

THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

Ezekiel alongside Jeremiah and Isaiah is one of the major prophets of Israel, and one of the prophets of the exilic period. He was a priest (1:3) though he never served in that office because of the Babylonian captivity during the reign of Jehoiachin (2Kings 24:10-16) who was king of Judah after Jehoiakim. His father was Buzi. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Daniel. However, Jeremiah was an old man at the time he started his prophecy. The account in 2Kings 24:14-16 reveals that the Babylonians took captives mostly from the prominent and influential families of the land. This means Ezekiel was probably from such a family. He prophesied to the Jewish exiles in Babylon at the same time Jeremiah was prophesying in Judah and Daniel in the Babylonian court. Ezekiel 1:1 tells us that his prophecy began in the thirtieth year. This is taken by scholars to refer to his age. Like many priests of Israel, he was married but his wife died during his prophetic ministry and God prevented him from mourning for her in public as a sign of Judah's lack of concern for the things of God (24:16-24).

Who wrote the book of Ezekiel?

The book takes its title from the priest of the same name. Written from a first-person perspective, this book records the visions and revelations he received from the Lord while in exile in Babylon. Ezekiel is the author of the book. In this book, his priestly lineage shines through in his ministry. His concern for the temple, the priesthood, the glory of the Lord and the sacrificial system.

When was it written?

It was written during his captivity in Babylon between 592 and 570 B.C. After being taken captive, he settled with other Jews in a place called Tel Abib on the Chebar River (1:1-3) where he recorded his visions of God. This makes us understand psalm 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.' At the same time that Israel was mourning in this psalm, Ezekiel was writing his visions: 'the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.' (1:1). He was among the captives who were placed by the great canal that came off the river Euphrates. Thus, he began his ministry five years after being taken into captivity at about thirty. And he spoke in the darkest days of the nation when their hope was all gone. He prophesied for about 20 years (29:17).

Message of Ezekiel

He is considered the most 'spiritual' of all the prophets because he dealt particularly with the person of God. Against the same false prophets whom Jeremiah had confronted before who held that Jerusalem would not be destroyed, he confirmed Jeremiah's message and warned them that they must return to God before they could return to Jerusalem. Because he spoke to a people whom God had allowed to be exiled due to their rebellion, most of his prophecies and warnings communicated judgment for sins committed (1:1-32:32). However, he also provided them with hope (33:1-48:35).

A message of symbolic actions: When he started his ministry, the people were indifferent and despondent. They would not listen to him. Therefore, he resorted to new methods. He acted out his words to attract the attention of the people. He locks himself in a room and starts digging himself out (12:8-16); acts symbolic of siege and exile (4:1-5:4); the refusal to mourn for his wife (24:15-24). All these acts were meant to pass across a message of God's judgment on the people and invite them back to the Lord.

A message of the glory of the Lord: this is one of the key messages of his prophecy, God's glory which makes Israel great. When Israel sinned, he saw the glory of the Lord leaving Solomon's temple, but he also saw the return of the glory of the Lord in future which will come to pass during the kingdom age. He not only prophesies the judgment on Israel's rebellion but also on the resurrection and restoration of God's people (ch.37), he offers a picture of the reconstructed temple in Jerusalem, complete with the return of God's glory to his dwelling place (40:1-48). Thus, Ezekiel is clear on one point that the Lord punished and restored for one reason which is for the sake of his name in order to demonstrate once and for all that he is the Lord. God becomes for them now a just shepherd (34:15) under whose rule a restored people enjoy prosperity (37:1-4) in a restored land, no longer afraid of the mysterious forces of God whom God has defeated for the sake of his name (38-39).

A message of repentance and humility: Israel's exile is not primarily to punish them, but the judgment of God is a means to an end. To bring his people to a state of repentance and humility before the one true God. They needed God to remind them of his holy nature and their humble identity in a dramatic way by removing them from the promised land. The Israelites who embrace his preaching now become the new Israel, enlivened by a new heart, imbued with a new breath (36-37), restored to a recreated land, temple and covenant relationship (40-48).

What does it mean for us today Christians?

The latter section of his prophecy where he offers hope of a recreated land, temple and covenant relationship looks forward to our worship of Christ who offers us a new covenantal relationship. He will rule Israel and the nations from his throne in Jerusalem during his thousand-year rule. Even in our sins, God does not abandon us, his glory and mercy keeps pointing us back to the covenant he made with us in Jesus Christ who gives us a new heart and a new mind. (*Fr Denis Tameh*).