

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. Today we introduce the book of EZEKIEL - PART 1.

POINT 1. THE WRITER OF THE BOOK EZEKIEL.

First. The history in Ezekiel's time.

Ezekiel was a member of a priestly family and was one of the exiles taken from Judah to Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar's second invasion in Judah in 597 B.C. He began to prophesy to the Jewish exiles in Babylon 4 years later. Because the prophet Jeremiah is an older contemporary of the prophet Ezekiel, the historical background of both prophets is the same. The only difference is that Jeremiah was God's prophet *to the remnant in Judah*, while Ezekiel was God's prophet *to the exiles in Babylon*. Jeremiah prophesied mainly during the last 40 years before the final exile of Judah to Babylon in 586 B.C., while Ezekiel prophesied for about 7 years before this event till at least 15 years thereafter.

Second. The prophet Ezekiel's life.

We know very little about Ezekiel's life. *Ezekiel* means either "God is strong" or "God makes strong". Ezekiel 1:3 and Numbers 4:3 make it clear that Ezekiel was probably called to be a prophet instead of a priest when he became thirty years of age. He lived among the Jewish exiles by the Kebar River. From Babylonian clay tablets we know that the Kebar River was a great water channel that flowed out of the Euphrates River just north of Babylon and flowed in a south easterly direction and back into the Euphrates River close to Ur. Ezekiel possessed his own house (3:24) and he was married (24:16). He must have been a man of education, because he had a good knowledge of the events of history of his time. The way he pictured the Phoenicians shows that he had a good grasp of the world economy (ch. 26-28). The Hebrew language he used shows that he had been much influenced by the Aramean language, which was the trade and political language in the Middle East during that time. The rhythm and pictures he used in his writing show that he had a poetic nature (esp. ch. 17, 19, 21, 27). Ezekiel loved his people and it caused him pain when he had to proclaim God's judgement to them. (9:8; 11:13).

Third. Ezekiel's visions.

Like the prophets before him, Ezekiel received visions of God and was so overwhelmed by what he saw, that he laid on his face for several days. Although the Holy Spirit allowed the prophets to see what others could not see, Ezekiel was fully conscious and maintained his complete personality and balance during the times he received visions. According to Ezekiel 8:1, he received a vision while he was in the presence of the elders, but according to Ezekiel 11:25, they only became aware of that fact after Ezekiel told them of the vision. Also according to Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 1 and Zechariah 1, the prophets who received a vision, continued to see, hear, think, speak, ask and answer questions during the time they received the vision and were later able to remember everything that had happened. Thus, a vision is simply an out-of-the-ordinary event in which God appears and speaks to a prophet and the prophet knows that he had met God.

POINT 2. THE RECIPIENTS, AND THE DATE AND PLACE OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL.

First. The recipients.

Although the contents of Ezekiel's prophecies concern Jerusalem and the inhabitants of Judah, the prophecies are not directed *to the remnant living in Judah*, but are directed *to the exiles living in Babylon* (3:11). Therefore, when the Lord says to him that he must speak to "the Israelites" or "the house of Israel", then not the Jews living in Judah are intended, but the Jews living in exile in Babylon are intended (2:3; 3:1,4,17)!

Second. The way the book was written.

Several places prove that Ezekiel did not prophesy to people *by writing* his prophecies to them, but *by speaking* directly to them (2:4-7). Ezekiel's prophecies were most probably recorded by himself. This is clear from the fact that the prophet Ezekiel speaks in the first or "I" form and is the narrator of his own history and prophecies. The only exception is Ezekiel 1:2-3, which must have been added by another person, so that readers may understand that Ezekiel dated all his prophecies from the beginning of the reign of king Jehoiachin in 597 B.C.

Third. The date and place the book was written.

According to Ezekiel 1:2 his first recorded prophecy is dated in the fifth year of king Jehoiachin, that is in 593 B.C. and according to Ezekiel 29:17, his last recorded prophecy is dated in the twenty-seventh year of king Jehoiachin, that is in 571 B.C. Thus, the book of Ezekiel must have been written between 593-571 B.C. in Babylon in modern Iraq.

