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Introduction to Ezekiel

In the Tyranny of the Mundane, it is easy to lose sight of who we are, where we are, the times in which we live, and whose we are! Today seems a lot like yesterday, and tomorrow most likely will be like today. Accordingly, what we do and the day-in and day-out of life are rather insignificant!

The book of Ezekiel won't let us think that way. Of all the prophets, God gave this prophet a glimpse at the forest! Habakkuk saw only the inequity of the day! Joel saw only the Day of the Lord! Hosea saw very little beyond the infidelity of God's people! Yet with Ezekiel, we get a larger glimpse into what God was and is doing in this world! Ezekiel will hopefully give you a greater vision for our life and ministry!

Prophetic Overview

1. Joel to Judah ~845 BC.
2. Jonah on account of Nineveh ~780 BC.
3. Amos to Israel ~765 BC.
4. Hosea to Israel ~750 BC.
5. Isaiah to Judah ~740 BC.
6. Micah to Judah ~735 BC.
7. Nahum to Judah ~650 BC.
8. Jeremiah to Judah ~627 BC.
9. Zephaniah to Judah ~622 BC.
10. Habakkuk to Judah ~605 BC.
11. Daniel to Judah ~605 BC.

The Background: The Prophet, The Date, and Setting, Ezekiel 1:1-3.

Ezekiel 1:1-3: "Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth *day* of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, the word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the Lord came upon him.)"

This prolog places the book of Ezekiel in the early part of the sixth century BC. If we are going to understand this prophesy, we therefore need to be familiar with the political history of Judah of this time. Accordingly, we pick it up with Josiah.

Josiah (640-609 BC), 2 Kings 22:1-2; 23:25.

Josiah was the sixteenth king of Judah. Because he was the son of Amon and grandson of Manasseh, the "people of the land" enthroned him at the age of eight upon the assassination of his father. He served as king for thirty-one years; his was a regency characterized by peace and reform. Hence, the years of his reign were among the most tranquil that Judah ever experienced under a king.

In fact, the Bible focuses almost exclusively on Josiah's spiritual reforms, which initially occurred in three stages.

The First Stage (632-628): Josiah's Personal Growth in Grace

Recall, at the age of sixteen Josiah personally "began to seek the God of his father David" (2

Chronicles 34:3). This truly could have marked the day he came to saving faith- when God regenerated him and opened his eyes to behold the Savior!

The Second Stage (628-622): The Cleansing of the Land

At the age of twenty, Josiah initiated drastic reforms and so endeavored to cleanse Jerusalem and the land of its idolatrous objects and the worship of Baal (2 Chronicles 34:3–7)!

The Third Stage (622): Repairing the Temple and Reinstating Full Worship

At the age of twenty-six, Josiah ordered that the Temple be repaired under the supervision of Hilkiah, the high priest (2 Kings 23).

Recall, during Manasseh’s reign, the worship of God was displaced with the worship and service of Baal and the many false gods of the Canaanites! The result was that the temple was re-allocated and so redesigned to house the worship of these false gods. It most likely was at this time that a faithful scribe/priest hid a copy of the book of Deuteronomy¹ in one of the newly erected walls of the temple. During the reform of 622 BC, this copy was discovered (2 Chronicles 34:14–15)!

When the book was read to Josiah, he was horrified to learn how far Judah had departed from the covenant and so the calling that God had placed upon the nation. This discovery provided a new momentum for the reformation that was already in progress.

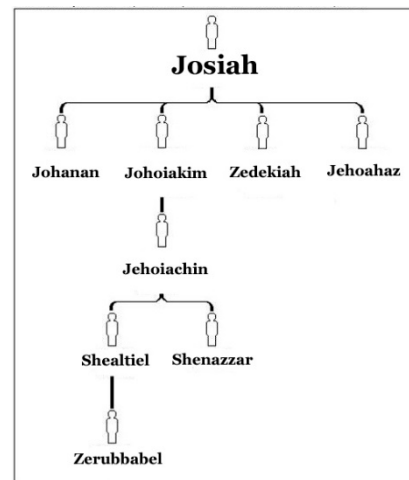
Josiah’s work and reform were short-lived as he died prematurely in battle at the hands of Neco in 609 BC (he was forty years old)! His fourth-born son would take his place.

Jehoahaz (609 BC), 2 Kings 23:31.

For whatever reason, Neco did not like Jehoahaz and so summoned him to the Syrian town of Riblah (cf. 1 Kings 23:33). Here Jehoahaz was captured, put in chains, and brought to Egypt where he died at a young age (cf. Jeremiah 22:10-12).

