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CARL GROSS

**WILL THE REAL “HOUSE OF ISRAEL”  
PLEASE STAND UP!**

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One of the most difficult passages in the book of Ezekiel is 4.4-6. In the NRSV, it reads:

<sup>4</sup> Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; you shall bear their punishment for the number of the days that you lie there. <sup>5</sup> For I assign to you a number of days, three hundred ninety days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment; and so you shall bear the punishment of the house of Israel. <sup>6</sup> When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah; forty days I assign you, a day for each year.

These verses come immediately after Ezekiel received God’s command to find a building brick, scratch upon it the ground plan of the city of Jerusalem, set up a frying pan on its edge between himself and the brick, and then pretend to attack it as if it were the city itself. In addition, God commanded Ezekiel to lie on his left side for more than a full year, and then turn over and lie on his right side for almost a month and a half. All of this was to be a “sign for the house of Israel.”

Apart from the rather strange actions that God commanded Ezekiel to do, the initial impression of the meaning of these verses is fairly clear. But this is deceptive, since the verses bristle with difficulties of interpretation. The two problems I want to focus on are:

1. Who are the “house of Israel” in vv. 4-5?
2. What do the 390 years in vv. 4-5 and the 40 years in v. 6 refer to?

### **The problem**

CEV includes a footnote to vv. 4-5 to explain the meaning of “Israel’s punishment.” The footnote reads:

*Israel here refers to the northern kingdom that was destroyed in 722.*

This footnote reflects the near consensus view that “house of Israel” in these verses refers to the northern kingdom. In the context of vv. 4-6, where the “house of Israel” is closely followed by the “house of Judah,” this seems to be a reasonable conclusion. Greenberg (1983, 104), in fact, says:

The scope of this term [includes] all Israel; only the contrast with “house of Judah” in vs. 6 indicates, indeed demands, its restriction here to the northern kingdom.

Almost all of the translations implicitly or explicitly follow this interpretation. But to take it in this way poses major lexical, discourse, and contextual problems. Firstly, it is “unexpected” and “unusual” in the book of Ezekiel to find the “house of Israel” referring to the northern kingdom (see Zimmerli, 1979, 163; Klein, 1988, 41). Secondly, the discourse features of the first six verses of ch. 4 make it highly unlikely that “house of Israel” in vv. 4-5 should be taken in this way. Thirdly, on this interpretation, “the number 390 defies all explanation” (Greenberg, 1983, 105).

### **The “house of Israel” in the book of Ezekiel**

The term “house of Israel” is used 83 times in Ezekiel, and it usually designates “the whole people of Israel, which was represented in Ezekiel’s day by Judah, forming the remnant of Israel with Jerusalem as its sacred center” (Zimmerli, 1979, 163). A word study of the term reveals that the overwhelming majority of uses relate to the prophet’s actual audience in exile, or to this remnant. A few examples of the data will suffice:

Mortal, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, “What are you doing?” (12.9; compare 18.25; 40.4; 44.6)

In many of these passages, it is not possible to distinguish whether Ezekiel is addressing only his immediate audience, or whether the message is addressed more broadly. In most cases it is likely that the message is addressed to all the remaining Israelites.

But there is an additional group of passages in which Ezekiel addresses one part of the contemporary remnant of Israel, namely, those who were still living in the city of Jerusalem before its destruction. For example:

He said to me, “Mortal, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?” (8.6; the context makes the meaning clear; compare 12.10)

These passages cannot refer in any way to the northern kingdom.

Certain other passages look forward to the future restored nation of Israel. It is not easy to differentiate these from the passages that refer simply to the

remaining remnant of Israel, since it is envisaged that the one will evolve from the other. For example:

and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste place rebuilt. (36.10; compare 43.7; 45.8)

There are a handful of passages where the term "house of Israel" refers specifically to the *southern* kingdom:

Then all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the LORD, because you were a staff of reed to the house of Israel. (29.6; compare 2 Kgs 18.21; compare also Ezek 29.16, 21; 35.15)

Some passages appear to refer to the whole nation of Israel, i.e., either the nation before the divided kingdoms, or the northern and southern kingdoms together:

Mortal, your kinsfolk, your own kin, your fellow exiles, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, "They have gone far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession." (11.15; also 18.6, 15, 20; 28.25; 36.17, 21; 44.12, 22)

But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness; they did not observe my statutes. (20.13)

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel." (37.11)

Of these, only 20.13 and 37.11 can confidently be said to refer to the nation as a whole. The rest could just as easily be understood to refer only to the southern kingdom, if Ezekiel's focus is restricted to his fellow Judahites, or to the future restored Israel. In any case, none of these can be used to support a usage of the term to apply just to the northern kingdom.

