

Ezekiel - an overview

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Introduction to Ezekiel

Author

Ezekiel was a major prophet during Judah's 70-year captivity in Babylon.

Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem as a member of the influential family of Zadok the priest but was deported to Babylon in 597 BC, when he was about 25 years old. He settled in Tel-Abib, near the Kebar River in Babylonia.

When Ezekiel was about 30 years old God called him to be a prophet (1:1-3:11) and he prophesied in Babylon for over 20 years. Ezekiel was married and his wife's sudden death was seen as a solemn warning to the nation of Israel (24:16-18). It is not known where or how Ezekiel himself died, and he is not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Ezekiel is sometimes called "the father of Judaism" because he had such a powerful influence on the way Jews worshipped after they returned to Israel from their time in exile. He may have helped to create the synagogue as a place of worship when he met with other Jewish leaders in Babylon (in the absence of a temple). He also stressed the immortality of the soul, our personal resurrection, and the importance of keeping the rituals of the law, which are still central in Judaism.

As a prophet Ezekiel stands out in the way he uses dramatic visions, symbols and actions in his prophecies. e.g. dry bones, eagles, vines, cooking pots, shaving his head and beard; eating of a scroll. (The image of eating a scroll with prophecy written upon it (2:8-3) is used again in Revelation Chapter 10).

Ezekiel prophesied at the same time as Jeremiah during the first part of his ministry and at the same time as Daniel in the second half of his ministry.

Ezekiel means "the Lord will strengthen". Ezekiel is rightly recognised as one of the "major prophets".

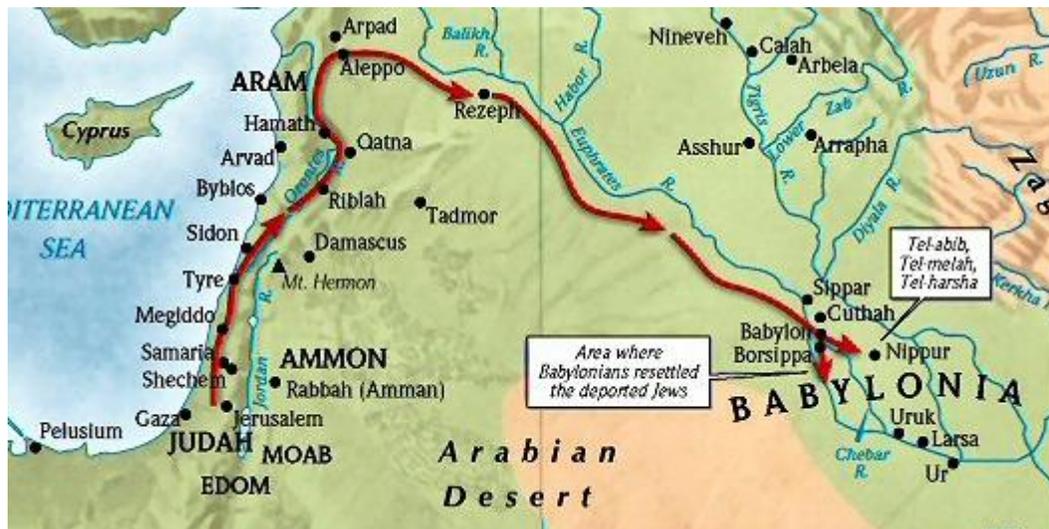
Background

After a long siege Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, conquered the city of Jerusalem in 597 BC. King Jehoiachin surrendered and was taken into captivity in Babylon, along with many priests and leaders. These included Ezekiel, who at the time was training to be a priest.

A few years later, in 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple and took most of the remaining people into captivity in Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem and the defeat of Judah was the culmination of a long period of rebellion against the Lord, led by a succession of evil kings.

It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end He thrust them from His presence. 2 Kings 24:20.

The captivity in Babylon lasted for a period of 70 years as predicted in Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10. It ended in 538 BC after the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, Cyrus then gave the Jews permission to return to their land so they could rebuild their temple. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple.



Date

Ezekiel prophesied between 592 and 570 BC. His ministry took place in two distinct periods:

- Between 592 and 587 BC (before the destruction of Jerusalem) Ezekiel warned the exiled Judeans to repent and to once again put their trust in the Lord. This period of Ezekiel's ministry is described in Chapters 1-24.
- Between 586-570 B.C. (after the destruction of Jerusalem) Ezekiel comforted the exiles and encouraged them to face their future with hope. This period of Ezekiel's ministry is described in Chapters 33-48.

Purposes

- To bring God's people to repentance so they would not experience more of God's judgement.
- To encourage God's people to live in righteousness.
- To proclaim judgement on other nations for their part in Judah's rebellion.
- To describe the future restoration of Israel and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
- To announce the coming reign of the Messiah.

