

The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0

Number 111

“Introducing the Book of Ezekiel”

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With

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Introducing the Book of Ezekiel

This episode marks the beginning of the Naked Bible Podcast series on the book of Ezekiel. Several characteristics set Ezekiel off from the rest of the classical (“Writing”) prophets: the prophet’s bizarre behavior, the use of symbols and symbolic acts, and the emphasis on the Spirit. This episode introduces the prophet and what to expect as we explore the book in future series episodes.

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 111, Introducing the Book of Ezekiel. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MSH: Pretty good Trey.

TS: Well good. Looks like Ezekiel won out.

MSH: So Ezekiel had 42 and you said Jeremiah got 40? I know it was kind of close. I expected Jeremiah to win but Ezekiel pulled it out.

TS: Yeah, by a large margin, almost 43 percent versus 33 percent for Jeremiah, almost 10 percent.

MSH: Majority wins so there you go. And Ezekiel is fun. It's not like any of the candidates would have been disappointing but now we know.

TS: And probably we know what the next book we could probably cover after Ezekiel, which would be Jeremiah. Maybe we'll do that or maybe we'll do another vote.

MSH: Whatever sort of hits us when we get to that point.

TS: Do you have an idea of how you're going to break down the book of Ezekiel, how many chapters you going to cover per episode and all that good stuff?

MSH: I don't yet. Some of them are going to just be one like what we're going to do today is what we did with Leviticus, just introduce the book. Those who've listened, well, we did it with Acts, too, a little bit, but moreso with Leviticus, just sort of giving people the lay of the land. Who is this guy? What's the book about, and that sort of thing. How does it flow? Some of the major things that will run into it. Some of the topics that scholars zero in on with respect to Ezekiel. So we'll introduce the book today and then next week when we have the next episode, that will be Chapter 1 because of all the stuff that's in there, the famous Ezekiel's vision. So even though Ezekiel's first vision really is the first couple of chapters, first really three, I think we'll probably just zero in on the first one because of the famous vision and then just sort of go from there. But sometimes it will be one chapter, sometimes it'll be two or three. I just don't really know yet.

TS: Sound's good, looking forward to it.

MSH: Alright, so let's just jump in here to introducing the book, just like we did with Leviticus. We just want to give you the lay of the land in this episode and then we'll jump into it more properly next time. So the prophet Ezekiel, I think most people will be familiar with the basics of who he was. He gets taken captive in what is known as the second phase of Judah's exile. Judah is the southern kingdom, the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. That was actually taken captive in three stages. If you had a Bible intro class or something in church that got into the book of Ezekiel a little bit, did a little background, you're going to know this. Judah was taken captive in

three stages roughly 605, 598-597 or so, then 586 BC is the third and last stage. And that's when Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed. There's no disagreement that Ezekiel was taken captive in the second phase.

So roughly he winds up in Babylon around 598-597 BC. That second phase was the first time that Nebuchadnezzar actually captured Jerusalem. The first of the three phases wasn't a capture of the city but the second one was. He goes in there, captures the city, doesn't destroy it, but he takes a lot of the what you think of as the elite intelligentsia back with him to Babylon, a lot of priests, a lot of scholars, scribes, some of the upper crust elite, royal family, administrative people that would've had serious responsibilities administratively in the government, those sorts of people. That's described in 2 Kings 24:10-17, this second wave, the second phase. So that's when Ezekiel winds up in Babylon. He's taken there, as we know from the beginning of the book, he tells where he's at. Specifically, he and the captives are resettled at the site on the River *Kebar* as we learned from the first chapter. Archeologically speaking, it's a place called Tel Abib, which means mound of the flood. That's actually one of the tributary canals of the Euphrates River. It's near the city of Nippur, for those of you who are interested in the geography. That's where they wind up.

That's where the book opens when they're at this place. Ezekiel himself was a priest. We learned that in the first chapter is well, not only where he is at but who he was a little bit. In verse 3, this gets mentioned. He has a priestly background so that means he has good command of the Torah. It's obvious if you're a priest, you're going to know the Torah pretty well and its laws. That little tidbit is actually going to become relevant in various places in the book, especially where Ezekiel is asked to do something that would've been a violation of the laws of the Torah for priests, some of the rules of purity. That will actually come into play in different parts of the book so it's nice to know that up front that he knows the law very well and he's going to be asked to do certain things and say certain things that that's really going to matter. He was married. We don't find this out in the first chapter but later in the book of Ezekiel 24:18. We do find out that he had a wife and that verse specifies the fact that God tells him that his wife is going to die and it's going to be by God's hand and he's commanded by God not to mourn, which becomes a sign act, a symbol of the sudden destruction of God's sanctuary in Jerusalem and God's own lack of remorse at that event. So he just point blank tells Ezekiel this is what's going to happen. I'll just read a little bit of it.

