

# HOMILIES ON THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

Saint Gregory the Great



Translated by Theodosia Tomkinson

*With an Introduction by  
Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna*

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST  
ORTHODOX STUDIES

**Homilies on the Book of  
the Prophet Ezekiel**

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by  
Saint Gregory the Great

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Second Edition



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## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

*Theodosia Tomkinson (née Gray)* was born in 1932 in Blackburn, Lancashire, England, and took her B.A. degree in Classics at Leeds University. She subsequently took a B.D. degree at Uppsala University in Sweden. Her previous translations include Saint Ambrose of Milan's *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke, with Fragments on the Prophecy of Esaias* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003) and *On Abraham* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2000). She is a convert to the Orthodox Faith, a student of Patristics, and a professional translator. She and her husband, Neil Tomkinson, who is also a professional translator, live in Preston, Lancashire, England.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

It should be noted that the King James Version of the Bible is generally considered by conservative Orthodox scholars to be more consistent with the Greek texts authorized for Church usage. However, since Saint Gregory worked from the Vulgate, which differs on occasion from translations derived from other manuscripts, I have found it convenient in my translation to quote from the Douai Version of the Bible. When various points which the Saint is making are not clear from either of these established versions, or from the Septuagint (on which Saint Gregory also draws), I have been obliged to translate the passage myself.

## CONTENTS

Introduction	15
<i>Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna</i>	
Preface	19
<i>Theodosia Tomkinson</i>	
BOOK ONE	23
Preface	25
First Homily	27
<i>Before beginning his interpretation of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, the Holy Doctor speaks about the tenses and modes of prophecy</i>	
Second Homily	41
<i>The first five verses of the Prophecy of Ezekiel are expounded according to multiple senses, especially the allegorical and the moral</i>	
Third Homily	59
<i>Four verses are expounded, from the sixth through the tenth, concerning holy preachers and their twofold life, the active and the contemplative</i>	
Fourth Homily	73
<i>In the explanation of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth verses (first part), many moral precepts, especially concerning unceasing concentration on God and attentiveness to oneself, are propounded.</i>	

Fifth Homily

83

*In the exposition of three verses, from the twelfth through the fifteenth, there is learned disquisition on the Holy Spirit and His impulse, movement, and indwelling in the Saints.*

Sixth Homily

95

*Verses fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen are interpreted, together with the middle part of the eighteenth verse; the meaning of the Prophetic discourse is turned towards the commendation of Holy Scripture, and especially of the Gospel.*

Seventh Homily

113

*An exposition of verse eighteen together with the five following verses, and in particular regarding the usefulness of sacred reading and performing acts of charity with such care that we may above all through repentance be attentive to ourselves.*

Eighth Homily

133

*An exposition of the remaining verses of the first chapter, starting from verse twenty-four, together with the beginning of the second chapter; and a lengthy disquisition concerning the Divinity of Christ, the Incarnation of the Word, preaching, the gathering, multiplication, and unity of the Church.*



## Ninth Homily 157

*An explanation of chapter two of Ezekiel; in this explanation not only are many points explained in moral terms, but also much is said with great erudition concerning the necessity of prevenient Grace, the consent and coöperation of our free will, and the obscurity and the interpretation of sacred Scripture.*

## Tenth Homily 183

*In the exposition of the first verses of chapter three through the fifteenth, the Holy Doctor commends Sacred Scripture, and recommends that it be the object of assiduous reading, meditation, and preaching.*

## Eleventh Homily 213

*There follows an explanation of chapter three of Ezekiel, from verses fifteen through twenty-eight, in which the pastoral office, the mutually connected sins of prelates and their subordinates, and mental blindness are dealt with in particular.*

## Twelfth Homily 233

*The Holy Doctor goes through the remainder of chapter three and continues his exposition as far as verse four of chapter four. He adjusts this exposition to various moral precepts or counsels for preachers and their hearers.*

BOOK TWO 255

Preface 257

First Homily 259

*In an explanation of the first three verses of chapter forty of Ezekiel and of the beginning of the fourth verse, the Holy Doctor deals especially with Christ and the Church, with the elect, and with God's hidden judgments concerning them.*

Second Homily 279

*In expounding two verses of chapter forty, namely the fourth and the fifth, the holy Doctor speaks at length about the active and the contemplative life, interspersing his exposition with a great many moral teachings, as is his wont.*

Third Homily 293

*In an exposition of three verses, the edifice of the Church in particular is described as being constructed of all the righteous under each Covenant.*

