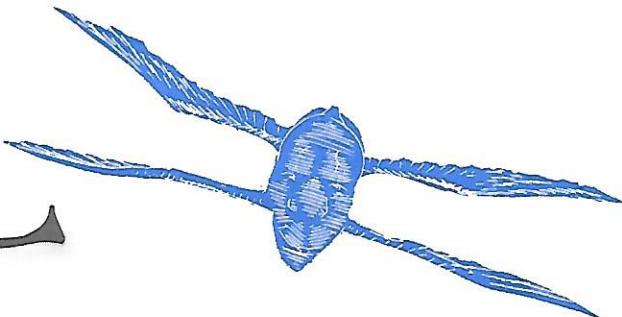


ScripturefromScratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

EZEKIEL



Difficult Prophet in Difficult Times

by Irene Nowell, O.S.B.

En the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I saw divine visions" (Ez 1:1). So opens the Book of Ezekiel and already there are problems! What does "thirtieth year" mean? Is it the thirtieth year of his life (the most common explanation)? Or does he refer to the finding of the book of the Law (the heart of Deuteronomy) in the Temple in 622 B.C., thirty years earlier? We do know that the year is 593 B.C. ("the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile") and that Ezekiel is in Babylon.

The beginning of the sixth century B.C. was a difficult time for the people of Judah. A little over a century earlier, the northern part of the country (called Israel, because it represented ten of the twelve tribes) had been taken captive by the Assyrians from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).

Now the Babylonians, the new major power in Mesopotamia, were threatening the tiny country of Judah.

In 597 B.C. the Babylonians swept in and carried off all the leaders—political, economic and religious. King Jehoiachin was also taken to Babylon in this deportation and his uncle, Zedekiah, was made king of Judah.

The Babylonians thought that Zedekiah would be their puppet, doing whatever they wished. But in 589 Zedekiah, encouraged by ambitious advisers, stopped paying tribute. The Babylonian response was swift and devastating. Nebuchadnezzar invaded the country and laid seige to Jerusalem. In August, 587, he took the city, burning the Temple, killing many of the inhabitants and destroying whatever lay in his path. Many of the survivors were exiled to Babylon and the country lay in ruins.

The Babylonian exile was not only a political and economic crisis for God's people, it was a religious crisis as well. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land that became the territories of Israel and Judah (Genesis 12:7).

God, who formed them as a people through the experience of exodus and desert sojourn, had made a covenant with them at Sinai (Exodus 19:3-8) and promised to be "their God." God had promised David that a descendent of his would sit on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

What had happened to the covenant and the promises? Had God now abandoned them? Had their sins been so terrible that God had finally given up on them? Or were the gods of the Babylonians stronger than Israel's

God? Were they lost forever?

Ezekiel, a young priest who was probably taken into exile with Jehoiachin in 597, had the difficult task of bringing God's word to the people through this period of disaster.

His call to prophesy came in 593, the fifth year of Jehoiachin's captivity. The last date mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel is 571, 16 years after the second group of exiles arrived in Babylon and

32 years before Cyrus would give them permission to return to their own land.

The Prophet and His Message

Ezekiel's experience of God's call is striking for several reasons.

EThere is a standard pattern for the telling of these "call" stories: an encounter with God, a commission, an objection by the prophet-to-be, reassurance and a sign from God (see, for example, Jeremiah 1:4-10).

Ezekiel wins the prize for encounters with God (see Ez 1:1-28)! First there is a storm wind, a huge cloud with lightning. Then four living creatures arrive with four faces and four wings each,

and each has wheels with eyes! Their whirring wings roar like the roar of mighty waters.

Only after this startling introduction does Ezekiel become aware of the presence of God. He sees a human-like figure seated on a throne who gleams like fire. Words fail him in describing his vision, which reminds him of the splendor of the rainbow. He retreats into statements of likeness:

"Such was the vision of

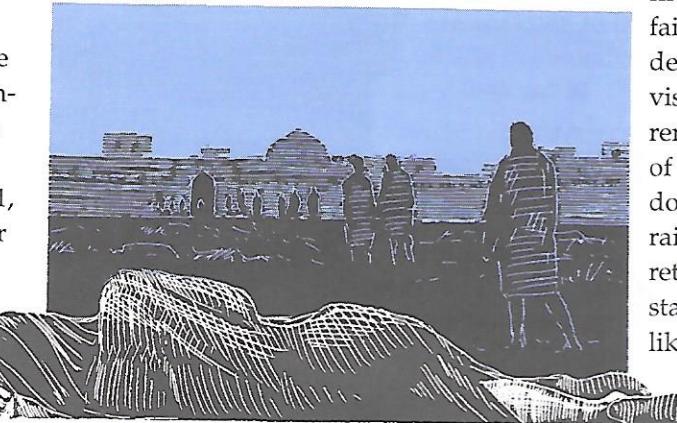
the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ez 1:28).

