

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
EZEKIEL
Chapters 25-48

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CONTENTS

<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	xi
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiv

TEXT AND COMMENTARY

PART 2: MESSAGES OF HOPE AND RESTORATION FOR JUDAH/ISRAEL (25:1-48:35)

I. Negative Messages of Hope: The Oracles Against Foreign Nations (25:1-32:32)	3
A. ORACLES OF JUDGMENT CONCERNING THE FIVE NATIONS (25:1-28:23)	13
1. Short Oracles Against Israel's Neighbors (25:1-17)	13
2. The Oracles Against Tyre (26:1-28:19)	28
B. YAHWEH'S AGENDA FOR THE NATIONS (28:20-26)	121
1. Yahweh's Theological Goal (28:20-23)	123
2. Yahweh's Design for Israel (28:24-26)	125
C. ORACLES OF JUDGMENT CONCERNING EGYPT (29:1-32:32)	128
1. The Oracle Against Pharaoh, the Crocodile of the Nile (29:1-16)	131
2. The Land of Egypt: Nebuchadrezzar's Consolation Prize (29:17-21)	145
3. The Day of Yahweh in Egypt (30:1-19)	154

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

4. Breaking the Arms of Pharaoh (30:20-26)	171
5. The Doom of the Pharaonic Tree (31:1-18)	178
6. The Doom of the Pharaonic Monster (32:1-16)	197
7. Egypt's Descent into Sheol (32:17-32)	212
II. The End of an Era (33:1-33)	234
A. THE FINAL SUMMONS (33:1-20)	236
1. The Charge for the Prophetic Watchman (33:1-9)	237
2. The Appeal of the Prophetic Watchman (33:10-20)	244
B. THE FINAL WORD (33:21-22)	253
C. THE FINAL DISPUTATION: STAKING OUR CLAIMS (33:23-29)	256
1. The Popular Quotation (33:23-24)	258
2. The Prophet's Response (33:25-29)	261
D. THE FINAL VINDICATION (33:30-33)	263
III. Positive Messages of Hope for Israel: The Gospel according to Ezekiel (34:1-48:35)	268
A. PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS: "STAND BY AND SEE THE SALVATION OF YAHWEH!" (34:1-39:29)	273
1. The Salvation of Yahweh's Flock (34:1-31)	273
2. The Restoration of Yahweh's Land (35:1-36:15)	309
3. The Restoration of Yahweh's Honor (36:16-38)	337
4. The Resurrection of Yahweh's People (37:1-14)	367
5. Yahweh's Eternal Covenant with Israel (37:15-28)	393
6. The Guarantee of Yahweh's Protection over Israel (38:1-39:29)	424
B. ENVISIONING THE GOOD NEWS: "STAND BY AND SEE THE RETURN OF YAHWEH!" (40:1-48:35)	494
1. The New Temple (40:1-43:11)	506
2. The New Torah (43:12-46:24)	590
3. The New Land (47:1-48:29)	686
4. The New City (48:30-35)	734

CONTENTS

INDEXES

I. Selected Subjects	747
II. Authors	757
III. Scripture References	766
IV. Extracanonical Literature	806
V. Selected Hebrew Words and Phrases	808

I. NEGATIVE MESSAGES OF HOPE: THE ORACLES AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONS (25:1-32:32)

◆ *Nature and Design*

Ezekiel 25:1 marks a major break in the collection of Ezekiel's oracles. Until this point his prophecies had dealt with the fate of Jerusalem, climaxing in the specific prediction of the city's fall in 24:25-27. It is possible that the account of the fulfillment of this prophecy in ch. 33 followed immediately after the prediction in an earlier edition of these oracles. The editor(s) may have felt the need for a buffer between the prophet's harsh pronouncements of judgment in chs. 4-24 (i.e., chs. 4-24 plus ch. 33) and the hopeful oracles of chs. 34-48. One may view the genre of the oracles against the nations as transitional or hybrid forms. Like the preceding messages concerning Jerusalem, chs. 25-32 consist exclusively of judgment oracles. But no longer are they directed against Judah/Israel. Indeed, in anticipating the judgment of the enemies of God's people, they function as indirect messages of hope, a conclusion reinforced by the fragment separating the oracles against Tyre from those directed against Egypt (28:24-26). The resulting structure of the book (oracles of judgment — oracles against foreign nations — oracles of deliverance) bears a striking resemblance to other collections, specifically those of Isaiah, Zephaniah, and the LXX arrangement of Jeremiah. Oracles against foreign nations were apparently considered transitional, linking words of woe with proclamations of good news.

