

Introduction to Ezekiel

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I. The Man

A prophet from a priestly family (1:3), like Jeremiah (Jer.1:1); Zechariah son of Berechiah (Zech.1:1); Zechariah son of Jehoiada (2 Chron.24:20; and John the Baptist (Luke 1:5).

Like John the Baptist, Ezekiel began his prophetic ministry at age 30—the very age he otherwise would have qualified to serve as a priest.

“Ezekiel” means “Strengthened by God” or “God Strengthens”

Written in first person (with few exceptions—e.g., 1:2-3)

Apart from this book, his name is not mentioned in scripture

In 605 BC Daniel and his friends had been deported to Babylon (Dan.1:1-4), about 700 miles from home.

In 597 BC King Jehoiachin was deported, along with 10,000 Jews (2 Kings 24:10-16; Jer.24:1), among whom were Ezekiel (at age 25) and his wife.

In exile, Ezekiel lived in Tel-Abib (3:15) on the Chebar Canal, which was probably southeast of Babylon. Life in Babylonia, for the exiles, was more like living in a colony than in captivity. They were able to farm their own lands there (Jer.29) and have their own houses (Ezek.3:24; 20:1)

The death of his wife coincided with the besieging of Jerusalem (24:15-27).

The time and circumstances of Ezekiel’s death are unrecorded. Jewish tradition says he died a martyr for rebuking the idolatry of an Israelite prince, around 560 BC.

II. The Ministry

Ezekiel’s ministry lasted 22 years (593-571 BC) (1:2; 29:17)

Contemporary with Jeremiah (who would have been about 20 years older than him) and of Daniel, who had been taken into captivity about 8 years earlier than himself, and would have been close to Ezekiel’s age. Daniel was prominent enough to be mentioned in Ezekiel 14:14, 20 (along with Noah and Job) and 28:3 (as the epitome of wisdom)

Ezekiel contains 14 dated references, generally dated from the deportation of King Jehoiachin (1:1, 2; 3:15-16; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1).

Ezekiel’s ministry was strange and bewildering, characterized by prophetic oracles, by acted signs (more than any other prophet), by parables and by four visions.

III. Characteristics of the Book

Combines three genres of literature: narrative, prophetic oracles, apocalyptic visions.

Jewish speculations regarding the chariot vision of chapter one gave rise to a school of Jewish mysticism that made a major contribution to later Kabbalism. For fear of the threat to orthodoxy, some rabbis, therefore, advocating the withdrawal of Ezekiel from public use, removing it from the synagogue lectionary and only teaching it to the most mature students (F.F. Bruce, *New International Bible Commentary*).

The prophecies are arranged mostly in chronological order, with the exception of 29:1-16, which is dated a year earlier than chapter 26, and 29:17—30:19, which is the latest dated prophecy in the book.

Visions in this book provided inspiration for Black spirituals, “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel” and “Dry Bones”

A. Major Visions:

—Ezekiel’s initial call (Chs.1-3);

— The departure of the glory from the temple (Chs.8-11);

- Dry bones rising (ch.37)
- The vision of the restored temple (Chs.40-48)

B. Acted “signs”:

- Ezekiel was mute for years (3:26; 24:27; 33:21f), except when the Lord opened his mouth
- Depicting the siege of Jerusalem on a tile (4:1-3)
- Lying on his left side for 390 days, then switching to the right side for 40 days (4:4-8)
- Limiting his diet and cooking his food over human excrement (4:9-15)
- Cutting, weighing, binding, and burning his own hair (5:1-4)
- Packing his luggage for exile (12:1-7)
- Groaning, clapping, striking with a sword? (21:6, 14)
- God commands not to mourn or weep over his wife’s death (24:15-27).
- Two sticks (37:15-23)

C. Parables/Metaphors:

- The Torched Vine (ch.15)
- Adulterous Israel and Judah (chs.16, 23)
- Eagles and Vine (ch.17)
- Lioness and cubs (ch.19)
- Rusty Cauldron (ch.24)
- Good Shepherd, bad shepherds (chs.34, 37)

D. Prophetic Oracles:

Like Jeremiah before him, Ezekiel prophesies judgment and restoration.