Fourth. The purpose of the book of Ezekiel.

The remnant living in Judah believed that Judah, Jerusalem and the temple would not be destroyed and that they would not go into exile. Thus, the task of *the prophet Jeremiah* was to convince the remnant in Judah that they were “rotten figs”, that they should not depend on king Zedekiah and the nationalist party, and that the fall of Jerusalem and the temple was imminent (Jer 24). The exiles living in Babylon also believed this and believed that they would soon return back to Judah. Thus, the task of *the prophet Ezekiel* was to convince the exiles in Babylon that they should drop every hope on king Zedekiah and on a speedy return to Judah. He prophesied through the spoken word, through prophetic actions and through his very life and suffering that the Lord would destroy Jerusalem, the temple and Judah and that the Lord would build up a new Israel in Babylon. His task was to direct Israel’s attention on the future, in which the Lord would again reveal his mercy to Israel.

POINT 3. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK EZEKIEL.

The theme of the book of Ezekiel is “**Prophecies concerning the destruction and renewal of Israel.**”

The book may be divided into three parts as follows:

Part 1 consists of Ezekiel chapter 1 to 24. **The coming destruction of Israel.**

Part 1 consists of 5 sections:

Section 1 consists of Ezekiel 1:1 to 3:21. Ezekiel’s calling and task.

Section 2 consists of Ezekiel 3:22 to 7:27. First series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.

Section 3 consists of Ezekiel 8:1 to 11:25. Vision of Jerusalem’s sin and rejection.

Section 4 consists of Ezekiel 12:1 to 19:14. Second series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.

Section 5 consists of Ezekiel 20:1 to 24:27. Third series of threats against Jerusalem and Judah.

Part 2 consists of Ezekiel chapter 25 to 32. **Prophecies against nations.**

Part 2 consists of 3 sections:

Section 1 consists of Ezekiel 25. Prophecies against Israel’s close neighbours: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia.

Section 2 consists of Ezekiel 26 to 28. Prophecies against Tyre and Sidon.

Section 3 consists of Ezekiel 29 to 32. Prophecies against Egypt.

Part 3 consists of Ezekiel chapter 33 to 48. **The coming reconstruction of Israel.**

Part 3 consists of 2 sections:

Section 1 consists of Ezekiel 33-39. The future salvation of Israel. Israel’s return, rebuilding and renewal.

Section 2 consists of Ezekiel 40-48. The new temple, city and land: the kingdom of God realised in the new Israel.

POINT 4. THE EXPLANATION OF THE FUTURE SALVATION OF ISRAEL.

Ezekiel chapters 33-39 prophesy the future salvation of Israel. Ezekiel prophesied the return of Israel from exile, the restoration of the land to Israel, the renewal of the people of Israel and the final defeat of their enemies.

First. Ezekiel 33 records the turning point in Ezekiel’s ministry.

As long as the temple stood, Ezekiel’s task was to proclaim the coming destruction of Israel. Now that it had become a reality, his task was to proclaim the rebuilding of Israel. Now, the Lord’s mercy would triumph over his judgement (Js 2:13)! Because the Lord’s absolute condition for rebuilding and renewal is conversion, Ezekiel’s task was to proclaim that everyone must turn from his sin and do what is just and right (33:10-20).

Second. Ezekiel 34 records prophecies concerning the Lord as the Shepherd of Israel.

Ezekiel prophesied against the evil *shepherds* of Israel (34:1-10). They included the kings, princes, officials, tribal elders and family heads, who had not taken care of God’s flock, but had ruled harshly and brutally over God’s sheep. Ezekiel prophesied that the Lord himself through the Messiah would be their Shepherd (34:11-16) and he would care for the weak, but judge *the rams and goats* that oppress the sheep through their violence and injustice (34:17-22).

Third. Ezekiel 35 and 36 records prophecies concerning the land of Israel restored by the Lord.

