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**EZEKIEL**



# **INTRODUCTION**

## The Ezekiel Scroll

As already pointed out in the Introduction (see page 10), if we want to attempt to understand the inspired words of the prophets, it is essential that we attempt to understand the situation of the people whom they were addressing. The people Ezekiel was addressing were from Judah. They were living in exile in a camp called Tel-Abib near Nippur in Babylonia. In 597BC the Babylonian army under Nebuchadrezzar captured Jerusalem and took the king, Jehoniah, and many of the leading citizens, including Ezekiel, into exile. A number of Ezekiel's oracles are dated: the earliest is 593 and the latest is 571. Moshe Greenberg in Volume 1 page 12 of his commentary published in the Anchor Bible Series in 1983 states:

Contemporary and other ancient records, biblical and extrabiblical, tend to corroborate the testimony of the dates in Ezekiel that its contents fall between 593 and 571 B.C.E. Events of those years are reflected in the prophecies, no event after 571 is reflected in them, and any that precedes 593 is clearly past.

The scroll hinges on the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587, by which time Ezekiel and his fellow exiles had been in Babylon for eleven years. We find the record of the beginning of the siege (588) in Ezekiel chapter 24, and the announcement of the city's fall (587) in chapter 33. The oracles in the first 24 chapters belong to the period between 593 and 587. These oracles are highly critical of the people's behaviour. They seek to explain why it is that YHWH appears to have abandoned them. Ezekiel insists that the people are undergoing a punishment which they have brought on themselves by their infidelity to the covenant. The oracles after chapter 33 belong to the period after 587. The time for threats is over. In these later oracles Ezekiel highlights YHWH's fidelity and promises a new beginning and a restoration of land and temple. Between chapter 24 and chapter 33 we have a series of oracles directed against nations other than Judah. These chapters provide a dramatic pause while the fate of the city hangs in the balance. Theologically they highlight the justice of YHWH. From the first 24 chapters one could get the impression that Judah was the only nation being 'punished'. These oracles declare that that is not the case and prepare for the words of restoration of Judah that we find after chapter 33.

The major political power of the day was Babylon under King Nebuchadrezzar, whose reign was from 605-562. Babylon's main rival was Egypt, firstly under Pharaoh Necho (609-595), then Psammetichus II (595-589), followed by Hophra (589-570). Ezekiel (and in this he agrees with Jeremiah) saw Nebuchadrezzar as God's instrument in punishing Judah for its infidelity. He spoke out against the policy of Judah's leaders who sought to throw off the Babylonian yoke by looking to Egypt. This proved to be foolish. It was also a betrayal of the covenant. They should have looked to YHWH.

To help provide the context for a profitable reading of Ezekiel's oracles, let us begin with the fateful year 609. In that year Necho became Pharaoh of Egypt and headed north to assist Assyria in its struggle against Babylon. King Josiah of Judah had taken advantage of the weakening of Assyria to throw off the Assyrian yoke and to regain control over northern Israel.

He did not want to see Assyria strong and so, confident in the support of YHWH, he attempted to stop the Egyptian army at Megiddo. His attempt failed and he was killed. It is difficult from this distance to appreciate the shock caused by his failure and death. He had been a faithful king – the best since David. He had reformed Judah, which, under his authority, returned to fidelity to the Torah. Yet – as they saw it – YHWH had abandoned them. The only way they could understand such action on God’s part was to think that it must have been necessary punishment for the sins that occurred during the long reign of Manasseh (696-642BC) – sins that not even the reforms of Josiah could wipe away.

The leading citizens of Jerusalem bypassed Josiah’s eldest son and appointed his younger brother, Shallum, to the throne. He took the throne name Jehoahaz. His reign lasted only three months. He was deported to Egypt and the Egyptians appointed his brother Eliakim as king of Judah. He took the throne name Jehoiakim, and remained committed to Egypt for the rest of his reign. This commitment dominated the final years of Judah, and is an important key to the understanding of the Ezekiel scroll. Jehoiakim had been king for only four years when in 605 Nebuchadrezzar, the crown-prince of Babylon, defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish. His father died the same year and Nebuchadrezzar was crowned king of Babylon. Jehoiakim, along with the kings of Syria, Moab and Edom, had to pay a huge tribute to retain some semblance of independence. Jehoiakim lived in the hope that Egypt would help him throw off the Babylonian yoke.

