Ezekiel: All Things New!

St. Michael Lutheran Church

all things NEW
Bible Study on Ezekiel

Introduction

In the book of Ezekiel we meet a priest, Ezekiel ben Buzi, one of the Judean exiles deported along with King Jehoiachin to Babylon in 597. Five years into the exile, in the year when Ezekiel would have begun his duties as a priest at the age of thirty (Num 4:3), he was called to be a prophet. Ezekiel not only lives through the collapse of Judah but also the undoing of the larger ancient Near Eastern world as he witnesses Assyrian’s downfall and Babylon’s rise.

With equal appropriateness, Ezekiel may be described as either the last pre-exilic prophet or the first post-exilic prophet. His use of poetry and prose, as well as the fact that he prophesied both before and after the destruction of Jerusalem, link him to both periods. In his specific concerns he has much in common with his pre-exilic predecessors. Like them, he addresses a definite historical crisis and denounces moral degeneracy and idolatry. To reinforce his spoken message, he makes extensive use of symbolic actions, just like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea. However, stylistically, Ezekiel is more akin to the post-exilic prophets. His book employs bizarre images, angelic intermediaries, numerology, and apocalyptic visions—all typical of later post-exilic writings. Ezekiel therefore straddles both the pre- and post-exilic worlds.
Take a Look in the Mirror

The first reason to study Ezekiel is that it will help you see yourself, and especially your sin, more clearly. The prophet Ezekiel was commissioned to be a watchman sounding the warning for the early waves of exiles in Babylon (3:17). The problem was the people didn’t want to hear his warning (2:4–7) in large part because they did
not have an accurate understanding of themselves and their relationship with God. Ezekiel repeatedly holds up a mirror to Israel, so that they can see their idolatry (e.g., chs. 8, 14, 16), their pride (e.g., ch. 19), their misplaced hopes (e.g., ch. 17), their self-righteousness (e.g., ch. 18), and their unfaithfulness (e.g., ch. 23). And he does not let them look away, or minimize their sins, or take refuge in flimsy excuses. In graphic and sometimes shocking language, he helps Israel see the painful truth of their condition before the Lord. And because they don’t want to listen, they don’t want to look into the mirror of God’s Word, God has him act out the message, in sometimes comical, but often painful “street theater.”

None of us like to look in the mirror and see that there’s something wrong. We’d rather study God’s Word for messages of how much he loves us, and what great plans he has for us (which is true). We’d rather mine God’s Word for practical wisdom and solid help for navigating the challenges of life (which it has). But if we don’t see what’s wrong, we won’t take action to address it. And that’s one of Ezekiel’s goals: to help us see the true nature of our problem so that we will repent and turn to God for the forgiveness and mercy we need (18:30–32).
Gain Perspective on God’s Plan

Second, Ezekiel wants us to understand what God is doing. He prophesied in the decades before and after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. That cataclysmic event marks the center of his prophecy and the turning point of the book. With the city overrun and the temple destroyed, God’s people wondered what God was doing, if the promises had failed, if their future was gone. So Ezekiel makes plain that God will judge the nations, just as he had judged Israel (chs. 25–32). The justice of God shows no partiality. But having judged his son, Israel, God would also display his faithfulness by bringing his son back to life. In an act of powerful recreation, his Spirit would restore Israel (ch. 37). For the sake of his own glory, he would make a new covenant with his people that could not be broken, and he would put his own Spirit in them (ch. 36). They would live peacefully and safely under David their shepherd and God himself would be their shepherd (ch. 34). And this restoration would culminate in an ideal temple (chs 40-46) in the midst of a new creation promised land (chs. 47–48), from which God would never again depart (43:7).

For people like Israel and us, who are wondering if God has a plan, Ezekiel’s visions give both hope and certainty. Some of the visions are obscure in their details, but their point is clear. The lack of details at times is frustrating, but that same lack makes clear that God is not giving us a blueprint that we must accomplish. Rather, he’s assuring us that through the power of the Spirit and the establishment of the New Covenant, fulfilled in the
finished work of Jesus Christ, God will certainly accomplish what we neither deserve nor can attain on our own.

