

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 1, Ezekiel among the Prophets

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Hello, my name is Leslie Allen and I have the title of Senior Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary. I hasten to add that senior is used as in senior citizen and does not indicate high rank. I have had a writing and teaching career all my life, and one of the commentaries I've written on is the Book of Ezekiel, two volumes in the series of the word biblical commentary. If, at any point, you need to know more than I have time to say, then I invite you to look up those commentaries in a library or even buy them and let me get the royalties.

Welcome to this series on the Book of Ezekiel. It's a long, long book that lives in a world of its own. It has many details and complications that need to be considered.

So let me say at the outset that this is an open-book course. I mean an open Bible and my understanding is that as I go through, you will have a Bible open before you in the Book of Ezekiel at the right chapter and verse. But also, I mean more than that because preferably, your Bible needs to have been opened in advance, and the more you have read of the chapters we shall be covering for the next lecture, the more you will get from what I say, and you will not be stumbling along from verse to verse but you will know the general content and see what I have to say further.

And so, you need to know the bare essentials of the text and how it moves along. I won't have time to read out the text in detail in every case and will have to assume that you've read it. At the end of each lecture I will take care to tell you what the next chapters will be devoted to in the following lecture.

The Bible I shall be using will be the New Revised Standard Version simply because that's the English Old Testament that I've used for many years now. But sometimes, I will be quoting from the New International Version, the NIV. But you have to be very careful with this version because it engages in revisions, and the particular NIV I will be using represents the 2011 revision, so if you have an older text and look it up, I'm not necessarily wrong in the text that I am quoting.

Let me say from the start that I won't be preaching sermons on Ezekiel, but let me add that in a certain sense, I will, but I'll explain that a little bit later. But we will have to lose ourselves in a pre-Christian world before we can eventually find ourselves again and understand the Christian relevance of the text. The New Testament assumes that the God of the Old Testament is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and we must assume that too.

This is speaking about our God when it speaks of God speaking. C.S. Lewis once wrote that the converted Jew has taken the whole syllabus in order as it was set and eaten the dinner according to the menu. Everyone else is in a special case, is a emergency regulations.

And so, we Gentiles, if such we are, have to have a lot of catching up to do to catch up with the Jew, who's much more familiar with the Old Testament text, and we need to retrace God's steps through the Old Testament as he gradually revealed himself and we have to retrace those steps at his own canonical pace. So that's what we'll be doing with the book of Ezekiel, and we dare not think that the New Testament has replaced the Old Testament with Christian scripture. That would be pure heresy.

The New Testament is the next installment in an ongoing serial story, and we need to know what happened in the earlier installments so that as we catch up with the new installment, we are aware of what's going on and who the characters are and so on and then we can understand the New Testament installment properly and appreciate it. To cite C.S. Lewis again, he spoke of his generation as dismissing earlier generations that had no electricity, and we could do the same in the case of previous generations that had no electronics. But a good student of the Bible is someone who must take an interest in history.

As God's Word, the history of the Old Testament is his story at an earlier stage, his story of engagement with his people. So, our first question as we approach the book of Ezekiel must not be what's in it for me but what was in it for the first hearers and readers. Exegesis is found in the text the sermon the text was preaching to its own congregation, and only then can we proceed from exegesis to exposition.

As we consider the amount of overlap between the situation in the Old Testament text compared with our own situation via the New Testament. I will be dropping clues about that as we go along, but I warn you my main objective will have to be a sort of spiritual archaeology setting Ezekiel in the context of his own times and in the context of ministering to a people with their own needs and problems, their own hopes and dreams. The book of Ezekiel belongs to a group of books closely associated with prophets, and we call those prophets the classical prophets.

They were also pre-classical prophets, and we think of Samuel and Nathan in David's time and then Elijah and Elisha later in the northern kingdom of Israel. But then we move on to the classical prophets, and historically, they belong; they start with Amos, and canonically, they begin in our order of books with the book of Isaiah. But historically, Amos launched a new phase, a new development in prophetic preaching, and from then on, the prophets were prophets of crisis, and they were warning the people in the northern kingdom and then in the southern kingdom with trouble to

come; disaster was on the horizon, and they fully explained why that disaster was coming.

