

Ezekiel

1. A survey of the Book of Ezekiel

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It is not unusual for anyone who reads the Book of Ezekiel in a casual manner to find oneself scratching one's head with a lot of question marks from chapter 1. We see four heavenly creatures with four faces of man, ox, lion, and eagle and flying around the Throne of God with four wings for each. If that is not confusing enough, it says, "a wheel in the middle of a wheel". Say what?

By now, there would be several people who throw their hands up in the air and give up reading and studying the rest of the Book of Ezekiel. It will be a great challenge for us to study this Book.

Ezekiel tells his readers about the Lord in this Book. He genuinely desires that people understand who God is. How needed that is in our day, too! With great enthusiasm and imagination, he vigorously declared God's message to an exiled generation of Jews – discouraged captives who needed a strong leader.

When modern minds often see humans as awesome, but God as a pain-in-the-neck party pooper, this big dose of Ezekiel is long overdue.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

We can tell who the author is right away because the Scripture plainly tells us – Ezekiel. Having grown up during the reformation of king Josiah, and having been taken captive in the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C., Ezekiel was called by God from being a priest to serving as a prophet.

As God's spokesman to the Jewish exiles in the land of Babylon, he would rebuke their sins and expose their idolatry, but he would also reveal the glorious future the Lord had prepared for them. He was thirty years old at the time of his call according to 1:1, the normal age for a priest to begin his ministry.

Prophets were usually despised and persecuted. They received their messages and orders from the Lord as the occasion demanded and could never be sure what would happen next. It was dangerous to be a prophet. Most people resent being told about their sins and prefer to hear messages of cheer, not declarations of judgment.

Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was greatly needed in Babylon because false prophets were all over and were giving the Jewish people false hopes of a quick miraculous deliverance – usually by Egypt – and a triumphant return to their land.

The most difficult task of a prophet is to change people's minds. This means pulling up the weeds of false theology and planting the good seed of the Word of God. It also means tearing down the flimsy thought structures that false prophets build and constructing in their place lasting buildings on solid foundations of truth.

I read the commentaries by a couple of respected Bible scholars that claim that Ezekiel and Daniel could have been friends. They could have been, but I do not see anywhere in the Bible, Ezekiel or Daniel referring to each other. So, I go back to the basic principle of the studying the Word of God – where the Bible is silent, I will be silent as well.

The Book of Ezekiel was written around 571 B.C. while he was in exile of Babylon. By the way, the Book of Ezekiel is the only Book written in chronological order in the OT.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

The theme of this Book is for God's glory, sovereignty, and the Spirit. The purpose of this Book is to deliver a heartrending word of divine judgment and a consoling word of hope to Judah.

C. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

1) Chapters 1-3: About the prophet

Ezekiel's call and commission – God's hand was on him; God's word was in him; God's message was coming through him

The prophecy began with his vision of the glory of God. Without a proper understanding of the glorious and holy character of God, the announcements of judgment in the following chapters would be meaningless.

One very important advice to you: Do not try to put what Ezekiel was describing in his vision into the molds of the earthly objects. Though he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write what he saw, he had the serious limitation of human language vocabularies like the rest of us. The earthly languages are not adequate to describe the glory of God and the things we would see in heaven.

2) Chapters 4-24: Judgment on Judah – God's glory departs from Israel

The Lord showed how Israel's wickedness had caused His glory to depart from her midst till she would be cleansed through the coming judgment. The announcements of this judgment are clarified as objections and are answered in chapters 12-19.

Then Ezekiel summarized the nature of the impending discipline and the reasons for it in chapters 20-24.

3) Chapters 25-32: Judgment on the nations, because all nations must answer to God

Chapters 25-32 form an integral part of the previous structural unit. In these chapters, the Lord condemned the nations around Judah for rejoicing in her destruction. Those who cursed Israel were to be cursed as we learned from Genesis 12:3. God faithfully executed that promise.

4) Chapters 33-48: Restoration of God's people – God's glory returns to Israel

While the Israelites were the exiles in Babylon, they were losing all hope. But the Lord promised their ultimate restoration to the land of blessing, Israel. The Lord would cleanse His people and fulfill His covenants with them so that they might dwell in the Promised Land, become His faithful people, experience the outpouring of the Spirit of the new covenant, and live under the righteous rule of the Messiah in the promised kingdom.

