

Ps 48:1  
Ps 99:5,6  
Ps 97:3,4,5  
Ps 96:3,4,5  
Ps 47:1,2,3  
Ezekiel 6,7  
Ezekiel 6:7b

Yarrow, April 10, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The thought is out there that we need to “discover the means whereby the ways of the world may be converted into the worship of God.”<sup>1</sup> Would you agree??

Let me explain. The point is not that we use the technology discovered by unbelievers and use that in the service of the Lord; that’s too obvious. The thought is rather that we need to take the habits and practices of the world and bend them so that they become suitable for the service of God. From Buddhism, for example, we can understand better how meditation works and apply that to the way we meditate on the Lord God. From Islam we can learn the habit of calling people to prayer and so improve our prayer life. And that’s the question: would you agree that we need to “discover the means whereby the ways of the world may be converted into the worship of God”?

The Lord God had sealed Ezekiel’s mouth so that he could speak only the things God wanted him to say. In chapters 6 & 7 the Lord causes Ezekiel to deliver two parallel sermons that criticize Israel’s practice of adapting habits of the heathens into the service of the Lord. That practice is so dead wrong, the prophet must say, because it doesn’t do justice to *who the LORD is*. That’s our text: Israel must *come to know* that He is the LORD.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## **GOD COMPELS HIS OWN PEOPLE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT HE IS THE LORD.**

1. Who the LORD is.
2. How the LORD drives home His identity.
3. When the LORD is to be taken seriously.

### ***1. Who the LORD is.***

First a bit of history. In the year 603 BC the armies of Babylon captured the city of Jerusalem and took into exile the leading people of the city. One might expect that the people whom Babylon left behind in Jerusalem would be repentant of their sins, and make it their business to live close to the Lord and His word. But it was not so. I read in 2 Chronicles 36 that the puppet king which Babylon put on Jerusalem’s throne “stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel” (vs 13). “Moreover, all the leaders of the priests and the people transgressed more and more, according to all the abominations of the nations” (vs 14).

This ongoing apostasy in Israel was catalyst for the Lord God to speak to the prophet Ezekiel in far off Babylon, by the River Chebar. God called this exile to the office of prophet, sealed his mouth so that he could speak only God’s words (chap 2 & 3), then had him draw Jerusalem on a clay tablet and lay siege to the city and while he lay on his left side for 390 days and then on his

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<sup>1</sup> Craigie, *Ezekiel*, pg 46.

right for 40 more he was to make plain to the exiles that this siege happened because of Jerusalem's transgressions – and the siege would result in the destruction of the city.

Chaps 6 & 7 builds on the word of God revealed in chaps 4 & 5. The prophet must “set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy to them” (6:2). No, Ezekiel by the River Chebar could not see those mountains of Israel; at 700 kms to the west they were much too far away for that. But Ezekiel had to face those mountains nevertheless, had to turn his body to face the west, and then say particular words that God put in his mouth (cf chaps 2 & 3). He had to speak, but his hearers were not the people living in the mountains of Israel 700 kms away; he had to address the mountains of Israel, and his hearers were *his fellow exiles in Babylon*. That is to say: God declares *in their hearing* what He will do to Israel and Jerusalem far off. Why, we wonder, must the exiles in Babylon hear what God intends to do 700 kms away? The exiles are to hear it so they might themselves come to know that their God is the LORD.<sup>2</sup>

“You shall know that I am the LORD.” That intriguing formulation is found *seven* times in the course of these two chapters (6:7b, 10a, 13a, 14b; 7:4b, 9b, 27b). The words are identical each time, with the exception that two times the word “you” is replaced by the word “they” (6:10, 14). Yet even when the pronoun ‘you’ is used the reference is not to the exiles in Babylon but to the people in the mountains of Israel 700 kms away. But again, since the people in the mountains of Israel cannot hear Ezekiel's words, the fine point of his preaching in these chapters is that *his fellow exiles in Babylon will come to acknowledge that their God is the LORD*. That's the purpose of the prophecy: the exiles are to know who God is.

