

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

EZEKIEL

THEME

Author and Title

Ezekiel is both the name of the sixth-century B.C. prophet and the title of the book that records his preaching. Ezekiel's name (Hb. *Yekhezqel*) means "God strengthens" or "May God strengthen," appropriate for a prophet called to proclaim a message of uncompromising judgment and later a message of a restoration for God's sake, not Israel's. Ezekiel lived out his prophetic career among the community of exiled Judeans in Babylon. He belonged to the priestly class and was married (see [24:15–24](#)), but it is doubtful that he had any children.

If Ezekiel was thirty years old at the time of the inaugural vision (see note at [1:1](#)), an intriguing connection can be made with the final vision of the book, which is dated to the twenty-fifth year of the exile ([40:1](#)), when Ezekiel would have been fifty. As [Numbers 4](#) makes clear, the ages of thirty and fifty mark the span of the active service of the priests. As a member of the exilic community, Ezekiel would not have been able to participate in the ritual life of the Jerusalem temple, nor would he have undergone initiation into priestly service while living outside the land. But perhaps the timing of these visions coincided with what would have been Ezekiel's "working life" as a priest had he lived in Jerusalem prior to the exile.

The relationship between the Hebrew prophets and the books that bear their names is complex. For both Isaiah (see [Isa. 8:16](#)) and Jeremiah (e.g., [Jeremiah 36](#)) there is evidence of individuals or groups who preserved the prophet's words. Such is not the case with Ezekiel. No such disciples are named, and Ezekiel's autobiographical style suggests his close involvement with recording the written traditions that bear his name. At the same time, the very preservation of his scroll implies the existence of a support group, which may also have provided some editorial input.

Date

Ezekiel's oracles are more frequently dated than those of other OT prophets. The first date of the book takes the reader to the summer of 593 B.C., five years after the first group of exiles was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. The latest-dated oracle

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comes 22 years after that summer, in April of 571 B.C. The book is arranged chronologically in three parts: [chapters 1–24 and 33–48](#) form one sequence, while the foreign-nation oracles of [chapters 25–32](#) have their own order (see [Outline](#)). Caution must be exercised in attempting to align Ezekiel's dates with those of the modern calendar, but the rough equivalents are as shown in the chart, [Dates in Ezekiel](#).

Dates in Ezekiel

Reference	Year/month/day following exile of Jehoiachin	Modern equivalent*/year B.C.	Situation
1:2	5th year / 4th month / 5th day	July 593***	inaugural vision
8:1	6th year / 6th month / 5th day	September 592	first temple vision
20:1	7th year / 5th month / 10th day	August 591	elders come to inquire
24:1	9th year / 10th month / 10th day**	January 588 or 587	siege of Jerusalem begins
26:1	11th year / month (?) / 1st day	c. 587–586	oracle against Tyre, before Babylon besieged it
29:1	10th year / 10th month / 12th day	January 587	oracle against Egypt
29:17	27th year / 1st month / 1st day	April 571****	Egypt assigned to Babylon; after end of Babylon's siege of Tyre
30:20	11th year / 1st month / 7th day	April 587	oracle against Egypt

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31:1	11th year / 3rd month / 1st day	June 587	oracle against Egypt
32:1	12th year / 12th month / 1st day	March 585	oracle against Egypt
32:17	12th year / 12th month / 15th day	April 585	oracle against Egypt
33:21	12th year / 10th month / 5th day	January 585	fugitive arrives in Babylon
40:1	25th year / 1st month (?) / 10th day (?)	April 573	second temple vision

*For simplicity, here and in the notes that follow, only the second month of the modern equivalent is given (cf. [Months in the Hebrew Calendar](#)) **Unique dating formula in Hebrew; see notes ***earliest recorded oracle ****latest recorded oracle

Theme and Purpose

Ezekiel spoke to a community forced from its home, a people who had broken faith with their God. As the spokesman for the God of Israel, Ezekiel spoke oracles that vindicate the reputation of this holy God. This radically God-centered point of view finds its sharpest expression in [36:22–23](#) (“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name. ... And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name. ... And the nations will know that I am the LORD”). Thus the primary purpose of Ezekiel’s message was to restore God’s glory before the people who had spurned it in view of the watching nations. But Israel’s own welfare was bound up with its God. So the prophet pleads: “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” ([18:31–32](#)).

Ezekiel’s message was unrelenting. Of all the books in the OT, only Psalms, Jeremiah, and Genesis are longer. Ezekiel’s uncompromising message is matched by language that often seems hard and sometimes offensive. If there is no softening his language, at least it appears that the grandeur of Ezekiel’s vision of God rendered much of the earthly reality he observed as sordid, and worse. The appropriate response, in Ezekiel’s terms, is not simply revulsion but repentance and a longing for the restoration of God’s glory.

