‘LORD WILL RENEW ISRAEL’
(CHS. 33–39)

Preceding chapters have ended with announcement of the ultimate demise of all powers, opening the way for the proclamation of Lord’s purposes for Israel, his people. The nations coming to ‘know that I am Lord’ is inextricably linked with the fortunes of his people. Chs. 33–39 prepare the people and land for the building of the new temple of chs. 40–48. The opening chapters (chs. 33–34) show how deep-seated is the problem of Israel’s rebellion, while chs. 35–39 focus on Lord’s action to bring about not only restoration, but also the transformation that ensures the present will not be repeated.

The key sections as represented by B’s major divisions commence (33:1–9) with the renewal of Ezekiel’s call as a σκοπός (‘watchman’, 3:17), warning of the results of continuing in wickedness, leading (33:10–20) to a response to the people’s claim that ‘Lord’s way is not straight’ with many echoes of ch. 18. Then comes (33:21–33) news of the fall of Jerusalem and Ezekiel’s mouth is opened (cf. 3:26; 24:27), now is the time to proclaim to a people who are not willing to listen. Ch. 34 is a denunciation of the self-centred, oppressive ‘shepherds’ who have failed to care for the ‘sheep’, but moves to announcement of a Davidic ‘shepherd’ who will arise and of Lord’s bringing of ‘peace’. 35:1–36:15 is one section in B, describing a reversal: ‘Mount Seir’ (Edom) had looked on the desolate ‘mountains of Israel’ and planned to take them over, but Lord is going to make Mount Seir desolate and restore the ‘mountains of Israel’ and its population. The emphasis from now on is restoration, not judgment. ‘The house of Israel’ is to be restored ‘for my name’s sake’, with return and cleansing of the people, so that the nations will know that Lord has done this (36:16–38). There will be new life for dry bones (37:1–14) and one nation under one Davidic ruler (37:15–28). However final opposition has to be overcome, with the defeat of Gog and Magog (chs. 38–39, one section in B), culminating in Israel knowing ‘I am Lord’.

The nine sections are closely matched by nine Greek chapters (ΜΑ-ΜΘ), the only differences being that 33:1–20 is one chapter and chs. 38 and 39 are separate. All Latin chapter divisions coincide with Greek divisions, except that in Greek 35:1–36:15 is undivided (see commentary for effect on reading).
P967 has two related major differences in this block: the present 36:23c–38 is missing and, following 36:23b, the order is chs. 38–39, 37, 40. Thus the statement that ‘the nations will know that I am Lord’ leads into the Gog chapters which describe the ultimate destruction of nations that oppose his people. This prepares the way for the vivifying of dead bones by the Spirit and unifying of the nation under one ruler, so leading straight into ch. 40 and the new temple. The body of the commentary deals with what became the traditional order, as in B, but the P967 differences and their significance are briefly discussed in Introduction §§2.2.1, 5.1.1.

38 Listen to the Watchman

In 3:16–21 Ezekiel had been commissioned as a ‘watchman’, with warning of the consequences if he did not ‘warn’ the people. Here he is told to go to the people and warn them of the consequences if they ignore the message, but again with the salutary reminder of his responsibility. That this short section is divided into three sub-sections in B, even though there are no divine speech formulae, and that all other early manuscripts divide into at least two (vv. 1–6, 7–9) points to active interest in the subject matter, drawing readers’ attention to the shifts in focus. Within Christian circles there are many references by Church Fathers applying the role of σκοπός and this passage to Christian teachers and priests, particularly v. 7. This is at least as early as Justin (Dial. 82.2; with τέθεικα, where LXX has δέδωκα), but also Basil and Gregory Nazianzus (Harl 1992 [1960]).

38.1 The Hearer’s Accountability

The oracle commences with what will prove to be a parable, of a people who appoint a watchman. The watchman fulfils his responsibility of giving warning, but if a hearer fails to act it is his own responsibility, and if someone does listen his life is saved.

The hanging nominative at the start, γῆ, is common in Greek and foregrounds the locus of Lord’s judgment, before moving to the actions of the people when that happens. In many ways this introduces what follows—Lord has brought destruction to Jerusalem and the land, so how are the people now to respond?—but at this stage the description is generic. The warning blowing of the trumpet is described with the straightforward σημαίνω ‘signify, signal’ (in 3:17–21 a different translator uses for the same Hebrew the much stronger διαπειλέω ‘threaten’ and διαστέλλω ‘give express orders’), while the desired response, using a