

EZEKIEL

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

The Book of Ezekiel covers a period of twenty-two years in the history of the Jewish people, concluding fifteen years after the destruction of the first Temple (571 B.C.). Afterwards the nation split between Israel in the north and Judah in the south. With the Temple destroyed and the people deported to Babylon (Iraq), the northern and southern kingdoms struggled to maintain their identity as the Chosen People of God.

Ezekiel was Israel's last great prophet. Although often overshadowed by Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel is unique among the major prophets for his strange, even bizarre public behavior when delivering his messages. Thus Ezekiel is a challenging book to read and understand for both Jews and Christians.

As a member of a high-ranking priestly family, Ezekiel would have received a quality education. By the time of the first deportation of the Jews from Israel to Babylon in 597 B.C., Ezekiel was married and both he and his wife were taken with the other deportees to Babylon. Ezekiel's wife died shortly thereafter.

Like most of his fellow exiled Jews, Ezekiel settled in southern Babylon where the community soon established their own farms. Later many of them worked on great building projects. This was Babylon's heyday when it was believed to be the largest city in the world, and "blest" by its supreme god, Marduk. Among the projects of Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar, was the Ishtar Gate, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the rebuilt Tower of Babel (renamed the Etemenanki ziggurat).

Ezekiel's name ("*God strengthens*") matches well the mission God entrusted to him. Five years after his arrival in Babylon, around age thirty, Ezekiel received a vision from God (1:1ff). From that point on, for about twenty-two years, Ezekiel was the spiritual guide for his fellow Jews in Babylon.

Ezekiel's entire mission centers on the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Prior to that catastrophic event, Ezekiel's prophecies call the people to repent and trust in God rather than in alliances with foreign nations. After Jerusalem is destroyed, Ezekiel insists that Babylon has in fact become God's instrument to punish Judah; and that there is no escape from the punishment that will purify their souls, namely, the "remnant" of the people of Judah who are taken into exile.

The first part of the Book of Ezekiel (1-32) announces God's judgment against both the people of Israel and the idolatrous nations surrounding her. After a short prologue in which Ezekiel describes how God called him, Ezekiel uses symbols to predict the inevitable destruction of Jerusalem.

Overview (1-3)

As a sign of his ministry, the Lord has Ezekiel eat the scroll inscribed with "words of lamentation and mourning and woe," representing the prophetic word that enters him (2:9-10). How to explain this strange command? Ezekiel's call and vision—like the words of the exiled Jeremiah—are filled with imagery from the Book of Exodus when God appears to Moses on Mount Sinai. Then, God appeared to Moses in the midst of a storm; He appears to Ezekiel also in the midst of a storm (1:4). As Moses was sent to Pharaoh who refused to listen (Exodus 4:21), Ezekiel speaks to the people of Israel who are "of a hard forehead and have a stubborn heart" (3:7). Such images and allusions to Moses give Ezekiel the authority to succeed Moses ("**The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me.**" Deuteronomy 18:15). Finally, though "to eat one's words" has today a negative connotation, in Ezekiel's time it was entirely agreeable. That is, the message was given by God but was to be assimilated by the prophet and made his own. In other words, God's word is not "finger food" for the picky. Rather God's word must be consumed and digested by the prophet so that what comes out of his mouth is what is in his heart.

Prophetic signs and prophecies against the city of Jerusalem (4-7)

God commands Ezekiel to construct a scale model of Jerusalem and use it to act out publicly the coming siege that will destroy the city. Furthermore, Ezekiel is to lie on his left and right sides for days on end to symbolize

the “years of punishment” that Israel and Judah are going to suffer. Ezekiel is also told to perform a particularly shocking sign (4:9, 12-13); however the prophet begs God to reconsider such a defiling act. The Lord relents and permits Ezekiel to bake the bread over cow dung instead. With such signs Ezekiel is symbolizing the depths of misery afflicting his people, and the desperation to which the exiles will be reduced because of their sinfulness.

Certainly Ezekiel’s signs are provocative and even outrageous. But the role of the prophet in ancient Israel often involved ecstatic or eccentric behavior (1 Samuel 19:24). The sometimes fantastic nature of Ezekiel’s actions are attempts to break through his fellow Israelites’ hardness of heart. By the fifth year of exile (593), Ezekiel’s prophecies are more about judgment, replete with images of the doom that is about to fall upon the Jews because of their sins.

