

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

PART ONE – BACKGROUND

Ezekiel is a long book in which it would be easy to get lost. Before getting into a detailed study it helps to have a plan. The first step is to read it! The second step is to read it again! The Lord promises to be our teacher,(I Jn.2:27) but we cannot expect God to teach us in a book we have not read carefully and prayerfully, asking Him to highlight what will be important for us. Every book in the Bible is about Jesus and Ezekiel is no exception.(Lk.24:27) The book of Ezekiel is intended to change our lives,(II Tim.3:16,17) so let us expect that to happen every time we open it.

My suggestion is that rather than working through chapter by chapter we concentrate on four key themes - background, Ezekiel's visions, his teaching methods and his message. I hope this will give you a sufficient framework on which to build a more detailed study.

Some Bible books have a strong indication of the circumstances of the writer as well as the nation at the time of writing, by encouraging us search elsewhere in scripture. Where they do we should make good use of the clues to their place in God's revelation to us. Where they do not the place, writer and time are obviously not important. Ezekiel is a book firmly set in the difficult conditions of the exile of the Jews to Babylon and their lives of virtual slavery between 605 and 536 BC. That seventy year period changed them for ever. The prophet Ezekiel was one of a number of men God used finally to get His message across to them that they could only have one God.

God had used a number of prophets in the years before the Jewish captivity began to warn His people of what was coming if they did not listen to Him. The most notable was Jeremiah who persevered for 53 years in trying to convince people that following other gods meant that they were not truly trusting God and would cause terrible suffering to themselves and their descendants if they did not listen. His first 40 years were in Judah itself and the last 13 were as a hostage of some Jewish leaders who thought they could escape judgement by running off to Egypt.(Jer.43) He had seen the good times when Josiah was king and led his people well, and the bad times under his 3 sons and 1 grandson who refused to listen and preferred to trust themselves. Jeremiah was about 25 years older than Ezekiel and also from a priestly family so they may well have met. If so Jeremiah may have been one of Ezekiel's heroes, a role model who inspired him for the rest of his life.

Ezekiel himself was a priest, born and trained to be able to bring his people to know and serve God. As he grew up he would have assumed that this would be centred on the temple in Jerusalem but a series of Babylonian invasions changed that. The first invasion in 605 BC, when Ezekiel was 18, saw a group of young men from leading families, including Daniel and his friends, taken to Babylon to be trained to be Nebuchadnezzar's agents to control the Jews. In 597 BC after King Jehoiachin rebelled against Babylonian rule, Nebuchadnezzar's army was back. The young king and 10,000 of his key people

including Ezekiel, now aged 25, were taken to Babylon leaving only the poor people behind. Everything valuable was looted from the temple but presumably it continued to operate.(II Kgs.24:8-16)

One can imagine Ezekiel wondering as he settled into life in Babylon whether he would ever return to be able to fulfil his calling as a priest, assuming he could not be effective without a temple in which to perform. At the age of 30, the time at which young people so often began their ministry,(II Sam.5:4; Lk.3:23) Ezekiel had his first real glimpse of the Lord. He started to discover what being a priest was meant to be about. The temple in which he had foreseen himself operating was totally destroyed just 6 years later in the third Babylonian invasion in 586 BC.

Daniel was presumably about the same age as Ezekiel. Whether they ever met we are not told but their ministries would be complementary. Daniel's calling was to witness to kings and senior government officials which he did very faithfully for 70 years. Ezekiel on the other hand was to teach the Jewish exiles who God was and the plan that He had for their lives. He also allowed God to use him effectively for 34 years so that when Cyrus, king of Persia, gave them permission to return home they were spiritually ready to do so. He discovered that a priest does not need a building, robes and ceremonies to serve God and his people. In this sense he teaches us what every Christian is called to be, someone who introduces people of all races, ages and social backgrounds to Jesus Christ.(I Pet.2:9; Rev.1:6)

QUESTIONS ON EZEKIEL I

Q.1. What kind of man was King Jehoiachin and what eventually happened to him? Where were the people of Judah exiled and why? How would the Jews be feeling about their circumstances? Give present day examples of parallel problems and leaders? What did the Jews then and what do people now need to know at such times?

Q.2. Which prophets had been ministering to the Jews shortly before the exile? What special warning had they given that had been ignored? What hope did they offer the exiles for the future? Put these parts of their message into New Testament terms.

Q.3. What had been Ezekiel's background and training? How did this show in his prophecy? What New Testament writers also show the effect of their previous occupations and experience in their writing?

Q.4. For how long did Ezekiel prophesy? What happened to the Jews during that time? What did the future hold for them? How does Ezekiel prepare them for what is to come?

Q.5. What is your overall impression of what this book is about?