

# Theological Studies



## THE MESSIANIC CONCEPTS OF EZECHIEL

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**T**HE third part of the book of Ezechiel, extending from the thirty-third to the forty-eighth chapter, contains the Divine communications which the prophet received after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. They predict the restoration and regeneration of the land and the people, and reveal a detailed plan for a more magnificent temple, a purer worship, a more holy Jerusalem, a more equitable distribution of the land, and a more just government. But some elements of this prophetic vision have not been fulfilled at all, whilst others have been verified but partially and imperfectly. How are we to explain these unfulfilled or partly fulfilled prophecies? Were they conditional, dependent for their realization upon human collaboration, which was wilfully withheld? Or were they Messianic, to be fulfilled exclusively or perhaps more fully in the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ?

We shall endeavor to answer these questions by a careful and impartial analysis of the prophecies. The purpose of this essay is exegetical; it is a positive study made from the original text, context, and historical milieu of Ezechiel's prophecies.

## A PERSONAL MESSIAS

It is noteworthy that Ezechiel's future state is to be an ideal theocracy. Criminally careless and oppressive kings are to be a thing of the past. Yahweh Himself will gather and lead His flock to the land of Israel, where He will tend it upon good pastures.<sup>1</sup> The Divine shepherd will manifest special solicitude for the unfortunate: "The lost I will seek, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will strengthen."<sup>2</sup> He will exercise this benign rule through an earthly representative whom He describes thus: "And I will appoint but one shepherd over them, and he shall tend them, my servant David. He shall tend them and be a shepherd over them. And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I, Yahweh, have spoken."<sup>3</sup> This conception is somewhat amplified in a later oracle on the reunion of the chosen people: "And my servant David shall be king over them, and there shall be one shepherd for all of them, and they shall walk in my ordinances, keep my statutes, and carry them out. And they shall dwell upon the land which I gave to my servant Jacob, the land upon which their fathers dwelt; yea, they shall dwell upon it: they and their children and their children's children forever. And my servant David shall be their prince forever."<sup>4</sup>

König<sup>5</sup> contends that "David" represents the restored Davidic dynasty. But his arguments are inefficacious. The fact that "David" has this figurative sense in a few passages of the Old Testament<sup>6</sup> is obviously inconclusive. It is true that "David" is styled prince (*nasi'*), and that this term, and not king (*melek*), is the official title of the rulers for whom Ezechiel legislates in the section dealing with the temple and the

<sup>1</sup>34, 1-15.

<sup>2</sup>34, 16. The translation of this and all other texts, cited from Ezechiel, is the author's.

<sup>3</sup>34, 23-24.

<sup>4</sup>37, 24-25.

<sup>5</sup>*Messianischen Weissagungen*<sup>2</sup>, p. 259.

<sup>6</sup>1 Kings, 12, 16; Ps. 132, 17.

community of the future.<sup>7</sup> But no importance can be attached to the use of the title "prince", for "David" is also called king,<sup>8</sup> and the prophet elsewhere assumes that the princes will in effect be kings.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Ezechiel does not say that these princes will be of Davidic origin, nor does he ascribe to them the same plenitude of authority as he does to "David." The only function of government explicitly assigned to them is that of providing for the sacrifices; all others are passed over in silence. In support of his contention König appeals to a somewhat parallel prophecy of Jeremias, but this also seems to apply to a personal Messiah rather than to a dynasty.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the collective interpretation of "David" forces us to assume that Ezechiel prophesied falsely. For post-exilic Judea was never at any time governed by a Davidic dynasty. Zorobabel was, indeed, a scion of David, but he ruled under the suzerainty of the Persians. The Hasmoneans, who reigned over Judea for some time, were Levitic and not Davidic in origin; and the Herods were Idumeans. Neither of these dynasties may be termed Davidic figuratively, by reason of the excellence and success of their administration.

Consequently, if Ezechiel's prediction is unconditional, it can only refer to an individual who is to exercise an everlasting dominion of mildness and justice. But a ruler, so exalted and supernatural, can be the Messiah alone, as is evident from a mere passing acquaintance with Old Testament prophecy. Hence Ezechiel's "David" must be Jesus Christ; he is Davidic by descent and by the fact that it is a man after God's own heart, although in a higher sense, but faintly foreshadowed by his royal progenitor.

