EZEKIEL

Chapter 20

*Rebellious Israel*

**In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and they sat down in front of me. 2 Then the word of the LORD came to me:  3 “Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign LORD.’ 4 “Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers  5 and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of the house of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, “I am the LORD your God.”  6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands.  7 And I said to them, “Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” 8 ”‘But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt.  9 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt.  10 Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert.  11 I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them.  12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy. 13 ”‘Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert.  14 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.  15 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands—  16 because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols.  17 Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert.  18 I said to their children in the desert, “Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols.  19 I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.  20 Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.” 21 ”‘But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert.  22 But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.  23 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries,  24 because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their fathers’ idols.  25 I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by;  26 I let them become defiled through their gifts—the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.’ 27 “Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In this also your fathers blasphemed me by forsaking me:  28 When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings.  29 Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to?’” (It is called Bamah to this day.)**

This is a long and polymorphous chapter. It is immediately divisible into two very uneven parts: an introduction (20:1–4), which gives us the context for the long divine speech (20:5–44). The latter is usually divided into two segments: a homiletical review of Israel’s history that serves as the indictment of Israel (20:5–31) and the future redemption that will bring forth a new Israel (the Christian church), couched in typological terms of a second exodus (20:32–44). (CC)

The diatribe divides Israel’s past history into four epochs addressing the people’s rebellion: (1) in Egypt (20:5–9); (2) in the desert by the original generation brought out from Egypt (20:10–17); (3) in the desert by the second generation (20:18–26); and (4) after the conquest, in the land (20:27–29). In a fifth section Ezekiel considers briefly the present exilic situation (20:30–31). (CC)

Then in 20:32–44, he considers Israel’s future transformation. Those promissory verses may, in turn, be subdivided into two parts. First is the description of the new exodus as Yahweh brings his scattered people out from the nations with his outstretched arm (20:32–38). He enters into judgment with them in “the wilderness of the peoples” (20:35) as an antitype of the earlier forty years in the wilderness following the first exodus (20:36). Second (20:39–44) is the description of the transformed Israel that is accepted by Yahweh and that offers acceptable worship on his “holy mountain” (20:40), which is an antitype of Solomon’s temple on Mount Zion, and in some ways an adumbration of Ezekiel 40–48, since the eschatological city and temple are on a high mountain (40:2; 43:12). Yahweh will finally fulfill his ancient promise, but this time he will not let human sinfulness stand in his way. Nevertheless, those who continue to revolt against him will pay a terrible price. Thus we may outline the chapter as follows:

      I.     Introduction to Israel’s history (20:1–4)

      II.     Indictment of Israel and promise of redemption (20:5–44)

      A.     Indictment: Homiletical review of Israel’s history (20:5–31)

      1.     Israel in Egypt before the exodus (20:5–9)

2.     The original generation of Israelites who participated in the exodus and received the Torah for life, but rejected it (20:10–17)

3.     The second generation of Israelites, born during the forty years of wilderness wandering (20:18–26)

      4.     Israel in the land after the conquest (20:27–29)

      5.     Israelites who are Ezekiel’s contemporaries (20:30–31)

B.     Yahweh’s future redemption creates a new Israel that offers acceptable worship (20:32–44)

      1.     The new exodus from the wilderness of the peoples (20:32–38)

2.     The acceptance and worship of the new, transformed Israel (20:39– 44)

**20:1** *seventh year … fifth month … tenth day.* Aug. 14, 591 b.c., the third date (see 1:2; 8:1). Since Ezekiel had received many revelations before this (see opening verses of chs. 12–18), the date must emphasize the importance of this chapter. Like chs. 16 and 23, it presents a negative view of Israel’s history; unlike them, it does not employ allegory. (CSB)

*elders of Israel.* See notes on 8:1; 14:1. (CSB)

*inquire.* See v. 3 and note on 14:3. (CSB)

We are given no clue as to why the elders of Israel came to Ezekiel. That they came to him at all suggests that, however skeptically or reluctantly, they do consider him a genuine prophet. However, their response as summarized by Ezekiel in 20:49 may indicate not only disappointment at the harsh reply, but also doubts about the authenticity of his claims to be an accredited spokesman of God. That the elders are “of Israel” implies that they spoke—or at least claimed to speak—for all Israelites, including those not yet exiled. Throughout the book it is evident that Ezekiel himself often does not distinguish between those already exiled with him in Babylon and those soon to be. Both were equally guilty of the same abominable ideas and practices. (Some critical attempts to distinguish the two by appealing to additional editors easily approach the ludicrous.) (CC)

**20:2-3** The elders are rebuffed in about the strongest possible language. The rhetorical question “Are you really coming to consult me?” casts doubt on the sincerity of the elder’s request and probably implies that Yahweh’s answer will be negative, if he answers at all (cf. 7:26). Whatever was in their hearts, they were not consulting him with their whole heart and being (cf. Deut 4:29). A similar rebuff had come in Ezek 14:3–11, where the reason Yahweh gave was that they had “fecal deities [idols] in their hearts.” It is undoubtedly for the same reason here, but Ezekiel does not make it explicit. (CC)

In the second part of the reply, “As I live, I will not let myself be consulted by you” (20:3), Yahweh emphatically states that he is not available for consultation by such skeptics. He emphasizes this by an oath by his own life (his very being and will), and the concluding signatory formula, “says the Lord Yahweh.” Answer to prayer is a gift to the contrite, not a “right” available also to “dogs … and whoever loves and practices a lie” (Rev 22:15). (CC)

As our Lord Jesus Christ himself teaches in the fullness of revelation, “no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Hence, the most precise Trinitarian form of prayer is *to* the Father (e.g., Phil 4:6; Jude 25), *through* the Son (e.g., Rom 1:8; 16:27), and *in* the Holy Spirit (e.g., Eph 6:18). The same thought is summarized when prayers begin with the baptismal formula (Mt 28:19), also used for the Invocation: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Scriptures and the liturgy and hymns of the church include prayers addressed to God the Son and to God the Holy Spirit as well as to the Father, but always with the full Trinity in mind, never in the sense of confessing a “unitarianism” of any one person, which arguably would be little better than prayer addressed to some indeterminate “God.” In practice, my perception is that this is a problem especially with prayers addressed only to Jesus; the Trinitarian context must be explicitly verbalized. All valid prayers are in Jesus’ name, that is, spoken with faith in Christ and in reliance on the divine mercy he has procured by his atonement on the cross, which is what makes us and our prayers acceptable to God (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3–4). (CC)

**20:3** *As surely as I live.* See note on 18:3. (CSB)

*inquire.* See note on 14:3. (CSB)

**20:4** Yahweh will not give the elders whatever they may have wanted to gain by approaching the prophet, but he will seize the opportunity to impress upon them the terrible legacy of flagrant disobedience they were affirming by continuing on the same path. The tenor of the searing sermon that follows (especially Ezek 20:5–31) is clearly indicated by the question that directs Ezekiel to “arraign/indict” them and by the command to “remind them of the abominable practices of their fathers.” In the Torah, this terminology (תּוֹעֵבוֹת, “abominations, abominable practices”) predominantly refers to the pagan practices of the peoples Yahweh was going to destroy so that Israel could inherit the land (e.g., Lev 18:22–30; Deut 7:25–26; 18:9–12). Now, severed from the covenant, Israel was in God’s eyes only another Canaanite nation. (CC)

**20:5** *I chose.* The only occurrence of the word “choose” (election vocabulary) in Ezekiel. Verses 5–26 present Israel’s history in three acts (vv. 5–9, Egypt; vv. 10–17, Desert, Part 1; vv. 18–26, Desert, Part 2); but see note on v. 28. Each act has four scenes: (1) revelation, (2) rebellion, (3) wrath, (4) reconsideration.

The bill of indictment begins with God’s unmerited election of “Israel.” The reference is not to the patriarch Jacob, but to the nation or people, as evidenced by the following parallel phrase “house of Jacob.” (The LXX adds “house” also to make “house of Israel.”) (CC)

It is striking that this is the only place in the book with the key verb בָּחַר, “choose, elect.” Just why is not certain, but the best guess is that Ezekiel avoids it elsewhere because of the tendency of sinful people to presume that their election by God allows them the luxury of responding with complacency and failure in sanctification—something Moses keenly warned against in his farewell sermon (בָּחַר in Deut 4:37; 7:6–7; 10:15; 14:2; see also 9:4–29).

