

Tova Ganzel

EZEKIEL

FROM DESTRUCTION TO RESTORATION

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Maggid Books

*Ezekiel*  
*From Destruction to Restoration*

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*Dedicated in honor of our children and with gratitude to  
those who have been and continue to be instrumental in their  
Jewish education and in fostering their love of Tanakh.*

*Nicole and Raanan Agus*



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## *Preface*

**T**he book of Ezekiel is unique among the books of Tanakh insofar as it describes what is happening to the nation of Israel during the years surrounding the Destruction of the Temple, from an external and internal perspective simultaneously. In the prophecies of Ezekiel, emanating from Babylon, we hear the immediacy of the nation's cry of pain and grief, but also the echo of distance and disconnect. The prophet is not speaking from Jerusalem, the epicenter of these events. From his location in exile he utters a prophecy of revival and relays the divine promise that God will remain in the midst of His people forever. The prophet's title, *tzofeh*, which means observer, is largely a reflection of this reality. He is not located in the midst of the events, but at the same time he is not unaware of them; he observes them. The prophecies, especially in the first part of the book, are harsh, and the study of Ezekiel can leave one with a sense of sorrow and pain. At the same time, however, the very existence of these prophecies conveys the message that the bond between God and His people is an eternal one.

The purpose of this book is to make Ezekiel accessible to those seeking its unique perspective. I have tried to treat the biblical book systematically, with a focus on central subjects in each chapter. When the same topic appears in more than one chapter,

the discussion in the latter chapter is meant as a complement to the former. I recommend reviewing the text of the relevant chapter in Ezekiel in its entirety before reading the discussion of it, although I quote the verses that are central to the discussion. In general, I have tried to avoid explaining the meaning of individual words and verses, focusing instead on the themes arising from them. Those interested in a close reading of the verses can consult the traditional commentaries (as presented in the *Mikra'ot Gedolot* editions) as well as more contemporary editions (such as *Daat Mikra*). I have tried to keep footnotes and bibliographical references to a minimum. Still, they appear wherever I wrote a chapter based on an idea that I learned from reading the works of other scholars, or as references for those seeking greater breadth or depth in a subject that I address only briefly, where there are other sources that have discussed the subject in a manner that dovetails with my aim in writing this book.

I embarked on in-depth study of the book of Ezekiel in 2000, when I chose it as the topic of my doctoral thesis at Bar-Ilan University: “The Concept of Holiness in the Book of Ezekiel.” Many of the insights that came to me as I wrote my thesis have been incorporated into this book. My thesis was supervised by Prof. Rimon Kasher, and it was he who introduced me to the world of Ezekiel. After I had completed my thesis I gave it to Prof. Baruch Schwartz, and our discussions added another layer to my understanding of the biblical book. I also gained much from my students at Bar-Ilan University (in the Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies, in the Department of Bible Studies, and in the Basic Jewish Studies program) and at Herzog Academic College. The discourse in the classes in which I taught Ezekiel, and the notes I added to my lesson plans in the wake of those discussions, helped to mold this book. I thank the translator, Kaeren Fish, and editor, Deena Glickman, for ensuring the high standard of the English edition, and the staff at Maggid – Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ita Olesker, Shira Finson, Caryn Meltz, Rachelle Emanuel, and Carolyn Budow Ben-David – for their professional guidance. I also thank Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, where an earlier version of this book first appeared.



I was fortunate enough to study many of the chapters of Ezekiel at the homes of Prof. Moshe Greenberg *z"l* and Prof. Jacob Milgrom *z"l*, in their later years. For me, this was an encounter with two intellectual and spiritual giants. It is to these two venerated scholars, who held the book of Ezekiel so dear to their hearts until their last days, that I dedicate this book.

Finally, I thank my father and my mother for raising me in a home that was centered around Torah. The realization of that early inspiration was made possible thanks to the encouragement, patience, and devotion of my husband, Chezi.

May God reward them.

Tova Ganzel  
Jerusalem



## *Introduction*

# Ezekiel, Prophet of Exile

**T**he book of Ezekiel covers a fateful period of some twenty-two years in the history of the Jewish people, beginning with year five of King Jehoiachin's exile (593 BCE) and ending fifteen years after the Destruction of the First Temple (571 BCE).<sup>1</sup> It was a momentous age, unprecedented in many ways. The Jewish nation was split between two centers, with each group maintaining a disparate identity. The Destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile engendered the unprecedented challenge of preserving the nation's identity in the absence of the familiar Temple in Jerusalem and at a distance from its land.

Ezekiel, prophet and priest and one of the exiled in Babylonia, with his prophetic messages and the encouragement he offered, laid new ideological groundwork. The Jewish nation, he declared, could and must exist in two loci – Judah and Babylonia – concurrently, with each group preserving a discrete Jewish identity.

Ezekiel's words are the only clear example of prophecy conveyed in Babylonia during the period that extended from the Destruction until Cyrus's declaration and the return to the land around thirty-five years

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1. The last explicit date in the book is found in the prophecy to Egypt (Ezek. 29:17); it comes in the twenty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin.

later. The independent status of the Jewish community in Babylonia at that time is discernible in the king of Babylonia's gracious treatment of Jehoiachin (II Kings 25:27–30; Jer. 52:31–34), and the Jews apparently maintained this status throughout the Second Temple period (Est. 2:5–6). The period between the Destruction of the Temple and the Return to Zion is also addressed by prophecies in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Isaiah, and perhaps even Joel and Obadiah. But these prophecies respond to the events of the Destruction from the perspective of the Land of Israel, as distinct from Ezekiel's prophecies, which are conveyed in Babylonia and grapple with the contemporaneous crisis in the land from a Diasporic vantage point. Thus, the prophet Ezekiel possesses a clear and unique ideological perspective. All of these factors make the book of Ezekiel essential to understanding both the Destruction and exile and their lasting influence on the Diaspora Jewish identity to this day.