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶“Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. ¹⁷ Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men.” ¹⁸ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded.

MSH: So Ezekiel is noteworthy for being asked or commanded to do unusual things and this happens to be one of them. This gives us this biographical note that he was, in fact, married but his wife dies in the course of his ministry. From the time of his call, which we get in the early chapters, until the final fall of Jerusalem in 586, the third and last wave of captivity for Judah, Ezekiel is sort of portrayed in the book as kind of a recluse in his own house. He has bouts of

dumbness where he can't speak and paralysis where he can't move. The people view him as sort of a nutcase or oddity. I don't want to be too flippant about that, and I think he would have also almost viewed as entertainment, like let's go over to Ezekiel's house and see what he's doing today. What goofy thing is he going to do? Are we going to find him naked? Is he going to be rolling around in the dirt? Is he going to be shaving his head? Who knows? Who knows what the guy's going to be doing but he's commended to do a series of really unusual things but they all have a purpose. It's not just this random sort of God zapping him and he goes crazy. They all have a specific purpose in the book and those are typically explained when they happen. Ezekiel is sort of a famous book for this kind of thing. Ezekiel received his call roughly shortly after he found himself taken captive in Babylon. His ministry ends around 571 B.C. Ezekiel actually dates the beginning of his call, this statement in the fifth year of the particular kingdom. Let me just go back and read it. There's actually a couple of numbers in the first few verses that scholars debate about. In verse 2, he says,

² On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin),

MSH: So if the captivity of the second wave happened in 598, then if it's the fifth year, 593. He's in Babylon for a few years before God comes to him and calls him as a prophet. And if you look at the chronology of the book, his ministry is going to end a little more than 20 years later, roughly 571 B.C. So it's going to end after Jerusalem and the temple is actually destroyed. That's going to happen during the course of his ministry while he's in Babylon. Some of the crazy things he's supposed to do is actually going to telegraph events that are happening back in Jerusalem. So he's like the TV version of what's happening back there. But he'll do symbolic things to inform the people of what's going on. That's very deliberate on God's part to have him do certain things. It's not just random or to draw attention without a purpose. The Anchor Bible Dictionary has this line in its entry on Ezekiel that says,

“Legend says that Ezekiel is buried in a tomb at Al Kifl, near the modern town of Hilal in Iraqi not far from the site of ancient Babylon. It has been a Jewish shrine of some note.”

MSH: A lot of these places have been in the news recently for being destroyed and pillaged by Isis and whatnot. But it sort of local legend. We don't know that's the case if this was actually the tomb of Ezekiel or not but people might be interested in that because of recent events in our day happening in the same region. Let's talk a little bit about the book itself. We know the basics of who Ezekiel is. He's a priest, knows the law. He's asked to do a bunch of really odd things, some would say crazy things, by God as sort of these visualizations of what's happening or what God is thinking or God's attitude toward his people, toward what's going on historically. In terms of how the book presents Ezekiel's ministry in his life and all this stuff, this book, conveniently enough, is actually one of the most highly structured books among the biblical prophets, the classical prophets. Now that term, classical prophets, refers to the writing prophets. If you had a little Bible college training about the prophets or if you were fortunate enough to actually venture to the Old Testament in church, you would know that there's a distinction between the non-writing prophets, people like Elijah and Elisha who didn't write any books.

There's no book named after them in the Old Testament or credited to them, and the writing prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets. So among the classical prophets, and we'll include the Minor Prophets here even though they're so short, this book has a very carefully laid out structure to it. It's clearly divided into three major sections. The sections actually reflect different parts or different stages of Ezekiel's own ministry. For instance, the first section would roughly be chapters 1 through 24, and all of those chapters are characterized by oracles, sermons, statements, utterances of judgment against Judah, the southern kingdom, and Jerusalem. So chapters 1-24, that's the overarching theme of all of it, judgment against Judah and Jerusalem for their sins, for their apostasy, for their spiritual crimes. Then you get chapters 25-32, and those are oracles against foreign nations, foreign powers, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, and Babylon. Chapters 33-48 comprise the third and last section of the book, and here you get oracles of future restoration and salvation for Judah, and in some places Israel is named as well.

