

The People's Bible

Ezekiel

Kieth Bernard Kuschel

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Ezekiel

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The People's Bible is just what the name implies—a Bible for the people. It includes the complete text of the Holy Scriptures in the popular New International Version. The commentary following the Scripture sections contains personal applications as well as historical background and explanations of the text.

The authors of The People's Bible are men of scholarship and practical insight, gained from years of experience in the teaching and preaching ministries. They have tried to avoid the technical jargon that limits so many commentary series to professional Bible scholars.

The most important feature of these books is that they are Christ-centered. Speaking of the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus himself declared, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). Each volume of The People's Bible directs our attention to Jesus Christ. He is the center of the entire Bible. He is our only Savior.

The commentaries also have maps, illustrations, and archaeological information when appropriate. All the books include running heads to direct the reader to the passage he is looking for.

This commentary series was initiated by the Commission on Christian Literature of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

It is our prayer that this endeavor may continue as it began. We dedicate these volumes to the glory of God and to the good of his people.

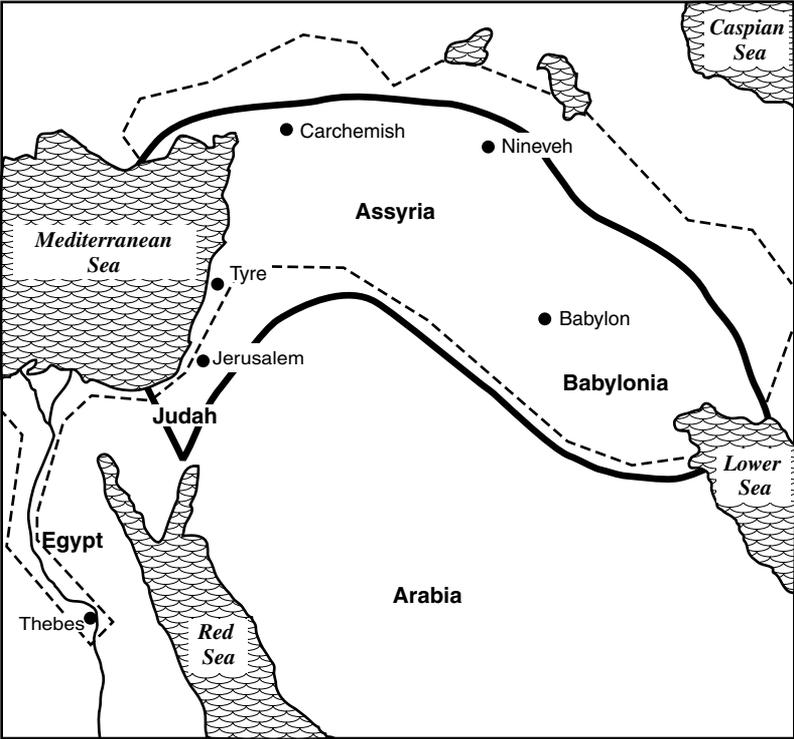
INTRODUCTION TO EZEKIEL

Historical background

This book of prophecy can be precisely dated, not just as a whole but also in its parts, because the prophet has dated 14 events for us. On the basis of this chronology, we can get a very good idea of the events that were occurring in the world of Ezekiel.

It had been one hundred years since the Assyrians had carried off the northern ten tribes of Israel and destroyed the capital city of Samaria. The date for this event was 722 B.C. In 612 B.C. the Babylonians had taken over the role of world dominator from the Assyrians. In 605 Nebuchadnezzar (ruled 604–562) had given legitimacy to Babylon's claim of being world ruler by defeating the only possible opposition, Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. The decisive battle took place at Carchemish. Since this battleground was in Syria, Nebuchadnezzar used the opportunity to seize control of the entire area, including the kingdom of Judah. On this occasion he took some captives, including Daniel, from Jerusalem back to Babylonia with him.