Apart from 4.4-5, only two passages have been identified by scholars as possibly referring to the northern kingdom. These are 9.9 and 37.16, but in neither of these cases is it likely, let alone necessary, that the northern kingdom is referred to.

Verse 9.9 reads:

He said to me, "The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city full of perversity; for they say, 'The LORD has forsaken the land, and the LORD does not see.'"

Here, as in 4.4-6, the contrast with Judah in the same context suggests that Israel might be the northern kingdom. But the wider context suggests otherwise.

In chs. 8 to 11, Ezekiel has been transported to Jerusalem, where he sees the abominations being committed by the leaders and people who remained in Jerusalem. He is shown the imminent judgment that God will inflict on them. This judgment is depicted in some detail in 9.4-7, and when he views this judgment, Ezekiel cries out in distress:

Ah Lord GOD! will you destroy all who remain of Israel as you pour out your wrath upon Jerusalem? (v. 8).

Ezekiel recognizes that all the remnant of Israel, especially those in Jerusalem, is under threat. God's reply in v. 9 ties the judgment specifically to the elders in Jerusalem. In short, ch. 9 focuses this judgment on the people in Jerusalem and explicitly indicates that it will occur in the imminent future. Thus it is impossible to take the "house of Israel" in 9.9 as the northern kingdom, which ceased to exist almost 150 years previously.

How should the term "house of Israel and Judah" in this verse be explained? Unusual as it is in Ezekiel, some have suggested that "and Judah" should be omitted as superfluous. But there is no textual warrant for that. The context requires that this term carry the same sense as "all who remain of Israel" in the previous verse. It can be noted that the terms "Judah" and "Israel" are used almost synonymously in chs. 8 to 11 (cf. 8.1, 6, 10-12, 17; 11.5, 13, 15). Hence the "house of Israel and Judah" is an emphatic term used to include all the remaining Israelites (cf. Cooke, 1936, 108).

The second passage alleged to support Ezekiel's use of the term "house of Israel" as referring to the northern kingdom is 37.16, which reads:

Mortal, take a stick and write on it, "For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it"; then take another stick and write on it, "For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it."

Once again, it is the usage in close context with "Judah" that suggests that "Israel" should refer to the northern kingdom. And indeed the sense of the passage requires a contrast between the southern and northern kingdoms; without this distinction, the acted parable would be meaningless.

But what is it that actually creates this distinction? The crucial terms that identify the two kingdoms are not "Judah" and "Israel"; rather it is "Judah" on the one hand, and "Joseph" and "Ephraim" on the other that distinguish the two kingdoms. The distinction does not rest on the associated terms, "the Israelites" and "all the house of Israel." In v. 11, as we have seen above, the identical words in Hebrew (*kol-bet-yisra'el*) refer to the whole nation of Israel, and later, in v. 19, the term "house of Israel" is abandoned in favour of "tribes of Israel." This variety of usage in these few verses shows that we cannot place any weight on alleged distinctions of meaning between the terms. There is, in fact, no valid semantic distinction between the term "the Israelites," which is attached to "Judah," "the house of Israel," which is attached to "Joseph," and "the tribes of Israel" in v. 19. They are simply general terms referring to people of the Israelite nation who survive the fall of the two kingdoms and who will form the nucleus of the future, restored nation.

Thus it is not possible to point to any passage in Ezekiel where the term "house of Israel" refers exclusively to the northern kingdom. Where Ezekiel does explicitly refer to the northern kingdom, he uses the terms "Samaria" (see 16.46-55; 23.4-10) or "Joseph" and "Ephraim" (see 37.16, 19). Occasionally the term refers to the whole nation, encompassing both northern and southern kingdoms before either went into exile. But in the overwhelming majority of instances, "house of Israel" refers to the southern kingdom or part of it. This is not in distinction to the northern kingdom; rather it is the southern kingdom as the continuing remnant of the whole nation of Israel.

