

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Ezekiel

I. Introduction

A. *Title*

Like all the other writing prophets, the book's title bears the name of its author—יְחֶזְקֵאל, *yēhezqē'l*, and as was common with Hebrew names, represents the faith of his parents either in affirmation ("God strengthens") or in appeal ("May God strengthen").¹ Interestingly, the name occurs only two times in the book (1:3; 24:24), and only one other time outside the book in reference to another priest from a previous generation (1 Chron 24:16).

B. *Focus*

Since Ezekiel found himself among the exiles in Babylon, the first recipients of his prophecies were naturally the specific community in which he resided in Tel-Abib near the banks of the Chebar cannal (1:3; 3:15). Despite God's judgment on them, they had apparently transplanted their apostasy and idolatrous practices into their new Babylonian context.

C. *Date & Authorship*

The book of Ezekiel is much different than Isaiah and Jeremiah in that the prophet dated the inception of everything he recorded in his book. This means Ezekiel, along with Haggai and Zechariah, contain the greatest number of historical dates among the prophets.² Fourteen different dates are referenced throughout the book giving it a clear position in the historical setting of the ANE. What's more, with the exception of some minor variances (29:1, 17; 33:21), the dates are given chronologically, making Ezekiel's prophecies extremely important for OT chronology:

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 9.

² Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Ezekiel," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), 396.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES IN EZEKIEL

PASSAGE	DATE
1:2/3:15-16	July 31, 593 B.C.
3:15-16	Aug. 6, 593 B.C.
8:1	Sept. 17, 592 B.C.
20:1	Aug. 14, 591 B.C.
24:1	Jan 15, 588 B.C.
26:1	587/6 B.C.
29:1	Jan. 5, 587 B.C.
29:17	Apr. 26, 571 B.C.
30:20	Apr. 29, 587 B.C.
31:1	June 21, 587 B.C.
32:1	Mar. 3, 585 B.C.
32:17	Mar. 17, 585 B.C.
33:21	Jan. 9, 585 B.C.
40:1	Apr. 28, 573 B.C.

The book begins with Ezekiel's call to ministry in 593 B.C. at the age of 30 (1:2) and ends with Ezekiel's prophecy concerning Egypt's destruction which he received in 571 B.C. In total, Ezekiel's ministry spanned a total of 22 years of Judean history.

Confidence in Ezekiel's authorship of the work went unchallenged throughout history up until the beginning of the 20th century. The book was considered one of the *antilogoumena* ("disputed books") because of certain discrepancies between it and the Mosaic Law (e.g., Num 28:11; Ezek 46:4). Yet his authorship was never in question until 1924 with the publication of a work by Gustav Hölscher in which he asserted that only a small percentage of the book could be attributed to Ezekiel and that the vast majority of the work was the product of a later redactor who composited it together in the 5th century B.C. Numerous other works followed Hölscher, offering various other "histories" of the text and its development.

However, by 1983 scholarly opinions on the work had finally shifted back with the publication of a 2-volume commentary by Walther Zimmerli, whose work "was somewhat of a watershed study in which the pendulum swung back from the position that attributed virtually nothing to the prophet, to a position that ascribed a majority of the material to Ezekiel."³ Shockingly, this occurred despite Zimmerli's clear theologically liberal slant, indicating just how clear Ezekiel's authorship truly is.

In reality, there is ample evidence for confidence in Ezekiel's authorship of the book.⁴

- *Language*: the Hebrew used in the book is clearly exilic rather than post-exilic, indicating that it was the work of an author who spoke the Hebrew of the exiles and not reflective of the changes in the language that occurred following the return.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Rooker, "Ezekiel," 396-98 for a detailed discussion of these evidences.

