

Studies in the Book of Ezekiel

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Introduction

Authorship

Ezekiel, the priest, the son of Buzi, 1:3, is the author of the book of Ezekiel. Like Jeremiah and Zechariah, Ezekiel was a priest. His father, Buzi is mentioned only in verse 3 of chapter 1. Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Ezekiel were the only prophet-priests, and all three prophesied during the exilic or post-exilic periods. Ezekiel's priestly background explains in part, his emphasis on the temple in Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord, and the actions of Jerusalem's priests and of God's future temple.

All of Ezekiel's prophecies are arranged chronologically, starting with the fifth year of the exile, verse 2, chapter 1, and the ending of the 25th year of our exile, chapter 40 verse 1. Ezekiel's ministry began in the fourth month on the fifth day of the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin came to the throne on December 597 BC after the petty tyrant, Jehoiakim died (2 Kings 24:1-2). After a reign of only three months, Jehoiachin was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and deported to Babylon. The fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile was 593 BC, and the fourth month was the month of Tammuz.

The last dated prophecy in Ezekiel was in the 27th year, in the first month on the first day (29:17). Since Ezekiel began prophesying in 593 (the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile, (1:2), this prophecy was 571 BC (March 26.) So Ezekiel's prophetic activity spanned at least 22 years (593-571 BC), from his age of 30 to his age of 52.

Historical background

When God created the nation of Israel, He gave the people the mosaic covenant (Exod 20; Deut 5, etc.). The law was not given to be a burden to the Hebrews. It was given for their own good, so that they might be blessed, yet the history of Israel was marked by disobedience to His covenant. Often the nation followed the false gods of the peoples around them, and the covenant itself had warned the Israelites that if they strayed from the Lord's ways,

revealed in His statutes and commandments of the law, the Lord would discipline them and disperse them in order to bring them back to Himself. Ezekiel spoke to his contemporaries, declaring to them, the faithfulness, holiness, and glory of God. God would bring judgment, cleansing, and ultimate blessing, that the people might come to know that the God of Israel was the one true God. He desired to turn the exiles away from their sinful ways and restore them to Himself. His judgment, therefore, was exercised as an instrument of love to cause them to see their abominations and recognize the Lord's faithfulness to His covenants. God was indeed faithful to his promises, both to judge and to bless.

The book of Ezekiel was written during the time of Judah's bondage to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar's rule. Ezekiel lived with a group of captives in Tel Aviv, but not the modern-day city of Tel Aviv in Israel by that name. This Tel Aviv, in Babylon was located by the river Chebar (3:15). The exact site of this settlement is unknown, but the Chebar River has been identified with the Grand Canal in Babylon. This canal branched off from the Euphrates just above Babylon and flowed east of the city. It continued through the ancient site of Nippur, and then reentered the Euphrates near Uruk.

During these final years, Ezekiel was ministering in Babylon, predicting the coming collapse of Jerusalem. His message fell on deaf ears until the word of the city's destruction was received in Babylon. The fall of the city prompted a change in Ezekiel's prophetic message. Before Jerusalem fell, Ezekiel's message focused on Judah's forthcoming destruction because of her sin. After Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel's message centered on Judah's future restoration.

The destruction of the city of Jerusalem demonstrated God's faithfulness to His holy character. On the other hand, Ezekiel gave hope that one day the true shepherd, the Messiah, would come to lead God's people. Though their contemporary rulers had exploited them and led them away from the Lord in the future, the people would be restored to the promised land by a righteous leader (chaps 34ⁱⁱⁱ and 37).

Structure and style

In addition to chronological arrangement, Ezekiel's book also has a structural order and harmony. The first 24 chapters focus on the judgment

Judah; then chapters 33—48 focus on the restoration of Judah. These two extremes are balanced by chapters 25 to 32, which deal with God's judgment on other nations. The glory of God departed from the temple in judgment (9:10:4, 18-19; 11:22-25), and reappeared in the temple for blessing (43:1-5). Ezekiel was commissioned to deliver a message of judgment (chaps. 2 and 3) and later was recommissioned to give a message of deliverance (chap. 33).

Focus on the glory and character of God

Ezekiel emphasized the glory of God, having received a vision of God's glory before he was commissioned. Ezekiel continued to refer to God's glory throughout the book. God's character determined the prophet's conduct throughout his prophetic ministry. 15 times, God declared that he had acted *for the sake of His Name* to keep it from being profaned. And in over 65 times, God said He had acted so that people would know that, *I am the Lord*.

Use of literary devices

Ezekiel used unique literary devices to drive home his message to a hardened and obstinate people. These included using proverbs, visions, parables, symbolic acts, and allegories. By these means, Ezekiel presented his messages in dramatic and forceful ways, thus getting the people's attention so they would respond.

