

General Comments on the Book of Ezekiel

Overview of the book of Ezekiel

1-3 Ezekiel's Commission

4-24 Judah, and Israel, Addressed

18 The Lord is angry, and disgusted with Judah

25-32 Nations Addressed, absent Babylon

33-48 Future Restoration of Israel

40-48 The future Temple

Comments on Ezekiel the man

We know very little about the man Ezekiel. We know he was of the lineage of the Levitical priests, and that he was married, and apparently became a widower. He must have been well-educated and a capable writer, given his clear and concise writing style. And, he had many visions of the Lord, and wrote them down meticulously. Aside from that, we know almost nothing else. With respect to his personality and demeanor we know nothing and have no real insight from the text.

When reading the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, there is a lot of text in there which clearly bears the imprint of the author's hand and personality as those two writers wrote their own content into the text. Not so in Ezekiel. We might infer from this that he was spare with his words and very deliberate with his writing. We might also conclude he was too humble to include his own writings.

Historical Context

Judah has been subjugated by Babylon, and their nation is in terrible disarray. Judah's horrible idolatry has caused this. The result is you have a large population of people don't really want to accept responsibility for their situation. They are sinning horribly, are being punished for it by an angry and uncompromising Lord, and they don't want to hear it. But, you have some small group of faithful Jews in there as well. This is the group Ezekiel is talking to. Ezekiel is letting them their God is real, powerful and still completely in control.

General Comments on the Text

Among ancient Rabbinical Jews, the book of Ezekiel was not to be studied by anyone under the age of 30, and was not to be studied at all by women. This is because of the very blunt talk in some of the content of ch. 4-24, and particularly the content of ch. 16, which is disturbing. Modern translations in English gloss over some of the language in these chapters to temper it. The Lord is exceptionally blunt and specific about the idolatries Judah had been engaging in, and addresses it without flinching. Additionally, some of the mystical traditions that had developed around the content of ch. 1 and 10 had run people off into strange roads, so Rabbis discouraged people from reading the text.

In the book of Ezekiel the Lord is no longer encouraging Judah to repent. It is too late for that. He is angry now, and his patience is at an end. Jerusalem has been invaded and occupied by Babylon, with the leaders and educated people taken captive into Babylon. Those who survived the invasion and who weren't taken into exile remain at Jerusalem, until Zedkiah is killed and the city and temple are destroyed. The situation for Judah is dire. And, it was all predicted by both Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Judah could have repented, but they didn't. They are now heaping upon themselves the negative consequences of the covenant curses of Lev. 26 and Deut. 28. But, the Lord is still their God, and instead of utterly destroying them or completely abandoning them, He is using this as an opportunity to winnow out a righteous remnant and offer them all of the great blessings He has to offer.

Major Themes

There are two recurring themes through the book of Ezekiel: Israel and Judah coming to know the Lord again through their tribulations, and the preeminent power and glory of the Lord.

The phrase "they shall know that I am the Lord" or a similar statement appears 63 times in the book of Ezekiel, and is presented as a conclusion or justification at the end of prophetic judgements both favorable and unfavorable. This phrase first appears in the book of Exodus nine times in a similar context where the Lord shows His power to both Israel and the Egyptians through grand overt miracles and explicit ordinances associated with the Law of Moses. The phrase also appears in the Book of Mormon six times, five times in a negative context.

The usage in Ezekiel is visceral, not intellectual. The Lord is being forced to punish these rebellious people in order to get their attention, as well as dispose of the idolatry and abominations from them. Clearly, the Lord's intentions are to reacquaint Judah and Israel with Himself through their tribulations, per the terms of the covenant curses in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28. Since Israel and Judah did not voluntarily repent, they are being punished until only a righteous remnant is left and they return to Him. Those willing to return to Him as a result of their tribulations will then know Him, because they have humbled themselves and submitted to His judgements on them. Judah has gone into captivity in Babylon, and the Lord said they would, because of their rebellion. Now they need to repent and return to Him. They have forgotten the Lord, but they will be made to remember Him or perish.

The second theme or phrase is "the glory of the Lord" or "the glory of God". This phrase appears 15 times in the book of Ezekiel and is depicted through grand imagery, such as the Lord's chariot throne in ch. 1 and 10, the numerous discussions around the Lord's presence in the Temple, and the various threats against heathen nations. Ezekiel is seeking to show Judah their God is not weak or small, He is great and all powerful over His creation. Israel and Judah being scattered doesn't mean the Lord is not their God, not at all. He is still the God over all the earth. The problem is His chosen people are generally awful. But, that doesn't make Him weak. He is still completely engaged and very capable at bringing about His will, despite their unwillingness to participate in the process.

The Eschatological Temple

In chapters 40-48, Ezekiel details a series of visions revealed to him about a future Temple built to the Lord, and forming the center of their future life. In ch. 7-9 the Lord explains that He is giving over the contemporary temple into the hands of the heathens because Judah has defiled it. Chapter 10 then details the Lord's presence abandoning the temple and withdrawing into heaven by the merkabah.