Nonetheless, to speak of the oracles against foreign nations as a distinctive genre is misleading.¹ Ezekiel's prophecies in this collection display no functional or formal differences from his oracles of judgment against Judah/Israel. The reasons for judgment are similar (social sins, hubris, etc.), the divine punishment is the same (the curses against Judah are turned against Judah's enemies), the vocabulary and tone are similar, and the forms are the same.² Ezekiel's audience would undoubtedly have

1. Contra Hals, *Ezekiel*, p. 351. For a study of oracles against foreign nations as a genre, see D. L. Christensen, *Transformations of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy: Studies in the Oracles Against the Nations*, HDS 3 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975).

2. Ezekiel's prophecies against foreign nations include proof oracles (most ending with the recognition formula; 25:1-7; 25:8-11; 25:12-14; 25:15-17; 26:1-6; 28:20-23; 29:1-16; 29:17-21; 30:1-19; 30:20-26), basic judgment oracles (25:1-26:21; 28:1-10; 28:20-26; 29:1-21; 30:16-26), prophetic laments (27:1-36; 28:11-19; 30:1-5; 32:1-32), and extended metaphors (27:1-36; 28:11-19; 29:1-9; 31:1-18). The overlapping reflects the paucity of "pure" forms of the genres.

welcomed these prophecies because they portrayed their enemies as the objects of Yahweh's judgment.³

Not all of Ezekiel's oracles against foreign nations are gathered in chs. 25–32. In ch. 35 an extended message concerning Edom interrupts his salvation oracles. Some scholars place the oracles against Gog in chs. 38–39 within this class as well.⁴ The prophet may well have proclaimed additional oracles against the nations listed here, to say nothing of the nations not found in this collection. Conspicuously absent are messages addressed to the most powerful nation of the day, and the one most affecting Judean affairs, Babylon.⁵ From 21:33–37 (Eng. 21:28–32) it is evident that Ezekiel occasionally drew Babylon into his judgmental pronouncements, but oracles of the type found in this part of the book are absent entirely. This absence may undoubtedly be attributed to the prophet's pro-Babylonian stance in political matters. To him Babylon was the sword in Yahweh's hand, executing his judgment on Judah. Indeed, the objects of divine wrath in these texts seem to have been selected deliberately, not only because they rejoiced over the demise of Judah but also because they stood in Nebuchadnezzar's divinely ordained path. This view would account for the inordinate attention given to Tyre and Egypt, who represented the principal obstacles to the fulfillment of the Babylonian's mission.

As already suggested, the function of these oracles is not simply to provide a transition between oracles of judgment against Judah and messages of hope for the nation. The nations addressed by Ezekiel all represented the enemies of Israel. Thus a divine pronouncement of judgment on them also served as a backhanded message of hope. Evidence for this understanding is found in the broad symmetrical structure of these oracles. Positioned at the center of this section is the key that unlocks the entire unit. The words of hope inserted in 28:24–26 function as a fulcrum, dividing Ezekiel's oracles against foreign nations into two sensitively balanced halves, virtually identical in length (see the diagram on p. 5).

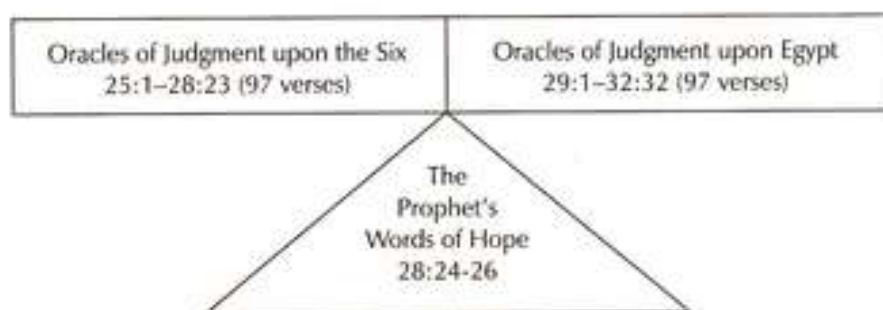
This large section (chs. 25–32) displays other signs of deliberate structuring as well. It is dominated by the number seven.⁶ Seven nations/states are

3. So also D. J. Reimer ("Political Prophets? Another Look at the Oracles Against Foreign Nations," paper read to the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Francisco, November, 1992), who rightly rejects Christensen's view of the writing prophets as political advisers on international affairs.

4. On the special form of these oracles see the commentary below.

5. Ezekiel's silence concerning Babylon contrasts with Jeremiah's utterances. Jeremiah devotes two chapters to Babylon (50:1–51:58), exceeding in length (104 verses) all of Ezekiel's oracles against Egypt.

