

The “Gospel” of Ezekiel

Who is this “shepherd-king”?

by Whitney Woollard

In another article, we explored Ezekiel’s bizarre yet prophetic calling as he was confronted by the awesome glory of God’s temple presence, his *kavod*, in Babylon. The vision of the “God-mobile” was pretty bizarre, but by chapter 11 the point could hardly be missed—Israel’s idolatry and violence had compelled God to leave his own temple. The only thing left for these rebellious people (and the surrounding pagan nations) was divine judgment. So our priest-turned-prophet spends the next five years speaking and acting out oracles of judgment. Chapters 1-32 are filled with a lot of doom and gloom.

But the fall of Jerusalem in chapter 33 is accompanied by a major shift in Ezekiel’s ministry. He was now to proclaim a message of hope for restoration and renewal. Chapters 34-37 are essentially “the gospel according to Ezekiel.” And it’s magnificent! Ezekiel leaves no stone unturned as he declares God’s plan of restoration.

"The range of material in Ezekiel 34-37 can be appreciated when we see what God promises in those chapters. He promises to bring Israel out of anarchy (Ezek 34), into the land (Ezek 35:1-36:15), back from disgrace (Ezek 36:16-38), up from the grave (Ezek 37:1-14) and together out of brokenness (Ezek 37:15-28). It is, in modern jargon, a truly holistic gospel. Ezekiel was ministering to a people who were broken and battered in every conceivable way. There were political, economic, agricultural, social, judicial, religious, personal, relational and spiritual dimensions to their sin and suffering. And God intended to tackle every aspect of that need. Such is the breadth and depth of the biblical gospel." – Christopher Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*

Ezekiel’s gospel message is so comprehensive that it is beyond the scope of this blog. So let’s zoom in on one aspect of his message and see how Jesus fulfills it perfectly in his coming: Ezekiel promises that a new king will come to reunify one people under a new covenant by the transforming power of the Spirit.

A New Shepherd-King

Chapter 34 begins with God’s accusations against the shepherds of Israel who served themselves at the expense of the sheep. Ezekiel chooses this “shepherd/sheep” metaphor to explain the relationship between Israel’s kings and God’s people. Historically, the monarchy in every period up to the exile had been corrupt and idolatrous (with a few exceptions like Hezekiah and Josiah). They misused their divinely delegated power to get rich and comfortable while neglecting and abusing those whom God cared about most—the orphan, the widow, the hurting, and oppressed. He condemns them in verse 4:

“The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.” (Ezekiel 34:4)

Therefore, Yahweh was against them and intended to remove these shepherd-like wolves to restore his divine kingship and care for his people (Ezek 34:10).

In verses 11-16, Ezekiel paints beautiful imagery of Yahweh reinstating himself as Israel’s shepherd-king. Israel’s kings had failed, but Yahweh would not. He promises to undo all the damage inflicted upon Israel by bringing them back from the uttermost parts of the earth into a land filled with plenty. The repetitive language in verse 16 emphasizes the divine action that would accompany full restoration:

"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice."
(Ezekiel 34:16)

Do you see the stark contrast between verse 4 and verse 16? Yahweh will get done what the leaders had failed to do.

From these verses, it's clear that God himself will rule over his people. But then you get this interesting statement in verse 23:

"And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." (Ezekiel 34:23)

So wait, is Yahweh going to rule over the people as the divine shepherd-king or will there be someone from David's line to rule over the people as a human shepherd-king? Is it going to be Yahweh or his servant David?

The answer is yes. Here Ezekiel, like the prophets and psalmist before him (think Isaiah 11 or Psalm 45), are binding together human royalty with divine rule. The human shepherd who governs Israel will be from David's royal line, but he will exercise divine authority in a way that only Yahweh can. Christopher Wright helps us understand this mystery, "The coming ruler will embody all that the rule of Yahweh himself implies. Like the equally mysterious Immanuel figure, his presence will embody the presence of God himself and all that comes with it" (Christopher Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*).