As with Jeremiah, the reasons given for judgment are the violation of the covenant, as well as the sense of unconditional security by which the people were deluded, partly by false prophets (13:3, 16; Jer.29:1).

Until the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC), the first six years of his ministry, Ezekiel’s prophecies warned that this would happen. Six months after Jerusalem was destroyed, an escapee from there came to Tel-Abib and told of the event (33:21). From then onward, Ezekiel gave prophecies of restoration in the Messianic kingdom.

A section of oracles against surrounding nations (chs.25-32) resembles similar sections in Isaiah (chs.13-23), in Jeremiah (chs.46-51), and in Amos (chs.1-2)

IV. Unity of the Book

There was no scholarly dispute about the unity of the book of Ezekiel until about 1924, when a German critic challenged the date and authorship of all but 170 verses. This skepticism prevailed for about a generation, but has now swung back in the direction of general agreement upon the 6th-century dating and the single-authorship of the book, so that this conservative view “no longer calls for defense against a contrary dominant position” (F.F. Bruce, 1979).

Evidence for unity of authorship:

1. The book unfolds logically, from start to finish
2. The book has a consistent message—the destruction of Jerusalem and eventual restoration
3. Style and language are uniform throughout the book:
 - a. The prophet addressed as “son of man” — 92 times (comp. 1 time in Daniel)
 - b. “the word of the Lord came to me”— 47 times (19X in Jer., 25X in rest of Bible)
 - c. “they [or “you”, “the nations”, etc.] shall know that I am the Lord”— 73X (6X elsewhere)

- d. “the glory of the Lord” (1:28; 3:12, 23; 10:4, 18; 11:23; 43:4, 5; 44:4)
- 4. The chronological arrangement is more consistent than in most prophets (e.g., Isaiah and Jeremiah)
- 5. First person singular is used throughout
- 6. Ezekiel’s personality and character are consistent throughout

V. Ezekiel and the New Testament

Though the man Ezekiel is not mentioned by name in the New Testament, his book is either quoted or alluded to 65 times by New testament authors (48 of which occurrences are in the Book of Revelation)

The Good Shepherd and the lost sheep (ch.34) form the basis of the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7; Matt.18:12-14) and of the references to Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), “that great Shepherd” (Heb.13:20), and “the Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4). Other references to Christ as the “Shepherd” are found in 1 Peter 2:25 and Revelation 7:17.

The Book of Revelation rebirths much of the imagery from Ezekiel, including: the cherubim (1:10; cf. Rev.4:7), the marking of the foreheads of those to be spared in the judgment (ch.9; cf. Rev.7:3), eating the scroll (3:1; cf., Rev.10:9f); the battle of Gog and Magog (chs.38-39; cf. Rev.20:8-9), the river of life (ch.47; cf. Rev.22:1-3), etc.

VI. Why the book is often found difficult

- A. Highly symbolic style
- B. Bizarre imagery
- C. Prophet’s symbolic actions are often difficult to picture
- D. The temple vision at the end is long and sometimes unintelligible
- E. Tedious repetition—
 - 1. “likeness” and “appearance” (9X and 13X, respectively) in chapter one alone
 - 2. “rebellious house” (7X in chs.2-3; 14X total)
 - 3. The watchman prophecy in 3:16-21 is repeated in 33:1-9
 - 4. The teaching of personal responsibility ids found in 18 is repeated in 33:12-20
 - 5. “My servant David” and the “covenant of peace” are found in 34:23-31 and in 37:24-26
- F. Special difficult passages (treated separately, in detail, below)
 - 1. What are the 40 days and the 390 days? (4:4-6)
 - 2. Who is the “king of Tyre” in 28:11-19?
 - 3. When were the 40 years of Egypt’s exile (29:11-13)?
 - 4. The expectations of the returning exiles were not realized (Chs.34, 37)
 - 5. The identity of Gog and the battle of chs.38-39
 - 6. What is the fulfillment of the temple vision of chs.40-47?

