

# Preaching the Book of Ezekiel



# Preaching the Book of Ezekiel:

*A Neglected Prophet*

By

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## FOREWORD

The Book of Ezekiel has long stood as one of the most enigmatic and challenging texts within the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament. Its complex combination of vivid imagery, dramatic sign-acts, piercing allegories, and intricate theological themes often renders it a neglected resource for contemporary preaching. Yet, in *Preaching the Book of Ezekiel: A Neglected Prophet*, Prof. Joel Biwul masterfully reclaims this prophetic work, offering a transformative guide for pastors, theologians, and lay preachers alike. It is a pioneering contribution to the field of homiletics, presenting Ezekiel as an indispensable resource for the modern pulpit. By exploring Ezekiel's creative communication tools—his metaphors, imageries, prophetic formulas, parables, and visionary encounters—the book reveals the prophet's unparalleled ability to confront, inspire, and restore his audience. Ezekiel's artistry and theological profundity are not merely historical artifacts but living instruments for preaching today's gospel with transformative power.

Biwul brings fresh perspectives to the preaching of Old Testament text by focussing on four pioneering aspects that could reshape the preaching of Ezekiel. First, this book provides distinctive attention to Ezekiel's unique literary styles. It uncovers the literary genius embedded within Ezekiel's text, emphasising how the prophet uses literary devices to communicate divine messages effectively. By analysing the interplay of poetry, prose, and parabolic expressions, the book equips preachers to harness these styles for compelling sermon delivery. Secondly, the book explores Ezekiel's creative communication strategies. The book highlights the prophet's imaginative use of symbols, sign-acts, and allegories, which vividly communicate divine truths. Biwul demonstrates how these creative strategies can inspire preachers to craft sermons that captivate and engage their congregations, making biblical messages relatable and impactful.

This work engages the discourse devices and theological themes in the book of Ezekiel through the lens of preaching the book. Biwul identifies Ezekiel's distinctive use of language and prophetic formulas as tools for emphasising key theological themes such as divine sovereignty, human responsibility, restoration, and hope. This focus equips preachers with a deeper

understanding of Ezekiel's theological vision and its relevance for contemporary audiences, particularly in the context of the sabotaging of this particular theological emphasis in our modern African preaching. Lastly, the book offers a sensitive approach to the multiple genres in the Book of Ezekiel in order to recover the original world and issues for preaching the Book of Ezekiel in today's world. In this regard, it boldly presents a genre-sensitive approach to preaching Ezekiel, recognising the diversity of forms within the text—ranging from oracles of judgment to visions of restoration, prophetic visionary encounters to events in the life of the prophet. Biwul encourages preachers to embrace the multifaceted nature of Ezekiel's communication styles for dynamic and versatile sermon preparation.

Beyond these contributions, *A Neglected Prophet* also situates the Book of Ezekiel within the broader biblical narrative, showcasing his prophetic voice as both a product of exile and a harbinger of hope. Biwul's work reminds us that Ezekiel's messages are timeless, addressing not only the ancient Israelites but also contemporary societies grappling with crises of identity, faith, and morality.

This book is a landmark achievement for biblical scholarship and practical theology, bridging the gap between academic study and pastoral application. Biwul's meticulous research, coupled with his passion for preaching, makes this volume an indispensable tool for anyone seeking to unlock the richness of Ezekiel on the pulpit.

As an expert on the Old Testament, I recommend *Preaching the Book of Ezekiel: A Neglected Prophet* for its innovative approach and invaluable insights. May this work inspire a new generation of preachers to embrace Ezekiel's prophetic voice, transforming the neglected prophet into a central figure in the preaching of God's Word in modern Africa and even beyond.

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Third, my daughter, Mrs. Grayom Aputgurum Faruk Tijani-Biwul, the last of three children, once said "Academics is quite stressful." This is true and apt because quality academic output demands commitment, dedication, sacrifice, and funding as well. Accordingly, my two-months research trip to Princeton Theological Seminary would not have been possible without the

award of the Global South Scholarship by the Seminary. The grant helped significantly in moving forward with the book project; without it this book would probably not have been completed. I express my unquantifiable gratitude to the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Jonathan Lee Walton, who graciously granted me a place as visiting scholar and approved the Global South Scholarship for my research for this book.

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Motivation

Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, from a priestly ancestry like Jeremiah (Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3), was among the Babylonian community of exiles who resided near Nippur called Tell-Abib on the Kebar River (Ezek 1:1; 3:15; 11:15, 24-25) in Babylonia (about 50 miles south of Babylon on the Euphrates River). He was called and commissioned to the prophetic role in exile and his period of ministry stretched approximately from 593 to 571 BCE. Like his prophetic colleagues, Ezekiel also left his prophetic memoirs behind, whether as a whole or in part.<sup>1</sup> The designation Ezekiel is a reference to both the name of the sixth-century prophet in exile and the records of his preaching.<sup>2</sup>

A modern reader may exclaim: “The Book of Ezekiel is a difficult book. I have a hard time understanding its message. I have lost interest in it and will not return to reading it.” Many readers of the book named after Ezekiel share this frustrated sentiment. When people become frustrated with a particular subject, they equally become disinterested, with little to learn from it. An illustration clarifies the point:

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<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that Ezekiel was not completed by one author; some sections or chapters are a later editorial reworking. Klaus Kock is correct in conceding that “To discern between the prophetic original and the additions of his school, however, is much more difficult than in the case of Isaiah or Jeremiah.” He reasons that “The relationship between the Hebrew prophets and the books that bear their names is complex”, as expressed above regarding the evidence of participating individuals or groups who preserved the prophet’s words (Isa 8:16; Jer 36). Nonetheless, it is important to note that “Such is not the case with Ezekiel. No such disciples are named, and Ezekiel’s autobiographical style suggests his close involvement with recording the written traditions that bear his name.” Kock, Klaus. “Latter Prophets: The Major Prophets”. In *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 363. Also see Reimer, David J. “Ezekiel”. In *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 1495.

