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978-0-521-09755-0 - The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Keith W. Carley

Excerpt

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THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

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WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

When Jerusalem was captured by Babylonian forces in 597 B.C. the city was left intact, but Ezekiel was taken away with the king and certain other leading men, to their captors' homeland. While an exile in Babylonia, Ezekiel saw a vision of God and was commanded to tell his people what God intended to do with them, and why. His activities as a prophet are the subject of the Old Testament book which bears his name. They extended from the time of his call in 593 B.C. until at least 571 B.C., the last date recorded in the book (29: 17). Until the time of the second capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., he castigated his people for their unfaithfulness to God and foretold the doom of those remaining in Jerusalem and the land of Judah. He may occasionally have uttered an encouraging word for his fellow exiles, but by both acted and spoken prophecies he made it plain that divine judgement had first to fall in punishment for Israel's failure to observe God's laws. With the destruction of Jerusalem, hopefulness began to predominate in his prophecies and he was charged also with the task of being a pastor to individual exiles – encouraging them to right living and warning them when their behaviour was bad. His words included prophecies of doom and success for nations other than his own people Israel, and he envisaged the eventual restoration of the exiles to their homeland.

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The order of the book

THE ORDER OF THE BOOK

Ezekiel appears to be the most orderly of all the Old Testament prophetic books. As we now have it, chs. 1–3 tell of the prophet's call; chs. 4–24 contain his prophecies of Jerusalem's terrible fate; chs. 25–32 are prophecies against foreign nations; chs. 33–9 encourage the hope of restoration after Jerusalem had fallen in 587 B.C.; while chs. 40–8 present a vision of a new temple, with God dwelling once more among his people. Many of the prophecies are even dated. But appearances can be deceptive. In Ezekiel the dates are not all in chronological order. The latest date occurs in the middle of the book, in a prophecy against Egypt (29: 17). The dates of the remaining prophecies against foreign nations probably once formed an independent series, and some dates appear to have been altered by editors of the book (e.g. see the commentary on 33: 21). Also, the dates normally only relate to the prophecy immediately following. Sometimes later prophecies or prophetic signs have been included early in the book – because of their importance in the prophet's life (e.g. 3: 16–21); to soften the harshness of a previous saying (20: 32–8); or to acknowledge a different outcome from that earlier foretold (29: 17–21). Moreover, some material is not from Ezekiel himself but from his followers or from editors of the book. Thus, each passage needs to be examined individually to determine, where possible, its place in the activity of the prophet and the growth of the prophecy as a whole.

HOW DID THE BOOK COME TO BE WRITTEN?

Books were not common in the ancient world. They had to be handwritten and not everyone could read and write. Prophets anyway were speakers of God's word rather than writers of it. But some prophets, at least from the time of Amos in the mid-eighth century B.C., either wrote, or had written for them, accounts of their activities. There are

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specific references to the recording of Isaiah's words so that their fulfilment might prove their truth (Isa. 8: 1f. and 30: 8). And Jeremiah used a scribe to record his prophecies so that they could be communicated to a wider audience at a later time (Jer. 36), since what prophets said on one occasion could be applied to other situations as well. Both of these motives may have persuaded Ezekiel of the importance of providing a written account of what he had said, done and felt as a prophet. This was not composed at a single sitting nor as a single connected narrative. There was a considerable period during which the prophet recorded and worked over accounts of his activities, adding pieces here, correcting passages there. Sometimes there is repetition in the form of doublets – sayings having the same meaning but put in slightly different ways. Sometimes his sayings are not prophecies at all, but sermons encouraging people to learn the lessons that God intended the exile to teach them. The dated prophecies concerning Jerusalem and Israel (chs. 1: 1 – 3: 15; 3: 16 and chs. 4–5 (which were originally introduced by 3: 16); chs. 8–11; 20; 24; 33: 21f.; and 40–8) probably formed a general framework for chs. 1–24 and 33–48 of the book we know. Among these prophecies were added collections of sayings on particular themes (e.g. false prophecy, ch. 13; the sword, ch. 21), often related to the time sequence of the dated passages only insofar as prophecies of doom were largely included prior to ch. 24 and those of hope were added between chs. 33 and 40. The prophecies against foreign nations are likely to have been one such separate collection. The insertion of it, with its dated sayings, between chs. 24 and 33 gave rise to the most obvious point of disorder in the book. Ezekiel may have played little part in assembling the book in its present form. The work of editors is apparent in a number of the minor collections (e.g. see the commentary on 6: 13f.) and the book as a whole has undergone considerable editorial revision (e.g. see on 3: 16–27). But between Ezekiel's own recording and revision of his prophecies and the editorial activity that has resulted in the