It was, in fact, the providential work of God working through secular history, and canonically, it came to a climax in the capture and fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Now I have to be careful because if you know anything about dating, you might want to say, no, it was 586 BC, and let me say that this one date is problematic; we just haven't got enough evidence to pin it down to 587 or 586 but I'm going to stick to 586 to have consistency. The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 meant the end of everything, the end of all the landmarks of faith.

It meant the end of worship in the temple, it meant the end of the Davidic monarchy, it meant migration forced upon the people into a foreign land of Babylonia, and all these sacred traditions, sacred in past history, collapsed in 587, and the classical prophets all want to say that this was and this turned out to be the judgment of God, the providential working of God and they anticipate the crisis as a coming certainty and they reflect on its necessity and they eventually help the people to recover from it. Recover because the prophets, the classical prophets, continue into a post-exilic age, including the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and these eventually help the people to recover from their deportation as they are back in the promised land. But in fact, most of these prophetic books also speak of salvation to come, but post-judgment salvation and this is the tradition of classical prophecy that the book of Ezekiel takes over and develops in its own particular way.

We mentioned the fall of Jerusalem in 587, and in so doing, we've introduced the importance of secular history, what was going on in the world year by year, and the work of the classical prophets coincides with the imperial power of three great nations, Assyria and Babylonia and Persia. Assyrian armies first marched west and eventually took over Judah as its southwestern frontier, and then the Babylonians and the Persians succeeded the Assyrians. Ezekiel was born into the Babylonian phase of Judah's colonial history.

The classical prophets all anticipated the prospect and experience of military invasion and subservience to a foreign power as nothing less than the outworking of divine providence. Israel the northern kingdom and then Judah the southern kingdom deserved all they got and first the northern kingdom fell in 721 and then finally the southern kingdom in 587. And God was using the military forces of foreign imperialism to represent his revealed will for them.

He was using them to punish the northern kingdom and then the southern kingdom for unfaithfulness and for departure from his revealed will for them. We can appreciate how unpopular such a message would be from any of the classical prophets. He was a prophet against the grain of a loving God who would always take his people's side and protect them.

In fact, there was always another type of prophet. Prophets of the contrary kind maintained the older religious tradition of saving and blessing God, who said firmly that the people's enemies were automatically God's enemies. And the classical prophets stood out against that crowd persisting in that unpatriotic stand inciting with the enemy.

Up to a point these prophetic books also claimed that not only was the enemy's power given them by God but it was also a limited power and eventually would give way to a turning of the tide. A time when God would once more take his people's side. And Ezekiel fits into this profile of classical prophecy.

It would be good to ask more precisely what the theological agenda of classical prophecy was and where Ezekiel stands in relation to that agenda. First, we need to know something about Ezekiel's historical setting. There were two deportations from Judah to Babylon and the first had been before Ezekiel was called to prophesy in 597 BC.

That was when Jerusalem was first captured, and at that point, the elite of Jerusalem's leaders were deported to Babylonia, and they became prisoners of war. And Ezekiel's family went with them. Ezekiel belonged to a priestly family, and his family was evidently one of the VIPs that the Babylonian judge would be better off of in Jerusalem.

And that would be a good step to quell the rebellious spirit against Babylon. Because there was always chafing at imperial power and the people wanted to be free. And so that was in 597 but it didn't really work.

But meanwhile young Ezekiel in exile received a call from God in 593. But after that there had to be another deportation and Jerusalem was besieged and eventually fell after about 18 months of siege. And there was a destruction of Jerusalem and final destruction and then the second more general deportation of the people of Judah.

From 593 to 587 obviously Ezekiel was talking to that first group of prisoners of war. And they all desperately wanted to go home and were praying and believed they would go home very soon. God was on their side.

No, says Ezekiel, that's wrong. Jerusalem is going to finally fall. Jerusalem, where you've lived all your life, is going to fall and be destroyed, and it's going to be the end of the nation.

He had that terrible message to bring. But then, in 587, the second group of prisoners of war arrived, and Ezekiel changed his tune. Now, he could indulge in a message concerning the return to the promised land.

Eventually there would be return to the land and so there's a new message of hope from then on. And after 587 the exiles were living in an interim period. And they were looking back at that terrible judgment on Jerusalem and Judah and trying to understand it.