We've already covered some of this turf about how the concept of the exile is fairly clear enough. The northern kingdom being taken into captivity or scattered to the wind in 722, the 10 tribes. And then you get the southern kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, taken later in the series of three captivities, or three invasions if you want to call them that, three stages. So that's easy enough to understand. We've already spent time when talking about eschatology about the concept that for the Israelite and later for the Jew, the exile isn't really over until all the 12 tribes are affected positively, until all the 12 tribes are sort of gathered back into the family of God, into right relationship with God. So that becomes an issue here because in Ezekiel, when he's living and prophesying, the northern 10 tribes are already history. They are already toast. So what he's doing is really ministering to the southern kingdom, the last two that remain. Nevertheless, in this last section, chapters 33-48, he actually does mention both Judah and Israel in terms of restoration and hope, salvation being brought back from exile. That will become important in different passages because it will take us back into this discussion of for a Jew, all these re-gathering passages that lots of modern Christians like to say that's 1948, is that really what they were thinking?

Does this have to be a national entity, national state reestablished or is it a return of members of all the tribes back into right relationship with God? So others would point to things like Acts 2, the events of Pentecost and the founding of the church, which was circumcision neutral because Ezekiel, and he's not the only prophet, will also link the return from exile, the exile being over, also with the gentiles. You don't get as much of that in Ezekiel as you do in a book like Isaiah but there is a consistent theology being put forth here. There are parts in Ezekiel where we'll venture back into eschatology. But you have these nice three sections in Ezekiel, oracles of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, chapters 1-24. Chapters 25-32, he gives it to the foreign powers, rails on them, and then 33-48 about hope and restoration. The division or structuring is clearly intentional. It casts Ezekiel as preaching judgment up until the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. So chapter 32 and the transition to 33, the hope and restoration message, is actually going to chronologically come coincide with the fall of Jerusalem. That sort of brings the whole captivity sequence to a disastrous end. And then from that point on, Ezekiel's message changes and that's important spiritually and theologically because God is saying I meant it when I said you were going to get what was coming to you. And sure enough, he did. But that's not the end of the story. Now, you've seen that I was serious here. Well, I'm just as serious about restoration and so there's a lot going on Ezekiel that is chronologically marked in these sorts of

ways. You can see these transitions. Anchor Bible Dictionary, let me just quote a little section from that about structuring here. ABD says,

“The oracles of judgment helped Israel understand why God let the city of Jerusalem fall and the old Kingdom end for good. The oracle’s directed to pagan nations to serve as a prelude to the establishment of a new kingdom of Israel by announcing punishment on all who oppress God's people. And the oracles of consolation focus on the new order that God will establish for Israel. This last section has two major movements. One, a promise of a new exodus and conquest of the land in chapters 33- 39, and two, a new division of the land and rebuilding of the holy city in chapters 40-48.”

MSH: So this is all very neatly presented. Who really cares? Well, on the one hand, it should be easy to follow and easy to orient yourself as you’re reading the book if you know this. But I think it's important to mention for another reason and one that we’ll hit on in another few minutes here, and that is Ezekiel is not only one of the most deliberately intentionally structured books, but it's also therefore, because of that, it's also one of the books that telegraphs an editorial hand in its creation. Now we've talked about this before on the podcast. I've criticized and will continue to criticize what I view as a paranormal X-Files view of inspiration, that the prophets and other biblical writers were zapped and had their minds go blank and then the Spirit of God takes over there brain and just sort of through automatic writing produce something. And then they wake up and snap out of it and there it is. This is the way inspiration is presented because we have to have a doctrine of verbal plenary full of inspiration. So because of that, this is the way it gets presented, that the Spirit of God has to dispense or download or whisper or dictate every word of the text and when it hits the leather, when it hits the paper so to speak, that's just what it is. It comes directly from the mouth of the Spirit of God. That’s sort of an odd way of putting things but you get the idea.

This is the way inspiration is presented. Ezekiel is a very loud argument that that isn't the way it worked. Are we supposed to conclude that Ezekiel in real time for the first X number of years, if it's 593 to 586, so for the first seven years of his ministry he could never utter a word against a foreign nation? Well, I’m supposed to preach against Judah and Jerusalem first and then the Spirit of God will direct me to preach against somebody else. And then it after it's destroyed, then I’m going to do this. Did he really do this in real time? Is his preaching really restricted this tightly to these three major sections? I can never talk about one thing before the other one's done. That’s a little silly but if you’re going to take this X-Files view of inspiration and the book just spills out the way it's formed, that's what you have to think. Ezekiel is a book that is just demonstrably not that way. I’ll hit this in another few minutes because this is one of those books that if you're a scholar, you notice the editorial hand of lots of things in the book. As we go through the book in the podcast, I’m not going to be pointing all this stuff out. When it is important, I will.

