

THE MUTE ORACLE

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THE BOOK of Ezechiel in the Old Testament is difficult to understand, and for that reason not what we would ordinarily choose for devotional reading. The multiplicity of types and allegories tends to draw our minds down the labyrinthine ways of confusion until we are lost in an allegorical maze. Still, with a knowledge of his life and times, an understanding of the spiritual message of Ezechial is attainable.

Ezechiel is one of the four major prophets of the Old Testament. The prophets were God's oracles—His mouthpieces to man—especially the Jews of pre-Christian history. Two types of prophets are mentioned in the Old Testament: the prophets associated with a school—the professional prophets—and the prophets by divine Vocation. The prophets of the school, like religious today, lived a community life. (1 Kings 10, 5) They were dedicated to personal observance of the Law and to directing the religious fervor of their fellow Jews. These professional prophets, however, did not have a direct divine mission. In those centuries before Christ the people lacked an infallible teaching authority such as we find today in our Holy Mother the Church. So God, to make his will known, raised up the prophets by vocation that they might speak His will to the Chosen People.

The office of oracle of the Divine was reserved to a few chosen men, spiritual giants of the Old Covenant, who like many of the saints had a special vocation for preaching and teaching. Ezechiel was one of these chosen few who received direct inspiration from God to preach His word.

THE STAGE

Ezechiel exercised his office at a most difficult time in the long, sad history of the Jewish people. He lived and prophesied in the desolate years of the Babylonian Exile. Religiously speaking the Jewish People had plunged into the chasm of idolatry. Because of political subjection to a series of polytheistic conquerors Jerusalem, the Holy City, had been drawn to offer sacrifice to vain deities in the figures of animals. The individual Jew, estranged from the services of Yahweh, the one true God,

was spending an empty spiritual life of presumption or indifference. In the political field, Ezechiel prophesied during a time of national destruction. The northern Jewish kingdom in Samaria had fallen in 722 B.C. Now was the time of doom for the kingdom of Juda in the south.

Babylonia had risen as the terrifying successor to the Jews' old enemy, the Assyrian Empire. In the year 606 B.C. the Babylonian mobs stormed down from Chaldea, under the ingenious command of Nabuchodonosor, a relatively good and just king, considering those cruel times. After this first invasion a small group of Jews—among them Daniel the Prophet—was sent captive to Babylon. The year 602 saw a second Babylonian attack, precipitated by the independent Joakim, king of Juda. The best of Jewish society, including Ezechiel the priest, was deported in chains to Babylon, leaving behind an idolatrous, doomed remnant of relatives and friends in the holy city.

Religiously degenerate and politically captives then, the exiled Jews were not receptive subjects of Ezechiel's message. Those left at home were even less so. The exiles, although the social and intellectual flower of Israel, were bitter at the enforced separation from home and friends. Some had their hearts set on a speedy return to the homeland and resumption of their cruelly interrupted lives. Personal guilt was an unknown concept to them; their blind hearts could not see the hands of Yahweh wielding a pruning sword upon their lives. In this milieu Ezechiel spoke God's message to the exiled Jews—and to us.

THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY

To understand the prophetic doctrines of Ezechiel we must begin by accepting the credentials he offers us. Ezechiel was standing upon the banks of the canal Chobar, a little south of the city of Babylon, when he was privileged with a sight lavished upon few human beings. He "saw the visions of God." (1, 1) Overwhelmed by the sight, like St. John in the Apocalypse, (Apoc. 1) Ezechiel fell on his face in reverence and fear. Then the spirit of God raised him up and spoke to him: "Son of man, I send thee to the Children of Israel. And they to whom I send thee are children of a hard face and of an obstinate heart: and thou shalt say to them: Thus saith the Lord God." (2, 3-4)

Ezechiel then is not a professional prophet, but his commission has come directly from God. The Catholic accepts this on

faith; the unbeliever accepts it if at all, as an historical fact. And if a persuasive argument is sought, it may be said that only a divinely inspired man could exhibit Ezechiel's tenacity and fidelity in such an unpopular office. Our poor minds look with awe at the stature belonging to the office of prophet.

