

- Introduction: In what sense is symbolism true? Consider a fish commercial...

LITERARY OVERVIEW

- **Title/Author**: Ezekiel (“God will strengthen or makes strong” or “May God strengthen”), a prophet and priest (1:3), with a particularly priestly perspective. Born around the time that Jeremiah’s ministry begins and serves as prophet for about 2 decades. He is about the same age as Daniel, and mentions him in two passages (14:14, 20 and 28:3). He is married (24:15-24) with no children mentioned. He is deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. and writes from the area of the River Chebar (possibly the Canal of Nebuchadnezzar, connecting the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia). He is therefore known as an “exilic prophet”.
- **Form/Genre**: The book is among the most dramatic and theatrical, using symbols as literary “special effects.” God, through the writer, obviously wants us to do more than know “the facts.” We are intended to enter in, relish the fantastical elements, and use the imagination to the full. Ezekiel is sometimes called the prophet of extremes, particularly related to the emotional and visionary elements.
- **Visionary writing** – not re-creating reality in our world, but transporting us to a fantastical realm. The truth seen there is not true in the factual sense, but nevertheless absolutely true in what it symbolizes.
- **Symbolic reality** – most important parts are the symbols and what they represent, not the details. These use real to life symbols from our world (i.e. vines, faithless wife, boiling pot).
- Almost all of Ezekiel is visionary/symbolic as opposed to narrative/actual. The narrative portions are fairly clear, and the symbols are often marked by “I saw visions of God” or “the Spirit lifted me up” or some other such devise. There is a noticeable likeness to the Book of Revelation in the NT in literary form (John, on Patmos, visions and the Spirit..
- There are two great ditches into which we can fall: Liberalism, that will call everything a symbol (including virgin birth, incarnation, resurrection, healings) and hyper-literalism (which “factualizes” [yes, my word] too much) and confuses symbol with fact, often in response to liberal views.
- **Main Characters**: God, the author, the exiled people, the nations under God’s judgment. There is the overarching plot of the battle of good and evil, and the declaration that in the end God wins and evil loses.
- **Purpose/Themes**: Common prophetic themes of sin/judgment, comfort for the faithful, and hope of future restoration. There is the prophetic approach of a satirical description of evil, a strong denunciation of evil, as well as warning and predictions of future judgment. Meanwhile, a glorious hope is promised to those who will remain faithful to the during troublesome times. One of the dominant themes is “then they shall know that I am the Lord”, used over 50x. Thus, even in the midst of all the troubles, God’s glory being made known is central.
- **Challenges**: Ezekiel shouldn’t be read as having a narrational flow, but as another anthology (thematic scrapbook) of the visions and prophecies of Ezekiel spanning almost two decades. There is sometimes little obvious transition, and might help to create own table of contents to distinguish prophetic fragments. The length of the book is a challenge, and so could read in smaller portions.
- One of the greatest challenges is in regards to the last 8 chapters, and the question of the temple and the sacrificial system described there. There are two primary interpretations: First, that the description is absolutely literal, and describes a future time (i.e. prior to or after the return of Christ during a millennial reign on the earth). The second is that it is symbolic, using the framework of the Old Covenant system to describe something in the future which is beyond their wildest dreams (especially to an exiled people).
- The three primary reasons I lean (un-dogmatically) toward the 2nd view are (1.) The overall nature of the book of Ezekiel, (2.) the introduction to the vision in 40:1ff, and (3.) the arguments from the book of Hebrews (especially 8:13). I could add the similarities between the “idealized” description to the description found in the end of Revelation.

OUTLINE¹

- I. INAGUARAL VISION (1:1-3:27)
- II. JUDGMENT ON JERUSALEM AND JUDAH (4:1-24:27)
- III. ORACLES AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONS (25:1-32:32)
- IV. AFTER THE FALL OF JERUSALEM (33:1-39:29)
- V. VISION OF RESTORATION (40:1-48:35)

¹ Taken from ESV Study Bible, Crossway Publishers.