### Discourse features of Ezekiel 4.1-6

We have seen that the reason why the “house of Israel” in vv. 4 and 5 is interpreted as referring to the northern kingdom is because the “house of Judah” is mentioned in v. 6. However reasonable, almost compelling, that may appear at first sight, it is quickly found to be untenable when one looks at the discourse structure of the early chapters of Ezekiel, especially from the point of view of the reader’s response.

In the first three chapters of Ezekiel, the synonymous terms “people of Israel” and “house of Israel” are each used once. In 2.3, the prophet is sent to “the people of Israel” to speak to them the word of the LORD. Thereafter they are often called a “rebellious house.” In 3.16, Ezekiel is appointed a “sentinel for the house of Israel.” In both cases the focus is on Ezekiel’s audience, the remnant of the nation of Israel. Then, in the first three verses of ch. 4, Ezekiel is told to enact the siege of Jerusalem. Presumably this was to be done in a public place so that the people could see what he was doing. This action was to be a “sign for the house of Israel,” that is, for the people who were watching Ezekiel’s strange behaviour. Thus, by the time the reader comes to vv. 4.4-6, the meaning of the term “house of Israel” is established—it means the remnant of the nation or, more specifically, Ezekiel’s audience.

On this basis, readers (or hearers) will proceed to vv. 4-5 and readily understand the term “house of Israel,” which is used twice in these two verses, in the same manner. Only when they reach v. 6 *might* they perceive something different when they encounter, for the first time in the book, the term “house of Judah.” If the introduction of this term is meant to change the established meaning of the term “house of Israel,” as asserted by the scholars and translators, the readers/hearers are given no help to make the adjustment. This certainly does not contribute to easy or insightful understanding. Some authors do indulge in such tricks on their audience, but that is not Ezekiel’s style. He makes his point, whether in direct statement, acted prophecy, parable or allegory, and he rams it home forcefully and repeatedly.

Thus, the discourse features of the first six verses of ch. 4 also make it highly unlikely that “house of Israel” in vv. 4-5 refers to the northern kingdom.

### The meaning of the 390 years

Although Vawter and Hoppe (1991, 42) abandon the attempt to make this figure apply to an historical time span, it is reasonable to expect that, when Ezekiel referred to a period of 390 years of “punishment” on the “house of Israel,” he was using a figure that was meaningful to his audience. Consequently, if we can identify the period that he was referring to, this should help in pinpointing the identity of the “house of Israel.”

In the previous section, we saw that the discourse features of the passage militate against the view that the “house of Israel” refers to the northern kingdom. But this assessment would be shaky if the 390 years of punishment suffered by the “house of Israel” in vv. 4-5 unambiguously and obviously referred to the northern kingdom. An informed reader/hearer would then be able to make the appropriate connection.

But the meaning of the 390 years is by no means unambiguous or obvious. To the contrary! In fact, as we have already seen, Greenberg says that “the number 390 defies all explanation,” if the “house of Israel” refers to the northern kingdom. Even when the “house of Israel” is interpreted more generally, the figure 390 remains obscure and difficult. The following discussion describes some of the problems.

### **The meaning of *ʿawon***

In 4.4-5, God tells Ezekiel to “lie on [his] left side [for] three hundred and ninety days, equal to the number of years of . . . the punishment of the house of Israel.” During this time Ezekiel had to “bear [their] punishment.” The Hebrew word *ʿawon*, here translated as “punishment,” has three closely related meanings, all of which are reflected in modern translations:

- (1) iniquity, sin (see KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, NEB, JB, AB);
- (2) guilt [incurred as a result of sin—this is often difficult to distinguish from (1)] (see GNT, NCV, NJB); and
- (3) punishment [for sin] (see RSV, NRSV, GNT, REB, NJV, CEV).

The word is used four times in these verses. Probably it has a mixture of these meanings each time it is used, and it is unlikely, in translation, that just one English term will be appropriate in all four places. Yet only GNT, which uses both “guilt” and “punishment,” tries to capture the subtle differences of meaning. But the choice of meaning radically affects the understanding of the 390 years. For example, if the word is translated “punishment,” we need to look for a period of 390 years *after* some event of judgment, during which the people suffer the punishment that is imposed upon them. But if the word is translated “iniquity” or “sin,” we need to look for a period *before* such an event, during which the people were committing the sin, for which the punishment was imposed.

