

THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

An Introduction to the Book of Ezekiel And Chapters 1 to 3 – The Calling of Ezekiel and A Vision of God’s Glory

Ezekiel is classified as one of the Major Prophets within the Hebrew Scriptures. His prophetic ministry comes at the most catastrophic period of Israel’s biblical history. The book is hard hitting and sometimes it hard going to read! It also contains some of the most wonderful promises of God to his people

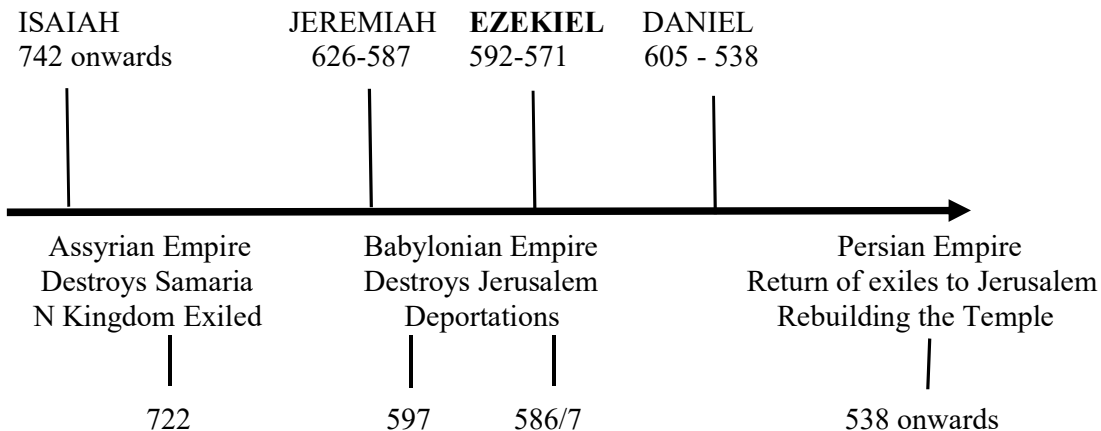
1. THE SHAPE OF OUR 4 WEEK STUDY

Wk 1	Chs 1-3	Introduction and Background. The Calling of Ezekiel and a Vision of the Glory of God
Wk 2	Chs 4 -19	Sin, judgement and the Covenant God
Wk 3	Chs 20–39	Disaster, Hope and the God of Renewal
Wk 4	Chs 40-48	A New Temple – and the God of a new Future

2. THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK – A COMMON OUTLINE

Chs 1-11	The Call of the Prophet & the Plight of the People
Chs 12-24	Oracles against the Nation of Judah
Chs 25-32	Oracles against the Nations
Chs 33-39	Oracles of Hope for Israel
Chs 40-48	A Vision of the Renewal of Israel and the Temple