Themes

The prophecies that Ezekiel brought were highly relevant for the people of Judah and many have proven to be relevant for all nations through history, including the nations of today.

The main themes in Ezekiel's prophecies were:

- **Judgement.** Ezekiel's main message was that God would judge Judah for her sins, and that the people must repent and turn back to the Lord. Initially this message was not accepted, but as more and more of Ezekiel's prophecies were proven to be true the Judeans began to repent.
- **God's faithfulness towards His people.** Ezekiel told the Judeans that their exile in Babylon would not last forever. God had made a covenant with Abraham and would be faithful to that covenant. He would bless the faithful remnant; restore them to relationship with Himself; make them a new people, and bring them back to their land. Ultimately He would use them to bring blessing to all nations of the world and, through Messiah, all peoples would honour the Lord.
- **The fulfillment of God's promises:**
 - **regarding the land of Israel.** Ezekiel described the boundaries of the land that God had given to His people, based on His covenant with Abraham. Within this land the city of Jerusalem would once again be restored and would be seen as "*The Lord is there*".
 - **regarding His relationship with His people.** Ezekiel described how God would relate to His people in the days to come. He would bring them into a new covenant in which relationship with

God would be restored and God's restless people would find rest in Him. God would send His Spirit, who will give them new life, a new heart, and a wonderful new way of living.

– **regarding the promised Messiah.** The promises of God would ultimately be fulfilled when He sends Messiah to His people. Messiah will reign over God's people and will be their everlasting King.

- **The temple.** Ezekiel was a priest so significant sections of the book are devoted to the temple, the priesthood, and to the various religious duties and festivals. Ezekiel looked forward to a day when the temple in Jerusalem would be rebuilt and God's people would once again worship Him there. Ezekiel saw the temple as a symbol of the presence of God being among His people and longed for the day when, once again, God's glory would fall upon them.

Along with most other Old Testament prophecies, fulfillment of the messages in Ezekiel can be interpreted as taking place at different times:

- When the remnant of God's people return to their land; Jerusalem is restored, and the temple is rebuilt. This began to be fulfilled in 538 BC when the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland.
- When the promised Messiah (Jesus Christ) comes to establish the Kingdom of God. This, of course, took place some 2000 years ago.
- When the Lord Jesus Christ returns to usher in the eternal Kingdom of God. Before this occurs a remnant of God's people will return to the land of Israel and God will do a great work of salvation in bringing them to Himself. The Jewish people have been back in their homeland (since 1948) and the return of Jesus could take place at any time!

Ezekiel's prophecies are thus relevant for all time, and will ultimately be fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth described in the Book of Revelation. God's wonderful promises to Abraham will then be completely fulfilled and God's grace will be poured out upon all those who have been reconciled to Him through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Outline

Ezekiel's call. 1:1–3:27.

Prophecies of judgment on God's people. 4:1–24:27.

Prophecies of judgement on the nations. 25:1–32:32.

God's plan for the future. 33:1–48:35.

Ezekiel's call (1:1-3:27)

Ezekiel was concerned about the future of the temple, especially as it was symbolic of the presence and glory of God among His people. (1 Kings 8:10-11). As a priest exiled in Babylon, it was surprising, then, that God should choose to reveal Himself to Ezekiel when there was no temple, and he was in exile in a foreign land. In calling Ezekiel to be a prophet God was assuring His people that He had not forsaken them, even though they were far away from their homeland.

Ezekiel was called to his prophetic ministry when he saw *visions of God*. The *hand of the Lord* came upon him and he saw a windstorm with much flashing and light. In the storm there were what looked like four living creatures. They were like humans but with *four faces and four wings*:

Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox. Each also had the face of an eagle.

These faces correspond to the four different pictures of Jesus portrayed in the gospels:

- Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as the King of the Jews (the lion).
- Mark presents Jesus as "the Son of man" (the man).
- Luke presents Jesus as "the suffering servant" (the ox).
- John presents Jesus as "the Son of God" (the eagle).

The four living creatures seemed to move on wheels and only went where the Spirit led them. High above the living creatures on a throne was a figure like a man surrounded by brilliant light.



Ezekiel describes this vision as the *likeness of the glory of the Lord*. When he saw it, he *fell face down* and the Lord spoke to him. This vision of God's glory, though difficult to understand, is the key to the book of Ezekiel because, ultimately, the book is a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ in all of His glory.



Associated with the vision was Ezekiel's call to be a prophet to the *rebellious nation* of Israel. Ezekiel was to say to them, '*This is what the Sovereign Lord says.....*' regardless of whether they listened or not. Through this God's people would *know that a prophet has been among them*. Ezekiel was *not to be afraid* even though they were a *rebellious people* and was to be careful that he too didn't become rebellious toward the Lord.

