

## The Man in Linen: A New and Old Interpretation of Ezekiel 9–10

By Lane Keister

Interpretations of Ezekiel 8–11 are both very unified and quite diverse. They are unified in that almost all interpreters see chapters 8–11 as a unit, of which the main theme is the departure of the localized glory of God due to Judah's idolatry.<sup>1</sup> However, the exact nature of the departure, and the reasons for it, are in dispute, as are the details of interpretation in the four chapters. For example, does the Lord's departure from Jerusalem happen as punishment for Jerusalem, or is the Lord departing from Jerusalem after he has already inflicted punishment?<sup>2</sup>

What I intend to do in this paper is examine some particular aspects of interpretation in chapters 9–10, particularly with regard to the identity of the man in linen in 9:2, and reflect both on how this text affects the understanding of the departure of God's glory from Jerusalem, and also how the larger picture of 8–11 qualifies the specific details of exegesis in 9–10. Therefore, I will be paying nearly constant attention to the interplay of context and text. Within the broader scope of Ezekiel studies, I will be advocating for a position that is relatively rare in the scholarship. The conclusions to which I come will only be stated at the end of the article, since a highly inductive method is necessary due to the unusual nature of the results I draw from the exegesis. The conclusions will be a bit tentative, since I do not regard the evidence as absolutely conclusive for the position I advocate.

The outline followed will look at the overall context of Ezekiel 8–11, examine the various exegetical options for selected questions in Ezekiel 9–10, propound the position advocated, answer some objections, fit the discussion inside the larger world of Ezekiel studies, and show how the conclusion contributes to a fuller understanding of Ezekiel.

As to method, a relatively straightforward grammatical-historical exegetical approach that follows holistic

and typological lines of thought will be evident in this paper. I hold that Jesus is actually in the Old Testament, and does not have to be read back into the text. However, this does not imply that Jesus is under every rock and tree. Rather, the whole of the Old Testament points forward to Christ in an organic, unfolding way. A synchronic approach (treating the text as a finished whole) will rule throughout, as the criteria used for discerning "contradictions" in the text is much too artificial and limiting, as if the original authors could only write in one way.

### THE OVERALL CONTEXT OF EZEKIEL 8–11

Discussion of the structure of the book of Ezekiel as a whole falls into one of two basic camps in modern scholarship. We may call them the "Mayfield" camp and the "Renz" camp, after the two scholars who have given the most attention to the overall literary structure of the book.<sup>3</sup> The theory of Renz is that Ezekiel has, on the macro level, three main units: 1–24 (which can be

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1. See, e.g., Tyler Mayfield, *Literary Structure and Setting in Ezekiel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 105; Michael Lyons, *An Introduction to the Study of Ezekiel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 148–9; Janina Maria Hiebel, *Ezekiel's Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives: A Redaction-Critical and Theological Study* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 136–8; Thomas Krüger, "Ezekiel Studies: Present State and Future Outlook," in *Ezekiel: Current Debates and Future Directions*, edited by William Tooman and Penelope Barter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 18–27, esp. 19.

2. See Lyons' *An Introduction to the Study of Ezekiel* for an excellent discussion of the options.

3. See Tyler Mayfield, 105, and Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

further subdivided into 1–7, 8–13, and 14–25), 25–32, and 33–48. According to Renz, the section 8–13 is the second cycle of the first part, and “underlines that this prophecy will come true in spite of possible objections.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the objection that 8–11 answers is “that God could not possibly abandon his people.”<sup>5</sup>

The other main camp (though there are relatively few in the camp) is the “Mayfield” camp, which argues that the chronological markers offer a better way to outline the book than the content.<sup>6</sup> However, Mayfield cannot completely ignore content after the literary markers do their job.<sup>7</sup> The difference for the interpretation of the unit 8–11 does not seem to alter much. Both camps recognize a complete literary unit in 8–11. The significance of this for the study is that even outlines that run at cross purposes to one another still agree on chapters 8–11 as a literary unit.

To situate 8–11 in the larger context of the book is relatively simple.<sup>8</sup> Covenantal indictment of Judah is the order of the day after Ezekiel receives his calling to be a priestly prophet. All of Ezekiel 1–24 takes place in between the first and second deportation of Judah, so between 597–586 BC. Ezekiel ministered to half of a fractured people. Ezekiel was deported in 597, and was therefore with the exiles in Babylon.<sup>9</sup> The question naturally arose as to which group of people “had

God on their side,” as it were.<sup>10</sup> Did God have to stay in Jerusalem, and was he tied down to the temple in the promised land? Or was God’s glory mobile? The vision of the wheels suggests that God’s glory was mobile and would therefore be present with the exiles. In particular, God would be with Ezekiel, who would need such reassurance. After all, if Ezekiel was trained as a priest, he would gravitate towards the view that God’s glory was positioned between the cherubim of the ark of the covenant. It was necessary for God to correct Ezekiel’s thinking so that Ezekiel would have the courage to give the prophetic word to the people in exile. The many sign acts of chapters 3–7 show the Jews in exile that they were not to rely on Jerusalem to solve their problems. While they were in exile, they needed to rely on God, submit to God, and repent of their sins. Ezekiel urged the people to these actions in spite of the natural inclination of the people to rely on Jerusalem, submit only to themselves, and blame other people for what happened to them.

