

Ezekiel

Resilience Amidst the Gloom

The story and teachings of Ezekiel are difficult to understand, for he says things in strange ways and he lives in a very complex and hard to fathom time in the destiny of the people of Yahweh. He and Jeremiah were both members of the priestly class in Judea at the time of the Babylonian exile, the conquest of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Judean nation. Jeremiah was the older man and probably a mentor to Ezekiel. They were certainly colleagues and on the same side of facing up to these grim times and to seeing the delusions and unfaithfulness of the people of Judea at that time.

The exile to Babylon of Judean families took place in waves over a period of time. Ezekiel and his family went to Babylon in the first group of exiled people, while Jeremiah remained as the prophet of doom in Jerusalem until after the final dispersal of the nation including the the end of the reign of the puppet king appointed by the Babylonians. This arrogant and falsely optimistic king was unfaithful to both the Babylonians and to the Truth of a covenant loyalty to the Power of Profound Reality, affectionally named “Yahweh.”

During the time between Ezekiel’s exile and the complete fall of Judea, Ezekiel joined Jeremiah as a prophet of doom—calling into question the delusions of the Judean people left in Judea as well as the homesick Judean people who were with Ezekiel in exile. These delusions consisted of a false hope for a quick return to nationhood as well as a false perspective on the covenant righteousness of this people—the notion that being the people of Yahweh required a nation. Ezekiel painted this nation-clinging majority force of Judean people as a harlot who instead of charging for her services bribed her clients to use her.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw their hope for a faithful Yahwist future within those who were carried off into exile. Jeremiah, after a time, went to Egypt with a group that established a community of Jewish practice there, but he bought a piece of land in Judea as a witness of his hope for the return from Exile of those who then resided in Babylon.

Meanwhile, after the complete fall of Judea, Ezekiel changed the tone of his prophesy to one of outlandish hope. Most memorable among his strange metaphors was the story of the dry bones that took on flesh and awareness. He was referring to the hopeless despairing remnant of the people of Yahweh trapped in a foreign land, their mission of deep humanity to all the nations of the world apparently over—certainly over in the old form of being an invulnerable nation.

King Nebuchadnezzar, emperor of Babylon, got a harsh press in the various narratives of the Old Testament literature, but he was a merciful leader compared with many others. Instead of simply slaughtering the leadership of their conquests, they carried them off and made use of them within Babylon's rather high class culture of those times. Nebuchadnezzar gave the Jewish exiles a life, and he let them practice their religion. Much was learned by the exiles from this powerful culture. The first chapter of the Bible was written using Babylonian science. The Biblical poetry reflects many gifts from Babylon culture, knowing which could help those of us who read Scripture today. The people who after their 49-year sojourn returned home to Judea to rebuild a nation were a stronger people, as a whole, than those who were carried off.

In case you don't believe me following is a quote from Bernard Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament* page 377.

"Jews were given a good bit of social freedom and economic opportunity. . . . their lot in Babylon was a great deal better than that of modern Jews who have been crowded into dingy ghettos or herded into concentration camps. . . . Babylonian Jews were permitted to move about freely, to live in their communities in or near the great cities, and to carry on their way of life."

"The most serious adjustment that the Jews of Babylon had to make was a religious adjustment. Their faith had been oriented to the land of Palestine, the inheritance that Yahweh had given them, the place that Yahweh had caused his name to dwell."

This new home was the context for Ezekiel's 20-year span of ministry in Babylon. He was a priest and he did priestly actions—liturgy, narratives, teaching, religious practices. He was a keeper of the heritage, a shaper of the narrative, and an inspiration to people who were embodying the Yahwist heritage. He was also a reformer of that heritage. It would have been easy for the whole community to assimilate into this strong culture of Babylon. Ezekiel and his allies were tough people relative to their faith. Many of them held to what was of most value in their deeply ancient heritage.

This toughness can seem strange or rigid of Ezekiel to be so true to his deep past. Ezekiel, however, was a wild man of religious forcefulness a story teller who made history, your history and mine.. If he had one outstanding teaching it was the Absolute Holiness of Yahweh. If we are among those who have any doubt about the living experience of that irrational Otherness of the Profound Reality of Yahweh, we would be scalded by Ezekiel's presence. We may have little idea about how much of Ezekiel characterizes our existing Bible. His people lived in exile in Babylon for 49 years before some of them came home to a broken-down Judea and built it anew.

Such a commitment to a Profound-Reality-honoring-religious practice has become rare in the contemporary Christian churches. Let Ezekiel have a place in your meditative counsel. He helped give an exiled people a sane passage through difficult times. He showed us the power of religion teachings and ritual for doing such a challenging feat.