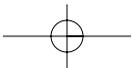
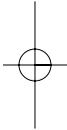
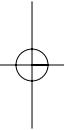


# TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 22

TOTC

EZEKIEL



# TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 22

GENERAL EDITOR: DONALD J. WISEMAN

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## EZEKIEL

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

JOHN B. TAYLOR



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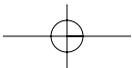
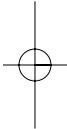
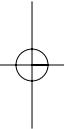
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## GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, as it was in the companion volumes on the New Testament, is to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary on each book, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Major critical questions are discussed in the introductions and additional notes, while undue technicalities have been avoided.

In this series individual authors are, of course, free to make their own distinct contributions and express their own point of view on all controversial issues. Within the necessary limits of space they frequently draw attention to interpretations which they themselves do not hold but which represent the stated conclusions of sincere fellow Christians. While he has done all this, the author of this commentary has shown that it is possible to make a book of the Bible – often little read and studied outside a few well-known passages – stand out afresh in its historical and prophetic setting, yet with meaning, relevance and application for the serious reader today.

In the Old Testament in particular no single English translation is adequate to reflect the original text. The authors of these commentaries freely quote various versions, therefore, or give their own translation, in the endeavour to make the more difficult passages or words meaningful today. Where necessary, words from the Hebrew (and Aramaic) text underlying their studies are transliterated. This will help the reader who may be unfamiliar with the Semitic languages to identify the word under discussion and thus to follow the argument. It is assumed throughout that the reader will have

ready access to one, or more, reliable renderings of the Bible in English.

There are signs of a renewed interest in the meaning and message of the Old Testament and it is hoped that this series will thus further the systematic study of the revelation of God and his will and ways as seen in these records. It is the prayer of the editor and publisher, as of the authors, that these books will help many to understand, and to respond to, the Word of God today.

D. J. Wiseman

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Commentaries may be divided into two classes. Some are designed to help readers of the Bible to understand better the parts which they read. The others are designed to help the same people to tackle the parts they would otherwise ignore. The present commentary is intended to fall within this second category. To those who have grappled confidently with the problems of Ezekiel's visions and who can spend happy hours working out the fulfilment of his prophecies, these pages have little to offer. But those who have done no more than dip tentatively into his forty-eight chapters will, I hope, be encouraged to be more venturesome. For their benefit I have tried to avoid undue technicalities and, even when I have felt it necessary to make reference to the original Hebrew, I have tried to make my comments clear and readable so that the complete layman will never feel himself at a loss. My success will be judged, therefore, not so much by the number of people who read this book as by the number who read Ezekiel as well.

I am most grateful to Professor D. J. Wiseman both for his personal encouragement and for a number of helpful suggestions and improvements he has made; to the Rev. Arthur Cundall for carefully checking the manuscript and pointing out inaccuracies which I may never have spotted; and to Mr. Alan Millard for help in preparing the chronological table in the Introduction. My thanks are also due to Mrs. Valerie Everitt and Mrs. Joy Hills for their invaluable help in typing the manuscript. Most of all I should like to express

my gratitude to my wife and children, who have willingly made sacrifices so that this book should be written and who have encouraged me more than I can say.

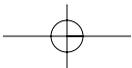
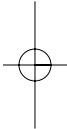
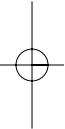
John B. Taylor  
Easter Day 1969

## CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

Akk.	Akkadian
<i>ANEP</i>	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures</i> by J. B. Pritchard, 1954.
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament</i> <sup>2</sup> by J. B. Pritchard, 1955.
<i>ARI</i>	<i>Archaeology and the Religion of Israel</i> <sup>2</sup> by W. F. Albright, 1953.
AV	English Authorized Version (King James).
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i> .
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i> .
Bertholet	<i>Hesekiel</i> <sup>2</sup> by A. Bertholet ( <i>Handbuch zum Alten Testament</i> ), 1936.
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i> .
<i>BZAW</i>	<i>Beibefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> .
Cooke	<i>A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel</i> by G. A. Cooke ( <i>International Critical Commentary</i> ), 1936.
Cornill	<i>Das Buch des Propheten Ezechiel</i> by C. Cornill, 1886.
Davidson	<i>The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel</i> by A. B. Davidson ( <i>Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges</i> ), 1892.
de Vaux	<i>Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions</i> by Roland de Vaux, Eng. tr. 1961.
<i>DOTT</i>	<i>Documents from Old Testament Times</i> edited by D. Winton Thomas, 1958.