Chapters 8–11 detail a gradual, almost reluctant, departure of God’s glory from the ark (9:3), to the entrance of the inner court (9:3), to the outer court (10:4), through the eastern gateway (10:19, 11:1), to the mountain on the east side of the city (11:23). Terry Clark states the movement of the section well: “The larger unit of Ezek 8–11 is rhetorically arranged to follow the pattern of a visionary tour with multiple scenes.”<sup>11</sup> These multiple scenes correspond with the movement of the Shekinah glory. The other parts of chapters 8–11 explain why it is that God’s glory is leaving Jerusalem. The abominations in chapter 8 and the corruption of leadership in chapter 11 together book-end the repeated description of God’s glory in the wheels (with chapter 10 echoing chapter 1) and the response to the abominations in chapter 9. It is crucial that chapter 9 is a response to the abominations of chapter 8, a fact that is proven by the instructions in 9:4 to place a mark on all those who groan over the abominations practiced in Jerusalem. The abominations in view might indeed be larger in scope than what chapter 8 describes, but they would certainly include those four abominations.

Preliminary conclusions follow concerning the context of 8–11 and its impact on 9–10. The abominations of chapter 8, in particular, are the impetus for God’s glory leaving Jerusalem, though the full story is broader than that. The abominations of chapter 8 could more precisely be called the last straw. God’s glory will not co-exist alongside such abominations.

4. Renz, 62.

5. Renz, 62.

6. Mayfield, 10–11.

7. See Mayfield, *Literary Structure*, 94, in which he states that 8–11 constitute “a narrative that reports a vision that Ezekiel experiences while sitting in his house with the elders of Judah.”

8. Even less synchronically oriented scholars, such as Leslie Allen (who tries to use both synchronic and diachronic methods), believes that “[t]he framework of the vision is firmly set within Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry to the Judean prisoners of war in Babylon, and there is no good reason to doubt this setting.” See Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1994, 129). Although Allen is writing about the historical setting rather than the literary setting, it seems fairly clear that the literary setting is highly dependent on the historical. Allen does argue that 11:1–13 was added at a later date “to confirm the visionary message of accusation and judgment in a temple setting that appears in chap. 9” (*ibid.*, xxvii.). However, he exegetes the verses as if they had always been there (see *ibid.*, 159ff).

9. Brownlee’s thesis that Ezekiel prophesied mostly in Jerusalem is a position rarely defended today. See William Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), xxiii ff.

10. See Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts Between the Exiles and the People Who Remained (6th–5th Centuries BCE)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). She treats Ezekiel in chapter 6, pp. 139–197.

11. Terry Clark, “I Will be King over you!” *The Rhetoric of Divine Kingship in the Book of Ezekiel* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 121.

## EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS IN EZEKIEL 9–10

I will consider six exegetical questions on the way to propounding my views on the identity of the man in linen. These questions will start from the most peripheral and progress to the most central, ending with the identity of the man in linen himself. Before we treat these six questions, the passage as a whole must come under scrutiny. Probably we are meant to think of chapters 8–11 as a covenantal lawsuit within the literary genre of a vision report. The Lord presents to Ezekiel the evidence in chapter 8, and sentences the people in chapters 9–10. Block believes that several indicators in the passage point to a judicial flavor. There are decrees (5–6), witnesses (Ezekiel himself), executioners (1–2, though their function is disputed, see below), a link between chapters 8–9 as indictment to sentencing, and the report of the man in linen as the decree accomplished (11).<sup>12</sup> Henry Parunak argues that the elements proving a lawsuit structure are: 1. convocation of the trial, 2. accusation by interrogation, 3. indictment, 4. declaration of guilt, and 5. declaration of doom.<sup>13</sup> If the overall context is judicial, the impact it has on the questions which will be considered is great, since the function of the man in linen must be understood within this judicial context. What he does to exercise both mercy and judgment is characteristic of a judge. All six exegetical questions will depend largely on this judicial context.

*The Identity and Function of the Six Beings of 9:1*

The first question has to do with the “executioners” of 9:1, both their function and their species. The word פְּקָדוֹת is an unusual word. The plural of פְּקָדָה, the word has a semantic range that includes soldiers, priests, administrators, gatekeepers/guards, overseers, executioners, and judges.<sup>14</sup> Given the weapons in their hands (בְּלִי נִשְׁחָחוּ בְיָדוֹ), weapons of war or execution, it seems likely that “executioners” is the more probable description of their function. Furthermore, the contrasting mission of the man in linen to mark those who groan supports this position. While not prematurely judging the question of what the mark means, it is still evident that those who were not marked by the man in linen do in fact perish. Even though the man in linen delineates those to be saved in chapter 9, in chapter 10 he has the commission to execute those not marked. If Block is correct about the judicial flavor of the chapter, then “executioners” is a very natural fit for the context. Someone has to carry out the sentence.