After this amazing encounter with God, Ezekiel hears a daunting commission: "Son of Man, I am sending you to the Israelites, rebels who have rebelled against me.... Whether they heed or resist...they shall know that a prophet has been among them" (2:3, 5). He makes no objection. Is he too overwhelmed? But God reassures him and gives him a sign anyway. He is to eat a scroll that says, "Lamentation and wailing and woe!" (Ez 2:10—3:3).

Why does Ezekiel experience such a dramatic encounter with God? He needs to know that God will be with him even in Babylon. Why does he eat the scroll? A prophet is a messenger of God. Ezekiel has internalized the message thoroughly.

The message Ezekiel ingests is "lamentation and wailing and woe." God has not been defeated by the Babylonian gods, but rather has been deeply offended by the idolatry and injustice of the people. As a consequence they will be driven from their good land.

The people still in Judah cannot remain complacent in their guilt. The people already in exile cannot expect to return any time soon. The vision of the four living creatures returns, this



Praying With Scripture

Ezekiel describes God leaving the temple to go into exile with the people (Ez 10:18-20) and then envisions God returning with them (Ez 43:1-7). consider the wonder of God's presence with us in Scripture, in the Eucharist and in each other. Where do you find God? Rest in God's presence. Thank God for this wonderful gift.

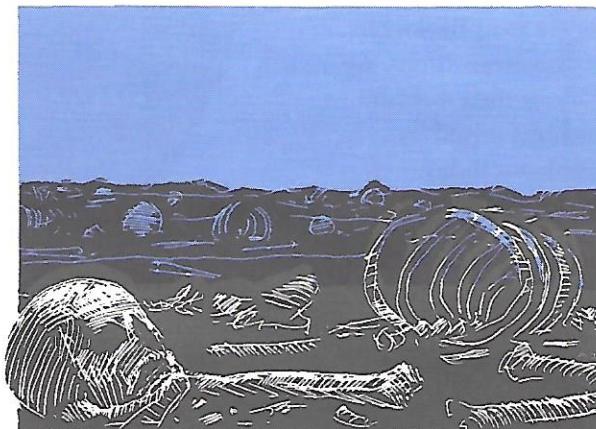
time with devastating news: God is leaving Jerusalem. The glory of God, riding upon the living creatures (the "cherubim") leaves the temple and takes up a stand on the Mount of Olives (Ez 8—11). Now Ezekiel knows for certain that the city is doomed. God has left it to the terrors of the Babylonians and will go with the people into exile.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Ezekiel delivers his message not only in word and story, but in a series of symbolic actions. He lies on his side for many days with an iron griddle set up in front of him and eats repulsive food to represent the siege of Jerusalem (Ez 4). He scatters his shorn hair to show how the people will be scattered (Ez 5). He acts out the packing and departure from the city (Ez 12). He has become the message that he ate. What must his neighbors have thought?

After a series of oracles against the other nations (Ez 25—32), the book returns to the central story with the news that a fugitive from Jerusalem had arrived in Babylon reporting the fall of the city (33:21). From this point on, the message of the prophet turns to encouragement.

The people are in exile through their own fault; it is for their own sins that they suffer (Ez 18, Ez 33). But God has not abandoned them forever. God, the good shepherd, will lead the flock back to their own land (Ez 34). God will reunite the tribes of north and south and make them one people with a descendent of David to rule them



The Book of Ezekiel Through the Centuries

As one can imagine, the Book of Ezekiel has not been easy for the believing community to accept and interpret. The bizarre imagery of the four living creatures

(27:15-28). Even though they think they are dry bones, God will again breathe life into them (37:1-14).

Once more the four living creatures return, now bearing a message of hope. God will return to Jerusalem and live there with the people forever (43:1-9). So Ezekiel describes in great detail how the new temple should be built and who may enter it (Ez 40—48).

Flowing from the Temple will be the river of life that makes the waters of the Dead Sea fresh (47:1-12). On the banks of this wonderful stream will grow trees whose fruit will serve for food and whose leaves will be medicine. There will not be just one tree of life growing in Eden, but life-giving trees all along the banks of the river.

Exile in Babylon is dreadful, but a great future still awaits God's people. Ezekiel's final word of hope is this: "The name of the City shall henceforth be 'The LORD is here'" (48:35).

and the strange actions of the prophet himself have led to all sorts of speculation ranging from the suspicion that Ezekiel was on drugs to a suggestion that he had seen visitors from another planet.