It’s easy to lose perspective in the midst of life’s challenges and trials. Ezekiel lifts our eyes and refocuses our vision on the centrality and certainty of God’s gratuitous, saving work in the gospel. Despite what we see in the world around us, or in our own lives, God’s plan was accomplished at the cross of Jesus Christ, is displayed now in the life of the church, and will be consummated in a New Jerusalem, in which there will be no temple “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

**Find Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

One of the burning questions of Ezekiel is “Where is God?” The book opens with God’s people in exile and God unexpectedly shows up (ch. 1). What is he doing in Babylon? Why isn’t he in the temple in Jerusalem? In dramatic and moving imagery, Ezekiel is shown that God has abandoned the temple in Jerusalem, driven away by the sins of Israel (chs. 8–10). The exile cannot be avoided; God’s judgment cannot be averted (ch. 12). The question haunts the first half of the book, and the answer seems self-evident: “The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see” (9:9).

From almost the very beginning of the book, God makes clear that in the midst of suffering and judgment they have misunderstood God’s heart. God declares “though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they
have gone” (11:16). His arrival in Babylon not only marks his judgment on Jerusalem, but anticipates his triumphant judgment over Israel’s enemies (chs. 38-39). His purpose is to put his Spirit within his people (36:27) and to restore them under a king like David (37:24–28). And the book ends with a final glance at the restored city, which is never called Jerusalem, but rather, “The Lord is There” (48:35)

Ezekiel wants us to know that God is where he always is; he is with his people. He’s with them in the midst of their judgment, a truth that finds its fullest expression at the cross, when the Son bore the sins of the sons. He’s with them in the new life that he gives through the new covenant, because he puts his very Spirit within them. That promise was also fulfilled through Christ, who ascended to the Father so he could send us the Spirit (John 14:16, 26), and who even now makes us alive by the power of the Spirit (John 3:5–8). And he will be with them forever in the New Jerusalem which is the people of God, a city which will need no temple because God himself will dwell in their midst. (Rev. 21).

Where is God when your world falls apart, when God’s promises seem impossibly far off, when the enemy seems to have the upper hand, and it feels as if God does not see and does not care? Ezekiel knew from bitter experience the reality and pain of those questions. But we study him not because he could give voice to our questions. We study him because he gave voice to God’s answer. Hope is found not in our circumstances, our feelings, or our efforts, but in the confidence that God is with his people, for what Ezekiel prophesied, Jesus Christ fulfilled—“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).
Timeline of Israel’s History and Ezekiel’s Ministry

- 722 BC – Exile of Northern Kingdom (Israel) by Assyrians
- 640 BC – Josiah Becomes King of Southern Kingdom (Judah) [2 Kings 22:1]
- 622 BC – The Birth of Ezekiel [Ezek. 1:1]
- 605 BC – Jehoiakim Burns the Scroll (Jeremiah 36)/Nobles (including Daniel) taken as hostages to Babylon [2 Kings 24:1; Dan. 1:1-2]
- 597 BC – First Deportation to Babylon (Ezekiel taken) [2 Kings 24:10-14]
- 592 BC – Ezekiel’s Call to Ministry [Ezek. 1:1-3]

Historical Issues

Historical markers appear in Ezek 1:1–2; 3:16; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:17; 33:21; and 40:1. The only two oracles that are not in chronological order are against Egypt. The first and sixth oracles against Egypt are placed first (Ezek 29:1–30:19), followed by the second through the fifth Egyptian oracles (Ezek 30:20–32:32). (Some are oracles
against Pharaoh, but that is essentially the same as Egypt). It would appear, then, that Ezekiel’s oracles are largely arranged in chronological order, with the exception made with the first and last Egyptian oracles in order to group them with the other oracles against Egypt. Seven out of the thirteen dates in the book are connected to Ezekiel’s oracles about nations.

