

## **Ezekiel: Historical Background**

From *Ezekiel's Vision: The Glory of the Lord*, by John Calahan: *It has been said that Ezekiel is the Prophet of the Holy Spirit, as Isaiah is the Prophet of the Son, and Jeremiah is the Prophet of the Father. The Spirit is mentioned twenty-two times in the book. The word "visions" is mentioned twenty-one times. The word "parables" occurs three times. Signs are mentioned nine times. Multiple times we are told that the "hand of the Lord" was on the prophet, and the Spirit had lifted him up. The glory of the Lord is mentioned ten times. It is the theme of the book. Born to a priestly family circa 622 B.C., Ezekiel, son of Buzi, is exiled with King Jeconiah and others in his twenty-fifth year. Ezekiel lived with the Jewish exiles from Judea on the Great Canal of Chebar. At the same time, Daniel was the prime minister under King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel is mentioned three times in this book. In his thirtieth year, God commissions Ezekiel to a prophetic ministry. Ezekiel and Daniel were almost the same age. Jeremiah, the prophet, was about twenty years older and was considered the sage prophet. There is an important lesson here for us. Daniel was in the king's palace, and Ezekiel was with the exiles. Yet, they were both prophets of God. According to Jewish tradition, Ezekiel did not write the biblical Book of Ezekiel, but rather his prophecies were collected by the Great Assembly, an assembly of possibly 120 scribes, sages, and prophets, which existed from the early Second Temple period (around 516 B.C.) to the early Hellenistic period (which began in the region with Alexander's conquest in 332 B.C.), roughly coinciding with the Persian hegemony over the nation of Israel. Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, is said by Talmud and Midrash to have been a descendant of Joshua by his marriage with the proselyte and former prostitute Rahab. Some statements found in rabbinic literature posit that Ezekiel was the son of Jeremiah, who was (also) called "Buzi," meaning in Hebrew "the one who is despised," because he was hated by the Jews. According to Josephus, Ezekiel was already active as a prophet while in Judea, and he retained this divine gift when he was exiled with King Jeconiah and the nobles of the country to Babylon. Ezekiel foresees the destruction of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar's army returns the second time to put down Judea. For a period of time, he stops prophesying altogether but then resumes with a message of hope for the community in exile. He foresees a restored Temple and a renewed Covenant relationship with God. Towards the end of the Book of Ezekiel, he describes in great detail the measurements of this restored Temple, indicating the return of God's perfect holiness and order to His people. A Davidic Prince will oversee this restoration, and the Covenant, when renewed, will be everlasting.*

## **Ezekiel: Overview of Theological Themes**

From *Theological Themes in Ezekiel* by Alan Padgett: *When reading the Book of Ezekiel, one gets the sense of God's overriding presence and command. The book prioritizes God's voice over the prophetic voice. God typically commands the prophet to say an oracle or do a sign-act. But the book does not usually depict Ezekiel as accomplishing these acts. God's command is enough. Ezekiel also uses the formula "They/you will know that I am the LORD" at least 70 times to express the priority of knowledge about God.*

*An example of this theme occurs in the prophet's call story in Ezekiel 2-3. The prophet is commanded to stand, but he needs the spirit to set him on his feet. We get the sense that this call story is less about the prophet's desires and more about God's. Further, the spirit animates*

*the prophet who is not able to respond as he is commanded. The missing element in this call story is the prophet's objection. Ezekiel does not object. In fact, the chapter does not record any response from the prophet. The emphasis is on the divine call and the rebellious people, not on Ezekiel. His digestion of the scroll also points to his lack of objection to this call. This nonresponse stands in contrast to Isaiah's "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips" and Jeremiah's "I do now know how to speak, for I am only a boy." The lack of a response by Ezekiel also highlights another feature of this book—Ezekiel's seeming lack of free will. He is unable to stand at the beginning of this chapter without the spirit's assistance. He carries out most of his prophetic tasks only under divine control.*

#### Glory of the Lord

*The vision of the glory of the Lord represents a view of God as transcendent Lord of all creation and serves as a symbol of the spiritual presence of God among the people. The visions occur at several points in the book, where God's glory is leaving the old Temple, coming to the Jews in exile, and dwelling within the future, restored Temple.*

*The Priestly tradition in the Bible includes this emphasis on glory from the time of the wilderness (Exodus 16:7) to the tabernacle, then the ark, and eventually the Temple. A vision of this glory from exile confirms God's ability to be revealed to the people outside of the Temple.*