We cannot escape these conclusions by supposing that the prophecy was conditional, promising a series of Davidic kings

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<sup>7</sup>44, 3.

<sup>8</sup>37, 24-25.

<sup>9</sup>43, 7.

<sup>10</sup>Jer. 23, 5.

if the Jews remained faithful to their religious and moral obligations. To begin with, there is nothing in the wording of the prophecy to warrant this assumption. Moreover, a comparison with other prophecies of similar import, which Ezechiel delivered on previous occasions, shows that it is absolute. Thus, when pronouncing the doom of Sedecias, the last king of Juda, Yahweh declares: "And thou, dishonored, wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come in the final period of iniquity, thus says Yahweh God: 'Off with the turban, and away with the crown! Nothing shall be what it is! Up with the low and down with the high! A ruin, a ruin, a ruin will I make it until he comes who has a rightful claim and to him will I give it.'"<sup>11</sup> These words foretell the downfall of the royal house of David; it is to be deprived of kingly sway until he comes who has a right to claim the throne, which then will be granted to him by Divine appointment. This prediction seems to allude to the Blessing of Juda,<sup>12</sup> in which the Messiah is described as "Shiloh", which should probably be written "Shelloh" and interpreted as, "He to whom it (the scepter) belongs." But there is a more decisive reason for considering Ezechiel's prophetic threat as Messianic. After the fall of Sedecias Juda was not again ruled by a Davidic king until the advent of Jesus Christ, the divinely predestined ruler of the Messianic kingdom. Now it is axiomatic that an inspired prophet cannot contradict himself: he cannot predict the abolition of royal power until the coming of the Messiah and at the same time promise an indefinite series of Davidic kings. Consequently Ezechiel's prophecy about "David" must be absolute and concern an individual Messias.

This inference is confirmed by the allegory of the cedar and the eagle. In the second half of the allegory Yahweh speaks thus:

"I also will take from the crest of the lofty cedar,  
From its topmost twigs I will pluck a tender one,

<sup>11</sup>21, 27.

<sup>12</sup>Gen. 49, 10.

And I will plant it on a high and massive mountain,  
 On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it.  
 And it shall produce branches and bear fruit  
 And become a great cedar.  
 And all the birds shall dwell beneath it;  
 All winged birds shall dwell in the shadow of its boughs.  
 And all the trees of the field shall know that I am Yahweh.  
 I humbled the lofty tree and raised up the lowly tree.  
 I caused the green tree to wither and the withered tree to bloom.  
 I, Yahweh, have spoken, and I will do it."<sup>13</sup>

As references to the first half of the allegory are unavoidable, a few remarks on its historical background and significance will be found useful. Joakim, the king of Juda, had revolted against Nabuchodonosor, his Babylonian overlord. In the course of the resulting hostilities Joakim died and was succeeded by his son Joachin. Meanwhile, Nabuchodonosor besieged Jerusalem, forced the city to capitulate, and carried Joachin captive to Babylon. In his place he appointed as king, Sedecias, the uncle of Joachin. Relying on the mirage of Egyptian assistance, Sedecias rebelled against Nabuchodonosor. The consequences were disastrous: Juda was depopulated, Jerusalem destroyed, and Sedecias was blinded and deported to Babylon.

These historical events and personages are symbolically represented in the first half of the allegory. The great cedar designates the royal house of David. The first great eagle denotes Nabuchodonosor. The crest or topmost branches, which the eagle tears off and carries to Babylon, is Joachin. The seed of the land, which he plants like a willow, and which grows into a lowly vine, is Sedecias, who was a native Judean. The second great eagle to which the vine turns for aid is the Pharaoh of Egypt.

These preliminary observations will suffice to make our argument concerning the second half of the allegory intelligible. The cedar again symbolizes the royal house of David. The twig or shoot which Yahweh takes from the cedar must rep-

<sup>13</sup>17, 22-24.

resent an individual scion of David. For in the first part the topmost branch and the seed of the land each denote an individual king. Now in the second part the action of Yahweh is intended to present a contrast to that of Nabuchodonosor; hence the shoot taken and planted by Yahweh must also denote a single person. This descendent of David is symbolized by a tender shoot to show that he and his family were in humble circumstances at the time when the Divine choice was made. Consequently, the house of David is designated as a lofty cedar not because of its present powerful position but because of its founder, its past history, and its destiny to be the racial stock of the Messias. The land of Israel, where this shoot is planted, is called a high and massive mountain on account of the religious preeminence enjoyed by the chosen people.

