

Chapter 13

End Game

(609 – 580 BCE)

In the seventh year, the month of Kislew, the king of Akkad mustered his troops,
marched to Hatti-land and encamped against the city of Judah.
On the second day of the month of Adar he seized the city and captured the king.
He appointed there a king of his own heart, received its heavy tribute and sent it back to
Babylon.

Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings¹

Jeremiah's temple sermon (609)

In 609, the year of Josiah's death and of Jehoiakim's coronation, Jeremiah chose to deliver a sermon in the gateway of the Jerusalem temple. Jerusalem priests had developed the idea that Yahweh had guaranteed that there would always be a Jerusalem Temple. In 1 Kings 9: 1-3 there is an account of a vision granted to Solomon in which Yahweh pledged that there would always be a temple. This is the text they relied on. It did not then include the statement now to be found in verses 4-9 in which it is made clear that Yahweh will abandon the temple if the dynasty failed to keep Yahweh's commandments. Nor had they taken heed of their own writings in the Holiness code which stated for example, 'Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.'² They believed that there would always be a descendant of David on the throne of David, and therefore that there would always be a city of David to house that throne. Yahweh would protect his temple, and therefore the extended temple that was the city. It was on this topic that Jeremiah preached:

Last Kings of Judah	
609	Josiah killed at Megiddo; Jehoahaz succeeds but deported to Egypt and replaced by Jehoiakim.
598	Jehoiakim dies; Jehoiachin succeeds
597	Jehoiachin exiled to Babylon and replaced by his uncle Zedekiah.
586	Fall of Judah; Zedekiah executed; temple destroyed; a governor appointed. But Jehoiachin lives on in Babylon.

Thus says Yahweh of Armies, the god of Israel:

"Amend your ways and your doings, and let me live with you in this place

Do not trust in deceptive words saying, "This is the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh."

"If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will live with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever.

"But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after who knows what other gods, and then come and stand before me in this house, which you call by my name, and say "We are safe!" Safe to go on doing all those detestable things?

"Has this house, which is called by My Name, become a den of thieves for you? Know, I have been watching," says Yahweh.

"Go now to My place that was in Shiloh, where I first made My Name dwell, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. When you were doing all these things, I spoke to you again and again but you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer; therefore I will do to the house that is called by My Name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh."

¹ From the translation of tablet 21946 in the British Museum. (D.J.Wiseman, 1956). Page 73. The king of Akkad was Nebuchadrezzar and this event took place in his seventh year on the throne of Babylon. Hatti-land refers to Syria/Palestine.

² Leviticus 20:22. See also Leviticus 18:28

*And I will cast you out of my sight. Just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.*³

Jeremiah did not get much further than this when a riot broke out. It was intolerable to hear the prediction that Jerusalem would become like Shiloh, desolate and without inhabitants, because of their sin. Such words in that dangerous time were treacherous. Jeremiah was seized and put on trial for his life. Jeremiah's defence was simple:

It is Yahweh who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard.

Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of Yahweh your god, and Yahweh will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you.

*But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants*⁴

Jeremiah's friendship with the family of Shaphan, the secretary of state to Josiah, may have been crucial to his survival. Ahikam, Shaphan's son influenced the court in Jeremiah's favour. Precedents were quoted from Hezekiah's time, when a prophet had prophesied against the city and been allowed to live. Jeremiah was released, but banned from the temple. Not all such prophets were so fortunate. When Uriah spoke in the same way as Jeremiah, he was condemned without trial by the king and was forced to flee to Egypt, where Jehoiakim's security forces sought him out, dragged him back to Judah and executed him.

Difficult times (609 – 604)

Josiah's reform movement ended with his life. Judah no longer had freedom of political movement with Egypt's puppet on the throne, and Judah was tied to a power that had not in the past always been fully committed to the defence of its dependencies.

These were personally difficult times for Jeremiah. He began to have doubts; Yahweh seemed to be failing the just, and allowing the wicked to thrive:

You are always right, Yahweh, when I plead with you, but let me talk with you about justice.

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why are the treacherous happy?

You plant them, and they take root.

They grow and bear fruit.

You are always on their lips

yet far from their hearts.

He finds his meditations disconcerting, for Yahweh seems to say that Jeremiah will have other, yet more difficult things to understand:

*"If you have raced with foot-runner and they have worn you out,
how will you compete with horses?*

And if in a safe land you fall down,

how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?

For even your brothers and your own family,

even they have betrayed you.

They have called out against you; do not believe them,

though they speak friendly words to you"

Jeremiah responds:

I have forsaken my home,

³ Jeremiah 7:1 - 15

⁴ Jeremiah 26:12 – 15. (When Jesus, quoting Jeremiah six centuries later, says 'You have made my house a den of thieves', he also put his life at risk)

*I have abandoned my heritage;
I have given the beloved of my heart
into the hands of her enemies⁵*

At a time of puzzlement and despair he recalls his enthusiasm at the time of the discovery of the book of the law:

*Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.
For I am called to your name, Yahweh, god of Armies.*

...
*Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound grievous, refusing to be healed?
You are like a mirage to me,
like waters that fail.*

In answer to his prayer, Yahweh says:

*“If you turn back, I will take you back,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall serve as my mouth....*

*They will fight against you,
but they shall not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue you and deliver you”⁶*

If the times were hard for Jeremiah, they were excellent for king Jehoiakim. His patron, Necho II, was in control of the Levant, and had established a garrison at Carchemish. The Babylonians tried to dislodge this garrison by cutting off its supply line. They captured the town of Kumukh, 45 km to the south. But Necho sent an army north in 606, recaptured Kumukh, and brutally eliminated the Babylonian defenders.

Meanwhile Necho was building canals, ports and forts to open up trade to the South via the Red Sea. He employed Greek shipwrights and Phoenician navigators in his enterprises. One of his projects sent an exploratory vessel south out of the Red Sea. It reappeared three years later in the Mediterranean, having presumably achieved an amazing circumnavigation of Africa!⁷

Nebuchadrezzar and the Battle of Carchemish⁸

In 605 Nebuchadrezzar took over command of the Babylonian army. The Egyptian army was moving north once more but, before it could arrive at Carchemish, Nebuchadrezzar launched his troops in a full direct attack on the Egyptian garrison there. The Egyptian garrison was overwhelmed and the Babylonians went on to meet the main army at Hammath where a second battle was fought with catastrophic results for the Egyptians. Jeremiah commented:

*Lord Yahweh of Armies holds a sacrifice in the land of the north by the river Euphrates’
for soldier has stumbled against soldier; both have fallen together.⁹*

The cause of the defeat is unknown: perhaps Necho underestimated the new Babylonian commander and left matters in the hand of one of his generals; perhaps the switch of tactics caught the two parts of the Egyptian army unprepared and uncoordinated. Nebuchadrezzar’s victory was a surprising outcome, since Necho had won the previous encounter and would defeat the Babylonians again. The immediate consequence of the Babylonian victory appears to have been that most of the Levantine states fell into

⁵ Jeremiah 12: 1 - 7

⁶ Jeremiah 15:16 & 18-20

⁷ Heroditus 4.42.2-4 quoted in ECIAT (Redford, 1992) p 452

⁸ See ECIAT (Redford, 1992) pp 453-455 for details and further references

⁹ Jeremiah 46: 10b - 12

Babylon's sphere of influence: the Babylonian Chronicles talk of the conquest of Hatti, as the general area of Syria and Palestine was then known. It is possible that Nebuchadrezzar set up a forward command point at Riblah about 50 miles south of Hamath and from there sent out troops to collect tribute, and possibly hostages, from his new vassal states. It was whilst he was still dealing with the 'Hatti', that he heard of his father's death, and leaving his troops in the field, returned to Babylon. He was enthroned as soon as he arrived, twenty-three days after the death of Nabopolassar. There seems to have been no challenge to his accession for shortly after his enthronement he was able to return to the army and continue his unopposed marches throughout the Levant collecting 'heavy tribute' which he brought back to Babylon.¹⁰ Early in 604, Nebuchadrezzar took the king's part in the New Year festival by which the monarch 'took the hands' of the Babylonian gods Marduk and Nabu (Marduk's son).¹¹

Earlier, Jeremiah had preached that Babylon was the instrument of Yahweh, sent to punish the idolatrous.

Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the clans of the north, says Yahweh, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant. I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all the surrounding nations; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace¹².

This prophecy is dated to 605 BCE, well before the first major Babylonian offensive against Judah. It will be cited later by Jeremiah as a demonstration of his track record as a reliable prophet. According to an addendum that may have been original, the prophecy went on to predict that the rule of Babylon would only last for 70 years. If so it may later have been of some comfort to the exiles to know that, according to the prophet who had been proved right about the exile, their grandchildren would be able to return to Judah. The prophecy of the return would also prove to be reasonably accurate¹³. It is interesting that Jeremiah described Nebuchadrezzar as the 'servant of Yahweh' in this passage; centuries later, in the stories of Daniel, he will be given the unhistorical role of a supporter of Daniel and his friends – a 'servant of Yahweh' in the service of their god.

Jeremiah was far from impressed by Jehoiakim. He accused him of failing to carry out the basic duties of a king and said:

*Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice,
who makes his people work for nothing,
never giving them their wages,
who says, "I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,"
and who cuts out windows for it,
paneling it with cedar,
and painting it with vermilion.
Are you a king because you surround yourself with cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy.
Then it was well.
...
Therefore Yahweh says, concerning King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah...
He shall be buried like an ass - dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem. ¹⁴*

¹⁰ D.J.Wiseman (1956): The chronicles of the Chaldean Kings.; p 69

¹¹ Bel, meaning 'Lord', was the god named in contemporary accounts. It was the title given in Neo-Babylonian times to Marduk, the slayer of Tiamat (chaos) and the chief of the Babylonian pantheon.

¹² Jeremiah 25: 8-9

¹³ From the first exile to the first return was 62 years. Some other potentially relevant dates are: - Assyrian loss of Haran (their last stronghold) to Babylonian forces 609; first exile of Judeans to Babylon 598; destruction of temple and second exile 586; third exile 579; Persian conquest of Babylon 539; first return 536; second temple completed 515 or 516.

¹⁴ Jeremiah 22:13-16 & 18. The reference to Jehoiakim's burial suggests to some that he was assassinated. (See also Jeremiah 36:30 'his corpse shall be exposed to the scorching heat by day and the frost by night'). Would not these texts have been edited out had he had a state funeral? However the

Jeremiah took a group of temple priests and other leading citizens of Jerusalem to the Valley of Ben-Hinnon, to the place known as Topheth. Before Josiah's reforms this area had been used for child sacrifice to Molech¹⁵. Now, under Jehoiakim, child sacrifice had resumed and the people were once more worshipping 'the sun, the moon and all the host of heaven'. In Deuteronomy the people had been given a choice between life and death and urged to choose life by loving Yahweh their god, obeying him and worshipping him¹⁶. Jeremiah concluded "*Death is being chosen over life by the whole remnant that remains of this evil family*"¹⁷ and he prophesied that the day will come when the bones of the kings, princes, priests, prophets and people will be exhumed and scattered on the ground to dry out in this place of human sacrifice because they were '*loving the host of heaven, serving them and worshipping them*'. Ezekiel would later take the image of dry bones and create a poem of restitution, but here Jeremiah predicted that the bones, picked over by birds, will be an object of horror; '*all who pass by will hiss*'.

