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THE

# Bible

STUDENT

THE ENTRANCE OF *THY WORD* GIVETH LIGHT

New Series  
Vol. XXIII. No. 4

OCTOBER  
1952

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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

# THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL<sup>1</sup>

By H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D.

EZEKIEL—for some the framer of choice problems, whether it be the chariot-throne of God, the *merkabah*, or the blue-prints of a temple yet to be; for others a foreteller hard to interpret; for yet others the giver of a few of the choicest promises in the Old Testament; for the vast majority an enigma, with the bulk of his writings unstudied and unappreciated. There are two adequate reasons for this.

First there is the man himself. In any society and at any time he would have been regarded as abnormal. Then he is bound to the circumstances of his own time as virtually no other prophet. He is the only prophet—apart from Haggai and Zechariah 1-8, who may well have been influenced by him—who carefully dates *all* the sections of his prophecy. This is not just because Ezekiel had a tidy mind, but because his prophecies cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of their historical background. The same is true of Haggai and Zechariah 1-8. It will be found elsewhere in the prophets that a date is normally an invitation to the prior study of the historical circumstances out of which the prophecy came. I am suggesting not that the prophecy cannot be understood without such a study, but that it cannot be *fully* understood.

## The Historical Background

When Josiah came to the throne in 639 B.C.,<sup>2</sup> Judah was firmly in the grip of Assyria, but already as Ashurbanipal's long

<sup>1</sup> This first article of a series on the Prophecy of Ezekiel serves to introduce to our readers Mr H. L. Ellison, who is Tutor for Old Testament Studies at the London Bible College, well known therefore to a wide circle of students and others. His book, *Men Sent from God* (The Paternoster Press), has already had a wide circulation, and other volumes are contemplated. What is particularly of immediate interest to our readers is that Mr Ellison is also kindly giving us a series of articles on *Biblical Hebrew Words*, which will start with the January issue, 1953. (It will be recalled by older readers that the late Mr W. E. Vine gave us a long series on the study of *Greek words*, which subsequently were enlarged to form the four substantial volumes now published by Oliphants, Ltd., and still selling well.)

Readers will find added pleasure in their own studies by telling others about these and other good things provided in *The Bible Student!*

<sup>2</sup> Dates are given for convenience. There is no guarantee of absolute accuracy.

reign drew to its close a new hope of freedom began to blossom. With his death (c. 626 B.C.) Assyria's power rapidly crumbled. Josiah's reformation, which reached its height in 621 B.C., was as much political as religious, an outward sign of the throwing off of the Assyrian yoke. Josiah was able to extend his power through Mount Ephraim and the Plain of Esdraelon into Eastern Galilee (2 Ch. 34:6). Jeremiah saw early that the reformation was spiritually a failure—see Jer. 5, a chapter that on internal evidence must be dated soon after 621 B.C. The collapse of the enlarged kingdom after Josiah's death at Megiddo in 609 B.C. showed that the political dreams were equally vain. For a time Jehoiakim was a vassal of Egypt, but after Nebuchadnezzar's great victory over Pharaoh, Necho at Carchemish in 605 B.C. all the lands down to the frontier of Egypt submitted at once to him.

Jehoiachim, in spite of his insignificance, dreamt his dreams of greatness (Jer. 21:13-19); he willingly lent his ear to the suggestions of Egypt and rebelled (2 Kings 24:1). He met an obscure and ignoble end, and Jehoiachin, his son, made haste to surrender (2 Kings 24:8-12) as soon as Nebuchadnezzar had invested Jerusalem (597 B.C.). The Babylonian king decided that drastic steps were needed. He never formally deposed Jehoiachin—we gather this from official ration documents discovered on the site of Babylon; note also that Ezekiel dates by the years of Jehoiachin's captivity (1:2, etc.) and see 2 Kings 25:27-30—but took him away to Babylon, leaving his uncle Zedekiah to rule as a sort of king-regent in his place. With him he took most of the influential people (2 Kings 24:14). The intention was to leave the people virtually leaderless looking to Babylon, where their rightful king was.