The year 597 B.C. saw Nebuchadnezzar return to Judah to put down a rebellion in Jerusalem. This was one of many attempts by the “postage stamp” nation of Judah to throw off the domination of the world powers. Often these attempts were made by trying to play off Egypt against the northern power. The result was usually the same—the dominant world power moved in and crushed Judah. This time Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, and the upper crust of society back with him to Babylon to



Assyrian Empire

11th–7th century B.C. - - - - -

Babylonian Empire

6th–5th century B.C. —————

Assyrian and Babylonian Empires

try to insure no future recurrence of such a rebellion. This capture of Jehoiachin is the reference point in Ezekiel 1:2 and in the other chronological references throughout the book. Ezekiel was included in the group of people who were taken captive in 597.

Later King Zedekiah of Judah attempted another rebellion. This time the Babylonians destroyed all of Jerusalem, including the temple. The rest of the people of Judah were carried off into captivity (586). The work and prophecies of Ezekiel, then, were all in the context of exile, from the 5th year (1:2) to the 27th year (29:17) of the exile of Jehoiachin.

A look at a map of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires helps in understanding this history.

Ezekiel's mission

Since Ezekiel was an exile, all of his work was among the exiles. Yet, his work can be divided into two distinct segments because of the tremendous event that occurred, not in Babylonia, but back home in Judah. Previous to 586 B.C., his major role was to try to dispel the false hopes of the exiles that the temple and the city of Jerusalem would be preserved from destruction. His message was a prophecy of destruction. The meaning behind the message was punishment, punishment from God for their rebellion against him. Ezekiel's purpose was to warn in order to achieve repentance. He wanted to warn the exiles in order to prevent a similar rebellion against the Lord while in Babylonia. Ezekiel wanted to teach them to obey the Lord and submit to his will, even while he was displaying his anger and allowing the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

After the fall of Jerusalem, when the tendency of the exiles was to despair over their future as a particular nation,

Ezekiel's role changed. He became a messenger of destruction, not a destruction impending against God's people but against the other nations who had been enemies of Judah and of the Lord. The meaning behind this message was deliverance, deliverance from exile because of the changing roles of the other nations. Ezekiel's purpose now was consolation and encouragement. He wanted to console the people and encourage their faith so they wouldn't turn their backs on the temple and their homeland, even though the temple had been destroyed and their land had been devastated.

Most of the exiles had become quite comfortable in Babylon. They had started businesses, were prospering, and generally had a good situation for their health and education. It would have been very easy for them to totally repress any thoughts of the temple and their homeland, especially after both were destroyed. It was Ezekiel's work, which for a period of 22 years maintained a nucleus of people who still wanted to serve the Lord in their homeland and in a restored temple. It was this work that helped to produce people who later under Ezra and Nehemiah were willing to return to Judah and Jerusalem.

We shall take a more detailed look at Ezekiel's life in the discussion of Ezekiel 1:1-3.

Literary style

The book of Ezekiel is a mixture of poetic, artistic description and detailed prose. The writer too is a mixture of personalities. Sometimes he is a stern preacher of punishment to the impenitent. Sometimes he is a gentle confessor and counselor to a despairing people.

The outstanding characteristic of Ezekiel's prophecy is the living pictures it paints. Points are made not with direct

statements, but with symbolic actions. Many of these actions were not actually carried out in Ezekiel's real-life existence but are only described in his vision. In other biblical literature, we find parallels in Jesus' parables or in the vision granted to Peter in Acts chapter 10. Many of the symbols, actions, and pictures used by Ezekiel appear again in the New Testament book of Revelation.

Theme and outline

The book's theme is summarized in a phrase used several times in Ezekiel (for example, 6:7): "*You will know that I am the LORD.*" Through his powerful judgments and tender mercies, God makes himself known.

The book of Ezekiel falls into three major divisions with numerous details under those divisions:

- I. Threats of Judgment on God's Impenitent People (1:1–24:27)
 - A. God sends a spokesman to his rebellious people (1:1–3:27)
 - B. The siege of Jerusalem symbolized (4:1–5:17)
 - C. Discussion of cause and effect (6:1–7:27)
 - D. The glory of the Lord departs (8:1–11:25)
 - E. Predictions of captivity (12:1–19:14)
 - F. Warnings prior to the fall of the city (20:1–24:27)
- II. Prophecies against Hostile Nations (25:1–32:32)
 - A. A prophecy against Ammon (25:1-7)
 - B. A prophecy against Moab (25:8-11)
 - C. A prophecy against Edom (25:12-14)
 - D. A prophecy against Philistia (25:15-17)
 - E. A prophecy against Tyre (26:1–28:19)
 - F. A prophecy against Sidon (28:20-26)
 - G. A prophecy against Egypt (29:1–32:32)