- EB* *Encyclopaedia Biblica* edited by T. K. Cheyne and J. S. Black, 1899–1903.
- Eissfeldt *The Old Testament, an Introduction* by Otto Eissfeldt, Eng. tr. 1965.
- Ellison *Ezekiel, the Man and his Message* by H. L. Ellison, 1956.
- ET* *Expository Times*.
- EVV English Versions (used where AV, RV and RSV agree).
- Fohrer *Ezekiel* by G. Fohrer (*Handbuch zum alten Testament*), 1955.
- GK* *Hebrew Grammar*<sup>2</sup> by W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 1910.
- HDB* *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*.
- Hengstenberg *Commentary on Ezekiel* by E. W. Hengstenberg, Eng. tr. 1869.
- Hertrich *Ezekielprobleme* by V. Hertrich, 1932.
- Hitzig *Der Prophet Ezekiel* by F. Hitzig, 1847.
- Howie *Ezekiel, Daniel* by C. G. Howie (*Layman's Bible Commentaries*), 1961.
- HUCA* *Hebrew Union College Annual*.
- IB* *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6. *The Book of Ezekiel*. Introduction and Exegesis by H. G. May; Exposition by E. L. Allen, 1956.
- IDB* *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, in four volumes, 1962.
- JB Jerusalem Bible, 1968.
- JBL* *Journal of Biblical Literature*.
- JSS* *Journal of Semitic Studies*.
- JTS* *Journal of Theological Studies*.
- Keil *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Ezekiel*, by C. F. Keil, Eng. tr., no date (2 vols.).
- Kliefoth *Das Buch Ezechiels* by Th. Kliefoth, 1864–5.
- Klostermann *Studien und Kritiken* by A. Klostermann, 1877.
- Knox *The Holy Bible*<sup>2</sup> translated by Ronald Knox, 1956.
- Koehler *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, 1953.

Kraetzschmar	<i>Das Buch Ezechiel</i> by R. Kraetzschmar ( <i>Handkommentar zum Alten Testament</i> ), 1900.
Lat.	Old Latin Version.
LXX	The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
May	See <i>IB</i> .
mg.	margin.
Moffatt	<i>A New Translation of the Bible</i> by James Moffatt, 1935.
MS	manuscript.
MT	Massoretic Text.
<i>NBD</i>	<i>The New Bible Dictionary</i> edited by J. D. Douglas, 1962.
<i>OTMS</i>	<i>The Old Testament and Modern Study</i> edited by H. H. Rowley, 1951.
<i>PEFQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement</i> .
Peake	<i>Peake's Commentary on the Bible</i> edited by Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley, 1962. Section on Ezekiel by J. Muilenburg.
RSV	American Revised Standard Version, 1952.
RV	English Revised Version, 1881.
Skinner	<i>The Book of Ezekiel</i> by John Skinner ( <i>The Expositor's Bible</i> ), 1895 (2 vols.).
Stalker	<i>Ezekiel</i> by D. M. G. Stalker ( <i>Torch Bible Commentaries</i> ), 1968.
Syr.	Syriac Version.
TB	Babylonian Talmud.
Toy	<i>Ezekiel</i> by C. H. Toy ( <i>Polychrome Bible</i> ), 1899.
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> .
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
Zimmerli	<i>Ezechiel</i> by W. Zimmerli ( <i>Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament</i> ), 1955 onwards.



## INTRODUCTION

### **1. The book of Ezekiel**

For most Bible readers Ezekiel is almost a closed book. Their knowledge of him extends little further than his mysterious vision of God's chariot-throne, with its wheels within wheels, and the vision of the valley of dry bones. Otherwise his book is as forbidding in its size as the prophet himself is in the complexity of his make-up.

In its structure, however, if not in its thought and language, the book of Ezekiel has a basic simplicity, and its orderly framework makes it easy to analyse. After the opening vision, in which Ezekiel sees the majesty of God on the plains of Babylon and receives his call to be a prophet to the house of Israel (1 – 3), there follows a long series of messages, some enacted symbolically but most expressed in spoken form, foretelling and justifying God's intention to punish the holy city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants with destruction and death (4 – 24). Then, at the half-way mark in the book, when the fall of Jerusalem is represented as having actually taken place (though

the news has still not percolated through to the exiles), the reader's attention is diverted to the nations that surround Israel, and God's judgment on them is pronounced in a series of oracles (25 – 32). By this time the reader is prepared for the bombshell of the news of Jerusalem's destruction, and 32:21 tells of the fugitive's statement, 'The city has fallen!' But already a new age is dawning and a new message is on Ezekiel's lips. With a renewed commission and a promise that God is about to restore his people to their own land under godly leadership by a kind of national resurrection (33 – 37), Ezekiel leads on to describe in apocalyptic terms the final triumph of the people of God over the invading hordes from the north (38, 39). The book concludes, as it began, with an intricate vision, not this time of the Lord's chariot throne moving over the empty wastes of Babylon, but of the new Jerusalem with its temple court and inner sanctuary where God would dwell among his people for ever (40 – 48).

