



An Introduction to the Book of Ezekiel

Author and Title

Ezekiel is both the name of the 6th Century BC prophet and the title of the book that records his preaching. Ezekiel's name (Hebrew *Yekhezqe'l*) means 'God strengthens' or 'May God strengthen', appropriate for a prophet called to proclaim a message of uncompromising judgement and later a message of a restoration for God's sake, not Israel's. Ezekiel lived out his prophetic career among the community of exiled Judæans in Babylon. He belonged to the priestly class and was married, but it is doubtful that he had any children.

If Ezekiel was thirty years old at the time of the inaugural vision, an intriguing connection can be made with the final vision of the book, which is dated to the twenty-fifth year of the exile, when Ezekiel would have been fifty. As Numbers Chapter 4 makes clear, the ages of thirty and fifty mark the span of the active service of the priests. As a member of the exilic community, Ezekiel would not have been able to participate in the ritual life of the Jerusalem temple, nor would he have undergone initiation into priestly service while living outside the land. But perhaps the timing of these visions coincided with what would have been Ezekiel's 'working life' as a priest had he lived in Jerusalem prior to the exile.

The relationship between the Hebrew prophets and the books that bear their names is complex. For both Isaiah (refer to Isaiah 8:16), and Jeremiah, e.g. Jeremiah Chapter 36, there is evidence of individuals or groups who preserved the prophet's words. Such is not the case with Ezekiel. No such disciples are named, and Ezekiel's autobiographical style suggests his close involvement with recording the written traditions that bear his name. At the same time, the very preservation of his scroll implies the existence of a support group, which may also have provided some editorial input.

Date

Ezekiel's oracles are more frequently dated than those of other OT prophets. The first date of the book takes the reader to the summer of 593BC, five years after the first group of exiles was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. The latest-dated oracle comes 22 years after that summer, in April of 571BC. The book is arranged chronologically in three parts: Chapters 1-24 and 33-48 form one sequence, while the foreign-nation oracles of Chapters 25-32 have their own order; their structure is depicted in three separate mind maps on the web site. Caution must be exercised in attempting to align Ezekiel's dates with those of the modern calendar, but the rough equivalents are as shown in the Supplementary Material on the web site.

Theme and Purpose

Ezekiel spoke to a community forced from its home, a people who had broken faith with their God. As the spokesman for the God of Israel, Ezekiel spoke oracles that vindicate the reputation of this holy God. This radically God-centred point of view finds its sharpest expression in 36:22-23 <<***Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes***>>. Thus the primary purpose of Ezekiel's message was to restore God's glory before the people who had spurned it in view of the watching nations. However, Israel's own welfare was bound up with its God. So the prophet pleads: <<***Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live***>> (18:31b-32).

Ezekiel's message was unrelenting. Of all the books in the OT, only Psalms, Jeremiah and Genesis are longer. Ezekiel's uncompromising message is matched by language that often seems hard and sometimes offensive. If there is no softening his language, at least it appears that the grandeur of Ezekiel's vision of God rendered much of the earthly reality he observed as sordid, and worse. The appropriate response, in Ezekiel's terms, is not simply revulsion but repentance and a longing for the restoration of God's glory.

Occasion and Background

Ezekiel prophesied during a time of great confusion. In 597BC the Babylonians had exiled Judah's king Jehoiachin, only 18 years old, and on the throne for only three months, along with several thousand of its leading citizens (2 Kings 24:10-16). Ezekiel was among their number; he was probably about 25 years old. The political

situation was complex: the Judæan king Jehoiachin was among the exiles, but the Babylonians had appointed a puppet king to the throne in Jerusalem, Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah.

The pattern in the history of the exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel, and now again for the Southern Kingdom of Judah, was that prophets emerged in times of crisis to bring God's message to his people. The time of Judah's exile was therefore a period of intense prophetic activity. Jeremiah was an older contemporary of Ezekiel and, like Ezekiel, from a priestly family. Ezekiel clearly knows Jeremiah's message and develops some of the older prophet's themes. However, it is not known whether they ever met, and it seems Jeremiah was not aware of Ezekiel, whose ministry did not begin until after Ezekiel had been in exile for five years.