Ezekiel prophesied that the land of Israel would be replanted and rebuilt *before* the exiles returned to Israel. Never again would they be deprived from their inheritance (36:1-15). He prophesied that the former profaned land and its people would be cleansed, not because of anything Israel was or did, but only as a result of God vindicating his own holy name. The restoration and renewal of Israel would be based only on God’s sovereign purpose and grace! That is why Israel is reminded of their sins, how they profaned God’s holy name among the nations. The Lord would nevertheless accomplish his purpose through deeds that neither the nations nor the masses of Jews believed he would do: He would bring them back to the land Israel (24), cleanse them so that they might again come into his presence (25), give them a new heart and cause the Holy Spirit to live in their spirit (26), so that they would willingly follow God’s will (27). Only when this renewal has happened, - and *only then* (36:33; 37:13-14) - would *the new Israel* be fit to live *in the new land*

and would God's original purpose be realised, namely that Israel would be the Lord's people and the Lord would be Israel's God. (28; Ex 6:7). Then the former ruins would be rebuilt and the former desolate land would be cultivated and the land would become like the garden of Eden (33-35)! And the people of Israel would again be numerous (37-38)(36:16-38). The new Israel *symbolises* the New Testament Community, that would eventually fill the new earth (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:1-2).

Fourth. Ezekiel 37 records prophecies concerning the people of Israel renewed by the Lord.

Ezekiel does not give an Old Testament teaching about the resurrection from the dead, but he proclaims good news, showing how God would renew Israel. The valley full of dead bones *symbolise* the whole house of Israel, destroyed and scattered among the nations, without life or hope (11). The graves *symbolise*, not literal graves, but the places to which Israel had been scattered and where they were living in exile, just as dead bodies were living in the graves (12-13). In this hopeless condition in exile, when Israel was convinced that God had left it permanently, God's grace would be revealed (11-12). God says that he himself would open their graves and bring them up from their graves, that is, bring them out of the countries to which they had been exiled. He would put his Holy Spirit in them and resettle them in their own land. *Only a born-again Israel would live in a born-again land* (36:33). Ezekiel prophesied that the exiles from the former Israel and former Judah would be re-united in the restored land (37:15-22). He prophesied that the glorious future of Israel would be under the rule of the true king David, a reference to the Coming Messiah, Jesus Christ (37:23-28).

Fifth. Ezekiel 38 and 39 records the final defeat of the enemies of Israel by the Lord.

Israel's recreation and simultaneous return would not be complete without answering the question concerning the opposing nations. From early times, Israel has been harassed by the nations from all sides. First from the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites, then from the Philistines and Canaanites, after that from the Arameans and finally from the Assyrians and Babylonians, who attacked Israel from the north. More and more Israel began to regard "the nations" as the inimical powers against God. The nations thus *symbolise* all the people on earth who oppose the living God and his people. Ezekiel prophesied that the last trial of Israel would be that the opposing nations would attack Israel in order to try to rob it of its peace and riches. But God would protect his people and destroy the opposing nations!

According to Ezekiel 38:17 (39:8), Ezekiel says that this prophecy concerning Gog and his hordes was also prophesied before by other prophets. The north has always been the great unknown to Israel, from where the inimical powers against God's people was expected to come (Isa 14:31; Jer 1:15; 6:1,22). In the book of Ezekiel, these northern nations were great hordes of horsemen, and Israel knew them as *Scythians*, who since 630 B.C. were notorious in the whole of western Asia and also devastated the fruitful Plain of Sharon and Philistia. Although the names of the attacking nations change and sometimes was Assur, and sometimes was Babel, there would come a time when the opposing nations together would attack Jerusalem (Joel 3:1-16; Jer 6:22-23; 25:15-33; 30:23-24; Zeph 1:14-18; 3:8-9; Zech 12:2-9; 14:1-21). Although the name "Gog" is not mentioned by the other prophets, they all refer to the same end-time event.