Did the exiles not know that God was the LORD? Certainly, they did, *on the surface*. They knew –like we do– that God had appeared to Moses at the burning bush and declared that He was Yahweh –I AM WHO I AM– a name that comes back in our Bibles as the word ‘LORD’ spelled with upper case letters. But knowing that bit of doctrine is not the same as understanding the *significance* of that name, and the consequences that follow for daily living in service to Him. And that's what God would teach them.

Who is the LORD, Yahweh? His revelation to Israel over the generations had answered that question for His people. Yahweh, the LORD, is the *God-who-is-there, who lives, who exists*. So much *God* is He that called into being what did not exist, and that's to say that He created time and space (for He is above time and space), and then fashioned a world that is limited by time and space. Sovereignly He spoke, and there was light, a firmament, water, fish, birds, dry land, grass, rabbits, and so much more. All He made continues to exist because God makes it continue to exist, gives is life and breath and everything else it needs to keep existing. Yet this sovereign and almighty God did not create a world so that it might be distant from Him; on this earth He placed a particular creature with whom He established a bond of love, mankind – created to image Him. It was His holy intent that all the world would be filled with humanity who delighted in God, reflected what He was like, and so added glory to His eternally glorious reputation. *That* is what is caught in the term ‘Yahweh’, LORD: this is the almighty Creature who established a bond of love with creatures so that mankind-made-of-dust might be children of this God.

It follows: the manner in which mankind would worship Him is not up to mankind to sort out, but up to this God-of-glory to dictate. That's precisely what the Lord did in His instruction to Israel at Mt Sinai. The privilege of being God's people was driven home to this undeserving people

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<sup>2</sup> In vs 13 the NIV reads: “And they will know that I am the LORD.” The Hebrew has unambiguously, “And you will know that I am the LORD.” All other major translations render this text as ‘you’.

*and* the manner of how to serve Him was driven home too. Recall the tabernacle Moses had to build, where the LORD God would live with Israel, and the altar of sacrifice that proclaimed the good news of *how* God could live with a sinful people – Another would die in place of the sinner who deserved to die. So many instructions followed about staying away from sin, being holy as God was holy, and so being different from the nations around, special, dedicated to this glorious God.

But in the years that followed the time of Moses, the people of Israel did not take the living, sovereign God seriously. Serve Him? They were happy to do that, provided they could do it in the way the nations around them served their gods. But to say that the Moabites and the Canaanites and the Egyptians were all wrong in the way they served their gods, to say that Israel alone had it right in how to serve the living God: *that* was seen to be too radical, too exclusive, and at the end of the day arrogant. So what did the people of Israel end up doing? They incorporated bits and pieces of the way their neighbours served their gods into the way in which *they* served the LORD. For example: the nations around them served the Baals and the Ashtoreths on the high places, the hilltops, of the land. So: Israel went and did the very same thing. Those high places: then you're closer to God.... What can be wrong with that?

But the LORD –that almighty Creator who formed a bond of love with Israel– had emphatically instructed His people-by-covenant that they were *not* to learn from the Canaanites of the land; they were instead to “destroy their altars and break down their sacred pillars and cut down their wooden images and burn their carved images with fire” (Deuteronomy 7:5). The reason for the command was that Israel was to serve the Lord God alone, and do so in the manner and place of His choosing (cf Deuteronomy 12) – lest they be carried away by the idolatry of the Canaanites. Despite that instruction, the books of Joshua and Judges spell out that the people of Israel did not obey this command; instead, they chose to serve the LORD *on the very high places God had commanded Israel to destroy* (Deuteronomy 12:4). Even such notable leaders as Samuel and Solomon offered sacrifices to God on the high places (1 Sam 9:12; 1 Kings 3:2ff). During the reign of Rehoboam the people “built for themselves high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree” and so “did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel” (1 King 14:23f). Time and again we read in the book of Kings that a particular king did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, “but the high places were not removed” (cf 1 Kings 15:14). King Josiah made an effort to cleanse the land of its high places (2 Kings 23), but the people did not follow his reforms. The result was that in the days of Ezekiel the mountains and hills of Israel were plastered with high places and altars and idols, and even the valleys and ravines between the hills and mountains had their artificial high places (cf Jeremiah 7:31). Please: do not understand this to mean that the people of Israel turned their backs on God and became heathen; they'd have been most offended if you would describe their actions that way! On the contrary, Israel sought to serve the Lord God, but thought to do so by taking on board some of the practices of the nations around them in their service of their gods. What can be wrong with using a high place to make a sacrifice to the LORD?! Can't one learn anything from the heathen?!