The dominion of the Davidic king will ever grow in extent and glory until it embraces all the nations of the earth. This is indicated by the slip which grows into a mighty cedar, affording refuge to birds of every feather. That this is the meaning of the metaphor is evident from Ezechiele's allegory about the Pharaoh, in which his kingdom is pictured as a cedar in which all the birds of the heavens build their nests.<sup>14</sup> Nabuchodonosor's empire is depicted by the same metaphor in the book of Daniel.<sup>15</sup>

The lofty and green tree, which is withered and laid low, symbolizes the humiliation of the house of David, whilst the lowly and withered tree, which is raised up and made to bloom, designates the exaltation of the house of David through its most glorious representative. The trees of the field, which acknowledge the power and dignity of Yahweh in this transformation, represents the Gentile nations.

There can be no doubt, then, that this Davidic king, who is appointed by Yahweh, and who holds universal sway, is the Messias. In this allegory, therefore, Ezechiele teaches that there will be no divinely constituted king of Israel until the advent

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<sup>14</sup>31, 6.

<sup>15</sup>4, 8ff.

of God's Anointed. Hence "David" of the previously discussed prophecy cannot be a series of divinely appointed post-exilic monarchs but must be the Messiah.

### THE RESURRECTION

One of Ezechiel's most impressive allegories concerns the future resurrection of the people.<sup>16</sup> Brought by divine power to the Babylonian plain, and supernaturally enlightened, Ezechiel sees the ordinarily bare and commonplace plain covered with a vast number of human bones, so disjointed and dry that every hope of a natural revival is excluded. At the command of Yahweh he prophesies that they shall be united and clothed with flesh; his prophecy is at once fulfilled. Again at the Divine bidding he prophesies that the prostrate bodies shall be reanimated; immediately "Spirit entered into them, and they lived, and they stood upon their feet, a host exceeding great."<sup>17</sup> According to the authoritative declaration of Yahweh these bones represented not the actual remains of the departed but the seemingly hopeless condition of Israel: the exiles deemed Israel politically dead and utterly incapable of recovering national life.<sup>18</sup> The vision, then, inculcates not the resurrection of the flesh but the restoration of the people as a national entity.

How, then, is the allegory Messianic? In the first place, the Israelites as a nation are promised continued existence of indefinite duration. Now this cannot mean merely political existence but must denote life as the chosen people of God, for, only under this aspect, were they the special object of Divine solicitude. But since the limited Hebrew theocracy was to be succeeded by the universal Messianic kingdom, this prediction of continuous duration implies the inclusion of the Israelites in the spiritual realm of Christ.

Secondly, it is said that the number of the restored Israelites will swell to a host of vast proportions. This declaration re-

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<sup>16</sup>37, 1-4.

<sup>17</sup>37, 10.

<sup>18</sup>37, 11.

minds us of the Divine assurance to Abraham that his posterity would be as the dust of the earth, the stars of the heavens, and the sand of the sea.<sup>19</sup> This countless posterity comprises not only the faithful Israelites of the Old Testament but also pre-eminently those who profess belief in the Messias. For St. Paul emphatically informs us that the genuine descendants of Abraham are those who imitate his sterling faith, be they Jew or Gentile.<sup>20</sup>

### REUNION

In contrast to the preceding, the symbolic act by which Ezechiel foretold of the unity of the chosen people was an explicit and exclusively Messianic prophecy. Taking two sticks, he inscribed one with the name *Juda* and the other with the name *Joseph*. One represents the southern kingdom, which was dominated by the tribe of Juda, whilst the other designated the northern monarchy, in which Ephraim, a tribe originating from Joseph, was prominent. Then Ezechiel joined the sticks lengthwise in his hand, making them appear as one. Thus would the age-long division of the chosen people be converted into a union of all the Israelites under one Davidic ruler.<sup>21</sup> Yahweh proclaims His unitive design thus: "Then they shall no more be two peoples nor shall they be divided into two kingdoms any longer. . . . And my servant David shall be king over them, and there shall be one shepherd for all of them."<sup>22</sup>

God, undoubtedly, counseled, although He did not strictly enjoin, the return not only of the Babylonian Jews but of all the Israelites to Palestine. This is evident from Ezechiel's instructions for the distribution of the land among the twelve tribes.<sup>23</sup> But in reality only a minority of the exiled Jews availed themselves of the opportunity to resettle in their an-

<sup>19</sup>Gen. 13, 15; 15, 6; 17, 1ff.; 18, 18; 22, 16.