Some of the Jewish rabbis were afraid that unstable people might attempt to recreate the prophet's mystical visions for themselves. Indeed a *merkabah* (chariot) spirituality based on the opening vision did arise around the 14th century A.D. Kabbalah mysticism is also rooted in this vision. The Talmud even prohibits the reading of chapter one in the synagogue although it was later allowed for the first day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost.

Contradictions between Ezekiel's interpretation of the law and the Pentateuch also caused much debate. Hananiah ben Hezekiah stayed up nights, burning three hundred jars of oil for light, trying to reconcile the contradictions. A rabbinic regulation stated that no one under 30 years of age could read the book and that it should not be read without a teacher.

Some of Ezekiel's images are found in the New Testament: God as the good shepherd (John 10) and God's people as the vine (John 15). But it is the Book of Revelation that borrows most heavily, with its vision of Christ (Rev 1:12-16), Gog and Magog (Rev 20:8), the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:2, 10-21) and the river of life (Rev 22:1-2).

Only a few early Christian writers took up the Book of Ezekiel: Origen, Jerome and Gregory the Great. Most other discussions clustered around only two passages. The dry bones passage (37:1-14) was interpreted as a

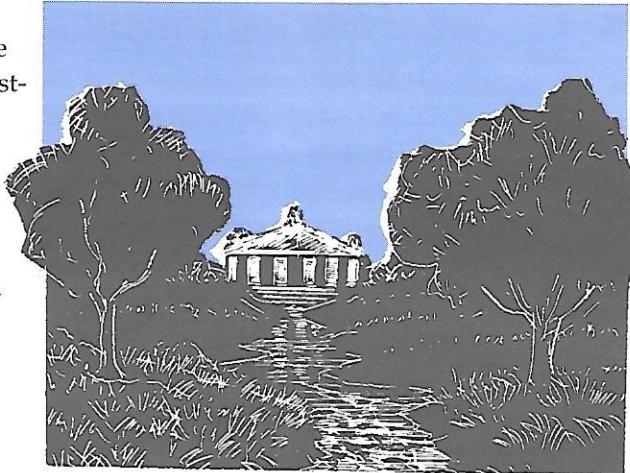
symbol for Christ's resurrection and of the resurrection of the righteous at the end of time. In the fourth century this was one of the readings for the celebration of Easter. In today's lectionary a few verses of this passage are read along with the story of the raising of Lazarus on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A. The great river (47:1-12) was seen as a symbol of baptism and is still used today in baptismal liturgies.

The Book of Ezekiel Today

So what should we make of this strange book? How can we understand it? First, it is helpful to read Ezekiel in conjunction with two other biblical stories: the exodus from Egypt and the tales of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

The situations of the exiles in Ezekiel's time is similar to that of the people enslaved in Egypt. They are in a foreign land. God seems distant. They need a dramatic message of hope.

Moses tells them with plague after plague that "thus you will know that this is the Lord" (for example Exodus 7:17; 8:18). Ezekiel supports his vivid message with the same assurance. "The trees of the field shall bear their fruits, and the land its crops, and they shall dwell securely on their own soil.



Thus they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bonds of their yoke and free them from the power of those who enslaved them (Ez 34:27).

The prophets Elijah and Elisha stand at the beginning of Israel's prophetic tradition. Sometimes their actions seem bizarre. Image of chariots, the whirlwind and possession by the spirit of God fill their stories. They continue to declare to the people, "You shall know the LORD" (for example, 1 Kings 18:37). Ezekiel's ministry is modeled on these two foundational moments in the history of God's people.

Second, even as we read Ezekiel in the context of his disastrous times, we must also consider our own moment in history. Some questions raised by Ezekiel are still pertinent today.

How complacent are we when

unjust economic, political and religious systems oppress the powerless? Are we willing to take up the prophetic task, to speak out against injustice? When disaster comes, where do we find hope that God has come with us, even into our tragic exile? Most of all, how can we learn to treasure above all else the wonder of God's presence with us? ■

Irene Nowell, O.S.B., is the author of Sing a New Song (Liturgical Press) and an editor for The Bible Today. She has a doctorate in biblical studies from The Catholic University of America and is working on the revision of the Old Testament for the New American Bible.

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Talking About Scripture

- **Ezekiel's message was often hard and his actions were strange. But he was called to be God's prophet. How do we recognize God's prophets today? How do they make us uncomfortable? How do we know they are genuine? Talk to other faithful people about this.**



Reading About Scripture

- **Craven, Toni. "Ezekiel," *Collegeville Bible Commentary*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1989.**
- ***The Bible Today*, 37 (January/February 1999), has six articles on the Book of Ezekiel by Lawrence Boadt, Ronald D. Witherup, Gregory J. Polan, Chris Frank, Kathryn Pfisterer Darr and Daniel Durken.**