

JEREMIAH, THE SUFFERING PROPHET, AND EZEKIEL, THE VISIONARY

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The author is fully aware of the many contentions about who wrote different parts of the Bible. Many others can and do interest themselves in the authorship issue. My interest is in commenting on the text itself, regardless of the identity of the writer, if that can ever be known.

Much of the Hebrew Bible is written as if it were autobiographical. Moses apparently tells his story, Samuel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel theirs. Are autobiographies the truth and nothing but the truth? An autobiographer chooses what he wishes to record. We have learnt from Freud that what we choose to record may not be the most important things; perhaps what we "forgot" may be more important.

Jeremiah's story seems too truthful and painful not to be true. The Talmud suggests he is the only prophet to have written his own story (BT Baba Bathra 14b). Is Ezekiel's story too outrageous to be true or too outrageous not to be true? The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (both of whom were also priests) lived and were active as prophets during a time of great catastrophe for the people of Israel, the conquest of Judah and the destruction of the First Temple. They devised different theologies to respond to the destruction of the Temple. Jeremiah blames the people for ethical misbehavior. Ezekiel blames the people for ritual misbehavior.

JEREMIAH

The people of Judah think that performing the sacrifices is sufficient to fulfill their part of the Covenant, and that God will protect them. Jeremiah disagrees. He condemns those who follow the Temple rituals as if that were all that God wants of them. Jeremiah cries out at the gate of the Temple that God will destroy the Temple and cares not for those who say *the*

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Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord (Jer. 7:4) but oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow; those who *consider this house which is called by My name* [to be] *a den of robbers* (v. 11). The priests, some of the prophets, and some of the people do not believe Jeremiah. For his words he is twice arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to death. (The first sentence is revoked by the King of Judah and the second by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian conqueror who destroyed the Temple.)

Nebuchadnezzar exiles the leaders among the Judeans in two waves; the first after he deposes King Jehoiachin, and the second 11 years later after he defeats and captures King Zedekiah, destroys the Temple, and razes Jerusalem. Jeremiah develops a theology of exile-repentance-restoration – if the Judeans repent, God will restore them to Jerusalem. To those carried off in the first exile, Jeremiah writes:

Build houses, settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and have sons and daughters, choose wives for your sons, find husbands for your daughters so that these can bear sons and daughters in their turn Work for the good of the city to which I have exiled you, pray to the Lord on its behalf since on its welfare yours depends (29:5-8).

This is a new concept of exile: work, be fruitful, and God will protect you where you are. God does not need the Temple.

Jeremiah is the only prophet who has dialogues with God in the form of prayers about his tortured life. They are introspective, self-revelatory and biographical, more private cries of distress than prophetic. He appeals and prays to God (each appeal is addressed to God and is thus a prayer) as a suffering human being, not in his function as a prophet to the people. Perhaps it is a complaint to the One who gave him his mission, in which he feels himself a failure. No one else in biblical literature felt this personal acute pain and its effect on his personal religious experience as did Jeremiah. It is more burdensome than he can bear. God even tells him, *'Do not pray for these people, neither lift up or cry or pray on their behalf, do not intercede with Me, for I will not hear you'* (7:16). This makes Jeremiah's position the opposite of that of Moses, who always interceded for the people. Does Jeremiah despair of God, or does he decide that he and only he "knows" God? He has no life other than his relationship with God. Moses had a life, had a wife and

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children and was close to his brother and sister, but Jeremiah – at God's request – has no family. He has nothing but God, an impossible companion!

He sees and feels the world differently than do his fellow Judeans. He knows that destruction must come because they have broken the Covenant. This consciousness gives Jeremiah a sensitivity, what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the pathos of God. He sees the apathetic indifference of H/his people as the voice of God and in this he differs from us.¹ He is inspired by Moses, Amos and Hosea, and absorbs God into his unconscious and becomes God-intoxicated. Jeremiah is not just a prophet. He has the more dangerous task of bearing every man's suffering and pain. God's anger may be righteous indignation at injustice, and Jeremiah's may be as well, but his anger is also human.

EZEKIEL

A stranger work than the Book of Ezekiel does not appear in the biblical canon. He is not an unknown prophet, yet, in contrast to Jeremiah, we are told very little about him. We know enough about his personality to suggest it is in fact very odd. The author reports that he is paralyzed, bound and dumb for seven days after his call (or for 430 days or perhaps for seven-and-one-half years) yet nevertheless he prophesizes from the moment he receives the message of the tragic fall of Jerusalem (3:4-6,26; 24:27; 33:22). He eats scrolls and excrement. He has his hair and beard cut off by a sharp sword or razor, into three separate parts to be burnt in three different places (5:1-2). He flies in his vision from Babylon to Jerusalem (11:1). He writes of bizarre visions, tasting some of his visions. He writes of gruesome and bloody events where human-like beings slaughter the people of Jerusalem except for those they mark on the forehead as mourners (10:2-7). He occasionally writes obscenely. In fact, his prose easily rates as the most sexually explicit in the Bible. People die from his look or words (11:1-13) and he resurrects people (37:7-10). He is the only prophet to be a "transported" visionary (apparently four times, in Chapters 8, 11, 37 and 43). One verse in his book suggests that he was a good entertainer. *As far as they are concerned, you are like a love song pleasantly sung to a good musical accompaniment* (33:32). Or, does he envision a different side of God from that seen by other prophets? His cherub-like vision may depict four different images of God.