Having shown his credentials, Ezechiel tells us that God gave him something to say. "And I looked, and behold a hand was sent to me, wherein was a book rolled up. And he spread it before me. And it was written within and without: and there were written in it lamentations and canticles and woe." (2, 9) Ezechiel makes God's message his own when he eats the book, that is, a scroll. Yahweh then places on his shoulders a heavy burden: Ezechiel is to be a "watchman to the house of Israel;" (3, 17) he is accountable before God for every soul of the captivity. It is interesting to note that at no time during these first three chapters narrating the reception of the office does Ezechiel speak. God appointed him and there was to be no argument. These opening chapters represent an integral part of the prophecies: the Prophet has been called by God, received his inspiration and his message to speak, and expressed his consent by eating the scroll.

THE MUTE ORACLE

Ezechiel begins his prophetic mission in the fifth year of his captivity. He labors, however, under a difficulty that dictates a strange procedure: his tongue is bound (3, 26), and so to fulfill his office of preaching to the worldly-wise Jews of the captivity, Ezechiel begins to *pantomime* the destruction of their beloved Jerusalem; he must preach the unpopular news of God's displeasure and justice not by word, but in dumb show.

At this point we are inclined to shut the book in despair, for symbolism is spread to seemingly fantastic lengths. Yet, despite his mute writhings, Ezechiel has but one thought to stamp on the blind hearts of his bearers: the wrath of God has doomed Jerusalem; her inhabitants shall be scattered and killed. This theme is portrayed, by a severe fast undertaken by the prophet and by the cutting of his hair and beard, and it is revealed to him in a remarkable vision of avenging angels slaughtering the inhabitants of the city. (chapters 4-10) Each is a frightful prophecy of the same reality—Yahweh's justice upon a sinful people.

Exposed as he was to the contempt and derision of the oriental mob, great humility was required of Ezechiel in performing

these two actions, symbolic of coming destruction. Ezechiel pantomimed the siege of Jerusalem, the hunger of her people, and her destruction. But by most he was not understood, and those who understood did not believe; so he was completely ignored. The incredulous Jews must have laughed at the concept of a destroyed city and the ignorant must have laughed at the mute "fool" who strove to prepare them for imminent tragedy.

Through thirty-two chapters of the book Ezechiel acts out his story of sorrow and tragedy. His prophecy was not believed even at the very moment in 587 B.C. when Nabuchodonosor was slaughtering the people of Jerusalem. Still Ezechiel persists in prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, and this time the city is symbolized by a scorched, charred cooking pot from which not even fire can clean the rust (ch. 24). A terrible picture of corruption is drawn, signifying the utter ruin of all that they hold sacred.

SORROW UPON SORROW

The prophets own sorrow is compounded when his young wife dies on the day of Jerusalem's fall. Yahweh speaks to him: "Son of man, behold I take from thee the desire of thy eyes with a stroke." (24, 16). This personal loss is added to the sad duty of telling the Jews how they must mourn for the fall of the Holy City, Jerusalem. "And thou shalt not lament nor weep: neither shall thy tears run down. Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead." (24, 16-17) Ezechiel was hurt terribly by this double blow. The desire of his eyes was taken from him, and the beloved city of the chosen people was taken from them. A heavy sadness, without relieving tears, weighed upon the souls of all.

Nabuchodonosor vindicated Ezechiel in the destruction of Jerusalem. But we may safely say that Ezechiel would have happily forgone vindication. The city fell after a long siege, being literally destroyed. The temple itself was torn down and the outer walls of the City were leveled, leaving it defenseless to those who escaped the wrath of God at Babylonian hands—and these were very few.

Several months after the fall of Jerusalem, the news reached Ezechiel and the exiles by the mouth of a bedraggled fugitive. (24, 26-27) At the appearance of this messenger the prophet opens his mouth and begins to speak a new message—God's message of mercy. He takes on the role of comforter to the saddened Jews. Destruction is still his prophecy, but not against the Jews.