Ezekiel was shown a scroll on which were written *words of lament and mourning and woe*. He was to *eat the scroll* and then *go and speak to the house of Israel*. He was to be as *hard and unyielding* in sharing God's word with them as they were in resisting it. God made Ezekiel a *watchman for the house of Israel*, so he would hear the word God spoke and *give them warning from Me*. If the people would not listen they would be responsible for their own judgement. If they did listen they would *surely live*. Either way Ezekiel was responsible for sharing what God told him to say. Refusing to do this would make him *accountable for their blood*, while obedience would mean he would have *saved himself*,

Ezekiel then *saw the glory of the Lord* and fell face down before God. The Lord lifted him up, confined him to his house and made his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth until He gave him something to say. *Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people*. This sentiment was echoed later on by Jesus when He said '*Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear*'. Matthew 11:15.

Ezekiel's call was slightly different from that received by Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah received his call with a vision of God's glory in the temple (Isaiah 6), while Jeremiah received his call along with a set of signs showing what God wanted him to do. (Jeremiah 1:11-15). Ezekiel's call combined both of these elements. He saw the glory of God and he was also told what God wanted him to do.

Prophecies of judgement on God's people. (4:1–24:27)

Ezekiel made much use of symbolism in his prophecies.

The first part of his book (Chapters 4 and 5).contains four symbolic acts:

- The siege of Jerusalem was to be represented on a clay tablet, together with ramps, camps and battering rams. Ezekiel himself was to face the city as if he was the one besieging it from behind a pan representing the wall of the city. This was to symbolize how God would be judging His people through the siege of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar.
- Ezekiel was to lie on his left side for 390 days bearing the sin of Israel (the Northern Kingdom), and for another 40 days bearing the sin of Judah, (the Southern Kingdom). This was a day for each year of the nation's sin.
- Ezekiel was to have sufficient supplies of food and water, but was to make his meals over human excrement This was to symbolize how God's people would eat *defiled food among the nations* where God *drove them* and would waste away during the siege. Ezekiel didn't want to defile himself by preparing his food over human excrement and God allowed him to do it using cow manure.
- Ezekiel's hair was to be cut off and a third burnt in the city, a third struck with the sword and a third scattered. This symbolized what would happen to God's people in Jerusalem. A third of her people would perish from famine; a third would be killed and a third would be scattered.

God said all this would happen to Jerusalem because *in her wickedness she rebelled against My laws more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected My laws and not followed My decrees*. God would be against Jerusalem and would withdraw His favour from her. Jerusalem would become a ruin and a reproach to all peoples. (This happened in 586BC, exactly as Ezekiel prophesied).

God's wrath would also be directed against the mountains of Israel (chapter 6) and the land of Israel (chapter 7). Towns would be *laid waste and the high places demolished*. (i.e. the pagan places or worship). Most of the people would be *slain* through plague, sword and famine, but a few would *escape and be scattered among the lands and nations*. Ezekiel declared that *an unheard of disaster is coming. The end has come!* This would be God's judgement on His people because of their *detestable practices*. The people would not be able to buy their way out of this great disaster, nor would they be able to fight their way through it. They had been proud of their gold, silver and beautiful jewelry, but now it would be handed over to foreigners as plunder. Robbers would even enter God's treasured places (i.e. the temple) and plunder it. *The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with despair and the hands of the people will tremble*. God will deal with His people *as their sins deserve*, Then they would know that He is the Lord.

In chapters 8–11 Ezekiel describes the *detestable things* done in Jerusalem that led to the judgements pronounced in chapters 1–7. These included:

- an idol that *provokes to jealousy* (8:3-5).
- elders bowing down to idols (8:11,12).
- women weeping for the god Tammuz (8:14).
- men worshiping the sun (8:16).

These things *provoked the Lord to anger* so He would not look on His people with pity or listen to them, even if they shouted to Him.

In the next vision (Chapter 9) Ezekiel is told to place a mark on the foreheads of those in Jerusalem who grieve and lament over all the detestable things done there. These faithful ones would survive God's judgement but all the others would be killed. Ezekiel asked if God was going to *destroy the entire remnant of Israel*, and God said His people had brought His judgment down on their own heads because of what they had done. Then (Chapter 10 and 11), Ezekiel saw the glory of God gradually being removed from the temple until it *departed from over the threshold of the temple*. God's great judgement on His people, and especially their leaders culminated with the unthinkable horror: *then the glory of the Lord went up from the city and stopped above the mountain to the east*. God's people had now lost His divine protection, and were about to be handed over to foreigners (the Babylonians) who would inflict punishment on them. Then they would know that God was the Lord and that in not following His decrees, had *conformed to the standard of the nations around them*.

But after His judgement had been poured out God promised to redeem His people and bring them back to their land. They would once again have a relationship with the Lord. There was still hope!

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again. They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws. They will be My people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord." 11:17-21.

So God said that He would:

- restore His people to their land
- purify His people
- renew a right relationship with His people.

These three themes are further developed in Chapters 33–48.

