



## **The Prophet Ezekiel, the Relentless Vision and the Call of History**

Authors: Robert Kaplan  
Submitted: 13. March 2023  
Published: 20. March 2023  
Volume: 10  
Issue: 2  
Languages: English  
Keywords: Ezekiel, Prophet, Old Testament, Jewish Exile, Babylon, Epilepsy  
Categories: Medicine, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law  
DOI: 10.17160/josha.10.2.879

### Abstract:

The Old Testament is the history of Israelite people expressed through their prophets. The original charismatic figures, prophets were chosen, rather than born – whether they wanted to or not. Prophets did not have an easy ministry. Their communities were reluctant to abandon hedonistic or sacrilegious lives while incorrect predictions of the future could lead to death. The Babylonian exile was a turning point in the history of the Jewish people. An elite group were forced to leave Jerusalem and make a new life in a distant location and foreign culture. Ezekiel, as one of the exiles and a descendant of a priestly family, is the only prophet to have operated outside the Holy Land. His famous chariot vision turned him to prophesy and the need to convince his flock to return to godly practices. The moral failings of the Israelites, he said, would lead to the destruction of the Temple. Exile was their punishment for disobedience and only his suitably pious followers were allowed to return from exile. Ezekiel is credited as the originator of that essential feature of the Diaspora life, the synagogue. Of more importance, Ezekiel is credited with making the shift from collective to individual guilt, a key feature of Jewish morality. The Book of Ezekiel that records his ministry is one of the longest books in the bible and regarded as a masterwork of prose. Yet Ezekiel's darker side is evident and the symbolic parables of women reveal a disturbing misogyny.

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# The Prophet Ezekiel, the Relentless Vision and the Call of History

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## Abstract

The Old Testament is the history of Israelite peoples expressed through their prophets. The original charismatic figures, prophets were chosen, rather than born – whether they wanted to or not. Prophets did not have an easy ministry. Their communities were reluctant to abandon hedonistic or sacrilegious lives while incorrect predictions of the future could lead to death.

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Yet Ezekiel's darker side is evident and the symbolic parables of women reveal a disturbing misogyny.

Ezekiel's behaviour has been the subject of much study. Analysis shows that he had the personality changes of chronic temporal lobe epilepsy, one of the first recorded cases in history.

## The Profession of Prophet

The Old Testament, hereafter referred to as the *Bible*, is the history of Israelite peoples expressed through their prophets. Starting with Moses (Abraham was a proto-figure), prophets mediated between their people and an unyielding Yahweh who required them to keep to his rules in order to maintain their chosen status. Until the Babylonian exile, prophets delivered their messages orally; after the exile their words were recorded and collected to ensure wide circulation, the prophesies turning more towards the divine, becoming intensely apocalyptic. The history of the prophets continues until shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple; after this, great Jewish history is not longer written and the period of Diaspora commences.

The word prophet, derived from the Greek, means *one who speaks forth or one who speaks of the future*. Prophets were unique figures who functioned as ethical and moral innovators, as well as revealers of the future.<sup>1</sup> Their official status varied, so they could also be described as religious officials, political advisers, guardians of religious traditions, isolated mystics or simply ecstasies out of control of their actions.

As prophets were thought to possess extraordinary power, this gave them a special charisma.<sup>2</sup> Their role was well defined: to mediate between the monolithic god Yahweh and his chosen people. Background, class and upbringing was irrelevant and they often came from the most humble circumstances. Having the role of a prophet thrust on one, then or now, was not a fate an individual would seek. Prophets were not born, but chosen, whether they wished it or not. Jesus' comment about being a prophet without honour in one's own land was not made casually, but rather a brutal recognition of the difficult, confrontational and frequently lonely terrain in which the prophet operated.<sup>3</sup>

The prophet had a supra-normal connection with God through ecstatic trances.<sup>4</sup> The means for God to communicate was by means of possession by taking control of their speech and actions; alternately, their spirit (or soul) could leave the body and travel to the world of the spirits. This manifested with loss of consciousness, physical collapse, obsessive behaviours, garbled speech and visions or hallucinations. Ezekiel indicated how the spirit lifted him up or entered into him and he would shake like a



drunken man, while Jeremiah referred to “my anguish, my anguish, I writhe in pain”. Some prophets demonstrated their oracles with symbolic acts. Isaiah, for example, walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem for three years. Jeremiah smashed a pot to demonstrate the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel made an elaborate drawing of the Jerusalem siege to demonstrate what was occurring.