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Occasion and Background

Ezekiel prophesied during a time of great confusion. In 597 B.C. the Babylonians had exiled Judah's king Jehoiachin—only 18 years old, and on the throne for only three months—along with several thousand of its leading citizens ([2 Kings 24:10–16](#)). Ezekiel was among their number; he was probably about 25 years old. The political situation was complex: a Judean king was among the exiles (Jehoiachin), but the Babylonians had appointed a puppet king to the throne in Jerusalem (Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah).

The pattern in the history of the exiled northern kingdom of Israel, and now again for the southern kingdom of Judah, was that prophets emerged in times of crisis to bring God's message to his people. The time of Judah's exile was therefore a period of intense prophetic activity. Jeremiah was an older contemporary of Ezekiel (and, like Ezekiel, from a priestly family). Ezekiel clearly knows Jeremiah's message and develops some of the older prophet's themes. However, it is not known whether they ever met, and it seems Jeremiah was not aware of Ezekiel, whose ministry did not begin until after Ezekiel had been in exile for five years.

Although Ezekiel's fellow exiles formed his main audience, it seems likely that his oracles would have been communicated to their compatriots back in Judah. Ezekiel probably lived out his days in exile. His second temple vision—in which a new constitution for renewed, ideal Israel was spelled out—came well into the long exile Jeremiah predicted ([Jer. 25:8–14](#)). If Ezekiel was 30 years old when his ministry began, this vision came when he was about 50.

Key Themes

1. As a priest, Ezekiel was deeply concerned with *the holiness of God*, and consequently with *the sin of his people*, that is, with any behavior that offended the holy God. These twin themes can hardly be separated, as attention to matters of purity can be found on nearly every page. Ezekiel's perception of the depth of Israel's sin shows graphically in his version of Israel's history ([ch. 20](#)). Even the oracles of restored Israel in [chapters 40–48](#) include provision for dealing with the people's sin so they can survive in the presence of a holy God. This concern also accounts for the many echoes in Ezekiel's oracles of the priestly material in the Pentateuch, particularly in the legislation of Leviticus and Numbers, as well as the resonances of Ezekiel's new temple ([Ezekiel 40–42](#)) with the Exodus tabernacle.

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2. Israel was of course subject to its national God. However, Ezekiel's God is no tribal deity but rather is *supreme over all nations*. Therefore Nebuchadnezzar, king of mighty Babylon, was simply a tool in God's hand to accomplish God's purpose (e.g., [21:19–23](#); [30:25](#)). God's absolute supremacy finds its most pronounced expression in the battle against Gog, the final enemy ([chs. 38–39](#)), where God alone crushes Gog's vast hostile forces.

3. The vigilance for holy living that the holy God demands places a claim both on *individuals* and on *the whole community*. Some see a significant milestone in biblical thought in Ezekiel's preaching on individual responsibility in [chapter 18](#) (cf. [Jer. 31:29–30](#)). While this chapter certainly focuses on the individual in the modern sense, Ezekiel's clear expression of the requirements binding on communities should not thereby be ignored.

4. The very structure of the book declares *judgment* on those clinging to (false) hope, but true *hope* for those who accept judgment ([37:11](#)). Ezekiel's restoration message was heard both before and after the destruction of Jerusalem, but radically God-centered judgment is partnered with a hope ("salvation") that wholly depends on God's gifts of a new heart and spirit ([36:22–32](#)).

5. The *condemnation of Israel's "princes"* (e.g., [ch. 19](#); Ezekiel is reluctant to use the title "king") finds its hopeful counterpart in the *promise of a future "prince"* who would rule with justice ([34:23–24](#)) and stand at the point of connection between God and people ([46:1–18](#)).

Style

Prophetic books often make use of formulaic statements, but such formulas have a frequency and consistency in Ezekiel not matched in other prophetic writings. Once recognized, these formulas can greatly help interpretation because they formally mark the introduction and conclusion of oracles. Introductory formulas include "the word of the LORD came to me" (50 times), or, at significant junctures, "the hand of the LORD" being upon Ezekiel ([1:3](#); [3:14](#), [22](#); [8:1](#); [33:22](#); [37:1](#); [40:1](#)). Conclusions are often marked with variations of the "recognition formula," e.g., "they shall know that I am the LORD" (more than 50 times), and the formula itself is an indication of the book's central purpose. Internally, oracles are frequently structured by the terms "because ... therefore," identifying the motivation and the message of the oracle.