Rather he foretells the revenge of God upon those who delighted in Jerusalem's fall—the Ammonites, Edomites, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt (chapters 25-32). These prophecies could not have restored hope and happiness to the sick hearts of the exiles, but they did show that Yahweh was swift in his revenge against those who hated Israel. It is interesting to note that Ezechiel does not pronounce woe upon Babylon, the actual cause of the destruction of Jerusalem. The reason is that Nabuchodonosor and his Babylonian hordes were more than mere conquerors: they were the instruments of God's justice upon His sinful people and, as such, did not fall under the hand of His wrath.

Ezechiel, too, has changed and his prophecy marks that change. He has become a saint, having suffered personal humiliation and human contempt. He has borne the heartbreaking loss of his wife, "the desire of his eyes." Still he ever remains God's servant, the prophet. This is his sanctity. The prophecy from chapter 33 to the end of the book, could have been spoken only by a mellowed, merciful man. The words lend themselves to no other interpretation.

VOICE OF HOPE

Having spoken revenge upon Israel's enemies, Ezechiel now begins the difficult process of rousing the dulled hearts of sinners, of men in despair. He lays the foundation of Israel's conversion to God. Speaking for Yahweh, he preaches: "As I live, saith the Lord God, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked may turn from his way and live. Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways: and why will you die, O house of Israel?" (33, 11) Beautiful words expressing infinitely more beautiful realities—the freedom of the human will and the mercy of God. The Jews are made to realize that their conversion to God must be an individual, interior, personal thing. (33, 12)

Ezechiel continues to prophesy in a merciful vein, foretelling the appearance of a new David, a great king and a great shepherd, who is Christ our Lord. "And I will set up one shepherd over them: He shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd." (34, 23) Still continuing his prophecy of joy, he speaks the sweetness of God to bitter hearts, exposing the *piece de resistance*: Israel is to be restored; the exiles are to go home again to a restored kingdom. "It is not for your sake that I will do this, O house of Israel, but for my holy name's sake. That the gentiles may know that I am the Lord." (36, 22-23)

Ezekiel confirms this prophecy of restoration by relating the resurrection of the dry bones, seen in a vision. (ch. 36) Strangely enough, modern day Jews seem to regard this vision as a factual occurrence, believing that Ezekiel really raised these dead. In this vision the hand of the Lord took Ezekiel and set him down in a plain filled with stark white bones, representing the deceased house of Israel. At the prophet's words these bones were joined, flesh covered them, and life entered into them. (ch. 37) This is perhaps the most compelling vision of the book, the symbolism being sharp and intelligible. The exiles must have breathed forth cries of gladness at the narration of the vision, for in it was foretold the resurrection and reunion of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Juda. The north and the south were to form one Jewish state again, and these poor exiles would be once again God's people. (37, 27)

In the final two chapters of this section, the prophet foretells under the symbol of Gog of the land of Magog, the permanence of the restoration. Gog, a type of anti-Christ, is to be defeated. His overthrow guarantees the permanence of the restoration. This prophecy obviously cannot be literally interpreted as applying to Israel, for the Jewish nation has long since fallen. Therefore we interpret it in a spiritual sense: the words of Ezekiel foreshadow in these chapters the indefectibility of the Catholic Church. (chapters 38-39)

Concluding his prophecy, from the fortieth chapter on, Ezekiel turns to a complex description of the new temple in Jerusalem, as seen in a vision. He is most meticulous in giving dimensions and measures for a temple and city that are, as a matter of fact, impossible of architectural achievement, because of the geographical contours of the Jerusalem area. The only logical explanation seems to be that Ezekiel speaks, like St. John in the Apocalypse, of the spiritual temple of God, our Holy Mother the Church. This is a legitimate interpretation of the text, remembering that the name of the city of the temple is "The Lord is there." (48, 35)

The Book of Ezekiel is well worth reading as a story of God's relations with his chosen people in a tragic period of their history. It is more, however, than a mere narration of events; in Ezekiel's prophecy we find God—our minds find His justice and mercy, and our hearts are thereby persuaded to love Him. As the prophet himself, speaking for God, tells us in his last verse: "The Lord is there."