

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Ezekiel

The prophet Ezekiel's book contains strange visions, images, and messages that seem far removed from contemporary life. Yet its message remains very relevant: God will purify his people and live among them forever. Even during the darkest days, God insisted that he would restore his people. This message offered hope to the exiled people of Judah and provides inspiration to all who put their trust in him.

Setting

The book of Ezekiel was written from Babylonia during the difficult days of Judah's exile in Babylon (605–538 BC). The Babylonians had captured the Assyrian capital of Nineveh (612 BC), and Babylonian domination was made complete with the defeat of the last resisting Assyrians at the decisive battle of Carchemish (605 BC). In that same year, the Babylonians raided Judah and took hostages from the upper classes back to Babylon, including Daniel and his three friends ([Dan 1:1–5](#)).

In 601 BC, King Jehoiakim of Judah rebelled against the Babylonians, and he died during the ensuing siege (598 BC). His son, Jehoiachin, reigned for only a brief period before he surrendered and was taken to Babylon in 597 BC. At that time the Babylonians also took the prophet Ezekiel and other prominent people into exile and plundered many treasures from the Temple in Jerusalem.

While Ezekiel was in Babylon, the Babylonians placed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah on the throne of Judah. When Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, the Babylonians ravaged Judah and besieged Jerusalem in January 588 BC. The city was finally breached and destroyed in August 586 BC. The Babylonians forced Zedekiah to watch as they put his sons to death; then he was blinded and taken to Babylon with the other citizens of Judah who had skills useful to their overlords. These exiles remained in Babylon for a generation until the fortunes of the empire changed again (see the book of Ezra).

Ezekiel's first visions took place in Babylon in 593 BC, when he was thirty years old ([Ezek 1:1–2](#)).

Summary

Ezekiel's visions span the years leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Before Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel delivered the woeful message that judgment would come upon the people of Judah. After that event, Ezekiel conveyed a new vision of hope: Israel would emerge from the ashes of her past. Although the prophet mourned what had been lost, he saw a bright future when the people would repent of the sins that brought their destruction and the Lord would establish the nation in holiness.

[Chapters 1–3](#) tell of Ezekiel's call and commissioning as a prophet. His opening vision tells of the Lord's glory, ominously on the move ([1:4–28](#)). With images of motion and judgment, the vision depicts the Lord as the divine warrior in his heavenly chariot, coming to judge his people. During Ezekiel's call ([2:1–3:15](#)), the Spirit told him that the stubborn and rebellious people of Judah would not listen to his message. However, the Lord wanted Ezekiel to be equally stubborn in faithfully delivering his message. Like a watchman ([3:16–27](#)), he should sound the alarm clearly and distinctly. God would hold the prophet accountable for delivering the message, not for the people's response.

In [chapters 4–24](#), Ezekiel delivers a litany of doom against Judah and Jerusalem. The prophet performs a series of sign acts depicting the coming siege and destruction of Jerusalem. [Chapters 8–11](#) depict Jerusalem's sins in four scenes of increasing abomination that clearly illustrate the reason for the coming destruction. God's glory departs from the sanctuary, and the Temple is completely destroyed. The poems, oracles, and visions throughout this section cumulatively establish the inevitability and justice of Jerusalem's destruction, culminating with the announcement of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem and a final message of the certainty of judgment ([ch 24](#)).

Ezekiel then turns toward hope, beginning with seven messages ([chs 25–32](#)) that indict the surrounding nations for having assisted the Babylonians and for delighting in Jerusalem's fall. These messages show that the promise God made to Abraham remained intact: "I will . . . curse those who treat you with contempt" ([Gen 12:3](#)). God's judgment would come on all who took pleasure in the downfall of his people and who profited from their demise.

[Chapters 33–48](#) complete the movement from judgment to hope, beginning with the decisive moment when the exiles finally hear the news of Jerusalem's destruction ([33:21](#)). At this point the Lord again commissions the prophet Ezekiel to minister as a watchman, proclaiming judgment on those who refuse to repent and promising life for those who do. Messages of hope promise a new shepherd with a renewed covenant and land, where the people will dwell together in unity ([chs 34–37](#)). The dark clouds of war threaten this picture of blessing ([chs 38–39](#)), but the Lord demonstrates the certainty of the new state of affairs. The Lord gathers the forces of Gog and his allies, not to judge his peacefully settled people, but to smash their enemies once and for all.

