



Background Notes on the Book of Ezekiel

Compiled by Pastor Dave Hentschel

The Book of Ezekiel (a priest who became a prophet) takes place while Israel is in exile (ca 593 BC–573 BC) because of the discipline given by God for the idolatry and covenant failure of his people to properly represent His name. Ezekiel, whose most common name for himself in the book is “*son of man*,” (“Son of man, eat this scroll...”, Ezek 3:3), witnessed the majestic glory of God (Ezek 1) which had tragically departed from the compromised Jerusalem temple (Ezek 10), but yet surprisingly followed his people to be with them in a foreign land, revealing that God is not confined to a building, city or nation. Using graphic and vivid word pictures, dramatic reenactments and prophetic street theater, God called Ezekiel to announce both the bad news message of God’s judgment and the good news message of God’s salvation.

“Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day.” (Ezek 2:3, from Ezekiel’s commissioning)

A Conundrum. The central issue in this book is God’s name (aka, God’s reputation, or “glory.”) How will God restore His name / reputation? God’s people were supposed to bear his name as being made in his image, but they did not, therefore, he must discipline his people for their rebellion who had been misrepresenting him. Yet, this solution created another problem to solve because of their defeat. In exile, God’s name was then being defamed among the nations, who misunderstood Yahweh’s chastisement as Yahweh being a weak and powerless god, as if He was unable to protect his people from foreign invasion. Yahweh then takes responsibility to

unilaterally correct this misunderstanding, by promising to completely remake his people himself, into an obedient and loyal nation again who represent his name well.

Yahweh, Israel's just and merciful covenant-keeping God, diagnoses the cause of this entire problem as the rebellion of the uncircumcised and stony human heart. Therefore, unable to get themselves out of this mess, Yahweh promises to one day unilaterally solve their problem through His promised Messiah, who would arise from David's line (Ezek 34), bring about a new covenant, send His Spirit to purify his people and create in them a soft heart (Ezek 36).

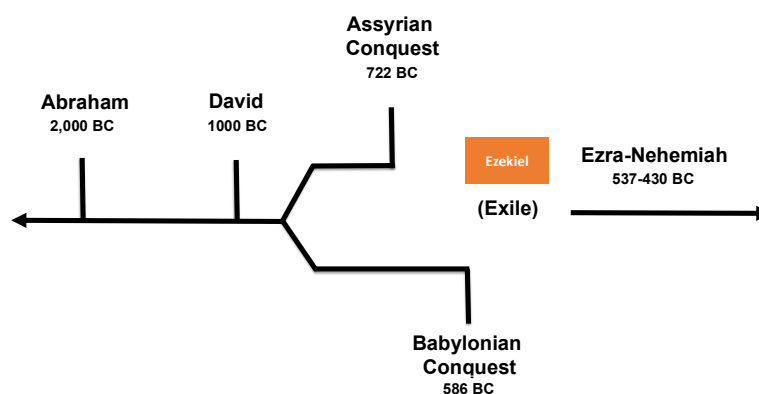
"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezek 36:26-27)

Then He will resurrect her dry bones from the dead (Ezek 37), returning them to the land. *"Can these bones live?" (Ezek 37:3)* He will then defeat Gog and Magog, and all of her proud enemies (Ezek 38-39). The book closes with a magnificent, breath-taking detailed vision of a new temple (Ezek 40-48), a new Jerusalem and a new creation, ending with the phrase, "the Lord is there." The final word over God's people is not exile but presence. *"And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There." (Ezek 47:35)*

Ezekiel is a story about both the departure and return of the glory of God, through judgment and restoration for the purpose of restoring God's reputation. *"Then you will know my name is the LORD." (used 62x throughout Ezekiel)*

Contemporary Relevance: This book challenges God's people to represent Him well by casting off idolatry, spiritual hypocrisy and the temptations of leadership corruption. It also encourages God's people that His presence goes with us wherever we find ourselves, even into exile. Ezekiel provides promises from God who will bring total victory over our sin, great hope for our future, and life from the dead. All of this will result in our salvation and restore His name among all the nations.