3. THE HISTORICAL SETTING & KEY DATES



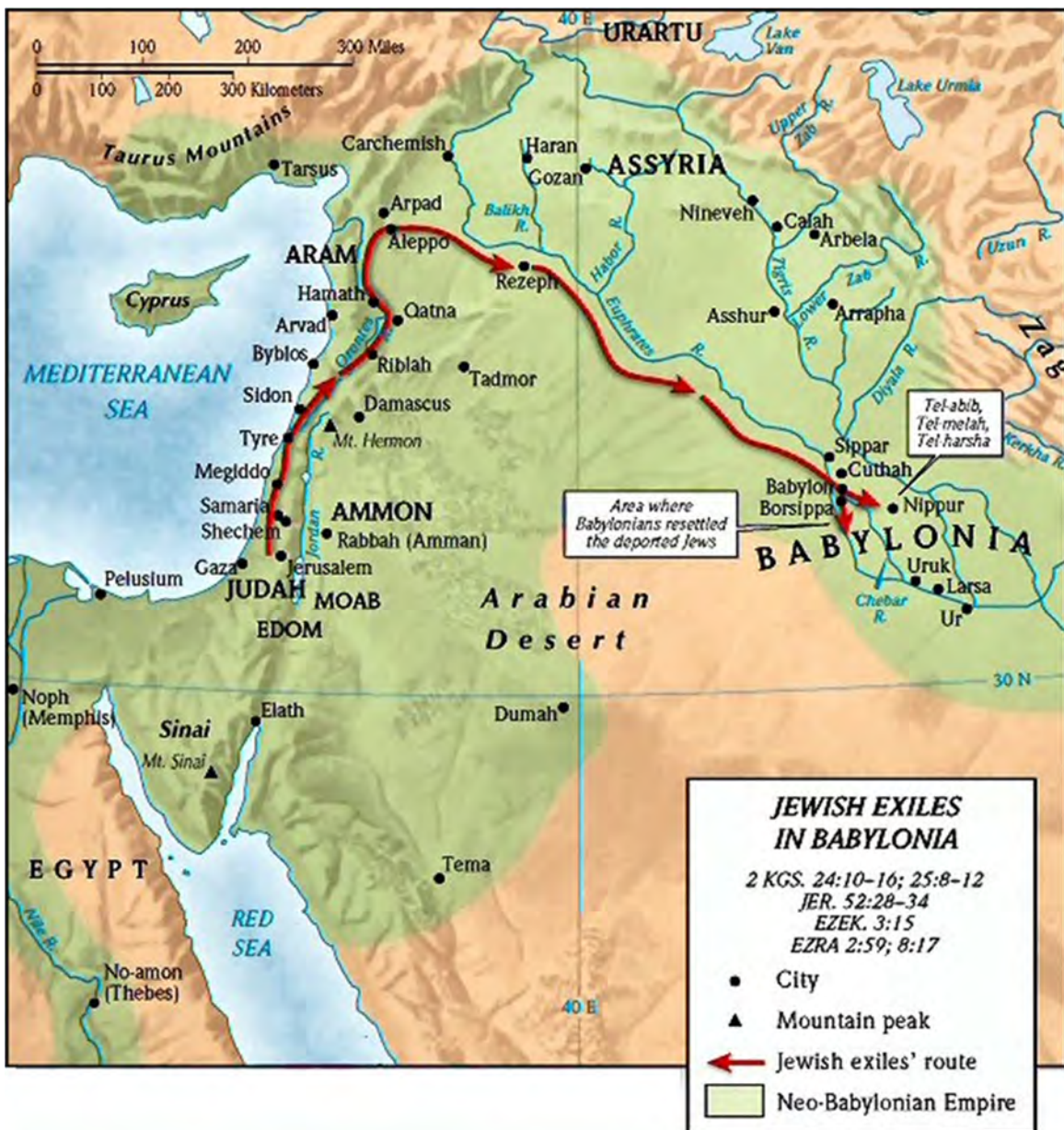
4. THE MINISTRY OF EZEKIEL

The prophet Jeremiah was the prophetic voice that came from within Judah – he was prophesying from home soil and he was particularly addressing those in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel was the prophetic voice from Babylon – he was prophesying from pagan soil so to speak. He was addressing the exiles.

THE LOCATION OF EZEKIEL IN BABYLON

Babylon is in modern day Iraq. As an ancient city it has become synonymous with the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis. But it also flourished as part of Mesopotamia which was known as ‘the cradle of civilisation’.

