INTRODUCTION TO EZEKIEL

(John W. Hilber)

"Son of man, eat this scroll, then go and speak" (Ezek 3:1). The expectation that the prophet ingest God's Word before proclamation demonstrates to every teacher or preacher that the text must first enter the heart of the messenger. But properly "digesting" God's Word depends on correctly understanding the meaning of the text. The book of Ezekiel confronts the interpreter with a number of challenges; most notable are his visionary experiences and the high concentration of metaphor he uses in many of his oracles. But even more difficult is the challenge of managing some of the most vociferous language in all the prophets. Ezekiel's blunt expressions do not make for delicate preaching material. Further complicating the practicality of teaching Ezekiel is its size—the second longest book in the Bible, barely surpassed only by the prophecies of Jeremiah. It is not surprising that several of the best commentaries comprise several large volumes. Not many people in ministry are granted the time necessary to plow through these mammoth works, as beneficial as that would be. So this commentary attends especially to the needs of the teacher or preacher who works with limited time. For economy's sake, it addresses only the most difficult aspects of the text, providing discussion on crucial issues and focusing carefully on the central message for God's people. What pitfalls should be avoided in exposition, and in what direction would Ezekiel aim his arrows were he to address the church today?

The Life and Times of the Prophet Ezekiel

God's design from the beginning of creation was to bless his world (Gen 1:28). But his creatures rebelled (Gen 3:1–24; 6:5; 11:6), so beginning with Abraham, God called to himself a people through whom he might channel his blessing (Gen 12:1–3). Under Moses, God shaped the descendants of Abraham into a nation in order to form a missionary kingdom to the world (Exod 19:5–6). But they failed their calling in the land that God had given to them. They fought among themselves, split in civil war, overturned social justice with violence, and abandoned the God who called them. Like Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the garden, the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah) were sent into exile (2 Kgs 17:7–23; 2 Chr 36:15–20). Such were the final consequences of breaking the terms of the covenant between God and his people (Deut 28:63–64). But by God's grace, that is not the final word; and Ezekiel proclaims both the message of doom as well as the vision of restoration.

Ezekiel was born into a priestly family (Ezek 1:3) and was a young man when the Babylonians subjugated the kingdom of Judah. As was customary, the conquerors took youths from elite families into captivity in order to "socialize" them to be good servants of their overlord. The first such deportation was in 605 BC. Among these earliest political prisoners were the likes of Daniel (Dan 1:1–7). Ezekiel was likely part of a second wave of deportation. After Jehoiachin's rebellion against the Babylonian overlords in 598 BC, there was a punitive exile of Jerusalem's leaders (2 Kgs 24:12–16). Ezekiel's prophetic call came five years after this event while living among the exiles (Ezek 1:1–3). His oracles span 20 years of his life (see comments at Ezek 40:1). God addresses Ezekiel as "son of man," which stresses his human frailty in contrast to the sovereign sufficiency of God (see comments at Ezek 2:1). We do not know the exact location of the Kebar Canal, where Ezekiel lived among the exiles, but it was a primary irrigation canal branching off the Euphrates River.

Prophecy in the ancient Near East was treated with special care, because it was an authoritative word directly from a deity. This is true whether it was a word from the god Adad to the king of Mari, from the goddess Ishtar to the king of Assyria, or from Yahweh to his people Israel. These ancient cultures transmitted divine words with words with the same respect given to royal, diplomatic correspondence, whether delivered orally or in writing. One dared not play fast and loose with it. So we have good reason to be confident that the words recorded in Ezekiel are the authoritative voice of God's prophet. If Ezekiel's oracles were not compiled by the prophet himself, his words were handled carefully and edited into book form under the guidance of inspired scribal editors (compare the process for wisdom literature presupposed in Prov 25:1).