The book of Ezekiel is organized almost completely chronologically, with chapters 1–24 dating to the years before the Destruction and chapters 33–48 to the years after it. The central chapters (25–32) contain a collection of prophecies directed towards other nations; these are placed together because of their content, rather than due to chronological considerations. The prophecies conveyed after the Destruction complement those dating from before it. Ezekiel's prophecies, then, may be studied both in order of their appearance and by subject. In the current volume, we will conduct an analysis that relates to the book's narrative in the order in which the prophecies appear while simultaneously examining the different subjects that appear in it thematically. We will also address the more general questions that arise from a study of the prophecies.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Editor's note: All translations of biblical passages in this volume are based on *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917), although changes have been made in cases in which my understanding of the language and its nuance differed from that of JPS and emendations have been made for the purposes of style and uniformity. Translations of Rashi's commentary on Tanakh are based on A. J. Rosenberg's *Judaica Books of the Prophets: A New English Translation of the Text and Rashi* (New York: Judaica Press). Translations of talmudic passages are based on Isidore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1961), with emendations.

## EZEKIEL IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nebuchadnezzar, orchestrator of the Destruction, was a figure with a storied past, and the Destruction itself was part of a greater campaign – a campaign not described in the Babylonian chronicles we currently have, but found in scriptural sources.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes referred to in Tanakh as Nebuchadrezzar, Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE), son of Nabopolassar, reigned following the death of his father in 605 BCE, during the reign of Jehoiakim (609–597 BCE). A few months after he headed the Babylonian army in the battle of Carchemish against Egypt (Jer. 46:2) his father, Nabopolassar, died, and Nebuchadnezzar hurried back to Babylonia, where he ascended the throne. Immediately upon his coronation Jeremiah described him as “My servant, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon” (Jer. 25:9), and expressed opposition to anyone who did not accept the new king’s authority (Jer. 25). In the winter of 604 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar’s army conquered Ashkelon and took its king into captivity.<sup>4</sup> In 601 BCE Nebuchadnezzar fought against the king of Egypt in a war that depleted both forces, and thereafter Nebuchadnezzar devoted himself to rehabilitating his army. This, it seems, was the moment that Jehoiakim picked to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 24:1). In 597 BCE Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem in response to this rebellion, but it appears that Jehoiakim died before the siege.

After Jehoiakim’s death, his son Jehoiachin ascended the throne. Three months later, he surrendered himself to the king of Babylonia (II Kings 24:12; Jer. 22). Nebuchadnezzar exiled him to Babylonia, along with his family and the dignitaries of Jerusalem (including Ezekiel), and made Zedekiah king in his stead. Zedekiah’s rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, against which Ezekiel rails in chapter 17 (see also Jer. 27), appears to have taken place in the year 595 BCE.<sup>5</sup> In response, in 587 BCE,

3. The historical information here is taken from Bill T. Arnold, *Who Were the Babylonians?* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 91–99.

4. These events made an impression in Jerusalem, too, and their echo can even be felt in II Kings 24:1 (“King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years”) and 24:7 (“for the king of Babylon had seized all the land that had belonged to the king of Egypt”). This may also be the reason for the calling of “a fast before the Lord” the following year (Jer. 36:9).

5. Since the Babylonian chronicle breaks off in the eleventh year of Nebuchadnezzar, the exact year of the rebellion is unknown.

Nebuchadnezzar once again laid siege to Jerusalem, beginning on the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year of Zedekiah (II Kings 25:1; Jer. 39:1; Ezek. 24:1–2) and lasting until the ninth of Av in the eleventh year of his reign (II Kings 25:3–4) in the summer of 586 BCE.

There are various estimates of the number of Judeans exiled at the time of the Destruction of the Temple, but a remnant was left behind. This remnant rebelled once again against Nebuchadnezzar in 582 BCE. Consequently, this remnant too was expelled (described in Jer. 52:30). Nebuchadnezzar's imperialistic aspirations did not end with the conquest of Jerusalem; indications of this are evident in Ezekiel's prophecy to Tyre, and later in the prophecy to Egypt (Ezek. 29:17–21), which is the latest prophecy in the book of Ezekiel (570 BCE).

### **“Brought to Babylon as Exiles by the King of Babylon” (II Kings 24:16)**

The account provided in the book of Kings supplies us with the nation's perspective on the events of Ezekiel's time – despite the fact that Ezekiel himself is not mentioned by name in any biblical book other than his own.