Why Jehoahaz was deemed a threat to Egypt we really do not know. Most likely, Jehoahaz looked like his father and so posed a risk of future rebellion. Yet this is pure conjecture. Regardless, after Jehoahaz’ three month reign, his older brother, Jehoiakim, was placed on the throne.

Jehoiakim (608-598 BC), 2 Kings 22:34.



Judah was placed under heavy tribute to Egypt! And shockingly, Jehoiakim did NOT spend his time laboring to protect God's people and the nation. Rather, the first three years of his reign were spent focusing upon himself- his comfort, authority, and power! At this time of uncertainty, want, and difficulty, Jehoiakim built an extravagant palace with forced labor- which means he enslaved his own people (Jeremiah 22:13-19)!!

Furthermore, he allowed Josiah's reforms to lapse and played into the hands of those who had always opposed them. As such, during his reign the wicked practices of Manasseh were reintroduced to the people of God with a vengeance. Public morality deteriorated! The strong and powerful were given full license to abuse the poor. And one of the most important elements of the Covenant- the care of the weak and hurting- was completely ignored!



Yet in 605 BC the political landscape in Palestine changed quite dramatically. The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, won a decisive victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish! As such, the Egyptian forces retreated to Hamath where they were defeated yet again!

Palestine lay vulnerable with no force to resist Babylon. In 605 BC, the Babylonians attacked! At first Jehoiakim resisted which resulted in the commencement of the siege referenced in Daniel 1. Yet Jehoiakim was a weak leader and soft. Accordingly, in no time he surrendered!

This gave both the Judean monarchy and the nation a vassal status before Babylon (2 Kings 24:1). This meant that NOT ONLY from this point forward Judah had to pay tribute to Babylon, BUT the Babylonian gods and religion had to be adopted and practiced in Israel! So much for covenant loyalty and service to God!

The first tribute that was to be paid to Nebuchadnezzar was in the form of gold and people! Nebuchadnezzar took the best and the brightest of the youth of Israel to be brainwashed, educated, and trained in the Babylonian system. Daniel was part of this first exile!

Now as a vassal and so a puppet king, things were difficult both for Jehoiakim and the Nation. Accordingly, when Egypt won a decisive victory over Nebuchadnezzar in 600/599 BC, Jehoiakim shifted allegiance to Egypt and so rebelled against Babylon! Initially Nebuchadnezzar was too busy in his own country to take action against Jerusalem. And so, he sent bands of marauders to plunder Judah (Jeremiah 35:11; 2 Kings 24:2).

Yet by 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had addressed the problems which had kept him occupied. Accordingly, "in the summer when the kings go to battle," he marched on Judah. Yet before Nebuchadnezzar could get there, Jehoiakim died. Accordingly, his son, Jehoiachin, was left to

deal with the impending threat of the Babylonians...

Jehoiachin (598-597 BC), 2 Kings 24:8-9.

The death of Jehoiakim did not stop Nebuchadnezzar from coming to Judah. Three months into Jehoiachin's reign, on March 15/16, 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Judah where he deposed Jehoiachin and placed his uncle, Zedekiah (Josiah's third born son), on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar left Israel taking with him 10,000 more exiles of which Jehoiachin, his mother (Nehushta), state officials, and leading citizens were a part. Ezekiel was part of this exile.²

Zedekiah (597-586 BC), 2 Kings 24:18-20.

With Zedekiah on the throne, Nebuchadnezzar anticipated that the problems with Judah were finished. Yet such was not to be the case. It is important to note that though the Second Deportation was not large, it was significant in that it removed many of Judah's key personnel and advisors. Accordingly, those who now led the government were ultranationalists lacking in experience, wisdom, and so caution! Furthermore, during this time, the false prophets of Judah said that the exile would only last two years (Jeremiah 28:3, 11) which played into the hands of the nationalists! And so being young and weak, Zedekiah did not have the strength to oppose all who called for rebellion. As such, in the 588 BC Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar!

This time the Babylonian king responded with an iron fist! He held Jerusalem under siege for one and one-half years! When the hunger in the city became intolerable such, that Judah was at its weakest point, the lower city was captured. Not long afterward, Zedekiah fled secretly out of Jerusalem during the night (Jeremiah 39:4)!

