

EZEKIEL

The Pantomime Prophet

Part One: Chapters 1-24

Historical context. Ezekiel was a prophet and priest. He prophesied in Babylon (called the “land of the Chaldeans”) from 598 to 571BC during the time when his people lived in exile. Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem and departed for Babylon with the first group of exiles. In his introduction to the ministry of Ezekiel, Fr. John Power writes:

The obliteration of the Davidic kingdom, and the reduction of the Israelites to slavery in a foreign land, presented them with the greatest single crisis in their history. And it was a specifically religious crisis. Yahweh was their God. The conquering Babylonians jeered that the gods of Babylon were obviously superior to the God of Israel. The fall of Jerusalem was interpreted, not merely as the defeat of a people, but as the defeat of that people’s God. The temptation to join with their masters in worshipping the imposing idols of Babylon was a pressing one. It was this crucial problem that confronted the young Ezekiel, when he received the prophetic call by the river Chebar. It is a measure of Ezekiel’s greatness, and of his right to be called a major prophet, that he was able to turn the exile from a period of dismal despair into years of reflection, repentance and hope. (Set My Exiles Free, pp 142-143)

Ezekiel is considered one of the most colorful and perhaps strangest personalities in the Bible. His own people labeled him “one who is always spinning parables” (21:5). They recognized him as a man whose imagination was always on fire.

Four dominant ideas in Ezekiel’s message

- ***Omnipresence of God.*** God is not bound to Judah, Jerusalem or the Temple. He is not some local deity whose powerful and protecting arm is too short to reach out to Babylonian towns and hamlets. This truth is underlined in Ezekiel’s opening vision. As the prophet sees it, the Lord’s chariot is mounted on wheels “*constructed as though one wheel were within another. They could move in any of the four directions they faced, without veering as they moved. ...Wherever the spirit wished to go, there the wheels went*” (Ez 1:16-17, 20).
 - ***Awesome majesty of God.*** God is over-powering and awesome reaching beyond human relationships (24:15-24) and human explanations (20:25). God is neither someone to be argued with, as in Jeremiah, nor someone agonizing over the fate of the people, as in Hosea. A phrase often used by Ezekiel to describe God’s majestic and overpowering presence is “the glory of God.”
 - ***Personal responsibility.*** Whereas previous generations had stressed *corporate* responsibility (all were punished for the sins of the few) Ezekiel emphasizes *individual* responsibility. Each person is responsible for his living out the covenant. Each person lives or dies according to his/her virtuous or wicked life. This teaching is very important to the exiles. For if they are to be held responsible for the sins of their ancestors, what hope would there be for them? But if each is accountable for his/her own deeds, the future could be different.
 - ***New exodus.*** A very important part of Ezekiel’s preaching is the promise that God will bring back the exiles to their homeland and religious roots. Ezekiel’s most impressive statement about the “new exodus” theme is found in his famous “dry bones” sermon (ch. 37).
- A prophet who acted out his sermons.*** Ezekiel frequently delivers his message through actions—oftentimes, bizarre actions. For example:
- He lies on his side several times—symbolizing the siege of Jerusalem (4:1-8).
 - He eats repulsive food—representing the famine that the besieged people will suffer (4:9-15).
 - He cuts off his beard with a sword—signifying the exile of the people (5:1-4).
 - He packs his bags and leaves the city through a hole in the wall—enacting the people’s exile from Jerusalem (12:3-5).
 - Perhaps his most striking prophetic action is his decision *not* to mourn the death of his wife. In like manner, the citizens of Jerusalem are warned not

to mourn the destruction of their beloved city, because it deserves the punishment in store for it. Thus, the prophet himself becomes the living manifestation of the message he proclaims.

