

INTRODUCTION TO

EZEKIEL



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 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.

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).

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
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*, p. 34)

Unique dating formula in Hebrew; see notes *earliest recorded oracle ****latest recorded oracle

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.

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.

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 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



The Near East at the Time of Ezekiel

c. 593 B.C.

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.

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, pp. 23–26. See also *History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ*, pp. 2635–2662.)

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.

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 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)
 - 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)
 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)
 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 homelander (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)
- 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)

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel in Babylon

1^aIn the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by ^bthe Chebar canal, ^cthe heavens were opened, and I saw ^dvisions of God.¹
2On the fifth day of the month (it was ^ethe fifth year of ^fthe exile of King Jehoiachin), ³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel ^gthe priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by ^bthe Chebar canal, and ^hthe hand of the LORD was upon him there.

The Glory of the LORD

4As I looked, behold, ⁱa stormy wind came ^jout of the north, and a great cloud, with ^kbrightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, ^las it were gleaming metal.² **5**And from the midst of it came the likeness of ^mfour living creatures. ⁿAnd this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, ⁶but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled ^olike burnished bronze. **8**Under their wings ^qon their four sides ^rthey had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹their wings touched one another. ⁵Each one of them went straight forward, ^qwithout turning as they went. **10**As for the likeness of their faces, ^teach had a human

¹ Or from God ² Or amber; also verse 27

¹⁰ ch. 10:14, 21

Chapter 1

¹ ver. 3; Num. 4:3]

² ch. 3:15, 23; 10:15, 20, 22; 43:3 ³ Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; 10:11; Rev. 19:11] ⁴ ch. 8:3; 40:2; [ch. 11:24; Num. 12:6]

² [ch. 8:1]; See ch. 20:1

² Kgs. 24:12, 15;

[ch. 17:12; 19:8; 33:21;

40:1]

³ [ver. 1] ⁴ [See ver. 1

above] ⁵ ch. 3:22; 8:1;

33:22; 37:1; 40:1; [1 Kgs.

18:46; 2 Kgs. 3:15]

⁴ Jer. 23:19; 25:32; 30:23;

[ch. 3:12] ⁵ See Jer. 1:14

⁶ ver. 27 ⁷ ver. 27; ch. 8:2

⁵ See Rev. 4:6-8 ⁶ ch.

10:14, 21

⁶ ch. 10:21

⁷ ch. 40:3; Rev. 1:15; 2:18

⁸ ver. 17; ch. 10:11 ⁹ ch.

10:8, 21

⁹ ch. 10:22 ⁹ [See ver. 8

above]

1:1-3:27 Inaugural Vision. The opening sequence of Ezekiel is the most elaborate and complex of the prophetic call narratives in the OT, and also one of the most carefully structured. In a vision, Ezekiel witnesses the awesome approach of the glory of God (1:1-28). Ezekiel receives his prophetic commission through swallowing the scroll God offers (2:1-3:11), thus both fortifying him and training him in obedience. After the glory of God withdraws (3:12-15), Ezekiel's role is further refined by his appointment as a "watchman" (3:16-21). The sequence concludes with a further encounter with God's glory (3:22-27).

1:1-3 Setting. Unusually, Ezekiel opens with an autobiographical note (v. 1) and some accompanying explanation (vv. 2-3). These verses have echoes in 3:14-15; together they frame the book's opening vision.

1:1 What the **thirtieth year** signifies is obscure, as it does not follow the usual pattern for dates in Ezekiel. It may refer to the prophet's age. Reference to the **Chebar canal** locates the prophet near ancient Nippur (or, in modern terms, halfway between Baghdad and Basra) and thus not in the city of Babylon itself. **Visions of God** links this vision with 8:3 and 40:2; the other great vision in the book (37:1-14) does not use this language.

1:2 Probably the "thirtieth year" of v. 1 should be linked with the **fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin** (i.e., 593 B.C.). Jehoiachin's exile is the regular chronological marker for dates given throughout the book. Jehoiachin was only 18 at the time of exile in 597 B.C., and had then been king for only three months (see 2 Kings 24:8).

1:4-3:15 Inaugural Vision. The vision forms a unified whole, in spite of its being comprised of distinct episodes. It is symmetrically structured, having onion-like layers: the "frame" (1:1-3 and 3:14-15) is wrapped around the approach and departure of the cherub-throne (1:4-28 and 3:12-13), with the prophet's audience before the Lord contained in 2:1-3:11. That central section has its own internal "nesting."

1:4-28 The Throne of the Lord Approaches. The richness of detail in Ezekiel's

account of this vision is both inspiring and perplexing. It recalls the traditions of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10-22), especially within the context of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:6-8), and stands at the head of the later mystical *merkavah* (Hb. for "chariot") tradition within Judaism.