### **Application to the northern kingdom**

If “house of Israel” refers to the northern kingdom, it is impossible to see what these 390 years refer to. If we understand the word *ʿawon* as “iniquity,” or “sin,” the 390 years would refer to a time during which the northern kingdom sinned against God. The theologians of Judah believed that the northern kingdom had rebelled against God (see especially 2 Kgs 17.5-23) and that this apostasy began in the time of Jeroboam, when the northern kingdom came into being, that is, in about 922 B.C.E. But the northern kingdom lasted barely 200 years in total, coming to an end when Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.E.! Where, then, are the 390 years of sin? If, on the other hand, the word *ʿawon* means “punishment,” the 390 years refer to the time the northern kingdom of Israel was being punished, presumably in exile. But at the time of Ezekiel, the northern kingdom’s exile had only lasted about 130 years. The prophet, therefore, cannot be referring to the exile as the punishment of the northern kingdom (against Brownlee, 1986, 71).

There is still one way in which it may be maintained that these verses apply to the northern kingdom. NEB follows, in part, the Septuagint (LXX) and replaces the "390" with "190." LXX actually stipulates 150 days for Ezekiel's bearing of the sins of Israel, a figure which NEB conveniently ignores. LXX then adds the 40 days of Judah's sin, for a total of 190 days, the figure retained by NEB. Now, 150 years is much closer in round figures to the time that the northern kingdom had been in exile, but it still does not fit the elapsed time between the fall of the northern kingdom and the prophecy of Ezekiel, as Brownlee (1986, 68) claims, on the basis of reordering the text. In addition, there are no Hebrew texts that support a reading of "150" or "190." So, according to the principle of text-criticism that "the harder reading is more likely to be correct," the readings of LXX are not likely to reflect a different Hebrew source text which is now lost. More likely they are an attempt by the Greek translator to make sense of the difficult number in the original. It is, therefore, not a good solution.

These considerations, added to the evidence in the previous two sections, effectively preclude the interpretation of "house of Israel" in vv. 4-5 as referring to the northern kingdom.

### **Towards a solution**

As we have seen, "house of Israel" in Ezekiel usually designates the whole nation, or that part of the nation that formed the remnant of Israel after the fall of the northern kingdom. Is it then possible to find a solution to the riddle of the 390 years on the basis of this meaning of the "house of Israel"?

### **390 years and the nation of Israel**

If the meaning "punishment" is retained for *ʿawon*, no solution is forthcoming. Based on the time of Ezekiel's prophecy, it is not possible to identify a meaningful period of punishment for the nation of Israel (either combined or in its remnant form). But if *ʿawon* is translated "iniquity," or "sin," it is possible to suggest what the 390 years could refer to. Looking back from the time of Ezekiel's prophecy, the 390-year period would begin in about 980 B.C.E. Zimmerli (1979, 166) claims that this date is close enough to the accession of Solomon and the building of the First Temple to be an appropriate beginning of this period. The accuracy of this suggestion depends on the intricacies of the priestly chronology or seeing the figure 390 as a round number. Given Ezekiel's priestly background, his awareness of the activities that took place in the Temple (see ch. 8), and his perception of the reasons for the exile (see 44.4-14), it is quite possible that Ezekiel saw the whole First Temple period as a time of sin and apostasy of the nation of Israel. In fact, in chs. 16, 20, and 23, Ezekiel makes it clear that the people of Israel had been rebelling against God throughout their existence, even while they were still in Egypt.

Although somewhat tenuous, this is the most promising solution proffered thus far. But before we can accept this as a workable solution, we must address the problem of the "punishment of the house of Judah" in v. 6.

### 40 years and the house of Judah

It is generally recognized (for example by all the commentaries quoted in this paper) that the terminology of 4.6 is based on Num 14.34. That may be so, but unless we are going to abandon the search for an historical referent for these figures, we still need to ask, “What of the forty years? Had they already passed, or were they still in the future? Do they refer to 40 years of sin, or 40 years of punishment?”