- *Homogeneity*: there is consistent literary style that suggests a single author with a unified message.
- *Historical dates*: Dates in the book fall into two categories—they either introduce oracles against foreign nations or they introduce major events in the life of Ezekiel. The use of these dates is another strong evidence of unified authorship.
- *Visions*: The various visions of Ezekiel portrayed in the book are more strong evidence for its unity.
- *Style*: The book has numerous stylistic elements that tie it together into a literary unit. Throughout the work, various phrases appear repeatedly, including “son of man” (93x), “the hand of Yahweh was upon me” (1:3; 3:22; 33:22; 37:1), “that you [they] will know that I am Yahweh” (73x), and the introductory phrase, “Then the word of Yahweh came to me saying” (46x). Additionally, the book includes numerous symbolic actions by Ezekiel and allegories that contribute to a unified style.

D. *Historical Setting*

When Ezekiel was only 30 years old—the year in which he would have begun his priestly ministry—Yahweh called him to be a prophet to Judah (1:1-2). The year was 593 B.C., and Ezekiel was one of 8,000 citizens of Jerusalem deported to Babylon five years earlier when King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem in response to the revolt of King Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 24:7).

Ezekiel’s ministry lasted 22 years, and during his tenure he lived and prophesied through some of the most turbulent years in Judah’s existence. At the start of his ministry, living among a specific community of exiles in Tel-Abib near the Chebar river, his job was to warn his people of judgment that was coming and uncover the spiritual apostasy that characterized his fellow exiles (e.g., ch. 18). In fact, the first 24 chapters of the book focus on the judgment to come.

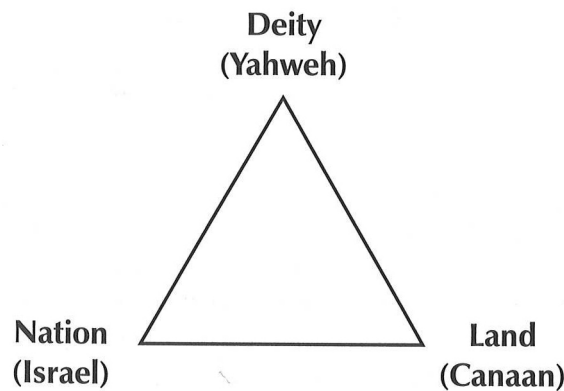
According to the biblical record, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, he deported most of the population to Babylon, leaving only the “poorest of the land” to tend the farms and vineyards (2 Kgs 25:11; 2 Chron 36:20; Jer 52:15). Some who remained ended up fleeing to Egypt following Gedaliah’s assassination (2 Kgs 25:25-26; Jer 41:1-2) while the rest who stayed in the land “suffered from severe depression expressed in economic poverty, political lethargy, and spiritual numbness. Although a new class of *nouveau noblesses* (relatively) emerged inevitably, they exhibited the same proclivity toward arrogance and spiritual bankruptcy as their predecessors. According to Ezek. 11:14-16, they had no understanding of their rich religious heritage and no sensitivity or pity for their deported compatriots.”⁵

In contrast to the deportation policies of the Neo-Assyrians, the Babylonians allowed their captors to remain together and maintain their religious and cultural identities. And both biblical and extra-biblical records indicate that the Jewish exiles were not slow in adapting to their new lives in Babylon. They quickly engaged in various trades in the

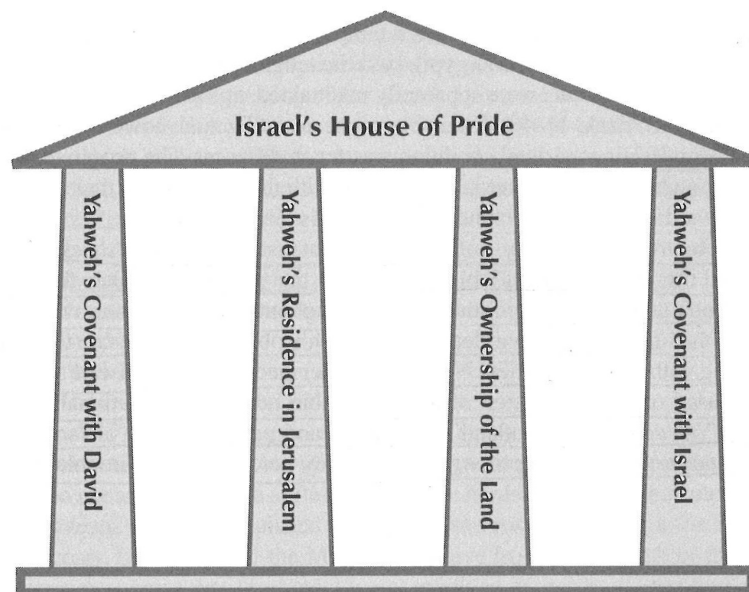
⁵ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 5.