Theological values

Five prominent theological concepts pervade the prophetic pages of Ezekiel. **1)** the nature of God, **2)** the purpose and nature of God's judgment, the individual's responsibility in view of divine prophecy, **4)** the ethical, religious, and moral history of Israel, **5)** the nature of Israel's restoration and millennial worship. God established a righteous way of life for the wellbeing of His people. If they followed His stipulations in the covenant, they would be blessed in every spiritual and physical way.

God's character logically reflects His judgment. The Lord loved the Israelites and chose them as His very own people to bless the world. Since they strayed from the righteous ways of the Lord, He brought judgment to make them conscious of their wickedness, so they would return to Him.

Ezekiel continually declared that the purpose of the Lord's judgment was to cause Israel, and many more of the nations to know that *I am the Lord*, a phrase repeated, more than 65 times in this prophetic book.

The Lord did deal with Israel nationally, but Ezekiel balanced this with an emphasis on individual responsibility. A person was not delivered from God's curse by the righteousness of the majority of the nation, or some other person's spirituality. Each person was accountable individually to God. Ezekiel, along with God's judgment announced in his prophecy, vindicated the Lord's righteous justice by recounting Israel's ethical, moral, and religious history. This is most important—and most vividly accomplished through the imagery of Israel as a spiritual prostitute who had been wooed and married by God, but had prostituted herself by going after the gods of the nations throughout her entire history (chaps 16 and 23). This history of unfaithfulness characterized her from 'birth' in Egypt.

Highlights from the exposition of the book

Ezekiel received this vision and was commissioned in the very year he would have begun his priestly service at the age of 30 (1:1-3). God was preparing Ezekiel to receive a vision that would provide the necessary framework for understanding the rest of the prophecy. It's important to the interpretation of this book to notice the phrase, "I saw visions of God." For this immediately declared the nature of the following vision. In the description of the vision there appears to be a general pattern to the commission narrative of the prophets. First, there is divine confrontation, an introductory word that forms the basis for the commission. Second, then the commission itself, where the task is enumerated and the prophet is called to that task, and its importance. Third, the objections the prophet may offer are stated, after which the fourth, the call of the prophet (see the calls of Moses and Jeremiah). The commission narrative closes with reassurances from the Lord, so that the answer to these objections is from the Lord, and the Lord is with him. All four elements are found in Ezekiel's commission also.

The Lord confronted Ezekiel with this glorious vision to impress on him the majesty, holiness, and wonder of the God of Israel (1:4-14). And God is about to execute judgment on the people of Israel. Ezekiel was awestruck by God's holiness, this indelible impression of this Theophany

served as a constant encouragement amidst his difficult ministry of announcing God's judgments against his own contemporaries. Against this backdrop of God's awesome holiness, visualized here, Ezekiel saw the wickedness of Israel and therefore understood why God had to judge his sinful people.

When the nations profaned the Lord by claiming that Judah is in captivity because God was weak, Ezekiel knew that his God was infinitely greater than Babylon's god. And the Lord was disciplining His covenant people. God had also revealed His glory on the vision on Mount Sinai, as well as in His Theophany to the children of Israel in the desert, also in the filling of Solomon's temple with the Shekinah glory, and in the vision associated with Isaiah's commission (Isaiah 6). The different forms in which God reveals His holiness and His glory should not bother us, God is limitless.

What Ezekiel saw appeared to be a raging electrical storm, dark, stormy clouds, lightning thunder, coming from the north, and in the four figures. They looked like people, but they were Cherubim. And we see a description of them. And then there is great thunder of rushing water, like a huge thunderous waterfall or violent rainstorm, or a noisy military encampment. And then the way these beings moved is quite fascinating. And these Cherubim are often accompanied by references to God's glory in the Old Testament. The wheels depict an 'unearthly chariot' for the throne of God. The faces: the eagle is exalted among birds; the ox among domesticated animals, the lion among wild beasts—despite their dignity, all are but creatures below the 'chariot' of the Holy One. The four figures with the wheels form the 'throne-car' of God. They move in all directions without turning. The multitude of eyes suggest omniscience and intelligence. The wheels moving at the Spirit's command picture the unity of the Godhead in all His works via His Spirit. The rainbow's illumination alludes to sublime beauty, abundant mercy and forgiveness, and covenant faithfulness.

The description of the wheels and the heavenly expanse (1:15-28) After describing the wheels within the wheels, the description turns to that of an awesome expanse resembling a pavement of crystal or of sparkling ice. The expanse appeared like a platform over the heads of the four living creatures. And then the throne of Lapis Lazuli, which is the color of sapphire or the blue of lapis Lazuli. A being resembling a human was on the throne. H

was surrounded by fire and gave off a radiance similar to a rainbow. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, it says (1:28).

