

# Introduction to Ezekiel

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## I. *Background*

- A. Israel's idolatry caused the ten northern tribes of that nation to be taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 B.C. At that time the southern kingdom of Judah was spared through the influence of righteous men like Isaiah. Judah soon experienced a revival under the leadership of young King Hezekiah. He had learned the spiritual lessons from the downfall of Israel and was encouraged by the ministry of the prophet Isaiah (2 Kings 18-19). However, Hezekiah's faith in the Lord and zeal for the Mosaic law were forgotten when his son Manasseh and his grandson Amon rejected the ways of the Lord. For fifty-five years (2 Kings 21:1-18) they turned the people to all kinds of idolatry and wickedness. This so perverted the people that they repudiated the law of God and forgot that it existed.
- B. Josiah, Amon's righteous son, brought renewed hope to Judah; but it came too late. As he was having the temple repaired, a copy of the Law of Moses was discovered (2 Kings 22). On reading it, Josiah was moved to obey it fully (2 Kings 23). He purified the temple and officially cleansed the land of the abominations of Manasseh and Amon. However, among the people this reformation was only superficial. The idolatry of Manasseh's long reign had so corrupted their hearts that there was little genuine repentance (cf. Jeremiah 3:10). The Mosaic law declared that the nation of Israel would be taken captive and dispersed among the nations if the people continually disobeyed the stipulations of that covenant (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28-29). That curse was now certain. It was the only way to remove the wickedness of Israel and cause the people to return to the Lord their God.
- C. Meanwhile, on the international scene there was a new power struggle. Assyria, the dominant nation in the ancient Near East for more than 250 years, was declining, while the Neo-Babylonian Empire was rising under the leadership of Nabopolassar. In 612 B.C. the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians; and Nineveh, their capital city, fell. The remnants of the Assyrian army under Ashurballit II retreated to Haran, where, with their backs to the Egyptians, they endeavored to keep resistance alive.
- D. In 609 B.C. Pharaoh Necho of Egypt marched to the aid of Assyria with a large force. At Megiddo, Josiah, the reformer king of Judah, tried to stop the advance of Necho, only to be killed in the ensuing battle. Necho continued on to Haran to support Ashurballit in his attempt to retain Haran, but the strength of the Babylonians gave them a decisive victory.

- E. Though Necho failed in his effort to aid Assyria at Haran, he did begin to consolidate Palestine and Syria. He removed Jehoahaz, the pro-Babylonian son of Josiah whom the people of Judah crowned as their new king, and established Jehoiakim, Josiah's eldest pro-Egyptian son, as his vassal king in Judah. Throughout this international turmoil, Jeremiah warned the people of Judah to submit to the Babylonians and not to follow the enticements of Egypt. They would not listen.
- F. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, the crown prince of Babylonia, attacked the combined Assyrian and Egyptian forces at Carchemish on the Euphrates in one of the most important battles of history. In Nebuchadnezzar's overwhelming victory, two great powers of the ancient Near East fell, never again to rise to international significance. As the Babylonians pushed their conquest southward, they invaded Judah and deported a group of young nobles from there (2 Kings 24:1; 2 Chronicles 36:6; Daniel 1:1-3, 6). This began the great Babylonian captivity of Judah that would ultimately affect every Israelite.
- G. Jehoiakim was both a reluctant vassal of Babylon and a greedy ruler over his people, despising the Mosaic law and the reforms of his father, Josiah (Jeremiah 22:13-17). After three years of unwilling submission to Nebuchadnezzar, Jehoiakim refused to heed the warnings of Jeremiah and revolted against Babylon in favor of Egypt (2 Kings 24:1). The stalemate in battle between Babylon and Egypt on the frontier of Egypt in 601 B.C. encouraged him. His revolt was a mistake, for as soon as Nebuchadnezzar reorganized his army, he retaliated against those nations that had revolted and had refused to pay tribute to him.
- H. In December 598 B.C., during the month that the Babylonians began to attack Judah, Jehoiakim died. His son Jehoiachin succeeded him (2 Kings 24:8), only to surrender the city of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar three months later. Jehoiachin, his mother, his wives, his officials and the leading men of the land (2 Kings 24:11-16), including Ezekiel (a priest; 1:1-3), were led away into exile.
1. This is shown further from Ezekiel 33:21 where the prophet speaks of his captivity as occurring in the twelfth year before the time when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, which came in 586 B.C.
  2. In 40:1 he speaks of a vision that occurred in the twenty-fifth year of his captivity, which he says was in the "fourteenth year after that the city was smitten."
- I. Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, was established by Nebuchadnezzar as a regent vassal over Judah. Though in exile, Jehoiachin remained the recognized king of Judah by Babylon, as demonstrated from administrative documents found in the excavations at Babylonia.
- J. Buoyed by false prophets' messages that Nebuchadnezzar's power was soon to be broken and the exiles would return, and seduced by the

