

PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH, NORTH WALES

NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS EZEKIEL

My friend Paul is Jewish and very aware of his ethnic roots, proud of them in a healthy way. He is also an atheist who objects to my usual “God bless” greeting on cards, letters and emails. There is nothing particularly unusual about that. Post-Holocaust Jews are frequently atheists. It would, however, be very unexpected were he a Zoroastrian, or a follower of pagan fertility gods, or a devout worshipper of Krishna, Brahma and Shiva. Jews can be atheists, but never polytheists. Which is strange, because before the Babylonian Exile which began in 587 BC Jews were, on the whole, polytheists. Those among them who worshipped and served Yahweh only were a minority. There is an extreme group of modern theologians who claim that monotheism was invented during the Exile, and was non-existent beforehand. There is no hard proof of this, and it begs the question of how the Jews survived with their identity intact from Abraham’s day if they were not marked by their belief in Yahweh as the one true God, even if, in practise, most of them felt perfectly comfortable to worship deities who were altogether more visible than the invisible Yahweh, and could be represented by house idols, village Asherah poles and loud festivals. The Bible is perfectly self-consistent in tracing the conflict between the devout minority and the practical polytheists in the land. Despite the occasional, much celebrated, monotheist kings such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah who did their best to restore some kind of order to the mixed bag of religion that possessed their nation, most Jews had no desire to be so restrictive in their spiritual practices. They preferred to keep all the deities happy. Yet those pluralistic practices died out after 587BC, the nation becoming monotheist to the point of martyrdom in the Maccabean revolt. The Exile was the great watershed of monotheism but we are not sure how this change occurred, the steps it followed, or the pace it happened, although we do know the name of the greatest prophet of the Babylonian Exile. It was Ezekiel. He must have had a huge influence and you would think then, that he would be hugely celebrated and revered, with his book becoming a favourite launching pad for many a sermon. He has been called “the father of Judaism”, so why do we not grant him more prominence?

Ezekiel is a difficult book. It does not make simple devotional reading. Apart from chapter 37 with its irresistible story of the dry bones, the book is challenging to preach from. Although theologically it probably presents fewer problems than most it is still a very odd book. Many are revolted by the character of Ezekiel as he portrays himself. He appears to have suffered a humour bypass. He is obsessive and very angry. His wild forays into drama and allegory make him the Tim Burton of the Old Testament. Creative, yes. Easy to digest? No. Some commentators have seen him as a suitable case for treatment, at best mentally ill, at worst a misogynist danger. Terrien, at one extreme, claims that “his contacts with sources of ritual impurity – especially corpses and foreigners – at the expense of his ethical sensitivity to social injustice and inhumanity . . . His persistent concern – not to say his obsessiveness- with the ritual uncleanness of blood and sexual secretions played a part in the cultic degradation of womanhood in Judaism.”ⁱⁱ Such viewpoints have been discarded by modern scholars, and these days Ezekiel does not occupy his own padded-cell category. He is still a bit weird, but not outside the mainstream of Old Testament prophecy.

The book troubled the Jews. It is reputed to have struggled to gain its place in the canon at the council of Jamnia in 90 AD. Ezekiel’s vision of a restored priesthood does not correspond exactly to the Leviticus version. For example, in the New Moon ceremony, the book of Numbers (28:11) demands a sacrifice of two bulls, seven lambs and one ram, while Ezekiel (46:6) demands one bull, six lambs and one ram. Speculation concerning the appearance of Yahweh and other symbolism was considered dangerous. Jerome recounts the story that Rabbi Hananiah ben Hezekiah burned 300 jars of oil studying it before it was accepted into the canon, but even in Jerome’s time, he says, anyone under 30 years of age was forbidden to read the beginning and end of the book.ⁱⁱ

Modern scholars have had issue with Ezekiel also. Historical criticism passed it by at first and it was not until 1924 when Gustav Hölscher voiced the opinion that Ezekiel contributed only 144 verses out of the book's 1273 that the traditional view of a single author in Babylon was challenged. Following that a silly season broke out for a while, culminating perhaps in C.C. Torrey's belief that the book had been written by a Pseudo-Ezekiel in the third century BC.ⁱⁱⁱ Similar viewpoints flourished for a while, ranging from Torrey's third century view to the suggestion that Ezekiel lived in the early Northern Kingdom, but they have all but been discounted now by the mainstream of theology which has settled back to the opinion that much of the material in the book is connected to Ezekiel and contemporary with him. Moshe Greenberg concludes that "the persuasion grows on one . . . that a coherent world of vision is emerging, contemporary with the sixth-century prophet and decisively shaped by him, if not the very words of Ezekiel himself."^{iv} Walther Eichrodt agrees: "throughout the whole book the unique and characteristic style of the parts composed by Ezekiel is so strong and dominant that it has not undergone any material change through the work of redaction, extensive though that has been, and it still continues to be the decisive factor which determines the whole."^v

