

## Ezekiel Introduction 11/25/2020 Sunrise church of Christ

The name means “God strengthens,” or one writer expressed it: “the Lord toughens.” Apparently, his name was intended to signify the strength he would need for the task assigned to him by Jehovah, and which he demonstrated in carrying out his sacred responsibility (3:7-8, 14).

He was of the tribe of Levi and a priest (1:3), the son of Buzi (of whom nothing else is known). Sometimes the greatest distinction one can have is in children who serve Almighty God.

There is no indication that he had formally functioned as a priest in Jerusalem. Ezekiel grew up in Judea in the declining days of Hebrew independence and was transported to Babylon along with King Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. with ten thousand other captives (2 Kings 24:10-16).

This was eleven years before the destruction of Jerusalem. He was in Babylon for five years before Jehovah called him to his prophetic office (592 B.C.). He was contemporary with both Daniel and Jeremiah. Daniel had been deported into Babylon in the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim (606-605 B.C.) [Daniel 1:1, 3]. He labored at the court of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:1-7). Jeremiah’s ministry was in Judah and it spanned some forty years (ca 626-576 B.C.).

Ezekiel was married, but his wife died in the ninth year of the captivity (24:18). He had his own house in Babylon (3:24; 8:1), and apparently was granted considerable latitude in the land.

He seems to have been thirty years of age when his ministry began (1:1). His written prophecies continued some twenty-two years, and he received a divine revelation as late as the twenty-seventh year of the captivity (29:17). He seemed to have the respect of the Hebrew elders in the land (8:1; 14:4; 20:1). There is no record of his death.

One does not travel far into the book before he confronts the reality that much of Ezekiel’s message is framed in symbolism, i.e., **pictorial images designed to convey spiritual truth**. **Symbolism** has the advantage of expressing truths in colorful and vivid ways. **It** has a potential disadvantage of providing a “happy hunting ground” for a variety of theological speculators who can discover a host of “truths” in various narratives for which there is not the slightest basis other than the preconceived theories with which they begin their journeys into exegetical fantasy land. **Symbolism** is a valid means of conveying divine truth, as evidenced by the parables of Jesus and the book of Revelation, but it must be approached with the greatest of care.

This brief, three-point outline is as follows.

- 1) Prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem (chapter 1-24).
- 2) Divine judgments to come on various nations (25-32).
- 3) Prophecies of the return to Canaan (33-48).

It must be noted that the book has some marvelous prophetic flashes of the coming Messiah, e.g., the mountain cedar tree (17:22-24), the “showers of blessing” (35:25-31), and Jehovah’s servant “David” (37:21-28).

The message delivered by Ezekiel was one of doom. He explained the reason for Judah’s captivity (1-24). At the same time, his message was one of hope. He prophesied that Judah’s restoration was assured (25-48).

The prophecies of Ezekiel were presented between 593(2) and 571(0) B.C. (1:2; 29:17). The book has thirteen dates included, seven of which are dated during oracles against the nations (25-32). The remaining ones are in chronological order. John B. Taylor suggested the following precise dates for the oracles, in relation to the Julian calendar:

1:2	<u>July 31, 593 B.C.</u>
8:1	September 17, 592 B.C.
20:1	August 9, 591 B.C.
24:1	January 15, 588 B.C.
26:1	February 12, 586 B.C.
29:1	January 7, 587 B.C.
29:17	April 26, 571 B.C.
30:20	April 29, 587 B.C.
31:1	June 21, 587 B.C.
32:1	March 3, 585 B.C.
32:17	March 17, 585 B.C.
33:21	January 19, 586 B.C.
40:1	<u>April 28, 573 B.C.</u>

### **The Purpose**

Ezekiel’s task was to impress upon (that is, prophesy to) the exiles the word of the Lord, explaining that their enslavement was due to their own sinfulness. They had committed abominations by their continued worship of idols. Therefore, god was bringing upon them a sword that would shed their blood—the penalty for their sinfulness. God said that these events occurred so that they would **“know that I am the Lord.”**

### **The Themes**

The main theme of the book is **“the person who sins will die,”** but “to turn [repent] is to live” (18:20-23; 33:7-16). Ezekiel set forth individual (personal) responsibility, a theme not emphasized by other prophets. The Israelites, while in captivity, had determined that their captivity was not due to their own sin, but to the sins of their fathers. Ezekiel reminded them of their own rebellion against the law of God.