Although Ezekiel's fellow exiles formed his main audience, it seems likely that his oracles would have been communicated to their compatriots back in Judah. Ezekiel probably lived out his days in exile. His Second Temple vision, in which a new constitution for renewed, ideal Israel was spelled out, came well into the long exile Jeremiah predicted (Jeremiah 25:8-14). If Ezekiel was 30 years old when his ministry began, this vision came when he was about 50.

Key Themes

1. As a priest, Ezekiel was deeply concerned with the holiness of God, and consequently with the sin of his people; that is, with any behaviour that offended the holy God. These twin themes can hardly be separated, as attention to matters of purity can be found on nearly every page. Ezekiel's perception of the depth of Israel's sin shows graphically in his version of Israel's history (Chapter 20). Even the oracles of restored Israel in Chapters 40-48 include provision for dealing with the people's sin so they can survive in the presence of a holy God. This concern also accounts for the many echoes in Ezekiel's oracles of the priestly material in the Pentateuch, particularly in the legislation of Leviticus and Numbers, as well as the resonances of Ezekiel's new temple (Ezekiel Chapters 40-42) with the Exodus tabernacle.
2. Israel was of course subject to its national God. However, Ezekiel's God is no tribal deity but rather is supreme over all nations. Therefore Nebuchadnezzar, king of mighty Babylon, was simply a tool in God's hand to accomplish God's purpose. God's absolute supremacy finds its most pronounced expression in the battle against Gog, the final enemy (Chapters 38-39), where God alone crushes Gog's vast hostile forces.
3. The vigilance for holy living that the holy God demands places a claim both on individuals and on the whole community. Some see a significant milestone in biblical thought in Ezekiel's preaching on individual responsibility in Chapter 18, as confirmed in Jeremiah 31:29-30. While this chapter certainly

focuses on the individual in the modern sense, Ezekiel's clear expression of the requirements binding on communities should not thereby be ignored.

4. The very structure of the book declares judgement on those clinging to false hope, but true hope for those who accept judgement (37:11). Ezekiel's restoration message was heard both before and after the destruction of Jerusalem, but radically God-centred judgement is partnered with a hope of salvation that wholly depends on God's gifts of a new heart and spirit.
5. The condemnation of Israel's 'princes', e.g. Chapter 19 where Ezekiel is reluctant to use the title 'king', finds its hopeful counterpart in the promise of a future 'prince' who would rule with justice (34:23-24), and stand at the point of connection between God and people (46:1-18).

Style

Prophetic books often make use of formulaic statements, but such formulas have a frequency and consistency in Ezekiel not matched in other prophetic writings. Once recognised, these formulas can greatly help interpretation because they formally mark the introduction and conclusion of oracles. Introductory formulas include 'the word of the Lord came to me' (50 times) or, at significant junctures, 'the hand of the Lord' being upon Ezekiel. Conclusions are often marked with variations of the 'recognition formula', e.g. 'they shall know that I am the Lord' written more than 50 times, and the formula itself is an indication of the book's central purpose. Internally, oracles are frequently structured by the terms 'because ... therefore', identifying the motivation and the message of the oracle.

Some of the unusual aspects of Ezekiel's prophecies are inevitably some of the better known. This is true of his frequent recourse to street theatre and symbolic actions of a quite odd and striking kind. He also makes plentiful use of extended allegories. Especially in the foreign-nation oracles, laments become vehicles for his message.

Influence

This book stands at a turning point in the history of biblical prophecy. In part this has to do with Ezekiel's standing on the cusp between the predominant pre-exilic message, which called for repentance by threatening judgement, and postexilic prophecy, which regularly called for repentance by promising restoration. It has also to do with forms of prophetic experience. While the origins of apocalyptic literature are still debated, Ezekiel's visions must play a role in contributing to its development. In particular, the scenario in which a vision of heavenly realities is given in the company of a celestial guide-interpreter, so familiar from Zechariah and Daniel, as well as the NT book of Revelation, finds its headwaters in Ezekiel's prophecy.