Jeremiah broke a pottery flask and said in Yahweh's name "*Just so will I break this city and this people...making this city like Topheth, unclean.*" As a result of this outing, Jeremiah was put in the stocks for a night, but when released he told the chief priest "*to Babylon you shall go; there you shall die, and there you shall be buried.*"¹⁸

Habakkuk (ca. 605)

It was not only Jeremiah who was concerned about the moral lapses of the country: the prophet Habakkuk was anguished by the injustice he saw around him and he too saw that Babylon, not Egypt, was the new power in the region. The book that now carries his name comprises three chapters. In the first two, the prophet complained about Yahweh's lack of action in response to the manifold wickedness of his fellow men and then, when this was answered, complained about the proposed punishment. These chapters are therefore likely to have been composed towards the end of the 7th century, when Babylon's intentions had become apparent, but before the siege of Jerusalem. The prophet began by calling on his god:

*Yahweh, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
...*

*The wicked surround the righteous
So that justice is perverted.*

Yahweh responded:

*Look at the nations, and see!
Be astonished! Be astounded!
For a work is being done in your days
that you would not have believed had you been told.
For I am rousing the Chaldeans –
that fierce and impetuous nation,
which marches through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own...*

author of II Kings 24:6, probably Baruch writing in exile, says that he '*rested with his ancestors*', implying that he was buried in the royal tomb.

¹⁵ II Kings 15-20 (DH)

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (part of a Reflection)

¹⁷ Jeremiah 7:30-8:3 (Jeremiah's prophesy)

¹⁸ Jeremiah 19:1-20:6 (Baruch's account of Jeremiah's prophesy). The passage includes a prediction that Yahweh would make the people eat their children during the siege – but Baruch was writing after the siege so this addition may have been included after the fact. The connection between this passage, the large reflection in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History on the one hand and the 'dry bones' vision from Ezekiel is another illustration the close relationships that existed amongst the biblical writers at this time.

But this response worried the prophet, who saw the Chaldean Babylonians as themselves oppressive and cruel, so he responded to Yahweh, saying:

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot look on wrongdoing.
Why do you tolerate the treacherous,
and are silent whilst the wicked swallow those more righteous than themselves?*

He saw the Babylonia like a fisherman, living in luxury from excessive catches and asked

*Is he to keep on emptying his net,
destroying nations without mercy?¹⁹*

But Yahweh answered that justice will come in the end: -

*“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it!”
For there is still a vision of the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
Although it is slow in coming, wait for it.
It will come, it will not delay.
See, he whose soul is not upright shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by faith.²⁰*

This last verse will be used by St Paul and the writer of Hebrews to support the doctrine of ‘justification by faith’.²¹ However, in the context of the Habakkuk poem, the verse was part of Yahweh’s answer to the prophet’s question, “*why are you silent whilst the wicked swallow those more righteous than themselves?*” It contrasted the ultimate downfall of the ‘wicked’ insatiable Chaldean Babylon with survival of the ‘righteous’ victim, Judah.²² Yahweh continued:

*Moreover, wealth is treacherous;
the arrogant do not endure.
They open their throats wide as Sheol;
like Death they never have enough.²³*

The prophet reflected on the meaning of Yahweh’s answer in a series of ‘Woe’ sayings in which individual wickedness is seen in parallel with the wrong doing of nations. His warning went out to both nations and individuals who profit through extortion and unjust gain: -

*“Woe to you who build a town by bloodshed,
and found a city on iniquity!”
It is not from Yahweh of Armies that peoples labour for a necessary trifle,
and nations weary themselves for a required emptiness.
For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh,
as the waters fill the sea²⁴.*

In the end justice could only come from Yahweh, not from foreign idols:

¹⁹ Habakkuk 1: 2 & 4b & 5-6 & 13 & 17

²⁰ Habakkuk 2:2-4

²¹ Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 & Hebrews 10:38-39

²² Sweeney (1992)

²³ That personified Death opens its throat insatiably to consume the living is an image that can also be found in the ancient Canaanite Baal myth. ‘Now Baal will descend into the throat of El’s son Death.... Baal must enter inside him; must go down into his mouth’. Stories from Ancient Canaan (Coogan, 1978) p 107

²⁴ This couplet is echoed in the ‘Peaceful nation’ poem of Isaiah 11. If Habakkuk was quoting Isaiah, then Isaiah 11:1-9 would be the 8th century Isaiah of Jerusalem. If Isaiah was quoting Habakkuk, then the Isaiah poem would be part of the 3rd Isaiah collection. There are arguments in favour of both hypotheses.

*Woe to you who say to the wood, "Wake up!"
and to the silent stone, "Rouse yourself!"
Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated.
There is no breath in it at all.*

*But Yahweh is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him²⁵*

The third chapter of Habakkuk took the form of a song complete with instructions for the accompanying music. There are differing opinions as to whether it was authored by the same prophet who was responsible for the rest of Habakkuk. It was not included in the 1QpHab, the Habakkuk scroll uncovered in Qumran²⁶.

The song began "*Eloah came out of Teman; the Holy out of Paran.*" Eloah is an unusual word for the God which otherwise occurs almost exclusively in the book of Job - a book which also has associations with Teman, a centre of wisdom literature. The mention of places, together with the unusual divine name, suggest that this poem may originally have come from outside Judah.

In the song, terrifying powers over creation were ascribed to Eloah. Pestilence went before him and burning coals were at his feet; he drove the nations apart; he scattered mountains; he went to war for the salvation of his people. As for the prophet, he ended by saying:

*I wait quietly for the day of calamity
to come upon the people who attack us.
Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vine;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
even so will I rejoice in Yahweh -
will exult in the Elohim of my salvation.
The Lord Yahweh is my strength.
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
and makes me walk upon high places.*

The name Lord Yahweh is used extensively by Ezekiel of whom Habakkuk was probably a contemporary: outside of these books it is very rare. The reference in the last line to the 'high places' is not a reference to the illegitimate shrines condemned by the Deuteronomists but now re-instated, but rather a part of the metaphor introduced by the 'feet of the deer'; its use here may be a quotation from psalm 18 or II Samuel 22²⁷.

In both poem and song, the author is depicted as waiting for an imminent disaster to be wrought on his people by an angry god. They may have been brought together by a later editor as a result of this common theme.

Nebuchadrezzar's blitzkrieg

Nebuchadrezzar marched south in 604. As Habakkuk feared, he did indeed '*keep on destroying nations without mercy*'. But Babylon was not really interested in Judah: Egypt was the target. The purpose of the march was to clear a way to Egypt through her vassals. All the states on the sea route to Egypt were methodically attacked and their abler citizens exiled.

Was Judah to be depopulated? Judah sent out appeals to Necho reminding him of his treaty obligations, but Necho did not respond. The disastrous battle of Carchemish may have cost him dearly and he needed time to replenish his resources. Judah was in peril: Jehoiakim's response was to declare a fast.

²⁵ Habakkuk 2:12-14 & 19-20

²⁶ Sweeney (1992)

²⁷ The same line recurs in psalm 18:33 (or 34) and in II Samuel 22:34 (David's thanks giving) which is a parallel to the psalm.

Jeremiah: The book of 604

Jeremiah engaged his friend Baruch to write an anthology of the poems, confessions and sermons of the first part of his ministry and to read it in the temple.²⁸ Jeremiah could not be present at the reading as he was banned from the temple precincts. It was read in the ‘*hearing of all the people*’ in the chamber of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, secretary of state under Josiah. Gemariah’s son was at the reading and he decided it was important enough for the contents to be reported to the senior members of the civil service who, at the time, were in conference in the secretary’s rooms in the palace. The words were considered so important that they ordered a private reading. When this was completed, they were alarmed: they decided first that the King himself would have to hear the scroll read, and secondly that the material was so incendiary that both Jeremiah and Baruch should go into hiding. A senior scribe, Jehudi, took the scroll to the king and read it to him in the presence of his officials

The book began with an image taken from Hosea – that of Yahweh’s marriage to his people, and Yahweh’s pained puzzlement at their faithlessness – but it developed into a criticism of the leadership.

*I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to Yahweh,
the first fruits of his harvest.*

...

*What wrong did your fathers find in me that they strayed far from me,
chasing after worthless things, becoming worthless themselves?*

...

*You entered my land and you defiled it;
you made my heritage an abomination.
The priests did not ask, “Where is Yahweh?”
Those who dealt with the law did not know me.
The rulers broke from me.
The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols²⁹*

Jeremiah stated that the crisis faced by the state was the direct consequence of the rulers’ betrayal of the covenant with Yahweh. Using Hosea’s image again, he said: -

*Look up to the bare heights and see!
Is there any place where you have not been laid?
You have sat by roadside, waiting for lovers
- like a nomad in the wilderness.³⁰*

Not only had they whored after other gods, they had also piled ‘*oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit.*’ Yahweh had no choice. He would ‘*refine and test*’ them unless they repented:

*People of Judah,
inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Circumcise yourselves to Yahweh,
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
or my anger will go forth like fire,
and burn with no one to quench it.³¹*

Jeremiah’s insight was that although Yahweh as a father was compelled to punish his wayward children, he would also suffer with them. Punishment would come from a distant land because Judah

²⁸ An extended version of this is probably the basis of Jeremiah 1-20. It may have incorporated earlier material whose historical context predates 604.

²⁹ Jeremiah 2:2b-3 & 5b & 7b –8

³⁰ Jeremiah 3:2

³¹ Jeremiah 4:4 Note the connection with the reflections in Deuteronomy 10:16 (‘Circumcise the foreskins of your heart.’)

had rebelled against Yahweh. They had brought punishment on themselves;

*For my people are foolish,
they do not know me.
They are stupid children,
that have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but have not learnt how to do good.³²*

The reader of these verses was left in some doubt, perhaps deliberately, as to who was intended to be the speaker of these verses. Was it a personification of Judah; was it the prophet, or was it Yahweh as both the disciplining father and the empathising parent? The anguished voice of the prophet follows, quoting and reversing the priestly story of creation.

*I looked on the earth and it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked at the mountains and they were quaking,
and to the hills; they shook to and fro.
I looked and there was no one at all,
- even the birds of the air had fled.
I looked and the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities lay in ruins³³*

Later there was a further passage that picked up the idea that Yahweh suffers with Judah at the same time as punishing her:

*But I said, "Truly this is my punishment,
and I must bear it."
My tent is destroyed,
and all my ropes are torn apart.
My children have gone from me.
They are no more.
There is no one to spread my tent again,
and to set up my curtains.
For the shepherds are stupid:
they do not talk with Yahweh.
Therefore, they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.³⁴*

Towards the end, the book addressed the royal family. It seems that Nebuchadrezzar's policy of clearing the countryside and even the desert was being implemented with the Negev shut-up and rural Judah taken. In this situation there was little left for the royal family to govern, so: -

*Say to the king and the queen mother: "Take a lowly seat,
for your beautiful crown has come down from your head."
The towns of the Negev are shut up with no one to open them;
all Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile³⁵.
Lift up your eyes and see those who come from the north.
Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock?
...*

³² Jeremiah 4:22

³³ Jeremiah 4: 23-26 referring to Genesis 1. Jeremiah may not have approved P's theology, but he certainly knew it. P did not post-date Jeremiah as was once held by some commentators; this text shows that P, or at least Genesis 1, was not an exilic work.

³⁴ Jeremiah 10:19b -21

³⁵ Babylon was capturing and exiling people from Judah's neighbours in preparation for a raid on Egypt. The same policy would probably have involved restricting Jerusalem's sphere of control to Jerusalem's immediate surroundings with substantial loss of territory. Hence 'where is your flock?' The Negev was under direct Egyptian control as far north as Rapha.