At that time, the troops of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon marched against Jerusalem, and the city came under siege. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon advanced against the city while his troops were besieging it. Thereupon King Jehoiachin of Judah, along with his mother, and his courtiers, commanders, and officers, surrendered to the king of Babylon. The king of Babylon took him captive in the eighth year of his reign. He carried off from Jerusalem all the treasures of the House of the Lord and the treasures of the royal palace; he stripped off all the golden decorations in the Temple of the Lord – which King Solomon of Israel had made – as the Lord had warned. He exiled all of Jerusalem: all the commanders and all the warriors – ten thousand exiles – as well as all the craftsmen and smiths; only the poorest people in the land were left. He deported Jehoiachin to Babylon; and the king's wives and officers and the notables of the land were brought as exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the able men,

to the number of seven thousand – all of them warriors, trained for battle – and a thousand craftsmen and smiths were brought to Babylon as exiles by the king of Babylon. And the king of Babylon appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, changing his name to Zedekiah. (II Kings 24:10–17)<sup>6</sup>

The Judean elite, exiled in the year 597 BCE, included Ezekiel son of Buzi, a priest and prophet. Jehoiachin's exile was a pivotal event for Ezekiel. The entire chronology of his book is enumerated according to the years of the exile of Jehoiachin (Ezek. 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 30:20; 31:1), as are the date of the prophecy foretelling the Destruction of the Temple (33:41) and the prophecies that are revealed post-Destruction (29:17; 32:1, 17; 40:1). This exile dealt a heavy national blow to the lifestyle and status of the inhabitants of Judah. Without the king and his family, the men of valor, the craftsmen, and all the treasures of God's House and the king's house, the land was left destitute.

Nebuchadnezzar likely considered this exile, in which he removed one king (Jehoiachin) and replaced him with another (Zedekiah), to be more significant in asserting Babylonia's authority over Judah than the exile that followed the Destruction of the Temple eleven years later. The appointment of Gedalia after the conquest of Jerusalem and the Destruction of the Temple indicates that, in Nebuchadnezzar's eyes, the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been sealed earlier. But the locals saw things differently. To them, as long as the Temple was standing nothing had really changed. The events of the past, in particular the campaign of Sennacherib, still echoed in their ears.<sup>7</sup> They expected that another miracle would save them in the final moments of the siege, firmly believing that the Temple was indestructible.

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6. See also Jeremiah 27:19–20, 29; II Chronicles 36:9–10.

7. In the year 701 BCE, Sennacherib set out on a campaign to the west that included the Kingdom of Judah, in order to punish Judah for rebelling against the Assyrian Empire. Assyria succeeded in conquering and razing all of the Judah's cities, exiling many of the residents, and even took the Temple's vessels. Miraculously, Jerusalem remained independent, and the Temple remained standing. As a result, from then on the Judeans in Judah believed that Jerusalem was invincible and that the Temple would never be destroyed – contrary to the words of the prophets.

**“Men of Your Kindred” and “Those Who Live in These Ruins”: Two Distinct Populations**

Ezekiel’s prophecy took place at a time when two discrete groups were forming within the nation and thus the historical context is crucial to understanding the book’s full significance.<sup>8</sup> His goal in his pre-Destruction prophecies was to impress upon the people the idea that God had departed from the Temple and a new reality had begun. The book abounds with discussions of this new reality of exile and Destruction and the dilemmas it raises. How does divine retribution relate to the individual (ch. 14, 18, 33)? What is the proper attitude towards Babylonia (ch. 17)? What is the status of the covenant between the nation of Israel and God, now that it has been violated by the nation and the Temple is to be destroyed (especially chapters 20, 36)? The prophetic response to these questions lays the foundation for understanding Israel’s future restoration (ch. 34–39), the vision of the future Temple (ch. 40–48), and the prophecies to the nations (ch. 25–32).

Although most of the prophecies to the exiles of Jehoiachin relate to events in the Land of Israel at the time, some of the prophecies in the book paint a picture of God’s view of the Babylonian exiles, in particular how their identity is distinct from that of the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the same years. Thus in chapter 11 Ezekiel quotes the “inhabitants of Jerusalem,”<sup>9</sup> who say that the exiles have distanced themselves

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8. See Oded Bustenay, *Galut Yisrael ViYehuda BeAshur UBeBavel (Mei’ot 8–6 Lifnei HaSfira)* (Haifa: Pardes, 2010).

9. The subject of Jerusalem’s names as they appear in Ezekiel is of importance. The twenty-six cases in which Jerusalem is called by name are all found in the pre-Destruction chapters (with one exception). They provide a picture of the shift in Jerusalem’s status throughout the sections of the book. The pre-Destruction exhortatory chapters highlight divine anger at the city. In chapter 22, idolatry is described as defiling the city’s name; Jerusalem is called “impure of name” (v. 5). From this point on, when the city and its name are impure, there is no longer any cause to apply the name Jerusalem to the city in which the Divine Presence resides. Ezekiel uses different designations for the city. The name Jerusalem is found only once in the restoration chapters, in 36:38: “like the flocks of Jerusalem ... so shall the [once] ruined cities be filled with human flocks,” but this description relates not to the future, but to the crowds that filled the cities in the past.



from God and from His land, and that they are not counted among the inheritors of the land and those close to God:

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O mortal, [I will save] your brothers, your brothers, the men of your kindred, all of that very House of Israel to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem say, **“They are far from the Lord; to us the land has been given as a possession.”** (11:14–15)<sup>10</sup>

God’s response, however, conveyed through the prophet, is that while those taken in captivity are currently in exile, God is with them there, in a “small sanctuary:”

Say then: Thus said the Lord God: “I have indeed removed them far among the nations and have scattered them among the countries, and I have become to them a **small sanctuary** (*mikdash me’at*) in the countries whither they have gone.” (11:16)<sup>11</sup>

This dialogue – featuring both the claim of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and reassurance to the exiles – demonstrates the exiles’ uncertainty regarding their identity in relation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and their questioning of God’s place in their midst. Their concern is unsurprising considering that the ten tribes who had been exiled some 150 years prior (some in 732 BCE, and the majority in the years 722–720 BCE) had lost their identity. Thus, Ezekiel’s prophetic message (like that of Jeremiah in Jer. 29:1–9) to the exiles is a new one, requiring a change of historical perspective. For the first time, the prophets affirm

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10. Portions of this quote have been rendered in English following Koren’s new translation (forthcoming), which I find closer to the text’s meaning.

