

EZEKIEL THE SENTINEL

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It would seem that destiny had ordained for Ezekiel to be placed at a critical juncture in history, where the future of Judean survival hung in the balance. The earlier extraterritorial experience, that of the Northern tribes of Israel in Assyrian captivity, had ended in failure. Would the second come to the same end? In this article, I shall attempt to address that single facet of that extraordinary man Ezekiel, prophet and priest, teacher and watchman, who succeeded where other great prophets had failed.

When King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah in the year 598 BCE,

he exiled . . . all of the commanders and all the warriors – ten thousand exiles – as well as the craftsmen and smiths He deported Jehoiachin to Babylon and the king's wives and officers and the notables of the land (II Kg. 24:14-15).

Jeremiah (29:1), addressing a letter to the deportees, added priests, prophets, and the rest of the elders of the exiled community, to the list recorded in the Book of Kings. Nebuchadnezzar, in selecting these special groups, had a dual purpose in mind. By deporting the elite, he weakened Judah, and he utilized the capabilities of the exiles to strengthen his own regime.¹

We know that the deportees either settled, or were settled, in compact communities, and that they established a framework of legislative and religious autonomy. Thus, the Book of Ezekiel relates on three different occasions that "elders" visited or consulted Ezekiel (8:1, 14:11, 20:1). It was nothing less than providential that this young and eccentric priest, called to be a prophet, was among the exiles. From talmudic to modern times, his great accomplishments were not properly evaluated. Thus, R. Judah said in Rav's name:

In truth, that man Hananiah is to be remembered for blessing. But for him, the Book of Ezekiel would have been hidden [excluded from the Canon], for its words contradicted the Torah. What did he do? Three hundred barrels of oil were taken up to him, and he sat in an upper chamber and reconciled them (T. Shabbat 13b).

Modern Christian Bible scholars are less than generous in their evaluation of Ezekiel. They consider him a lesser prophet than Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Amos. To some of them he was too fanatic, too much concerned with ritual. In fact, Torrey² argues that Ezekiel never existed. Now, this "imaginary" Ezekiel was very instrumental in saving the Babylonian exiles from the fate that befell the Assyrian exiles. Precisely because he combined the functions of priest and prophet, he recognized the imperative needs of the moment: To instill and strengthen the religious consciousness of the deportees as the adhesive force to withstand turmoil and inner conflicts, thus saving Jews and Judaism from oblivion.

THE CHALLENGE

About 120 years prior to the tragic events in Judah, a similar catastrophe was visited upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel, when it was conquered by the Assyrian juggernaut. There occurred a series of deportations of Israelites, leading to the legend of the Ten Lost Tribes. What actually transpired is documented by Lawson Younger.³ Indeed they were lost, but by the force of drastic assimilation. Even deported Kohanim [priests] were pressed into the service of the conquerors. An entire unit of the army of Tiglath-Pileser III, with its own commanders, was composed of deportees. Within one generation those exiles were forced into the mold that promoted rapid assimilation into Assyrian culture. It must be stressed that there seemed to be very few inner resources to stem the tide of fading out of Israelite history. It is my thesis that Ezekiel properly diagnosed the causes for the failure that brought about the speedy disappearance of the Northern tribes, and set for himself the monumental task of meeting the challenges to the survival of the Judean exiles.

CHANGED ROLE OF THE PROPHET – TEACHER – WATCHMAN

We know from subsequent history that the Babylonian exiles did not share the fate of the Assyrian exiles. It is assumed that this should be attributed to the cumulative effect of preceding prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. But the Books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel bear witness to the heathen practices, syncretism, and moral corruption of the Jerusalemites. What then brought about the dramatic changes in the national and religious conscious-

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ness of the deportees, purified of paganism and yearning for a return to the land of Israel? Ironically, some of the credit must be given to the changed conditions, that forced the prophet to adapt to these changes. The great prophets had exerted their influence through oratory to large audiences gathered for services at the Temple. Amos also spoke his exhortations at Bethel, "the king's sanctuary" of the Northern Kingdom (Amos 7:18). The exilic community, deprived of such central sanctuaries, utilized special sites devoted for public gatherings for study and prayer services on Sabbaths, new moon celebrations, and holy days. It is at such gatherings that Ezekiel taught and prophesied. Furthermore, we are told that on several occasions elders came to him for instruction on religious matters. Thus Ezekiel assumed the role of a charismatic teacher to select groups who, in turn, spread his instructions to larger groups.

