

Book of Ezekiel

Title:

The book has always been named for its author, Ezekiel (1:3; 24:24), who is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture.

His name means “strengthened by God”, which, indeed, he was for the prophetic ministry to which God called him (3:8-9).

Ezekiel uses visions, prophecies, parables, signs and symbols to proclaim and dramatize the message of God to His exiled people.

Author – Date:

If the “thirtieth year” (of 1:1), refers to Ezekiel’s age, he was 25 when taken captive and 30 when called into ministry.

Thirty was the age when priests commenced their office, so it was a notable year for Ezekiel.

His ministry began (in 593/592 B.C.), and extended at least 22 years until (571/570 B.C.; compare 25:17).

He was a contemporary of both Jeremiah (who was about 20 years older), and Daniel (who was the same age), whom he names (in 14:14, 20; 28:3), as an already well known prophet.

Like Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1), and Zechariah (compare Zech. 1:1 with Neh. 12:16),

Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest (1:3).

Because of his priestly background, he was particularly interested in and familiar with the temple details; so God used him to write much about them (8:1-11:25; 40:1-47:12).

Ezekiel and his wife (who is mentioned in 24:15-27), were among 10,000 Jews taken captive to Babylon (in 597 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:11-18).

They lived in Tel-abib (3:15), on the bank of the Chebar River, probably southeast of Babylon.

Ezekiel writes of his wife’s death in exile (Ezek. 24:18), but the book does not mention Ezekiel’s death, which rabbinical tradition suggests occurred at the hands of an Israelite prince whose idolatry he rebuked (around 560 B.C.).

The author received his call to prophesy (in 593 B.C.; 1:2), in Babylon (“the land of the Chaldeans”), during the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s captivity, which began (in 597 B.C.).

Frequently, Ezekiel dates his prophecies (from 597 B.C.; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1).

He also dates the message (in 40:1 as 573/572, the 14th year after 586 B.C.), i.e., Jerusalem’s final fall.

The last dated utterance of Ezekiel (was in 571/570 B.C.; 29:17).

Almost all of Ezekiel’s prophecies are in chronological order and are precisely dated (1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1).

The commencement of his ministry is said to be “in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin’s captivity” (1:1-2; or 593 B.C.).

The expression “in the thirtieth year” (1:1), probably refers to Ezekiel’s age when he began to prophesy, which, in this case, was the same age at which priests became qualified to serve (See Numbers 4:3).

The latest dated prophecy in the book was given “in the seven and twentieth year, in the first month, in the first day of the month” (29:17).

The twenty-seventh year should be dated to Jehoiachin’s exile (as in 1:2), which would terminate Ezekiel’s ministry (in 571 B.C., at age 52), or a total of 22 years.

Background – Setting:

From the historical perspective, Israel’s united kingdom lasted more than 110 years (ca. 1043-931 B.C.), through the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon.

Then the divided kingdom, Israel (north), and Judah (south), extended from (931 B.C. to 722/721 B.C.).

Israel fell to Assyria (in 722/721 B.C.), leaving Judah, the surviving kingdom for 135 years, which fell to Babylon (in 605-586 B.C.).

From the more immediate setting, several features were strategic.

Politically, Assyria’s vaunted military might crumbled after 626 B.C., and the capital, Nineveh, was destroyed (in 612 B.C.), by the Babylonians and Medes (compare Nahum).

The neo-Babylonian empire had flexed its muscles since Nabopolassar took the throne (in 625 B.C.), and Egypt, under Pharaoh Necho II, was determined to conquer what he could.

Babylon smashed Assyria (in 612-605 B.C.), and registered a decisive victory against Egypt (in 605 B.C.), at Carchemish, leaving, according to the Babylonian Chronicle, no survivors.

Also in 605 B.C., Babylon, led by Nebuchadnezzar, began the conquest of Jerusalem and the deportation of captives, among them Daniel (Dan. 1:2).

In (Dec. 598 B.C.), he again besieged Jerusalem (and on Mar. 16, 597 B.C.), took possession.

This time, he took captive Jehoiachin and a group of 10,000, including Ezekiel (2 Kings 24:11-18).

The final destruction of Jerusalem and the conquest of Judah, including the third deportation (came in 586 B.C.).

Religiously, King Josiah (ca. 640/609 B.C.), had instituted reforms in Judah (compare 2 Chron. chapter 34).

Tragically, despite his effort, idolatry had so dulled the Judeans that their awakening was only “skin deep” overall.

The Egyptian army killed Josiah as it crossed Palestine (in 609 B.C.), and the Jews plunged on in sin toward judgment under Jehoahaz (609 B.C.), Jehoiakim [Eliakim] (609-598 B.C.), Jehoiachin (598-597 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.).