When this had occurred, then the departed glory of the Lord would return to the new temple established in the messianic kingdom. Israel would worship God in righteousness according to His holy statutes and ordinances.

If you are into the studies of the eschatology, the end time prophecies, you cannot ignore three chapters of the Book of Ezekiel – chapters 37, 38, and 39. Chapter 37 talks about the rebirth of the modern day Israel from nothing. There were plenty of

Jewish people around the world, but they did not have a nation to call 'homeland' until 1947. The biblical scholars of the early 20th Century didn't know how to explain Ezekiel 37 in literal format, because the country did not exist. Just as the Lord prophesied through Ezekiel, Israel came back to life.

In chapters 38-39, we find Gog and Magog coming into the picture. Many uninformed people think that the war against Israel by Gog and Magog will happen at the end of the tribulation, misunderstanding this war as the Battle of Armageddon. The participants are different. This war can happen anytime before the rapture or during the Tribulation. It has nothing to do with either one of them.

D. LITERARY FORMS

Few Books of the Bible use such a wide variety of literary forms as does Ezekiel. Though most of the Book is a regular writing style, while others were written in poetry. Ezekiel uses almost every kind of literary device and imagery to communicate graphically the messages of judgment and blessing: dream-visions (chapters 1-3; 8-11); apocalyptic literature (chapter 37-48); drama (chapters 4-5; chapter 12); allegory, parable, proverbs (chapter 16; chapter 18); and funeral dirges (chapter 19; chapter 32). The frequent rhetorical questions and repetitious phrases enhance the excitement and importance of the prophecies.

E. THE MESSAGE

The exiles gathered by the rivers of Babylon had no earthly reason to smile. They had no song to sing. As they looked around there was an absence of anything that would revive their hope. But when they observed Ezekiel's dramatic object lessons and heard his message, they were reminded: God is alive; God is at work; His glory is here, in spite of their circumstances. That fact alone gave them reason to go on.

Unless these captives in Babylon saw the glory of their majestic, all-powerful God, they would never regain their hope. The unmistakable message of Ezekiel's life is this: There is hope when you focus on God's glory in the midst of our unstable circumstances. I believe that is the full message God wanted to speak through Ezekiel.

God's passionate desire was to reveal Himself to those captives as well as to us through this prophet. You may miss some subtleties or the descriptions of the heavenly creatures or things in the Book of Ezekiel, but please don't miss this point: **God wanted to reveal His person and His glory through His prophet Ezekiel to the exiles. And He wants to do that today through us as we have opportunity each day to reflect the light of His glory to all we meet.**

F. ENDURING TRUTHS

1) Those who significantly influence others for God have three things in common: God's hand is on them. God's Word is in them. God speaks through them.

Many who read these words have experienced that in your own lives. God's hand is on you. God's Word is in you. God is speaking through you. Do not underestimate the impact your life is having in a world that has neither salt nor light.

2) Truth gains authenticity when it is modeled, not just declared.

Talk about God's all-sufficient hand in pain! Ezekiel experienced it in chapter 24 as we will study, and so do we. God puts us through pain, and in doing so He has us model the willingness to endure under it with grace and dignity and maturity. The truth gains authenticity in the eyes of other people when they see it modeled.

3) Nothing is impossible with God, not even the restoration of corpses in a valley full of dry bones.

We may have crossed off certain people in our minds. Perhaps we've said, "They're too far gone. God's through with them"; "There's no way in the world that person could ever come back"; or "no way that person will ever be reached." Wrong! Be careful that we don't underestimate the power of the God of the universe. Nothing is impossible with God. If God can put muscle and flesh on dry bones and build a body out of them, surely He can renew someone we might think is all washed up and finished in God's sight. Even Obama can become a truly born-again Christian.

4) There's always reason to hope when we focus on God's glory .

If we are looking for hope, let's look no further than the intimate presence of the living God. He wants to come close to us and He really does. He wants to shine His glory on us, and He wants us in turn to reflect that glory to all we meet. Let's concentrate on His glory, and we will discover fresh hope.