The relationship of prophets with their community was, by definition, confrontational. While capable of bringing about changes in their societies by bringing messages from the divine realm, their status depended entirely on the acceptance of the society in which they functioned – there was a reciprocal relationship between the two.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, they had to cope with the immensity of the intense relationship with an awesome god; at the same time, there was no place for a tolerant, caring and relaxed attitude to their flock. Prophets spent most of their time raging about the immorality and idolatry of a people who, mostly, displayed not the slightest inclination to change their ways while continuing to worship whatever god or idol was fashionable and partake in the always pleasurable activities that such worship permitted. Change only occurred when disaster was unavoidable or, even worse, afterwards. This meant that the prophet spent most of their time in despair at the feckless way in which their injunctions were ignored, despite imminence of the disasters they predicted.

This did not make for a pleasant workplace. Towards their own kind prophets were even less tolerant and conflicts with the competition was common, an early form of turf war as it were. Any prophet who spoke in the name of other gods was subjected to the death penalty. Ezekiel, for example, cursed the prophets still active in Jerusalem as apostates.

For a prophet, there was no success like a prediction that came true. Once their words were seen as having come to pass, their status within the community was assured. On the other hand, a wrong prediction could produce a far worse threat than merely being ignored, namely death, always a bad career move. Far from responding to the injunctions to change their ways and rein in the sinful stuff, the flock were always ready to take up the stones or cudgels and turn propheticidal. This was guaranteed to expose the unfortunate prophet to the ugly wrath of misled punters, resulting in a reduced half-life.

In the past, the tendency in prophetology has been to make a distinction between the Israelite prophets *sui generis*, and healers, spiritualists, shaman figures, entrail readers (haruspicy), magicians and self-proclaimed messiahs. Our understanding has been expanded with studies of the extra-biblical mystics known as the Mari, based in the Mesopotamian city of the same name, around C18 BCE.<sup>6</sup> They may have been ordinary individuals or had a special title, indicating their function: the answerer, the ecstatic,



the speaker, the shouter or the revealer; other groups had message-givers or visionaries.

Regardless of the cultural group or society, whether designated as shamans, priests, diviners, sages or prophets, behaviour that would be designated as an illness or even criminal in other individuals was regarded as an essential feature of their professional function. Within a particular society, possession was expected to follow a standard pattern. When this failed to occur, or the prophet deviated from the pattern, it was taken as a sign of the failure of their powers. Violent or uncontrolled behaviour was considered a sign of evil spirit possession or mental illness. Furthermore, there had to be group acceptance that divine possession had actually occurred.

Since time immemorial the debate has been whether the prophet was a unique individual having a relationship with God beyond the realms of the material world, i.e., one that could only be uncritically accepted on the basis of faith; alternately, were the experiences of the prophet the result of natural phenomena, psychology or psychopathology? In their time and culture, the prophets would mostly not have been regarded as mentally ill.

The current view is that prophets had a distinct, if not unusual, personality, but psychopathology (eg., madness) tended to be the exception, rather than the rule. Explaining the experiences of a Moses, an Isaiah or a Paul as arising from staring too long at a burning bush in the rays of the setting desert sun, hysterical blindness, raving delirium or excessive use of hallucinogenic chemicals, is simplistic, does not take cultural variables into account and challenges rational attitudes about what were widely accepted phenomena at the time.

### **The Book of Ezekiel**

The Book of Ezekiel (hereafter BoE) was written by the Prophet Ezekiel in the sixth-century BC. One of the Major Prophets, Ezekiel appears in the latter half of the Old Testament with other prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah.

Prior to the Babylonian exile, Jewish faith was based on worship of God at the Jerusalem Temple. Ezekiel provided a solution to the problem of living in a foreign land.<sup>7</sup> He is held by some as the originator of that essential feature of the Diaspora life, the synagogue. Of more importance, Ezekiel is credited with making the shift from collective to individual guilt, a key feature of Jewish morality.<sup>8</sup> In the history of moral philosophy, this was a turning point, the equivalent in scientific terms of Galileo's view of the moons of Jupiter through his telescope.

*A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own.*



Ezekiel was a priest descended from the Royal House of Ado, a pedigree making him a member of the Judean elite. He was directly descended from the Priest Zadok, as was his father Buzi.<sup>9</sup> Combining both duties was unusual for a prophet. He is the only prophet to have operated outside the Holy Land, in what we now know as Mesopotamia or present-day Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

The inter-exilic period, a crucial period in Jewish history, had a defining effect on Diaspora life that continues to the present. Providing an extensive dating, Ezekiel allows his prophecies to be placed in an historical context. The first date in the book is 593 BC, five years after the first group of exiles was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar with King Jehoiachin. The last-dated oracle occurs in April of 571 BC; consequently, the dates of Ezekiel's ministry is accepted as being from 593-571 BC. It is remarkable to have such historical precision, setting it off from other biblical books.