<sup>2</sup> Reimer, “Ezekiel”, 1495.

During my first year as a seminary student, three and a half decades ago, one of the courses I attended was Introduction to Church History. The lecturer was from Ireland. It was difficult to follow him because I could not understand his Irish accent. But I was not alone. A fellow student also complained about the teacher's difficult linguistic accent, saying that all he heard and understood in that class was the word "Jesus". So, for a whole semester, the student struggled to follow the lecturer in class, just as I did. Although the teacher was a simple and nice person, some students lost interest in the course he was teaching because they were frustrated by his difficult Irish accent. This can also be said about the Book of Ezekiel.

Some Old Testament books are quite difficult to comprehend in terms of their literary style and their messages. Gordon J. Wenham observes that the Old Testament as a whole is perceived to have a bad reputation in the eyes of many readers. As the author puts it, "In many circles, including the churches, the OT has such a bad reputation, as cruel, violent and obsolete, that a preacher will have a job to make people listen to its message."<sup>3</sup> A similar negative attitude can be said to exist about the book of Ezekiel due to some of its bizarre images, absurd language, and enigmatic and difficult aspects. Joseph Blenkinsopp confirms that we cannot doubt that Ezekiel is a difficult book.<sup>4</sup> Among the Old Testament prophetic books, Ezekiel seems to be one of the most difficult and uninteresting to many modern readers, and for good reasons.

But the same can also be said about the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. These two books are like Siamese twins that balance the Old and New Testaments with their dauntingly bizarre and difficult literary styles and content. Both books contain problematic visionary contents, and absurd and difficult graphic images, symbols, and metaphors of which the meanings are difficult to decipher. Not many readers or preachers have an interest in a biblical book that appears to make only a little sense at best or is simply confusing at worst.

Ezekiel is presented in two literary formats—narrative and poetic. Quite obviously, the literary structure of the book flows seamlessly with an

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<sup>3</sup> Wenham, Gordon J. "Preaching from Difficult Texts". In 'He Began with Moses . . .': Preaching the Old Testament today, ed. Grenville J.R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, and Laurence A. Turner (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 215. See pp. 215-232 for the whole article.

<sup>4</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Ezekiel: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 3.

obstructing intrusion. The prophet interrupts the divine message to Israel to provide space to accommodate messages to the surrounding foreign nations relating to harmful relationships with the covenant nation. While the narrative sections appear straightforward, the poetic sections present hermeneutical hurdles.

After a considerable number of years studying the Book of Ezekiel, I am convinced that the book can become interesting to modern readers if the poetic sections are well interpreted. Readers should set aside the idea that the book is incomprehensible. Walter Brueggemann laments the general present attitude to the prophetic texts in the church. “These texts have dropped out of the repertoire of the church because they do not conform to our deceived condition. But when these texts can be read, heard, shared, and only slightly interpreted, they will do their work of undeceiving.”<sup>5</sup> This truth also applies to the text of Prophet Ezekiel.

Hence, the motivation for this book is that when pastors or preachers put in an effort to study the text named after the prophet Ezekiel, with an adequate grasp of the poetic sections, and interpreting the entire book against its historical, political, social, religious, and psychological contexts, they will gain a better understanding of the book. When such new knowledge is creatively and innovatively shared through preaching, it will achieve two significant results—it will shine a new light as it opens the door to understanding the book to readers, and this in turn will generate interest in the book. The endeavour here is to apply a rhetorical-discursive approach to the Book of Ezekiel to motivate interest and gain more readership.

### *The Difficulty*

Though Prophet Ezekiel was a fascinating personality, the book named after him is widely considered as a difficult one. Several reasons explain such perceived difficulty. When reading the book, it becomes clear that, compared to other prophetic literature that use less elaborate forms, Ezekiel is “made up of intricate, deliberately composed literary creation ... [hence,] Ezekiel’s character as a literary text makes it a complex book to read and interpret”.<sup>6</sup> The uniquely Ezekielian literary style of prophetic utterances

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2019), 110.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, Stephen L. “Ezekiel”. In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Coogan, Michael D., Brettler, Marc Z., Newsom, Carol A., and Perkins, Pheme (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 118.

such as the bizarre images, the absurd sexually provocative language, the enigmatic visionary encounters, the difficult metaphors, and figures and symbols, have contributed to the fact that this book is perceived negatively. For this very reason, many people of faith and others have been deterred from reading it. As Gary T. Manning Jr. observes, Ezekiel's disconcerting habit of using familiar metaphors in unfamiliar ways makes this prophet one of Israel's most unusual prophets.<sup>7</sup> The Prophet Ezekiel himself remains an obscure figure, even more so than the book that bears his name, which remains an eccentric sacred literary text in which there is minimal interest.

