

CHAPTER I

THE MAN AND HIS TIMES

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 (ch. 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, ch. 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 a 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 640 B.C., Judah was firmly in the grip of Assyria, but already as Ashurbanipal's long reign drew to its close a new hope of freedom began to blossom. With his death (633 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 (II Chron 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. (II Kings 23: 29f.) 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.

Jehoiakim, in spite of his insignificance, dreamt his dreams of greatness (Jer. 22: 13-19; the building of a new palace was symbolic of a new beginning); he willingly lent his ear to the suggestions of Egypt and rebelled (II Kings 24: 1). He met an obscure and ignoble end, and Jehoiachin, his son, made haste to surrender (II 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 II 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 (II Kings 24: 14). The intention was to leave the people virtually leaderless, looking to Babylon, where their rightful king was, but he had not allowed for Zedekiah's weakness or the fanaticism of many of those who remained in Jerusalem.

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. Jewish

tradition is of no help here; the suggestion that it refers to Ezekiel's age seems to have been first made by the Church-Father Origen (†253). Many of the suggestions by modern scholars assume a corruption of the text.

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 connexion 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).¹ 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 twenty-five 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 before. For few of the captives can deportation have been a greater blow, for it seemed to mean the end 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, 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,

¹ This is not the place to deal with the apparent discrepancies between Num. 4: 3; Num. 8: 24 and I Chron. 23: 24. I 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.

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 EXILES IN BABYLONIA

We should not think of the exiles to whom Ezekiel prophesied as normal prisoners of war. Prisoners of war there were, many in 597 B.C., more after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. These were slaves, whose fate depended on the whim of their captor or purchaser. The approximately ten thousand deportees (to whom we must probably add dependants) who were taken with Jehoiachin into exile were rather unreliable subjects of Nebuchadnezzar whom he had decided to move to another part of his dominions, where they could not get up to mischief.

A very few like Jehoiachin and his family were in company with other kinglets and princelings from subject territories, the

"guests" of Nebuchadnezzar in or near Babylon itself. Though we cannot be sure, Jehoiachin's imprisonment was probably a precautionary measure when Zedekiah's rebellion broke out, though it may refer to his position from the first.

"The craftsmen and the smiths" (II Kings 24: 14) were for the most part held as a mobile labour force for work of national importance. We do not know enough of the conditions in Nebuchadnezzar's time to be able to say whether their skill was able to restrain their overseers' brutality.

From Jeremiah's letter (Jer. 29: 4-20) and from the general picture in Ezekiel it seems clear enough that the remainder of the exiles were settled in various centres in Babylonia with a great deal of freedom to live their lives as they wished. Probably the only important restriction placed on them was that they could not move to other centres, and it is questionable how far any of Nebuchadnezzar's subjects had unlimited freedom of movement. Our feeling that no effort was made to destroy their national existence is supported by the threefold reference to the elders of Judah in *Ezekiel* and by the general picture of the returning exiles given us in *Ezra*. In other words for the majority of those deported exile is a better word than captive.

TO WHOM DID EZEKIEL PROPHECY?

This study takes for granted that Ezekiel's prophetic activity was confined to the exiles, and that there is no evidence that he ever moved far from Tel-Abib. This has, however, been very strongly challenged in recent years. Many, including a few conservatives, maintain that ch. 4-24, either in whole or in major part, were spoken in Jerusalem, not in Babylonia, and that it is only from ch. 33 onwards that we have Ezekiel's prophecies to the exiles.¹

The main reason for this view is superficially a valid one. If we except the prophecies against the nations, which in most cases were probably not communicated, except perhaps indirectly, to the nations concerned, we have no evidence for prophecy *about* persons rather than *to* them. There are cases where the prophetic message had to be sent by letter, e.g. II Chron. 21:12 15; Jer. 29; but there is no evidence that the message was first given orally to others. It is therefore at first sight strange enough that Ezekiel should act and speak a whole series of denunciations against Jerusalem to the exiles in Tel-Abib.

¹ The most plausible expression of this view may be found in Pfeiffer: *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 535-541. It seems unnecessary to mention some of the more extreme modern views on the book.

It should be noted that there is no suggestion that the prophecies were to be written down and sent to Jerusalem. The time needed speaks against it. It took six months for certain news of the destruction of Jerusalem to reach Tel-Abib (33: 21—see p. 118). Ezra under the most favourable conditions ("according to the good hand of his God upon him"), needed three and a half months for the journey (Ezra 7: 9; 8: 31). The length of Nehemiah's journey is not given, but the indications are again that it will have lasted about the same time as Ezra's, even though he had a royal escort and special papers.

Further, if Ezekiel had indeed sent his prophecies to Jerusalem, it seems strange that he did not seek to strengthen the hands of lonely old Jeremiah there, or again that Jeremiah does not even suggest that any such supporting prophecies ever arrived from the far-distant exiles.

The ICC, holding the usual view that Ezekiel remained in Babylonia, states (p. xxiii), "No doubt we find it difficult to adjust ourselves to the position of a prophet in Babylonia hurling his denunciations at the inhabitants of Jerusalem across 700 miles of desert." I agree; it is not only difficult, but also rather absurd.

When we examine the other arguments in favour of Ezekiel's having prophesied in Jerusalem, we find them either very weak, or quite capable of another explanation. Against the view is above all that, as generally propounded, it involves alterations in the order of the text, and makes Ezekiel a very clumsy writer who has led generations of readers to false conclusions.

There is, however, an entirely satisfactory explanation of the difficulty. Ezekiel was in fact prophesying *of* but not *to* Jerusalem. As Jer. 24 shows us, when Jehoiachin and his companions were led away captive, those left in Jerusalem put it down to the peculiar sinfulness of the exiles. These probably looked on it in the same light. The message of Jeremiah that the exile was an act of grace on the part of God, and that the real sinners had been left in Jerusalem for dire punishment, was one that was hard to accept both in Jerusalem and in Babylonia. Until the exiles grasped that God had really brought them into exile that He might make them the beginnings of a renewed people, Ezekiel could not begin his task of preparing them for the future. So during the last dark years of Jerusalem, before Nebuchadnezzar executed God's punishment to the full on the city, Ezekiel had to explain to the exiles the inner meaning of the agony that was going on in their fatherland. His message was not for those that were left in the city, because, as Jeremiah had to say, there was no hope left for

them. But such was the effect of Ezekiel's work, that when temple and city went to the ground, and the end of Judah seemed to have come for all time, some at least of the exiles were willing to listen to Ezekiel and learn of him as he prepared a new generation for the return that God had promised when the seventy years had run their course.

In God's inspired record not merely the blessings of the righteous but also the fate of the sinner are recorded that we may learn both from the one and the other.