

## Historical Background of Ezekiel

The book of Ezekiel is part of the larger collection of Israel's prophecies that include Jeremiah and Isaiah. The prophet Ezekiel received his prophetic call at the age of thirty (594 B.C.E.). The historical circumstances of his teenage years arguably influenced his twenty-two year prophetic ministry (593–571 B.C.E.). As a youth, Ezekiel lived during the social and spiritual reformation instituted by king Josiah (639-609 B.C.E.). The purging of pagan priests from the Jerusalem temple and the destruction of local shrines purified the toxic polytheism that raged through Judah. As a priest, Ezekiel must have welcomed the religious cleansing of the temple as well as the reinstatement of the ancient Israelite laws and worship practices. Following the death of king Josiah at Megiddo, the nation of Judah began to regress back to her pagan ways.

Very little is known about Ezekiel's personal circumstances. He was married and lost his wife in 587 B.C.E. when Jerusalem was overtaken and destroyed by the Babylonians (24:15ff). The book of Ezekiel recorded fourteen precise dates for individual oracles. Over half of the dates occurred in the oracles against the nations (chs. 29–32). Several prophetic visions recorded Ezekiel being transported from Babylon to Jerusalem and back (8:3; 11:24). His unique personality and actions have led modern scholars to describe him as schizophrenic, catatonic, and psychotic.

Roughly coinciding with Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was the rise of the neo-Babylonian dynasty (605–562 B.C.E.) under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar II. The Babylonians overtook the land routes from Africa to Asia once controlled by the Egyptians. Following a brief reign of Josiah's youngest son Jehoahaz, the Egyptian pharaoh Necho placed Eliakim, the eldest son of the deceased king, as the vassal over Judah. After the appointment, Eliakim took the regnal name Jehoiakim. In 605 BC, Jehoiakim transferred his allegiance to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, which he repudiated three years later.

The historical turmoil surrounding the life of Ezekiel accentuated his unique personality and prophetic message. He was the son of the priest Busi (1:3) and genuinely loved the temple and the sacral ordinances. Resulting from Jehoiakim's cavalier decision to withhold tribute to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar attacked the rebellious vassal and besieged Jerusalem. It was during this tumultuous time that the young Ezekiel was deported in 597 B.C.E. to Babylon and his hope of fulfilling his priestly office in Jerusalem was abolished. He along with other exiles settled in Tel Abib (3:15) near the "River Chebar," probably not far from the city of Nippur in Babylon. While residing in this area, Ezekiel received his prophetic call in the fourth year of exile.

The exiles in Babylon were from the upper classes that ignored the previous prophetic warnings. In short, the exiles hoped for an expedient return to Palestine. Naturally, the people in exile despised Ezekiel for his prophetic message. The prophet himself identified the fate of his people by taking on the suffering and dramatizing their fate through personal anguish and agony. Yet, the people over time accepted their new home in Babylon and the message of Ezekiel. The conditions in Babylon were favorable and comfortable. The displaced people flourished so much so that many refused to return to their homeland when given the opportunity. While in Babylon the exiles adopted Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of international trade.

From a religious standpoint, the people in exile questioned the overarching reach of Yahweh's supremacy. They questioned whether Yahweh's presence and superiority extended beyond the borders of Palestine and over the official Babylonian god Marduk. The exiles were reminded daily of the paganism of their overseers. Nebuchadnezzar built a four-stepped ziggurat

in Babylon, which included a temple dedicated to Marduk. The religious crux in Babylon was whether Yahweh could be worshiped outside Jerusalem. It is from this social and religious climate in the Babylonian exile that allowed Ezekiel to proclaim his theological message that emphasized a new historical situation.

The message of Ezekiel differed from the words proclaimed by Jeremiah and Hosea. He argued the people were corrupt from the beginning. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were considered deviant offspring of sin and surpassed deplorable Samaria. Even amid his cantankerous message, Ezekiel cherished the hope reposed in the monarchal covenant between Yahweh and David. The prophet reapplied the Davidic promise by emphasizing its fulfillment in the future. The message of restoration reached a climax through the oracles of hope in 33:1–34:24. The vision of the revitalization of the dry bones in 37:1–14 promised the miraculous renewal and restoration of the exiles to Palestine.