*And if you say in your heart, “Why have these things come upon me?”
It is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up,
and your rear violated.*

*Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?
Can you do good?*³⁶

It was winter, and the room where the book was read was warmed by a fire. As each section of the scroll was read, the king took out a knife, cut off that section and cast it in the fire – despite the protests of Gemaliah and his colleagues. The narrator of these events, presumably Baruch, remarked that the king was not alarmed by this prophecy; nor did he tear his clothes as Josiah had done when he had listened whilst another book, the book so beloved by Jeremiah, had been read.³⁷

In hiding, Jeremiah dictated another scroll to Baruch, containing all the words of the first scroll and ‘*many similar words*’ besides. The new scroll was probably the origin of much of the material now to be found in the first 20 chapters of Jeremiah. Amongst those chapters is an interesting comment on the ark:

*In those days, says Yahweh, they shall no longer say, “the ark of the covenant of Yahweh”
It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.*³⁸

It appears that it was missed, but that Jeremiah wished that the people would stop mentioning it. Why? Had it been moved? One theory is that it was moved by the priests to prevent it being contaminated by the ‘abominable things’ that Manasseh permitted in the Temple. But in the Deuteronomic History, the author wrote as if the Ark was in the temple, and he may have been writing only a few years earlier. Was it moved in anticipation of the Babylonian invasion Jeremiah was prophesying? If so, where was it taken? Did Jeremiah know? There is a report in the second book of Maccabees (late second century BCE) that when Jeremiah was eventually forced to leave for Egypt around 570 BCE, he took the Ark with him and hid it in a cave declaring the place shall remain secret “*until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy*”³⁹

The Babylonian Campaign against Egypt

In 604, Ashkelon and Gaza were destroyed and their populations removed to Babylonia where their expatriate communities were still to be found a century later. Nebuchadrezzar returned in 603 and cleared the last of the philistine city-states away to exile, but still Babylon did not attack Egypt. Jehoiakim was not sufficiently impressed to feel the need to send tribute to Nebuchadrezzar until the emperor appeared on Judah’s borders with a significantly larger army in 601. Power in the Levant had changed significantly in just 4 years. In 605 all of the coastal Levant had been under the control of Egypt. Now it was under the control of Babylon. Events were moving fast, and Jehoiakim was slow to recognise the new reality.

In 601, Nebuchadrezzar decided he was ready to attack Egypt.

The battle of Migdol (601)

Jeremiah advised the Egyptians to pack their bags and be ready to leave for exile. But the Egyptians had made other preparations. A line of forts protected Egypt stretching from an outpost near Raphia (still a border town today) through to the main garrison town of Migdol and beyond. Similar arrangements had been made to prevent a flanking inland attack. Necho would not be taken by surprise as he had been at Carchemish. His front-line army was supported in depth. He even had a garrison of Greek mercenaries in place protecting the western approach to the Delta. Well warned of Nebuchadrezzar’s approach, the main Egyptian army met the Babylonians at Migdol. A massive battle followed and great losses were inflicted. The Babylonians were forced to withdraw and Egypt moved north to re-occupy Gaza.

Jeremiah had predicted a Babylonian victory on this occasion, as he did on every occasion

³⁶ Jeremiah 13:18-23

³⁷ Jeremiah 36

³⁸ Jeremiah 3:16.

³⁹ II Maccabees 2:4-8. There is an Ethiopian tradition that the Ark was taken to the Judean temple on Elephantine Island and later moved Lake Tana.

when Babylon took to the field. But he was wrong this time and wrong again when he later predicted the destruction of the Arab kingdom of Kedar⁴⁰

So heavy was the loss of men and equipment that Nebuchadrezzar's army was rendered inoperative for a year, or as the Babylonian Chronicler put it: -

In the fifth year, the king of Akkad (i.e. Babylon) stayed in his own land and gathered together his chariots and horses.⁴¹

Babylon could only manage a few token raids on small nearby states in 600 and 599. Jehoiakim decided that Babylon was now so damaged that he could afford once more to withhold tribute.

Since the Egyptian armies had turned back the Babylonians in 601, the main focus of Necho's military effort had switched to the South. A fleet of 18 or more vessels had been sent up river, complete with horses and possibly chariots. The outcome was indecisive: Ethiopian forces continued to harass the southern border.⁴²

The first exile (598-597)

Jehoiakim died sometime in 598 at the age of 36 and the kingship passed nominally to his eighteen-year-old son Jehoiachin. There are a number of alternative accounts of Jehoiakim's death – he died naturally (II Kings 24:6), he died later in Babylon (II Chronicles 36:6), or he was assassinated on instructions from Nebuchadrezzar (Josephus: Antiquities 10.6.3), but nowhere is it said that he was buried like an ass outside the gates of Jerusalem - as Jeremiah had predicted.

The young king had no real opportunity to reign, for Nebuchadrezzar's army turned up outside the gates of Jerusalem in December 598. Nebuchadrezzar probably counted on Egyptian involvement elsewhere and relied on surprise and speed to keep Egypt out of the fray, for his army was still not strong enough to take on the Egyptians again. It may have been a gamble, but that was Nebuchadrezzar's style.

Just as had happened 100 years before, Jerusalem was put under siege by a Mesopotamian ruler frustrated by his inability to invade Egypt, and thus attracted by the easier fruit that hung nearby. And just as she had done on that earlier occasion, Judah had provoked the attack by humiliating the larger power by a stoppage of tribute. In this instance, however, the royal family gave themselves up early in 597 and they, together with 3,023 upper class citizens and a heavy load of tribute were dispatched to Babylon - where they were treated reasonably well.

The Babylonians put the uncle of the young exiled prince, the third son of Josiah, on the throne. They gave him the throne name of Zedekiah. A catastrophe for Judah had been averted by her prompt capitulation.

Once the predicted punishment of exile had begun, Jeremiah's focus changed. Now he reminded the people that the punishment was only to be temporary. Yahweh still loved his people and would take them back. Jeremiah's message to the departing exiles was one of encouragement. He told them Yahweh had said: -

*Again I will build you, Virgin Israel,
and you shall be built!
Again you shall take your tambourines,
and go out to dance with joy.
Again you shall plant vineyards on Samaria's hillsides;
and the farmers shall enjoy the fruit.*

....

*Set up road markers for yourself,
make yourselves signposts.
Take note of the highway,
the road by which you go.
Return, virgin Israel,*

⁴⁰ Jeremiah 46: 19 ff & 49: 28 ff

⁴¹ Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings: D.J. Wiseman (1956): p 71.

⁴² Redford (1992); p 463

*return to these your cities.*⁴³

Jeremiah may have had high hopes for the new king, Zedekiah who, like Jeremiah, was a member of the 'Babylonian Party' in Jerusalem. At least they both believed, albeit for different reasons, that the future of Judah lay with a close alliance to Babylon.

*See, the days are coming, says Yahweh, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch. He shall reign as king and prosper, and do what is just and righteous in the land. In his days Judah will be saved – Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "Yahweh is our Righteousness."*⁴⁴

The Hebrew for 'Yahweh is our Righteousness' can be shortened to 'Zedekiah'.

In the years after the first exile, it became clear that the price Babylon had paid in the Egyptian campaign was heavy indeed. Nebuchadrezzar could only just resist a rebellion by Elam; dissatisfaction grew in the army; in 596 Nebuchadrezzar could only manage a one-month tour of inspection around Carchemish. There was a rebellion in Babylon in 595 that was only put down with much bloodshed.

These factors encouraged a faction of Zedekiah's court to actively consider revolt. Zedekiah may have heard Jeremiah, but he was too weak to oppose his counsellors however much he may have wanted to. Jeremiah illustrated this folly by wearing a yoke. In the temple he was confronted by the prophet Hananiah who claimed that Yahweh would bring back the exiles and the treasure in two years.

'So be it! May Yahweh do so', responded Jeremiah 'But listen now to the word that I speak;

...The prophets that preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for any prophet that promises peace, only when the word of that prophet comes true it will be known that Yahweh has sent that prophet.'

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah and broke it in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says Yahweh: this is how I will break the yoke of king Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years"

At this the prophet Jeremiah went away and made himself a yoke of iron, saying that Yahweh had broken wooden bars only to have iron ones forged in their place.

"Listen, Hananiah, Yahweh has not sent you, but you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says Yahweh: 'I am going to send you off the face of the earth.' Within this year you will be dead"

And he was.⁴⁵

It was not only in Jerusalem that hopes for a quick end to the exile were entertained. Such ideas were apparently buoying up the hopes of the exiles themselves. Jeremiah sent them a letter, carried by Elasah, one of Shaphan's sons, and another Gemariah, the son of Hilkiyah – who may have been Hilkiyah the high priest. These two were on a mission to Babylon on behalf of King Zedekiah and agreed to carry and read Jeremiah's letter. Jeremiah wrote: -

Thus says Yahweh of Armies, the god of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare....'

⁴³ Jeremiah 31: 4 – 5 & 21 - 22

⁴⁴ Jeremiah 23: 5 – 6. See also 31:16 for an almost identical text.

⁴⁵ Or at least that was what was recorded in Jeremiah 28: 6 ff

'Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name... Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

*'As for me, I know the plans I have for you... plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. If, when you search for me, you seek me with all your heart, then you will find me.'*⁴⁶

Jeremiah got into trouble for this letter; complaints were sent back to Jerusalem that the high priest was failing in his duty. Had he not been appointed to put into the stocks such '*madmen who play the prophet*'?

But Jeremiah remained convinced that the future lay with the Babylonian exiles, and not with those who remained in Jerusalem or who had fled to Egypt.

A conference of the leaders of Judah, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Moab and Ammon took place in Jerusalem in 594 to discuss rebellion, but without Egypt, then in the first year of a new ruler, little came of it – save possibly two things. One was what must have been a rather uncomfortable interview for Zedekiah as he was taken to Nebuchadnezzar's camp to account for his actions⁴⁷. The other may have been the popular expectation that in times of crisis some form of support could be expected from Edom. The disinterested new ruler of Egypt was Psammetichos II, the son of Necho II, and his first priority was to sort out the Kushite (Ethiopian) threat on his southern border. Babylon was still weak from the defeat Egypt had inflicted on her in 600, and so questions concerning the northern border could wait awhile.

Egypt's problems in the South were resolved in 593 when the new Pharaoh launched a substantial expedition south from Elephantine. The Egyptians burnt Napata, the Kushite capital, took 4200 soldiers captive and established permanent garrisons south of the first cataract. The victory was complete; it was the end of the Kushite threat.

Now Pharaoh could give his attention to the north.

Ezekiel is called to preach (593)

The Judeans in Babylonia may well have considered themselves to be the leadership in exile. The Judean royal family was there. The young king was under a form of house arrest. But he was taking Jeremiah's advice. By 593, the 23-year-old Jehoiachin had five sons for whom accommodation and supplies were provided by the Babylonian state. The majority of the priests and the scribal class were there too. Ezekiel was amongst the Aaronite temple-priests exiled in 597. He preached from where he settled in exile – at Tel-abib on the Kebar canal, not far from Nippur and about 150 kms SE of Babylon.

Ezekiel made use of a number of special terms for Israel, God, and himself. His concept of Israel was no longer a geographic one; that Israel had been dispersed by the Assyrians; and Judah was the rebellious state whose end, he considered, was imminent. Ezekiel's Israel was a spiritual Israel – the people of Israel were Yahweh's people even if they had no state and no land – even if they were principally in exile. Ezekiel generally called his god 'lord Yahweh' (*adonai Yahweh*).⁴⁸ This appellation is rare outside of Ezekiel, being used only occasionally by other prophets, in the prayers attributed to early leaders and in some psalms⁴⁹. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet himself is referred to as 'Son of Man' when addressed by Yahweh. (This should not be equated with the Aramaic 'son of man' used by Jesus and others in the 1st century CE as a self-deprecating way of saying 'I'.) Here it was used simply as an appropriate form of address from Yahweh to his mortal servant; 'Man' or 'Mortal' also seem satisfactory translations.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Jeremiah 29: 4 - 14. See also Deuteronomy 4:29 for the same idea and similar phraseology.

