. Again and again, He extended His mercy and grace to them for His Name’s sake. Part of what God was dealing with was the visibility that His dealings with Israel had to all the nations around there.

God was trying to communicate to all nations that He was a righteous God, therefore He had to judge sin. At the other side of the coin, He would like to be merciful. But He also ran the risk that if He was merciful, that could be misunderstood by the nations around them, that He was not powerful enough to enforce His own laws.

The relationship was not just between God and Israel. Part of it was intended to be a demonstration, a form of visibility, to the nations around there. He did this only for His name’s sake, for His glory among those nations. Moses understood that, and used that when he negotiated; he would plead on behalf of His Name’s sake. (Ex 32:12, 14:16.)

**Clarke: Cast ye away—the abominations—**Put away all your idols; those incentives to idolatry that ye have looked on with delight.

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<sup>20</sup> Chuck Smith, Pastor/Founder, Calvary chapel, Costa Mesa CA, Notes on Ezekiel

**Constable 7-9:** The Lord had told the Israelites to abandon the detestable, defiling gods of Egypt because He was their God, but they rebelled against Him and refused to do so (cf. Exod. 5:19-21; 6:9; Lev. 17:7; 18:3; 26:30; Deut. 29:16-17; Josh. 24:14). He purposed to judge His people in Egypt for their rebellion, and their enslavement there was partially a judgment for their idolatry. Some expositors believed that this is a reference to God judging the Israelites at Mt. Sinai because of the Golden Calf incident. However it seems clear that the Lord was referring to Israel's idolatry in Egypt before the Exodus, which is not revealed as explicitly elsewhere in Scripture. Then He chose to bring them out of Egypt for the sake of His reputation among the other nations (cf. Gen. 15:13-16).

Though Israel had failed to sanctify the name of the Lord among the nations, the Lord himself would do so by his deliverance of Israel from Egypt [cf. Exod. 7:5; Ps. 106:8-12].

### **Ezekiel 20:8**

**But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.**

Would God have been justified? Sure.

**Dake:** [rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt] Twenty-two abominations and sins of Israel:

1. Israel rebelled against God in Egypt (Ezekiel 20:8).
2. Israel would not listen to God.
3. Israel refused to cast away the abominations of their eyes.
4. Israel refused to forsake the idols of Egypt.
5. Israel rebelled against God in the wilderness (Ezekiel 20:13).
6. Israel walked not in His statutes.
7. Israel despised His judgments.
8. Israel polluted His sabbaths.
9. Israel Their hearts went after their idols (Ezekiel 20:16).
10. Their children rebelled against God.
11. Israel walked not in His statutes (Ezekiel 20:21).
12. Israel did not keep His judgments.
13. Israel polluted His sabbaths.
14. Israel did not execute His judgments (Ezekiel 20:24).
15. Israel despised His statutes.
16. Eyes followed the idols of their fathers.
17. Israel offered their firstborn children in fire to idols (Ezekiel 20:26).
18. Israel blasphemed God (Ezekiel 20:27).
19. Israel committed a trespass against God.

20. Israel established places of idol worship on every green hill and in the groves (Ezekiel 20:28-32).
21. Israel offered sacrifices to their idols to provoke God.
22. Israel committed whoredom in idolatrous worship (Ezekiel 20:30-32).

**Dake:** [I will pour out my fury upon them] Three times God determined to punish Israel:

1. When they were so rebellious in Egypt—but He spared them (Ezekiel 20:8).
2. When they were so rebellious in the wilderness—but He spared them. (Ezekiel 20:13)
3. When they were so rebellious in the early days of Canaan—but He spared them again (Ezekiel 20:21-22). This rebellion continued until God finally had to destroy them (Ezekiel 20:23-32).

**[the land of Egypt]** Ezekiel mentions Israel in Egypt more than any other prophet. The word is used eight times in this one chapter (Ezekiel 20:5-10,36).

**Clarke:** **They did not—cast away—**They continued attached to the idolatry of Egypt; so that, had I consulted my justice only, I should have consumed them even in Egypt itself. This is a circumstance that Moses has not mentioned, namely, their provoking God by their idolatry, after he had sent Moses and Aaron to them in Egypt.

**Nelson: the idols of Egypt ... in the midst of the land of Egypt:** Here God spoke of something not explained in the Book of Exodus; that is, the Israelites had engaged in the idolatry of the Egyptians during their sojourn there. Thus, though not mentioned elsewhere, there was the threat of divine retribution against the people before the time of the Exodus (which is mentioned in v. 10).

### **Ezekiel 20:9**

**But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt.**

**Clarke:** **But I wrought for my name's sake—**I bare with them and did not punish them, lest the heathen, who had known my promises made to them, might suppose that I had either broken them through some caprice, or was not able to fulfill them.

**acted for My name's sake:** God vindicated His grace, power, and trustworthiness before the Egyptians by fulfilling His promises to defeat Egypt and deliver even His disobedient people (His people who were supposed to worship God). On God acting for the sake of His name and honor, see also Isa. 48:9–11 (compare 2 Tim. 2:13).

**ESV 9–13: But I acted for the sake of my name** (v. 9; cf. vv. 14, 22) strikes one of the insistent notes in Ezekiel, that God's reputation, not Israel's merit, is the basis for forbearance and grace. This phrase includes the law-giving at Sinai (v. 10). Verse 11 (cf.

vv. 13, 21) echoes Lev. 18:5 (see note there). The emphasis on **Sabbaths** (Ezek. 20:12) is another distinctive of this recital (see also vv. 13, 16, 20, 21, 24).

### **Israel's rebellion in the wilderness and God's grace 20:10-26**

#### **Ezekiel 20:10**

**Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness.**

**Missler:** It is interesting how the Lord, right up front, indicated to Moses that He was going to redeem them out of Egypt, but that it was not going to come easy, and that He would have to harden Pharaoh's heart to make a very dramatic demonstration. Because the Lord wanted to show Himself strong, not just to the Egyptians, but to all the world.

We have vestiges of that incident around today. Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is considered unlucky, because the firstborn in Egypt died on the 14th of Nisan. The Hebrew day began at sundown; thus in the gentile world the reckoning would be the night of the 13th. So Friday the 13th is the gentile side of the 14th of Nisan when the firstborn in Egypt were slain.

God showed Himself strong in Egypt to shake up the Gentile world, and it did, as seen many years later with Joshua at Jericho. Remember the two witnesses talking to Rahab, and she says, "I have heard." The reputation was widespread of how God was dealing with this peculiar people. So we need to realize that it was not just a two-way relationship between God and Israel, but it was in a forum of the world at large.

All the way through this part of Ezekiel you are going to see, "I, I, I." God was the primary agency here. He was the one motivating this and causing this to happen, so recognize His identity with the cause here.

**Carke: I caused them to go forth**—Though greatly oppressed and degraded, they were not willing to leave their house of bondage. I was obliged to force them away.

**10-17. *Israel's rebellions in the wilderness.*** 11. Statutes and ... ordinances. Giving of the Law at Sinai (Ex 19ff.). 12. My sabbaths. As a sign that the Lord was their God and they were his people (v. 20; Ex 31:13, 14; Isa 66:2, 4). During the Exile the observance of the sabbath became a distinguishing sign of the Jews as the people of the Lord (see vv. 12, 13, 16, 20, 21, 24). I am the Lord that sanctify them; i.e., have set them apart from other peoples and consecrated them for myself. Out of regard for his name (v. 14) and out of pity for the sinners (v. 17), the Lord spared the second generation.<sup>21</sup>

10-12. Next Ezekiel traced Israel's history in the wilderness (vv. 10-26), discussing God's relationship to the first generation (vv. 10-17) and to the second generation (vv. 18-26).

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<sup>21</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:10). Chicago: Moody Press.

The wilderness experience began with another outpouring of God's grace, by which He led them out of Egypt and ... into the desert. Those listening to Ezekiel would remember hearing about the miracle at the Red Sea when God parted the waters for Israel and delivered them from Pharaoh's pursuing army. God did not rescue Israel only to abandon her in the heat of the desert. He saved her from Egypt so that He could set her apart to Himself as His special nation. The Books of Exodus and Leviticus contain God's Laws and statutes for His Chosen People.

God singled out one of His laws—the Sabbaths—as a visible manifestation of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Isa. 56:1-8). It was a sign to the Israelites that they were God's special people and were obligated to keep His Law.<sup>22</sup>

*Israel in the wilderness (20:10–17).* God brought his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. He led them to Sinai where he gave them a life-giving code of conduct. He established the sabbaths as a sign of the bond between himself and his people. In the law he revealed himself to them as Yahweh, the God who sanctifies. Nonetheless, Israel rebelled against their God in the wilderness. They refused to follow his life-giving code. They profaned the sabbaths (20:10–13a).

Again the Lord resolved to destroy his people. Grace, however, prevailed. He acted for the sake of his name. He did not wish his name to be profaned among the Gentiles. Because of their sin he swore that he would not bring that generation into the Promised Land. Only because of God's grace did Israel escape complete destruction in the wilderness (20:13b–17).<sup>23</sup>

Following their exodus from slavery in Egypt, God began to sanctify the Israelites by revealing to them a code of Law and entering a covenant relationship with them on a Creator-creature basis. If a man does, he shall live: This does not teach that eternal salvation can be earned by good works, but that the quality of the believer's physical and spiritual life on earth are related to his or her obedience to the living God. God's statutes and judgments were given to His people as a means of maintaining their walk with the living God, not as the basis for establishing their salvation.

**Constable:** So the Lord led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness. At Mount Sinai He gave them statutes and ordinances that would result in their welfare if they obeyed them, namely, the Mosaic Law. He also gave them the Sabbath Day as a sign of the special relationship and blessing that they enjoyed because He had chosen them. By observing the Sabbath the Israelites demonstrated their uniqueness among the nations, their sanctification unto Yahweh (Exod. 20:8-11; 31:13-17). The Sabbath was a dual sign to the Israelites. It reminded them of Yahweh's creation of the cosmos (Exod. 20:11) and of His creation of their nation (Deut. 5:14-15). It was the central sign of the Old Covenant (Isa. 56:2, 4).

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<sup>22</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:10–12). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:5–29). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

### **Ezekiel 20:11**

**And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which *if* a man do, he shall even live in them.**

**Clarke: I gave them my statutes**—I showed them what they should do in order to be safe, comfortable, wise, and happy; and what they should avoid in order to be uninjured in body, mind, and possessions. Had they attended to these things, they should have lived by them. They would have been holy, healthy, and happy.

The Law was presented here as a source of Life. Look at this carefully.

**Christian Ethics, Moral Imperatives**—The power of sin to blind us to God's moral guidance is tragically awesome. Eventually even God will not intervene to stop our rebellion.