Therefore, it is not surprising that there is hardly any preaching from the Book of Ezekiel. It seems most preachers not only treat Ezekiel as a neglected prophetic figure and forget this prophetic book; they apparently treat it as an unfortunate outcast among the prophetic books in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It may be for this very reason that Daniel I. Block considers the Book of Ezekiel as both enviable and unenviable. According to this author, the book is enviable because preaching the Book of Ezekiel is preaching from one of the most fascinating books in the entire Bible. This is true for those who understand the various contextual issues addressed by Prophet Ezekiel and the content of the compelling prophetic text. Yet, Block also considers the book as unenviable because no textbooks on preaching from the Old Testament, whether written by homileticians or Old Testament scholars, offer any help in preaching Ezekiel. Block observes that available textbooks abound with references to Old Testament books such as Genesis, Joshua, the Psalms, Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, but they rarely mention Ezekiel.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully, Block himself contributes a chapter on "Preaching Ezekiel"<sup>9</sup> in an attempt to bridge the gap.

### *The Appeal*

The book of Ezekiel can be understood and preached to stimulate a thirst for it. Pastors, both from the Global North and Global South, need to

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<sup>7</sup> Manning, Gary T. Jr. "Echoes of a Prophet: The Use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John and in Literature of the Second Temple Period." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 270, ed. Mark Goodacre (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Block, Daniel Isaac. *By the River Chebar: Historical, Literary, and Theological Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2014), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Block, Daniel I. "Preaching Ezekiel". In *'He Began with Moses ...': Preaching the Old Testament today*, ed. Grenville J.R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, and Laurence A. Turner (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 157-178.

creatively and innovatively preach from it to achieve this end. This will motivate and encourage the community of faith to develop an interest in reading the book to discover its inherent richness and mine its hidden treasures. For this purpose, a case is made for preaching the Book of Ezekiel by pastors or preachers in order to restore interest in it in the community of faith.

It is rare to find a book on preaching the Book of Ezekiel, even more so any that specifically address the purpose of clarifying the difficult literary aspects of the book. This book is written to fill the gap by addressing the difficult literary styles and the genres that Ezekiel uses as a creative and innovative communicator of the divine prophetic word with the hope that it will ignite the interest of readers in this neglected prophetic book.

Would Ezekiel not use different comprehensible literary genres in preaching such as word pictures, metaphors, imageries and symbols as representative linguistic expressions to address current happenings in our world today such as terrorism, disregard for human life and dignity, rape, sexual degradation, acts of abuse and dehumanisation, unjust wars, racial and gender superiority and discrimination, ethno-tribalism, and deprivation and oppression, to preach sermons from them as a preacher? IF so, we certainly would have understood the literary styles employed by this prophetic preacher in describing these human conditions because they would have addressed the lived contextual existential realities of our day. The Book of Ezekiel appears difficult to many readers today only because they did not live during the day of Ezekiel and have no understanding of what the prophet and his audience experienced.

Reasons abound why this prophetic figure and the book named after him should not remain a mere prophetic text to many from the Northern and Southern hemispheres. It is true that the majority of people in the Global South are still very interested in religion and spirituality. Christians like to listen to preachers preach from the Bible because they believe they will encounter the solutions for their physiological, sociological, economic, ecological, relational, and spiritual challenges there. This is a further reason why pastors or preachers should preach from the Book of Ezekiel; because it addresses turbulent and traumatic contextual issues experienced by the exiles, which finally end on a hopeful note. In a similar way, given the myriads of challenges that people globally are facing, preaching the Book of Ezekiel will assist people in discovering the parallels between Ezekiel's context and theirs so they are able to draw practical lessons for life from its hopeful ending as they make connections between Ezekiel's time and theirs.

I am convinced that the Book of Ezekiel will come alive like the dry bones do in the book, generating more interest in its readership, if preachers can creatively and innovatively treat its inherently difficult aspects through preaching. Also, pastoral students will be motivated to read Ezekiel if Old Testament professors contextually and creatively address those difficult-to-understand literary aspects of the book in the classrooms.

So, what are the difficult aspects that stand as obstacles in the eyes of readers opposed to the prophetic book named Ezekiel? How could they be made easy to overcome by readers of this book?

Would modern readers not understand Ezekiel better when interpreted against the disturbing historical context of the prophet's day, described as "Jerusalem's darkest hour",<sup>10</sup> and the experiences of the traumatised audience? For instance, unlike his prophetic colleagues, Ezekiel prophesied during a time of great confusion and political turmoil and upheaval for Judah; the land, city, and its inhabitants were surrounded by the invading enemy. Blenkinsopp captures the condition of the deportees aptly: they "were trying to pick up the pieces of their lives after passing through a terrible trauma. Their land had been devastated, the temple destroyed, many of their friends and relatives were dead, missing, or left behind, and they had to begin a new life from scratch."<sup>11</sup> Following the aftermath of this event that finally reduced Judah to vassalage status under Babylonian suzerainty after 587 BCE, "The reign of the house of David came to an end; the kingdom of Judah ceased to be an independent nation; Jerusalem and the Lord's temple lay in ruins."<sup>12</sup> Judah's occupation of the promised ancestral land was lost, it became a wasteland. All this resulted in the demise of the priesthood and priestly functions and the loss of Israel's identity.

An understanding of the disturbing and frustrating context from which this prophetic text emerged is crucial for preaching it, so its message can resonate with modern readers. This is what this book seeks to achieve, particularly in view of the fact that it seems rare to find a book on preaching the book of Prophet Ezekiel.

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<sup>10</sup> Hillmer, Mark and Stek, John H. "Ezekiel". In *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker, Mark L. Strauss, and Ronald F. Youngblood (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 1336.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel: Interpretation*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Hillmer and Stek, "Ezekiel", 1335.