- III. Promise of Restoration for God's Chastened People (33:1–48:35)
 - A. Ezekiel as a watchman (33:1-20)
 - B. Jerusalem's fall explained (33:21-33)
 - C. Shepherds and sheep (34:1-31)
 - D. A prophecy against Edom (35:1-15)
 - E. Prophecy to the mountains of Israel (36:1-38)
 - F. The valley of dry bones (37:1-14)
 - G. One nation under one King (37:15-28)
 - H. Prophecy against Gog (38:1–39:29)
 - I. Visions of restoration (40:1–48:35)

***Threats of Judgment on God's
Impenitent People***

(1:1–24:27)

God sends a spokesman to his rebellious people

The living creatures and the glory of the LORD

1 In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

Since the reference to the 30th year has no cross-reference to the other dates in the book, it is most likely a statement of the age of Ezekiel at this time. According to Numbers 4:3, 30 was the age at which Israel's priests began their duties. It happens to correspond to the age Jesus began his public ministry and is close to the age pastors of our church body finish their seminary training. Perhaps the thought passed through Ezekiel's mind: "If I were back in Jerusalem, I'd be starting my life's work as a priest." But he was in exile a thousand miles from Jerusalem, and God had a different commission for him.

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar first attempted to stop recurrences of rebellion by taking the leaders of the society back to Babylon with him. The Babylonians realized the priests were leaders in Judah's society. Because Ezekiel was a priest, he was taken captive with the group in 597 B.C. Ordinarily Ezekiel would have been in Jerusalem beginning his life's work of carrying out priestly functions at the temple. Now, because he had been deported from his homeland, he had been picked by the Lord to be a spokesman of the Word of the Lord—in other words, a prophet.

During his exile Ezekiel lived at Tel Abib (3:15) near the Kebar River. He possibly owned the house that became a gathering center for the exiled elders (8:1; 20:1). Ezekiel was married, but his wife died (24:15-27). His work lasted 22 years, from 592 to 570 B.C. The Kebar River was a major irrigation canal, a fact that indicates that some of the exiles were engaged in agriculture.

Although God doesn't actually have a hand, "the hand of the LORD was upon him" shows the Lord was giving Ezekiel the power to do things that on his own he couldn't do, in this case seeing and proclaiming heavenly truths.

Three phrases in this section all emphasize the same thing: Ezekiel did not take the initiative. He did not seek some special visions or receive them as a result of some self-induced altered state of mind. Rather, the Lord took the initiative: "the heavens were opened" by the Lord; "the word of the LORD came"; "the hand of the LORD" acted. This is always true. Revelations from God are not products of our own efforts, activity, meditation, investigation, or self-instruction. It is not a person's special talents or charisma or scholarship that makes a person a spokesman for God.

The "LORD" is said to have called Ezekiel. The divine name, spelled with all capitals in most translations, is God's

Old Testament Savior name. This name describes him as the God of the covenant, the God who bound himself by solemn contract to ancient Israel. It was this God of free and faithful grace who revealed himself in writing. It is he who gives his Word to men. He opens the heavens for people, if he chooses to. And he places his hand upon people when he wants them to do something for him.

This chapter gives us an opportunity to practice the Lutheran principle of letting Scripture interpret itself. In order to do this, we must go to verse 28 before we approach the rest of the chapter. After the intriguing description of his vision, Ezekiel himself tells us what it was a vision of—the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. All the details of the vision must be understood in light of the explanation given to us by the prophet himself.

“I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north— an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light.

Wind, cloud, lightning, and bright light had been parts of visions of and revelations from the Lord in the past. God had appeared to Israel on Sinai in a dense cloud, with thunder and lightning. He had led Israel through the wilderness by means of a pillar of fire and cloud. Moses had even described the Lord as a “consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24).