Even though Ezekiel does not develop it, the vocabulary of election is useful in summarizing biblical typology and the unity of the church of both Testaments in Christ. In the NT, ἐκλέγομαι, “choose, elect,” is used of God choosing Israel’s patriarchs (Acts 13:17); of Christ himself as chosen/elected by the Father (Lk 9:35); of Christ choosing the apostles (Lk 6:13; Acts 1:2); and of all Christians as the elect (Mk 13:20; 1 Cor 1:27–28; Eph 1:4; James 2:5). The typological connection between those chosen in the OT and Christ, and between Christ and the elect in him, pervades the patristic writings. One can diagram this by two triangles with their apexes meeting in *the Elect One*, Christ himself, in whom the elect of both Testaments find their unity. The history of the “chosen people” in the OT finds its fulfillment in Christ and then is continued with the church as the new Israel until the consummation, when all the elect (“all Israel,” Rom 11:26, that is, all believers in Christ) shall be saved. (CC)

In the phrase “descendants [literally, ‘seed’] of the house of Jacob,” which occurs only here in the OT (cf. Jer 23:8; Ezek 44:22), Ezekiel has combined the very common “house of Jacob” (twenty-one times in the OT) with the less common “seed of Jacob” (only Is 45:19; Jer 33:26; Ps 22:23). Perhaps the point is to underscore the congenital and common complicity of the whole people in their history of sin. “Jacob” and “Israel” are often used in parallelism and indistinguishably, but sometimes, as perhaps here, “Jacob” refers to the unregenerate shyster the patriarch initially was (and his descendants were), while “Israel” reflects the conversion affected in connection with the change of name (Gen 32:22–28). (CC)

*With uplifted hand.* A symbolic act accompanying the swearing of an oath (see vv. 15, 23, 42). (CSB)

To emphasize that the initiative for Israel’s special covenantal relationship lay with God alone, Yahweh twice affirms in Ezek 20:5 that “I swore with uplifted hand.” Also emphasizing divine monergism in salvation is Yahweh’s citation of only part (“I am Yahweh, your God”) of the common covenant formula that summarizes the meaning and benefit of the covenant. The formula normally also continues with a clause like “and you will be my people,” but it was precisely that part Israel had neglected and spurned. The establishment of the covenant is a unilateral gift of God, but it is not enforced upon anyone without reception in faith, nor is it some sort of magic. (CC)

*I am the Lord your God.* See Ex 3:6, 14–15 and notes. (CSB)

Yahweh’s statement “I made myself known to them” (וָאִוָּדַ֥ע לָהֶ֖ם, Ezek 20:5) in connection with the exodus from Egypt is a direct reference to the revelation of the meaning of his name to Moses in Ex 3:14 and to Ex 6:3, where Yahweh told Moses, “(By) my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them [the patriarchs]” (וּשְׁמִ֣י יְהוָ֔ה לֹ֥א נוֹדַ֖עְתִּי לָהֶֽם). In addition to the verbal explanations Yahweh gave to Moses, the meaning of his name would be shown by his acts of salvation as he redeemed Israel from Egypt. The Hebrew יָדַע, “to know,” often implies far more than mere cognition and hence is not easy to translate (cf. its idiomatic use for the act of marriage). In a covenantal context such as this, it implies more than mere awareness of the existence of the divine name (“Yahweh,” the Tetragrammaton); it also signifies an awareness of all that the name conveys (election, covenant, etc.) and an intimacy with the God who bears the name. By revealing his name to them, God allows himself to be invoked by them, but at the same time opens up the possibility that his name will be misused. It is no accident that the “preamble” to the Decalogue opens by citing the name (Ex 20:2 || Deut 5:6), and later the entire Second Commandment is devoted to “the name of Yahweh, your God” (Ex 20:7 || Deut 5:11). (CC)

**20:6** I SWORE TO THEM – The reiteration of the oath now brings it into connection with a choice land. Here the promise is to the Israelites in Egypt, not to the patriarchs. The reference, if we look for a specific one, is probably Ex 6:8, where Yahweh extends the patriarchal promise (“the land which I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham”) to the Israelites in Egypt (“I will give it [the land] to you as a possession”). Yet Ezek 20:6 is so much in line with the general thrust of the exodus narrative that we do not need a more specific reference to that effect. Apart from the covenant oath, Ezekiel does not dwell on the redemptive activity in connection with the exodus. Zimmerli has noted that nowhere in the book does Ezekiel ever even use גָּאַל or פָּדָה, verbs for “redeem, ransom” that the Torah uses to summarize Yahweh’s redemption of Israel through the exodus. (CC)

I HAD SEARCHED OUT – Instead of the usual verb נָתַן, “give,” in reference to the gift of the land (as in 20:15, 28, 42), in 20:6 we have תּוּר, “search out, spy out, reconnoiter.” The reference is to Num 10:33 and Deut 1:33 (both use תּוּר), where God scouts for Israel’s campsites as he leads them by means of his ark (Num 10:33–36), “the cloud of Yahweh” (Num 10:34; cf. Deut 1:33), and the pillar of fire by night (Deut 1:33). Perhaps, however, there is also a deliberate allusion to one of the tragic examples of Israel’s disobedience during the journey. After the twelve spies reconnoiter Canaan, all the spies but Caleb and Joshua bring a negative report and the people mutiny, with the result that Yahweh threatens to annihilate them and start anew (תּוּר is used throughout Numbers 13–14, including the participle for the “spies” in 14:6). Moses’ intercession commutes the sentence to the fact that all the unfaithful would die in the desert without themselves setting foot in the promised land, and the forty days of spying translates into the forty years in the desert (Num 14:33–34). The whole episode is so similar to Ezekiel’s pattern of recounting Israel’s history as one of apostasy, with complete annihilation threatened and just barely averted, that one is almost surprised that he does not dwell on it a bit longer. (CC)

*land flowing with milk and honey.* See note on Ex 3:8. (CSB)

*most beautiful of all lands.* Cf. Dt 8:7–10; Jer 3:19 for the land’s natural beauty. Its real beauty lay in being selected as God’s dwelling place (Dt 12:5, 11). (CSB)

Let us observe parenthetically that the theme of the “land” is difficult typologically. With its eschatological component we have no difficulty: the new heavens and new earth with the new Jerusalem, to be created after Christ’s second coming, are the promised land for Christians (e.g., Isaiah 11; 65; Ezekiel 40–48; Revelation 21–22). But what of the interim between the first and second comings of Christ? For now Christianity has no specific “land” in a geographical sense, and the NT refrains from speaking in such terms. But anywhere on this globe we still occupy space and time, and if we have not totally spiritualized or privatized the concept of the church as the “*body* of Christ” (not merely a metaphor), its pre-eschatological counterpart is to be sought there. Of that, the physicality of the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) should be a major reminder, and we look forward to “the resurrection of the *body*” for “the life everlasting” (Apostles’ Creed). (CC)

**20:7** *idols.* See note on 6:4. (CSB)

Except for Josh 24:14, we have no explicit record of Israelite idolatry in Egypt, nor of an explicit demand there that they cease and desist. But there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about either, and in fact, both can be inferred by the Israelites’ interactions with Moses: their initial rejection of the very idea of leaving Egypt with Moses (Ex 6:9, 12), their reaction when they feared that the Pharaoh had them trapped at the Red Sea (Ex 14:11–12), their repeated expressions of a desire to return to Egypt (e.g., Num 11:4–5, 18, 20; 14:2–4), and the golden calf incident (Exodus 32). (CC)

I AM THE LORD – The last clause in Ezek 20:7, “I am Yahweh, your God,” is a repetition of its use in connection with the revealing of the covenant name in Ezek 20:5. The clause (and the shorter “I am Yahweh”) is common in much Pentateuchal legislation. Yahweh had no need to offer a rationale of every command; often he begins (e.g., Ex 20:2 || Deut 5:6; Lev 18:2; 19:3; 26:1) and/or ends (e.g., Lev 18:30; 19:36; 25:55) a block of legislation with this statement of his name. It was Yahweh’s will, consonant with his revealed nature, and the faithful need no other explanation. The principle still applies! (Compare the “name” of the Lord Jesus in the NT [e.g., Acts 2:38; 3:6; 1 Cor 1:2, 10].) (CC)

**20:8** *But they rebelled.* See vv. 13, 21; see also Jos 24:14. (CSB)

*So I said I would pour out my wrath on them.* An internal refrain (see vv. 13, 21); see also note on 7:8. (CSB)

*spend my anger against.* See note on 5:13. (CSB)

Such a resolve by God against the Israelites while still in Egypt is not attested elsewhere, but compare Ex 32:10 soon afterward, and Ezek 20:9 may suggest that Ezekiel is condensing events after the reference to “bring[ing] them out of the land of Egypt” (20:6). The resolve here may be partly formulaic, because almost identical language will be repeated in 20:13, 21 regarding Israel’s later sins, which are attested elsewhere. Formulaic patterning will also be true of the next verse. (CC)