Ezekiel's vision of the total destruction of Jerusalem and the sending into exile of all of God's people would have seemed so unlikely that it was almost unbelievable. Ezekiel reinforced the message by packing his bags and going out *like those who go into exile*. He carried the bags in full view of the people, and dug through the walls to leave the town. When people asked what he was doing he said it was a sign for them.

As I have done, so it will be done to you. They would go in to exile as captives. Only a few of God's people would be spared, and through this they would know that God is the Lord.

Ezekiel was to *tremble* and *shudder* as he ate and drank, to symbolize the anxiety God's people would face *because of the violence* that was about to happen to them. Even worse, the vision was about to be fulfilled *without delay* because whatever the Lord says *will be fulfilled*. (Chapter 12). 2 Kings Chapter 25 describes what happened when Jerusalem was destroyed and the remaining Jews taken into captivity in Babylon. It was certainly a day of great violence!



At the time the people were rejecting God's word given through genuine prophets like Ezekiel. They had been deceived by prophets who had brought *false visions and utter lying*, giving the people a false sense of security. Ezekiel launches a blistering attack on these false prophets. He says that *God has not sent them*, and that God will judge them and all who follow them *with destructive fury*. The lies of the false prophets had resulted in many using *magic charms* which *ensnare people like birds*. God's great judgment would save His people from the hands of the false prophets and, through this, they would know He is the Lord. (Chapter 13).

Next Ezekiel turns his attention to those who had *set up idols in their hearts*, This included the *elders of Israel*. Unless the people *turned from their idols and renounced their detestable practices* God would set His face against them and make an example of them. This would come through the *dreadful judgments of sword, famine, wild beasts, and plagues*. Even if righteous men like Noah, Daniel and Job were among them, the only way anyone could be saved was by their righteousness. (Chapter 14).

In chapters 15–17 Ezekiel uses three parables to show God's imminent judgment on Jerusalem.

In Chapter 15 Jerusalem is described as a vine that has been cut down and thrown into a fire. The charred wood is useless. Even though Jerusalem may *come out of the fire* she will end up *desolate*.

In Chapter 16 Jerusalem is likened to a young woman who was abandoned by her parents, but adopted and loved by the Lord. He washed and clothed her and when she *grew up and developed* she *became the most beautiful of jewels*. God made a covenant with her and gave her everything she needed. She belonged to the Lord! When she was fully developed her fame spread far and wide and *she trusted in her beauty and used her fame to become a prostitute*. She rejected the Lord, followed idols and made alliance with evil nations around like the Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, and even the Babylonians. Cities like Sodom (Genesis 19) and Samaria (2 Kings 17:6) were known for their immorality and now Jerusalem is like their sister, but worse. God had judged these cities for their wickedness and would now judge Jerusalem. Even though she will *bear the consequences of her lewdness and detestable practices*, God will still *remember the covenant* He made with her. When He makes atonement for Jerusalem's sins she will remember how God loved her and will *be ashamed*.

Chapter 17 is an allegory showing that God is sovereign over the nations and their politics. Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom (Israel) but was now no longer powerful. Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north both had great political and military power and are pictured as *great eagles with powerful wings*. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar had taken over Judah by removing Jehoiachin, *the top of a cedar*, and taken him into exile along with many leaders (including Ezekiel). Nebuchadnezzar allowed the remaining Judeans some control over their affairs under Zedekiah but required them to be subject to Babylon and not to any other nation. Judah, *a low-spreading vine*, tried to align with Egypt, against Nebuchadnezzar. This unfaithfulness would cause Nebuchadnezzar to pull up the vine (Judah) by its roots and make it wither. Chapter 17 finishes by looking forward to a time after the exile, when God will restore His people to their land under Messiah, a *tender shoot*. He will become a mighty cedar, bringing new life and blessing to all. Then all will know that *I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish*. This kind of positive ending with a glimpse of Messiah's reign, is common in many of Ezekiel's prophecies.

Chapters 18–22 are specific prophecies for Judah, its leaders, and the exiles.

In Chapter 18 Ezekiel declares God's requirements for righteousness: *Every living soul belongs to Me: the soul who sins is the one who will die. If a man is righteous he will surely live, but if he is sinful he will be put to death and his blood will be on his own head.*

- A father will not be held accountable for his son's sin.
- If a sinful man changes his ways and becomes righteous *he will live.*
- If a righteous man changes his ways and becomes sinful *he will die in his sins.*

The people had been charging God with injustice because they believed God would judge them for the sins of their ancestors. (The 10 commandments say that God may *punish the sins of their parents to the third and the fourth generations.* Exodus 20:5). Ezekiel shows that God is truly just in that the righteousness of a righteous *will be credited to them*, and the wickedness of the wicked *will be charged against them.* God *takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but is pleased when they turn from their ways and live. If a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live.*

