

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
EZEKIEL
Chapters 1-24

DANIEL I. BLOCK

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INTRODUCTION

I. BACKGROUND: THE WORLD OF EZEKIEL

A. POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Ezekiel was born into a turbulent world. The major players on the ancient Near Eastern stage were switching roles and smaller nations were disappearing from the scene altogether. For centuries the neo-Assyrians had maintained their imperial grip on the region, at times reaching as far as Egypt. By the time of Ashurbanipal's death in 627 B.C., however, it had become evident that the Assyrians had not only overextended themselves; they had also lost the imperial heart. Meanwhile, the Babylonians were waiting in the wings, ready to try their hands. Babylonia had been an important political center for more than a thousand years, having produced in the previous millennium world-class figures like Hammurabi (ca. 1792-1750) and Nebuchadnezzar I (ca. 1133-1116). But since the 8th century the Babylonians had been dominated by their neighbors to the north, the neo-Assyrians. This situation was understandably insulting to Babylonian pride, and anti-Assyrian agitation flared up repeatedly in the land. The most significant challenge was launched by an important Chaldean sheikh, Merodach-baladan, a contemporary of Hezekiah of Jerusalem (2 K. 20:12; Isa. 39:1).¹ But Assyrian might prevailed, and in 689 Sennacherib inflicted the ultimate indignity upon Babylon, the holy city, dragging off the statue of its patron deity, Marduk, and razing the town.²

1. On Merodach-baladan see J. A. Brinkman, "Merodach Baladan II," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim*, ed. R. D. Biggs and J. A. Brinkman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 6-53.

2. On Marduk, the divine patron of Babylon, see D. I. Block, "Chasing a Phantom: The Search for the Historical Marduk," *Archaeology in the Biblical World* 2 (1992) 20-43; W. Sommerfeld, "Marduk," *RLA*, 7:360-70. On this event see *ARAB*, 2:341.

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The crumbling of the Assyrian empire coincided with the emergence of another genius of Chaldean descent, Nabopolassar (625-605). Rising from obscurity, this man not only founded a new dynasty in Babylon; he also laid the foundation for one of the most brilliant, if short-lived, empires of the ancient world. The pace of historical events quickened with his arrival on the scene. In 626 he won a resounding victory outside Babylon in the last attack the Assyrians would ever make on this city. In 616 Nabopolassar went on the offensive, marching his army up the Euphrates. However, alarmed at the rising might of the Babylonians, under Psammetichus I, the Egyptians did the unthinkable, changing allegiances and joining the Assyrians to stall the Babylonian advance. But in 614 the Medes joined the fray on the side of the Babylonians, taking the city of Asshur by storm. The allies continued their pressure on the dying empire, laying siege to Nineveh in 612 and bringing about its fall after three months. What remained of the Assyrian army dug in at Harran. With the aid of the Medes, in 610 Nabopolassar drove the combined forces of Egypt and Assyria out of the city. In 609 an attempt was made to retake Harran, but it ended in failure. The decisive battle occurred four years later at Carchemish (Jer. 46:2). With this victory the Assyrians were driven off the map, never to be heard of again, and the Egyptians were forced to retreat to their homeland like whipped puppies with their tails between their legs.³

If Nabopolassar was the founder of the dynasty, the fabled glory of the empire must be credited to his son, Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562), who had served as general of the Babylonian forces in the spectacular victory at Carchemish.⁴ After the routing of the Assyrians he pursued the Egyptians as far as Hamath. Before he could secure control over the Levant, word reached him of the death of his father, and he hurried home to consolidate his power in Babylon. But he would not remain away for long. Indeed, from this time onward the affairs of Judah become so intertwined with Babylonian activities that for our purposes they may be examined together.

In spite of the apparent latter-day conversion of Manasseh (2 Chr. 33:10-20), who reigned 687-642, the historian branded him as the worst king to sit on David's throne (2 K. 21:1-18; 24:3-4), and the kingdom of Judah never recovered from the spiritual degradation to which he had brought the nation. After forty-five years of court-sponsored paganism, Judean apostasy was so deeply entrenched that the sweeping reforms of the good king Josiah (640-609) could do no more than scratch the surface, but not for lack of trying. Acceding to the throne of David at the tender age of eight, Josiah represented Judah's last hope.