It is not surprising, therefore, that most older commentators regarded Ezekiel as being free from the literary fragmentation that was imposed by critics upon the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and some of the twelve minor prophets. A. B. Davidson's introduction to his commentary on Ezekiel (1892) began with the oft-quoted verdict: 'The Book of Ezekiel is simpler and more perspicuous in its arrangement than any other of the great prophetic books. It was probably committed to writing late in the prophet's life, and, unlike the prophecies of Isaiah, which were given out piecemeal, *was issued in its complete form at once.*'<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later G. B. Gray could still draw the conclusion that 'no other book of the Old Testament is distinguished by such decisive marks of unity of authorship and integrity as this'.<sup>2</sup> But by the time McFadyen wrote his *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1932 edition), he was having to use more cautious language: 'We have in Ezekiel the rare satisfaction of studying a carefully elaborated prophecy whose authenticity has, till recently, been practically undisputed.'<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'till recently' refers to the work of scholars

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1. Davidson, p. ix (my italics).

2. G. B. Gray, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament* (1913), p. 198.

3. McFadyen, p. 187.

such as Kraetzschmar, Hölscher, C. C. Torrey and James Smith. But before we consider their views, let us briefly summarize the arguments on which the traditional view of the unity of Ezekiel has been based.

There are six main reasons for ascribing the book to a single author, the prophet Ezekiel.

1. The book has a balanced structure, as we have already observed, and this logical arrangement extends from chapter 1 to 48. There are no breaks in the continuity of the prophecy, except where (as in the case of the oracles against the nations, 25 – 32) this is done for deliberate effect. The only part that could readily be separated from the rest, the vision of the new temple (40 – 48), appears neatly to balance the opening vision of chapters 1 – 3 and is better regarded as a fitting conclusion to the whole, although manifestly of somewhat later date (cf. 40:1).

2. The message of the book has an inner consistency which fits in with the structural balance. The centre-point is the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. This is announced in 24:21ff. and reported in 33:21. From chapter 1 to 24 Ezekiel's message is destructive and denunciatory: he is a watchman set to warn the people that this is the inevitable consequence of the nation's sins. But from chapter 33 to 48, while he still regards himself as a watchman with a message of individual retribution and responsibility, his tone is encouraging and restorative. Before 587 BC, his theme was that the deportation of 597 BC in which he himself was one of the victims, was certainly not the end of God's punishment upon his people: worse was to come, and the exiles must be prepared to face it. But after it had come, and the worst had happened, God would act to rebuild and restore his chastened Israel.

3. The book shows a remarkable uniformity of style and language. This is largely due to the repetitious phraseology used throughout the book. May<sup>4</sup> gives a list of no fewer than 47 typical Ezekielian phrases which appear periodically in its pages, and many of these are peculiar to this prophet. This does not of course prove anything

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4. *IB*, pp. 50f.

about the actual authorship, because an editor could easily have picked up phrases typical of Ezekiel and woven them into the additional material he incorporated, but it is strong evidence for the unity and coherence of the book in its final stage, and it suggests that the editor of the finished work, if he was not Ezekiel himself, identified himself closely with Ezekiel's outlook and beliefs.

4. The book has a clear chronological sequence, with dates appearing at 1:1, 2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1. No other major prophet has this logical progression of dates, and only Haggai and Zechariah among the minor prophets afford any comparable pattern.<sup>5</sup>

5. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and Zechariah, which all combine material in the first and third persons singular, a feature which is usually regarded as a sure sign of editorial compilation, Ezekiel is written autobiographically throughout. The only exception is the duplicate introduction (1:2, 3), which looks very much as if it was an editor's explanation of an opening verse which clearly needed some kind of interpretation for his readers (see Commentary, p. 55). But this is the only such instance.

6. The picture of the character and personality of Ezekiel appears consistent through the whole of the book; there is the same earnestness, the same eccentricity, the same priestly love of symbolism, the same fastidious concern with detail, the same sense of the majesty and transcendence of God.

Despite this evidence there has never been lacking a handful of critics who have been sceptical about the unity of Ezekiel. Josephus' statement<sup>6</sup> that Ezekiel left behind him two books must not be made to shoulder too much of the blame for this. A century ago Ewald distinguished two elements in Ezekiel, the former representing spoken prophetic oracles and the latter being the literary production of a writing prophet. He did not, however, feel that this division

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5. The chronology of Ezekiel is studied more closely under section 3 of the Introduction, below, p. 38.

6. *Antiquities*, x. 5. 1: '... Ezekiel also, who was the first person that wrote, and left behind him in writing two books, concerning these events' (W. Whiston's translation).

demanded that the unity of the book should be abandoned. Some years later Kraetzschmar argued strongly against literary unity on the grounds that he could detect numerous inconsistencies in the text, doublets and parallel versions, which led him to postulate two recensions of the book, one in the first person and the other in the third person. The weakness of Kraetzschmar's conclusion was that the only passages in the third person were 1:3 and 24:24 (where Yahweh says: 'Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign'), and not surprisingly he received scant support for his theory. Scholars such as Herrmann,<sup>7</sup> who saw the validity of Kraetzschmar's evidence but rejected his conclusion, preferred the more conservative estimate of Ezekiel as being a unity compiled by the prophet's own hand, but with later editorial accretions.