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present book, there have been extensive attempts to reinterpret and apply the prophecies to the situations of later periods by the followers of the prophet.

EZEKIEL AND HIS DISCIPLES

It seems very likely that just as Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah had disciples who assisted in their work (2 Kings 2: 3; 6: 1; Isa. 8: 16 footnote; Jer. 36: 4), Ezekiel too had his followers. The disciples are not mentioned, but the very preservation of the prophet's words, as well as their continuing exposition, implies that they struck a responsive chord among some of Ezekiel's contemporaries, who saw to it that his prophecies were not forgotten. Who these people were we will never know. Among them may have been some of the elders who came to sit before the prophet in his house to inquire of God's will (e.g. 8: 1). The kind of emphasis the disciples have contributed to the book suggests that there were priests among them, some of whom were concerned to make the prophecy an instrument of their desire to dominate the priesthood of the restored Israel (44: 15–31). Others wished to ascribe Israel's punishment and its hope for the future solely to God's concern for his holy name (36: 16–32). Often they have adopted the language and style of Ezekiel himself, to elaborate his words or to add prophecies intended to complete his work.

Often we cannot say whether Ezekiel or one of his followers was responsible for a particular passage. It may be clear enough that a word or saying has been added later. Sometimes it is an expansion of, or a natural supplement to, what has already been said. Sometimes it contradicts a previous saying or gives quite a new meaning to what was said earlier. And while it is important to determine, where we can, what Ezekiel's own words were, it is no less important to try and determine the reasons for their reinterpretation, whether by the prophet or his disciples. For in the book of Ezekiel there

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is preserved not the words of one man alone, but evidence of the response to, and continuing exposition of, his words within a living community. For example, in ch. 1 Ezekiel's account of the living creatures consisted of verse 5 and parts of verses 6 and 11. His disciples have added further details. In ch. 12 a prophecy of the second exile has been revised in the light of the actual event, possibly by Ezekiel himself. Ch. 23: 36–49 illustrates the reinterpretation of the prophet's words to counter a specific evil of a later time.

Of Ezekiel's life we learn only incidentally. Since his behaviour constituted a 'sign' for his contemporaries (12: 6; 24: 24), personal experiences became the substance of his prophecies. But we should beware of reading the book of Ezekiel as a biography of the prophet. It was intended primarily as a record of the word of God. We do learn of Ezekiel's likely age (1: 1), of his priestly descent (1: 3), of his apparent seizure, so that he was unable to speak or move at some time during his prophetic ministry (see on 3: 22–7), and of the death of his wife whom he loved deeply (24: 15–24). Beyond that, his origins, physical circumstances and fate are unknown. His prophecies do indicate, however, his wide knowledge of his people's heritage and his desire to recall them to their responsibilities as God's people. He combines a prophet's deep sensitivity to moral injustice with a priest's concern for appropriate religious observance. And so intensely does he assert God's control of history that he attributes the worst deeds of his people to God's deliberate plan to punish them for their earlier bad behaviour (20: 25f.). Throughout the book there is repeated the phrase – 'that they may know that I am the LORD'. All that was promised through the prophet would show to Israel and the nations the nature of Israel's God and his power to act among them. For sympathetic understanding of the prophecy, some appreciation is necessary of Ezekiel's passion to vindicate and proclaim anew God's justice and holiness, and to affirm his lordship over all.