VII. The most remarkable prophetic predictions whose fulfillments can be verified

- A. Tyre’s destruction. (ch.26)
- B. Israel’s restoration from Babylon (chs.36, 37)

VIII. Outline of the Book

I. The call of the prophet (chs.1-3)

- A. First Vision: the cherubim-attended throne-chariot (ch.1)
- B. The commission: eat the scroll, be the watchman, be mute (chs.2-3)

II. Messages of the doom of Jerusalem (chs.4-24)

- A. The siege depicted on a tile, by the prophet's sleeping and eating (ch.4)
- B. Prophecy over a haircut (ch.5)
- C. Prophecy against the high places (ch.6)
- D. The end has come (ch.7)
- E. Second Vision: Abominations chase God out of Jerusalem (chs.8-11)
 - 1. The abominations in Jerusalem (ch.8)
 - 2. The marking of the remnant (ch.9)
 - 3. The glory departs (chs.10-11)
- F. Ezekiel portrays captivity by digging through wall, eating quaking (ch.12)
- G. False prophets denounced (ch.13)
- H. Exiles have idols in their hearts (ch.14) A denunciation of the elders
- I. The torched vine (ch.15)
- J. God deals with his adulterous wife (ch.16)
- K. The eagles and the vine (ch.17)
- L. A proverb refuted (ch.18) the "atomistic ethic"
- M. The lioness and her lost whelps (ch.19)
- N. Israel's sins and God's sword (chs.20-22) Shiloh prophecy—21:27 (Gen.49:10)
- O. Two harlot sisters: Oholah and Oholibah (ch.23)
- P. The cauldron and the prophet's wife (ch.24)

III. Oracles against Gentile Nations (chs. 25-32)

- A. Amon, Moab, Edom, Philistia (ch.25)
- B. Tyre (chs.26-28)
- C. Egypt (chs.29-32)

IV. Messages of Hope (chs.33-48)

- A. Messages occasioned by Jerusalem's fall (ch.33)
- B. Renewal, protection and vindication of Israel (chs.34-39)
 - 1. Good Shepherd, bad shepherds (ch.34)
 - 2. Edom is going down (ch.35)
 - 3. Israel restored (ch.36)
 - 4. Vision of Dry Bones, sign of two sticks (ch.37)
 - 5. The war of Gog and Magog (chs.38-39)
- C. Final vision (chs.40-48)
 - 1. The temple and its rituals (chs.40-46)
 - 2. The living river and healing trees (47:1-12)
 - 3. Borders of the Land (47:13-23)
 - 4. Division of the Land (ch.48)

Especially Difficult Questions

I. The 390 and the 40 years (4:4-6)

“The number of years represented by the 390 days for Israel and the 40 days for Judah presents problems both of the text and of its interpretation.” (John B. Taylor, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*)

LXX changes 390 to 190 (without Heb. Manuscript support)—adopted by NEB

Do the two periods run concurrently, or is there a total of 430 years?

Do the periods speak of the length of the iniquities being committed, or the duration of their judgments?

A. If iniquities, then:

390 yrs. = the time from Solomon’s apostasy (in the 960s BC?) to the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC). [about 380+ yrs] (F.F. Bruce; NLT Study Bible)

390 yrs from Jeroboam’s apostasy (931 BC) to the destruction of Jerusalem (*Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*) [this totals only 345 years, but if taken to the end of exile, 392 years, as suggested in *Shepherd’s Notes*]

40 years = the length of time from Jeremiah’s call to the fall of Jerusalem. (F.F. Bruce)

40 yrs = the period of gross idolatry after Josiah’s reforms failed (*Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*)

B. If the judgments, then:

390 yrs = the exact period from 722 BC to the conquests of Alexander (332 BC, who showed great lenience and favor to the Jews (*Halley’s Handbook*) (NKJV Study Bible agrees)

40 yrs = symbolic of a lost generation (those in Babylon) reminiscent of the lost generation in the wilderness (NLT Study Bible).