The nuance of the word here “executioners” in Ezekiel 9:1 is disputed, though. Rashi translates it as “appointees” having the power to destroy.<sup>15</sup> The sense of

“overseers” is well represented in the literature as well.<sup>16</sup> Cocceius uses the word “visitationes,” implying not only oversight, but also a specific occasion of oversight.<sup>17</sup> Oecolampadius agrees with Cocceius, whereas the other major Post-Reformation commentaries use the idea of “prefect.”<sup>18</sup> The view of Keil and Davidson that they are protectors seems highly unlikely.<sup>19</sup> The question is not whether they might have swords to protect the people of Judah from attack by outside forces, since there is no hint of this in the context. The question is a division of the people of Judah within Jerusalem between those who groan and those who do not.

There are two main views of what order of being these six executioners are: angels or humans. The view that they are angels seems preferable here. Although there are no unmistakable signs, the efficiency needed to carry out such a task would seem to point to angelic

12. See Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 303. Hummel agrees with this assessment. See Horace Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 264.

13. Henry Van Dyke Parunak, “Structural Studies in Ezekiel,” Dissertation, Harvard, 1978, 208–210. Note that Allen claims that Parunak’s claim “is forced” (*Ezekiel 1–19*, 130). Allen’s argument appears to be that this passage is similar to an earlier sign act in the book. However, even in describing the earlier sign-act phenomenon, Allen uses courtroom language to describe the earlier phenomenon! Methinks Parunak’s take is not as forced as Allen would have us believe.

14. See TDOT XII, 61.

15. See Rosenberg, *The Book of Ezekiel: Volume One* (New York: The Judaica Press, 2000), 57.

16. See Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume 11, *Ezekiel I* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 300; and William Greenhill, *An Exposition Upon the Book of Ezekiel* (repr. Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1994), 208, among many others.

17. Johannes Cocceius, *Prophetia Ezechielis Commentario Illustrata* (Amsterdam: Someren, 1669), 47.

18. See Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Ezechielem Prophetam Commentarii* (Geneva: Crispinana, 1558), 58; Franciscus Junius, *Commentaria in Iezezkelem Prophetam* (Heidelberg, 1610), 195; Johannes Piscator, *In Prophetam Ezechielem Commentarius* (Herbornae Nassoviorum, 1614), 60; Amandus Polanus, *In Librum Prophetiarum Ezechielis Commentarii* (Conrad Waldkirchii, 1620), 247; and Matthew Poole, *Synopsis Criticorum Aliorumque S. Scripturae Interpretum*, volume 3 (London: Smith, 1673), 1101, who naturally refers to all the options. Hummel prefers “supervisors” (*Ezekiel 1–20*, 263–4). He simply calls it “premature” to translate as “executioners.” It is not clear why he thinks that 9:1b-2 demands an administrative or supervisory office, since 9:1b-2 have to do with the weapons that they hold. Allen translates it as “you who are responsible for the city’s fate,” a rendering which seems to want to capture all of the nuances simultaneously. See Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 116.

19. C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Ezekiel, Daniel, volume 1* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 126; and A.B. Davidson, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), 65.

agents of destruction. However, given the fact that Ezekiel sees all this in a vision (8:1–3), there is not a necessity to choose. Greenhill, the Pulpit Commentary, Hengstenberg, Schröder, Fohrer, Keil, Davidson, May/Allen, and Rochester hold that they are angels.<sup>20</sup> Blackwood argues that they were human beings, specifically Babylonian generals, though he gives no reasons why.<sup>21</sup> Gill argues that they could have been either angels or Babylonian princes.<sup>22</sup> Block and Sweeney do not make a decision on the issue, choosing rather to describe them by their function rather than by what kind of creature they are.<sup>23</sup>

Rochester believes that the six together with the man in linen “can be viewed as a symbolically complete group of heavenly agents.”<sup>24</sup> It is certainly true that 6+1 is a verifiable pattern in the Old Testament. The weekly rhythm has this pattern, as does the yearly pattern of six years of land being available for planting while in the seventh year it lies fallow. It is difficult, however, to

see what place this numerical symbolism would have in the context of Ezekiel 9, unless it were to underline the completion of destruction. If the numerical symbolism is intentional, why would the man in linen be described so very differently from the other six? Even if the last one in the series has some differences (such as the Sabbath being different from the other days), the last item in the series still has to be of the same general kind as the six. If Gill or Blackwood is correct in describing them as Babylonian generals or princes, then why is the man in linen not solely an agent of destruction from the first? It is not perfectly clear at this point in the exegesis whether those marked are spared from execution or not. However, the act of marking is certainly not an act of destruction. Both his description and his function seem to be by way of contrast with the description and function of the other six, not continuity: the six have weapons of war, whereas the man in linen has a writing kit; the six destroy, whereas the man in linen marks those who will not be touched by the six (9:6).