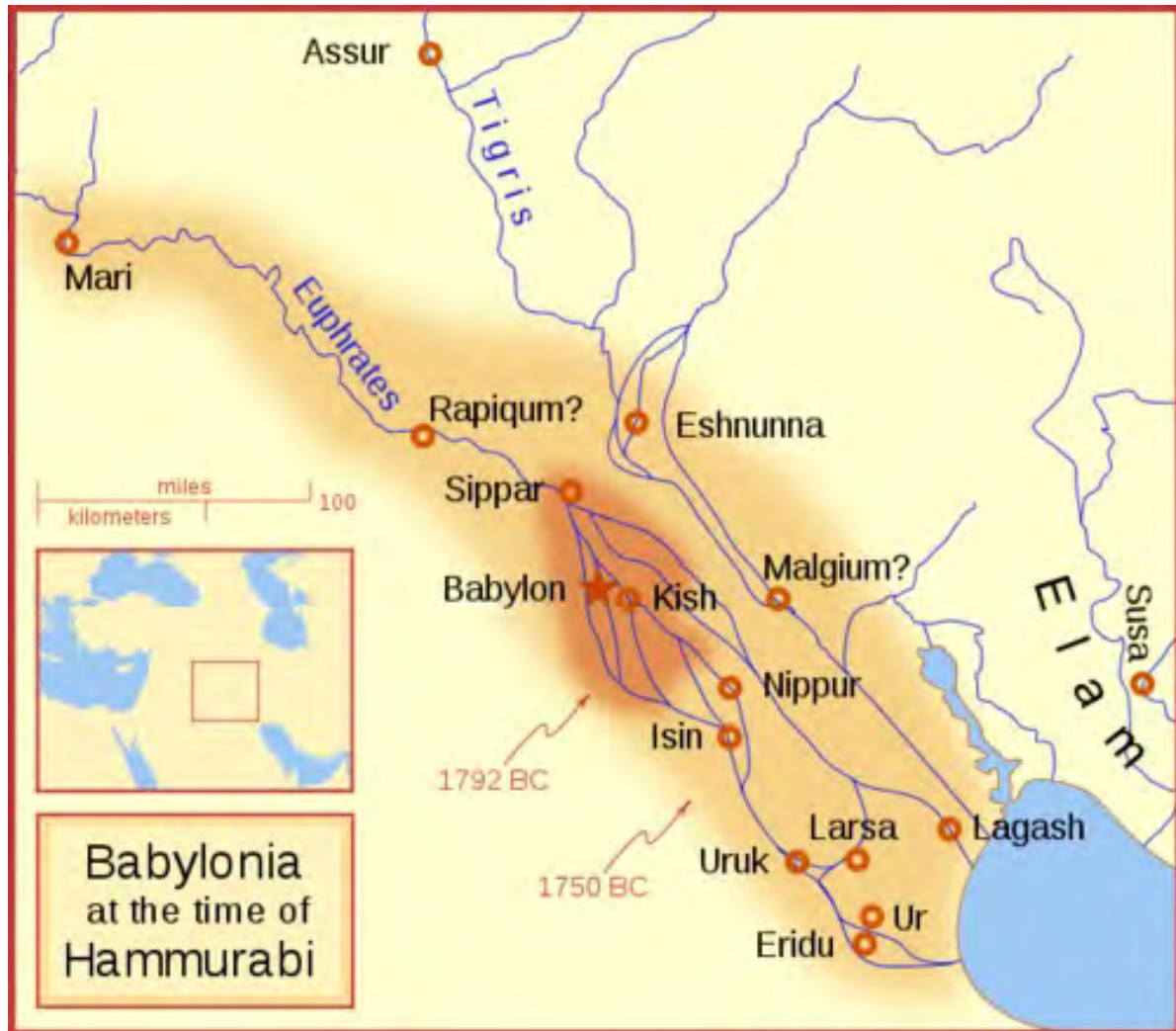


Ezekiel by the river

Ez 1:3 In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the (River) Chebar (canal),

Ez 3:15 And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the (River) Chebar (canal)

Tel-abib is on the River or Canal Chebar connecting with the city of Nippur. Possibly a part of an ancient irrigation system. Babylon's name means "The hill of the flood". It was a place of rivers and waterways as this map of ancient times depicts.



The Hanging Gardens of Babylon

This area was also in the region of one of the 7 wonders of the then ancient world – The Hanging gardens of Babylon. This is now a lost city and the area is mainly desert. It is the only one of the 7 wonders of the world that has not yet been fully located and discovered.



5. THE PERSON CALLED EZEKIEL

His name means - “God Strengthens”

This is like a prophetic name. We can imagine his parents having a sense of his calling when they named him and giving him a name, which was also like a prayer “May God strengthen him”. It was a very apt name because his calling was not an easy assignment at all, but the toughest of callings. Indeed we read that by his grace it was the Lord who strengthened him and gave him a ‘tough skin’ to do his ministry (Ez 3:8).

Son of Man – A mortal man

Ezekiel had a divine calling but he was also very human. We note that the phrase Son of Man is used as a title for him some 90 times in the book. However, that should not be confused with the same title that Jesus took for himself – or the phrase used to describe one ‘like a son of man’ in the great visions we shall see later. The phrase is also translated as ‘mortal man’ which serves to describe how, even though Ezekiel delivers a divine message, he is still a frail human who comes under a great deal of pressure. For example after his first vision he was angry and overwhelmed. Ezekiel we find is often a reluctant prophet.