When it's interesting, I will. Scholars spend a great deal of time trying to detect this activity and seems just to learn how the book was put together. One of the most telling things is a switch from first person to third person. We’ll get to that in a moment. It will be a familiar illustration for those long time listeners to the podcast. This kind of thing happens in Ezekiel a lot. On occasion, sort of understanding it becomes important for interpreting a particular

passage so I wanted to mention it here. Let's talk about, just transition here generally noteworthy features about the book. Ezekiel is known I would say primarily for really two things just on a thematic level. And that is what scholars like to call the ecstatic visions of Ezekiel and what that means is the instances where Ezekiel will say he was taken by the Spirit or lifted up by the Spirit or the Spirit of God comes upon him, sort of like, catch the terminology because you'll actually see this in academic literature, sort of spirit possession but in a good sense, like he's possessed by the Spirit of God to do these crazy things. That doesn't account for how the book was formed and the evidences for editing. It might be sort of a bad characterization just generally.

Was he really possessed? I don't like the term because it conjures up certain kinds of images because of the dark side of such language. But that's the way scholars will talk about it. The other thing that it's really known for thematically is sign acts and symbolic acts where Ezekiel is supposed to do something a little bit crazy as a visualization. Let's talk about the visions part. Ezekiel does stand out in this regard among the classical prophets, the major writing prophets. It is very obvious, those other books don't have nearly as much of this kind of language in them as Ezekiel does. The classical prophets generally avoid phrases like the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon me. You won't read that in most of the prophetic books. Ezekiel, however, uses it fairly frequently so it's a marked difference between this book and other prophetic books. Generally, I'd say the language indicates a divine compulsion to speak or some sort of divine prompting. Some scholars have taken the language and interpreted it like its possession or some kind of trance state. That's disputed among academic, how to understand a phrase like the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon me, came upon me. Does that have to denote that Ezekiel lost his mind or had some kind of, for lack of a better way to characterize it, some sort of epileptic seizure? You'll actually find some scholars who discuss this.

They say Ezekiel probably had some medical condition like epilepsy or something and then he just thought he saw this or that. Those who take a more skeptical attitude toward the existence of God, much less God's interactivity with a person or prophet, that's the direction they go. They'll characterize it that way. Personally, I think that the parallels that you could marshal from other passages make a trance state for this kind of language really unlikely. What I mean by that is if you actually look up some of the language used of Ezekiel, it will actually refer elsewhere like in the case of Elijah, let's use him as an example. Elijah in 1 Kings 18 says,

¹² And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me,"

MSH: This idea of being lifted up by the Spirit or seized by the Spirit or taken by the Spirit, if you go to Elijah's instance, you're talking about geography. He is transported, he is moved from one location to another. So it's not this trance state. I will grant you that there'll be people who will say we can't take this language literally, like Elijah was actually physically transported. In his mind he was transported, so he is some sort of trance state. This is why there's a debate. But I think if you just take it for what it says, and in Elijah's case, and you have other cases of this in the Old and New Testament like with Phillip in the New Testament book of Acts. They are actually moved physically from one location to another by the Spirit of God. It's not a trance.

They're actually there and then they're not there. They're somewhere else. So I personally think that the parallels or the way this material gets talked about.

I find it kind of unsatisfying if we're just going to say that this is all happening in the prophet's head, that kind of discussion. In the academic literature, a lot of the people who are writing that sort of stuff, they either don't assign reality to a lot of the Spirit activity that you'll see a book like Ezekiel. And so this is the direction they go in their interpretation that it's this trance like state. It's just all happening in the prophet's mind. He's having some sort of seizure. There's something wrong with the brain wiring or whatever. The more bizarre theories is that he took hallucinogens or something. You'll read this kind of thing when you read about, academically speaking read about the classical prophets. Because if you don't want to assign validity to a Holy Spirit who is a person who's part of the Godhead, or even if you're Unitarian, this is actually a divine entity, a divine being, who can actually transport someone physically? If you're not going to go there, what are you left with? You're left with some of this other talk about it's all happening in the brain. There's no immaterial spiritual reality here. So that's just what you're going to run into. Before we leave this topic, we should also point out that this language shows up in the Torah and also you get it in the book of Judges, this idea of being overcome by the Spirit. For instance, in Numbers 11, just read a couple of these examples. We read,

¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

MSH: Are we really supposed read that God's telling Moses you know how you flip into trances a lot? I'm going to do that to other people that will help you. To me, the language just doesn't work. That doesn't work well with trying to figure out what's going on here. The Spirit moves the bands of the prophets in 1 Samuel 10 when Saul was among them. They have an ability to see things or say things. They get visions and things like this. The visions actually happen in real time. There's some counterpart to it that lends credibility and reality to what's going on. So in the visions case, you can say God showed them something and that's inside their head but it doesn't always work. You have these other contexts or passages where just to say somebody went into a trance, it might work one place but it doesn't really work in another. The account of Balaam is sort of noteworthy for this where Balaam is hired to curse the people of Israel and can't do it because God takes over the process. So in that episode, you get the same kind of thing. You also get in the Balaam episode the phrasing about setting one's face against the object of an oracle or prophecy.