<sup>20</sup>Rom. 4, 11; Gal. 3, 7.

<sup>21</sup>37, 15ff.

<sup>22</sup>37, 22, 24.

<sup>23</sup>47, 13—48, 35.

cestral country; they were not joined by an appreciable number of the northern Israelites.

If all of the Israelites had returned, and if their descendants had accepted Christ as the Messiah, they would have been actually united on Palestinian soil under a Davidic king when Christ founded his Church. The prophecy, however, has not been altogether frustrated by the indifference and hostility of the Jews. The necessity incumbent upon all Israelites to join the Church was first proclaimed in Palestine. Theoretically, therefore, the prophesied reunion was fully achieved. In every part of the world, from the earliest times down to the present, there has ever been a steady, though not large, stream of converts from Judaism into the Church. The ultimate return of the Jews, as a national group, is guaranteed by the authority of St. Paul.<sup>24</sup>

#### REGENERATION

Another striking prophecy concerns the regeneration of the land and the people. Addressing the mountains of Israel, Yahweh declares that they shall be repopled with men and domestic beasts, and that they shall no longer incur the reproach of devouring human beings.<sup>25</sup> By this He means that the land shall no more be harassed by such catastrophes as war, plague, famine, and wild beasts, which in pre-exilic times had taken such a heavy toll of human lives. These calamities were due to the sins of the Israelites. The prophecy, therefore, is conditional, demanding obedience to the Divine commands for its realization. The repeated misfortunes of the post-exilic Jews, which culminated in the utter ruin of their state, were caused by their delinquency. The prophecy can be termed Messianic only if we suppose that the promise of immunity from devastation pertained primarily to the Messianic kingdom and merely secondarily to its type, the Promised Land. No outward force, but personal guilt alone, can deprive its members of supernatural

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<sup>24</sup>Rom. 11, 25.

<sup>25</sup>36, 1-15.

life. Nor will the Church be ever so ravaged as to become extinct before the end of time. This assumption, however, may be putting too much into the meaning of the prophecy.

The regeneration promised to the people has a negative and a positive aspect. The negative aspect is thus explained by Yahweh: "And I will sprinkle pure water upon you, so that you shall be cleansed. From all your impurities and from all your idolatries will I cleanse you."<sup>26</sup> The sprinkling with pure water is evidently a figurative expression for the Divine act by which sin is remitted. It is not difficult to understand why this metaphor was chosen, for washing and sprinkling with water are prescribed in the Mosaic code to denote the removal of ritual defilement.<sup>27</sup> The uncleanness from which the Israelites are to be purified is not merely ritual but also moral, as is clear from the specific mention of idolatry. The verb "tihhar", which describes the act of cleansing, is used in the Old Testament to define the remission of sin and of its penalties. Yahweh, therefore, seems to say that He will pardon not only the guilt but also the temporal punishment of all the past transgressions of the Jews. This, of course, supposes that they will be duly contrite.

The prophecy, however, seems to have an additional deeper meaning. When describing the restoration of the sinful Jews, the prophets sometimes refer not only to some era of grace of the immediate future but also to the Messianic age of which this era is a prelude and a type. Thus Isaias glorifies the Redemption in his beautiful poems on the return of the exiles.<sup>28</sup> Joel primarily contemplates the day of Pentecost and the subsequent ages of the Church when he predicts a prodigal outpouring of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Ezechiel's vision is focused especially upon the sacrament of Baptism when he foretells the forgiveness of sin by the sprinkling of pure water.

<sup>26</sup> 36, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Num. 19, 1ff.; Lev. 15, 19.

<sup>28</sup> 40, 1ff.

<sup>29</sup> 2, 28-29.