All verses but 1:3 are autobiographical in content, and after allowing for the influence of the editor(s) who assembled the final version there is no reason to discount the towering historical figure of the prophet from the book's formation. There is no reference to the nation's return under King Cyrus, so we may well infer that the book was completed within the first or second generations of the exiles in Babylon:

"No long period of time seems to have elapsed in the composition of the book . . . While Ezekiel ministered in person to the pre-587 prisoners of war and the first generation of post-587 exiles, the later adaptations that appear in the book seem to have been made among the second generation exiles . . . The edited book invites its readers to look back at the prophet's ministry and to apply its challenge and assurance to their own hearts and lives." - L.C. Allen.^{vi}

There have been several difficulties along the way. Brevard Childs sums it up by saying that "the problem of the book lies in the ability to construct a picture of Ezekiel conforming even in general to the main features of Hebrew prophecy which critical scholarship has come to expect."^{vii} The style of the book lacks the form of an oral tradition and the overload of allegory, symbolic acts and visions has caused some commentators to complain of a hiatus between Ezekiel and previous prophets. However Walther Zimmerli did much to rehabilitate Ezekiel to mainstream prophetic tradition.^{viii} His ministry follows the usual pattern of a call narrative, historical recitals of God's power, and themes of exodus and election. Visions were not new, although he does extend the genre. For example, Amos had a vision of Israel as a basket of over-ripe summer fruit, which is vision-as-parable. Ezekiel takes that kind of oracle into a new phase of oracle-as-allegory where, for example, Jerusalem and Samaria are represented as two promiscuous sisters. He tends to extend traditional categories of prophecy into new areas. For example, Isaiah's call narrative involves a vision of heavenly places with a throne, fire and seraphim, Ezekiel's call narrative also involves a vision of heavenly places with a throne, fire and cherubim, but is longer, more complicated and perhaps influenced by Babylonian artistic descriptions of spiritual beings.^{ix} His prophetic acting out of oracles is a large part of his communication skills, but hardly original. It had always been part of prophetic ministry, with prophets going so far as to strike one another or even walk around naked or semi-naked (1 Ki 20:35ff; Is 20). While it is true that he favours prose over poetry and introduces the beginnings of Hebrew apocalyptic style, he does not neglect traditional prophetic themes of land, judgment, restoration, covenant and law. He too prophecies to surrounding nations and comments heavily on Israel's foreign policy. While he brings his own creative abilities to bear on his calling as a prophet he can be seen as extending prophetic tradition rather than breaking with it.

Another problem is that of locus. Both Jerusalem and Babylon feature heavily in the prophecies, and this has led to various suggestions over the last hundred years of theology. It has been claimed that he began his ministry in Jerusalem and completed it in Babylon, or that he travelled between the two. Within this question is also raised the issue of which group is his target audience, the Jerusalem elite or the Babylonian exiles? This issue is explored in depth by Andrew Mein in the chapter 'Ezekiel and the Exiles' in his book

Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile.^x In part, the two groups were the same, although in socially different circumstances. In 597 BC when the Jerusalem aristocracy and politicians first decided to break away from their vassalage to Babylon and return their political alignment to Egypt the reply was swift. With the Babylonian army camping outside the walls of Jerusalem and the Egyptian army notable only by its absence, King Jehoiachin surrendered. Following ancient methods for tactical dominance of captured cities, the Chaldean army took a large number of the elite prisoner and transported them to Babylon. Just how many were taken is unclear. 2 Kings 24:14 puts the numbers at around 10,000, but this looks suspiciously like a rounded up symbolic number suggesting just “a massive number of important people”. In verse 16 this number seems nearer 8,000. Jeremiah is more precise and in Jer 52:28 puts forward the figure of 3,023 followed by two more batches bringing the total up to 4,600. However many there were, we know that they included the King Jehoiachin and the royal family, leading political families, craftsmen, smiths, military leaders and soldiers. Jeremiah comments that only the poorest were left in the land. The inclusion of 16 dates in the book of Ezekiel helps to ground his prophecies in the community in Babylon. Wevers says “it is clear that the chorological pattern is an intentional editorial one; the arrangement is one that has been imposed upon the materials”^{xi}