Some of the unusual aspects of Ezekiel's prophecies are inevitably some of the better known. This is true of his frequent recourse to street theater, and symbolic actions of a quite odd and striking kind (e.g., [4:1–5:17](#); [12:3–6](#); [24:16–18](#); [37:16–17](#)). He also makes

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plentiful use of extended allegories (e.g., [chs. 15–17; 19; 21; 23](#); etc.). Especially in the foreign-nation oracles, laments become vehicles for his message (e.g., [27:2; 28:11–12; 32:2](#)).

Influence

This book stands at a turning point in the history of biblical prophecy. In part this has to do with Ezekiel's standing on the cusp between the predominant preexilic message, which called for repentance by threatening judgment, and postexilic prophecy, which regularly called for repentance by promising restoration. It has also to do with forms of prophetic experience. While the origins of apocalyptic literature are still debated, Ezekiel's visions must play a role in contributing to its development. In particular, the scenario in which a vision of heavenly realities is given in the company of a celestial guide-interpreter—so familiar from Zechariah and Daniel, as well as the NT book of Revelation—finds its headwaters in Ezekiel's prophecy.

Ezekiel inherited some of his themes from earlier prophets, but his handling of them contributes to their later shape in the NT. This seems particularly true of the imagery of the “good shepherd” ([34:11–24](#)) and “living water” ([47:1–14](#); cf. [Rev. 22:1–2](#)). The book of Revelation draws inspiration from some of Ezekiel's most negative images—e.g., the “whoring” of [Ezekiel 16 and 23](#), the enemy Gog of Magog (on the use of this in [Rev. 20:8](#), see note on [Ezek. 38:2](#))—but Ezekiel's vision of a new city also resonates there ([Rev. 3:12; 21:1–22:5](#)). There are few clear hints of resurrection in the OT, but one of them is found in the interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (see [Ezek. 37:12–13](#) and [note](#)). Whatever it might have meant to Ezekiel's audience, it makes an important contribution to the development of biblical thought.

History of Salvation Summary

Like other prophets called to explain the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel stressed that it was due to the people's faithlessness toward God, and therefore to their failure to live as God's renewed humanity. He also stressed that even this disaster was not the end of Israel's story. God would restore them morally and spiritually, and eventually use Israel to bring light to the Gentiles. Ezekiel adds a nuance to this prophetic refrain: Israel's calling was to show forth the holiness of God's name, but they had “profaned” that name (treated it as unholy); in restoring them, God would act to vindicate the holiness of his name before all nations, enabling them to know him. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

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Literary Features

The book of Ezekiel is one of the most complex books in the Bible because so many different genres converge in it. It is important to grasp right at the start that this book is an anthology of separate pieces of writing. There is no single overarching story line; the unity is that of a carefully arranged collection (see [Outline](#)). The general arrangement of the material is one that several other OT prophetic books also follow — a general movement from (1) oracles of judgment against the prophet's own nation of Judah (usually called Israel in the text), to (2) oracles of judgment against the surrounding pagan nations, to (3) oracles of future, eschatological blessing on those who believe in God.

Several observations are in order. First, much of the book consists of visionary writing, which transports readers to a world of the imagination where the rules of reality are obviously suspended in favor of highly unusual visions. To understand and relish the book of Ezekiel, readers often need to abandon expectations of realism. Second, Ezekiel employs a technique known as symbolic reality, which occurs when a writer consistently transports the reader to a world of visionary experience where the most important ingredients are symbols — symbols like a vine, a boiling pot, or a valley full of dry bones. Third, prophecy is itself a genre, made up of oracles (pronouncements from God through the agency of a prophet) that fall into two main categories — oracles of judgment and oracles of blessing. Oracles of judgment are ordinarily examples of satire, and in the prophetic satire of Ezekiel there are three motifs: (1) *description* of evil, (2) *denunciation* of this evil, and (3) *warnings and predictions* that God will judge the evil. Prophecy often merges with apocalyptic writing about epic, end-time struggles. These sections often portray events at the end of history. Finally, readers should not overlook the obvious — the prophet Ezekiel expresses himself in the form of poetry.

In addition to abandoning expectations of consistent realism, readers should give themselves to the sheer strangeness of what is presented. Ezekiel talks about real, historical events, but much of the time he does not portray these events in literal terms. Instead he prefers extravagant visions as his mode. Additionally, readers need to be ready for a kaleidoscope of details, always shifting and never in focus for very long. The best approach to the oracles of judgment is to analyze them according to the usual literary rules regarding satire.

The Near East at the Time of Ezekiel

c. 593 B.C.