kingdom and apparently became quite successful, so much so that some exiles chose to remain after Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to the land in 539 B.C.

Yet despite their apparent success at integrating into life in Babylon, the Jewish exiles “suffered from intense theological shock.”⁶ As Block explains, “Even though the prophets justifiably denounced the people of Judah for their idolatrous and socially criminal ways, throughout the Babylonian crisis the people had maintained confidence in Yahweh’s obligation to rescue them. In keeping with standard ancient Near Eastern perspectives, this sense of security was based on the conviction of an inseparable bond among nation patron deity (Yahweh), territory (land of Canaan), and people (nation of Israel).”⁷



Block goes on to explain that Israel rested their confidence in God on four theological pillars that functioned as an “official orthodoxy” for the nation. As Babylon’s armies drew closer, the nation clung more frantically to these pillars:



⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid.

As Block concludes, “But Jerusalem fell, the Davidic house was cut off, the temple was razed, and the nation was exiled from the land. The spiritual fallout was more difficult to deal with than the physical.... Based on appearances, Marduk, the god of Babylon, had prevailed. Ezekiel faced an audience that was disillusioned, cynical, bitter, and angry. The ‘house of rebellion’ (*bêt mēřî*, e.g., 2:5-6) had collapsed, with no one to rescue them.”⁸

Thus, following Jerusalem’s destruction which Ezekiel finally announced in 33:21, the prophet’s message turned from judgment to hope as he encouraged the despairing nation that their current status didn’t signal their ultimate end. Despite their wickedness and the present circumstance, God had not abandoned his covenant with Israel.

II. Major Themes

A. *The Glory of God*

While the prophet Isaiah featured the holiness of God as the key feature of his divine portrait, even referring to Yahweh repeatedly as “the Holy One of Israel,” the prophet Ezekiel chose the glory of God as the key divine attribute upon which he would fix his portrayal of Yahweh throughout the book.

In fact, the book begins and ends with God’s glory on display. From the very start, Ezekiel makes it clear that he has had visions of the very likeness of Yahweh’s glory—his *kābôd*. The term originally referred to something heavy or weighty and was used in early Hebrew with reference to the weight of a person’s belongings, which would serve as a relative indicator of his worth. Eventually, the word took on the idea of importance, magnificence, and honor.

In the opening chapters of Ezekiel, God’s glory is expressed *visibly* through a series of spectacular images. In fact, much like the book of Revelation, one gets the impression that Ezekiel seems to be grasping for words to explain the visions he sees. There is a windstorm, living creatures, wheels, and a platform and throne (1:4-27). Everything is spoken in analogy. Not until 1:28 does the text indicate “that the prophet has finally caught on to the significance of the vision: this is none other than the *glory of Yahweh*! The doors of heaven have been flung wide open, and he beholds Yahweh in all his splendor, enthroned above the living creatures.”⁹

The effect of his vision in chapter 1 is encouraging. In the midst of Judah’s deportation and Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem, the people would find comfort in the knowledge that Yahweh remained in control of events and maintains his concern for Judah.¹⁰ However, encouragement turns to alarm as Ezekiel describes Yahweh’s glory depart the temple because of the pagan idolatry that had infiltrated the temple through Ju-

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰ Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 62.