40 yrs. A round figure representing the time from 586 BC to 539 BC (47 yrs)

40 yrs may denote “a generation”—denoting the time from the prophecy to the end of the captivity, which was yet to be 56 years. (*Halley’s Handbook*)

430 years = from end of David’s monarchy—the deportation of Jehoiachin (597 BC) to Hasmonean kingdom (167 BC)? (Africa Bible Commentary)

“No explanation of the totals seems satisfactory” (Wm. MacDonald)

430 yrs may echo the captivity in Egypt, suggesting another such captivity, though of different length. (*Halley’s Handbook*; so also Fairbairn)

II. Identity of the king of Tyre? (28:11-19)

A. Perhaps a reference to Satan?

1. In the Garden of Eden
2. Called a “cherub
3. Said to be “perfect in wisdom, in beauty, and in all his ways

B. Simply referring to the human king (as representing the whole city’s character and destiny)

1. Ezekiel’s poetry does not encourage literal interpretations
2. The Assyrian [king] is likened to a tree in Lebanon, and even in Eden

3. Satan was not the cherub in the Garden of Eden—he was the serpent
4. The description of the king as “perfect” is the king’s own self-description being thrown back at him
5. He is said to have been corrupted by commercial success

III. The prophesied 40-year exile of Egypt (29:11-13)

Forty Years? Corresponds, in length, to the 40 years of Israelite wandering in the desert

“The country from Migdol, which was on the isthmus between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, was so completely ruined that it might well be called desert; and it is probable that this desolation continued during the whole reign of Amasis, which was just forty years. See Herodotus, lib.iii, c.10.” (Adam Clarke)

Approximate length of time between the war on Pharaoh Hophra by Nebuchadnezzar to the fourth year of Cyrus. (Adam Clarke)

“We learn from Berosus that Nebuchadnezzar sent several captive Egyptians to Babylon; and from Megasthenes, that he transplanted others to Pontus; and it is probable, that at the dissolution of the Babylonian Empire, about forty years after, Cyrus permitted them to return to their native country. Ch.30:23. Jer.46:19.” (*Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*)

Halley’s Handbook agrees with Adam Clarke and the *Treasury* (above)

The time Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, reigned supreme over Egypt (567-527 BC) (John MacArthur)

A Babylonian chronicle suggests that Egypt was conquered about 568 BC (three years after the prophecy was given). This lasted approx. forty years (till 525 BC when Egypt came under Persian rule (ESV Study Bible)

40 years may represent a generation (as in 4:6—NLT Study Bible)

Non-fulfilled (F.F.Bruce)—perhaps due to some change in Egypt’s policies (see Jer.18:7-10)

IV. The failure of the return from exile to meet expectations (chs.34, 37)

Return from exile spiritualized as salvation in Christ— John 11:51-52

Isaiah 10:21 (Rom.9:27)

Isaiah 11:11-12; 15-16 (Romans 15:10)

Isaiah 35:8-10 (Matt.11:1-6; Hebrews 12:12)

Jeremiah 11:16 (Romans 11:16ff)

Jeremiah 30:3, 10; 31:8-10, 21; 32:37, 44 (Matt.2:17-18; Luke 22:20; Heb.8:7-13)

Ezek.34:11-13; 37:21-22 (John 10:11, 14, 16; Hebrews 13:20)

Joel 3:1 (Acts 2:16-21)

Amos 9:14-15 (Acts 15:14-17)

V. Identifying the battle of Gog and Magog (chs.38-39)? Riddle:38:17

A. A future war? Things happen that have never been seen in history.

1. The Popular View: Future invasion of Israel by Modern Russia?

- a) Timing: In the latter years (38:8, 16) when Israel has been regathered (38:8; 39:27)

- b) Features that have never literally occurred: Fire from heaven (38:22; 39:6), burning weapons 7 years (39:9) and burying the dead for 7 months (39:12)
- c) “Prince of Rosh” ±Russia? Meshech and Tubal = Moscow and Tobolsk? (38:2)
- d) “Uttermost parts of the north” (Russia?) (38:15; 39:2)

But...

