

Introduction to Ezekiel
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Historical and Political Background

After the death of Solomon, the nation which had been Israel divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel (10 tribes) and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (two tribes plus Jerusalem). The Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BCE and never existed again. In the following century and a half, Judah continued to exist but almost always as a vassal state to the one of the world powers (Assyria, Egypt, or Babylon). As Egypt and Babylon contended to be the major world power at the turn of the seventh century BCE, Judah tried to assert its independence. In response, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem. The city fell in 597. Nebuchadnezzar pillaged Jerusalem and the Temple; he took home the spoils of his raid, and he scattered some 10,000 Jews throughout the Babylonian empire. Among these exiles were King Jehoiachin and Ezekiel (who had not yet been called as a prophet). A decade later, Judah again tried to assert its independence. In 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar again conquered Jerusalem, but this time he destroyed both the city and Temple. King Zedekiah was forced to watch the assassination of his nobles and his sons; then he was then blinded and taken into exile. This event officially marked the end of the Kingdom of Judah, though a third and final deportation took place in 582 BCE.

The Prophet and His Writing

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel was a prophet with a priestly lineage. His calling takes place in 593 BCE, some five years after his (and King Jehoiachin's) deportation. At the time, he is living with the other exiles along the Chebar River (1:1-3), making Ezekiel the only Hebrew prophet whose calling and career take place in Babylon.

Note that while Ezekiel is already in Babylon at the time of his calling, the Temple has not yet been destroyed (and Judah has not yet been dissolved). This pivotal event, the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE, occasions the marked shift in message and tone which takes place beginning in ch. 33. As in Jeremiah, a change in circumstances leads to a change in the prophetic message. After the loss of the Temple and the land, the people need a word of hope, and Ezekiel offers precisely that. The book may be outlined as follows:

- Call (chs 1-3)
- Oracles against Jerusalem and Judah (chs 4-24)
- Oracles against the nations (chs 25-32)
- Oracles of restoration (chs 33-48)

Two other features of Ezekiel's prophecy merit note. One is characteristics which both stem from and point to *apocalyptic literature*: composite creatures (sometimes blending animal, human, and angel), bizarre imagery, and visions which include being carried away "in the spirit." Other than Daniel and Revelation, Ezekiel is the most apocalyptic writing in the Bible.

Also worth note is Ezekiel's designation as "*son of man*," a phrase used 93 times in the book. Its primary meaning suggests humanity, or mortality (thus the NRSV translates it "mortal"). Especially because it is spoken by YHWH, the term "son of man" connotes human limitations and a corresponding humility: God is God, and we are not. At the same time, the prophet has the remarkable privilege—and weighty responsibility—of speaking the message of YHWH. In this sense, humanity is elevated: "mere" humans complete the awesome task of conveying God's message. (A similar elevation of humanity takes place when the hearers of the message obey it.) This notion of humanity is very paradoxical and very Hebrew. On the one hand, humans are made in God's image and are the pinnacle of God's creation (Gen 1:26-28); on the other hand, we do not comprehend God (Is 55:9) nor follow God's ways (Is 65:2). Ultimately, this view of humanity reflects the grace of God: we do not deserve God's mindfulness, yet God has made us "a little lower than the angels" (Ps 8:4-5).

Finally, Christians will quickly note that the most common self-designation of Jesus is “son of man.” In Christian thought, the gap between the human and the divine are bridged by Jesus; and his use of the phrase “son of man,” echoing both Ezekiel and Daniel, identifies Jesus with both the prophetic tradition and the apocalyptic tradition.

Call

Like the other major prophets, Ezekiel narrates his call experience (though Ezekiel’s is the longest and most detailed). The reader is immediately struck with one of Ezekiel’s most prominent themes: *the otherness of YHWH*. The prophet uses many qualifiers and comparisons—“it was like,” “it seemed,” “it was as if,” “it appeared”—because words are inadequate to describe the living God.