11. The Hebrew term *mikdash me’at* is often translated as “diminished sanctity” or “small sanctuary.” I prefer the latter translation rendered by Block, as it indicates that God’s presence is diminished both in terms of length of time and in terms of strength relative to the past. See D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapter 1–24*, NICOT (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 349–50. In Jewish tradition, the words *mikdash me’at* have become a term for the synagogue; see Menachem Ben-Yashar, “HaMerkava BeSefer Yehezkel VeMikdash Me’at,” *Iyunei Mikra VeParshanut* 4 (1997): 9–28.

the Jewish identity of the exiles: They remain part of God's nation – even though the Judeans still living in their homeland have a different view, maintaining that God's place is still in the Temple in their midst.

Surprisingly, this view of the inhabitants of the land does not change even after the Destruction, as we learn from a different dialogue that Ezekiel quotes in his prophecies after the Destruction:

The word of the Lord came to me: O mortal, those who live in these ruins in the Land of Israel argue, "Abraham was but one man, yet he was granted possession of the land. We are many; surely, the land has been given as a possession to us." (33:23–24)

Even after the Temple is burned down, Jerusalem is devastated, and the captives have been led away by Nebuzaradan (II Kings 25), when only a few of the "poorest people in the land" (II Kings 24:14) are left in Jerusalem, they maintain their view that they are numerous in comparison with the solitary Abraham. Therefore, those who remain in the land will inherit the land, they claim, not those who have been taken into captivity to Babylonia. The prophet dismisses this view:

Therefore say to them: Thus said the Lord God: "You eat with the blood, you raise your eyes to your fetishes, and you shed blood – yet you expect to possess the land! You have relied on your sword, you have committed abominations, you have all defiled other men's wives – yet you expect to possess the land!" (Ezek. 33:25–26)

Those who have remained in the land have not learned the lessons of the Destruction, indicates the prophet. They continue to sin. Note that the sins Ezekiel lists here are unconnected to the Temple, which has been destroyed. He goes on to reject the claim of those remaining in the land; not only are they not destined to inherit the land, but it will instead become completely desolate – which is indeed what happens after the murder of Gedalia.<sup>12</sup>

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12. After the Destruction, the Babylonian king designated Gedalia son of Ahikam as leader. His murder at the hands of his fellow Judeans was the final nail in the coffin

Thus said the Lord God: “As I live, those who are in the ruins shall fall by the sword, and those who are in the open I have allotted as food to the beasts, and those who are in the strongholds and caves shall die by pestilence. I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud glory shall cease; and the mountains of Israel shall be desolate, with none passing through. And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I make the land a desolate waste on account of all the abominations which they have committed.” (33:27–29)

The dwelling places of those remaining in the land described here are typical of a population that remains after the destruction of a city: They live in the open fields, in strongholds, and in caves. But if this prophecy brought some comfort to the captives in Babylonia, Ezekiel concludes that it is not only those remaining in the land who have not changed their deeds, it is also those exiled with Jehoiachin:

Note well, O mortal: your fellow countrymen who converse about you by the walls and in the doorways of their houses and say to each other and propose to one another, “Come and hear what word has issued from the Lord.” They will come to you in crowds and sit before you in thrones and will hear your words, but they will not obey them . . . They hear your words, but will not obey them. But when it comes – and come it will – they shall know that a prophet has been among them. (33:30–33)

The Destruction establishes Ezekiel’s authenticity as a prophet who bears God’s word. But though the people come to hear God’s word from him, their behavior remains unchanged even after they find out that the Temple has been burned and Jerusalem destroyed.

Both groups, the inhabitants in the land and those exiled to Babylonia, despite their differences, have this in common: Neither changes its behavior during these years. Perhaps, then, we can see that Ezekiel’s

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for the community, which ceased to be a sovereign entity; the remaining Judeans subsequently fled to Egypt (Jer. 44). Thus, there were three centers of Jewish life: Jerusalem, Babylonia, and Egypt.

prophetic mission at the time was not to call upon the people to mend their ways and repent, but rather to explain the significance of the events in Jerusalem, and thereby to lay the groundwork for the prophecies of rebuilding which came after the Destruction, as well as the vision of the future Temple.

In a time of change, Ezekiel was a novel prophet, the first to function in the Diaspora. His prophecy constituted a significant milestone; it fostered a Jewish presence in the Diaspora and established that God's presence existed there in a "small sanctuary." The ideological infrastructure in Ezekiel's prophecy, it appears, laid the spiritual groundwork upon which Diaspora Jewry has based itself for two thousand years of exile, primarily since the Second Temple's destruction. In effect, it attests to the fact that Jews can live in any place in the world. Even following the establishment of the State of Israel, this infrastructure remains relevant.

