

## Introduction

The book of Ezekiel represents the most unique prophetic voice of the genre. The stunning description of his visions, the engineer-like focus on the detail of sight and sound, the eccentric performances of current events, his use of the catchphrase, 'and then you will know that I am the Lord,' all these elements and so many more are found in the prophet's voice, which creates a vast composite picture of the Lord's redemptive plans for Jerusalem.

That is not to say that Ezekiel's message presents a theological aberration in the broader theological field of the other prophets of the Old Testament. A comparison between Ezekiel and Jeremiah provides an instructive example. The two prophets were ministering at roughly the same time, though in starkly different contexts. Jeremiah was preaching in the still-standing city of Jerusalem, while Ezekiel was to be found in the Chebar refugee camp in Babylon. Both prophets hail from priestly families, Jeremiah perhaps from the disgraced Abiatharite line of Anathoth and Ezekiel favoring the Zadokite line, which explains why they both have a particular interest in the Temple. Jeremiah confronts the Temple leadership face-to-face in Jerusalem, while Ezekiel reports on the failure of the Temple leadership through the vision sequences in the first part of the book. Despite their various styles, contexts, and audiences, however, the two prophets have the same message for the people of God: God's judgment is coming to Jerusalem as a result of the people's apostasy and injustice, but God is present with the exiles and invites them to enjoy His blessings through repentance. The two are in remarkable agreement, both voices adding to the consistent message of Scripture, all the while mediated

through diverse personalities, experiences, and environments of the human author.<sup>1</sup>

### Author, Recipients, and Date

Ezekiel's community lives in exile, taken into captivity during the second Babylonian deportation in 597 B.C., some eleven years before the razing of the city of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.<sup>2</sup> The entire book hinges on the prophet's clear foretelling of the fall of Jerusalem and its consequences. The precision of the prophet's prognostication has led critical scholars incorrectly to date these prophecies after the actual fall of the city. Abraham Heschel's prominent work on the prophets summarizes this view:

Ezekiel's ability to tell Babylonia what happened in Jerusalem at the exact moment it happened, and to foretell political events, is explained by asserting that 'the entire first part of his book, that is chapters 1–31, are not real prophecies but are only disguised as such. They are, without exception, *vaticinia post ventum*,' a production uttered in full knowledge of what had already happened. The same opinion is held in regard to the 'prophecies' of Second Isaiah.<sup>3</sup>

Such a view is only made plausible by a naturalistic worldview that entails the rejection of supernatural prophecy as a possible phenomenon. The opinion is presupposed, and, as such, it is not shared by most believers who are acquainted with the God of the Bible. Furthermore, it adds a pejorative and somewhat patronizing tone to the interpretation of the text by assuming the ancient prophet's claims about the timeline of the prophecy and the events are untrue.

---

1. Mackay writes that the prophet 'was one who had been set apart to that role before he was born (Jer. 1:5), and whose subsequent life and environment had in God's providence shaped him into precisely the instrument God required as the channel for His communication. The medium through whom the message was conveyed and also the message itself were divinely originated and controlled.' John L. Mackay, *Ezekiel: A Mentor Commentary, Volume 1: Chapters 1–24* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2018), 12.

2. For an overview of the history of Israel during and immediately after the exilic period, see Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 278–303.

3. Abraham Heschel (*The Prophets*, 195), citing M. Bultmann, 'The Date and Character of Ezekiel's Prophecies,' *HUCA*, VII (1930), 7.

Ezekiel was the son of Buzi and a priest in Jerusalem before his captivity during the second deportation of 597 B.C. He was married, though he lost his wife to an unknown condition in the middle of his ministry (24:15-27), an event that becomes a tragic illustration in the prophet's ministry of the destruction of the Temple that happens roughly at the same time.

He received his call to minister in 593 B.C. while living in the Chebar canal region of Babylon, in a district known as Tel Abib (Ezek. 3:15). Attempts to argue for a Palestinian context for the prophet rise from the observation that the prophet is aware of events in Jerusalem, is concerned primarily with the failures of the leadership in Jerusalem, and is not as interested in the daily lives and struggles of the exilic community. These arguments have been largely dismissed in recent years, so that, as Renz argues, 'no convincing arguments have been brought forward to shed doubt on the book's presentation of a prophet who was exclusively active as a prophet in Babylonia.'<sup>4</sup>

Notably, Ezekiel begins his ministry at the age of thirty and receives his final vision twenty years later, which is the same age range required of priests (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47; cf. Num. 8:24-26). His background with the priesthood explains his overarching interest in the failure of the Temple leadership and the need for a restored Temple in the eschaton. It also helps explain his attention to detail of Temple worship and the architecture of the restoration Temple in the visions of chapters 40-48. Ezekiel does not neglect the themes common to the other prophets, but the ones that are not centered on the Temple, like the new covenant or the restoration king, are backgrounded to the restoration Temple.

Like Daniel and the exiles of the first deportation in 597 B.C., Ezekiel's original audience suffers under the oppression of their Babylonian captors while many Judahites enjoy a relatively secure existence in the Land. This stands in contrast to the situation of the audience in other well-known

---

4. Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 38. See pp. 27-38 for a more complete history of this issue within Ezekiel studies.

prophetic books. Most casual readers of the biblical prophets get the impression that the prophets see their audiences as hostile opponents of the prophet and the Lord. In the case of Isaiah, for instance, the prophet is called to preach the word of God in order to 'make the heart fat, the ears heavy, and the eyes blind' and expedite their descent into exile (Isa. 6:10-11). We should not discount the sense of terror and impending disaster that pervades the early section of the book of Isaiah (chs. 1-39) as a whole.