At first a spirit of optimism will have prevailed among many of the captives. Hananiah was prophesying in Jerusalem that they would return with the temple vessels in two years' time (Jer. 28). In Babylonia itself there were 'prophets' among the captives who, though perhaps not so precise, were foretelling a speedy return (Jer. 29:8). Jeremiah's letter (Jer. 29), and the death of Hananiah (Jer. 28:15-17), and of Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer. 29:21-23), as prophesied by Jeremiah, destroyed any hopes of a speedy return.

#### **Ezekiel's Background**

Ezekiel came of a priestly family (1:3). We know nothing of his father Buzi, but we have every reason for thinking that

he belonged to the more influential circles of the priesthood. This is suggested partly by the respect shown to Ezekiel by the elders of the people in exile (8:1; 14:1; 20:1), but even more by the fact that Ezekiel though young was included among the captives.

The dating in Ezekiel is throughout in the years of Jehoiachin's captivity, i.e. beginning from 597 B.C., except the mention of the 30th year in 1:1. Every type of explanation for this date has been attempted, but the only one that would seem to hold water is that it means Ezekiel's 30th year.

Strangely enough neither in the Old Testament nor in the traditions of the Jews as preserved in the Talmud and other Rabbinic writings have we any indication of the age at which a priest began his service. This may be due to the necessity of exceptionally early service, if the high priest, or some other in special office, died comparatively young. Note in this connection that as no descendants of Nadab and Abihu are ever mentioned, it may be that they were quite young at the time of their sudden death (Lev. 10:1, 2). There is, however, an intrinsic probability that the normal age for entering on priestly service was thirty as with the Levites (Num. 4:3).<sup>\*</sup> This may be the explanation of the age of our Lord at His baptism.

If this is correct, Ezekiel will never have functioned as priest in the temple at Jerusalem. It was, however, expected of the priest that he should be meticulously accurate in every detail of the traditional ritual, so a long period of preparation was necessary for the young men of priestly family. No very close reading of his writings is called for to show us that Ezekiel was steeped in the traditions of the priesthood. If he was a young man of 25, when he was taken off by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C., he may well have been preparing for his anticipated life-work for at least five years. For few of the captives can deportation have been a greater blow, for it seemed to mean the ending of all real purpose in life.

It should be easy to picture his distress as his thirtieth birthday drew near, and he thought of the temple far to the west, where

<sup>\*</sup> This is not the place to deal with the apparent discrepancies between Num. 4:3; Num. 8:24 and 1 Chron. 23:24. 1 Chron. 23:3 shows that the law of Num. 4:3 was still in force in David's time, nor could he have changed it. The younger ages were probably for initiatory and more menial service.

if Jeremiah's words were true, he would never have the privilege of serving.

#### **Ezekiel and Symbolism**

It is necessary to stress Ezekiel's priestly background and training, for they explain that element in his prophecies that the modern Christian finds hardest to understand, an element that may even repel him.

Symbolism is familiar to Christians from the Tabernacle and its sacrifices, and from the Christian sacraments. In its religious sense symbolism means that a building, a dress, action, form of words, or whatever is involved have a deeper spiritual meaning than a merely literal interpretation would suggest. If that meaning is prophetic of our Lord, we normally speak of a type rather than a symbol.

Since a spiritual truth is never completely expressible in words, symbolism probably plays some part, consciously or unconsciously, in the life of every Christian. On the whole, however, in modern urban Protestantism it has little importance in public worship. Though we are intellectually aware that very much in the Bible is symbolic, we do not allow our life or worship to be deeply influenced by it. This may be a sign of spiritual maturity, or perhaps the reverse, but it does make it very difficult for us to understand a man like Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's training for the priesthood had familiarized him with every aspect of symbolism. In addition it is clear that he was a man for whom this method of expressing religious truth had a peculiar and special value. In our indifference to symbolism we often overlook the fact that there are some for whom it is indispensable, if they are to reach full communion with God. For such Ezekiel has a far deeper appeal than the other prophets of the Old Testament. Conversely those to whom symbolism means little will never find their favourite reading here. Since, however, God was well pleased to reveal Himself through this man, it is our duty to try and penetrate through the veil of symbolism to the truths underlying it. It may even be that as we make the effort we shall learn a deeper respect for this method of expressing the truth.

