Background of Ezekiel: The book of Ezekiel begins with a bang as the prophet reveals the heavens opening to unveil a vision of God. The prophet wastes no time dropping his readers right into the thick of the life and times of Judah immediately following the fall of Jerusalem. Because of this fast-paced, intense style, there are several important background features to note prior to taking in this prophetic text.

Ezekiel and Historical Setting
Born in 622 B.C., Ezekiel’s life begins at a significant time in Judah’s history, that very same year King Josiah discovered the book of the law and forged ahead on intense reform in Judah. Being born into a priestly line during such a time as this would have certainly left a lasting impact on Ezekiel personally (1:1). His name represents either an affirmation of faith, “God strengthens/toughens,” or an appeal to faith, “May God strengthen/toughen.”1 Ezekiel’s life and ministry certainly lives up to both interpretations of his name. In the face of cynicism and rejection of his ministry, God does indeed strengthen him and grant him power to lift up and renew the faith of a broken and discouraged nation.2

While he was born in a time of great reform, by Ezekiel’s 30th year of life (1:1), the kingdom was in decline and would soon fall to an invading Babylonian army. Deported from Judah in 597 BC after Jehoiakin’s unsuccessful rebellion against Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, Ezekiel settled with other exiles in Mesopotamia. In exile, God intervened dramatically in Ezekiel’s life, commissioning him to speak a prophetic word (3:1) and sending him to the Israelites already living in exile.3

Even more, Ezekiel and his contemporaries would live to witness the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, an act that would send shockwaves through the entire nation. Sadly, Zedekiah’s unsuccessful rebellion brought final judgment from Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar ransacked Jerusalem and razed the temple, pillaging the remaining riches of the land. He exiled all but the poorest inhabitants of the land, and left God’s people scattered and hopeless. By 587 B.C., Ezekiel faced a growing exilic population needing comfort and a sense of meaning in the midst of Jewish culture seemingly in ashes.

Style and Structure
Reading Ezekiel’s riveting and provocative witness presents a challenge to most modern readers. It can be difficult to fully appreciate the depth of the prophetic witness or to establish contemporary meaning within the text. Yet, the beauty and power of Ezekiel rises up under continued reflection on the occasion for his prophetic ministry. In the midst of confusing and painful circumstances, God offers startling prophetic messages to reset the people’s

dependence on Him alone. Rather than making sense of God out of our circumstances, Ezekiel challenges us to make sense of our circumstances in light of who God is and what God has done.

Ezekiel makes use of street theater language including symbolic actions that are provocative and striking (4:1–5:17; 12:3–6; 24:16–8; 37:16–17) alongside extended allegories (Ezekiel 15–17; 19; 21; 23). Ezekiel also makes use of prophetic oracles often leveled at foreign nations, laments that become creative ways to communicate his message (e.g., 27:2; 28:11–12; 32:2). Ultimately, the entire book unfolds in perfect chronological sequence, validating the prophet’s message and confirming a sovereign God’s power over time and circumstance. Indeed, many of Ezekiel’s oracles, whether dated or not, end with a simple phrase: “I am Yahweh. I have spoken. I will do it.”

The most common structure for Ezekiel breaks the book into four sections:

- Chapters 1–11—The call of the prophet and the plight of the people of Jerusalem in light of their sin and rebellion.
- Chapters 12–24—Oracles against the nation of Judah and its people for covenant violations.
- Chapters 25–32—Oracles against the nations.
- Chapters 33–39—Oracles of hope for both Israel and Judah.
- Chapters 40–48—Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple and the rejuvenated land of Israel.

Within these sections, Ezekiel presents a compelling message of hope in the midst of judgment. God’s sovereign power over all things holds promise for life and peace yet to come. Even as a displaced people, God’s children can look to Him for a future.

Themes

As a prophet among the exiles, Ezekiel’s message reverberates with a strong sense of judgment as well as peace. God’s people possess an everlasting hope secured in the covenant promises revealed and secured by God Himself. Ezekiel speaks to an audience close to despair. The people were asking why this disaster had come on them and where God was in the middle of their personal struggles. Several key themes rise up and frame this book.

“The Sovereignty and Glory of God”

Ezekiel’s opening vision describes God in all His greatness and glory (Ezekiel 1). Much like the visible presence of God marked His blessing on Solomon’s temple (2 Chronicles 7), so Ezekiel’s vision reminds the people that real blessing is not found merely in the temple alone but in the presence of the God who consecrates the temple. God has a plan and the power to execute His

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6 Iain M. Duguid, Ezekiel (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 35.
plan. While the people may feel the nation’s glory and pride diminishing under exile and the temple’s destruction, God’s glory cannot ever be dimmed. Greater still, their glorious and sovereign God goes with them even in exile (Ezekiel 11:16). He has not abandoned them and will never abandon them.

“The Utter Sinfulness of Humans and the Inescapability of Judgment”
Every biblical prophet stood against the sin and idolatry of their own day. Each one preached a message of human sin and divine judgment. Yet, perhaps none was quite as comprehensive or as sweeping in their indictments as Ezekiel. In some ways, Ezekiel’s provocative imagery and intense descriptions serve as particularly pointed messages of condemnation and judgment. As Ezekiel puts it, Jerusalem had acted like a prostitute from the day of its birth (Ezekiel 23:3) and was actually worse than Sodom and Gomorrah (16:46–48)! In the face of such wickedness, judgment would come surely and swiftly because no person or people can escape God’s wrath.

“The Return of the King and the Restoration of the People”
While sin and judgment strike a strong chord in Ezekiel, the heart of Ezekiel’s message is God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises and to those people living under the safety of such covenant relationship. Even if present circumstances spoke of judgment and discipline, God would preserve His people and restore them in the land. The promise of the coming Messiah was remembered by the prophets who lived before the exile (Isaiah 9:5–6; Amos 9:11; Micah 5:1–5) and on the eve of the exile (Jeremiah 23:5–6; 30:9), as well as after the exile (Zechariah 12:8). Ezekiel’s message is no different but speaks strongly of the coming king who would restore His people and heal the land.

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7 Duguid, Ezekiel, 35.
8 Duguid, Ezekiel, 36.