

# The Book of Ezekiel

## Background

The Book of Ezekiel is one of the most bizarre texts of the entire Old Testament. Within its pages are strange visions of wheels, dry bones, and strange animals, alongside peculiar prophetic behavior (e.g., shaving hair, lying on the left side for 390 days, and so on). Ezekiel is a book that celebrates God's mysterious nature and provides a message of hope to the exiles in Babylon. Ezekiel was among the first people deported to Babylon in 597 BC, after Nebuchadnezzar's first strike on Judah. His prophetic career spans from 593 to 571 BC. Ezekiel's father is identified as Buzi, who was, according to the Hebrew text, most likely a priest; thus, it is possible that Ezekiel was also a priest. Ezekiel's wife died during the siege on Jerusalem. While in Babylon, Ezekiel first announced words of judgment and warning to the rebellious people still in Judah, but after Jerusalem fell, his words became assurances that God was still present among the exiles.

## The Call of Ezekiel

The Book of Ezekiel opens with the call story of how Ezekiel became a prophet. While he was among the exiles by the river Chebar, Ezekiel had an incredible vision, which defied easy description. The fact that what he saw was beyond words is revealed in the continual use of the phrase "something like" (1:4,5,13,16,22,26,27) as Ezekiel tries to relate what he experienced. During this vision, Ezekiel sees four creatures whose bodies are human, but each being has four faces (three animal-like and one human), four wings, and human hands under their wings. The imagery sounds very similar to the statues that often guarded Assyrian and Babylonian sanctuaries and palaces. In ancient iconography the animals (lion, ox, and eagle) were often used to represent divine speed, strength, and reason. Attached to these human-animal figures were wheels that appeared so that each wheel was inside the wheels of the others, with eyes within their rims, and they seemed to be supporting a heavenly throne. On the throne was a figure that was something like a human but not really human. These wheels allowed the throne to move in any direction. Ezekiel declares that he has encountered the divine likeness and then falls on his face, waiting to hear his mission. The mission is for him to prophesy to the rebellious house of Israel. God assures Ezekiel that he should not be afraid of anything for God is with him (chapter 2). Then Ezekiel is presented with a scroll, containing holy words, and he is instructed to eat it. The prophet does as he is told, ingesting the words of God, and filled with God's words, he returns to the exiles ready to prophesy (chapter 3).

## The Messages of Ezekiel

After his call experience in chapters 1—3, the next section of the book (chapters 4—24) presents Ezekiel's message to the people prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Here are found the strange visions, symbolic actions, and parables that have made Ezekiel famous. The primary message was that God would punish the nation severely for being unfaithful. He accused the people of false hope. In his warning about what is to come, Ezekiel delivers the message on behalf of God so that, in their punishment, the



people will “know that I am the LORD” (6:7). This lack of knowledge of God has led to the sinfulness of the community. It is only in recognizing God’s power and the requirements of the Covenant that the people will be able to repent.

One area Ezekiel addressed in his prophecies was individual responsibility for one’s own actions. Throughout the Israelites’ history, the importance of communal responsibility had played a very important part in their religious and social life. They understood that the actions of one person affected the whole community, and so no one suffered alone for their mistakes. Over time, though, this idea had been adulterated into the notion that there was no personal responsibility for one’s actions. To make his point, Ezekiel cites a proverb that must have been common among the people: “[Parents] have eaten green [sour] grapes, / thus their children’s teeth are on edge” (18:2). The original intention of this proverb was to say that the effects of the parents’ sins are experienced by their children, an understanding of corporate responsibility, recognizing that no one lives in isolation. However, the people addressed by Ezekiel were using this proverb to claim that they were not responsible for their current situation. Ezekiel declares such a misunderstanding of corporate responsibility to be invalid. Instead, God will consider the actions of each person, and that person will be held accountable for his or her sinful behavior. This was also a reversal of the statement in Exodus 20:5 that states that God inflicts punishment for the sins of the parents on the third and fourth generations. Ezekiel, instead, affirms the words of Deuteronomy 24:16: “Only for his [or her] own guilt shall a [person] be put to death.” The people of Ezekiel’s day could no longer play the blame game.

In the second major section of Ezekiel, chapters 25—39, the prophet speaks oracles against foreign nations, who had been the enemies of Israel, and then offers words of future restoration to the exiles. One of the concerns of the exiles in Babylon was that God was not present among the people. Banished from the holy city of Jerusalem and with the Temple destroyed, the people felt that God had abandoned them. They had developed the mistaken idea that God was bound by the wall of the Temple or the gates of Jerusalem. Ezekiel prophesied to the people telling them that God’s presence was mobile—God was not bound by any physical structure. Indeed, God was with them in Babylon. Ezekiel’s vision, experienced during his initial call, made it clear to the prophet that, like the spinning wheels he saw, God moves effortlessly in any direction and is not limited to a certain time or place.

The most memorable example of the future restoration of Israel that Ezekiel recounts is his visit to the valley of the dry bones (chapter 37). In what today would be considered an out-of-body experience, Ezekiel is transported by God from Babylon to another realm of existence. Here, the Lord shows the prophet a valley filled with human bones, with no flesh, no life, among them. God asks Ezekiel if he thinks that these bones can live, to which Ezekiel wisely answers, “Lord GOD . . . you alone know that” (37:3). Then God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones, telling them that God will bring them back to life. He does as God commands and, while Ezekiel is speaking, the bones take on flesh and regain life. Afterward, God describes the obvious symbolism—the bones represent Israel. To the people in exile, God is proclaiming God’s power to restore them to fullness of life again.

## Ezekiel’s Strange Behavior

More than any other biblical prophet, Ezekiel uses symbolic behavior to enhance the prophetic messages he delivers. These extreme object lessons include: shaving his head and using piles of his hair to deliver a message (chapter 5), not mourning the death of his wife (24:15–23), and lying on his left side for 390



days and on his right for forty days (4:1–8). After performing these acts, Ezekiel provides an interpretation for his audience. A good example would be after Ezekiel shaves his head. With the hair, Ezekiel makes three piles. One he burns, another he cuts with a sword, and a third he scatters into the wind, with a few hairs attached to the hem of his garment. The explanation provided by God for this strange behavior is that it is dramatizing God's anger and the punishments that will be afflicted upon the unfaithful. One third of the people will "die of pestilence and perish of hunger," a third will "fall by the sword," and a third God "will scatter in every direction" (5:12). The few hairs that remain attached to the hem of Ezekiel's garment represent the remnant of people who will survive and be restored after God's wrath has been expended.

## Conclusion

Even though Ezekiel was addressing people living in physical exile in the sixth century BC, there are lessons taught by this prophet that defy the limits of historical and cultural context. Exile can be experienced as a physical place, but it can also take on the form of a spiritual separation. For people of any era or place, there are times when God seems to be absent or when a person feels isolated from a place called home. In the midst of such exile experiences, Ezekiel's words echo through time to remind people that God's presence is not limited by location or humanity's behavior. There is nowhere we can go or anything we can do that will separate us from God. In fact, the spirit of God is so omnipresent that it can bring life where there appears to be only death and find us when we believe ourselves to be in a foreign land. This strange prophet with his unusual visions was not predicting aliens or combustion engines. Ezekiel was trying to give words to his experience of the Holy God, and such things have always been too awesome for simple words or pictures.

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