In the same year that Herrmann produced his commentary on Ezekiel, however, Gustav Hölscher published a study<sup>8</sup> reversing his own conservative views of ten years earlier<sup>9</sup> and subjecting the book of Ezekiel to what Rowley has described as 'the most dramatic dismemberment it has yet suffered'.<sup>10</sup> He took as his starting-point the belief that Ezekiel was a poet and therefore that it was unlikely that he would have written many of the prose passages in the book. He also excised poetical passages that were not in what he regarded as Ezekiel's characteristic metre. Out too went passages where symbolism was mixed in with concrete facts, for he argued that a true poet would not do such a thing. Even more arbitrary was his view that the doctrine of individual responsibility must be post-exilic, so these passages also had to be relegated to redactors. The result of

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7. *Ezechielstudien (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament, 1908)* and *Ezechiel (Kommentar zum Alten Testament, 1924)*, both by J. Herrmann.
  8. G. Hölscher, *Hesekiel, der Dichter und das Buch* (1924).
  9. G. Hölscher, *Die Profeten* (1914), pp. 298ff.
  10. The essay by H. H. Rowley, 'The Book of Ezekiel in Modern Study', *BJRL*, XXXVI, 1953-54, pp. 146-150 (now more readily available in his book, *Men of God: Studies in Old Testament History and Prophecy, 1963*), from which this quotation is taken, is an admirable survey of the extensive literature on Ezekiel which can only be touched on in this Introduction.

this drastic analysis was that Ezekiel the prophet was left with a bare 170 verses out of a total of 1,273 contained in the book named after him. Although Hölscher's conclusions were revolutionary, his methodology was not original (Duhm had given much the same treatment to the book of Jeremiah in 1903<sup>11</sup>) and before very long an American scholar, W. A. Irwin, came to similar conclusions through different reasoning.<sup>12</sup> Irwin began with a detailed study of Ezekiel 15, deducing from this that there was a discrepancy between the oracle itself and its interpretation which amounted to sheer misunderstanding. The interpretation could not therefore be Ezekiel's work. Applying this principle to the rest of the book he left Ezekiel with about 250 genuine verses, or only one-fifth of the whole book.

Radical as these assessments may be, they appear almost conservative in comparison with the view of C. C. Torrey,<sup>13</sup> who deleted Ezekiel altogether. For him Ezekiel was a fictitious character, invented originally about 230 BC by an author who was attempting a pseudepigraph purporting to be by one of the prophets who preached in Jerusalem during the reign of Manasseh (c. 696–642 BC; cf. 2 Kgs 21:1–17). His reasoning was that 1–24 dealt primarily with Jerusalem and probably had its origin there (we shall find this problem recurring later on), and that the idolatries described in Jerusalem (8:1–18) could not have occurred after Josiah's reforms had taken place in 621 BC. The present form of the book, with its Babylonian setting, was the work of a later, anti-Samaritan editor who reshaped it and added chapters 40–48 as the plan of a new temple which would surpass in splendour that built by the Samaritan sect on Mount Gerizim. James Smith<sup>14</sup> also attributed the ministry of Ezekiel to Manasseh's reign, but regarded him as a historical character whose ministry was exercised partly in Palestine and partly among the exiles of the northern kingdom of Israel (compare Ezekiel's many references to 'the whole house of Israel'). He may

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11. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia übersetzt* (1903).

12. W. A. Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel* (1943).

13. C. C. Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy* (1930).

14. J. S. Smith, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: a New Introduction* (1931).

even have been the priest referred to in 2 Kings 17:28. Like Torrey, Smith postulated a later editor who transformed the book and gave it its Babylonian environment.

Herntrich<sup>15</sup> drew on the work of both these men to give Ezekiel a Palestinian setting for the whole of his prophetic ministry. He did not follow them in referring this back to Manasseh's reign but concentrated it into the years 593–586 BC. A disciple of Ezekiel later clothed his work in Babylonian dress and added chapters 1 and 40–48, as well as other editorial material. Herntrich's work was important and influenced a number of writers,<sup>16</sup> chief of whom was the German, Alfred Bertholet, whose second commentary on Ezekiel<sup>17</sup> incorporated the classic statement of the view that Ezekiel exercised a double ministry. From 593 BC, the date of his call, Ezekiel prophesied in Jerusalem until its fall; he was then taken into captivity and continued his ministry in Babylonia. Fischer<sup>18</sup> modified Bertholet's view to the extent that he believed Ezekiel received his initial call in Babylon, not Jerusalem, which involved too much dislocation of the text, but that his call was to go to the house of Israel and this he did by making the journey to Jerusalem described in 8:3. Among others who subscribe to the view of a double ministry in Palestine and Babylon are Pfeiffer,<sup>19</sup> Wheeler Robinson,<sup>20</sup> Auvray<sup>21</sup> and May.<sup>22</sup>