It is one of the critical periods in Jewish history. Over six hundred years had elapsed since the Israelites had established themselves in Canaan, and almost four hundred years since Solomon erected the First Temple. The Babylonians, having invaded Canaan, took an elite group back to their own land. They allowed the exiles to keep their religious and national identity and use their skills as artisans. The communities were left to their own devices, allowed to settle in small groups, practice their religion and were not subjected to persecution.<sup>11</sup> This led to an ambiguous situation. As long as the Temple stood, the exiled Israelites believed that they would eventually return to Jerusalem. Until then, they needed to adapt to life in a foreign land. While keeping their religious and national identities, many Jewish people become part of Babylonian society. While this was a notable improvement on the exile in Egypt, when the enslaved Israelites suffered brutal oppression, it was a pathway to unholy temptations.

Ezekiel was born during the time of the spiritual reform of King Josiah. From the detailed knowledge he displayed of temple ritual, it is highly likely he had some status as a Temple priest. He settled with a community in the land of the Chaldeans at Tel-abib<sup>12</sup> on the banks of the Chebar near Nippur in Babylonia.

The BoE gives little detail about Ezekiel's life and there is no other historical evidence. It appears that his prophetic role was not necessarily desirable nor tolerable. He expresses the desire to be freed of the prophetic burden with *'and though they cry within my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them.'*

Ezekiel, meaning "God strengthens" or "May God strengthen", is mentioned only twice by name; in an early reference and later in chapter 24. Ezekiel was married, but it is unlikely he had children. He lost his wife in the ninth year of exile, although how



this occurred is unknown. The circumstances or time of his death is unknown. His tomb is reputed to be located at Al Kifln in the neighbourhood of Hilla.

For most of the last century, after the work of Hölscher, it was held that the BoE was a redaction with scarcely an original line remaining. In recent decades, this view has turned 180 degrees and the BoE is now regarded as an accurate reflection of the author's words.<sup>13</sup> This, however, does not help to explain some of the most puzzling sections, conflicting strongly with basic Jewish theological principles, to say nothing of passages of unadorned sadism and misogyny that still have the capacity to shock.

Unique among the books of the Bible, the BoE continues to attract, fascinate and, it must be said, on occasions repel. The author's attitudes, values, intentions, ideas and emotions suffuse the text in an utterly compelling manner, allowing an opportunity to explore the mentality of an historical figure, who although interceding between his people and the monolithic God, was nevertheless human and subject to all the exigencies of material existence.

The book, written entirely in the first person, leaves the reader in no doubt that the author was the prophet receiving messages from Yahweh to chide, berate, intercede and provide solace to his suffering people. Ezekiel's prophetic message commences with repentance and salvation; following the fall of Jerusalem, it becomes one of judgement and restoration associated with a utopian vision of the new Israel. Intrinsic to this is the doctrine of personal retribution.

The narrative is characterized by lucid parables and the most extensive use of symbolism in the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Widely regarded as the finest literary work in the Old Testament, it is distinguished by well defined passages; the poetry is rhythmical, the text written in elegant prose.<sup>15</sup> Some of the most vivid passages of the book are descriptions of the trade list of the city of Tyre, the depiction of their king in Paradise and the defeated Pharaoh and his army in the underworld realm. The style is characterised by rich imagery, detailed descriptions, repetitions of words and phrases and, at times, extreme coarseness, even obscenity. For reasons both theological and prurient the rabbis advised men not to read it until they were forty, and women not at all. This explains why it is comparatively less well known than the other books, despite its theological importance.

### **Ezekiel, the Prophet**

Ezekiel commences his work with the words that echo down through history:

*On the fifth day of the month; this was the fifth year of the captivity of king Joakim.*



*And the word of the Lord came to Jezekeil the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans, by the river of Chobar; and the hand of the Lord was upon me.*

*And I looked, and, behold, a sweeping wind came from the north, and a great cloud on it, and there was brightness round about it, and gleaming fire, and in the midst of it as it were the appearance of amber in the midst of the fire, and brightness in it.*

We are transported two and a half millennia back in time to the Fertile Crescent, where civilisation began, the deliberate use of the first-person tense (the only time in the entire book) chosen to leave us in no doubt that Ezekiel intends us to see the past through his eyes – a prophet and a rabbi, but a great historian too. What follows is one of the great prophetic visions of all time, far richer in its visual and auditory elements than those relayed by the other prophets. God approaches Ezekiel as a divine warrior, riding in his battle chariot. The chariot is drawn by four creatures, each with four faces (of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle), and four wings. The creatures could travel forward and backward, up and down, and moved in flashes of lightning. Beside each living creature was a beryl-coloured wheel, constructed as a wheel within a wheel, with tall and awesome rims that had eyes all around. The verbal accompaniment to this scene is intense: *‘And there came a voice from above the dome of their heads’*. The sound of the wings of the creatures is like *“the sound of mighty waters like the thunder of the almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army”*.<sup>16</sup>

God commissions Ezekiel to be a prophet and a watchman in Israel:

*Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites.*<sup>17</sup>

The chariot vision has led to an entire school (*‘merkabah’*<sup>18</sup>) of eschatological study and resurfaces in the hallucinations of John of Patmos, the New Testament author of *Revelation*.