Fourth Homily 315

*In four verses, from the ninth through the twelfth, which are explained allegorically or morally, it is narrated.*

Fifth Homily 333

*From the final part of the twelfth verse through the seventeenth the fortieth chapter of Ezekiel is expounded, and the Holy Doctor speaks especially about contemplation.*

## Sixth Homily 353

*Exactly three verses are interpreted, and it is shown how much perfection shone forth in Christians, and particularly in the Apostles.*

## Seventh Homily 373

*[In other texts, the nineteenth.] The Holy Doctor expounds seven verses, from twenty through twenty-seven [twenty-six], and at the same time sets forth a great many moral precepts concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the steps leading thereto, true perfection, and the necessity of good deeds.*

## Eighth Homily 395

*[In other texts, the twentieth.] Verses twenty-seven and the remainder, up and including thirty-eight, are expounded, briefly for the most part, but at greater length in some cases, and in particular the doctrine of the resurrection is set forth.*

## Ninth Homily 415

*[In other texts, the twenty-first.] Five verses, from thirty-nine through forty-three, are expounded, and with scarcely any attempt to explain the literal sense, the spiritual and moral senses are propounded, and above all the pastoral office is discussed.*

Tenth Homily	439
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*[In other texts, the twenty-second.] In expounding four verses, from forty-four through forty-eight, the Holy Doctor disserts more freely on faith, hope, love, and the need for offering good works to God in the altar of one's heart, and concludes this work.*

FRAGMENTS	461
-----------	-----

First Fragment	463
----------------	-----

*On Angels*

Second Fragment	464
-----------------	-----

*On Abraham, Isaac, and Rebecca*

Third Fragment	474
----------------	-----

*On Moses and the Rod*

Fourth Fragment	476
-----------------	-----

*On Abominations*

Fifth Fragment	477
----------------	-----

*On a Sheep for an Ass*

Sixth Fragment	478
----------------	-----

*On Moses and the Dark Cloud*

Seventh Fragment	479
------------------	-----

*On the Wandering Leprosy*

Eighth Fragment	481
-----------------	-----

*On Aaron Between the Living and the Dead*

Ninth Fragment	482
<i>On a Bird and Her Young</i>	
Tenth Fragment	485
<i>On Wool and Linen</i>	
Eleventh Fragment	486
<i>On the Day of Tribulation</i>	
Twelfth Fragment	487
<i>On the Lord's Ascent</i>	
Thirteenth Fragment	488
<i>On the Scar of Penitence</i>	
Fourteenth Fragment	489
<i>On the Ships of Tharsis</i>	
Fifteenth Fragment	490
<i>On the Dove of Holy Church</i>	
Sixteenth Fragment	491
<i>On the Precedence of the Ethiopians</i>	
Seventeenth Fragment	492
<i>On the Sons of Ephraim</i>	
Eighteenth Fragment	493
<i>On Strongholds and Terror</i>	
Nineteenth Fragment	494
<i>On Rising Before Light</i>	

## INTRODUCTION

### *Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna*

It was with particular pleasure that I initially urged the other directors of the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies to undertake the publication of Mrs. Tomkinson's translation of the homilies of Saint Gregory the Great on the writings of the Prophet Ezekiel. First, these sermons have never appeared in English translation, making their publication an event of some moment. Second, Mrs. Tomkinson, whom I met in Sweden while I was teaching at the Theological Institute of Uppsala University—of which she is a graduate—, is meticulous in her translation, having spent more than a decade in preparing the present work. It seems to me that, combined with her sensitivities as an Orthodox Christian, this scholarly scrupulosity helps to bring into vivid focus the position that Saint Gregory, as a so-called Latin Father, holds in the Eastern Orthodox world.

To be sure, from an Orthodox standpoint Saint Gregory the Great, the *Διαλόγος* ("Dialogist"), stands in the tradition of the Greek Fathers. Though many Western commentators are quick to cite, as evidence of his Latin disposition, Saint Gregory's lack of abilities in Greek, his great attention to the writings of Saint Augustine, and his immersion into a Roman society largely separated from the world of the Greek Fathers, their arguments are greatly overstated and subject to dispute. Saint Gregory's theological writings and views generally reflect the consensual unity of the Greek Fathers. Indeed, in several places in his writings he demonstrates a knowledge of Greek. Moreover, an overstatement of the admittedly growing distance between the Latin West and Byzantine East does not address the Byzantine hegemony which nonetheless still prevailed in the Mediterranean world in the sixth century. In fact, Saint Gregory has always held a position of great honor in the Eastern Church. His writings are widely read and appreciated, and the standardized text of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, one of

the three liturgies most commonly celebrated in the Orthodox Church, is often attributed by Orthodox sources—albeit wrongly so—to his pen.

