

Introduction to Ezekiel

Kenneth J. Morgan
August, 2016

Background

Prophet's Name

The name *יְחֶזְקֵאל*, *Ezekiel*, is a combination of the verb *חָזַק*, *to be or to grow firm, strong*, and *אֱל*, *God*. Thus: *God strengthens or God will strengthen*.

Identification

Ezekiel Himself

Nothing is known about Ezekiel except what is found in his book. However, that represents considerable information. A number of conclusions can be drawn just from 1:1-3.

1. Ezekiel was deported to Babylon in 597 and settled with many other deportees at the River Chebar, which has now been identified as a royal irrigation canal of Nebuchadnezzar that carried water from the Euphrates River to nearby farming areas (cf. Ps. 137:1).
2. He was a priest and therefore of the tribe of Levi. As the son of Buzi, he was of the family of Zadok.
3. If 1:1 refers to Ezekiel's age at the time of his call (the most likely interpretation), then he was 30 years old when God called him. Since priests began their ministry at the age of thirty (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 39, 43), Ezekiel probably never served as a priest at the temple in Jerusalem before his deportation to Babylon.
4. Again, assuming 1:1 refers to Ezekiel's age, he was born in 627 and received his call at 30 years old on July 31, 593, the fifth year of his captivity, counting 597 as the first.

Other facts about Ezekiel can be deduced from the remainder of his book:

He was married and had his own home (8:1; 24:18). When his wife died during his ministry, he was forbidden to mourn for her. This was a sign to the other captives of how they were to respond when the Lord destroys the temple (24:15-27).

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Daniel. During the period of overlap Ezekiel ministered to those in Babylon taken captive in 597, Jeremiah ministered to those who remained in Judea, and Daniel served in Nebuchadnezzar's court. Neither Ezekiel nor Jeremiah mention each other, but Ezekiel mentions Daniel three times (14:14, 20; 28:3), and Daniel mentions Jeremiah once (Dan. 9:2).

At first Ezekiel's message was not well received (14:1, 3; 18:19, 25). However, the turning point in his ministry occurred when news of Jerusalem's fall in 586 was brought to the captives already in Babylon (33:21). Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, had predicted this judgment, and when it came it served as God's confirmation of Ezekiel's ministry. It formed the foundation upon which his later ministry was built. With the passing of time his prophecies began to bear fruit, and the nation was purged of its idolatry.

His prophetic ministry lasted about 20 years. Nothing is known of the circumstances of his death.

His Style

Ezekiel is probably the most neglected of the prophetic books. Likely this is due to the difficulty of interpreting his figurative and visionary prophecies. Ezekiel uses more symbols and allegory than any other Old Testament prophet.

1. Many of Ezekiel's messages contained *visions*. His visions form the contents of 17 chapters of the book.
2. Ezekiel also is instructed by God to perform numerous *symbolic acts*, often attended by great personal inconvenience and hardship. At least 10 (some authors see 11) are related in the book: 4:1-3; 9-15; 5:1-4; 3:25,26; 4:4-6, 8, 13; 12:3-7, 17-21; 21:11-12; 24:3-5, 15-24; 37:15-17.

The literary form of the book includes both prose and poetry.

Date

If the book was compiled by Ezekiel at the end of his ministry, twenty years after 593 would place its date at approximately 573, till during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who died in 562.

The Four Deportations to Babylon

- 605: Jehoiakim, some of the upper classes, royalty, the skilled and educated; included Daniel and his three friends (Dan. 1:1-4; 2 Kgs. 24:1-2; 2 Chr. 36:6-7).
- 597: Jehoiachin, his family, his court, the upper classes *en masse*, all the artisans, the temple vessels and treasures; included Ezekiel and about 10,000 people in all (2 Kgs. 24:10-17; 2 Chr. 36:10).
- 586: Complete destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kgs. 25; 2 Chr. 36:11-21; Jer. 39:1-10).
- 581: a final deportation from Judah mentioned only in Jer. 52:30 with no details in explanation.

Basic Theme

The basic theme of Ezekiel's prophecy has been summarized in a number of ways.

1. The most concise description would be this: if Isaiah's major theme was the *salvation of the Lord* and Jeremiah's was the *judgment of the Lord* and Daniel's was the *kingdom of the Lord*, then Ezekiel's was the *glory of the Lord* (Feinberg, p. 21).