1:4 A stormy wind (Hb. *ruakh se'arah*) heralds the approach of the Lord, as in Job 38:1; 40:6. Likewise, the **north** is associated with the divine abode (see Ps. 48:2), and in Jeremiah it indicates the source of divine judgment (Jer. 1:13-15). The phrase **as it were** translates the Hebrew preposition *ke-*, "like," which is used 18 times in this description; half of those are in Ezek. 1:24-28. Clearly Ezekiel is groping for language to describe the vision.

1:5-14 The piling up of detail contrasts with the bland label of **living creatures**, only later identified as "cherubim" in 10:20. The first impression (1:6-9) is followed by closer detail (vv. 10-13). (A beautiful carved ivory that may depict one of these composite creatures has been found, dating to the 9th century B.C. It probably comes from the site of Arslan Tash in northern Syria. The figure combines all four features described in ch. 1: a human figure, wings of an eagle, forelegs of a lion, and hind legs of an ox.)

1:5 The many uses of the term **likeness** (Hb. *demut*, 10 times in ch. 1) emphasize the impressionistic nature of the vision's description.

1:9 The notice that **their wings touched** is reminiscent of the description of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:27). The four-sided form of the creatures ensures that they can always do the impossible: go **straight forward**, in any direction, but **without turning** (cf. "went straight forward" [Ezek. 1:12] with "darted to and fro" [v. 14]).

1:10 The creatures had a predominantly human shape, but each had four different **faces**. This assemblage is unique, although complex combinations of supernatural beings are known throughout the ancient Near East. Many suggestions have been made to explain their symbolism. Certainly each creature is majestic in its realm, whether among the wild (**lion**; Prov. 30:30) and domestic (**ox**; Prov. 14:4) animals, or in the air (**eagle**; Prov. 23:5; cf. Obad. 4), with each of them noticed subsequently to the **human face** (cf. Gen.

11^aVer. 23; [Isa. 6:2]
 12^f[See ver. 9 above] ^gch. 10:17
 13^m[Ps. 104:4] ⁿ[Ps. 97:3, 4]
 14ⁱ[Zech. 4:10] ^j[Matt. 24:27; Luke 17:24]
 15^hch. 10:9; [Dan. 7:9]
 16^h[See ver. 15 above] ⁱ[Dan. 10:6] ^jch. 10:10
 17^gch. 10:11 ^hver. 8 ⁱver. 9
 18^hch. 10:12; [Rev. 4:8]
 19^gch. 10:16 [ch. 10:19; 11:22]
 20ⁱch. 10:17
 21^h[See ver. 19 above] ⁱ[See ver. 19 above] ^j[See ver. 20 above]
 22^f[ver. 25, 26; ch. 10:1] ^g[Rev. 4:6]
 23^mver. 7 ⁿver. 11
 24^hch. 43:2; [Rev. 1:15] ⁱPs. 29:3, 4; 68:33 ^jSee Gen. 17:1 ^kDan. 10:6; [Rev. 19:6]
 25ⁱ[ver. 22]
 26^hch. 10:1; [1 Kgs. 22:19] ⁱEx. 24:10 ^jDan. 8:15; [Rev. 1:13]
 27^hch. 8:2; [ver. 4] ⁱSee ver. 4 ^jver. 4
 28^hGen. 9:13; [Rev. 4:3; 10:1]

face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while ¹²two covered their bodies. ¹²^sAnd each went straight forward. ^vWherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. ¹³As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was ^wlike burning coals of fire, ^wlike the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. ^xAnd the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. ¹⁴And the living creatures ^ydarted to and fro, ^zlike the appearance of a flash of lightning.

¹⁵^aNow as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹ ¹⁶^aAs for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like ^bthe gleaming of beryl. ^cAnd the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷^dWhen they went, they went ^ein any of their four directions ^fwithout turning as they went. ¹⁸And their rims were tall and awesome, ^gand the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. ¹⁹^hAnd when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; ⁱand when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰ⁱWherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, ^jfor the spirit of the living creatures ³was in the wheels. ²¹^hWhen those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; ⁱand when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, ^jfor the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²²Over the heads of the living creatures there was ^kthe likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring ^lcrystal, spread out above their heads. ²³And under the expanse their wings were ^mstretched out straight, one toward another. ⁿAnd each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings ^olike the sound of many waters, like ^pthe sound of the ^qAlmighty, a sound of tumult ^rlike the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵And there came a voice from above ^sthe expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

²⁶And above the expanse over their heads there was ^tthe likeness of a throne, ⁴in appearance ^ulike sapphire; ⁴and seated above the likeness of a throne was ^va likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷And ^wupward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were ^xgleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and ^ythere was brightness around him. ⁵ ²⁸Like the appearance of ^zthe bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

¹ Hebrew of their faces ² Hebrew on their four sides ³ Or the spirit of life; also verse 21 ⁴ Or lapis lazuli ⁵ Or it

1:26). This imagery is later echoed in the four (separate) creatures before the throne in Rev. 4:7.

