

## Reflection on the Principal Text

### The Background to Ezekiel

Ezekiel stands between two crucial periods in this history of the Jewish people. Behind them was the period where Judah was (more or less) a united and strong Kingdom, that entered into a period of decline culminating with the exile in Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem. Ahead lay the future restoration when the exiles would return home.

Ezekiel was a priest who was taken into exile by the Babylonians when Jerusalem fell in 597BCE, and was called to be a prophet to a 'rebellious people'. He was married but his wife died at the time of the Babylonian invasion (possibly at their hands) and his grief for her was expressed in his writing.

Immediately prior to the fall of Jerusalem, Judah found itself a divided kingdom and lodged between the two 'super powers' of the day Egypt and Babylon. Following the Babylonian defeat of Egypt in 605BCE, and Judean attempts to resist the political power of the Babylonians, King Jehoiachin of Judah had been removed by the Babylonian King Nebuchadrezzar and sent into exile with his court – and the priest Ezekiel seems to have gone with them. Jehoiachin was replaced as king by Zedekiah who was beset by different factions – pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian. In 586 BCE, a pro-Egyptian uprising by Zedekiah was crushed by the Babylonians, Jerusalem destroyed and Judah finally became a province of Babylon.

The exile was deeply traumatic for the Jews – removed as they were from the land of promise and from the city which was the centre of their religion. The monarchy, which traced its line back to David, was 'cut down' – the Sons of Zedekiah was executed.

The utter devastation that was left raised painful questions for the Jews – were they still the People of God? What was the status of the Covenant? Had God abandoned them?

The Book of Ezekiel cannot be said to be one of the most accessible in the Bible yet its imagery has clear resonances with elements of New Testament theology (particular 'the Son of Man') and the earlier part of Chapter 37 has close association in Christian minds with the resurrection of Jesus.

The language of Ezekiel hovers at the edge of *apocalyptic literature* (eg Daniel) and there is also a 'pathological' element to his visions (ecstatic visions that lead to paralysis of the limbs and of his tongue) which have been rich pickings for those interested in psychological readings of the Bible. Indeed some of the imagery and possible contradictions with the Torah (Pentateuch) almost rendered it being declared apocryphal by Rabbinic schools.

## **Ezekiel 37.15-28**

First of all let us consider how this passage would have been understood by the first readers of the Scroll of Ezekiel. The context of the passage is a Kingdom divided under different rulers. This was the Kingdom that once had been united under the Kingship of great rulers like David and Solomon. This had been the land that had been inextricably tied up with the Covenant given to Abraham and renewed through Moses and the return to the land of promise.

This land of promise had become the land of division – even the land of disintegration. This is the theological tragedy that lies at the heart of Ezekiel. This tragedy is reflected in the most famous image from Ezekiel's writings, that of the valley of the dry bones, which aims to portray a picture of division, disintegration, death and hopelessness. The tragedy is not the action of a capricious god, but a tragedy felt by a Covenantal God who is distressed at the faithlessness of his beloved people but who nonetheless yearns for their return to the covenant and their consequential unity and prosperity. The Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann summarises this as Israel's being "regathered in obedience".

The second half of Chapter 37 provides less familiar imagery than the first half. We have two pieces of wood that are symbolic of the divided nation. Some Bible translations have rendered the Hebrew as "leaf of a wooden tablet", however most commentators seem to agree that 'stick' or 'pieces of wood' was probably intended. The pieces of wood are held by the prophet as if they were one single piece. So symbolising that God would bring his people back from their scattered exile, bringing back into one the two former Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, binding them together in the one covenant:

"Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (vs.23).

The uniting of the people into one Kingdom is not just about restoring the exiles but also the laying aside of pre-exilic divisions that led to the downfall of Israel.

But as well as there being 'one nation' there will also be 'one King'. This is identified with David which for the Christian reader will take interpretation in a Messianic direction ('prince forever' in particular has Christological overtones) whereas a Jewish understanding would see this in terms of the restoration of the Covenant people to the land under the restored Davidic throne.

## Reflection

So that is the immediate context of this passage. However for the church there is a very different layer of interpretation. In what we might call “classical theology”, the Church is the New Israel. In Christ there is a new Covenant with the New Israel which gathers together humanity – Jew and Gentile – into a new relationship with God.

For the churches in Korea it is not difficult to see the resonances both political and ecclesial with this Ezekiel passage: a nation with a proud, ancient history stands divided – one part prosperous, the other less so - and a church that is divided in many respects because of those same political realities both internal and external.

In our Western European context the issues to ponder are also particularly pertinent to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We live with a reality of a church divided for a variety of complex reasons – both theological and historical. The New Israel, like the Israel (that is the People of God) of Ezekiel’s time, finds itself divided and in many places looking for a new spirit of life and renewal. It is important to stress at this point that a Christian interpretation of this passage is not a denial of God’s continuing Covenant with the Jewish people, nevertheless there is an important place for this ecclesiological reading.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity calls us to pray for the full visible unity of the Church. Crucially one of our chosen readings for this year is the so-called “High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus in John’s Gospel, in which he prays that the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one, but we also face the reality that just as the division of the kingdoms of Israel was a scandal to God’s Covenant with his chosen people, so is the continual division of the Church, the Body of Christ, a scandal to God’s New Covenant in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps in this important week we are challenged to see a divided Church to be as much a scandal as political division, fragmentation and disintegration was in the time of Ezekiel, and is now. But perhaps also this passage lends an important hopeful image – that just as the pieces of wood are held by Ezekiel in such a way as they appear as ‘one’ so too is the Church held together in Christ, despite our human divisions, as if it were one and will be one in Him.