#### *The First Commission of the Man in Linen*

The first commission of the man in linen is to mark (וְהִתִּיבֵתָם) the foreheads of all those who groan under the abominations practised in Jerusalem. Several issues need to be addressed. Firstly, what is the sign itself? According to the text quoted above, the sign is the Hebrew letter *tav*. Several commentators suggest that the Hebrew letter would not have looked like the modern Hebrew letter, but would have looked more like an “X,” or a cross in the ancient way of writing the Hebrew letters.<sup>25</sup> The *tav* is simply a distinguishing mark (a cross is one of the easiest signs to make, which might very well be the reason why it was chosen as the mark), setting apart those destined for being spared from those destined for destruction.<sup>26</sup> Block’s suggestion that the mark “represented Yahweh’s signature, his claim on those who were citizens of the true kingdom of God” is compatible, though not identical, to the interpretation of the people being spared.<sup>27</sup> It is probable that Yahweh was marking his own people for the purposes of sparing them.

If this is so, then what is the significance of the mark?<sup>28</sup> If it marks out those to be spared, then what kind of sparing is in mind? Again, differing positions confront the interpreter. Some believe that all those marked were spared from the physical destruction that the rest of the inhabitants of Jerusalem suffered.<sup>29</sup> The strength of this interpretation is the phrase in verse 6: וְעַל-כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-עָלָיו הָתוּב אֶל-הַנֶּשֶׁבֶט. This clause seems to indicate that whatever the destroying angels were doing

20. Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 210; E.H. Plumptre and T. Whitelaw, et al, *Ezekiel* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 162; E.W. Hengstenberg, *The Prophecies of the Prophet Ezekiel Elucidated* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1869), 82; Fr. Wilhelm Julius Schröder, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (repr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 113; Georg Fohrer, *Ezechiel* (Tübingen: Mohr Seibeck, 1955), 53, who calls them “himmlische Wesen in Männergestalt” (“heavenly beings in human form”); Keil, *Ezekiel*, 126; Davidson, *Ezekiel*, 65; Herbert May and E.L. Allen, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 111; and Kathleen M. Rochester, *Prophetic Ministry in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 128. These authors do not all agree on the function of the angels, but they do all hold to the view that the six beings are angels.

21. Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr., *Ezekiel: Prophecy of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 77.

22. John Gill, *Exposition of the Old & New Testaments, Vol. 6, Ezekiel to Malachi* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 38.

23. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 303, claiming that they are simply “agents who are charged with the execution of a sentence”; and Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2013), 60, who says that they are agents “designated for an official task.”

24. Rochester, *Prophetic Ministry*, 128. She references Greenberg, who also notes the number of completion. See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 175–6.

25. This is noted by many commentators, but see as one example Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 307. He says that the cross or “X” would have been the shape of the *tav* in the archaic cursive script. He notes further that this shape would have essentially been the shape of the letter all the way until the advent of the Aramaic square script.

26. See Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*, 61.

27. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, 307.

28. The fullest treatment of the meaning of the mark is undoubtedly Steven Tuell’s article, “The Meaning of the Mark: New Light on Ezekiel 9 from the History of Interpretation,” in *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet*, ed. Paul Joyce and Andrew Mein (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 185–202.

29. Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*, 61.

to (at least) the majority of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, they would *not* be doing to those marked. Others believe that those marked were spared, but not from physical destruction. Instead it was a spiritual destruction from which they were spared.<sup>30</sup> This position can claim the first part of verse 6 as support, which verse seems to assert unlimited destruction. However, Tuell (who holds the position of spiritual destruction) does not address the significance of the clause quoted above, which would seem to mitigate against his interpretation. Jewish interpretation, possibly reacting against the Christian “cross” interpretation of the mark, said that it means those marked would only receive a quick and easy death.<sup>31</sup> This interpretation also does not come to terms with the exemption from destruction that is explicit in the phrase quoted above. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that the seemingly all-inclusive destruction of the people in the beginning of verse 6 is qualified by the instruction to spare those with the mark.

A relevant question is in order at this point: how would the man in linen know which people to mark? If there were people to mark, would they all have been groaning and lamenting over the city at the same time, such that there would be a clear external sign showing the man which people to mark? Or would the man in linen have been equipped to peer into the hearts of all in Jerusalem so as to know which should be marked and which should not? Should we simply throw up our hands, and say that since it was a vision, it was not important? It seems better to say that the man in linen was equipped to know which people should be marked. It is possible that God would have granted such knowledge of human hearts to a mere angel. However, there are no definite examples of this happening in the Bible. The supernatural knowledge is implied in the command from the Lord in verse 4. The Lord obviously expected the man in linen to be able to accomplish the task, which means that the man in linen must have been equipped. This at least hints at supernatural knowledge of human hearts. This point is rather important for the question of the identity of the man in linen.

