



Ezekiel and Exile

By John Strong, PhD

The United States loves a rags-to-riches story, and our history is flush with such stories. In the 1800s, many immigrants arrived on this soil poor in money, rich with hope, and confident that opportunities for a better life would arise in this land of liberty for the pursuit of happiness.

Today, across the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, wartime refugees live in camps—groupings of tents and improvised lean-tos cobbled together by people just trying to survive—where hope is found lacking. These people did not want to leave their ancestral homes, but were dragged away, leaving behind all their possessions, and even more importantly—their hope for the future. Such was the situation for Ezekiel and his fellow Judahites, all of whom had formerly made up the nobility and intelligentsia of the ancient southern kingdom of Judah. How could they hope to build an empire having been forced to leave behind their land, homes, status, and dreams? And yet, Ezekiel hoped.

In 597 BCE, Judah rebelled against Babylon, the dominant world empire during this era (cf. the Timeline for details, names of kings, and dates), but with disastrous results. Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar deported King Jehoiachin, along with Judahite aristocratic leaders, including a young priest named Ezekiel. This group of former nobility was settled by the **River Chebar** (Ezek 1:1,3; 3:15, 23, and elsewhere), their homes being located on an ancient ruin named **Tel Abib** (cf. 3:15). While texts indicate that Jehoiachin and his family may have eventually been treated as foreign royalty (2 Kings 25:27–30; Jer 52:31–34), Ezekiel and his community of war prisoners seem to have been devastated and humiliated in their setting (cf. Ps 137). Modern scholarship has identified symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome in Ezekiel and other texts stemming from this time and setting. How, then, does a priest, whose very existence is wrapped up with the ideology of **theocracy**, of right worship centered around the temple in Jerusalem in their native land, communicate hope in the midst of the catastrophe of exile?

Ezekiel's First Temple Vision [Ezek 8–11]

To address this question, Ezekiel delivers two messages in two visions of the temple in Jerusalem. First, Ezekiel correctly predicts the complete and total destruction of the Judahite state, of its capital city, **Jerusalem**, and of the **Solomonic Temple**, all of which came to pass in the summer of 587/586 BCE (cf. Timeline and note the narratives in 2 Kings 25:1–21; 2 Chr 36:15–20; Jer 52:1–30). But merely predicting Judah and Jerusalem's fall was insufficient by itself; *explaining why it happened* was necessary in order to preserve any hope that the future might lead to a new, restored Judahite kingdom, a theocracy again led by Yahweh allowing Judahites the liberty to pursue happiness.

The **house of Israel** came to Ezekiel, looking for answers in the eloquence of his rhetoric and powerful visions (e.g., Ezek 20:49; 33:32). Above all, his vision in chapters 8–11 of the departure of the Glory of Yahweh, which represented the presence of God for Ezekiel and his community, explained the catastrophe. Beginning with chapter 8, Ezekiel, though in exile in Babylon, depicts the complete sinfulness of the nation's worship prior to the exile, and the consequent state of pollution of the temple in Jerusalem. In the north gate, an image made the national deity Yahweh rage with jealousy (8:3–5).

Further into the temple precinct (8:7–13), Ezekiel views 70 **elders** worshipping images of various kinds, a practice strictly prohibited by ancient Judahite law (Deut 5:8–10; Exod 20:4–6). The specification of 70 elders was intentional; these elders represented the same body that tradition held banqueted with Yahweh at the foot of **Mt. Sinai** to seal the covenant with Israel (Exod 24:9–11). As Ezekiel's vision progresses deeper into the temple precinct (8:14–15), it also progresses in respect to the sin and the sinners, for here we see women weeping for **Tammuz**. By their location, it would seem that these were female religious functionaries, i.e., priestesses of Yahweh's cult, perhaps those referred to elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as Daughters of Zion (Cant 3:11; Isa 3:16–17, 4:4). Most properly, these priestesses would have served Yahweh and, thus, the theocracy in a variety of important roles (e.g., national mourning, temple rituals,

etc.). And in a final stroke, Ezekiel views 25 men located in the center of the temple precinct, turned eastward, with their backs toward the **Holy of Holies** and Yahweh's throne, worshipping the sun. Scholars have no doubt that these men are highly placed members of the priesthood, for they would be the only persons allowed in such a central location in the temple. With this vision, Ezekiel explains that every segment of Judah's society, including the priesthood, has defiled the temple, which should mediate the Presence of God to the nation. How could the Presence of God remain in such a place?