The sins in the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem (8-11)

How bad were their sins? How corrupt had Jerusalem become for it to suffer such a horrific end at the hands of the Babylonians? In the sixth year of the exile (592 B.C.), Ezekiel is caught up in a vision and sees what is really going on in the inner courts of the Temple. Ezekiel sees seventy elders of Israel worshiping images of “beasts” and “creeping things.” He also sees women weeping before the pagan goddess Tammuz, and twenty-five men with their backs to the Temple, facing east and “worshiping the sun.” Clearly the corruption of the Jewish leaders has arrived at the very heart of the holy place itself. The Jews must learn that God’s presence is *not* inseparably tied to the Temple. For the abominations practiced by the elders and the city inhabitants have driven out the glory of the Lord. Now the Lord’s “sanctuary” will transfer to the exiles in Babylon. Still, there remains hope for covenant renewal and the return of God’s presence in the future.

Israel’s idolatrous heart

The early Christian apologist, Tertullian, wrote: “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry.” Nowhere else does Scripture address idolatry as often and so thoroughly as in the Book of Ezekiel. The sin of idolatry—substituting someone or thing for God—was the primary reason for God’s judgment on Israel that resulted in the Babylonian exile. Whether atop mountains and hills (chap.6), in the Temple (chap. 8), or in the heart (chap. 14), of all the sins God condemns, idolatry is the sin that explains the others.

Most pernicious of all, as Ezekiel writes in 20:16, is the sin of idolatry rooted in the heart: **“They rejected My rules . . . for their heart went after their idols.”** Even at the time of their deliverance from Egypt, **“none of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt”** (20:8).

Signs and prophecies for Israel (12-19)

God commands Ezekiel to dress and pack as someone being forced to leave his home. Actually, Ezekiel probably would have stripped naked. The root meaning of the verb in Hebrew “to go into exile” is to “be naked.” Captives were often forced to march unclothed into exile (Isaiah 20:1-6). As expected, Ezekiel draws the attention of onlookers, giving him the opportunity to deliver his prophecy: *As I am, so will be the King of Israel and all of Jerusalem, exiled!* Furthermore, Ezekiel is to drink and eat while “quaking” and “trembling” to dramatize the fear that will overcome the Jerusalem inhabitants.

With such elaborate “parables” Ezekiel condemns Israel in the north and Judah in the south for their sins. Ezekiel declares the relationship between the Lord and Jerusalem to be that of a bridegroom and an adulterous bride. He retells the story of the Exodus as a love story, and likens Jerusalem to an orphan girl adopted by the Lord. When she (Jerusalem) had “reached the age for love,” God betrothed Himself to her by means of a “covenant” so that she may become His bride. But Jerusalem abandons her divine Spouse and, incredibly, uses the wealth bestowed upon her to buy sexual favors from foreigners, even going so far as to slaughter her children to the gods (16:15-34). As a result, the Lord will hand her over to the power of her

lovers who will abuse and destroy her. Yet the Lord will remember His love for Jerusalem, and restore her to an “everlasting covenant.”

Ezekiel then compares Israel’s enemies, Babylon and Egypt, to eagles struggling for control of a cedar branch. God Himself will plant the branch—the people of Jerusalem—so that it will become a “noble cedar” where all “birds” and “beasts” (Gentile nations) will seek refuge. In this image Ezekiel anticipates not only the restoration of Israel but also the conversion of the Gentile nations.

Then follows an extended sermon on individual culpability for sin. Though the Israelites believe they are suffering due to the sins of their fathers, God insists that each person shall die for his own sins (18:20).

Salvation history and the spiritual adultery of Jerusalem (20-23)

In order to explain how Israel has fallen so miserably, Ezekiel recalls salvation history from the time of Moses to the destruction of Jerusalem. He begins with Israel in Egypt and proceeds through the Exodus, the giving of the 10 Commandments, Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness, her settlement in Canaan, and tragically her idolatry. In this concentrated overview of her history, Israel is like an adolescent, rebelling against the Lord so as to be like the more worldly pagan nations. However the Lord will bring about a new exodus, in which He will gather Israel from all the places where she is exiled, and purify and impress upon her the gravity of her sins.

The boiling pot and the death of Ezekiel’s wife (24)

The ninth year (587) of Israel’s exile marks the final Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that would lead ultimately to the destruction of the city, the Temple, and the deportation of all remaining inhabitants. In this vision Ezekiel likens Jerusalem to an old rusted pot in which flesh is boiled until it is dried and charred, and the pot melted by the flames. Even the death of Ezekiel’s wife becomes a prophetic sign of the passing away of God’s spouse; that is, Jerusalem will depart without being mourned, since the would-be mourners will be struggling merely to survive.