Preaching is a performative task; the message of the preacher becomes easily understood when such a task is creatively and innovatively done. This can counteract the prevalent antagonistic attitude towards or even abhorrence of the sacred text named after Prophet Ezekiel.

### **Why is this book necessary?**

The prophetic book of Ezekiel is a rich sacred text with several theological and socio-ethical lessons for readers today. But, as stated previously, many modern readers are deterred by the absurd, obscure, disturbing, and the literary aspects which are difficult to understand. No doubt, almost half of the prophetic book is absurd and daunting. Consequently, this sacred book has not only become neglected by most readers and preachers, but it also appears the book will continue to remain dormant for a very long time. The implication is that the prophetic Book of Ezekiel may soon fall into oblivion if interest in it is not resurrected in the reading community. It is in order to prevent this very rich and exciting prophetic text from being endangered and becoming obsolete, that this book is written.

I am convinced that, just like with Isaiah and Jeremiah, careful preaching of the Book of Ezekiel, following a creative and innovative ancient-modern contextual approach,<sup>13</sup> will generate fresh insight and a renewed interest in the book. Good and creative preaching of this supposedly barren and neglected difficult prophetic book will whet the appetite of readers, increase their curiosity, and stimulate their imagination and interest in such a prophetic book; its sacral richness is inexhaustible for both members of the community of faith and unchurched people alike. This is why the call in this book is for preachers to endeavour, through their creative, innovative,

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<sup>13</sup> The ancient-modern approach means that the text should bridge the gap between ancient and modern by being read backwards historically and forwards contemporaneously. Ezekiel, as a prophet in Judah's history, lived within a specific historical timeframe; the prophetic book that bears the prophet's name also emerged in a specific historical context. A historical reading and an appropriate relevant application to the modern time will achieve a more meaningful understanding by modern readers. Every individual prophetic book of the Hebrew Scripture has an emerging theology; this is a significant aspect of contemporary benefits to readers. Accordingly, a modern approach suggests a bridge-building approach that connects the world of Ezekiel and that of the modern readers via a relevant contextual application of the message of the book of this prophet. This means preachers from all over the globe should read the Ezekiel book historically in conversation with the modern contexts.

skilled, and orchestrated performative preaching, to excavate and bring Ezekiel to life in our time so the ancient prophetic message comes alive and speaks to modern readers in the context of their lived existential realities. This task becomes instructive, as the preoccupation of those in the prophetic ministry of preaching is with the word of God.<sup>14</sup>

### *So, what next?*

As stated previously, the book named after Prophet Ezekiel grew out of unique historical, political, social, economic, psychological, and religious contextual realities. This means there are points of resonance with our various different modern contexts. Therefore, this book on preaching the neglected prophetic Book of Ezekiel becomes necessary because it holds relevant social, ethical, political, and theological messages for the church and society today.

This book on the preaching of Ezekiel undertakes to motivate interest and encourage more readership in this exciting but neglected prophetic book by attempting to respond to four interwoven questions: Why should we preach from the Book of Ezekiel? Chapters 1 to 3 attempt a response to this enquiry. How should we preach from this book? The sixth chapter supplies an answer to this question. What should we preach from it? The response to this enquiry is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. And of what real benefit is preaching from such a book to modern readers? The seventh chapter discusses such gains. The aim of writing this preaching book is not merely to add to the already existing works of literature on Ezekiel, although books on preaching on Ezekiel are not readily available. The aim, rather, is to provide a framework that makes the difficult literary aspects of the book easily accessible, comprehensible, and theologically beneficial to its modern readers.

Clearly, then, the central argument about the necessity for preaching the Book of Ezekiel is to the effect that Ezekiel himself, being an exciting personality, was a preaching prophet and the message he preached (his prophetic sermonic memoirs) relevantly resonates with our troubling social, political, and religious contexts today. Although the Book of Ezekiel is unfortunately neglected, its content deserves preaching in order to rekindle interest in mining its very rich content.

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<sup>14</sup> Robinson, Haddon W. *Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), iv.

## **The procedure**

This book follows an intentional and decidedly defined sequence. It unfolds in seven chapters flowing from the three interwoven questions of why, how, and what regarding preaching the prophetic Book of Ezekiel.

Chapter 1 is the key opening message with regard to preaching Ezekiel. It addresses the question of the necessity of preaching from the neglected book of the prophet Ezekiel. Because this prophetic book has relevant connections with the modern lived existential experiences of people, the first chapter argues that it demands a hearing by modern audiences of the global community of faith through preaching. Chapter 2 pleads for an adequate understanding of the context of Ezekiel's ministry and the context that gave birth to this prophetic book. It argues that an adequate historical and social background understanding of the time and the challenging context of the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel will facilitate the appropriation of this book for preaching. For in its context lies the ethical, social, and theological message of the book.

Chapter 3 addresses the contemporary challenges of preaching the book of Prophet Ezekiel and undertakes to address the question of the method of preaching from it by modern preachers. Accordingly, attention is focussed on the genre of the book, the preaching styles of Ezekiel, the preacher in exile, and the unique creative and innovative skills employed by the prophet as a communicator of the prophetic word. Yet, the contents of Chapters 1 to 3 are more or less merely introductory to what will follow in the subsequent four chapters.

Chapters 4 to 5 address the literary preaching styles of Prophet Ezekiel. The focus here is on the prophet's visionary encounters and the use of imageries, symbols as attractive communicative modes, metaphors, parables and allegories, and the performative engagement of sign-acts to communicate the divine word and the prophetic message.