#### Holy Character of God

*The holiness of the Lord is a constant theme of this book, a background belief manifested in many ways. God's holiness appears in visual form in the awesome throne vision (Ezekiel 1:4-28). Divine holiness demands that evildoers and idolaters be punished—a central theme in Ezekiel's prophecies against Judah, Israel, and the nations. Despite the covenant God made with God's people, they were disobedient and rebellious: "You are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you..." (5:7). Because of divine holiness and righteousness, the Lord punishes the people; yet, in defense of the holy name, God does not utterly destroy (Ezekiel 20:9, 14, 22). God will gather, heal, and sanctify the people in future restoration. The structure and character of the restored Temple embody the holiness of the Lord (Ezekiel 40—43).*

#### Hope of Restoration

*Despite the sinfulness of Israel and the righteous wrath of God, Ezekiel does contain messages of healing, hope, and consolation. The long vision of the restoration of the land and Temple is one significant locus for this theme (chapters 40—48), but it occurs in many places (Ezekiel 6:8-10; 11:16-20; 16:60-63; 20:33-38). Ezekiel's theology focuses on Israel, and in a future new exodus God will gather the people back to the Promised Land. God's words of consolation are about concrete blessings from God, such as food, peace, land, and a restored covenant and Temple.*

#### Responsibility: Individual and Corporate

*Like much of the Old Testament, Ezekiel has a firm notion of the corporate responsibility of a tribe, nation, or people before the Lord. His judgments against the nations are evidence of this. Yet we find a new theme alongside it: the responsibility of the individual sinner to repent, and the justice of the Lord in punishing individuals only for their own sins (Ezekiel 18).*

## Rethinking Salvation History

*Israel in exile is faced with unbelief: Is their god real, or just a local deity of little importance? Is their religion of any enduring value? Ezekiel's resounding "Yes" to continued faith in the Lord occurs along with a willingness to rethink key issues in the relationship between God and Israel, including their covenant history (chapters 16 and 20). This suggests the flexibility of God in relationship to God's people in history.*

## Sinfulness of God's People

*As was common among the prophets, Ezekiel's prophetic vocation includes a powerful word of the Lord to the people of Israel regarding their sins. The sinfulness of the people is not recent; Ezekiel retells the early history of Israel to emphasize their constant rebellion and sinfulness (chapter 20). These sins include rebellion, turning their backs on the Lord (that is, abandoning their faith in God), idolatry, defiling the Temple, willfully breaking the commandments, including blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking. For these grave sins, God punished Judah and Jerusalem with destruction and exile.*

## Sinfulness of the Nations

*As the holy Creator and Lord, God acts as judge of the nations and their rulers (chapters 25—32). The Lord does not expect them to follow the laws of Israel (like the Sabbath), but condemns them for general wrong-doing, such as oppression, corruption, greed, and lust for violence. Especially important for the prophet was the cruel way Israel's neighbors treated Judah/Jerusalem during its fall; their greed and gloating is condemned by God. Another theme is the prophet's words against any false trust that some were putting in other nations (chiefly Egypt) rather than in the Lord.*

## Temple: God's Dwelling Place

*The Temple is a key theme in Ezekiel. The Temple is a physical manifestation of the presence, glory, and blessing of God in Israel. A key sin of Israel is the defilement of the Temple (5:11; 8:5-18), and this is in turn a key reason for its destruction, the sacking of Jerusalem, and the exile. In one of his visions of the "glory of the LORD" as an awesome throne-chariot, Ezekiel sees the glory departing from the Temple (10:18-19). In the large vision that ends the book (chapters 40—48), the prophet-priest describes the future restoration of the Temple and its rituals as God's promise of blessing, restoration, and divine presence for the future.*

## True and False Religion

*As prophet and priest, Ezekiel is zealous for the Lord, consistently condemning idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, and disobedience to the law. This applies to Israel past, present, and future as well as to the surrounding nations (on grounds of general human justice rather than Israel's unique laws). The Lord is revealed throughout the book as Lord of all nations and all creation.*

## Wrath of God

*The wrath of God against Judah, Israel, the Jews in exile, and the nations and their rulers is a common theme in Ezekiel. The wrath of God is not arbitrary or vicious, but God's steady resolve to destroy evil and wickedness. God's wrath is provoked by the sinfulness of the people of Israel, sins which include idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, defiling the Temple, and placing their faith*

*in other nations rather than in the Lord. God's wrath also rests upon sinful nations and rulers surrounding Judah/Israel.*