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Ezekiel recorded his visions and prophecies while living in the vicinity of Babylon, where he had been exiled years earlier. By Ezekiel's time, the Babylonian Empire had engulfed virtually all of the area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and would eventually subdue even the land of Egypt, where many other Judeans had fled.



Outline

Ezekiel is the most overtly and deliberately structured of the Major Prophets. The book as a whole is organized around the fulcrum of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., with [chapters 1–25](#) preceding its fall, and [chapters 33–48](#) following. The foreign-nation oracles of [chapters 26–32](#) also have a chronological ordering, as well as geographical and thematic organization (see notes for details). The book's major visions play a structuring role too. The inaugural vision of [chapters 1–3](#) finds an explicit cross-reference in the middle of the first temple vision of [chapters 8–11](#) (see [10:20–22](#)). The “dry bones” vision of [37:1–14](#) is shorter than the others but

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plays a pivotal role in the movement toward restoration, seen in the culminating vision of [chapters 40–48](#), which in turn makes a pronounced cross-reference back to the inaugural vision as well as the previous temple vision ([43:1–5](#)). These observations alone powerfully imply that in Ezekiel’s book, both content and form contribute to the message.

- I. Inaugural Vision ([1:1–3:27](#))
 - A. Setting ([1:1–3](#))
 - B. Inaugural vision ([1:4–3:15](#))
 - 1. The throne of the Lord approaches ([1:4–28](#))
 - 2. The prophet commissioned ([2:1–3:11](#))
 - 3. The throne of the Lord withdraws ([3:12–13](#))
 - 4. The vision concludes ([3:14–15](#))
 - C. The watchman ([3:16–21](#)) [cf. [33:1–9](#)]
 - D. Inaugural vision reprise ([3:22–27](#))
- II. Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah ([4:1–24:27](#))
 - A. God against Jerusalem ([4:1–5:17](#))
 - 1. God against Jerusalem enacted ([4:1–5:4](#))
 - 2. God against Jerusalem explained ([5:5–17](#))
 - B. Oracles against the “land” ([6:1–7:27](#))
 - 1. Against the mountains of Israel ([6:1–14](#))
 - 2. Against the land of Israel ([7:1–27](#))
 - C. Ezekiel’s temple vision ([8:1–11:25](#))
 - 1. Transportation and abominations ([8:1–18](#))
 - 2. Slaughter in Jerusalem ([9:1–11](#))
 - 3. The fire and the glory ([10:1–22](#))
 - 4. Punishment for civic authorities ([11:1–13](#))
 - 5. Promise of a new heart, spirit ([11:14–21](#))
 - 6. The glory of the Lord departs ([11:22–25](#))
 - D. Anticipating exile ([12:1–28](#))
 - 1. Exile predicted ([12:1–20](#))

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2. Exile confirmed ([12:21–28](#))
- E. False prophecy, true prophecy ([13:1–14:11](#))
 1. False prophets ([13:1–23](#))
 2. False inquirers ([14:1–11](#))
- F. The consequences of infidelity ([14:12–15:8](#))
 1. Noah, Daniel, Job ([14:12–23](#))
 2. The useless vine ([15:1–8](#))
- G. The faithless bride ([16:1–63](#))
 1. Jerusalem, the foundling bride ([16:1–43](#))
 2. Jerusalem and her sisters ([16:44–58](#))
 3. The everlasting covenant ([16:59–63](#))
- H. The parable of the eagles and the vine ([17:1–24](#))
 1. The parable narrated ([17:1–10](#))
 2. The parable explained ([17:11–18](#))
 3. The parable interpreted ([17:19–21](#))
 4. A new parable ([17:22–24](#))
- I. Moral responsibility ([18:1–32](#))
 1. The one who sins dies ([18:1–4](#))
 2. Three case studies ([18:5–18](#))
 3. Two objections ([18:19–29](#))
 4. Conclusion: repent! ([18:30–32](#))
- J. Lament for the princes of Israel ([19:1–14](#))
 1. A lioness and her cubs ([19:1–9](#))
 2. A vine and its stem(s) ([19:10–14](#))
- K. Learning from history ([20:1–44](#))
 1. Looking to the past ([20:1–31](#))
 2. Unthinkable idolatry ([20:32](#))
 3. Looking to the future ([20:33–44](#))
- L. Fire and sword ([20:45–21:32](#))

