

# OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### EZEKIEL

We should bear in mind that certain prophets were contemporary. Jeremiah should be studied in connection with Ezekiel and Daniel; in fact, the three, together with the minor prophets, Zephaniah and Habakkuk, might very profitably be taken together as a group that deal largely with the same period and to a great extent with the same events.

Ezekiel is closely related to Jeremiah. He began his prophetic ministry in the fifth year of Jehoiakim's captivity, 1:5, and prosecuted it for twenty-two years at least, 29:17. Whether for a longer time or not we have no means of knowing. He was the prolongation of the voice of Jeremiah. He took up the theme of his fellow prophet touching the future of the chosen people and developed it more and more, until we get in him and in Daniel a full revelation of the divine purpose.

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel was a priest as well as a prophet, and the priestly character in him is much more predominant than in the former. His call to the great office is recorded in 1:5, (cf. 3:1-15). As Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets, he was brought into immediate contact with God, whereby the gift was imparted.

**“The hand of the Lord was upon him”**—the communication of a message and the power to declare it. The imposition of the hand was followed by a vision of the Lord, and the scroll written within and without with its awful burden, 2:10.

The place where Ezekiel prophesied was at Tel-Abib on the **“river Chebar,”** either a tributary of the Euphrates, or one of the great canals which Nebuchadnezzar constructed. He had been carried into captivity with many other Jews in the second deportation to Chaldea in the reign of Jehoiakim. A colony of exiles had located at Chebar, and to them was the prophet sent; among them he exercised his ministry. But there seems to be clear evidence that the word spoken by him was not intended exclusively for the captives who dwelt at Chebar. The expression, **“the house of Israel,”** which occurs five times in chapter three, and once among these five is found **“all the house of Israel,”** contemplates a wider circle of hearers, a larger audience than the exiles among whom Ezekiel dwelt. In fact, the message of this prophet is for all Israel of this day, and for all time down to their predicted restoration and blessing, as chaps, 40-48 abundantly attest.

Chap, 1:1, is the common formula for the authentication of the book, and not for the first chapter alone.

The date “thirty years” of this verse is somewhat difficult to determine. The most satisfactory explanation is that it refers to Ezekiel’s own age. According to Numbers 4:3, the sons of Kohath—the line of the priests, Exodus 6:18, 20—were to enter on their duties as priests at this age. As a priest, it seems fitting that Ezekiel should begin his work at thirty.

In chap, 11:16, the Lord promises to be a little sanctuary to the exiles in Chaldea. Ezekiel was to be a sort of ministering priest to them at this sanctuary. Hence his prophetic office probably dates from his priestly age which was, of course, thirty years.

In this connection it may be well to record some other dates of real importance to the study of the books which historically belong to the time of the fall of the kingdom of Judah:

- Battle of Carchemish and death of Josiah, B. C. 611;
- First invasion of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar (third year of Jehoiakim), Daniel 1:1, B. C. 506;
- Second invasion, Jehoiakim, king, B. C. 599;
- Third invasion, Zedekiah, king, destruction of Jerusalem and fall of the kingdom, B. C. 589 or 588.

About B. C. 594 Ezekiel entered on his prophetic mission in which he labored for at least twenty-two years, viz., to B. C. 572. For a considerable period he was Jeremiah’s contemporary, though widely separated from the latter as to place.

The book may be divided into three parts:

Part I, chaps, 1-24, Testimonies from God against Israel in general and against Jerusalem in particular.

Part II, chaps, 25-32, Judgments denounced against surrounding nations.

Part III, chaps, 33-48, The subject of Israel is resumed, and their restoration and blessing foretold.

A more minute classification is indicated by the prophet himself in the several dates which at intervals he places as the superscriptions to the messages he received. The groups with their time notes are the following:

(1) Call and commission of the prophet, 1-3:15; time note, 1:2.

(2) Description of the wickedness of Israel, siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent calamities, 3:16-7; time note, 3:16.

(3) Profanation of the temple, corruption of the priesthood, God’s determination to forsake His sanctuary, safety for the faithful remnant and punishment for the wicked, chaps, 8-19; time note, 8:1.

(4) Terrific indictment against the guilty people, judgment no longer to be delayed, chaps, 20-22:1; time note, 20:1.

