

Ezekiel: Prophet to the Exiles

May 23, 2021

Ezekiel 18:1-31

Ezekiel is almost unique among the Prophets in that his entire ministry is outside the bounds of Israel. I say “almost,” because Moses’s sister Miriam died before the Israelites reached Canaan. Moses died in Israelite territory on the east side of the Jordan later assigned to Reuben, which was not in Canaan but was arguably in Israel. Ezekiel was born in Judah, but was taken away into captivity to Babylon along with about 10,000 others from Jerusalem. This happened when Jehoiachin surrendered to the Babylonians in 597 B.C. So Ezekiel is a contemporary of Jeremiah, but prophesied in Babylon. *II Kings* 24:13-17 reports,

“13 He [Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon] carried off all of the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king’s house; he cut in pieces all of the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which king Solomon of Israel had made, all this as the LORD had foretold. 14 He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land. 15 He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. 16 The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, artisans and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war. 17 The king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah.”

Ezekiel was one of these who had been taken captive to Babylon. The Babylonians seem to have taken away pretty much anybody useful. They obviously did leave some of the royal family, the “princes” we read about in Jeremiah last week, and must have left at least some of the priests. Ezekiel was called by God in Babylon. We read in Ezekiel Chapter 1:

1 In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. 2 On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), 3 the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzbi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.

I won't go through the details of Ezekiel's vision – it is strange and confusing. It can be dated to July 21, 592 B.C. Ezekiel was stunned by it. (The reference to the thirtieth year is not understood with any confidence.) There are five particular commissions, things Ezekiel is to do. He is first to eat a scroll containing the LORD's words. He is to go to Israel. Third, he is to speak the LORD's word. These first three are typical of the callings we have seen for other prophets. The fourth commission is to be a "sentinel" for Israel. This is interesting and worth considering separately, because of its connection to our scripture. It is something of an expansion of the charge of a prophet given in *Deuteronomy* 18:18-22. There are comparable metaphors in *Jeremiah* 6:17, *Hosea* 9:8, *Habakkuk* 2:1 and *Isaiah* 56:10, but none of those as comprehensive as here in *Ezekiel*. We read in Chapter 3, verse 19, Ezekiel speaking, **"I came to the exiles at Tel-a-bib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days."** The calling to be a sentinel is described in the next several verses, and later elaborated considerably in Chapter 33.

16 At the end of seven days, the word of the LORD came to me: 17 Mortal, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 18 If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give them no warning, or speak to warn the wicked from their wicked way, in order to save their life, those wicked persons shall die for their iniquity; but their blood I will require at your hand. 19 But if you warn the wicked, and they do not turn from their wickedness, or from their wicked way, they shall die for their iniquity; but you will have saved your life. ..." (Ezekiel 3: 16-19)

The word "sentinel" is translated "watchman" in earlier translations. The duty of a sentinel is to watch and give warning. It's not quite the same as being a guard, because the sentinel is not required to fight the enemy himself. Guards are expected to offer defense of whatever they are guarding. It is the responsibility of those warned by the sentinel's word, trumpet, or bell, to take the needed action. This is interesting because of the issue of responsibility. The individual sentinel bears the responsibility for all of those he is serving, but that responsibility is limited to issuing the warning. The sentinel is not responsible for what those receiving the warning do about it. So, this is how Ezekiel understands his call. He must convey the word of the LORD. If he does not, the lives of those who were not warned will be forfeit, and his as well, for not being faithful to his duty. Yet, if they are warned and do not heed the warning, he has fulfilled his responsibility.

This issue of responsibility was particularly important given the setting. He is among the exiles in Babylon. More specifically, he and the other exiles were at the “River Chebar.” There are different theories about this place, that is referenced only in Ezekiel. The explanation that sounds most plausible to me is this one. “An opinion that has much to support it is that the ‘Chebar’ was the royal canal of Nebuchadnezzar, the Nahr Malcha, the greatest in Mesopotamia, which connected the Tigris with the Euphrates, in the excavation of which the Jewish captives were probably employed.” <https://biblehub.com/topical/c/chebar.htm> It seems likely that the exiles were used as, essentially, ditch diggers. The “authorities” over them were the Babylonian taskmasters. There was no king, no Temple of the LORD, no Judahite authorities, and nothing there of the organized community that was the Kingdom of Judah. Just each of them as individuals. And, then, Ezekiel appears.

