

Postscripts

In 561 BC, some twenty years after Jeremiah's death, a new king of Babylon declared an amnesty for the Judan captives there. He released Jehoiachin from prison and assigned daily rations from the royal household to support Jehoiachin and his five sons. The lineage of David was hanging on by a hair.

A Prophet in Exile

Ezekiel

The Exile was Yahweh's judgment on His people, but as in the time of Moses, He was able to use such tragedy productively. These few generations did more to transform Judaism (the faith of the people of Judah) than all the centuries since Joshua. A few key people spearheaded the transformation; the prophet Ezekiel was one of them.

Ezekiel's Call

A handful of Jews were taken to Babylon in 605 BC, but thousands went in 597. (See map, page 342.) For the decade until Jerusalem was crushed, these clung to the hope that any day now, Yahweh would work a miracle and bring them home. They huddled in holding patterns and eked out livings in their makeshift settlements along the canals of the Euphrates River. They were also largely unwilling to face any responsibility they may have had for their sufferings.

Among these exiles of 597 was a priest-in-training named Ezekiel. Four years later, on his thirtieth birthday, he was eligible to be anointed as a full-fledged priest. But in Nippur, a Babylonian city a thousand miles from Jerusalem, there was not much

for a priest of Yahweh to do. No temple, no sacrifices. About the only work was teaching the writings of Moses.

But Yahweh had another assignment for this priest. That year, 593 BC, was when King Zedekiah sent envoys to Babylon and later went there himself. It was the year Jeremiah wrote to the exiles, advising them to settle in for seventy years and ignore those among them who were prophesying a speedy return. (For that, one of those exiled prophets urged that Jeremiah be executed.) The ice under Jerusalem was daily growing thinner, and the expatriate leaders were incompetent.

In that year, Yahweh blasted His new priest with a vision: a blazing windstorm, in the midst of which were four living creatures, glowing with fire. Each had four faces and four wings, and they stood as the four corners of a square, outstretched wings touching. Resting on their spread wings was a crystalline expanse, upon which stood a sapphire throne. On the throne Ezekiel could make out a manlike figure gleaming like white-hot metal and fire. This was a physical representation of the glory of Yahweh; the Presence that had led Israel through the desert, indwelt the tabernacle, and inhabited Solomon's temple was now appearing to the exiles in Babylon.

Ezekiel had the usual response to such a sight: he hit the dirt. Yahweh breathed His Spirit into the prone form so that Ezekiel could stand up, then began issuing instructions to His new prophet, whom He addressed as "son of man." "Son of" in Hebrew parlance signified someone's essence: a "son of iniquity" was a thoroughly wicked person; a "son of Abraham" was a person with a character like Abraham's; and "son of man" (or "son of Adam") referred to an utterly human, Adam-like person, in contrast to the holy God.

Yahweh appeared to Ezekiel in this terrifying way to strengthen him for a harsh task. The Jewish exiles were *rebellious*. Yahweh had a woeful message for them, just like the one Jeremiah was giving the Jews back home. Ezekiel would need the same tough hide Jeremiah had to withstand abuse from people who didn't want to hear what he had to say.

The Spirit of Yahweh literally picked Ezekiel up and dropped him in a nearby village of exiles. For a week he sat dazed by

his encounter, feeling Yahweh's anger against His people's stubbornness churning in his own gut.

Free to Choose

Yahweh compared the prophetic task to that of a watchman, stationed on the heights of a city to inform its people about the progress of a battle or approaching couriers. Jeremiah was posted in Jerusalem to warn about the coming holocaust. Ezekiel's job was to notify the exiles that each of them was as individually accountable for his own actions as Jerusalem was as a whole for hers.

The exiles were saying they were suffering for their parents' crimes, or for the nobility's corruption—it was always someone else's fault. Yahweh wanted them to face the fact that in His sight, each of them lived or died by his own virtue or vice. It's true that Yahweh allows parents' sin to taint their children's lives, for no man is an island. But the children always have enough freedom to choose darkness or light. Even a person who has been wicked since birth retains the freedom to choose to change—not enough power to break ingrained habits on his own, but enough to reject them in principle and wholeheartedly seek Yahweh's help to reject them in practice.

In their heart of hearts, the exiles suspected that Yahweh enjoyed saddling people with inherited sin and then zapping them for it. To this Yahweh retorted, "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? . . . Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

Living Message

Like Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, Ezekiel often had to live his message. First, Yahweh made it impossible for him to speak except when giving a direct message from his Boss. Then silence went on for seven years until Jerusalem's destruction, and symbolized the nation's refusal to listen.

Then Yahweh told him to build a clay model of Jerusalem under siege (the real siege was as yet five years off), and to lie on his side in front of it one day for each year of the treason of Israel and Judah. For 430 days Ezekiel had to lie there eating nothing but vegetarian patties baked on cow dung (a taste of famine food)

embodying what Yahweh had suffered for 430 years. For it was really He who had borne the nation's evil all those years, and He who would suffer with His people every anguish of siege, starvation, and slaughter. Ezekiel, the son of man, was a living picture of what Yahweh was willing to bear for love of treacherous children. And like Hosea, the prophet was able to enter into the intimacy of Yahweh's grief and share it with Him as a friend.