Historical Timeline:



Outline of the Book of Ezekiel

I. Ezekiel's Vision of Yahweh leaving and destroying the temple (Ezekiel 1-11)

- a. Ezekiel's vision and commission (1:1-3:27)
- b. Ezekiel's message and prophetic sign acts (4:1-7:1ff)
- c. Ezekiel's vision of the temple's defilement (8:1-11:25)
 - i. The Four Abominations (8:3b-19)
 - ii. The city's ruin (9:1-11)
 - iii. Long vision of Glory of God (10:1-22)
 - iv. Abominable city leaders (Ezek 11:1-13)
 - v. Judgment and future hope (11:14-21)
 - vi. God departs the temple (11:22-25)

II. Ezekiel's warnings to Israel and the nations (Ezekiel 12-33)

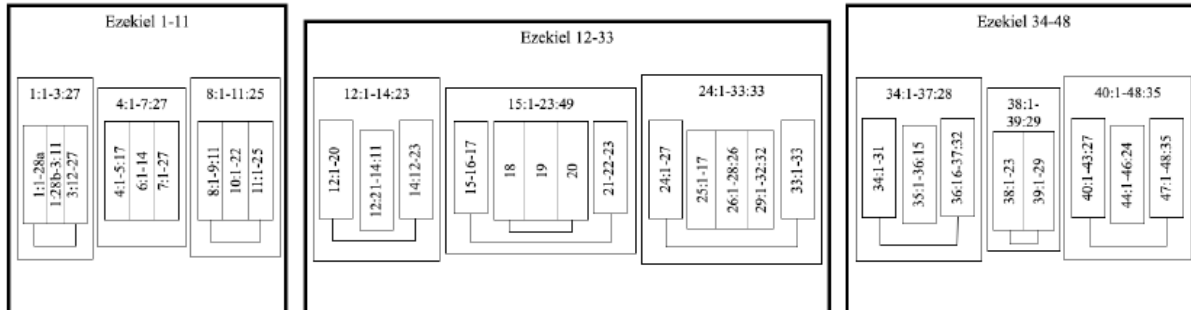
- a. Oracles against Judah's leaders (Ezek 12-14)
 - i. 12:1-20
 - 1. King (12:1-7)
 - 2. King, exile, remnant (12:8-16)
 - 3. Land Desolation (12:17-20)
 - ii. 12:21-14:11
 - 1. Prophets and proverbs (12:21-28)
 - 2. False prophets (13:1-23)
 - 3. Prophets and proverbs (14:1-11)
 - iii. 14:12-23
 - 1. Land Desolation (14:12-20)
 - 2. Remnant (14:21-23)
- b. Oracles against Judah and Jerusalem (Ezek 15-23)
 - i. Ezek 15-17
 - 1. Parable of Useless vine burned with fire (15:1-8)
 - 2. Allegory of unfaithful wife (16:1ff)
 - 3. Parable of Eagle and Vine (17:1-24)
 - ii. Ezek 18-20
 - 1. Generational guilt (18:1-31)
 - 2. Parable of Lion and Vine (19:1-14)
 - 3. Generational guilt (20:1-44)
 - iii. Ezek 21-23
 - 1. The Sword of Babylon (21:1-37)
 - 2. The city of bloodshed (22:1-31)
 - 3. Allegory of unfaithful sisters (23:1ff)
- c. Oracles against the 7 nations (Ezek 24-33)
 - i. Parable of scorched pot (Ezek 24:1-14)
 - ii. Ezekiel's wife dies, refugee denounces Jerusalem (24:15-27)
 - iii. Nations (25:1-17)
 - 1. Ammon (25:1-7)
 - 2. Moab & Seir (25:8-11)

3. Edom (25:12-14)
- iv. 7 oracles against Tyre and Sidon (26:1-28:26)
 1. *Note: judgment on nations = restoration of Israel (28:25-26)
- v. 7 oracles against Egypt (29:1-32:32)
- vi. Parable of the Watchman, refugee denounces Jerusalem (33:1-33)

III. Ezekiel's restoration in the Messianic kingdom (Ezekiel 34-48)

- a. Restoration of Israel in a new Eden (Ezek 34-37)
 - i. Shepherds of Israel vs. New Shepherd David (34:1-31)
 - ii. Oracle against Mt. Seir / Edom, Desolation (35:1-15)
 - iii. Oracle for the mountains of Israel, Restoration (36:1-15)
 - iv. New heart and Spirit (36:16-38)
 - v. Dry bones live (37:1-14)
 - vi. Regathering, repurification, Covenant of Peace (37:15-28)
- b. Defeat of evil among nations (Ezek 38-39)
 - i. Gog's downfall (38)
 - ii. Israel's restoration (39)
- c. Restoration of God's presence in the new Eden (Ezek 40-48)
 - i. A purified temple (40:1-43:27)
 - ii. A purified liturgy and priesthood (44:1-46:24)
 - iii. A purified land and city (47:1-48:35)