## **The Zadokite Priesthood**

*From The Zadokite Priesthood by The Bible Project Online: The Zadokite Priesthood refers to the line of priests descending from Zadok, a prominent figure in the religious history of ancient Israel. Zadok was a priest during the reigns of King David and King Solomon and played a crucial role in the establishment of the Solomonic Temple worship. The Zadokite line is often associated with faithfulness to the Davidic covenant and the proper worship of Yahweh.*

### **Biblical Origins and Historical Context**

*Zadok first appears in the biblical narrative during the reign of King David. He is introduced as a priest alongside Abiathar, serving in the religious leadership of Israel (2 Samuel 8:17). Zadok's loyalty to David is evident during Absalom's rebellion, where he remains faithful to the king and plays a key role in the eventual restoration of David to the throne (2 Samuel 15:24-29).*

*Upon Solomon's ascension to the throne, Zadok's position is solidified. When Abiathar is removed from the priesthood for supporting Adonijah's claim to the throne, Zadok is appointed as the sole high priest (1 Kings 2:26-27, 35). This appointment marks the beginning of the Zadokite priesthood's prominence in Israel's religious life.*

### **Role in the Temple Worship**

*The Zadokite priests were entrusted with the sacred duties of the Temple, which included offering sacrifices, maintaining the sanctity of the worship space, and teaching the Law to the people. Their role was crucial in upholding the religious and moral standards of the nation. The Book of Ezekiel highlights the Zadokites' faithfulness, contrasting them with other Levitical priests who went astray. Ezekiel 44:15-16 states, "But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept charge of My sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from Me, will approach Me to minister before Me. They will stand before Me to offer Me fat and blood, declares the Lord GOD. They alone shall enter My sanctuary and draw near to My table to minister before Me."*

### **Theological Significance**

*The Zadokite priesthood is often seen as a symbol of covenantal faithfulness and divine election. Their exclusive right to minister in the inner sanctum of the Temple underscores the importance of holiness and obedience in the service of God. The Zadokites' adherence to the divine commandments serves as a model for spiritual leadership and integrity.*

### **Post-Exilic Period and Beyond**

*After the Babylonian exile, the Zadokite line continued to play a significant role in the religious life of the Jewish community. The Book of Chronicles emphasizes the continuity of the Zadokite priesthood, linking it to the restoration of the Temple and the reestablishment of proper worship practices (1 Chronicles 6:49-53).*

*In the Second Temple period, the Zadokites maintained their influence, although the political and religious landscape had changed significantly. Some scholars suggest that the Qumran community, associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, may have had connections to the Zadokite priesthood, reflecting their emphasis on purity and adherence to the Law.*

It is important to note the overlap of the Zadokite priesthood, which remained dominant until the non-Zadokite Hasmonaeen bloodline took control of the Judean high priesthood after the Second Century BC Maccabean Revolt, and the Great Assembly. Together, they were the preservationist faction within Judea during the period of Persian hegemony – basically, Judea’s version of what we might call “the Continuing Church” - that worked to sustain fidelity to a Deuteronomic view of the Mosaic Law as re-established by Ezra and Nehemiah following the Babylonian Captivity. The Deuteronomic view of the Mosaic Law focused on the personal integration of the Covenant Law into an individual’s life (a theme that will characterize the Pharisees later), the separation of Jews from Gentiles to preserve bloodline purity, the strict adherence to the Sabbath Rules, and the centrality of worship in Jerusalem (and, in particular, in the Temple priesthood). Zadokite priests were Temple liturgical purists in the same vein as the Great Assembly were recorders and archivists of the ancient texts and prophetic teachings. In essence, the Zadokite priests and the Great Assembly were the coming together of Liturgy and Word, which is analogous to our own coming together of Sacrament and Word, or Catholic Tradition and Holy Bible. They understand that each needs the preservation of the other. What follows the Maccabean Revolt, and the loss of the Zadokite high priestly hegemony, is a breaking apart of this preservationist continuity into factions: The Sadducees are the heirs to the Zadokite priestly line who focus on liturgical purity sometimes to the exclusion of the internalization of the Word, the Pharisees focus on a personal adherence to the Law that is legalistic sometimes to the point of being puritanical, the Essenes, often the sons of priests, forge a desert community of their own as a rejection of the increasing “form without substance” Temple liturgical practices, and the Zealots seek to restore the “spirit” of the Maccabean Revolt against the Roman occupiers. The loss of the preservationist continuity into separate, and often competing, factions is analogous to what happens in the Western Church in the Sixteenth Century AD with the Protestant Reformation. In this context, Ezekiel, a prophet but from the Zadokite priestly line, epitomizes the coming together of the Zadokite priests and the General Assembly that had forged the preservationist continuity. He becomes a symbol for Judeans of their last great period of Liturgy and Word consensus – what is remembered after the factional divide following the Maccabean Revolt as a kind of golden age in comparison to their own. In this sense, the Judeans in the period from his life to the end of the Judean Age (marked by the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD) see Ezekiel in much the same way as we Western Catholics look back at Saint Augustine, that is to say, as a symbol of the unity of the Western Church who is able to harmonize theological themes in his own writings that will later become the source of factional divide between Catholics and Protestants (Augustine being the intellectual father of both Catholic and Protestant schools of theology centuries later). Ezekiel is the Prophet of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the Divine Person most associated with the institutional authority and continuity of the Holy Church. Therefore, as much as Ezekiel is the symbol of the preservationist continuity from the Second Temple to the Maccabean Revolt, so the Holy Church is the principal means and expression of the continuity of Liturgy and Word – also Catholic Tradition and Holy Bible – from her inception at Pentecost to the Great Schism, and then in the West from the Great Schism to the Protestant Reformation. In a practical sense, what this means is that Ezekiel provides a Biblical roadmap for what is necessary to restore the organic unity of the Holy Church. For as much as he was a symbol to post-Maccabean Judeans of their own golden age, so he can be a symbol to Catholic Christians of the themes that, when properly analogized, will characterize the restoration of our own golden age. The Holy Spirit is and will remain forever the primary actor in the restoration of Church unity, but the Holy Spirit can and will work through us to this end. Ezekiel can be an important aid for us in learning how