Like Isaiah, Ezekiel is called through a vision (chs 1-3). In the heavenly sphere, there is a dome with splendor above and below and throughout, including fire and jewels and blazing brightness. There is a throne, below which are “something like four living creatures.” The creatures have human bodies and hands, four wings, and composite faces, including the face of a human, of an ox, of a lion, and of an eagle. (The faces represent the four categories of living creatures in Hebrew thought: humans, domesticated animals, wild animals, and flying animals; that they dwell under the throne represents God’s complete sovereignty. Readers of the New Testament will recall these same living creatures from the vision of God’s throne in Revelation.) On the throne was “something that seemed like a human form,” encased in fire and gleaming jewels and the colors of the rainbow; and this, says the prophet, “was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (1:28). Overwhelmed, Ezekiel falls on his face, and a “spirit” has to enter into him to set him back on his feet. Addressing Ezekiel as “son of man,” the voice declares that he must prophesy to the people; to be clear about its divine origin, the message will be introduced with, “Thus says the LORD.” The prophet is given a scroll with writing on the front and the back (symbolizing YHWH’s message), which he is commanded to eat. On the one hand, the scroll is “sweet as honey”—likely representing God’s strengthening Ezekiel for his task (honey was considered nourishing and strength-giving); on the other hand, Ezekiel is repeatedly warned that the task will be difficult and the people obstinate—they have “a hard head and a stubborn heart” (3:7). Ezekiel is charged, moreover, with being a sentinel, or watchman; and if he fails to relay God’s warnings, the blood of the people will be “required at [Ezekiel’s] hand” (3:16-18; see also 33:7-9).

Prophetic Actions

No Hebrew prophet is remembered for more prophetic actions than Ezekiel. He is commanded to:

- build a model of Jerusalem under siege, a warning of what will soon happen (ch 4);
- lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days, representing the periods of exile, respectively, of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (ch 4);
- eat bread cooked on dung, symbolizing that during the exile, the people will not be able to live according to their Law and their customs (ch 4);
- shave his head and beard; the hair is then to be burned, chopped up, and scattered to the wind, representing the fate of the people when Jerusalem falls: some will burn, some will die by the sword, and some will be scattered, or taken into exile (ch. 5);
- dig through wall of his house and take out his baggage, symbolizing the journey of the exiles to Babylon (ch. 12);
- eat and drink with quaking and trembling, a foreshadowing of the desolation which will soon come (ch. 12);
- most painfully, Ezekiel is commanded not to mourn or weep when his wife dies (he may “sigh, but not aloud”), a sign that devastation is coming, and people won’t have the opportunity for grief or funeral rites (ch. 24);
- join two sticks together, signifying that one day God will reunite Israel and Judah (ch 37).

Innovative Theology

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel represents a blend of traditional and innovative theology. YHWH is both sovereign and righteous. These qualities mean that God is entitled to call people to faithfulness, obedience, justice, and right living; and they mean that God can use other nations to chasten Judah—and God can restore Judah as a manifestation of God's mercy. In all these teachings, Ezekiel sounds like a traditional prophet and a traditional Hebrew.

Yet Ezekiel also introduces new ideas (or gives greater emphasis to what had been minor, or obscure, teachings). In a way even more emphatic—and dramatic—than Jeremiah, Ezekiel upends the traditional view that God dwells in Jerusalem. In the ancient world, deities were often associated with specific locations. Judaism had long asserted that YHWH dwelt in the Holy of the Holies in the Temple; even more precisely, it asserted that “the glory of the LORD” was contained there (see 1 Kings 8:11). In Ezekiel 10, however, the prophet offers a stunning vision (which, in its imagery, is similar to the vision in ch 1). The throne of God, upon which rests the glory of God, is above both the living creatures and the cherubim—because the LORD is God over heaven and earth. The wheelworks beneath the throne now (as compared to ch 1) take on a much greater significance: they allow the glory of the LORD to rise up from the Temple and move to the community of exiles on the Chebar River in Babylon. As is often the case with the message of a prophet, this one has two sides. It portends the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple; but at the same time, it says that *YHWH is connected not to a place but to a people*: wherever God's people are, there God will be found!