⁴⁷ Oxford; (Coogan, Michael D. (ed), 1998) p 348-353 describes these years.

⁴⁸ 'Lord Yahweh' (*adonai Yahweh*) is usually written in English translations as 'the Lord GOD' and therefore easily confused with 'Yahweh Elohim' usually written as 'the LORD God' (as used for example in Genesis 2 & 3)

⁴⁹ The prayer references are Abraham (Gen. 15:2), Moses (Deut. 3:22 & 9:26), Joshua (7:7), David (II Sam 7:20) and Solomon (I Kings 8:53). Ezekiel uses Lord Yahweh 217 times; by comparison Isaiah incorporates Lord Yahweh 25 times and Jeremiah and Amos just 14 times each.

⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the Hebrew bible, the 'son of man' phrase was only used in poetry – in the second part

He had a special vocabulary that differed somewhat from that found in the other prophets⁵¹. He did not use the key theological concept of *'hesed'* (loving kindness and mercy) – although it was used by Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets as well as prolifically in the psalms⁵². On the other hand, he was a keen user of the abusive term *'gillulim'*, which is often translated as 'idols': but it literally means 'lumps of excrement' Whilst other authors also used terms like *'elil'* or *'atsab'* for idols, Ezekiel stuck exclusively to the one word. Idolatry was a key issue for Ezekiel – almost four out of every ten references to idols in the bible were made by Ezekiel.

The book carrying his name shows extensive connections with the prophetic work of Jeremiah and with the priestly writings, especially the Holiness Code. The phrase "*Thus you shall know that I am Yahweh*", repeated at the end of most episodes in Ezekiel, is a more extensive version of the phrase "*I am Yahweh*" that ends so many of the commands in the Holiness Code. It was noted earlier - in the 'Introduction to the Epics' - that Ezekiel appeared to have access to a version of P that was not yet merged with J and E. It was argued there that lines from Ezekiel 20 depended on lines from Exodus 2 and 6 read continuously without the intervening J and E material. In this passage Ezekiel wrote

*Thus says Yahweh God: On the day when I chose Israel, I raised my hand to the offspring of the house of Jacob—making myself known to them in the land of Egypt—I raised my hand to them, saying, 'I am Yahweh your god'. On that day I raised my hand to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt.*⁵³

The phrase *'making myself known to them'* (from the Septuagint's version of Ezekiel) matches exactly the P account of this event in Exodus 6:2⁵⁴ and P's phrase, "*I will bring you out to the land that I raised my hand to give*" (Exodus 6:8) matches Ezekiel 20:6 quoted above. When, in the same chapter, Ezekiel referred to the *'land of sojournings'*, he was again using a P expression from Exodus.⁵⁵ In the Holiness Code, death by the sword, famine and pestilence was threatened if Israel disobeys Yahweh's commandments and worships other gods, and Ezekiel prophesied that these things will come to pass in his oracle against the Mountains of Israel. A particularly close parallel can be found where the Holiness Code threatened: -

“...and I will cast your corpses upon the corpses of your idols (*gillulim*); and my soul will abhor you. And I will lay your cities waste, and make your sanctuaries deserted.

for in Ezekiel 6:5-6 we read

*...and I will cast the corpses of the people of Israel before their idols (*gillulim*); and I will scatter your bones round about your altars. Wherever you dwell your cities shall be laid waste and your sanctuaries deserted.*⁵⁶

The sentences are not always exact matches, suggesting that the Holiness Code was recalled from memory rather than copied from scroll to scroll. Nevertheless, the influence of the Holiness Code on Ezekiel's thought is clear.

of a pair of parallel verses in which the first half generally referred to 'man'. It occurs extensively in the Book of Enoch.

⁵¹ Lawrence Boadt in his ABD article on Ezekiel estimates that there are 130 words used exclusively or overwhelmingly in Ezekiel.

⁵² Other words commonly used by the pre-exilic prophets but not by Ezekiel include *da'at* for the knowledge of god, *yasar* and *saddiq* for the upright and righteous persons, *'ahab* or *raham* for the love of god and *barak* – to bless

⁵³ Ezekiel 20:5-6. To 'raise one's hand to someone' probably implies making a formal commitment – like 'shaking hands' today.

⁵⁴ The phrase 'made himself known' comes from the Septuagint and matches exactly the phrase used in Ezekiel. Translations based on the MT have to confront the problem that the last words of verse 25 in that version are 'and Elohim knew.' Knew what? Translators often feel the need to add a word or change the verb – or both; thus the NSRV has 'and God took notice of them' and the NIV has 'and (God) was concerned about them.' The phrase 'make myself known' is picked up in Exodus 6:3 (even in the MT) so that it looks as if the MT version of Exodus 2:25 contains a scribal error that possibly arose after the Priestly text was broken up.

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 20:38 and Exodus 6:4

⁵⁶ Ezekiel 6:5-6 and Leviticus 26: 30-31

The connections between Jeremiah and Ezekiel are prolific; many will be picked up as the careers of both prophets are traced in this chapter and the next. The messages of these prophets appear in many instances to be coordinated, suggesting that the two prophets corresponded – or at least were well aware of each other’s work, even though separated by exile. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were sent to a stubborn people who would not listen; both dealt with the issue of false prophets; both spoke of Judah and Samaria as wanton sisters, a metaphor that Ezekiel expanded into a lengthy allegory; and both argued that a revolt against Babylon was a revolt against Yahweh.⁵⁷ Both prophets repudiated the J theme that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children.

Ezekiel was an extreme prophet. Other prophets dramatized their oracles with signs – Jeremiah wore a yoke, Hosea married a prostitute – but Ezekiel took this to a level that, to the modern mind, seems to verge on insanity. He lay on his side for 390 days, ate food cooked on excrement, clawed out a hole in the wall of his house and ignored the death of his wife. He found Yahweh’s use of him as a prophet so overwhelming that after his first vision he sat stunned – the Hebrew implies ‘appalled’ – for seven days. His commission struck him dumb so that for several years he could speak no words save those that Yahweh gave him to speak. All of this is so suggestive of mental illness that some readers have attempted a clinical diagnosis. Nevertheless, the book also states that the elders of the community came regularly to consult him. Some regarded him as being in touch with God and they sought God’s word through him; others may have come to be entertained.

The book of Ezekiel as we have it today is well structured – scarcely the product of a disordered mind. In parts it is carefully tabulated with dates showing the progressive unfolding of Yahweh’s plan; all but one date being related to the exile of Jehoiachin⁵⁸. The book begins and ends with visions of the Glory of Yahweh. It starts with a visionary tour of the defiled Jerusalem temple and ends with a similar tour of an envisioned new and pure temple. At its centre the author observed the destruction of Jerusalem, with all the text before it dedicated to explaining the cause of Yahweh’s wrath and all the text after it explaining Yahweh’s grace and purpose in leading his purified people back. Chapters 1 to 24, oracles written before the fall of Jerusalem, were oracles of doom, warning ‘Israel’ of her fate and explaining its cause; chapters 33 to 48, oracles written after Jerusalem’s destruction, were oracles of hope. In the centre of the book, as was traditional in prophetic works, were placed a collection of oracles against foreign nations (chapters 25 to 32); these were composed during the siege of Jerusalem. In the first half of the book, Ezekiel was dumb – only able to utter the oracles of Yahweh: in the second half, his speech had been restored and he can speak for himself of hope restored.

Scholars have varied in their views as to how much of the book is due to the work of the prophet, and how much the creation of later editors. There are those who have argued that only the ecstatic trance material truly originated from the prophet, but the current consensus seems to be that most of the material in the book stems, at least in its original oral form, from the man who prophesied in Exile from year 593 BCE to around 568, although the material may have been written up by a disciple.⁵⁹

In the year 593 Ezekiel received his calling.

*It was in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin that the word of Yahweh came to Ezekiel ben Buzi in Chaldea (Babylonia) by the river Chebar*⁶⁰.

There he has an extraordinary vision: -

I saw a storm wind coming from the north, a vast cloud surrounded by flashes of fire and brilliant light; and within was radiant brass, glowing in the heart of flames.

This is similar to Jeremiah’s early vision of ‘*a cauldron on a fire, fanned by the wind, tilted from the north*’. Moshe Greenberg⁶¹ points out that in July, when Ezekiel’s vision occurred, that part of Mesopotamia suffers from violent dust storms born on strong north winds. The word “*hashmal*”, here translated as ‘radiant brass’ and sometimes rendered as ‘amber’, is of uncertain meaning. A similar

⁵⁷ References are: stubborn unhearing people (Jeremiah 1:18; Ezekiel 3:8); false prophets (Jeremiah 14:14; Ezekiel 12:24; 13–17); sisters in infidelity (Jeremiah 3:6–11; Ezekiel 23:1–27); revolt against Babylon (Ezekiel 17:11–21; Jeremiah 27:8–10).

⁵⁸ Jehoiachin was exiled just a few months after coming to the throne.

⁵⁹ Boadt (1992) Book of Ezekiel in ABD

⁶⁰ Ezekiel 1:2–3

⁶¹ Ezekiel 1–20; (Greenberg, 1983); p 42

word in Akkadian is used to describe a god's radiant appearance⁶².



In the cloud he saw four living beings, each with four faces – of man, lion, ox and eagle – and four wings with human hands; their legs were straight with calves' heels that glittered. The creatures were accompanied by four sparkling wheels, each a wheel within a wheel, the rims of which were full of eyes. The creatures emanated fire and lightning. The creatures moved at the behest of the spirit, (Hebrew "ruah"), and the wheels moved with the beings. All moved freely in three dimensions whilst never turning. The wings made a noise which Ezekiel imagined to be like the thunder of *Shaddai*. When they halted a vault appeared above their heads which he described as follows:

*Above the vault over their heads was something with the appearance of a sapphire in the shape of a throne and high above all, upon the throne, a form in human likeness. What I saw looked, from the waist upwards, like glowing brass with fire around and within. And from the waist downwards, I saw what looked like radiating fire. Like the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day was the radiance all around. It was like the appearance of the glory of Yahweh.*⁶³

The living beings thus described had some similarities to the creatures which formed part of the mercy seat above the ark of the covenant, and whose images formed part of the thrones of gods and kings in the Ancient Near East. (See, for example, the detail from an ivory decoration found in Megiddo, dated 14th to 12th century BCE, and the coin showing a god seated on a winged wheel, 4th century BCE Phoenician).



The vision of glory thus described was full of phrases such as "appearing like...", but these are not necessarily to be taken as indicators of imprecision. The prophet may have been saying that the vision appeared exactly like 'the form of a man', but that he knew it was not a man.

Later, some early rabbis were sufficiently concerned by the imagery of the first chapter of Ezekiel as to ban its use in synagogues – or for the private reading of anyone under the age of 30!⁶⁴ Ezekiel heard a voice, saying:

'Take to heart all that I say to you; listen carefully, then go to your exiled people, and speak to them. Say to them, "Thus says the Lord Yahweh"⁶⁵; whether they listen or not.'

*Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of Yahweh rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling; it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them... The spirit lifted me up and carried me away; I went in bitterness, my spirit angry, the strong hand of Yahweh being upon me.*⁶⁶

This passage from Ezekiel 3 has become separated from Ezekiel 1 which it originally followed.

The intervening material is the vision of the scroll. In this vision Yahweh gave Ezekiel a scroll to eat. And it tasted in his mouth as sweet as honey. The image is reminiscent of Jeremiah's remark "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart".