The next communication Ezekiel receives is an instruction to build a brick model of Jerusalem with a metal plate that represents the ongoing Babylonian siege. He then lies on his left side with the model resting on him for 390 days (representing the 390 days of Israel’s punishment); then on the right side for 40 days (representing the 40 days of Judah’s punishment). While this can be viewed in a purely symbolic light, it matches the neuropsychiatric states of mutism, stupor, dissociation or catatonia.<sup>19</sup> Conditions causing this include delirium, schizophrenia, melancholic depression or post-ictal stupor.

Visions occur at regular intervals. One of the most evocative interactions occurs when Ezekiel is asked to eat the Holy Torah rolls, which taste "as sweet as honey." There are





more visits to the temple, the return of the chariot, and a flight to Jerusalem to warn the inhabitants of the impending tragedy. Ezekiel predicts destruction and exile, followed by God's forgiveness, using a magnificent metaphor:

*I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.*

For the Jewish community in exile, worship was a dilemma when they do not have access to the Temple in Jerusalem. They visited Ezekiel for guidance, only to receive a most depressing response. The moral failings of the Israelites, he said, would lead to the destruction of the Temple. Exile was their punishment for disobedience.

Ezekiel's rage was not just directed at their apostate behaviour, but for the injury inflicted on the majesty of God. His theodicy was in direct contravention of the royal theology still prevalent in the Temple community:

*'A "man who lifted up his voice like a trumpet and declared to Israel its sins, whose word fell like a hammer upon all the pleasant dreams and projects in which it had indulged, and crushed them to powder, whose entire appearance furnished a powerful proof that the Lord was still among his people."<sup>20</sup>*

He condemned King Zedekiah's policy of resistance against Babylon in the hope that they would be saved by the alliance with Egypt, clashing with the prevailing political view that exile was only temporary – a political prophesy for which he was to be vindicated.<sup>21</sup>

The ferocity and vehemence of Ezekiel's sermons in the text is hard enough to read several millennia later. His prophesies make no provision for tolerance and frailty. The effect on those who had to listen to the ranting philippics must have been aversive, so it is no surprise that the relationship was tense on both sides. He was the cynosure of the exiles, a figure of derision, if not fun, to the community, who only came to listen to him for entertainment. In return, an exasperated Ezekiel describes his "impudent and stubborn" flock as a rebellious house. If Ezekiel's behaviour seems extreme, no prophet had to go to such lengths to overcome the resistance of their audience to his message.<sup>22</sup> Threats of vengeance to the enemies of Israel, notably the Edomites, Moabites, Philistines and Ammonites, follow.

History now intervenes. Jerusalem finally falls and is sacked in 586 BCE, terminating the old political and religious institutions; the first Temple was destroyed. The exiles are devastated. Their hopes of continuing the link with the Temple have been negated. His prophesies vindicated, Ezekiel's audience – finally – pays attention. He now offers hope: once the exile community returns to devout worship, they will eventually triumph and rebuild the new Temple. For those who survived the sack of Jerusalem, he has not a shred of mercy; there is no compassion or chance of redemption for them,



only the purified members of the exile community will be allowed to return to the rebuilt Temple in future.

*"I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one."*

The marvellous, but still mystifying analogy of the Valley of the Dry Bones follows. God leads Ezekiel to a valley filled with desiccated bones. At the Prophet's words, the bones sew themselves back together, flesh and skin cover them and the corpses come alive, a mass reincarnation that symbolizes the restoration of Israel.<sup>23</sup> One *midrash*<sup>24</sup> for the story is that Nebuchadnezzar abducted the male youths of Israel to Babylon, but their beauty so entranced the Babylonian women he had them executed and their bodies mutilated, hence Ezekiel brought them back to life.

The Dry Bones vision is one of Ezekiel's most memorable contributions to eschatology, prompting endless study, recapitulation and consideration of redemption. And so it should be, another indication of the chiliastic visions which so many mystics, saints and visionaries receive after an ecstatic event.

Ezekiel receives other messages from God, including commands to shave his head, eat bread made from human and animal dung, and dig a hole in the temple wall when escaping from Jerusalem during the siege. The head-shaving command, in particular, has received much attention from theologians, delving into its spiritual and symbolic meaning. Yet interpreters cannot avoid the fact that head shaving (let alone eating hair) is in dramatic contrast to the usual biblical instruction to remain unshaven in response to loss or grief.