Being a sacred literary work that had prevalent theological messages for the prophet's initial audience, and still has for modern readers of all generations, Chapter 6 necessarily echoes the significance of formulaic expressions and the emerging theological themes inherent in this fascinating book. The last chapter completes the circle of the book by addressing the inherent real benefits of preaching Ezekiel's prophetic book.

It is hoped that a book like this on preaching the Book of Ezekiel will motivate readers and preachers who, hitherto, were either deterred or lost interest in reading and preaching from the book of Prophet Ezekiel, to return to it. The Book of Ezekiel, assuredly, has a message worth preaching because it is an exciting prophetic book that holds several timeless lessons for readers today and subsequent generations of readers as well. It is my hope, therefore, that modern readers will rekindle their interest and love for Prophet Ezekiel and in the prophetic message of the book that bears the prophet's name.

# CHAPTER 1

## A MESSAGE WORTH PREACHING

### Introduction

While some people think that the events and experiences in human life move in a cyclical fashion because life itself is perceived as cyclical, others think these events rather move in a steadily progressive continuum. Either way, the existential experiences in human societies over time have some resemblances and similarities. Therefore, history offers many lessons to learn from it. This holds true for the account of the Book of Ezekiel, a revered sacred and historical book of the Israelites, cherished by many today.

Men and women from different social and cultural contexts who are serious, devout people of faith, know that there is no need to debate the assertion that the message of Ezekiel as an ancient biblical text has relevance for modern readers. The Latinised theological concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (created out of nothing) by a supreme God is already firmly rooted in their religious consciousness and belief. This indicates that the core content of the Bible, which they accept as the inspired word of the Creator, despite its various genres and literary features, and to some extent misgivings about it, has meaningful applicable socio-moral and theological lessons for modern readers. Therefore, being a part of the inspired living word of God, the prophetic sermons of Ezekiel, when well promoted and contextualised, have relevant messages also worth preaching in every context of our day.

John Walter Hilber asks the question, “. . . in what direction would Ezekiel aim his arrows were he to address the church today?”<sup>15</sup> This question calls upon the preacher to creatively and innovatively contextualise the Ezekiel text in a relevant manner so it becomes meaningfully beneficial to the modern audience. This is also what Daniel I. Block describes as the daunting task before modern preachers, who should declare the message of Ezekiel

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<sup>15</sup> Hilber, John W. Ezekiel. A Focused Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Eugene: Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 1.

*ex cathedrā* (by virtue of their preaching position) with authority, vigour, and clarity, to rehabilitate Ezekiel and rediscover the vitality of the book that bears his name in view of its perplexities and the growing issue of repelling gendering issues.<sup>16</sup>

To achieve the task of preaching the Book of Ezekiel today requires the application of something unique. We do not live in the ancient world in which Prophet Ezekiel lived. But we are endeavouring to recapture and reconstruct the prophet and his message so preachers can re-preach what he preached centuries ago. Such a difficult task is achievable only when preachers build effective bridges between the time of Ezekiel and ours. This is what John Stott agitates for in his concept of crossing the cultural gulf to “build bridges spanning the chasm between the biblical world and the modern world”.<sup>17</sup> As Chris Wright correctly explains, this is significant because “our goal is *to preach and teach* from the words of the prophets, and that means building the bridge from the world of the Bible into today’s world. We want to see how the words of the prophets can relevantly apply to our own world and our own people.”<sup>18</sup> This homiletical art and the principle of effectively building bridges across times and cultures are also very important because we preach the content of the Bible not merely to *inform* but particularly to *transform* souls into becoming agents of transformation as well. This way, the purpose of biblical preaching with a pastoral motivation reaches its goal and climax of producing “a people who know their God and are living lives that glorify him”.<sup>19</sup> Quite obviously, heaven descends and the Father’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven only when the content or message of the Bible is reverently preached and appropriately and relevantly applied to life and its contextual existential realities.

This brings us to the crucial point of the value of preaching the text of Ezekiel, considered by some as quite ancient, remote, and obsolete. Times change; there is a time gap between the prophet’s day and ours, even if certain resemblances and similarities do exist. John H. Sailhamer captures this point quite aptly: Preachers of the prophetic texts “must remember that

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<sup>16</sup> Block, *By the River Chebar*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, John R.W. *The Challenge of Preaching* (Cumbria: Langham Preaching Resources, 2011), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, Christopher J.H. *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Mbewe, Conrad. *Pastoral Preaching: Building a People for God* (Cumbria: Langham Preaching Resources, 2017), xiii.

there is a genuine difference between the ancient prophets' message in its context and our preaching that message today. It is as much a societal and political difference as it is a theological one."<sup>20</sup> The sociology, global economics and politics, ecology, military warfare, transportation systems and travels, and the traditional way ancient people expressed religion, have obviously recorded significant changes. Yet, what modern preachers should seek to achieve as the goal in preaching the Book of Ezekiel is ultimately seeking to understand and communicate the theological undertone of Ezekiel's sermons. The God who called and commissioned, inspired and empowered, strengthened and directed Ezekiel to expressly and undauntedly preach his message to the doubting, apprehensive, and resistant exiles is the same God whose thoughts and will preachers today should seek to communicate from the biblical texts to the modern audience. For this is the mandate for preaching.<sup>21</sup>

This argues for the relevance of the sermons of Prophet Ezekiel for the modern era. It contends that Ezekiel's prophetic sermons resonate with the challenging contextual existential realities the world is facing today such as social, moral, political, economic, ecological, relational, human rights, and religious issues. Careful and curious readers of the Ezekiel text will come away with one conviction—that the message of the book is worth preaching today due to several connecting points the prophet's day and ours share. Therefore, this chapter exegetes the aspects that make Prophet Ezekiel and the book named after him a neglected fallow ground necessitating our attention, explaining reasons that justify the book as worth preaching today.