#### *The Second Commission*

The man in linen is not finished in his tasks, however, just because he has completed the previous task, and reported it in 9:11. For in 10:2, the same man in linen is further directed to take a handful of embers and throw them over the city. In this action, the man in linen clearly passes over from the work of mercy to the work of justice. At first, this change might seem rather startling. Predictably, historical-critical scholars try to

explain the contrast in terms of diachronically distinct layers in the text. One scholar describes the change this way:

[T]he double function of the man in linen, first as a scribe marking the innocent (9:2e, 3d, 4, 11b) and then as priestly arsonist throwing fire over the city (10:2, 6–7) appears awkward; especially because he is characterized as a scribe only in Chapter 9 but not in Chapter 10, whereas his portrayal as a priestly figure (dressed in linen) is constant. These observations suggest the existence of two layers in the present text.<sup>32</sup>

To answer Hiebel’s arguments is fairly straightforward. Firstly, why would the man in linen need to be characterized as a scribe in both chapters? Would the author think that the audience had already forgotten the description in chapter 9 when he wrote chapter 10? Furthermore, the man in linen’s first commission had to do with writing, whereas the second commission does not. The nature of the commissions being different, the description would understandably be different as well. A different description of the same person, *as those descriptions are related to their particular tasks*, is no reason to posit literary layers as the explanation for the differences.

Secondly, the portrayal of the man as a priestly figure dressed in linen in both chapters is an argument in favor of unitary authorship. Both commissions are priestly in character. Discerning between what is clean and unclean is analogous to discerning the difference between those who mourn and groan versus those who do not. This similarity shows that the first commission was priestly in character. Furthermore, only priests would have access to the coals in their described location as being underneath the cherubim<sup>33</sup> (אֶל-תְּחִתּוֹ לְכַרְיֹב). Therefore, the second commission is

30. Tuell holds this position, believing that Calvin is a forerunner. See Tuell, *op. cit.*, 200–202. Tuell holds that “[T]he mark in Ezekiel 9 may be understood as God’s signature or seal, declaring that those marked belong to God. Those God claims as God’s own are not held accountable for Jerusalem’s sin; however, they still must suffer Jerusalem’s fate. These persons...understand why the city must fall and so can face this tragedy with equanimity” (201–202).

31. See Moshe Greenberg, quoting Abarbanel, in *Ezekiel 1–20* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), 177.

32. Hiebel, *Ezekiel’s Vision Accounts*, 103.

33. See M.E. Andrew, *Responsibility and Restoration: The Course of the Book of Ezekiel* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1985), 52. Zimmerli sees clearly that the two commissions have not transgressed the boundaries of priestly work. Contrary to Hiebel’s conclusion, Zimmerli writes “That now, unlike 9:2f, 11, the instrument of the scribe is no longer mentioned in the equipment of the man

also priestly in essence. The man in linen is carrying out the judgment of the Lord, since the coals of fire represented God's own purifying fire.<sup>34</sup>

There is therefore no contradiction between the two commissions, any more than there would be a contradiction between distinguishing two parties, and then judging one of those parties after they have been distinguished. Even based on two different views of the identity of the man in linen (one holds that it is Christ, and the other an angel), Greenhill and Calvin both note how, ultimately, both mercy and justice come from God.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Significance of the Cloud*

Given that, in the overall context of 8–11, the Shekinah glory of God is in the process of leaving Jerusalem, it is a bit of a puzzle why the cloud inhabits the temple again (the glory had risen from the temple to the court of the temple in 9:3), and specifically at the same moment that the man in linen enters the temple (10:3). This movement appears to be a step backwards in the progression of the Shekinah glory leaving the temple and Jerusalem. This seemingly backward progression, however, makes a rhetorical point, which is that the Shekinah

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clothed in linen, need not give rise to critical operations. The second task is no longer that of a scribe, but yet remains in another way the work of a priest,<sup>37</sup> in Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1979), 250.

34. See Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989), 97.

35. Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 233, and Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, 322. Cf. Also Patrick Fairbairn, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (repr. The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1969), 96–7, who says, “We have here the Old Testament foundation of the doctrine of the New, that all judgment has been committed to the Son; and a remarkable example of the harmony of the two Testaments, which in recent times has been but too much overlooked.”

36. Gill argues that the Shekinah glory was present “not as a token of God's presence, as at the dedication of the temple; but rather of judicial blindness and darkness, which the people of the Jews were left unto” (*Exposition*, 41). Most likely this is true, except that there is an incorrect comma in Gill's sentence after the word “presence.” God was present here in Ezekiel, though not in the same way as at the dedication. Gill's comma seems to be implying that God's presence was not indicated at all in Ezekiel, with the dedication as but one counter-example. The Shekinah glory is present, but not in the same way as at the dedication. This could have been what Gill was trying to say, but the comma makes the relationship of the clauses vague.

37. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 320.

38. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 286.

39. It is somewhat puzzling that Odell believes that the report of the entrance of the man in linen is delayed until verse 6. See Margaret Odell, *Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005). The end of verse two has **וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהִים**. The phrase in verse three is **וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהִים**. How are these not reports of the man going in?

40. Greenhill, *An Exposition*, 234–5.

glory is present, and even goes backwards, when the man in linen enters the Temple. The Shekinah glory, in other words, goes back into the temple when the man in linen is there. On reading the account, one gets the distinct impression that the Shekinah glory would not have temporarily reversed its exit for just anyone. The significance of this cloud and the moment of time when it is manifested is an important link in the case I am seeking to make.