The message of Ezekiel emphasized the promise of God’s faithfulness in carrying out His eternal purpose: This sinful nation had to die, but the penitent remnant would be saved.

*Five themes are predominant:*

- 1) **The holiness of God.** In the midst of an evil nation, God's eternal attribute of righteousness was manifested.
- 2) **The sinfulness of Israel.** The word "sin" occurs twenty times in the book. Three chapters chronicle Israel's sinfulness.
- 3) **God will not allow sinfulness to continue: He will punish sin.** Ezekiel often portrayed Israel's sin as having accumulated, until finally the "cup" was full. She would now receive the extent of God's wrath, which He would "spend" or pour out".
- 4) **Individual responsibility.** While this theme is repeated often in the text, the prophet especially focused on it in chapter 18: "The person who sins will die."
- 5) **God will restore.** The forgiving nature of God is beautifully illustrated. God's righteousness required punishment, but His compassion allowed forgiveness and restoration. This truth is not powerfully illustrated in the Vision of the valley of dry bones (ch. 37).

**Another key idea is God's Spirit, or "glory," leaving and returning. He left the temple in chapters 8 through 11 and returned in chapter 43. He left when there was judgment, then returned after restoration.**

### **The Historical Background**

**In a remarkably swift turn of events, the Babylonians disposed of the powerful Assyrians in 612 B.C. This shift of power had a profound impact upon Judah, and Ezekiel would have been a witness to many changes that were taking place. During his lifetime, five kings reigned, with Josiah being the most noteworthy:**

***Josiah* (640-609 B.C.)**

***Jehoahaz* (also called Shallum—609 B.C)**

***Jehoiakim* (609-598[7] B.C.)**

***Jehoiachin* (also called Coniah and Jeconiah—598 [7] B.C.)**

***Zedekiah* (598 [7]-587 [6] B.C.)**

## The First of the Vision (1:1-3)      The Glory of The Lord

**Verses 1, 2:** Ezekiel's account of his prophecies begins with a narrative about his visions of God. These "visions" occurred in the thirtieth year. Bible historians have counted backward from the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile arriving at the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, when he found "the book of the law."

Ezekiel apparently received this Vision and his commission in the very year he began his priestly service. Thus God involved Ezekiel in a ministry immediately upon his becoming a priest, and we are allowed to witness the work of Ezekiel from his first commission.

The statement I saw visions is the first direct claim of inspiration for the book. As is explained in 1 Samuel 9:9, one who saw visions was a prophet. The fact that the heavens were opened indicates that God was allowing Ezekiel to see things both in and from the heavenly realm. Notice that Ezekiel also saw "visions of God." These incredible visions of God are described—in symbolic details—beginning in verse 4.

The visions came to Ezekiel by the river Chebar, a minor river or a canal in Babylonia. The location of the Chebar, if it can be identified with the Babylonian naru kabari, was between Babylon and Nippur.

**Verse 3:** The phrase Ezekiel the priest presents some grammatical ambiguity; the phrase "the priest" could either be referring to the father or to the son. It does seem, though, that Ezekiel himself was a priest. This makes two sections especially significant: (1) chapter 4, where Ezekiel is asked to eat unclean food, and (2) chapter 8, where Ezekiel is taken, in a vision, to see the abominations associated with the temple in Jerusalem.

He is described as a "sign" in 12:6, 11: 24:24, 27. "By his action, what Yahweh is about to bring upon his people is already present. The prophet belongs inseparably to the 'message.'"

Verses 1 through 3 provide evidence of Ezekiel's divine call:

1. "The heavens were opened," affording Ezekiel a special revelation given only to the true prophets of God. (Compare Ezekiel's Vision to the one given to John in Rev. 4).
2. "I saw visions of God." Ezekiel was allowed to see God in a special way.
3. "The word of the Lord" came expressly to Ezekiel. We see a clear indication of inspiration; Ezekiel was given—directly—a message from God.
4. "The hand of the Lord came upon him." God was going to give Ezekiel the strength to bear and proclaim the message.