What are we to think of so strange a prophet? In his book *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Fr. Peter Ellis writes:

As we know from the history of the other prophets, God used prophets as they were, adapting their personalities to suit his purpose. At the beginning of the exile he needed a man who would make a strong and vivid impression on the minds of the doubting and discouraged exiles. Ezekiel fitted the role to perfection. Words are easily forgotten, but actions inspire curiosity, arouse discussion, and endure in the imagination along with their significance. What Ezekiel did was not easily forgotten. While only a few of the embittered exiles came to his home at first to consult and listen to him (8:1;14:1;20:1), he succeeded eventually in interesting the crowd by his eccentric behavior, and before long his words and actions were being discussed from house to house and in the streets and lanes (33:30-33).

When Jerusalem fell in 587 the full significance of Ezekiel's behavior became apparent to all, and his position as a true prophet was established. From that time on there was little pantomime, much serious preaching, and elaborate planning for Israel's prophetically assured return and restoration. (p.375)

A visionary and apocalyptic writer. When we read Ezekiel, we enter a strange world of many visions, some of which seem a bit bizarre. Over and over, Ezekiel describes being taken by God's Spirit to the heavenly realm where he witnesses incredible sights. Angelic beings (called cherubim), spinning wheels, symbolic creatures, and various visions of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem occupy the pages of this prophet. He is the "sentinel" of God (3:17; 33:1-9) who is to deliver God's warning to Jerusalem because of the people's sinfulness (4:1-17; 33:21). Ezekiel is given various images of destruction, such as the sword that cuts like a barber's razor (5:1) and the vine thrown into the fire (15:1-8). Yet there are also marvelous images of hope. The purpose of God's destructive actions against the people of Judah is not to annihilate them but to ensure their return to the Lord (33:10-11).

Ezekiel is the first biblical author to use *apocalyptic literature* to communicate his message. This type of

literature uses symbols and bizarre figures of imagination to reveal God's unfolding plan for the world.

Division of chapters. As we read this book, we should be aware that Ezekiel's ministry is divided into two separate periods: *before* and *after* the final fall of Jerusalem. In the first period, Ezekiel warns the first exiles about their optimism. Many believe no harm can happen to Jerusalem and the Temple but Ezekiel tells them that such optimism is folly. Because the people fail to listen to God speaking through the prophets, Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed.

Once the news arrives that Jerusalem and the Temple are in ashes, and streams of new exiles start to come to Babylon, the exiles are plunged into unbelievable disillusionment. All hope of a future is lost. God has abandoned them. So in the second half of his ministry, Ezekiel's task is to restore hope to the people to save them from despair. Ezekiel the 'corrector' becomes Ezekiel the 'comforter.' His message shifts to one of hope. The book can be divided into five parts:

Part 1: Call of the prophet (Chapters 1-3)

Part 2: Oracles against Jerusalem. She will be destroyed because of her sins. (Chapters 4-24)

Part 3: Oracles against the surrounding nations (Chapters 25-32)

Part 4: Words of comfort and hope of salvation for Israel (Chapters 33-39)

Part 5: The New Israel. The final chapters describe in great detail the new Temple and the new community that God will create once the exile is over. (Chapters 40-48)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: THE CALL OF EZEKIEL (CHAPTERS 1-3)

"The word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel...by the river Chebar...." (1:3)

"Son of man, stand up! I wish to speak with you. ...I am sending you to the Israelites, rebels who have rebelled against me."(2:1-2)

"And whether they shall heed or resist...they shall know they had a prophet amongst them."(2:5)

“Son of man, eat this scroll....’I ate it and it was sweet as honey in my mouth....” (3:1-3)

3:1-3. Ezekiel receives his call to be a prophet to the exiles in the fifth year after the first group of exiles arrives in Babylon. The call occurs in 593BC at a Jewish settlement by the Chebar River.

