

Preface

MY FASCINATION WITH EZEKIEL began in 1978, when it dawned on me that Ezekiel was the only prophet to fulfill his ministry entirely in a foreign land. I began to ask how his environment might have colored his ministry and the book that preserves his work. I discovered that links and influences are everywhere: in his geographic references, the *akkadianisms* and *aramaisms* in his vocabulary, his iconographic images, and his conceptual framework. This is just one of many reasons why the book is both so fascinating and such a riddle. As Christian interpreters of the Hebrew Bible we must always ask at least three questions: (1) What does the text say [the text-critical question]? (2) What did the text mean to the original audience [the hermeneutical question]? (3) What does the text mean to me [the theological and practical question]? However, there is a fourth that is especially important when reading Ezekiel: (4) Why does the text say it like that [the generic and cultural question]? Without reference to the world in which Ezekiel lived many features in the book remain enigmatic and unclear, if not confusing and meaningless.

At first the riddle of Ezekiel was a personal and private matter. A telephone call from R. K. Harrison in Toronto in 1982 changed all that. When he asked if I would be interested in producing a commentary on this book for the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series (Eerdmans), I thought foolishly that it might take me four or five years. Little did I realize what a challenge and delight this project would be. After living with this prophetic priest for fifteen years I sometimes felt like I knew the man personally; at other times he left me totally bewildered by his utterances, if not angry over his portrayal of God.

All that is known of Ezekiel derives from his book. He was a son of Buzi (1:3), taken captive to Babylon in 597 BCE, along with King Jehoiachin and 10,000 others, including political and military leaders and skilled craftsmen (2 Kgs 24:14–16). As noted above, Ezekiel was the only

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Israelite prophet to carry out his ministry entirely outside Israel's homeland. He received his call five years after he was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. This tragedy, foreseen by the Prophet Isaiah more than one hundred years earlier (2 Kgs 20:16–18), represented the culmination of a series of historical events. After the horrendous apostasies of Manasseh, the godly king Josiah (640–609 BCE) attempted sweeping religious reforms (2 Kgs 23:1–25), but it was too little and too late. The doom of the nation had already been determined. According to the Hebrew historians, Josiah's successors were all wicked. His son, Jehoahaz, ruled only three years before the Egyptians deposed him and replaced him with his brother Jehoiakim (609–598 BCE). Babylon replaced Egypt as the dominant political force in the ancient Near East after the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. Under Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian army marched as far south as Jerusalem, claiming Judah as his vassal. At this time Daniel and his three friends were taken to Babylon apparently as hostages, but from the divine perspective in order that they might prepare the way for the arrival of masses of Judeans in 597. Because Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon in that same year, Nebuchadnezzar removed him from the throne and replaced him with his son Jehoiachin, but he too resisted the Babylonians, and Nebuchadnezzar deported him and all the upper classes (including Ezekiel) to Babylon and put his uncle Zedekiah on the throne. Remarkably, Zedekiah also resisted Nebuchadnezzar's authority. Finally, in 587 BCE Nebuchadnezzar's armies besieged Jerusalem, and the city fell in 586 BCE.

Ezekiel lived in his own house near the River Chebar, an irrigation canal that channeled the Euphrates River into surrounding arid areas. He was married and ministered from his own home (3:24; 8:1; 33:30–33). His wife died suddenly (24:18), but he was not allowed to mourn his loss. But we know Ezekiel primarily as a prophet who received oracles from God and passed them on to the people (cf. 2:5; 33:33). However, his obvious priestly interests give good reason to interpret him primarily as a priest who also functioned as a prophet. YHWH's call to him came in his thirteenth year (1:1), the age priests normally were inducted into office (Num 4:30). In Jerusalem, he would have inherited the priestly office and prepared for it by traditional means. However, in exile the call came dramatically and directly from God. In a vision he was called into divine service and ushered into the presence of God. In autobiographical notes Ezekiel described his reactions to events with priestly sensitivities, especially to issues involving cleanness and uncleanness (4:14). Some of the actions God

assigned to him were appropriate only for a priest: “bearing the iniquity” of the people (4:4–6) and not mourning the death of his wife (24:15–27; cf. Lev 21:4–5). This is especially true of temple visions in which YHWH himself took Ezekiel into the temple and guided him throughout the building (chs. 8–11; 40–43). In both visions Ezekiel’s legitimate presence in the temple is contrasted with the illegitimate presence of others (8:7–18; 44:1–14). In his preaching and teaching Ezekiel fulfilled the role of a priest charged with the responsibility of teaching the Torah in Israel (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10a). Ezekiel delivered oracles received from God, permeated by Mosaic theology and forms. Priestly ministry is associated with sacrifices and other tabernacle/temple rituals (cf. Deut 33:10b). But removed from Jerusalem, Ezekiel could not carry out temple duties. The primary priestly function left was teaching. Ezekiel presents a model of the priest as teacher of the Torah.

This is not to deny him prophetic status or prophetic functions. Normally priests engaged in prophetic ministry through the Urim and Thummim (Num 27:21). However, denied official priestly vestments, Ezekiel could not use these objects. As a prophetic priest he received messages directly and verbally from God. Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel initially resisted God’s call. This accounts for the nature of the opening vision, the intent of which was to overwhelm him and break his resistance (1:1–28a); for YHWH’s warning to him not to be rebellious (2:8); for Ezekiel’s deep emotional disturbance at his call (3:15); for the harshness of YHWH’s warning not to fail as a watchman (3:16–21); and for the severe restrictions of his call (3:22–27). Once he accepted the call, he proclaimed God’s messages fearlessly. Because he displayed many bizarre actions, some have characterized Ezekiel as neurotic, paranoid, psychotic, or schizophrenic. However, his unusual behavior derives from his utter obedience to God. Ezekiel was gripped by the Spirit of God, had a profoundly theological perspective on contemporary historical events, and exhibited an unflinching determination to deliver the messages just as God gave them.

The present volume reflects my longstanding interest in Ezekiel, the man and his book. This collection is arranged as follows: a general essay on preaching the message of Ezekiel; a synthetic essay on the theology of the book; a series on more specific theological topics, and two literary studies focused on specific texts that frame the first half of the book (chs. 1 and 24). Additional essays dealing mostly with the second half of the book are available in the companion volume, *Beyond the River Chebar: Studies in Kingship and Eschatology in Ezekiel*.