seemingly renewed strength of Pharaohs Psammetik II (594–588 B.C.) and Apries (588–568 B.C.), on whom Zechariah pinned his hopes of restored national independence, the king was persuaded to rebel once more against Nebuchadnezzar. The response of Babylon was immediate. Early in 588 the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 32:1-2), having already destroyed the fortress cities of the Judean hill country (described in the Lachish Letters). In the fall of 586, Jerusalem was destroyed; Zedekiah was captured and blinded after witnessing the execution of his sons; many inhabitants of Jerusalem were murdered by the Babylonians; and others were deported to Babylon (2 Kings 25:2-21; Jeremiah 52:5-27). Judah had fallen.

- K. During this period of international turmoil, combined with the immorality and apostasy of Judah, Ezekiel prophesied. Having grown up during the reform of Josiah and having been taken captive in the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C., Ezekiel proclaimed to the exiled Jews the Lord's judgment and blessing.
- L. The following outline will clarify the chronological relationship between the Judean, Egyptian, and Babylonian kings.
  - 1. Judean kings
    - a) Josiah (640–609 B.C.)
    - b) Jehoahaz (Josiah's second son) (609 B.C.)
    - c) Jehoiakim (Josiah's eldest son) (609–597 B.C.)
    - d) Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim's son) (597 B.C.)
    - e) Zedekiah (Josiah's youngest son; a regent) (597–586 B.C.)
    - f) Jerusalem destroyed (586 B.C.)
  - 2. Egyptian kings
    - a) Psammetik I (664–609 B.C.)
    - b) Neco (609–594 B.C.)
    - c) Psammetik II (594–588 B.C.)
    - d) Apries (Hophra) (588–568 B.C.)
  - 3. Neo-Babylonian kings
    - a) Nabopolassar (626–605 B.C.)
    - b) Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 B.C.)

## II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. Ezekiel's authorship of the entire book was never seriously questioned before the second quarter of the twentieth century. Recent objections to the book's unity have been based on critical literary analysis. In fact, as late as 1924, Gustav Holscher asserted that only 170 out of 1,273 verses were truly penned by Ezekiel.
  - 1. However, the style and content of Ezekiel are remarkably consistent.

2. Furthermore, there are serious difficulties in altering the text and devising stylistic, geographical and historical objections versus accepting genuine authorship.
- B. Ezekiel also allows us to keenly see the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration. He speaks seven times of the Holy Spirit transporting him some place (3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5). In addition, he speaks of the Holy Spirit eight other times (1:12, 20-21; 10:17; 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29).
  - C. Few books in the Old Testament place as much emphasis on chronology as does Ezekiel. The first three verses of chapter 1 mark the chronological setting, dating the book by Jehoiachin's deportation to Babylon in 597 B.C. The first prophetic message is dated in "the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity" (1:2; i.e., 593 B.C.), and the last-dated message (29:17-30:19) was given in "the seven and twentieth year" (571 B.C.). The book contains thirteen chronological notices.
    1. Chapters 1-24, which announce both the judgment on Jerusalem and Judah and the basis for it, are dated 593-589 B.C. (1:1-3; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1).
    2. The prophecies against the foreign nations in chapters 25-32 are dated 587-585 B.C. (26:1; 29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1; 17), with the exception of 29:17-30:19.
    3. The messages of blessing and hope in chapters 33-48 were delivered between 585 and 573 B.C. (33:21; 40:1).

### III. **Place Of Origin And Destination**

- A. Ezekiel 1:1-3 and 3:15 clearly define the place of origin of Ezekiel's work as Babylonia, specifically at the site of Tel Abib located near the Kebar River and the site of Nippur. Many identify this "river" as a canal, called *Naru Kabari* in the cuneiform inscriptions, which makes a south-easterly loop, connecting at both ends with the Euphrates River. It was an important part of the irrigation system of Babylonia.
- B. We know few particulars concerning the Jews in Babylon. However, all indications of the conditions of the Jews in the Babylonian exile show that it was not severe. Though placed at the specific site of Tel Abib, it seems that they had freedom of movement within the country and the opportunity to engage in commerce (e.g., he received the elders of the Jews in his home in 8:1 and 20:1). They were regarded more as colonists than slaves. They enjoyed the instruction and example of Daniel, who was carried away captive to Babylon eight years before the captivity of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was also married but his wife died in the ninth year of his captivity (24:1, 15-18).