1:1-28—Inaugural vision. Heavenly visions like this one, the call of Moses (Ex 3), the call of Isaiah (Is6), Gabriel’s visit to Mary (Lk 1), the transfiguration (Lk 9) are all indescribable experiences. Ezekiel’s vision is one of *sight* and sound with no speech, no words. Peter Ellis writes:

The symbolism of the vision is directed to the instruction of the exiles and the strengthening of their faith. The exiles are in danger in Babylon of succumbing to the pagan belief that the true God who dwells in Jerusalem is, like the pagan gods, only a local divinity incapable of exercising dominion outside his own territory and capable of being conquered by a more powerful local divinity. In the light of these false beliefs, the approaching fall of Jerusalem may well be misinterpreted by the exiles. The inaugural vision is designed to offset such beliefs by showing:

- *God is not bound to Jerusalem. He leaves Jerusalem and comes (from the north—the exiles’ route from Jerusalem to Babylon) to visit His people in exile.*
- *He is a universal God, as powerful in Babylon as in Jerusalem. His universality is symbolized by the multi-winged, multi-wheeled, multi-eyed creature capable of moving in any direction without difficulty.*
- *The pagan nations are his servants. This is symbolized by the “cherubim” (tutelary divinities of the Babylonians, with the head of a man, body of a lion, wings of an eagle, and limbs of a bull), who are shown in the vision as God’s lackeys, bearers of His throne (ibid, pp 376-377).*

2:1-8—Commissioning of Ezekiel. Ezekiel’s reaction to God’s majestic presence is to fall on his face. Then God tells him to stand up and commissions him to go and preach to his fellow exiles. The mission will not be easy because the people are still in a rebellious state against God. They are “hard of face and obstinate of heart” (v.4). Ezekiel

is told that his mission is to faithfully preach God’s word and not to be concerned with whether the people respond to him or not. The man who had a mystical experience is now called to prophetic ministry, to be speaker of God’s word.

3:1-21—Eating of the scroll. Ezekiel is often addressed as “son of man”—a term Jesus often used to describe himself. Here the phrase carries no messianic overtones. It simply reminds Ezekiel of his human and mortal status. He is a mortal man being addressed by an immortal God. God’s message is written on a scroll which Ezekiel is ordered to eat. Such instruction symbolizes Ezekiel’s call to eat, digest and then preach God’s word. “Take into your heart all my words that I speak to you, hear them well”(3:10).After this heavenly experience, Ezekiel goes away “spiritually stirred” and feeling that “the hand of the Lord rests heavily upon him.”

3:16—“I sat among them distraught.”After his mountain top experience, Ezekiel has to return to the gloomy reality of life in exile. Sometimes after a spiritual high, return to everyday tasks can be a letdown. But there is more to Ezekiel’s down feeling. His fellow exiles may be stubborn but they are his friends and only companions. Like him, they have experienced the agony of defeat and the pain of being taken off to a pagan land, and now Ezekiel must preach to his own friends a tough word from God.

3:16-21—Commissioned to be a watchman. An important part of Ezekiel’s role is to confront evil and affirm good. In Catholic spirituality, one of the “spiritual works of mercy” is correcting the wrongdoer. Here Ezekiel is told that he must go to the person doing evil and point out his/her sin to him/her. This refers to the prophet’s teaching about *personal responsibility* which we mentioned in the introduction.

3:22-27—Ezekiel is muzzled. The newly commissioned prophet is told by God to be silent as a sign of his single-minded dependence on the word of God to come to him. Only then will he speak.

Pause: How hard might it be to go to a family member, friend or co-worker and talk to them about their destructive behavior? Have you ever had that experience?

PART 2: ORACLES BEFORE THE SIEGE AND FALL OF JERUSALEM (CHAPTERS 4-24)

As we move into the first major section of Ezekiel, we remember, as mentioned earlier, that the book is divided into two periods: *before* and *after* the fall of Jerusalem. Chapters 4-24 record the actions and words of Ezekiel before the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC.

In this section, Ezekiel *“is calling the people who remained in Judah as well as those in Babylon to a right knowledge of God. In symbolic acts, allegorical stories, visions, parables, and judgment speeches, Ezekiel describes the imminent, irrevocable doom about to befall the chosen people on account of their idolatrous behavior. They have profaned God’s holiness by turning to false gods and false prophets, and there can be no peace for them”* (The Collegeville Bible Handbook, pp 127-128).

CHAPTERS 4-5: Acts symbolic of siege and exile

In these two chapters, Ezekiel is told to enact four symbolic acts that describe the fate of the Judeans who have not gone into captivity. Ezekiel acts out in four ways God’s role toward the people of Judah and the circumstances of those who will be punished.