For Ezekiel's implied audience, however, the tragedy of devastation and exile is all around them. Their daily experience is the stuff of pre-exilic nightmares: taken from their Judahite families and homeland, forced to migrate to the Mesopotamian south, subjugated to labor-camp existence from whence they stand impotently by as Jerusalem prospers for a time before being destroyed.

During the early part of his ministry, the identity of these two communities, those in exile and those remaining in the Land, would be a topic of great interest. Who is under the judgment foretold by Moses and the prophets? Who had been forsaken, and with whom did the Lord dwell? On the face of it, one might assume that the Lord dwelled in Jerusalem, in the place where He had set His name, that is, in the Temple sanctuary (Deut. 12:11; 2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Kings 5:5; 8:29; 2 Kings 21:4), but Ezekiel's message is that the Lord had abandoned the house built for Him by King Solomon and had returned to the wilderness to be with His people in exile.

In the book of Ezekiel, the reader finds a well-formed account of vision, performance, and preaching that retains as much of its disruptive force today as it did in its original setting over two millennia ago. The book's unique, sometimes bizarre, use of spiritual imagery has confused those who think they know what the future holds and has ignited the passions of those who think themselves abandoned and lost. In an effort to understand Ezekiel's ancient neuroses, analysts have applied modern psychological techniques to the book, usually with little to show for it. The prophet's eccentric behavior, including what appears to be ecstatic experiences like loss of speech and movement, has led some to conclude that the prophet may have suffered from

possible aphasia, catatonia, epilepsy, or schizophrenia.<sup>5</sup> The argument is merely speculative, certainly anachronistic, and of little interpretive value. Clinical analysis is difficult enough when the client is present in the same room as the clinician. How much more when the client is mediated through a 2600-year-old document?

What is clear is that Ezekiel's message is for those who are accustomed to looking in from the outside. He speaks to those who watch from a position of great lack as others 'receive their reward in full' (Matt. 6:2). Ezekiel's community is not the object of others' derision but rather the object of something far worse, neglect and apathy. This stands in contrast to the situation of the audience in other well-known prophetic books.

## Text

### *Structure*

The literary structure of the book of Ezekiel displays a formidable organization, what Blenkinsopp calls a 'striking architectonic unity of the book,'<sup>6</sup> that holds the book together. The book of Ezekiel is organized into three discrete sections, the first dealing with the reality and rationale behind the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (chs. 1–24), assurance that the national enemies of God's people will likewise be judged (chs. 25–32), and an extended discourse on the restoration age to come (chs. 33–48). In the same manner, the book could be viewed in two sections, the first and the last, and both deal with the fate of the Temple, which are linked by a central section of oracles against nations.<sup>7</sup> The messages of warning and hope found in the first and third sections are so distinct, that Josephus referred to the 'two books' of Ezekiel instead of the one, though the whole book's unity of structure and themes argues against such sharp

---

5. E. C. Bromme, Jr. 'Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality.' *J* 65 (1946): 277-92; Karl Jaspers. 'Der Prophet Ezechiel: Eine pathographische Studie,' in *Arbeiten zur Psychiatrie, Neurologie und ihren Grenzgebieten: Festschrift K. Schneider* (Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1947), 77-85.

6. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy of Israel* (rev. and enlarged; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1996), 168.

7. In this way, the book reflects the central placement of the oracles against the nations found in Isaiah 1–39, as well as in the LXX versions of Jeremiah and The Twelve.

division.<sup>8</sup> The similarity of the two outer sections encourages such a reading; each includes a narrative in which the prophet is called to be a 'watchman,' both include two significant visions each (the chariot and judgment of the Temple in the first section and the valley of dry bones and the new Temple in section three) couched in a series of sermons about these future events. The first section culminates on the departure of the divine presence from the Temple, and the third section on the return of the presence and the subsequent flourishing of the world.<sup>9</sup> See *Table 1*.

*Table 1*

	<b>Bridge Section</b>	
I. Judgment and Destruction of the Temple	II. Global Judgment of Israel's Enemies	III. Blessings and the Restoration of the Temple
A. The Reality of Divine Absence from the Temple (1:1–7:27)	Judgments against Nations (25:1–32:32)	A. Global Judgment and Restoration for Israel (33:1–39:24)
B. The Rationale of Divine Absence from the Temple (8:1–24:27)	(Oracles and Laments against nations and kings who had oppressed Israel)	B. The New Temple Order (40:1–48:35)

There is a secondary structure to the book marked by the fifteen time signatures recorded by the prophet.

### *Dates*

*Table 2* includes the basic dates with their approximations in the Gregorian calendar. Overall there are fifteen such 'time-stamps' found in the book.<sup>10</sup>

8. *Antiquities*, 10.79.

9. 'Indeed the contrast between the first part of the book, chaps. 1–24, and the second half, chaps. 25–48, is so pronounced that the ancient historian Josephus reported that Ezekiel left behind 'two books,' not just one (Ant. 10.79). This view, however, distorts the internal connection between the parts of the book.' Anchor Bible Dictionary.

10. This table can be found in Lawrence Boadt, 'Ezekiel, Book of,' *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 713. More specific dating can be found in Mackay, *Ezekiel*, vol. 1, 20.