

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 44

EZEKIEL

I. BACKGROUND

As a book, we should consider Ezekiel a counterpart to Jeremiah. Both books were written during the same time period. Jeremiah prophesied to those in Jerusalem, while Ezekiel was in Babylon prophesying to those in captivity.

Before asking certain questions about Ezekiel, it is important to put the book into its historical context. This history is a refresher that has already been covered in this class, but it is necessary for a good understanding of Ezekiel.

Israel as a nation found its national identity with its exodus from Egypt. In that exodus at Mount Sinai, the people received “the Law” through Moses which served as a constitution for the nation. In that law, there were instructions for how the people were to live. Along with those instructions were certain promises, including that if the people refused to follow God in obedience, then the result would be discipline. If the disobedience continued unabated, then there would come a point where the discipline would result in the dispersion of Israel among the gentile nations (*see Lev. 26:27-33* – “If in spite of this you still do not listen to me...I will scatter you among the nations...your land will be laid waste and your cities will lie in ruins....”).

Israel wondered to and from the wishes of God over the centuries. Finally, Israel reached a point where it wanted a king over it beyond the kingship of God himself. God acquiesced and Saul was anointed King over the people. Not having a heart for obedience, Saul’s lineage did not keep the throne. David was the king after Saul.

David was a man after God’s own heart. God’s promise was that the throne of David would be without end. Indeed, from the seed of David would eventually come the Messiah who would reign for eternity. Prior to the Savior’s coming, however, David’s kin did not do the best job of leading Israel in righteousness before God. David’s son, Solomon, maintained Israel through its golden age, but the country was split into two upon Solomon’s death.

Civil war resulted in a Northern Kingdom that was called “Israel” and a Southern Kingdom that was called “Judah.” The Northern Kingdom, with its eventual capital of Samaria, lived in near constant rebellion to God and His ways. The Southern Kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital and center of worship, had good kings and evil kings. There were times of obedience and national purity as well as times of paganism and disobedience.

Meanwhile, in the world outside the Jewish countries, Egypt was historically the world’s superpower. In the 700’s, things saw significant change. The Assyrians gained world domination status in the north above Israel while Egypt continued to be a powerhouse to the south. To put this into a broader historical context, this is about the time that Homer wrote the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*.

The 700’s saw Israel and Judah caught between two countries struggling for world domination – Assyria and Egypt. Assyria captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel, destroying the capital city of Samaria and dispersing the Jews throughout Assyria in 722 B.C. The Assyrians attempted to also capture Judah, but were unsuccessful. Judah experienced religious revival with King Hezekiah who withstood the Assyrian assault (2 Kings 18–20).

Hezekiah’s son and grandson (Manasseh and Amon) did not have the fervor for the Lord that Hezekiah maintained. Instead, they led the nation of Judah into intense paganism and idolatry (686–640 B.C.; 2 Kings 21). Part and parcel with this turn from God was mistreatment of the people and degradation of society. Following the reign of Amon, his eight year old son, Josiah, became king. Josiah led the country into religious revival, but the people themselves did not follow with lasting conviction (640–609 B.C.; 2 Kings 22–23).

During this time period, international turmoil was occurring in the north. Babylon was rising as a powerhouse threatening the supremacy of Assyria. In 612 B.C., the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians and captured the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. Rather than succumb totally, the Assyrian king and army retreated to the west to try and fight another day and recapture that which was lost. In 609 B.C., Pharaoh Neco from Egypt agreed to come to the rescue of the Assyrians. Neco’s northward march took him past Judah. Rather than leaving well enough alone, Josiah went out to fight Neco and the Egyptian army. Judah lost the battle and Josiah lost his life. Neco and Assyria were ultimately unsuccessful at rebuffing

Babylon. Egypt did manage to exercise control over the area of Palestine, including Judah, for some additional time.

Four years later, in 605 B.C., Egypt and Assyria again tried to defeat the Babylonians in a battle north of Judah at Carchemish. This was one of the most significant battles in history. The Babylonians won, and the Assyrians and Egyptians never again regained the superpower status they had once held.

Following this decisive victory, the Babylonians went south and took captives from Judah and the surrounding countries. Initially, Babylon took a few aristocrats and notables from Judah, leaving a king in place and a good deal of Judean society (2 Kings 24). At this point, the king in Judah is Jehoiakim. Although Jeremiah repeatedly warned Jehoiakim that Babylon was destined to rule, Jehoiakim stopped paying tribute in an act of rebellion against Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar came in and again shipped off a large number of Jews in an effort to punish those responsible for the rebellion. Among those that were taken into captivity this second time was the 18 year old king, Jehoiachin (son and successor to Jehoiakim) and the leading men of the land (2 Kings 24). This group that left for Babylon included the priest Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1-3). This occurred in 597 B.C.

While many were in captivity, Judah continued as a subject state to Babylon for slightly over a decade. Judah's rebellion again (against the advice of Jeremiah – again) led to a third and final army attack by Babylon against Jerusalem. This time, the destruction was complete. Most every one was carted away, and the temple destroyed. The walls of the city and most of its structures were razed and destroyed as well.

With that history fresh in our minds, let's look at the book of Ezekiel.

Who was Ezekiel?

Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet of Israel. Although from Judah, he was part of the second deportation of Jews into Babylon in 597 B.C. Ezekiel was a member of the house of Zadok, so he would have been part of the aristocracy of Judah. His name means "God strengthens" and was well chosen for his life and ministry. While in captivity, Ezekiel had the visions and insight that is now our book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel ministered to the Jews that were in captivity in Babylon.

