



## The Book of Ezekiel

### Ezekiel, Part 1

#### Ezekiel Introduction

The Book of Ezekiel is a strange and remarkable work. One of the many things that renders this text unique amongst the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible is that it is written entirely in the first-person voice of the prophet. This fact has often made it very easy for readers to psychologize Ezekiel as a person, dismissing him as mad or crazy. While this interpretation is deeply problematic, it is also easy to buy in to, especially given the many vivid and unsettling visions present in the text.

Indeed, the entire book opens with a very famous, very wild vision of the deity, followed by complex chapters of visions and oracles. Ezekiel as a prophet often seems very angry - we find him frequently proclaiming terrible things about Israel, but unlike in Jeremiah, there is often a "but" in Ezekiel's message. There is a hope of restoration - this is influenced in no small part by the difference in historical setting between the Books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The Book of Jeremiah was written largely before and on the cusp of the Babylonian exile. For Ezekiel, however, the exile has now happened. He is living in Babylonia after having been exiled in the first wave of deportations in 597 BCE that targeted the elite population, prior to the larger mass deportation in 587 BCE. That likely indicates that Ezekiel belonged to an elite social class, and indeed, he appears to have been a priest prior to the exile; if the tenor of his writing and his imagery is anything to go by, he is perhaps the most priestly priest in the entire Hebrew Bible!

Ezekiel is living in the doom that Jeremiah was prophesying - in a very real way, he is living in the post-apocalyptic reality following the destruction of Judah. Naturally, this also means that Ezekiel's audience is primarily those who are also experiencing exile, and it is perhaps no surprise that Ezekiel is the first prophet chronologically to ask, "what now?" after the exile. The very worst thing has come to pass - not just exile, but the complete destruction of the temple. Where do the people of Israel go from here?

#### The Loss of Divine Presence, and Ezekiel the Priest

The total destruction of the temple represented the total loss of divine presence, something that not even Jeremiah had accounted for in his prophecies of doom. The Book of Ezekiel wrestles with this new reality throughout its many chapters, and this is especially illustrated by the priestly knowledge that Ezekiel clings to in the text. As an author, Ezekiel is clearly very well versed in the priestly material of the Pentateuch, specifically the layer scholars refer to as "H" or the "Holiness Code," itself

the second layer of "P" or the "Priestly Source." Ezekiel utilizes the language of H enormously, which is sensible given it includes the part of Leviticus that warns the people that if they keep messing up, not only will God leave the temple, but they will also be evicted from the land. This reality is far worse than even the famous curses in Deuteronomy 28.

Ezekiel is out there in Babylonia in 597 and onward attempting to figure out how to make sense of what has happened, and what therefore to prophesy. In the pre-exilic period, the big threat was obviously the possibility of exile itself; but once this possibility becomes a lived reality, prophets can hardly threaten it anymore. For Ezekiel, and the trajectory of biblical prophecy in general, the messages turn from threatening the "stick" to promising the "carrot." In order to get Israel to change its present ways, which is the goal of every Biblical prophet, the rhetoric is no longer about threatening a terrible outcome, but rather offering a path for things to get better and improve.

### The Visions of Ezekiel

The prophetic word event, understood as primarily spoken medium, and textuality get mixed up in interesting ways throughout Ezekiel, right from the beginning and his awe-inspiring first vision. We know from Ezekiel's location in Babylonia that he would likely be encountering images of fearsome hybrid creatures via Babylonian state architecture, as they are typical mythic entities common throughout Babylonia and Mesopotamia. Obviously, depicted in stone reliefs, these creatures would be immobile and not living - hence Ezekiel's emphasis on the alive-ness of the creatures in his vision, and on their physical movements. These creatures also have wheels beneath them, and this may speak to one of the great dilemmas Ezekiel faces after the temple is destroyed: with the structure gone, where does God go? And not just where does God go, but how does God move around? In the post-exilic period, as reflected in writings such as Ezekiel, Israel's deity becomes mobile for the first time in a way that hasn't quite happened before. This mobility echoes the last time YHWH did not have a permanent abode - it uses the language of the Tabernacle, which was itself a portable, mobile sanctuary.

Ezekiel's descriptions of his visions are at once incredibly precise and yet frustratingly ambiguous. He constantly uses language like "it was something like," and this is even reflected in Chapter 8 during his vision of the temple back in Jerusalem. This vision, despite not relating to heavenly creatures as in the initial episode, still retains a vague, imprecise quality, all of which serve to remind the reader that these are very specifically visions. We are inhabiting the hazy world of the prophetic word event and first-person subjectivity, experiencing the divine word along with Ezekiel in a way that is deeply unpleasant.

This unpleasantness continues as a theme throughout the Book of Ezekiel. In Chapter 3, the prophet physically consumes the divine word by eating the scroll, leaving the bitter taste of YHWH's words despite the sweetness of the initial consumption. This act causes Ezekiel to embody the divine word in a physical way, filling his stomach, and even calls to mind imagery of the womb. YHWH is sending Ezekiel to Israel, not to foreign nations - God even quips that if Ezekiel were to speak to foreign nations, they would surely listen to him, despite the language barrier. Not so with Israel. Their hard heads and stubborn hearts prevent them from hearing the word of God. This language of the anatomical composition of Israel will be echoed later in the hope of restoration - what will make such a restoration possible? Well, clearly a heart transplant!

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