What's this have to do with Ezekiel 6 & 7? This: *this is precisely the point on which the prophet has to criticize Israel for*. Vs 3: “O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the sovereign LORD. This is what the sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring the sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.” Adopt the practices of the heathen in the worship of the LORD? Serve the sovereign Creature –the eternal and almighty God who condescends to adopt people-of-dust (sinners at that!) to be His children– in the same

way as the Canaanites would serve their Baals?? How dare they! The LORD on a level with the idols of the nations?? Seek counsel from the idols on how to serve the LORD? *That is arrogant!*

And *that* is why the Lord called Ezekiel to his office as prophet with that vision of His greatness and His majesty in chap 1. Who is the LORD actually?? The vision showed God to be *real*, alive, *there*. More, He's majestic, awe-inspiring. Recall the whirlwind, that great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself (vs 4). There were angels reflecting the glory of God, living creatures carrying the chariot of God, ready to go wherever the Master instructed. Above the angels and the chariot of God was a firmament of awesome crystal (vs 22), and above the firmament the likeness of a throne, and "on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with an appearance of a man high above it" – God in His majesty! (vs 26). "This," says Ezekiel, "was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" – so awesome that when Ezekiel saw it he fell on his face... (vs 28). Who is the LORD?? The message is so clear: the LORD is no small God whom you can carry around and manipulate, no closet deity whom you can serve as you wish. The LORD: the vision of chap 1 lays out how *infinitely great and holy He is*. We understand: given the greatness of this God, it is not for people (and certainly not for *His* people) to go to the heathens for lessons on how best to serve Him! That's chaps 6 & 7: the LORD won't have this conduct on Israel's part!

Now one more thing before we move on to our second point. Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon, and it was to the exiles that Ezekiel had to speak the words of chaps 6 & 7. What do you think: had the exiles in Babylon learned that it was wrong to learn from the nations around them how better to serve the LORD? Recall simply what we read from Ezekiel 2:3f: the exiles remained a rebellious and obstinate people. There were no high places for Baal in Babylon, simply because Baal wasn't the local god. But as the exiles learned the Babylonian language and the Babylonian culture, was there any danger of them incorporating bits and pieces of local practices into the service of the LORD? And another question: how could they evangelize in Babylon with staying *different??*

That brings us to our second point:

## **2. How the LORD drives home His identity.**

Ezekiel, recall, is standing in Babylon facing the mountains of Israel a long way off, speaking God's words in the hearing of the exiles in Babylon. What are the exiles hearing Ezekiel say? Says the Lord in our text: "Then you shall know that I am the LORD." How shall the LORD compel this knowledge in Israel? That holy and exalted Creator, the God who revealed His majesty in chap 1, comes into action. Look at chap 6:3ff: "I, even I, will bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. Then your altars shall be desolate.... I will lay the corpses of the children of Israel before their idols.... The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the LORD" (6:3ff).