## The Vision (1:4-28)

Ezekiel described his Vision in figurative (“apocalyptic”) language. Many people have decided to read the book, only to be discouraged after encountering the first chapter. While some find the apocalyptic images fascinating as well as challenging, others would prefer to receive their information without so much effort. Simply stated, the goal of this Vision was to give a demonstration of God and His magnificent glory (vv. 1, 28). Why did God not just state truths about His glory in decisive terms? Why did He use the figurative method of establishing such concepts?

First, we must remind ourselves of the perfect nature of God and His omniscience. God knows the best and the most perfect way to communicate important truths.

Second, a difficult task lay ahead of Ezekiel. He was being sent to a stubborn and obstinate people (3:7). This Vision would help him to recall the greatness of the God he was serving. By remembering this Vision, Ezekiel would be continually strengthened and motivated to face the obstacles of preaching to such a people.

Third, we must remember that many people during Old Testament times believed that the gods of conquering nations were the stronger gods. What is remarkable is how the Israelites were so inclined to idolatry that they did what the other nations did not do: adopt the gods of the defeated nations! (see 2 Kings 16:6; 17:8).

Ezekiel, as a result of the Vision, would have sufficient evidence that the Babylonian gods—or any other gods for that matter—were powerless, unlike the one true God. He would be motivated to proclaim the excellencies of the Lord and encourage the people to renew their covenant with Him. If they would do this, they would find a God who was willing to forgive and reestablish them in their land.

What should we keep in mind when we are interpreting this type of literature? Ezekiel was painting a picture, and all the parts help to form a whole. These parts do not necessarily have meaning in and of themselves. Many times, phrases with the word “like” or “as” are used. This construction, called a “simile,” tells us that Ezekiel’s description is, at best, a likeness—an approximation—of what he was actually seeing. “Likeness” occurs sixteen times in Ezekiel, and “like” is the preposition, found eighteen times in chapter 1 (166 times in Ezekiel). In addition, notice the use of “like” with “appearance.”

In preparation for studying this incredible Vision, we should note the four predominant aspects of the Vision. Each one should be considered in regard to how it contributes to the picture of the glory, majesty, and power of God.

1. The four living creatures (vv. 4-14).

2. The wheels (vv. 15-21).
3. The expanse (vv. 22-25).
4. The throne (vv. 26-28).

## **The four Living Creatures (1:4-14)**

**Verse 4:** As the stage was set for this Vision, Ezekiel noted four features that seemed to indicate that severe weather was approaching. **(1)** He said that a storm wind was coming from the north which is frequently the direction from which God’s judgments are said to come (see Jer. 1:14; 4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20). **(2)** He saw a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually—suggesting a powerful electrical storm with continual lightning flashes. **(3)** He saw a bright light round about it, apparently shining brightly behind and around the storm clouds. **(4)** He saw something like glowing metal—lights in this storm that were atypical of any storm Ezekiel had ever seen. It had flashing lights with the vividness of hot metal when it was brought out of fire.

**Verse 5:** Within the storm, Ezekiel saw four figures resembling living beings (see Rev. 4). Though the beings looked like men (having human form), each one “had four faces and four wings.” Perhaps the reference to “human form” is because the creatures stood upright, with their legs straight (v. 7).

**Verse 7:** While the straight legs mentioned depict the creature standing upright like a man, the feet are like those of a calf, providing a high degree of stability and durability, as well as mobility. These feet also drew Ezekiel’s attention because they were glowing brightly like burnished bronze.

**Verse 8:** Ezekiel observed human hands under the wings. The description reminds us that one of the primary functions of these beings is to serve God in ministering to mankind.

**Verse 9:** Two of the four wings were in the act of flying, so stretched out that the extremity of each touched a wing of the next living creature, which also had its wings outstretched (vv. 9, 11, 23). This was when they were in motion, although the text never says that the wings were moving. Movement of the wings might be assumed from the noise they made (v. 24). While Ezekiel described these beings as cherubim, the four wings mentioned here remind us of the description of the seraphim mentioned in Isaiah 6:2 (see Ezek. 1:6, 9, 11; 10:5, 12, 14, 21, 22; Rev. 4:8).

