# Daniel and Ezekiel Compare Notes

The article compares the way Daniel and Ezekiel describe the causes of exile, purity and defilement, holiness, images and idols, their visions and the way they relate to their vocation, the end that comes within ordinary time and the final End, the “son of man,” Israel and its past, Israel’s death and resurrection, the experience of being a servant of God, and the Spirit of God.

Key words: Ezekiel, Daniel, exile, holiness spirit, hope

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## Introduction

It is fitting that Ezekiel and Daniel come next to each other in the Christian Scriptures, because their lives overlapped in time and place. Ezekiel tells us (1:1-3) that God appeared to him in the fifth year of Jehoiachin’s exile, 597, so the year is now 593. It was “the thirtieth year.” If it was the thirtieth year of his life, it was the year he became a priest. In exile, he could not function as a priest in the temple, but he might still undertake priestly ministries such as teaching and counseling. His birth about 623 would be just after Josiah’s reformation of Judah’s life and its relationship with Yahweh in 626 (2 Kings 22:1 – 23:25); another possibility about “the thirtieth year” is that it relates to that event.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The book of Daniel has Daniel and his colleagues taken to Babylon in the third year of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin’s father (1:1), which implies a link with the circumstances to which Jeremiah 25 refers and a date around 605.[[2]](#footnote-2) They are “young men,” which suggests they would have been born about the same time as Ezekiel and grew up in Jerusalem at the same time as him, so they might have known each other. During that time, Josiah lost his life, Jehoahaz reversed the effects of his reformation, and Jehoiakim continued the same policies (2 Kings 23:28 – 36). At different points Ezekiel and Daniel both end up among the Judahites who are forced migrants in Babylon, and one could use one’s imagination to picture them meeting each other there, too. To put it more technically, In this paper I shall engage in an exercise in intertextuality, which in this case means asking what happens when one puts two texts together.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Why Did the Forced Migration Happen?

Ezekiel and Daniel could have compared notes on why they and their people were in exile. Both in 605 and in 597 groups of Jerusalemites became forced migrants, with Daniel in the first group and Ezekiel in the second; it happened again in 587, when Jeremiah was also taken off to Egypt. Second Kings 23:26 – 24:20 affirms that in 597 and 587 Yahweh was acting in wrath against Jerusalem for the waywardness that went back to the time of Josiah’s grandfather, and Ezekiel’s perspective is the same.

Neither 2 Kings 24 nor Daniel says anything along those lines about that earlier moment when Daniel and his colleagues were taken off. While 2 Kings may take it for granted, the book of Daniel begins with the simple declaration that the Lord let Jehoiakim fall into Nebuchadnezzar’s power, and gives no theological explanation. The omission fits with the assumption implied elsewhere in the Scriptures that there are things that happen in the world and in the life of the people of God that God deliberately makes happen because we have done what is wrong in his eyes, but there are other things that just happen. Sometimes God sends an epidemic or famine, or makes a woman infertile; sometimes these things just happen. Yahweh is sovereign in relation to both sorts of event, but the first kind have a specific divine intention attached to them. While they may be acts of chastisement, they may mean God is testing people or disciplining them to seek to draw them back to him. Or there may be no reason, though God can still then use them. It wouldn’t be surprising if God let Jehoiakim fall into Nebuchadnezzar’s power to try to get Jehoiakim to turn around; Jeremiah talks along those lines. If Ezekiel and Daniel compared notes, they would see various possibilities concerning why their people were forced into migration and how they should look at that experience.

Why were Daniel and Ezekiel in particular among the exiles? Many people in Jerusalem deserved it, but they were surely not among them. They were committed to Yahweh’s way. Sometimes individuals within the people of God suffer because they are part of the bigger whole that they belong to. They suffer with them and because of them. These two suffer because they belong to a priestly family and to a family within the administration. Such individuals may then suffer for their people: they may be able to make their undeserved suffering an offering to God. Their suffering makes it possible for Ezekiel to have a ministry to his people and for Daniel to have a ministry to the empire. They could not have functioned as prophet and as adviser to the empire if they had not been taken off into exile. Neither Daniel nor Ezekiel says that God caused them to become migrants so that they could have a ministry, but it was a result.

## Purity and Defilement

For both Daniel and Ezekiel, becoming migrants raised questions about purity and defilement. Purity is not inherently a moral category but a religious one, a sacral one, though it can be adapted so as to become a moral category or used as a metaphor for describing things that are morally right or wrong. Further, doing things that are morally wrong does convey impurity. They convey taboo. They make it impossible to be in God’s presence without cleansing as well as repentance. But by their nature purity rules also provide identity markers; they remind individuals of who they are, and they help keep the community together.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A country like Babylon, devoted to the service of other gods, is bound to convey defilement. The first problem that Daniel feels about being there, and specifically about being on the king’s payroll, is that he has to eat the king’s food, so he asks if he can just have vegetarian food (Dan 1:8-12); the implication may be that the meat would come from animals that had been offered to the Babylonian gods. Although Daniel accepts the king’s education and the new name Belteshazzar that makes it sound as if he prays to a Babylonian god, apparently he knows he must draw a line at eating the king’s food even though he knows that idols don’t really exist (1 Cor 8).