A Son of a Priest - a Priest in Training (a young priest?)

Ezekiel was the son of a Jerusalem temple priest named Buzi (1:3). This meant that he was probably in training to be a priest himself. However, he wouldn’t have qualified as a priest in the temple because that role was not taken on until the age of 30 and he was about 25 years old when he was taken into exile.

Ezekiel's father Buzi was ministering as a priest at the time of King Josiah who was a good king and who brought in many great spiritual reforms (2 Kings ch 22 & 23). We can image Ezekiel being shaped by this spiritual renewal movement and growing as a young man with a passion and heart for the Lord. He would have been thoroughly immersed in temple worship and priestly ministry with a good knowledge of the Deuteronomic law. This explains his intricate understanding of the things of the temple in his writing.

A 'Radical Theo centricity'. Ezekiel had what Professor Paul Joyce calls a radical Theocentricity. That is he saw everything in terms of his passion for the name and glory of Yahweh. God always calls those who are gifted and who have passion for his good purposes. Ezekiel was God's man for this time.

Married – but with tragedy (24:15-24)

He lost his wife when he was still young, probably at about age 35. He then painfully and powerfully incorporated this into his preaching as a prophetic sign. Often tragedy touches those who are called into ministry.

A Young Man

He was according to most scholars age 30 when he began his ministry. We can imagine how difficult it must have been for a young man needing to speak such strong and unpopular words into the life of the people and nation. While age and experience are important in leadership God often speaks through and uses younger people. We can consider St Paul nurturing and encouraging young Timothy and instructing others not to look down on his young age (1 Tim 5:14). The prophetic and apostolic voice of our faith through history has often come from the young, as well as from elders.

6. THE LITERARY NATURE OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

The book known as Ezekiel has a unity about it that indicates that it was ordered and shaped by Ezekiel himself, although there may be some editing of parts by his later disciples in places. It is written in the first person, and is autobiographical in many places. Much of it is recorded in clear and accurate chronological order unlike most other of the prophets.

However, Ezekiel is not an easy book to read and it is known as one of the three **"mysterious books"** – along with, Daniel and the Revelation of John in the New Testament.

The early church Father Jerome, considered Ezekiel the most difficult book in the whole of the Old Testament to understand and explain. The visions at the beginning and the end he described as being *"involved in great obscurity"* and the writing as *"a labyrinth of the mysteries of God"*. He tells us that at one time it was not allowed to be studied by the Hebrews until they were over 30 years old because it was too hard and in places shocking, especially the sexual language used in different parts of the book!

The ancient Jewish Rabbis also struggled with the book and at one time it was nearly excluded from the Old Testament. One Jewish scholar, Hananiah ben Hezekiah is said to have hidden himself in a dark attic room studying and writing that he burned 300 barrels of oil in his little lamp as he worked at it.

We can take comfort that we are not the only ones to struggle understanding this biblical book. So how do we approach it?

Ezekiel is Holy Scripture

We remember that even though it is a tough book both in the language used and the imagery within it, Ezekiel is part of our Holy Scriptures.

“All Scripture is God-breathed useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)

This is how we should approach Ezekiel. We may not fully understand all of its complexity and mystery, but we can listen to it and receive it as God’s word to us, allowing it to teach us, rebuke us, correct us and train us in righteousness. That was its original purpose for Ezekiel’s generation – but it is also God’s Word that is still living and active to us today. May we be attentive to the Lord speaking to us as we learn.

7. INTERPRETATING THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Crisis Literature

Ezekiel is not a book written by someone sitting in a white tower of a university, nor is it a book of systematic theology written for 21st century readers in comfortable nations. It was written at a time of national crisis and calamity of the highest order. Because of this the language used is raw and vivid. It is shocking at points - these were shocking times.

Apocalyptic Language

Ezekiel uses this genre of writing as a key part of his communication style, and arguably the first to do so within the scriptures. The word apocalypse is a Greek word meaning “a revelation” or “an unveiling of things not previously known”. By its very nature this genre of literature is mysterious because it deals with images and symbolism. It is expressed in colourful language and paints big pictures for the imagination. Therefore it is more like a movie with multiple scenes, rather than like a documentary or letter or book of instructions, things which we are usually more familiar with.