The Literary Design of Ezekiel



Design by Tim Mackie, Didasko seminar

Ezekiel's Temple (Ezek 40-48)

Notes below taken from Tim Mackie (Notes from Didasko Seminar)

(3) Main Interpretive Views of Ezekiel's Temple:

(1) **A Blueprint for the eschaton:** These chapters describe an actual temple to be built when the Messiah returns to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the messianic kingdom.

- **Problem:** There is no basis in the New Testament for the hope of a restored temple in Jerusalem. Any texts that might be appealed to are fraught with interpretive challenges and are by no means a clear anticipation of a new temple that should be associated with Christian hope.

- **Problem:** In the depiction of the New Creation in Revelation 21:22, it is very clear that there is no centralized temple, because the entire creation is filled with God's presence.

13 John's vision is on a 'high mountain' (Rev 21:10); a new Jerusalem in which God dwells (21:11); the heavenly guide with a measuring rod (21:15-17); symmetrical plan for the city (21:11-21); river of life (22:1).

- *Problem:* The Gospels portray Jesus as the ultimate reality to which the physical temple pointed (John 2:13-22). Jesus acted and spoke as if he played the role of the temple (offering forgiveness, Mark 2:1-13; healing and purifying the unclean, Mark 5:24-34; receiving worship, Matt 14:33).

- *Problem:* The rest of the New Testament portrays "the body of Christ," i.e. *the community of Jesus' followers as the body of the Messiah, that is, as a temple* (John 7:37-39; Acts 2:1-4; 1Cor 3:16-17, 1Pet 2:4-10).

- *Problem:* The restored temple in Ezekiel 40-48 presumes an Israel that still sins and requires sacrifices of atonement for their sins. This stands in tension with a vision of the restored Israel as fully obedient to God's will (Ezek 36:22-36) and also with the idea that Jesus' death and resurrection provided an ultimate and unrepeatable act of cosmic atonement (as in Hebrews 8-10).

(2) **Symbolic Ideal:** These chapters are part of Ezekiel's prophetic message of challenge and hope (40:4; 43:10-12) aimed at generating repentance. He depicts an idealized temple using "symbolic geography and architecture" to convey his prophetic message; it was not intended for precise historical reference or as a blueprint for those attempting to build a future temple.

Symbolic Architecture

- The location of the temple ("a very high mountain", 40:2) is symbolic: "high mountain" = symbolic connection point between heaven and earth. The temple is heavenly, and already exists, it doesn't need to be built.

- The city-temple complex is over one mile wide and a perfect square, a magnified version of the Holy of Holies (48:17, 35).

- There is a river coming from the temple mount (47:1-12). It is a symbolic stream that plays a similar role to the four headed river from Eden (Gen 2:10-14).

- The image of priests offering continuing sacrifices (ch. 45) and of the messianic 'chief' having purification-offerings made on his behalf (45:22) is inconsistent with the New Testament theology of the finality of Christ's sacrificial death (Hebrews 9-10)

(3) *Territorial Rhetoric*, a.k.a. "Utopian vision"

- At multiple points in the visions, Ezekiel is told the purpose of his being shown these spaces and what he is supposed to do with all that he saw and wrote down.

- Ezek 40:1-4 and 43:1-11 make it clear that Ezekiel's vision was originally addressed to an exilic audience, and was designed to have a rhetorical impact on their view of the hoped for restoration, and on their view of themselves before Yahweh.

- Kalinda Rose Stevenson (in her book, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40-48*)

"If Ezekiel 40-48 do not provide a construction blueprint for the post-exilic temple, is this temple intended to be only a literary creation, a symbol for the universal presence of God? ... What would be the rhetorical purpose of producing a text in the Babylonian exile which organizes post-exilic Israel around a temple if Ezekiel didn't expect the returned Israel to have a temple. I find it incomprehensible that Ezekiel could imagine a society without a temple at the symbolic center of the society. Rather than a choice between a building plan or a symbolic metaphor, there is a third option: it is *territorial rhetoric*... This text calls for radical social change, by reorganizing Israel's entire geography around Yahweh's presence. Every space that was distorted and abused by Israel's priests and kings has been reshaped and made subordinate to Yahweh's presence in the land." — adapted quotes from Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *The Vision*

of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40-48, p. 151-53.

