



A CONDENSED STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL



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INTRODUCTION

‘THE PROPHET OF THE EXILE’

His full name, which means, ‘May God strengthen him’, was ‘Ezekiel Ben Buzi’, because he is said by the Jewish Talmud to have been a descendant of Joshua and ‘Rahab’, the harlot about whom we read in the Book of Judges. (Note: the Talmud says that Joshua was also the ancestor of the prophet Jeremiah).

Ezekiel has been called ‘the prophet of the Exile’, but before becoming a prophet and the leader of those taken captive to Babylon, he was a priest in Jerusalem and one of the first batch of the nobility and prominent citizens who were taken into captivity.

The names which are usually associated with the Babylonian Captivity are those of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and, in thinking about that period of Jewish history. The name Ezekiel does not readily spring to mind. But, whilst Isaiah and Jeremiah were the ones who predicted captivity, Ezekiel was the one who experienced it! This is because they were not contemporaries.

1. Isaiah was born about 775 BC. because his prophetic ministry began ‘in the year that King Uzziah died’ Isaiah 6, which is believed to have been in 745 BC, and, since it is unlikely that he became a prophet before he was thirty years old, the age at which a man became a priest, in the days of Jesus, a Member of the Sanhedrin, he must have been at least thirty years when he received his call.

It is worth noting that there are, among Jewish scholars, there are those who claim that Isaiah was related to the royal family and was a cousin of King Uzziah; this claim that this accounts for the ease with which he moved in royal circles.

After a very long ministry, he died about 580 BC, when King Manasseh, who was probably the most wicked King in the history of Judah, became responsible for his death.

Jewish documents, the ‘Talmud’ for instance, state that Manasseh had the prophet placed in a hollow tree and sawn in two, and this is generally believed to be confirmed by the statement in Hebrews 11:37. If this is not an accurate interpretation of this verse, we do not know how Isaiah died.

2. Jeremiah was born in the village of Anathoth, about 655 BC. Jeremiah 1:1.

He was the son of a priest named Hilkiah and was himself training for the priesthood when God called him to become a prophet. (vs. 5) If we say that Jeremiah was less than enthusiastic, it would be a great understatement!

Although we can understand that his response is not surprising when we bear in mind that the call meant taking an unwelcome message of God’s judgment to the wayward people of Judah.

In this connection, it is significant that the most likely meaning of the name ‘Jeremiah’ is, ‘Adonai (the Lord) throws,’ and warns that God ‘casts down nations’.

Furthermore, in addition to the antagonism that he realised he was sure to encounter when he delivered his unwelcome message, there was the fact that had forbidden him to marry! However, his ministry began in 626 BC., when he was about 29-30 years old, and what he had predicted eventually occurred.

The first Babylonian entry into Jerusalem occurred in 597 BC. In it appears that Jeremiah was treated with unusual leniency, and instead of being taken to Babylon, he was allowed to go into exile in Egypt, Jeremiah 43:7.

The probable reason for his considerate treatment is that he had warned the people that what was about to happen to them was a judgment from God. He predicted that the punishment would last for seventy years, one year for every 'Year of Jubilee', which they had failed to observe during a period of four hundred and ninety years.

Every seventh year was known as the 'Year of Jubilee', a sacred and very special Sabbatical Year when slaves were freed and debts forgotten, and when the land was allowed to 'rest'. This ordinance of the Mosaic Law had been neglected, and they were now facing the consequences.

Jeremiah advised the people to accept their punishment. On instructions from God, he said, 'Go to Babylon and live as normal a life as possible; marry, raise your families and await the deliverance which God promises He will bring about'.

Not surprisingly, this 'pacifistic' advice was not well-received by the proud leaders of Judah, and almost certainly increased Jeremiah's unpopularity. He escaped transportation to Babylon and died in Egypt, where, eventually, according to Jewish tradition, he was stoned to death in 570 BC, and his tragic death is probably referred to in Hebrews 11:37.

But that is not the end of the story of Jeremiah, because although he had been unpopular and unhonoured in his life, he later came to be regarded as the most important of the prophets by later generations of the Jews. In Matthew 16, when Jesus asked His disciples who the people thought he was, they said, 'Jeremiah, or one of the prophets,' Matthew 16:14.

