

God is There

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It's easy to get caught up in the fantastic visions that come to Ezekiel—cosmic wheels, clouds of glory, bones that spring to life, and a magnificent temple. But if we step back from this strange imagery and view the book as a whole, we can recognize how each vision fits into Ezekiel's overall message.

God's presence on his throne

"Wheels" may be the word modern readers most associate with the book of Ezekiel. The opening images of Ezekiel's vision are striking, and it is this first vision that sticks in readers' minds. Behind this grand and confusing vision lies a very personal—and illustrative—story of how our God is a God who is *present* for his people.

In this first vision, the Lord comes upon Ezekiel in the same shocking way that this story comes upon the reader. Ezekiel relays to us what he sees—the images of four cherubim, with their four faces and four wings, coming in a windstorm carrying a vault as of sparkling crystal and above

that a throne as of lapis lazuli, with a figure that was like a man upon it. And the man bore the appearance of fire and metal, and was surrounded by light like a rainbow's on a rainy day (Ezek 1).

Ezekiel is a man out of place and time, an exile in a foreign land just before the destruction of Jerusalem. His introduction of God's presence is clear in its meaning for us: We humans fall face first in awe of the majesty and wonder of God.

God now speaks to Ezekiel, and his Spirit lifts Ezekiel to his feet (2:1–2). Though God speaks to Ezekiel, he is merely a childish creature, a human, a "son of man." God tells Ezekiel to eat a scroll that lies before him; in doing so, Ezekiel becomes filled

with the lament and woe from God (3:1–11). God instructs Ezekiel to speak to the Jewish exiles and announce the consequences of their sinfulness and rebellion. God appoints Ezekiel watchman over his people (3:17, 33:7).

With the scroll in his stomach, Ezekiel goes out to mourn for his people, hearing God's voice and demonstrating lament for what will happen.

God's presence departs

When the time for the destruction of Jerusalem is at hand, God appears to Ezekiel in a second vision and transports him by spirit to see what transpires (chs. 8–11). There Ezekiel sees the judgment on Jerusalem—especially its leaders, for their idolatry and their harm of innocents.

Now the cherubim reappear, and Ezekiel watches as the glory of the Lord dramatically leaves the temple and flies away toward the east as if taken upon an angelic chariot (10:18–19, 11:22–23). The presence of the Lord has left his temple, his people. The point? God's presence was not a given.

This gives Ezekiel the difficult task of speaking to God's people in exile, helping them to understand what went wrong (12:3); calling them to repent of their past (14:6, 18:30, 20:4); and looking to the future that is coming without delay (12:28). God's justice is moving in the world, and the restoration of his people is coming (chs. 20–36).

God's presence brings life

The turning point of the book of Ezekiel comes with the next vision, when God puts his hand on Ezekiel and carries him in the spirit to a valley full of dry bones (37:1–2). There God commands Ezekiel to prophesy that the bones come to life—and before Ezekiel's eyes, the bones start joining together and become en fleshed (37:4–8). Then, upon God's command, Ezekiel calls forth breath from the four winds, and it enters the flesh and bones. Before Ezekiel's eyes, the bones become an army of living people (37:9–10).

The dry bones are brought to life. They represent a multitude of God's people. But life comes to them only because God's Spirit becomes present in them (37:14). This is a rebirth, a restart. Ezekiel learns there is no real life apart from the presence of God.

Ezekiel continues to prophesy: God's people will unify under one shepherd (37:15–28), God will oppose Gog and Magog (38:1–39:24), and he will restore the fortunes of his people (39:25–29).

God's presence returns


Then comes the final vision given to Ezekiel. God again takes Ezekiel to Jerusalem (40:1–2). The glory of God that Ezekiel encounters is similar to his past visions of God, but by this time Ezekiel has grown accustomed to it, and he does not speak of it. Still, Ezekiel falls facedown.

In this vision, Ezekiel encounters a man with the appearance of bronze; he is carrying a linen cord and a measuring rod (40:3). As Ezekiel watches, the man of bronze begins to mark out the dimensions of the new temple (40:4–43:27), the restored priesthood (ch. 44), and the land as an inheritance for God's people (chs. 45–48).

Most importantly, as the new temple and the new city are planned, Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord coming from the east, as if on an angelic chariot, and entering the new temple (43:1–4). Ezekiel watches as the glory of the Lord fills the temple with his presence (43:5).

After describing all the dimensions of the new city, Ezekiel ends his book with a final note: "And the name of the city from that time on will be: 'The LORD Is There'" (48:35 ESV).

In a sense, Ezekiel ends his book the same way he begins it—by explaining how God's presence is made known to people. This time, however, instead of God's presence being made known to people in rebellion, it is made known to people who are faithful. We know these people are faithful because God has replaced their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (11:19; 36:26).

What is the message behind the vision of the wheels and the other surreal images in Ezekiel? For his people, it's no mystery: "The Lord Is There." 



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