- C. Ezekiel's messages were primarily for these exiles.
1. He condemned the abominations that were leading Jerusalem and Judah to ultimate destruction. The exiles questioned the prophecies of Ezekiel; and he, in turn, answered them carefully.
  2. He played the role of a watchman to warn them of the impending judgment on Judah and to proclaim the hope of their ultimate restoration to the land of Israel.
    - a) Though in some of Ezekiel's visions he was carried to Jerusalem, his messages were not directly given for the benefit of the Jews in Palestine.
    - b) Jeremiah, Ezekiel's contemporary, was simultaneously proclaiming a similar message of warning and judgment to those remaining in Judah.

#### IV. ***Occasion And Purpose***

- A. When God created the nation of Israel, he gave the people the Mosaic law as their "constitution," which told them how to live for the Lord. The law was not given to burden the Hebrews; it was given for their own good (Deuteronomy 10:12-13), so that they might be blessed (Deuteronomy 5:28-33).
- B. Yet the history of Israel was marked by disobedience to this covenant. Often the nation followed the gods of the peoples around them. As the above historical section shows, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah became increasingly corrupt and ultimately forgot their law. The covenant itself had warned the Israelites that if they strayed from the Lord's ways revealed in the statutes and commandments of the law, the Lord would discipline them through captivity in order to bring them back to Himself.
- C. Ezekiel spoke to his contemporaries, declaring to them the faithfulness, holiness and glory of God. Their God would bring judgment, cleansing and ultimate blessing through which all peoples might come to know that He, the God of Israel, was the one true God.
1. The Lord desired to turn the exiles of Israel away from their sinful ways and restore them. His judgment, therefore, was exercised as an instrument of love to cause them to see their abominations and to recognize the Lord's faithfulness to his covenants.
  2. He was faithful to His promises, both to judge and to bless His people. The destruction of the city of Jerusalem demonstrated God's faithfulness to His holy character (cf. Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28-30) as revealed in His covenant.
  3. 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 spiritually restored by a righteous leader (Ezekiel 37:24-28).
- D. Ezekiel, as a watchman for Israel, warned the people of the judgment that was imminent and stressed the need for individual responsibility as well as national accountability before God. Each Israelite was personally to turn to the Lord. Likewise, the whole nation must ultimately return to Him.

## V. ***Scriptural Themes***

- A. Five prominent concepts fill the pages of Ezekiel: (1) the nature of God; (2) the purpose and nature of God's judgment; (3) individual responsibility; (4) the ethical, religious and moral history of Israel; and (5) the nature of Israel's restoration.
- B. God's attributes most strongly emphasized are those relating to His promises. A righteous and holy God had established a righteous way of life for the well-being of His people. If they followed the demands of that covenant, they would be blessed in every spiritual and physical way (Leviticus 26:3-13; Deuteronomy 28:1-14). If they rebelled against the Lord's righteous ordinances and disobeyed them, the Lord -- being holy, just, and righteous -- would discipline His people and withhold blessing (Leviticus 26:14-39; Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Ezekiel demonstrated the Lord's faithfulness to these promises. He was judging Israel and Judah because they had broken the law, but He would also faithfully "restore" the people and confer on them Messianic blessings of the new covenant (Genesis 12:1-3; 2 Samuel 7:12-17; Jeremiah 31:31-34).
- C. God's character logically reflects judgment. The Lord loved the Israelites and chose them as His very own people to bless the world (Genesis 12:2-3; Exodus 19:4-6; Deuteronomy 7:6-11). Since they strayed from His righteous ways, the Lord brought judgment on them to make them conscious of their wickedness so that they would return to Him. Ezekiel declared that the purpose of the Lord's judgment was to cause Israel, or the nations, to "know that I am the Lord," a phrase repeated over sixty times in this book. Judgment was for Israel's good because it would result in their return to the Lord and their recognition that He was the only true God.
- D. Though the Lord often dealt with Israel nationally, Ezekiel balanced this with an emphasis on individual responsibility (cf. Deuteronomy 24:16; 29:17-21). 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. Everyone was equally responsible for his or her own disobedience and unright-

eousness. Therefore, Ezekiel exhorted the exiles to turn from their sinful ways and live righteously (cf. 18:1-32, 23:1-49).

- E. Along with God's judgment announced in this prophecy, Ezekiel vindicated the Lord's righteous justice by recounting Israel's moral and religious history. This was accomplished through the imagery of Israel as a spiritual harlot who, having been wooed and married by God, had prostituted herself by going after the gods of other nations throughout her entire history (cf. 16:15-16, 28, 31, 35, 41; 23:5, 19, 44). This idolatry and unfaithfulness had characterized her from her birth in Egypt.
- F. In spite of Israel's consistent idolatry, the Lord gave a message of hope through His prophet. The last section of the book promises a restored Israel under Christ with a new temple. However, premillennialists believe that Israel's restoration to the land of Palestine in the end times will be literal. Furthermore, they believe that chapters 40-48 give the most exhaustive explanation of worship during the Millennium.