**20:9** *for the sake of my name.*† See vv. 14, 22, 44. Name and person are closely connected in the Bible. God’s name is what he has revealed concerning himself, that by which he is known. The phrase used here is equivalent to “for my own sake” (cf. Isa 37:35; 43:25). God’s acts of deliverance—past and future—identify him, revealing his true nature (see 36:22; Ps 23:3; Isa 48:9). (CSB)

*profaned.* By ridicule (see Nu 14:15–16). (CSB)

**20:10** *desert.* Act Two (see note on v. 5). (CSB)

With this verse begins the second phase of Israel’s past: the original generation of Israelites who participated in the exodus (ca. 1440 b.c.) and their relationship to Yahweh in the desert. While 20:11–12 certainly refers to the Torah God gave Moses at Sinai, one cannot help but note that Yahweh says nothing specifically about Mount Sinai or Horeb, neither here nor anywhere else in the book. The concern here is not the geographical location but the Israelites’ encounter with their God. (CC)

**20:11** *will live.* See vv. 13, 21; contrast v. 25. See notes on 16:6; 18:9; see also Lev 18:5 and note. (CSB)

The key terms “statutes,” “ordinances,” “live,” and “observes/keeps” are found throughout the Torah in abundance. The verse is very similar to Lev 18:5. The accent on faithfulness to Yahweh as the key to life repeats the emphasis of Ezekiel 18, where the man who keeps Yahweh’s “statutes” and “ordinances” (the same terms used in 20:11 are also in 18:9, 17; “statutes” is also in 18:21) will “live.” The use of הָָאָדָ֖ם (“man” in the generic sense, “mankind, humanity”) suggests a universal aspect. While the passage is about OT Israel, the promise of life also applies to all those incorporated into the new Israel through faith and Baptism into Christ (e.g., Gal 3:26–29; 6:16). We have earlier discussed the multivalence of “statutes” and “ordinances” (see the textual notes on Ezek 5:6 and 11:12), as well as the eschatological meaning of “live” in such contexts, which points to eternal life (see the commentary on 18:4 and also on 18:7–9). The proper understanding of all these terms in the light of all Scripture (including the NT) will keep them from being misunderstood as sheer legalism. Far from onerous demands, the Torah was God’s gracious gift, along with the land. (CC)

**20:12** *Sabbaths as a sign.* Israel’s observance of the Sabbath was to serve as a sign that she was the Lord’s holy people (see Ex 31:13–17). Ezekiel highlights the Sabbath (see 22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24; 45:17; 46:3), as did Jeremiah (Jer 17:19–27; cf. Ne 13:17–18). Jewish legalism later corrupted the Sabbath law (see Mt 12:1–14). (CSB)

Yahweh revealed the general principles of his covenant relationship with his people, and here he highlights the Sabbath as a special “sign” or distinguishing mark of that closeness. “Sign” is not quite an adequate reproduction of אוֹת. In some contexts it might be called “incarnational” (e.g., Is 8:18) or “sacramental” (see further the last textual note and the commentary on Ezek 4:3). The word connotes an outward, visible indication of divine power or truth. If Block is correct in applying the plural “my Sabbaths” to the extensions of the seventh day of the week (to Sabbatical Years, the Jubilee, and other occasions when all work ceased), its application not only to time, but also to space and matter, that is, to all dimensions of life, is even more obvious. (CC)

The two versions of the Decalogue give two complementary reasons for the Sabbath command. Ex 20:11 relates it to God’s own rest at the end of his six days of creative work, when he “sanctified” (“made holy,” factitive Piel of קָדַשׁ) the seventh day, while Deut 5:15 bases the observance of the Sabbath on the exodus, when Yahweh saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. That is, in both the orders of creation (Ex 20:11) and of redemption (Deut 5:15), the believer renounces his claim to autonomy over his time and space, abstaining from his own concerns to confess God’s domain over his whole life. (CC)

The Third Commandment enjoins the faithful to “remember” (זָכ֛וֹר֩) the Sabbath to “*keep* it holy” (לְקַרְּשֽׁ֗וֹ, Ex 20:8; cf. Deut 5:12). That is possible only because God had originally “*made* it holy” when he established it (וַיְקַרֵּ֖שׁ אֹת֑וֹ, Gen 2:3). The same Piel verb is used in both passages, but with those different nuances. It is to the divine, factitive sense of Gen 2:3 and the Leviticus passages he is quoting (see the textual note) that Yahweh returns by his use of the Piel participle at the end of the verse: “It is I, Yahweh, who sanctifies them [מְקַרְּשָֽׁם].” God sets aside or sanctifies not only the day as such, but all who participate in it and confess its meaning. His sanctification of it occurred once in primordial time, and its sanctifying, “sacramental” power also continues throughout time, particularly through the means of grace in the worship service on the Lord’s day, unto the final rest at the end of time—the eternal Sabbath furnished by Christ (e.g., Heb 4:4–11). (CC)

Keeping the Sabbath was a sign that God had sanctified or consecrated Israel to himself to be a holy people, set apart and endowed with his own holiness, which he imparts through his appointed means. It is noteworthy that when the final purpose clause in Ezek 20:12 is recast in 20:20, the last part is replaced by “… that I, Yahweh, am your God.” Thus, having him as God, his consecration of his people, and their dedication or consecration of their lives to him (epitomized on the Sabbath day) are all of a piece. (CC)

*Mutatis mutandis* (“with the necessary changes having been made”), it is not all that different for Christians. Rejection of a legalistic view of the OT Sabbath (especially as it was burdened with ever-increasing rabbinical regulations) was from the very beginning a major distinction between Jews and Christians, evident already in the ministry of Jesus himself (e.g., Mt 12:1–12; Jn 9:13–16) and sharply in St. Paul versus the Judaizers (especially in Galatians; see, e.g., Gal 4:10; Col 2:16). Yet the NT does not expunge the Third Commandment from the Decalogue. Rather, the NT church proclaimed that Christ has ushered in the beginning of the eschatological “rest,” both in terms of the new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and arrival at the promised “land” through Christ as the new Joshua (cf. Heb 4:8), and so sanctified the first day of the new week (the eighth day, the day after the old Sabbath), when our Lord rose from the dead, as the day of Christian worship (Jn 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). (CC)

Although in Christian freedom any day of the week could serve (Acts 2:46; Col 2:16), the NT custom has largely continued until the present day, and Sunday is formally a “holiday” even in secularized parts of the West. Among those who claim membership in Christendom, only Seventh-Day Adventists separate themselves by insisting that the OT Sabbath (along with certain dietary laws) is still mandatory. The term “Sabbath” is used by many Reformed groups when speaking of Sunday—a usage virtually unknown in Lutheranism, but which would facilitate the teaching of the Third Commandment in catechesis. Often attached to that Reformed idiom were various “blue laws” that kept stores closed and prohibited various other activities on Sunday. Today, however, secularism has largely succeeded in erasing most “Sabbath” restrictions, and so the church faces the problem of competition from other Sunday activities, including work schedules that prevent Sunday morning church attendance, as well as sports and other recreational activities. Increasingly, observance of the Sabbath is one of those areas where the intrinsic *counter*cultural nature of the church must manifest itself. It must remain high on our agenda that we not abuse our freedom in Christ, but concern ourselves with keeping our *day* of worship “holy”—not only one hour of that day—as a concentrated expression of our lives every day, until the “Day of the Lord” finally arrives, and Christ’s second advent ushers in the eternal Sabbath rest. (CC)

It should be noted, finally, that critical opinion has long inclined to the view that in ancient Israel, the Sabbath, in whatever form it existed (if it even existed at all), was observed only desultorily until the time of the exile. There may be a half truth there. During the great periods of apostasy that the OT itself records, there is no reason to suppose that the Sabbath was kept with any greater zeal than the rest of the Torah. In fact, that seems to be the very sort of atmosphere Yahweh is confronting in this chapter. For whatever reason, accent on the Sabbath as a major distinguishing feature of God’s people is most prominent in later texts of the OT (Ezekiel here, paralleled by Jer 17:19–27 and Neh 13:18). But it stands to reason that in the exile and the Diaspora, when national and communal marks of identity disappeared, the Sabbath would assume greater importance as a touchstone of loyalty to Yahweh and a mark of an authentic member of his community—something that is still true of observant Judaism today. (CC)

**20:13-14** Even though the scene has shifted to the Israelites in the desert who had been redeemed through the exodus, it is déjà vu, as evidenced partly by the nearly verbatim repetition of portions of previous verses (especially 20:8) describing Israel’s rebellion while still in Egypt. The major difference is the addition of the people’s utter desecration of the Sabbath, which had been introduced in 20:12. That addition attests to the supreme importance Yahweh in Ezekiel attaches to its observance. (CC)