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From Babylon to Jerusalem

FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM

A feature of the prophecy which is puzzling to most readers is Ezekiel's reports of having been taken by a spirit from his home among the exiles to Jerusalem and back. That was a distance of about 700 miles in each direction, by way of the Euphrates valley and Syria (see map, p. 169). The difficulty has sometimes been solved by supposing that Ezekiel really lived in Jerusalem during the first part of his prophetic activity, or that he made a number of journeys between Jerusalem and Babylon in an orthodox manner. The references to the spirit are thus simply figures of speech. But there are several points at which the prophecy suggests Ezekiel was conscious, with great intensity, of unseen forces such as are mentioned in the prophecies of Elijah and Elisha 300 years earlier. Those prophets sometimes found their physical powers increased (1 Kings 18: 46) or believed themselves removed from one place to another (1 Kings 18: 12; 2 Kings 2: 16). They described this in terms of 'the hand of the LORD' being upon the prophet, or of 'the spirit of the LORD' lifting and bearing the prophet away. We hear little of such experiences from the prophets from the time of Amos onward, but outside the Bible, particularly in Arabic literature, we find similar accounts of such experiences. In present-day Papua New Guinea, there are numerous reports of men who claim to have flown astonishing distances to effect healing, to give counsel or simply observe conditions in other places. Ezekiel, aware of such feelings of removal (see on 11: 1f.), appears to have used the terms of the earlier prophets – 'the hand of the LORD came upon [me]', 'the spirit lifted me and took me' (cp. e.g. 1: 3; 3: 14) – to describe them.

EZEKIEL AND OTHER PARTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Beside the links with the early prophets, Ezekiel displays knowledge of the so-called 'writing prophets', especially

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Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah. Like Isaiah he knew the common belief that Jerusalem, with its temple, was protected against all enemies because it was the dwelling-place of God. The prophecies of Hosea, though he was from the northern kingdom of Israel, are reflected at a number of points; this may have been partly due to Jeremiah's influence, for Jeremiah was most intimate with Hosea's message and Ezekiel in turn was familiar with many parts of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah may even have been known to Ezekiel personally before the latter's exile. Although neither prophet mentions the other, Ezekiel adapts numerous sayings of Jeremiah and may well be termed a disciple of his elder contemporary.

Like other prophets, the basis of Ezekiel's work was the belief that Israel was responsible to obey the law of the covenant made between his people and God. His prophecies of doom illustrated the inevitable outcome of behaviour which broke that agreement. The Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20 and 21-3 respectively) were early forms of covenant law. Another law-code, in the form of material now incorporated in Deuteronomy, had been made much of in the religious and political reform of King Josiah toward the end of the seventh century B.C. (see on 6: 1-14). Ezekiel was aware of the code of Deuteronomy and shows evidence of agreement with some of its provisions. But he more often appeals to the covenant law now found in Lev. 17-26 as the basis for judgements of individuals or the nation of Israel. This so-called 'Holiness Code' calls Israel to obey the law so that it might be 'holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy' (Lev. 19: 2). Ezekiel's familiarity with its tradition of law, though not with the code as a written document, suggests it may have derived from the priesthood of Jerusalem - or a group within that priesthood - with which Ezekiel was associated because of his priestly descent. There are also links in the book with the material in the Pentateuch (the first 'five books' of the Bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy), which came from what is termed the 'Priestly' author or

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The style, text and history of the book

authors. This is composed of a narrative interspersed with earlier traditions of Israel's origins and – like the Holiness Code – was written down in exile. The Holiness Code is from the sixth century and the Priestly material possibly from the sixth, continuing into the fifth century B.C. (On these writings see also *The Making of the Old Testament*, pp. 108ff., in this series.)

THE STYLE, TEXT AND HISTORY OF THE BOOK

The literary style of Ezekiel is diverse. The prophet has employed a great range of imagery, some familiar from other parts of the Old Testament, some remarkably fresh and vivid. That which he has borrowed is often dramatized or its symbolism is drawn to almost bizarre lengths. In debate he follows the typical Near-Eastern fashion of exaggeration and seeming crudity in his frankness. He is a master of allegory and of fine poetry, but often words and phrases are repeated over and again for the sake of emphasis, and his painstaking elucidation of legal cases may seem irksome if thought is not given to the importance of the decisions to be reached.