One positive effect of the restoration is expressed in these words: "And I will give you a new heart and will put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and will bring it about that you walk in my statutes, keep my ordinances, and carry them out."<sup>30</sup> The heart denotes the mind and will, whilst the spirit designates the dispositions which animate them. In the past, Israelites had possessed a heart like stone, impervious to Divine inspiration and failing to perform its vital religious functions. In the future, God will give them a heart of flesh, susceptible to Divine impressions, and fit to be the center of a new religious life. In the past, the Israelites had been motivated by evil dispositions; in the future Yahweh will infuse a new source of energy into them, His own spirit. Thus, being radically transformed, they will be capable of observing the Divine law. As Ezechiel observes elsewhere,<sup>31</sup> this transformation of the heart and the spirit supposes the cooperation of the Jews. Evidently the Holy Spirit and His manifold graces are meant which enable man to overcome his concupiscences and supernaturalize his actions, although they do not dispense with the free consent of his will. Other prophets similarly predict the effusion of the Divine Spirit in the coming idyllic age.<sup>32</sup>

A glance at the post-exilic record of the Jews shows that the anticipations of the prophet were but imperfectly fulfilled. The Jews manifested a decided improvement over their forefathers, but were nevertheless not without grave faults. At the time of Christ their outlook on life was so materialistic and their religion was so devoid of inner vitality that the mass of the people could not, or would not, accept their long awaited Messias.

On the other hand, the New Testament testifies that the prodigal effusion of the Holy Spirit foreseen by the prophets was not completely realized until the foundation of Christ's

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<sup>30</sup>Is. 26, 26-27.

<sup>31</sup>Is. 31.

<sup>32</sup>Is. 42, 1; 44, 3; 59, 21; Agg. 2, 5; Joel, 2, 28-29.

Church. This gift of the Spirit was inaugurated on the feast of Pentecost<sup>33</sup> and will continue to be lavished on the faithful till the end of time.<sup>34</sup> Hence if we wish to see the full efficacy of the Spirit envisioned by Ezechiel, we must look beyond the post-exilic period to the spiritual Israel, to her wonderful propagation, her extraordinary sanctity, and her inexhaustible fecundity in well-doing.

God explains another feature of the impending restoration in these terms: "And I will make a covenant of peace for them; it shall be an eternal covenant."<sup>35</sup> It is to be noted that this covenant differs from the bilateral Sinaitic covenant. By the latter Jahweh obliged Himself to grant the Israelites certain privileges if they observed the Divine precepts; if they failed to do so, the covenant was broken on each side, and the Israelites were subject to dire penalties.<sup>36</sup> But Ezechiel's covenant is unilateral; it is not so much *with* the Israelites as *for* them; it cannot be nullified but is everlasting; it is characterized by peace. But these are attributes of the Messianic covenant.<sup>37</sup>

After the new covenant is established, penitent Jerusalem, which symbolizes the Jewish people, will receive Sodom and Samaria as her daughters.<sup>38</sup> This signifies that the regenerated people will become the nucleus of a new community, to which nations, guilty of similar sins, will belong. But the conversion of the nations and their union with the chosen people is characteristic of the Messianic age.<sup>39</sup>

The final feature of the restoration will be the following: "And I will set my sanctuary in the midst of them forever. And my dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And the nations shall know that I am Yahweh, who sanctifies Israel, when my sanc-

<sup>33</sup>Acts, 2, 16ff.

<sup>34</sup>Rom. 8, 23; Eph. i, 13ff; 4, 30.

<sup>35</sup>37, 26.

<sup>36</sup>Ex. 19, 5ff; Lev. 26, 15ff; Deut. 31, 16ff.

<sup>37</sup>Is. 9, 6; 11, 6; 55, 3; 59, 21; 61, 8; Jer. 31, 31.

<sup>38</sup>16, 61.

<sup>39</sup>Is. 2, 2ff.

tuary is in the midst of them forever."<sup>40</sup> This prediction cannot refer merely to the post-exilic temple. It did not endure forever, but was destroyed in 70 A.D. Although the returned Jews practically forsook the worship of alien gods, they were not conspicuous for the whole-hearted devotion to Yahweh which the prophecy seems to presage. Nor did the rebuilt temple lead a considerable number of the Gentiles to recognize Yahweh as the true God and the author of Israel's sanctity. Hence the prophecy applies only in a limited way to the post-exilic sanctuary. For its complete realization we must turn to the Church of Christ. She is everlasting, eminent for her knowledge and worship of God, and affords conclusive evidence that she was founded by God, is sanctified by Him, and made the sanctuary of all mankind.