⁶²Oxford Bible Commentary quotes Greenberg as a reference for this assertion.

⁶³ Ezekiel 1:26–28

⁶⁴ The Living world of the Old Testament; (Anderson, 1988); p 433.

⁶⁵ 'Lord Yahweh' in a divine name used extensively by Ezekiel but rare elsewhere; it does however occur in Habakkuk as noted above.

⁶⁶ Ezekiel 3:10-14

In his commissioning as a prophet, Yahweh explained that the people will not listen to Ezekiel, because they are defiant and obstinate. But he was advised not to be overawed by them, for they were a tribe of rebels. Seven days later, just as he was recovering from the shock, Ezekiel was commissioned to be a lookout for Israel with the warning that if he fails to pass on the word of Yahweh then he, Ezekiel, will be held responsible for the consequences.⁶⁷ Ezekiel went into his house, and Yahweh bound him and struck him dumb, save when he was relaying Yahweh's words.

Israel Changes Sides (593-589)

In 593, Babylonian officials were well aware of the talk of revolt amongst their western vassals. The previous winter, Nebuchadrezzar had summoned Zedekiah to account for his actions in organising the 594 conference of potentially rebellious vassals (Judah, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Moab and Ammon). But that was all Nebuchadrezzar appears to have done.

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, may have been concerned that this talk of rebellion would lead to actual rebellion, with potentially disastrous results for Judah. He foresaw another and more protracted siege. Just as Jeremiah had illustrated the importance of obedience by wearing Babylon's yoke, so Ezekiel felt called to portray the siege of Jerusalem that would result from open rebellion. His instructions came from a vision in which he heard the voice of Yahweh saying:

Son of man, take a brick and place it in front of you. Inscribe a city on it, Jerusalem; put siege works against it, build a siege wall against it, cast up a ramp against it; set camps against it, and plant battering rams against it all around. Then take an iron pan and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; turn your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege with you besieging it.⁶⁸

The siege was to precede the punishment of Judah. Ezekiel acted out the punishment of Israel and Judah, first by lying on his left side for 390 days (the Septuagint has 190 days) representing the years of exile of Israel, then on his right side for 40 days representing the years of exile of Judah⁶⁹. He ate limited rations, baked bread on dung, and drank limited water – imitating the limited food of besieged citizens. Throughout this time, he was dumb and immobile. (He used an ingenious argument based on the Holiness Code to persuade Yahweh to allow him to use animal dung rather than human excrement for baking the bread)

Then he shaved his head and divided the hair into three piles. One pile was burnt, one was destroyed with the sword and one was scattered to the wind and chased with a sword. But from this last some was rescued and put into the hem of his garment, but even from these some were burnt. All these acts were symbolic of the punishment that would befall Judah and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem would be subjected to famine, plague, wild beasts, and the death of children - the punishments prescribed in the Holiness Code for breaking Yahweh's covenant in Leviticus 26.

Clap your hands and stamp your foot, and say 'aach' over the vile abominations of the people of Israel, who shall fall by the sword, by famine and by plague.

Those far off shall die of plague,

Those nearby shall fall by the sword;

Those who remain besieged shall die of famine.

Thus I will exhaust my anger upon them. And you shall know that I am Yahweh, when their slain lie among their shit around their altars.

*On every high hill,
on every mountaintop,
under every green tree,*

under every leafy terebinth –

wherever they offered pleasing odour to all their lumps of excrement – I will stretch out my hand against them, and make the land desolate and waste, throughout all their settlements,

...

⁶⁷ Ezekiel 3: 17-21 and 33:7-9

⁶⁸ Ezekiel 4:1-3a

⁶⁹ Ezekiel 4:1-8. Ezekiel's prophesy of a forty-year exile differs from Jeremiah's seventy years, but may have been nearer the mark. Jerusalem was destroyed and the second exile took place in 586. The first returnees left Babylon in 536 – fifty years later.

*Then they shall know that I am Yahweh*⁷⁰

Babylon did not seem that much of a threat to the officials of Judah. In 592, they were more interested in Egypt and the demands of her new Pharaoh.

With his southern border finally and decisively secured, Psammetichos turned his attention to the north. He organised an expedition as far as Tyre and Sidon. The cities of Phoenicia agreed to continue the age-old supply of timber to Egypt. Some consider that a measure of military cooperation between Egypt and Judah was agreed; perhaps during a state visit to Judah that Psammetichos may have made in 592⁷¹. Zedekiah was unable to resist the pressure to switch his loyalties and form a treaty with Egypt instead of Babylon.

Such a switch would have been vigorously opposed by Jeremiah who consistently advocated submission to Babylon as he believed it was part of Yahweh's plan. Moreover, the switch involved a breach of a treaty oath made in Yahweh's name. Judah was not the only vassal state to switch sides; Tyre, Sidon and Ammon did the same thing. The Egyptian tour of the Levantine coast went completely unopposed. Babylon let it happen. Both in exile and in Jerusalem there were those who hoped and believed that the exile would be short.

Jeremiah's attitude to Zedekiah changed with Zedekiah's breach of his treaty obligations to Babylon. He no longer saw him as the saviour of Judah. He had a vision of two baskets; one filled with very good figs and the other with very bad ones. The exiles in Babylon were like the good figs, for: -

"I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. ... I will give them a heart to know that I am Yahweh."

But

*"...King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt are like bad figs, so bad that they are uneatable. I shall make them a horror... until they are completely destroyed."*⁷²

In Tel-abib, shortly after spending many days on his side, the vision of the blazing figure returned to Ezekiel and he was transported in a vision to Jerusalem. He described what he saw in the court of the temple: -

...there, portrayed on the wall all around, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome animals, and all the shit-balls of the house of Israel. Before them stood seventy of the elders of the house of Israel. Each had his censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was ascending.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his shrine of shit? For they say, 'Yahweh does not see us, Yahweh has forsaken the land.'" ...

Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of Yahweh; women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz. Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these."

And he brought me into the inner court of the house of Yahweh; there, at the entrance of the temple of Yahweh, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of Yahweh, and their faces toward the east, prostrating themselves toward the east – to the sun.

*Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it not bad enough that the house of Judah commits the abominations done here? Must they fill the land with violence, and provoke my anger still further?"*⁷³

If this was a fair description of the temple at the time, it is clear that the reforms of Josiah had been quickly reversed and popular religion had reasserted its presence in the temple. It may also have been that this vision was prompted by Psammetichos' state visit to Judah, perhaps accompanied by Egyptian priests whose presence in the temple would have defiled Judah's covenant with Yahweh just as

⁷⁰ Ezekiel 6:11-14

⁷¹ R Althann: The article on Zedekiah in ABD

⁷² Jeremiah 24

⁷³ Ezekiel 8:10b – 18a

Psammetichos' visit would have broken Judah's treaty with Babylon. Ezekiel 11 probably records the continuation of the original vision with a difficult metaphor in which the city officials see themselves as choice morsels in the cooking pot of Jerusalem, for they were enjoying all the empty houses of the exiles. But, Yahweh says, they will be thrown out and their victims will be the chosen morsels.

Then, in a recapitulation of the Passover (today's Ezekiel 9), all the faithful, those who resisted the abominations, are given a mark and all the rest are slain by six avengers. The bodies of those slain in the temple were left there to defile it. Then (Chapter 10) '*above the heads of the winged creatures appeared something like a sapphire throne from which came an order to take coals from between the wheels of the chariot and scatter them over the city*'. Then the glory of Yahweh leaves the temple and rested over the winged creatures before rising from Jerusalem and halting on the mountain to the East.

Ezekiel told the exiles everything he had seen in the vision⁷⁴.

Another sign act was required of Ezekiel. This time he had to mimic a person escaping a siege. He packed his belongings as for exile, made a hole through the wall of his house and by night crawled out blindfolded. Later he explained the sign to the elders: Yahweh indicated that Zedekiah would shoulder his pack and go out by night through a hole in Jerusalem's wall; he would be brought to Babylon, although he could not see it because he would be blinded. Zedekiah would die in Babylon.⁷⁵ This need not have been a prophecy after the event, as some scholars suggest, since blinding was a standard punishment for breaking a covenant. Zedekiah had broken his Covenant with Babylon. As far as Ezekiel and Jeremiah were concerned, the rest was inevitable. Ezekiel spells it out in the voice of Yahweh: -

[The king of Babylon] took a prince of the royal line [Zedekiah] and made a treaty with him, putting him on oath... [Judah] became a humble kingdom, not raising itself up so that it might survive by keeping the treaty. But the prince rebelled against him and sent messengers to Egypt, asking for horses and a large army. Can such a man prosper?

...

He has made light of the oath he took by me and has violated the covenant I made with him.

...

I will cast my net over him, and he will be caught in its meshes, I will bring him to Babylon and bring him to judgement there, because he has broken faith with me.

...

*You shall know that it is I, Yahweh, who has spoken.*⁷⁶

It may have been in early 591 that Ezekiel began to look to a time after the exile. He gave a message to the exiles which in today's bible is slotted in to the vision of the glory of Yahweh leaving Jerusalem, but originally may have stood alone. Yahweh reassured them that the claim of those left in Jerusalem (that the city now belonged to them) was not to be believed. Whilst Yahweh had sent the exiles away, he would care for them in the country to which they have gone and would bring them back and give them the land of Israel. Then they will purge Israel of the loathsome practices. And Yahweh said:

*I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their god*⁷⁷.

Jeremiah composed similar material in the Little Book of comfort – possibly put together during the great siege of 588 to 586.

Just as Jeremiah had to deal with nationalist prophets in Jerusalem, so Ezekiel faced similar elements in the exiled community. He attacked those who issued prophesy out of their own imagination, declaring them to be like '*jackals among the ruins*' when they should be repairing the

⁷⁴ The original arrangement of this passage probably began with Ezekiel's visionary transportation to Jerusalem where he witnessed the abominations there (8:1-18 & 11:1-13) This was followed by the execution of the evil-doers (9:1-11) and the vision of the glory of Yahweh leaving Jerusalem (10:1-22 & 11:14-25)

⁷⁵ Ezekiel 12:1-16

⁷⁶ Extracts from Ezekiel 17:11-21

⁷⁷ Ezekiel 11:19-20

walls of Israel so that the people might stand on Yahweh's Day. He attacked those who issued empty reassurances, comparing them to those who used whitewash instead of plaster to protect a house. And he attacked the women who 'hunted souls' offering charms, wrist-bands and veils⁷⁸.

There are a number of passages in which Ezekiel attacked the comfortable images that the people had of themselves – the luxuriant vine; the wife of Yahweh; the strong lion⁷⁹. The vine was shown to be useless – not even as fuel, for it did not burn well; like Jerusalem it needed to be put on the fire twice! As for the lion of Judah, Ezekiel told a story of cubs who grew up and learned to devour men until the nations caught them and dragged them on hooks; one to Egypt and the other to Babylon.

In the extended passage on the "wife of Yahweh" Ezekiel picked up Hosea's image of the beautiful Israel as a faithless bride. Yahweh spoke: -

I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you and covered you. I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you and you became mine.

...

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, lavishing yourself freely on any passer-by. You took some of your clothes and made yourself colourful shrines and played the whore on them. You took your beautiful ornaments, made of my gold and my silver that I had given you and made for yourself male images and with them you played the whore...

You took the sons and daughters you had born to me, and sacrificed them to these images for food...

You whored with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbours, ... so I reached out my hand against you and cut down your allowance, and gave you up to your enemies, the Philistine women, who were disgusted by your lewd behaviour. Unsatisfied, you bedded with the Assyrians - you led them to bed, and still you were not satisfied. You bedded Chaldea, the land of merchants, countless times - and even with this you were not satisfied.