2. Ezekiel's purpose was twofold: (1) before the destruction of the temple (593-586), it was to remind Israel of the sins that had brought judgment and exile upon them, and (2) after the destruction of the temple in 586, it was to encourage and strengthen their faith with prophecies of their future restoration and glory.

3. Major lessons taught in the book:

- *The certainty of judgment for sin.* Israel's covenant relationship with God did not make them immune from such judgment.

- *Individual responsibility for sin.* Each person was accountable to God for his own sins.
- *God's sovereignty over all nations.* Some thought that only Israel was under God's authority. Ezekiel declares that God is sovereign over all nations, and that each nation is accountable to God.
- *Hope of restoration.* Ezekiel gives the exiles hope of ultimate restoration in the glory of the millennial kingdom.

It is of interest that Ezekiel does not directly mention either the first or second advent of the Lord. Only a few passages are directly Messianic (34:23-24; 37:23-25). Moreover, Ezekiel is never directly quoted in the NT, although the imagery of the book of Revelation is clearly based on his visions (cf. Ezek. 1 with Rev. 4-5; Ezek. 3:3 with Rev. 10:10; Ezek. 8:3 with Rev. 13:14-15; Ezek. 9 with Rev. 7; Ezek. 10 with Rev. 8:1-5).

Outline With Interpretive Comments

Scholars have divided the book of Ezekiel in various ways.

A common method divides the book into two parts:

1. Moral condition of Israel under Jehoiachin and Zedekiah (1-24)
2. Prophecies of the future of Israel and the nations (25-48)

Others divide the book into two parts at 33:21 because of the importance of the destruction of the temple in Ezekiel's ministry.

Some scholars see a threefold division:

1. Prophecies before the destruction of Jerusalem with emphasis on the sins of Jerusalem and Samaria (1-24)
2. Prophecies during Jerusalem's fall (25-32)
3. Prophecies after Jerusalem's fall (33-48)

Feinberg and others use a fourfold division. Since the sections are smaller, such an outline makes understanding the book easier. It is adopted here.

I. Prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction (1-24)

A. The call of the prophet (1:1-3:21)

- B. Prophecies of the fall of the nation (3:22-7:27)
- C. The pollution of the temple (8:1-11:25)
- D. The certainty and causes of the nation's doom (12:1-19:14)
- E. Additional prophecies of Israel's judgment (20:1-24:27)

II. Prophecies against the nations (25-32)

- A. Amon, Moab, Edom, Philistia (25:1-17)
- B. Tyre (26:1-28:19)
- C. Sidon (28:20-26)
- D. Egypt (29:1-32:32)

III. Prophecy of Israel's blessing (33-39)

- A. The ministry of the prophet (33:1-33)
- B. The Davidic Shepherd (34:1-33)
- C. The rebirth of the nation (35:1-36:38)
- D. The resurrection of united Israel (37:1-28)
- E. Judgment on Gog and Magog (38:1-39:29)

IV. The millennial temple and sacrifices (40-48)

- A. Architectural features of the temple (40:1-43:27)
- B. Priestly functions of the temple (44:1-46:24)
- C. The division of the land among the tribes (47:1-48:35)

Important Passages and Problems

A. Incorrect prophecies

According to many modern scholars, Ezekiel was mistaken in some of his predictions about the nations. Examples cited are 26:3-14 and 29:17-20. These problems are analyzed in detail by Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 276-278.

B. "Ezekiel saw the wheels . . ." (1:4-28)

The difficulty in interpreting this amazing introductory vision often dissuades many from reading further. However, the central theme of the vision is clearly stated in verse 28: the glory of the Lord.

1. *The vision of the cherubim* (1:4-14). The four living creatures in the first part of the vision are identified as cherubim in 10:15, 20. They are not symbols but a special class of angels always associated with the holiness of God.

2. *The vision of the chariot* (1:15-25). Later Jews called the second part of this vision the "vision of the chariot." The vision gives the impression of great motion and irresistible progress symbolizing the progression of the orderly and controlled government of God over the whole universe.

3. *The vision of the throne* (1:26-28). In the last part of the vision, Ezekiel sees a throne in the chariot occupied by a figure having the appearance of a man, representing God himself.

C. Ichabod: "the glory has departed" (10:1-22)

Ezekiel is given a vision of the step-by-step departure of the Shekinah glory from the temple: a picture of God's reluctant determination to forsake his sanctuary.