It would be attractive to follow Klein (1988, 43) here and simply delete v. 6 as a gloss. It is understandable that such an explanatory addition might be made by an editor concerned with the interests of Judah, who thought that the only remaining part of the nation should be specifically mentioned. But there is a more weighty reason for seeing this verse as intrusive. In v. 9, it appears that only one period of suffering was imposed on Ezekiel:

During the number of days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it.

This figure, 390 instead of 430, is most easily explicable if v. 6 was originally lacking. But the fact that the verse is not lacking in any manuscripts is against that, so this is certainly not a solution to be recommended.

In seeking to explain this verse, most interpreters try to retain the balanced structure of the passage. Thus, if the 390 years refer to the “punishment” of the “house of Israel,” the 40 years should also refer to the “punishment” of the “house of Judah”; likewise, if the years refer to the “sin” of the two houses. Some have found it impossible to maintain this linguistic balance. Greenberg (1983, 104-5), for example, can draw meaning out of 390 years of Israel’s “sin,” but not from the 40 years of Judah’s “sin”; similarly he can make sense of 40 years of “punishment” for Judah, but not of 390 years of “punishment” for Israel. There is, of course, another complication, if one accepts the meaning “sin” instead of “punishment.” In that case, the pattern cannot be strictly maintained, because the days of Ezekiel’s suffering cannot refer to anything but “punishment.”

We have already seen that no good sense can be made of the 390 years, if *awon* is taken to mean “punishment.” Hence, to retain the balanced structure in translation, we would need to look for a period of 40 years during which Judah sinned. But this does not produce a satisfactory solution. There is no evidence that Ezekiel saw the period since about 630 B.C.E., or any other 40-year period of Judah’s history, as a time of especially great apostasy. On the other hand, it does make perfectly good sense if Ezekiel is looking forward to a period of punishment. Substantial numbers of his compatriots had already been taken into Babylon, Jerusalem would soon be destroyed, and Ezekiel foresaw a time of exile for the people; these disasters were due to the rebelliousness and wickedness of the nation. It should not cause great concern that Ezekiel foresaw an exile of 40 years, even though his contemporary, Jeremiah, predicted a 70-year exile, and we know that it actually lasted about 50 years. The phrases “forty days” or “forty years” are used so often in the Bible for indeterminate, longish periods that we can easily accept Ezekiel’s usage as a prediction that the exile would last a generation or so. Thus it is best

to understand the 40 years’ *cawon* on the “house of Judah” as referring to a time of punishment that had just started or was about to start. This punishment was the Babylonian exile.

In the light of the above considerations, reasonable historical sense can be made out of the passage if it is interpreted as follows. Ezekiel had to lie on his left side for 390 days to depict God’s punishment on the nation for its 390 years of sin and rebellion during the period of the First Temple. Then he had to lie on his right side for 40 days to depict the 40 years that God would punish the remnant of the nation, Judah, in the Babylonian exile. Given the different meanings of the Hebrew word *cawon*, this interpretation does not disturb the linguistic structure and balance of the passage. Such ambiguity is quite understandable when words have different meanings, but it does mean that it may not be possible to maintain the appearance of a strict balance in translation.

But the issue is not quite as simple as that. We need also to ask about the identity of the “house of Judah.” This is not in doubt: Judah was the southern kingdom, centred around Jerusalem, and, after the fall of the northern kingdom, the only continuing remnant of the nation of Israel. But, for Ezekiel, “Judah” and “Israel” are substantially synonymous, as a study of Ezekiel’s use of the term “Israel” bears out clearly.

Apart from in the phrase “house of Israel,” Ezekiel uses the term “Israel” 103 times and never is there a trace of the Deuteronomists’ distinction between Israel and Judah. Most of Ezekiel’s usages refer to the people or the land in very general or traditional terms, for example:

Set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy. (6.3)

On the day when I chose Israel . . . I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt. (20.5-6)

There are also some cases of special interest, in which the term “Israel” seems to apply to Judah. Certain verses seem to put Jerusalem and Judah together with Israel in such a way that it is impossible to make a distinction between them; for example, the Lord speaks about “the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel” (12.19); Jerusalem is referred to as “my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel” (20.40); a prophecy against Jerusalem is addressed to “the land of Israel” (21.2ff.); Tyre traded with “Judah and the land of Israel” (27.17). When the word of the Lord came to “the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel” (33.24), it is addressed to the survivors in Judah (see NRSV section heading). In 35.12 and 36.1-8, the references to “Israel” could easily be taken to apply only to the southern kingdom of Judah, since they are in the context of an oracle against Edom, although most likely the references in ch. 36 have a broader application (compare 36.5, 10). And finally, in 14.1 and 20.1, the “elders of Israel” sit in attendance upon Ezekiel; presumably these were the same people as the “elders of Judah” in 8.1.