3. For a survey of and bibliography on Nabopolassar's achievements see R. H. Sack, "Nabopolassar," *ABD*, 4:977-78.

4. The most helpful study of Nebuchadnezzar is provided by D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

His attempts to break out of a half century of paganism by purging the nation of pagan cult objects, eliminating divination and magic, centralizing public worship in Jerusalem, and reinstating the Passover are laudable (2 K. 23; 2 Chr. 34). His extension of the campaign against idolatry into the northern kingdom (2 Chr. 34:6-7) as well as his effort in 609 to intercept Pharaoh Necho on his way north to Carchemish, suggests that he may have been trying to restore the old Davidic kingdom. But it was too little too late.⁵ His tragic death at the age of thirty-nine (2 K. 23:28-30; 2 Chr. 35:20-27) leaves one wondering what might have been. Or was righteous Josiah like Enoch, out of step with the times and with divine plans for Judah? Had the nation's fate been sealed this early, so that it became necessary for God to remove him to prevent his reforms from taking root? These are intriguing questions.

Following the untimely death of Josiah, the people installed his middle son, Jehoahaz, on the throne. But his reign was only three months, just long enough to demonstrate that he had inherited more personal qualities from his grandfather Amon (642-640) than from his father. Pharaoh Necho took advantage of the political uncertainties in Jerusalem after the death of Josiah and placed his own puppet, Eliakim, Josiah's oldest son, on the throne, renaming him Jehoiakim as an act of sovereignty (2 K. 23:31-37). Jehoiakim's was a fateful reign. Continuing the spiritual policies of his predecessor, he managed to undo most of the effects of Josiah's reforms.

Sometime after 605, when Nebuchadrezzar had consolidated his control in Babylon, his forces returned to Palestine to continue the offensive against the Egyptians. They were driven out of Judah, and Jehoiakim became a vassal of Babylon. To maintain Judean loyalty, Nebuchadrezzar took some of the nobility, like Daniel and his friends, to Babylon.⁶ But Jehoiakim was not inclined to comply with his new overlord's demands, and in 598/597 he rebelled. Now Nebuchadrezzar had had enough. Together with a horde of other armies, after a three-month siege, Nebuchadrezzar's forces brought Jerusalem to its knees.⁷ Jehoiakim was captured and apparently executed (Jer. 22:18-23; 36:30), and his son Jehoiachin installed in his place (2 K. 24:8-17). But he ruled only long enough to establish a pattern of evil, and either could not or would not lead his people in submission to the Babylonians. Nebuchadrezzar responded to his overtures to Egypt for aid (2 K. 24:7) with severe indignities: the king, queen,

5. On Josiah's reform and its relation to previous reforms see H.-D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980), esp. pp. 251-61.

6. On these events see Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, pp. 2-25. On Ezekiel's relationship to Daniel see below on 14:14.

7. The event is recounted in the Babylonian Chronicle. See *ANET*, pp. 563-64; A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, TCS 5 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1975), p. 102, Chronicle 5, rev. 11-12. On the text see the commentary below on 1:1-3.

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royal officers, leading citizens, and vast amounts of booty, including the temple treasures, were removed to Babylon.⁸ Many of these captives, including Ezekiel, were settled in a separate Jewish colony near Nippur on the Chebar canal.⁹

In Jehoiachin's place Nebuchadrezzar installed Josiah's youngest son, Mattaniah, whom he renamed Zedekiah (2 K. 24:17-18). The reign of this, the last descendant of David on the throne of Jerusalem was a fiasco. Zedekiah joined with his neighbors on several occasions to throw off the Babylonian yoke. In 589, together with Tyre and Ammon, and under the sponsorship of Edom, they launched an open revolt. This time Nebuchadrezzar responded with a vengeance. Judah was invaded,¹⁰ and Jerusalem put under siege. After more than a year, the walls were finally breached. Zedekiah fled, but he was soon captured and presented to Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah. While Zedekiah watched, his sons were executed, then his eyes were gouged out, and he was taken in chains to Babylon (2 K. 25:1-21; Jer. 52:9-11). Two months later Nebuchadrezzar's general, Nebuzaradan, torched the city, reducing even the temple to a pile of rubble and leaving only a few survivors to try to eke out a living among the ruins. The nation of Judah had vanished.¹¹

B. SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

During Ezekiel's tenure as a prophet of Israel, Jews were found in three principal locations: Judah, Egypt, and Babylon.¹² According to the biblical record, the Babylonians deported virtually all who remained of the population

8. A Babylonian court document (*ANET*, p. 308) suggests that in time Jehoiachin was promoted to a position of relative honor among detained rulers in Babylon. See also 2 K. 25:27-30.