In 601 Nebuchadrezzar attacked Egypt but was repulsed. He withdrew to reorganise his army. Jehoiakim, encouraged by Babylon’s failure to take over Egypt, took the occasion to refuse payment of the tribute. In 598, the Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege and was succeeded by his eighteen year old son Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. Three months later Jerusalem surrendered and the young king along with the leading citizens was taken hostage (see Ezekiel 17:13). The biblical record differs as to the number who were taken into exile (see 2Kings 24:14-16 and Jeremiah 52:28). Whatever the exact number, for our purposes it is important to note that one of them was a priest, Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:3; 3:15). Jehoiachin’s uncle, Mattaniah, was appointed king (or, more likely, regent, as Jehoiachin, held hostage in Babylon, was treated as the legitimate king). Mattaniah took the throne-name Zedekiah.

Ezekiel’s prophetic ‘career’ belongs to the early years of the Babylonian Exile. As part of the exile himself, Ezekiel is addressing his fellow exiles. He also has in focus the bulk of the Judaeans who were left behind in Judah. The Babylonian Exile demanded an enormous religious adjustment (see the Introduction pages 11-12). Among the exiles as well as those left behind in Judah there appear to have been two camps. There were those who advocated acceptance of their fate. What was required of them was that they repent. Their fidelity to the Torah would please YHWH who, in his own time, would restore the land to them. Back in Judah, the prophet Jeremiah belonged to this party, and the priest Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, was of the same conviction. We will see this in his tirades against Egypt and those who looked to Egypt to liberate them from servitude to Babylon.

## Introduction to Ezekiel

In his commentary on Ezekiel, (in the Hermenia Series, Fortress Press 1969) Walther Zimmerli includes the following as areas in which there is agreement between Jeremiah and Ezekiel: ‘submission to the Babylonians, the decidedly anti-Egyptian attitude, the expectation of a new future for Israel among the exiles and not among those left in the land, the condemnation of the action of Zedekiah, and statements about the inner transformation of the people in the promised age of salvation’ (page 45).

The second party was led by Zedekiah. They looked to Egypt to help them throw off the Babylonian yoke. There was no place in their thinking for submission or repentance. In 594 Nebuchadnezzar had to put down an anti-Babylonian conspiracy in which Zedekiah was involved. A few years later, Zedekiah repeated the mistake made by Jehoiakim and, encouraged by Egypt, withheld tribute. In 588 Ezekiel’s threats were realised when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. Egypt’s intervention was unsuccessful (Ezekiel 30:21). Zedekiah attempted to escape, but was captured (Ezekiel 12:1-16). Ravaged by famine (see Ezekiel 4:9-11; 5:10), Jerusalem capitulated (587). A further group of the leading citizens were taken into exile (Jeremiah 52:29), and the city was razed to the ground.

### Ezekiel’s oracles and the Ezekiel ‘School’

As we embark upon a study of the Ezekiel scroll, it is important that we make a distinction between the prophetic oracle and the written scroll. The medium used by the prophets to convey their insights was first and foremost the spoken word. Having experienced what they judged were inspired insights, they felt called, even impelled, to share these insights with their contemporaries, to remind them of YHWH their God and to challenge them to listen to, heed, and act on the divine word. There are examples of prophets seeing to it that their oracles were written down. In this way they wished to underline the lasting importance of their words. Because as a priest Ezekiel belonged to a learned elite who were practised in writing, it is not unlikely that he himself composed parts of the scroll that bears his name. However we should expect that Ezekiel’s disciples had a significant role in composing the written text as is the case for other prophetic scrolls. They treasured Ezekiel’s words. They also reflected on them in the light of their experience. It should not surprise us that they kept discovering new depths of meaning in his words. They believed that YHWH had spoken to them through Ezekiel. They knew that YHWH is a living God, and so, to keep the word fresh and relevant they felt free to ‘clarify’, update and expand the oracles in the light of historical events and changed circumstances (see Introduction pages 8-9).

Scholars speak of a ‘Deuteronomistic School’, a ‘Priestly School’, a ‘Jeremiah School’ and an ‘Isaiah School’. They speak also of an ‘Ezekiel School’. In reference to this ‘School’ Walther Zimmerli states in his commentary that they ‘edited the prophecies of Ezekiel, commented upon them, and gave them a fuller theological exposition’ (page 70). Later he writes: ‘We must see here a serious effort to grasp the meaning of what was revealed to the prophet by Yahweh and an attempt at further clarification’ (page 124). Joseph Blenkinsopp (Ezekiel, John Knox Press, 1990, page 8) writes: ‘Most critical scholars accept the basic authenticity of the work, while admitting significant contributions from a “school” of Ezekiel.’ This is the view taken by Blenkinsopp and we are following it in this commentary.