#### THE TEMPLE

Ezekiel's specifications for the rebuilding of the sanctuary<sup>41</sup> are so detailed and differ in so many particulars from those of the Solomonic and post-exilic temples of Zorobabel and Herod that they have always aroused considerable speculation as to the meaning of his visionary edifice. Did he desire his plan to be carried into execution, or was it a mere symbol or allegory of the Messianic kingdom?

Let us try to find an answer to this question by a careful weighing of the facts. Ezekiel's angelic guide gives him detailed measurements of the outer and inner courts, the complex gateways, the temple, the chambers in the courts, the pavements, and the kitchens. Although the height of the prospective structures is in most instances left undetermined, the ground-plan is sufficiently outlined to enable a skilled builder to execute the project. The directions for the construction and consecration of the altar of holocausts are so specific that its actual erection seems to be contemplated.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>37, 26.

<sup>41</sup>40, 1ff.

<sup>42</sup>43, 13-27.

Equally detailed are the regulations for the cult to be practised in the temple. The place where the prince is to worship is defined. Even the manner in which the people are to enter and leave the edifice is prescribed. The priests and subordinate officials are carefully distinguished. Rules are laid down for the conduct of the priests and provision is made for their sustenance. The number of sacrifices to be offered daily and on certain specified festivals is stated. The domain to be assigned to the priests and Levites is determined exactly.

In view of these minute, business-like and prosaic prescriptions, the conclusion seems irresistible that the prophet really desires his temple to be built and his worship to be performed. For this reason we find ourselves unable to agree with those who ascribe an allegorical meaning to the prophet's vision.<sup>43</sup> If we assume this explanation, we can not discover a reasonable interpretation for many of his architectural and ritual details. Besides, Ezechiel received the following command from God: "And make known to them the form of the house, its arrangements, its exits, its entrances, and all its laws, and all its statutes. And write them before their eyes that they may keep all its laws, and its statutes, and carry them out."<sup>44</sup> This seems to prove conclusively that the prophet's regulations are to be taken literally and not figuratively. How can the rules relating to the temple be carried into execution, if they are merely symbolic and refer to the distant Messianic kingdom? We grant, however, that Ezechiel's temple, like the Mosaic tabernacle and Solomon's sanctuary, which it resembles in its general outlines, is a type of the Church of Christ.

It may be objected that the prophet's program for the temple and the cult was not followed by the post-exilic Jews. This does not prove, however, that they are allegorical. The Jews, most probably, considered his directions not as strict precepts but as counsels which they were free to disregard on account of the difficulty or impossibility of fulfilling them under the special circumstances of the times.

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<sup>43</sup>Knabenbauer, *Comment. in Ezechielem.*

<sup>44</sup>43, 11.

In connection with this topic we must consider the outer, eastern gateway of the temple. Because the glory of the Lord had passed through this gateway to take up its abode in the sanctuary, it was to be forever closed; no mortal, except the prince, was ever to enter by its portals.<sup>45</sup> Many devotional writers in both the Eastern and Western Church have applied this passage to the Blessed Virgin, who preserved her virginal integrity "ante partum, in partu, et post partum." Since Ezechiel's temple is not allegorical, this cannot be the literal sense of the passage. Nor is there any solid ground for considering it the typical sense. This view is not supported by any text of the New Testament, nor may it claim the unanimous consent of the Fathers. At most, therefore, it is a pious accommodation of the words to the Mother of God.

#### THE MIRACULOUS STREAM

There is one section, however, of Ezechiel's vision of the temple which is allegorical. A stream issues from beneath the entrance to the vestibule of the temple, flows eastward, passing the southern side of the altar, and emerges in the open on the right side of the outer eastern gateway. Beginning as a trickle, it rapidly swells into a mighty river, which sweeps down through the Jordan valley into the Dead Sea. Ezechiel is told that it will sweeten the briny waters of this sea so that fish will abound as in the Mediterranean, and fishermen will ply their craft along its shore. But the swamps and pools will not be changed that they may supply the Israelites with salt. Along the banks of this miraculous stream there are many trees, which will ever be green; every month they will bear choice fruit and their leaves will heal diseases.<sup>46</sup>

We cannot assume that God, even conditionally, intended to work the stupendous miracles demanded by the literal interpretation of this prophecy. Now in the Old Testament abundance of water and exuberant vegetation are frequently used

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<sup>45</sup>43, 1ff; 44, 1-2.