dah's syncretistic practices (chs. 8-10). "The most severe aspect of God's judgment was his absence from among his people."¹¹ As Block explains,

Through this vision, Ezekiel discovers why his inaugural vision had come to him in its overwhelmingly brilliant and fiery form. In addition to bringing the *kābôd* of Yahweh down to him, the heavenly chariot now arrives with the coals of divine judgment for Jerusalem, and will depart bearing the glory out of the temple and away from the city.¹²

This departure begins in 9:3 when the glory moves from the Most Holy place to the threshold of the temple, progresses through chapter 10 where the glory rides to the east gate, and concludes in chapter 11 with the glory departing the city and hovering over the Mount of Olives, indicating God's abandonment of the temple and his lifting of protection from the city. Presumably, the glory returns to its original heavenly place, aligning well with Daniel's visions of the coming Ancient of Days riding on the clouds in glory (7:8-10) and John's vision of Christ's enthronement (Rev 4:1-11).¹³

Ezekiel's vision of Yahweh's glory, however, comes full circle in 44:4-6. Whereas God's presence departs in judgment in the book's opening chapters, here the text reveals that the glory will return. With the new temple comes new relationship and fellowship with God, with Yahweh once again living among his people.

B. *The Knowledge of God*

One of the thematic statements of the book is the phrase, "They will know that I am Yahweh" and its variations, occurring some 73x throughout. The phrase reveals the divine motivation for the events that occur in Ezekiel. Whether through judgment or restoration, God's actions are intended to reveal his character and impart saving and redeeming knowledge to his people. In fact, the statement appears in three different contexts:

1. *Knowledge through Israel's Judgment:* On numerous occasions, the rationale for God's judgment on Judah is "that they may know that I am Yahweh." Judgment reveals God to people. It demonstrates his righteous wrath toward sin. It shows his justice and holiness. This is the same expression used by Moses in Exodus as the impetus for the plagues. Egypt's suffering at the hands of Yahweh was so that the Egyptians would "know that I am Yahweh." The tables have now turned, and this tool is used against Israel.
2. *Knowledge through Israel's Restoration:* On other occasions, the phrase appears in statements promising God's forgiveness, blessing, and restoration to the nation. This is no accident. While judgment may reveal God to the nation, so will restoration. In it, Judah will see God's goodness, mercy, and grace. They will see his compassion on his people, and his determination to faithfully fulfill his covenant promises. Through judgment and restoration, Israel will "know" Yahweh—language that speaks of intimate relationship.

¹¹ Ibid., 131.

¹² Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 317.

¹³ Ibid., 358.

3. *The Nations through God's Hand*: The phrase is not unique to God's dealings with Israel. It also appears numerous times in Yahweh's interactions with the nations. As God deals justly and wrathfully with the nations of the earth, they all will "know" that Yahweh is God. The nations, who had pursued their own gods and their own moralities, will receive the fruits of their endeavors and come to the knowledge of the God they spurned. Likewise, as God's blessings are finally poured out on the nations, so they will also come to know who Yahweh really is.

C. *Son of Man*

The phrase "son of man" is the common designation Yahweh uses for Ezekiel. In fact, the phrase occurs 93x, while God never calls him by his proper name. The phrase has a very clear meaning. "Son of" in this context simple means "one characterized by," while "man" emphasizes humanity. Contrasting with the visions of divine glory in the opening chapters, the phrase marks the frailty and mortality and man.¹⁴

D. *The Temple*

Since Ezekiel is a priest (1:3), it is no wonder that the temple receives special emphasis throughout the book. The temple is, of course, the permanent form of the tabernacle complex described by Moses in the Torah. It was a sanctuary—a dwelling place—for Yahweh's presence, so that the nation could properly mediate according to the Mosaic Covenant. With the establishment of the permanent house of David came the construction of a permanent house for Yahweh, and his glory resided in that house.