All of these references to time are tied to Jehoiachin’s exile with one exception—Ezek 1:1 where the thirtieth year probably refers to Ezekiel’s age. If this is the case, the prophet was born in 623. At that time Assyria was still the dominant power in the ancient Near East but its demise was on the horizon. This would bring with it an era when Judah was a pawn in a massive battle for control of the Syria-Palestinian corridor.

Assyrian dominos began to fall when Nabopolassar (625–605)—Babylon’s founder—rallied the Chaldeans and Medes to form an imposing coalition. He defeated Assyria in the following battles—Asshur (614), Nineveh (612), and finally Haran (609). Babylon then triumphed over Egypt at the battle of Carchemish (605). After this Nebuchadnezzar (605–562)—Nabopolassar’s son—began to exercise his iron grip over the Levant.

Meanwhile, in Judah King Jehoiakim assumed the role of Nebuchadnezzar’s vassal from 604–602. Then, relying on Egyptian help, he revolted but ended up dying on 21 Marcheshvan 598 (Dec 9, 598) before Babylon could respond. When Nebuchadnezzar marched against Jerusalem the city surrendered on 2 Adar 597 (April 16, 597). Jehoiachin paid dearly for his father Jehoiakim’s folly. He was exiled to Babylon, along with Ezekiel and other priests and nobility (2
Kgs 24:11–16). Five years later Yahweh called Ezekiel into ministry (Ezek 1:2).

Judean deportees were placed into agricultural communities as well as in the city of Babylon. Those who lived in the urban center were possibly enlisted for work in the temple, while the book of Ezekiel attests to another community that was more agrarian. These settlements were by the Chebar River (e.g., Ezek 1:3; 10:15; 43:3), one he calls Tel-abib (Ezek 3:15). According to Ezek 8:14, many of the exiles enjoyed a degree of freedom in their refugee camps. They were able to build homes, cultivate fields, and engage in business. But, lest they get too comfortable, Ezek 37:1–14 indicates that Yahweh’s plan is to bring them back to the promised land.

The prophet’s oracles from Ezek 1:4–29:16; 30:20-33:21 were received 593–574. The last oracle in the book appears in Ezek 29:17–30:16 which was during Jehoiachin’s (and Ezekiel’s) twenty-seventh year of exile or 571. Because the prophet never mentions the release of Jehoiachin in 560 (cf. 2 Kgs 25:27–30), it is reasonable to conclude that his messages cover the period from 593 to 571.
Literary Features of Ezekiel

Ezek 1–24 mostly denounces and condemns and while Ezek 33–48 consists largely of promissory oracles of return and restoration. Chapters 24 and 33 function as key structural markers. Ezek 24 announces the beginning of Jerusalem’s
sige while Ezek 33 reports the city’s capture. Both chapters mention the prophet’s call when God made him mute (Ezek 3:24–27). His loss of speech (Ezek 24:25–27) comes to an end when a messenger announces Jerusalem’s fall (Ezek 33:21–22). Sandwiched between chapters 24 and 33 are Ezekiel’s oracles about foreign nations which, in their present literary arrangement, make the transition from Yahweh’s judgment of his people to their salvation. Seen in this way, Jerusalem’s destruction is the fulcrum of the book, marking the end of judgment and the beginning of divine mercy.

The book of Ezekiel breaks down into four parts: (1) the prophet’s call (Ezek 1:1–3:27); (2) oracles of doom for Judah and Jerusalem (Ezek 4:1–24:27); (3) seven nations are condemned, indicating universal judgment (Ezek 25:1–32:32); and (4) announcements of restoration (Ezek 33:1–48:35). The book is made up of fifty literary units, forty-eight of which are clearly signaled—either by a chronological marker or with the phrase “the word of Yahweh came to me.” Because of this high degree of literary coherence, Ezekiel is one of the easiest books in the OT to outline.