## Section I

# Pre-Destruction Prophecies

**T**he first section of the book of Ezekiel, comprising the first twenty-four chapters, consists of the prophecies expressed by Ezekiel in the years before the Destruction. Located as he was in Babylonia following the exile, Ezekiel was in a novel position: He was prophesying from outside of the Land of Israel about the future of the nation.

The purpose of Ezekiel's prophecies during this period was to inform the people that God had departed from His Temple in Jerusalem. He therefore describes in detail the divine chariot and the journeys of God's glory outside the Temple (especially in chapter 1 and chapters 10–11). Moreover, Ezekiel emphasizes that the Destruction of the Temple is only a matter of time; even in the years leading up to this event, Jerusalem is defiled and God's presence is not found within the city (1:28–3:15; 24:15–27). Ezekiel's symbolic acts (especially in chapters 4–5) reinforce this message, which climaxes in the description of the sins of the people and the corruption of the city (especially in chapters 8–11, 15, 23). The essence of the prophet's role is to be an observer (*tzofeh*) of what is happening (3:17–21; 33:1–9), along with conveying his prophecies to those who visit his house (8:1; 14:1; 20:1). Employing a number of different forms – symbolic acts, language drawn from biblical books, and parables – Ezekiel lends credibility to the dire and disheartening predictions for the nation's future.



## Chapter 1

# The Journeys of God's Glory

*Ezekiel 1:1–28*

### SETTING THE STAGE: EZEKIEL AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “THIRTY YEARS” (1:1–2)

A literalist (*peshat*) reading of the prophecies of Ezekiel raises many difficulties. Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency,<sup>1</sup> in his commentary on Ezekiel, notes these complexities, explaining the difficulty of interpreting the words of the prophet in his introduction:

Son of man, see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears and set your heart to the language of this prophet, for it is wondrous, esoteric, and brief. Even to our sages, of blessed memory,

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1. Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency lived in the twelfth century and belonged to the second generation of Tosafists. Of his commentary on the Bible the sections on Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets are still extant. In his commentary he represents the extreme literalist school in France, emerging from the school of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam). One of the distinguishing features of this school is the almost complete avoidance of reliance on midrash (see Menachem Cohen, ed., *Mikraot Gedolot “HaKeter”*: *Sefer Yehezkel* [Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000], 10).

his words appeared to contradict teachings of the Torah, so esoteric and concise were they.

The first specific problem that arises for Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency (and many other commentaries) is the date with which the book begins: “In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month” (Ezek. 1:1). First, there is no indication of the point from which the prophet counts these thirty years. Second, the next verse gives a different date, counting from the exile of Jehoiachin, but the relationship between the two counts is unclear: “On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin” (v. 2).

Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency writes in his introduction:

He does not explain how he calculates “thirty years.” And although the words of *Targum* [*Yonatan*] are ... that this is [thirty years] since Hilkiyah the Priest found the Torah scroll, nevertheless this is not the [customary] way of the Writings ... We might suggest the following: We find no prophet rebuking his own generation about Torah and the commandments the way he does. Most of what he says is like Torah speech; he almost repeats the entire Torah for them ... It was as though he was teaching them a new Torah, for it had been forgotten in the days of Menashe. And since his prophecies and his words concerned the words of the Torah scroll that had been found, therefore he counted [the years] from the time of its discovery, for the whole essence of his book is dependent upon it.

Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency accepts the solution proposed by *Targum Yonatan* – that the prophet refers in the first verse to the thirty years that had passed since the discovery of the Torah scroll during the reign of Josiah – even while acknowledging that “this is not the [customary] way of the Writings [to count].” But his answer does not simply resolve the question of the dates; it emphasizes a connection to the Torah that is significant. Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency thus appears to be solving two fundamental difficulties in Ezekiel: First, how is it possible that during such fateful years for the Jewish people, Ezekiel almost entirely avoids any call to the people to repent? Second, why does Ezekiel, unlike all



other prophets, give the people statutes and laws? And some that appear to contradict laws of the Torah, at that? By adopting the explanation of “the thirtieth year” as referring to the discovery of the Torah scroll in the days of Josiah, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency emphasizes that despite the discrepancies between the perceptions familiar to us from the Torah and those arising from a study of the book of Ezekiel, the prophecy of Ezekiel in its entirety rests upon the Torah, as emphasized at the very outset when the date of the prophecy is noted in relation to the discovery of the Torah scroll in the days of Josiah.

Other commentators, meanwhile, attribute different significance to the thirty years: Rabbi Menachem ben Shimon<sup>2</sup> views the date as an indication of Ezekiel's age, while Rashi, Radak, Rabbi Joseph Kara,<sup>3</sup> and other commentaries, in light of *Seder Olam Rabba* 24, regard the “thirty years” as placing the date in the context of the Jubilee cycle. Although this view is not supported by the plain text, it does offer another significant message to the inhabitants of Babylonia of that time – and perhaps even future generations. Counting the years in accordance with the Jubilee in the Land of Israel creates a direct link between the prophecy conveyed outside the land and events in the land. Likewise, the book thus alludes, right from the outset, to the fact that Ezekiel's prophecy in its entirety is for the sake of the Land of Israel, as Rabbi Judah HaLevi notes: “Who-soever prophesied did so either in the [Holy] Land, or concerning it... Ezekiel and Daniel on account of it” (*Kuzari* II:14).<sup>4</sup>