This called for absolute holiness on the part of Israel. Yet the message of Ezekiel is that the nation had become unclean. They had profaned themselves with their sin, and defiled the temple with their idolatry, which they had actually incorporated into the temple itself. For this reason, Yahweh's presence had to depart and the nation had to be cleansed to allow for God to return and reside among them once again. Thus, the book begins with the old temple, polluted with idols, and eventually destroyed, and it ends with a new temple, pure and clean, filled with Yahweh's glory.

E. *The Spirit of Yahweh*

"Ezekiel may well be described as the most spiritual prophet of the OT. Indeed he may well be designated 'the prophet of the spirit.'"¹⁵ The term "spirit" (*ruāḥ*) appears more often in Ezekiel than any other prophet book. Even Isaiah uses the term less, and Jeremiah, whose ministry had a profound effect on Ezekiel, only sparsely uses the term in his prophecies. As a priest, one might think that the prophet's emphasis on the Spirit flows out of Levitical theology, yet the term is strangely absent from that book. As Block asserts, "With his emphasis on the spirit Ezekiel is obviously going his own way."¹⁶

¹⁴ Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 74.

¹⁵ Daniel I. Block, "The Prophet of the Spirit: The Use of *RWH* in the Book of Ezekiel," JETS 32, no. 1 (March 1989): 28.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In Ezekiel, the Spirit takes on many roles. The root concept behind the term *ruāḥ* is “wind” or “breath,” a meaning found over 100x in the OT. But it also came to refer to God’s moving, effectual power—his Spirit. In Ezekiel, it is Yahweh’s Spirit that transports him from place to place during his visions. It is also the force that gives life and animation to living things (i.e., “breath [*ruāḥ*] of life”). It is, in fact, the Spirit that enters into the dry bones of Israel and Judah causing the nation to come back to life (37:5-6), and enters into the individual as part of the New Covenant ministry (36:27). It is Yahweh’s Spirit that superintended Ezekiel as he prophesied on behalf of Yahweh (2:2; 3:24; etc.).

F. *Restoration of Israel*

Ezekiel’s message, of course, is thoroughly negative. Half of his book relates the coming reality of God’s judgment upon Israel for their idolatry and sin. But the book is thoroughly covenantal as well. God’s purpose in judgment is to prepare his people to be who they are supposed to be, and even judgment in God’s plan is redemptive, salvific, and transformative. As Block observes,

The very pillars on which the people had falsely based their earlier security (but which Ezekiel had systematically demolished in the judgment oracles) are restored. As it turns out, Yahweh’s promises are eternal: (1) Israel is his covenant people *forever*; (2) the land of Canaan has been given to them as their territorial homeland *forever*; (3) Yahweh will dwell in the midst of his people *forever*; (4) Yahweh’s commitment to his servant David endures *forever*: Yahweh will not go back on his word. After all, as he himself declares, “I am Yahweh; I have spoken; I will perform.”¹⁷

Block then goes on to list the key and recognizable features of Yahweh’s future plans for his people:¹⁸

1. In a new exodus, Yahweh will regather the scattered people out of the countries to which they had been scattered (11:16-17a; 20:20-41; 34:11-13a, 16; 36:24a; 37:21a)
2. Yahweh will bring them back to their hereditary homeland, which has been cleansed of its defilement (11:17b-18; 20:42; 34:13b-15; 36:24b; 37:21b)
3. Yahweh will revitalize his people spiritually, renewing his covenant with them, giving them a new heart, and infusing them with his Spirit, so they walk in his ways (11:19-20; 16:62; 34:30-31; 36:25-28; 37:23-24)
4. Yahweh will restore the dynasty of his servant David as an agent of well-being and a symbol of unity for the nation (34:23-24; 37:22-25)
5. Yahweh will bless Israel with unprecedented prosperity and guarantee the security of the nation in their own land (34:25-29; 36:29-30; 37:26; 38:1-39:29)
6. Yahweh will establish his permanent residence in their midst and reorder the worship of the nation (37:26b-28; 40:1-48:35).