### **Ezekiel 20:12**

**Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I *am* the LORD that sanctify them.**

**Dake: [to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them]** The sabbaths are again stated to be for a sign between God and Israel—a sign of the covenant between them (Ezekiel 20:12,20; cp. Exodus 31:12-18).

**Clarke: I gave them my Sabbaths**—The religious observance of the Sabbath was the first statute or command of God to men. This institution was a sign between God and them, to keep them in remembrance of the creation of the world, of the rest that he designed them in Canaan, and of the eternal inheritance among the saints in light. Of these things the Sabbath was a type and pledge.

**LAN 12-13:** The Sabbath, instituted by God at creation, was entrusted to Israel as a sign that God had created and redeemed them (Exodus 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). This day of rest was a gift from a loving God, not a difficult obligation. But the people repeatedly desecrated the Sabbath and ignored their God (see also Ezekiel 20:20-21). It was meant to be a memory device but they ignored it. Today, many Christians celebrate the Lord's Day, Sunday, as their Sabbath. Whatever the day, we must be careful to fulfill God's purpose for the Sabbath. He wants us to rest, to refocus, and to remember him.

Though Ezekiel was strong in his rejection of ritualism, he wholeheartedly endorsed and upheld the observance of the Sabbath, not as a scheduled legalistic requirement but as a sign of God's relationship with His people, and as a regular spiritual refreshing and renewal.

**My Sabbaths:** This is an important verse (emphasized again in v. 20) for understanding the Sabbath (see Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15). Sabbath means “rest.” That is, the Sabbath was a day to cease all ordinary work or labor, as clearly emphasized in Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15. This verse explains the purpose of the Sabbath; it was to serve as a sign or a potent symbol of God’s covenantal relationship with His people.

### **Ezekiel 20:13**

**But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and my sabbaths they greatly polluted: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them.**

**Dake:** [Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness] Five periods of Israel's rebellion:

1. In Egypt (Ezekiel 20:2-8)
2. In the wilderness (Ezekiel 20:9-13)
3. In Canaan from Joshua and Hezekiah (Ezekiel 20:14-26)
4. Hezekiah to Josiah (Ezekiel 20:27-29)
5. Ezekiel's generation (Ezekiel 20:30-32)

**Clarke:** **But the house of Israel rebelled**—They acted in the wilderness just as they had done in Egypt; and he spared them there for the same reason.

The generation that went into the wilderness rebelled against God, and He let them die in the wilderness.

**Constable:** Nevertheless the Israelites rebelled against their God in the wilderness by disobeying His commands, which God intended to result in their blessing (Lev. 18:5). They also made the Sabbath common by failing to observe it as a special day of the week even though God intended it to be a day of rest and remembrance for them. Consequently, Yahweh decided to annihilate them in the wilderness.

### **Ezekiel 20:14**

**But I wrought for my name’s sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out.**

**13-17.** Instead of responding in obedience to God’s gracious provision, the nation disobeyed and rebelled against His rule (cf. Num. 10:11-14:35) and kept on in idolatry (Ezek. 20:16).

God’s response was the same as His response in Egypt. The people deserved to die, but for the sake of His name (cf. vv. 9, 22) He spared them. There was a temporal

judgment, though. Those who had sinned were not allowed into the Promised Land (v. 15).<sup>24</sup>

**ESV 14–17:** This phase shows some variations in wording, as the main formulas of this passage are missing, but the concepts remain. The parallels of vv. 6 and 15 envelop the story of the exodus generation.

**Constable:** However again His reputation as Israel's God moved Him to have mercy on them. Annihilating them would have made it appear to the other nations that He was unable to sustain them and to fulfill His promises to them.

'For my name's sake' expresses one of God's motives in dealing with humanity. Although it means so little to most men, the name of the LORD is infinitely precious to Him. See 36:20, where the LORD says of unfaithful Israel, 'they profaned my holy name, and the following verse, where He says of Himself, 'I had pity for my holy name. Consistent with His holiness God is concerned to vindicate the honor of His name.

### **Ezekiel 20:15**

**Yet also I lifted up my hand unto them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given *them*, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands;**

**Clarke: I lifted up my hand**—Their provocations in the wilderness were so great, that I vowed never to bring them into the promised land. I did not consume them, but I disinherited them.

The phrase, “raised My hand” indicated the taking of an oath.

**Constable 15-16:** Notwithstanding, He swore to the Israelites that He would not bring that generation of them into the Promised Land because they had rebelled against Him and had worshipped idols. For Ezekiel, "idolatry is the quintessential cause of the Babylonian exile.

### **Ezekiel 20:16**

**Because they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted my sabbaths: for their heart went after their idols. might know that I *am* the LORD.**

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<sup>24</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:13–17). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

## **Ezekiel 20:17**

**Nevertheless mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness.**

**Missler:** If they would have kept the Law, they would have lived. That was the whole role of the Law. But, because they broke the Law, they were dead in trespasses and sins. What is not provided there is what Paul talks about in Romans 8:3, “There was no enablement so they could keep the Law.” Is it possible to keep the Law? If it was possible, then Jesus Christ died in vain. There is no other way. Three times in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed, “If there is any other way, let this cup pass from me.” For those who were dead in trespasses and sins, there was no enablement, no provision for life. That all came later through Jesus Christ.

The Sabbath was mentioned 6 times in this chapter. It was pointed to here as a sign of the covenant. “I gave my Sabbaths to be a sign between me and them,” verse 12 said. Clearly the role of the Sabbath in Israel was as the sign of the covenant relationship. There were only two explicit places in the wilderness wanderings where the Sabbath was clearly profaned. Exodus 12:27 and Numbers 15:32. However, there are lists of places about how they profaned it after the time of those 40 years in the wilderness. Neh 10:13; Isa 56:58; Jer 17; Amos 8:5.

As you read through the Old Testament narrative of the relationship struggles between God and Israel, you can almost feel His frustration. On the one hand, His righteousness demands that He be consistent; but in its extreme, it would imply that He needed to wipe them out because they were so willful, so obstinate and rebellious. He seeks every chance He can to extend mercy, pity and so forth; but He is always constrained in a sense, because He is, after all, anxious for the nations not to misunderstand, not to get the wrong impression about what His real power is.

**God, Grace**—God had good reason to destroy Israel before He even gave them the land. Instead, He pitied them and endured centuries of idolatry. Truly His love and grace are great, much greater than His wrath.

So the Lord spared His people. He did this in response to Moses' intercession for the people (cf. Num. 14:13-19; Deut. 1:26-40; Ps. 106:23-25).

### **The Wilderness Generation (Missler)**

We see their hearts continually leaning towards idolatry, and that is the burden of what He deals with here. Verses 18-26 considers the “wilderness generation.” For 40 years they wandered in the wilderness, and only two from the original generation were allowed to enter the land, Joshua and Caleb who had given the good report. Even Moses himself did not get to go in; but that second generation did and they are the ones in focus in verses 18-26 as God continued His sort of survey of His relationship with the nation.

## **Ezekiel 20:18**

**But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols:**

**Dake: [their children in the wilderness]** The new generation of Israel, after the one that was cursed to die in the wilderness. God appealed to them not to rebel as the old generation did, the one that came out of Egypt, but He got no response from them to obey. On the contrary, they rebelled as their fathers had done, and every following generation did likewise up to the very time of the last generation before that of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 20:21-26). This took in all the period of the judges and the kings up to at least the reign of Hezekiah, when the old and new generations of Ezekiel's time came into being. See note, <sup>□</sup>Ezekiel 20:13.

**Dake: [Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols]** Fourteen commands of God in Ezekiel 20:

1. Speak to the elders of Israel and say, Thus saith the Lord God (Ezekiel 20:3).
2. Cause them to know the abominations of their fathers (Ezekiel 20:4).
3. Cast away every man the abominations of his eyes (Ezekiel 20:7).
4. Defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt.
5. Walk not in the statutes of your fathers (Ezekiel 20:18).
6. Do not observe their judgments.
7. Do not defile yourselves with their idols.
8. Walk in My statutes (Ezekiel 20:19).
9. Keep My judgments and do them.
10. Hallow My sabbaths (Ezekiel 20:20).
11. Speak unto the house of Israel and say, Thus saith the Lord God (Ezekiel 20:27).
12. Set your face toward the south, and drop your word toward it (Ezekiel 20:46).
13. Prophesy against the forest of the south field.
14. Say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the Lord (Ezekiel 20:47).

**Dake: [of your fathers]** This proves that the Jews made laws respecting idol worship to be observed instead of the law of Moses on this point. These were the laws they were commanded not to observe instead of the laws of Jehovah (Ezekiel 20:18-19).

**Clarke: But I said unto their children**—These I chose in their fathers' stead; and to them I purposed to give the inheritance which their fathers by disobedience lost.

18-26. *Rebellion of the second generation against God.* 18. Their children in the wilderness. See Deut 1:39; Num 14:31, 33. 21. They imitated the sins of their fathers (Num 25:1, 2; Deut 9:23, 24; 31:27). 23-26. The sins were punished in two ways: by the threat of dispersion upon entering Canaan (vv. 23, 24); and by forcing them to incur punishment (vv. 25, 26). 23. Scatter them among the heathen. Such threats could be averted by repentance (cf. Mic 3:12; Jer 26:16-19; 18; Jonah). 25. I gave them also statutes that were not good. The Lord is not here speaking of the Law, which was good (vv. 13, 21). But the rebellious people were left to a law of another kind (v. 18), working not life but death. "It is part of that universal moral government of the world ... that the

effect of disobedience and the neglect of grace is to lead the sinner on to greater sin” (F. Gardiner in Ellicott’s *Commentary*). For the judicial blindness with which God afflicts those who willfully close their eyes, see Acts 7:42; Rom 1:24, 25; II Thess 2:11. 26. God permitted them to fall into the crime of offering by fire all their first-born (RSV; cf. v. 31; 16:21; 23:37) that they might know that I am the Lord.<sup>25</sup>

*The second generation (20:18–26)*. As they grew up in the wilderness God warned the sons of the condemned generation to be faithful to him. He urged them not to walk in the way of their fathers, nor to defile themselves with idols. He urged them to follow the divinely revealed Law, to sanctify the Sabbaths as signs of the covenant relationship between the Lord and themselves. By following these instructions that second generation would come to know by personal experience that Yahweh was their God (20:18–20).

The second generation was no better than their fathers. They too rebelled against God and refused to follow his law. They too profaned the sabbaths. According to the book of Numbers, the culmination of their sin occurred at Baal-Peor in the plains of Moab (Num 25). Once again God was minded to pour out his wrath upon them. He withdrew, however, his hand and acted again for the sake of his name. He did not wish his name to be profaned among the Gentiles (20:21f.).