Ezekiel’s first problem is similar (Ezek 4:9-17). Yahweh tells him to bake bread on a fire made with human feces. Ezekiel is disgusted, for a different reason from the one that would strike modern Westerners. Yahweh tells him he can use animal feces instead, and apparently he accepts that alternative. Cooking on animal feces is common in traditional societies, but using human feces would convey defilement. The passage does not indicate why it would do so. The only scriptural passage that implies a related assumption is the rule about defecating outside the camp when the army is on a campaign (Deut 23:9-14 [10-15]), but that rule seems more concerned with the act of defecation than the results; it refers to the need to avoid exposure (‘*erwâ*). Yet it does follow a rule about sexual emissions that make a man unclean, and it may reflect one of the principles underlying many purity rules: they safeguard the bounded nature of the body. Things that come out of the body such as semen, blood, and feces cause defilement. And Ezekiel compares the action that Yahweh requires with eating something from which the blood had not been drained. Yahweh’s instruction to Ezekiel thus requires him to do something “bad” (*ra‘*; Deut 23:9 [10]). It raises the same issues as the story of Daniel and the king’s food supplies. Yahweh is telling Ezekiel to do something that would bring home the defilement of life in a land characterized by defilement, and to behave as if he is not an Israelite bound by the rules that distinguish Israel from other peoples. A priest exists to maintain these rules, to safeguard Israel’s distinctiveness as Yahweh’s people. In a different context in the outworking of God’s purpose, Peter will resist God’s instruction to forgo the implications of those rules and God will insist that he does as he is told (Acts 10). In this context God yields to Ezekiel. Daniel had asked the Babylonian palace official to test him; perhaps God was testing Ezekiel. The distinctiveness of Israel and of a priest continue to be important.

## Holiness or Sacredness

Holiness or sacredness or sanctity is related to purity, as Deut 23:9-14 [10-15] shows by its reference to holiness. In Daniel, Mount Zion is holy, Jerusalem is holy, the temple is holy (and it is the place towards which Daniel prays), the covenant is holy, and the people of Israel are holy (9:20-26; 11:28-30; 12:7). The book of Daniel doesn’t use the word “holy” when it describes the temple objects appropriated by Nebuchadnezzar, but the sense of scandal about what Nebuchadnezzar and his successor do with them implies their holiness (1:2; 5:2-4). Such things become holy because of their association with the God whom Isaiah characteristically calls “the Holy One of Israel.”

When the book of Daniel refers to “a holy one” (4:13, 17, 23 [10, 14, 20]; 8:13), it is speaking not of the one God but of a different kind of supernatural being, one of the beings that the Scriptures elsewhere call angels. Peoples who think there are a number of gods can use the term “holy ones” to refer to all those beings, but the Old Testament knows that there is an absolute difference between Yahweh the one God and other so-called deities, between *the* Holy One and other holy ones. English can make this distinction by using an initial capital letter to differentiate between God and the gods, the Holy One and the holyones*,* but in Hebrew *’ĕlōhîm* can refer both to God and gods, and so can *qādôš*. In Daniel, the ambiguity arises in the words of Nebuchadnezzar and of the queen mother in Belshazzar’s time (4:8, 9, 18 [11, 12, 15]; 5:11). They speak in a way that may imply thinking that Daniel is indwelt by “the spirit of the holy ones,” but Israelites listening to these stories would know that really Daniel was endowed with “the spirit of the Holy One.” One effect of Daniel’s own references to holy ones (who are servants of the one Holy One) is to remind Christians that the heavens are a more densely populated place than we may remember, as Revelation assumes. There may be more interplay between the heavens and the earth than Christians allow for. In the New Testament, angels appear frequently, as they do in Daniel. While such appearing might be confined to scriptural times and to the special events of those times (and the New Testament also warns about paying angels too much attention), we might be unwise simply to assume it. It is possible to entertain angels unawares (Heb 13:2).

Ezekiel refers once to Yahweh as the Holy One *in* Israel (39:7) and in that same context refers to Yahweh’s holy *name*. A person’s name sums up who they are; in principle, then, Yahweh’s holy name implies Yahweh’s nature as the Holy One. In addition, someone’s name suggests their reputation. Both significances apply when Ezekiel speaks of Yahweh’s holy name. He laments its being profaned (20:39; 36:20-22; 39:7; 43:7-8). Being profaned does not imply blasphemy; it denotes treating something as ordinary when it is not. Profaning the Sabbath means treating it as an ordinary day. Profaning Yahweh’s name is the opposite to acknowledging it (39:7). Yahweh is passionate about his name and he will make it holy (36:23; 39:25).