Ezekiel inherited some of his themes from earlier prophets, but his handling of them contributes to their later shape in the NT. This seems particularly true of the imagery of the 'good shepherd' (34:11-24), and 'living water' (47:1-14) as confirmed in Revelation 22:1-2. The Book of Revelation draws inspiration from some of Ezekiel's most negative images, e.g. the 'whoring' of Ezekiel Chapters 16 and 23, the enemy Gog of Magog, but Ezekiel's vision of a new city also resonates there (Revelation 21:1-22:5). There are few clear hints of resurrection in the OT, but one of them is found in the interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Whatever it might have meant to Ezekiel's audience, it makes an important contribution to the development of biblical thought.

Literary Features

The Book of Ezekiel is one of the most complex books in the Bible because so many different genres converge in it. It is important to grasp right at the start that this book is an anthology of separate pieces of writing. There is no single overarching story line; the unity is that of a carefully arranged collection. The general arrangement of the material is one that several other OT prophetic books also follow, a general movement from (1) oracles of judgement against the prophet's own nation of Judah (usually called Israel in the text), to (2) oracles of judgement against the surrounding pagan nations, to (3) oracles of future, eschatological blessing on those who believe in God.

Several observations are in order. First, much of the book consists of visionary writing, which transports readers to a world of the imagination where the rules of reality are obviously suspended in favour of highly unusual visions. To understand and relish the Book of Ezekiel, readers often need to abandon expectations of realism. Second, Ezekiel employs a technique known as symbolic reality, which occurs when a writer consistently transports the reader to a world of visionary experience where the most important ingredients are symbols like a vine, a boiling pot, or a valley full of dry bones. Third, prophecy is itself a genre, made up of oracles, i.e. pronouncements from God through the agency of a prophet that fall into two main categories: oracles of judgement and oracles of blessing. Oracles of judgement are ordinarily examples of satire, and in the prophetic satire of Ezekiel there are three motifs:

1. Description of evil.
2. Denunciation of this evil.
3. Warnings and predictions that God will judge the evil.

Prophecy often merges with apocalyptic writing about epic, end-time struggles. These sections often portray events at the end of history. Finally, readers should not overlook the obvious, the prophet Ezekiel expresses himself in the form of poetry.

In addition to abandoning expectations of consistent realism, readers should give themselves to the sheer strangeness of what is presented. Ezekiel talks about real, historical events, but much of the time he does not portray these events in literal terms. Instead he prefers extravagant visions as his mode. Additionally, readers need to be ready for a kaleidoscope of details, always shifting and never in focus for very long. The best approach to the oracles of judgement is to analyse them according to the usual literary rules regarding satire.

The Near East at the Time of Ezekiel (circa 593BC)

Ezekiel recorded his visions and prophecies while living in the vicinity of Babylon, where he had been exiled years earlier. By Ezekiel's time, the Babylonian Empire had engulfed virtually all of the area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and would eventually subdue even the land of Egypt, where many other Judæans had fled.



Regional Map

History of Salvation Summary

Like other prophets called to explain the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel stressed that it was due to the people's faithlessness toward God, and therefore to their failure to live as God's renewed humanity. He also stressed that even this disaster was not the end of Israel's story. God would restore them morally and spiritually, and eventually use Israel to bring light to the Gentiles. Ezekiel adds a nuance to this prophetic refrain: Israel's calling was to show forth the holiness of God's name, but they had 'profaned' that name, i.e. treated it as unholy; in restoring them, God would act to vindicate the holiness of his name before all nations, enabling them to know him.

Outline

Ezekiel is the most overtly and deliberately structured of the Major Prophets. The book as a whole is organised around the fulcrum of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC, with Chapters 1-24 preceding its fall, and Chapters 33-48 following. The foreign-nation oracles of Chapters 25-32 also have a chronological ordering, as well as geographical and thematic organisation.

The book's major visions play a structuring role too. The inaugural vision of Chapters 1-3 finds an explicit cross-reference in the middle of the first temple vision of Chapters 8-11. The 'dry bones' vision of 37:1-14 is shorter than the others but plays a pivotal role in the movement toward restoration, seen in the culminating vision of Chapters 40-48, which in turn makes a pronounced cross-reference back to the inaugural vision as well as the previous temple vision. These observations alone powerfully imply that in Ezekiel's book, both content and form contribute to the message.