Against this view G. A. Cooke<sup>23</sup> stood out for the more traditional

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15. V. Herntrich, *Ezechielprobleme* (BZAW, 1932).
  16. Cf. Oesterley and Robinson, *An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament* (1934), p. 325; J. Battersby Harford, *Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* (1935).
  17. A. Bertholet, *Hesekiel* (*Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, 1936). His earlier commentary was published in 1897 as *Das Buch Hesekiel* (*Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament*).
  18. O. R. Fischer, *The Unity of the Book of Ezekiel* (1939) (unpublished).
  19. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1941).
  20. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Two Hebrew Prophets* (1948), pp. 75, 81ff.
  21. P. Auvray, *Ezéchiel* (*Témoins de Dieu*, 1947).
  22. *IB*, p. 52.
  23. Cooke, pp. xxiiif.

interpretation, as provided by the biblical text, of an exclusively Babylonian locale for Ezekiel's ministry, explaining along psychological lines the problems of Ezekiel's acute awareness of events in Jerusalem and, more particularly, the strange account of Pelatiah's death (11:13). For a long while his was a lone voice, but Howie's monograph, published in 1950,<sup>24</sup> returned wholeheartedly to the conclusions that were accepted so widely at the beginning of the century. This was no mere conservatism for its own sake, but the result of a careful examination of the earlier theories which led him to the conclusion that there were fewer difficulties in accepting the traditional view than in postulating extensive editorial alterations of the text. Howie has been followed in broad outline by several post-war commentators, such as Georg Fohrer,<sup>25</sup> Walter Zimmerli,<sup>26</sup> Eichrodt,<sup>27</sup> Muilenburg<sup>28</sup> and Stalker,<sup>29</sup> as well as by writers like Orlinsky,<sup>30</sup> Rowley<sup>31</sup> and Eissfeldt.<sup>32</sup>

Muilenburg expressed his conclusions in the following terms: 'That the book passed through a long and complicated literary history can scarcely be questioned, and that it represents a compilation of traditions of great diversity is apparent. But the weight of evidence seems to fall in favour of a view not greatly unlike that held by scholars of previous generations. The considerable disagreement in the results achieved by recent scholars does not inspire confidence in

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24. C. G. Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel* (JBL Monograph Series IV, 1950).
  25. G. Fohrer, *Ezekiel* (*Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, 1955).
  26. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (*Biblischer Kommentar*, 1955 onwards).
  27. W. Eichrodt, *Der Prophet Hesekiel* (*Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, 1959 and 1966).
  28. Peake, pp. 568f.
  29. D. M. G. Stalker, *Ezekiel* (*Torch Bible Commentaries*, 1968).
  30. In *BAJOR*, CXXII, 1951, pp. 34–36.
  31. Rowley, *Men of God* (1963), pp. 209f.
  32. Eissfeldt, p. 372, comments: 'So far as the period and place of the prophet's activity is concerned, we must be satisfied with the remark that there are no really decisive arguments against the reliability of the tradition which finds expression in many passages in the book.'

their validity. While the presence of expansions and supplements may well be admitted, even here the difficulty is that the passages are so similar in style and content that absolute certainty concerning their secondary character is excluded . . . Our conclusion, then, is that the book as a whole comes from him.<sup>33</sup> This is the standpoint adopted in the present commentary. Attempts to isolate Ezekiel's own work from his editor's have been eschewed as being too uncertain an occupation.<sup>34</sup> The homogeneity of the whole book is such that we are inclined to the view that the prophet could well have been his own editor.

The average reader, however, regards this as a matter of small consequence, and he comes to the book of Ezekiel anxious to understand the message of this book and to hear the word of the Lord speaking to his own generation as it did to the Jews of the sixth century BC.

## 2. Ezekiel the man

Ezekiel was the son of Buzi; he was a priest and probably the son of a priest.<sup>35</sup> He was taken captive in 597 BC, when the armies of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, captured Jerusalem after a brief siege. With the young king Jehoiachin and 'all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths' (2 Kgs 24:14), he was removed from the temple, which was to have been his life, and resettled on the dusty plains of Babylonia. In the fifth year of his exile, i.e. 593 BC, the call of God came to him to exercise a prophetic ministry to the house of Israel. If we are right in thinking that 'the thirtieth year' referred to in 1:1 was the thirtieth year of his age, it follows that Ezekiel was a young

33. Peake, p. 569.

34. Cf. S. Mowinckel, *Prophecy and Tradition* (1946), pp. 84f.

35. The fact that this information is found in 1:2, 3, the passage in the third person singular which may well have been an editorial interpolation, does not in any way invalidate the truth of the statements. If we had not been told that Ezekiel was a priest we should almost certainly have guessed that he was.

man in his mid-twenties when the exile began and this would allow for the considerable period of time over which his ministry extended. The latest date that is given to one of his oracles is the twenty-seventh year of the exile (29:17), and this would take him to the age of 52. Nothing is known of his life apart from what is contained in the book which bears his name, nor is there any tradition to tell us when or how he died. We know that he was married and that his wife died at the time of Jerusalem's fall (24:18). He was a man of influence, being consulted by the elders among the exiles (8:1; 20:1); and although this may be due to his prophetic ministry and the reputation which he quickly acquired, it is just as likely that it is attributable to his social standing derived through his father, Buzi.

