

ISRAEL'S LATER PROPHETS: EZEKIEL

HEBREW TEXT WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION AND FOOTNOTES

Ezekiel lived at a time of great national tragedy and upheaval, sharing in the exile of the people of Judah to Babylonia, and living through the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 B.C.E. His ministry began in 593 B.C.E., and continued on until 573 B.C.E. This means that Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah (626-586 / 587 B.C.E.), beginning his preaching in the closing years of Jeremiah's proclamation.

Mighty Assyria, that had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (in 722 \ 721 B.C.E.) had begun to crumble before the rapidly emergent new Kingdom of Babylon. In 612 B.C.E., her capital city of Nineveh fell before the combined forces of the Babylonians and Medes. Just three years later, Pharaoh Necho of Egypt marched north to the aid of the beleaguered Assyrians in their fortified city of Carchemish on the northwestern Euphrates River. King Josiah, the brave young King of Judah, marched north to meet and stop Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo--but his attempt was ill-fated, and Josiah died in the battle (609 B.C.E.). A number of kings followed in succession after Josiah--Jehoahaz first, who after only three months was replaced by Pharaoh Necho's choice, Yehoyaqim. But in 605 B.C.E., the combined forces of the Egyptians and the Assyrians were dealt a crushing blow by the Babylonians at Carchemish, and the Babylonians entered into a long period of almost absolute rule over Syria and Palestine. Nebuchadnezzar, the victorious general at Carchemish, was made King of Babylon, and he ruled over the newly acquired areas with an iron hand.

Upon Yehoyaqim's revolt against Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful Babylonian army was sent into Judah, and Jerusalem was captured in 597 B.C.E.--Yehoyaqim's son Jehoiachin, along with some 10,000 Jews (including Ezekiel), were carried away as exiles into Babylon, where they joined other Jews who had already been taken captive before them. Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah was placed on the throne of Judah, but within a few years he too rebelled against the Babylonians, and the final destruction of Judah and Jerusalem began to unfold. The armies of Babylon placed Jerusalem under siege in 588, and in July of 586, the city's walls were broken through, and the city was plundered. Then, on August 14, 586 B.C.E., both the city and her beautiful Temple were burned to the ground, and the large majority of Judah's people followed their predecessors into Babylonian captivity.

Babylon continued on as the most powerful nation in the Near-East until 539 B.C.E., when Babylon herself was overcome by the armies of the Medes and Persians under the great Persian Emperor Cyrus, who after a short while allowed the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to their native land of Judah. Such were the frightening times during which Ezekiel delivered the Divine message to the people of Judah who were exiles in Babylon, and sent his messages to the people still living in Judah before the final fall of Jerusalem.

All that we can know about the man Ezekiel is derived from the **Scroll** that bears his name. He was among those Jews exiled into Babylon in 597 B.C.E., and it was there in captivity that he received his Divine call to speak for YHWH. We learn from his writing that he was a married man (**24:15-18**), that he lived in a private home of his own (**3:24; 8:1**), and that he lived a fairly decent life of freedom while a captive in Babylon.

Ezekiel, whose name in Hebrew, **יְחֶזְקֵאל**, **yechezqe**l, means "Supreme God Strengthens," was evidently from a priestly family, and the marks of his priestly upbringing are found throughout his

writing, as he shows a deep concern for the temple and its rituals (see **chapters 8-11**, and **40-48**), even though the temple of Solomon was destroyed in the 11th year of his ministry.

His writing reveals Ezekiel to have been a man of great knowledge--both of international affairs, and history, as well of his own national traditions. He had a broad understanding of early Near-Eastern culture, including ship-building and literature. He constantly delivered his message through acted-out symbolism (which we call "vision-stories," or "vignettes" performed in what was like "street-theater"). Ezekiel used imagery in a powerful manner--in such a way that we are convinced that he is the greatest "allegorist" in the **Hebrew Bible**. We wonder if Philo of Alexandria learned his "allegorical" method of interpretation from Ezekiel.