So what became of the two groups? Government in Jerusalem was re-established by those who were left, the remnant of the old ruling classes. They were to bear the brunt of Jeremiah’s stinging prophetic oracles of judgment and destruction. Ezekiel, in prophesying in Babylon was effectively preaching to the same social class of people, albeit in a very different social setting. Odet claims that “Actually, the main centre of the people of Israel between the fall of Jerusalem and their return under Cyrus . . . was located in Babylonia and was concentrated around the exiled royal family.”^{xii} Just how much influence Jehoiachin would have had is speculative, but he was well treated. We have recovered Babylonian civil service records referring to his food allowance. Others of course were launched on a career in the civil service, notably Daniel and his companions. However, lacking the necessary skills in Cuneiform and Sumerian most would not have had the qualifications to fare nearly so well. We know from an inscription on the Etemenanki temple that Nebuchadnezzar redeployed exiled prisoners of war on his public building projects and the ‘murashu’ documents recovered from a banking firm, albeit from a rather later date, refer to Jewish people in agriculture, or as shepherds or fishermen.^{xiii} Exile is a place of hard labour. “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off,” complains the people (Ez. 37:11). While it is true that by the time of the return to Jerusalem in the reign of Cyrus they had begun to prosper, those early days were harsh. The green hills of Judea were several months’ journey away, and all they could do was to stare out at the flat, parched land with its huge irrigation canals where they were forced to scratch for a living. But they still saw themselves as the elite. They still felt connected to Jerusalem. Many of them dreamed of returning there. Indeed, back in Jerusalem, Hananiah the prophet infamously predicted a return to Jerusalem of exiles and temple treasure within two years (Jer. 28). This sparked a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles telling them to settle in Babylon because this generation would not return (Jer. 29). Towards the end of this two year timetable we find the elders of the exiles sitting in Ezekiel’s living room asking him, presumably, if it was likely to happen (Ez. 8:1). They are rewarded with a vision of God’s glory departing from the temple. There would be no return, and no reprieve for the inevitable destruction of Jerusalem.

So, Ezekiel prophesied to the same group of people but only while in Babylon. The visits to Jerusalem are only ever in visions, not in fact. He knew the city well, of course, because he had lived there and been trained for the priesthood there. Prophesying to distant peoples was standard prophetic tradition, so Ezekiel just follows the protocol now that he is in Exile and pronounces oracles against Jerusalem’s rulers. The issues were different, though, in the two places. There are two different moral worlds addressed in the book of Ezekiel – that of the Jerusalem elite and that of the exiles. Although originally drawn from the same group, they are facing two different moral challenges. In Jerusalem these centre upon the land and politics, in Babylon they centre on exile and the domestic world. Ezekiel’s oracles encompass both.^{xiv}

The connection to Jerusalem is important for another reason. All prophets have their own special interests. Hosea, for example, because of his marital situation majors quite heavily on covenant promise and the “honeymoon” in the Exodus. Joel bases his work around the natural disaster of a locust invasion. Ezekiel’s background is very clearly that of a Jerusalem priestly family. The largest influence on his work is the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-26. This is vital to understanding the book of Ezekiel. How are the Jews going to cope spiritually without a temple? Ezekiel digs deep into his training and comes up with the Levitical code. He writes like a priest (see the legal ‘case study’ of chapter 18 and the legal rulings of chapter 14) and thinks like one. In his vision of the elders of Jerusalem he sees them with censers in hand, reminding one not of the 70 elders seeing the glory of God with Moses (Ex.24:9ff), but more chillingly of the recalcitrant priestly sons of Korah awaiting their death, censers in hand (Nu 16:16ff). So it is a priest-turned-prophet who asks how the people are going to survive in Exile. Like a priest he answers that they are going to survive by remaining (or, rather, becoming) pure in an impure, pagan, oppressive, society. The word “impurity” is found 280 times in the Hebrew text, 182 of which occur in Leviticus and Numbers, and no less than 44 times in Ezekiel. They can only know God’s blessing by being pure. In chapters 40-48 he will reconstruct the nation ideally based on the Levitical model. They are to start observing the Sabbath as if they mean it. They are to hold the Torah to their hearts. And how will this happen if it has never happened before? Because God will change the people’s heart. “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.”(Ez. 11:19). It is only by grace. Carley affirms that the book is:

“marked by strong tensions, of which none is more dramatic than that between the challenge to get a 'new heart' and a 'new spirit' in 18:31 and the promise that a 'new heart' and a 'new spirit' will be given to Israel in 36:26-27. These texts represent the twin poles of the book: on the one hand, a strong insistence upon Israel’s responsibility before her God and, on the other, a remarkable assurance that Yahweh will enable his recalcitrant people to obey him.”^{xv}