6. On the significance of the number seven in the OT and the ancient Near East see A. S. Kapelrud, "The Number Seven in Ugaritic Texts," *VT* 18 (1968) 494–99; M. H. Pope, "Seven, Seventh, Seventy," *IDB*, 3:294–95.



addressed: Bene Ammon (25:1-7), Moab (25:8-11), Edom (25:12-14), Philistia (25:15-17), Tyre (26:1-28:19), Sidon (28:20-23), and Egypt (29:1-32:32), a pattern reminiscent of Amos's proclamations against nations foreign to the northern kingdom in Amos 1:3-2:5.⁷ But no effort is made to reduce these oracles to a common length. The prophecies against Egypt are equal in length to the sum of the previous six. Even among the latter there is great variation, from the short prophetic vignettes against Bene Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, and Sidon, to almost three chapters devoted to Tyre. Seven mini-oracles are incorporated into the first half.⁸ Seven oracles against Egypt are preserved in 29:1-32:32, signaled by the sevenfold occurrence of the word-event formula.⁹ Seven date notices break up the oracles.¹⁰

Like Amos's oracles against the nations, Ezekiel's appear to be geographically arranged. In the first half (25:1-28:23) the prophet begins by gazing directly to the east (Bene Ammon), and, moving in a clockwise direction, he deals successively with Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, and Sidon.¹¹ Structurally these prophecies divide into three major parts: (1) short oracles against the five nations (25:1-26:6); (2) additional Tyrian oracles (26:7-28:19); (3) a short oracle against Sidon. The classification of 26:1-6 among the oracles in ch. 25 may be questioned, especially since its intro-

7. The heptad of nations recalls Deut. 7:1, which lists the seven nations occupying the promised land. Garscha (*Studien*, p. 133) suggests that the prophet may be envisioning the eventual return of Judah as a new exodus. For a full discussion of Amos's oracles see J. Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations*, SOTSMS 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a comparison of Amos's and Ezekiel's oracles see J. B. Geyer, "Mythology and Culture in the Oracles Against the Nations," *VT* 36 (1986) 131-32.

8. The dropping of Egypt is compensated for by doubling the oracle(s) against Bene Ammon (25:1-5 and 6-7). See tables 1 and 2.

9. See 29:1, 17; 30:1, 20; 31:1; 32:1, 17.

10. See 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17.

11. This arrangement may explain the placement of the oracle against Sidon (28:20-24) after Tyre, even though in length it resembles the first four (25:1-17). The oracles against Egypt (chs. 29-32) have their own distinctive style and structure, and may be treated separately.

ductory date notice appears to signal a new subunit, the oracles against Tyre that extend through most of the next three chapters. However, this discrepancy should not blind the reader to the fact that it has much stronger stylistic and structural affinities with the foregoing oracles than with the texts that follow.

Even so, scholars disagree about the number of separate prophecies contained in 25:1-26:6. Specifically, do 25:1-7 represent two independent oracles editorially combined,¹² or is the prophet issuing a single message in two parts? The latter is more likely, not only because the two segments are deliberately and uniquely connected by the particle *kî*, but also because the general nature of vv. 6-7 seems to presuppose vv. 3-5. Without vv. 3-5 a reason for Bene Ammon's joy "over the land of Israel" is missing. Furthermore, Yahweh's declaration of his determination to eliminate Bene Ammon as a nation in v. 7 is much more powerful if it is viewed against the backdrop of Bene Ammon's gloating over the annihilation of Israel in v. 3. Nevertheless, as the synopsis in table 1 (p. 7) indicates, both panels of this oracle preserve many of the formulaic features of the separate oracles that follow. With some variation, these mini-oracles tend to follow the standard structure of judgment oracles, each panel consisting of: (1) the introductory citation formula (26:1-6 being an exception); (2) the indictment introduced by *ya'an*, "because" (28:21-22 being an exception); (3) the punishment introduced by *lākēn*, "therefore," followed by two or more announcements of divine actions;¹³ (4) the effect, described by means of the recognition formula. In view of the similarities already mentioned it is perhaps not surprising that this well-defined structure finds its closest parallel in Amos's oracles against the foreign nations (1:3-2:8), though Ezekiel's pronouncements lack Amos's second element, the proclamation of irreversible judgment.¹⁴ Another common feature is the absence of mythological or religious motifs that characterize many of the other oracles against the nations that follow in Ezekiel (chs. 27-32) and those found in the other major prophets, Isaiah (chs. 13-23) and Jeremiah (chs. 46-51).

Stylistically and lexically the oracles display considerable overlapping (table 2, pp. 8-11). Each describes the judgment pronounced on the respective nations in broad terms, the emphasis being on Yahweh's personal initiative and involvement. But the pool of verbs and idioms used to describe his action,

12. So most scholars: Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, pp. 12-14; Fohrer, *Ezekiel*, pp. 145-46; Wevers, *Ezekiel*, p. 196; van den Born, *Ezechiël*, pp. 159-60; Garscha, *Studien*, pp. 135-36.

13. Ezek. 28:20-23 lacks *lākēn*, but this is more than compensated for by the twofold statement of divine action, each of which ends with its own recognition formula.

14. "For three transgressions and for four I will not revoke the punishment." Cf. Geyer, *VT* 36 (1986) 131.

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Robert L. Hubbard Jr., general editor

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