To that second generation God revealed his plan for the righteous punishment of Israel’s sin. If they continued their rebellious ways, some day he would “scatter them among the nations” (cf. Deut 28:64ff.). He would give them (i.e., allow them to have) “statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live.” The pagan law codes which they substituted for the life-giving law of God would become a severe taskmaster. God would pronounce them “unclean” because of the way they used the gifts he bestowed upon them. Their participation in child sacrifice would make necessary the desolation of their land (20:23–26).<sup>26</sup>

**ESV 18–21:** Passing on to their children (v. 18), that is, the wilderness generation, gives another opportunity for faithful covenant living (vv. 19–20), which is again spurned (v. 21).

The Lord then instructed the children of the generation that He had liberated from Egyptian bondage not to follow the bad example of their fathers. Since He was Yahweh their God they should remain faithful to the terms of the (Mosaic) covenant that He had made with their nation.

### **Ezekiel 20:19**

**I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them;**

**18-26.** God repeated His opportunities of blessing to the second generation in the wilderness. But the same reaction developed. God gave the children the same orders He

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<sup>25</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:18). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:5–29). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

had given their parents (vv. 18-20; cf. vv. 11-12), but the children followed their parents in violating God's laws (v. 21a). Destruction was deserved, but once again God acted in grace for the sake of His name (vv. 21b-22; cf. vv. 9, 14).

God did not destroy the second generation of people for their sin, but He did impose some judgments on them. The first judgment was dispersion (v. 23). Just before Israel entered the land, God exhorted the people to obey His covenant. He delineated the blessings that would come through obedience and the problems that would result from disobedience (Deut. 28), including being scattered among the nations (Deut. 28:64-68).

God's second judgment was abandoning the people to their sin. He gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by. Some have felt that God was referring here to the Mosaic Law, as if God imposed on the people stringent laws they could never keep. However, this view lowers the intrinsic quality of the Mosaic Law as an expression of God's righteousness. Paul declared that God's Law was "holy, righteous, and good" (Rom. 7:12). Even sinners must "agree that the Law is good" (Rom. 7:16). This view also neglects the chronology presented by Ezekiel. This judgment came *after* the second generation rebelled. The Mosaic Law was given to the first generation years earlier.

It is better to see the "statutes" and "laws" (Ezek. 20:25) as commandments of the pagan religions to which Israel had turned. These laws "required" the Israelites to offer the sacrifice of every firstborn (v. 26), a practice God strongly condemned (cf. Lev. 20:1-5).

God's "giving over" of the people to sin was His judicial act. Because they refused to follow His righteous ways, God would abandon them to the consequences of their actions. Paul expressed a similar judgment by God on the heathen (cf. Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).<sup>27</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:20**

**And hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I *am* the LORD your God.**

**hallow:** This word means "to treat as holy," "to observe as distinct," and "to consecrate." God commands that His **Sabbaths** be continually maintained by His people as sacred—distinct and separate from all ordinary days.

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<sup>27</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:18–26). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

### **Ezekiel 20:21**

**Notwithstanding the children rebelled against me: they walked not in my statutes, neither kept my judgments to do them, which *if* a man do, he shall even live in them; they polluted my sabbaths: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the wilderness.**

The next generation was rebellious also. However, they also rebelled against the Lord, as their fathers had done, so He resolved to punish them in the wilderness.

### **Ezekiel 20:22**

**Nevertheless I withdrew mine hand, and wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted in the sight of the heathen, in whose sight I brought them forth.**

**Clarke: I withdrew mine hand**—I had just lifted it up to crush them as in a moment; for they also were idolatrous, and walked in the steps of their fathers.

**ESV 22–26:** The final phase in the history includes a passage notoriously difficult to understand. Although the giving of laws in v. 11 held out the possibility of life, in v. 25 God 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 God'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. Verse 26, offering up all their firstborn (cf. v. 31), points this way. This phase is analogous to God giving up people to their own idolatrous desires and the consequences thereof (Num. 11:4–6, 31–35; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; cf. Acts 7:42).

Again the Lord withheld punishment for the sake of His reputation (cf. Num. 16:21-22; 25:1-9), but He swore to them that He would scatter them among the other nations and disperse them in other lands because of their covenant unfaithfulness (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:64; Ps. 106:26-27).

### **Ezekiel 20:23**

**I lifted up mine hand unto them also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries;**

**[I lifted up mine hand unto them]** This expression is used seven times in this chapter (Ezekiel 20:5-6,15,23,28,42). It was a custom to raise the hand in making a vow or an oath.

**LAN 23-24:** At the very beginning of Israel's history, God clearly warned the people about the consequences of disobedience (Deut. 28:15ff). When the people disobeyed, God let them experience those devastating consequences to remind them of the seriousness of their sins. If you choose to live for yourself, apart from God, you may

experience similar destructive consequences. However, even through such consequences, God may be drawing you to himself. Let your misfortunes bring you to your senses and to the merciful God before it is too late.

### **Ezekiel 20:24**

**Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols.**

**Chuck Smith:** God spoke to them through Moses and said, "Look, God is gonna scatter you throughout all the nations. He's gonna disperse you among the nations." It's in the song that Moses taught them so that when they were scattered that they would be singing the song and they'd remember God warned them of this. "If you turn from God and all, then God will turn you over into the hands of your enemies and you'll be dispersed among the nations. You'll become a curse and a byword on the lips of all the people."

### **Ezekiel 20:25**

**Wherefore I gave them also statutes *that were* not good, and judgments whereby they should not live;**

**Dake:** [I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live] The idea here is that God allowed their captors to make laws which were not good for them, and judgments for them to live by. It does not mean that His laws were not good for them.

**Clarke:** I gave them also statutes that were not good—What a foolish noise has been made about this verse by critics, believers and infidels! How is it that God can be said “to give a people statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they could not live?” I answer, in their sense of the words, God never gave any such, at any time, to any people. Let any man produce an example of this kind if he can; or show even the fragment of such a law, sanctioned by the Most High! The simple meaning of this place and all such places is, that when they had rebelled against the Lord, despised his statutes, and polluted his Sabbaths—in effect cast him off, and given themselves wholly to their idols, then he abandoned them, and they abandoned themselves to the customs and ordinances of the heathen. That this is the meaning of the words, requires no proof to them who are the least acquainted with the genius and idioms of the Hebrew language, in which God is a thousand times said to do, what in the course of his providence or justice he only permits to be done.

Why would God give them laws that weren't good? This isn't talking about any aspect of the Mosaic Law—Ezekiel reinforces that law (Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 21). Evidently the Jews had taken Exodus 13:12 and Exodus 22:29, the dedication of firstborn animals and children, as a justification for child sacrifice to the Canaanite god Molech. God was giving them over to this delusion to get them to acknowledge him, to jar their consciences, and to revitalize their faith (Ezekiel 20:26).

**McGee 25-26:** This is a strange passage of Scripture, and there is a difference of opinion among commentators as to what it means. I feel that the thought here is the same thought Paul had in 2 Corinthians 2:15–16—“For we are unto God as a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life . . .” When God gave these people His Word and they rejected it, He gave them over to their own way. The very law that was good became bad, because it condemned them and judged them. The same thing is true of the gospel today. If you listen to the gospel and reject it, it would actually be better if you had never heard it. If you reject it, the gospel becomes a savor of death unto you. You can never go before God and say that you had not heard it.

Considering this tremendous condemnation, you would think God was through with these people. But tucked in here and there throughout the Book of Ezekiel we find marvelous, wonderful passages of promise. At the darkest time in their history, the light of prophecy shone the brightest.

The law given by God was good and promised life in exchange for obedience. The statement that God gave “statutes that were not good” is not a permission for evil, but rather the passing of a judicial sentence based upon the desires and determination of the people (Acts 7:42; Rom 1:24, 25; 2 Thess 2:11). When Israel refused to renounce idolatry, God allowed them to be hardened and drawn deeper into its power and control. When people reject truth and righteousness, God allows the wicked desires of their hearts to rule them. God’s design in doing this is to attempt to arouse such horror and shock in the minds of the people concerning their deeds that, if possible, they would be brought to consider their condition and turn again to YAHWEH in repentance (v. 26).

**Constable 25-26:** The Lord also gave them statutes that were not good for them in the sense that He allowed them to choose to live by worldly rules that caused them misery and death (cf. Lev. 26; Deut. 28:15—29:19; 2 Kings 17:26-41). He also gave them ordinances that were too difficult for them to keep in that He did not lighten the burden of responsibility that the Mosaic Law imposed. When the people offered their children as burnt offerings to the idols, the loss of their children was God's punishment for this sin (cf. Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chron. 28:3; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). He had commanded that they offer their first-born to Him or redeem those children (Exod. 13:12; 22:29; Num. 18:15-19), but He had not told them to offer their children to Him as burnt offerings. Ezekiel seems to have been countering the people's claim that because God had commanded them to dedicate their first-born to Him, He was authorizing child sacrifice. Verse 25 may reflect a statement of the people that Ezekiel quoted and then rebutted in verse 26.

A sacrifice as understood by Israel's pagan neighbors was a way of giving desirable things to the gods. . . . How about really impressing a god with your dedication and sincerity by sending that god something more precious to you than anything else—your own firstborn child? Thinking themselves likely to gain the lifetime favor of the gods in this way, the Israelites borrowed child sacrifice, too, from their neighbors and began killing their firstborn infants and burning them on altars as a means of sending them to the false gods they were worshiping. It is evident that such people really wanted the gods to love them and were willing to 'give their all' to gain such love.

## **Ezekiel 20:26**

**And I polluted them in their own gifts, in that they caused to pass through *the fire* all that openeth the womb, that I might make them desolate, to the end that they**

**Missler:** There was a Molech worship ceremony where they took their children and put them into the fire. That was one of the things that is behind this allusion here in verse 26. The tone of this was that God was just giving them over to the worship that they were in. It is one form of judgment that sin almost becomes its own punishment. Disobedience continues to lead to greater sin and the sin itself is its own punishment, and there is no more of a vivid case perhaps than that in idolatry. We tend to become like the gods we worship. If you worship Baal, you will become like Baal. If you worship Molech, you will become like Molech. We all tend to identify with and become like the god we worship; and that is one of the great blessings of worshiping Jesus Christ.

Clearly, this next generation that went through the wilderness, those who did ultimately inherit the land, were no better than their fathers. It is interesting that the prophecy about them being scattered was predicted so very early.