There were those in Babylon who would be receptive to such a message. Ezekiel had been born in the reign of Josiah who had instigated a restoration of monotheism in the nation. His supporters came from the same elite that was transported to Babylon. It is noteworthy that the poorer people gave Jeremiah no respect or mercy, refusing point blank to abandon their idolatry (Jer 44:15 ff). They disappear in the direction of Egypt. Meanwhile the Babylon exiles emerge with a strong monotheist faith based on the Torah. As Gowan says “They solved their identity problem in exile, and came out of it understanding that one can be a Jew anywhere, and that what makes one a Jew is obeying God.”^{xvi}

How successful was Ezekiel? Several times we find the elders in Exile seated around, seeking his opinion. We can only assume that he won the day, because out of the dry soil of Babylon grew a Judaism which reinvented itself around the Holiness Code and the rest of the Torah. Their national distinctiveness was to be reflected in their religious and moral life style. The old polytheism disappeared, to be replaced by a thorough-going, uncompromising monotheism. Not that Ezekiel quite got his own way. His vision of a restored nation in chapters 40-48 was never quite factual enough to be constructed on this earth, and, in any case, was shown to the people in the first instance to shame them: "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan” (Ez. 43:10). In the course of preaching restoration he has to admit that it can only come about by the grace of God and the action of his Spirit on the hearts and minds of his people. Ezekiel points forward to a day when God’s grace will rule the hearts, and the demands of the Law will be fulfilled. He never quite came to see that in these days, there would be no need for a temple, nor priests, nor sacrifices. In that sense, his vision failed, only to be swallowed up by something far more wonderful, the salvation of the nations in Christ.^{xvii}

Peter James Cousins
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- ⁱ Samuel Terrien, *The exclusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1978) pp. 212-13, quoted by Ralph W. Klein, *Ezekiel and his Message* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) p.7. See also E. C. Broome, *Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality JBL 65 (1946) 277-92*. Bernhard Lang, *Ezechiel* (Darmstadt; Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981) p. 70 who claims he was ill because of temporary paralysis and aphasia. Daniel Block summarizes the various psychological studies about Ezekiel, not least Karl Jaspers view that he was schizophrenic, and concludes that he was not sick, just reluctant to do the job. He was an ordinary man out of his depth. Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Vol. 1, Chapters 1-24*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 10-11.
- ⁱⁱ Keith W. Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*. The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: CUP, 1974) p.8. Also Bruce Vawter & Leslie J. Hoppe, *Ezekiel*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) p. 185 and Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The New Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zonderman, 1999) p.17. Jerome *Ep. Ad Paulinam*, 8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ C.C. Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel And the Original Prophecy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1930) p.102.
- ^{iv} Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) p. 27 quoted by Iain M. Duguid, *op. cit.*, p. 25. See also R.E Clements, 'The Chronology of Redaction in Ezekiel 1-24,' in J. Lust (ed.), *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation*, (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium LXXIV (Leuven, 1986), pp. 283-94.
- ^v Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, Old Testament Library, trans. Cosslett Quin (London: SCM, 1970) p.21.
- ^{vi} L. C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, Word Biblical Commentary 28 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), pp. xxv-xvi., quoted by Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001) pp. 40f.
- ^{vii} Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979) p. 357.
- ^{viii} Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel Vol 1*, trans. R.E. Clements and *Vol. 2*, trans. James D. Martin (Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
- ^{ix} Carley's commentary has some illustrations for comparison. I like the idea of pictures in a Bible commentary. A *manga* version would be nice.
- ^x Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). This excellent book is available in the Bangor University library and is a must-read if you are planning on writing an essay including Ezekiel.
- ^{xi} John W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* .The New Century Bible Commentary (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons), p.3.
- ^{xii} B. Oded, 'Judah and the Exile', in J.H. Hayes and J.M. Miller (eds.), *Israelite and Judean History*, OTL (Phil. 1977) quoted by Mein, *op.cit.* p.58.
- ^{xiii} Mein, *op.cit.* p. 61.
- ^{xiv} *ibid*, pp.53f and p. 212.
- ^{xv} Carley, *op cit.*, p. 125.
- ^{xvi} Donald E. Gowan, *Ezekiel*. Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) p. 5.
- ^{xvii} For the sermon series I will be using, mainly the following Bible commentaries:
 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001)
 Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The New Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zonderman, 1999)
 Ernest Lucas, *Ezekiel*. The People's Bible Commentary (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2002)
 Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, Old Testament Library, trans. Cosslett Quin (London: SCM, 1970)