- I. Inaugural Vision (1:1-3:27)
 - a. The Vision of the Chariot (1:1-28)
 - i. Setting (1:1-3)
 - ii. The Throne of the Lord Approaches (1:4-28)
 - b. The Vision of the Scroll (2:1-3:11)
 - c. Ezekiel at the River Chebar (3:12-21)
 - i. The Throne of the Lord Withdraws (3:12-13)
 - ii. The Vision Concludes (3:14-15)
 - iii. The Watchman (3:16-21)
 - d. Ezekiel Isolated and Silenced (3:22-27)

- II. Judgement on Jerusalem and Judah (4:1-24:27)
 - a. God against Jerusalem (4:1-5:17)
 - i. The Siege of Jerusalem Portrayed (4:1-17)
 - ii. A Sword against Jerusalem (5:1-17)
 - b. Oracles against the Land (6:1-7:27)
 - i. Judgement on Idolatrous Israel (6:1-14)
 - ii. Impending Disaster (7:1-27)
 - c. Ezekiel's Temple Vision (8:1-11:25)
 - i. Abominations in the Temple (8:1-18)
 - ii. The Slaughter of the Idolaters (9:1-11)
 - iii. God's Glory Leaves Jerusalem (10:1-22)
 - iv. Judgement on Wicked Counsellors (11:1-13)
 - v. God Will Restore Israel (11:14-25)
 - 1. Promise of a New Heart and Spirit (11:14-21)
 - 2. The Glory of the Lord Departs (11:22-25)
 - d. Anticipating Exile (12:1-28)
 - i. Judah's Captivity Portrayed (12:1-16)
 - ii. Judgement Not Postponed (12:17-28)
 - e. False Prophecy, True Prophecy (13:1-14:23)
 - i. False Prophets Condemned (13:1-23)
 - ii. God's Judgements Justified (14:1-23)
 - 1. False Inquirers (14:1-11)
 - 2. Noah, Daniel and Job (14:12-23)
 - f. The Useless Vine (15:1-8)
 - g. God's Faithless Bride (16:1-58)
 - i. Jerusalem, the Foundling Bride (16:1-43)
 - ii. Jerusalem and her Sisters (16:44-58)
 - h. An Everlasting Covenant (16:59-63)
 - i. The Two Eagles and the Vine (17:1-21)
 - i. The Parable Narrated (17:1-10)
 - ii. The Parable Explained (17:11-18)
 - iii. The Parable Interpreted (17:19-21)

- j. Israel Exalted at Last (17:22-24)
- k. Individual Retribution (18:1-32)
 - i. The One Who Sins Dies (18:1-4)
 - ii. Three Case Studies (18:5-18)
 - iii. Two Objections (18:19-29)
 - iv. Conclusion: Repent! (18:30-32)
- l. Israel Degraded (19:1-14)
 - i. A Lioness and her Cubs (19:1-9)
 - ii. A Vine and its Stems (19:10-14)
- m. Learning from History (20:1-44)
 - i. Israel's Continuing Rebellion (20:1-32)
 - ii. God Will Restore Israel (20:33-44)
- n. Fire and Sword (20:45-21:32)
 - i. A Prophecy against the Negeb (20:45-49)
 - ii. The Drawn Sword of God (21:1-32)
 - 1. The Drawn Sword (21:1-7)
 - 2. The Sharpened Sword (21:8-17)
 - 3. The Sword of Nebuchadnezzar (21:18-29)
 - 4. The Sword Sheathed and Judged (21:30-32)
- o. The Bloody City (22:1-31)
 - i. A City Defiled (22:1-16)
 - ii. The City of Dross (22:17-22)
 - iii. Systemic Failure (22:23-31)
- p. Oholah and Oholibah (23:1-49)
 - i. The Sisters and Politics (23:1-35)
 - ii. The Sisters and Religion (23:36-49)
- q. Two Losses (24:1-27)
 - i. The Boiling Pot (24:1-14)
 - ii. Ezekiel's Bereavement (24:15-27)