More often, Ezekiel talks about the holiness of things, as Daniel sometimes does: about Yahweh’s house, its accoutrements, its offerings, its priests (e.g., 20:40; 22:8, 26; 36:38; 41:4; 44:8, 27; 48:10-14). Given that he is a priest, it’s not surprising that he speaks much in terms of holiness. It was a priest’s responsibility to make sure that things that were supposed to be holy stayed holy, and to teach people about it (44:23; cf. Lev 10:10-11). Ezekiel also speaks about making things holy and making Israel holy. Yahweh’s holy place will be among the Israelites, and it will be an indication that Yahweh makes them holy (37:26-28). It was in this connection that Yahweh gave them his Sabbaths, which they were to make holy; but they profaned them, treated them as ordinary by working and trading on the Sabbath (20:12-13, 20; 44:24).

Like purity, holiness is not in itself a moral category, though it can also be adapted so as to become a moral category. As the Holy One, Yahweh is the one who embodies integrity and faithfulness; Canaanite or Babylonian “holy ones” do not, as the stories about them show. Perhaps it is on the basis of this link that in Yahweh’s case holiness becomes a moral category, and it then comes to imply a moral category when applied to his people. They are called to be holy like him, which implies being people of integrity and faithfulness, like him. Ezekiel and Daniel do not work out that logic; they simply stress the fact that Yahweh as the Holy One is distinctive over against all other beings in the heavens and on the earth. By associating Israel, its land, and its temple with himself, Yahweh makes them holy. Their vocation as a people is to maintain that holiness in order to witness to the holiness of the one they serve. And the vocation of a priest is to encourage that witness.

Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and the New Testament speak less of holiness than Ezekiel does, and the New Testament does use holiness as a moral category. It thus implies that the church, too, witnesses to the God who is uniquely holy by itself being holy. The New Testament also speaks of (for instance) the holy city and a holy kiss; it continues to use holiness as a religious or sacral category. Unlike Daniel, Ezekiel does not use the expression “holy city” and he in fact implies that the city as such is profane; it is the priestly and sanctuary area that is holy (48:8-22). The New Testament does not refer to the holiness of the Sabbath, though Genesis 1 – 2 suggests that the category of holiness is built into creation: God makes the Sabbath holy from creation.

## Images and Idols

Images are an issue in Daniel and Ezekiel, in different ways. Daniel’s three colleagues are among the people required to bow down to an image that Nebuchadnezzar sets up, but they will not do so. Their accusers report to the king that “they do not serve your gods and do not bow down to the image that you have set up” (3:12). It’s not clear whether the object is a statue of the king or a divine image, but it makes little difference to the three men. Admittedly, they would know that bowing down need not imply worship; people can properly bow down to a king (e.g., 2 Sam 16:4). Bowing down need not be wrong. But Mordecai would not bow down to Haman, perhaps recognizing that would imply a subservience that one owes only to God (Esther 3:5). If Nebuchadnezzar’s statue represents the king, the three men may imply it has similar significance. The story of this image follows the story of another image (2:31-45) that stands for the empire over which Nebuchadnezzar rules. He is the head; the rest of the image embodies the regimes that will follow him. So both king and god can be represented by an image, and the difference between king and god is fluid. Daniel’s colleagues possibly think it wise to be on the safe side, by not bowing down. In another sense, they know, it will turn out to seem the unsafe side, because it endangers their lives, but actually it will be the safe side (the story thus parallels that of Mordecai and Esther).

Ezekiel’s concern is with images in Jerusalem; he implies that “idolatry is the quintessential cause of the Babylonian exile.”[[5]](#footnote-5) English translations traditionally refer to “idols,” which is an ambiguous term. It can denote images of Yahweh, but it can also denote a god other than the real God, an alien god who is represented by an image. In connection with some alien gods, Ezekiel uses the word *’ĕlîlîm* (30:13), which is close to the word *’ĕlōhîm*; yet these allegedly godlike beings are really just godlets or nonentities. Elsewhere Ezekiel speaks of “images” (*ṣelem*; 16:17) and explicitly of “offensive images” (7:20). An image is a statue (*ṣemel*), but “a statue that arouses passion”: it infuriates Yahweh (8:3, 5). In Jerusalem it could also seem that everyone has “a figure” or “carving” (*maskît*; 8:12). Ezekiel’s favorite word for images is “lumps” (*gillûmîm*; e.g., 6:4; 8:10; 14:3; 20:7; thirty-eight times altogether), a word significantly close to the expression for lumps of human feces (*gelălê ādām*), which we have come across already (4:12, 15). So some expressions may refer to images of an alien god or to images of Yahweh. And there were indeed periods when Judah worshiped other gods and had images of them, though Josiah’s reformation had removed them from official worship in Jerusalem. So the images Ezekiel castigates might be images of Yahweh, but Jeremiah and Ezekiel likely think that images of other gods and images of Yahweh are really not very different. If people think they can image Yahweh, it’s not really Yahweh they are imaging. It can’t represent Yahweh, the acting and speaking God (see the argument in Deut 4). People may think they are worshiping Yahweh when they use an image, but it’s not the real Yahweh that they are worshiping.