See Deut 28:63-68. All through Deuteronomy, you will find passages dealing with this concept of being scattered, not just to Babylon. The scope of this goes far beyond the judgment in view here that Ezekiel was talking about in Chapter 20. There are worldwide “scattering” passages, and worldwide “regathering” passages. We are going to touch on those shortly.

**Clarke: I polluted them in their own gifts**—I permitted them to pollute themselves by the offerings which they made to their idols. Causing their children to pass through the fire was one of those pollutions; but, did God ever give them a statute or judgment of this kind? No. He ever inveighs against such things, and they incur his heaviest displeasure and curse. See on Ezekiel 20:31 (note).

## **Ezekiel 20:27**

**Therefore, son of man, speak unto the house of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Yet in this your fathers have blasphemed me, in that they have committed a trespass against me.**

**27-29.** *Israel's rebellion against God upon entering Canaan.* 28. Canaanite worship on high places and under green trees was adopted by Israel. It was condemned by Amos (4:4; 5:21); by Hosea (6:6; 8:11, 13; 9:1); by Jeremiah (2:20; 3:6). They offered there their sacrifices. Hebrew *zēbah* means animals slaughtered and eaten at feasts, especially peace offerings and thank offerings (Lev 3:1ff.; 7:12-25). The provocation, or vexation (omitted by the Syriac) of their offering. Hebrew *qorbān*, “offering,” refers to both bloody and nonbloody oblations (Lev 1:2, 3, 10; 2:1, 5), such as first fruits (Lev 2:12; 23:10, 17). Soothing odors (RSV; *rēah nîhōah*). Odors of flesh, fat, or meal burnt on the altar as pleasant to the Lord (Gen 8:21; Ex 29:18; Lev 1:9). Drink offerings (*nesek*). Libations of wine that accompanied meal offerings and peace offerings (Lev 23:13; Num 15:1-12). 29. What is the high place whereunto ye go? These idol repositories (v. 28)

were not fit for the worship of the Lord. “High place,” *bāmâ*, is the object of a scornful play on words—*bā*, “go,” plus *mâ*, “what.”<sup>28</sup>

**27-29.** Israel’s new location in the land of promise did not change her sinful actions. In the land the people offered their sacrifices to idols on hills and under leafy trees, using the Promised Land as the setting for their idolatry. (On the “high place” see comments on 6:1-4.) With a wordplay Ezekiel emphasized the sin of the people by asking them, What is this high place (*mâh habāmâh*) you go to? (*habā’îm*) The similarity of these words underscored the point that Israel had turned to idol worship.<sup>29</sup>

**Israel in Canaan (20:27–29).** God kept his word. He brought those unworthy people into Canaan. Even then they refused to serve him. They “blasphemed” the Lord by “acting treacherously” against him, i.e., they departed from the Lord to serve other gods. They saw the pagan shrines in the high hills and among the leafy trees and worshiped there. They provoked the Lord with their sacrifices, their libations and incense offerings which were presented to pagan deities. God called them to account for their conduct by asking, “What is the high place to which you are going?” That was how those pagan shrines came to be called *bamah*, i.e., high place.<sup>30</sup>

**ESV 27–31:** 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 (vv. 28–29), see note on 6:3. 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 God’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.

The Lord instructed Ezekiel to continue speaking for Him. The Israelites’ forefathers had blasphemed (slandered) the Lord with further covenant unfaithfulness (cf. Num. 15:30–31). After He had brought them into the Promised Land, they used that good land to practice idolatry.

### **Ezekiel 20:28**

***For when I had brought them into the land, for the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to them, then they saw every high hill, and all the thick trees, and they offered there their sacrifices, and there they presented the provocation of their offering: there also they made their sweet savour, and poured out there their drink offerings.***

**Missler:** Remember that the “high places” were where the idol worship took place. While these were Levitical expressions, they were offering them in “high places.” The nature of Canaanite idolatry was to set up their idols on the high hills. They carved the large trees

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<sup>28</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:27). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>29</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:27–29). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:5–29). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

into phallic symbols, and had a whole system of idol worship that was extremely involved with perverse sexual practices. That is why, throughout the Old Testament, you will find admonitions against the “groves.”

Unless you have done the background, unless you understand what is underlying it, it is a weird thing, the “groves” seem like just a grove of trees. But in Biblical times, it refers to those places of idol worship throughout Canaan; and those practices were taken over by Israel, which is why, throughout the Old Testament, this business of putting an altar in the high places was not an altar to God, those were pagan altars.

Then, when there was a revival, a king would go to the high places and tear those down, and reestablish the worship God had commanded. The term “high place” was used idiomatically for this false worship, and that shows up in a strange way in verse 29.

**high hills ... thick trees:** These phrases refer to the locations of altars in Canaan for idol worship. Many of the exiles had visited such places in the past, and many in Judah were still doing so. high place: The name Bamah is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for *high place* (see 16:15–34).

### **Ezekiel 20:29**

**Then I said unto them, What *is* the high place whereunto ye go? And the name thereof is called Bamah unto this day.**

**Missler:** In the Hebrew, the word “Bamah” is “ba” which means “to go,” and “mah” which means “where.” Thus, Ezekiel was putting together a contemptuous pun. Bahmah means “going nowhere.”

We miss that in the English, of course, as it is linguistically dependant. It is the Hebrew play on words, making a pun, making it sound as if it was really putting together going nowhere.

Ezekiel was just using Bamah as if it did mean going nowhere, to make a sort of jibe. “Where is this going-nowhere-place you are trying to get to?” is sort of the thought.

**Dake: [Bahmah]** Bamah, meaning high place. God commanded only one place of sacrifice, but Israel set up places of worship on every high hill, and in groves where immoralities could be carried on in some privacy. The word Bamah became a byword expressing the displeasure of Jehovah upon such places—a memorial of the guilt of the people.

**Constable:** The Lord had confronted His people with their use of the high places on hilltops for idolatry. The name of the high places, Bamah, had a double significance. It meant “high place,” but it also meant literally “go where” or “go what” (Heb. *ba mah*). Thus Bamah became a contemptuous pun. When the people went to the high places to worship idols, where were they going? They were going nowhere of any significance to do nothing of any importance since these idols were nonentities and could not help them. The name Bamah said more about these places than just identifying them as high places of worship, and the Lord had perpetuated the name Bamah for this reason.

In the world of the Old Testament, everyone worshiped by using idols. It was unthinkable not to. Idols were thought to be absolutely necessary for proper worship in the same way that wings are thought necessary for an airplane today. The practice of idolatry was based on what is sometimes called 'sympathetic magic,' that is, the ability to influence reality by manipulating an image of that reality.

## **Israel's rebellion in Ezekiel's day and God's grace 20:30-38**

### **Ezekiel 20:30**

**Wherefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye polluted after the manner of your fathers? and commit ye whoredom after their abominations?**

Obviously, those were rhetorical questions and the implied answer is, “Yes.”

**30-32. *Rebelliousness of Ezekiel's generation.*** 30, 31. Ezekiel's contemporaries who, like their fathers, had defiled themselves, could not receive an oracle from the Lord (cf. v. 3). 32. Let us be as the heathen. One interpretation holds that the exiles were planning to assimilate themselves to their heathen surroundings, but it is not likely that they would have shared such plans with the prophet Ezekiel. A second view claims that the exiles wanted Ezekiel's approval for setting up an altar and temple to the Lord in Babylonia. (Cf. the Jewish temple at Elephantine, Egypt). More likely the prophet, speaking for Jehovah, was condemning the syncretistic and idolatrous practices of his fellow countrymen in Judah.<sup>31</sup>

**30-31.** In Ezekiel's day Israel was still rebellious, just like her ancestors, and was involved in idolatry and child sacrifice. Therefore God refused to let them inquire of Him (cf. v. 3). He would not be a divine ouija board they could manipulate for an answer whenever they pleased.<sup>32</sup>

Ezekiel was to ask his hearers if they planned to defile themselves and to prostitute themselves to things the Lord detested, as their ancestors had done.

### **God's Plan for the Present (20:30–39).**

How could God cancel the threats which he had made through the years against the infidelity of his people? Ezekiel's generation had defiled itself in the same way as their fathers before them. They were playing the harlot with their “detestable things,” i.e., their idols. They were continuing to present their gifts to these gods and to make their sons “pass through the fire,” i.e., burn them alive. God could grant them no favorable insights into the immediate future. Some both in Babylon and in Jerusalem desired the complete

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<sup>31</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:30). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>32</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:30–31). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

paganization of Israel. Their motto was this: “We shall be like the nations serving wood and stone.” God would not allow this to come about (20:30–33).

As paradoxical as it might seem, God’s program of judgment was designed to guarantee the survival of his people. He would manifest his kingship over Israel in judgment “with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out.” The reference is to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.. Then the Lord would bring his wayward people “into the wilderness of the peoples,” i.e., into exile. There he would “enter into judgment” with them (20:34f.).

Centuries before in the wilderness of Egypt the Lord had discriminated between those who were destined to enter the land of promise, and those who were not. So now the Babylonian exile would serve to discriminate between those who were to be permitted to return, and those who would be denied. The divine Shepherd would make his sheep “pass under the rod” so that he might identify those who were truly his. With this remnant he would enter into “the bond of the covenant.” Rebels and transgressors would not be permitted to join the remnant on their trip back home. This purging process would reveal the true nature of the Lord (20:36–38).

God’s purpose in having a holy people in this world would not be frustrated by the idolatry of that generation. Therefore, the Lord sarcastically challenged them to continue apace with their idolatry if that be their choice. He assured them, however, that the day would come when God’s holy name would no longer be profaned by the idolatrous practices of his people (20:39).<sup>33</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:31**

**For when ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons to pass through the fire, ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day: and shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you.**

That, of course, is a throwback to the opening verses. All of this is a presentation to the elders of Israel who had come to inquire. God was saying, “Shall I be inquired of by YOU?”

**Clarke: Ye pollute yourselves**—This shows the sense in which God says, verse 26, “I polluted them in their own gifts.” They chose to pollute themselves, and I permitted them to do so. See on Ezekiel 20:25 (note), Ezekiel 20:26 (note).

So here they are sitting before the prophet Ezekiel, saying, “Inquire of the Lord for us.” And God says, “Hey, Ezekiel, just tell them the history. And then say, ‘Should I be inquired of by you?’ No way.”

They were defiling themselves by practicing child sacrifice. For this reason the Lord would not give them the answers to the questions that they brought to him (cf. vv. 1, 3).

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:30–39). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

## **Ezekiel 20:32**

**And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, that ye say, We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.**

This has all been historical - Egypt, the deliverance, the wilderness wanderings and so forth. Now in this passage we are going to shift to the future.