For the first seven years of his proclaiming of the Word of YHWH (593-586 B.C.E.), Ezekiel constantly spoke a devastating word of Divine judgment against Judah. Many of his fellow exiles expected a quick return to Judah from their captivity, as Jerusalem, they believed, would escape destruction, and there were many prophets who proclaimed and defended their view--meaning that Ezekiel was constantly in danger because of his constantly speaking and acted out a devastating word of judgment that rejected any such premature hopes. Jerusalem was certain to fall, and her temple would be destroyed (**chapters 1-24**). The fact that Judah claimed to be YHWH's people of the covenant, and the fact that the temple was YHWH's chosen place of worship, would not alter the fact of devastating, soon-coming judgment and the "end" of Judah as a nation and the "end" of the temple in Jerusalem. We think that Ezekiel had been influenced by Jeremiah's letter to the exiles to settle down in their captivity, and learn to live in peace both with themselves and with YHWH, Who Ezekiel had envisioned, was present with them even in distant Babylon. See **Jeremiah 29:1-23**.

In **24:1-14**, Ezekiel was told by YHWH that Jerusalem was under siege for the last time, and that his wife would shortly die. The delight of Ezekiel's eyes, his wife, would be taken away from him, just as the temple in Jerusalem, the delight of Judah's eyes, would be destroyed and taken away. YHWH instructed Ezekiel not to openly lament his wife's death, just as Judah was not to lament the destruction of Jerusalem (**24:15-27**).

Immediately following that terrifying message, Ezekiel was given Divine messages against seven foreign nations (**chapters 25-32**), in which he announced the coming of YHWH's "Day" upon those foreign nations.

Then, when the news came to Ezekiel that the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple had actually occurred (**33:21-33**), he began to proclaim a completely different message--it was a Divine word of hope and consolation for the people of Judah, coming from the great Shepherd of the sheep. YHWH still had a future for his people, in spite of the destruction of their capital city and center of national worship, and despite the fact that there would still be terrifying enemies to fight, and victory to be won (**chapters 38-39**). Judah, together with Israel, would be brought back to life through the Spirit of YHWH, and the reunited Israel would be restored to its native land. The temple would be rebuilt on a much grander scale, as the people fulfilled the Divine purpose of blessing to the world--as life-giving water would pour forth from the renewed temple to bring life to the deadest place on earth (the Dead Sea), and as other prophets insisted, extend from there to the ends of the earth!

The **Scroll of Ezekiel** contains more exact dates than do the writings of any other of the prophets for YHWH, and as a result his various messages can be dated with a great deal of certainty. Having received his call to speak for YHWH in July, 593 B.C.E., Ezekiel continued his work of proclamation

for a total of 22 years, with his last dated message being given in April, 571 B.C.E. Thus his work began seven years before the destruction of Jerusalem, and continued after it for fifteen years.

Ezekiel proclaims the fact that YHWH God is present in all the earth. He is not a God whose presence is only to be found at his chosen site of worship (in the temple in Jerusalem). In an overwhelming vision-story in the first three chapters of his **Scroll**, Ezekiel was granted the vision of the Divine Presence among the exiles in the Land of Babylon. At the close of his **Scroll**, Ezekiel's vision of the renewed temple closes with the name of that city being given: "YHWH Is There!"

This Great God YHWH Who is Present (both in Babylon and in Jerusalem) Deeply Desires to be Known and Acknowledged by His people--not only by Judah and Israel, but also by all the nations. Some 65 times the phrase "They will know that I am YHWH" occurs throughout the **Scroll of Ezekiel**. **Chapters 1-24** teach that YHWH will be revealed through the destructive judgment that comes upon Jerusalem and its temple. **Chapters 25-32** teach that the surrounding nations will likewise come to know YHWH through His Judgments. Then, in **chapters 33-48**, there is the Promise that YHWH God Will Be Known in all the world as a result of the restoration and renewal of the united Judah and Israel, and the going forth from their new temple of the Water of Life, to the deepest, deadest place on earth.

Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel follows a sequence of first, Divine messages directed against [YHWH's] people themselves; second, Divine messages against surrounding nations; and third, Divine messages of hope and consolation for the restored and renewed people of YHWH. Ezekiel speaks with a sharpness and repetitiveness of style, that has a "hammering effect" upon the reader (see especially **chapter seven**, with its repetition over and over again that "the end has come!").