Do you hear it, beloved? Just five years earlier (according to the date given in Ezekiel 1) God had given the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem over to the Babylonians on account of the people's sins. Now God pronounces further devastation upon the inhabitants of Israel *because they have not learned the lesson of the earlier punishment*. So zealous is God for His own honour: the people *shall be made to know* that He is the LORD – that awesome and majestic and holy God of Ezekiel 1. If defeat before the armies of Babylon doesn't teach that, than destruction and death around their high places maybe will teach that lesson. *But learn it Israel shall!*

The details are worked out in vss 8-14. There will, says God through Ezekiel in vs 8, be those who escape the devastation that will come upon the people of Israel in the Promised Land. What will happen to them? They will be carried away captive, says vs 9, they will join their brethren in Babylon. But see now what will happen to these new exiles. Vs 9: "they will loathe

themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations.” They will loathe themselves, and that’s to say that they will be sorry for their sins, broken in heart because they have adopted the styles of the unbelievers in their service of the LORD. Here is repentance from their sins, and the result will be that they acknowledge “that I am the LORD.” The effect of their repentance and self-loathing will be that they throw out the influences of the world in their future service of the Lord, and they shall worship Him as He has commanded in His word. Amongst the descendents of these exiles in Babylon is also our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who served God perfectly according to His word, with never a single worldly influence in His service. And that, of course, is what made His service to God acceptable – so that He could pay for our sins and we may be children of God.

But, the LORD continues in Ezekiel 6, not all will escape the slaughter around the high places. Vs 11f: “they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. He who is far off shall die by the pestilence, he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged shall die by the famine. Thus will I spend My fury upon them.” Vs 14: “I will ... make the land desolate....” For none shall live.... Then –vs 14– “they shall know that I am the LORD.” Who shall know it? The dead, those slain by God on account of their sins..., shall know that God is the LORD.... How, you wonder, can the dead know? The dead, of course, enter the judgment hall of God..., and that is to say that they see God face to face in all the glory portrayed in Ezekiel 1, and so they fall on their knees to worship the great and awesome God of heaven and earth – whether they want to or not.<sup>3</sup> “They shall know that I am the LORD.”

Again, what exactly shall these people come to know? That “I am the LORD” – and I trust that we now understand what that phrase means. They will come to know that God is *there*, that God is *real*, that He’s the almighty Creator of all who has been pleased to lay His claim of love upon sinners through Jesus Christ. And understanding who He is, celebrating His holiness, His uniqueness, His **God**-ness leaves no place for serving Him in a self-chosen manner, no place for taking a page or three from the religious books of the unbelievers around you – as if this God is somehow on a level with the gods of the heathen. To confess Him as *LORD* is to refuse to take on board bits and pieces of how others serve their gods.

Yet in real terms, congregation, *that refusal is so hard* – because it comes across as so judgmental of other religions and of other peoples.... And that means you end up outside the mainstream of culture.... That brings us to our third point:

### ***3. When the LORD is to be taken seriously.***

The answer we’re tempted to give to that question is: later, another day, but not now.... Those exiles in Babylon: they’re not wanting to be oddballs, out of step with their times! How great the temptation to do religion in some small way like the other peoples do religion.... Why be a stick in the mud....

That is why, congregation, God compelled Ezekiel to keep on talking. Chapter 7 contains three message, two short ones and one longer one. The first, vss 2-4, have a series of short phrases, with shoddy grammar, and both those elements point up that Ezekiel is so involved in the urgency of the message he must bring to his fellow exiles that he hasn’t the time to phrase things just right. The people with him in Babylon must know that the end, the end has come to the city of Jerusalem (recall the siege of the clay tablet in chap 4), for the LORD God will repay that city for all its abominations. Point: the enemy is coming, and that enemy is God Himself. Message for the

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<sup>3</sup> Craigie, *Ezekiel*, pg 50.

exiles: Repent of your stubborn ways, acknowledge the greatness of the LORD in your new land, or perish in your stubbornness – either way you must acknowledge the holy identity of this God, that there is no place in His service for tidbits learned from the heathen. Vs 4: “Then you shall know that I am the LORD!”

