

An Overview of  
**Ezekiel**

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Spiritual "equipment" for the contest of life.

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## Introduction to Ezekiel

The Book of Ezekiel is one of the more difficult and yet fascinating books of the Old Testament. It follows the pattern of Isaiah and Jeremiah in foretelling the coming destruction of Jerusalem, as well as providing glimpses into Israel's restoration under Messiah. Yet, Ezekiel does so in a manner that is virtually unique in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). In post-exilic Israel, Jewish leaders did not permit the reading of Ezekiel except for well-trained students because of the difficulty of its content (and, in part, how it did not correspond to their views of Israel's restoration). Its close connection with Revelation (in symbols, apocalyptic style, and mystery) makes it one of the more intriguing books of the Bible. Modern-day Bible theologians are fond of mining Ezekiel for proof-texts to support their beliefs concerning Premillennialism, even though this book has nothing to do with that subject or the end of the world. Despite the erroneous views that are so often drawn from its texts, Ezekiel has a profound message that is consistent with Isaiah and Jeremiah, namely: Jehovah will bring the Jews to their knees for their flagrant and impenitent violation of His covenant; and He will also bring about the reunification and restoration of both Israel and Judah. Thus, it is a book of the certainty of God's promises, for the purpose of punishment as well as that of providing hope for the future.

The Book of Ezekiel (at times) uses a literary style that some refer to as "apocalyptic," from the Greek word meaning "uncovering" or "unveiling."<sup>1</sup> Apocalyptic literature emphasizes symbolic language and imagery, rather than literal descriptions or narration, to explain something or tell a story. Certainly Revelation is the purest example of apocalyptic literature in Scripture, and some of what John "saw" in his visions is exactly what Ezekiel "saw" in his. Thus, an apocalypse defines the kind of visionary scenes which God gives directly to His prophet to "see" through the use of symbols, numbers, and intentionally-exaggerated details. Apocalyptic literature also exercises a consistency in the expressions or devices that it uses. For example, if a dragon means or represents one particular thing in one part of an apocalypse, then it will carry that same meaning throughout the writing. Yet, apocalyptic literature also has a "cosmic" or universal sense to it, in that it applies to the entire world and even beyond this world. Thus, it is considered supra-historical and is not bound by earthly circumstances or even time itself.

Most of Ezekiel is in standard prophetic literary form, comparable to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Minor Prophets. Thus, we do not see this "supra-historical," apocalyptic perspective throughout, but a much more literal one. This does not mean there are not apocalyptic ideas being implied, however. For example, Ezekiel foretells the tribes of Israel re-settling in their Promised Land, with newly-apportioned allotments for each tribe (chapters 40 – 48). The immediate reference is to the reunification of Israel (albeit in a spiritual context); yet, this necessarily implies a universal

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the theophany (or, divine showing) of God in chapter 1 (and elsewhere), the vision of Gog and Magog (chapters 38 – 39), and the vision of the city of God under the rule of the Prince (chapters 40 – 48).

scope, inasmuch as Ezekiel sees Christ's church (Christ being the "Prince" of that section) in a symbolic, image-laden perspective. The conclusion, then, is that most of the Book of Ezekiel is not truly apocalyptic literature, but it most certainly employs apocalyptic elements. Instead of lumping Ezekiel and Revelation together in the same literary group, it is more accurate to say that Revelation draws heavily from Ezekiel, yet takes its literary elements to a much higher and transcendent level than how they were understood in their Old Testament context.

Ezekiel is not organized chronologically *per se*, but thematically. It is message-driven—these messages often being accompanied by symbolic acts, allegories, and lamentations—rather than offering a historical narrative. It is, in fact, an anthology or collection of messages, visions, and oracles that serve to illustrate the fall of Jerusalem and what will happen after its destruction. It appears that as the prophets get closer and closer to the actual destruction of the city (in real-world, real-time history), the prophecies themselves become increasingly intense and dramatic. Most of Ezekiel's early prophecies center around the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which King Nebuchadnezzar (of Babylon) brought about in 587/586 BC. After this event actually happens, the tone and direction of the book shifts to describing the restoration of God's people rather than their well-deserved punishment. Ezekiel the prophet seems to be paired with Jeremiah in bringing a very similar message to the Jews. This pairing is not unique: Elijah and Elisha, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, and Haggai and Zechariah all speak at the same times to the same audiences. This is consistent with Jesus' sending out disciples two by two (Luke 10:1) to proclaim the kingdom of God, or the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3-12.<sup>2</sup> "Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (2 Corinthians 13:1) is a regular theme of the entire Bible.