Ezekiel is one of the books where this language shows up and it really doesn't show up in other ones. Ezekiel sets his face against so and so and pronounced an oracle against them. That material comes from the Torah so there's some relationship between the way things are worded in Ezekiel and the way things get worded in certain passages in the Torah. There are going to be points in the book of Ezekiel where that will be helpful to note these parallels and help us figure out what's happening and what maybe is not happening. If you do a lot of reading on classical prophets, especially if it's from someone who just doesn't want to tolerate an immaterial world, they're committed to a materialistic worldview, this is what you're going to get. It's all just something happening in the head. It's something physical, something medical, and something psychological. Now I'm going to give an example of this what I'm commenting on. This is a

lengthy quotation from Anchor Bible Dictionary just to illustrate how academics talk about this typically because they want to be so careful not to say any of this is real, and that's probably a little bit pejorative. They want to be careful to attribute any of this stuff to the intervention in human history or in someone's life by an actual deity. They might say it's real but it's just something going on in the head. They are often so careful to not sound too pious or too religious or too believing that it's just kind of irritates me. I think you can probably tell this. Here's this passage from Anchor Bible Dictionary. This is their discussion about the book of Ezekiel. Listen to this.

“Commentators have long been troubled about certain seeming inconsistencies between the claims for Ezekiel's historical ministry and the nature of the actual oracles in the book. One major question has centered on the personality of the prophet. There are accounts of great ecstatic visions which seemed to seize the prophet (chapters 1:8-10, 37,40). He speaks of the hand of God grabbing him and moving him physically (Ezekiel 37:1) or the Spirit of God entering him in power (Ezekiel 2:1). He performs symbolic actions, which appear impossible or crazed by modern standards, lying on his side for 390 days or digging through a wall of his house or swallowing a scroll in ecstasy. Many scholars have argued that he received most of his words in a trance or showed signs of abnormal parapsychology or even of an unbalanced mind. Still others have been troubled by the contrast between the vividness of his descriptions of Jerusalem and his knowledge of what was going on there and the claim that he knew this only through prophetic revelation while in Babylon.”

MSH: I'll stop here for a moment. There are places in Ezekiel where he describes precisely what's going on Jerusalem. How do you do that? Nowadays, if you're committed to a totally or gravitate toward a nonmaterialistic worldview, and what I mean by that is it's not a denial of his consciousness. It's a denial there's deity involved, that it's some sort of psychic power. That's okay because that's still something that's attached to your brain. We can live with that. We just can't have a deity actually doing any of this stuff. Now you'd call it remote viewing, that sort of thing. And this is why I'm very wary of Christians using the Bible using passages about Ezekiel and other prophets to prop up certain notions like remote viewing. I'm not denying that there can be a psychic ability like this. That isn't my point. My point is you don't want to take language that's attributed to the activity of God and making it only your brain. A lot of Christians do that for some reason, that they have to have a Bible proof text for this topic they're interested in, remote viewing. That's like what Ezekiel was doing. Well, do you really want to say that, because if you say it often enough, you're going to divorce God from the equation. You're going to delete the Spirit and when you delete God and the Spirit, you start deleting the immaterial reality. You start eliminating a dualistic worldview whether it's a genuine spiritual realm and the physical realm. So back to the quotation.

“Over the last hundred years, several notable scholars have argued that Ezekiel's ministry must've taken place only in Jerusalem, at least from the period from 593-586, and the so-called Babylonian like locale was an editorial fiction to make the book acceptable later to the exiles. However,

in light of the book's unwavering insistence on Ezekiel's location in Babylon and the strong probability of exchange of messengers between the exiles and homeland, this seems mostly a forced exercise and has one very little critical support."

MSH: So now you're reading this as someone who believes in a spiritual world and you're thinking the guy who wrote the Anchor Bible Dictionary must be a believer. He's a good guy now because he's saying it's just not legitimate to say that Ezekiel was there in Jerusalem because that's the only way he could have gotten this information. The writer's denying that so you might think he's on the side of the supernatural. Not so fast.

"If Ezekiel was already an adult when he was sent into exile in 598, he probably knew the Jerusalem scene well and his oracular words may well have been fueled by specific incidents reported to the exiles in Tel Abib by an occasional messenger from Jerusalem. This by no means rules out the further possibility that he had some parapsychic powers to envision events at a distance."