Chapter 19 is made up of two laments. In the first lament the Princes of Israel are likened to a *strong lion* that lost its power and freedom when it got trapped and sent to prison in Babylon. In the second lament the mother of Israel is likened to a fruitful vine that got uprooted in a storm, so that it withered *in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land.*

In Chapter 20 Ezekiel describes Israel's rebellious past to some of the elders who had come to enquire of him. God had revealed Himself to His people while they were in bondage in Egypt and promised them a *land flowing with milk and honey.* They rebelled and would not listen to Him, but to stop His name being profaned, God led them out of Egypt and into the desert. There He gave them His laws so they could be holy. Once again they rebelled in the desert so they had to wander there for many years. Even in the Promised Land they continued to *rebel against the Lord* and God said they would *dispersed among the nations.* They wanted to *be like the nations, the peoples of the world,* but God wanted them as His own special people. After God's judgement on them through being banished from their own land, God would gather them once again and would show Himself *holy among them, in the sight of the nations.* Then they would know that He is the Lord.

In Chapter 21 Ezekiel was told to groan about the upcoming judgement of Jerusalem. The Babylonians would come as a *sharpened and polished sword, a sword for slaughter* and Ezekiel had to mark out two roads leading up to this. One would lead to the Ammonites and one to Jerusalem. The Babylonians would decide to head towards Jerusalem and would take the city with battering rams. The city would be ruined and *would not be restored till He comes to whom it rightfully belongs.* The Ammonites would also be destroyed.

God's grace in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament God is often portrayed in a harsh and judgmental way with a strong emphasis on His justice and power. (Which is why the people were charging God with injustice in Ezekiel 18). In the New Testament God is portrayed much more as a God of grace and love. Indeed, much of the New Testament is taken up with the need to live under grace and to walk in love. (Quite different from living under the strict requirements of Old Testament law, where failure to meet the requirements of the law results in God's judgement).

So is God a God of love and grace just as much in the Old Testament as He is in the New Testament? Yes! God doesn't change. Psalm 102:27, Malachi 3:6, James 1:17. He is *the same, yesterday, today and forever.* Hebrews 13:8.

This passage of Ezekiel shows that while God is just, He is not unfair. In His love and grace He wants us to be saved – but this requires us to live according to God's righteous standards. And in Jesus Christ God has provided the way by which we can do just that!



In Chapter 22 Ezekiel lists all the ways that Jerusalem had sinned against the Lord that would result in God's judgement against her people. Once again, this leads into the positive reason why God would do this: *I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you through the countries; and I will put an end to your uncleanness. When you have been defiled in the eyes of the nations, you will know that I am the Lord.* God didn't want to judge His people like this but when He *looked for a man who would stand in the gap* on behalf of the poor and needy He found none.

Chapter 23 is a parable similar to Chapter 16. It tells of two sisters, Oholah representing Samaria (the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and Oholibah, (representing Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judah). The sisters engaged in prostitution so God handed Samaria over to the Assyrians, and the even more adulterous Jerusalem over to the Babylonians. God did this to put a stop to their prostitution but they would have to *bear the consequences* of their behavior.

This leads into the parable of the cooking pot in Chapter 24. Jerusalem is likened to a rusty pot and her people likened to pieces of meat boiling in the pot. They would die on the day Nebuchadnezzar begins his siege of the city and Jerusalem would not be clean again until all of God's wrath against her had subsided.

At this point Ezekiel's wife died. Through this, God showed Ezekiel and His people in Babylon that all that had been prophesied regarding the downfall of Jerusalem was about to take place.

This chapter concludes the first part of Ezekiel. God's people now know why God is so angry with them. God has spoken through Ezekiel using prophecies, parables and object lessons explaining what will happen in Jerusalem, and countering all arguments about God's fairness in pouring His wrath upon His people. He has also reassured the exiles that God will still look after those who are righteous and that, in time, a remnant of His people will return to their land and once again enjoy relationship with God.

Prophecies of judgement on the nations. (25:1-32:32)

Ezekiel now gives a series of prophecies against the pagan nations surrounding Israel. They will be judged because they had treated Israel badly, and because Israel had begun to take on many of their evil ways.

- **Ammon** would be taken over by a nation from the east and would be *exterminated*. (25:1-7).
- **Moab** would be *taken over by a nation from the east*. (25:8-11).
- **Edom** will be *laid waste*. (25:12-14).
- **Philistia** would experience *great vengeance* from the Lord. (25:15-17).

Ammon, Moab, and Edom were not attacked by the Israelites on their march to the Promised Land because they were distant relatives. The Ammonites and Moabites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and the Edomites descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob. The three nations would now be judged because they had supported Babylon in attacking Jerusalem and had rejoiced when Jerusalem fell and the temple was devastated.

The Philistines had been Israel's enemy for many years and were considered an *everlasting enemy*. They had controlled much of Israel's territory during the time of the Judges and Kings.