(5) Announcement of the final end, chaps, 24-25; time note, 24:1. The doom of the holy city and people is strangely represented by the sudden death of the prophet's wife, and by the stoniness of the grief that was too deep for tears and too terrible for a funeral dirge. But Judea would not be alone in the day of wrath; Ammon and Moab and Edom would share therein.

(6) Predictions against Tyre, chaps, 26-28; time note, 26:1.

(7) Predictions against Egypt, chaps, 29-31; time note, 29:1.

(8) Overthrow of various nations and death wail for them, Israel not escaping, with appeals to repentance and promises, chaps, 32-36; time notes, 32:1, 17; 33:21.

(9) Israel's national resurrection and judgment on Gog, the end of God's judicial dealing with His people, chaps, 37-39; time note, 37:1.

(10) Glowing picture of the latter-day glory, chaps, 40-48; time note, 40:1.

The main object of Ezekiel's prophecies appears to be

- To comfort the exiles in their desolation and loneliness,
- To fortify them against the idolatrous practices by which they were surrounded,
- To turn their faces toward the land from which they had been expelled but to which God would restore them if with true hearts they should turn to Him again.

His name is significant of his mission. Ezekiel, "*God will strengthen.*" His whole ministry is characterized by strength. Like a giant he wrestled against Jewish degeneracy and Chaldean pride, He threw himself with all the force of his passionate soul against the evils of his people and of the times; but he was as strong in his tenderness and love as in his denunciations and reproofs.

Ezekiel is strictly the prophet. Unlike Jeremiah little of his feelings or his personal history enters into his prophecies; nor did he address himself to the guidance of public affairs.

The circumstances of his ministry did not require he should.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, had to do with the kings of their times, with the people of Israel and with the first great Gentile empire. Ezekiel's mission was to the exiles in Chaldea; he was the prophet of the remnant, the seer of a glorious future for his people and for the earth.

His style is lofty and trenchant. Apart from his prophetic gift, which unquestionably was very great, he possessed profound erudition and genius.

In symbolic representations and prophetic action Ezekiel abounds.

- He has visions (8-11),
- He has symbolic action (4:5:1-4),
- He has similitudes (12:15)
- He has parables (17),
- He has proverbs (18),
- He has allegories (23-24),
- He has open prophecies (as 6, 7, 20, etc.).

There is scarcely a form in which the divine communications were made to the men of God that is not employed by this prophet. This wealth of imagery imparts singular beauty and variety to his pages. They glow with life and action and brilliant colors. But this fact makes the book all the more difficult of interpretation.

Jerome long ago called the book “an ocean and labyrinth of the mysteries of God.” Yet if we keep in mind the distinction between symbols, and visions, and signs wrought in the prophet’s own person, our understanding of the book will be greatly simplified.

- In chap, 37:16, 17, the prophet joins together two sticks to represent the reunion of the ten tribes with Judah and Benjamin.
- In 5:1-4, he cuts off his hair and burns it, smites and scatters it in the wind, to signify approaching judgment.
- At one time we see him stamping with his feet and clasping his hands, as if in the agony of grief, 6:11;
- At another he portrays on a tile the holy city, lays siege to this pictured city, casts a mount against it, sets a camp and battering rams against it, in short, he enacts a mimic battle in the sight of the people, 4:1, 2.
- Again, by divine direction the prophet collects his household stuff together for removal, and takes it upon his shoulders and sets forth, with covered face, as if he were bound on a long and tiresome journey, 12:1-2.

All these were acted parables with a deep significance for the house of Israel. And just as full of meaning was his allegory of the two eagles, 17:1-10.

He showed by the one eagle (Nebuchadnezzar) who had cropped the highest twig in Judah (Jehoiakim), and by the other (Pharaoh) to whom the vine that was left (Zedekiah) was turning, the uprooting of the whole; and digressing from that he predicts the replanting of the whole under Messiah, the Branch (Leifchild).

How much of this symbolic action was really performed by the prophet it might be difficult to determine; yet there can be little doubt but that much of it, perhaps all of it, was literally done in the sight of his countrymen, that the divine message with which he was entrusted might impress the people all the more vividly and intensely.