The Message of the Book as a Whole

One way to summarize the whole message of Ezekiel into one sentence is: *Yahweh, the God of glory, must judge his rebellious people, yet he will restore a repentant remnant to covenant blessing in the land, where they will enjoy his glorious presence forever.*[1] "Yahweh," was the revealed name of Israel's covenant God (Exod 3:13–15). It is usually translated "Lord" in our English versions (see discussion of "Sovereign Lord" at Ezek 2:3). Over sixty-five times in Ezekiel, the Lord declares, "then they will know that I am Yahweh." The intervention of Israel's God in history will once and for all make his name known and respected, not only in Israel but in all the earth. Of particular concern in Ezekiel is the glory of God, which cannot be present among a sinful people; so Ezekiel envisions the glory departing from the temple and from Jerusalem (Ezek 11:22–23; cf. Exod 33:3–5). In the oracles of judgment against the nations, God's glory is also of preeminent concern. This is demonstrated most clearly in the oracle against Tyre (Ezek 28:2, "because your heart is high you say, 'I am god'").

Ezekiel lived among a community of Jewish exiles who had not fully repented of the nation's corporate sins, but they were nevertheless expecting an immanent return to their homeland. Their hope was rooted in an imbalanced theology that God would never abandon Jerusalem, the city of his temple (cf. Ps 48:8). They did not take seriously the warnings of the covenant. Much of Ezekiel's message was targeted at such presumptuous expectations. The people needed to understand that punishment for Judah's covenant rebellion had not run its course, especially because the people in exile and back in Jerusalem had not turned from their evil ways. Ezekiel's contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, confronted this same problem from the vantage point of his residence back in Jerusalem (cf. Jer 29:1–23).

Nevertheless, Ezekiel envisions a day when God's glory will return to dwell among his people in a healed land (Ezek 43:5–7; 47:1–12). In preparation for that return, the people of Israel are restored spiritually as well as physically to full covenant blessing (Ezek 36–37). God will bring to fulfillment the covenant blessings promised to Abraham and Moses (Ezek 11:16–20; 16:60; 36:8–12; 37:11–14) as well as to David (Ezek 34:23–31; 37:24–28). The whole "covenant package" is assured in the final line of Ezekiel, "Yahweh is there" (cf. Exod 3:12–15; Lev 26:12). Much of the challenge in preaching Ezekiel is to translate these themes for Christian hope and living.

An overview of the book's structure is as follows:

1. Judgment against Israel (Ezek 1–24)

After seeing a vision of the glory of God (chapters 1–3) and dramatically portraying the siege of Jerusalem (chapters 4–7), Ezekiel envisions the glory of God departing from the defiled temple (chapters 8–11). Then, a dramatic portrayal of exile (chapter 12) is followed by extensive explanation of the reasons for judgment (chapters 13–24).

2. Judgment against the Nations (Ezek 25–32)

The nations, who would exult their own glory over that of the Lord will be humiliated in judgment, including: neighboring nations (chapter 25); Tyre (chapters 26–28); Egypt (chapters 29–32).

3. Renewal of Israel and Restoration to a Glorious Kingdom (Ezek 33–48)

Through a new covenant, Yahweh will restore his people to new life, under new leadership, in a new kingdom in which his glory will again dwell forever. Ezekiel's messages turn to salvation (chapter 33); new leadership (chapter 34); restoration to the promised homeland (chapters 35:1—36:15); restoration spiritually (chapters 36:16—37:28); final deliverance from chaos (chapters 38—39); and restoration of worship in the blessing of God's presence (chapters 40—48).

Because Ezekiel's prophetic oracles are organized chronologically through the book, they present a story in a general way. There is no elaborate plotline, but the chronological notices trace a progression of interactions between the prophet and his community, which has been traumatized by forced deportation. The narrative arc begins with the prophet's call and his confrontation with the exiled compatriots. He labors to convince them that their exile is justified because of sin, and furthermore, that the doom announced against Jerusalem is sure to come. This puts their trauma in theological perspective. This trauma is amplified when news arrives of the destruction of their homeland, recorded half-way through the book. From that point on, Ezekiel's task changes from confrontation to comfort.

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[1] A earlier form of this statement has a pedigree stretching back through my professors, Elliot E. Johnson and Allen P. Ross, to Bruce K. Waltke.