Apocalyptic writing is not meant to be taken in a strict literal sense, nor is it neat and tidy. It is designed to capture attention, to surprise and to draw one into the unfolding drama. Ezekiel employs all these things in his ministry.

Priestly and Pastoral

Ezekiel has a deep passion for the holiness and purity of Judah and for them to be the priestly people God had called them to be. As a priest he represents the people before God.

He stands in the gap and intercedes for them. Like a Pastor he seeks to encourage his people out of complacency & despair – often needing to condemn their sin and call them to holiness and to face up to their failures. He frequently uses words of tough love. Sometimes tough love is what we need!

Beware priests and pastors and teachers who just want to 'tickle your ears'. St Paul said to Timothy:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

A Theology of Exile

Beware the type of teaching that only ever talks about victory or prosperity, but fails to embrace the reality of suffering and the troubles of human sinfulness. Ezekiel gives a much needed 'theology of exile' which helps us to be stronger when difficulties or persecutions and hardships come. We will encounter this as we go through the weeks

8. EZEKIEL'S CALLING & MISSION – Chapters 2 & 3

Ezekiel is given a specific calling to be a prophet and this is what we find outlined in Ez ch 2 and 3. Chapter 1 begins with a great vision that is given to Ezekiel, which we will come back to. However, at the end of this vision we find what is known as a 'call narrative' where Ezekiel is given his mission.

God's Spokesperson – speaking God's Word.

Ch 2:2-3 "you will speak my words" - "I send you to the people of Israel"

Ezekiel is sent, but he does not have to travel anywhere. Geographically he is already where God wants him! What he does need to do is to obey. All too often we think of mission being 'somewhere else from where we are' – overseas or distant. Whereas consistently through the bible the call to go, the sending out, is most often to our neighbours and locality.

We can also note here, as in so many other call narratives, the God's encouragement **v6 "Do not be afraid or dismayed"** – a common refrain in Scripture. This promise is for us too as we step out to bring God's word to the neighbours whom God sends us to.

God's Spokesperson - A Prophetic Ministry

Ezekiel is asked to do something as a prophetic sign for others but also himself!

Ch 2:8-10 "But you, son of man, hear what I say to you....open your mouth and eat what I give you." And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.

Ch 3:1b-3 ... Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

Here Ezekiel's calling to the prophetic ministry of God's word is powerfully communicated to him. He shall speak only God's words. God's word was to fill him and satisfy him. It was as sweet honey to him. However when we read on:

Ch 3:14 The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit,

It was to be a bitter sweet ministry for Ezekiel. Prophetic ministry is never easy and it has cost for the prophet.

A Watchman's Ministry - Chapter 3:16-21

In any ancient city a watchman had a vitally important role to play. They were there to scan the horizon for dangers, to warn of threats, to sound the alarm, especially in time of war. It was a huge responsibility.

However, Ezekiel was to be another kind of watchman – a spiritual watchman. He was to look to God and to bring his word of warning loudly, clearly and persistently. But it was going to be at first an unwelcome message of judgement and it was going to be resisted strongly. Yet he was still to give it because the people were in danger. But how was he to do it?

Bound and Mute – Chapter 3:22-27

And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. 26 And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. 27 But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

This is powerful metaphorical language. It cannot though be that Ezekiel is literally bound, or mute, since he is soon to get very active and vocal. It means that Ezekiel is to be:

- Bound to the LORD and can only do what the LORD asks of him.
- Mute, in that he is limited in his usual conversation with others and for this time he was to only speak the words which the LORD was to give to him. Then his tongue would be loosed and he would speak.

9. THE CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 1

It is important to set the context before going deeper into the vision of chapter one. Well before the prophetic voices of Jeremiah and Ezekiel rang out, the LORD had already spoken to his people about this period through the prophet Isaiah as we shall see. First let us get an understanding of the flow of events:

722 B.C. The Northern Tribes of Israel were conquered and taken captive. Judah then was spared, but they were often under threat.

715 B.C. to 686 B.C. King Hezekiah ruled as the King of Judah. However he made an unholy alliance with Babylon and so he was warned by the prophet Isaiah that his actions would mean judgement would come upon Judah, and this would be at the hands of Babylon itself. (2 Kings 20:14-18)

616 B.C. Babylon marched into Assyria and took city after city including the capital Ninevah.

609 B.C. Babylon pushed south and came into conflict with Egypt. Judah got caught up in this and tragically good King Josiah was killed in a battle in Meggido (2 Kings 23:29).