1:11 The **two wings** of these creatures (also in v. 23) are similar to the three pairs of wings of the seraphim in Isaiah's throne vision (Isa. 6:2).

1:12 straight forward . . . without turning. See note on v. 9. Should this **spirit** (Hb. *ruakh*) be identified with that of v. 20? It is certainly different from the *ruakh* (Hb. for "wind") of v. 4. Given the closer identification of the spirit in v. 20, it seems likely that here the reference is to a "spirit" beyond the living creatures—in other words, the creatures' movements are responsive to the divine spirit (for "Spirit," see note on 3:12).

1:14 darted to and fro. See note on v. 9.

1:15–21 The complex structure of their **wheels** is difficult to envisage, though something gyroscopic seems to be suggested.

1:16 Beryl (Hb. *tarshish*) is a crystalline mineral found in different colors. Here, it is likely to be the pale green to gold variety. The Septuagint does not use a consistent Greek equivalent.

1:18 The wheels' **eyes** should be understood metaphorically and as related to the "gleaming" beryl of v. 16 (perhaps protruding gemstones).

1:22–28 The climax of the vision: a form can be discerned **above** the wheels,

above the creatures, above the expanse, on a throne. Wrapped in light, **the glory of the LORD** cannot be captured in human language.

1:22–23 Expanse appears four times in the immediate context (vv. 22–23, 25–26) and forms a strong link to Gen. 1:6–8, 14–20, where it is used nine times (out of a total of 17 times in the whole OT). There the expanse forms the dome of the sky; here it is borne on the wings of the creatures and forms a boundary *beyond* which comes the culmination of the vision.

1:24 For the first time in the vision, sound dominates sight, even though the preceding description includes a violent thunderstorm (v. 4). The sound of **many waters** will again accompany the approaching glory of God in 43:2.

1:25 While the sound of a **voice** is registered, report of speech is deferred until v. 28b.

1:28 The bow . . . on the day of rain could signal the covenant rainbow of Gen. 9:13–16. Given the ominous message that follows, the more likely symbolic reference is to the bow that is the Lord's weapon from the storm, which shoots arrows of lightning (see Ps. 7:12–13; Hab. 3:9). The **glory of the LORD** is his manifested presence with his people, visible in the wilderness (Ex. 16:7) and then accessible through the sanctuary (Ex. 40:34–35); in Ezekiel the term appears in Ezek. 1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23; 43:2–5; 44:4. This glory will leave the temple (chs. 9–11) and then will return to the restored temple (43:2–5). See note on Isa. 6:3. **I fell on my face.**

Such was the appearance of the likeness of ^athe glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, ^bI fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Ezekiel's Call

2 And he said to me, ^c“Son of man, ^dstand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” ²And as he spoke to me, ^ethe Spirit entered into me and ^fset me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to ^gnations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. ^hThey and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants also are ⁱimpudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ ⁵And ^jwhether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are ^ka rebellious house) ^lthey will know that a prophet has been among them. ⁶And you, son of man, ^mbe not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, ⁿthough briars and thorns are with you and you sit on ^oscorpions. ² Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. ⁷And you shall speak my words to them, ⁱwhether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

⁸“But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. ^oBe not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and ^peat what I give you.” ⁹And when I looked, behold, ^qa hand was stretched out to me, and behold, ^ra scroll of a book was in it. ¹⁰And he spread it before me. And it had writing ^son the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

3 And he said to me, ^c“Son of man, eat whatever you find here. ^tEat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. ³And he said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” ^uThen I ate it, and it was in my mouth ^vas sweet as honey.

⁴And he said to me, ^w“Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. ⁵For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel—⁶not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. ^xSurely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. ⁷But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel ^yhave a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. ⁸^aBehold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.