Ezekiel joins the prophet Jeremiah in voicing a *responsibility, or accountability, that is less corporate and more individual*. The traditional view was that when an individual sinned—especially if that person were a leader—the group would be punished: the sins of the king brought misery to the nation; the sins of the father meant punishment for the family. This corporate accountability was expressed in the proverb, “The father has eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth have been set on edge.” Like Jeremiah before him, Ezekiel quotes this proverb in order to refute it: “The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge’? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.” (18:1-4; see Jer 31:29-30)

Ezekiel also echoes Jeremiah with an emphasis on newness, especially a new understanding of God's true concern, which is the human heart. Traditional Judaism emphasized external rites and rituals, particularly circumcision, sacrifice, and ritual purity. The implication was that by tending to the external, what's inside could be cleansed or renewed. Ezekiel, however, insists that *God seeks renewal from the inside out*. As Jeremiah had spoken of “a new covenant” (in Jer 31:31-34), Ezekiel says that in the time of renewal and restoration (see below), God will give each person “a new heart and a new spirit” (see especially 36:26-28).

Restoration and Renewal

While Jeremiah's emphasis on renewal is significant, Ezekiel amplifies and expounds this important theme. As noted above, repentance and judgment dominate the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, however, the people found themselves in national and religious crisis. The heart of Judaism had always been the covenant (fulfilled through the land), worship (fulfilled through the Temple), and the monarchy (exemplified by King David). Now, suddenly, all three—the land, the Temple, and the monarchy—were lost. Individually and collectively, the people wondered if God had abandoned them. Ezekiel 32-48 resoundingly declares that hope is not lost, that God's mercy is greater than the people's sins, and that God will restore and renew God's people. Significant images and passages include:

- The LORD is the true shepherd of Israel. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture. . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God." (34:11-15 Note: while Psalm 23 is arguably the most famous of all Bible passages today, this passage from Ezekiel 34 meant so much to the post-exilic community that it was more well-known than the 23rd Psalm!)
- The valley of dry bones. In a remarkable vision, the prophet is carried "by the spirit of the LORD" to a valley where there once had been a great battle. In the intervening years, scavengers and sun had turned the corpses into skeletons, the bones of which were now scattered. Before the prophet's eyes, the bones were assembled; flesh and sinew came upon them; and the breath of God "came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." Then the LORD explains that the dry bones represent the people, who have cried out in lament, "Our bones have dried up, and our hope is lost." Just as the LORD revived the bones, so the LORD will revive the people and restore them to the land! (37:1-14 At the risk of stating the obvious, this passage is the basis for the church camp/Bible School song which begins, "The foot bone connected to the ankle bone. . . .")
- The new Temple in the new Israel. Ezekiel's most detailed vision in the oracles of restoration is chs 40-48, in which God shows him the renewal, or rebirth, of the land. At the center of the vision is the new Temple, which is described in great detail, including the gates, courts, doors, doorposts, walls, chambers, sanctuary, and altars. The climax of the vision is in ch 43, where "the glory of the LORD" comes from the east and enters the Temple. God is once again on the throne of the Temple—and, metaphorically, is once again the King of God's people.
- The covenant reestablished. Just as the Land and the Temple will be restored, so will the covenant. It will be "a covenant of peace" (34:25; 37:26) and an "everlasting covenant" (37:26; see also 16:60).

Naturally, the Temple, the land, and covenant represent the *corporate* dimensions of Judaism: the people collectively will worship in the Temple, live in the land, and fulfill the covenant. At the same time, however, each person will experience *individual* renewal. As noted briefly above, the passage from ch 36 represents God's vision—and God's plan—for each person: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (36:26-28)