9. See below on Ezek. 1:1-3.

10. Correspondence during these dark days between the capital and Lachish, a southern military post, is preserved in the so-called Lachish Letters (*ANET*, pp. 321-22).

11. For more detailed analyses of the historical background to the book of Ezekiel see B. Oded, "Judah and the Exile," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp. 435-88; J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), pp. 310-72.

12. Like Ezekiel, I use the term "Israelite" as a theological and ethnic designation for the so-called people of Yahweh, whether they be the original twelve tribes, the kingdom of Judah, or the remnant of exiles. Strictly, the designation "Jew" (*yēhūdī*) identifies a descendant of Judah or a citizen of the kingdom of Judah (cf. the first occurrence of the noun in 1 K. 16:6). The term, which appears in 8th-century-B.C. neo-Assyrian texts as *la-ū-da-a-a* (*ANET*, p. 282), became common after the fall of Samaria. During the exile the people of God became known as *yēhūdī* (Dan. 3:8, 12; Zech. 8:23; Esth. 8:17). As early as Hezekiah, however, *yēhūdīt* identifies the Judean dialect of Hebrew (2 K. 18:26, 28 = Isa. 36:11, 13 = 2 Chr. 32:18). Cf. Neh. 13:24.

(*yeter hā'ām*) of Judah after the earlier exile (597 B.C.) and the devastations of 588-586 (2 K. 25:11; 2 Chr. 36:20; Jer. 52:15); only some of the "poorest of the land" (*middallat hā'āreš*) were left behind to tend the vineyards and olive groves. Of the few that were left, many fled to Egypt in the wake of the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor installed by the Babylonians.¹³ Archeology confirms the complete devastation of the land, particularly the major population centers like Jerusalem and Lachish.¹⁴ In general, the people who remained suffered from severe depression expressed in economic poverty, political lethargy, and spiritual numbness. Although a new class of *nouveau noblesses* (relatively) emerged inevitably, they exhibited the same proclivity toward arrogance and spiritual bankruptcy as their predecessors. According to Ezek. 11:14-16, they had no understanding of their rich religious heritage and no sensitivity or pity for their deported compatriots.

According to Jer. 44:1, Jewish settlements were established in Egypt at a series of sites: Pathros, Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis. But the modern discovery of numerous papyri has made the most famous the military colony on the island of Elephantine on the Nile.¹⁵ How these people got there is unknown; some of them may have arrived as early as the time of Manasseh.¹⁶ These papyri reveal relative autonomy in internal social affairs. The religious climate was syncretistic. The Passover and Sabbaths were celebrated to Yahweh (*yhw*) and a temple was built for him, but many other deities were also invoked: Ishumbethel, Anathbethel, Sati, Nabu, Anathyahu, Khnub, Bel, Shamask, and Nergal.¹⁷

Ezekiel's primary audience was the community of Jews in Babylon. Mesopotamia had long been the benefactor of forced Israelite immigration. According to neo-Assyrian records hundreds of thousands of citizens from the northern kingdom had been dispersed throughout the empire.¹⁸ Nebuchadrezzar continued this policy with the Judeans, bringing the cream of the population to Babylon and settlements nearby. These deportation policies were driven by several objectives: (1) to break down bonds of nationality and resistance; (2) to

13. 2 K. 25:25-26; Jer. 41:1-2. According to Jer. 43, Jeremiah was forced to go with those who were fleeing to Egypt.

14. Cf. Oded, *Israelite and Judaean History*, pp. 478-79.

15. Opposite Aswan (ancient Syene); cf. Isa. 49:12 (Sinim). For details on the colony see B. Porten, "Elephantine," in *ABD*, 2:445-55. Porten also provides further bibliography.

16. Manasseh seems to have provided troops for Ashurbanipal's campaign in Egypt (*ANET*, p. 294). The 2nd-century-B.C. (?) *Letter of Aristeas* (§13) reports that Jews had also supported Psammetichus I (664-610/9 B.C.) in his conflict with the Ethiopians. For the text see R. J. H. Shutt, tr., in *OTP*, 2:13.

17. For translation see *ANET*, pp. 491-92. See the discussion by W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 5th ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 162-68, and more recently K. van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu, Some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine," *Numen* 39 (1992) 80-101.

18. *ANET*, pp. 283, 288; cf. 2 K. 17:6.

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Robert L. Hubbard Jr., general editor

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Grand Rapids/Cambridge

ISBN 0-8028-2535-4



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