

Introduction to Ezekiel

Where is it in the Bible?

Ezekiel, the fourth book in the major prophets section, is the twenty-sixth book in the Old Testament and is found between Lamentations and Daniel. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezekiel is part of the latter prophets and comes between Jeremiah and Hosea, the first book of the minor prophets.

Who wrote it?

The book is attributed to Ezekiel the son of Buza, a priest who was called by God to be a prophet, also. He was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah and was included with the elite of Judah who were deported by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Ezekiel was a young man around thirty years old and living in Babylon when he had the vision described in chapter 1. The book was probably compiled and edited by his followers shortly after the exile.

When was it written?

The book covers a period of about 20 years from 591-571 B.C. Some of it might have been written down during Ezekiel's life time, but the book probably reached its final form sometime after the exile.

What is it about?

The book of Ezekiel includes prophecies, visions, extended allegories, and symbolic actions. These occurred during the Babylonian exile and concerned the temple, Jerusalem, Judah, and the nations. The book is full of symbolism which draws from earlier Old Testament books and is often related to the historical and political situation of the prophet. Ezekiel's purpose was to reveal God's glory and righteousness to the people who had rejected God and to urge them to repent.

How is it structured?

- I. Ezekiel's Call and First Vision (1:1-3:27)
- II. Oracles Against Judah and Jerusalem (4:1-24:27)
 - a. Symbolic Acts Concerning the Siege of Jerusalem (4:1-5:17)
 - b. Oracles of Judgment on the Land (6:1-7:27)
 - c. The Destruction of the Temple and the City (8:1-11:25)
 - d. Symbolic Acts Concerning the Exile (12:1-28)
 - e. False Prophets (13:1-23)
 - f. Stubborn People (14:1-23)
 - g. Oracles Against the People and Their Rulers (15:1-20:49)
 - h. Additional Oracles of Judgment (21:1-23:49)
 - i. Jerusalem Conquered (24:1-27)
- III. Oracles Against Foreign Nations (25:1-32:32)
- IV. Future Restoration of Israel (33:1-48:35)

What are some things to look for?

- **Dates:** One of the distinctive features of the book of Ezekiel is the dating of events using formulas such as "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin" (1:2). This occurs fifteen times. The latest date in the book is given in 29:17, referring to the year 571 B.C.

- **Individual Responsibility:** Many of the Old Testament prophets refer to the corporate responsibility that groups of people, such as families, tribes or nations, have before the Lord. In chapter 18, Ezekiel adds teaching on individual responsibility to this. The prophet says that people are judged on their own merits. Each person is responsible for repenting, and God is justified in punishing individuals for their own sins. This seems obvious to us in our individualistic culture, but it would have seemed radical in Ezekiel's day.
- **Priestly Concerns:** Of all the prophets, Ezekiel is the one who is most concerned with the temple, proper ritual, holiness, and purity. Sometimes his version of these things differs from what is found in the Pentateuch. Scholars argue about whether this is because the laws were not yet in their written form and alternative versions existed or because Ezekiel was reinterpreting the laws for a new context.
- **Symbolic Actions:** "As part of his prophetic vocation, Ezekiel engaged in a large number of extreme activities, the purpose of which were to dramatize and symbolize his message of doom from the Lord. These activities strike the modern reader as odd, eccentric, or even weird. They include:
 - building a model of the city of Jerusalem and setting siege to it, part of which meant being tied up with ropes and lying on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for forty days (4:1-15);
 - shaving his head bald, dividing up his hair and striking part of it with a sword all around the city model (5:1-4);
 - packing up his belongings every night in a mock exile (12:3b-7);
 - trembling and shaking when he ate and drank (12:17-20)

While seemingly very strange, they may have been very effective, memorable means of dramatic communication in the small community Ezekiel served in exile."¹

- **Valley of Dry Bones:** Ezekiel 37:12-13 has been interpreted by some as one of the few hints about resurrection in the Old Testament. In context, this passage seems to be referring to a revival of the nation. "Whatever it might have meant to Ezekiel's audience, it makes an important contribution to the development of biblical thought."²

¹Alan Padgett at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=46>

²ESV Study Bible, "Introduction to Ezekiel", 1497.