On the same basis, the bizarre dictum to eat bread made from first human, then animal dung, remains a deeply shocking statement, one that runs so contrary to Jewish views on cleanliness and purity that rabbinical interpreters over the next two millennia were unable to come up with any explanation. One explanation, moving right out of the religious loop, is *coprophilia* – an obsession with emptying bowels and faecal matter that can have sexual overtones. Admittedly a long bow to draw, considering the absence of any other such mention in the text, in view of sado-masochistic descriptions elsewhere in the text, there is a case to be made.<sup>25</sup>

In the conclusion of the BoE, having established his moral authority, as well as been vindicated in his predictions, Ezekiel explains that the Temple will be gloriously restored and the people of God would be blessed as never before. The Messianic times will return, with prosperity in the Kingdom of God. In the climax of his utopian vision, the twelve resurrected tribes are given land defined in the visions of the archaic land of Canaan.

## **The Mind of Ezekiel**



Ezekiel has received a good deal of attention from pathographers, psychohistorians, psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as theologians and historians, coming up with a range of explanations to explain the dramatic nature of Ezekiel's visions, his capacity to travel through time and space, and other extraordinary, if not baffling, behaviour.<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious in the BoE that Ezekiel was a most unusual individual.<sup>27</sup> Like a later figure of not insignificant spirituality, Feodor Dostoyevsky, the work he produced is a monument to the symptoms that played such a role in shaping it. If we scan the known terrain of psychiatry and neurology, what conditions could be responsible?

Let's start with madness. The first descriptions of schizophrenia come from the Assyrian codex of approximately 2.5 thousand years ago – not greatly removed in time or geography from Ezekiel's situation. Schizophrenia is a severe psychotic disorder, characterised in the acute phase by thought disorder, hallucinations and delusions, in addition to other symptoms such as catatonia, depersonalisation and depression. For a long time, the neurotheology/psychohistory school characterised all shamans as schizophrenic, an hypothesis which has been repeatedly shown to be incorrect, although this does not exclude the fact that some of those who had spiritual phenomena with altered states of consciousness also could have schizophrenia.

Command hallucinations, hearing conversations between two or more people about oneself, non-verbal auditory phenomena, and auditory and visual hallucinations are features of schizophrenia. These include *'He said to me; mortal eat this scroll that I give to you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.'* The shaving of Ezekiel's head would have gone against priestly prohibitions to shave. He is commanded to dig a hole in a wall in his escape from the city of Jerusalem during the siege, *'The word of the Lord came to me . . . Dig a hole through the wall in their sight and carry the baggage through it . . . I did just as I was commanded brought out my baggage by day as baggage for exile and in the evening I dug through the hole with my own hands.'*

Many of Ezekiel's visions, out-of-body experiences and altered states of consciousness could, at first glance, be regarded as schizophrenic.<sup>28</sup> He hears people gossiping about him by the walls, *'As for you mortal your people who talk about you by the walls and at the doors of the house say to one another each to a neighbour "Come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord".'*

Ezekiel hears the conversations God was having with others, *'To others he said within my hearing "pass through the city and kill, your eyes shall not spare".'* Using the phrase *in my sight* is interpreted to mean that others must have observed him.

Several issues argue strongly against the diagnosis of schizophrenia.



Firstly, paranoia is not exclusive to schizophrenia, but can occur in other psychiatric states, even on a spectrum that verges to normality. As we have noted, the prophetic state was one that promoted discord, tension, suspiciousness, if not open confrontation. Second, schizophrenia can occur with other conditions, temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) being the most obvious example.<sup>29</sup> That it arises from the changes in the limbic area shows the anatomical basis of the two disorders – whereas it occurs much less frequently in generalised epilepsy. Third, it would be unusual for someone with a severe psychotic disorder that was likely to lead to periods of breakdown to maintain an active role as a spiritual leader to his people for (at least) 22 years. Fourth, hypergraphia (as opposed to repetitive but largely meaningless scrawling) is rarely a feature of schizophrenia, but typical of the changes found in TLE.<sup>30</sup> Fifth, much as Ezekiel displays intense obsessionality, there is nothing to indicate thought disorder, the disorganised thinking found in schizophrenia.

Finally, while hallucinations, notably visual, occur in a wide range of normal and physiological situations, command hallucinations are characteristic of schizophrenia, as well as other psychotic states; eg., in a psychotic depression, a patient may hear voices commanding them to kill their children to spare them further suffering. An example would be the command to eat the scroll, which turns from ashes into honey. This could occur in a manic or depressive psychosis. However, before labelling this as psychotic, it is worth considering the intense symbolism of the parable, eg., as a show of devotion to experience the sweetness of the word of God, an extreme example of a metaphor which frequently throughout the Bible and is therefore not regarded as an expression of mental disorder.