But, in ch. 40-48 there are a series of promises made a future temple is rebuilt and restored and filled with the presence of the Lord on ch. 43, the messianic king David is restored. Israel is united with Judah and a great river pours out from underneath the temple in ch. 47, which transforms the desert into an Eden-like garden and even flows on to heal the Dead Sea. The Levitical priesthood is restored, a prince is put back in place, and the 12 tribe's lands are reapportioned, this time centered on Jerusalem and the temple.

The purpose is to show the Lord is planning on preserving Israel and keeping the covenants He made with Abraham. Yes, things are bad now among Ezekiel's contemporaries, but the Lord still has big plans, is still willing to work with them when they repent, and is looking forward to a day when He can return to His temple where His people worship Him the way they are supposed to. And, when they do repent and return to Him, He will gladly accept them, return to His temple and bless them miraculously.

The healing waters of ch. 47 are an emphatic symbolic version of 36:33-36, that centers squarely on the temple, the house of the Lord. It makes it clear that when Judah returns to Him and makes genuine temple worship the center of their lives, then the Lord will bless according to all of the promises of fertility in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28. He will change the desert into the garden of Eden and Judah will prosper. This is a clear curse reversal. Is it to be interpreted literally? Yes, we should see this as an enduring promise the Lord has made to Judah that He is willing to fulfil.

The problem is when Cyrus restored the remnant of Judah to Jerusalem, they didn't get back with the zeal they needed to actually fulfil these predictions. Doesn't make the prediction false, it means the people were false, per 43:10-12.

10 Thou son of man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern. 11 And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write it in their sight, that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them. 12 This is the law of the house; Upon the top of the mountain the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the house.

John's Revelation picks up these predictions (cf. Rev. 11) and retools them in a last days setting, perhaps a millennial reference.

The Extraordinary Imagery of Ezekiel

Lets take a closer look at some of the exceptional imagery Ezekiel details in his visions.

Ezekiel 1 The Merkabah

Ezekiel's Merkabah is a combination of a battle chariot, palanquin, and the ark of the covenant, all wrapped into one. It represents an idealized eminently powerful vehicle through which the Lord exercises His will on the earth and manifests His presence.

Judah has just been militarily defeated by Babylon, making the Lord look bad. From the human point of view, it makes Israel's God look weak. But, the truth is the Lord is very powerful, and exercises His will on the world as He sees fit. The imagery of the Merkabah is to convey to Judah that the Lord is powerful, He is in control, and He is still their God.

4 And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. 5 Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. 6 And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings....10 As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle...13 As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. 14 And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.

15 Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. 16 The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. 17 When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. 18 As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four.

19 And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. 20 Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. 21 When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up

over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.

26 And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. 27 And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. 28 As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.

Ezekiel 10 Temple Abandoned

The Lord moves out of the Temple. Judah's wickedness has cause the Lord to leave His house, and leave Judah to their destruction. They have offended Him, so He leaves, abandoning His house and leaving them with no power.

16 And when the cherubims went, the wheels went by them: and when the cherubims lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the same wheels also turned not from beside them. 17 When they stood, these stood; and when they were lifted up, these lifted up themselves also: for the spirit of the living creature was in them.

18 Then the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims. 19 And the cherubims lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight: when they went out, the wheels also were beside them, and every one stood at the door of the east gate of the Lord's house; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above.

Ezekiel 37 – Reunification of Israel and Judah, dry bones

1 The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, 2 And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. 3 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. 4 Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. 8 And when I beheld, lo, the sinews

and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. 9 Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.

11 Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. 12 Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, 14 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.

Ezekiel 37 – Reunification of Israel and Judah, two sticks

15 The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying, 16 Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions: 17 And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand.

18 And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not shew us what thou meanest by these? 19 Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand.

20 And the sticks whereon thou writest shall be in thine hand before their eyes. 21 And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: 22 And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all: 23 Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwellingplaces, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God. 24 And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them. 25 And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell

therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. 26 Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. 27 My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28 And the heathen shall know that I the Lord do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore.

Ezekiel 47 - The Healing River

1 Afterward he brought me again unto the door of the house; and, behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward: for the forefront of the house stood toward the east, and the waters came down from under from the right side of the house, at the south side of the altar.

6 And he said unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen this? Then he brought me, and caused me to return to the brink of the river. 7 Now when I had returned, behold, at the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other. 8 Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed.

9 And it shall come to pass, that every thing that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: and there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come thither: for they shall be healed; and every thing shall live whither the river cometh. 10 And it shall come to pass, that the fishers shall stand upon it from En-gedi even unto En-eglaim; they shall be a place to spread forth nets; their fish shall be according to their kinds, as the fish of the great sea, exceeding many. 11 But the miry places thereof and the marshes thereof shall not be healed; they shall be given to salt. 12 And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.