¹ Or *Son of Adam*; so throughout Ezekiel ² Or *on scorpion plants*

²⁸ch. 3:23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18, 19; 11:22; 23; 43:4, 5; 44:4; [Ex. 24:16] ^och. 3:23; 43:3; 44:4; [Gen. 17:3, 17; Josh. 5:14; Dan. 8:17; Acts 9:4; Rev. 1:17]

Chapter 2

¹ch. 3:1, 3, 4, 17, 25; 41, 16; 5:1 ^oDan. 10:11
²ch. 3:24 ch. 3:24; Dan. 8:18
³ver. 5, 6, 8; ch. 3:26; 24:3; 44:6] ^och. 20:16, 18, 21
⁴[ch. 3:7]
⁵ch. 3:11; [ch. 3:27; 17:12] ^o[See ver. 3 above] ^och. 33:33
⁶ch. 3:9; Jer. 1:8 ^o[ch. 28:24; 2 Sam. 23:6; Mic. 7:4] ^o[Deut. 8:15]
⁷[See ver. 5 above]
⁸[Isa. 50:5] ^oRev. 10:9; [ch. 3:1, 3]
⁹ch. 8:3; Dan. 10:10; Rev. 10:2 Jer. 36:2
¹⁰Rev. 5:1

Chapter 3

¹[See ch. 2:1 above] ^o[ch. 2:8]
³Jer. 15:16; Rev. 10:9, 10 ^o[Ps. 19:10; 119:103]
⁴See ch. 2:1
⁶[Matt. 11:21, 23]
⁷[John 15:20] ^o[ch. 2:4]
⁸See Jer. 1:18

In the NT, John's vision of the risen Christ (Rev. 1:9–20, esp. v. 17) stirred a similar response.

2:1–3:11 *The Prophet Commissioned.* The vision of glory culminates in a call that is both sweet and severe. Two speeches bracket a test of obedience.

2:1 Ezekiel is never addressed by name, but 93 times as **son of man** (Hb. *ben-ʾadam*), out of a total of 99 times for the phrase in the OT; Daniel is the only other person so addressed in the OT (Dan. 8:17). The Hebrew idiom “son of x” indicates membership in a class. “Son of man” identifies Ezekiel as a creature before the supreme creator. This highlights the humanity and thus the proper humility and dignity of the servant before Israel’s almighty, transcendent God.

2:2–4 The characterization of the people of Israel as **rebels** sounds a distinctive note throughout the commissioning vision. This deep-seated trait (**and their fathers**; cf. v. 4) will be emphasized again in Ezekiel’s retrospective of Israel’s history in ch. 20. Ezekiel is sent to speak on God’s behalf (**you shall say to them**), but no content is given—yet.

2:5–7 The label **rebellious house**, used almost like a refrain in these verses, is unique to Ezekiel (see also 3:9, 26–27; 12:2–3, 9, 25; 24:3). This label joins 2:2–4 in pointing to a deeply ingrained bent to rebellion, while treating the Judean nation as a whole. On the parallel of vv. 6b–7 to 3:9b–11, see note on 3:9b–11.

2:8–3:3 The demand to **eat** the scroll immediately tests Ezekiel’s obedience, a matter of contrast with the rebelliousness of his compatriots. The progression from command to compliance moves through three moments of speech and response (2:8–10; 3:1–2; 3:3).

2:8–10 The request to **open your mouth and eat** comes without any indication of what is to be given. The missing “content” of v. 4 is about to be provided, not as food but as the **scroll of a book**. This phrase (elsewhere

found only in Ps. 40:8; Jer. 36:2, 4) emphasizes the scroll’s physicality. When it is unrolled, the **writing** is visible front and back: the scroll is full, just as Ezekiel soon will be (Ezek. 3:3). Its **words** are all audible, though their precise content remains unspecified.

3:1–2 The command to **eat** is now combined with the commission to **go and speak**.

3:3 feed your belly. Does this third instruction imply hesitation on the prophet’s part? Finally, having tasted, the prophet gets another surprise: the words of mourning are not bitter, as one would expect, but **sweet as honey**. Ezekiel has taken a first step in obedience to the Lord.

3:4–11 Following Ezekiel’s obedient response, the emphasis shifts from prophet to people, though both remain in view.

3:4 The command to **go and speak** is repeated in v. 11, framing this second speech. While the first speech emphasized divine sending (2:3–4), here the focus is on the prophet’s going.

3:5–7 Contrary to expectation, Ezekiel is cautioned that a cross-cultural mission would be easier than taking words of God to his own people. There is nothing inherently derogatory about **foreign speech and a hard language**, although the terms could be negatively applied to a foreign oppressor (cf. Isa. 33:19).

3:8–9a made your face as hard. This equipping forms the necessary step to the final charge.

3:9b–11 The conclusion to the second speech echoes and expands on that of the first (2:6b–7). Despite the striking resemblance of the English texts, the Hebrew is cast quite differently in the two passages. This could simply be stylistic variation. If the Hebrew constructions are intended to carry a nuance, then 2:6b–7 has the force of an immediate instruction (“don’t be afraid [now!]”) while 3:9b–11 has that of a blanket prohibition (“never fear!”). It could also

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