It is vital to remember this side of Ezekiel, as we read his prophecies, for we shall see that much in them which if taken literally seems difficult or offensive takes on a new meaning if interpreted as predominantly symbolic.

**The Throne of God (1:4-28)**

In the height of the summer of 592 B.C. Ezekiel was transported in a trance (3:12, 14) to the banks of the 'river' Chebar, one of the main irrigation canals south of Babylon. Tel-abib (3:15), his home, was in the immediate vicinity of the canal. He saw a great storm cloud coming towards him from the north (1:4). As it drew nearer he saw that it was the chariot-throne of Jehovah borne by four cherubim.

Why did the throne come from the north? The glory of Jehovah dwelt in Jerusalem (chs. 8-11), and the vision of its forsaking of the Temple had not yet been given. Jerusalem lay almost due west, and there was no need for God to take the long way round by Carchemish that the captives had had to follow. The desert was no obstacle to Him. One reason was doubtless to impress on the prophet to be that the shame and ignominy of the captives was not hidden from their God. He was willing to go the way that they had gone. More important than this was the Babylonian belief that their gods lived in the far north (Is. 14:13). If the chariot-throne came from the north it meant that whatever gods might live there had been vanquished on the way. This is not to attribute to Ezekiel any real belief in these gods, but it was the sign that there was no power in heaven or on earth that could stay Jehovah on His triumphant way.

The bearers of the throne are the cherubim. It is frequently claimed by scholars that Ezekiel's description of them resembles the winged figures so often found as the guardians of Mesopotamian temples. I am far from convinced that this is so, but if they are correct, it simply means that not only has Jehovah defeated the gods of Babylon on their own ground, but He has also carried off their servants to be His slaves.

The cherubim, as an order of heavenly beings, are often mentioned in the Bible, but little is told us as to their functions. The differences in the description here and in Rev. 4 show us that in both cases we are dealing with a purely symbolic picture which need have no approximation to the reality. We cannot even assume that they were represented in approximately the same form on the mercy seat and in Solomon's temple. Note that in 41:18, 19, possibly for ease in reproduction, the cherubim have only two faces. This supports the suggestion that we are dealing with symbolic representation of heavenly beings.

Their appearance and their number, which again may well be symbolic, suggest that they are peculiarly the heavenly representatives of the earth. Modern man is strongly influenced by size, and even the Christian is inclined to depreciate the importance of the earth, a mere speck in the vast distances of space. This is especially the case if he is influenced by the old Greek dislike and suspicion of the material. But for the Old Testament this earth is the crown of God's creation and the especial revelation of His glory. So it is only fitting that His chariot-throne should be borne by beings who are particularly linked with God's creative and redemptive power here on earth.

It is doubtful whether much is to be gained by an attempt to puzzle out the details of the throne. The old rabbis declared that if anyone knew the secrets of the *merkabah*, he would know all the secrets of creation. This strongly suggests that the difficulties of the passage have little or nothing to do with the inadequacies of the English translation, but are due to Ezekiel's inability to describe what he saw with his spiritual eyes.

Many of the details yield up their meaning easily. Both the cherubim (1:9) and the wheels (1:17) need not to turn round; they can go at once without delay in whatever direction 'the spirit was to go' (1:12), and that with utmost speed (1:14); all together give a picture that no servant of God needs to have explained. The eyes (1:18) speak both of the all-knowledge of God, but also that when God takes matter into His service, it is lifted to a new plane of being and value. Fire (1:13, see R.V. mg. for correct rendering, and cf. 10:6) with all its symbolic meaning is one of the commonest accompaniments of a theophany.

If anything the vision of God (1:26-28) is even more symbolic than what has preceded. Above the chariot is a 'likeness of a throne' (1:26), its colour reminiscent of the blue vault of heaven, and round it is the glory of the covenant rainbow (1:28). The dimly seen figure is a combination of fire and glory. Since God made man in His own image, He deigns, when He appears to man in symbolic form, to appear to him in 'a likeness as the appearance of a man'.

(to be continued)