It is also important to understand that the Eastern Church has long appreciated Saint Gregory's ecclesiology, which expresses with some precision the Orthodox teaching about the Roman See, which he occupied. The Orthodox Church has always rejected the notion of Papal primacy, a notion which gained greater and greater ascendancy in the Latin Church as that church became ever more separated from its Eastern roots. Though many of his statements have been invoked to support the modern idea of Roman supremacy in the Christian Church, Saint Gregory very clearly attributed to the See of Saint Peter a primacy of spiritual honor only—a primacy which he in turn ascribes to the Church of Antioch, too, a See which Saint Peter, according to tradition, held for several years before going to Rome. To the See of Alexandria, founded by Saint Mark, he also attributes a primacy of honor, since the Apostle Mark was sent to Alexandria by Saint Peter himself. His references to the shared primacy of the Petrine See correspond exactly to the Orthodox Church's understanding of the Petrine primacy as one of confession, the very confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of the Living God, upon which rock the Church is built. As Bishop of Rome, Saint Gregory exercised his authority—indeed, shared his authority—as an expression of his duty to uphold the confessional truths of the Christian Faith and the unity of the Christian witness, retreating into Scripture in affirming oneness with his fellow Bishops: "*Ut omnes unum sint...*"

It is notable that when the Pope, or Patriarch (the actual meaning of the appellation "Pope"), of Constantinople assumed the title "Œcumenical Patriarch," it was Pope Gregory who first objected to this title, not because it compromised the supposed primacy of the Roman Pontiff, but because he feared that the Constantinopolitan See thus intended to compromise the essential equality of all Bishops in the Christian Church. In our times, when the Petrine supremacy of the Roman Pontiff has become a dogma and

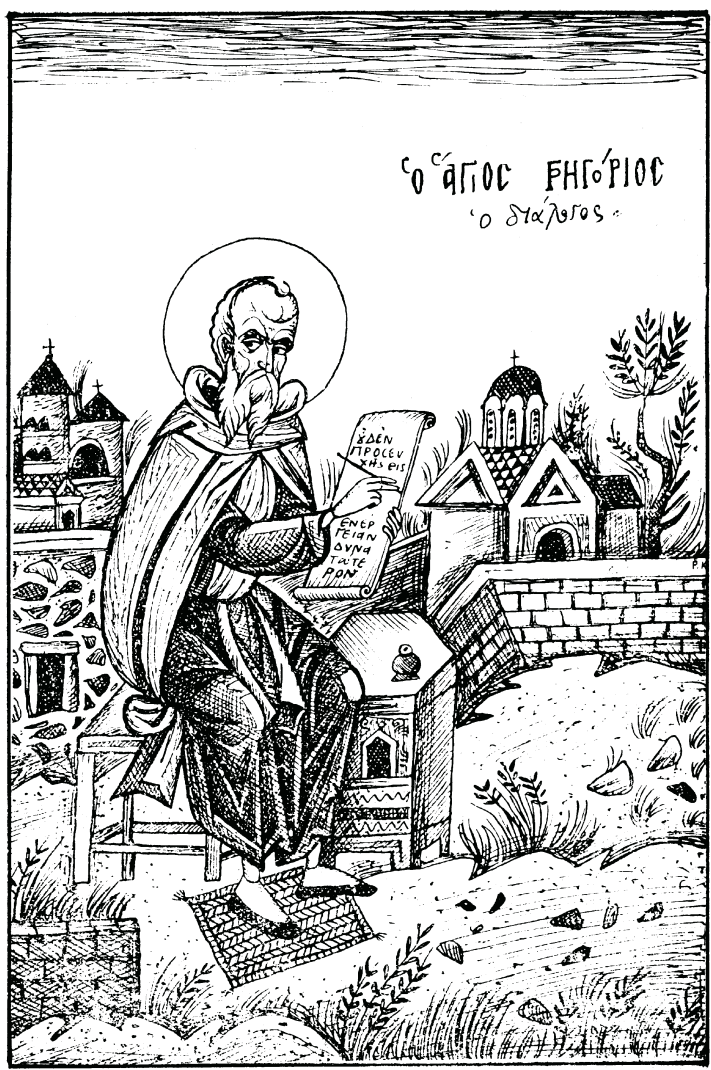
when the Patriarch of Constantinople has come to misunderstand his simple primacy of honor in such a way as to distort the equality of the Episcopacy that the Orthodox Church has always zealously guarded, Saint Gregory's ecclesiology takes on a new significance for us. It is thus no unimportant thing to see his writings more widely distributed, that we might draw on his general wisdom and emulate his able guardianship over the spiritual foundations of the Church.