In a sense, Ezekiel is a counterpart to Jeremiah. While Jeremiah was God's voice in Jerusalem during this time period, Ezekiel was God's voice in Babylon to those who had already been deported. Jeremiah prophesied and reported events from the perspective of those in Judah while Ezekiel prophesied and reported events to those in Babylon.

What kind of Book is Ezekiel?

Ezekiel is a composite of many different types of literature. Ezekiel is considered one of the Major Prophets. It has prose and poetry. It recounts visions and historical events. It contains a recounting of Israel's past as well as prophetic insight into the age to come. Ezekiel emphasizes matters of national consequence as well as matters of an individual nature.

II. TEXT

Ezekiel is written in a chronological fashion. The matters recounted fall into a time period that the book defines. The first vision of Ezekiel was "in the fifth year of the exile of king Jehoiachin" (Ezek. 1:2), which would have been around 593 B.C. This is BEFORE the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel has a vision of God that displays God as omnipresent (in Babylon as well as Judah), omnipotent and omniscient. The calling of Ezekiel, like that of Isaiah and Jeremiah, begins with this awesome revelation of God and his glory. Ezekiel is commissioned for his tasks to tell the people the words of God.

God then gives Ezekiel words that are framed primarily for those in captivity. Ezekiel condemns the continuing practices of Judah and Jerusalem and forecasts the ultimate annihilation of the nation. The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel deal with this coming judgment against Judah. He portrays the siege of Jerusalem (Chapters 4-5), and he charts the corruption of the people that set the destruction into place (6-11). Ezekiel then describes the coming exile and various judgments on various segments of society (12-24).

Following this section, Ezekiel prophesies judgments against the nations who revel and enjoy the desolation of Judah (25-32). The book concludes with prophecies that are consoling to Israel in their promises of the coming Messianic kingdom (33-48).

A. *Themes*

The Nature of God.

God's glory is the first matter that draws Ezekiel's attention and to which he draws our attention. Yahweh is shown to be the absolute ruler over all creation as he sits enthroned in the vision of Ezekiel set out in the first three chapters. This is especially significant at a time where the thought of the day was that the "gods" were regional, each having their own territory. The vision to Ezekiel was occurring in a foreign land where pagan gods supposedly had reign.

God shows himself to be everywhere. In a real sense, he was shown as God of all the earth, not merely Judah or Israel. Ezekiel gives special prominence to God being ever present in his writings. More so than any of his predecessors, God is shown as a constant to be realized and recognized throughout the world.

Over and over, we see God manifesting himself to Ezekiel in the plains of Babylon (3:23), visions of the Temple (8:3-6), and in visions of Jerusalem (9:3, 10:4).

We also see the nature of God manifested in God's dealings with man. Over 50 times in Ezekiel, we read the phrase "You shall know that I am the LORD (Yahweh)" (Ex. 6:7). God's interactions with man are to bring awareness of who God is.

In using the name Yahweh, Ezekiel takes a name and adds much to it. The constant dealings God has with Israel are "for my name's sake." In other words, God interacts to bring insight into who he is and what he is. His character and nature are seen in what he does and how he does it. God is not arbitrary and capricious, acting upon whims of emotion. He is consistent in his morals and actions. His decisions are purposeful and right. They convey to the watchful eye, whether devout or pagan, who the creator is.

The nature of God is also one of holiness. The phrase "manifest my holiness" appears over and over to show the nature of God (20:41; 28:22, 25; 36:23; 38:16, 23; 39:27). Again, we are reminded here that the Hebrew word for "holy" has at its root, the idea that God is separate or set apart from others.

The Nature of Israel.

Israel is ultimately set forward as having significance both in its origins and its existence to the name of Yahweh. That Israel exists at all is testimony to Yahweh (20:9, 14, 22). The defeat of Israel brings disgrace to Yahweh among the nations (36:20), but when history comes to a close, God's full scheme of redemption will show his overriding power and greatness (39:23).

The Responsibility of the Individual.

A major point with Ezekiel goes beyond the sins of the nation. Ezekiel repeatedly emphasizes that individuals are responsible for their actions before God. Ezekiel specifies,

The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (18:20)

This personal responsibility is also set out for the actions of Ezekiel himself. In the beginning of the book, as the call of Ezekiel is set out, God clarified to Ezekiel that Ezekiel's responsibility was to give the message. Whether the message was obeyed was irrelevant for Ezekiel's purposes.

The Kingdom of God in its Final Glory.

In chapters 40–48, Ezekiel sets forward an apocalyptic understanding of the future that lies ahead for the kingdom of God. God is set out as dwelling in visible glory in the sanctuary in the midst of his people. The people are redeemed and righteous. The terms used and the descriptions given are highly allegorical; yet, they offer substantial descriptions for us.

The descriptions include tribal boundaries and divisions of the land that some believe to be the distribution of properties among the Jews in the Millennial kingdom. Others see this as allegorical and representative of the fairness and foresight with which God will set out his kingdom.

We are ultimately told that this will include God's dwelling and "the name of the city from that time on will be: Yahweh is there" (48:35). That verse ends the vision and the book. The description of the new name of the city where God dwells with his people emphasizes that relationship. The city is not ultimately different from Eden itself as a place for man where we also find "Yahweh is there."

III. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. God Is Omnipresent (All Places)
- B. God Is Omnipotent (All Powerful)
- C. God Is Omniscient (All Knowing)
- D. Get the Vision and Commission
- E. Man Is Individually Responsible
- F. God Has a Future With His People