Other conditions to consider are manic-depressive psychosis and migraine. There would be no doubting that Ezekiel had episodes of depression, but this is as common a feature of the inter-ictal phase of TLE as it would be in manic depression – to say nothing of having to deal with exilic life as the spiritual leader to a community who were more interested in assimilating with the hedonistic Persian lifestyle. Migraine can produce very graphic hallucinations, but would not lead to any other changes displayed by Ezekiel.

That Ezekiel was a priest, a prophet, a seer and a visionary is beyond doubt; but this was driven by TLE. Typical behaviour of TLE includes episodes of fainting spells, mutism, altered sense of space and time associated with out-of-body experiences. Time and space travel, similar to *de ja vu* and *jamaïs vu* experiences, are common, as well as other neuropsychiatric phenomena, notably Sleep Paralysis. The dreamy mystical state is a characteristic feature of spiritual experiences in TLE.<sup>31</sup> A well-described feature of TLE is intense religious experiences (religiosity), often of a highly mystical or visionary nature, following ictal episodes. The frequency of Ezekiel's visions – 93 times – was far more than any other prophet, including Moses who not only led



his people for a longer time, but arguably had a far more intense relationship with God. In addition, the way God addresses him as ‘Son of Man’ or ‘Mortal’ is unique.

While Ezekiel may not be the earliest example of TLE that we know, the BoE is the first documentation of the personality changes in history and one of the most florid examples we are likely to see. The corpus of the BoE is replete with typical features, notably hypergraphia and religiosity, pedantry and obsessiveness, extreme sexually fantasies associated with intense misogyny, insensitivity to the feelings of others, stickiness of thinking manifesting in repetitiveness, anger and emotionally discordant behaviour.<sup>32</sup>

When his wife dies, Ezekiel is commanded not to grieve for her, only to *sigh, but not aloud*. This can only be described as an extraordinary reaction. It would be next to impossible to consciously refuse to allow oneself not to experience intense sadness under such circumstances. Not only is the instruction counter-intuitive (God constantly tells the prophets that the people should grieve and mourn their losses), but a manifestation of Ezekiel’s “sticky” personality, eg., intolerance to social mores, as well as emotional rigidity. Ezekiel’s injunctions for moral behaviour and worship extended to the tendentious; he was obsessively concerned with the minutiae of religious worship and at times could not be distracted from this.

The best example of the obsessive stickiness in Ezekiel’s thinking is evident when he inspects the rebuilt Temple.<sup>33</sup> A copper-coloured man carrying a ruler guides Ezekiel through the temple. They stop at every wall, window, door, and altar to take measurements, which Ezekiel dutifully records in his book. He also writes down elaborate descriptions of statues and carvings. Ezekiel appears preoccupied with the number twenty-five: the gate is twenty-five cubits wide; its length is fifty cubits; the distance from gate to gate is a hundred cubits; the inner court is a hundred cubits square; the total measurement of the temple area five hundred square cubits. Just when it seems as if he changes to other figures – the measurement of the steps of the ascent to the level of the sanctuary begins with the figure seven; the inner court is reached by eight steps; the level of the temple building is reached by a further ten steps – the measurement of the steps forming the ascent as a whole adds up to the figure twenty-five.<sup>34</sup>

But that is not all. The measurement of the steps of the ascent at the level of the sanctuary begins with the figure seven, which is again significant. The Inner Court is reached by eight steps, while the level of the Temple building is reached by a further ten steps. Thus the total measurement of the steps forming the ascent comes to twenty-five.<sup>35</sup>

The apotheosis of Ezekiel’s obsessionality occurs in his apocalyptic vision where the Twelve Tribes of Israel are resurrected, re-united and allocated their land in two



rectangular rows. In the allocation of land, the system of measurement is still listed as twenty-five thousand cubits by twenty-five thousand. This arrangement pays no attention to geo-political realities, let alone that even the Israelites accepted that ten of the tribes had disappeared into history and the geography of the territory made the disposition untenable.

Hypergraphia is characteristic of TLE personality changes, as it is never found in other conditions to the same extent. The BoE is the fourth longest book in the Old Testament – more than 50% longer than Leviticus – and only 3% shorter than Genesis, which covers a vastly greater time span in history.

Ezekiel's hypergraphia and stickiness are evident in many lines, eg.,

*Then came the word of the LORD unto me, saying "Son of Man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, 'Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye come to inquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be enquired of by you.' ... And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD...*

Ezekiel's attitude to women is close to rebarbative. Taking into account that in those times woman were often described as feckless, seductive and immoral, Ezekiel's portrayal of them as harlots is only the start. In Chapter 16, he uses the story of a marriage that fails; God is the husband, Jerusalem is the wife. As a literary analogy this is simply superb – the relationship falters, then fails and the wife becomes a whore, nothing less than an insatiable nymphomaniac.