Two obvious parallels between 20:13–14 and the Pentateuchal record are Ex 32:10–14 and Num 14:11–19. Both times Yahweh threatens to annihilate (the exodus generation of) the people, but relents after Moses intercedes with appeals to Yahweh’s reputation among the nations and his promises to the patriarchs (as Ezekiel summarizes: “for the sake of my name so that it would not be profaned in the sight of the nations,” Ezek 20:14). Major examples of the Israelites’ rebellion are the golden calf incident (Ex 32:1–6) and the pagan orgy at Baal Peor (Num 25:1–3). Desecration of the Sabbath is mentioned in Ex 16:27 and Num 15:32. An assertion parallel to Ezek 20:13 (also to 20:21 and possibly also to Jeremiah’s sarcastic rhetorical question in Jer 7:22) appears in Amos 5:25–27. (CC)

Ezek 20:14 is nearly identical with 20:9. There is consistency in the people’s behavior, but also a consistency in God’s concern for his “name”—his character of keeping his Word, of not being arbitrary and impetuous, as the heathen gods were and are thought to be. (CC)

**20:13** *desecrated.* By not observing the Sabbath-rest (see Jer 17:21–23) or by not observing it in the manner and spirit God intended (see Am 8:5). (CSB)

**20:15-16** Numbers 14 attributes Israel’s failure to enter Canaan to their unbelief of God’s promises, leading to their cowardly refusal to attempt to take the land. Ezekiel follows his formula of attributing their failure to the four kinds of sins specified in 20:16. Obviously, there is not contradiction, only complementarity. As usual, Ezekiel has no interest in repeating specific historical details that would have been familiar to him (as a priest, 1:3) and to his audience from the Torah. (CC)

**20:17** “My eye had pity on them,” with the verb חוּס (“pity, look upon with compassion”), may mislead a reader into understanding Ezekiel to be speaking about a sudden outburst of sentimentality by God for his people that overrides all other considerations. The verb itself can sometimes have such emotional connotations, but in the context there is room for no motive other than Yahweh’s concern for the sanctity of his name. Hence the idiomatic phrase could be paraphrased as “I spared them,” that is, God did not inflict the deserved and expected punishment. Only once in the entire book does Ezekiel attribute tender sentiment to God with רִחַם, “have compassion for” (39:25), and even there (as here) it is for the sake of “my holy name.” Of course, Ezekiel would not have denied that Yahweh is compassionate and merciful, but he is not writing a comprehensive “biblical theology.” His concern throughout the book is the necessity for God to manifest his love in judgment. Therefore Ezekiel is a needed corrective to the constant temptation for the pastor and theologian to sweep all sorts of aberrations, moral and doctrinal, under the rug in the name of sentimentalistic “love.” (CC)

**20:18-21** Ezekiel now turns to the next generation of Israel, the children born in the desert to the parents who had participated in the exodus. To a large extent, the language is simply a recasting of what we have met before. Block argues that the changes suggest a growing impatience on Yahweh’s part. This is surely plausible, and Block’s intuition may be correct, but in my judgment, he overstates his case. He notes that there is no opening summary of God’s earlier acts of grace, and the use of the imperatives throughout suggests to him that they are presented as demands rather than gifts to be received. Since the recognition formula in 20:20, “so that you might know that I, Yahweh, am your God,” echoes that in 20:12 but omits “who sanctifies them,” Block thinks the Sabbaths likewise have simply become days for the people either to keep holy or desecrate (not days on which God performs his sanctifying work). And he thinks the absence of the promise that the faithful will “live” (which was in 20:11 and 20:13) is significant. In contrast, I am inclined to construe the differences as more a matter of stylistic variation. (CC)

The addressees in the latter part of the Torah (especially after Numbers 14) would have included those of this second generation. Particularly Deuteronomy has many exhortations to faithfulness of the sort that could be summarized by Ezek 20:18–20. Additionally, throughout the historical books and Jeremiah, there is ample record of God continually summoning his wayward people to return to him. A general parallel to Ezekiel’s charges here can be found in Numbers 16, the rebellion of Korah and his followers, and after their annihilation, the murmuring of the entire congregation against Moses and Aaron. The Pentateuch does not indicate that these events no longer included the first exodus generation, so perhaps these precise incidents should not be highlighted too much. But Moses (with Aaron) does dissuade God from destroying the people (Num 16:22; 16:44–50), as Moses did earlier (Ex 32:10–14; Num 14:11–19). (CC)

**20:18** *I said to their children.* Act Three (see note on v. 5). God began anew with the second generation in the desert (see Nu 14:26–35). (CSB)

**20:23-24** The Pentateuch is silent about any oath by Yahweh to exile the people even before they entered the land. The possibility that it could happen if they were disobedient is mentioned in both Lev 26:33 and Deut 28:64, but Ezekiel speaks of more than possibilities. In both the Pentateuchal texts, the nation is regarded as a whole; no distinction is made between successive generations. The Pentateuch’s perspective is prospective, while Ezekiel’s is retrospective. By placing this oath after the apostasy of the second desert generation, Ezekiel implies that it is punishment also for the rebellions described in Ezek 20:8 and 20:13. The people’s fate was sealed in God’s mind long before they reached Canaan; it was only a matter of time before it would actually be executed. Greenberg compares it to the implicit condemnation of the Amorites in Abraham’s time (Gen 15:13–16); their iniquity was “not yet complete,” but by the fourth generation the time would be ripe for their destruction by the invading Israelite. (CC)

**20:25–26**† Cf. God’s judgment on willful, hardened sinners in Ro 1:24–32. (CSB)

To get the particular reference of Ezek 20:26, one must refer back to Exodus 13, where “every issue that opened the womb” **(**כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם) occurs several times (Ex 13:12, 15; also 34:19; cf. 13:2). “Every issue that opened the womb” of animals must either be sacrificed to Yahweh or “redeemed” by substitutionary sacrifice, but children “you shall redeem” (Ex 13:13; 34:20; cf. 13:15). The repeated insistence of Jeremiah (7:31; 19:5; 32:35) that Yahweh had not commanded the sacrifice of firstborn *children* makes plain that the Israelites had misinterpreted or ignored those passages in Exodus and by some syncretistic confusion had concluded that Yahweh permitted, and perhaps even commanded, such behavior. The polemic against the practice in Deut 12:29–31 makes plain that the aberration was known already in Mosaic times, but the evidence is that it had become especially common since the days of the reign of Manasseh in the seventh century. (CC)

The “Topheth” was Jeremiah’s name for the place in Valley of Hinnom (just south of Jerusalem) where the rite was practiced in his time (e.g., Jer 7:31–32). Archaeologists have applied that name to other sites of child sacrifice, and a famous one at Carthage has been excavated; others are known. Excavation cannot tell us whether the infant bones found were those of firstborn or not, but that is entirely plausible in the light of the special status and privileges accorded the firstborn as the “beginning of … strength” (Gen 49:3; Deut 21:17; cf. Micah 6:7) throughout the ancient Near East. Especially in times of crisis, the firstborn would naturally be viewed as an especially potent means of propitiating the deity. Many details of the actual practice and meaning of the rite are unclear or debated but need not detain us here. (CC)

**20:26** *sacrifice of every firstborn.* See v. 31 and note on 16:20. (CSB)

*so they would know that I am the Lord.* God will go to any lengths to get his people to acknowledge him (see note on 5:13). (CSB)

**20:27** This short section (20:27–29) provides a brief review of the more recent past, Israel in the land, to be followed by an address to at least some of the people now in the exile (20:30–31). In many respects, it is the climax of Israel’s provocations, as may be indicated by the idiomatic “therefore, speak …” (לָכֵן followed by a command to speak, as also in 20:30). Most often לָכֵן (“therefore”) indicates consequence, but here it may express climax. The relatively unusual vocabulary employed may connote the same thing. (CC)

**20:28** *When I brought them into the land.* Apparently Act Four in Ezekiel’s history (see note on v. 5), but it is not carried through with the same schematic consistency. (CSB)

In this verse is summarized the gravamen of Ezekiel’s entire indictment. Instead of gratitude and thanksgiving for bringing them to the promised land, the people repaid Yahweh with pagan worship in every suitable place. If it were not for כַּעַס (“their *vexatious* offerings”), there would be no way to tell from the vocabulary itself whether Yahwistic or pagan (probably syncretistic) worship was being spoken of. The shared vocabulary probably indicates a considerable amount of similarity in the items and rituals used in both. But even if the words and actions were identical, there would be great differences in how they were understood. For example, the “fragrant sacrifices” (literally, “soothing odor”) in a pagan cult would be offered in the hope of pacifying or propitiating unpredictable gods. Ezekiel himself usually uses the idiom for idolatrous worship (6:13; 16:19; 20:28), although Leviticus and other OT texts make plain that it was prominent in orthodox ritual too (as in Ezek 20:41). We know little about the role of “libations” in Yahwistic ritual, but the term is used in worship of Yahweh in, for example, Gen 35:14; Ex 29:40; Lev 23:13, 18, 37. Scholars usually suppose that the liquid used was wine and that the ritual was most prominent in the meals of the communion sacrifices (שְׁלָמִים, often translated “fellowship” or “peace offerings”). Pagan sacrifices attempted to rectify the sinful human condition by offering alimentation to appease the god(s), so that was probably the intent of the libations on the high places (suggested by Jotham’s reference in Judg 9:13 to “wine that cheers gods and men”). (CC)