All of this leaves the unavoidable impression that Ezekiel saw “Israel” in holistic terms, as the nation of God, whether in its original form at the time of its creation at the exodus, its remnant form of his own day, or its future restored

form. Thus, for Ezekiel, “Judah” and “Israel” are virtually interchangeable. Neither Ezekiel nor his audience is likely to have drawn a clear distinction between them, for they would have seen themselves as both the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah.” This is not as strange as may appear. A somewhat comparable situation applies in modern common parlance, for example, with the terms “America” and “the United States.” But it leaves us with the thorny question of why was “house of Judah” used here in contrast to “house of Israel”?

There is no easy answer to this. One is tempted to again suggest the work of an editor interested mainly in Judah, even if that “editor” was the prophet himself. But such interchange between near synonyms is always at the discretion of the author, and the reasons for it are not always apparent to the outsider. In this case, the historical situation reinforced the change—the sins of Israel during the 390 years had been committed by both the northern and southern kingdoms, but now, in the time of Ezekiel, Judah was all that was left of the nation to go into exile. This unexpected change to a synonym may also alert the reader/hearer to look to the different meanings of the words used for the change in the nuance of *‘awon*.

But another factor may be at work here. Alongside the historical solution that has been suggested, Ezekiel may have had a more subtle message for the people. Zimmerli (1979, 167) suggests that the underlying message of Ezekiel’s numbers is that there will be “a new exodus of Israel after the period spent in exile.” This conclusion is based on a similarity with Exod 12.41, which reads:

At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.

Familiar with this figure of 430 years of punishment, followed by an exodus, Ezekiel’s audience would be encouraged by the  $390 + 40 = 430$  years of Ezekiel. It meant that they only had a relatively short time to bear their lot before there would be a new exodus for them. Ezekiel’s use of the 40 years, then, may have been influenced more by this stylized schema than by any historical considerations.

### Conclusion for translators

From the point of view of translators, this study may not be very enlightening. On the whole, the words themselves are quite straightforward. The main contribution of this study to the actual process of translation is to exclude the possibility of “house of Israel” being interpreted as the northern kingdom. The rest of the paper does little more than attempt to answer the questions that translators will ask.

Finally, a model for these three verses is:

<sup>4-5</sup>After that, lie down [on the ground] on your left side. Stay like that for 390 days. The people of Israel sinned for 390 years. You must take their punishment on yourself for 390 days, one day for each year that they sinned.

<sup>6</sup>After that, lie down [on the ground] on your right side. Stay like that for 40 days. You must take the punishment of the people of Judah on yourself for 40 days, one day for each year that they will be punished.

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SEPPÖ SIPILÄ

## AN ORTHODOX LITURGICAL VERSION *VERSUS* AN INTERCONFESSIONAL VERSION OF PSALMS: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction: An Orthodox liturgical version

Organizations working with Bible translation, such as UBS, tend to support the idea of interconfessional translations. As far as I can see, there are both ideological and practical reasons for this. From the point of view of practicality, one interconfessional translation is clearly better than several confessional translations. To make one translation is cheaper and maybe even faster than making several translations for different denominations. From the point of view of ideology, to make one translation is an answer to the calling to serve all the churches, an ideological choice that UBS underlines.

However, an interconfessional translation does not always serve the churches. Sometimes the need of one particular Church can be rather unique and the interconfessional translations might not answer to this special need. In this paper I shall discuss issues relating to a special need of one Church, namely, to the need to use the translation in connection with the highly traditional liturgical life of an Orthodox church. When I speak about Orthodox churches, I have in mind the various Eastern Orthodox churches, although many of the issues to be mentioned are not unique to the Orthodox confessions. Similar problems are discussed also, e.g., in the Vatican document *Liturgiam authenticam*.

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