The Shekinah glory does not always have to be connected specifically with the gracious presence of God. It can also signify the justice of God.<sup>36</sup> It always signifies God's holiness. The cloud here is clearly the Shekinah glory. Block makes a very compelling case for this by stressing the definite article, as referring to *the* glory, the well-known and familiar glory.<sup>37</sup>

The moment the cherubim stand at the right side of the temple is the same moment the man in linen enters. Hummel notes that the *beth* preposition “is a normal Hebrew idiom for a temporal clause.”<sup>38</sup> While the temporal use of *beth* here connects the cherubic movement with the entrance of the man in linen, and does not grammatically include the cloud filling the inner court, the meaning of the text is still that these three events (cherubim standing at the right side of the temple, the man in linen entering, and the cloud filling the temple) are simultaneous. While it is certainly possible that the three events are somewhat coincidental, the juxtaposition of the entrance of the man in linen with the glory-cloud filling the temple is suggestive, especially when combined with the halt and reverse motion of the Shekinah glory in comparison to the rest of chapters 8–11.<sup>39</sup> If the glory-cloud is in the temple/tabernacle, human beings cannot be. This is clear from Ex. 40:35, Lev. 16:2, 1 Kings 8:10–11, Ez. 42:2,4. Therefore the man in linen cannot be a human being. Angels could theoretically be in the presence of the glory-cloud. However, nowhere in the Old Testament is the glory-cloud so concomitant with the appearance of an angel. In other words, there is more than a hint here that the man in linen is more even than an angel. Greenhill makes a point of connecting this cloud with the appearance of Christ, since the glory-cloud is often connected with appearances of Christ. He mentions expositors, but does not specify who they are.<sup>40</sup> Of course, the Shekinah glory is not always associated with a Christophany. It is more often associated with the Holy Spirit and the Father. Nevertheless, the context here indicates that there is a centering of focus on the man in linen in connection with the Shekinah glory, an element that is not present in the non-Christophanic appearances of the Shekinah glory.

Previous mentions of קָרָב have to do with the priests.<sup>41</sup> That certainly seems to be its function here. While there is no previous mention of the glory-cloud in connection with any man in linen in the Hebrew Bible, since this appearance is unique, the silence is not significant. Ezekiel, trained as a priest, would certainly have thought of priestly vestments whenever linen is mentioned, even more so this particular kind of linen.

#### *The Writing Paraphernalia*

According to several scholars, the phrase “writing kit” (that describes what the man in linen has to mark the foreheads of those who groan) is an Egyptian loan word.<sup>42</sup> Davidson has a good description of what the writing kit would have included, and is followed by others with very little variation: “The inkhorn consisted of a case for holding the reed pens, with an inkholder attached near the mouth of the case. Such inkhorns are carried in the girdle at the present day, and those worn by high officials are often of silver, richly chased and ornamented.”<sup>43</sup>

The significance of the writing kit is stated well by Trapp: “An ensign of his prophetic office, say some, as his linen clothing was of his priestly; and of his kingly, that he was among, or in the midst of, the six slaughtermen, as their captain and commander.”<sup>44</sup> It is possible, contra Trapp, that the writing kit had more reference to a priestly act than to prophetic and kingly offices, since the marking of the foreheads was an exercise in the kind of distinctions that priests had to do so often. In this connection, I am not referring to the marking itself, but rather to what the marking is supposed to do: distinguish between those who mourn the abominations and those who do not. It is this distinction that parallels priestly decision-making regarding clean and unclean, common and holy, etc. The Pulpit Commentary definitely seems to be stretching things a bit when it claims that “it is obviously connected with the oft-recurring thought of the books of life and death in the chancery of heaven.”<sup>45</sup> As has been fairly adequately demonstrated, the mark on the forehead has more to do with those marked being spared from the physical destruction of Jerusalem. While there would (presumably) be a fairly significant, or even majority, overlap between those who groaned over the abominations, and those who are faithful Israelites in an inner sense, this is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence, and it is hardly the point of the passage. Furthermore, it is not likely that the ideas are connected, once it is pointed out that the book of life is a slightly different writing medium than the foreheads of human beings. It is still

possible that other texts that mention the book of life may have patterned their thoughts on Ezekiel.

#### *The Identity of the Man in Linen*

Having addressed the previous exegetical questions, the stage is now set for the final exegetical question, involving the most controversial claims.

The position I hold is that the man in linen was the Angel of the Lord as an appearance of the preincarnate Christ. I believe this position makes the most sense of the data of the text, and it also has the resources to answer some of the objections that might be raised against a simple equation of the man in linen with Christ in some other form. On the other hand, it makes better sense of the text than the position of his being a mere angel.

Consider the following points. As Greenhill observes, the man in linen seems to have a position of pre-eminence among the destroyers.<sup>46</sup> The hint of supernatural knowledge in the wording of the first commission seems to point to a divine figure, not merely a heavenly one. That judgment and mercy both are in the hands of the man in linen would be unusual if merely an angel were in view, whereas it makes perfect sense if a divine being is carrying out both kinds of action. The timing of the cloud entering the temple at the same time as the man in linen would indicate that the man in linen, being able to be present at the same time as the Shekinah glory, is at least more than a man. There is no indication that such a meeting happened with a sin offering, which also suggests a sinless being (thus ruling out a mere man as a possibility). This could be true of a mere angel. However, the conjunction of this meeting with the glory cloud possibly points in a more exalted direction.