**20:29** The pun constituting this verse is contemptuous (see the textual notes). What one believes is witnessed by where and how one worships (cf. contemporary “worship wars”). The issue all along had been Yahweh versus the gods, and “to this day” (a phrase frequently associated with OT wordplays) indicates that degenerate worship on the high places was still very much a live question when Ezekiel wrote. Yahweh now turns his attention to the continuing rebellion of the Israelites in the exile. At the same time, together with the questions in the next two verses, 20:29 facilitates the transition to the rest of the chapter. Since Ezekiel’s contemporaries were continuing to patronize the high places they were implicated in all the infidelities of their ancestors. The high places, at least since the building of Solomon’s temple, had been the foci of repudiation of the place where Yahweh had chosen for “his name to dwell” (e.g., Deut 12:11; 14:23. (CC)

*Judgment and Restoration*

**30 “Therefore say to the house of Israel: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images?  31 When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your sons in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, O house of Israel? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will not let you inquire of me. 32 ”‘You say, “We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.” But what you have in mind will never happen.  33 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.  34 I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.  35 I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you.  36 As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign LORD.  37 I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.  38 I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, yet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD. 39 ”‘As for you, O house of Israel, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols.  40 For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD, there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices.  41 I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will show myself holy among you in the sight of the nations.  42 Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers.  43 There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done.  44 You will know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name’s sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.’”**

**20:30-31** Here we have the climax of the entire indictment, even repeating earlier language. All of it is applied to the contemporary generation. Thus, for the first time in Yahweh’s speech (20:5–44) he uses the second person (“you”). The “house of Israel” is confronted directly. The two questions in 20:30 are obviously rhetorical. The present generation is not responsible for the misbehavior of previous generations (a point chapter 18 had established), but the people of this generation are accountable for continuing the same pattern of defiant disobedience. Ezek 20:31 then answers both questions. The repetition of “to this day” (20:31, from 20:29) emphasizes that they cannot evade their answerability and deflect God’s wrath away from themselves. (CC))

**20:30** *Will you … ?* The point of the chapter: “How will you act?” (CSB)

**20:31** *inquire.* See note on 14:3. (CSB)

**20:32-44** The second major part (20:32–44) of the divine speech (20:5–44) begins here and constitutes the rest of the chapter (according to the Hebrew chapter division). Instead of continuing to excoriate the almost congenital rebelliousness of Israel in the past, Yahweh now turns to the future. To safeguard his “name” (20:39, 44; previously 20:9, 14, 22, 29) and be true to his covenant promises, he must and will restore “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). But he will display “tough love” to purge Israel before the eschatological restoration will occur. (CC)

The rest of the chapter might be divided in various ways, but those two movements seem to invite its division into (1) Israel in the “wilderness of the peoples” (20:32–38) and (2) the new, transformed Israel (20:39–44). Since these verses (20:32–44) are promissory, many critics assume that they are later supplements, since they allegedly presuppose the fall of Jerusalem. However, able defenses of the original unity of the material can be found in Cooke, Greenberg, and Block. (CC)

**20:32** *like the nations.* The temptation to lose its uniqueness was always present for Israel (see 1Sa 8:5). (CSB)

Ezekiel’s contemporaries were saying, “Let us become like the nations, like the families in other countries, by worshiping wood and stone.” In contrast to those who interpret this wish as an expression of despair, or, at least, resignation (see the textual notes), it seems clear to me that it is a defiant wish or statement of intent to apostatize. It is very comparable to liberal Christianity’s tendency today to become nothing more than a “cultural religion” by simply blessing the norms and ideals of the surrounding pagan society. As the earlier part of the chapter made plain, a desire for conformity with the heathen nations had been the people’s attitude or motivation in their persistent rebellions all along. And the very next verse (20:33) is one of God’s indignant reaction—not encouragement, as when he later responds to genuine expressions of despair (33:10–20; 37:11–14). (CC)

The parallel with 1 Sam 8:5, where an earlier generation had given the same rationale for their desire to have a king, is too close to be coincidental. In the earlier case, Yahweh had overruled Samuel and conceded to their request, granting them Saul. In this case, he refuses even to listen. Both cases have to do with kingship, but a kingship with less than happy results. Samuel, after conveying to the people God’s positive answer to their request, gave a harsh preview of what life under a monarchy would be like (1 Sam 8:10–18)—a virtual prediction that came true many times over in the following centuries. Here, in the very next verse (Ezek 20:33), God promises (or should we say threatens?) to be their king with “wrath outpoured.” In fact, one may wonder whether we do not find here part of the reason for Ezekiel’s coolness toward the whole concept of kingship and his reluctance even to use that vocabulary. In Ezekiel Yahweh customarily refers to Israel’s kings as mere princes, and even in the next verse, speaking of himself, he uses the verb “to reign, rule” (20:33) rather than the noun “king.” (CC)

In 1 Samuel 8 too, in the context of the people’s request for a king, Yahweh had noted that they had rejected him as their king and they had “worshiped other gods” (1 Sam 8:8). “Worshiping wood and stone” (Ezek 20:32) would hardly be the way the people would perceive or describe their actions, but it is a derisive truth added to the preceding quote of them. The concept of idols being nothing more than wood and/or stone also appears in earlier texts: in Deut 4:28 after an extended warning against any sort of idolatry in Israel (Deut 4:15–28), and in an extended satire on worshiping idols made of wood and metal (Is 44:9–20). Paganism itself thought its statues were indwelt by the spirit of the gods they represented, but to a monotheist, they could be no more than mere “wood and stone,” fashioned out of products of the one triune God’s creative activity, but totally separate from the Creator himself. (CC)

It must be noted finally that the temptation to be “like the nations” (20:32) has not disappeared in modern times, but still thrives in something more like “fine idolatry” (without the statues, but desires and actions that are nonetheless idolatrous). A good case can be made that many aspects of the modern “ecumenical” impulse are not all that different in principle from ancient syncretism, which often eventuated in gross idolatry. Agreement among denominations and Christians is relatively easy if all differences are simply declared “not divisive of church fellowship” and concern for church discipline disappears or is derided as “sectarian.” The particularity of the faith dissolves under the broad rubric of “religion.” At its most extreme, what is lost is *the* scandal of particularity that is at the heart of biblical religion: salvation only through Christ crucified, and the result is plain (pagan) universalism. (CC)

More subtle versions of syncretism and idolatry submerge denominational particulars under slogans of “inclusiveness,” “unity in diversity,” “tolerance,” or “pluralism of faiths” under one organizational roof. Statements of unity may be couched in language elastic or ambiguous enough that both parties can interpret them on their own terms. It is significant that historical confessions, such as the Augsburg Confession, not only state the positive (the truth that is being confessed) but also the negative (the errors that simultaneously must be condemned). Whether a denomination still adheres to its historical confessions (such as the Lutheran Confessions) may be revealed by whether they are taught, at the seminary level, as part of dogmatic theology (as expressions of the Christian faith that continue to be normative) or as part of historical theology (as historical documents that may be relevant no longer) (CC)

*will never happen.* As happened to those who were exiled to Egypt (see Jer 44:15–19). (CSB)

**20:33** *mighty hand … outstretched arm.* Terminology of the exodus (cf. Dt 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8). (CSB)

The phrases “with a mighty hand” and “with an outstretched arm” are almost inextricably associated with the exodus; they are used frequently in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy. Their repetition at the end of the next verse (20:34) makes of them an inclusion or frame around the thought expressed in 20:33–34: the drastic steps God will take to countermand the people’s determination to be “like the nations” (20:32). The startling novelty here is that those phrases traditionally described God’s ferocity toward Egypt in order to free Israel, but here they are turned against Israel itself in order to force the people finally to accept God’s kingship once and for all. (CC)

That inversion of redemption language is reinforced by the addition of “wrath outpoured” (20:33–34; cf. 20:8, 13, 21). That Hebrew terminology was not used in the Torah in connection with the exodus deliverance, but already there Yahweh had threatened to unleash his “wrath” against disobedient Israel (Lev 26:28; Num 25:11; Deut 9:19), and the outpouring of God’s wrath is used repeatedly in Ezekiel of God’s fury toward Jerusalem. Earlier in this chapter (20:8, 13, 21), Yahweh had desisted from pouring out his wrath, but in 36:18 and Lam 2:4 he will declare that he has poured it out . (The language of this verse, 20:33, may have been anticipated by Jer 21:5.) (CC)