First symbolic action (4:1-3) Ezekiel is told to pantomime the siege of Jerusalem. He is to take a brick and draw on it a map of the city of Jerusalem, then place around it instruments of siege: a tower, a ramp, camps, an iron griddle. In this pantomime, Ezekiel dramatizes God’s attack on Jerusalem using the Babylonians.

Second symbolic action (4:4-8). Ezekiel is told to lie on his left side motionless for 39 days and on his right side for 40 days. Scholars tell us that Ezekiel did not spend that many days on his side. Rather, he would spend some time each day on his side in order to attract the attention of his neighbors. This action of Ezekiel is intended to draw attention to the suffering of the people of Jerusalem during the siege.

Third symbolic action (4:9-17). This pantomime illustrates food rations in Jerusalem during the siege. The preparation of food over cow’s dung symbolizes the uncleanness of the people of Jerusalem.

Fourth Symbolic Action. Again, imagine Ezekiel’s neighbors watching his every move. They must wonder if he is crazy, and it must not have been easy

for Ezekiel to carry out such bizarre actions. This symbolic act is intended to communicate the destruction that is coming to Jerusalem and its people, as described in verses 5-17. Some will be burned to death as the city goes up in fire. Some will die in battle and others will be scattered and taken into exile. All these terrible things will happen because the people “spurned God’s ordinances” and “failed to live by his statutes” (v.6).

Pause: Can you recall a symbolic action on the world stage, in church or in your family that made a big impression on you?

CHAPTERS 6-7: An angry God announces the end for the whole nation of Judah

“...See I am bringing a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. Your altars shall be laid waste....” (6:3-4)

“...Thus says the Lord God to the land of Israel: ‘An end! The end has come upon the four corners of this land.’” (7.2)

Whereas previously, Ezekiel had directed his symbolic actions to Jerusalem, in these chapters he announces the end for the whole nation. The reason for the destruction is the nation’s worship of false gods. But in 6:8-10, there is a ray of light: those scattered will eventually recognize their sins and turn back to God. This is Ezekiel’s hope for his fellow exiles.

CHAPTERS 8-11: Ezekiel is transported to Jerusalem by the spirit

[Note: The New American Bible text of chapters 8-11 has been extensively rearranged.]

“Spirit lifted me up in the air and brought me in divine visions to Jerusalem....” (8:3)

“Son of man, do you see what they are doing? Do you see the great abominations that the house of Israel is practicing here, so that I must depart from my sanctuary?...” (8:6)

Carried in vision to Jerusalem, Ezekiel is shown the depths of idolatry to which his fellow-citizens have descended. It is because of such rampant infidelity that God will proceed to punish the wicked, destroy the city, and abandon his Temple. It should be noted that these chapters restate more emphatically and

more dramatically what Ezekiel has already prophesied in pantomime and word in chapters 4-7: Jerusalem is doomed, not because God is being conquered by the invaders but because God is leaving Jerusalem to be punished by the Babylonians, the instrument of his justice.

Chapters 8-11 end on a positive note in 11:14-21, verses that seem to belong to the latter part of the book, perhaps chapter 36. The verses speak of God's plan to bring home the exiles.

CHAPTER 12: Two symbolic acts regarding the exile

“Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are bellious house.”(v.2)

Here we have two more symbolic acts and two sayings which Ezekiel hopes will move the people to “see” and repent of their rebelliousness. In the first symbolic act, Ezekiel is instructed to prepare an exile's baggage and leave the city by night. This act symbolizes the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The verbal interpretation of the act follows (vv 8-16). It is directed to the exiles who are warned not to put their hope in the holy city or in a quick end to the exile.

In the second symbolic act, Ezekiel is told to eat his food with quaking and trembling, a sign of the panic that will seize the inhabitants of Jerusalem when their city is surrounded. The two sayings at the end of the close of this chapter (vv 21-28) prepare the way for the section dealing with false prophets (13:1-14:10).