...

How sick is your heart that you did all these things?

...

I will gather all those whom you pleased; those whom you loved and those whom you hated...and I will judge you as women who commit adultery are judged.... I will deliver you into their hands. They will gather a mob against you, and they will stone you... They will burn your houses...

In this way I will satisfy my anger with you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you. I will be calm.

...

I might deal with you as you have done - you who have flouted the oath and broken the covenant; yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed....⁸⁰

As well as dealing with the fate of nations, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel developed a new theology concerning the individual. One crucial development was the new doctrine of individual responsibility. The Yahwist had talked of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. Ezekiel and Jeremiah both quote the proverb

*"The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge."⁸¹*

and both prophets then repudiate it. In Ezekiel this is developed into an elaborate sermon. The sermon recognizes the power of Yahweh's forgiveness:

⁷⁸ Ezekiel 13

⁷⁹ The vine in chapter 15, 17 & 19:10-14; the wife in chapter 16; the lion in chapter 19:1-19

⁸⁰ Ezekiel 16: 8-61

⁸¹ Ezekiel 18:2 and Jeremiah 31:29

Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

...

If the wicked turn away from their sinful ways and keep all my laws, doing what is just and right, they shall live, yes, they shall live; they shall not die. None of the offences that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they shall live because of their righteous deeds. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Would I not rather that they change their ways and live?⁸²

He also states that the righteous person who turns to evil ways will not be forgiven: righteousness is not a commodity that can be stored up to offset future sins. He concedes that this may seem unfair:

Yet the people of Israel say, "The way of Yahweh is unfair". Is my way unfair, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unfair? I will judge you, house of Israel – each one of you according to his own ways." says the lord Yahweh.

Turn, turn from all your offences, or your sinfulness will be your ruin. Cast away all your past misdeeds and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why should you die, people of Israel? For I have no pleasure in anyone's death, says lord Yahweh.

Turn, then, and live!⁸³

Earlier, Ezekiel had discussed the question of whether a whole community might be saved because of the presence of the righteous men within it⁸⁴. To this question Yahweh's answer had been that even if the three most righteous men known to Israel – Noah, Dan'el and Job – lived there, their presence would save none but themselves. The choice of Dan'el suggests that Ezekiel was referring to the ancient Canaanite stories.

In 591, some of the elders came once more to Ezekiel to 'inquire of Yahweh'. This was a fairly regular occurrence, but we never find out the nature of their enquiries because Yahweh refused to answer them; instead the elders received sermons from Ezekiel. In this case they could come to Ezekiel because some of them hoped that the exile was about to end. If Hananiah's prediction that the exile 'would end in two years' had any validity, then now was the time they should have been going home. On this occasion, Ezekiel, speaking as the voice of Yahweh, rehearses the history of Israel's disobedience to the will of Yahweh from Egyptian times up to the exile; in Egypt, in the wilderness with the generation of the exodus, in the wilderness with the next generation and even in the Land given to them as an inheritance. In each case Yahweh had considered destroying them, but in each case, he had withheld his hand, finally deciding to scatter them amongst the nations. He concluded: -

Do you defile yourselves as your ancestors did? Do you go whoring after their vile things? When you bring your gifts, when you make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your shit to this day. How can I be consulted by you, men of Israel? As I live, says Lord Yahweh, I will not be consulted by you.⁸⁵

The reference to child sacrifice here and earlier in the same passage, taken with Jeremiah's visit to Topheth indicates that the practice of child sacrifice had returned despite Jeremiah's strong and repeated denials that Yahweh had ever asked for such sacrifices.⁸⁶

There was a reasonably constant communication between the exiles and Jerusalem as evidenced by the exchange of letters with and about Jeremiah. Thus Ezekiel would have known what was going on in Jerusalem. Some scholars consider that he may have been describing the abominations that DH claimed went on in the time of Manasseh, but it is clear from Jeremiah's sayings that idolatry had returned to the temple following Josiah's death. With the exile of the 'good figs', the resistance to the abominations described may have diminished, whilst the political success of the Egyptian party may have brought fresh idols into the temple.

⁸² Ezekiel 18:2 & 21-23

⁸³ Ezekiel 18:29-32

⁸⁴ Ezekiel 14

⁸⁵ Ezekiel 20:30-31

⁸⁶ Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5 & 32:35 "And they have built the bamah of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, in which to burn their sons and their daughters; which was no command of mine, nor did it ever enter my mind."

The great siege (ca. 588 – 586)

Psammetichos fell ill shortly after his return from the triumphant Northern tour and he died two years later in 589. He was succeeded by Wahibre (known in Greek as Apries and in the bible as Hophra). In the year of his accession he made a tour of the Levant as far north as Sidon, confirming that Egyptian policy was unchanged. This encouraged the Judean leadership into renouncing their treaty obligations to Babylon – again!

Nebuchadrezzar's army had recovered its strength, and he chose not to tolerate Egypt's increasing dominance in the Levant. Having curtailed domestic opposition to his rule at home, he was able to re-assert his power abroad. It was possibly in late 589 – the date is not certain – that he took his army out and ran a complex campaign with twin attacks on the rebellious states.

Ezekiel had a vision from Yahweh in which he was told to make a signpost showing the way to the Ammonite city of Rabbah, and to Jerusalem. There, at the parting of the ways he envisaged Nebuchadrezzar casting lots and consulting diviners as he decided what to do: and in the vision, the lot fell on Jerusalem⁸⁷ and Yahweh said to Zedekiah: -

As for you, vile, wicked prince of Israel, you whose day has come – the time of final punishment, thus says lord Yahweh:

*“Remove the turban, take off the crown.
Things will not be as things are.
Raise the low, and bring down the high.
Ruin, ruin, ruin!
It shall be no more, until he come whose right it is;
To him will I give it”⁸⁸*

Nebuchadrezzar based himself in Riblah in Syria and divided his forces in two; one army went to deal with the Phoenician cities; the other went south to Judah. The action against Phoenicia was indecisive; Tyre was besieged, timber was carried off to Babylon, but the Egyptian fleets still operated at will.⁸⁹

But Jerusalem's fate was sealed. Sitting in Nippur, probably aware that the Babylonian army had marched, Ezekiel had a vision that re-played the history of Israel and Judah by means of an allegorical story of two women who represented Samaria and Jerusalem. Born in Egypt, the girls were sexually abused as children. They became Yahweh's wives and bore him children, but Oholah (Samaria) slept around with Assyrian lovers, “*officers in blue, viceroys, governors, all of them young, riding on horseback*”. She had become addicted to Egyptian sex and kept going with those who had molested her when young. Yahweh abandoned her to the Assyrians, who ravished her, enslaved her sons and daughters and killed her. Oholibah (Jerusalem) saw all this but also gave herself up to the ravishing Assyrians until she saw a picture of the gorgeous Babylonians; she sent for them and they came and bedded her. She was infatuated with their male prostitutes who were hung “*like asses and whose seed spurted like horses' ejaculations*”⁹⁰. Yahweh proposed to hand her over to those whom she hated, who will make her feel their hatred. Ezekiel was invited to judge the sisters, but Yahweh prosecuted, speaking to the court: -

“They came into my sanctuary and polluted it, slaughtering their sons as an offering to their shit-balls. They would send for foreigners...”

And to the women: -

“You bathed your body for these men, you painted your eyes, you dressed up for them, you sat upon a bed of state and had a table put before it and laid my own incense and my own oil upon it...”

And in judgement:

⁸⁷ Ezekiel 21:18 - 22

⁸⁸ Ezekiel 21:25-27

⁸⁹ ECIAT p 465

⁹⁰ Ezekiel 23:19-20

These are the words of the Lord Yahweh

*“Summon the invading army; abandon them to terror and to rape. Let the invaders stone them and dismember them with swords, kill their sons and daughters, and burn their houses”.*⁹¹

The siege begins

The Babylonian southern army did not have the element of surprise. Zedekiah was able to get messages out to Egypt. Various ostraca recovered from Lachish give first-hand accounts of events as seen from an outpost in that area. One reported that an army commander had passed through on his way to Egypt. Another says, “*Let my lord know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, for we cannot see Azekah*”. And yet another complains of the demoralisation caused by a letter that had been forwarded to them from Jerusalem: he writes, “*The words of the princes are not good ... [they] weaken our hands and slacken the men.*” He asks his superior to write to Jerusalem and urge those there to look to the king and to his house, concluding “*since your servant read the letters, there has been no peace for your servant*”.⁹²

Whilst the Babylonian forces manoeuvred to besiege Jerusalem, Hophra started to organise a force to march from Egypt to relieve the city.

As the siege began, in January 588, Ezekiel sang a song of derision concerning a cooking pot. The pot is Jerusalem and it is ritually unclean because blood has contaminated it.

Thus says the Lord Yahweh:

“Woe to the bloody city,

the corroded pot, whose rust has never been cleaned!

Empty it piece by piece, making no choice at all.

(For the blood she shed is inside it; she placed it on a bare rock;

*she did not pour it out on the ground, to cover it with earth.)*⁹³

The citizens, the meat, are to be emptied out and burned, and the pot, Jerusalem, is to be purified by being put empty on the fire. This metaphor uses the blood provisions of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17:11-13).

Ezekiel felt himself commanded to do one more sign-act. The word of Yahweh came to him saying:

Man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor give way to tears. Keep in good heart; be quiet; make no mourning for the dead. Cover you head as usual and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your upper lip or eat the bread of mourners.”

So I spoke to the people in the morning: and in the evening my wife died.

*And on the next morning I did as I was commanded.*⁹⁴

And when the people asked him what this meant, Ezekiel was told to say

This is the word of Yahweh:

“I will desecrate my sanctuary, which has been the pride of your strength, the delight of your eyes and the desire of your heart... The sons and daughters that you left behind shall fall by the sword.

⁹¹ Ezekiel 23. The girls’ names, Oholah and Oholibah mean ‘she has a tent’ and ‘a tent is hers’. They may refer to the sanctuaries (tents) that both cities possessed.

⁹² ANET p 321-322; Lachish ostraca II, IV and VI. These letters use dateable classical Hebrew, and are therefore of considerable importance to scholars of the language – as well as for the insight they give to the thoughts of an officer running an outpost near Lachish. They also confirm that literacy was fairly widespread at the time. In one note the officer is appalled at the suggestion he might need a scribe to interpret the letters and clearly writes his responses himself.