It is not too much to say that the prophets in some cases became actual signs, and what they did under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was as certainly a revelation from God as what they spoke.

3. *One symbolic transaction, however, deserves special mention, viz.:* that recorded in 4:4-17.

The prophet was to lie, first on his left side, for a period of three hundred and ninety days; next, on his right side for forty days; the whole amounting to four hundred and thirty days. It is a question more curious than profitable, whether Ezekiel actually did this in the presence of his people, or whether it was a vision. That it is within the range of possibility no one will venture to deny.

It is related that a nobleman of Louvain lay sixteen years in one posture, and many an invalid has maintained a like position for a much longer time than the prophet; for on the supposition that Ezekiel really did it he spent about thirteen months prostrate; nor are we required to believe that it was absolutely continuous. But this question is not essential to an understanding of the transaction. This prophetic action probably had reference to the future.

Hosea had already predicted a repetition of the history of Israel in the afflictions which were about to come upon them for their sins; a repetition of bondage like that of Egypt, Hosea 8:13; 9:3.

The forty years for Judah would be like that of the wilderness journey; years not only of punishment, but of discipline and preparation for the destiny that awaited them in the restoration. The northern kingdom would suffer for a much longer time than the southern, hence the significant 390 years, 20:35-38.

In this view, Israel is regarded as the greater transgressor, Judah the less guilty. And the facts appear to corroborate it.

Samaria was the leader in apostasy from God. Such is the opinion of Fairbairn, and one that commends itself to the reader.

All Israel is for the time set aside, disowned of God as His peculiar people, and power passes over to the Gentiles in the person of Nebuchadnezzar.

A second oppression, comparable in many ways to that endured so long before in Egypt, now awaits the people; longer, however, for the kingdom that originated the rebellion against the authority of God. In fact, Ezekiel resembles the Pentateuch in not a few particulars. But in this book a totally new order of things is announced, 40, 48.

4. *The vision of the throne of glory, chap. 1.*

Nothing can exceed the majesty of this description. It furnished the poet Milton the material for one of his finest paragraphs:

Forth rushed with whirlwind sound  
The chariot of paternal Diety,  
Flashing thick flames, wheel within wheel undrawn,  
Itself instinct with Spirit, but conveyed  
By four cherubic shapes; four faces each  
Had wondrous; as with stars their bodies all  
And wings were set with eyes, with eyes the wheels  
Of Beryl, and careering fires between;  
Over their heads a crystal firmament,  
Whereon a sapphire throne.

It is the throne of the Eternal, the glory of the Lord of hosts that is the main object of the vision, vss. 26, 28. The “**four living creatures**” which are closely associated with the throne are identical with the cherubim of Scripture. Just what these were or symbolized, it is hard to determine.

The term cherub has been defined to be one that guards and covers. In Genesis 3:24, where the first mention of them is made, they guard the way of the tree of life. The prince of Tyrus is likened to the cherub that covereth, Ezekiel 28:14. Perhaps the reference in this last case is to the cherubim that overshadowed the mercy seat of the ark in the Tabernacle, Exodus 25:18-22.

The Ark of the Covenant to some extent represented the throne of God. The cherubim formed the sides of the throne; their wings, which were projected over their heads and forward so as to cover the mercy seat, made a sort of canopy; and the mercy seat itself was the base or foundation of the throne. Between the cherubim and over the mercy seat blazed the Shekinah, the emblem of the divine presence. With the blood of atonement on the mercy seat the ark became the throne of grace, and is no doubt the origin of that expression in Hebrews 4:16.

But the “**living creatures**” do more than guard and cover. Here in Ezekiel 1 and in 10 they are intimately connected with the throne, are its supporters, and in some sense are the executors of the divine will. Instinct with the life of the throne, they “**ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.**”

Their activity and intelligence are figured by a system of complicated wheels, wheels within wheels, with high and dreadful rings, and filled with eyes. It was through them that the Spirit of the throne went forth, every way, whithersoever it would.

Each of them in Ezekiel had four faces, the “**face of a man and the face of a lion on the right side; the face of an ox on the left side; and each had the face of an eagle,**” vss. 6-10.

Moreover, each cherub in Ezekiel has four wings, 1:6; and each has the likeness of a man, vs. 5. The reference is doubtless to the bodily shape. They are composite, the four great heads of creation, the lion, the ox, the eagle and man being united in one complex symbolic figure.