The Lord revealed His magnificent Person to Ezekiel to prepare him for ministry (2:1-3:11). The one who genuinely sees God's glory cannot help but fall prostrate in worship before the Almighty God as Ezekiel did. So, the glory of the Lord is the backdrop for this announcement of judgment which Ezekiel would make. The Holy God who gave the Mosaic Covenant could not tolerate disobedience to that covenant because of His righteous character. He had to execute judgment on the iniquity that His holy nature could not tolerate. Therefore, when God brought judgment on Jerusalem, His glory had to leave its residence in the temple until the Lord's glory could return.

The Lord God speaking through the Theophany, addressed Ezekiel with the title, "son of man." This became Ezekiel's normal designation throughout the remainder of the book—used over 90 times. The title indicated the frailty, weakness, and mortality of a human being humbled before the mighty and majestic God. By this title, Ezekiel was reminded continually of his dependence on the Spirit's power, and this enabled him to receive God's message and to deliver it in the power and authority of the Lord. The same name, 'Son and man', was given to Christ in the gospels (Lu 19:10) to emphasize His relation to humanity and His voluntary dependence on the Holy Spirit (Mk 8:31).

The commission side of Ezekiel's call encompasses the majority of chapters 2 and 3 (2:3-4). God was about to commission Ezekiel for a most difficult task. He was to go to his own people in exile, the people of God described as rebellious against Him, against His law, and against His messengers, the prophets. This was not a new condition. The Israelites had transgressed the Mosaic Covenant throughout history. God's chosen people were obstinate and stubborn, hard-hearted, hard-faced. This demonstrated a strong-willed determination to resist God in His ways. Undoubtedly, a major contribution to Judah's current rebellion were the abominations of King Manasseh, who had stained the hearts of the people (2 Ki 21:2-9).

Ezekiel's message was not to be conditioned on his listener's response, even if they closed their ears and closed their eyes and not. He was still to speak in God's authority, not his own (2:5). And the people would know that a prophet had been among them. In light of this difficult

ministry to which Ezekiel was called, the Lord reassures him, regardless of how frightful the opposition might be, being stuck and pricked by a bed of thorns or stung by scorpions, Ezekiel was not to give up or be afraid, or become dismayed (2:6-7). On the contrary, he was to be faithful in proclaiming God's message, for his recipients were rebels who needed his warnings. The truth is still a source of encouragement today to those who are called to proclaim the truth of God's Word in the midst of a perverse and wicked generation

The Lord's charge to Ezekiel emphasizes the absolute necessity of hearing, understanding and assimilating God's message prior going forth as a spokesman for the Lord (2:8-3:3). Ezekiel was to listen to God and not rebel against Him, as did the people of Israel who failed to listen to the Word of the Lord. Before beginning his ministry, Ezekiel was to symbolize his complete acceptance of the Lord's message by eating the scroll. The nature of this message he would proclaim was written on the scroll in funeral dirges and mourning's and lamentations. Certainly, this was not a joyous note with which to begin, but even when ministry would seem difficult and distasteful, the Lord would cause His Word to be as sweet as honey.

The recipient's response to Ezekiel's message was not to govern the nature and manner of his ministry (3:4-9). The people rejected the divine messenger because they had been alienated from God. And though Israel was obstinate, and though it had it would have been easier to preach to a foreign people in a foreign language. But, Ezekiel in serving as God's watchman to His people was to be strong and not to respond in fear and dismay. The Lord prepared Ezekiel for this task by making him more determined than the people of Israel, as sharp as flint. That is a significant principle for God's servants today—are His ministers more determined than the obstinance of the unbelieving and impenitent? The Lord always prepares and reassures His messengers with the needed equipment.

The word of the Lord had to become part of Ezekiel before he would go and speak (3:10-11). Thus, the prophet was to meditate on the Lord's message, giving continual attention to it throughout His ministry. Then he would be able to speak repeatedly with God's authority, even to audiences that did not care to listen to him.

End Notes:

ⁱ Kenneth L. Barker and John Kohlenberger III, Eds., Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," NIV Bible Commentary

ⁱⁱ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Eds., Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, O.T.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Barker and Kohlenberger

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} D. Guthrie, J. A. Motyer, A. M. Stibbs, D. J. Wiseman, Eds., G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Ezekiel," *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, pp. 666-667

^{vii} Charles F. Pfeiffer, Everett F. Harrison Eds., Anton T. Pierson, "Ezekiel," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp. 707-712

^{viii} Barker and Kohlenberger