With their king gone, Judah's resolve dissipated and the Babylonians easily conquered the rest of the city. The temple, the palace of the king, and the houses of the rich and powerful were burned. The walls of the city were broken down. The house of the Lord went up in flames!

In the meantime, the Babylonians pursued Zedekiah and caught him, deserted by his troops, in the plain of Jericho (Jeremiah 39:5). They took him bound to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar had retreated. There Zedekiah's sons were killed before his eyes. Then his eyes were gouged out, and he was carried away in bonds to Babylon (Jeremiah 39:6-7).

Such was the downfall and so the destruction of the nation of Judah; the date was 586 BC. In this exile, all the prominent people of Judah who weren't executed were subject to transporting. The gold, silver, and bronze from the temple went to Babylon too. Only the poorest of the people were left behind! They made due by living in caves, hiding out in shelters, and even moving in to the abandoned homes of the wealthy (cf. Ezekiel 33:23-29). All of this serves as the background to the prophecy before us.

Ezekiel 1:1-2, "Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth *day* of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile...)"

The date indicators of the opening verses in Ezekiel tell us that Ezekiel received his call to the prophetic ministry on July 31, 593 BC. Accordingly, if we go back thirty years from this date (as v. 1 directs), we are at the time when the Temple was cleansed of its Baalism under Josiah and the book of Deuteronomy was discovered (622 BC). It is noteworthy that Ezekiel was born around this time!! As such, Josiah's revival would have a significant impact in the life and ministry of Ezekiel- as we'll see.³

Now our text advances us thirty years into the life of Ezekiel where by "the River Chebar" Ezekiel was called by God to the prophetic ministry! Note the map included in your notes... "the river Chebar" was but one of many branches of an elaborate canal system that distributed water from the Tigris and the Euphrates throughout the city and its environs. Located in Nippur, it brought the waters of the Euphrates in a loop south-eastwards from Babylon via Nippur and back to the main river near Uruk. Ezekiel so happened to be standing by the "the river Chebar" when God opened his eyes to behold the glory of God and the majesty of His Kingdom! With this, Ezekiel continued the description of his call.



Ezekiel 1:3, "The word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest,⁴ son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the Lord came upon him.)"

We do NOT know who "Buzi" is... BUT we do know that he was a "priest." This means that:

1. Ezekiel was raised during the revival of Josiah in Jerusalem to serve as a priest in a newly dedicated system!
2. Ezekiel would have been around thirteen when Josiah was killed.
3. Ezekiel would have been privy to Judah's rather quick plunge back into Baalism, the folly of Jehoiakim, and the horrible religious and social abuses that occurred at this time!

Yet that was his youth. It now has been thirty years and no doubt to his shock (which we'll talk about another time), Ezekiel is living in the capital city of Babylon where he was privy to the ministry of Daniel and his three friends as they served in Nebuchadnezzar's court (recall all the statements about the glory and sovereignty of God that Nebuchadnezzar issued on account of his interaction with Daniel; Ezekiel no doubt would have been encouraged by these as well)! It was at this time, God called Ezekiel into the prophetic ministry- and so began the revelation and the events outlined in this prophesy!

It is important to note that Ezekiel's initial calling was unlike any of the other prophets.

The first seven years of his ministry, Ezekiel's mouth was closed! As a prophet/in his office, Ezekiel was NOT allowed to say anything to the people of God beyond what God gave him; he was not allowed to expound upon any of the glorious truths God revealed to him! Describing the terms of the prophet's call, God told Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 3:26, "Moreover, I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be dumb, and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious house."

We read about this further in chapter 12. God further explained the restriction placed upon Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 12:6b, 9, 11a, "...I have set you as a sign to the house of Israel... Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, 'What are you doing?'... Say, 'I am a sign to you. As I have done, so it will be done to them...'"

Other prophets were called to be signs to God's people.⁵ Yet with Ezekiel, during the first seven years of his ministry all he could be to the people of God was simply a sign/a parable- *and so an unexplained declaration of the word of God!* He would do things, the people would ask him what it meant, and he could say nothing! J. B. Taylor describing Ezekiel's ministry as a sign wrote,

...it was a 'ritual dumbness', an imposed and willingly accepted proscription of any speech unless it was a pronouncement given him from the Lord. (Taylor, 2009, p. 29)

This would last until the announcement of the fall of Jerusalem. In chapter 24 we read God's announcement of the fall of Jerusalem:

Ezekiel 24:26-27, "...on that day he who escapes will come to you with information for *your* ears? On that day your mouth will be opened to him who escaped, and you will speak and be dumb no longer. Thus you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord."