Moshe Greenberg notes that while most of Jeremiah's prophecies materialized, Ezekiel's did not.² Yehezkel Kaufmann says the same.³ Rashi notes that prophesying on foreign soil is problematic. If a prophet is intended to speak God's words, are Ezekiel's too imaginative? Maimonides suggests his visions were imaginary.⁴

Ezekiel presents some radical theologies. He says that God gave Israel laws that He knew *were not good and judgments they could not live by* (20:25). That is a shocking statement – and an even more shocking theology. Is Ezekiel saying that some of the laws of Moses are perverse? Is the destruction of Israel and Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple, simply God's will? Even if one of Ezekiel's themes is the inscrutability of God, his theology is difficult to maintain.

He needs to find a reason for the destruction, and a way out. His reason for the destruction is the total depravity of the people of Israel from the beginning of their history, and his definition of depravity is idolatry defined in sexual terms. Ezekiel describes Israelite history as evil from the beginning of its relationship with God in a way never described by any other prophet. Hosea and Jeremiah use sexual metaphors, but never in the way that Ezekiel uses explicit sexuality to describe Israel's evil. It is for these reasons that the sages of the Talmud were more critical of his book than any other book in the Bible (see BT. Meg. 25b; Men. 45a; Hag. 13b; PT Meg. 4:12). As Moshe Greenberg notes, Ezekiel takes "the adulterous wife of Hosea and Jeremiah [and gives them] a biography."⁵ Instead of talking about ethics, Ezekiel uses women as a symbol of priestly and ritual uncleanness.

Ezekiel also centers on the Temple, but his Temple differs from that described in the texts. And Jeremiah, his contemporary as a prophet, does not see the abominations Ezekiel describes in the Temple.

Ezekiel is the first apocalyptic prophet. Having condemned Israel, he needs a way out, and this is the development of the first Hebrew apocalypse (the destruction of evil in the form of Gog and Magog) and then a new messianic Temple. This is the beginning of the Israelite idea of eschatology and utopian messianism. Ezekiel begins his book with the vision of the *Merkavah* – the Chariot. (His vision of the chariot of God became, after his own time, the idea of mystical travel to heaven.)

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He is the first prophet to emphasize the visions of the secret world. When Isaiah tells of his vision (Chapter 6) it is still a secret that is the background to his words (Chapters 7, 9, 11), and his words are clearly more important than the vision. Similarly, Jeremiah's visions serve to illustrate his words. The Talmud, in discussing Ezekiel's place in the canon, resents his telling the secrets of God's world. The Mishnah forbids the explaining of *Ma'aseh Bere-shit* – the stories of Creation. They understand that Ezekiel's vision was the secret of the Creation. His vision was an attempt to penetrate the mystery of God, the world of the Divine. His was a world of four-headed beasts, each with four wings, who were like lightning (1:13-14), like wheels within wheels (1:19,21), attached to a throne of sapphire stone (1:26). Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll of his vision, to internalize the vision and perhaps to hide it. In his vision of the New Temple (described after the apocalyptic battle of evil represented by Gog and Magog) the prince is both a high priest (44:3; 45:7,17) and a political leader, either or both criticized as being corrupt in the past (45:8-9).

Ezekiel was told by God that He '*shall raise up one shepherd, My servant David, and put him in charge of them to pasture them . . . My servant David a prince*' (34:23-24). And, '*Again my servant David shall be their king . . . their prince*' [nasi] (37:24-25). This is a new use of the word *nasi*, translated as "prince" or "leader." It has never previously been used for David as a messianic figure.

Ezekiel talks about priestly rules (he actually makes them different from Leviticus) and a key word for him is *tamay* [ritual uncleanness]. His criticism of the Israelites is on ritual misbehavior. Ezekiel's theology is based on priestly rituals, and he is more concerned with his priestly than his prophetic role. Walter Zimmerli points out that the word "God" appears 434 times in the Book of Ezekiel, more often than in any other biblical book. In half of these references, the name of God is doubled, as Adonai Lord. This doubling appears only 66 times outside of Ezekiel.⁶ (Jeremiah uses the term Lord of Hosts 82 times.) This confirms Joyce on the theocentricity of Ezekiel's theology.⁷

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

The similarity of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is in the discussion of new hearts. Jeremiah says, *Circumcise yourselves for the Lord, apply circumcision to your hearts* (4:4, 9:25-26). Ezekiel says in the name of God that, *I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give a heart of flesh instead* (36:26). What does the phrase "a new heart" mean? The old heart allows freedom to choose God or not. Ezekiel and Jeremiah know that Israel has not chosen God. *Your ears do not hear His words. Look, their ears are uncircumcised* (Jer. 6:10). To Jeremiah, a new heart is defined as a new covenant. To Ezekiel, it is a new spirit, one that will listen to God.

Jeremiah is a prophet and a priest who preaches about ethics. Ezekiel is a prophet and a priest who preaches about ritual. This is not to deny Jeremiah's belief in the ritual laws nor Ezekiel's belief in ethics, but one chooses the prophetic role and the other the priestly role. They each see a different problem facing the Israelite people. These two messengers of God relate different messages.

NOTES

1. D.J. Moore, *The Human and the Holy: The Spirituality of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, (New York: Fordham University Press, N.Y., 1989) pp. 78-79.
2. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel, The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 1, 1983; Vol. 2, 1997 (New York: Doubleday).
3. Yehezkel Kaufmann, trans. Moshe Greenberg, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) p. 429.
4. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) pp. 403-407.
5. Green berg, Vol. I, p. 299.
6. Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, trans. R.E. Clements (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) pp. 556-558.
7. Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Vol. 51 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press).