The **Scroll of Ezekiel** contains four great "vision stories":

- (1) Ezekiel's inaugural vision story of YHWH's Mysterious Presence in Babylon, the land of captivity, **chapters 1-3**;
- (2) The vision story of the corrupted Temple, **chapters 8-11**;
- (3) The vision story of national resurrection, **37:1-14**; and
- (4) The vision story of the new temple and a renewed worship, **chapters 40-48**.

At this point we need to heed an observation made by Reimer concerning Ezekiel's vision-stories: "Much of the scroll consists of visionary writing, which transports readers to a world of the imagination where the rules of reality are obviously suspended in favor of highly unusual visions. To understand and relish the **Scroll of Ezekiel**, readers often need to abandon expectations of realism. Second, Ezekiel employs a technique known as symbolic reality, which occurs when a writer consistently transports the reader to a world of visionary experience where the most important ingredients are symbols--symbols like a vine, a boiling pot, or a valley full of dry bones." Yes, indeed!

The **Scroll of Ezekiel** also contains many symbolic acts on the part of the prophet for YHWH, involving what we may call "street theater," in which Ezekiel (and his helpers) act out symbolically the message intended for the exilic leaders--but that obviously are not meant literally:

- (1) Ezekiel is tied up with ropes and lies silent, **3:22-27**
- (2) Jerusalem's siege is drawn on a clay tablet by Ezekiel, **4:1-3**
- (3) Ezekiel lies upon his left side for 390 days, then upon his right side for 40 days, **4:4-8**
(no street theater can expect its audience to stay that long!)

- (4) Ezekiel eats meager provisions, even unclean foods, such as people eat during siege, **4:9-14**
- (5) Ezekiel shaves his head and beard, burning a third of the hair, striking a third of it with a sword, and scattering a third part to the wind. Still he tucks away safely a few strands of hair, a small part of which is also burned, **5:1-4**
- (6) Ezekiel packs his belongings for exile, digs through a wall, and goes out of the city, **12:1-16**
- (7) Ezekiel trembles and shudders as he eats his food, **12:17-20**
- (8) Ezekiel groans with broken heart and bitter grief, **21:6-7**
- (9) Ezekiel marks out two roads for the sword of the King of Babylon, **21:18-24**
- (10) Ezekiel refuses to follow customary mourning rites over the death of his wife, **24:15-27**
- (11) Ezekiel joins together two sticks of wood into one stick, **37:15-28**

In all of these symbolic actions, what Ezekiel does becomes an "acted parable," a "vision-story," a "vignette," concerning YHWH's Word and relationship with Israel. Hilmer puts it this way: "More than any other prophet he was directed to involve himself personally in the Divine Word by acting it out in prophetic symbolism." (P. 1226)

There are five other sections of the **Scroll of Ezekiel** that can be labeled simply as "parables":

- (1) **Chapter 15**--Jerusalem, a useless vine
- (2) **Chapter 16**--An allegory concerning Jerusalem--the orphan daughter, who grew up to be the King's queen, but who became a prostitute without pay--who now deserves capital punishment--but YHWH resolves to remarry her and restore her fortune, along with restoring the fortunes of Samaria and Sodom!
- (3) **Chapter 17**--Two eagles and a vine
- (4) **Chapter 19**--A lament concerning a lioness and her cubs, a vine and its branches
- (5) **Chapter 23**--The two prostitutes, Oholah and Oholibah (Samaria and Jerusalem)

Ezekiel focuses his attention on Israel / Judah as the set-apart people with its set-apart temple in its set-apart city, in its set-apart land. Because Israel has defiled its worship, it has become unclean--and so has its temple, its city, and its land. It is this deep-seated defilement of its set-apartness that calls forth the inescapable Judgment of YHWH through national destruction.

But Judgment and destruction are not the final word for Ezekiel. Because YHWH Is Faithful to the covenant he made with Israel's ancestors, and because His Love for His people is so great, Israel in captivity can know that YHWH Will Revive His united people once again. Their great Shepherd Will Come to them in David His servant to shepherd them once again, binding up their wounds, seeking their lost sheep, and renewing Israel as His covenant people. He will lead them to Divine Victory over all the evil forces arrayed against them, and restore them to their land, their city, and their temple, from which the Water of Life will flow forth to all of Israel, and even to all the nations, so that all people will come to know YHWH as the God of all the earth. The reader of the closing chapters of **Ezekiel (33-48)** is reminded once again of how the prophets for YHWH "stood on tip-toe," looking out into a future filled with vibrant hope and promise for YHWH's people who return to him.