### **Why should we preach from the book of Ezekiel?**

Several years ago, I encountered two fascinating titles from Paul Little. The first is *Know What You Believe*, and the second is *Know Why You Believe*. Paul Little moves his readers from mere substantial religious belief to the substantially rational justification and validation of their faith.

Likewise investigating the reason(s) for preaching from Ezekiel, a prophetic book with a message that appears absurd, obscure, and disturbing to some readers, and even considered obsolete by others, demands rational justification. Like Paul Little, I want to justify why I am motivating and

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<sup>20</sup> Sailhamer, John H. "Preaching from the Prophets". In *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Biwul, Joel K.T. *Expository Preaching in Africa* (Bukuru, Nigeria: ACTS Publishers, 2019), 17-48.

encouraging preachers to rekindle interest in Ezekiel through preaching the book named after him. Carol Newsom's thoughts regarding the preservation of the prophetic texts sets the tone: it "reflects a conviction that the prophet's words were not only significant for the circumstance in which they were originally pronounced but potentially relevant for later ones as well".<sup>22</sup>

### *Ezekiel is a neglected prophet*

The book named after the Israelite prophet Ezekiel is indeed a neglected prophetic book. The majority of readers of the Old Testament biblical books, especially the prophetic books, readily prefer the stories behind other biblical prophets, and even more so other prophetic books. For this reason, the Book of Ezekiel, unfortunately, has become a familiar detour for most modern readers of the Old Testament prophetic books. The reasons for such avoidance of the Book of Ezekiel by both academia and preachers (pastors, missionaries, itinerary evangelists, Sunday School class teachers, and so on) are obvious.

To reiterate the point previously made, the obscurity of much of the book's contents, such as obscure language and images, are the reason for this. For example, in this prophetic book are obscure choreographic representations, obscure engaging of imageries and symbols, obscure visionary representations of the divine message, and obscure pornographic representations. Obscurity in the book is a deterring factor to modern readers. Many turn to the Book of Ezekiel only for its proverbial "Dry bones shall live" section. Yet, as previously implied, much of the lack of interest in this prophetic book can be overcome by clear creative and innovative performative preaching from it. Iain M. Duguid shares this sentiment by explaining that even the rabbis had to struggle to understand Ezekiel's obscure literary representations. Yet, Duguid states that the Book of Ezekiel can both be comprehensible and profitable.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the presence of such deterring obscurities in the book of Ezekiel, good preachers can make it interesting, palatable, and desirable when they cast new light on it. All that is needed is ingenuity in creativity and innovation—as Ezekiel himself showed. This point needs illustration.

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<sup>22</sup> Newsom, Carol A. "Introduction to the Prophetic Books". In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 969.

<sup>23</sup> Duguid, Iain M. *Ezekiel: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 17-18.



Whenever I teach the course in Intermediate Hebrew Grammar, I always tell the students that the Hebrew language is sweet. As a creative and innovative teacher, this statement is used as a motivating bait to arouse students' interest in learning the classical Hebrew language because most of them already have a preconceived mindset that the language is difficult to learn.

Ironically, the prevalence of obscurities could generate a growing curiosity and interest in the person and the book that bears the name of Ezekiel in modern readers. Readers of the Old Testament prophets should have sought to discover why such obscurities exist in Ezekiel to a greater extent more than the books of other Israelite prophets. Yet, this is not the case; it is not even questioned by people in the field of Practical Theology under which preaching resorts. Rather, a growing dislike and neglect and even abhorrence of the book has dominated the reception of it over the years as other prophetic books are favoured by more attention from pastors. I contend that the Prophet Ezekiel and the book attributed to the prophet should be given space in both the academia and by those engaged in the field of Practical Theology as it is a part of the sacred Scriptures.

Furthermore, the book deserves close attention in the light of the prominent place the records of the events in the book occupy in Jewish history. Chris Wright correctly describes the historically decisive event of 587 BCE that shook Judah to its foundation as the most traumatic event in Israel's entire biblical history.<sup>24</sup> We can neither question nor contest the fact that the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel, and the prophetic book that later developed from it, both emerged at a decisive moment in Israel's history. This historical moment threatened the political identity and the survival of the nation of Israel as a covenant people of Yahweh, and put their continued possession of the covenant land at risk. The unfolding events in this period also threatened the presence of Yahweh in the midst of his people and the religion of Yahwism in the land. It further threatened the existence of the nation of Israel as a political entity with its Davidic monarchic dynasty, even its social and religious institutions. Critically, the fate of Israel's national identity as a theological community in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, hung in the balance. As in the days of Ezekiel, is our world today not facing far more complex life-threatening issues deserving a prophetic message of hope?

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<sup>24</sup> Wright, Christopher J.H. *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 20.