The Book of Ezekiel follows in the footsteps of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but with one crucial difference: Ezekiel himself has been deported to Babylonian captivity, and speaks directly to the captives there. The books of Isaiah and Jeremiah take place in Judah, and their immediate audience is the Jews who live in Jerusalem and vicinity. Ezekiel the prophet lives in a small city called Tel-Abib (3:15) on the River Chebar, an irrigation tributary to the Euphrates River. Like the other prophets, Ezekiel is watching the shifting of world powers and the upheaval of the old system to a new order. In his youth, Ezekiel witnessed the crumbling of the old Assyrian Empire as well as the rising strength of Babylon. His ministry began during the fifth year of the reign of King Zedekiah (of Judah), or ca. 593 BC, and continued for a period of 22 years. (The last date reference in the book is "the twenty-seventh year" of exile [29:17], or ca. 571 BC.)

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2 Wilhelm Möeller, "Ezekiel—The Prophet and His Book," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (electronic edition) [Database © 2004 by WORDsearch Corp].

## The Prophet Ezekiel

Nothing is known about Ezekiel other than what is written in the book that bears his name.

“Ezekiel” means “God strengthens,” which is a fitting name for the nature of the man himself as well as his message of hope to a nation shamed with disgrace. He was born during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC) as the son of Buzi the priest, and served (or, was eligible to serve) as a priest himself (1:3). His ministry began in “the thirtieth year” (1:1)—presumably, the thirtieth year of his life, since no other date reference makes sense. Furthermore, priests began their priestly ministry in their thirtieth year (Numbers 4:3, 39); this also corresponds to the age that John the Baptist and Jesus began their own ministries (Luke 3:23). If this understanding is accurate, he was born in the year 623 BC.

Ezekiel lived during very dark and perilous times for Judah. The Assyrians, some 130 years before, had destroyed the land of Israel and exiled its people. This was the direct work of God’s divine judgment against His people for their shameless devotion to idolatry. In Ezekiel’s day, however, Judah faces the same demise, only this time at the hands of Babylon. (The Assyrian nation had been overthrown by a coalition army led by Nabopolassar, King Nebuchadnezzar’s father in the Battle of Nineveh [612 BC].) Ezekiel was among the first groups of Jews to be forcibly deported from Judah by Babylon, possibly in 605 BC but more likely in 598/597 BC. This latter date would have been concurrent with the time that King Jehoiachin [Coniah] was also taken prisoner to Babylon and replaced with his uncle Zedekiah, who swore to serve Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:6-16, 25:27-30; see Jeremiah 22:24-30). This also matches the time stated in 40:1: “In the twenty-fifth year of our exile...in the fourteenth year after the city was taken”—i.e., in 573/572 BC (since Jerusalem fell in 587/586 BC)—which would put Ezekiel’s exile at 598/597 BC. Regardless, Ezekiel’s actual prophetic ministry began five years after Jehoiachin’s deportation (1:2), or ca. 593/592 BC. Like many Jews in captivity, Ezekiel established a home in one of the refugee camps (Tel-Abib) and tries to make the best of his circumstances. He is married, though the Lord will take his wife from him as a powerful and personal sign of the fall (or death) of Jerusalem (24:15-18). Overall, Ezekiel enjoys a much better ministry than his contemporary, Jeremiah, who was beaten and imprisoned for his preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem. He is given at least some measure of respect, and many of the people actually do listen to him (compare with Jeremiah 25:3).

Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry is characterized not only by unique and extraordinary signs and visions, but also the special name by which God called him: “son of man” (used 93 times in this book). This indicates the frailty of man versus the unlimited power of God, yet also shows how powerful a man (i.e., a prophet) can become when filled with the Spirit of God. This ministry sets him apart from the thousands of his fellow prisoners in foreign captivity. Thus, Ezekiel stands as an exemplary model of the type of man that God seeks to carry out His will. It is no surprise that

Jesus referred to Himself also as “Son of Man,” but in an ultimate or absolute sense of the word: Ezekiel was the son of (a) man, but Jesus was the Son (or, sole heir, or model example) of all of humanity—the best and highest expression of human life that is possible.

## **General Outline (For This Study)**

- ❑ **Part One:** Ezekiel’s Commission (chapters 1 – 3)
- ❑ **Part Two:** Prophecies against Judah and Surrounding Nations (4 – 32)
  - Prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem (4 – 24)
  - Prophecies against Surrounding Nations (25 – 32)
- ❑ **Part Three:** Future Reunification and Restoration of Israel and Judah (33 – 48)
  - Redemption and Reunification of Israel and Judah (33 – 39)
  - The Vision of Israel under the Prince (40 – 48)



# Part One: Ezekiel's Commission (chapters 1 – 3)

## Lesson One: Ezekiel's Vision of God (chapter 1)

**E**zekiel's Vision of God (chapter 1): After identifying himself and his circumstances (1:1-3; see notes in "Introduction"), Ezekiel immediately begins to describe a most fantastic scene. This theophany [lit., showing of God] is unique in all of Scripture, and seizes the attention of every person who reads this book. This theophany is not without purpose, even though we may not understand every *part* of that purpose. One commentator has captured this well, however: "In order that the prophet might be prepared to discharge his prophetic ministry aright, it was necessary that, in the first place, he should experience a just conception of the greatness, holiness, and authority of the Being by whom he was commissioned."<sup>3</sup>

In this vision—for we must remember that it *is* a vision—Ezekiel sees a storm-like whirlwind and a great cloud filled with fire<sup>4</sup> approaching him from the north.<sup>5</sup> Within this cloud, he sees four angels ("living beings"; compare with Revelation 4:5-8) that are perfectly symmetrical—symmetry being one of the pronounced details of this grand scene (1:5-14). Undoubtedly, the number four is also significant, since it has been used since antiquity to describe an earthly perfection (four directions; four seasons; four elements [earth, wind, fire, and water]; four hands, feet, eyes, etc. in the holy union of a man and wife in marriage; etc.). Perhaps these details show God as the Master over earthly ideals as well as heavenly ones;<sup>6</sup> or, that earthly values are based upon heavenly ones. These beings are of human form but have certain features of animals, and four wings like a bird. These wings do not flap in the wind, as we would expect, but communicate the sense of flight nonetheless. Under the two wings that remain close to their bodies are human hands, contributing to the "human" form. Each being has four faces: man, eagle, bull, and lion. This seems to communicate the best traits of the animal kingdom (flight, sight, strength, and ferocity), as well as the intelligence of a human being. Or, they represent the chief of each class of earthly creatures: eagle, the chief of all flying creatures; bull, the chief of all tamed animals; lion, the chief of all wild

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3 J. R. Thomson, *The Pulpit Commentary*, "Ezekiel," vol. 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers [no date]), 1:18.

4 The Septuagint (LXX) uses the word "electrum," a mixture of gold and silver, which best corresponds to the Hebrew word that is used here (Robert Jamieson, Andrew Fausset and David Brown, *New Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Testament Volume*, D. Douglas, gen. ed. [© 2009 QuickVerse for Windows], on 1:4).

5 From an ancient Jews' perspective, all calamity and enemies came from the north, including Assyria and Babylon, since they followed the arm of the Fertile Crescent (or, Mesopotamia) into Palestine. In this vision, God's approach from the north indicates a divine judgment that would descend upon Judah in the form of an army from this same direction. "Filth pours out of Jerusalem (as it were) toward the north and it will be out of the north that God's response comes. It's as if God followed the stream of garbage to its source. It would be from the north (toward which the river of filth was flowing) that God's doom would come in the form of the Babylonian army" (Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Ezekiel* [Lubbock, TX: Montex Publishing, 1979], 86).