It was from the north that the Babylonians—and before them the Assyrians—had invaded the land of Israel. They had brought destruction on Jerusalem and would continue to do so for a time. Here, however, we have the statement by God, “I am behind it all.” The brilliant glow of God’s brightness indicates God was working through the cloud of fiery judgment from the north. The north was not the home of the

gods of Babylon, who didn't really exist. The Lord, who is everywhere and rules everything, was at home in the north also. The fiery storm cloud said, "The Lord controlled nature, not Marduk, the lord of the storms, or Shamash, the god of light." The Lord is in control of all things at all times. He is behind the storm clouds of life to discipline, direct, and strengthen us.

The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, ⁶but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

¹⁰Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ¹¹Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body. ¹²Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. ¹³The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. ¹⁴The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.

Later in the book (10:15) Ezekiel will tell us what these four living creatures were. They were cherubim. The next question of course is, "What are cherubim?" Cherubim are mentioned for the first time in Scripture when God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24). Those particular cherubim were to keep humans away from the tree of life. At the time of Moses, two golden representa-

tions of cherubim were attached to the mercy seat, the cover above the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament tabernacle (Exodus 25:17-19). Since the mercy seat represented the presence of God, they were located there to guard the presence of the Lord. Representations of cherubim were also woven or embroidered on the inner curtain and the veil of the tabernacle. Years later, when King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, he placed two representations of cherubim, made of olive wood and overlaid with gold, in the Most Holy Place of the temple, the symbolic location of God's presence among his people. The cherubim, then, are celestial, spiritual beings belonging to the general classification of creatures that we call angels. The Bible mentions them most often in connection with God's holiness, the characteristic that separates him from sinful men.

Like the rest of the angels, cherubim are messengers of the Lord who do his will. Their four faces, each looking in a different direction, remind us that God rules over all four corners of the world. At times God acts independently and at times through his angels. The wings remind us that the Lord's messengers move swiftly to where they are to carry out God's will. Combine this thought with the meaning of the four faces and we learn that no matter where the Lord wants to exercise his rule, he can do so immediately, also through his cherubim.

Of course, the four corners of the world included Babylon and the Jewish exiles. Part human and part animal creatures did not determine the course of human events, as the Babylonian religion insisted. Whatever happens to individuals and nations is the result of the Lord's directions, often implemented through his angelic messengers, the cherubim.

These creatures are able to carry out God's will perfectly because they have the combined intelligence and power of

representatives of four different classes of living creatures: man, wild animal (lion), domestic animal (calf, ox), and flying animal (eagle). They have the capacity for service of a calf or ox, straining stiff-legged under a burden with hardened, bronzelike hoofs firmly dug into the soil. They have the manual and intellectual talents of man. They have the regal strength of a lion and the independence, swiftness, and eyesight of an eagle. The cherubim go straight ahead with undivided attention. They aren't distracted to this side or that as they carry out God's will. Since they exist for the sole purpose of serving God, their spirits always lead them in the direction God has prescribed.

The burning coals, torches, fire, and lightning remind us of God's holiness and purity, just as they had on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). The movement of the fire points to the ceaseless activity of the Lord.

¹⁵As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ¹⁶This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹⁷As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not turn about as the creatures went. ¹⁸Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

¹⁹When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. ²⁰Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. ²¹When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Chrysolite is a crystalline substance that refracts light, and so would make a good medium to make something look



The living creature

sparkling. Each wheel seems to have had the appearance of a gyroscope, making it possible to move in all four directions without turning. Therefore, the cherubim must be able to move to every possible corner of God's creation easily and swiftly. The eyes on the rims give the angelic transportation the ability to see and avoid all obstacles that might ruin their missions as they carry out the Lord's commands. The same energy or spirit that motivated the living creatures also propelled the wheels (verses 19-21). The motion of both is governed by the Lord. The cherubim did not go off on missions and in directions incompatible with God's will.

The wheeled structure is not defined in Ezekiel's vision. Some have thought it to be a battle chariot, opposing Nebuchadnezzar's military might. Others have defined it as a sort of chariot throne, much like Daniel saw in his vision (Daniel 7:9).

²²Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome. ²³Under the expanse their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. ²⁴When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.