Not Moses, Ezekiel, or Daniel. Not even the great Isaiah, but Jeremiah. Indeed, there was, among the Jews of the days of Jesus, a widely held belief which claimed that, at the time of the Babylonian Crisis, Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the Covenant that most sacred and important Box, and had hidden it in a cave.

And, before the coming of Messiah, he would return, bringing the Ark, to be restored to its place in the 'Holy of Holies' in the Temple. How this belief arose is difficult to understand in the light of what Jeremiah himself wrote in Jeremiah 3:16!

3. Ezekiel is thought to have been born in 622 BC, four years after Jeremiah began his ministry and was never as well-known in Jerusalem, as either Isaiah or Jeremiah, because whilst they walked and talked with kings and people and even disputed openly with their opponents.

The false prophets, who were advising the rulers to put their trust in Egypt, their powerful neighbour, Ezekiel lived a more reclusive life in the Temple-complex, where there was accommodation for the priests and their families.

He did not go down into the city to meet the people; the people came to him in the Temple, and he only became a recognized figure when God called him to become a prophet, i.e., a spokesman for God, a role he filled when he was taken to Babylon among the first batch of influential, prominent citizens, the 'aristocracy of Jerusalem', and it was in Babylon that he became 'The Prophet of the Exile'.

For the average Bible reader, the Book of Ezekiel is strange territory and much more puzzling than the books of the other major prophets, although, of course, the Book of Daniel is difficult enough!

It is also a fact that we know very little about Ezekiel's personal life prior to his move to Babylon. Back in Jerusalem, serving as a priest, he would have lived in accommodation for the priests, within the Temple complex, relatively isolated from the people.

The priests did not go out among the people; the people came to the priests, whilst Isaiah and Jeremiah walked with both people and Kings: and with rich and poor, and even debated publicly with their opponents, the false prophets. Consequently, they were well-known to the citizens of Jerusalem as they delivered warnings concerning the impending Captivity.

Read [Ezekiel 33](#), and you will see the situation with which he was confronted. He appears to have been a very good orator, but, whilst the people seem to have admired his oratory, the warnings he delivered had no effect on them. The Book of Ezekiel is not as well-known, nor as popular as either those of Isaiah or Jeremiah, but this is not surprising, considering the strange, mystical imagery about which he writes. It opens with his ‘visions of God’. There is no formal, personal introduction, such as we find in Isaiah and Jeremiah. The writer does not identify himself.

In [Ezekiel 1:3](#), he is identified in an impersonal way: ‘The word of YHVH came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi in the land of the Chaldeans.’ There then follows a strange, mysterious attempt to describe the indescribable! This is a vision of the Throne and the One Who sits on it.

It reminds us of John’s vision in the [Revelation 4-5](#), and it is my personal opinion that such visions exist to remind and assure us, that no matter what strange and disturbing events are depicted in these books, everything that happens, happens under the ‘permissive will’, the supervision, and in the control of the One Who sits on that Throne!

THE VISION OF GOD

When we read that first chapter, the thing that strikes us is the frequent use of the words ‘likeness’, ‘like’ and ‘appearance’. These words occur twenty times in the chapter, and they reveal the prophet’s inability to describe what he sees.

In [Ezekiel 2](#), Ezekiel next receives his commission. Notice [Ezekiel 2:1](#)! There then follow seven chapters that describe a series of strange actions which he is commanded to perform, actions which are intended to arrest the attention of the exiles, and which might properly be described as ‘acted parables’.

Then, [Ezekiel 8](#) introduces something different. We see that Ezekiel possessed another exceptional gift, besides that of prophecy. He was able to visualise things that were happening in other lands and could tell what he saw, and he could even ‘transport’ from Babylon to other places.

[Ezekiel 8](#) records that the Spirit took him back to Jerusalem, where they saw that the ‘remnant’ who were still living there had turned to the worship of idols in the Temple of God itself.

They would have claimed that they had not abandoned the ‘God of Israel’, but believed they could worship other gods along with YHVH. Such worship is described as syncretism, something repeatedly condemned and forbidden throughout the Old Testament scriptures.

Today, we recognise that Syncretic worship, the worship of several gods at the same time, is a sign, not of intellectual or spiritual advancement, but is the sign of degeneration and a declining culture.

Degenerate cultures always find it easy to accept all sorts of superstitions and think that they may pick and choose to believe and do whatever pleases them. This is what Ezekiel found had happened in Jerusalem during the period 597 to 568 BC.