The Jewish Targum on this passage explained the meaning of these wings and their respective positions: “Holy ministers are in the sky before Him, each with six wings. With two, they are covering their faces, lest they see the Lord. With two they are covering their bodies, lest they be seen; and with two they are ministering.” Ezekiel explained that two of the wings cover “their bodies” (v. 11). He also noted that when they stood still they “dropped their wings” (vv. 25, 25).

Before describing the appearance of their faces, Ezekiel observed that their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward.

**Verse 10:** Their “four faces”—those of a man, a bull, and eagle, and a lion—represent the major areas of created life.

Man is God’s ultimate creation commissioned to subdue the earth; the lion is the king of wild beasts; the ox (or bull) is the strongest of domesticated animals; and the eagle rules the air. The chariot was borne aloft above the totality of creation, a symbol of the fact that nature is under the domination of the Lord (Carl G Howie, *The Book of Ezekiel*).

A Midrash to Exodus 15:1 supports the idea presented above:

...four kinds of proud beings were created in the world; the proudest of all—man; of birds—the eagle; of domestic animals—the ox; of wild animals—the lion; and all of them are stationed beneath the chariot of the Holy One...”

Only the greatest of animals are worthy to be the bearers to God Almighty.

The general meaning of the faces could be as follows:

**Man**—rational and moral nature, suggesting wisdom and intelligence.

**Lion**—majesty and strength, suggesting power, rule, and authority.

**Bull (ox; KJV)**—patient and productive service, representing labor, strength, and energy.

**Eagle**—winged velocity and swiftness, indicating Vision and flight.

Ezekiel wrote, “...so I knew that they were cherubim” (10:20). What are cherubim? These creatures always appear in a most intimate relation to the glory of God. They are seen as engaging in worship and service to God. In Ezekiel’s Vision they were bearing up and transporting the throne of God.

Cherubim are spiritual creatures (Ps. 18:10; Heb. 9:5). Some think they are angels of the highest order, but that idea is not provable by Scripture; they are never called angels.

### **Psalm 18:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.

### **Hebrews 9:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

In ancient Israel, the cherubim were God’s attendants and messengers. Representations of cherubim were found in the tabernacle (Ex. 36:35) Having these did not violate Exodus 20:4 because they were not worshiped. When Solomon built the temple, he had two gold cherubim, fifteen feet high, standing separately from the ark but

still located in the most holy place. Passages for further study include Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18-22; 26:31; 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 22:11; 1 Kings 6:25-35.

### **2 Chronicles 3:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> In the Most Holy Place he made two cherubim of wood and overlaid them with gold.

**Verse 11, 12:** Ezekiel noted concerning the wings that each had two touching another being (v. 11). This is reminiscent of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, whose wings touched above the ark (Ex. 25:18-22).

The Spirit provided the leadership for the four living beings. Wherever the spirit would go, these beings would follow (see v. 20). Since this is a section about God's glory, it is logical that this spirit would be the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God.

**Verse 13, 14:** Ezekiel saw something that looked like torches or burning coal of fire, as if coming from the bodies of the living beings themselves (v. 13). In apocalyptic literature, fire frequently symbolizes God's judgment.

### **Psalm 18:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him.

### **Psalm 50:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest.

This image seems to demonstrate that His judgment is quick and decisive, covering all the earth. Not only was lightning flashing from the coals of fire, but the living beings themselves ran to and fro like bolts of lightning (v. 14). Their movements were quick and awe-inspiring. **A vision of power was found among these creatures.**

## **The Wheels (1:15-21)**

Verse 15-17: The wheels are the second part of the Vision. The Hebrew term (*tharshish*) has been suggested to mean sparkling beryl (v. 16), chrysolite, yellow jasper, or topaz. It is important to remember that the wheels are a symbol for something and are not meant to be interpreted literally. The wheels probably represent the idea of the activity of God or His movement. The Jews in Babylonia perhaps did not believe that God could come to them there. The idea existed in the ancient world, and in many Jewish people's minds, that God was confined to one geographical area.

### **1 Kings 20:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, "Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.