Vss 5-9 form a repeat. The message is the same, is clear and sharp, with the phrases equally short and the grammar equally shoddy: “an end has come, the end has come.... Doom has come to you.... Now upon you I will pour out My fury.... My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity....” The urgency is the same: in the land of the Babylonians repent, acknowledge the greatness and the majesty of this God with loathing for your sins, and so allow no place in your thinking for trying to be like the religions around you. Repent, or perish; either way “you shall know that I am the LORD who strikes.”

The third message (vss 10-27) is longer, but equally pointed and just as insistent on giving no place for things of the world in the service of God. In the course of these verses, the grammar gradually improves, the phrases not so biting; it’s as if Ezekiel calms down somewhat. But the message doesn’t change; the LORD is too much **God** to tolerate being worshipped as the nations worship their gods. He’s pointed in how He’ll respond if the exiles insist on serving Him as the nations around them serve their gods; vs 22: “I will turn My face away from them....” Vs 24: “I will put an end to the pride of the mighty, and their sanctuaries will be desecrated.” Vs 26: “Calamity upon calamity will come.... The teaching of the law by the priest will be lost, as will the counsel of the elders....” Point: these newcomers to Babylon will surely need to learn to speak Babylonian, but they must not, *must* not become part of the culture of Babylon such that their worship of God becomes Babylonian. They must stay *different*.

It gives us much to think about. What’s this high regard for the LORD to look like in real life? Doesn’t such a high regard for the LORD close the doors of your church to the community and effectively put you in a cultural ghetto? How can you be a blessing, then, to those around you?

In answer to that question, consider the life of another exile, a contemporary of Ezekiel. Daniel was taken into Nebuchadnezzar’s palace and told to eat particular foods contrary to the commands the Lord had given through Moses. It wasn’t, we should know, that the foods God forbade Israel to eat were toxic, but rather that through making a distinction between foods the Lord taught Israel that they had to be *different* than the peoples around them – different because they belonged to the *real* God, the *living* God. Daniel and his three friends took the living God for real, and so acknowledged in deeds who He was. So He dared to be different, even in his diet. He was part of the Babylonian culture, even getting into high places of government, but he refused to compromise a dot in the service of the LORD. And God blessed His obedience, blessed his high regard for God, and made Daniel a blessing in the Babylonian empire.

And we? The temptation is to tailor our church service into a more Canadian-like mould. So: less emphasis on the Word, more emphasis on audience feelings. Increase the profile of the sisters of the congregation so as to give them positions of leadership in church, family, school and society. Canada does a Christmas tree, so we’ll do it too.... Canada does a certain kind of music in the service of God, so we’ll head that direction too.... Adopting bits and pieces from Canadian culture, including religious culture, is so tempting; it’s hard being different....

But Israel learned, brothers and sisters, that when you take something of heathen origin and then dedicate that item to a new and holy purpose, you are playing with fire; gradually the influence of the old faiths that formed the practice you’re borrowing reasserts itself – and

eventually takes over. Israel found out that serving the LORD on the high places of the heathens opened the way for heathen rituals to receive a place in Israel's worship, and gradually the thinking behind the rituals influenced Israel's thinking also – with as result that eventually Israel was serving the LORD according to patterns learned from the heathens around them. Those patterns, of course, arose from within the sinful human heart..., and the result was that the living God was offended because His **God**-ness was actually ignored.

That is why the words of chap 7:26 are so revealing of what is happening in Canada today. Why is it that so many pulpits of Canada no longer preach *the gospel of Jesus Christ*? Why is it that in so many churches of Canada *the counsel of the elders* is gone?? It's because those churches have ceased acknowledging who the LORD actually is, and treated Him as if He's on a level with the other gods of our world.

Why, then, is the word of Ezekiel in the Bible the living God has preserved for us? The LORD God would teach us to take seriously who He is.