“Sir Thomas More in 1516 invented the term ‘utopia’ by playing on two Greek prefixes, *ou* and *eu*. The prefix *ou* means ‘no/not’ and *eu* means ‘good/well.’” “Combined with the Greek word *topos*, which means ‘place’ a utopia is thus, at once a place of well-being and a fictive non place. What More’s utopia is not, contrary to widespread usage, is a perfect place. And neither is Ezekiel’s ideal temple and land. Ezekiel’s utopia is not yet the full realization of God’s reign over the new creation. Access to the temple is still limited to only the priests, sacrifices of atonement for sins are still necessary, and the ideal David of Ezek 34:23-24 and 37:25 is a far cry from the diminished “chief” of Ezekiel 40-48. In particular, Israel’s promised future heart transplant is *not* presupposed (Ezek 11:19-20 and 36:26-27); atonement offerings would not be necessary if it had already taken place. A literary utopia of More’s type is a means of social critique, which must grapple persuasively with the continuing struggles and tragedies of real life. *A literary utopia thus keeps at least one foot in the problematic world of the present...* The original island of Utopia described by More in his book of 1516 was not futuristic or eschatological, but an engaging critique of contemporary England. *Similarly, Ezekiel 40-48 is not a vision of a future God-given reality, which readers must fit into all of God’s other plans for earth’s destiny. Neither is it a blueprint for an actual, realistic temple slated for human construction... It is a revolutionary text designed to challenge the status quo as Israel looked forward to its return from Babylon.*” — Stephen L. Cook, *Ezekiel 38-48*, p. 5-6.

The Visionary Temple Tour

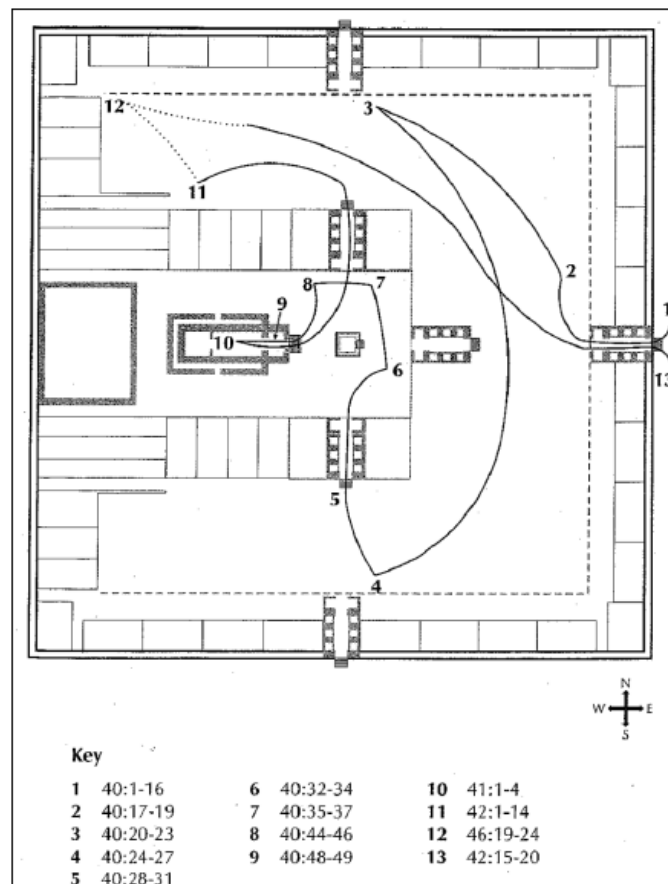


Chart from Daniel Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, p 571

The Land (Ezek 47:1-48:35)



Map 2. Ezekiel's Vision of the Land of Israel

Map from Daniel Block, Ezek 25-48, p 712

Recommended Resources for the study of Ezekiel:

- **Commentaries:**
 - Daniel Block, 2 Volume commentary on Ezekiel (NICNT)
 - Christopher Wright, *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary, “The Message of Ezekiel”
- **Videos:**
 - Bible Project: Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-CIPu1nko8>
 - Bible Project Part 2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDeCWW_Bnyw
 - Bible Project Course on Ezekiel: <https://bibleproject.com/classroom/ezekiel>