Also today, when great changes are on the horizon and when society faces challenges and threats it has never before known, the person of Saint Gregory takes on a particular importance for Christians in general—for Orthodox and heterodox alike. Throughout his writings, there is a sense of urgency, reflecting the confusion and turmoil of his own age. He anticipates at all times the impending end of time, placing great stress on the individual Christian's need for spiritual renewal and preparation for the other world. He thus touches on one of the essentials of Christianity: its constant and relentless reference to the eternal realm, which lies beyond the world of sin and which beckons every Christian in every age to the ever-present end of the world that is ushered in by the inevitability of individual death. In his apocalyptic zeal he inspires each of us to prepare for the visitation of death, just as he calls our age of confusion and chaos to sober reflection on the eschatological realities which all of mankind shall either forestall by its repentance or endure through its prayers.

Saint Gregory was a man of great culture, known for his gentle nature and distinguished for his courage in confessing the Christian truth. A visionary with deep insight into the mysteries of Scripture, he represents, perhaps, the ideal Western man—steeped in the learning of the Roman society in which he lived and formed by the universal values and supreme wisdom bequeathed to that society by the Greek world. It thus seems wholly appropriate that his commentaries on Ezekiel should appear in the English language, being made available to Westerners in a language that has become the *lingua franca* of much of the Western world.



Ὁ ἍΓΙΟΣ ΕΠΙΘΩΡΙΟΣ  
Ὁ ΔΙΑΚΟΝΟΣ



## PREFACE

*Theodosia Tomkinson*

Saint Gregory's homilies on the Book of Ezekiel the Prophet were delivered as sermons to the Christian Faithful at the end of 593, when Rome was actually under siege by the Lombards. There are many references to this in the text, as Saint Gregory bewails Italy's lost glory and peace. At the time of their composition, he left his sermons in note form, just as the notaries had compiled them, being busy with other cares. Eight years later, at the Brothers' request, he asked for them, looked them over, and corrected them in preparation for their reproduction in a manuscript that could be conveniently read. The amended text comprised two books, the first of which he dedicated to Bishop Martinian, who had begged Saint Gregory for it at about that time, and the second to the very Brothers who had initially requested it. Prevented by the pressure of many cares, as he himself says, he could not explain the whole of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. He expounded only on Chapters 1:1–4:3 (Book One) and Chapter 40 (Book Two).

There is some dispute among scholars concerning the matters that pertain to the exegesis of the Prophet Ezekiel. It is rightly said that Saint Gregory particularly explained "meanings suited to the formation of character," or chiefly inclines to investigate mysteries, in his treatment of the Prophet's writings. This point will become abundantly clear to the reader as he works his way through the present text.

Saint Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome and Apostle of the English, was born in Rome *ca.* 540 to a noble and pious family. He received the formal, classical education appropriate to his rank and became a civil servant, eventually being appointed city prefect. When his father, Gordianus, died in 573 and his mother, Saint Sylvia, retired into religious seclusion, Saint Gregory sold his patrimony, gave much of the proceeds to the poor, and founded six monasteries on his family estates and one at his family home on the

Cælian Hill. This latter institution, which was dedicated to Saint Andrew the First-Called, he entered as a simple monk. It is clear from many passages in his writings that Saint Gregory would have preferred to remain a mere monk, but he was recalled to the world in 579 to become a Deacon, with responsibility for the welfare of Christians in Rome. Not long afterwards, he was sent as *apocrisiarius* of the Bishop of Rome to Constantinople, there to request the help of the Emperor against the Lombards, since the Imperial Exarch at Ravenna had remained passive before their threat. In 590, when bubonic plague raged in the city, Saint Gregory was made Pope, or Bishop, of Rome.

Saint Gregory was born and brought up in a time of war, tribulation, devastation, disease, pain, and suffering. Italy had been disturbed and confused for many years in consequence of plague, which first arrived in 543; the invasions of the Lombards, who represented a political and a spiritual threat, being both pagans and heretics or schismatics; and floods. Thus, Saint Gregory had every reason to believe that the end of the world was at hand, and it was thus of paramount importance that his people repent and turn to God in preparation for the Last Judgment.