If Ezekiel's work has links with the Pentateuch, it also has points of contrast. It is reported that when discussion took place about the composition of the Hebrew Bible some time prior to A.D. 70, Ezekiel's position within the Jewish scriptures was secured only after the rabbi Hananiah ben Hezekiah had burned 300 jars of oil, studying the prophecy in order to explain the differences between it and the already accepted laws of the Pentateuch. Even then, according to Jerome, a biblical scholar of the late fourth century A.D., rabbis forbade persons under thirty years of age to read the beginning or the end of the book. Speculation concerning the appearance of God and the other symbolism of the opening vision was regarded as dangerous. Within the Christian Church, however, the book's authority as scripture has been unchallenged, and although it is rarely referred to elsewhere in the New

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Testament, extensive use is made of its imagery in the book of Revelation.

At numerous points the Hebrew text of Ezekiel is extremely difficult to understand. As the N.E.B. footnotes indicate, the Hebrew is often 'obscure', the English rendering 'probable' but not certain. Fortunately the Greek version, the Septuagint, was translated from an earlier and shorter form of the Hebrew text than any we now possess. So we can see, by comparing the Greek and Hebrew, many places where the latter has been expanded or altered by scribes in the course of copying the text. In this short commentary only a few passages can be noted where this is important for showing that the Hebrew text has been expanded and elaborated by later scribes. However, the Greek translation is not correct throughout and cannot be solely relied upon to restore the original Hebrew. Help sometimes comes from Hebrew manuscripts dating from the ninth century A.D. onwards, or versions of the text in other languages may throw light on the meaning of words or phrases (see pp. ixf.). A complication with older Hebrew writing was that no vowels were used, nor were there any divisions into verses or chapters. Sometimes these factors have led to misunderstanding of words and the inadvertent reading into the text of words which scribes had added in the margin to help readers understand the themes of passages. Some instances are noted in the commentary.

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Ezekiel's call to be a prophet

* The first three chapters describe the awesome vision of God's glory and the command Ezekiel receives to prophesy. Parallels to the vision and call of Isaiah (ch. 6) are numerous. *

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EZEK. I: 1-3

Ezekiel's call to be a prophet

THE SETTING OF THE PROPHET'S CALL

1 **O**N THE FIFTH DAY of the fourth month in the thirtieth year, while I was among the exiles by the river Kebar,^a the heavens were opened and I saw a vision
 2 of God. On the fifth day of the month in the fifth year
 3 of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel son of Buzi the priest, in Chaldaea, by the river Kebar, and there the hand of the LORD came upon him.

* 1. *in the thirtieth year*: the date in this verse has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One suggestion is that it indicates the prophet's age. If so, it establishes his authority as a priest, since according to Num. 4 members of priestly families could undertake priestly duties from the age of thirty. *the river Kebar*: or Kebar canal, was a broad waterway which left the river Euphrates near Babylon and flowed south-eastward through the city of Nippur to rejoin the Euphrates near Erech (see map, p. 169). *the heavens were opened*: Ezekiel would have shared the idea common in his day of a 'three-decker' universe, with the flat earth sandwiched between heaven and the underworld (or Sheol). A close parallel to the image of the sky opening to reveal God is found in Isa. 64: 1: 'why didst thou not rend the heavens and come down?'

2. *the fifth day of the month in the fifth year*: here the number of the month has dropped out of the text (cp. 'the fourth month' in verse 1). Most of the dates in the book mark the time of exile of King Jehoiachin, implying that Ezekiel regarded him as still the rightful ruler of Jerusalem, although he reigned only three months after the death of his father, Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24: 8). In Babylon Jehoiachin was placed under some form of arrest until the death of Nebuchadrezzar in 562 B.C. (2 Kings

[a] Or the Kebar canal.