THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR EZEKIEL

- Content: a series of prophecies announcing the fall of Jerusalem, including the departure of Yahweh, followed by Israel's eventual restoration with the return of Yahweh
- Prophet: Ezekiel, an Israelite priest and prophet who was taken to Babylon among the first wave of captives from Judah in 598 B.C., and a younger contemporary of Jeremiah
- Date of prophetic activity: from 593 (Ezek 1:2) until 571 B.C. (29:17)
- Emphases: the inevitability of the fall of Jerusalem because of her sins, especially idolatry; the transcendent sovereignty of God as Lord of all the nations and all history; the loss and restoration of the land and of Yahweh's presence among the people of God; the promise of the life-giving Spirit as the key to covenant faithfulness

B. OVERVIEW

The book of Ezekiel contains a variety of prophetic visions and oracles, which Ezekiel presented to the exiles in Babylon over a twenty-two-year period (593–571 B.C.), the most turbulent years in the history of Jerusalem. Except for the oracle and lament over Egypt (29:17–30:26), the oracles appear in chronological order.

The book is in three clear parts. Chapters 1–24 contain oracles from the five-year period preceding the siege of Jerusalem (588). These are primarily announcements to overconfident Judeans of God's certain judgment against the city and her temple. Next is a series of oracles against surrounding nations (chs. 25–32)—Babylon itself being notably excepted. The final oracles (chs. 33–48), which cover a sixteen-year period after the fall of Jerusalem, focus on hope for the future.

The structure of the book reflects Ezekiel's theology: Yahweh's *holy wrath* against his people's idolatries would cause Jerusalem to be destroyed, including her temple (the place of his presence)—despite disbelief and protest to the contrary (chs. 1–24). Yahweh is also *the sovereign God* over all the nations, so they, too, will experience judgment because of their idolatries and sins (chs. 25–32). But Yahweh is a God of *great mercy and compassion,* who intends to restore his people and be present with them once more (chs. 33–48).

B. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING EZEKIEL

In order to read Ezekiel well, you need a measure of appreciation for the history of his times, some of which can be found in 2 Kings 22–25. Ezekiel was born into a priestly family in Jerusalem just before the reforms of Josiah (622 B.C.) and was presumably preparing for priestly

duties to begin at age thirty (593). But in 598, disaster struck in the form of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Over the span of Ezekiel's life, Judah's kings had made some bad political choices in the struggle between Egypt and Babylon over supremacy in the area. So Nebuchadnezzar eventually laid siege to Jerusalem; King Jehoiachin surrendered, and he and most of Jerusalem's prominent people, including Ezekiel's family, were taken into exile (see Jer 29:2) and placed in a refugee settlement south of Babylon near the Kebar River. Apparently many believed this exile was only a temporary blip on the screen of their glorious history as God's people (see Jer 28). But Jeremiah had already informed the exiles in writing (Jer 29:1–23) that they were going to be there for the long haul. Five years later Yahweh called Ezekiel to be a prophet who would announce God's judgment against Jerusalem, addressing his words to "the house of Israel"—primarily to the exiles in Babylon (Ezek 3:1, 11).

Lying at the heart of things was a theology to which both Ezekiel and the people were committed, although they had radically different views as to what it meant—the people of Israel as Yahweh's people, created and redeemed by him and ultimately defined by their *place* (the land, and especially Jerusalem) and by Yahweh's *presence* (symbolized by the temple in Jerusalem). Most people understood this theology to mean that Jerusalem was inviolable, a view reinforced by the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria some 125 years earlier (see 2 Kgs 17–19). This theology had been continually fed to the people by the false court prophets (e.g., Hananiah, Jer 28), although opposed by Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

Ezekiel also understood that Israel was defined by place and presence (he was, after all, to become a priest in Jerusalem). But he also recognized that Judah had failed to keep covenant with Yahweh (see the arresting imagery of chs. 16; 23), thus they would forfeit the land and God's presence. Through a variety of visions, prophetic actions, and oracles, he announced over and over again that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed and that Yahweh would depart from his temple (ch. 10). This was both as unbelievable to the exiles in Babylon as it was excruciating for Ezekiel. But he also saw clearly that all of the best of the past was to be renewed in the future: king, land, people, covenant, and presence—which was eventually realized in Christ and his new-covenant people.

About the oracles themselves. You will observe that, in contrast to the prophets who preceded him, Ezekiel spoke his oracles primarily in prose rather than poetry. Indeed, reading Ezekiel is like entering into a verbal picture book, as one prophetic word after another comes either in the form of a symbolic action on his part or as a vision or allegorical picture, some of which are also interpreted. These latter cover a broad range, from the apocalyptic imagery in chapters 1 (cf. 10:1–22) and 37, to the interpreted symbolic visions of chapters 15 and 17, to the parable of chapter 16, which is so straightforward that it needs no separate interpretation.

You will want to be looking for other features that are also unique to Ezekiel, including his interest in the temple and things priestly. For example, watch for the frequency with which oracles are introduced by Yahweh's asking questions, and how often they conclude with the words "so you/they will know that I am the LORD [Yahweh]" (58*x*) or with "I the LORD [Yahweh] have spoken" (18*x*). His tendency to be repetitive may at times be burdensome to the modern reader, but for Ezekiel it was a way of reinforcing what he saw and reported. The repeated address to him as "son of man" is a Hebraism emphasizing his humanity in the presence of the eternal God.

Finally, you will meet many of Ezekiel's words and ideas when you come to the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters and John's Revelation. Many of John's own images are retakes of Ezekiel's as he joins them to some from Daniel and Isaiah to form a whole new set of images intended to express anew the unspeakable greatness of God and his ways.[1]
Jeremiah.

[1] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 195–197.