- a) “Latter years” means only “future years” and Israel was regathered beginning in 539 BC.
- b) Apocalyptic language makes much of fire and brimstone and the number “seven”
- c) “Prince of Rosh” means “chief prince” in Hebrew. Meshech and Tubal were sons of Japheth (Gen.10:2), not Russian cities. Josephus identified Meshech and Tubal with an area in Modern Turkey, and modern scholars tend to agree. The first associations of Meshech with the word “Moscow” are not found until the 16th century.
- d) Many invasions of Israel (even from Babylon and Assyria) were said to come from “the north”

2. *Final Battle of Revelation 20:8-9*

- a) Leader called “Gog and Magog” (38:2; Revelation 20:8)
- b) The world united against the beloved city (Revelation 20:9)
- c) Ends with fire out of heaven destroying the attackers (38:22; 39:6; Revelation 20:9)
- d) Could be a world war, a global persecution, or even a demonic onslaught against the church

B. An ancient war? Fought on horseback with swords, arrows, armor, and burnable weapons

1. *Antiochus Epiphanes’ attempt to destroy Jewish faith*

- a) “North” (38:15; 39:2) with Daniel 11:21ff
- b) “Turned back: (38:4)
- c) “a sword” (38:21) Maccabean guerrillas?
- d) No longer profaning God’s name (39:7; Daniel 11:31)

2. *Haman in the time of Esther?*

- a) All the lands named in Ezekiel 38 were within the Persian Empire
- b) The word for “multitude” (Heb. “*Hamon*”) is like *Haman* (39:11, 15, 16)
- c) Haman was an Agagite—descended from Agag the Amelekite (Esther 3:1)
- d) LXX seems to read the Hebrew “Agag” as “Gog” in Numbers 24:7: “A man came forth out of his seed and he shall dominate many nations. And Gog his kingdom shall be raised up high, and his kingdom shall be increased.”
- e) The prophecies alluded to (38:17; 38:8) could be Exodus 17:16; Numb.24:7; 20; Deut.25:19; 1 Samuel 15:2; 30:8; Psalm 83
- f) Haman was a chief of the princes (Esther 3:1), and the battle of God is led by the chief prince.
- g) Timing: when Jews had newly returned (38:8) and Jerusalem lacked walls (38:11)
- h) Intended victims: those living in unwalled towns (38:11; Esther 9:19)
- i) Object: to take spoils (not land) from Jews (Esther 3:9; Ezek.38:12-13)
- j) Seems associated with Purim which was 7 months prior to Succoth. The fact that the corpses were marked, but not buried for 7 months (39:12-15) suggests waiting to bury until Succoth, when water of purification was prepared.

VI. The fulfillment of the temple in the final vision (chs.40-47)

A. Zerubbabel's Temple?

1. *In favor: It was the only temple that was built after this prophecy was given*
2. *Against: It did not fit this description, but was very inferior to it*

B. A future temple—possibly in the millennium?

1. *In favor: Since there has been no temple like it in the past, it follows that it is yet to be built*
2. *Against: No such system of worship can be valid since the coming of the New Covenant*
 - a) Centralized worship is replaced by spiritual worship (John 4:21-24)
 - b) There are no more animal sacrifices—(see 43:27; 45:15, 17; Hebrews 9:12; 10:8-10, 18)
 - c) Physical circumcision is no longer relevant (see 44:9; Gal.5:2-4, 6; 6:15)
 - d) There will never again be a levitical priesthood (see 40:46; 43:19; Heb.7:11-17, 23-24)
3. *Against: The description cannot describe circumstances after the second coming of Christ*
 - a) No marriage (nor, presumably, child-bearing) in the resurrection (see 44:22; 47:22; Mark 12:25)
 - b) There is no temple in the New Jerusalem (see 40:5; 43:5; 45:20; Revelation 21:22)

C. A potential temple which never came to be.

1. *Contingent upon a degree of repentance that did not exist among the exiles in 539 BC (43:11; cf. Zech.6:15)*
2. *The design details were intended to correspond to spiritual realities in the Church (1 Cor.3:16; 2 Cor.6:16; Eph.2:20-22; 1 Tim.3:15; Heb.3:6; 1 Peter 2:5), just as in the case of the tabernacle (Hebrews 8:5)*