In 20:34 it will become even more clear that Ezekiel is here employing considerable typological imagery. “Typology” implies that it is not mere “imagery.” “Typology” is a near synonym of “prophecy,” accenting prophetic events (e.g., the action prophecies in chapter 4) more than just words. It always involves both continuity and discontinuity, that is, it is neither mere analogy nor simple repetition (which, if we are speaking of history, is impossible). The “antitype” or fulfillment is a “recapitulation” (there is no adequate term for something miraculous) on a higher level of the implicit intent of the “type.” One fulfillment often becomes a sort of springboard for still further “recapitulation” until the “consummation” is finally achieved. In 20:39–44 Ezekiel will speak of a consummation according to OT vistas (just as all OT prophecy uses b.c. language), but the final antitype is Christ and his “exodus” (Lk 9:31). NT precedents mandate that the Christian exegete factor in that climactic event—Christ’s death and resurrection—although, in this interim between his first and second advents, we too await a consummation at the end of time, all the while receiving and celebrating the benefits of the divine action in Christ by means of God’s Word and Sacraments. (CC)

In this verse (Ezek 20:33), salvation and judgment are mingled in one event. What better “type” could one desire of the cross, where the entirety of God’s wrath at humanity’s sin was poured out on the sinless Christ, who by his atonement procured salvation for all? Ezek 20:33 does not specify exactly what action(s) or event(s) will take place, but obviously some are implicit in “with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with wrath outpoured,” which will accomplish his purpose, “I will rule over you!” We confess the cross of Christ to be the locale of God’s maximal judgment on sin, there visited on his Son vicariously for the sins of all, who must surely perish unless they believe and are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. And concurrent in that judgment is total salvation for the believer, with supplementation neither needed nor possible. (CC)

**20:34** The typology of a new, second exodus is explicit in this verse. Yahweh’s assertion of his kingship in the previous verse is here made historically concrete. In fact, this second exodus will involve more than the first exodus from Egypt: the first concerned only deliverance from one land, but here many lands are in view and from them all God’s reconstituted Israel is to be gathered. The same assertion is made in 20:41 and 34:13. Which lands are these? Besides Babylon, where most of the captives went in Ezekiel’s day, Yahweh may also have in mind the exiles from the northern kingdom (2 Ki 17:6) and the groups that would flee to Egypt with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 43–44). It may well even be that the Diaspora throughout the ancient Near East was well under way by this time. (CC)

But when dealing with prophecy, the horizons are often much larger than the merely “historical” (in its usual modern, positivistic sense). They often include the transhistorical and eschatological as well. The rest of the chapter indicates that Yahweh is envisioning far more than the return to Canaan after Cyprus’ edict in 538 b.c. “Exile” has become a type of all those who remain afar from their true homeland in Christ. These are not the ones who are still in spiritual slavery and whose allegiance is to the Jerusalem below (Gal 4:21–25, 30), but rather all children of the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:26–31)—all baptized believers in Christ, who are sons of Abraham, children of God, and heirs of all the promises (Gal 3:26–29). (CC)

Thus, in a well-known Advent hymn, even we in this time of the “not yet” sing, “Oh, come, Oh, come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive *Israel*, That mourns in lonely *exile* here.” The return from the exile began with the Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) and Pentecost (Acts 2). God’s new Israel consists of all in Christ, gathered from all nations (Romans 9–11), the end of whose exile will take place with the realization of the vision of the Seer of Patmos of “a great multitude … of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). (CC)

We should note finally that in the eighth-century b.c. poetic prophecy of Isaiah 40–66 we find an OT counterpart to this cosmic perspective, also replete with second exodus language. (CC)

**20:35-36** It is just as futile to try to locate or limit geographically the “wilderness of the peoples” (20:35) as it was the “countries” of 20:34. The expression is obviously a typological counterpart to the “wilderness of the land of Egypt” (Sinai) in 20:36. The great Syro-Arabian desert, which those exiled in Babylon had to traverse on their return to Canaan, may provide a point of departure for the prophetic imagery. The expression “wilderness of the peoples” refers to a sort of no-man’s land that nobody calls home, where the plethora of religious options provides just as bleak a terrain as a desert, where the people must make spiritual choices, and where God will confront his people. God is described as meeting people “face to face” several times in the OT, but the past precedent for 20:35–36 must be the theophany at Sinai (Deut 5:4). Then the people tried to run away; this time there will be no escape. (CC)

Typologically, we finally must refer the action here to the great assize at the end of time:

At [Christ’s second] coming all men will rise again with their bodies and will give an account of their own works. And they that have done good will go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. (CC)

As those words make plain, the references to God’s people as a whole must be interpreted in light of the teaching of Scripture (e.g., Ezekiel 18) that each individual cannot delegate to anyone else the necessity to confront the Judge and receive his verdict, which will be determined by whether or not the void of his fallen human soul has been filled with the Gospel of Christ as his substitute, for the Christ who lives in the believer does indeed produce good works (Gal 2:20). (CC)

The phrase “wilderness of the peoples” (Ezek 20:35) is a suggestive one whose applications extend far beyond the limits of exegesis. That non-Christian Jews have today been scattered to the four corners of the earth is irrelevant, as is the fact that many make *‘aliyah* (immigration) to the modern state of Israel. Christians (Jews and Gentiles alike in Christ) also now are scattered throughout the world, though not as a divine judgment, but as an opportunity for proclaiming the one saving Gospel to all peoples. The “wilderness of the peoples” takes on increasing cogency now as multicultural and multilingual populations are present especially in metropolitan centers, but also throughout most of the world. (CC)

**20:35** *desert of the nations.* Exile among the nations would be for Israel like a return to the desert through which she journeyed on the way to the promised land (see Hos 2:14). (CSB)

**20:37** *pass under my rod.* The way a shepherd counts or separates his flock (see Jer 33:13; Mt 25:32–33). (CSB)

*I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.* As he had in the Sinai Desert (see 16:60, 62). (CSB)

In spite of the uncertainty about the Hebrew word in “the *bond* [?] of the covenant” (see the textual note), the verse proclaims that those who survive the sifting will be brought into the covenant relationship. The expression parallels the covenant oath Yahweh swore in 20:5 and the revelation of his “statutes” and “ordinances” (Torah) in 20:11. By “bond of the covenant” we must understand not only the covenant punishments, but also the covenant promises (Law and Gospel). Also the promises of the covenant are bonds by which God trains and educates his people. (CC)

**20:38** *purge.* As in the first desert experience, many were not allowed to enter the land (see Nu 14:26–35). (CSB)

This verse returns to the theme of 20:37a and amplifies it. “Land of sojourning” (מָגוֹר אֶרֶץ) is an expression that referred to the land of Canaan, which God promised to the patriarchs, but in which they resided only temporarily without actually taking full possession of it. Only here is it applied to the lands of exile, from which “those who revolt and rebel against [God]” will be brought out. But like most of the original exodus generation, and also like the false prophets of 13:9, the rebels will not be allowed to enter the promised land. Just exactly what will happen to them is not made clear. Perhaps Ezekiel could not press the underlying typology of the section farther. Or perhaps it was irrelevant to his main point, that God will have rid the faithful of the faithless. In the faithful remnant, Yahweh will have finally accomplished his goal of having a purified, holy people who truly “know” him. Here it is plain that the emphasis has begun to shift to an eschatological focus, as is apparent in most of the rest of the Hebrew chapter (20:39–44). (CC)

This theme of “holy things for holy people” (applied to the Lord’s Supper in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy) pervades Scripture; see, for example, Is 35:8–9; Rev 22:14–15. It can be taken as an expression of the goal of Christ’s redemptive activity, with the understanding that we sinners become God’s holy people in Christ (e.g., 1 Pet 2:5, 9–11, which also calls Christians “sojourners and exiles”; compare 1 Pet 2:11 to Ezek 20:38). It also underlies the practice of closed Communion (required to prevent *manducatio indignorum*, “eating by the unworthy”), the use of private and/or corporate confession and absolution (so that our sins are forgiven) before our main worship services, and the opening versicles of many minor services, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise” (Ps 51:15; only after God has opened our lips can we truly sing his praise). (CC)