**Clarke:** **And that which cometh into your mind**—Ye wish to be naturalized among idolaters, and make a part of such nations. But this shall not be at all; you shall be preserved as a distinct people. Ye shall not be permitted to mingle yourselves with the people of those countries: even they, idolaters as they are, will despise and reject you. Besides, I will change your place, restore your captivity; yet not in mercy, but in fury poured out; and reserve you for sorer evils, verse 34.

**32-38.** After recounting Israel's past history of rebellion, God told of her future restoration. The people wanted **to** be like their idolatrous neighbors, but God would not let His people become totally divorced from Him: What you have in mind will never happen. He would remain their God, ruling over them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath (v. 33). The words "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm" would call to mind God's strength in delivering His people from Egypt (cf. Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; Ps. 136:12; and cf. "outstretched arm" in Ex. 6:6 and "mighty hand" in Ex. 32:11). However, His hand and arm would now bring wrath, not deliverance.

Much as the Exodus brought Israel out of bondage into the wilderness, so God's new "Exodus" would bring Israel from the countries where she had been scattered. She would be brought into the wilderness, but this would be a desert of ... judgment. In this "Exodus," like the one from Egypt, God repeated that He would use His mighty hand and ... outstretched arm but in outpoured wrath (Ezek. 20:34).

As Israel gathered in the wilderness, God would begin the process of eliminating those who had rebelled. I will take note of you as you pass under My staff, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant (v. 37). This pictures a shepherd holding out his rod and forcing the sheep to pass under it single file for counting (cf. Jer. 33:13). The shepherd would let those sheep that were actually his enter the fold, a place of protection. In this instance the fold was "the bond of the covenant." The "covenant" could refer to the Mosaic Covenant, which Israel had broken (cf. Ezek. 16:59), but this does not seem likely since Israel invalidated the Mosaic Covenant by her unbelief. Therefore God will make a New Covenant with her when He restores her to Himself (Jer. 31:31-33). Ezekiel seemed to make the same distinction (Ezek. 16:60) between the Old Covenant of Israel's "youth" and the "everlasting covenant" which will be enacted at the time of her restoration. God will again bring Israel into a covenant relationship with Him—but this covenant will be permanent.

As the sheep will pass under the rod of the Great Shepherd, those who do not belong to Him—unbelieving Israelites who rebel against God—will be removed. God will not allow those sheep to enter His land. God's process of purification will mean that only true sheep will enjoy the covenant of blessing.

This scene described by Ezekiel is yet future. At the end of the Tribulation God will regather Israel to the land of promise for the Millennium (cf. 36:14-38; 37:21-23). But first the Israelites will be required to stand before the Lord for judgment. Those who have placed their trust in Him will be allowed to enter the land and participate in His kingdom (cf. John 3:3). Those who are rebels will be judged for their sin and banished to everlasting punishment.<sup>34</sup>

**like the Gentiles:** Chosen to be a nation separate from sin and secular ways—a special instrument to reveal God’s glory—Israel’s consistent tendency was to identify with the neighboring, ungodly nations and to take on their idolatry (see Ex. 19:5, 6; Deut. 17:14; 26:16–19; 31:21; 1 Sam. 8:5; Ps. 135:4).

Unthinkable Idolatry. 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 Deut. 28:64.

**Constable 32-35:** The Lord would not allow them to become like the idolaters all around them who served wood and stone. He would be their king, He swore, and bring judgment on them. But He would re-gather them to their land from the distant countries where He had scattered them (cf. 36:14-38; 37:21-23; Deut. 30:1-10; Isa. 11:11-16; 49:17-23; 60; 61:4-9; Jer. 23:1-8; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 10:8-12; et al.). The descriptions of God doing this with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm recall the terms used of His liberation of the Israelites from Egypt (Exod. 6:6; 32:11; cf. Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; Ps. 136:12). A second exodus is in view. He would bring them into another type of wilderness, a wilderness full of people, and there He would personally judge them. This probably refers to the present worldwide dispersion of the Jews that began in A.D. 70 when the Jews had to leave the Promised Land again.

### **Ezekiel 20:33**

**As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you:**

**Dake:** [As I live] This expression, "As I live," is used 16 times by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 5:11; Ezekiel 14:16-20; Ezekiel 16:48; Ezekiel 17:16,19; Ezekiel 18:3; Ezekiel 20:3,31,33; Ezekiel 33:11,27; Ezekiel 34:8; Ezekiel 35:6,11), and only 4 times by all the other prophets (Isaiah 49:18; Jeremiah 22:24; Jeremiah 46:18; Zeph. 2:9). It is not found in any other section of the Bible; but "As truly as I live" occurs in Numbers 14:21,28. The purpose of the expression was to emphasize the absolute truth of what was being spoken by God.

**Dake:** [saith the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you ...] The 26th prophecy in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 20:33-44, unfulfilled). Next, <sup>□</sup>Ezekiel 20:45.

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<sup>34</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:32–38). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Twenty Predictions—Unfulfilled:

1. Surely with an outstretched arm, and a mighty hand, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you (Ezekiel 20:33).
2. I will bring you out from the people and gather you out of the countries wherein you are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out (Ezekiel 20:34).
3. I will bring you into the wilderness of the people (Ezekiel 20:35).
4. There will I plead with you face to face.
5. As I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you (Ezekiel 20:36).
6. I will cause you to pass under the rod (Ezekiel 20:37).
7. I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.
8. I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against Me (Ezekiel 20:38).
9. I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn.
10. They will not enter the land of Israel.
11. You will know that I am Jehovah.
12. In My holy mountain all the house of Israel will serve Me (Ezekiel 20:40).
13. There will I accept them.
14. There will I require your offerings, the first fruits of your oblations, with all the holy things.
15. I will accept you with your sweet savor, when I bring you out from the countries wherein you have been scattered (Ezekiel 20:41).
16. I will be sanctified in you before the heathen.
17. You will know that I am Jehovah, when I bring you into the land of Israel, into the country which I lifted up My hand to give to your fathers.
18. There you will remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein you have been defiled (Ezekiel 20:43).
19. You will loathe yourselves in your own sight for all the evils that you have committed.
20. You will know that I am Jehovah, when I have wrought with you for My name's sake, not according to your wicked ways, nor according to your corrupt doings (Ezekiel 20:44).

**33-39.** *A second encounter in the wilderness* (in contrast to vv. 10-26) for *the purpose of judgment*. 34. Will I rule over you. The sovereign Vindicator of right and truth speaks. 34. I will bring you out from the people. As a distinct race, to be dealt with as his own people. 35. Wilderness of the people. Perhaps not a material wilderness, but a wilderness condition—scattered among the nations. 37. I will cause you to pass under the rod. A figurative reference to a shepherd's staff, used in counting sheep (Lev 27:32; Jer 33:13). I will let you go in by number (so RSV, following the LXX) into the fold. 38. I will purge out from among you the rebels. The rebels will be separated and not allowed to share in

the future restoration. 39. Serve ye every one his idols. God will give them up to pursue their chosen way to its inevitable end.<sup>35</sup>

God tells them that He intends to bring them back into the land. God's purpose with Israel will yet be fulfilled. He will someday be declared right by those who had said He was not right.

**33-44** This section describes the coming judgment of those Jews who will be living at the conclusion of the tribulation period when Christ returns to earth. The Chief Shepherd (Christ) will then examine His flock (*pass under the rod*, v. 37; cf. Lev. 27:32), *purge ... the rebels* (v. 38), and bring the faithful into the blessings of the new *covenant* in the kingdom. At this same time, Gentile survivors of the tribulation period will also be judged so that all who live through that terrible time will at its conclusion either enter the kingdom in unresurrected bodies or be cast into hell. Thus, at the very beginning of the Millennium, all who enter it in earthly bodies will have proved through these two judgments that they are redeemed. See note on Matt. 25:32.<sup>36</sup>

The judgment of captivity in Babylon had begun in the deportations of 605 and 597 B.C. and would be continued with Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C. However, God also promised to restore Judah and to judge her enemies with fury (see Deut. 4:34). This refers to the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C. and to the three returns of the Jews to their land and the rebuilding of their homeland (538—c. 330 B.C.; see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). Yet Israel would again be taken captive and made to wander throughout the nations: wilderness of the peoples. This section refers to the time of Roman domination, which began with Pompey taking Jerusalem in 63 B.C. mighty hand ... outstretched arm: The language repeats the phrasings used in the Exodus from Egypt (see Ex. 7:5; 15:6). I will bring you out: Leaving Babylon would be a second Exodus, celebrated prophetically by Isaiah as well (see Isa. 40:1).

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

**ESV 33–44:** Looking to the Future. The structure of two phases in the wilderness finds its mirror image in two phases of restoration: vv. 33–38 use exodus/wilderness motifs as the community is purified; vv. 39–44 focus on worship, in a reversal of ritual behavior in the land (vv. 27–31). Both movements here parallel the “bringing out” in the historical recital (vv. 5, 22 and 34, 41).

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<sup>35</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:33). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>36</sup> Ryrie Study Bible

### **Ezekiel 20:34**

**And I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out.**

“Countries” is plural, not just from Babylon. The scope of this goes far beyond simply bringing them back out of Babylon.

### **Ezekiel 20:35**

**And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face.**

**Dake: [into the wilderness]** This is one of a number of simply stated scriptures on the flight of the sun-clothed woman of Rev. 12 into the wilderness where she will have a place reserved of God to protect her for three and a half years from the Antichrist. Israel is spoken of as going into the wilderness several times, but never the Gentiles, the church, or Christendom (Ezekiel 20:33-44; Isaiah 16:1-5; Isaiah 42:11-13; Hosea 2:14-23; Rev. 12:6,13-16). See The Sun-Clothed Woman.

**Dake: [there will I plead with you face to face]** In this wilderness God will plead with Israel face to face as He did in the wilderness coming out of the land of Egypt (Ezekiel 20:35-36). God sent Moses and Aaron to plead with them in those days, and in the future He will send the two witnesses, Enoch and Elijah, to plead with them in the coming tribulation (Rev. 11:3-11). He will bring Israel under the rod and into the bond of the covenant (Ezekiel 20:37). At that time all rebels will be purged from them (Ezekiel 20:38). In fact, Zech. 13:8-9 predicts that two-thirds of Israel will be destroyed, leaving only a third to accept Jesus Christ at His second coming (Zech. 12:10-13:1; Romans 11:25-29).

**Clarke: I will bring you into the wilderness of the people**—I will bring you out of your captivity, and bring you into your own land which you will find to be a wilderness, the consequence of your crimes.

**There will I plead with you**—There I will be your king, and rule you with a sovereign rule; and the dispensations of my justice and mercy shall either end you or mend you.