¹⁷ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 55

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-56

A critical aspect in this future restoration of Israel is the reunification of the 12 tribes. By this time, the northern tribes had long since been deported by Assyria and assimilated into Gentile life. As a nation, northern Israel had been annihilated. Only Judah remained as a unique ethnic people. But Ezekiel's message is not just the promise of a restored Judah, but rather a restored Israel. Both houses of Israel, torn in the early days of the monarchy under Rehoboam, would one day be reunited under the sovereign power of Yahweh to once again be one nation.

III. Purpose

The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple were necessary measures for the God of glory to employ to correct His disobedient people; however, in the future, Yahweh will restore a repentant remnant of His people to the land and will establish them there with a new temple.

IV. Literary Structure

Unlike Jeremiah, Ezekiel's prophecies offer a much more straight-forward structure. In general, the book revolves around 33:21, where the prophet announces the fall of Jerusalem. For the most part, what precedes that point are oracles of judgment, while what follows are messages of hope.

That being said, the book has nevertheless garnered several different outlines from commentators. The simplest and most often cited is the 2-fold division, which divides the book evenly in half (1-24; 25-48). Josephus' mention of Ezekiel's "two books" may suggest that this was a common approach to the book by Jewish scholars, and the two coordinating commission scenes (ch. 3, 33) all support this division.

Others, however, divide the book into three parts, whereby they separate Ezekiel's oracles against the nations into their own major section (1-24; 25-32; 33-48). The following are a few suggested outlines for the book:

EZEKIEL

Messages of Doom and Gloom for Judah/Israel			Messages of Hope and Restoration for Judah/Israel		
The Call of Ezekiel to Prophetic Ministry	Signs and Visions of Woe for Israel/Judah	A Collection of Prophecies of Woe against Israel	Negative Messages of Hope: The Oracles against Foreign Nations	The End of an Era	Positive Messages of Hope: The Gospel according to Ezekiel
1:1	4:1	12:1	25:1	33:1	34:1

1. Announcements of Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (chs. 1-24)¹⁹

- A. Throne-Chariot Vision and the Call of Ezekiel (1:1-3:21)
- B. Symbolic Acts of the Doom of Jerusalem (3:22-7:27)
- C. The Temple Abandoned by God (chs. 8-11)
- D. Symbolic Acts and Prophecies of Woe against Israel (chs. 12-24)
 - 1) Demonstration of the Exiles (12:1-20)
 - 2) The False Leaders (12:21-15:8)
 - 3) The Spiritual History of Israel (ch. 16)
 - 4) The Unfaithful King (ch. 17)
 - 5) Individual Responsibility (ch. 18)
 - 6) Lamentation for Princes of Israel (ch. 19)
 - 7) The End is in Sight (chs. 20-24)

2. Hope and Restoration for Judah and Jerusalem (25-48)

- A. Oracles Against Foreign Nations (chs. 25-32)
 - 1) Ammon (25:1-7)
 - 2) Moab (25:8-11)
 - 3) Edom (25:12-14)
 - 4) Philistia (25:15-17)
 - 5) Tyre (26:1-28:19)
 - 6) Sidon (28:20-26)
 - 7) Egypt (chs. 29-32)
- B. Announcements of Restoration for Israel (ch. 33-39)
 - 1) The watchman recommissioned (ch. 33)
 - 2) The shepherds of Israel (ch. 34)
 - 3) Judgment of Edom (ch. 35)
 - 4) Israel's restoration (chs. 36-37)
 - 5) Eschatological judgment and protection (chs. 38-39)
- C. Vision of the Restored Community (chs. 40-48)
 - 1) New temple (40:1-43:12)
 - 2) Regulations for worship (43:13-46:24)
 - 3) Land of blessing (chs. 47-48)

V. Recommended Resources

Block, Daniel I. *Ezekiel 1-24*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Cooper, Lamar Eugene, Sr. *Ezekiel*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994.

¹⁹ Taken from Rooker, "Ezekiel," 399-400