**20:39** *Go and serve your idols.* Irony; the opposite is meant (cf. 1Ki 22:15; Am 4:4). (CSB)

Besides the challenges of the Hebrew (see the textual notes), another difficulty is that we might think the verse is positioned inappropriately. Ezek 20:38 had begun to move in a strongly eschatological direction (looking toward the final gathering of all Christians at Christ’s second coming), but here we have an obvious recognition of continued idolatry at the present time, expressed in a satirical command to continue it. In a similar vein is Rev 22:11: “Let the evildoer keep doing evil, and let the filthy man still remain filthy, and let the righteous man keep doing righteousness, and the holy man still be sanctified.” (CC)

The injunction for idolatry is all the more curious since we probably have here the beginning of a subsection describing Israel’s purified, eschatological worship. Perhaps we understand the verse best if we take it as transitional. If we are labeling it “eschatological,” it is an inaugurated eschatology, but not yet consummated. Ezekiel apparently still has in view those who have come close to the promised land but have not entered it, and if they persist in their past idolatries, they never will. I would understand the verse as a sort of summary of the church on earth, in the time of the “now-not yet,” which will always have hypocrites in its midst (even if they are known only to God). The dream of a “pure” church on earth is utopian and finally contrary to the Bible’s own descriptions. As each Christian remains sinner and saint throughout earthly life (e.g., Romans 7), so too the visible church on earth remains a mixture of wheat and weeds until the harvest (Mt 13:29–30). (CC)

The last clause of the verse makes plain that the offensive forms of worship were directed against Yahweh. “My holy name” is used here for the first time in the book; it is developed more fully in 36:20–22 and mentioned in 39:7, 25 and 43:7–8, as well as elsewhere in Scripture. The defiling of Yahweh’s name (20:39) and of the idolaters themselves through their gifts and offerings had started long ago by divine decree (20:26) and has lasted into the present. By claiming to honor Yahweh while worshiping idols, the people had reduced him to the level of any other god. Whatever their rationalizations, they did not really “know” him (20:38, 42). Ezek 20:39 has described the negative correction of such delusions (by God’s judgment), while 20:40 will begin to describe the positive correction (by his grace). Whether before or after the people’s transformation, it is noteworthy that Yahweh’s measure of their faithfulness is the quality of their worship—whether idolatry or acceptable worship (20:40), which, he makes plain, is a gift to them that only he can enable. (CC)

**20:40** *my holy mountain.* Mentioned only here in Ezekiel, it refers to Jerusalem or Zion (see Ps 2:6; 3:4; 15:1; see also Isa 11:9; 56:7; 57:13; 65:11; Ob 16; Zep 3:11). (CSB)

Thus, it is no surprise that 20:40–41 is full of traditional, sometimes technical, liturgical language. First of all, true worship must take place on Yahweh’s “holy mountain”—in contrast to every “high hill” (20:28, sites of idolatrous devotion). The obvious reference is to Zion, the temple mount. It is “holy,” not by nature, as pagan sites were often thought to be, but by God’s election or choice. Even as he “chose” Israel (20:5), culminating in Jesus Christ, then spreading out to all believers (see the commentary on 20:5), so also he “chose” Zion as the one location for OT worship and his temple (e.g., Deut 12:5–26). It is a “high” mountain (Ezek 20:40) because it towers above all competitors, and all who would be saved must make the pilgrimage to it (Is 2:2–4 || Micah 4:1–3). It is the site of God’s “incarnational” presence on earth (cf. Christ as the new temple, e.g., Jn 2:18–22). Located there is as much of paradise restored as is possible until the new creation, in which its worshipers already participate (2 Cor 5:17). It manifests a transcendence of all earthly desires (Pss 42:1–3; 122:1; cf. Ezek 24:21), a transcendence that Christian worship replicates in its antitypical way. (CC)

THERE IN THE LAND – The importance of *place* of worship is underscored by the repetition of “there” (שָׁם) thrice in 20:40 (contrast its five occurrences in 20:28–29 for places of idolatrous worship). Christian worship is not bound to one geographical mountain, but takes place “in Spirit and truth” (Jn 4:20–24). Yet neither can it be divorced from Bethlehem (in the hill country), Mount Calvary, the Mount of Olives, and what occurred in those places (Christ’s incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension). As long as we are in this world of time and space, worship will take place at some specific time and place where God’s Word is proclaimed truly and his Sacraments administered rightly, and not merely in the privacy of the individual heart, apart from the body of Christ—the church. It has been said that he who does not worship at specific times and places probably does not worship at all. (CC)

*entire house of Israel.* Includes the northern kingdom, which fell in 722–721 b.c. (see 11:15; 36:10). (CSB)

“There the *whole* house of Israel will worship me—*all* [כֹּל] of it” (Ezek 20:40) appears to say that a complete restoration of right worship will only be accomplished when all the people have been restored, that is, when all who shall be saved will be gathered in at the final judgment (Revelation 20–22). Here it is bound with בָּאָ֑רֶץ, which, with only slight freedom, I have translated “in the *home*land.” אֶרֶץ “land,” can be used more broadly, but often it refers specifically to the land of Israel, as here. The boundaries of spiritual and physical Israel will finally coincide when all the chaff has been blown away, that is, only eschatologically, when the wheat and the weeds are no longer intermingled, as they inevitably are on earth. As Ezekiel describes the ultimate normalization of all covenant relationships—God, nation, and land/mountain—he inevitably predicts the future through his OT lens, the future in terms of his present, just as St. John envisions the consummation through his contemporary NT lens in Revelation 21–22 (and we too view the future through the lens of our present). What was said above about the Spiritualization of “mountain” via the Holy Spirit—not “spiritualization” (untethered interiority)—also applies here of the “land.” (CC)

WILL SERVE ME – The verb עָבַד (20:40) is often translated “serve,” but here (and often) “worship” is most appropriate. It is a happy coincidence that in both Hebrew (the noun cognate to עָבַד) and English the same word can be used both of a liturgical “worship service,” as well as in the broader sense of Christian conduct (e.g., Rom 12:1), because neither activity has integrity apart from close association with the other. It is perverse to pit worship and missions against each other; Christian “service” requires both to be done rightly. (CC)

I WILL ACCEPT THEM – “There I will accept them” uses the verb רָצָה, “to be pleased with, accept, show favor/grace,” which occurs in Ezekiel only in 20:40–41. Along with its related noun רָצוֹן, “favor, acceptance, grace,” it is sometimes used in a more general sense, but often has a specialized, liturgical sense. It is used of God’s acceptance of the worshiper, as here, or of the sacrifice. The worshiper has no natural right to claim acceptance by God, except through God’s grace for Christ’s sake, in view of his atoning sacrifice. Similarly, our offerings are not pleasing to God if they are offered in any other spirit than gratitude for God’s grace. The Lutheran definition of justification by faith as the *favor Dei*, earned vicariously by Christ, is as fully applicable to the OT church as to the new. (CC)

*I will require.* See Dt 23:21 (“demand”); Mic 6:8. (CSB)

“There I will *request* your offerings” (20:40) uses רָּרַשׁ, obviously a play on its use in 20:1, 3, 31 (also 14:7, 10), where idolatrous Israelites attempt to “consult” Yahweh or “inquire” of him through Ezekiel, but Yahweh refuses to answer their inquiry. People do not “seek” God of their own volition (and if they look for him apart from where he has promised to be found, in his Word and Sacraments, they will never find his grace). But Yahweh seeks them out (Ezek 34:10–16; Mt 18:10–14; Jn 6:44; 12:32) and requests their thank offerings. Here the verb might have been translated “demand, require,” as it often implies, but in this evangelical context “request” seems more appropriate. (CC)

*offerings.* Possibly refers to a prescribed contribution. The other 19 occurrences in Ezekiel of the Hebrew for this word are confined to chs. 44–48, where the reference is to the land set aside for the temple and priests (see 45:1; 48:8–10, “portion”) or to the special gifts for the priests (see 44:30). (CSB)

*choice gifts.* Voluntary contributions (but see NIV text note). (CSB)

Three terms (“offerings … choice gifts … holy things”) follow in 20:40, all of them fairly technical and at least partly synonymous. The precise meaning of תְּרוּמָה (plural here: “offerings”) has long been debated. In the Torah it traditionally was rendered as “heave offering” and was associated with תְּנוּפָה, traditionally rendered as “wave offering” (the two occur together in, e.g., Ex 29:27; Lev 7:34; 10:14–15). Since the “heave offering” was thought to be presented to God with vertical motion and the “wave offering” with horizontal waving, thus, in effect, making the sign of the cross, it was often interpreted as a prediction or premonition of the cross of Christ. But recent expositors argue that תְּרוּמָה does not mean “heave offering” because it is not derived from the Qal of רוּם, “be high, lifted up,” but rather from the Hiphil of רוּם in its specialized sense “dedicate, reserve” (a portion of the sacrifice), and there is a cognate Akkadian noun with that meaning. Sometimes it is used almost generically of any “contribution” to Yahwistic ritual. The theory of Milgrom is widely accepted, namely, that the תְּרוּמָה was a gift dedicated *to* Yahweh outside the sanctuary without a ritual, in contrast to the תְּנוּפָה (“wave offering”), which was presented *before* Yahweh in the sanctuary by ritual. (CC)