**LAN 35-36:** When the Israelites disobeyed God by refusing to enter the promised land the first time, God chose to purify his people by forcing them to wander in the desert until that entire generation died (Numbers 14:26-35). Here he promised to purge the nation of its rebellious people again as they cross the vast desert from their captivity in Babylon. Only those who faithfully followed God would be able to return to their land. The purpose of this desert judgment would be to purge all those who worship idols and to restore all those faithful to God.

### **Ezekiel 20:36**

**Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord GOD.**

**Constable 36-38:** As the Lord had judged the fathers in the wilderness long ago, so He would judge the children of His people. He would discipline them to sanctify them (cf. Jer. 33:13). It was customary for shepherds to count their sheep as they passed under their staff that they held over the doorway of the sheepfold.

“Reference to those who 'pass under my rod' was first an allusion to the tithe (Lev 27:32). Every tenth animal that passed under a 'rod' held over the sheep was separated and declared to be holy. The purification of the exile, likewise, would separate the righteous and the wicked. The 'rod' also was an instrument of discipline, correction, and punishment. This was another way of communicating the purpose of the exile, which was to 'purge' and purify those who rebelled against God (v. 38).”<sup>37</sup>

The Lord would also bring His people under obligation to keep the terms of a covenant. This is evidently a reference to the New Covenant (cf. 36:25-38; Jer. 31:31-34). He would weed out the rebels and transgressors from among them and bring them out of the countries where they lived but would not bring them into the Promised Land (cf. Num. 16; Deut. 11:6). This probably refers to the Jews who will die during the Tribulation period (cf. Zech. 13:8; Rev. 12:15-17) and or when the Lord returns to the earth (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). Of course, many other Jews will enter the Millennium, as the verses cited make clear.

“The passage is a prophecy of future judgment upon Israel, regathered from all nations . . . The issue of this judgment determines who of Israel in that day will enter kingdom blessing (Ps. 50:1-7; Ezek. 20:33-44; Mal. 3:2-5; 4:1-2).”<sup>38</sup>

Then His people would know that the One who did this was Yahweh.

### **Ezekiel 20:37**

**And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant:**

**Missler:** This concept of being passed under the rod is like a shepherd counts sheep. We see that idiom several places (Jer 33:13; Mt 25 which is the sheep and goat judgments, the judgment of the nations.)

**Dake: [to pass under the rod]** To "pass under the rod" means that the ones who are not rebels will be counted in the flock, in that day. This was the manner of counting sheep—they were numbered as they passed under the shepherd's club (Jeremiah 33:13; Micah 7:14).

**Clarke: I will cause you to pass under the rod**—This alludes to the custom of tithing the sheep. I take it from the rabbins. The sheep were all penned; and the shepherd stood

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<sup>37</sup> Cooper, pp. 206-7

<sup>38</sup> The New Scofield ... p. 859

at the door of the fold, where only one sheep could come out at once. He had in his hand a rod dipped in vermillion; and as they came out, he counted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine; and as the tenth came out, he marked it with the rod, and said, "This is the tenth;" and that was set apart for the Lord.

**Clarke: I wilt bring you into the bond of the covenant**—You shall be placed under the same obligations as before, and acknowledge your selves bound; ye shall feel your obligation, and live according to its nature.

As the animals were passed under a rod, every tenth animal was separated as a tithe (Lev 27:32). The Hebrews are to be judged by God, who will save the righteous and judge the wicked.

**Nelson: pass under the rod:** This is the way a shepherd counts and controls his sheep (see Lev. 27:32; Jer. 33:13). A rod sometimes speaks of discipline (Ps. 89:32), but here it is parallel to the idea of bring you into the bond of the covenant. God's lordship of His people for personal, purposeful relationship is in view. This future bonding with God will be a time when Israel is cleansed of spiritual idolaters (see v. 39; 16:15–34). At that time, the people will finally know that God is the LORD (see 16:63; 36:25–38; Jer. 31:31–34; Dan. 12:10).

### **Ezekiel 20:38**

**And I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall know that I *am* the LORD.**

**Clarke: I will purge out from among you the rebels**—The incorrigibly wicked I will destroy; those who will not receive him whom I have appointed for this purpose as the Savior of Israel. And I will gather you who believe out of all the countries where you sojourn, and bring you into your own land; but those of you who will not believe—will not receive the Son of David to reign over you, shall never enter into the land of Israel, but die in your dispersions. This is what the contradicting and blaspheming Jews of the present day have to expect. And thus, both of you shall know that he is Jehovah, fulfilling his threatenings against the one, and his promises to the other.

**An application of this history lesson 20:39-44**

### **Ezekiel 20:39**

**As for you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord GOD; Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter *also*, if ye will not hearken unto me: but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols.**

**Missler:** This is a strange verse, which is similar to several verses in Revelation and elsewhere. Let him that is going to be wicked, be wicked still. He is not admonishing

them to be wicked. It is just God's way of expressing some finality, some exasperation, if you will.

Here we have divine irony—Go serve your idols now and hereafter if you do not want to hearken to Me, but do not pollute My holy name anymore with your gifts and idols.

The Israelites were worshiping idols and giving gifts to God at the same time! They did not believe in their God as the one true God; instead, they worshiped him along with the other gods of the land. Perhaps they enjoyed the immoral pleasures of idol worship; or perhaps they didn't want to miss out on the benefits the idols might give them. Often people believe in God and give him gifts of church attendance or service, while still holding on to their idols of money, power, or pleasure. They don't want to miss out on any possible benefits. But God wants all of our lives and all of our devotion; he will not share it because devotion to anything else is idol worship. Beware of trying to keep God pleased while you also pursue the pleasures of sin. You must choose one or the other.

**39-41.** When Israel enters into the New Covenant she will really know the Lord (vv. 39-44). Though Israel was serving **idols** in Ezekiel's day (to her own defilement, vv. 25-26), in the future God will not permit such sin among His people (you will ... no longer profane My holy name; cf. 39:7; 43:7).

God's ideal for Israel will finally be realized in the millennial kingdom. She will serve the Lord, He will accept her, and the people will offer Him their choicest offerings ... gifts, and sacrifices in sincere worship. (For an explanation of sacrifices during the Millennium see the comments on 40:38-43.) As a result, God will show Himself holy. "Holy" (*qōdēš*) means "set apart," the opposite of "profaned" or "made common." Israel had profaned her God by debasing her worship with sin and idolatry (20:39). In the future, however, she will set God apart so all the nations will sense God's holiness.<sup>39</sup>

The command **Go, serve every one of you his idols** is an ironic command; the rest of the verse indicates that God was giving the stubborn people over to what they had decided. God grants each one a destiny consistent with his or her decisions. Then God looks to an unspecified future time when Israel will glorify His name, meaning "His reputation" among the nations (vv. 40-44).

**Chuck Smith:** In other words, God says, "All right, that's it. Do it." So He gave them statutes that were not good. You know, just, He saw that they were bent in that direction, "All right, if that's what you want to do, do it." It's terrible when God gives up on a person and just turns him over to his own desires, to his own destruction.

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<sup>39</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:39-41). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

### **Scattered among the Nations (Missler)**

Be alert to the fact that what we have in view here is not just the regathering from Babylon. It is much broader than that. The concept of Israel being scattered throughout the entire world and then being regathered is fundamental to prophecy.

See Deut 30:1-10 - "all the nations." One of the things that Ezekiel is going to deal with, and one reason we are sort of attracted to the book of Ezekiel, is because we are sensitive to the fact that in the later chapters he is going to deal so clearly, so broadly, so explicitly with the regathering of Israel in the land, that we are experiencing uniquely in our lifetime! That chapter also notes how that regathering will be in stages, how they will first be brought together in unbelief; but then they will, in effect, be shocked into an awareness of God's dealing with them again.

We do not see that yet; but we are going to see it shortly in Israel. That is what makes Ezekiel so timely. To accomplish this God stages some very specific events.

In Deuteronomy 30, we have the whole thing summarized. See Isaiah 11:11-16. Remember that the first time that He set His Hand to regather His people was after Babylon. He scattered them, and He regathered them. The second time He did that started May 14th, 1948 and is continuing to this very day.

See also Isaiah 49:17-23 and 61:4-6. Israel is going to attain their role. What God had wanted them to do was be the mechanism by which He could show Himself strong throughout the earth. They failed at that all through history, but in this period, they are going to achieve that destiny. See Isaiah 61:7-10 and Jeremiah 23:1-8.

It is interesting how the "north country" is earmarked in this passage. The country that is predominately north of Israel is Russia, the former Soviet Union. We will get into this more in Ezekiel 38 and 39 and the major passage on this is in Chapter 36. See also Amos 9:11-15 and Zechariah 10:8-12. The ultimate regathering... Let us get back to Ezekiel Chapter 20 and the Divine regathering of Israel.

**ESV 39–44:** With gathering complete, the worship life of the renewed community comes into focus. The contrast with the defiling practices of vv. 26 and 28 is complete. The lingering shame (v. 43) is consistent with the restoration picture in 16:54, 61. God's own reputation is supremely the reason for the restoration of God's people (20:44).

**Constable:** For now the Israelites to whom Ezekiel spoke could continue to practice idolatry, not with the Lord's blessing of course, but in the future they would listen to and obey the Lord. Then they would make His name common no longer with their unacceptable worship gifts and idolatry. Those who consistently reject God and his Word favor self-willed idolatry and immorality and are finally given over by him to reprobation (20:30-39), a process described in detail in Rom 1:24-28.

## **Ezekiel 20:40**

**For in mine holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, saith the Lord GOD, there shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve me: there will I accept them, and there will I require your offerings, and the firstfruits of your oblations, with all your holy things.**

Here, in contrast to His attitude towards Israel in Ezekiel 20, God says the time is coming when He will accept their offerings, and will welcome their offerings. It is talking about a time yet future, a time that you and I would call the Kingdom period.

**[in mine holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel]** This refers to the mountain of the Lord's house that will be built when the Messiah comes. Israel will flow into it with all nations and be blessed in all eternity (Isaiah 2:1-4; Isaiah 54:1-7; Isaiah 62:1-9; Isaiah 63:17-25; Isaiah 66:20-24; Micah 4).

**Dake: [offerings, and the firstfruits of your oblations, with all your holy things]** Here is another reference to sacrifices and offerings being made again, in the Millennium and the New Earth period eternally—not to take away sins, for they did not actually do this in the past, but to serve as a memorial and instruction for the coming generations, teaching them the wonderful work of Christ on the cross (Ezekiel 20:40-42). See notes on Ezekiel 40:5-48:34.