Apart from his visionary visit to Jerusalem (8:3 – 11:24), the only location with which Ezekiel is connected is either his house or the plain (or 'the valley'; 3:22f.; 37:1), near to the river Chebar at a place called Tel Abib. The river Chebar has been tentatively identified with the *naru kabari*, or 'great river', referred to in two cuneiform texts from Nippur. It was the name given to an irrigation canal which brought the waters of the Euphrates in a loop south-eastwards from Babylon via Nippur and back to the main river near Uruk (biblical Erech). The modern name for it is Shatt en-Nil. About Tel Abib nothing geographical is known except that it probably represents Akk. *til abûbi* ('mound of the deluge?'). The first word is a common description given to a mound over the remains of a succession of buried cities (cf. Tell el-Amarna, Tell es-Sultan, etc.), and a comparison with Ezra 2:59 (where some of the returning exiles came from places like Tel-melah and Tel-harsha) suggests that the Judean captives may have been allowed to build their exilic communities on old ruined sites of this sort, which to this day are scattered over the plains of Babylonia. Of Ezekiel's house we can deduce that it was made of mud-bricks typical of the locality, and this suggests a tolerably settled way of life for the exiles.<sup>36</sup>

The prophet seems to have had reasonable freedom of movement

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36. The brick mentioned in 4:1 was of this sort, and the action of digging through the wall in 12:5 suggests this kind of building.

to come and go as he wished, and the evidence both of the fugitive's arrival (33:21) and of Jeremiah's correspondence with the exiles (Jer. 29) indicates that theirs was no prison-camp existence. Restrictions there must have been, but community organization (i.e. the existence of elders, 8:1; 20:1), agriculture, worship and instruction, marriage and communication-links with Jerusalem were all permitted them. Almost certainly they were able to visit some of the great cities of the land, chief of which was Babylon with its world-famous hanging gardens, its vast fortifications and the magnificent Ishtar Gate. Ezekiel would have seen the stepped ziggurats, or temple-towers, reminiscent of the tower of Babel, and perhaps he was conscious of their formal similarity with the great stepped altar of Solomon's temple which he incorporated with only slight modification in his own temple of the future (43:13–17; Fig. IV). He would have been made aware of the strange, composite sphinx-like creatures which were depicted everywhere, either as deities or as guardians of the gods, and it is not impossible that the sight of these encouraged his imagination to think in similar terms when describing the visions that he saw, though it must never be forgotten that his priestly training at the Jerusalem temple would have introduced him to the cherubim depicted there. His most striking impression, however, would have been of the combination of excessive idolatry and worldly splendour. The multiplicity of temples, the incredible prosperity of the city, the hive of industry and culture, all this would have made any Hebrew captive feel how small his home country was and how great were the all-conquering gods of Nebuchadrezzar. But once Ezekiel had experienced his vision of the *merkabah*, the chariot-throne of Yahweh, confirming to him that the God of Jerusalem was alive and triumphant even in this heathen, polytheistic land of Babylon, it is not surprising to find that his recurring theme is the majesty of the Lord and his reiterated message is that the house of Israel, the exiles, the nations of the world, even the forces of darkness, should all 'know that I am the Lord'. To judge from the frequency of its use (over fifty times in all), this aim was Ezekiel's consuming passion.

All this presupposes that Ezekiel's ministry took place in Babylon. Against this view the advocates of a partial or total Palestinian ministry for Ezekiel argue that his intimate knowledge of the

idolatries that were being practised in the temple (8:1–18), his apparent confrontation with Pelatiah (11:1–13) and his telepathic awareness of events such as the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (24:2) and its eventual fall (33:22), indicate that it was far more likely that he was there on the spot in Jerusalem for some or all of the time. Further, they would argue that his commission was to the house of Israel, that many of his messages concerned Jerusalem (4:1 – 5:17) and were addressed to the people of Jerusalem and Judah (6:1 – 7:13; 16:3ff.; 21:1–17, etc.), and that it is difficult to contemplate (in Cooke's words) 'a prophet in Babylonia hurling his denunciations at the inhabitants of Jerusalem across 700 miles of desert'.<sup>37</sup> However, no-one has yet insisted that Ezekiel's oracles addressed to the foreign nations should have been delivered on Ammonite territory or in Tyre or Egypt, and there is no need to suppose that his oracles addressed to Jerusalem must therefore have been delivered in the holy city and not in front of the exiles. As Ellison<sup>38</sup> rightly points out, 'Ezekiel was in fact prophesying *of* but not *to* Jerusalem.' Although several years had passed since their deportation had taken place, the exiles still lived for Jerusalem and home. It was the centre of their interests and hopes; every snatch of news that came through to Babylon was treated like a grain of gold-dust. Apart from the duration of their stay in exile, events in Jerusalem were the only supremely relevant factor in their thinking. It would be strange indeed if Ezekiel did not give it the prominence it deserved in his ministry to the exiles.