The following phrase (רֵאשִׁ֛ית מַשְׂאוֹתֵיכֶ֖ם, 20:40), literally, “first of your gifts,” is unique in the OT. The first term, רֵאשִׁית, often means “first,” and “firstfruits” (designated by the different Hebrew term בִּכּוּרִים) were often thought of as the best of a crop, offered in recognition that the entire crop was really a divine gift. Milgrom, perhaps correctly, distinguishes between בִּכּוּרִים (“firstfruits”) as “first ripe” gifts, and רֵאשִׁית (“first”) as “first processed.” The second term of the phrase in 20:40 is the plural of מַשְׂאֵת, which normally designates a “portion, contribution, gift” given from one person to another, and only here refers to a gift to God. In any case, these “choice gifts” will be a God-pleasing alternative to all the futile, pagan offerings mentioned previously (20:26, 28, 31, 39). The literal “first of your gifts” here probably also implies a God-pleasing alternative to “every first issue that opened the womb” (20:26), which, incredibly, the Israelites had perverted to justify infant sacrifice. (CC)

The most comprehensive of the three terms in 20:40 is “holy things” (קֳדָשִׁים, plural of קֹדֶשׁ, which is common in Ezekiel 41–48). The primary reference is, no doubt, to offerings, but since everything about the Yahwistic cultus was to be holy (also objects, personnel), the nonspecific translation “holy things” seems best. If so, the בְּ (בְּכָל־קָדְשֵׁיכֶֽם) is not a *beth essentiae*, as some take it, which would make the phrase essentially synonymous with the preceding two expressions. Instead, “with all your holy things” subsumes the previous two phrases and also is broader, since it includes everything and everyone involved in the divine liturgy. “Worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness!” (Pss 29:2; 96:9; 1 Chr 16:29; cf. 2 Chr 20:21). The Christian conception of authentic worship is essentially the same. (CC)

**20:41** *as fragrant incense.* Either in a metaphorical sense (as in Eph 5:2) or in a literal sense (as in 6:13). (CSB)

This is the only time in the OT where people themselves are described as a “fragrant sacrifice.” It is also the only time Ezekiel himself uses the phrase positively, although it is frequently used in that way elsewhere in the OT (especially of God-pleasing sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus). Undoubtedly Ezekiel tends to avoid the phrase for the polemical reason that it was misappropriated by apostate Israelites for idolatrous worship (to which it refers in 6:13; 16:19; 20:28). (CC)

It is often forgotten or overlooked that the NT uses corresponding Greek similarly:

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as an offering and sacrifice to God for a pleasing aroma [ὀσμὴν εὑωδίας]. (Eph 5:2) (CC)

Christ himself is the ultimate sacrifice that satisfied God’s wrath once and for all. In 2 Cor 2:14–16 St. Paul declares that the “aroma” (ὀσμή) of Christ perfumes the church and is an “aroma from death to death” for unbelievers, but an “aroma from life to life” for believers. St. Paul calls the gifts sent to him by the Philippians via Epaphroditus “a pleasing aroma [ὀσμὴν εὑωδίας], an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God” (Phil 4:18). Compare also the apostle John’s vision of the prayers of the faithful as plentiful incense in the celestial liturgy in Rev 5:8 and 8:3–4. These scriptural depictions should be called to the congregation’s attention when our worship services use the “fragrant aroma” of incense, which is employed in the greater part of Christendom. There is no reason why it should not be used in Lutheran churches, especially on festive occasions, except because of Protestant anti-Catholic and anti-ritual prejudices. (CC)

*bring you out.* Cf. v. 34. (CSB)

Yahweh will have shown himself holy, both by his purifying judgment on his people and by his ability to effect a new exodus, gather a new Israel, and restore his people to their homeland. (CC)

**20:42** The remaining verses in the chapter reaffirm the new creation that will have taken place in the hearts of all Israel and will give the people a new vantage point from which to survey and evaluate their past relationship with Yahweh. (CC)

**20:43** *you will remember … and … loathe yourselves.* A thorough repentance (see 6:9; 16:63; 36:31; Lk 15:17–19). (CSB)

“*There* [שָׁם] you will remember … and you will loath yourselves” stresses that such repentance and faith will not occur in the exile, but only after the restoration, as 16:61 and 16:63 (cf. 6:9) have already asserted. (Compare the commentary above on “there” in 20:40.) The self-loathing is not some neurosis, but genuine contrition or repentance. Anyone can regret his past mistakes, but only those who have been overcome by the Law and who now know the comfort of the forgiving Gospel can recognize the depths of the depravity from which they have been delivered—and to which the old Adam in them is still prone throughout earthly life. This verse bears witness to the ongoing role of the Law and repentance in the life of believers, even after they have been converted and regenerated by the power of the Gospel. (CC)

**20:44** *for my name’s sake.* Summarizes and concludes the oracle (see note on v. 9). (CSB)

The final verse of the oracle has a climactic use of the recognition formula: “Then you will know that I am Yahweh when I deal with you for the sake of my name and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt deeds.” Zimmerli summarizes:

The mystery of Yahweh’s being, however, will then clearly be the mystery of one who is not compelled to follow the law of human activity, in its scheme of retribution, but of one whose inner loyalty maintains what it has promised and thereby demonstrates his holiness (CC)

*Prophecy Against the South*

**45 The word of the LORD came to me:  46 “Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest of the southland.  47 Say to the southern forest: ‘Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it.  48 Everyone will see that I the LORD have kindled it; it will not be quenched.’” 49 Then I said, “Ah, Sovereign LORD! They are saying of me, ‘Isn’t he just telling parables?’”**

**20:45-46** Ezekiel is preaching to an audience of Israelites in exile in Babylon. His audience surely would have thought “south” because of the application to Jerusalem. For a southerly direction to make geographical sense, Ezekiel must have the homeland in mind. Those in Babylon would have easily grasped that because their hearts and thoughts were still very much back in Judah. (CC)

**20:46** *set your face.* A posture required eight times of Ezekiel (here; 13:17; 21:2; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2). (CSB)

*toward the south.* Toward Judah and Jerusalem, the object of all of Ezekiel’s prophesying in these chapters. Any Babylonian invasion would traverse Palestine from north to south (see 26:7). (CSB)

**20:47** *set fire.* Common figurative language for invading forces (see Isa 10:16–19; Jer 15:14; 17:4, 27; 21:14; see also note on 15:7). (CSB)

*both green and dry.* All trees (cf. 17:24; Lk 23:31). (CSB)

*from south to north.* Expresses totality, not direction; equivalent to saying, “from the border on the right to that on the left.” (CSB)

Ezekiel’s primary concern is not with trees, but with people. Hence, the trees surely represent people, and the forest of 20:46 the entire population. The “green” and “dry” trees correspond to the “righteous” and the “wicked” (another merism) in 21:3; cf. Lk 23:31). “Every face will be scorched” because faces would be the first to feel the heat, but this is soon expanded by כָּל־בָּשָׂ֔ר, “all flesh/everyone,” in the next verse. (CC)

**20:48** The verse is an expansion and intensification of the previous ones. “Every face” becomes “all people, everyone.” The verb “see, realize, recognize” (רָאָה) is used instead of יָדַע, “know,” in “everyone will see that I, Yahweh, have kindled it,” which (like clauses in 21:5 and 39:21) is a variant formulation of the recognition formula: “then you/they will know that I am Yahweh.” What will be seen or recognized is that the “fire” (20:47) is caused by divine action and not something that can be explained by natural or inner-historical causes. The repetition of “(It) will not be extinguished” underscores the irrevocability of Yahweh’s decision (cf. 6:10 and 14:23). (CC)

**20:49** *parables.* See note on 17:2; for other ridiculing of the prophet see 12:21–28; 33:32. (CSB)

Once again we have one of those rare occasions where Ezekiel’s own voice is heard. Oracles like the one just uttered, plus his sometimes bizarre action prophecies, make it easy to understand that the people would think of him as a master entertainer. When the “elders” are reported to be with him in chapters 8, 14, and 20, the motivation may have been mostly mere curiosity to see what he would do next. And such a view of his actions and words would surely call into question his authority as a genuine prophet and discredit, or at least neutralize, the impact of his ministry. Rough parallels among some clergymen today would surely not be hard to find! (CC)

Implicit in Ezekiel’s complaint is a request that the riddle just uttered be explained. The request is readily granted by Yahweh, first by an interpretation of the simile in 21:1–7 and expanded still more in 21:8–17. (CC)