**Clarke: For in mine holy mountain**—The days shall come in which all true ISRAELITES shall receive HIM whom I have sent to be the true sacrifice for the life of the world; and shall bring to Jerusalem—the pure Christian Church, their offerings, which I will there accept, for they will give me thanks for my unspeakable gift.

**40-44. Idolatry to be rooted out of Israel and true worship made possible.** 40. In the mountain of the height of Israel (Mic 4:1, 2; Isa 2:2, 3), all the (redeemed) house of Israel will be accepted. 41. As a sweet savour to the Lord. I will manifest my holiness among you (RSV). So that the nations may acknowledge the Lord's power and sole deity. See also 28:22, 25; 36:23; 38:16, 23; 39:27. 42. I am the Lord. Israel will know the Lord as the God to be honored and served when he fulfills his ancient promises to the fathers in the restoration of the land. 43. Ye shall loathe yourselves. For their past sins (6:9; 16:61ff.). But they will be brought to repentance by the goodness of God (Rom 2:4). 44. I am the Lord. The people will see that all through their past the Lord, for his name's sake, dealt with them in grace and not as they deserved (cf. Isa 40:5). Verses 40-44 point forward to chapter 40 and the following.

2) Israel To Be Punished by God's Avenging Sword. 20:45–21:32.<sup>40</sup>

The future repentant, renewed, and regathered Israel will be characterized by: (1) a return to the land of Israel and an acceptable, sacrificial system of worship (see chs. 40–48); (2) a revived, personal knowledge of its sovereign and faithful Lord; (3) a renunciation of former sins; and (4) a recognition that God's grace governs the nation's history of sin and

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<sup>40</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:40–45). Chicago: Moody Press.

salvation. **My holy mountain:** Reference is made to the glorious central location for worship in Israel—Mount Zion in Jerusalem (Ps. 2:6; 78:68; Isa. 35:10; 60:14).

The **holy mountain** as the place of God's renewed presence with his people is especially prominent in the latter chapters of Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 56:7; 66:20), and its **height** is celebrated in the psalms of Zion (cf. Ps. 48:1–3).

**Constable:** At that future time, all Israel would serve the Lord, specifically on the holy mountain where the temple stood (cf. Isa. 27:13; 56:7; 66:20; Joel 2:1; 3:17; Zeph. 3:11; Zech. 8:3). Then the Lord would accept their offerings of worship, their special gifts to Him, and all the things that they devoted to Him because they had repented (cf. chs. 40–48).

### **God's Plan for the Future (20:40–44).**

Looking beyond the exile Ezekiel described the relationship between God and Israel. He saw the high and holy “mountain of Israel,” i.e., Zion. He saw “the whole house of Israel” serving the Lord faithfully in that mount “in the land.” In that place the Lord would accept his people and all the offerings which they presented. They would become to him as a living sacrifice creating a “soothing aroma.” Because of this, God promised “I will prove myself holy among you,” i.e., demonstrate his presence, “in the sight of the nations” (20:40f.).

The regathering of Israel to their land would cause his people to understand the Lord as never before. They would look back upon their evil conduct prior to the captivity and they would “loathe” themselves. True repentance thus would be indicated. The grace of God finally would impact upon their minds. They would see that God had dealt with them for the sake of his name. They deserved nothing. They would understand that the Lord had not punished them to the extent that their “evil ways” and “corrupt deeds” deserved (20:42–44).<sup>41</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:41**

**I will accept you with your sweet savour, when I bring you out from the people, and gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the heathen.**

**Dake: gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered]** Again and again God predicts the regathering of Israel from all nations to fulfill the many prophecies of the eternal earthly kingdom of David and the Messiah (Ezekiel 20:34–38,41; Isaiah 10:10–12, notes).

**Dake: [sanctified in you before the heathen]** Again, the meaning of sanctification is made clear. It simply refers to setting anything apart for holy and sacred use, or to be

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<sup>41</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:40–44). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

revered in the hearts of men, as in this case. It has no reference to cleansing from sin or dealing with a fallen nature.

**Constable 41-42:** The people would be as a soothing aroma to God when He regathered them to the Promised Land from where He had scattered them, and He would accept them. He would then prove that He is holy among the nations, namely, uniquely different from all the so-called gods. The Israelites would also recognize Him when He fulfilled His promise to the patriarchs to give them the Promised Land.

### **Ezekiel 20:42**

**And ye shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel, into the country *for* the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to your fathers.**

**Dake:** [into the country for the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to your fathers] Here again the often repeated fact is affirmed—that all 13 tribes of Israel will be gathered back from the nations to occupy the original promised land of Palestine in all eternity (Ezekiel 37:11-14,21-28; Ezekiel 49:1-35).

**42-44.** God’s restoration of Israel will produce several changes: (1) The first change will be a new *realization* of her God. God said that Israel will know that I am the LORD. “LORD” (*Yahweh*) is God’s personal name, revealed to Israel (cf. Ex. 3:13-15). It stresses God’s self-existence and His covenant-keeping faithfulness. Israel will come to understand the true meaning of God’s name (and character) when He brings her into Palestine. This promise does not depend on her faithfulness, for she had been extremely unfaithful. The promise, made by God, depends on *His* faithfulness. He will demonstrate His covenant loyalty by fulfilling it (cf. Ezek. 20:44).

(2) The second result of Israel’s restoration will be her *repentance*. She will remember her conduct and will loathe herself for all the evil she has done. The shame Israel should have felt (but didn’t) in Ezekiel’s day will finally be manifested when God restores her.<sup>42</sup>

### **Ezekiel 20:43**

**And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed.**

**Missler:** When God gives the insight to see our sin, we are filled with loathing. Job experienced that in Job 42; so did Isaiah in Isaiah 6 when he saw the Throne of God and realized the righteousness of God, he loathed himself. It is an interesting reaction. We see it in several places, and apparently Israel will also, when they realize, as they look back at

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<sup>42</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:42–44). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

their history, they will loathe themselves for their unbelief and for the evils they have committed against the Lord.

**Dake:** [there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed] There—in the land of Israel, the country I lifted up (sware) to give to your fathers—you will remember your ways and all your doings wherein you have been defiled. There you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for all the evils you have committed; there you will know that I am Jehovah (Ezekiel 20:43-44).

**Clarke:** And there shall ye remember your ways—Ye shall be ashamed of your past conduct, and of your long opposition to the Gospel of your salvation.

These promises may, in a certain limited sense, be applied to the restoration from the Babylonish captivity; but they must have their proper fulfillment when the Jews shall accept Jesus as their Savior, and in consequence be brought back from all their dispersions to their own land.

**Constable 43-44:** Back in the land then the Israelites would remember their past sins and loath themselves. They would also come to know the Lord for the kind of God He is because they would recognize how graciously He had dealt with them as a people.

The prospect of future grace, restoration, and blessing has always been the strongest motivation for present holiness (Rom. 2:4). This is why this message ends as it does. The prophet Ezekiel straddled two eras, the grim era of the past and present which culminated in double exile and—in prospect at least—a glorious era to be inaugurated by a new work of God. In this chapter both these aspects are set side by side so that it presents an epitome of his total message.

### **Ezekiel 20:44**

**And ye shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have wrought with you for my name's sake, not according to your wicked ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O ye house of Israel, saith the Lord GOD.**

This is where the Hebrew text ends Chapter 20. They place verses 45-49 at the beginning of Chapter 21.

A new chapter in the Hebrew Bible begins with 20:45. The section of the book that it begins contains four messages of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem with special emphasis on the judgment coming on the leaders of the people. The Lord explained the basis for His judgment of Judah (20:1-44) and then proceeded to describe and to affirm the certainty of that judgment (20:45—21:32).

### **The Prophecy of the Sword (Missler)**

Here (20:45-49 thru 21:1-32) we have what is sometimes called “The Prophecy of the Sword,” or “The Sword Song.” The focus here is on the very near term.

The sword in view here is Nebuchadnezzar. In B.C.588 he had a campaign to quell the revolts of Tyre, Judah, and Ammon, the three principalities that were revolting against him. He launched a siege which ended in B.C. 586 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel's burden primarily focuses on the city of Jerusalem, particularly in the later part of Chapter 21.

We are going to discover that there are three terms used for the south. In 47:19 we find the concept of looking south when something is on the right side, where the speaker is looking east. It was the eastern tradition to face the rising sun, so something on the right was south, something on the left was north. That is one way we find of speaking of the south.

Another way of speaking of the south was the shinning land that we see in Deuteronomy 33:23 and Joshua 15:21, where we have the Negev, meaning the south, the desert of the south. It actually means the compass direction to the south.

### **Ezekiel 20:45**

**Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,**

**[Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying ...]** The 27th prophecy in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 20:45-49, fulfilled). Next, Ezekiel 21:1.

Six Predictions—Fulfilled:

1. Set your face and drop your word toward the south, and prophesy against the forest of the south field ... I will kindle a fire in you (Ezekiel 20:46-47).
2. It will devour every green and dry tree in you (Ezekiel 20:47).
3. The flaming flame will not be quenched.
4. All faces from the south to the north will be burned therein.
5. All flesh will see that I the Lord have kindled it (Ezekiel 20:48).
6. It will not be quenched until it has burned out.

**LAN 45-47:** "Toward the south" refers to Jerusalem and Judah. "The southland" is the region of the Negev, which is compared to a forest about to be destroyed by fire.

**45-49.** *The figure of a fire devouring the forests of the south.* 46. **Set thy face toward the south.** Three words for south occur in this verse—*têmân*, *dārôm*, and *negeb*, meaning respectively, "right hand," "brilliant" or "midday," and "dry land." All are designations for Israel, which lay south in the path of conquerors advancing from Babylon (cf. 1:4). Note the threefold reference to Israel in 21:2, 3. Preach. Literally, *drop your word against* (cf. 21:2; Amos 7:16; Mic 2:6, 11). 47. Kindle a fire in thee. This is a figure of destruction (cf. Isa 9:17; 10:17-19; Jer 21:14; Zech 11:1-3; Ps 83:14). Green tree ... dry tree. Cf. 21:3. All alike, righteous and wicked, are to be involved in the national judgment (cf. Lk 23:31). All faces. Of spectators, or of the trees.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible commentary : Old Testament* (Eze 20:45). Chicago: Moody Press.

**45-49.** Ezekiel's long message (vv. 1-44) was followed by a short parable. In the Hebrew Bible 20:45 is actually the first verse of chapter 21, thus showing that this parable introduces the four messages in chapter 21. Ezekiel was to face toward the south (*tēmānāh*) and preach against the south (*dārôm*) and the southland (*neḡeb*). The first of these three Hebrew words is literally "what is on the right hand" as an individual faces east. It was a poetic word, though when used as a proper name (Teman) it described a city in Edom, to Judah's south (cf. Amos 1:12; Jer. 49:7; Ezek. 25:13). Possibly the idea in 20:45 is that Ezekiel was to face toward Teman. The word *dārôm* was also poetic. Ezekiel used that word 12 other times, all in describing the millennial temple (cf. 40:24 [twice], 27 [twice], 28 [twice], 44-45; 41:11; 42:12-13, 18).