Domestically, Ezekiel and the 10,000 lived in exile in Babylonia (2 Kings 24:14), more as colonists than captives, being permitted to farm tracts of land under somewhat favorable conditions (Jeremiah chapter 29).

Ezekiel even had his own house (3:24; 20:1).

Prophetically, false prophets deceived the exiles with assurances of a speedy return to Judah (13:3, 16; Jer. 29:1).

From (593-585 B.C.), Ezekiel warned that their beloved Jerusalem would be destroyed and their exile prolonged, so there was no hope of immediate return.

In 585 B.C., an escapee from Jerusalem, who had evaded the Babylonians, reached Ezekiel with the first news that the city had fallen (in 586 B.C.), about 6 months earlier (33:21).

That dashed the false hopes of any immediate deliverance for the exiles, so the remainder of Ezekiel’s prophecies related to Israel’s future restoration to its homeland and the final blessings of the messianic kingdom.

Historical – Theological Themes:

The “glory of the LORD” is central to Ezekiel, appearing in 1:28; 3:12, 23; 10:4, 18; 11:23; 43:4-5; 44:4).

The book includes graphic descriptions of the disobedience of Israel and Judah, despite God’s kindness (chapter 23, compare chapter 16).

It shows God’s desire for Israel to bear fruit which He can bless, however, selfish indulgence had left Judah ready for judgment, like a torched vine (chapter 15).

References are plentiful to Israel’s idolatry and its consequences, such as Pelatiah dropping dead (11:13), a symbolic illustration of overall disaster for the people.

Many picturesque scenes illustrate spiritual principles.

Among these are Ezekiel eating a scroll (chapter 2); the faces on 4 angels representing aspects of creation over which God rules (1:10); a “barbershop” scene (5:1-4); graffiti on temple walls reminding readers of what God really wants in His dwelling place, namely holiness and not ugliness (8:10); and sprinkled hot coals depicting judgment (10:2, 7).

Chief among the theological themes are God’s holiness and sovereignty.

These are conveyed by frequent contrast of His bright glory against the despicable backdrop of Judah’s sins (1:26-28; often in chapters 8-11; and 43:1-7).

Closely related is God’s purpose of glorious triumph so that all may “know that I am the LORD”.

This divine monogram, God’s signature authenticating His acts, is mentioned more than 60 times, usually with a judgment (6:7; 7:4), but occasionally after the promised restoration (34:27; 36:11, 38; 39:28).

Another feature involves God’s angels carrying out His program behind the scenes (1:5-25; 10:1-22).

A further important theme is God’s holding each individual accountable for pursuing righteousness (18:3-32).

Ezekiel also stresses sinfulness in Israel (2:3-7; 8:9-10), and other nations (throughout chapters 25-32).

He deals with the necessity of God’s wrath to deal with sin (7:1-8; 15:8).

God's frustration of man's devices to escape from besieged Jerusalem (12:1-13; compare Jer. 39:4-7).

And God's grace pledged in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), being fulfilled by restoring Abraham's people to the land of the covenant (chapters 34, 36 to 48; compare Gen. 12:7).

God promises to preserve a remnant of Israelites through whom He will fulfill His restoration promises and keep His inviolate rod.

Interpretation – Purpose:

The backgrounds of the books of Daniel and Ezekiel are quite similar.

Daniel was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (in 605 B.C.), during the reign of Jehoiakim (Dan. 1:1).

At first, Jehoiakim supported Nebuchadnezzar, but (in 601 B.C.), he changed allegiance to Egypt (2 Kings 24:1).

As a result, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem and captured it (in March 597 B.C.).

Jehoiakim had already died in disgrace and been succeeded by his son Jehoiachin.

The latter, feeling that matters were quite hopeless, surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and was taken captive to Babylon along with Ezekiel and a total of 10,000 of the leaders and skilled craftsmen (2 Kings. 24:8-17; Jer. 22:24-30; Ezek. 19:5-9).

Thus, all of Ezekiel's ministry, except for visionary glimpses of life in Jerusalem, took place in Babylon Since Ezekiel prophesied both before and after the destruction of Jerusalem during Nebuchadnezzar's third campaign (586 B.C.).

His early prophecies emphasize the impending disaster; his later prophecies stress Israel's future restoration, especially their glorious new temple.

The purpose of the book is essentially threefold:

- (1) To explain that Judah must be judged for disobedience;
- (2) To encourage the remnant of Judah through prophecies of her glorious future restoration;
- (3) To emphasize the preeminence of God's glory and character.

The Glory of God may well be viewed as the theme of the book, because Ezekiel's ministry begins with a vision of God's glory and emphasizes it throughout the book (1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4).

Upwards of 75 times God expresses His own concerns in the book as “for my name’s sake” or that “ye shall know that I am the LORD”.

All of God’s actions, either in judgment or blessing, emanate equally from His holiness and for His glory.