

## 4 Ezekiel

Ezekiel may be the least known of the major prophets. People tend to give up at the start, a vision of strange heavenly creatures and *wheels within wheels*. The valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37) is the vision we know best.

Ezekiel was a priest. More than a decade before Jerusalem fell, Ezekiel was taken to Babylon. In captivity, he wrestled with questions about who rules the world, and how the temple could fall if God was there. Was it the end for God's nation? Or did God's people still have a future?

If you've ever faced difficult questions about God—about how things can go so wrong if God is running the world—Ezekiel is a powerfully relevant prophet.

### 4.1 Who's running the world now? (Ezekiel 1–2)

Sitting among the exiles by a canal in Babylon, Ezekiel has his first vision of God. God sits enthroned in heaven, surrounded by other-worldly creatures.

The vision presents God as:

- **omnipresent** (present everywhere), for his chariot has wheels so he can move in any direction without stopping to turn and change direction (1:15-21)
- **omniscient** (all-knowing), for there are *eyes all around* (1:18)
- **omnipotent** (all-powerful), holding the throne of radiant glory (1:25-28).

What Ezekiel sees is that heaven still reigns over the earth, even though Babylon was taking over Jerusalem. Babylon has not displaced God. God is everywhere—even by the rivers of Babylon. No one sneaks up on God; God sees everything. They haven't captured God's throne; he's still reigning in majesty in the heavens.

But here on earth, things aren't right. There's no longer a nation representing God's reign. Babylon has taken over. Israel is no longer functioning as God's servant to the nations. Is the Abrahamic project over now?

Ezekiel hears God's call. Listen to how God addresses him:

#### Ezekiel 2:1-4 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you." ...<sup>3</sup> He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites ...

<sup>4</sup> Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.'



Zondervan Atlas of the Bible (Zondervan, 2010), 175.

Ezekiel was a son of Levi (the priestly tribe), but that's not how God addresses him for the temple is falling. Ezekiel was a son of Israel (the nation representing God), but that's not how God addresses him, for the nation is falling. God calls Ezekiel *son of man* (descendant of humanity), for in the beginning humanity was created in God's image to represent his reign (Genesis 1:26-28).

There's no more Abrahamic nation. It's simply as *a human* that Ezekiel serves God. 93 times, the Sovereign LORD calls his servant *son of man* (effectively, "Hey, human!").

And Human serves *Sovereign LORD* (*Adony YHWH*, 217 times in Ezekiel). *Adony* means master or ruler. YHWH is the name God gave to his covenant people at Sinai. *Adony YHWH* is the *Sovereign LORD* (NIV) who reigns not only over Israel but over all the peoples of the earth.

That's Ezekiel's identity: *human servant of Sovereign LORD*.

That was Jesus' identity too. More than 80 times in the Gospels, Jesus referred to himself as *the son of man*.

## 4.2 The end! (Ezekiel 7–13)

You may have seen strange people wearing a sandwich board that reads, "The end is nigh!" Here's where it comes from:

Ezekiel 7:2-6 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to the land of Israel:

"The end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land!

<sup>3</sup> The end is now upon you ...

<sup>6</sup> The end has come! The end has come!"



Ezekiel was not describing the end of the world, but the end of *Israel* (verse 2). Babylon's invasion was the end of their nation. Had God utterly rejected them? (Lamentations 5:22)

Why would God let this happen? Where was God when disaster destroyed them? These questions plague us when everything goes wrong.

**Why?** Ezekiel's answer is that the covenant people had violated the covenant. They didn't want to serve the LORD, so he gave them what they wanted: to serve another ruler. As a priest, Ezekiel describes how they desecrated God's house, filling it with *things that will drive me far from my sanctuary* (8:6).

**Where was God?** God wasn't in the temple. He vacated the house where he wasn't welcome. Slowly, as if waiting for them to miss his presence, God had moved out:

Ezekiel 9–11 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> <sup>3</sup> Now the glory of the God of Israel **went up** from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple.

<sup>10</sup> <sup>18</sup> Then the glory of the LORD **departed** from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim.