Ezekiel is famous for his propensity to reuse phrases. Note the following examples: son of man (ninety-three times); the word of Yahweh came to me (fifty times); thus said Lord Yahweh (one-hundred and twenty-two times); the oracle of my Lord Yahweh (eighty-five times); the house of Israel (eighty-three times); and I am Yahweh (eighty-six times). The prophet also reworks themes like divine glory (Ezek 1:1–28; 8:1–11:25; 43:1–9), the prophet as a watchman (Ezek 3:16–21; 33:1–9), Jerusalem as a pot (Ezek 11:1–12; 24:1–11), personal responsibility (Ezek 18:1–32; 33:10–20), and Israel’s harlotries (Ezek 16, 23).
Theological Themes in Ezekiel

Christ in Ezekiel

Ezekiel envisions a new David who will shepherd and rule his people (Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25). In Ezek 34:24 and 37:25 he is depicted as a prince or leader. The leader appears again in chapters 40–48 (e.g., Ezek 44:3; 45:7). Christ is this Good Shepherd who leads his people to find good pasture, that is, abundant life (John 10:1–10).
John’s Gospel also accents the motif of Christ as the new Temple (e.g., John 1:14; 2:19–22). And, just as Ezekiel’s Temple flows with living water (Ezek 47:1–12), so John maintains that Christ is the source of this river. It begins with just a trickle. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “No one can enter the reign of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). It picks up momentum: “But the water I give will become a fountain of water springing up into eternal life” (John 4:14). And then it becomes a surge: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). But, in an ironic twist for the ages, this raging river completely dries up. Christ laments on the cross, “I thirst” (John 19:28). The Roman spear thrust brought with it a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:34). Here is the Temple, crushed and cursed—not by the might of Babylon—but by the sin in people’s lives. Yet just as the Spirit entered the dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14) and God’s glory returned to Ezekiel’s Temple (Ezek 43:1–5), this same Spirit and glory returned to the Crucified One. Jesus is alive forevermore.

This death and resurrection motif is central to Ezek 24:15–27. The passage is often understood to be that, just as Yahweh commanded Ezekiel not to mourn his wife’s death, Judeans were not to lament the death of Jerusalem. Yet Yahweh’s instructions to the prophet to put on sandals and a turban (Ezek 24:17) come from rituals marking status transformation, not acts of mourning. Priests and kings donned turbans when they were installed in office, and marriage rituals involved both sandals and turbans. This means that even in the midst of death (Ezek 24:2), there is new life. The destruction of the old (Ezek 1–24), makes way for the building of the new (Ezek 33–48). Christ’s triumphant
cry from the agony of the cross surely epitomizes this idea (John 19:30), while his resurrection on the third day indicates that this is how God has chosen to work in the world.

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**Sin and Grace in Ezekiel**

Ezekiel frequently alternates between sin and grace, woe and weal. For example, after Yahweh’s scathing rebuke in Ezek 16:1–52, the chapter concludes with promises that God will remember his covenant and restore the fortunes of his people (Ezek 16:53–63).

Much has been written about a supposed turn in the OT from generational sin, articulated in the Pentateuch, to a doctrine of individualistic accountability as stated in Ezekiel (Ezek 18:1–32; 33:10–20). Some believe that during the exile the doctrine of individual responsibility began to undermine the understanding of corporate/generational sin. However, Ezekiel is not responsible for an individualism that replaced the previous emphasis of the corporate group. The prophet does not promote a new doctrine of sin. Rather he combats a fatalistic view of life engendered by self-pity and a one-sided emphasis or moral collectivism or corporate solidarity. He calls the people to own up to their sin instead of blaming their parents for the current crisis (Ezek 18:2–3).
The community’s culpability was brought about by their fascination with other gods (e.g., Ezek 8). The prophet even speaks of people taking idols into their hearts (Ezek 14:1–11). Ezekiel’s most frequent term for idols is גִּלְעָל, *fecal deities*. He employs it thirty-eight out of the forty-eight times it appears in the OT (e.g., Ezek 8:10; 16:36; 18:6; 20:8, 24). The noun derives from the verb *roll*, so it denotes pellets of dung/excrement or something of that sort. Because of this offensive idolatry Yahweh rejects the intercession of even the most righteous people (cf. Ezek 14:14). There is no room in the relationship for anyone other than Israel and her God. Two’s company, three’s a crowd.