⁹³ Ezekiel 24:6-7

⁹⁴ Ezekiel 24:15-17

*Then Ezekiel shall be a sign to you and when it happens you will do as he has done.
And you will know that I am Yahweh.*

*And you, son of man ..., you will no longer be dumb. You will be a sign to them.
And they will know that I am Yahweh.”⁹⁵*

Before Hophra’s force could make an impact on the siege, the siege had had an impact on the defenders. The city was running out of food. There was probably internal dissention within the city as the Lachish letter suggests: certainly Jeremiah’s constant recommendations to surrender would have ‘weakened the hand’ of the defenders. The king decided to release the slaves. Was this in order to relieve the slave owners of the obligation to feed them? Or was it to raise additional forces to defend the city? Zedekiah asked Jeremiah’s advice. ‘*Would Yahweh perform some wondrous act to save Judah?*’ he enquired. To which question, Jeremiah conveyed Yahweh’s uncompromising answer:

“I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both human beings and animals; they shall die of a great plague. Afterwards I will give King Zedekiah of Judah, and his servants, and the people in this city—those who survive the plague, the sword and the famine—into the hands of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, into the hands of their enemies, into the hands of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword; he shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion.”⁹⁶

The siege lifted

But Zedekiah’s appeal for help from Egypt bore fruit. Help came and the Babylonians were forced to break off the siege. Jeremiah prophesied that the Chaldeans would not go away permanently. The government, with the food supply improved, decided to rescind their former decision to release the slaves. Jeremiah predicts that Yahweh would in turn release the slave-owners – indeed he would release them ‘*to the sword, to plague, and to famine*’ and make them ‘*a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.*’

Taking advantage of the lifting of the siege, Jeremiah himself set out to return home to Anathoth, but was stopped by the guard at the Jerusalem gate who suspected him of deserting to the Babylonians – a not unreasonable suspicion since this is what he had been advising others to do for some time. Jeremiah denied that he was going over to the Babylonians, but was arrested as a subversive anyway and committed to prison in a cistern. And there he remained for many days⁹⁷. Perhaps it was from this time that we have his prayer:

*Listen to me, Yahweh -
hear what my adversaries are saying!
Is evil a recompense for good?
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.*

*Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them,
to turn away your anger from them.
Therefore give their children over to famine;
Deliver them to the power of the sword⁹⁸*

The siege resumed

The force that Hophra had sent was not sufficient for the task. When confronted with the Babylonian southern army, their commanders decided that there was no prospect of defeating this force in open battle and retreated to Egypt in good order. The towns of the Shephelah capitulated leaving just Lachish and Azekah holding out.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ezekiel 24: 21-27

⁹⁶ Jeremiah 21:5-7

⁹⁷ Jeremiah 37:11-16 in Bibles based on the Masoretic Text. The Septuagint’s account of this event differs slightly. Other people are involved.

⁹⁸ Jeremiah 18:19-21

⁹⁹ Jeremiah 37:11

Jerusalem was shut again by the Babylonian army in January 587. This prompted Ezekiel to pronounce one of his seven oracles against Egypt. In it he recalled the words spoken a century earlier by the Assyrian emissary standing before Jerusalem and demanding its surrender, for he remarked:

“The support you gave to the Israelites was a reed, which splintered in the hand when grasped and tore their armpits. When they leaned upon you, you broke and their limbs gave way.”¹⁰⁰

He prophesied that the Egyptians would be exiled for forty years before being brought back a humbler nation upon whom the Israelites would not be tempted to rely again.

Judah was facing extermination. In these circumstances the inevitable question was “Why?” It is possible that a scroll was put together, now found in Chapters 21 to 25 of Jeremiah, which sought to address that question. These chapters were written with an awareness of exile, past and to come. The text has a noticeably different style to chapters 1–20 in that here the writer’s voice is heard interpreting the material much more frequently. If Baruch wrote chapters 1 – 20 largely at Jeremiah’s dictation, it seems that in putting together the material in chapters 21 – 25 he took a more significant role. The purpose of this work was to address a topic close to his heart as a Deuteronomic Historian, namely the understanding of the cause of Judah’s predicament by means of comparing Judah’s actual behaviour with that which was required of them by their Covenant with Yahweh. He laid out the question clearly:

*Many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say to one another,
“Why has Yahweh dealt in this way with that great city?”¹⁰¹*

Three times this question will be posed and answered. The other two occasions were in Deuteronomy 29:24-25, following the oath taking ceremony associated with the *torah* in Deuteronomy, and as a warning following the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 9: 6-9 (part the Deuteronomic History). In each case the answer is the same.

*“It is because they abandoned the covenant of Yahweh their God,
and worshiped and served other gods.”*

It will be recalled from chapter 11 that a very similar remark was recorded in the annals of Ashurbannipal where it was noted that “The people of Arabia asked one another saying, ‘why is it that such evil has befallen Arabia?’ and they said, ‘because we did not observe the obligation sworn to the god of Ashur.’”¹⁰² The scribes of Judah who worked with Assyrian officials on the promulgation of the Succession Treaties may have been made aware of this observation as they prepared the reading of that Treaty’s oaths. It seems to have made a distinct impression on Baruch since all three biblical usages of the warning occur in passages for which that he could have been responsible. In Yahweh’s voice, Baruch expanded the answer to address the Jerusalem priesthood – described as the shepherds to whom Yahweh had entrusted his sheep. Instead of caring for the sheep: -

*“You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away,
and you have not attended to them:
so I (Yahweh) will attend to you for your evil doings”¹⁰³*

In the scroll, Baruch recalled Zedekiah’s request that Jeremiah find out whether Yahweh had it in mind to do some wondrous deed on behalf of Judah, and received Jeremiah’s devastating reply. Now Jeremiah advised that Yahweh said: -

*“Look, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.
Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by plague;
but those who leave and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you will escape with
their lives”¹⁰⁴*

¹⁰⁰ Ezekiel 29:6-7. See also Isaiah 36:6

¹⁰¹ Jeremiah 22:8. See Deuteronomy 29:24 and 1 Kings 9:8-9 for other instances of this scenario.

¹⁰² Streck quoted by Weinfeld (1991); ‘Deuteronomy 1-11’; p 8

¹⁰³ Jeremiah 23:2

¹⁰⁴ Jeremiah 21: 8 - 10

The reference to the words from Deuteronomy that stated, ‘I have set before you today life and goodness, death and harm¹⁰⁵’, cannot be accidental. In Deuteronomy the people were exhorted to choose life - to choose the way of the covenant. There the author warned that destruction and exile would be the consequence of worshipping other gods and thinking ‘*we are safe*’. That whole passage was apposite to the events Jeremiah was living through. And why should the future of the people lie with submission to Babylon? To answer this, some earlier prophecies were recalled; one of which was addressed to the house of David:

Act with justice and righteousness, and save from their oppressor anyone who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

If you listen to this word, then through the gates of this house shall come kings who will sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses; they, their servants, and their people.

*But if you will not listen to these words, I swear by myself, says Yahweh, that this house shall become a desolation.*¹⁰⁶

Then the oracle against Jehoiakim was quoted from over a decade previously. Jehoiakim indeed had failed to listen to the word. And of his son, Jehoiachin, Jeremiah said:

Land, land, land! Hear the word of Yahweh. Thus says Yahweh:

*“Record this man as childless -
a man whose days shall not be filled with success,
for none of his descendants shall succeed him
sitting on the throne of David,
and ruling any more in Judah.”*¹⁰⁷

Jehoiachin would spend his days in Babylon and none of his offspring would rule in Judah. Jeremiah seems here to accept the possibility that the Covenant with the house of David may not have been unconditional, and that Jehoiakim may have been the king whose actions finally broke it. The thematic unity of the Masoretic Text is broken at this point by the inclusion of Jeremiah’s favourable oracle describing Zedekiah as a righteous branch of Jesse who will shepherd his people back to their land¹⁰⁸. Presumably this oracle, from the days when Zedekiah was a vassal of Babylon, was placed here by a later editor who felt the need to counter the utter finality of the prophesy of the end of the house of David.

The other shepherds who had failed Yahweh were the prophets, or rather the false prophets, who opposed Jeremiah:

*In the prophets of Samaria I saw a disgusting thing:
they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray.
But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers
so that none turn from wickedness.*

....

Therefore Yahweh of Armies speaks thus concerning the prophets:

*“I am going to make them eat wormwood,
and give them poisoned water to drink;
for from the prophets of Jerusalem
ungodliness has spread throughout the land.”*¹⁰⁹

Not all was lost however; for here the author reminded his reader of Jeremiah’s vision of the two baskets of figs. Whilst all who remained in Judah or had escaped to Egypt were ‘rotten figs’, there was a basket of ‘good figs’ in which the hope for the future lay – but these good figs were the exiled

¹⁰⁵ Deuteronomy 30:15

¹⁰⁶ Jeremiah 22:3-5

¹⁰⁷ Jeremiah 22:29-30; the Hebrew also uses the word play on the meanings of the verb ‘to succeed’.

¹⁰⁸ Jeremiah 23:3-8

¹⁰⁹ Jeremiah 23:13-15

people in Babylon.

To emphasise the fact that Jeremiah himself was Yahweh's true prophet, the author reminded his readers that, way back in 605, Jeremiah had predicted the exile of 598. He had pointed out that Jeremiah had been preaching Yahweh's word to them for 23 years, but they had not listened. He had warned them then of the consequences of their failure to listen, and those consequences had subsequently come to pass. The implication was clear.

In April Ezekiel recorded another vision in which Yahweh said:

Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh, king of Egypt: it has not been bound up to heal or wrapped in a bandage to give it the strength to wield a sword. ... I will break both his arms – the sound and the broken. ...Then I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon. ...When I put my sword in the hand of the king of Babylon, and he stretches it out over the land of Egypt ...they shall know that I am Yahweh.¹¹⁰

Through the summer of 587, the terrible siege continued.

In July, Ezekiel spoke of Egypt asking her what she considered herself to be like. He pointed out that Assyria had once thought herself to be like a great cedar in whose shade nations could rest, but that she had been cut down by Babylon and now lay amongst the dead in Sheol. He concluded that a similar fate awaited Egypt and she too "will lie with the strengthless dead – among those who have died by the sword."¹¹¹

The great siege deepened, recorded in Lamentations: -

*My eyes are blinded with tears, my guts wrench, my bile is spilt on the ground because of my people's wound
– when infants and babes faint in the streets of the city crying to their mothers "Where is bread and drink?"
– when they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, gasping out their lives on their mothers' breasts.¹¹²*

Tyre may have exploited the earlier exile of the Judean king in 597. Ezekiel quoted Tyre as having gloated over the opportunities afforded by Judah's distress:

*The gate of the people is broken; it has swung open to me (Tyre);
I shall be replenished, now that she (Judah) is laid waste¹¹³*

But now the western Babylonian army had engaged with Tyre. In an oracle, Ezekiel claimed that the earlier gloating by Tyre had provoked Yahweh's response, "I am against you Tyre; I will bring as many nations against you as the sea brings its waves." The attack Ezekiel described commenced with the ground trembling under the horses, chariots and siege engines of the Babylonians. He predicted that Tyre, an island fortress, would be reduced to a bare rock around which fishermen cast their nets. This was the first of a group of oracles against Tyre dated to the year beginning March 587.¹¹⁴ In another oracle from this group, Yahweh said that the city, whose strength lay in the sea, will be covered by the primeval waters¹¹⁵ and buried there so that it will never be found. The maritime theme continued in the allegory that followed. Here Tyre was depicted as a magnificent ship of 'perfect beauty'; made of the finest of materials – cedar from Lebanon, oak from Bashan, boxwood from Greece, patterned linen from Egypt for the sails, with purple and violet awnings from Crete – and manned by a multi-national crew of all the talents. The ship traded in fabulous goods: iron, tin and lead from Ionia; slaves and bronze vessels from Asia, horses, mares and mules; ivory and ebony from Rhodes; purple cloth, brocade, fine linen, black coral and red jasper from Edom; wheat, meal, oils and balsam from Israel; wine, wool, sweet cane; lambs, goats, spices, precious stones and gold from ports throughout the region. But this richly laden ship, the image of Tyre, was wrecked by a Babylonian

¹¹⁰ Ezekiel 30: 21-26

¹¹¹ Ezekiel 31:18

¹¹² Lamentation 2:9-10

¹¹³ Ezekiel 26:2

¹¹⁴ Ezekiel 26, 27 & 28.

¹¹⁵ Ezekiel 26:19 The primeval deep is *t'hom* – a reference to Genesis 1:2 'the breath of god hovered over the face of the deep.'