MSH: Don't credit to God, maybe he was a remote viewer. Maybe he had parapsychic ability. If you're a supernaturalist, and I realize this is like a Venn diagram, like there are events that are paranormal, powers and abilities that presumably use terms like paranormal and parapsychology for. I get that. I'm friendly to the question. This is why we do the other podcast, peernormal to discuss topics like this. So I don't feel any inner compulsion to say that there aren't such abilities like that because if we say that there are, then we have to dump our Bible. It is not an all or nothing proposition so let's just dispense with the either/or fallacy right here. What I'm saying, though, is that there is a propensity to assign everything in the Bible, miracles, how they have to have a naturalistic explanation. What happens to Ezekiel, that has to be remote viewing. It has to be some parapsychic ability, as though God can't do anything. We tie god's hands when we try to make these one-to-one equations and you get that a lot in academic discussion of the prophets, even by people who, like this guy, he's trying to word it in such a way where he's not making it all normal.

Some of it might be paranormal but it's still not a deity. It's not God doing something. It's a parapsychic ability and that irritates me because that's just academese for I don't want my colleagues to think that I actually believe any of this stuff about the God of Israel, so that's a bit irritating. But I just want you to know the reason why I included the quotation here. This is how stuff gets talked about and we need to think about how we're talking about what happens to prophets, how we're talking about what they do so that, on the one hand, maybe the stopping of the Jordan River in the days of Joshua, maybe that was due to an earthquake. Maybe the river was stopped at just the right time and the Israelites crossed over. There are people who argue for this. I get it. It is still miraculous because God has to have it happen at the right time. But it's this propensity to try to find something normal about a miracle or about a divine act to make it palatable, to make it reasonable. I would suggest to you that it is reasonable that God exists, and if God exists, it's perfectly reasonable that he can actually do something. It would be unreasonable to think that he can't do anything or He's not interested in doing anything. That would be unreasonable for an intelligent being, especially one who had great power.

We're intelligent beings and we like to do stuff. So it's not reasonable to gravitate away from real time divine activity. You know who the guy behind the microphone here, that I'm a supernaturalist, I'm perfectly willing to see God doing things. But in the academic discourse, this is how stuff gets talked about, even among believers, even among scholars who would accept the trinity and they're Christians. Here we go with the selective supernaturalism again that I wrote about in *Unseen Realm*, just so that you know. Let's talk a little bit about symbolic acts. That was these ecstatic states if you want to look at it that way, and the other thing thematically the book is known for is symbolic acts. This refers to when Yahweh, the God of Israel commands the prophet to do something strange and provocative, this visualization idea. Now other prophets do things that are a little bit odd but Ezekiel is famous or infamous for this. It happens with more frequency in this book.

The point of them is dramatic effect. The prophet performs the message. He doesn't just preach verbally. He performs a message. He gives it a visualization and typically, either before he does it or after he does the symbolic action, the interpretation and the reason he's doing it, what it means is actually offered and explained in the text. Examples would be, just generally, we're going to hit all these naturally as we go through the book in the podcast. Examples would be where Ezekiel draws Jerusalem, draws the city on a brick, chapter 4. Another point, he lays on his side for both 390 and 40 day increments, chapter 4. He shaves his head with a sword, chapter 5. He makes a directional sign to Jerusalem for the invading Babylonians, chapter 21. It's like you guys who are invading Jerusalem, here's the correct direction. We don't want you to miss the city. He actually does stuff like this and there's a point to it. God is sending this army and that's why they're going to show up and that's why they're going to do what they're doing. It is a judgment.

So Ezekiel is just known for this kind of thing and it's what makes the book interesting and to some degree popular among the prophets because it's just strange stuff. Let's talk about a few other things. Broadly speaking here, we're talking about noteworthy features. We talked about ecstatic visions and the symbolic acts. Those are the two things that are new mostly associated with the book broadly by a broad audience. When you get into the academic circles, Ezekiel is also known for textual problems. This isn't something that translates well to a podcast and you all would have to be readers of Greek and Hebrew. I am not going to burden any podcast episode with textual criticism. Where it matters, I'll say something about it and how it helps or how it produces a resolution or a problem or whatnot. But the book of Ezekiel has a fair number of difficult words in it, difficult or archaic grammatical forms that you won't see anywhere else. There's lots of text critical problems. Some of these will become important. For instance, in Dan Block's article, Dan Block wrote a noteworthy commentary. It is actually a two volume commentary on the book of Ezekiel and he actually has a number of journal articles that are relevant to the book of Ezekiel he took out of his commentary and expanded on them. One of them has to do with chapter 1 and Chapter 1 has an unusual number of text critical problems, things that just don't seem right.