The Glory Departs

The next year Ezekiel saw a dreadful thing: in a vision of Jerusalem he watched the glory rise from the temple and depart. Out the front gate of the city it went, and stopped over a nearby hill called the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem had abandoned Yahweh; now He was abandoning her. Ezekiel cried out in horror, but Yahweh was unmoved.

Covenant Sentence

Ezekiel saw in detail what was coming on Jerusalem: the famine; Zedekiah fleeing the city through a hole in the wall; the bloodshed. He directed some scathing tongue-lashings toward both Judah and the exiles. Jerusalem was a woman Yahweh had found as an abandoned baby, raised tenderly, and finally married and adorned as a queen. But she had used her fame and wealth to become a whore and attract gigolos, so Yahweh was handing her over to be torn apart by her lovers. Ezekiel described both idolatry and international intrigue in graphic lewd imagery.

He had choice words for Judah's leaders, both in Jerusalem and Babylon. They were like shepherds who cared nothing for their sheep, only for themselves.

And from a thousand miles away, Ezekiel fought the same battle Jeremiah was fighting against the false prophets who predicted that everything was going to be okay. Real prophets, said Ezekiel, would be repairing the gaps in the moral and spiritual wall of the city, so that it could stand against all upheavals in the Day of Yahweh. But instead, when the leaders of Judah built a flimsy wall, these prophets simply whitewashed it to look like a solid piece of justice and commitment.

Every bleak picture, though, held its ray of hope. One day,

when Yahweh's whoring bride was humbled, He would take her back as wife. He would take His sheep from the false shepherds and give them a true shepherd: a son of David. Ezekiel saw the same restored remnant glimpsed by every other prophet since Hosea first announced doom: fabulous harvests in a land without war; true love between Yahweh and His people; a new covenant written on the heart. Over and over He explained the purpose of both destruction and restoration: "Then they will know that I am Yahweh."

News of the End

In August of 586 BC, Yahweh told Ezekiel that the next day he would lose the delight of his eyes: his wife. He was not to show any sign of mourning, for on that same day the exiles would lose the delight of their eyes and their hopes would crumble: Jerusalem would fall. In his silence, Ezekiel had only Yahweh with whom to share his grief. For if lying on his side before a model of Jerusalem had let Ezekiel taste Yahweh's suffering, here was the ultimate empathy; both God and man saw their beloved brides die that day, and wept together alone.

Five months later the first captives arrived with news of the final desolation of the Holy City. For seven and a half years, Ezekiel had been unable to speak except when delivering a message from Yahweh. Now his tongue was loosed to greet the refugees. All this time his job had been to urge the exiles to turn from the self-centeredness to which, insanely, they still clung, despite the ordeals they had suffered. His tactic had been to predict destruction as a sign of Yahweh's rage.

But now that the worst had happened, Yahweh gave him a new assignment: to sketch out yet more of the glorious future He planned, so that hope might accomplish what warning had not. Again He gave Ezekiel a series of visions: Israel was like a valley of dry bones, but Yahweh would breathe into them until they were again a great army. He would bind Israel and Judah together again into one nation under one Davidic king.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;
I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you

a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:26-28)

World powers would amass to destroy the new kingdom, but Yahweh would reduce their armies to carrion. Yet Yahweh was quick to reiterate the purpose:

"It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. . . . Then the nations will know that I am [Yahweh] . . . when I show myself holy through you before their eyes." (36:22-23)

Yahweh's eye was ever on the nations.

Enigma

The final section of Ezekiel's book is puzzling—its symbolic meaning seems clear enough, but its literal fulfillment confounds the imagination. The prophet saw the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem according to a plan of mammoth proportions—the entire complex covered a square mile with wide buffer zones between it and the rest of the city.¹ The plan drove home the point that Yahweh's holy place was utterly separate from the commonplace city of getting and spending around it. No longer would Yahweh's house sit cheek-by-jowl next door to a palace like Solomon's. In fact, the priests and Levites would have about twenty-one square miles each around the temple precincts to form a further buffer between the holy and the common. The city itself would be only a quarter the size of the holy area.

Yahweh gave Ezekiel detailed regulations for the priests who would serve Him in His house. The overall picture is of the tabernacle system of Leviticus radically revamped and expanded, but still largely intact. And the overall message is HOLINESS, including the absolute need for blood sacrifice to cleanse the people enough to live even at arm's length from a Holy God.

Ezekiel saw the glory move back into Yahweh's dwelling place just as he'd seen it abandon Solomon's temple before Jerusalem was burned. He also saw a river flowing out of the temple, giving life to everything it touched. He saw how Yahweh would redistribute the Promised Land in equal portions to the twelve tribes—no more of this amassing of wealth in the hands of a few. And finally, Yahweh renamed the city. It would no longer be called *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem), but *Yahweh-Shammah*: Yahweh Is There.

NOTE

1. The lengths of the Hebrew measurements are somewhat debated, but this is a ballpark figure.