Davidson-Streane begin their commentary with the statement that "The [**Scroll**] of **Ezekiel** is simpler and more perspicuous [clearly expressed and easily understood; lucid] in its arrangement than any other of the great prophetic [scrolls]. It was probably committed to writing late in the prophet's

life, and, unlike the prophecies of Isaiah, which were given out piecemeal, was issued in its complete form at once.” (P. ix) We say, Yes—to some extent; but we also say No—**Ezekiel’s Scroll** is not by any means “easily understood”!

In this translation and its accompanying footnotes, we will be paying close attention to the Hebrew text, taken from Codex Leningradensis, and noting differences between it and its Greek translation (**Rahlfs Septuagint**). We will follow the comments of Rabbi Dr. S. Fisch in his **Ezekiel** (The Soncino Press, Ninth Impression, 1978) as well as the comments of David J. Reimer in the **English Standard Version Study Bible**, of Mark Hilmer in **The NIV Study Bible**, the first commentary I read on **Ezekiel**; those of Gordon Matties in **The New Interpreter’s Study Bible**, and the helpful footnotes in the **New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)**.

We are also indebted to other scholars who have spent long years of their lives in the study of **Ezekiel**, including Walther Eichrodt in his **Ezekiel, A Commentary** (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia) whose two volume **Theology of the Old Testament** has played such an important role in twentieth century biblical understanding. Eichrodt handles the text very cavalierly, dismissing large sections of the text, re-writing others, in a manner reminiscent of much twentieth century scholarship; but nevertheless, makes very important and insightful comments throughout his commentary. We have also been privileged to use the 2015 **The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary**, Volume 5, where the commentary on **Ezekiel** is by Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, Associate Professor of Hebrew at Boston University, who has returned to a much more conservative treatment of the Hebrew text. Even more helpful is the earlier commentary on **Ezekiel** in the **International Critical Commentary** series, by G.A. Cooke, whose love for the **Scroll of Ezekiel** is beautifully expressed again and again:

A vision of [YHWH] in His Glory and Holiness, Enthroned yet in Motion, Approaching to Reveal Himself outside the land of Israel: this conveyed to Ezekiel in Babylonia a call to prophecy. It determined the substance of his message. He could never forget what he had seen and heard and the reader is intended to bear it in mind throughout (**3:23; 8:4; 10:15, 20, 22; 43:3**). Accordingly the **Scroll** begins with a narrative of the vision written in the first person, **chapter 1**.

“Three main subjects are dealt with in the chapters which follow: denunciation of Israel’s sin and warning of the inevitable punishment, **chapters 2-24**; judgments upon foreign nations, especially Tyre and Egypt, **chapters 25-32**; the restoration of Israel in the future, **chapters 33-48**. Thus the **Scroll** falls into three parts, the third being sub-divided into **chapters 33-39**, which describe the outward and inward renewal of the nation, and **chapters 40-48**, which outline a scheme for the future temple as seen in vision.”

These present notes have been begun at a late stage in my life, at 88 years of age, following long years of work in the **Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah**. And I wonder how many more years I will be given to work in the Hebrew text—which I have loved since the age of 19. It is my hope that my work will be helpful to younger students coming after me, and that the message of **Ezekiel** can be returned to a prominent role in Christian interpretation!

There are some fourteen end-notes on the **Scroll of Ezekiel**:

1. David Qimchi, Jewish commentator on the Hebrew Bible;
2. The Hebrew noun רוּחַ, **ruach**, “wind”; “spirit” and “Spirit”;

3. The Navel of the Earth;
4. Gillul, “Idol” in the Hebrew Bible;
5. Predictions / Proclamations of the End of the World;
6. Ehrlich, Polish American Jew / Christian’s Life-Work in the Hebrew Bible;
7. The Jewish Sanhedrin;
8. The God Tammuz;
9. YHWH, the Returner of Captivities and Restorer of Fortunes;
10. Long-Lasting Covenants in the Hebrew Bible;
11. The Future Verb “He Shall / Shall Not Live” in the Hebrew Bible;
12. Pekod;
13. The Phoenician God Melqart;
14. Bashan
15. Lebanon