There's variant readings in the Septuagint or some other manuscript or it has a bunch of these sort of odd grammatical elements. Block actually has an article where he grocery list these things. Just an example for those who do have a little bit of Hebrew. At one point, the writer will use the second person suffix which is you or your on a noun. Then he'll use the same noun a verse later and switch the person and number or he'll use one grammatical form that's normal for something and then he'll take the very same vocabulary item and put it in some weird form

that is archaic, old forms of Hebrew. Hebrew's like English. It's like any other language. It goes through stages of development both in terms of vocabulary and in terms of grammar. So why does this happen in this book, because it happens a lot? Block in chapter 1 actually says that he thinks it's actually deliberate in that chapter because to him, it conveys the idea that this thing I'm seeing is so crazy and so awesome, I'm going to do crazy stuff as I write about it just draw attention to fact that I'm witnessing shock and awe. I don't know if I buy that explanation but just to give you an idea that sometimes these kinds of things happen in the book and when it becomes an issue, I'll bring it up. But this isn't a discussion for text critical scholars. But it's one of the things that Ezekiel is known for and I'm bringing it up because there will be occasions as we go through the book where I say the way to resolve this thing, it is a text critical issue. You go one way or the other based upon whether you're reading the traditional Masoretic text or the Septuagint.

Now for those who read Unseen Realm, you already know where this can happen in the course of our podcast, especially if you ventured out of Unseen Realm when you went to the companion website of the book, more unseen realm.com. Ezekiel 28, I said in the book, my view is actually the minority view in academic scholarship. I think that Ezekiel 28 is describing Eden, and the cherub in Ezekiel 28 is a divine being in rebellion. That is a minority view and the reason is text critical because I'm sticking with the Masoretic text there. And I think there's lots of things in chapter 28 that point to a Canaanite rebellion motif and we'll get to those when we get to the chapter. Other commentators go with the Septuagint. If you read Ezekiel 28 with the Septuagint, then the cherub in the garden, you have this odd situation where you don't have the cherub in the garden. You have somebody either with the cherub and then they would say that points to Adam. Who else would be in the garden? And so Adam becomes the point of the pride talk in Ezekiel 28. Adam becomes the focus of the royal language, the glittering language and all this kind of stuff. This is why a lot of people will say Ezekiel 28 has nothing to do with Genesis 3 and it has nothing to do with Isaiah 14, the so-called fall of Lucifer passage. I'm saying it has everything to do with those two chapters but most scholars don't because they prefer the Septuagint in Ezekiel 28.

I don't think there's any reason to retreat, and I'm using that word deliberately because I think it is a retreat, to retreat to the Septuagint to explain what's going on Ezekiel 28. There's no reason for it at all. So when we get to that chapter, that's a good example of how we'll get into text critical talk and how it really matters for how you read something in the book. The book is well known for these sorts of situations. Another thing it's known for that I brought up a few minutes earlier was evidence of editorial work and the best place to go for that is the first chapter. This will sound familiar for a lot of you but some of you are going to be new to this idea of editorial work in the Bible. How can you say the Bible was edited? Well, basically the short answer is because it was because if you actually read it closely, you can tell. Inspiration is a process, not an event. It's not a paranormal event. It's a process. God used many hands to produce the final form of this thing we call the inspired word of God. It's all God. It doesn't matter if you know who touched it or you don't. You either believe that God is behind the process or you don't. I do. Let me just read you the first few verses of Ezekiel 1 to see this just point blank. Listen carefully.

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I

saw visions of God. ² On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), ³ the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the LORD was upon him there.

MSH: Did you see what happened there? Did you hear it? There is a change from first person to third. That doesn't make any sense at all if it was dictated or downloaded.

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. ³ the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest.

MSH: Why doesn't it say the word of the Lord came to me? Why don't we continue in the first-person? Why doesn't it say the hand of the Lord was upon me there? It says upon him, refers to Ezekiel the third person. So who's narrating this? Is it eyewitness testimony, first-person Ezekiel, or is it somebody else writing about Ezekiel? The answer is yes, you have both of them in the same three verses. This shows that parts of the book are very evidently written by the prophet himself and other parts are going to be written by somebody else about the events. Ezekiel is actually going to give you a combination of first-person writing and third person writing. This is crystal clear evidence that someone other than Ezekiel contributed to the book and fashioned the book into the form in which we have. It's a very carefully ordered, very carefully crafted book, three discernible sections, each section is its own sort of real estate, oracles against Jerusalem. Then you get the foreign nations, then you get restoration and hope. It's very easy and neatly laid out. Somebody had to do that and somebody did do it. So there will be passages in Ezekiel as we go through in the podcast where I will comment about the best way to look at this is to recognize that you have some sort of addition, something that was added to maybe a sermon that Ezekiel is preaching had first-person language and here's something that's added, a thought that's added to it. There will be things like that in the book that you just have to be a careful reader and pick out and then consider the importance or the implication of what's going on. We'll hit a few of those as we go through.