CHAPTERS 13:1-14:10: Oracles against false prophets

“...Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel.... You did not step into the breach, nor did you build a wall about the house of Israel that would stand firm against attack on the day of the Lord.” (vv1, 2, 5)

This section is a harsh condemnation of both male and female prophets who delude the people by preaching not *God's* word but *their* word, which only whitewashes the drastic situation in Jerusalem.

14:12-23—Personal responsibility

In the remainder of this chapter and in the following nine chapters (14:12-23:49), Ezekiel's message for Israel is related to various events from its past history. Ezekiel, like Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, recounts the history of God's dealings with the people in order to draw a contrast between past acts of mercy and present experiences of judgment, and also to testify to the graciousness of God. (The Collegeville Bible Commentary, p.544)

CHAPTER 15: Parable of the vine

In this short allegory on the wood of the vine, the prophet declares that in God's eyes the inhabitants of Jerusalem have become unproductive and valueless, like a useless vine that no longer produces fruit. Like wood that is good for nothing, the homeland will be thrown into the fire. Later on, the prophet will return to this image of Israel as the vine of the Lord (19:10-12).

Commenting on this parable, Peter Ellis writes: *The Vine (Israel) is no better in itself than any other tree (nation) of the forest. Only the gratuitous love of God manifested in the Sinai covenant has made them any different. Since they have rejected the covenant, they are fit, like any other wood of the forest, for the fire (ibid, p.379).*

CHAPTER 16: Israel, the unfaithful spouse

“Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations.”(v.2)

“...I entered into a covenant with you, you became mine...” (v.8). “I adorned you with jewelry...” (v.11). “You were renowned among the nations for your beauty...” (v.14).

“But you used your renown to make yourself a harlot...” (v.15). “You took your splendid gold and silver and turned them into false gods...” (v.17). “The sons and daughters I gave you, you offered to your false gods...” (v.20).

“I will inflict on you the sentence of adulteress and murderess; I will wreak fury and jealousy upon you” (v.38). “I will re-establish my covenant with you that you may know that I am the Lord” (v.62).

In this longest chapter of this book, Ezekiel describes Jerusalem as an adulterous spouse.

Verses 1-14. Jerusalem is an unwanted orphan whom God has cared for and taken as his bride.

Verses 15-34. The story turns sour. Whereas in her destitute childhood, Jerusalem had no strength, now she has power and influence to use or abuse as she wants. Sadly, she chooses to become a prostitute, “spreading her legs to every passerby” (v.25). A part of her sin is *forgetfulness*. She fails to “remember the days of her youth” and God’s goodness to her.

Verses 35-43 tell of God’s judgment on the adulteress. She is sentenced to death.

Verses 44-52. Samaria (capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Sodom—described as sisters to Jerusalem—are condemned for their abominable behavior.

Verses 53-63. In these final verses, the terrible language of judgment and condemnation gives way to an expression of hope and the re-establishment of the covenant (v.62).

Pause: What helps you to be faithful to God? What tempts you to be unfaithful?

CHAPTER 17: A political parable

The allegory of the eagles and the vine (vv 1-10) and its interpretation (vv 11-21) comment upon the political disquiet experienced in the land of Judah. In 597B.C. Nebuchadnezzar (“the great eagle,” v.3), came to Judah and took King Jehoiachin in (the “topmost branch” of the cedar, v.4) and the leading citizens to Babylonia. Zedekiah (“seed of the land,” v.5) was then appointed head of the Judean state. (The Collegeville Bible Handbook, p.129)

Like chapter 16, this chapter ends with a note of promise that God will plant a sprig from the high cedar, care for it and cause it to grow. The future of Israel is entirely in the hands of God who can make a high tree low and a low tree high.