And that is exactly what happened.

Ezekiel 33:22, "Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me in the evening, before the refugees came. And He opened my mouth at the time *they* came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer speechless."

That is why in Ezekiel 34-48 we have the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel in full. Everything prior to this as it related to God's people were signs, acts, parables, and strange activities, like these:

- Locking himself up in his house, Ezekiel 3.

- Setting up a small replica of Jerusalem in the town square and laying siege against it, Ezekiel 4.
- Sleeping on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days, Ezekiel 4.
- Tying a cord around his entire body except for his right arm which was to remain bare, Ezekiel 4.
- Starving himself throughout all this time, Ezekiel 4.
- Cooking his bread over cow dung (which originally was to be human waste), Ezekiel 4.
- Cutting his hair and beard off with a sword and scattering it throughout the town with the same sword, Ezekiel 5.
- Every day for a time carrying out from his house baggage as if he were going on a journey, Ezekiel 12.
- Digging a hole through the wall of his house, throwing out the baggage, and acting like he was going on a journey, Ezekiel 12.
- Going out in public and purposely eating and drinking his food with shaking/quivering hands, Ezekiel 12.
- Proclaiming God’s word while clapping, Ezekiel 21.
- Making two paths in the city and setting up a signpost labelling the paths as leading to Rabbah and Judah, Ezekiel 21.
- Not mourning the death of his wife, Ezekiel 24.

That was the calling and much of the initial ministry of Ezekiel! With this notice a key theme of Ezekiel.

The Imminent Downfall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel 1:1, 2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 29:17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1; 32:17; 33:21.

The book of Ezekiel is filled with time indicators which serve as a countdown to the horrible day of judgment when God would recompense the Nation of Judah for its covenant rebellion! This is made more significant when we understand

that the book of Ezekiel was written at a point in time (unlike Jeremiah, Daniel, and Isaiah); that means its structure was intended!

Ezekiel's Chronology
Mostly taken from J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel, TOTC* p. 38.

