

EZEKIEL – Prophet To The Exiles

While Jeremiah was enduring the privations of the siege of Jerusalem, Ezekiel, 600 miles (1,000 km) away as the crow flies, was busy in Babylon. He had been taken prisoner in 597 BC, along with thousands of other Jews, and forced to settle in the land of the enemy. Here, at the age of 30, the young priest was appointed a prophet of the Lord.

Like Moses and Isaiah before him, he was granted an opening vision of the Lord in glory. He saw God enthroned on moving chariots of fire, with four cherubims, like those in the Tabernacle and Temple, and giant wheels full of eyes. Then he was told he was to be a watchman for the exiles, warning them of spiritual danger. He would be made dumb, unable to speak except when God had a message for the people, so that when the word did come, it would have extra power.

Ezekiel's role was to counter the hopefuls who were convinced the exiles would soon return to Jerusalem. Perhaps Egypt would conquer Babylon, they thought, or Nebuchadnezzar would change his mind and let them go. Instead, Ezekiel taught, by a series of ingenious mimes (for he could not speak), that Jerusalem was doomed. In chapter four, he constructs an elaborate model of the city on his lounge carpet, complete with siege mounds and battering rams. For over a year he lies on his side in front of the model, growing daily thinner as he rations his food and water to represent the inhabitants of Jerusalem, away across the desert. Then in chapter five he cuts off his hair and chops it with a knife or burns it in the fire to represent the bloody end to the siege, tucking a tiny part of it into his cloak to simulate

the minority who would survive the siege.

In chapter eight the prophet is taken in a vision to Jerusalem, to see first-hand the evils that were bringing God's judgments on the city – the elders of the city worshipping idols in the Temple, and men bowing down to the sun. He watches the glory of God, enthroned in the cherubims, departing from the city. God could no longer dwell there.

In another episode (chapter 12:6, 7) the dumb prophet blindfolds himself, then digs a hole through the mud wall of his house and crawls through it at dusk with his possessions in a bundle. You can imagine his audience trying to work out this mime! He was acting out the desperate attempt of their vanquished king Zedekiah to escape from Jerusalem, and his being trapped and then blinded by Nebuchadnezzar, tired of his rebellions. *"I will bring him to Babylon, yet he shall not see it"*, said the Lord, and that is how it turned out.

In one of his more dramatic dramas (chapter 24:3) Ezekiel set a pot of stew on the fire in his kitchen and allowed it to boil dry and then burn red hot. Imagine the smoke! When his lips were unsealed, he explained that this very day Nebuchadnezzar had begun the siege of Jerusalem, and God would purge it of its filth by an unquenchable fire of judgment. Shortly afterwards his wife died, and he was told not to mourn for her, because that is how it would be in Jerusalem when so many perished in the war there was no time to be sad.

From chapter 25 to 32, the prophet anticipates any hope that other countries would rescue Judah from Babylon by predicting the downfall of

their neighbours Ammon, Moab, Edom, Tyre and Egypt. History shows he was correct. They fell into the hands of Babylon in their turn.

The last part of Ezekiel is full of hope. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, he looks down through the centuries to a time when God would restore and forgive His people, bring them back to their land, and give them a king. You may have heard of the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Chapter 37 has the prophet surrounded by a battlefield of ancient skeletons, representing, he is told, the people of Israel. As he speaks, the bones come together, flesh appears on them, and the breath of life fills their lungs. They stand up again, a great army. Then, as the prophecy continues, they are back in their homeland. The ten tribes and the two tribes are reunited, and David (in Hebrew, 'the Beloved', a title of Jesus) rules over the whole nation as one kingdom for evermore (chapter 37:21-28).

But trouble strikes again. In chapter 38 a giant confederacy from the north sweeps down into the land that has become newly re-inhabited. All seems to be lost. But God, at the last moment, intervenes with earthquake and fire, and the enemy hordes are knocked out, leaving the people thankful and obedient once more. The final chapters describe the construction of a magnificent new Temple. Fresh water flows like a river from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, bringing it new life, and the cherubic glory of God that departed over two thousand years before, now returns to God's holy hill.

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