CHAPTER 18: Personal responsibility

“Fathers have eaten green grapes, thus their children’s teeth are on edge?...only the one who sins shall die.” (vv 2-4)

“If a man is virtuous, if he does what is right and just...he shall surely live. ...But if he begets a son who is a thief...he shall surely die....” (vv 5-13)

“If a son does not commit his father’s sin...he shall not die for the sins of his father...” (vv 14-17)

“Do I derive pleasure from the death of the wicked?... Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live?” (v.23)

“Therefore I will judge the house of Israel, each one according to his ways.” (v.30)

The popular saying or proverb in verse 2 is a way of saying that one generation will be held guilty for the sins of their ancestors. Moses says that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon children to the third and fourth generations (Ex 20:5). Ezekiel in this chapter passionately argues that each generation is responsible for its own actions. God’s judgment falls upon the sinner: each generation receives life or death according to its own actions.

Pause: Does it make sense that children pay for the sins and dysfunction of their parents, e.g., alcoholism, violence, sexual promiscuity?

Verse 23 states that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked person. Rather, what gives joy to God is the sinner repenting and living. Some say that when the government executes the wicked, it is giving up on them and ending their chance of repenting, something God would never do. What do you say?

CHAPTER 19: Two laments for two princes

The allegorical lament for the royal princes, Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, and for Mother Israel (the vine), gives eloquent expression to the sentiments of God, more prosaically expressed in the last verses of chapter 18: *“Why should you die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Return and live!”*

CHAPTER 20: A history of Israel’s infidelity

“Son of man, speak with the elders of Israel...” (v.3). “...Make known to them the abominations of their ancestors...” (v.4). “...they rebelled against me and refused to listen to me...” (v.8).

Ezekiel delivers a depressing historical summary of Israel’s infidelity to her covenant with God:

- the sinfulness of the chosen people from their very beginning in Egypt (vv 5-9)

- through the rebellious first generation (vv 10-17)
- and second generation (vv 18-26) in the wilderness
- even to the present generation (vv 27-31)

CHAPTERS 21-24: The sword of destruction is coming to Jerusalem

As the day for the destruction of Jerusalem comes closer, Ezekiel's condemnation of the capital grows in intensity in these four chapters.

Chapter 21: The sword of God. Ezekiel begins the "Song of the Sword" by dramatizing the destruction of Jerusalem. In verses 11-12, the prophet expresses grief over the looming suffering of his people. He is instructed to grieve with deep emotional sadness as a sign that the end has come. In verses 30-32, Ezekiel speaks about the downfall of Zedekiah and the ruinous state of the monarchy.

Chapter 22: Jerusalem's sins. Three oracles on the common theme of the defilement of Jerusalem are grouped together in this chapter. The destruction of the city is inevitable given the universal corruption of the city. "*What is holy to me you have spurned, and my Sabbaths have been desecrated*" (v.8). "*Her priests violate my law and profane what is holy to me...*" (v.26).

Chapter 23: A tale of two cities. This chapter is taken up with the story of Oholah and Oholibah, with its various levels of interpretation. On the surface, it is a story of two sisters whose lives are characterized by blatant immorality and failure. But the story serves as an allegory: it is also a tale of two cities and their fate in the history of the world's nations. One sister is called Oholah and represents Samaria, the capital city of the northern state of Israel. The other sister is Oholibah, representing the capital of the kingdom of Judah, namely, Jerusalem.

Ezekiel points out that despite having witnessed the fate of her sister Oholah (Samaria) as a result of her lustfulness, Oholibah (Judah and Jerusalem) does not have the good sense to learn her lesson but instead continues in unbridled idolatry down to the present.

CHAPTER 24: Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple

"*Woe to the bloody city, a pot containing rust, whose rust has not been removed*" (v.6). In this allegory, the rusty pot symbolizes the decaying city of Jerusalem; the flesh and bones beneath the pot represent the Babylonian enemy.

Verses 15-23— Don't mourn for the city and temple in flames. The death of Ezekiel's wife is another example of how the prophet uses his own experience as a 'prophetic song' to the people. His reaction to his wife's death is to be a model of how the exiles should respond themselves when they hear that Jerusalem has gone up in flames. They are not to grieve. The "death" is to be seen as an event that was allowed by the Lord because of the people's sins.

Pause: Can you recall an example of when it was better in the long run that some plan or something had gone up in flames?