The third word used by Ezekiel (*neḡeb*, "southland" in the NIV) is also used as a proper name. Negev is the name of the southern portion of Palestine near Israel's border with Edom (cf. Josh. 15:21). Today the Negev is a semi-arid region with little rainfall and few sources of water. But since Ezekiel referred to the Negev forest, the land must have been more densely covered in those days. Major settlements in the Negev included Arad, Kadesh Barnea, and Beersheba.

In this prophecy against Judah, Ezekiel said God was going to devastate it by fire (probably a "fire" of judgment, not a literal fire).

The people saw Ezekiel's actions but refused to understand them. Ezekiel complained to God that the people were saying he was just telling parables, or perplexing riddles. Though he was predicting Judah's destruction, the people were only confused by his words.<sup>44</sup>

**McGee:** "Prophecy against the forest of the south field"—some commentators feel this refers to Judah, and others think it means the Negeb. At least, it is south. If you were to see the Negeb, you would wonder what happened to the forest. Well, my friend, God judged it; He said He would remove it. That land was once the land of milk and honey, but you cannot come to that conclusion when you look at it today. Not only is it not the land of milk and honey, they do not even have enough water there.

This is a remarkable prophecy. God is not through with these people or with that land.

### **Parable of the Fire (20:45–21:5).**

God directed Ezekiel to set his face toward the south and to prophesy against "the forest of the southland" (NIV), i.e., Judah. God was about to kindle a fire against this forest. That fire would consume every green tree as well as every dry one. The thought is that both the righteous and the wicked would suffer from the devastation caused by the Chaldean invaders. That blazing inferno could not be quenched. "Every face" (NIV) throughout the land would be seared by the flames. This judgment on Judah would reveal the true character of Yahweh to all flesh (20:45–48).

At this point Ezekiel offered to the Lord a prayer of complaint (cf. Jer 4:10). People were ignoring what the prophet had to say. They were brushing it aside because he used

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<sup>44</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Eze 20:45–49). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

the parabolic form of teaching. Ezekiel's complaint contained an implied petition that he be allowed to preach plainly (20:49).

Ezekiel's prayer was answered. He was allowed to preach in such a way as to explain the parable of the fire. He was to set his face toward Jerusalem and prophesy against the land of Israel. He was to preach against the pagan sanctuaries in particular. He was to announce God's hostile relationship to his people: "Behold, I am against you." The divine sword was unsheathed, i.e., the agents of Yahweh were about to invade the land. Both righteous and wicked would be cut off in that judgment. "All flesh," i.e., other peoples, would also feel the effects of that sword. The sword would not return to its sheath until the destructive work was finished (21:1–5).

The teaching here regarding the cutting off of both righteous and wicked does not contradict the teaching of chapter 18 that only the soul that sins shall die (cf. 18:20). The former passage spoke of final judgment, while this passage speaks of temporal judgment. As regards final judgment, the righteous will not be destroyed along with the wicked. In temporal judgments, however, both often suffer equally.<sup>45</sup>

**ESV 45–21:32:** Fire and Sword. The chapter division in English versions can obscure the relationship of 20:45–49 to the following oracles. In the Hebrew text, 20:45 begins a new chapter. The abrupt change in subject, from fire to sword, reinforces this confusion. However, the conjunction of fire and sword appears in both literal (e.g., Judg. 1:8) and theological contexts (Isa. 66:16; Nah. 3:15). Seeming frustration at the symbolism of the "fire" oracle (Ezek. 20:45–49) prompts its unpacking in terms of the "sword" (21:1–32). Once the sword symbolism is introduced, it is developed in a cascading series of oracles linked by their common theme. Formulaic language (e.g., "the word of the Lord came to me," and concluding formulas) help to demarcate distinct movements.

**ESV 45–49:** The Parable of the Fire. The command to set your face, distinctive in Ezekiel, and the orientation to the southland are both reminiscent of 6:2, which introduces another "sword of the Lord" passage. Here, however, all-consuming fire is the destroying agent, clearly announcing the totality of coming divine judgment (destroying both green tree and dry tree). But what of the addressees: the "southland" (Hb. *teman*), the south (*darom*), and the forest of the Negeb (*Negeb*)? This inclusive breadth of territory, rather than the fiery content itself, seems to prompt the outcry of 20:49, Ah, Lord **God!** Once before, Ezekiel similarly cried out on his own behalf (4:14; cf. 9:8; 11:13). For parables, see note on 17:2.

**Constable 45-46:** The Lord commanded Ezekiel to address Teman with a prophecy. Teman (Heb. *temanah*, right) refers to the south. Perhaps the translators of the NASB left this word transliterated because Teman was also the name of an important town in Edom to Jerusalem's southeast, and they felt the Lord might have intended this prophecy for that town. The Septuagint translators understood this word this way, and they also interpreted the other two words that describe Judah as place names. The Lord further described the object of this prophecy as the south (Heb. *darom*) and as the forest in the Negev (Heb. *negeb*). The Negev was the southern part of Judah that was a buffer geographically

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Major Prophets* (Eze 20:45–21:5). Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

between the marginally fruitful southern part of Judah and the wilderness farther to the south. Evidently the whole kingdom of Judah was quite wooded in Ezekiel's day, and the woods extended south into the upper Negev. By using the three most common Hebrew terms for "south," the Lord referred to Judah. Later He clarified that the south included Jerusalem, its sanctuaries, and all the land of Israel, which was then Judah (cf. 21:2). Judah was, of course, the "Southern Kingdom."

### **Ezekiel 20:46**

**Son of man, set thy face toward the south, and drop *thy word* toward the south, and prophesy against the forest of the south field;**

**Dake: [prophesy against the forest of the south field]** This prophecy of the south field being devoured by fire symbolizes the complete destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. The whole land was to be destroyed like a fire devouring the whole of the forest, leaving nothing but roots, stumps, and logs lying around. Judah would be destroyed, Jerusalem and other cities would be burned to the ground, dead bodies would be strewn all over the open fields, and all flesh would see and know that it was a supernatural power which caused Nebuchadnezzar to destroy such a strong country, formerly protected by God (Ezekiel 20:45-49; Ezekiel 7:15; Jeremiah 9:22; Jeremiah 26:18).

**Set thy face toward the south**—Towards Judea, which lay south from Babylon, or Mesopotamia, where the prophet then dwelt.

**The forest of the south field**—The city of Jerusalem, as full of inhabitants as the forest is of trees.

The **forest land, the South** refers to the land of Judah—the southern kingdom—which had more trees than than now. **from the south to the north:** This figure of speech expresses totality, meaning “everywhere.”

### **Ezekiel 20:47**

**And say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the LORD; Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee, and it shall devour every green tree in thee, and every dry tree: the flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein.**

**Clarke: I will kindle a fire**—I will send war, “and it shall devour every green tree,” the most eminent and substantial of the inhabitants; and every dry tree, the lowest and meanest also.

**Clarke: The flaming flame shall not be quenched**—The fierce ravages of Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans shall not be stopped till the whole land is ruined.

**All faces from the south to the north shalt be burned**—From the one end of the land to the other there shall be nothing but fear, dismay, terror, and confusion, occasioned by the wide-wasting violence of the Chaldeans. Judea lay in length from north to south.

**Constable:** Here it becomes clear that God was using the trees in the south to represent Judah's people. The Lord announced that He was going to judge the Judahites as when a fire sweeps through a forest. All types of people would suffer, the outwardly righteous (green tree) and the outwardly unrighteous (dry tree), and the judgment would affect the whole land. The fact that the Babylonians would capture and kill the righteous and the wicked does not contradict chapter 18, which teaches that every person is responsible for his or her own actions. There the point was that God does not punish people for the sins of others but for their own sins. Here the point is that the coming invasion would affect everyone. Everyone would eventually realize that Yahweh had brought this terrible judgment on the Judahites.

The most devastating consequences [*sic*] by far of Judah's covenant failure was her depopulation by exile.

### **Ezekiel 20:48**

**And all flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it: it shall not be quenched.**

**All flesh**—All the people shall see that this war is a judgment of the Lord.

**It shall not be quenched**—Till the whole land shall be utterly ruined.

### **Ezekiel 20:49**

<sup>49</sup>**Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, Doth he not speak parables?**

**Missler:** These verses are actually the first part of Chapter 21, as you will see. This whole idea of a *fire*, of course, is judgment. The *green tree* is generally an idiom for that which bears fruit; and somebody *righteous and dry* is typically someone spiritually withered (for example Luke 23:31). This idiom of the *forest devastation* is one you might want to compare with Zechariah 11:1-3.

This idiom also shows up in the Book of Revelation, so it is worth your while, if you are a student of prophecy, to do your own study and see how this idea of fire and forest, and dry and green trees are used prophetically, both here and elsewhere.

**Clarke: Ah Lord God**—O my God, consider my situation; who will believe what I shall say? They put the evil day far from them.

**Clarke: Doth he not speak parables?** *halo memashshel meshalim hu*, “Is not he a maker of parables?” Is it not his custom to deal in enigmas? His figures are not to be understood; we should not trouble ourselves with them. We are not obliged to fathom his meaning; and perhaps after all it does not refer to us, or will not be accomplished in our

time, if it even respect the land. Thus they turned aside what might have done them good, and rejected the counsel of God against themselves.

By dividing the word with our neighbor we often lose the benefit both of threatenings and promises. They voluntarily shut their own eyes; and then God, in judgment, sealed them up in darkness.

Ezekiel was exasperated and discouraged. Many Israelites were complaining that he spoke only in riddles (“parables”), so they refused to listen. No matter how important our work or how significant our ministry, we will have moments of discouragement. Apparently God did not answer Ezekiel’s plea; instead, he gave Ezekiel another message to proclaim. What has been discouraging you? Have you felt like giving up? Instead, continue doing what God has told you to do. He promises to reward the faithful (Mark 13:13). God’s cure for discouragement may be another assignment. In serving others, we may find the renewal we need.

**Parables.** Or enigmas. For the word *māshāl*, see 18:2. The people took notice of the prophet’s method of speaking, but did not apply his message to themselves.

Ezekiel replied to the Lord that the people were not taking what he said seriously; they were explaining away his announcement of judgment as *only* a parable or fictional story, not as a symbolic message of real judgment to come.