And even now, living in its wake as exiles. But they were looking forward to a new era of God's grace. This leads to what we need to say going on to the agenda now.

Ezekiel's position agrees to a very large stance. To a very large extent to the stance that had been taken by the earlier classical prophets. And also those that followed him.

There were five components in the theological agenda of classical prophecy. The first look back long ago to Israel's receipt of covenant grace. And that position of grace from God focused on the exodus from Egypt.

We might turn to a text like Hosea 13.4 to see how an earlier prophet represented that situation. This is what Hosea had to say: In God's name, I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt.

You know no God but me and beside me there is no savior. So that was that initial message linked with the exodus. Ezekiel has little to say about the exodus.

He comes to it in chapter 20 and devotes a couple of verses to it—chapter 20 verses 5 and 6—but he ignores it in general. not because it wasn't true.

Not because it, but because the real reason was it wasn't relevant to his message of judgment. And in fact, he manages to weave judgment into his reference to the exodus. And say even back then the Israelites were sinners.

You get the contrast of grace and sin even in the Exodus. So Ezekiel puts his own negative spin on God's old saving work. A few of the classical prophets, mainly Isaiah, also locate God's grace in his choice of Jerusalem.

And we call this Zion theology. And Isaiah especially takes it over. And there are Psalms that we call Songs of Zion that celebrate God's presence in Jerusalem.

In the Jerusalem temple. And say ah, yes, this means that God will protect Jerusalem. God is there forever, and he will protect us at the same time.

And so, in Psalm 46, we read God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. And he speaks of the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High as the Psalmist says God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.

God will help it. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. And one thing Ezekiel had to do was to deny that old Zion tradition as not relevant for this particular time.

The reason for this is the next component of the classical prophets' agenda. Israel's covenant obligation. Israel had a responsibility to live in line with the obligations of the covenant.

Israel's relation with God was a matter of responsibility as well as privilege. The Exodus had Sinai as its sequel. And the gift of the covenant, a barbed gift because it laid demands upon Israel.

Sinai meant a call to religious and moral faithfulness and compliance with God's moral and religious will for his people as a society.

It was a call to justice and righteousness. The classical prophets all say this didn't work out. In fact, Israel went from bad to worse.

And so, this led to the third component, Israel's lack of responsibility. And this looms largest in the book of Ezekiel and in the ministry of Ezekiel. Over and over again, in the messages leading up to 587, we find Ezekiel arguing in terms of this component.

A special factor in the way that Ezekiel treats this component of the agenda is that he had been trained as a priest. So, he had a special concern for religious sins and for worship at the high places and local shrines.

And for religious irregularities in the temple. Both involve image worship. And so, for him, this was a very serious crime against God.

But he also has an eye for social failings that took place in Judah. And he also complains about political unfaithfulness to God. For trying to rely on foreign alliances to see Judah through its troubles.

This component leads on in turn to the fourth component of classical prophecy. God's rejection of his people. And earlier Amos had summed it up.

Amos chapter 8 and verse 4. Where are we? Let's get the right reference. Amos chapter 8 and verse 2. The end has come upon my people, Israel. I will never again pass them by.

The end. That terrible note of finality. And we shall find Ezekiel echoing that verse at a certain point.

And so, Jerusalem must fall. Ezekiel argues in his messages to the 597 prisoners of war. And he imports as a priest.

He goes back to the old covenant curses of Leviticus 26. And he incorporates that priestly document, which set out that if the covenant was not kept.

Instead of a blessing, there would be a curse. Time and time again, we shall see that he likes to quote Leviticus 26 as an extra authority to back up what the classical prophets had said.

There was a fifth component. The promise of Ezekiel's renewal. And as I said earlier we find that Ezekiel after 587.

He can move on to this extra component. But apart from him, it's only going to be the post-exilic prophets who talk in this way.

It was... renewal was a miraculous thing. Nobody could expect it. Nobody could argue that Israel deserved it.

But with a miraculous outpouring of grace, life was to start again in the land. After 587, Ezekiel embraces this component with fervor.

He had four years speaking in terms of his ministry of judgment. But the next 16 years not with gaps in between them. He can bring a new message of salvation.

He can speak of the restoration of the old Davidic kingdom. He can speak of a renewed Israel in Judah. He can speak of a new temple to worship in.