On the next level, above these most startling and majestic creatures was the Lord himself, separated from the cherubim by a sparkling, icy, awesome expanse. The audiovisual effects add to the awe that comes to us when we think about the Lord.

²⁵Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. ²⁶Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. ²⁷I saw that

from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. ²⁸Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

The piercing purity of the Lord's holiness and the cleansing fire of his judgment are again obvious in this view of the Lord (verse 27). And yet, the radiance around him was made up of the soft glow of his grace as it had been enunciated to Noah after the flood by the rainbow (verse 28)—the Lord's blessings would unfailingly be dispersed throughout all generations. National disaster had come from the north. The Lord's holiness, his purity, his lightning-flashing anger was behind it. And yet, it did not overwhelm the glow of his gracious promises. His threats and even his implementation of discipline never remove or even diminish the predominance of his gracious forgiveness.

This vision was not intended to restrict God to a set tangible form. Ezekiel made sure we are aware of this by heaping up phrases: "like that of," "looked like," "what appeared to be," "appearance of the likeness of." This kind of language gives us the right to exercise the freedom to conclude that these visual effects are symbolic of the different characteristics we know God possesses, as we have just done in the foregoing. The section closes with an expected reaction: Ezekiel fell down in awe. Then a voice was heard next. The verbal comment is needed to explain why God had appeared to him at such a time and in such a way.

General comments on chapter 1

All the repetition in the vision recorded for us in this chapter seems to indicate Ezekiel was having a difficult time

fully understanding all the details of what he had seen and heard. He compared what God had shown him with things we have seen, giving us at least a small grasp of what he saw by the power of the Lord. Sometimes Ezekiel seems to go back, take a second look and try a second time to describe what he saw so we might have a better chance to see it through his eyes.

This was not just a fireworks display put on by the Lord for Ezekiel to enjoy. It was something the Lord did to equip Ezekiel for his ministry: to strengthen him to preach judgment and to make him confident enough to point to God's promises. The reappearance of elements of this vision at later crucial points in his prophetic ministry indicates how practical the vision was for Ezekiel and for his ministry.

The difficult circumstances under which Ezekiel lived and worked demanded such a source of strength and confidence. After all, it seemed the God of Judah had just been defeated by Nebuchadnezzar's god, Marduk. Jerusalem and its temple would soon be destroyed. At that point Babylon would claim Marduk was in control of the universe, and the discouraged captives from Judah might be tempted to believe such a claim. They would easily doubt God's promise to protect his people. Ezekiel's vision was to arouse a potentially dispirited prophet to carry out his work among a potentially dispirited people.

In the vision the Lord was saying, "I can appear in the heartland of the conqueror's power. I can give you a display showing I am in control. I have power over animate and inanimate creation. I have the power to keep my promises and to carry out my threats."

Details in the vision familiar to those who knew what was in the temple at Jerusalem demonstrated this was the same God whom they had worshiped in Jerusalem and in the

temple. The Old Testament does not give us an interpretation of each detail of the unusual vision God showed Ezekiel, a fact that led John Calvin to say: “I don’t understand this vision.” Even though we cannot understand God completely, even though the hints and traces he does give us of himself won’t be made complete until later—“when he appears . . . we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Yet the vision does picture clearly God’s might and mercy as extending over all the world. No matter where his people are or under what difficult conditions they are living, he is always able to deliver them and to let them enjoy the beauty of his grace.

Ezekiel’s glorious vision in the opening chapter of his prophecy is one of many Old Testament references to the glory of the Lord. At times God would appear in majestic and spectacular ways. He appeared in a burning bush to Moses (Exodus 3); at the dedication of the temple of Solomon, God appeared in a cloud that filled the temple—“the glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kings 8:10,11). Such appearances assured God’s people of his gracious presence. On other occasions the glory of the Lord was an awesome threat of judgment against God’s enemies. Numbers 16:42 relates that “when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron . . . the glory of the Lord appeared” and sent a plague among the people. For Ezekiel the glory of the Lord was a comfort as the prophet struggled to bring God’s Word to exiles living in a strange land far from their home.

Ezekiel’s call

2 He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” ²As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

Since Ezekiel had fallen facedown at the splendor of the vision of God, the Lord told him, “Stand up on your feet.”