It was after the theophany of the *Merkava* [Divine chariot] which marked the beginning of his prophetic ministry, that Ezekiel sat "stunned" in Tel-Aviv and received the word of the Lord: *'O mortal, I appoint you watchman for the House of Israel, and when you hear a word from My mouth you must warn them for Me'* (3:17-18). It is incumbent upon the prophet, under Divine threat to his life, to warn of the dangers threatening Israel. Brooding on the challenges to Jewish survival posed by the conditions of extra-territorialism, Ezekiel recognized with uncanny insight the major threats: assimilation, syncretism, and defeatism. He went beyond warnings. Furious with the prophets who *did not enter the breaches* (13:5), he undertook to *repair the walls for the House of Israel* (13:5).

REPAIRING THE WALLS

The revolutionary concept of God being One, universal, knowing no national borders, was the precious possession of the choice spirits and minds of Israel. The large majority, while still adhering to the God of Israel, was incapable of comprehending Him in all His ramifications. We can easily discern echoes of this attitude in the Bible. Thus, David, when confronting Saul who was pursuing him, pleaded: *For they have driven me out today, so that I cannot have a share in the Lord's possession, but I am told 'Go and worship other gods'* (I Sam. 26:19). The ancient practice of pagan societies that people vanquished accepted the idols of their conqueror – put into law by the

Romans in the infamous *cuius regio, eius religio* – posed a serious threat to the deportees. False prophets in Jerusalem taunted the exiles, saying: *Keep far from the Lord, the land has been given as a heritage to us* (Ezek. 11:15). They still kept to the belief, already bitterly disputed by Jeremiah, that Jerusalem and the Temple were the exclusive possession of God; that they were chosen while the deportees, being outcasts, had no share in Him or the land of Israel.

Ezekiel, dismissing this detrimental interpretation of "exile," assured the dispirited exilic community: *Thus said the Lord. I have indeed removed them far among the nations . . . and I have become to them a little sanctuary* (mikdash me'at) (11:16). I may be permitted to theorize that Ezekiel established the beginnings of what later became known as the synagogue. There, he instilled the hope in the deportees that the future of restoration resided in them and that "with a new spirit in them" God will gather them and return them to the Land of Israel. Without doubt, Ezekiel succeeded in stemming the most powerful factors, syncretism, despair, lost hope, leading to total assimilation.

SYNCRETISM

In the remarkable Chapter 14, the following scene unfolds. Certain elders came to Ezekiel and without any transition, almost in a non-sequitor, he wrote: *The Lord came to me: O mortal, these men have turned their minds upon fetishes and set their minds upon the sin through which they stumbled: Shall I respond to their inquiry?* (14:3-4). Let us try to understand what transpired here by reconstructing obvious missing parts in these verses. What was the reason for the meeting of these elders with Ezekiel, and what was their inquiry? It is not stated, but from the context of this minor theophany, it may be inferred that these elders came to Ezekiel with a request from their "constituents" to allow the introduction of some Babylonian "fetishes" into the worship of the Lord. For that matter, Ezekiel may have suspected that these elders had wished this syncretism for themselves. After all, they may have argued, deportees live in close contact with a highly advanced Babylonian civilization. Why not adopt some of its attractive beliefs and practices? This was God's response:

Thus says the Lord: 'If anyone of the House of Israel turn his thoughts upon these fetishes . . . and yet comes to the prophet . . . I

the Lord will respond to him . . . Thus I will hold the House of Israel to account for his thoughts, because they have all been estranged from Me through these fetishes' (14:4-5).

The Lord will respond directly to a man of Israel who goes to the prophet to inquire of Him, and at the same time has his mind on fetishes. It is against syncretism that Ezekiel fought uncompromisingly with all his might. Both the inquirer and the prophet who heeds his request will be accountable to the Lord Himself.

The troublesome issue of syncretism was of profound concern to Ezekiel throughout his ministry as prophet. Shortly after the dramatic theophany of the *Merkava*, elders of the exiled community gathered in his house. This is what we learn in Chapter 8: *The hand of the Lord fell upon him* and, in spirit, he was lifted up and brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. There he witnesses terrible abominations. He sees in his vision 70 elders offering incense to depictions on the walls of detestable forms. He notices women engaged in pagan mystery cults, such as lamenting Tammuz.

We may assume that these cultic mysteries and other forms of idol worship were not merely in the vision of Ezekiel, but were actually practiced in the Temple. We now can fully comprehend his fury with the elders who, with fetishes in their hearts, wished to inquire of the Lord. As a prophet, dedicated also to "repair the breaches," Ezekiel in Chapters 8 and 14 closed the circle of chastising syncretism, with a new vision at the end of his ministry. In the 25th year of the exile (starting in 598), and 14 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, on a Yom Kippur, the Hand of the Lord was upon him. For almost eight chapters he envisions a new Temple, built to the glory of the holy God, entirely divested from every vestige of idolatry, cultic practices, and profanity.