### **1 Kings 20:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> And a man of God came near and said to the king of Israel, "Thus says the LORD,

‘Because the Syrians have said, “The LORD is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys,” therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD.’”

They may have believed that He was limited to the area surrounding Jerusalem and therefore could not be with them in Babylonia. These wheels show otherwise. The omnipresence of God is being described in apocalyptic terms.

**Within another** could mean that the second wheel was concentric to the first wheel, like an archery target, or that it was perpendicular to the first wheel. This construction would allow the wheels to be rolling constantly, never needing to turn (v. 17).

**Verse 18, 19:** While discussing the wheels of this divine chariot, Ezekiel described the rims as lofty and awesome (v. 18). This expression indicates not only that the rims were very high or tall, but also that they had a frightening appearance.

**Verse 20, 21:** These wheels were not inanimate objects; they had spirits inside them (v. 20). The fact that Ezekiel repeated this point is noteworthy. How were the wheels and the living beings able to move in perfect harmony? Ezekiel explained: for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels (v. 21b). The same spirit that led the living beings also dwelt within the wheels. Such a characteristic is apparently not something Ezekiel could witness, but he knew this truth through Revelation.

## The Expanse (1:22-25)

**Verse 22:** The expanse is the third part of the Vision. This word is the Hebrew word (*rakia*), the same word used in Genesis 1:6-8 for the hard plane dividing the upper from the lower waters. The word “firmament” is used in the KJV, although this is not a good translation. The expanse seems to represent the widespread influence of God. Ezekiel did not dwell upon the expanse. He merely described that which provided the inspiring backdrop to the whole scene. Nevertheless, it appears that the expanse provided a firm, level surface upon which the throne of God was resting (see Rev. 4:6).

**Verse 23, 24:** It is obvious that the wings of the living beings continued to impress Ezekiel (v. 23). In this section he repeated their location, but this time elaborated on the tremendous sound (v. 24) being made by these wings.

**Verse 25:** In spite of all the noise generated by the wings of the four living creatures, Ezekiel was able to hear a voice from above the expanse—from the location of the throne of God. Ezekiel mentioned no words that were uttered, at least not yet, but the Lord spoke to him.

## The Throne (1:26-28)

**Verse 26;** The throne is the fourth part of the Vision. What Ezekiel saw was not an actual throne but something resembling a throne. It was like lapis lazuli, a sapphire-like stone that was very valuable in the ancient world. Ezekiel did not dwell on the throne itself, because He who is on the throne is far more important.

Nevertheless, a throne is always an image of power and authority. The word “throne” is a key word in the Revelation. Here, Ezekiel was relating the universal power of the “King of kings.” God’s throne rises above the feeble attempts of authority and rule of man; it is far more glorious than the imagined thrones of pagan gods.

**Verse 27:** The awe-inspiring portrayal of God in this verse emphasizes three primary features: His fearsomeness, His radiance, and His majesty. God is depicted as being surrounded from His waist up by something flowing like electrum (glowing metal). From His waist down, Ezekiel said that He was encompassed by what looked like fire. The entire figure, then, was encompassed with splendor. “Fire” is that which can destroy (in judgment) or can illuminate. Ezekiel would announce the fiery judgments of God.

**Verse 28:** The description in this verse includes the image of a rainbow. For Jews, the rainbow was a symbol of God’s mercy and God’s covenant (see Gen 9:13). A rainbow comes after a storm. In this case, the storm of God’s judgment was coming—but there was hope. There would be a rainbow after the storm, providing hope for the future.

This is the first occurrence of the phrase the glory of the Lord, one of the key phrases in the book. Ezekiel seems to have structured his book around this phrase the word “glory” occurs twenty-three times.

When Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord, he said I fell on my face. Why did he do this? Death resulted if one looked upon the face of God (Ex. 33:20). When Ezekiel realized who he was seeing, he dropped to the ground and covered his face so that he might live. Ezekiel is one of many who were overwhelmed by witnessing the glory of the Lord: Jacob (Gen. 32:30), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6), Isaiah (Is. 6:5), Daniel (Dan. 10:8,9), and John (Rev. 1:17) all responded with similar reactions.