The leader of the attacking hordes, called "Gog", was a historical person, but became the *personification* or incarnation of the inimical powers opposed to God and his people. Ezekiel did not need to explain to the Israelites who Gog was and where the land of Magog was, because these were known facts to the exiles. Gog is described as the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, which was located in the north in Asia Minor. He was most probably the known Gyges of the Lydians, who was a fierce king in Asia Minor in about 660 B.C. Most likely Ezekiel took this Gog or Gyges from Asia Minor as representative of the alliance of nations attacking Israel from the north. "Gog" becomes a *symbol* of the Old Testament Antichrist, the last enemy who must be defeated before the kingdom of God would be completely established in Israel.

The opposing nations are named as Meshech, Tubal, Magog and Beth-Togarmah, who were Phrygians and Cappadocians living in Asia Minor in the north; Persia and Gomer, who were Iranian people originally living in the east; and Cush and Put, who were North African people living in the south. It is noteworthy that the traditional enemies of Israel are *not* mentioned among these nations attacking Israel, because in Ezekiel chapter 24-32 they had already come to know the power of the God of the Bible and no longer dared to attack the people of the God of the Bible (36:36).

Ezekiel prophesied that this attack would happen "after many days, in future years" (38:8), "in days to come" (38:16; 39:8). With all the prophets, this expression means "the end-time" in the sense of "the time when the glory of the Messiah would shine over Israel and God's purpose with Israel would have been fully realised (Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20; Hos 3:5; Dan 10:14).

It is noteworthy that according to Ezekiel 38:3-9, God would sovereignly bring Gog and his hordes out against Israel. This means that Gog would only be *an instrument* in the Lord's hands (Prov 16:4). Although Gog would be fully responsible for his actions, his actions would be determined and controlled by God (Gen 45:5,8; Isa 5:26; 7:18-20; 10:5). This shows that the God of the Bible is the sovereign Ruler of all the nations on earth and of all events that take place in history (Isa 41:4,22-29; 43:9-13; 44:8; 45:21). Therefore, this attack by Gog and his hordes would be no

surprise to God. In Ezekiel 38:19-23 and 39:1-20, Ezekiel prophesied how God would sovereignly break the power of these opposing nations. Through a mighty earthquake, hailstorms and burning sulphur, probably from volcanic actions, God would destroy these opposing nations. The vast armies, their officers and their horses would become a great sacrificial meal, not for the gods, but for the wild animals (Rev 19:17-21). During this attack and destruction of the opposing nations, Israel would not have to fight, but would only be spectators of God's mighty acts of salvation. In Ezekiel 39:21-24, Ezekiel stated the reason of this last confrontation between God and the opposing nations as God vindicating his holy name by displaying his glory. From that day onwards, Israel would know that the God of the Bible is really their God. And the nations would know the real reason why the God of the Bible had previously punished Israel, Jerusalem and the temple with destruction. In this passage, Ezekiel's prophecy returns from the future to the present suffering of Israel. The destroyers are no longer Gog and his hordes, but the Babylonians (39:23). Thus, the picture of the last days serves to comfort Israel in their present situation of exile and assures them of the certainty of their coming deliverance. Also Israel must learn to live by faith, to believe God's prophetic word, even when it might take a long time before it is fulfilled, and to submit to God's sovereign guidance in their present lives.

In Ezekiel 39:25-29, Ezekiel gave a summary of God's end-time actions. He prophesied that a new period in Israel's history was about to begin: The three great end-time actions would be the return from exile, the destruction of the opposing nations and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (39:29; Isa 32:15-20; 44:3-5; Joel 2:28-32; Zech 12:10-14).

POINT 5. THE EXPLANATION OF THE NAME "ISRAEL".

There are Jews and Christians today, who regard "Israel" only in nationalistic terms. They believe that the physical nation of Israel is still the people of God and that God has a different plan of salvation for the nation of Israel than for all the other nations in the world.

However, a closer study of both the Old Testament and the New Testament will show that the prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus and the apostles of the New Testament did not see Israel primarily as *a nationalistic entity*, but as *a religious entity*: "Israel" is the community of those who have the God of the Bible as God. While the majority of the physical nation of Israel would perish, the remnant of Israel or true spiritual Israel would be saved, and thus God would fulfil his promises to Israel.

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read Ezekiel 25-48. Next week we will introduce the book of Ezekiel - part 2.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".