to do the work of effective ecclesial reunification. Learning the themes in his prophecy and how to apply them to our own context toward preserving and restoring the Church as God intended her will be critical to this objective over time. Note the importance here of remembering the role of the Holy Spirit in institutional preservation/restoration and not just (or even primarily) in our own personal spiritual lives. In modern times, we tend to associate the Holy Spirit primarily with our own personal conversion to the Lord, personal insights gained from ecstatic moments, such as visions, personal or group healings, personal or group speaking in tongues, etc. Outside of the Catholic Church especially, we are much less inclined to see the Holy Spirit at work in a similar, direct way in the institutionalized Church Order and Holy Sacraments. Ezekiel shows us that this is wrong, though. The Holy Spirit works as much, if not more, in the institutionalized mechanism of grace and teaching authority. This does not deny the personal experience of the Holy Spirit at all, but this does remind us that our personal experiences must conform with the sacramental and teaching authority of the Church. Otherwise, we cannot be certain that our personal experiences are in fact coming from the Holy Spirit and not from some other spirit. Therefore, as much as the Prophet Ezekiel is the Prophet of the Holy Spirit, he is also the Prophet most associated with our Catholic Christian continuity of God's inspired Liturgy and Work (Catholic Tradition and Holy Bible). Ezekiel's Holy Spirit is not a rebellion against tradition/continuity but a reaffirmation of it. His focus on faithfulness to liturgical tradition and order shows him to be a prophetic voice in defense of ecclesial and spiritual conservatism as the bedrock against factionalism and discord.

*From Ut Unum Sint, the Encyclical of Pope John Paul II: Already in the Old Testament, the Prophet Ezekiel, referring to the situation of God's People at that time, and using the simple sign of two broken sticks which are first divided and then joined together, expressed the divine will to "gather from all sides" the members of his scattered people. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord sanctify Israel" (cf. 37:16-28). The Gospel of John, for its part, considering the situation of the People of God at the time it was written, sees in Jesus' death the reason for the unity of God's children: "Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:51-52). Indeed, as the Letter to the Ephesians explains, Jesus "broke down the dividing wall of hostility ... through the Cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end"; in place of what was divided he brought about unity (cf. 2:14-16).*

As the symbol of the last golden age of Judea before the Maccabean Revolt, Ezekiel stands out as a symbol of preservationist continuity. He is the prophet of restoring the broken Church. This is clear from the Pope's use of Ezekiel's "two broken sticks" metaphor. Ecumenical unity among Christians is clearly God's will. There can be no serious argument that God prefers the present-day state of Church denominational and sectarian divide. The only question is how properly to effectuate this ecumenical resolve. The tension will be between watering down differences, thus losing the faith over time in the service of a surface level reproachment, versus denominational rigidity in the service of Pharisaical sectarianism. Only Christ Jesus offers the perfect balancing of the two extremes. Our success in balancing ecumenical outreach with catholic preservation is going hinge on our fidelity to Him. Ezekiel provides the Biblical proof text by which we can see if indeed we are applying our gifts of the Holy Spirit to this end in the way that God will prefer.