I agree with the viewpoint that the book named after Ezekiel “stands at a turning point in the history of biblical prophecy”<sup>25</sup> as much as that of the entire history of Judah because in these records are the account of the exile. Accordingly, I contend beyond apologetical ploys that a crucial and most significant part of Israel’s history as a covenant nation would have been lost without the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel in Babylonia and the records of the prophetic book named after him. This explains why a book on preaching from Prophet Ezekiel is placed in the hands of readers as part of calling attention to the important message of the book and to the key significant relevant lessons that thirsty religious modern readers could draw from it. As Block rightly states, the need “to rehabilitate this prophet and to rediscover the vitality of the book that bears his name”<sup>26</sup> is an urgent one. In this connection, George K. Barr notes that Jesus made considerable use of books of the Old Testament such as Isaiah and Psalms and made important references to books such as Leviticus, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and a few other Old Testament prophets. Barr states that the Old Testament, therefore, provides a vocabulary of thoughts and ideas that Jesus applied to a number of questions.<sup>27</sup> Preachers should follow the Christological recognition of the value of the Book of Ezekiel. Like Jesus, as Barr contends in the conclusion of his work, “It is still valid to draw on the truths expressed by the prophets.”<sup>28</sup> Walter Brueggemann suggests that when, as preachers, we face a prophetic text, we know we face a *text*, not a prophetic *role*. The task, then, is to exposit the prophetic text with all of the imagination that we can muster, always remembering that we are text interpreters of what is ancient and remote.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in letting the text speak when preaching this neglected prophetic book, it is crucial that any exegete or preacher of the Book of Ezekiel must interpret the events and message of the book from its

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<sup>25</sup> Reimer, “Ezekiel”, 1497.

<sup>26</sup> Block, *By the River Chebar*, 2. Block submits four proposals as an encouragement to both the academia and pastors and preachers to rekindle interest in preaching from the Book of Ezekiel. According to Block, when we understand the prophet (the character, passion, and argumentation), we will be able to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity. This is only possible if we also have a good understanding of the prophet’s audience and their exilic condition. We need to have a good grasp of the nature and structure of the book. Lastly, when we understand the message that the prophet proclaimed, it will enable us to preach from Ezekiel with authority and clarity. Block adds that we also need to understand the rhetorical and homiletical strategy of Ezekiel. See pages 2-21.

<sup>27</sup> James K. Barr, “Preaching the Old Testament” *The Expository Times*, No. 118 (2006): 17.

<sup>28</sup> Barr, “Preaching the Old Testament”, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 71.

historical, political, social, psychological, religious, and theological contexts of the time of the prophet and the audience.

### ***Ezekiel was a preacher***

History has its appropriate place in life. Today, preachers read the history and memoirs of people who preached great sermons during their lifetime such as St. Augustine, Charles Spurgeon, Billy Graham, and Paul G. Gindiri of Nigeria. One reason for reading them is to learn from these ancestral preaching pioneers the motivation, methodology, and styles of their preaching in order to reinforce ours. These earlier preachers offer great inspiration and motivation to fan into flames the effort to communicate God's word to God's world in our day. The same can be said about Ezekiel.

God called Ezekiel to be a preaching prophet to his exiled covenant people. Like Apostle Paul of the New Testament era (Acts 9:3-6; 26:19; Rom 1:16; 2 Tim 1:11-12), the prophet was convinced of his vocation and the nature of the task he was called and commissioned to execute (Ezek 2:1-8; 3:17). The pages of the prophetic sermons Ezekiel left behind clearly indicate he was a faithful preacher who was dedicated and committed to his task as a diligent servant of God (Ezek 3:1-11, 14-15, 22-23). He acted promptly whenever God directed him to carry out a course of action. True belief in the authority of the Bible coupled with the character quality of deep personal conviction for the preaching task is the propelling force for the effective preaching of the Bible today.

Furthermore, Prophet Ezekiel assumed the role of a radical and fearless preacher of the prophetic word according to the divine mandate (Ezek 3:9). Elizabeth Achtemeier expresses the idea of prophetic capturing of attention by stating that the prophets of the Old Testament were people who pointed attention to those events in which God was at work and why he was active in them. "Thus, Jeremiah and Ezekiel can point to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah in 587 B.C. and say they are events brought about by God because of Judah's sin, but they also can tell of that coming time when God will restore his people to their land"<sup>30</sup> (Jer 31:16-17; Ezek 37:1-14). In the case of Ezekiel, he severely blamed his fellow exiles as being part of the reason God sent them into the Babylonian exile (Ezek 5:6; 20:21; 22:18-22; 23:39). He confronted both their ancestors and them with

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<sup>30</sup> Achtemeier, Elizabeth Rice. *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 110.

wrongdoing even when his audience protested and claimed innocence (Ezek 16:45; 18:1-4, 20).

Despite this, Ezekiel preached with compassion and love for his audience. His sermons on the vision of revived dry bones and restoration clearly illustrate this point (Ezek 37:1-14). In a world where so many people are becoming more and more self-centred, insensitive to a sense of morality and accountability, disrespectful of human dignity in their behaviour, and godless in their character and lifestyle, preachers have much to learn from the prophetic sermons of Ezekiel to address head-on such challenges of our time.

### ***Ezekiel's message provides contemporary consolation***

It was the Apostle Paul who proposed the concept of a *groaning* creation (Romans 8:22-23). So many people globally are experiencing the groaning pains of exile as a result of the effects of natural disasters, bad governance, or activities of human inhumanity by their fellow humans such as oppression and deprivation, rape, and the senseless killing of innocent people through wars and terrorism. The endless brutality suffered as a result of the activities of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS based in the Middle East, Al-Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Fulani herdsmen<sup>31</sup> in Nigeria, and more attest to the agonies of many surviving victims in the world today.