Actually, God's Presence couldn't remain, as Ezekiel succinctly states in Ezek 8:6: "Do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?" (NRSV). This movement from Yahweh's sanctuary is what Ezekiel then explains in greater detail in chapters 10–11.

So, how could such a devastating defeat of the theocracy of Yahweh happen? Judah's God had abandoned the temple because of the sins of the people, beginning with the common citizens paying homage to the "image of jealousy" at the north gate (Ezek 8:3–4) all the way to those who should be most sensitive to the honor of Yahweh, the priests who served the presence of God through altar sacrifices (Ezek 8:16–18).

Ezekiel's Second Temple Vision [Ezek 40–48]

While Ezekiel's first temple vision explains the downfall, Ezekiel's second temple vision promises hope for the future, for in this vision, Ezekiel describes Yahweh's return and future enthronement in the temple in Jerusalem (?). This message is conveyed by Ezekiel's other great temple vision in chapters 40–48. Scholars date this vision at 25 years into the exile (40:1), or, half-way to the **year of Jubilee**.

Then, after describing a grand new temple (chapters 40–42), Ezekiel describes the re-entry of Yahweh's Presence into the temple (43:1–9), in which the Glory of Yahweh retraces its steps, coming from the east (43:2), through the eastern gate (43:4), and into the future temple (43:5)—a complete reversal of its departure described in Ezek 10–11. Upon the completion of this re-entry, Ezekiel hears the national deity announce that he will be enthroned forever (43:7). Not only that, but then, in a glorious vision of a life giving **river of paradise**, flowing from beneath the temple (47:1–12), Ezekiel promises prosperity for the future nation as well. He ends this vision, indeed the book itself concludes with a simple summary of this envisioned hope, the name of this place would be *Yahweh shammah* "God is there" (48:35). Briefly then, at the halfway point in the exile, Ezekiel describes for the former Judahite nobility the restoration of the theocracy, and thereby presents the hope necessary for the Ezekiel and his fellow war prisoners to pursue happiness.

Ezekiel's Vision of God's Presence in Exile [Ezek 1]

A hopeful future, while amazing in the face of the reality of exile, still remains a dream, and falls beyond the scope of most of the exiles' lifetimes, including that of Ezekiel. What reassurance or comfort did Ezekiel see for the exiles' current, exilic state?

In the very first chapter, when Ezekiel was first called to be a prophet, Ezekiel saw the Glory of God appear to him by the River Chebar, in the land of Babylon, with all of the characteristics of **theophany** in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East (e.g., Exod 19:16–19; 24:15–18, Num 9:15–23). The language in Ezek 1, while strange to the modern reader, would have been clear to Ezekiel's ancient audience. The creatures that Ezekiel saw were **cherubs**, composite beasts who served as heavenly guardians, and who here in Ezek 1, escorted the divine Glory of God. Striking to the ancient and modern reader alike, however, are the wheels, which are associated with these divine escorts, signifying not a throne, but a mobile chariot.

Ezekiel's vision, then, declares that when the people were forcibly removed from the land, Jerusalem, and the temple of Yahweh, that is to say, from all the ways in which they encountered the Presence of God, at that time Yahweh came to them. The assurance of Yahweh's presence, seen here in the grand vision of Ezek 1, is repeated at times elsewhere in the text, strikingly right in the middle of the vision of Yahweh's departure from the temple. There, Yahweh himself promises to be a "sanctuary to them for a little while" (Ezek 11:16; NRSV). Thus, while hoping to one day live in the city, "Yahweh is There" (Ezek 48:35),

Ezekiel preached to his exilic community that they could still find comfort in the presence of God even in the midst of the harsh labor camp that was Babylonian Tel Abib.

One may argue that Ezekiel's hope never quite materialized exactly as he envisioned. Certainly, the people were allowed to return to the land of Judah in 539 BCE, being permitted to do so by the Persian, King Cyrus, whom Isaiah identified as Yahweh's **Messiah**. But it would seem from books dealing with this time period (e.g., Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai) that the return to the land required sacrifice, and was itself quite harsh. Many, it would seem, decided to remain in Babylon, where they had established a new life. While a temple was indeed rebuilt in Jerusalem in 520–516 BCE, Ezekiel's grand vision of a new temple was rather ethereal and heavenly, quite unlike the new second temple structure, which fell short in the eyes of many (cf. Hag 2:3). But for an ancient priest and his community, who only knew of theocracy as the context in which to pursue happiness, the belief in the presence of God, even in exile, gave them the hope to endure, and in the end, provided them with hope for future generations' survival and return—a hope that many spiritual descendants of these ancient forced migrants pursue to this very day.