And above all, it is a remaking of God's people from the inside. There would be a heart transplant that they would be given. That would replace their old spirit of rebellion against God.

But and this is a very important item that Ezekiel adds to his messages of salvation. There was a proviso that with that new privilege there also went responsibility. And responsibility even now before they went back to the land.

Before that day dawned, the exiles must live responsibly with God's help in the light of that coming salvation. And they must be already committed in their lives to its coming and to God's future will for them.

And after 587 Ezekiel is given a new commission to be a watchman for Israel. Warning the exiles if they were guilty of wrongdoing.

And steering them away from it. We should read this in chapter 33 as a message part of the message of salvation. But it comes earlier in chapter 3 and we should be thinking of that before long.

And then, in chapter 18, he spells out God's covenant standards for the exiles. In religious, sexual, and moral terms. And this text, too, seems to belong to Ezekiel's post-587 ministry.

Classical prophecy, of course, also had a sixth component that Ezekiel couldn't share. Israel's arrival at the door of hope. And Haggai etc.

bring out this message. But they took over Ezekiel's concern. That they'd return to the land but that full age of salvation hadn't dawned.

But meanwhile there was a responsibility upon the people of God to live responsibly in accord with God's revealed will. And so Ezekiel had a legacy that the post-exilic prophets took very seriously. Let's mention now the forms that Ezekiel's prophecy took.

The pre-classical, the classical prophets, major in prophecy of judgment. They have to say that the people have been going wrong and so they deserve judgment from God. In those years leading up to 587, this is what Ezekiel has to say over and over again.

He has to present it in different ways and give that message to people who don't want to hear it. They are still cherishing in their hearts the hope that they will be going home very soon.

Oh no, worse is to come, Ezekiel has to say. And so, Ezekiel speaks in terms of judgment and accusation. And that accusation dwells on the past history of Judah and then it moves on to the particular sins that the exiles, the 597 exiles, were guilty of even now.

But then, after 587, he can take over a convention that we already find in some of the classical prophets of a prophecy of salvation. And he can speak with great hope himself. But it's always a post-judgment salvation, and there's no easy way to find it.

The first one must go downhill with God into the fall of Jerusalem before one can start going uphill again. A number of the prophetic books contain messages against foreign nations intended to be heard by God's people but rhetorically addressed to the nations. Our book has a middle section devoted to this theme, chapters 25 to 32.

Earlier prophetic books incorporated visions as a form of revealing God's purposes. And in pre-classical prophecy you may know of Micaiah's vision in 1 Kings 22. A vision

of God's courtroom where he and his counselors, angelic counselors, are deliberating the judgment that must fall upon Ahab.

Well, the classical prophets take up this use of a vision. But Ezekiel really goes to town on it and visions are a major component in Ezekiel's prophesying. And they're described vividly and at length.

A way of prophesying that classical prophets took was to engage in symbolic actions. And there was a sort of show-and-tell principle that there was an enactment, sort of a metaphorical gesturing enactment of some sort of situation, which was then interpreted in terms of a proper prophetic message. Ezekiel takes over this tradition too.

He engages in symbolic actions that he explains as signs with accompanying messages that interpret those actions. A new element that Ezekiel imports into his prophesying is priestly material. He's not only a prophet, and he's a priest-prophet with a hyphen between the two words.

He incorporates his priestly training as a teacher. Prophets had two roles in pre-exilic Judah. They ran the temple with its worship and sacrifices, but they also had a teaching role.

Ezekiel was far away from the temple, but he could teach. He uses that teaching practice throughout, using words like clean and unclean, holy and profane, uncleanness, and abomination.

He has a special eye for religious sins, and they stick out for him as a priest as the worst of sins. He has a high regard for the presence of God in the temple. In his visions, he sees God's presence abandoning the temple.

What a terrible thing. But later on, he can envisage God returning to the new temple and staying there. He also engages in priestly instruction, especially in chapter 18 and chapter 22.

And he speaks just as a priest would in pre-exilic Judah, telling the people how they were to live. Scholars talk about the radical theocentricity of Ezekiel. And what they mean is that more than in any other prophetic book, God stands at the center.

In very striking ways. Readers of the book of Jeremiah are disappointed when they come to Ezekiel. They've lost those narratives about Jeremiah's adventures.