- **Tyre** had much pride because it was a port that serviced ships from many nations. It would be reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar. (26:1-28:19).



The ruler of Tyre considered himself as *wise as a god* and would be put to death showing *he is a man not a god*. Chapter 28:11-19 describes the fall of the king of Tyre, but it is often ascribed to the fall of Lucifer, one of God's archangels. Lucifer was originally *full of wisdom and perfect in beauty*, but rebelled against God and was thrown down from heaven to the earth where, as our great enemy satan, he continues to try to draw people away from the Lord. Like the king of Tyre he will *come to a horrible end and will be no more*. (Revelation 20:7-15).

- **Sidon**, a port city in Phoenicia, would experience a plague. (28:20-26).

So when God *gathered the people of Israel* from where He scattered them, six surrounding nations (Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, and Sidon) would have experienced God's judgement. This would enable the returning Israelites to live in safety when back in their own land.

- **Egypt** (29:1-32:32).

Egypt would be defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and become a *desolate waste* for the way it had treated the house of Israel. Her people would be scattered and after 40 years come back to her land, but Egypt would always be a *weak nation*. Then they would know that God is Lord. Pharaoh considered himself to be like a cedar in Lebanon but would be cut down and destroyed. He will be like a monster in the seas that is hauled on land and is gorged on by birds and animals.

God's judgement will *shatter the pride of Egypt* and she would no longer be a stumbling block for Israel. Her judgment will take place because Egypt had tried to convince the Israelites they could overcome the Assyrians and Babylonians with Egypt's help. In 722 BC the Assyrian troops took the northern capital of Samaria, and in 586 BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, but Egypt didn't help at all, wanting to take control of Israel herself. The Babylonians then conquered Egypt and later it was taken over by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. The fall of Egypt coincided with the fall of a number of other kingdoms: Assyria, Elam, Meshech and Tubal, Edom and Sidon.

God's plan for the future. (33:1–48:35)

Having pronounced God's judgement on His people (Chapters 4-24), and on the surrounding nations (Chapters 25-32), Ezekiel now turns to God's plans for the future of Israel and, through Messiah, for the future of mankind.

He begins by reviewing the main points from Chapters 1-24:

- Ezekiel is a watchman sent by God to warn the house of Israel that God's judgement was about to be poured on them. (Compare 33:1-9 with Chapters 1-3).
- Israel had sinned and God would judge each person *according to their own ways*. God is just so the righteous will be saved and the wicked will perish. *God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked* and wants the people to *turn from their wicked ways and live*. (Compare 33:10-20 with Chapter 18).
- Jerusalem was about to be overtaken by the Babylonians. This was because her people had heard God's words but *had not put them into practice*. (Compare 33:21-33 with Chapters 20 and 21).

In Chapter 34 Ezekiel prophesies against *the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves*, and don't take care of their flock. God will hold them accountable for their selfishness and will remove His people from their evil control. He will search for His sheep Himself and become their Shepherd. (Compare John 10:1-18). He will look after them by bringing them back to their own land and there will shepherd His flock with justice. The Lord will care for those who follow Him by giving them safety, blessing, fruitful crops and protection from enemies. Then they will know that He is the Lord; that He is with them, and that they are His sheep. A quite different outcome is prophesied for the *goats* who refuse to follow the Lord. (Compare Matthew 25:31-33).

Chapters 35 and 36 are prophecies against Edom (in modern-day Jordan), and for *the mountains of Israel* (equivalent to the modern-day West Bank, Bethel, Bethany, Bethlehem and Jerusalem in Israel - i.e. the very heart of the nation of Israel).

God says He will:

- make Edom desolate forever because she hated God's people.
- Make *the mountains of Jerusalem* to be populated again and become very fruitful. Israelites will be *gathered from countries where they have been dispersed* and will live there forever. They will be *sprinkled with clean water* and *will be clean*, and God will give them a *new heart* and put a new spirit in them. They will *follow His decrees and obey His laws*. The land which once was a wasteland will *become like the garden of Eden* and from this the nations around will know that God is the Lord. God's people will *become as numerous as sheep* and they too will know that God is the Lord.