HOW CAN WE SURVIVE?

Probably the most insidious threat to the exilic community was the depressing sense of despair and defeatism. There must have been a sizeable number of deportees who kept the faith in the God of Israel, but were conscious of irreparable sins they had committed. *Our transgressions and sins weigh heavily upon us; we are sick at heart about them; how can we survive?* (33:10). They acknowledged that exile was the just punishment. Yet the

shock of their tragedy left in their minds and hearts a troublesome feeling of lost hope. There were others who felt self-righteous, but questioned the proverb: *Our fathers ate sour grapes and the children's teeth are blunted* (18:2), and blamed their calamities on their fathers' sins. To them, Ezekiel presented his doctrine of individual responsibility:

'As I live – declares the Lord – the proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel The person who sins, he shall die. A son shall not share the burden of a father's guilt, nor shall a father share the burden of a son's guilt' (18:3, 20).

Jeremiah had raised the same question, but did not offer a remedy for it. Indeed, so revolutionary was this doctrine of individual responsibility that it prompted the following talmudic statement:

R. Jose b. Haninah said: "Our master Moses pronounced four adverse sentences on Israel, but four prophets revoked them. Moses had said: 'The Lord is visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon children unto the third and fourth generation Ezekiel came and declared, the soul that sinneth shall die' (T. Makot 24a).

In addition, Ezekiel soothed the troubled conscience of both groups by pointing out to them the power of repentance and the grace of God: *'Is it My desire that a wicked man shall die? . . . It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live'* (18:23). Of course, Ezekiel's magnificent vision of the Dry Bones coming back to life was a boost for those who said, *Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we are doomed* (37:11), and who had lost hope in their future.

FALSE INTERPRETATION OF EXILE

Undoubtedly, the feeling that God was unable to protect His land and save His people from defeat and deportation was adopted by the Assyrian exiles and was one of the major causes of their disintegration. *These are the people of the Lord . . . yet they had to leave His land* (36:20). To forestall a similar fate for the exilic community in Babylonia, Ezekiel produced a remarkable tour-de-force: The House of Israel, warned repeatedly that its irreparable sin would lead to disaster, insisted: *The days grow many and every vision comes to naught* (12:26), meaning that these warnings were empty threats. The Lord, as it were, was impelled to impose disaster and exile upon the recalci-

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trant Judeans. This, in turn, led to the profanation of His Holy Name, since these calamities were wrongly imputed to His weakness. To vindicate His honor, He must now manifest His awesome power by mighty acts. *Not for your sake, but for My holy name which you have caused to be profaned among the nations* (36:22). He Himself will sprinkle water to cleanse the sin of His people, gather them up and return them to the land. He will cause the desolate land again to become fruitful. Thus, revealing His power, Israel and the nations will recognize that both adversity and restoration are His doing.

In effect, Ezekiel impressed on the discouraged deportees that it was God's anger that had caused their misfortune, and now, profaned by them, He owes it to His honor to redeem them. It is not certain whether Ezekiel was aware that the two doctrines, individual responsibility and God taking full charge of events, were essentially contradictory. In the first, man has the power to redeem himself by his acts, while in the second he is in need of Divine intercession. Yet these two antithetical concepts have become part and parcel of Judaism, finding room for both, side by side, in its organismic structure.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

History attests to the fact that idolatry, if not moral deficiency, had ceased once the captives returned to their ancient homeland. Much of the credit must be given to Ezekiel. Unlike other prophets who viewed their primary function to be conveying God's word to the people, Ezekiel's ears were finely attuned to the problems and needs of the captives. Those who rushed for a quick return were warned that the time had not yet come, but would come in the foreseeable future. Those who felt rejected by the Lord, Ezekiel comforted by declaring that it was precisely them He had chosen for a glorious return. Those who felt betrayed by the Lord, Who, in His alleged weakness, permitted the disasters that had befallen Israel, were reassured: God Himself, Ezekiel insists, will take matters in His Hands, cleanse the people, wreak revenge on their oppressors, and return them to the Promised Land. For those burdened by the heinous sins of their fathers, Ezekiel eased their consciences with his immortal doctrine of individual responsibility. And, finally, by his uncompromising stand against any kind of syncretism, Ezekiel saved the pristine simplicity of Judaic monotheism.

NOTES

1. The Book of Daniel informs us that Babylonia took young, promising Judeans, and submitted them to a rigorous education to train them for administrative tasks.
2. Charles Cutler Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930).
3. See: K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "Israelites in Exile," *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Vol. 29:6 (November-December 2003) pp. 36-45, 65-66.