Yet in spite of their sin of idolatry Yahweh will shower people with his grace. He promises to gather his scattered people (Ezek 11:16–17; 20:42; 34:11–13), bring them back to the promised land (Ezek 11:17–18; 34:14–15; 36:24), give them a new heart and his Spirit (Ezek 11:19–20; 16:63; 34:30–31; 36:25–38; 37:23–24), restore David’s dynasty (Ezek 34:23–24; 37:22–25), and establish his presence in the midst of his people (Ezek 48:35). Yet, lest Israel again get puffed up with inordinate pride, Ezek 36:22–32 indicates that Yahweh does all of this because of his own self-regard. It is not based upon any righteousness in Israel.
Divine Glory

Yahweh’s glory, is Ezekiel’s central theological idea. It first appears in chapter 1 in the form of a man (Ezek 1:26–28). In this chapter the prophet also sees living creatures with chariot wheels filled with eyes functioning as a platform for Yahweh’s throne. The faces of the creatures indicate that God is all-present, the eyes suggest his omniscience, and the numerous wheels signal that Yahweh’s presence is not static but mobile. The glory is like a dazzling brightness, a flashing fire, and a gleaming metal.

The second appearance of God’s glory comes in Ezek 8–11 where the prophet witnesses Yahweh’s withdrawal from the temple. The vision begins with people making an altar in the Temple to “the idol that provokes jealousy” (Ezek 8:5). Elders have their own idols (Ezek 8:12), women worship Tammuz (Ezek 8:14), and still others bow down to the sun (Ezek 8:16). Bloodshed and violence fill the land (Ezek 9:9) and these abominations drive Yahweh from his Temple (Ezek 8:6).

Leaving in stages like a jilted lover (e.g., Ezek 9:3; 10:4, 18–19), Yahweh finds it heart-wrenching to leave the ones he loves. Even when he finally departs, he does not go far. Yahweh’s glory stops moving on the mountain east of Jerusalem (Ezek 11:23). There he stands, in solidarity with the exiles. They are outcast, so is he. They are displaced, so is he. They are faced with unfamiliar surroundings and so is he. Yahweh is present in the vortex of Israel’s loss. Though sovereign and free, his glory affiliates with the marginalized exilic community.
In grace Yahweh’s glory returns from the east to fill the rebuilt Temple (Ezek 43:1–5). Ezekiel likens this sound to many waters (Ezek 43:2; cf. 1:24) and goes on to write that this glory is what he saw in chapter 1.
Yahweh’s Marriage to Israel

In chapters 16 and 23 Ezekiel joins other prophets (e.g., Hos 1–3; Isa 61:10–11) who portray Yahweh’s relationship with his people as a marriage. The marriage began with great promise. When Yahweh passed by Jerusalem and saw that she was ready for love, he covered her nakedness with his garment and entered into a covenant with her (Ezek 16:8). But after some time, she forgot the days of her youth and committed abominations (Ezek 16:43). Israel became an unfaithful bride who broke the marriage covenant. People played the harlot (Ezek 16:15, 22, 25–26; 28–31, 34–36, 41; 23:3, 5, 7, 11, 14, 17, 19, 27, 30). They pursued other lovers by worshiping idols and graven images and by depending on other nations, primarily Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon (e.g., Ezek 16:32, 38; 23:37, 43, 45).

Judah’s failure to turn from her adulteries resulted in divine judgment (Ezek 16:38; 23:45 cf. Lev 20:10; Deut 22:20). But because Yahweh is steadfastly devoted to his wife, she may anticipate redemption (e.g., Ezek 16:60–63). He will reconstitute the marriage under an everlasting covenant (Ezek 16:60) and Israel will come to “know Yahweh,” likely indicating an emotional and intimate knowledge (Ezek 16:8). Come what may, Yahweh is a faithful husband who keeps his covenantal obligations (e.g., Ezek 16:9–14).
The New Temple

The vision in chapters 40–48 comes to the prophet in 574 (Ezek 40:1). The same guide that met Ezekiel in chapters 8–11 to give him a tour of the doomed city reappears and meets him on a very high mountain (Ezek 40:2). The vision describes the new Temple and how it will function in the new era.