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2. Active in Posquières, Provence, in the twelfth century, Rabbi Menachem ben Shimon served as an example of a purely literalist, or *peshat*-based commentary, eschewing both philosophical and midrashic approaches and focusing on language and style. Of his commentaries, only those on Jeremiah and Ezekiel remain today (see Cohen, *Yehezkel*, 11).
  3. Rabbi Joseph Kara (1055–1125) was one of the great molders of *peshat* exegesis in his time. He was a disciple and colleague of Rashi, and his commentaries are based on Rashi's commentaries on Tanakh. He devoted himself primarily to teaching Tanakh and its commentary; this would appear to be the reason for his being known as “Kara” (see Cohen, *Yehezkel*, 9–10). His extant commentaries cover only some of the books of Tanakh; he may have written commentaries on all the books (see Avraham Grossman, *Hakhmei Tzarfat HaRishonim* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001], 289).
  4. Translator's note: Translations of the *Kuzari* in this volume are taken from Hartwig Hirschfeld, trans., *The Kuzari (Kitab al Khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1964).

Admittedly, this view, too, is far removed from the literal meaning of the text. Perhaps Moshe Greenberg, stating “The date in vs. 1 is explained in vs. 2 in terms of the era of Jehoiachin’s exile,”<sup>5</sup> is correct in proposing that the reference is to the thirtieth year of the exile of Jehoiachin, and that the aim of this introduction is to make note of the date of the last prophecy of the book (after the prophecy in the twenty-seventh year, as recorded in 29:17).

### THE CHARIOT AND THE JOURNEYS OF GOD’S GLORY (1:3–28)

At the beginning of his book, Ezekiel describes how “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.” Chapter 1, described by *Hazal* as the working of the divine chariot (*ma’aseh merkava*), is one of the most difficult chapters to understand in the Tanakh.<sup>6</sup> We will address the significance of the divine chariot as the introduction to the book of Ezekiel as a whole. At the beginning of the chapter we are told that Ezekiel receives his prophecy in Babylonia: “When I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar River” (1:1), a point that Rashi and Radak note in their commentaries.

Ezekiel’s vivid description of “the visions of God” in chapter 1 expresses the power of the prophet’s encounter with the divine vision. He portrays these visions in all their force (“a stormy wind” [v. 4], “they went” [vv. 12–13]; “dashing to and fro” [v.14]); in all their color (“a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance” [v. 4]; “their sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze” [v. 7]; “looked like burning coals of fire. This fire, suggestive of torches” [v. 13]; “in appearance

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5. See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, The Anchor Bible Dictionary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 39.

6. The well-known teaching of our sages on the Mishna (*Hagiga* 2:1) makes this point: “The subject of forbidden relations may not be expounded in the presence of three... nor [the work of] the chariot in the presence of one.” “Thus far you have permission to speak, thenceforward you have not permission to speak, for so it is written in the book of Ben Sira: Seek not things that are too hard for thee, and search not things that are hidden from thee” (*Hagiga* 13a). Similarly, Rashi’s commentary on Ezekiel 1:27: “No permission was granted to ponder over this verse,” and on 8:2, “It is forbidden to reflect on this verse.”

like sapphire” [v. 26 and elsewhere]); and in all their sound (“like the sound of mighty waters ... a tumult like the din of an army” [v. 24]). As the prophet’s description of the vision progresses, he gradually seems to lose his grasp of tangible expression. It grows increasingly difficult for him to describe what he is experiencing. See, for example, the pervasive use of the prepositional *kaf* (like), and the growing number of instances in which he refers to a *demut* (semblance or likeness):

Above the expanse over their heads was **the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire**; and on top, upon **this semblance** of a throne, there was **the semblance** of a human form. From **what appeared** as his loins up, I saw a **gleam as of amber – what looked like** a fire encased in a frame ... **what looked like** fire. There was a radiance all about him. **Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance** of the surrounding radiance. That was **the appearance of the semblance** of the presence of the Lord. (vv. 26–28)

This divine vision, which appears at the very outset of the book, holds the key to understanding one of Ezekiel’s central prophetic messages.<sup>7</sup> The recollection of this vision and the messages it embodies accompanies Ezekiel’s prophecy throughout the rest of the book, as we will see.

### **The Movement of God’s Glory throughout the Book of Ezekiel**

Encounters with the divine vision are recorded throughout the book, from this first one, in the fifth year of Jehoiachin’ exile, to Ezekiel’s vision twenty years later – though no vision includes the level of detail with which the divine vision in the first chapter is described. The prophecies of movement begin in the fifth year, when Ezekiel first sees divine visions upon the river Chebar (Ezek. 1). In these visions, God’s glory is borne in a chariot, which indicates motion. Then the prophet is carried upon the wind and hears the sound of the divine vision, and then

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7. On this divine vision as a sort of prophetic epigraph to the book, and its comparison with Isaiah’s prophecy, see Mordechai Breuer, “The Prophecy of Isaiah,” in *Pirkei Mo’adot* (Jerusalem: Horev, 1986), 457–75.

arrives at “the exile community that dwelt in Tel Abib by the Chebar River” (3:15). After another prophecy, he sees God’s glory as he goes out into the plain, like the glory which he had seen by the river Chebar (3:22–24). A year later, Ezekiel is sitting in his home and he sees a likeness that takes him to Jerusalem “in God’s visions” (8:2–3). There, after descriptions of the idolatry being practiced in the Temple, Ezekiel witnesses the departure of God’s glory from within the Temple (ch. 10). This description ends with the glory of God “on the hill east of the city” (11:23). The most significant message of all of these visions is that God’s glory has departed from the Temple.

