

Ezekiel: The Prophet Himself

Ezekiel was a priest or belonged to a priestly family, since the priesthood was hereditary. He was active over a period of more than two decades from his call in 593 to 571 B.C. He was deported to Babylon after the *first* Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 598 B.C. or shortly thereafter and resided in the Jewish settlement in Tel-abib (til-abubi) on the Chebar irrigation canal near Nippur (1:1; 3:15). He was married, and his wife, the delight of his eyes, died in 588 B.C. at the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (24:15-18).

While it is possible that Ezekiel returned to Jerusalem on one or more occasions after the deportation, it is much more probable that his entire prophetic career was spent in the Babylonian diaspora. His intimate knowledge of what was happening in Judea some seven hundred miles distant does not, in any case, invalidate this conclusion. Close contacts were maintained with the homeland by exchange of correspondence (e.g., Jer. 29) and no doubt also by visits back and forth.

The Historical Context of Ezekiel's Message

The prophet is addressing a quite specific historical situation, generally a situation of crisis. Our task, then, is to inquire how a word spoken in that situation can apply to our quite different situation, or, to put it more theologically, what we can discern about the will and intentions of God for our situation based on an understanding of the prophet's response to that quite different set of circumstances.

During the entire lifetime of Ezekiel, Judah was a pawn in the struggle of the great powers of control of the strategic Syro-Palestinian corridor. **Around the time of Ezekiel's birth Judah was still nominally an Assyrian vassal.** The death of Ashurbanipal, last important king of Assyria; marked the beginning of a precipitous decline of the superpower that had terrorized the Near East for more than a century. It ended less than twenty years later with its disappearance from history, to no one's regret. (One might read the Book of Nahum for a Judean reaction to this event.) Ashurbanipal's death was also the signal for movements of national emancipation in the vassal states including Judah. One important moment in Josiah's religious reforms, the discovery of a law book in the temple, is dated by the historian to the eighteenth year of the reign, therefore about 622 B.C., but the reform probably got under way some years earlier in connection with a bid for independence triggered by the accession of a new Assyrian king (II Chron. 34:3). **After the fall of Nineveh, both Egypt and the newly founded Babylonian kingdom moved to fill the power vacuum in the Near East.** Josiah seems to have decided-correctly, as it turned out-that the future lay with the Babylonians, but he lost his life attempting to oppose Egyptian passage along the coastal route (II Kings 23:29-30; II Chron. 35:20-24). His son Jehoahaz was deposed by the Egyptians after a reign of three months, after which another son, Eliakim, renamed Jehoiakim, ruled as an Egyptian puppet until the battle of Carchemish on the upper Euphrates (605 B.C.) brought the **entire area under Babylonian control.** The next twenty years saw Judah blundering toward total disaster as the result of weak and inefficient rule. The principal culprit was the war party at court supported by the traditionalist and nationalistic landowners ("the people of the land") who could not forget Josiah, whom they had put on the throne, and could not understand that they were now facing a completely different situation. It was their influence on Jehoiakim and Zedekiah that Jeremiah, at risk of his life, tried unsuccessfully to

counter. Ezekiel was deported with several thousand others shortly after the first Babylonian reduction of Jerusalem in 598 B.C. (II Kings 24:12-16). The vision of the chriot throne five years later coincided with the revolt of Zedekiah instigated by the war party and abetted by the new Egyptian ruler Psammetichus II. Its predictable outcome was the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, followed by further deportations which put an end to the nation-state and monarchy after an existence of more than four hundred years.

This, then, was the situation that faced the survivors and with which Ezekiel, as one of them, was attempting to come to terms. Even those believers who have not had to live through a crisis of this kind can appreciate how it could threaten to undermine the religious assumptions on which their lives are based. Perhaps the most pressing issue for the deportees was worship. In antiquity, religion was essentially a social phenomenon dependent on communal participation in certain cultic acts. The idea of a private religion, independent of institutional allegiance and territorial location, was simply not available. With the temple destroyed, the sacrificial system brought to an end, and an entire segment of the population relocated outside the territorial jurisdiction of their God, the very possibility of worship was called into question. We may be sure that the question asked by the psalmist, how it was possible to sing hymns to Yahweh in a foreign land, arose out of a real dilemma (Ps. 137:4). The vision by the Chebar canal provided an answer in principle: Yahweh could appear and therefore be worshiped outside the land of Israel, just as, according to the Priestly author, he could appear to Moses in the land of Egypt polluted by idolatry (Exod. 6;28). It remained to work out the appropriate forms of worship in this interim period between the destruction of the old and the erection of the new temple.

The critical years leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem were fatal to many prophetic reputations. Optimistic prophets like Hananiah, who put their reputations on the line with short-term predictions of Babylonian defeat (Jer. 28), were obviously and quickly discredited. But even those like Jeremiah who foresaw disaster even while trying to stave it off did not emerge unscathed. As we see from the rejection of Jeremiah's preaching after the event in Egypt (Jer. 44:1-19), it could be argued that they had contributed to bringing about the disaster by the very fact of predicting it or that they had advocated policies that had helped to bring it about. Conflict within prophetic circles, amply in evidence in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and a growing public skepticism and disillusionment with respect to prophets in general, testify to the crisis that prophecy was undergoing at that time. What was worse, disillusionment with prophecy inevitably induced loss of confidence in the reality, power, and justice of the God in whose name the prophets spoke. We do not need to read between the lines to discover many indications of this theological crisis in the literature that has survived from that time. With the help of the commentary, the reader is invited to identify the points at which Ezekiel is responding to this crisis of faith and should bear in mind that this kind of situation is not confined to the sixth century B.C.