## Visions and Vocations

Ezekiel and Daniel are both visionaries. Along with John in Revelation, they are the most extraordinary visionaries in the Scriptures. They are actually the biggest influences that God uses in enabling John to see and to describe what he sees. The content of the seeing is partly the majesty of God in heaven and partly the intentions God intends to fulfill on earth. Each is present in both Ezekiel and Daniel, but the former more in Ezekiel, the latter more in Daniel.

A vision sets Ezekiel going as a prophet (Ezek 1 – 3), a vision more spectacular than any other scriptural vision apart from John’s. Indeed, everything about Ezekiel is more spectacular than what appears anywhere else.[[6]](#footnote-6) The vision came in that thirtieth year when he would become a priest and have a responsibility to teach his people. Priests in Jerusalem were leading the people in worship by means of the images that we have just noted, or at least that they were colluding with such worship. Neither Jeremiah nor Ezekiel says that the priests who had been taken into forced migration in 597 were also guilty in this way. Perhaps Ezekiel’s father, Buzi, was a priest in the mold of Hilkiah earlier (2 Kgs 23) and of Jehoshua later (Zech 3), and had brought up his family to be faithful to Yahweh in accordance with the Torah. But even a pastor’s kid needs a vocation if he is to be a prophet, and Ezekiel’s monumental vision gives him a commission as a teacher that goes beyond anything that would be regularly expected of a priest. Henceforth “two spheres intersect in the person of Ezekiel, the life of the priest and that of the prophet.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although Ezekiel describes his experience as a vision of God, what he reports is really a vision of God’s means of transport, a throne sitting on a platform that rests on the backs of four sphinx-like creatures; Ezekiel describes the creatures at much greater length that he describes the fiery human-like figure on the throne. He subsequently has a series of more down-to-earth visions concerning the faithless nature of the worship in Jerusalem, and then (the other side of the coming act of devastation) has visions of the restoration that Yahweh intends. These visions come to a climax with a detailed portrayal of a new land and new temple, which occupies the entire last fifth of the book.

Daniel 10, too, relates a vision of heaven, and this vision, too, is the backcloth to a revelation concerning events to affect the people who hear the report of the vision. But most of the content of the visions in Daniel relates to the history to unfold from Daniel’s day onwards. The visions picture four unnamed monster-like regimes (Dan 7) and a sequence of less frightening creatures that explicitly stand for Media, Persia, and Greece (Dan 8). They then introduce a promise about the city and temple (Dan 9) and a more detailed account of events during the conflicts between the Seleucids and Ptolemies from the time of Alexander to the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan 11).

“The Enlightenment assumes that the future will be like the past, though it sometimes puzzles over how it knows this. . . . The Enlightenment banishes God to a decent deistic distance from humankind’s earth; primitive Christianity awaits earth’s renewal (and heaven’s renewal) by the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:21; Rev 21).” The real God is then “the Ground – not of being, but . . . of adventure. The future will not be like the past.” Furthermore, “God in this light must be seen as the power of *transformation*.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Those convictions are Daniel’s convictions. The events portrayed in Daniel 11 are just one thing after another; they go nowhere. But in due course God acts.

## The End and the Ends

Among features Daniel and Ezekiel have in common is that both are dismissive of the imperial powers. Both know that Yahweh is going to bring the final fulfilment of his purpose. Both talk about events that will happen in people’s experience, which they can call “the End” but which will turn out to be “*an* End” but not actually “*the* End,” which the people of God will still await. In Ezekiel’s case, the End is the fall of Jerusalem in 587 and then the restoration of community and temple between 539 and 516. In Daniel’s case, it is the crisis that leads into the city’s deliverance from Antiochus and his forces in 164. In Ezekiel, one would have thought that the resurrection of the people, the reunion of Judah and Ephraim, the installing of a new David, and the solemnizing of a new and perpetual covenant (37:1 – 27) would be the end of the story; the last word in that chapter is “forever.” It is therefore surprising that the story starts again with Gog and Magog (38:1 – 39:29). Perhaps the visions do not come in chronological order, which would fit with the suggestion that Gog and Magog stand for Babylon, whose fall will precede the events in Ezekiel 37.[[9]](#footnote-9) But if the events in Ezekiel 38 – 39 follow the ones in Ezekiel 37,[[10]](#footnote-10) the dynamic in Ezekiel compares with that in Daniel. There “the time of the end” draws near in 11:40 and people come back to life in 12:1 – 3; and in 164 there was a great deliverance in Jerusalem. But no resurrection happened at that point. The End turns out to have come but also not to have come. God both acts now and will act at *the* End.