<sup>46</sup>47, 1-12.

as metaphors for spiritual blessings.<sup>47</sup> This gives us a clue to the meaning of the passage. The sanctuary will be a source of inexhaustible spiritual graces to the people; they will produce spiritual life where formerly there was death; they will furnish supernatural sustenance to the soul and healing for its maladies. These benefits will be analogous to the physical effects which would be produced by a miraculous stream flowing into the valley of the Jordan and the Dead Sea.

We think, then, that the vision is rather an implied similitude than a strict allegory; it resembles the allegory of the Prince of Tyre. In illustration we quote a few significant sentences from this allegory: "In Eden, the garden of God, thou wast, jewels of all kinds were thy covering. . . . With the Cherub I placed thee. Thou wast on the holy mountain of God. In the midst of stones of fire thou didst walk."<sup>48</sup> God means that the prince of Tyre, in his gifts and privileges, was similar to Adam in paradise.

On account of the marvelous blessings promised the allegory of the stream cannot be restricted to the Judean state but must refer primarily to the spiritual exuberance of the Messianic age. The Church recognizes the appropriateness of the application in the antiphon which she prescribes for the Paschal season: "I saw water flowing from the right side of the temple, alleluia." More conclusive than this liturgical adaptation is the fact that other prophets also picture the Messianic blessings as a stream emanating from Sion.<sup>49</sup>

But the closest and most remarkable parallel to Ezechie's allegory is found in a vision of the Apocalypse, which describes the felicity of the new Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup> From the throne, upon which God and the Lamb are sitting, St. John sees a stream of crystal clearness flowing through the principal way of the new Jerusalem. It is flanked on either side by trees of

<sup>47</sup>Is. 12, 3; 35, 6; Amos, 9, 13; Jer. 31, 12; Joel, 3, 18.

<sup>48</sup>28, 13-14.

<sup>49</sup>Joel, 3, 18; Zach. 13, 1; 14, 8.

<sup>50</sup>22, 1-2.

life, which produce fruit each month, and whose leaves are for the healing of nations. The stream proceeding from the throne seems to designate the Holy Spirit manifesting Himself through the operation of His grace. The countless favors which He bestows are denoted by the never failing fruits of the trees; they nourish the supernatural life of the soul until it culminates in the unending bliss of heaven. The medicinal leaves represent the graces which heal the spiritual ailments of the soul. Both fruit and the leaves are derived from the tree of life to show that they were acquired by the merits of Jesus Christ.

#### THE APPORTIONMENT OF LAND

Another section of Ezechiel, to which some have given a merely symbolic significance,<sup>51</sup> is that relating to the apportionment of the land.<sup>52</sup> Yahweh bids the restored exiles to divide the Promised Land equally among the twelve tribes. This land no longer includes the territory east of the Jordan. This river and the Dead Sea form the eastern border, whilst the other boundaries agree roughly with those proposed in the books of Numbers and Josue.<sup>53</sup>

God, therefore, implicitly invites not only the Jews but also the scattered Israelites of the erstwhile northern kingdom to return, and promises to secure for them the eventual possession of the land whose boundaries He defines. This promise is, of course, conditional: it supposes that the returned exiles reform their lives and dedicate themselves to the Divine service.

It cannot be said that the northern Israelites had entirely disappeared, so that an invitation of this kind was quite useless. As the book of Tobias shows, some adhered faithfully to their ancestral religion; many others may have retained some tattered remains of their ancient beliefs and practices. Nor is the division of the land into more or less equal parts altogether impossible. Hence if the Israelites had obeyed the Divine in-

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<sup>51</sup>Knabenbauer, *op. cit.*; Heinisch, *Ezekiel*.

<sup>52</sup>47, 13-48, 35.

<sup>53</sup>Num. 34, 1-15; Jos. 15, 1-4.

vation, and if they had complied with the required conditions after their return, Divine Providence would have ultimately assured them possession of the promised territory. Thus the apportionment of the land prescribed by the prophet would have been possible. The failure, therefore, of the prophecy to be fulfilled must be ascribed to the Israelites themselves and not to any inherent mystic meaning, rendering it inapplicable to the chosen people.

This completes our survey of all the predictions of Ezechiel which are Messianic, either expressly and exclusively, or inclusively, or typically. The thought of the prophet is frequently deep and mysterious, but it yields a rich reward to the courageous student.