Ezekiel has numerous visions and messages from God which he passes on to his fellow exiles. Many of these concern God’s judgment on Jerusalem. The exiles in Babylon are warned not to expect the city to survive. Ezekiel is called by God to act out his message by portraying Jerusalem by a brick, and then modeling the Babylonian siege being brought against it (Chapter 4). The exiles in Babylon are warned that those left in Jerusalem are doomed. They will not be given the opportunity to even mourn for the dead. Ezekiel was called by God to act out even this. (See Ezekiel 24:15-27)

The passage in Ezekiel that is the focus of our study today is Chapter 18 on individual responsibility. The main message can be found in verses 4 and 32:

4 Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die. ...

32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

The issue was that the exiles blamed their forbears for their own situation. That meant they considered themselves not responsible for the catastrophe of their circumstances, and as well lost hope of escape. After all, In Exodus, in the Ten Commandments, God said of himself, 34: 6-7 “...by no means clearing the guilty, visiting iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.” So, their parents had sinned, they had suffered, and those in Jerusalem would suffer more too, and there could be no escape. If they believed this, and continued to act on it, it was the end of Israel.

Ezekiel has received a new vision from God. They are each individually responsible. As is his manner, Ezekiel progresses systematically through several cases:

vs. 5-9: One who is righteous will surely live.

vs. 10-13 If that man has a son who is evil, his blood will be upon himself.

vs. 14-18 If a son sees the sins of his father who is evil and is righteous, he will live.

vs. 19-20 A summary of the above: The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the parent, or the parent for the iniquity of the child.

vs. 21-23 If the wicked turn away from their sins and obey God, they will live.

vs. 24 If those who are righteous turn away and become wicked, they shall die.

vs. 25-29 Against protests that this is unfair, God says no, it is you who are unfair.

vs. 30-32 Summary: an appeal to the exiles to cast away their transgressions and get a new heart and a new spirit.

The idea of individual responsibility for sin or righteousness seems to be new to Ezekiel's listeners. I suppose that they had become use to the idea of corporate responsibility. The King was the intermediary with God who was supposed to make things go the right way. Prophets went to the kings with messages about what was to be done, forsake idols and such, because the king was empowered to control worship and the lives of his subjects. That didn't work out very well, especially in Israel, the Northern kingdom. After Ahab, from the time of Elisha, Hosea and Amos, we see prophets going to the people, rather than to the kings. Kings had not been responsible to the Covenant with God which defined and controlled Israel. That model of corporate responsibility had failed. Yes, there were moments of reform such as in the time of King Hezekiah and King Josiah. But idolatry was never completely set aside, and always returned.

Sometimes institutions are beyond reform. Such was the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It took the destruction of those kingdoms for something new to emerge. The visions of renewal, both in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, focus on the individual's relationship to God. Here in Ezekiel, each shall live or die by his own righteousness or iniquity. God begs the exiles to turn to righteousness, that a new heart and a new spirit can be given to them. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 we see the same. Both prophesy renewal. When the exiles do eventually return, it's not easy. They struggle against the Samaritans and other "peoples of the land." They are not independent; they are vassals of Persia. What a contrast to the Israelite conquest of Canaan under Joshua! Yet, that experiment in independence had ultimately failed.

The Israelites had ultimately failed to maintain their independence, their faithfulness to God, and their land. Yet God worked in and through them, just as he had promised Abraham, that his descendants would be a blessing. Yes, they had the likes of Ahab and Jezebel, Manasseh, and Jehu. But they also had David and Ruth. There were the prophets. The foundation of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch and the writings of the prophets, came into existence. Yes, idolatry persisted. There were also those who thought God could not abandon Jerusalem and His temple. He needed them, and could not allow Jerusalem to fall, whatever they might do. But God cannot be held hostage. Out of the destruction, a new and better Israel came to be. The Jews would be the people of God still, and had put aside the explicit idolatry of Israel before the exile. That set the stage for the coming of Jesus.

We live in complex times when we have both individual and corporate responsibilities. Are we responsible for the sins of others? Are our sins or conditions before God due to the actions of either our ancestors, or maybe somebody else or their ancestors? These are questions that are very much an issue in today's public discourse. Are you sinful because of who you are, your race, your sex, or "genetics" or your family background? Or righteous for any of those same reasons? Where does corporate responsibility end or begin? As we consider those issues, we know that Jesus is there for us, and calls out to each of us individually. We need but repent of our sins, and seek to sin no more. God's forgiveness and promise of salvation is ours. For, in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Prayer: God of prophecy and pronouncements, may Ezekiel's messages touch our hearts and direct our actions. Amen.