None of these points, either singly, or in the conglomerate, would constitute absolute proof of the position advocated here. What I am arguing is that the

41. See James Hoffmeier’s article on linen in NIDOTTE III, p. 711, where he states, “This type of linen was used for priestly garments (Exod 28:42; 39:28; Lev 6:10[3]), including the ‘linen ephod’ worn by priests (1 Sam 2:18; 22:18) and is even called ‘holy linen’ in Lev 16:4.” This is in contrast to various other kinds of linen mentioned in the same article.

42. See Lamar Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 127; Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 130; John Taylor, *Ezekiel* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 1969), 101; and Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 266.

43. See Davidson, *Ezekiel*, 65.

44. Trapp, *Commentary*, 586.

45. Plumptre/Whitelaw, et al, *Ezekiel*, 162.

46. Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 211. He argues this from the prepositional phrase “among them.” This seems a bit more shaky than simply the overall picture, though his point is suggestive.

man in linen being the Angel of the Lord as the preincarnate Christ would fit the data admirably in all of its suggestiveness.

At this point a history of the various options on offer in the history of exegesis is in order. Greenhill, Trapp, and Henry all hold that the man in linen is Jesus Christ *simpliciter*.<sup>47</sup> Several scholars hold that the man in linen is an angel *simpliciter*.<sup>48</sup> Most of the rabbis say either Gabriel or a man.<sup>49</sup> Several commentators say it was the Angel of the Lord (some connecting it with Christ in a typological way, and others identifying the Angel of the Lord with the preincarnate Christ).<sup>50</sup> Some say that it was a human.<sup>51</sup> Lastly, some hold that Babylonian planetary deities are the background of the six plus one.<sup>52</sup>

#### OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

There are a number of obstacles in the way of my interpretation which must be answered. Keil objects to this interpretation with the most comprehensiveness. His objections amount to these: 1. Being clothed in linen is not exclusive to the angel of the Lord, or Christ. 2. The being with the writing materials is strongly contrasted

47. Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 211; Trapp, *Commentary*, 586; Henry, *Commentary*, 798.

48. See Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, 302; Davidson, *Ezekiel*, 66 (the “high angel”); G.A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 104 (“ranking angel”); and Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 273. This is certainly a strong possibility.

49. Moshe Eisemann, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1977), 170. If it was an angel, it seems a bit pointless to speculate on whether it was Gabriel or not.

50. Fairbairn, *An Exposition*, 95 (“angel of the Lord”); Hengstenberg, *The Prophecies*, 83 (Angel of the Lord as a type of Christ); Schröder, *Ezekiel*, 113 (same as Hengstenberg); Feinberg, *The Prophecies*, 55 (“[T]he Angel of the Lord, the preincarnate Christ”).

51. Abarbanel, in Rosenberg, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 57, who says it was a Babylonian officer. This is among the more bizarre interpretations in the history of exegesis. What would a Babylonian officer be doing marking the foreheads of Judeans in order to spare them from Babylonian slaughter? Joyce thinks that there is a contrast between the man in linen and the divine figure in 8:2. See Paul Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 102, which would imply a position that the man in linen was simply a man. However, Joyce does not explain how the two differ.

52. See Fohrer, *Ezekiel*, 54 (following Gunkel); cf. D.M.G. Stalker, *Ezekiel: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1968), 104, who (agreeing with Fohrer about the background) holds that “[T]he man clothed in linen (v. 2) occupies a middle place between the angel of Yahweh and the later Gabriel.” It is unclear why he thinks this. There do not appear to be any indications that the man in linen occupies a middle position between any angels, but rather between God and humans, given his location of the temple, and the command from God to mark humans. Fohrer’s position has been adequately answered by Ellison, *Ezekiel*, 44.

53. See *ISBE*, rev. ed., I, 125, for this list of passages, and a penetrating analysis of their content.

with the appearance of Yahweh in Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 10 (or Christ in Revelation 1). 3. There is no indication that the man in linen is a being equal with God. His first objection amounts to an argument from silence. As a result, his argument could neither prove nor disprove the presence of Christ in the appearance of the man in linen. The only way his argument would be cogent would be if anyone argued that the man in linen was identifiable as Christ *because* of the linen. To my knowledge, no one has ever argued this. Most agree that there is a priestly association with the linen rather than a divine association. As to his second argument, there is no disagreement that the description of the man in linen contrasts rather strongly with the theophanies that Keil references. However, Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 10 are not obviously Christophanies as opposed to theophanies. It would therefore be unclear why a contrast to Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 10 would make a Christophany in Ezekiel 9 unlikely. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose that Christ could have appeared in OT times in only one form or appearance. As to his third objection, I would argue that the degree of knowledge implied in the task commissioned to him, as well as the perfection required in being able to enter the temple without a sacrifice, combined with the glory-cloud appearance (especially with its retrograde movement), point in a divine direction over and above (though probably inclusive of) an angelic appearance.