It would be interesting to listen to Ezekiel and Daniel discussing, more than two millennia later, the way people have understood their visions. The detailed series of events in Daniel 11 have been interpreted as happening over these two millennia.[[11]](#footnote-11) In recent history in the United States and in Britain, the common referent of Gog and Magog has been Russia, especially in the multi-million-selling book *The Late Great Planet Earth*.[[12]](#footnote-12) This interpretation has been revived in connection with the presidency of Vladimir Putin, though Gog and Magog have also been identified with Iran. Earlier ages saw the fulfillment of the prophecy in the Romans, the Goths, the Mongols, the Vikings, the Turks, and the Napoleonic Empire. Considering the twentieth- and twenty-first-century interpretations in light of that long history of interpretation suggests one or two reflections. The identifications that have been suggested were both wrong and right. They were wrong in the sense that God was not giving Ezekiel or Daniel visions of things that simply were going to happen in those contexts. Indeed, Ezekiel had to deal with people who dismissed the relevance of his prophecies on the grounds that they related to “many days [ahead] and distant times” and to warn them that fulfillment would come in their time (12:26-27). Yet the way the prophecies received a partial fulfillment that left God with more to do continued the dynamic that runs through Israel’s story, and it validates the belief of succeeding generations over two thousand years that God was acting in their day. He was not bringing *the* End, it has always transpired, but he was bringing a partial embodiment of the fulfilment of that final purpose.

It would also be interesting to imagine Daniel and Ezekiel discussing the Aramaic and Hebrew phrases that translate literalistically as “son of man,” *bar ’ĕnāš* and *ben ’ādām*. In both languages they are idiomatic expressions for “human being.” As a “son of righteousness” is a righteous person, a “son of man” is a human person. It is Yahweh’s standard way of addressing Ezekiel; it comes nearly a hundred times. It is also a supernatural being’s way of addressing Daniel in 8:17. It draws attention to the ordinary human nature of the one addressed by God or by that supernatural being, as is the implication elsewhere where it appears in the plural (e.g., Pss 11:4; 33:14). It is also the implication when Daniel has his vision of an exalted figure on a throne (traditionally, “the ancient of days”) and then of someone “like a human being” being presented before him (7:13). This use of the expression “son of man” does not determine whether the one represented in the vision is a human being (the “ancient of days” is also humanlike, but the figure represents God). But in the vision, he is a human being. If we imagine Daniel and Ezekiel then reading the Gospels, they would both be surprised at how significant the expression “son of man” is for Jesus, and they might wonder what has happened in between. If they asked Second Temple scholars and New Testament scholars, they would discover various possibilities, but find general agreement that the expression “son of man” somehow became a term to describe a preexistent being which became associated with the idea of a Messiah, but that Daniel did not think in these terms. (But Daniel and Ezekiel might then remind each other that “general agreement” between scholars in one generation often collapses in the next generation, and that at more than one point they themselves have been the victims of that dynamic.)

## Israel and Its Past

Both Ezekiel and Daniel have an understanding of the history of Israel, and in both cases it is gloomy. Ezekiel 16 is a distressing, unsavory account of Jerusalem’s history, a “grotesque attack” that perhaps constitutes a satire.[[13]](#footnote-13) Jerusalem was an unwanted baby of dubious parenthood. Yahweh adopted her, nurtured her, and looked after her, but she ended up a whore. Ezekiel 23 reformulates the unpleasant story. While Ezekiel might be taking a risk, of encouraging the men who heard his prophecies to take a demeaning view of their womenfolk as if they were women of that kind, one can imagine how confrontational and humiliating the prophecies would be for the men themselves: “You’re just a whore!”[[14]](#footnote-14) Ezekiel is seeking to shake them to their senses. Daniel 9 might have the same effect as it shares its prayer with people and makes the same point in a way that is more polite but just as devastating. It implicitly invites them to join in a confession that says, “We failed, we went astray, we acted faithlessly, we rebelled, we turned away from your authoritative commands, we didn’t listen to your servants the prophets. Shame attaches to us. We deserved the terrible devastation you brought on Jerusalem.”