*"You trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passerby."*

Her lovers visit, strip her naked and set a mob to cut her to pieces. Only after this, when all passion (meaning rage) is spent, does God forgive and promise to remarry her. Leaving aside the moral failings of the Israelites forsaking their vows and making allegiances with the enemy, this is a remarkable tale of how sexual jealousy and rage can destroy a relationship – any relationship – and would have currency even today. It is, in short, literature of the highest order, the metaphor for its time notwithstanding.

In Chapter 23, Ezekiel returns to the woman/whore analogy to a degree that can only be considered repellent. This time it is the sisters Oholah and Oholibah (representing Samaria and Jerusalem) who become whores with first the Egyptians, then the Assyrians. The graphic description is appalling, and the terminology cannot be described as anything but pornographic.



*Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. <sup>20</sup> There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. <sup>21</sup> So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.*

In the end, Oholah and Oholibah pay the ultimate penalty for their feckless behaviour, being brutally slaughtered including having their nipples, nose and ears sliced off.<sup>36</sup> This analogy is sado-masochistic to an extreme.

In the text, there are no indications of Ezekiel's sexuality, and nor would we expect to find any, considering the biblical views on sexual aberration. All that is known is that he was married. The absence of any children is an interesting hint of hyposexuality but, as there could be so many different reasons for a barren union, nothing more can be made of this.

Ezekiel's religiosity is, by any standards, extreme, even when compared to other prophets. His recurrent use of the term *Mortal* and *Son of Man* is not only deeply idiosyncratic for the time, but obsessional, a reflection of his pedantic thinking, if not preoccupation, with eschatological matters. His attitude to his peers, the other biblical prophets, is no different to the severe criticism he threw out on the people for their state of moral turpitude. In his remorseless and intolerant panegyric, not even Noah, Daniel or Job could redeem themselves. If nothing else, anticipating Savonarola by two millennia, this attitude reveals the extent of his remorseless moralising from which no one, even the revered prophets, was exempt. This is an apt demonstration of how his hypermoralising religiosity and insensitivity to social boundaries, to say nothing of his lack of empathy, come together.

## **Conclusion**

As a man, Ezekiel must have been impossible, intolerable, magnificent and utterly compelling to deal with. As a spiritual leader, he faced a challenge that had not been known by his people since the far-off days of the Egyptian exile. He would have been badly affected by the trauma of first defeat, then enforced exile. That his people were not persecuted by the canals of Babylon where they established themselves only made his mission more difficult. Whereas to the modern materialist, the intensity of his visions are simply crazy, in the context of his time, they represented an unshakeable commitment to the highest moral precepts of monotheism. Despite the cacophony of visions, voices and extra-temporal experiences he experienced, in reality Ezekiel had one vision, and one vision alone. He was the fountain through which flowed the unique vision of history, that of the monolithic god and his chosen people. We will never know anything more of who he was, but this is hardly necessary. His magnificent book has all we need to know.



The BoE will remain an enduring item of the world's literary canon. It succeeds in conveying the anguish, confusion and disarray of a people uprooted from their land and the central focus of their religion. It does so in language that, despite the coarse and extreme intrusions, is extraordinarily eloquent, literature – and history – at its best. It provides the two foundations of Jewish life that are to sustain it for the next two thousand years: the importance of individual responsibility, and the establishment of the synagogue.

All of this stemmed from the man who, two and a half millennia ago, stood by the banks of a canal when something extraordinary came over him. So intense was the nature of the experience, as well as those that followed over the next two decades, that he was determined to make it a lasting feature of the cosmogony of his people. With the lines

*Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, that I was in the midst of the captivity by the river of Chobar; and the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God*

– he tied us all to the moral history of his people.

## **Acknowledgement**

Dedicated to Professor Konrad Kwiet, whose untiring investigations of the Holocaust has provided an invaluable insight into the most terrible period of Jewish history.