In Revelation 4, they have each six wings, and appear to be separate from each other. And in the Revelation they engage in acts of worship, 5.

If now we gather together all that is told us of the nature and functions of the cherubim it will be seen that they not only guard and cover, but likewise execute the sovereign will of Him who occupies the glorious throne, and they render worship and homage to Almighty God. Besides, they are distinguished for intelligence and piercing insight, for they are “**full of eyes before and behind**”—they see into the future as into the past; they possess a kind of omniscience. And their action is of indescribable swiftness and irresistible power. Like the lightning burst they go and come.

What do the cherubim symbolize? Some say, the fullness of the deity; others, the manhood of Christ; others, angels; and others still, redeemed humanity.

In determining the significance of them, it should be borne in mind that they are associated with the throne of God, and with the great work of redemption. On the throne as seen by Ezekiel, One whose likeness was “**as the appearance of a man**” sat. Those familiar with the language of the Bible need not be reminded that this is the Old Testament description of the Lord Jesus. Be it remembered that the throne of Ezekiel is one both of judgment and of grace. I believe the “**living creatures**” of Ezekiel are hieroglyphs of God’s attributes, of the eternal forces and infinite powers of the throne of God.

Whatever they have or do, purpose or execute, is derived from Him and the result of His mighty energy. Intelligence, strength, stability, and swiftness in judgment, and, withal, the movement of the whole course of earthly events, depend on the throne. Majesty, government and providence unite to form the throne and execute His behests who sits on it. The execution of His will is through the powers and forces which He himself has created, angels, natural law, human beings, and the animal creation. Everything is subject to Him, does His bidding.

Let it be observed also, that the throne of the Supreme and Sovereign Lord is seen in Chaldea. In 11:23, 24, “**the glory of the Lord**” departs from the city (Jerusalem) and is beheld by the prophet at Chebar. It never returns to the city or the land until the vision of the glorious temple and city (8:1-7) has its ample fulfillment.

It is noteworthy that when the glory of the Lord returns to Israel in the latter day, it comes “**from the east.**” It had gone away to the east at its departure when the throne of David fell; power went forth to the Gentiles, and the “**times of the Gentiles**” began. When it comes back, it comes from the east whither it had gone, and Zion’s time for favor has come again.

This affords the explanation of the title “**son of man**” given to Ezekiel and Daniel. Ninety and more times it is bestowed on Ezekiel, never by himself, but always by the Revealer; once to Daniel, Daniel 8:17.

It belongs to the two prophets in exile and to no others. The nation is rejected; God is outside of it, stands at a distance from it; and speaks to the prophets through whom He communicates His will as if Jewish distinctions were gone, and God addresses them as men, only men. The title and the testimony are exactly adapted to each other.

### 5. *Vision of the idolatry secretly practiced at Jerusalem, 8.*

The chapter lets us into the real causes for the overthrow of the kingdom of Judah. In the subterranean passages beneath the temple area were fitted up chapels decorated after the fashion of Egypt with likenesses of sacred animals to which incense was offered. They had also a wailing-place where women wept and howled over the loss of the Syrian god Tammuz. Within the space of the sacred temple court between the porch and the altar there was a band of high dignitaries who turned their backs on the sanctuary and paid their devotions to the eastward, to the sun as he rose over the Mount of Olives. Although this was the most ancient form of idolatry it does not appear in Judah till the close of the monarchy.

We learn from Ezekiel's contemporary, Jeremiah, that the queen of heaven was worshipped, Astarte, (Jeremiah 7), and likewise the brutal Moloch (Jeremiah 7), a Phoenician idol. Children were sacrificed to it; the fruit of the body was given for the sin of the soul. The idol stood in the valley of the son of Hinnom, the scene of the unnatural rites was Tophet. Thence came the significant and dreadful word, *Gehenna*, hell.

### 6. *Israel's restoration.*

In common with the other prophets Ezekiel announces repeatedly a glorious future for his people, the house of Israel—a future but partially realized in the return from the exile of Babylon. (See chaps. 11, 17-20; 16; 34; 36).

