

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Ezekiel

Scripture: Ezekiel

Code: MSB26

Title

The book has always been named for its author, Ezekiel (1:3; 24:24), who is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture. His name means “strengthened by God,” which, indeed, he was for the prophetic ministry to which God called him (3:8,9). Ezekiel uses visions, prophecies, parables, signs, and symbols to proclaim and dramatize the message of God to His exiled people.

Author and Date

If the “thirtieth year” of 1:1 refers to Ezekiel’s age, he was 25 when taken captive and 30 when called into ministry. Thirty was the age when priests commenced their office, so it was a notable year for Ezekiel. His ministry began in 593/92 B.C. and extended at least 22 years until 571/70 B.C. (cf. 25:17). He was a contemporary of both Jeremiah (who was about 20 years older) and Daniel (who was the same age), whom he names in 14:14,20; 28:3 as an already well known prophet. Like Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1) and Zechariah (cf. Zech. 1:1 with Neh. 12:16), Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest (1:3). Because of his priestly background, he was particularly interested in and familiar with the temple details; so God used him to write much about them (8:1–11:25; 40:1–47:12).

Ezekiel and his wife (who is mentioned in 24:15–27) were among 10,000 Jews taken captive to Babylon in 597 B.C. (2 Kin. 24:11–18). They lived in Tel-Abib (3:15) on the bank of the Chebar River, probably SE of Babylon. Ezekiel writes of his wife’s death in exile (Ezek. 24:18), but the book does not mention Ezekiel’s death, which rabbinical tradition suggests occurred at the hands of an Israelite prince whose idolatry he rebuked around 560 B.C.

The author received his call to prophesy in 593 B.C. (1:2), in Babylon (“the land of the Chaldeans”), during the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s captivity, which began in 597 B.C. Frequently, Ezekiel dates his prophecies from 597 B.C. (8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1,17; 33:21; 40:1). He also dates the message in 40:1 as 573/72, the 14th year after 586 B.C., i.e., Jerusalem’s final fall. The last dated utterance of Ezekiel was in 571/70 B.C. (29:17).

Prophecies in chaps. 1–28 are in chronological order. In 29:1, the prophet regresses to a year earlier than in 26:1. But from 30:1 on (cf. 31:1; 32:1,17), he is close to being strictly chronological.

Background and Setting

From the historical perspective, Israel’s united kingdom lasted more than 110 years (ca. 1043–931 B.C.), through the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. Then the divided kingdom, Israel (north) and Judah (south), extended from 931 B.C. to 722/21 B.C. Israel fell to Assyria in 722/21 B.C. leaving Judah, the surviving kingdom for 135 years, which fell to Babylon in 605–586

B.C.

In the more immediate setting, several features were strategic. Politically, Assyria's vaunted military might crumbled after 626 B.C., and the capital, Nineveh, was destroyed in 612 B.C. by the Babylonians and Medes (cf. Nahum). The neo-Babylonian empire had flexed its muscles since Nabopolassar took the throne in 625 B.C., and Egypt, under Pharaoh Necho II, was determined to conquer what she could. Babylon smashed Assyria in 612–605 B.C., and registered a decisive victory against Egypt in 605 B.C. at Carchemish, leaving, according to the Babylonian Chronicle, no survivors. Also in 605 B.C., Babylon, led by Nebuchadnezzar, began the conquest of Jerusalem and the deportation of captives, among them Daniel (Dan. 1:2). In Dec., 598 B.C., he again besieged Jerusalem, and on Mar. 16, 597 B.C. took possession. This time, he took captive Jehoiachin and a group of 10,000, including Ezekiel (2 Kin. 24:11–18). The final destruction of Jerusalem and the conquest of Judah, including the third deportation, came in 586 B.C.

Religiously, King Josiah (ca. 640–609 B.C.) had instituted reforms in Judah (cf. 2 Chr. 34). Tragically, despite his effort, idolatry had so dulled the Judeans that their awakening was only “skin deep” overall. The Egyptian army killed Josiah as it crossed Palestine in 609 B.C., and the Jews plunged on in sin toward judgment under Jehoahaz (609 B.C.), Jehoiakim [Eliakim] (609–598 B.C.), Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.).

Domestically, Ezekiel and the 10,000 lived in exile in Babylonia (2 Kin. 24:14), more as colonists than captives, being permitted to farm tracts of land under somewhat favorable conditions (Jer. 29). Ezekiel even had his own house (3:24; 20:1).

Prophetically, false prophets deceived the exiles with assurances of a speedy return to Judah (13:3,16; Jer. 29:1). From 593–585 B.C., Ezekiel warned that their beloved Jerusalem would be destroyed and their exile prolonged, so there was no hope of immediate return. In 585 B.C., an escapee from Jerusalem, who had evaded the Babylonians, reached Ezekiel with the first news that the city had fallen in 586 B.C., about 6 months earlier (33:21). That dashed the false hopes of any immediate deliverance for the exiles, so the remainder of Ezekiel's prophecies related to Israel's future restoration to its homeland and the final blessings of the messianic kingdom.