This still does not resolve the problem of Ezekiel's trancelike visit to Jerusalem. But here we are up against the problem of the ease of communication between Babylon and Jerusalem. It is highly unlikely that Ezekiel would have been allowed to return from exile to Jerusalem, and Bentzen's suggestion<sup>39</sup> that permission may have been granted in order that Ezekiel could be used as the pawn of Babylonian propagandists has little to commend it. If a Palestinian setting for any of Ezekiel's ministry is demanded it is preferable to argue that this should have followed an original call in Palestine and

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37. Cooke, p. xxiii.

38. Ellison, p. 20.

39. Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1948), Vol. II, p. 128.

not in Babylon. But to postulate an original call in Palestine involves considerable dislocation and rearrangement of the text as we have it in chapters 1 – 3. A study of the efforts made by commentators to separate two distinct strands in chapters 1 – 3, one belonging to an original Palestinian call and the other being a later Babylonian recommissioning, will be enough to convince most readers that the ingenuity and emendation that are needed for the task condemn the theory as highly implausible. And Orlinsky pertinently asks: ‘What could Ezekiel (or a redactor) have hoped to gain by shifting the locale of the initial call from Judah (if so it was) to Babylon?’<sup>40</sup> Orlinsky’s question has not been satisfactorily answered, but the exponents of a double ministry argue in reply that their theory provides a better explanation of the problems associated with Ezekiel’s apparently telepathic powers.

It seems, however, to the present writer that those who take this view are trying too hard to reduce Ezekiel to a level of complete normality. Abnormality of some sort was an essential feature of the Old Testament prophet’s charismatic ministry. He was uniquely aware of God, whether from a supernatural, visionary experience which constituted his call or from the inner consciousness of having a message from God implanted in his mind. He was a man for whom the miraculous held no surprises, especially when this was connected with the fulfilment of words that he had spoken under divine constraint. If Ezekiel’s extrasensory powers had operated over-frequently or been switched on to order, we could feel suspicious; but they give the impression of having been rare, memorable and concerned only with events of crucial importance. At the same time we must beware of making too much of these powers, for much of the knowledge Ezekiel shows of the state of affairs in Jerusalem could well have come to him through normal channels of information, particularly as he would have been one of the first to receive confidential news of temple affairs.<sup>41</sup> The real ‘coincidences’ appear to be Pelatiah’s death (11:13) and the start of the siege of Jerusalem (24:2).

40. *BASOR*, CXXXII, 1951, p. 35.

41. Note the use of the phrase ‘came to me’ in 33:21.

The case of Pelatiah is set in the context of Ezekiel's vision in which he felt himself transported to Jerusalem. Still in vision he sees twenty-five elders by the east gate of the temple and he is able to identify two of them, Jaazaniah the son of Azzur and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah. It is reasonable to suppose that these were well-known characters, known by name both to Ezekiel and to the elders of the exiles in whose presence Ezekiel is supposed to have had this vision, and to whom he subsequently described it all (11:25). While Ezekiel prophesies, Pelatiah falls down dead. The text does not stipulate that it was *because of* Ezekiel's word that he died (as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:5, 10), but the coincidence was enough to make Ezekiel shocked and frightened (11:13b). The significance of the event is twofold. First, it is significant that Ezekiel was able to be aware of a striking occurrence which took place hundreds of miles away in Jerusalem at the same time as he was in a trance-like state in Tel Abib. Secondly, when news of this event reached the elders in exile it would have been powerful confirmation of Ezekiel's supernatural powers and would authenticate him and his message in their eyes. The importance of this incident is not therefore to show that Ezekiel had the power to strike a man down with a single word at a range of 700 miles, as some have interpreted it. It was the last thing that Ezekiel wanted or intended to happen. Rather it illustrates his *awareness* of a major event taking place far away and is therefore exactly parallel to the other examples of this same power in relation to the timing of the siege and fall of Jerusalem. To want to deny occasional exhibitions of such power to a prophet of God shows a lack of understanding of the power of God's Spirit in a man, and to deny it to Ezekiel of all people is to attempt to make him other than what he was.

In our judgment it is equally mistaken to try to categorize Ezekiel, especially at this remove, in modern psychological terms. His unusual behaviour and highly imaginative symbolical acts have been accounted for in a number of ways. Stalker comments: 'Ezekiel has been called a cataleptic, a neurotic, a victim of hysteria, a psychopath, and even a definite paranoid schizophrenic, as well as being credited with powers of clairvoyance or levitation.'<sup>42</sup> To transfer his ministry

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42. Stalker, p. 23.