The third section of Ezekiel, as noted, consists of restoration prophecies. Here we find that in the twenty-fifth year (40:1), Ezekiel has a vision of the return of God’s glory to the future Temple. First, there is a return to the Land of Israel (40:2); then Ezekiel experiences a divine vision like the earlier one and sees the glory of the God of Israel returning to the Temple (43:1–5); finally, God’s glory fills the House (44:4).

The movement of God’s glory as described in Ezekiel’s visions throughout the book, it appears, contains prophetic messages that are the central axis around which his prophecies revolve. What are these messages? Why are they significant?

First, even in Ezekiel’s pre-Destruction prophecies (between the fifth and twelfth years of the exile of Jehoiachin), the glory of God has already departed from the Temple. The Divine Presence is no longer within the city of Jerusalem. Therefore, during the six first years of Ezekiel’s prophecy – from the time he begins to prophesy until the Destruction of the Temple – there is no call to the nation as a whole to mend its ways and to repent (although there is attention to individual repentance; see the discussion concerning chapters 3, 14, 18, 33). The fate of Jerusalem has already been sealed; the Temple is defiled and desecrated, and the city will not be purified until God has poured out His wrath in its midst. Chapters 1–24 of the book, in which Ezekiel establishes his status as a prophet, should be understood against this backdrop.

Second, the description of the journey of God’s glory raises the question of where God’s glory was to be found during the years of the Destruction. Ezekiel describes God’s glory as returning from the north of Babylonia (1:4); thereafter he describes God’s glory atop the

mountain that is to the east of the city (11:23); finally, the glory of the God of Israel comes “from the way of the earth” (43:2), to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem in the future.<sup>8</sup> Where, then, is God’s glory during the years of Destruction and the exile of the nation? Does God’s glory wander with the people to Babylonia? Or does it remain in the Land of Israel, outside Jerusalem, waiting for the people to return? What is meant by God’s place specifically in the east? What significance should be attached to Ezekiel seeing the divine visions in the heavens? Is it possible that God’s glory is exiled with the people to Babylonia but does not descend to the soil of Babylonia, in order not to dwell on the impure soil outside of the Land of Israel?<sup>9</sup>

Third, the description of God’s glory wandering intensifies the gap between the assumption held universally by the people (expressed in the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah during these years) that God would never abandon His Temple and the prophetic message that the presence of God’s glory in the Temple depends on the nation’s actions; there is no guarantee. Therefore, the very fact that God’s glory appears to Ezekiel in Babylonia strengthens the message that God’s glory has indeed departed from the Temple.

### **“The Divine Presence Undertook Ten Journeys” (Chapters 10–11)**

There are a number of sources in which *Hazal* describe the process of God’s glory departing from the Temple in “ten journeys”; however, the different descriptions do not all list the same stations.<sup>10</sup> In chapters 10–11, Ezekiel describes the process of God’s glory leaving the Temple. The stages listed explicitly include the cherub (10:2), the platform or threshold of the House (v. 4), the courtyard (v. 4), the cherubim (v. 5), the platform or threshold again, apparently referring to an outer doorway (v. 18), the cherubim (v. 19), the east gate (11:1), the cherubim (11:22), and an ascent to the hill east of the city (11:23). A study of the verses suggests

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8. The direction from which the exiles will return to Jerusalem is also mentioned by other prophets: see, for example, Jeremiah 3:18.

9. A comprehensive discussion of these questions is to be found in Ben-Yashar’s article, “HaMerkava BeSefer Yehezkel,” 9–28.

10. See Shmuel HaKohen, “Eser Masa’ot Nasa Shekhina,” *Sinai* 88, no. 3–4 (1981): 104–19.

that it is the cherubim that carry God's glory upon their backs, and as such the repeated mention of them as "stations" in the "journey" should be understood only as the means by which this departure is effected.

*Hazal's* descriptions of the journeys of the Divine Presence are not identical to those in the book of Ezekiel; the closest source to the journey as described in Ezekiel is found in Lamentations Rabba:

The Divine Presence undertook ten journeys – from cherub to cherub; from cherub to the threshold of the House; from the threshold of the House to the cherubim; from the cherubim to the eastern gate; from the eastern gate to the courtyard; from the courtyard to the roof; from the roof to the altar; from the altar to the wall; from the wall to the city; from the city to the Mount of Olives.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless, the prophetic message is clear: God's glory has departed from the Temple, even before its physical destruction.

### **The Return of God's Glory to the Temple (Chapters 43–44)**

The importance of these visions throughout the book is evidenced in the description of Ezekiel's vision of God's glory returning from the way of the east back into the Temple: "Then he led me to a gate, the gate that faced east. And there, coming from the east with a roar like the roar of mighty waters, was the presence of the God of Israel, and the earth was lit up by His presence" (43:1–2). The next verse appears, at first glance, to be repetitive: "Like the appearance of the vision which I had seen, like the vision that I had seen when I came to destroy the city, and the visions were like the vision I had seen by the Chebar River" (43:3).