605 B.C. Judah was annexed by Nebuchadnezzar, and King Jehoiakim was allowed to rule. Some of the nobles of Judah were taken captive. (2 Kings 24:1-7). However, he soon died and his son Jehoiachin became king. Fatefully he decided to rise up against Nebuchadnezzar.

598/7 The revolt was quickly crushed – and it was then that a much larger wave of exiles were taken away. It was catastrophic. Judah's King Jehoiakim was himself taken along with the royal family, many soldiers and community leaders, about 10,000 people – including the young Ezekiel. (2 Kings 24:8-16)

Nebuchadnezzar then installed his own puppet king in Judah and named him Zedekiah.

Ezekiel now found himself in Babylon together with the other exiles. They had been embattled by foreign forces. They had endured a very hard siege in Jerusalem. They were forced to surrender and were taken captive, ripped away from their homes and deported into a foreign land. And so they lamented. One of the most famous laments is found in **Psalm 137**

***By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'
How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider
Jerusalem my highest joy.***

A Crisis of Identity – A Crisis of Faith

It was a time of crisis. A national calamity. God's people had been humiliated and they had been taken out from God's land. Her status and all that she thought defined her she had lost.

Unsurprisingly they were in despair and with many questions:

- Why has this disaster happened to us?
- Where is God in the middle of all this?
- What about the promises of the earlier prophets to hold us safe?
- How could Yahweh permit such a thing? Is he not in control?
- Had Yahweh been defeated by the Babylonian gods?

A New Perspective was needed

This is the context into which Ezekiel is called to minister. The people needed some very direct talking. They needed to face their sin head on. They needed the right perspective.

10. A VISION OF GOD'S GLORY - Chapter One

Read this fully, and even out loud to capture the feel of it.

Heaven is opened and a spectacular revelation is given. Each part is recorded in 'apocalyptic technicolour language'. And we note that in many ways Ezekiel is hesitant as he describes things. He carefully and fearfully describes the appearance of what he thinks he is seeing.

AN UNFOLDING VISION

In true apocalyptic style the vision unfolds in stages, like scenes in a play. We are drawn into a dramatic and dynamic opening of the heavenly places.

Scene 1 – A Storm Approaches

First Ezekiel saw what he thought was a great storm coming from the distance and from the North with wind and darkness and flashing, like a tropical storm full of fiery lightening.

The North is highly symbolic language.

- The enemies of Israel frequently came from the north. The Assyrians and the Babylonians most recently.
- The North was frequently thought of as where judgement came from. Jeremiah had a similar prophecy. Jer 1:13ff ***"I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north."*** **14 Then the Lord said to me, "Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land."**

We can also note how it is amongst storms and clouds that the bible often describes other appearances of his presence to his people (Isa 29:6; Job38:1; Pss 29:3-9; 104:3).

This prophetic language carries a warning of judgement to come, and that also the judge, the Lord himself is coming!

Scene 2 – Living Creatures

As the scene changes Ezekiel sees that what is approaching him is actually alive, and his vision is now filled with winged creatures racing towards him – all wings and movement. He describes them as having human likeness. They have four faces each. Sixteen faces. Each face had the face of what we might call Gods highest creatures:

Human	chief of God's creation	(intelligence)
Lion	king of the wild animals	(courage/ferocity)
Ox	most powerful of the domestic animals	(strength)
Eagle	most majestic of the birds	(Freedom)

From whatever angle Ezekiel looks he sees the four faces all at once, he could not escape them.

And each had four wings - so sixteen wings – so that they could move in any direction they chose at will and with ease.

The number 4 symbolically means the ‘four winds’ or the four corners over the earth. These living creatures are able to see and move and be wherever they want to be.

Ezekiel then sees that these creatures are full of light and fire, like the power of lightening and the speed of light. Spectacular heavenly beings – named as Cherubims in ch 10.

Scene 3 - A Chariot of Wheels

Then Ezekiel looks above the creatures and sees a chariot with wheels - and wheels within wheels which intersect each other. The description is not easy to conceptualise, many have tried to draw it and failed!