to Jerusalem may remove the stigma from some of these accusations but it does not satisfactorily solve the problem, for as we have seen it raises more problems than it solves. Much of Ezekiel's 'abnormal' behaviour is a matter for interpretation. To begin with, as we have already observed, for a prophet a certain degree of 'abnormality' was normal; he was caught up in ecstasy and frequently reinforced his oracles with dramatic acts (cf. Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, 1 Kgs 22:11; and Jeremiah, Jer. 13:1–14; 19:10–13). Ezekiel was also a priest by training and upbringing, and therefore symbolism on a grand scale was second nature to him, especially a symbolism that combined word and deed. Whatever we may think about the strangeness of some of his actions, about his silent grief on the death of his wife, his dumbness, his long periods of lying on his side, he comes over to us as a supremely controlled personality, in the grip of a passionate zeal for God rather than of some mental illness. 'He is best understood', writes Howie, 'as a sensitive human soul caught in the crosscurrents of history, driven by a burning zeal for God, painfully aware of the tragedy in which his people were involved'.<sup>43</sup> His sensitivity may be judged by the brief description of his feelings for his wife (24:15–18), by his earnest plea that God will spare his people and not destroy them completely (9:8; 11:13), and by the tenderness of his description of God as the Shepherd of his sheep (34:11–16). This balances the harshness of many of his prophecies of judgment and the cold logic that characterizes his insistence that God will act 'not for your sake ... but for the sake of my holy name' (36:22).

For Ezekiel everything had a meaning. The actions he performed, the words he used, all were directed towards an end. His dumbness is typical of his personality. It could not have been a literal dumbness, or we should have to displace all the oracles that were attributed to him before 33:22. Certainly the editor of the finished work did not mean us to interpret his dumbness in this way. The only alternative is that this was a 'ritual dumbness', an imposed and willingly accepted proscription of any speech unless it was a pronouncement given him from the Lord. Understood like this, it can be seen how much

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43. Howie, p. 15.

additional regard would have been given to his symbolic actions and the oracles that accompanied them. His visions were classic examples of this symbolical sense. The inaugural vision of the chariot-throne held meaning in every line; much of it is lost on us today but the broad outline can nevertheless be still discerned. It attempted to describe the indescribable and to say in the language of spiritual experience something about the character of the God it represented. The vision of the new temple, on the other hand, used priestly symbolism to say what this God required of his worshippers. It is bound up with concepts of holiness and the demand for order and perfection, reverence and symmetry.

As a writer Ezekiel is often ponderous and repetitive.<sup>44</sup> A limited number of phrases and themes recur frequently and this can be daunting for modern readers who are not acquainted with the conventions of ancient writing. Occasionally he uses poetry, but for the most part he writes in prose; not a colourful, descriptive prose, but a sombre, prophetic prose with a cadence but no discernible metre. When he recites a poem it is frequently an elegy or lamentation (Heb. *qînâ*; see note on 19:1), a poem set in the mournful 3:2 rhythm. Sometimes he picks up a snatch of a song, like the song of the sword (21:9, 10) or the song of the cooking-pot (24:3–5), and he interprets them in his own way. He shows a vivid imagination in his lament over the kings of Israel (19:1–14) and in his description of the sinking of the good ship Tyre (27:3–9, 25–36), as well as in the vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1–10), but on other occasions he shows a remarkable lack of imagination. The one thing he does not lack is a passionate intensity – towards God,

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44. Examples of phrases frequently used by Ezekiel in a variety of forms are: ‘they (you) shall know that I am the Lord’ (66 times); ‘I will vindicate the holiness of my great name’ (8 times); ‘I (the Lord) have spoken (and I will do it)’ (49 times); ‘as I live, says the Lord’ (15 times); ‘I will scatter you among the nations and disperse you through the countries’ (9 times); ‘I will gather you out of the countries ...’ (10 times); ‘I will pour out my wrath (satisfy my fury) upon you’ (16 times); ‘the word of the Lord came to me’ (49 times); ‘because ... therefore ...’ (37 times).

towards his message and towards his hearers. Everything was subordinated to his almost overwhelming sense of obligation and responsibility. He was a watchman, and if he failed to warn the people, their blood would be upon him. To this end he was prepared to listen to the prevailing mood among the exiles and to answer their objections. He took up popular proverbs (11:3; 12:22, 27; 18:2) and showed they had no validity. He answered the unexpressed bewilderment that was in men's hearts (18:19, 25; 20:32). In short, he combined in a unique way the priest's sense of the holiness of God, the prophet's sense of the message that had been entrusted to him, and the pastor's sense of responsibility for his people.

### 3. Historical background

The early period of Ezekiel's life saw the ending of the dominance of the Assyrian Empire, a brief interim spell of Egyptian influence in Judah's affairs and then the growing control of Babylonian kings over Near Eastern politics. The kings of Judah under whom he lived were:

Josiah	640–609 BC
Jehoahaz	609 BC
Jehoiakim	609–597 BC
Jehoiachin	597 BC
Zedekiah	597–587 BC

Josiah's extensive programme of temple repairs and religious reformation is well known to every reader of the Old Testament (2 Kgs 22:1 – 23:30; 2 Chr. 34; 35). His reign was a watershed in Judah's spiritual development. Although his reforms were based on the finding of the book of the law during the reconstruction work on the temple (almost certainly this was Deuteronomy in whole or in part), his freedom to carry them through was partly due to political considerations. In the Ancient Near East vassalage frequently involved the inferior partner in an obligation to accept the worship of the overlord's gods, as well as the payment of tribute or other dues. Thus the cult of astral deities or the setting up of idols by earlier kings of Judah was often a mark of submission to Assyrian