- III. Oracles against Foreign Nations (25:1-32:32)
 - a. Against Judah's Neighbours (25:1-17)
 - i. Proclamation against Ammon (25:1-7)
 - ii. Proclamation against Moab (25:8-11)
 - iii. Proclamation against Edom (25:12-14)
 - iv. Proclamation against Philistia (25:15-17)
 - b. Oracles against Tyre (26:1-28:19)
 - i. Proclamation against Tyre (26:1-21)
 - ii. Lamentation over Tyre (27:1-36)
 - iii. Against Tyre's King (28:1-19)
 - 1. Proclamation against the King of Tyre (28:1-10)
 - 2. Lamentation over the King of Tyre (28:11-19)
 - c. Proclamation against Sidon (28:20-24)
 - d. Future Blessing for Israel (28:25-26)
 - e. Oracles against Egypt (29:1-32:32)
 - i. Proclamation against Egypt (29:1-16)
 - ii. Babylonia Will Plunder Egypt (29:17-21)
 - iii. Lamentation for Egypt (30:1-19)
 - iv. Proclamation against Pharaoh (30:20-26)
 - v. The Lofty Cedar (31:1-18)
 - vi. Lamentation over Pharaoh and Egypt (32:1-16)
 - vii. Dirge over Egypt (32:17-32)
- IV. After the Fall of Jerusalem (33:1-39:29)
 - a. Reminders (33:1-20)
 - i. Ezekiel Israel's Sentinel (33:1-9)
 - ii. God's Justice and Mercy (33:10-20)
 - b. The Fall of Jerusalem (33:21-22)
 - c. The Survivors in Judah (33:23-33)
 - d. Shepherds and Sheep (34:1-31)
 - i. Israel's False Shepherds (34:1-10)
 - ii. God the True Shepherd (34:11-31)
 - e. The Mountains of Edom and Israel (35:1-36:15)

- i. Judgement on Mount Seir (35:1-15)
 - ii. Blessing on Israel (36:1-15)
 - f. The Renewal of Israel (36:16-38)
 - i. State of Impurity (36:16-21)
 - ii. Divine Intervention: a New Spirit (36:22-32)
 - iii. Land Renewed (36:33-36)
 - iv. Populace Increased (36:37-38)
 - g. The Valley of Dry Bones (37:1-14)
 - h. The Two Sticks (37:15-28)
 - i. Gog of Magog (38:1-39:29)
 - i. Invasion by Gog (38:1-16)
 - ii. Judgement on Gog (38:17-23)
 - iii. Gog's Armies Destroyed (39:1-10)
 - iv. The Burial of Gog (39:11-20)
 - v. Israel Restored to the Land (39:21-29)
- V. Vision of Restoration (40:1-48:35)
 - a. The New temple (40:1-42:20)
 - i. The Vision of the New Temple (40:1-47)
 - 1. The Vision Begins (40:1-4)
 - 2. The Outer Court and its Gates (40:5-27)
 - 3. The Inner Court, Gates and Chambers (40:28-47)
 - ii. The Temple (40:48-41:26)
 - iii. The Holy Chambers and the Outer Wall (42:1-20)
 - 1. Chambers of the Outer Court (42:1-14)
 - 2. Exterior Measurements (42:15-20)
 - b. Regulations for Renewed Israel (43:1-46:24)
 - i. The Divine Glory Returns to the Temple (43:1-12)
 - 1. The Return of God's Glory (43:1-5)
 - 2. New People for New Temple (43:6-12)
 - ii. The Altar (43:13-27)
 - iii. The Closed Gate (44:1-3)
 - iv. Temple Access and Rules for Priests (44:4-31)

1. Admission to the Temple (44:4-14)
 2. The Levitical Priests (44:15-31)
 - v. The Holy District (45:1-9)
 - vi. Weights and Measures (45:10-12)
 - vii. Offerings and gatherings (45:13-46:24)
 1. Offerings (45:13-17)
 2. Festivals (45:18-25)
 3. Miscellaneous Regulations (46:1-24)
- c. Water Flowing from the Temple (47:1-12)
- d. The New Boundaries of the Land (47:13-23)
- e. The Tribal Portions (48:1-35)
 - i. Territories of the Northern Tribes (48:1-7)
 - ii. The Central Territories (48:8-22)
 - iii. Territories of the Southern Tribes (48:23-29)
 - iv. Access to the City (48:30-35)