11<sup>23</sup> The glory of the LORD **went up** from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.

Ezekiel explains that Babylon had not captured God when the temple fell. Babylon captured Jerusalem because God had already left. They'd driven God out, but he had not completely gone. There might still be a future for them if the LORD was hanging around, hovering over the Mount of Olives just east of the temple entry.

### 4.3 Judgement on God's people (Ezekiel 14–24)

Since the LORD is still running the world, it's ultimately his responsibility to sort it out. That's what **judgement** means: sorting out what's wrong, and setting it right. Those twin themes—judgement, and the subsequent restoration—are Ezekiel's message:

- Judgement starts with God's people (Ezekiel 14–24).
- God sorts out the nations too (Ezekiel 25–32).
- God restores his people into his leadership (Ezekiel 33–39).
- They provide a house for their heavenly sovereign to live among them (40–48).

God says he will deal with their idolatry, their desire to serve someone else (Ezekiel 14).

God deals with their unfaithfulness to him as their covenant partner (Ezekiel 16).

Children always suffer as a consequence of what their parents did, but God promises to bring the next generation back from exile if they will serve him (Ezekiel 18).

The wise sovereign is able to judge who are his:

#### Ezekiel 20:33-35 (NIV)

<sup>33</sup> As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will **reign** over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.

<sup>34</sup> I will **bring you** from the nations and **gather you** from the countries where you have been scattered—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. <sup>35</sup> I will **bring you** into the wilderness of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute **judgment** upon you.

Why would God *execute judgement* on his people? When we hear *judgement*, we tend to think *condemnation*. But God's judgment is his wise discernment, his capacity to evaluate who are his and who are not, to sort the sheep from the goats. God's judgement is crucially important now that his flocks are muddled in exile.

Similarly, God's *anger* is not malice. God feels anger at the way they have turned away from him, but God's anger motives him to separate what cannot be rescued from those who will serve him, the ones he will bring back from exile.

That's why *judgement begins with God's household* before God sorts out the rest of the world (1 Peter 4:17).

God even uses Babylon to sort out his people (Ezekiel 21). Because of their disobedience (22) and unfaithfulness (23), God puts them in the cooking pot (24).

As the servant of the Sovereign LORD who has lost his partner (Israel), Ezekiel has no opportunity to grieve openly when he loses his wife (24:15-27).

## 4.4 Judgement on the nations (Ezekiel 25–32)

Like God's nation, the nations also need sorting out. Sovereign LORD reigns over all nations, so he asks Human to declare his evaluation of the nations as well.

Specifically, God promises to judge:

- Amon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia—neighbours to the east and south (25)
- Tyre and Sidon—northern neighbours on the Phoenician coast (26–28)
- Egypt—the southern neighbour (29–32).

But what about Babylon? Why is there no mention of judgement on Babylon? Ezekiel says God is using Babylon as the weapon to bring judgement on Israel (17:12-20; 19:9; 21:19-21; 24:2) and on the nations (26:7; 29:18-19; 30:10-25; 32:11).

Of course, Ezekiel is in Babylon. He wouldn't survive long if he openly announced judgement on Babylon. We're probably meant to understand that Babylon—like the other nations that resist God's authority—will eventually face God's judgement too.

If that's right, Ezekiel's rant against the king of Tyre (Ezekiel 28) and his lament for the fall of Pharaoh (Ezekiel 32) stand as warnings for the emperor of Babylon too:

### Ezekiel 28:2 (NIV)

Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." But you are a mere mortal and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god.'"

No doubt, the king of Tyre was full of himself, as rulers often are. But it was Nebuchadnezzar who took God's people, claiming to rule over them in the LORD's place.

Whether in Tyre, Egypt or Babylon, what's wrong with the world is other powers that claim to be ruling in God's place. That's been the problem since the beginning when humans wanted to be *like God* (Genesis 3:5). But we're not gods; we're mere mortals. Death comes to those who claim to take God's world into their own power:

### Ezekiel 28:12-16 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. <sup>13</sup> You were in Eden ...

<sup>14</sup> You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. ...