There is a difference in the audiences of the two analyses. Ezekiel is speaking *about* Jerusalem but *to* the 597 exiles, during the time before the city’s fall in 587. Maybe these exiles still need to acknowledge the reality and seriousness of what took them into exile. Further, the coming catastrophe will show that what happened to the city and to them in 597 was relatively mild in light of what will happen in 587. They must not think that the worst is over. The city has not yet acknowledged the extent and ongoing persistence of its waywardness. Yet further, the threat in Ezekiel 16 concludes with the promise that Yahweh will renew the covenant relationship with them, and expiate for them everything they have done. The promise thus has a distinctive formulation. Making expiation is something Israel does, to gain cleansing from its stain by making Yahweh a bloody offering. Ezekiel promises that Yahweh will himself do the priestly act for them.

The prayer in Daniel 9 presupposes a later context. The fall of Jerusalem happened long ago. So when will Yahweh fulfill his promises of restoration? The people on whose behalf Daniel prays are not the people who were engaged in the faithlessness that led to the city’s fall. Nor do they need to face the possibility that more chastisement is coming, as Ezekiel’s community do. Yet the prayer is Daniel 9 is nevertheless a confession. Its implication is that any single generation within the people of God is one with other generations. The presupposition also underlies those prophecies of Ezekiel. People cannot say, “I wasn’t us; it was our parents or our ancestors.” Any generation shares in the blessings that come from earlier generations’ faithfulness, and shares in the troubles that come from their faithlessness. It doesn’t mean they are inevitably imprisoned by their wrongdoing or that they cannot throw away their blessings. The complaint that the parents sinned but the children suffer the consequences is an oversimplification. The children have to be realistic in acknowledging their identification with previous generations; it is when they have acknowledged it that they can escape from it from and its consequences.

## Death and Resurrection

Both Ezekiel 37 and Daniel 12 have visions of God’s bringing people back from the dead. They are visions with different implications, and they complement each other. Ezekiel sees a plain like that of Jezreel, full of the bleached bones of a slaughtered people. His vision comes from after the city’s fall, and by now many Judahites have literally died by epidemic, by famine, and by the sword, and many others become forced migrants (5:12). One might have expected the nation as an entity to go out of existence like other nations such as Ammon and Moab. “Can these bones come to life?” To answer “Yes” might be unrealistic, while to answer “No” would indicate unfaith. So either yes or no would be stupid, in different senses, and Ezekiel is too smart to express a view. Yahweh gets him to preach to the bones, and they come together into skeletons, then become bodies with muscles and skin, but still corpses. Yahweh then gets him to bid breath to come into them, it does, and they become a living people again.

The background is the sense on the part of the people of Israel as a whole that they are like a collection of bones, with no hope. God’s promise is to bring them back to life as a people, able to enter the land as the Israelites did in Joshua’s day. Then they will “acknowledge that I am Yahweh,” Ezekiel says three times (37:6, 13, 14). It is one of his key themes. The people of Judah did not really acknowledge Yahweh in Ezekiel’s day. They were more inclined to acknowledge the traditional gods of the land. Having seen their land, city, and people devastated by the Babylonians, they needed a renewal that brought them back to life as a people and transformed them in their commitment to Yahweh. Yahweh promises to breathe new life into a broken people in a way that changes them in their relationship with him. Yet further, the Israelites are long-divided between Ephraim and Judah and are now scattered around the Middle East; Yahweh follows up the dry bones promise with the promise of two branches becoming one (37:15-27).

When he did restore the Judahites as a people and enable them to rebuild the temple and the city, it did lead into an era in which they were more inclined to acknowledge Yahweh. The story of the people in the time to which Daniel’s visions refer illustrates the point. It’s difficult to imagine the people in Ezekiel’s day rebelling against the imperial authorities by insisting on keeping the Torah. In Antiochus’s day, people in Judah did so. Daniel 12 reflects this different context and makes a different promise. Here the context is not the death of the nation that had deserved to die. It is the death of people within the nation who have died as martyrs because they stayed faithful to Yahweh. In Daniel’s vision God promises to put down the imperial oppressors and thus free his people. What about the martyrs? God promises to bring them back to life and to make them shine like stars.

So far in the Old Testament, there has been no talk of the resurrection of individuals. Theologically, it is for the good reason that it will be only when Jesus has died and risen that resurrection will be possible. Daniel 12 is the one exception to that rule in the Old Testament, though even Daniel speaks only of the resurrection of martyrs, because morally and theologically, God can surely not simply leave the martyrs dead.

So Ezekiel and Daniel contribute complementary insights. Ezekiel promises that the nation will come back to life as a people and in their relationship with Yahweh, and will possess the land again, which happened when Yahweh enabled the exiles to return and the Jerusalem community to rebuild temple and city. Daniel promises that the martyrs will come back to life, which people started doing after Jesus’s resurrection (Matt 27:52-53).