The focus is not on the engineering design of the wheels, but it is on the fact of their complete freedom and ease of movement. This is a heavenly design.

Ezekiel suddenly sees that the rims were full of eyes, and they went wherever the spirit wanted to go because the spirit was in the wheels. This chariot is under Yahweh’s control. He sees all things. Nothing is hidden from him. He is the power behind it all.

Scene 4 – The Heavenly Throne

Ezekiel’s sight is drawn up higher and he sees that this extraordinary heavenly chariot of living creatures and living wheels is supporting an awe-inspiring crystal platform. Suddenly the whole vision fills with noise – the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of a marching army.

Scene 5 – One like the Son of Man

And then Ezekiel gets stuck for words. On the throne he sees one with what he describes as ‘the likeness of human appearance’. One who has the appearance of fire, of glowing radiance and brightness. Ezekiel is very careful to not go too far and claim he has directly seen God – he knew his Scripture.

Ex 33:20 ***“you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live”***. .

What Ezekiel describes is what Professor Paul Joyce calls

A “Sensational Theophany”

Theophany is the Greek word for ‘an appearance of God’. There are other Theophany’s recorded in the Old Testament such as Abraham (Ex Gen 18:1-3); Moses at the burning bush (Ex ch3), Isaiah’s calling (Is ch 6). Ezekiel’s vision exceeds them all.

The extraordinary vision is given to grasp the attention of Ezekiel, and the exiles, to give them a perspective that they need to hold onto as they go through these tough times. It shows them that:

The LORD is present with them.

The God of Israel, Yahweh, is there in Babylon. Even in their exile they can know his manifest presence. He is not absent, they are not rejected or left as orphans. He has not given up on them. They are not outside of his eye.

The LORD is Sovereign

He reigns over them wherever they are. His sovereignty extends to every corner of the earth. He is not limited by geography. His mighty hand reaches out to them where they are, and therefore they also remain under his Lordship.

The LORD is Transcendent.

He transcends and exceeds all that they think he is, and what they have previously known of him. His Shekinah Glory shines not just in Jerusalem but also there in their plight – in the darkness of exile. This is all a wonderful comfort. But it is a double edged sword.

The LORD is Judge

He is omniscient. He knows all, and he sees all. He comes in burning purity and light. His holiness and justice shine forth. There is no escaping. The reason for their exile is because of their sin and rebellion. Judgement comes to all, and yet the Judge is always just and compassionate.

But his judgement has purpose. Through it they would be a faithful remnant of his covenant people and once again dwell in the land he had given them, rebuild the temple and reflect his glory to the nations. This was always their purpose.

11.LIVING AS GOD’S COVENANT PEOPLE

All of this was a dramatic reminder to those in exile of the essence of God’s covenant promise to Israel.

I will dwell among you and be your God, and you shall be my people (Ex 29:45-46; Ez 37:27)
I will make my dwelling among you...¹² And I will walk among you (Lev 26:11-12)

St Paul then applies this covenant promise for the New Covenant people of God. The church:

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor 6:16)

He also describes believers as the temple of the living God:

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph 2:22)

Then St John in his grand vision in Revelation describes how Jesus walks among his church:

‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. (Rev 2:1)

All, this then has implications. God is not here with us like a magic genie for our use from time to time. But, we are to live as his people. We are to be a people of his presence. We are called to reflect his glory to the world.

For Prayer and Reflection:

- May we allow God's word to give us a fresh perspective of who he is; His character, his sovereign majesty and his blazing glory.
- May we learn to be in his presence and so draw closer to him in prayer and meditation, in study and reflection on his word.
- May we know his transforming presence in our lives and church fellowship.
- May we capture a fresh glimpse of Jesus the glorious one who walks amongst his church and will judge with absolute justice and purity.

Col 3:1-3

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The holy One, is here;
Come bow before him now
With reverence and fear
In him no sin is found
We stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire,
With splendour he is crowned:
How awesome is the sight
Our radiant king of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place:
He comes to cleanse and heal,
To minister his grace -
No work too hard for him.
In faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place

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Readings for the next Lesson

Read Ezekiel chapters 4 to 16 (or through to 19). They are hard going! If you do not have time read especially; Chapters 4 & 5; Chapters 8 to 11.