As if these predictions were not enough nor explicit enough, another more remarkable in various ways than any preceding it in the book is given; it is the famous thirty-seventh, viz., the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. It is the graveyard of the Jewish nation the prophet sees, the helpless, dismembered, denationalized people, whose return and restoration to the favor of God and to national unity are as resurrection from the dead. It is common to apply this vision to the conversion of sinners, but while the process is the same in all cases, whether Jew or Gentile, the prime application is to Israel, as vs. 1 clearly shows, "**Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.**"

### 7. *The judgment of Gog, 38, 39.*

The revised version has made a change in the second verse of the first chapter. The message is against "**the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal,**" names that are surprisingly akin to Rus, Moskovy and Tobolsk. It is a northern power that is meant, one north of Judea. He will invade the land with the suddenness and impetuosity of a storm; but he shall be destroyed by supernatural intervention.

If Ezekiel 39:17-20, describes the same event as Revelation 19:17, 18, then Gog's overthrow precedes the millennium. If John, in Revelation 20:7-9, treats of the same power and invasion as Ezekiel, and the description seems to establish the identity, then Ezekiel's prediction refers to the very last outbreak of sin and rebellion in the history of the earth, viz., that which takes place after the millennium and in the little season during which Satan is loosed from the pit.

Gog, then, is the end of all the dealings of God with Israel and the Gentile world, the last transaction before the setting of the Great White Throne.

8. *The vision of the city and temple, 40-48.*

This is the last vision of Ezekiel, and the most notable of all. The contents of these chapters may be distributed into three parts:

- The vision of the temple, 40-43;
- The vision of the worship, 44-46;
- The vision of the land, 47, 48.

It should be remembered, however, that the vision is one, and glides easily from the temple to its worship, and then to the partition of the land among the restored tribes. The dimensions of Ezekiel's temple correspond with Solomon's; but the courts are enlarged considerably. Its services are very different from those of Mosaic times. The city of the vision is enormously enlarged. The circuit of Jerusalem in the time of Josephus was about four miles.

The city of Ezekiel has a circuit of about thirty-seven miles. Ezekiel's land, likewise, is immensely larger than that of the olden time. Wilkinson's estimate is as follows: From north to south it extends about six hundred miles, and the average breadth about five hundred; which would give some three hundred thousand square miles for the whole country. Besides, the location of the tribes is very different from that of the past. If any measure of literality attaches to this wonderful description it belongs to the future; it cannot in any proper sense belong to the past. Just what the meaning of this vision is, it is by no means easy to determine.

(1) It is not a pattern for the second temple (Grotius), for it was never carried out.

(2) Nor was it designed to furnish an idea of the magnificence and grandeur with which the second temple should be built (Hengstenberg); the whole description of this symbolic structure forbids it. In short, Ezekiel's temple and the services connected with it cannot be identified with either the first or the second temple; it stands apart from Herod's also.

(3) Note the changes in the dimensions of the sanctuary, the court, the gates, the walls, the locality, raised as it is on a high mountain.

(4) *There are subtractions.*

There is no Ark of the Covenant, no shewbread, no candlestick, no veil, no mercy seat, no cherubim, no tables of the law, no holy of holies, no high priest. The priesthood is confined to the sons of Zadock. The Levites have passed away as a sacred order. Of the three great festivals Pentecost is omitted; nor is there any mention of the Day of Atonement.

(5) *The additions, too, are wonderful.*

In this vision there is the return of the glory from the East, where it had gone when Judah failed and went into captivity (43:1-5), to dwell in the temple forever; the living waters that flow from beneath the altar (46:1-5); the trees (47:7, 12); the new distribution of the land according to the twelve tribes, and the prince, and his portion, the suburbs; the new city and the immense temple area,—all combine to point to a future reestablishment of Israel and to the millennial glory.

This whole prophecy is a symbolical representation, a typical foreshadowing of the bliss which awaits the chosen people of God and the entire earth. It has never yet had its appropriate fulfillment. To spiritualize it, as some do, exhausting all its splendors and hopes in the Christian dispensation, is to mistake its meaning and dwarf its magnificent proportions. For unmistakably the vision has to do with Israel in the last and glorious days when all God hath promised for that people shall have its accomplishment.

**~ end of chapter 27 ~**

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