## The Servants of God

Ezekiel’s vision was the means of turning him into a servant of God of a particular kind, though “servant of God” is not an expression used of him. And though Yahweh notes that people will acknowledge Ezekiel as a prophet (2:5; 33:33), Yahweh’s own preferred word is lookout (*ṣōpeh*;3:17; 33:2). He is like the sentinel who stands on the city walls or at an outpost some distance from the city from which it is possible to see further, whose job is to watch keenly for any threatening forces that approach the city. The lookout’s job, and Ezekiel’s job, is to warn people that disaster is coming. There was then an irony about the monumental vision in whose course Ezekiel received this commission, with the strange encouragement to speak out whether people listen or refuse to listen (2:1 – 7). Yahweh warns that actually they won’t listen (3:4 – 9): so why is he sending him? First, part of the point is to provoke them into proving him wrong, especially if he actually tells them about his summons to serve Yahweh in this way and thus tells them that they will not listen. The dynamic is the same as when Isaiah tells Judah that Yahweh has sent him to harden their hearts (Isa 6:9-13). It’s the most solemn of warnings, but it’s designed to provoke them to turn back to Yahweh, like the Ninevites whom Jonah notified that their city was going to be overturned and who repented even though they had not been told that they could or should do so. On the other hand, secondly, if the Judahites did not turn and then found that a further experience of devastation came, they could not say they had not been warned, and it might now draw them into turning to Yahweh. And thirdly, either way Yahweh’s words through Ezekiel are on record for future generations to learn from, as we are doing.

Daniel’s job, too, is to prophesy in a way that is meant to be self-falsifying, though he speaks directly to the imperial authorities rather than to the exiles. For them, too, the idea is that they should take notice of what he says so that it does not happen. The point is clear in Daniel 4 and 5, where Nebuchadnezzar eventually learns his lesson and is restored, whereas Belshazzar does not and is not. Perhaps there is an implication that the imperial authorities need to heed the revelations in the other chapters, too, though those revelations are especially intended for Judahites to learn from and be encouraged by. Their significance resembles that of the prophecies about foreign nations in Ezekiel 25 – 32. These nations never hear those prophecies, as far as we know; they are given to the Judahites so that they can see what Yahweh is doing in the world and can shape their own faith, trust, and commitment in light of them.

Daniel does call himself a servant of God (9:17; cf. 6:20 [21]). “Prophet” is not a term applied to him at all, though he acts like a prophet when he issues his challenges to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (see especially 4:27 [4:24 in Hebrew Bibles]). Jesus does call him a prophet in Matthew 24:15, in connection with the warnings about the future that come in chapters 8 – 12. In the book of Daniel he is one of Nebuchadnezzar’s expert advisers, conventionally described as the sages or wise men (*ḥakkîmîn*). He is head over them, though he himself is never described by that term.

## The Spirit of God

The Babylonians call Daniel someone in whom is an outstanding spirit (5:12; cf. 6:3 [2]), namely “the spirit of the holy gods” (*rûaḥ ’ĕlāhîn qaddîšîn*, 4:8, 9, 18 [5, 6, 15]; 5:11, 14). Daniel would prefer to describe it as “the spirit of holy deity”; the Aramaic phrase could be understood either way. A Pharaoh uses the equivalent Hebrew expression of Joseph in a similar connection (Gen 41:38). It is because the spirit of God is in them that they are able to interpret a dream or a portent such as the writing on the wall in Daniel. To put it in New Testament terms, they have a spiritual gift, a gift of knowledge. The Holy Spirit is engaged within their mind in enabling them to see things that other people cannot see. Nebuchadnezzar and the queen mother had seen the fruit of God’s work in Daniel over a time, and the Pharaoh is convinced enough about God’s spirit being at work in Joseph to give him high responsibility in government. The spirit of God is at work *in* them on an ongoing basis, it is not just coming *on* them at one moment in a way that might or might not recur. One can also see the fruit of the Spirit in the life of Joseph and Daniel and his colleagues, fruit such as forgiveness, courage, and faithfulness.

Ezekiel refers much to the spirit, though with some ambiguity. Yahweh’s spirit falls on him and Yahweh gives him a message for people (11:5). God’s spirit lifts him up and carries him among the exiles (11:24). Yahweh takes him out by the spirit of Yahweh and sets him down on a plain, apparently in a vision (37:1). More often Ezekiel refers simply to “the spirit” or “a spirit” that comes into him (2:2; 3:24) or carries him (3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1; 43:5), and he can speak of the human spirit in close association with those references (3:14; 11:5). It’s sometimes hard to tell whether Ezekiel is referring to the Spirit or the spirit. Now ambiguity in the Scriptures is sometimes a revelatory feature to be appreciated, not a problem to be resolved. Perhaps Ezekiel himself has a hard time making that distinction between spirit and Spirit. It’s difficult if not impossible to articulate the process or mechanism whereby the Spirit is at work in our spirit, and Ezekiel’s speaking about it in a number of ways respects that mystery.