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1. The parable of the fire ([20:45–49](#))
 2. The drawn sword ([21:1–7](#))
 3. The sharpened sword ([21:8–17](#))
 4. The sword of Nebuchadnezzar ([21:18–29](#))
 5. The sword sheathed and judged ([21:30–32](#))
- M. A city defiled ([22:1–31](#))
1. The bloody city ([22:1–16](#))
 2. The city of dross ([22:17–22](#))
 3. Systemic failure ([22:23–31](#))
- N. Two sisters ([23:1–49](#))
1. The sisters and politics ([23:1–35](#))
 2. The sisters and religion ([23:36–49](#))
- O. Two losses ([24:1–27](#))
1. Jerusalem, the bloody pot ([24:1–14](#))
 2. No mourning for Ezekiel’s wife ([24:15–24](#))
 3. Fugitive news ([24:25–27](#))
- III. Oracles against Foreign Nations ([25:1–32:32](#))
- A. Against Judah’s neighbors ([25:1–17](#))
1. Against Ammon ([25:1–7](#))
 2. Against Moab ([25:8–11](#))
 3. Against Edom ([25:12–14](#))
 4. Against Philistia ([25:15–17](#))
- B. Oracles against Tyre ([26:1–28:19](#))
1. Against Tyre ([26:1–21](#))
 2. A lament against Tyre ([27:1–36](#))
 3. Against Tyre’s king ([28:1–19](#))
- C. Oracle against Sidon ([28:20–23](#))
- D. Israel gathered in security ([28:24–26](#))
- E. Oracles against Egypt ([29:1–32:32](#))

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1. Against Pharaoh ([29:1–16](#))
2. Nebuchadnezzar and Egypt ([29:17–21](#))
3. Lament for Egypt ([30:1–19](#))
4. The kings of Egypt and Babylon ([30:20–26](#))
5. The fall of Pharaoh ([31:1–18](#))
6. Lament over Pharaoh ([32:1–16](#))
7. Egypt's descent to the pit ([32:17–32](#))

IV. After the Fall of Jerusalem ([33:1–39:29](#))

- A. Reminders ([33:1–20](#))
 1. The watchman (reprise) ([33:1–9](#)) [cf. [3:16–21](#)]
 2. Moral responsibility (reprise) ([33:10–20](#)) [cf. [18:21–29](#)]
- B. The fall of Jerusalem ([33:21–22](#))
- C. Culpability ([33:23–33](#))
 1. A word for the homelanders ([33:23–29](#))
 2. A word for the exiles ([33:30–33](#))
- D. Shepherds and sheep ([34:1–31](#))
 1. Wicked shepherds and the good shepherd ([34:1–16](#))
 2. The flock: problems and prospects ([34:17–31](#))
- E. The mountains of Edom and Israel ([35:1–36:15](#))
 1. Against Mount Seir ([35:1–15](#))
 2. The mountains of Israel restored ([36:1–15](#))
- F. Restoration for the sake of God's name ([36:16–38](#))
 1. State of impurity ([36:16–21](#))
 2. Divine intervention: a new spirit ([36:22–32](#))
 3. Land renewed ([36:33–36](#))
 4. Populace increased ([36:37–38](#))
- G. The vision of dry bones ([37:1–14](#))
- H. The houses of Israel and Judah ([37:15–28](#))
- I. Gog of Magog ([38:1–39:29](#))

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- V. Vision of Restoration ([40:1–48:35](#))
- A. Vision of the new temple ([40:1–42:20](#))
 - 1. The vision begins ([40:1–4](#))
 - 2. The outer court and its gates ([40:5–27](#))
 - 3. The inner court, gates, and chambers ([40:28–49](#))
 - 4. The temple interior ([41:1–26](#))
 - 5. Chambers of the outer court ([42:1–14](#))
 - 6. Exterior measurements ([42:15–20](#))
 - B. The return of God’s glory ([43:1–5](#))
 - C. Regulations for renewed Israel ([43:6–46:18](#))
 - 1. New people for new temple ([43:6–12](#))
 - 2. The altar regulations ([43:13–27](#))
 - 3. The prince’s gate ([44:1–3](#))
 - 4. Temple access and rules for priests ([44:4–31](#))
 - 5. The temple districts ([45:1–8](#))
 - 6. Legal measurements ([45:9–12](#))
 - 7. Offerings and gatherings ([45:13–46:15](#))
 - 8. Rules for inheritance of the prince ([46:16–18](#))
 - D. The river flowing from the temple ([46:19–47:12](#))
 - 1. The temple kitchens ([46:19–24](#))
 - 2. The temple’s river ([47:1–12](#))
 - E. Dividing the land: allotment and access ([47:13–48:35](#))
 - 1. The outer boundaries ([47:13–23](#))
 - 2. Territories of the northern tribes ([48:1–7](#))
 - 3. The central territories ([48:8–22](#))
 - 4. Territories of the southern tribes ([48:23–29](#))
 - 5. Access to the city ([48:30–35](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 1495-1501). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.