I'm not going to turn this into a graduate school class. When I was in graduate school, one of the required courses was Ezekiel and it's for this reason. Because in grad school, they used the book to teach you about what they call redaction, which is editing, the deliberate techniques that writers would use to arrange material and communicate certain things by virtue of those arrangements. That's the kind of thing you do in grad school. I'm not going to turn the podcast in that but where it's important, I'll mention it. You'll have a frame of reference for it. Now lastly, before we end this overview, the other thing that's going to become apparent in Ezekiel is dates and chronology. Ezekiel actually has a lot of chronological information in it. It's well known for providing a pretty specific chronology of events within the book itself. There are actually 15 different dates given in the book so that you can just follow the events of the book sequentially which allow scholars to date the material with a high degree of certainty. Let me read another little section from Anchor Bible here about the dating issues. It says,

“There is a calculated series of dates which had selected oracles throughout the book. These dates fall into two major types. One is a series

of seven dates that had oracles against foreign nations in chapters 25-32. They are tied to specific political actions on the part of enemy nations which Ezekiel denounced at the time. Six of these had oracles against Egypt. They are almost certainly reliable [**MSH: a high degree of precision when it comes to helping date the book itself and what's being referred to in the book.**] The second series of dates has major moments in the prophets preaching career and served show that the message he delivered was step-by-step in line with God's plan as it moved inexorably through judgment, disaster, and then restoration. These also form a series of seven, a favorite number in Ezekiel to show completion and fullness. Chapter 1:2-3 and chapter 3:16 mark the prophet's inaugural call. Chapter 8:1 indicates the time of the vision of the divine glory in Jerusalem. Chapter 20:1 was more problematic but maybe tied to the beginnings of rebellion under Zedekiah. Chapter 24:1 marks the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Chapter 33:21 notes the arrival of the news of the fall of Jerusalem and the start of Ezekiel's Ministry of promise. Chapter 40:1 signals the final vision of the new Jerusalem and its Temple. Each date is later than the proceeding one in the series so that their placement gives a strong chronological ordering of the whole book.

MSH: The 15th date, the one outlier here, occurs in the first line of the book and that's something we'll hit in the next episode when we jump into chapter 1 because there is bit of a controversy about the date and how to understand it. But for our purposes here in this introductory overview, we're going to hit these passages that talk about the dates. We're going to see Ezekiel doing things for 390 days and 40 days and all that sort of stuff. And there are going to be places where that's important knowing that Ezekiel gives lots of dates and he telegraphs or attaches those dates to certain things he's doing and certain things happening in real time. Knowing that helps you decipher what in the world the guy's talking about and what's going on. So it's a very nice book for giving you that kind of orientation. So to end here for this episode of the overview, what's the take away?

Well, the first one you already knew. Ezekiel has a lot of strange stuff in it, sign acts, being seized by the Spirit. Is that a trance or not? Is it something else? How do we understand that? Why is he running around with no clothes on? It has a lot of strange stuff in the book, which makes a little bit popular if people ever get to it either in personal reading or church. That stuff isn't random. It's not there for entertainment. It's not there to get a laugh. It's not a laugh track. It's actually important and we'll talk about what it signifies when we get to those places. Secondly, at times correct interpretation of Ezekiel hinges on recognizing some more academic things like textual problems, archaic grammatical forms, and editorial clues. When it's important, I will make that part of a podcast episode when it really contributes something to interpretation as opposed to just being a point of curiosity. We're going to hit some of that stuff. I can almost guarantee that you not going to hear that kind of thing in church or anywhere else, if you ever get to hear the Old Testament in church. But sometimes it's really important and when it is, we'll hit those and I'll try to unravel it for you. Third and lastly, I alluded to this a little bit with Ezekiel 28.

There are certain contexts in Ezekiel that we need to pay attention to. They're in Babylon. That's the biggest one. So there are going to be things in the book that will make sense in a Babylonian or Mesopotamian context. And the writers there, the people he's writing to are there and Ezekiel, or whoever the editor was at any given point, either the prophet or somebody else, the fact that they're in Mesopotamia could be important because they could be taking a stab at a Mesopotamian belief or Mesopotamian god or Mesopotamian point of their religion, something like that that will lend clarity to what's going on in the text. But that's not the only context. That's not just Mesopotamia or Babylon. You have a strong Canaanite context in certain chapters. You have a strong Phoenician context in certain chapters. So when we hit these places, we are going to go into Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Canaanite, Phoenician religion and some of this is external material that will help us decipher what in the world was Ezekiel trying to say to his audience in their own time and space. We're going to pay attention to looking at Ezekiel in his own context, in the original context, because that's what we do here at the Naked Bible Podcast. This is where we live. This is sort of the bread-and-butter here and it's something that I believe the audience can digest and appreciate. I'm not going to turn it into a classroom necessarily but when we hit those things, we will not be afraid to get into them when they have explanatory power and when they really contribute something to the discussion.