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<sup>31</sup> One common characteristic is apparent in all these terrorist groups—the enthronement of Islamic ideology and philosophy in the world. This is clear from the antecedent of their founders and leaders and from the composition of the majority of their fighters. The phrase *Boko Haram* is in the Hausa language, which is spoken predominantly in Northern Nigeria. *Boko* means Western education and *Haram* means forbidden. The ideology of the Boko Haram terrorist group is to fight against Western education and civilisation in favour of Islamic education. Yet, this ideology is self-defeating; its contradiction lies in the fact that this very group uses westernised clothes, shoes, medication, modern weaponry, and more products of Western education and civilisation. Rational reasoning would concede that this religiously inclined ideology is conceived, planted, germinated, nurtured, and orchestrated on the plains of ignorance. ISWAP is an acronym for the Islamic State of West African Province. The motivating ideology is to Islamise the African continent. Lastly, Fulani herdsmen are an ethnic extraction imported into Nigeria from other African countries such as Libya and Niger for the purpose of achieving an Islamic politico-religious agenda. This group was to fight alongside other terrorist groups to overthrow Nigeria should Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the President of

The memoirs of Ezekiel's sermons possess an intrinsic consolatory character for both then and now. The dominating motif of chapters 33-48 of the book is the hope of Israel's restoration to the Promised Land that had been temporarily dispossessed and repopulated, especially the land in the north, on account of their exile. Chapter 37 is the nucleus of such hope resident in the metaphor of the dry bones.

This is a clear indication that the prophetic preaching of Ezekiel can also offer hope to the disenfranchised and hopeless today, offer courage and strength to the broken-hearted and weak, guarantee some level of security for the unsafe, and restore the self-esteem and human dignity of people whose personhood has been debased and made psychologically dysfunctional. The exilic condition of the Samaritan captives since 722/721 BCE, the Judean captives from 605 BCE till 539 BCE, and their final experience of restoration from the Assyrian and Babylonian captivity back to Palestine from 538 BCE till 444 BCE depicts this truth quite vividly.

This is why preachers are encouraged and motivated to creatively and innovatively preach the message of the Book of Ezekiel to their audiences. Most importantly, such creativity and innovation in preaching Ezekiel should not be an abstract exercise but a practical and a realistic one, drawing relevant lessons from it and competently applying them to the many lived existentially challenging issues faced by people in many places today. Ezekiel motivated faith and hope in his audience; preachers should apply the same principle in their preaching the book on the grounds that no bad situation lasts forever, for there is always light at the end of the tunnel. The God who elevated Cyrus, King of Persia, to grant release to the Jewish exiles can do the same today by placing a king or ruler on the throne of a suffering nation to rule in justice, equity, and fairness (2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-8) after years of oppression, pain, and a seemingly hopeless condition. For instance, the oppressive Apartheid regime in South Africa was supplanted when Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, a South African citizen, came into power as the first democratically elected President and willingly served for only a term of office from 1994 to 1999. The cruel, oppressive, and dehumanising

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Nigeria, fail to hand over power to the retired General Mohammadu Buhari in 2015. The grand motivation was for the Fulani group to take over Nigeria and make it their Islamic nation, as the Fulanis have no particular country to call their own. Their African patron, General Buhari, was manipulatively and forcefully enthroned as President of Nigeria in 2015 through an election that was marred by violence, manipulation, and rigging. The purpose of his election under the guise of fighting corruption for a better Nigeria was to achieve an ethnic and religious agenda.

Nazi rule of Adolf Hitler of Germany from 1933 to 1945 was dismantled to usher in relief for the oppressed. In a similar manner, God caused the consciousness of human life and human dignity in some parliamentarians and civil rights activists who protested against the evils of slavery and slave trade. Following this development, the brutal transatlantic sub-Saharan African slave trade and slavery elsewhere was outlawed through the Abolition Act of Parliament to set the captives free.

### *Ezekiel's message has relevant connections today*

Pain is a universal human experience. It comes in different forms and ways. National and personal reactions to it may differ, but the experiences and magnitude of its excruciating effect remains the same. The Book of Ezekiel is a prophetic book recounting the pain experienced both by the prophet himself and his audience. This makes its message relevant for us today and worthy of its creative preaching. David Larsen notes, "One of the most arduous responsibilities of the biblical preacher is to make careful application of the text, moving it from then to now."<sup>32</sup> As indicated earlier, several similar existential motifs and points of commonality exist between the experience of Ezekiel's audience and those of people in many parts of the world today. The message that Ezekiel preached to his audience resonates with the myriads of traumatic experiences that people live through today, like the exilic Israelites did. This seems to be one reason why Marvin Sweetney notes, "... it is also essential for us to consider the impact of the Prophets for our own times. To ignore such a dimension potentially marginalizes the Prophets in our thinking about the present when in fact they have important insights for the contemporary world."<sup>33</sup>

Hence, preaching the Book of Ezekiel as a neglected prophetic book holds great value and relevance for our society today. Principles from his sermons aptly respond to the vices, political errors or intentional manipulation, various acts of social injustice, moral decay and prevalent acts of criminality, and the impunity and human degradation that are found in every human society. Rapacious people like the Assyrians and the Babylonian captors are always with us in every society. Insensitively evil and brutal people who take delight in the pains of others are also a part of every human

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<sup>32</sup> Larsen, David L. "Preaching the Old Testament Today". In *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Sweetney, Marvin Alan. *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 217.