6 John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors [no date]), 4425.

animals; and man, the chief of all Creation.<sup>7</sup> When these living beings move, they do not turn (as we would expect), but move as needed in perfect harmony, yet quickly (“like bolts of lightning”;

1:14). The sense is that they are continuously encircling the One who sits in the midst of them like electrons encircle the nucleus of an atom.

Alongside (or, directly underneath?) each living being is a wheel—really, the inexplicable union of two wheels moving as one, “as if one wheel were within another” (1:15-21). The composition of these wheels is that of something gem-like and brilliant, and their rims are “full of eyes” all around the wheels. These wheels—both their actual form as well as their movements—are directly yet mystically linked to the living beings, “for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels.” Thus, the spirits of these beings drive the turning of the wheels, and not the other way around.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these collective features—of the living beings, their wings, and the wheels within wheels—communicate at least the following ideas:

- ❑ Perpetual motion and activity—in the living beings, the wheels, and God’s will [implied].
- ❑ This activity is without exhaustion or depletion (Isaiah 40:28-31).
- ❑ These beings show no sign of age, corruption, or deterioration.
- ❑ Just as God never sleeps, neither does His work—whether it is judgment or salvation.
- ❑ God is attended by fascinating yet extremely capable forms of angelic creatures.
- ❑ God’s throne is attended by all sorts of life, activity, sounds, energy, colors, and symmetry (compare with Revelation 4).
- ❑ “Eyes” indicate omniscience: God sees everything, and is always watching everything (Jeremiah 1:11-12, Hebrews 4:12-13).
- ❑ “Wheels” indicate endless, seamless activity: just as there is no beginning or end to a wheel, so there is no human perception of the beginning or end of God’s work.
- ❑ Uniqueness: no earthly king ever had an entourage like this, and no earthly king ever had a throne like what is about to be described.

Again, it is critical to remember that this is a vision. Thus, we can “see” the characteristics and capabilities of those beings that minister to God without necessarily knowing the beings as they really are. God shows us symbols and signs, but these things point to something beyond themselves; they are pictures of the substance, not the substance itself.

After this, Ezekiel describes the One in the midst of the fiery cloud, and the object of the angelic beings’ attention (1:22-28). Above these angels is “an expanse,” or a kind of crystal platform

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<sup>7</sup> JFB, on 1:6.

<sup>8</sup> This is the opposite of what we see in human physiology: we do not drive the beating of our heart, but our heart is what drives the life of the human body. On the other hand, our mind (often referred to as our “heart”) is what drives human life—and (ideally) it is God who drives the human mind.

or firmament, upon which God is seated upon a throne. This throne is “like lapis lazuli in appearance”—i.e., like sapphire or a deep, rich blue (see Exodus 24:10). The color blue has long been associated with holiness (see Exodus 28:31, Numbers 4:4-12, 15:38, et al). God is not described in detail, and it is likely that Ezekiel does not see Him in any detail. The prophet simply says that He “was a figure with the appearance of a man.” The body of God appears to be glowing like fiery-hot metal, and around God is a rainbow-colored radiant aura (compare with Daniel 7:9-10, Revelation 1:12-16, and 4:2-6). Not surprising, when God begins to speak, His voice is loud and thunderous, and Ezekiel falls upon his face before Him. This entire scene emphatically concludes that God is the source of all the messages and visions that Ezekiel will see from this point forward.

## Questions:

- 1.) What do you think is the *purpose* for God to appear to Ezekiel in the manner described in this chapter? What message(s) might He be conveying?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2.) The Jews were taken into captivity because of their penchant for idolatry. How does this scene of God’s glory compare to the “glory” of man-made idols and false gods?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3.) Please read Revelation 4:5-8 in conjunction with Ezekiel 1. What is so fascinating about the angelic beings with which God surrounds Himself—and the sheer amazement of God’s world overall? (There are several answers.)