Another possible objection arises at this point: if the man in linen is Christ, then why is no worship accorded to him? The answer is that worship was not always given to Christ when he was on earth. It depended on the context of what was happening at the time. People had to recognize Christ’s glory in order to worship him. In the context of Ezekiel 9–10, that glory is not recognized, since there is no one but Ezekiel to see it happen.

Responses to Jewish objections to my position would have to be a bit more imaginative, since the Jewish scholars consulted for this paper did not address the exegetical issues under discussion, nor did they interact with the various Christian interpretations much.

It is quite probable that Jewish scholars would object to any idea that an angel could share in deity. However, the appearance of the Angel of the Lord that quite probably includes at least a theophany is quite common in the Old Testament: Gen. 16, 18, 22, 24, 31, 48; Ex. 3, 13–14, 23, 32; Josh. 5–6; and Jdg. 2, 6.<sup>53</sup> By the same token, Jewish objectors might agree that Ezekiel 9–10’s man in linen is an angel, but they could say that there is a big gap between an angel and God. Of course, there is a

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big gap between an angel and God. However, as the list of passages above shows, God often manifests his glory through his angels. God and angel often seem to merge in appearance, if not ontologically. Therefore, when it comes to an *appearance* of God in a *theophany*, the distance between God and angel is not so large, however big the ontological difference might be.

Some might conceivably object that such a preincarnate appearance of Christ would jeopardize the uniqueness of the incarnation of Christ. For this reason, I have chosen the appearance of Christ as the Angel of the Lord. This Angelic appearance of Christ would have looked human, was angelic, and was further Christophanic. There is no need to suppose that this appearance of Christ looked exactly like Jesus would look centuries later, or like other theophanies or Christophanies. My position would thus be able to safeguard the uniqueness of the incarnation of Jesus Christ without precluding the possibility of the second person of the Trinity appearing in the Old Testament.

#### THE LARGER PICTURE

The interpretation on offer here has several implications both for the larger picture of Ezekiel, and for Ezekiel studies. To start with the Ezekiel implications, one rather obvious conclusion is that judgment oracles and visions, which largely predominate in the first part of Ezekiel, are still tempered with mercy and lovingkindness. There is always a remnant that God will spare, a remnant that does not bow the knee to Baal. Mercy can and often does interrupt judgment. As has been noted, the Shekinah glory had been in the process of leaving the temple and Jerusalem. The appearance and commission of the man in linen puts a temporary stop on that process, while the remnant is marked. God is both merciful and just. My position argues that it is God, the second person of the Trinity, who himself does the marking. Surely, this would be a cause for hope!

Many people believe that the God of the Old Testament is merely a God of judgment and holiness. This is a significant distortion. God is slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, as the oft-quoted words of Exodus 23 make plain. Even when the patience of God has run out with regard to the guilty, that does not mean his patience has come to an end with regard to those less guilty, or with those who are innocent of particular sins.

If God marks those who are his by a sign, then this marking in Ezekiel is of a piece with both circumcision, in the Old Testament, and baptism, in the New Testament. The Lord marks those who are his, not for his own sake, as if he needed

a reminder, but for the sake of angels and humans. There are differences between, say, baptism, and the mark in Ezekiel 9. Baptism is a new covenant ordinance that marks the inclusion of a person within the visible church, whereas the mark of Ezekiel 9 merely marks those to be saved from destruction. However, the idea of some kind of “marking” system distinguishing one group who is to receive grace from another group that will not receive grace is similar in both Ezekiel 9 and in circumcision/baptism.

In Ezekiel studies, while the position I advocate has been held in the past, it is rare, largely because of a reluctance among the majority of Old Testament scholars to seeing Jesus in the Old Testament. There are many reasons for this, not least including the Enlightenment, which has fragmented all knowledge and has contributed to a divorce between Old Testament and New Testament. A second reason has surely been the Holocaust. No one desires to offend the Jews, given what they went through in World War II. However much the Jews have suffered, their suffering does not make their reading of the Old Testament correct, nor does it make the Old Testament *their* Bible. Of course, there are scholars who would reject my conclusions while not laboring under these influences. Still, these influences do make positions such as mine less likely in the eyes of many scholars. While I write based on Christian assumptions, I hope also that the truth of Jesus’ words in John 5 and Luke 24 concerning the meaning of the Old Testament will also receive strong elucidation here. The Old Testament really is all about Jesus Christ.

How does this paper contribute to Ezekiel studies? A sharper understanding of what is happening in Ezekiel 9–10 furthers understanding of the whole section 8–11, and what significance the presence of the Angel of the Lord might have in a context where the Shekinah glory is, in general, leaving the temple in Jerusalem. Understanding who the man in linen is will also prevent unnecessary bifurcations of the text into diachronically separated layers. I hope also that this paper will contribute to an understanding of the unity of Ezekiel as a whole. If it is true that sections of text once thought to be indicative of diachronic differences in the text can be shown not to support that position, then more synchronic approaches will become more attractive to scholars. This will only prove more conducive to a theological understanding of the text, and promote a complete reciprocity between systematic theology and exegesis. ■

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considered specifically the relationship between divine