Reference	Event Described	Ezekiel's Date			Date by Julian Calendar			King
		Day	Month	Year	Month	Day	Year	
	Ezekiel's Birth						623	Josiah's Revival
~~~~~								
	Ezekiel Departed (~ age 26)						597	
1:1	Ezekiel's call	5	4	30	July	31	593	Zedekiah
1:2	Ezekiel's call	5	~4	5	July	31	593	
8:1	Vision of idolatry in Jerusalem	5	6	6	September	17	592	
20:1	Deputation of elders	10	5	7	August	9	591	
24:1	The siege begins	10	10	9	January	15	588	
26:1	Oracle against Tyre	1	~11	11	February	12	586	
29:1	Oracle against Egypt	12	10	10	January	7	587	
29:17	From Tyre to Egypt	1	1	27	April	26	571	
30:20	Pharaoh's broken arm	7	1	11	April	29	587	
31:1	Oracle against Pharaoh	1	3	11	June	21	587	
32:1	Lament over Pharaoh	1	12	12	March	3	585	Gedaliah/Johanan
32:17	Pharaoh in Sheol	15	~12	12	March	17	585	
33:21	'The city has fallen'	5	10	12	January	8	585	
40:1	Vision of the new Jerusalem	10	1	25	April	28	573	



If we overlook the shaded section (which contains Ezekiel's oracles to the nations AND which clearly were inserted by Ezekiel into the middle of this work for a reason we'll look at later), the book before us was assembled to be a chronological witness of the downfall of Jerusalem! Feel the impact:

Ezekiel 1:1-2: "Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth *day* of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile...)"

As we just saw, the dating here fixes the opening of this prophesy to July 31, 593 BC- six and a half years before the destruction of Jerusalem! Skip to chapter 8.

Ezekiel 8:1, "And it came about in the sixth year, on the fifth *day* of the sixth month, as I was sitting in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell on me there."

It is now September 17, 592 BC- roughly a year closer to the day of destruction!

Ezekiel 20:1, "Now it came about in the seventh year, in the fifth *month*, on the tenth of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and sat before me."

Another year has transpired, it is August 9, 591 BC. Only four and one-half years left for the people of God!

Ezekiel 24:1, "And the word of the Lord came to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth of the month, saying, 'Son of man, write the name of the day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.'"

That fateful day was January 15, 588 BC! Over the next year and a half, God's people in Jerusalem would be subject to horrible suffering on account of their sin. And yet still they would not repent!

Ezekiel 33:21, "Now it came about in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the tenth month, that the refugees from Jerusalem came to me, saying, 'The city has been taken.'"

The city fell in the summer of 586 BC. Five months later, January 8, 585 a survivor made it to Nippur where he announced the horrible news to Ezekiel!

Five passages in historical order which vividly mark the progress of God's judgment as it descended upon Jerusalem, the Nation of Judah and so the land! Again, this is a Major Theme of this Book: The Imminent Downfall of Jerusalem!

How ought we to apply this Prophetic Countdown?

First, we must see that Ezekiel was living at an incredible moment in Redemptive History- a moment when God was actively bringing to pass His redemptive purpose in Christ!

Second, we must see that Ezekiel therefore was hand chosen and placed where he was to be a watchman for the house of Israel (Ezekiel 3:17). Knowing this as Ezekiel did, the prophet clearly reflected a sobriety and specified purpose as he went about the ministry!

And so it also ought be with us! We too live in an age in which everything is on a crash course to judgment, where every path, every event, every providence one day will converge at one point, the Final Judgment!

Romans 2:5-6, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds."

We must understand that it is toward this event that everything in this life is headed!

In other words, our day differs very slightly from Ezekiel's. As a KEY theme of this book is the Imminent Downfall of Jerusalem, so a KEY theme in our lives must ever and always be the Imminent Downfall of this World! And like Ezekiel, God has placed us on this earth to be witnesses of this awesome day.

Acts 1:8, "...and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (cf. Matthew 28:18-20)

The parallels with Ezekiel don't stop here. As God gave many messages to the people of God by making Ezekiel a Sign, so today the Lord continues to proclaim the message of Judgment through the various and sundry signs of the time.

Luke 13:1-3, "Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'"

May we be wise servants of the Lord and, unlike the Pharisees of Christ's day who could only read the weather (Matthew 16:1-4), let us understand the signs of the time and so be sober-minded in all things! Yet the signs of this age are not all bad. To the child of God, the one who has eyes to see and ears to hear, the Lord has given us two incredible signs to bolster our faith and encourage us on our way.

Speaking of circumcision which was replaced by baptism in the New Covenant, Paul wrote:

Romans 4:11a, “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised...”

Every time you think of your baptism or see another baptized, you are reminded that God saves by grace through faith in Christ alone! If you are trusting in Christ alone, then regardless of how you feel about your salvation, you are saved! And yet there is another sign that God gives to us.

1 Corinthians 10:16, “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?”

When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we do far more than simply remember His life and death... we spiritually unite with Christ and so commune with the Savior! We fulfill the *Telos* for which we have been saved, “...enjoying Him forever”! Listen... as we’ll see, it was by and through this alone that Ezekiel proved faithful to his calling. And so, it will also be with us!

## References

Taylor, J. B. (2009). *Ezekiel (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*. Chicago: Intervarsity Academic.

## End Note(s)

¹ We say this because Nehemiah (who prophesied around this time) contains multiple allusions to Deuteronomy. It is clear that the prophet was “obsessed” with this book! Furthermore, many of the reforms of Josiah reflect a renewed interest in Deuteronomical law.

² The preservation of Jehoiachin is significant for he was in the line of Christ. In time, Jehoiachin was shown special favor by the Babylonian King Evil-Merodach (~561 BC) such that Jehoiachin was removed from prison into the royal palace of Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30; Jeremiah 52:31–34). Jehoiachin’s eldest son, Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel, was born in 598 BC. This is the line of Christ!

³ It is very clear that Deuteronomy significantly influenced Ezekiel’s response to the crisis surrounding the events of 587 BC, shaping the way he saw Israel’s past history of rebellion against Yahweh, present situation of divine judgment, and future hope of restoration. The rise and fall of Israel in chapter 16, Ezekiel’s view of Israel’s history in chapter 20, Ezekiel’s language and conception of idolatry, the scattering of Israel as an image for exile, and the related motif of gathering as an image for return to the land all have rich parallels to Deuteronomical teaching.

⁴ D. I. Block wrote, “No other prophet, not even the professional priest Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1), displays such an intense interest in priestly matters (sacrifices, the cult, regulations concerning ceremonial purity, the temple, precision in description and dating). The particular attention given to the Zadokites in 44:15–31 may even point to a Zadokite lineage.” (*The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT, p. 88)

⁵ e.g., Hosea (Hos. 1:3-9) and Isaiah (Is. 8:18).