It seems that precisely at the moment when God's glory returns to the Temple in Ezekiel's future vision, he feels a need to emphasize that this is the same vision that accompanied him throughout the years of his prophecy before the Destruction of the Temple, when he was in Babylonia. This emphasis is achieved by repeating each of the stations where Ezekiel saw

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11. Lamentations Rabba *petihta* 25 (Salomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Eikha Rabba al pi Ktav Yad BeOtzar HaSefarim Romi* [Hildesheim: Olms, 1967], 29); similarly, Rosh HaShana 31a.

divine visions in the first part of the book. Thus, “Like the appearance of the vision which I had seen,” refers to the vision in chapter 1, with the emphasis on the definite article – “*the* vision.” Thereafter, “like the vision that I had seen *when I came to destroy the city*” refers to the vision in chapters 8–11, and matches the description of the ruin of the city in chapter 9 (vv. 4–11). Finally, the prophet concludes that all these visions appeared to him when he was *by the Chebar River* (ch. 1–3). In this way Ezekiel emphasizes that even though this was the first time since the Temple had been built by King Solomon that God’s glory departed it – indeed the Temple lies in ruins – nevertheless the same divine vision would return and once again dwell in the future Temple. The nation need not fear that the departure of God’s glory from the Temple means the departure of His glory from the nation.

In describing the Temple being filled once again with God’s glory, the prophet notes, “I fell upon my face” (43:3), much like the end of chapter 1: “The presence of the Lord entered the Temple by the gate that faced eastward. A spirit carried me into the inner court, and lo, the presence of the Lord filled the Temple.” (43:4–5).

This description of the return of God’s glory into the Temple represents the climax of Ezekiel’s visions of the future, since the aim of the building of the Temple, in all its detail, is that God’s glory might dwell within it. The uniqueness of this prophecy is also evident in its description of God’s throne and the soles of His feet:

O mortal, this is the place of My throne and the place for the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people Israel forever. The House of Israel and their kings must not again defile My holy name. (v. 7)

They would defile My holy name by the abominations that they committed. (v. 8)

And I will dwell among them forever. (v. 9)

From now on, the place of God’s entry (“the gate that faced eastward”) will be closed, protected against human entry and thereby against further defilement, as we will discuss in more detail later on: “And the Lord

said to me: This gate is to be kept shut and is not to be opened! No one shall enter by it because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut” (44:2).

It is in this spirit that Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl explains:

It is therefore important that the eastern gate – the main entrance-way – be closed, with no practical use except as a reminder: It is through here that God will return, for it was from here that He departed, when the Divine Presence left in anticipation of the destruction. If you remember that God can also depart the Temple, perhaps He will never again have to leave.<sup>12</sup>

This, it appears, is one of the ways in which the future Temple is protected against the possibility of God once again abandoning His Temple in Ezekiel’s prophecy. From now on the people will behave only in accordance with God’s command (Ezek. 36:27).

These verses at the beginning of chapter 43 describe the resting of the Divine Presence within the nation (vv. 7, 9, and similarly 37:26–28). The only other source in Tanakh that describes God’s glory coming to rest is the Revelation at Sinai: “The presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai” (Ex. 24:16).<sup>13</sup>

At the giving of the Torah, as in the resting of the Divine Presence in the book of Ezekiel, there is confirmation of the unbreakable bond between God and Israel, ultimately leading to God’s glory coming to rest amongst the nation. The realization of this lofty vision will come when “The House of Israel and their kings does not again defile My holy name” (43:7).

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12. Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl, “HaShaar HaPoneh Kadim Yihyeh Sagur – Lama?” *Sinai* 123–124 (2000): 369.

13. On the occasion of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* we find, “and the presence of the Lord appeared to all the people” (Lev. 9:23), but the expression “abode” in relation to God’s glory is not used there.

We can further appreciate the uniqueness of this expression by noting that in I Kings, chapter 8 (as well as in the parallel account in II Chronicles, chapter 6) the text describes the ceremony of inauguration of the Temple, but despite the special nature of that occasion, God’s glory is not described as coming to rest in the Temple.



Furthermore, note that this is the only place in Tanakh where the words “defiling (T-M-A) God’s name” appear in combination. The rare use of this phrase expresses the crisis; “God’s name” represents holiness, the opposite of any form of impurity. This extreme contrast between God’s name and impurity – that is, God’s refusal to dwell in an impure setting – has its source in the Torah. This idea is emphasized in two places. First, it is expressed in the command to send impure individuals out of the camp: “Remove from the camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse. Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell” (Num. 5:2–3). Second, it is seen in the context of cities of refuge, where unintentional killers are sheltered: “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I the Lord abide among the Israelite people” (Num. 35:34).

A prophetic message arises from the description of the divine chariot at the beginning of the book and the journeying of God’s glory described throughout (especially its departing the Temple in chapters 8–11 and its return in chapters 43–44): God’s presence in the Temple cannot be assumed to be unconditional; God will not allow His presence to dwell there if the nation causes the Temple to be defiled. But even though the nation refuses to accept the prophet’s message and fails to repent, even after the Destruction of the Temple, God will never abandon His people. Still, in order to maintain His presence amongst the people in the future, the conditions of access to God’s dwelling place will differ from those of the past.

It is this message, that the connection between God and His people is irreversible – both in the generation of the Destruction and afterwards – that explains the selection of the first chapter of Ezekiel as the *haftara* for Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah (Megilla 31a). Besides the obvious similarity between the description of God’s Revelation at Sinai, in fire and thick cloud, and Ezekiel’s description of the divine chariot, when we read the vision of the divine chariot on Shavuot, we internalize the message (also notably articulated by Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency) that the Torah given to Israel is eternal, and remains valid even in times of profound crisis.