So with a wink and a nod, we wonder "Who is this shepherd-king?" It's Jesus! The tensions in this passage (i.e., the binding of the theocratic reign of God himself with the messianic reign of a new David) can only be finally resolved through a Christological reading of the text. Jesus' birth narratives claim that he came both as the son of David (see Matt 1) and the son of God (see Mark 1). Luke brilliantly explains how Jesus

"will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

This is the language of Ezekiel 34!

Jesus himself claimed to be the long-awaited shepherd-king when he announced,

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

Make no mistake; this isn't the declaration of fun-loving hippie Jesus who carries little lambs in his arms. Jesus, the great God-man, is announcing that the Davidic Messiah, Israel's shepherd-king, has arrived in his person. He has come to rescue the weak, bind up the brokenhearted, vindicate the oppressed, and feed his flock with his very own body. But as promised in Ezekiel 34, he had also come with divine authority to judge Israel's rulers for their neglect of the flock. No wonder they claimed he was demon possessed and wanted to kill him!

The apostle Peter affirmed the fulfillment of the divine human rule in Jesus during one of the most important sermons ever preached on the day of Pentecost. We see in Acts 2 how the church is built upon the belief that Jesus came as the shepherd-king in stride with that great vision of Ezekiel 34 to gather his flock and rule over them in righteousness, truth, and justice. The New Testament portrait of Jesus is saturated with imagery of Ezekiel's shepherd-king. King Jesus has finally come to reign over his people.

A Reunified, Transformed People

It's great news that a new Davidic king was coming to shepherd God's people. But the book of Ezekiel (along with most of the Old Testament) makes us wonder if humans will ever be the kind of people fit for this king. After all, it wasn't only the kings that sent Israel into exile. Israel itself has persisted in flagrant idolatry and injustice to the point of no return. They too were the problem. They hadn't been "good kids" who messed up occasionally. They had been like rebellious children who were determined to disobey their parents. They persistently and willfully broke the laws of the Torah. They chose to go after other idols and they delighted in it! The problem wasn't just their kings or their bad behavior; the problem was their hearts.

Israel, a mini depiction of the whole human race, was thoroughly corrupt, down to the core of their being. So what hope is there for people with dry rot for hearts? A simple surgery would not do. Nothing short of a heart transplant could fix this, which is exactly what Ezekiel offers:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:24-27)

Here the seeds of hope from chapter 11 fully bloom. God is going to fix the problem of the human heart by giving Israel new hearts in a new covenant.

The whole heart-transformation is going to be made possible by the Spirit. This is explained in another visionary experience in the following chapter. Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones, a metaphor for Israel's spiritual state. God tells Ezekiel that his Spirit is coming to bring his people back to life. So this wind comes and causes all of the bones to stand up and fills them with breath and life. Then Ezekiel sees all these new humans stand up. This brings to mind Genesis chapter 2 where God enlivens people with his divine breath. The point is that in this New Covenant God's Spirit is going to give humans new hearts so that they can be the kind of people (a new "creation") who love and obey him. This Spirit imagery is one of Ezekiel's unique contributions to the Hebrew Scriptures. We know from his older contemporary, Jeremiah, that in the New Covenant God was going to write the Torah on their hearts, but now we know from Ezekiel that he's going to do it by his Spirit. That's huge!

And this good news won't just be the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah. Ezekiel's act of writing the names of the kingdoms on two sticks and then joining them together in his hand (see Ezek 37) represents the reunification of one new people living peacefully under the new king. Ezekiel envisions one people living under one covenant governed by one king:

"My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes." (Ezekiel 37:24)

Enjoying Ezekiel's Vision

Today, we know that Ezekiel's grand vision isn't some pie in the sky dream. Jesus came as the shepherd-king who laid down his life for the sheep and then was exalted to heaven, inaugurating the new covenant promises and pouring out his Spirit. Paul speaks of the heart transformation that's possible because of the work of Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior; so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

Paul also tells us that this Spirit-transformation is offered to all people who believe in Jesus and his work, regardless of tribe or race or gender (see Eph 2:11-22). God's people are now one unified, Spirit-transformed body living under the just and compassionate reign of King Jesus just as Ezekiel prophesied long ago in the gospel according to Ezekiel.