Some content in this article is derived from the chapter in my book *The Exceptional Brain and How it Changed the World* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011)

(Word Count: 6472)





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- <sup>1</sup> There were a minority of women prophets, including Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Nodiah and Isaiah's wife.
- <sup>2</sup> Biblical prophets were the original charismatic figures cited by Max Weber.
- <sup>3</sup> de Jong MJ. Biblical Prophecy—A Scribal Enterprise. The Old Testament Prophecy of Unconditional Judgement considered as a Literary Phenomenon. *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011) 39-70.
- <sup>4</sup> See: *Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives*. Oxford University Press, 2017, Chapter 5 171-191.
- <sup>5</sup> See: Lindblom J. *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*. Blackwell, 1967.
- <sup>6</sup> Craghan, John F. Mari and its Prophets: The contributions of Mari to the understanding of biblical prophesy. *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 1975-02, Vol.5 (1), p.32-55.
- <sup>7</sup> Betteridge WR. Ezekiel, The Prophet of the Exile. *The Biblical World*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Apr., 1895), pp. 248-257.
- <sup>8</sup> Criswell, S. Ezekiel Preached About Individual Responsibility 09 Aug 2007: 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Betteridge WR. Ezekiel, The Prophet of the Exile. *The Biblical World*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Apr., 1895), pp. 248-257.
- <sup>10</sup> Kohn, RL. Ezekiel At The Turn Of The Century. *Current Biblical Reviews*, 2003, 2.1, 9-31.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Dandamayev. Chapter 13 *The Diaspora from The Persian Period* in W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein. *The Cambridge History of Judaism*. Cambridge University Press: 28 March 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> No connection with the modern city of Telaviv.
- <sup>13</sup> Greenberg M. *Ezekiel 1-20*. 1983 (AB, 22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday). Cited in: Levitt Kohn, R. Ezekiel At The Turn Of The Century. *Current Biblical Reviews*, 2003, 2.1, 9-31.
- <sup>14</sup> Calasso, Roberto. *The Book of All Books* (p. 349). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
- <sup>15</sup> <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5952-ezekiel-book-of>. Accessed on 24 February 2022.
- <sup>16</sup> See Callahan, T. 2005, 'Ezekiel's spaceships, *Skeptic*, 12(1): 70. This effectively demolishes the UFO enthusiasts fantasy that it was a spaceship.
- <sup>17</sup> Many will note the use of the term Son of Man which is often believed to have originated with Jesus.
- <sup>18</sup> The Israeli-designed tank is called the *Merkava*.
- <sup>19</sup> Stein, G. (2008). Did Ezekiel have catatonia? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 193(3), 253-253.
- <sup>20</sup> Hengstenberg, cited in Betteridge WR. Ezekiel, The Prophet of the Exile. *The Biblical World*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Apr., 1895), pp. 248-257.



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- <sup>21</sup> Betteridge WR. Ezekiel, The Prophet of the Exile. *The Biblical World*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Apr., 1895), pp. 248-257.
- <sup>22</sup> Some would dispute that Moses had similar, if not worse, problems.
- <sup>23</sup> Some writers see this as an analogy for the reincarnation of Jesus. See: Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*. Penguin eBooks, 2008.
- <sup>24</sup> A term for biblical exegesis.
- <sup>25</sup> See: <https://lavatoryreader.typepad.com/the-lavatory-reader/2009/10/eating-faeces-and-drinking-urine-in-the-bible.html>. Accessed 19 February 2020.
- <sup>26</sup> Van Nuys, K. 1953, 'Evaluating the pathological in prophetic experience (in particularly Ezekiel)', *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 21(4): 244–251.
- <sup>27</sup> Knight H. The Personality of Ezekiel-Priest or Prophet? *The Expository Times* 1948 59: 115-120.
- <sup>28</sup> Cook CHC. Psychiatry in scripture: sacred texts and psychopathology. *The Psychiatrist* (2012), 36, 225-229; and, Broome, E C : Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality. *Journal of Biblical literature*, 1946-09-01, Vol.65 (3), p.277-292.
- <sup>29</sup> Masia, S.L. & Devinsky, O. 2000, 'Epilepsy and behavior: A brief history', *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 1: 27–36.
- <sup>30</sup> See Robert M Kaplan. *The Exceptional Mind and How it Changed the World*. Chapter 4, 34-44. Allen & Unwin, Sydney 2011.
- <sup>31</sup> Altschuler EL. Did Ezekiel have temporal lobe epilepsy? *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 2002; 59: 561-2.
- <sup>32</sup> Geschwind, N., 'Personality changes in temporal lobe epilepsy', *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 15: 425–433.
- <sup>33</sup> Howie CH. The East Gate of Ezekiel's Temple Enclosure and the Solomonic Gateway of Megiddo. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. 117 (Feb., 1950), pp. 13-19.
- <sup>34</sup> Simon, B. 2009, 'Ezekiel's geometric vision of the restored temple: From the rod of his wrath to the reed of His measuring. *Harvard Theological Review*, 102:4 411–38.
- <sup>35</sup> There can also be a Cabbalistic explanation for the symbolism and significance of numbers.
- <sup>36</sup> The remarkable analogy with the modus operandi, over two centuries later, of Jack the Ripper has been pointed out by Charles van Onselen, who noted that the Ripper, whom he discovered to be the Jewish Joseph Lis, killed his victims in exactly the same way. See: van Onselen, C. *The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007.