The word for spirit is also the word for wind (e.g., Ezek 1:4; Dan 2:35). So Ezekiel’s talk of the *rûaḥ* carrying him from Babylon to Jerusalem in a vision could also suggest the wind as easily as the spirit, and/or his use of the same word could suggest that the wind is an expression of the spirit. Further, *rûaḥ* can denote human breath, in a quite down-to-earth sense (e.g., Gen 7:15, 22; Job 27:3; 34:14), suggesting that our breath comes from God’s spirit. The dry bones vision (37:1-14) capitalizes on such possibilities and extends them (see also 11:1-24), in “a dazzling fusion of wind, breath, and spirit.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Yahweh’s *rûaḥ* takes Ezekiel onto the plain strewn with bones, and Yahweh bids him tell the bones that he intends to cause *rûaḥ* to come into them, then to summon the *rûaḥ* to come from the four *rûḥôt* (the plural of *rûaḥ*). The *rûaḥ* comes into them and they come to life. Subsequently Yahweh explains that he intends to put his *rûaḥ* inside the Israelites so that they come to life. The breath of God is embodied in the wind and in the breath that God breathes into people when bringing them into being. The implication might be that our spirit is the Holy Spirit’s natural entry point into us as human beings. Although our spirits were under the domination of our lower nature, they retained some metaphysical affinity with the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit could thus come into our spirits and transform them so that we become more what we were created to be.

There is another variation and instructive ambiguity about Ezekiel’s references to the spirit. Yahweh promises to give the Israelites one heart or mind, a new heart or mind, and to put a new spirit within or among them. He will take away their rocky heart or mind and give them a fleshy heart or mind, put his spirit within them or among them, and thus get them to walk by his laws and keep his rules (11:19-20; 36:27-28). Whereas Paul uses flesh as a negative image for humanity’s lower nature, Ezekiel thus uses it as a positive image for a mind or heart that is soft and malleable rather than tough and resistant. Israel will become people committed to his ways, which will mean they produce what Paul would call the fruit of the Spirit. God will pour his spirit on them (39:29). So far, pouring has been an uncomfortable image in Ezekiel. Yahweh has spoken of their pouring blood and of his pouring fury (36:18). Pouring suggests drowning, flooding, overwhelming. But Yahweh’s talk of pouring now comes as a promise. He is picking up the negative image and transforming it into something positive. Its positive implications will be taken further in his vision of water flowing wildly and profusely from the temple to the Arabah (47:8-12).[[16]](#footnote-16) The result will be their acknowledging Yahweh as God (e.g., 39:28), a key phrase in Ezekiel. It will be another fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

The ambiguity in Ezekiel’s talk of a new heart and mind is that in between his two articulations of God’s promise concerning it, he can also tell them to make themselves a new heart or mind (18:31). Their transformation requires their action as well as his. Paul will in effect echo Ezekiel’s combination of promise and exhortation when he urges people to work out their salvation on the basis of the fact that God is at work in them (Phil 2:12-13).[[17]](#footnote-17)

If we could listen to Ezekiel and Daniel comparing notes as they look forward to resurrection day, perhaps they would be especially interested to see the way Christian theology has provided a new way of thinking about what we would call the activity of “the Holy Spirit,” and/or would want us not to lose the dynamic of the way the Holy Spirit inspired them to speak of that activity.

## Conclusion

As far as we know, Ezekiel and Daniel never met, but they were servants of God who lived in the same place at the same time, so it is feasible to imagine a conversation between them. It is simply an exercise of imagination. But instructive insights emerge from comparing their perspective on a number of key topics that appear in both works.

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1. See the discussion in (e.g.) Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this question and others concerning the book of Daniel, I presuppose arguments and conclusions in Goldingay, *Daniel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. my studies “Proverbs and Isaiah 1 – 39” and “Daniel Compares Notes with Jeremiah.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 137-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Goldingay, “Ezekiel,” 623-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. McClendon, “The God of the Theologians and the God of Jesus Christ,” 197-98 (his emphasis); the essay dates from 1981 and “Ground of Being” was a description of God expounded by Paul Tillich: see his *Systematic Theology* (3 volumes; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951 – 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Strine, “*Chaoskampf* against Empire.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2:304. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See especially Doukhan, *Daniel 11 Decoded.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Zoutendam, “A Grotesque Attack.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Odell, *Ezekiel*, 183-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Levison, *A Boundless God*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I owe this point to Jina Kang, who kindly read a draft of this article and made helpful observations on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)