<sup>15</sup> You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. <sup>16</sup> ... So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, guardian cherub ..."



*The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World, (Carta Jerusalem, 2014), 265.*

That cannot be true of any human individual such as Ethbaal II (king of Tyre), or Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon). But it is true of humanity in relation to God.

God made us *like him*, with authority to *rule over* creation (Genesis 1:26-28). We were *crowned with glory and honour, ... rulers over the works of your hands* (Psalm 8:5-6). God commissioned us as *gardeners and guards* of Eden (Genesis 2:15).

We were blameless, until we tried to be *like God*, taking authority reserved for God (*the knowledge of good and evil*). We became mortal, exiled from God's garden, replaced with cherubim entrusted with guarding the divine presence (Genesis 3:24).

Ezekiel sees that same rebellion against God's authority in the rulers of his day. It was true of the king of Tyre. It was also true of the king of Babylon who literally took the mountain of God, claiming to be the ruler over God's land (compare Isaiah 14:3-27).

These verses are often understood as describing Satan (as the serpent in the garden). Ezekiel certainly is describing the power of evil that oppresses God's world, not merely an individual king. But his point is that the human rebellion that began in the garden persists in the violence and oppression we experience in every generation as mortal rulers try to play God, taking God's power into our own hands.

## 4.5 Restoration of God's people (Ezekiel 33–39)

Ezekiel finally receives the news that Jerusalem has fallen (33:21). This is a hinge point in the book. Now Ezekiel speaks not only of their failure, but of their restoration.

Why did the kingdom fall? Ezekiel holds the **shepherds** of God's people responsible, the kings who used their power to benefit themselves (compare 2 Kings 21:1-16):

### Ezekiel 34:2, 10 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ... <sup>10</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.



Babylon invaded because God was rescuing his flock from the kings who misrepresented his authority. But God did not plan to leave them under the king of Babylon:

### Ezekiel 34:22-24 (NIV)

<sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. <sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

One day, God would save his people, restoring them as his kingdom under a good shepherd, a son of David, God's anointed. Guess who? (Hint: Matthew 1:1.)

In Ezekiel's time, this seemed impossible. Jerusalem was decimated with no defensive walls. The leaders were captives in Babylon. The land was like dead soldiers strewn over a battlefield.

Surely the kingdom could never rise again.

### **Ezekiel 37:1-5 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ... <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones:

I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life."



God promised to raise the graveyard back to life (verses 11-14), resurrecting both Israel and Judah (37:15-23), establishing them as his kingdom under his anointed king, under a new covenant:

### **Ezekiel 37:24-27 (NIV)**

<sup>24</sup> "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. ... <sup>25</sup> David my servant will be their prince forever.

<sup>26</sup> I will make a covenant of peace with them ... <sup>27</sup> My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.

How did God fulfil this promise? When did God restore his kingdom to David's son?

There was this day when God's anointed rode into Jerusalem, recognized as the son of David come to save his people (Matthew 21:1-13). But abusive shepherds were still in power (John 10:7-10). They wanted him dead (Mt 23:30-37; 26:1-4, 63-65). So they handed him over to the rulers of their day (Rome). He entered the graveyard of God's people. The Breath of God entered his dead flesh and bones, raising him to life as the leader restoring heaven's authority to earth (Acts 2:22-38, quoting Psalm 16:8-11). His people are raised to life in him (Ephesians 2:6).

Many Jews today do not accept Jesus as their Messiah, so they do not see this text fulfilled in Christ. Some view the return of Israel to their land after World War II as the resurrection of their nation, the fulfilment of Ezekiel 37. Some Christians agree, especially those who follow Dispensational theology (popular in USA). But the nation of Israel today is not a kingdom with "David" ruling over them. What do you think?

## 4.6 Restoration of a house for God (Ezekiel 40–48)

The final section of Ezekiel describes the temple to be constructed after the exile, a house to welcome God to live among his people again. A second temple was built and dedicated to the LORD in 515 BC. But the dimensions of Ezekiel's vision in the Hebrew text are enormous, too large for the temple mount. Ezekiel envisaged something more glorious.

