

Introduction to Book of Ezekiel

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I. Preface: Our Limitations as Readers

Many of us are under the impression that all Prophets in the Bible are very similar in context and content. To be honest, I feel that too. However, I did not want that impression to hinder our reading of the Prophets. Everything written in the Prophets, being it in the form of narration, poems, sermons or commentaries, may appear to readers that just a few messages were being repeated constantly surrounding themes such as *the coming of the Lord's punishments, the falling of nations, and the Lord's restoration of His people*. If we keep going with that mindset in reading the Prophets, we will surely feel dreary.

I hope this course can help you grasp the essence of Ezekiel through twelve consecutive lessons.

We surely have certain limitations since we are not the prophet himself, nor did we see any of those visions. How we view 'mission' and 'commission' is also different from that of Ezekiel. How would it then be easy to interpret his visions and subsequently understand his messages?

The Book of Ezekiel alone is beyond our life experiences. By studying the history of Israel, we can at least understand the context of prophecies. However, Ezekiel's visions, upon a closer look, extend way beyond our imaginations. Therefore, it is only possible to study the Prophets in depth if we dive into the apocalyptic literature.

II. Basic approach in studying Ezekiel:

- Understanding the style of writing: Ezekiel adopted the use of apocalyptic and prophetic literature

- Interpretation of the prophecies
- Messages behind the visions
- Timing of punishment and the Apocalypse
- What kind of God is our Lord?
- Implications of Ezekiel's messages in the present age

Ezekiel was a prophet who delivered messages mainly through visions. Despite being in exile with other Judeans in Babylon, Ezekiel was able to communicate his visions to people in Jerusalem using figurative language, prophesizing the coming of God's condemnation upon them. This type of speech is common across the prophetic books. Yet, the Book of Ezekiel differentiates with other Prophets in describing how God first proclaimed His judgment on Judeans through visions, and then declared the same judgment on other nations. Similar to visions of other prophets, the three main visions detailed in this book contain both theological significance and literary content. Below are some main points from those visions:

Three main visions in the book of Ezekiel:

1. Commission of Ezekiel (1:1-3:15)
2. Condemnation and judgment (8-11)
3. Restoration of the new temple (40-48)
 - Divine appearance of the Lord
 - Details of those visions
 - Commissioned Ezekiel to deliver His messages

Ezekiel spoke about visions in first person?

The book of Ezekiel was written in around 580 B.C. At that time, there were two groups of Judeans: the group of exiles whom Ezekiel was with in Babylon, and the rest who were still in Judah. The two groups even had their own kings. Among the exiled, there was Jehoiachin; and in Jerusalem, there was Zedekiah. Ezekiel described a picturesque theme and used it to speak to both groups of Judeans. To the ones remained in Judah, he delivered his messages through vision; while to his fellow captivated Judeans, he gave warnings by using himself as an example.

III. Setting the big picture

Background Information – Author / identity of prophet (by whom); Audience (to whom);
Historical period of the prophecies (when)

Chronology of Old Testament Prophets

Division of Kingdom	8 th Century B.C.	Jonah (Nineveh) Amos, Hosea (Northern Kingdom) Isaiah, Micah (Southern Kingdom)
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Kingdom of Judah	7 th Century B.C.	Nahum (Nineveh) Zephaniah, Habakkuk Jeremiah (6 th -7 th Century B.C.)
Captivity	6 th Century B.C.	Daniel, Ezekiel Obadiah (Edom)
Return	5 th Century B.C.	Joel Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

IV. Overview of Ezekiel

Born in a family of priests (1:3) and was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel was captivated and brought to Babylon along with Jehoiachin, the king of Judah and some noble men in 597 B.C. There Ezekiel resided along Chebar canal (Kebir River in NIV).

The book of Ezekiel challenges its readers both by extraordinary visions and by the use of extensive symbolic language, which reflects the unique perspectives and creative writing style of Ezekiel. The book has also raised the bar for study of visions, figurative language and messages in prophetic literature.

1. Background and Setting:

Ezekiel's ministry as a prophet was contemporary of that of Jeremiah. While Jeremiah resided in Jerusalem, Ezekiel exiled in Babylon. Born in a family of priests (1:3), Ezekiel was captivated and brought to Babylon along with Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, some noble men and other Judeans in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 20:10-16).

2. This book can be divided into three sections (based on the New Chinese Version); while some Bible interpreters prefer to have two sections only. Below is an overview of the three sections:

1) God's judgment on Israel and Judah (1-24)

This section was about the first five years of Ezekiel's ministry as a prophet, when he was called to speak to Jerusalem round 593 B.C. (1:1-2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1). Chapters 1-14 provide details of how God was to cast down punishments to the rebellious Israel, and verses 1-27 in chapter 24 serve as a turning point.

2) Proclamation of God's judgment to the nations (25-32)

The main objective of this section is for the Lord to speak to the rebellious Israel through Ezekiel (16; 23). Even though Israel was chosen by God to be respected and adored, its acts of idolatry following other nations and its rebellion against God were seen as committing adultery. (See 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17).

3) Revival and hope for God's chosen people (33-48)

In the third section, Ezekiel again detailed about the revival of Israel and compared that with the return to Eden (34:25-30). The coming of the New World marked the road to revival. The dominant theme is hope for the future through God's promise of restoration.

You may also refer to the defining of sections in *Bible-CGST Study Edition* (in Chinese) or page 203 in *Prophetic Literature: an Introduction* by David L. Peterson.

V. Scripture interpretation, structure and message

Points to ponder within each section and between sections

- Repeated terms or phrases – recurring theme or details
- Change of people or location, transition of time
- Change of topics
- Transition of literary styles (narration <---> dialogue)
- Sentence structure
- Use of conjunctions (because, if, but, therefore, however, overall, etc.)
- Change of tone (e.g. from imperative to indicative)
- Addressing of specific group of people (e.g. “O house of Judah”)
- Messages/Applications

While we attempt to interpret the book of Ezekiel, it is of particular importance to outline its key messages. Pay attention to the following aspects:

- The Lord and His divine appearance
- The prophet and his ministry
- The prophet’s proclamation of the coming of divine judgment
- Important topics of calling for repentance and revival
- How we can relate to the messages of Ezekiel

Conclusion: To split a pie into three –

1. The first piece tackles the key points in chapters 1-24;
2. The second piece covers the main idea of nations receiving divine judgments;
3. The third piece examines the hope and revival of Israel.

Looking at the entire book of Ezekiel from a bigger picture, we are to explore the flow of thoughts in this book with emphasis on interpreting and summarizing the theological messages from Ezekiel.