Those left behind had been left without qualified leadership because their real leaders had all been taken to Babylon, all, that is, except Jeremiah, whom they disliked because of his gloomy predictions, and to whom they would not listen.

The remnant left behind believed that the terrible things that had occurred proved that God had deserted them. He had failed to protect them from the Babylonian army, and they now thought that they should have done what Jeremiah's opponents, whom he had called 'false prophets', had advocated; they should have 'trusted in the horses and chariots of Egypt'.

Perhaps the gods of Egypt were stronger than the God of Israel, after all. Why should they continue to serve such an impotent god? It was thus that they had turned again to idolatry. This is what Ezekiel discovered when the Spirit took him into the temple in Jerusalem.

The first object he saw is described as 'the Image of Jealousy'. It is not identified by a name, such as 'Nebo' or 'Bel', but it was probably known to the prophet as the god that had been a problem for the leaders of the people ever since they left the land of Egypt.

That god was called Baal, a name which means 'husband, owner, master'. Prophets such as Elijah and Elisha had opposed this worship but had not succeeded in stamping it out, 1 Kings 18:12.

In Ezekiel's 'guided tour', he was shown a door, a 'secret door,' behind which there was a room with walls carved with pictures of 'creeping things and abominable beasts', to which seventy of the leaders of the people were offering incense in worship. Remember! This was happening inside the holy Temple of God!

This is all that Ezekiel tells us about that shameful scene, but we may take it for granted that the 'creeping things' were crocodiles and snakes, reptiles which were the symbols of Egypt's Osiris Worship.

Then, outside the temple, near the northern gate, Ezekiel sees several women who are said to be 'weeping for Tammuz'. Now, this draws attention to another form of idolatry.

From the earliest times, even from the time of Abraham, in Mesopotamia, from where Abraham originally came, the people had worshipped 'Tammuz', the child of the goddess 'Ishtar'. She was the great 'mother-goddess', worshipped in Samaria, Joshua 24:2.

This was the worship of youth and spring. In a sense, it was the worship of the changing Seasons, because the power of Tammuz was believed to increase and decrease throughout the Seasons. They believed that each Winter, Tammuz died and went down into 'Mother Earth', and the women mourned.

Then, in the Spring, Tammuz rose again, having been wedded to 'Mother Earth', Osiris. Each year, there was a Wedding, a birth, and a Death, and the women of Mesopotamia wept and rejoiced year after year.

But Ezekiel's vision does not end with this scene. He is next taken by the Spirit into the innermost court of the Temple, where normally only the priests walked, and there he sees twenty-five men, with their backs turned to the Temple itself, i.e. to the Holy of Holies, and they are facing and bowing down to the sun. They had adopted another Egyptian form of worship: the worship of the Sun-god, Aten.

This was worship which had been introduced and promoted by the Pharaoh, Ahakenhaten, who, more than seven centuries earlier, had abandoned Egypt's polytheism, and made the worship of the Sun, the religion of Egypt.

By giving Ezekiel a grim demonstration of the depths to which Judah had fallen, the prophet learned, at first hand, why God's judgment on His people was so severe.

But God had not yet finished. Ezekiel must understand the consequences of Judah's infidelity. In Ezekiel 10:4 he sees the 'Shekinah', the 'Glory of YHWH', which had demonstrated the presence of God with His people, throughout the wilderness Journey, and which, thereafter, rested between the Cherubim in the Most Holy Place in both Tabernacle and Temple, rise from its place and move to the entrance of the Temple, filling it with smoke.

In Ezekiel 10:18-19, Ezekiel sees the 'Glory of YHWH' move again. This time it stands over the Cherubim, 'the burning Ones' who are always associated with the holiness of God, and in Ezekiel 10:19, the Cherubim, with the Glory of God over them, 'lift up their wings', mount into the air, and fly to the door of the East Gate.

In Ezekiel 10:23, finally, the prophet sees the Glory of God, leaves both the Temple and the City and flies to rest on the mountain on the East side of Jerusalem, and the Spirit returns Ezekiel to the exiles in Babylon. 'Ichabod', which means 'the Glory has departed'!

There is much more that must happen before the book closes. But the final chapter brings everything to a grand climax. There is a new temple, and a penitent and chastened people restored to their own land and City.

And the most wonderful message of all, Ezekiel 48:35, 'and from that day, the name of the City shall be, 'YHWH is there!' because the 'GLORY of YHWH' has returned!