This message is repeated in Chapter 37 in Ezekiel's well-known "dry bones" prophecy. Ezekiel saw *a valley full of dry bones* (representing the nation of Israel) and God asked him whether the bones could live again. Ezekiel replied "*Lord, You alone know*". God said He would make the bones come to life and Ezekiel prophesied to the bones and they came together *bone to bone*. The bones were then covered in skin and when God breathed life into them they became a *vast army*. "*Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'*"

Ezekiel was then told to bring together two sticks, one from Judah (representing the southern tribes) and one from Joseph (representing the northern tribes). The two sticks became one in his hand. God said He would *take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be My people, and I will be their God.*

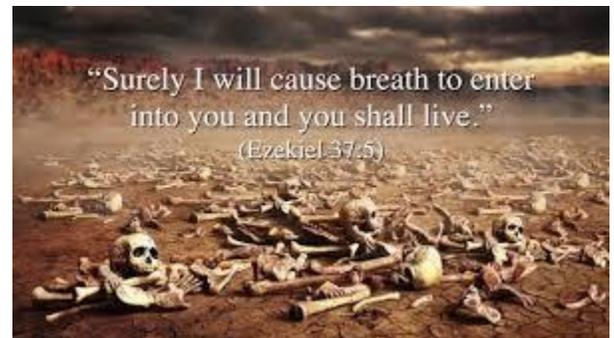
This renewed fellowship between the Lord and Israel would be sealed with a new covenant, a "covenant of peace" and they would have Messiah as their King. "*My servant David (i.e. Jesus who was from the house of David. Luke 1:27) will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow My laws and be careful to keep My decrees. They will live in the land I gave to My servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put My sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be My people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.'*"

This prophecy has been fulfilled and the people of Israel are now increasing in numbers in their national homeland. The next phase is for them to acknowledge Jesus as their rightful Messiah. This will take place sometime before Jesus returns. Romans 11:25-32.

These are very specific prophecies, which unlike others in Ezekiel, contain no conditions that the Israelites are required to meet. God simply states what He is going to do!

We are privileged to see that these prophecies have been fulfilled in our time. In 1948 the State of Israel was formed (fulfilling Ezekiel 11:17), but the areas contained in the "mountains of Jerusalem" were immediately taken by Jordan. They were named as the "West Bank of the Kingdom of Jordan" by King Abdullah in 1950, and were occupied by Jordan through until 1967. The West Bank was captured by Israel during the 6 day war in June 1967 and has been re-settled by Israelis in fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:8-12;22-24; Jeremiah 31:1-17, Isaiah 35:1-10 and Zechariah 10:2-13.

Today the areas in Jordan which were part of Edom are desolate wastes.



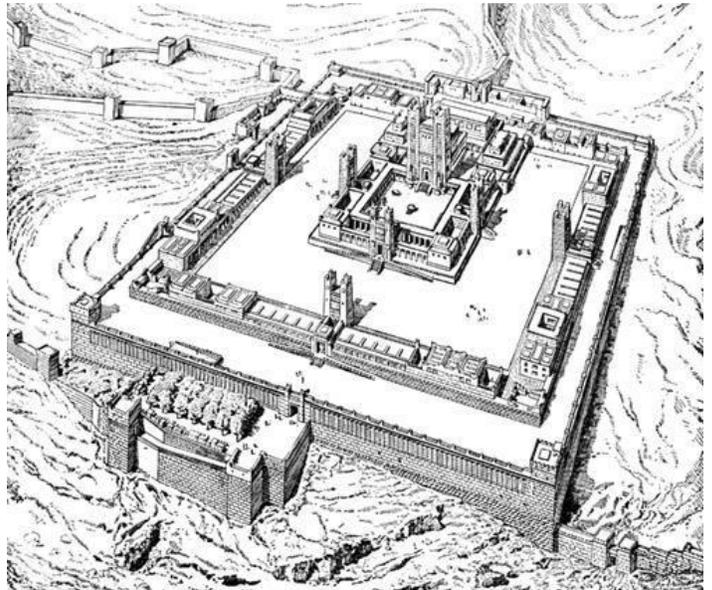
In Chapters 38 and 39 Ezekiel prophesies against Gog – a nation *from the north* (normally interpreted as being Russia). Gog will bring a number of other nations against Israel once she is settled back in her homeland, but will be overwhelmingly defeated. Through this God will display His glory to the whole world: *I will make known My holy name among My people Israel. I will no longer let My holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the Lord am the Holy One in Israel.* The defeated enemy will be buried in the valley of Hamon Gog, and the extent of the victory will be such that all will know that God has done a mighty work on behalf of His people.

Restoration of the temple. (Chapters 40-46).

Ezekiel was a priest, so was keenly interested in what would happen to the temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. In the last section of his prophecy Ezekiel describes how the temple was to be rebuilt and its worship restored, after the remnant returns to Jerusalem.

He received *visions of God* in which he saw each of the components of the temple and their required sizes and dimensions:

- the east gate to the outer court
- the outer court
- the north gate
- the south gate
- the gates to the inner court
- rooms for preparing sacrifices
- rooms for the priests
- the temple with its outer sanctuary, inner sanctuary containing the Most Holy Place, doors, walls, sides and floors
- extra rooms for the priests.



In a very powerful way, Ezekiel then saw that *the glory of the Lord entered the temple* and he was lifted up in the Spirit and brought into the inner temple. God said He would *live among the Israelites forever* and that the house of Israel would never again defile His holy name by putting idols into the temple.