After God defeats Gog and his allies, he can reveal the final Temple and the reoriented land ([chs 40–48](#)). With architectural, ritual, and geographic imagery, Ezekiel's final vision depicts the same message as the rest of the book: God will raise his people to a new level of holiness so that he can once again dwell in their midst. Those who were faithful in the past receive renewed access to God's presence, while those who were less faithful remain on the margins. A river of life flows out from this new Temple; as it flows, it grows and transforms death into life. God's final words to his people through Ezekiel do not warn of abandonment and destruction; rather, they promise fellowship and life.

Authorship and Date

In the opening verses of the book, the prophet Ezekiel claims that he is the author ([1:3](#)), and there is little reason to doubt his claim. The book shows all the interests expected from a priest such as Ezekiel, and the central event of Jerusalem's destruction dominates the book's structure. The prophet most likely wrote the book during the period in which his visions and messages were given (593–571 BC), with the completed composition probably dating shortly after the final message.

Meaning and Message

Before 586 BC, both the exiles in Babylon and the people remaining in Judah were convinced that Jerusalem could not be destroyed. They believed that the presence of the Temple and its prescribed rituals would guarantee the city's survival. Ezekiel had to tell them that they were completely wrong. Because the Temple and its rituals were corrupt and the hearts and lives of the people were thoroughly pagan, Jerusalem had to be destroyed.

While all the Old Testament prophets condemned sin and idolatry, perhaps none used quite such sweeping terms as Ezekiel. From Israel's time in Egypt onward, the disobedience of God's people infected every branch of society and encompassed every form of offense against God. God could not ignore or condone such sin and would surely judge his people soon. Nothing could save God's city or its people from his judgment.

Following the destruction of Jerusalem, God's people were in grave danger of disillusionment and despair. They felt spiritually dead, abandoned by God and cut off from his presence. They said, "Our sins are heavy upon us; we are wasting away! How can we survive?" ([33:10](#)). Babylonian deities, who seemed to have triumphed over the Lord, surrounded the people. No one had returned home from captivity. Their hopes were dashed, and they believed they had no choice but to settle in the pagan land of Babylon and become part of its culture.

To these disillusioned people, the prophet delivered a message of God's sovereignty and glory, depicting God as majestic, transcendent, and powerful. The Babylonian gods had certainly not defeated the Lord; rather, God had voluntarily abandoned his land and dwelling place because of his people's sin. Although he left the defiled city of Jerusalem, this glorious God did not abandon his people. Instead, he went to the remnant of his people in exile ([11:16](#)), where Ezekiel himself first saw the Lord's glory ([1:1](#)). God was still controlling all things, even the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's attempts to consult his own gods through divination ([21:21-23](#); cp. [Dan 2-4](#)). The Lord had decreed the destruction of Jerusalem for its sins; Nebuchadnezzar was simply acting as God's agent.

Jerusalem's destruction did not mark the end of the story for God's people. God had promised to bless

Abraham's descendants, making them into a mighty nation and blessing all nations through them. The oracles against the nations surrounding Judah ([Ezek 25-32](#)) demonstrated that God had not forgotten his ancient promise that those who rejoiced at Israel's downfall would themselves be severely judged. God would not forever abandon his people. One day he would return to be their shepherd ([34:11](#)); he would transform the land and the people from death to life. God's glory would once again return to the Temple, which would never again be defiled. Further, God would gather his scattered people into his presence and replace the old ways of doing things with new laws and higher standards of holiness. When filled with God's Spirit, the people would no longer defile the land with their sins.

Ezekiel points toward a greater hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God's glory fully dwells in our midst as light in the darkness of our exile ([11:16](#); [43:1-5](#); [John 1:14](#)). The Good Shepherd restores justice for his sheep ([Ezek 34:1-24](#); [John 10:11](#)). He fills us with his Spirit and makes us new creatures in him ([Ezek 36:26-28](#); [37:1-14](#); [2 Cor 5:17](#)). Those who have allied themselves with Christ have even greater access to God's presence than Ezekiel's visions anticipated. They are able to approach the throne of grace freely and drink from the life-giving water that flows from the throne ([Ezek 47:1-11](#); [Rev 22:1-5](#)). Everything that Ezekiel anticipated—and more—is ours in Christ.