Later authors were careful to preserve the texts that they inherited, but not as archive pieces. They wanted to explore them to find what their God was saying to them in their present circumstances. It would have been easier for us if these later authors had kept separate the prophetic texts and their own ‘updating’, but that was not their way. They considered the inherited text as an expression of God’s word in the past. They considered that God continued to reveal his word to them for the enlightenment of their contemporaries. There is lively debate among scholars when it comes to assigning sections of the scroll to the prophet himself or to later writers. Our interest in this introductory commentary is not in seeking clarity in this complex matter. Rather, it is to take the text as we have it and to attempt to see what it is about the text that made it so important to generation after generation of Jews. We should surely expect it to speak to and inspire us as well.

### Inspired by Ezekiel?

#### 1. Divine punishment

Most of Chapters 1-24 (prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587) consists in declarations of the divine punishment that was coming upon Judah because of the people’s infidelity. When we add to this chapters 25-32 and 35-39 which consist in divine punishment of other nations it is clear that divine punishment takes up the largest part of the scroll.

It is essential that as we read this material we remember the key assumption that Ezekiel shared with his contemporaries that whatever happens in history is an expression of God’s will. We examined this assumption in the Introduction (see pages 16-17). While we cannot follow Ezekiel in this assumption, one lesson we can learn from him is that what we do matters, and that we cannot simply wish away the consequences of the decisions we make.

Some of these declarations of punishment call for repentance (a change of mind and heart and behaviour) with a view to avoiding the punishment (see 14:6; 18:30). In fact repentance was not forthcoming, but we can learn the importance of changing our way of thinking and deciding when it becomes evident that we are wrong. Only the truth can set us free.

Again and again Ezekiel makes the point that YHWH is reluctant to punish.

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord YHWH, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? ... Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!  
Why will you die, O house of Israel?

– Ezekiel 18:23, 31

He also insists that God’s judgment is just. We are punished because of the way we behave (see 7:3-9; 39:23). It is because the people had ‘a wanton heart that turned away from me’ (6:9). They were rebellious (5:5-10), unfaithful to the covenant (11:12; 8:1-18; 16:59). We are assured that the innocent would not be punished (9:4; 18:4, 20, 30, 33).

## Introduction to Ezekiel

### 2. Special responsibility of anyone in leadership

Ezekiel has a lot to offer those of us who are in positions of leadership. He is devastating in his criticism of bad leaders who look after themselves and neglect those they are supposed to care for (see especially his declaration against the ‘shepherds, chapter 34). God will not abandon his ‘sheep’:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

– Ezekiel 34:11 (read 34:11-16)

I will break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them.

– Ezekiel 34:27 (read 34:27-31)

Ezekiel criticises the priests (see 22:26-27; 8:1-18), and especially those who claim to speak for God but who ‘follow their own spirit and have seen nothing’(13:3); who see a cracked wall and cover the crack with whitewash (13:10, 15); who ‘prophesy out of their own imagination’(13:17). Ezekiel himself is instructed to ‘eat’ God’s word (3:1-3), to ‘receive it in your heart’(3:10), to speak whether people listen or not (3:11).

### 3. Restoration

Dotted throughout the scroll, especially in the chapters that post-date the fall of Jerusalem (chapters 33-39), we find a promise of restoration (36:8-12, 24-28; 39:25-29), and of a covenant that will last forever (37:26). Though YHWH must punish, his will is that ‘they will be my people and I will be their God’(14:11):

I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord YHWH.

– Ezekiel 16:62-63

YHWH wants to re-establish the loving communion he offered when Israel first became his people (see 16:8). For this to happen the people will need a new spirit.

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

– Ezekiel 11:19-20

This text seems to make this gift dependent on repentance (see the context, 11:18-21). Elsewhere the gift is presented as wholly a divine initiative flowing from God’s largesse (read 36:22-32; 37:14).

### 4. Awe in the presence of the divine

Ezekiel uses extraordinary imagery to express his experience of his initial encounter with God (chapter 1; see also 3:23 and 8:4), including the imagery of ‘spirit’ (1:12) and ‘fire’(1:13, 27; 8:2). The destruction of the temple does not end God’s presence with his people. The glorious (and always transcendent and mysterious) YHWH is ‘a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone’(11:16). This is surely a consoling message for all of us, whatever state we find ourselves in.