Historical and Theological Themes

The “glory of the Lord” is central to Ezekiel, appearing in 1:28; 3:12,23; 10:4,18; 11:23; 43:4,5; 44:4. The book includes graphic descriptions of the disobedience of Israel and Judah, despite God's kindness (chap. 23; cf. chap. 16). It shows God's desire for Israel to bear fruit which He can bless; however, selfish indulgence had left Judah ready for judgment, like a torched vine (chap. 15). References are plentiful to Israel's idolatry and its consequences, such as Pelatiah dropping dead (11:13), a symbolic illustration of overall disaster for the people.

Many picturesque scenes illustrate spiritual principles. Among these are Ezekiel eating a scroll (chap. 2); the faces on 4 angels representing aspects of creation over which God rules (1:10); a “barbershop” scene (5:1–4); graffiti on temple walls reminding readers of what God really wants in His dwelling place, namely holiness and not ugliness (8:10); and sprinkled hot coals depicting judgment (10:2,7).

Chief among the theological themes are God's holiness and sovereignty. These are conveyed by frequent contrast of His bright glory against the despicable backdrop of Judah's sins (1:26–28; often in chaps. 8–11; and 43:1–7). Closely related is God's purpose of glorious triumph so that all may "know that I am the LORD." This divine monogram, God's signature authenticating His acts, is mentioned more than 60 times, usually with a judgment (6:7; 7:4), but occasionally after the promised restoration (34:27; 36:11,38; 39:28).

Another feature involves God's angels carrying out His program behind the scenes (1:5–25; 10:1–22). A further important theme is God's holding each individual accountable for pursuing righteousness (18:3–32).

Ezekiel also stresses sinfulness in Israel (2:3–7; 8:9,10) and other nations (throughout chaps. 25–32). He deals with the necessity of God's wrath to deal with sin (7:1–8; 15:8); God's frustration of man's devices to escape from besieged Jerusalem (12:1–13; cf. Jer. 39:4–7); and God's grace pledged in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) being fulfilled by restoring Abraham's people to the land of the covenant (chaps. 34,36–48; cf. Gen. 12:7). God promises to preserve a remnant of Israelites through whom He will fulfill His restoration promises and keep His inviolate Word.

Interpretive Challenges

Ezekiel uses extensive symbolic language, as did Isaiah and Jeremiah. This raises the question as to whether certain portions of Ezekiel's writings are to be taken literally or figuratively, e.g., being bound with ropes, 3:25; whether the prophet was taken bodily to Jerusalem, 8:1–3; how individual judgment can be worked out in chap. 18 when the wicked elude death in 14:22,23 and some of the godly die in an invasion, 21:3,4; how God would permit a faithful prophet's wife to die (24:15–27); when some of the judgments on other nations will occur (chaps. 25–32); whether the temple in chaps. 40–46 will be a literal one and in what form; and how promises of Israel's future relate to God's program with the church.

Outline

The book can be largely divided into sections about condemnation/retribution and then consolation/restoration. A more detailed look divides the book into 4 sections. First, are prophecies on the ruin of Jerusalem (chaps. 1–24). Second, are prophecies of retribution on nearby nations (chaps. 25–32), with a glimpse at God's future restoration of Israel (28:25,26). Thirdly, there is a transition chapter (33) which gives instruction concerning a last call for Israel to repent. Finally, the fourth division includes rich expectations involving God's future restoration of Israel (chaps. 34–48).

I. Prophecies of Jerusalem's Ruin (1:1–24:27)

A. Preparation and Commission of Ezekiel (1:1–3:27)

1. Divine appearance to Ezekiel (1:1–28)
2. Divine assignment to Ezekiel (2:1–3:27)

B. Proclamation of Jerusalem's Condemnation (4:1–24:27)

1. Signs of coming judgment (4:1–5:4)
2. Messages concerning judgment (5:5–7:27)
3. Visions concerning abomination in the city and temple (8:1–11:25)
4. Explanations of judgment (12:1–24:27)

II. Prophecies of Retribution to the Nations (25:1–32:32)

A. Ammon (25:1–7)

B. Moab (25:8–11)

C. Edom (25:12–14)

D. Philistia (25:15–17)

E. Tyre (26:1–28:19)

F. Sidon (28:20–24)

Excursus: The Restoration of Israel (28:25, 26)

G. Egypt (29:1–32:32)

III. Provision for Israel's Repentance (33:1–33)

IV. Prophecies of Israel's Restoration (34:1–48:35)

A. Regathering of Israel to the Land (34:1–37:28)

1. Promise of a True Shepherd (34:1–31)
 2. Punishment of the nations (35:1–36:7)
 3. Purposes of restoration (36:8–38)
 4. Pictures of restoration—dry bones and two sticks (37:1–28)
- B. Removal of Israel's Enemies from the Land (38:1–39:29)

1. Invasion of Gog to plunder Israel (38:1–16)
 2. Intervention of God to protect Israel (38:17–39:29)
- C. Reinstatement of True Worship in Israel (40:1–46:24)

1. New temple (40:1–43:12)
 2. New worship (43:13–46:24)
- D. Redistribution of the Land in Israel (47:1–48:35)

1. Position of the river (47:1–12)
2. Portions for the tribes (47:13–48:35)

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