

The Prophet Ezekiel and the History of His People

Robert M Kaplan

It is a critical period for the Israelite nation. In 597 BCE, Nebuchadrezzar pillages the Temple, taking King Jehoiachin and a group of prominent citizens back to Babylon. The exiles keep their religious and national identity and use their skills as artisans. Among them is the man we know as the Prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's ministry is accepted as being from 593-571 BCE and his work has come to us in the Book of Ezekiel (BoE). With the opening lines

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, that I was in the midst of the captivity by the river of Chebar; and the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God

he ties us to the moral history of his people.

What follows is one of the great prophetic visions of all time, far richer in its visual and auditory elements than those experienced by the other prophets. God approaches Ezekiel as a divine warrior, riding in his battle chariot drawn by four creatures, each with four faces (of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle), and four wings. The creatures could travel forwards and backwards, up and down, and moved in flashes of lightning. Beside each living creature is a beryl-coloured wheel, constructed as a wheel within a wheel, with tall and awesome rims that had eyes all around. The auditory accompaniment

to this scene is intense: *'And there came a voice from above the dome of their heads'*. The sound of the wings of the creatures is like *'the sound of mighty waters like the thunder of the almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army'*.

The chariot vision has led to an entire school of eschatology (the doctrine concerning the last things, or end of the world, such as death or the Last Judgment) and resurfaces in the hallucinations of John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation.

Other messages instruct Ezekiel is to build a brick model of Jerusalem with a metal plate that represents the ongoing Babylonian siege. He lies on his left side for 390 days (representing the 390 days of Israel's punishment); then on the right side for 40 days (representing the 40 days of Judah's punishment). There are more visits to the Temple and a flight to Jerusalem to warn the inhabitants of the impending tragedy. Commands follow to shave his head and dig a hole in the temple wall when escaping from Jerusalem during the siege. The bizarre dictum to eat bread made from animal dung is deeply shocking, one that runs so contrary to Jewish views on cleanliness and purity that rabbinical interpreters over the next two millennia were unable to come up with any explanation.

The Old Testament is the history of Israelite peoples expressed through their prophets. Starting with Moses (Abraham was a proto-figure), prophets mediated between their people and an unflinching Yahweh who required them to keep to his rules in order to maintain their chosen status.

Ezekiel is the only prophet to have operated outside the Holy Land. He faced a challenge not known by his people since the Egyptian exile six centuries earlier: how to maintain their identity and worship of a monolithic god outside the Holy Land where the temple had stood. As with all prophets, his audience did not necessarily take to his message. That they were not persecuted by the canals of Babylon where they were abducted only made his task more difficult. The more relaxed circumstances made them more susceptible to the heathen temptations around them.

Ezekiel provided a solution to the problem of living in a foreign land. He is held as the originator of that essential feature of diaspora life, the synagogue. More importantly, he laid down what was to be the central ethical principle of Judaism, the shift from collective to individual guilt. In a radical leap, he declared that the individual alone bears responsibility for his deeds: 'A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteousness shall be his own'.

The BoE remains an enduring item of the world's literary canon. It has influenced the history of Jewish and Christian mysticism and apocalyptic literature more than any other book. It succeeds in conveying the anguish, confusion and disarray of a people uprooted from their land and the central focus of their religion. It provides the two foundations of Jewish life that sustain it for the next two millennia: the concept of individual responsibility, and the establishment of the synagogue. It does so in language that, despite its extremism at times, is extraordinarily eloquent; history at its best.

Widely regarded as the finest literary work in the Old Testament, the narrative is characterized by lucid parables and extensive use of symbolism. It is distinguished by well-defined passages of elegant prose and rhythmical poetry. The style is characterised by rich imagery, detailed descriptions, repetitions of words and phrases and, at times, extreme coarseness, even obscenity. For reasons both theological and prudential, the rabbis advised men not to read it until they were 40, and women not at all.

Ezekiel, a priest, a prophet, a seer and a visionary, was a most unusual individual. The frequency of his visions – 93 times – was far more than any other prophet, including Moses. His visions, capacity to travel through time and space, and other extraordinary, if not baffling behaviour, has received explanations from psychiatrists, psychologists, theologians and historians.

Of all these issues, Ezekiel's attitude to women goes way beyond the extreme, a source of much contention. Taking into account that biblical women were often described as feckless, seductive and immoral, his portrayal of them as harlots is only the start. In Chapter 16, he uses the story of a marriage that fails; God is the husband, Jerusalem is the wife. As a literary analogy this is simply superb – the relationship falters, then fails – but the wife becomes a whore, nothing less than an insatiable nymphomaniac. Only after this, when all passion (meaning rage) is spent, does God forgive and promise to remarry her.

In Chapter 23, the sisters Oholah and Oholibah become whores with first the Egyptians, then the Assyrians. The graphic description is

appalling, and the terminology cannot be regarded as anything but pornographic.

Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.

In the end, Oholah and Oholibah pay the ultimate penalty for their behaviour, having their nipples, nose and ears sliced off. This description is sado-masochistic to an extreme.

What can explain this behaviour in such a devout prophet? Ezekiel is one of the earliest examples of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy we have (the first is in the Book of Numbers). Since it was first described, it has been associated with intense religious experiences, a dreamy mystical state and disturbances of identity, perception or orientation. Other features include fainting spells, mutism, out-of-body experiences, time and space travel, the well-known *de ja vu* and *jamais vu* experiences and other neuropsychiatric phenomena. Typical features include hypergraphia and intense religiosity, pedantry and obsessiveness, extreme sexual fantasies associated with intense misogyny, insensitivity to the feelings of others, stickiness of thinking manifesting in repetitiveness, anger and emotionally discordant actions.

Whatever the explanation, Ezekiel is first and last a prophet. He is the fountain through which flowed a unique vision, that of the monolithic god and his chosen people. He must have been impossible,

intolerable, magnificent and utterly compelling to deal with. We will never know more of who he was, but this is hardly necessary. His magnificent book is all we need.

Robert M Kaplan is interested in prophets, priests, shamans, soothsayers, heptomancy and demiurges as an alternative to his immersion in medical history, forensic crime and genocide.

Words 1354