Some Dispensationalists and some Jewish sects imagine this temple must still be constructed. It's a very controversial view, since it requires the demolition of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque that are currently on the Temple Mount.

Not all Jews want a temple rebuilt. Most don't want animal sacrifices reinstated.

And the idea of animal sacrifices does not fit with the New Testament understanding of what God wants. The temple of the Old Testament was merely a shadow representing the reality of God's throne in heaven. The reality came to earth in the person of Jesus (John 2:19-22) who fulfilled everything the temple stood for (Hebrews 8:5; 9:5). God no longer dwells in a stone structure, but in the community that his come to life in King Jesus (Ephesians 2:21), the temple of God's Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Yes, they constructed a second temple after returning from exile. But the glory of the LORD returning to live among his people came to earth in the Messiah.

Do you recall how Ezekiel described the glory of the LORD leaving the first temple (9:3; 10:18; 11:23)? Guess what happens when they build a house that welcomes God's reign over them?

### Ezekiel 43:2-4 (NIV)

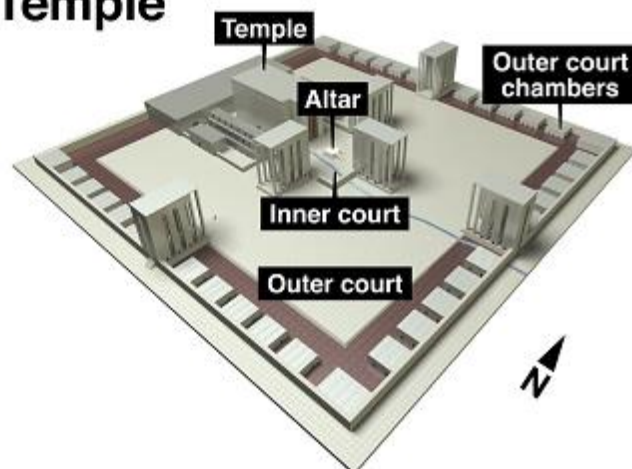
<sup>2</sup> I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.

<sup>3</sup> The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. <sup>4</sup> The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east.

When God's life-giving presence is restored to his people, his people are restored. They were still waiting for this restoration at the end of the Old Testament (Malachi 3:1).

They were still waiting for the *prince* who reintroduces God's reign (Ezekiel 45–46). With echoes of Eden (Genesis 2:10), Ezekiel described the presence of God flowing from the temple like a life-giving river watering the land (Ezekiel 47). The kingdom is restructured around the prince whom God has provided to rule them and the divine presence he represents (Ezekiel 48).

## Ezekiel's Temple



Source: Logos Bible Software.

So in the end, Jerusalem is not a city abandoned by God, and his people are no longer exiled from God. The Abrahamic project is back on. The dry bones come to life with God's breath. And the nations see the reign of heaven's king in his people:

### Ezekiel 48:35 (NIV)

The name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE.

What a reputation! The new Jerusalem bears the name *YHWH Šāmmāh*. God's people are known for the presence and life of their eternal king.

Anything you'd like to discuss on the Book of Ezekiel?

In preparation for next week, read Amos 9 and Jonah 4.

## 4.7 Resources

Posts from <https://allenbrowne.blog>

- [The enigma of God's throne](#) (Ezekiel 1)
- [What did Ezekiel mean by "The end is nigh"?](#) (Ezekiel 7)
- ["You were in Eden"](#) (Ezekiel 28)
- [The valley of dry bones](#) (Ezekiel 37)

Video from Bible Project:

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ezekiel/> (2 videos)

Commentaries:

- Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*. The Bible Speaks Today. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001.
- Daniel Isaac Block. *The Book of Ezekiel*. (2 volumes). New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997–1998.

New Testament quotations:

Few verses from Ezekiel are quoted in the New Testament:

Prophet	Quotation
Ezekiel 20:34,41	2 Corinthians 6:17
Ezekiel 36:22	Romans 2:24
Ezekiel 37:27	2 Corinthians 6:16