They have lost Jeremiah, who is philosophizing to himself about how he doesn't want to be a prophet and how his ministry is not going very well. And we find nothing of that in Ezekiel—hardly anything.

Hardly anything about Ezekiel as a person. Hardly anything about his reactions to what God was saying. The book, to a very large extent, is an account of God speaking privately to Ezekiel and telling him what to say and what to do.

And whether that actually happens, we assume it does. But the emphasis, here is what I want you to say, Ezekiel. Here is what I want you to do.

And there is this radical theocentricity coming out in this way and reporting what God had said to Ezekiel. And overall, there's a sense of the reality of God and enforcing upon the exiles a sense of this reality.

And Ezekiel is portrayed as very seldom having a will of his own or reacting in his own way or doing his own thing. But he is just subservient to God. And in this way he stands out as a contrast to the exiles who are portrayed as rebels against God.

But he is the obedient servant to God. Always implicitly saying, yes God, I certainly will. Ezekiel comes over as a sensational prophet.

And he has to because nobody wants to listen to what he is saying. And so, he has to stand out from the crowd in remarkable ways. And he is ministering to people who are shocked by their forced migration.

And they've lost all that they've held dear. And so they're both unable and unwilling to hear what Ezekiel has to say about the worst to come. They can't bear it.

One way that Ezekiel stimulated their interest was that he was a teller of fascinating stories. He could take a metaphor and develop it in detail into something that one was bound to listen to.

It was so interesting. And it gripped the imagination. And then, he would turn the story into the spiritual truth that he needed to convey.

Then, of course, Ezekiel had a priestly background to begin with. He was known as the priest Ezekiel ever before he was known as the prophet Ezekiel. And he could trade on that, I suspect.

It gave him an authority and a respect that other prophets wouldn't have had. Another aspect whereby he stood out was that he fell into trances. And he would have these visions in these trances and then he would wake up and presumably tell the people what he'd seen in these trance visions.

And they were marvelous visions. Once, he reported that the spirit from God had physically lifted him up and transported him through the air, then let him down somewhere else. In this respect, he was like an old-world prophet.

A similar thing is said about Elijah; in 2 Kings 2:11, Ezekiel had vanished. And Elisha his successor knew he'd been taken up to heaven.

But the disciples, other disciples of Elijah said, well, where is he? We'll have to send out a search party. And why was that? 2 Kings 2.16 It may be the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley. And Elisha says, don't bother to send the search party.

And so, they don't. But there was this belief and this gets taken up in the early chapters of Elijah. Sometimes before Elijah received a vision he would report that he felt a hand pressing heavily on his head.

And he would report this is God's hand. And this was the signal that some vision or some important message God was going to give was coming, Elijah. This is the sign God said, oh that hurts.

That was a sign that he was no longer an ordinary person. He was going to be the medium of hearing God's word or seeing a vision from God. In a variety of ways, Ezekiel was able to make his message heard to an unappreciative audience.

Lastly, let me say something about the structure of the Book of Ezekiel. There are two quite different structures. One is very obvious: You get dating all through the book.

You get consecutive dating. And you're moving on from 593, the call in chapter 1, down to chapter 40, 573, 20 years. There's one deviation in chapter 29, which refers to 571.

But apart from that deviation it's steadily moving on from beginning to end. And of course there's a break. The first half of the book one can roughly say are messages of judgment to the 597 prisoners of war.

And then messages of salvation, but barbed salvation with a sense of responsibility to the general group of exiles. It is added to the 597 group who came in 587. And so that's the first general structure.

In the middle, the oracles against the foreign nations in 25 to 32 play a transitional role. But that seems to be the first edition of the book. What one has to go on to say is that interspersed in that first half are prophecies of salvation.

But they include an element of judgment of responsibility. So, they're barbed messages of salvation. And I think we shall find the first in chapter 3 which takes back from chapter 33 the new commission of God as Ezekiel as the watchman for God.

He was warning the people of God. And puts it back in chapter 3. So then, in chapter 3, we come to a message really intended directly for the 587 exiles, but it comes in the middle of material relating to the 597 exiles. And so there we are.

And so, we have to see where we're going. We have to notice that second edition of the book which wants to intersperse those messages of judgment with new messages to the 587 exiles. And there we shall stop.

Thank you for joining us.