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Glossary of Terms and Concepts

Cherub: Cherub is an English transliteration from a Hebrew word, which identifies a composite heavenly being, variously depicted with human faces, lion or bovine bodies, and most often, wings. These beings were understood to be heavenly attendants in the divine court in ancient Near Eastern literature. They are commonly seen as a part of the iconography comprising ancient Near Eastern royal thrones.

Elders: In ancient Israel and Judah, an elder was the head of a local village or region. They were not royal officials, operating in the Jerusalem court, but would have represented their villages and people before the Jerusalem royal court.

Glory: A technical term for the visible manifestation of the presence of Yahweh (Ezek 1:28; 8:4; 43:2, 5; and cf. Lev 9:6, 23). The Glory of God is marked in Ezekiel and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible by terrifying composite heavenly attendants (i.e., cherubs), and threatening natural phenomenon such as clouds, thunder, lightening, fire, and other elements associated with theophanies (e.g., Exod 24:15–18; Num 16:42 [Eng.]).

Holy of Holies: This is the innermost room in the temple, where Yahweh's throne is located, being formed out of two cherubim (2 Kings 6:19–22, 23–28; 2 Chr 3:8–14).

House of Israel: As elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Exod 16:31; Lev 10:6; Num 20:29), this term is used in the book of Ezekiel to identify the entire assembly of the twelve tribes, thus, inclusive of both the Northern Kingdom (i.e., "Israel") and the Southern Kingdom (i.e., "Judah"). At times, the house of Israel is described as being rebellious, and addressed harshly (e.g., Ezek 3:7; 8:6), but at other times the text promises the house of Israel restoration (e.g., Ezek 37:11–14).

Jerusalem: Called the "City of David," because it was not a part of any tribe, but taken by David and his army to be his own royal city (cf. 2 Sam 5:6–16), loyal to him and his dynasty.

Messiah: Literally, this term identifies someone anointed for special service, perhaps as a priest (Lev 6:19–23 [Eng.]) or a king. In the Hebrew Bible, only three men were said to have been anointed by Yahweh to be a king: Saul (1 Sam 10:1), whose dynasty failed; David (1 Sam 16:12), whose dynasty continued until the destruction of the Jerusalem temple; and the Persian king, Cyrus (Isa 45:1). In later Jewish literature and thought, Messiah came to signal the savior of the nation, a tradition applied in the New Testament to Jesus of Nazareth.

Mt. Sinai: This is the ancient mountain of God, where Judahite and Israelite ancient tradition held that God first met Moses and the people of Israel in order to establish a covenant with them. There, the tradition narrates how God appeared to Moses (Exod 19), gave to him the law (Exod 20:1–23:19), sealed the covenant with a sacred banquet (Exod 24:118), and provided a cultic system by which the people could maintain a relationship with God (Exod 25:1–31:18).

River Chebar: Ancient texts from Mesopotamia have been discovered that locate the River Chebar in the Nippur region, southeast of Babylon. Scholars believe that the ancient Babylonians used prisons from its wars, Judahites among these, to help build irrigation canals in order to control and take advantage of water from the Euphrates River.

River of Paradise: Water was both a destructive force, seen naturally in the form of uncontrolled floods that destroyed crops and villages, but also a life giving element, necessary and tenuous in the agrarian society of ancient Israel, and the Near East as a whole. Hence, in all of the ancient literatures of Egypt, Israel, and Mesopotamia, water is depicted both as a dangerous monster to be slain (e.g., the Babylonian chief deity, Marduk, defeats the Chaos monster, Tiamat, in the epic, *Enuma Elish*), but also as a source of life, necessary to quench human thirst as well as for successful crops and livestock herds. In regard to the latter aspect of water, in Israel's literature the Gihon spring provided the city of Jerusalem with an unceasing supply of water, and was viewed as one of four primordial rivers (Gen 2:13). Isaiah accuses Ahaz of rejecting the life-giving, gentle waters of Shiloah, perhaps a reference to an irrigation

channel that carried water from the Gihon into the fields in the Kidron Valley (Isa 8:5). Psalm 46:4 provides evidence that the image of a river symbolized the prosperity given by Yahweh. But nowhere is this theological symbol embellished to such an extent, or the Gihon spoken of with such hyperbole than here in Ezek 47:1–12.