Much about this Temple is similar to Solomon’s Temple as it is presented in 1 Kgs 6–8. Perhaps most striking is the threefold structure of the Temple outlined in the section extending from Ezek 40:48–42:20; first comes the vestibule, then the nave, and finally the inner room which is the holy of holies.

But there are discontinuities as well. For example, Ezekiel’s Temple appears to be almost empty. Virtually all of the furnishings in Solomon’s Temple are missing. The only interior furniture mentioned is the “altar of wood” in front of the inner room (Ezek 41:22). This is distinct from the stone altar of burnt sacrifice that stands outside of the Temple (Ezek 40:47; 43:13–27). Most notable among the omissions, however, is the Ark of the Covenant. Why is this so? Ezekiel’s vision emphasizes Yahweh’s all-sufficiency. Within chapter 36, for example, Yahweh acts to restore his people for no other reason than that he may be known as he really is. The book’s focus is so much on Yahweh that everything else is finally eclipsed. The city’s name at the end of the book is “Yahweh Is There” (Ezek 48:35). What need, then, is there for the Ark?
Solomon’s great bronze sea of 1 Kgs 7:23 is reworked to become a river flowing from the Temple (Ezek 47:1–12). Here Ezekiel’s faithful guide points to the water under the threshold of the altar (Ezek 47:1). The prophet describes it as מפכים, *trickling*. Several verses later this trickle becomes a surging river of life. The river flows to the Dead Sea which is 1,400 feet below sea level and has a saline content of thirty-five percent. In antiquity it was simply called “the Salt Sea.” Ever since divine fire torched Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities at the southern end of the Dead Sea, the entire area became the ultimate symbol of death (cf. Gen 19:24–25).

The prophet catches up with his guide after a third of a mile and splashes into ankle-deep water. After another third of a mile Ezekiel wades into water up to his knees. By the time he reaches the mile marker he can’t find a bottom to the river. Afraid to get in over his head, Ezekiel stands on the bank, only to find that both banks are covered with a great number of trees, which, he is told, will miraculously bear fruit every month and always yield leaves that heal. The guide takes him no farther but points eastward and tells the prophet that the river from the Temple will transform the Dead Sea into a freshwater lake as rich in fish as the Mediterranean Sea. The river runs all around the Dead Sea, from En-gedi to En-eglaim which represents a topographical merism, highlighting the totality of the healing waters. Fishermen are at work, spreading their nets and hauling in their catches. “Wherever the river flows everything lives” (Ezek 47:9).

Additional differences between Solomon’s and Ezekiel’s Temple include the fact that Solomon’s was one of a number of buildings (e.g. 1 Kgs 6:1–14), whereas the new Temple will stand alone (Ezek 43:10–12). As Yahweh’s earthly regent, monarchs wielded final authority in sacred as well as civil
matters. In Israel’s future Jerusalem’s leaders (Ezek 45:7, 8, 13–17) will no longer set “their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them” (Ezek 43:8). Instead the Davidic prince will be allotted land at the periphery of the city, well away from its sacred center (Ezek 45:7; 48:21–22). Henceforth, the Temple mount will belong to the priests (Ezek 45:3–5; 48:9–12).
Additional differences between the old age and the new include the following: (1) the Transjordan will no longer play a role in tribal distribution (Ezek 47:13–20); (2) Judah is placed in the north (Ezek 47:7–8); and (3) the Leah and Rachel tribes are closest to the Temple (Ezek 48:1–7).

Conclusions

Ezekiel is the most unusual person among the goodly fellowship of the prophets. He lies immobile for long periods of time (Ezek 4:4–7), is commanded to bake barley cake over human feces (Ezek 4:12), is mute (Ezek 3:24–27; 24:25–27; 33:22), is conveyed to Jerusalem in visions (Ezek 8:1–4), shows no emotion when his wife dies (Ezek 24:15–17), and engages in outlandish behaviors (e.g., Ezek 5:1–4; 12:3–5). Through it all he sees visions, the people see the prophet, and both see Yahweh, the holy and merciful God of the universe.