Ezekiel was then given regulations for sacrifices to be made on the altar in the temple so the temple could be cleansed and rededicated to the Lord.

The East gate of the temple was to remain shut until the Prince (i.e. Jesus) entered through it. (It is still shut awaiting Jesus' return).

Ezekiel then *saw the glory of the Lord filling the temple* and he *fell face down* before God. The Lord said that the idolatrous practices that had led to the destruction of the temple must never happen again. This was to start with the priests and the Levites who must *teach the people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the clean and the unclean.*



God told Ezekiel that the priests would not have an inheritance of land but the Lord Himself was to be their *only inheritance*. The princes of the tribes would be allotted land but must no longer oppress the people they lead, and they must make provision for the peoples' worship and for the priests.

The various *sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings* must be revived to *make atonement for the house of Israel*. Also the great festivals and appointed feasts must begin again, and follow their required protocols, especially for the first feast of Passover.

Ezekiel passed on all of these instructions to the Jewish leaders in Babylon. They now knew what was going to happen when they returned to Jerusalem, actions they must take and how they should behave.

The One who revealed all this to Ezekiel then brought him back to the entrance of the temple and showed him a *great river* that flowed from the temple out to all parts of the land of Israel. Wherever the river flowed there was much blessing, growth and abundance. *Where the river flows everything will live.* God was saying that He would bless the whole nation under the new covenant He was offering His people. The evil they had done which resulted in their exile in Babylon had been cleansed and now they could start again as His special people, in right relationship with Him.



The final message that God revealed to Ezekiel was where the remnant would settle when they returned to Israel and how land would be allotted to them. God told Ezekiel where the borders of the land were to be and how the land was to be allocated to the tribes. Provision had to be made for a special portion for the Lord where the priests and Levites could live.

Jerusalem was to have 12 gates, named for each of the tribes: three of the north; three on the south; three on the east and three on the west.

And the name of the city from that time on will be "The Lord is there." (Jehovah-Shammah).

In giving Jerusalem this name God was signifying His great desire to now live forever in covenant with His people Israel.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe how the remnant of God's people returned to Israel and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and then the temple. In time they returned to their evil and idolatrous ways and the Lord did exactly what he said He would do: He dispersed them throughout the nations. Through Jesus Christ, though, He has made a way by which all people (including the Israelites) can live in right relationship with Himself, and He is now working out His purposes for the nation Of Israel, just as predicted in the Book of Ezekiel.

Interpretation of Ezekiel Chapters 33–48.

Obviously the prophecies in Chapters 33-48 had an immediate application to the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem; the rebuilding of the temple, and the restoration of relationship between God and His special people Israel. The prophecies began to be fulfilled with the decree of Cyrus I (538 BC) which permitted the Jews to return to their land (Ezra 1:1-3, and continued exactly as Ezekiel stated.

There are two main schools of interpretation regarding how the prophecies have been/will be fulfilled beyond the time of Israel's return to her land.

Some see the prophecies as applying to the nation of Israel and to the Christian church. In this interpretation God will work sovereignly in the end times to fulfill His call to the nation of Israel. He will use the Christian church to bring the gospel to the nation of Israel and the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt before Jesus returns. The promises in Ezekiel's vision will all be fulfilled before the coming of new heavens and a new earth. Romans Chapters 9-11; Revelation Chapters 11-19.

Others see the prophecies in Ezekiel as applying to all believers, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Believers are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Genesis 15:6; cf. Romans 4:11-13; Galatians 3:6-9, 29; Galatians 3:28-29). Ezekiel's message is thus a prophetic expression of how God's grace would come to all those who are reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:10-12; Titus 2:11.

Discussion questions

Why did God send His people into exile for 70 years? How did God try to prevent this from being necessary? What was the result of the exile? Did God's people learn from their time in exile? What can we learn from this about the ways that God works in our lives?

Ezekiel contains many prophecies. Which prophecies have been fulfilled regarding: Judah? the nations? Jesus the Messiah? The Church? The future? Which ones have yet to be fulfilled?

Ezekiel used visions, object lessons, symbolism and dramatic actions to illustrate his prophecies. Do modern-day prophets use similar approaches? Why? Why not? How can we make valid interpretations of prophecies that use these kinds of illustrations?

Identify all references to Jesus in Ezekiel. How do these references help your understanding of Jesus as Messiah?

Do a character study of Ezekiel. What was his calling from God? How did he fulfill that calling? What was his heart like toward the Lord? What was his heart like toward God's sinful people? How did he communicate his message? What qualities did he demonstrate that you admire?

Ezekiel's most well-known prophecy is of the dry bones. (Chapter 37). Who was the prophecy for? How was it received? How is it relevant for the nation of Israel and for Christians today? How is it relevant for you?

What have you learned from your study of Ezekiel? How will you apply this in your life?