Solomonic Temple: This is simply the temple of Yahweh, located in Jerusalem, on the top of Mount Zion. As the national shrine of Judah, it was believed to provide an entrance to the throne room of Yahweh (cf. Isa 6:1–3). Archaeologists have uncovered a similar remarkable temple at an ancient site of Ain Dara, complete with footprints of the deity carved into the threshold, depicting the deity (i.e., Ishtar) entering the temple and traveling into the inner sanctuary (see an easily accessible article by John Monson, “(Ain Dara Temple: The New Closest Solomonic Parallel,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 26/3 [May/June 2000]: 20–35, complete with great photos!).

Tammuz: Also known as Dumuzi in Mesopotamian literature, Tammuz was a dying and rising god, the husband of Ishtar, who ordained weeping and wailing for this deity to ensure fertility.

Tel Abib: This term is known from ancient Mesopotamian documents, and means something like “Mound of ruins left from the waters of the Great Flood.” What seems most evident to scholars in this term is an ancient ruin, so old that no one knew its origins, and so attributed its ruin to the primeval flood, reported in the Gilgamesh Epic, Gen 6–9, and other ancient Near Eastern literature.

Theocracy: Literally, this term means “ruled by God” (compare with Democracy, “ruled by the people”). All ancient Near Eastern kingdoms were theocracies. Assyria was ruled by their chief deity Assur, Babylon by its chief god, Marduk. Judah was ruled by Yahweh. Included in the belief system of Judah were a number of important tenets. 1) Yahweh was the Divine King enthroned on Mt. Zion (located in Jerusalem). 2) The Davidic kings (e.g., David, Solomon, and later Jehoiachin, etc.) were the earthly regents carrying out the will of the Divine Great King. 3) Mount Zion, and thus, Jerusalem, which was located on the slope of Zion, was place to enter into the throne room of the Great King, and was thus, believed to be a place of protection and refuge (Pss 46:5–7, 48:1–8, 12–14 and 76:1–3). This tenet is related to the belief that the Divine King would provide protection against the powers of Chaos, including foreign nations (cf. Pss Ps 46; Ps 76:4–12). 4) Yahweh would provide for the prosperity of Judah (cf. Ps 46:4; and most prominently Ezek 47:1–12).

Theophany: The manifestation of God. (See “Glory” in this glossary.)

Year of Jubilee: According to the law stated Lev 25:1–17, the year of Jubilee comes at the end of 50 years, and marks the time when debts are erased and all property is restored. The principle is to allow families that have fallen on hard times and have had to enter into debt-slavery to regain their land and begin anew.

For further reading about particular details, consult the following helpful recent commentaries:

Steven Tuell, *Ezekiel*. New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2009.

Paul Joyce. *Ezekiel: A Commentary*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Series 482; New York: T & T Clark, 2007.

A Brief Outline of the Contents of Ezekiel

Of all of the prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible, Ezekiel is the most clearly structured. On the basis of the dates given to the various passages and in conjunction with the content of these passages, scholars have identified three visions that seem to have controlled the organization and general message of the book. These three visions are the three visions discussed in this article: 1) Ezekiel's call by the River Chebar, Ezek 1:4–3:14; 2) Ezekiel's first temple vision, Ezek 8:1–11:23; and 3) Ezekiel's second temple vision, Ezek 40:1–48:35. Around these controlling visions, Ezekiel's other oracles were arranged.

Superscript for the entire collection: Ezek 1:1–3

Part 1: Oracles predominantly of judgment, chapters 1–24:

1. Ezekiel's call and the vision of Yahweh's Glory: hope in God's presence (Ezek 1:4–3:27)
2. Sign-Acts of Exile (4:1–5:17)
3. Judgments against the land (Ezek 6:1–7:27)
4. Ezekiel's first temple vision: explaining the demise of the theocracy (Ezek 8:1–11:25)
5. Images and metaphors of judgment (Ezek 12:1–24:27)

Part 2: Oracles against the nations, chapters 25–32:

1. Oracles against Judah's neighbors (Ezek 25:1–17)
2. Oracles against Tyre (Ezek 26:1–28:26)
3. Oracles against Egypt (Ezek 29:1–32:32)

Part 3: Oracles predominantly of salvation, chapters 33–48:

1. Reconstructing the land and the people (Ezek 33:1–39:29)
2. Ezekiel's second temple vision: a hope for a new theocracy (40:1–48:35)