D. The king of Tyre or Satan? (28:12-19)

The judgment on Tyre is the subject of 26:1-28:19. However, the lament in 28:12-19 has caused much controversy. Some liberal scholars argue that we have here an importation of a mythical tale of Phoenician origin about a primal being who lived in the Garden of Eden. Many conservative scholars, including Feinberg, have argued that the language in 28:12-19 goes beyond the king of Tyre and addresses Satan, depicting his fall as an angel of God. Others, however, do not see a reference to Satan either here or in Isa. 14:4-20. To quote Archer, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 279-280:

As for a relationship with Satan, there does not seem to be any decisive evidence in the text that the Prince of Hell is being indirectly addressed through the prince of Tyre...Certainly the theory advanced by some writers that this chapter contains a flashback to Satan's personal career prior to his rebellion and expulsion from heaven is at best an unsupported conjecture. All the hyperbolic language employed in the verses discussed above can best be understood as the flattering self-delusion of the Tyrian millionaires and their money loving leaders...

It is also to be noted that this passage does not point to any specific king of Tyre. "Like the 'King of Babylon' in Isaiah 14, this 'king' serves as a symbol or personification of the government and people of the entire city-state of Tyre" (Archer).

E. The responsibility of the watchman (33:1-20)

Here is an extremely practical passage. The watchman was the guard who was to watch over the city and sound the alarm if an enemy

approached. If the watchman sounds the alarm and the people ignore it, then their blood is upon their own heads. However, if the attack comes and the watchman fails to sound the alarm, their blood will be required of him. Ezekiel draws a parallel to his ministry as a prophet warning of God's judgment. It also has an application to all of us who have the message of the gospel.

F. Ezekiel's version of the New Covenant (36:22-38)

Many feel that 36:25-27 forms the OT background for John 3:3-5.

G. The valley of dry bones (37:1-28)

This vision is one of the most spectacular promises of the restoration of Israel, two nations reunited into one nation. The New Covenant is again the heart of the promise (37:24-28).

H. The prophecy against Gog (38-39)

This passage has been the subject of much debate. Liberal scholars believe it to be an insertion. Conservative scholars display considerable disagreement in their interpretation of the passage. I would argue for the following points:

1. The passage describes a literal battle.
2. Since Ezekiel states that many other prophets foretold this battle (38:17), the passage most likely describes the great battle at the second advent of Christ, the battle of Armageddon (Ps. 2:1-3; Isa. 29:1-8; Joel 2:20; 3:9-21; Zech. 12:1; 14:2-3; Rev. 16:12-16; 19:11-21).
3. Rosh does not refer to Russia, and Tarshish does not refer to Great Britain. The United States is not mentioned directly or indirectly anywhere in this passage or anywhere else in the Bible.
4. The battle described in Rev. 20:7-10, mentioned nowhere else in Scripture and which occurs at the end of the 1000-year reign, is not the same battle described in Ezek. 38-39. It is a subsequent battle that, due to its similarity, is described in terms of the great battle of Armageddon, which was so prominently featured in biblical prophecy.

I. The eschatological temple (Ezek. 40-48)

The description here fits no temple of history. Many Christian

interpreters take the passage figuratively as a description of the NT church and its worship, Christ's spiritual temple (cf. Eph. 2:20-22), cast in OT terminology. However, nine full chapters of minute details would be unprecedented in all of literature if we have figurative language here.

It is best to take this as a description of a temple and its worship that will exist during the time of Israel's restoration--a millennial temple.

What about the reinstatement of the Levitical sacrifices (e.g., 43:18-27)? Does this not run counter to the whole argument of the book of Hebrews?

The best solution seems to be to acknowledge the clear teaching of this text--the sacrifices will be restored. However, they will not be performed for atonement for sin. What, then, will be their significance?

In 1 Cor. 11:24-26, the Lord's supper is to be observed "*until He comes.*" What happens *after he comes*? I believe Luke 22:15-18 makes it clear that he will again observe the full passover, a feast specifically mentioned in Ezek. 45:21. In a similar way, the sacrifices will be reinstated. However, they will not point forward to Calvary as *types*, but back to it as *memorials*, in an analogous way that the Lord's Supper does today.

Bibliography

Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

Feinberg, Charles Lee. *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1969.

Freeman, Hobart E. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968.