As Pope of Rome at a time when Italy was ruled from Constantinople and the Imperial Exarch at Ravenna was disinclined to offer active help, Saint Gregory was forced to assume more and more responsibility for the physical welfare of his people, for the military defense of the city, the supply of food (grain) and pure water, the disposal of sewage, the protection of Italian interests against corrupt Imperial officials, the ransoming of prisoners of war, the care of refugees, *etc.* At the same time, he had to administer his Church, ensure the election of good Bishops, deploy them when their Sees were laid waste, discipline the clergy—the more important when the end of the world seemed imminent—, watch over the interests of the Church's tenants, protect his flock from the Arian influences of the Lombards, and withstand any tendencies to resort to paganism. Amidst all of these cares, Saint Gregory stood firm as the father of his flock. His actions and his writings indicate his versatility,

consistency, and kindness. He obviously served God lovingly and faithfully, showing diligence, steadfastness, and common sense.

## **Book One**

## PREFACE

*Gregory, Bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his most beloved brother Bishop Martinian:*

Amid the pressure of urgent cares, I had abandoned to oblivion the homilies that were taken down just as I delivered them before the people. But after eight years, at the request of the Brothers, I was zealous to require the clerks' notes and, glancing through them, by God's Grace I have amended them, insofar as the straits of tribulations allowed. Then in your affection you asked for them to be sent, so that you might read them; but I believe it highly inappropriate that you partake of this poor water, you who are known assiduously to drink the profound and astute streams that flow from Ambrose and Augustine. But again, as I ponder that amid daily delights also simple victuals often taste sweet, I have delivered the feast to one who reads the better, so that when you consume cruder food, you may, as if through aversion, the more eagerly return to subtler feasts.

## FIRST HOMILY

### *Before beginning his interpretation of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, the Holy Doctor speaks about the tenses and modes of prophecy*

Before speaking of Ezekiel the Prophet—with the inspiration of Almighty God—I must first reveal the tenses and modes of prophecy, so that when the approach thereto is laid bare, virtue may be better understood. Prophecy has three tenses: the past, of course; the present; and the future. This must be understood because prophecy loses its etymology in two tenses. Since it is called “prophecy” as predicting future events, when it talks of the past or the present, it loses the justification for its name, in that it does not prophesy what is to come, but either relates what was done or what is happening. For we speak more truly of the three tenses of prophecy if we quote the evidence of Holy Writ. Prophecy concerning the future: “Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son.”<sup>1</sup> Prophecy concerning the past: “In the beginning, God created Heaven and earth”<sup>2</sup>—for a man speaks of a time when man was not. A prophecy about the present is when Paul the Apostle says, “But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when it is said, “The secrets of his heart are made manifest,”<sup>4</sup> it is truly shown that through this mode of prophecy the Spirit does not predict what the future will be, but reveals what is. How, then, may it be called “the spirit of prophecy” that lays bare no future event but reports the present? In this case, attention must be paid to what is rightly described as prophecy, not because it predicts future events, but because it

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<sup>1</sup> Esaias 7:14; St. Matthew 1:23.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:24–25.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:25.

## Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Mrs. Tomkinson's beautiful translation of Saint Gregory the Great's homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel is the first English rendering of this important and profound theological work. If ever the ideal oxymoron were to be found, doubtless one of the prime candidates would be the words "easy reading" when applied to the writings of the Church Fathers. Whether Greek or Latin, the Fathers of the Church were largely men of letters, schooled in rhetoric, and given to a style of writing and logical exposition that is a challenge to the contemporary reader. Their thought processes are difficult to follow with ease, their logic is complex, and their writings are not "read," in the normal sense of the word, but "studied." Mrs. Tomkinson has not, in this excellent translation, tried to make the writings of Saint Gregory something that they are not, as do some ugly and inaccurate contemporary renderings of the writings of the Church Fathers. A British scholar living in Sweden, she brings to her translation of Saint Gregory's complex Latin a correspondingly eloquent English. Her sentence structure is complex. Her words provoke reflection. She has thus offered to an English-speaking audience the words of this renowned Church Father with a loyalty to the original Latin that is seldom found. She has found a treasure which she has not exploited, but has left whole and genuine, so that we might all benefit from it.

*Archbishop Chrysostomos*

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