Prophecies against the nations (25-32)

Ezekiel declares that the Gentile nations will be punished because they gloated over Jerusalem’s destruction and took advantage to pillage and abuse the survivors. Ezekiel then focuses on the two major powers that border Israel: Tyre and Egypt. Envisioned by Ezekiel as quasi-angelic beings, the rulers of these nations are condemned because their great power and “beauty” led them to elevate themselves in the presence of God. Implicit is Ezekiel’s charge of the rulers’ satanic arrogance, resulting in their self-worship to rival God Himself. By giving themselves over to demonic aspirations, these rulers have retraced the steps of the first angelic being (Lucifer) to rebel against God, and like him, will be punished by being thrown down.

Jerusalem’s Eastern Gate

Among the eight gates surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem, the oldest is the Eastern Gate (A.D. 500-700), also called the Golden Gate or the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:2). This gate gives the most direct access to where the Temple once stood. Jesus passed through the same gate to shouts of “hosanna!” when He entered Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (Matthew 21). Today Jewish tradition expects the Messiah to pass through the Eastern Gate when he comes to rule. In A.D. 1540-1541, the Moslem Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire, ordered the Eastern Gate blocked up to prevent the Jewish Messiah from entering Jerusalem. Ever since then the Eastern Gate’s archways have remained sealed, filled with sixteen feet of cement.

The new Exodus and a new creation (33-39)

With Israel conquered and the last of the inhabitants deported to Babylon, Ezekiel’s tone changes to one of consolation. Ezekiel declares that the day is coming when the Lord himself will be their shepherd and seek out the lost. God will bring back the straying, bind up the crippled, and strengthen the weak. God will bring His scattered children back to the Promised Land. This will be the new exodus. Just as the first generation

Israelites prepared to receive the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai by washing themselves, so now in the new exodus, God will prepare his people by cleansing them from sin with water so that they receive His law within the “heart.” The new exodus will surpass the old exodus as it will involve a new creation as well, since the Promised Land itself will become “like a garden of Eden” (36:35).

In Babylon, as Ezekiel shares the hardship of exile with his fellow Jews, he tries to keep the exiles’ hopes alive. Upon hearing news of the collapse of Jerusalem, many Jews believe God has abandoned them. But Ezekiel insists that God’s power, love and mercy will work for their conversion.

Ezekiel preaches personal responsibility. Generally it was commonly believed that cities and nations were punished as a whole—the just and the unjust; that the sins of parents were paid for by their children. However Ezekiel speaks of individual responsibility. As it was *in the beginning*, a man’s salvation or condemnation depends on him alone, that is, on his response to the grace received. Ezekiel further explains the meaning and purpose of divine punishment, teaching that it is possible for an *individual* to be reconciled with God. Since man is responsible for his actions, he must also suffer the consequences for his unfaithfulness. However even in exile, one can recover lost grace by being converted, which is the true purpose of any punishment God metes out (18:21-23).

But what about those Israelites who died before the new exodus takes place? Ezekiel answers that the Israelites who died before the new exodus need not despair, because God is able to raise them from their graves to enjoy the blessings of this “new creation.” This is the point of the famous “vision of the valley of dry bones” (37:1-14). The skeletons that come together with flesh and bone represent the whole house of Israel “reassembling” (“. . . **know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, all my people.**” 37:12-13). Ezekiel is linking the future resurrection to the restoration of the kingdom of David, that is, all twelve tribes of Israel. Although Ezekiel does not use the word *messiah*, he is saying that the new exodus, the new creation and kingdom will come when the future Davidic king finally arrives (37:24-26-8). Lastly, Ezekiel pronounces judgment upon Israel’s enemies, Gog and Magog, which are symbolic names for the forces of evil, i.e., the king of Babylon and his people.

The new temple (40-48)

Writing in 573 B.C., Ezekiel sees hope for the future. In this vision, a “man” escorts Ezekiel through a future Temple, measuring and providing the dimensions of the stairs, courts, anti-chambers, buildings, walls, and other features of the sanctuary. This Temple is much bigger than was Solomon’s Temple. Ezekiel describes a river flowing out of the “right side of the threshold of the temple.” This miraculous river gets deeper and deeper as it travels toward the Dead Sea. As it flows it brings life and health, even healing the Dead Sea so that its waters become fresh and life-giving. Once again, the imagery is of a new creation in which all that is dead will be brought to life—even the famous “Dead Sea.”

Finally, Ezekiel sees a completely new society for Israel, reorganized around the celebration of the liturgy. The Temple remains the center of the capital within the sacred precinct, and therefore is the center of the nation. Thus the whole nation is a kind of Temple-state, a society whose purpose is the perpetuation of true worship. This true worship is the sacrificial liturgy that celebrates and perpetuates Israel’s communion with God. All members will make a pilgrimage to the Temple for worship. With these prophecies, Ezekiel comes to a striking conclusion: there will be a new exodus, a new covenant, a new creation, and a new Temple and Promised Land.