Easterly. Nearby mariners raised a dirge over the fallen vessel.¹¹⁶ And to king Ittobaal III (whose name meant 'man of Baal') Ezekiel issued an oracle saying:

*In your proud heart you say
‘I am a god; I sit enthroned on the high seas’
Though you are a man, and no god,
you compare your mind with the mind of a god.
You are indeed more clever than Dan’el - no secret is too dark for you –
you have amassed wealth for yourself by your wisdom and understanding,
and gold and silver for your treasures by clever trading.
...
Therefore I will bring strangers against you,
the most terrible of nations
...
And will you dare to say that you are a god when you face your assailants?
Though you are a man and no god.
In the hands of those who wound you -
in the hands of strangers you will die strengthless.¹¹⁷*

Ezekiel says of the king “You were in Eden..., You walked on Elohim’s holy hill..., You were blameless in all your ways from the day of your birth until your iniquity was found in the wealth of your commerce. Lawlessness filled your heart and you sinned”. So Yahweh kindled a fire within him, and he was left as ashes on the ground for all to see.¹¹⁸ That was Ezekiel’s prophecy. In reality, Tyre was not cut off; it could still obtain supplies by sea despite the Babylonians at its gate. Not so Jerusalem:

*The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of his mouth for thirst;
The children beg for food but no-one gives them anything
...
The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children
They became their food in the destruction of my people¹¹⁹*

As the siege worsened, Zedekiah sought out Jeremiah again to enquire if there was any word from Yahweh. There was. The Babylonians would triumph. But Jeremiah asked Zedekiah in return to release him from prison, for what wrong had he done? “Where are those who prophesied to you saying, “The king of Babylon shall neither come against you, nor this land” he said, implying that they not he should be in prison. Zedekiah accepted his plea and had him moved to the prison court. But not for long. Jeremiah continued to give seditious advice:

Those who remain in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by disease: but those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live.¹²⁰

Jeremiah’s continual public pronouncements of this type got him re-arrested and put in a cistern again. In this case it took an appeal from an Ethiopian eunuch (whose name, Ebedmelech, simply means ‘king’s servant’) to get him out of the cistern. But Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

The ‘Book of Comfort’

In the court of the guard, Jeremiah compiled his little ‘Book of Comfort’ where he spoke of a ‘new covenant’ – an unconditional covenant in which Yahweh promises that ‘you shall be my people and I shall be your god’. This phrase was repeated, enclosing the central oracle which talked of the wrath of Yahweh.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Ezekiel 27

¹¹⁷ Ezekiel 28

¹¹⁸ Ezekiel 28:13-19

¹¹⁹ Lamentations 4:4 & 16

¹²⁰ Jeremiah 38:2

¹²¹ Jeremiah 30:23 -24

The comfort comes from the inclusion of poems promising that although exile is imminent, it will end with a return. In these poems, the exiles are often referred to as Ephraim, Israel, Samaria or Jacob. The people should rejoice and proclaim ‘Yahweh has saved his people, the remnant of Israel. “Look, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth”’¹²²

*I am going to restore the fortunes of the Jacob’s tents,
and have compassion on his dwellings;
The city shall be rebuilt upon its ruins,
and the palace on its proper site.
Out of them shall come thanks-giving,
and the sound of merry-makers.
I will multiply them, and they will not be few;
I will honour them, and they will not be distained.¹²³*

It included a remarkable passage about Rachel’s children – Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph was the father of Ephraim and Manasseh, and Benjamin was the tribe of the Davidic Dynasty that ruled Judah, so Rachel’s children can be said to include all the exiles – Jeremiah was alluding to the earlier exile as well as the present one:

*A cry is heard in Ramah, mourning and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted because they are no more.”
Thus says Yahweh:
“Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded.
They shall come back from the land of the enemy.¹²⁴*

The book included Jeremiah’s advice to the exiles to note the route by which they were taken into exile so that a reformed ‘virgin Israel’ could find her way back. It concluded:

*Yahweh will create a new thing on the earth:
the woman will protect the man.¹²⁵*

The original Book of Comfort (Jeremiah 30:1 – 31:26) had begun with a poem in which the panic of the men had been compared with the cries of a woman in labour and the question was asked “can a man bear a child?”: it closed here with an enigmatic line about a new thing - woman as ‘protecting’ or ‘returning to’ man. Maybe the idea is that the faithless daughter, now restored as virgin Israel, will return from exile and give birth to and protect Yahweh’s new people.

Jeremiah’s original book was expanded later with a prose passage, which contained some new theology. It is here that Jeremiah included the idea, elaborated more fully in Ezekiel, that each individual will suffer only the consequences of his own sin; no longer will the sins of the father be visited upon the children.¹²⁶

Its most remarkable idea, also shared by Ezekiel, is that of the new covenant to replace the one that has been broken – a covenant that cannot be broken, for

“I will set my law within them and write it in the hearts; I will become their god and they shall become my people. No longer need they teach one another to know Yahweh. All of them, high and low, shall know me; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”¹²⁷

Another theme is that, after exile, the land will be returned to the people. This is illustrated with the story of Jeremiah’s land purchase. With his home town of Anathoth in Babylonian hands, and

¹²² Jeremiah 31:7-8

¹²³ Jeremiah 30:18 - 19

¹²⁴ Jeremiah 31:15-16 Ramah, a Benjamite town is one of two places said to be the burial place of Rachel. Rachel’s children were Benjamin and Joseph, who in turn fathered Ephraim and Manasseh. Through her slave-maid Bilhah she acquired Dan and Naphali. Judah, however, was her sister’s son.

¹²⁵ Jeremiah 31:21 - 22

¹²⁶ Jeremiah 31:29-30 and Ezekiel 18:2-24

¹²⁷ Jeremiah 31:33-34. See Ezekiel 11:19-20 for the same idea in Ezekiel.

all of Jerusalem starving, Jeremiah heard of an opportunity to buy some land there... *and I bought the field...and weighed out the money...seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it and got witnesses.* Afterwards he had doubts that he had done the right thing. He prayed to Yahweh for reassurance, and reassurance was given:

In the towns of Judah and the desolate streets of Jerusalem - without human or animal inhabitants - there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness; the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; and the voices of those who sing as they bring thank offerings to the temple of Yahweh:

*“Give thanks to Yahweh of Armies,
for Yahweh is good,
his love endures forever!”*

“For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first”, says Yahweh.¹²⁸

Whilst Jeremiah remained in the guard-house he was consulted secretly by Zedekiah. Jeremiah advised that the King should give himself up. If he did so, his life would be spared and the city would not be destroyed. But if he did not, the city would be burnt and the King himself would not escape. But Zedekiah was afraid that he would be handed over to the Judeans who had deserted to the Chaldeans and that they would abuse him. Although Jeremiah assured him that this would not happen, Zedekiah decided not to accept Jeremiah's advice.

Zedekiah's anguish may have been expressed in a poem that is now retained as Psalm 102. It is a royal psalm¹²⁹, and yet it is super-scribed as the prayer of someone who is overwhelmed by his afflictions. It is written in the voice of one who yet hopes that Yahweh will rescue Jerusalem and himself from the inevitable: -

*My days are like a tapering shadow and I wither like grass
But you, Yahweh, have sat enthroned from eternity*

...

*You will arise to show pity on Zion
Because it is time to show mercy to her*

...

*For your servants love her stones
And by her dust are moved to pity.*

*Then will the nations revere the name of Yahweh
And all the kings of the earth your glory.*

Even now the author hopes that Yahweh will build Zion anew in response to the prayers of its destitute people and earn praise for his compassion on them:

*Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise Yahweh:
“He looked down from his holy height,
from heaven Yahweh looked at the earth,
to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to release those who were condemned to die”*

But his concern is also for himself and the probability of his own death:

*Yahweh has broken my strength by his power;
El has cut short my days.
I said “do not take me away before half my days,
when your years last generations”¹³⁰*

¹²⁸ Jeremiah 33:10 - 11

¹²⁹ Michel Dahood (1970) in his psalms 100-150 (Anchor Bible Vol 17a) draws attention to several connections between this psalm and other royal psalms.

¹³⁰ Psalm 102; verses 12-15 & 19-21 & 24-25

The end of the siege

Jerusalem's resistance finally broke in July 586. Zedekiah was captured whilst trying to escape and brought in chains to Riblah where Nebuchadrezzar was based. There he was judged and punished as a treacherous servant. His sons were executed before his eyes; then he was blinded and taken to Babylon with the remainder of his family, as Jeremiah had foretold. Zedekiah was consigned to the house of the mill – to punishing labour - and there he died. Whilst Nebuchadrezzar considered what to do with Jerusalem and the rest of its population, the Judean authorities no doubt wondered how best to preserve their heritage. It might have been then that they moved the Ark of the Covenant to somewhere safer.

Nebuchadrezzar decided to send a punishment division back to Jerusalem. This force burnt the temple, the palace and every other significant building and carried away to exile another 832 of Judah's more useful citizens.

Lamentations

*How lonely sits the city that was once full of people!
How like a widow she has become, that was once great among the nations!¹³¹*

Thus began Lamentations, a group of poems concerning the final days of Jerusalem that have been made into a distinct book. There is a strong tradition that the poems are the work of Jeremiah. The Septuagint, the third century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, introduced Lamentations with the words "Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem." The Targum, the Syriac, the Babylonian Talmud, various rabbinic works and the Vulgate make similar ascriptions to Jeremiah.

Modern scholarly opinion discounts this early tradition, largely on the grounds of the contrast in attitude between Lamentations and Jeremiah. For example, Lamentations 4:17 says "*Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; we were watching eagerly for a nation*", whereas Jeremiah consistently opposed the alliances with other nations. But the book does contain imagery familiar from Jeremiah, such as the passer-by 'hissing' because of the disaster that has befallen. If it is by Jeremiah, then Lamentations 3 could almost be autobiographical:

*Yahweh is good to those who wait for him; to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly for Yahweh's help.
It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth,*

*to sit alone in silence when Yahweh has imposed it,
to put one's mouth to the dust though there may yet be hope,
to give one's cheek to be slapped, and be filled with insults.*

*For Yahweh will not reject forever.
Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*

...

*Those who were my enemies without cause have hunted me like a bird;
They have cut off my life in the cistern and hurled stones on me;
Water flowed over my head; I said, "I am lost."*

*I called on your name, Yahweh, from the depths of the cistern;
You heard my voice, "Do not close your ear to my breath, to my scream"
You came near when I called on you; you said, "Do not fear!"¹³²*

In this poem, the verses are arranged in groups of three lines, each line of the triplet beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 triplets in total, one for each letter of the alphabet. All of the poems in Lamentations are based on the alphabet in some way such as this.

¹³¹ Lamentations 1:1 ff

¹³² Lamentations 3:25-33 & 52-57

Another source of the Jeremiah tradition is the statement from Chronicles that “Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the men and women of the choirs have sung of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments”¹³³ – although this argument is weakened by the absence of the lament for Josiah from the present book.

Whoever wrote Lamentations, it is clear that they were a contemporary expression of grief by someone who was in the city before, during and after the siege. He or she must have been one of the very few able scribes left after the second deportation.

The last poem was set after the siege is over; in its final plea for mercy it is the most desolate:

*Remember, Yahweh, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!
Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
We must pay for the water we drink:
the wood we get must be bought.
With a yoke on our necks we are driven hard;
we are weary, we are given no rest...*

*But you, Yahweh, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?
Turn towards us, Yahweh, that we may be turned;
renew our days as of old -
unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.*

Aftermath

Jerusalem had been made uninhabitable by the Babylonian punishment division. It is easy to imagine the depth of despair to which this had driven the survivors. Their world had come to an end; it might have seemed to some that this merely presaged the end of the whole world. For surely Yahweh would not permit Babylon the destroyer to survive. Two poems, of uncertain date and authorship, but retained in the book of Isaiah encapsulate this eschatological mood

*The anger of Yahweh is on all the nations -
his wrath on all their armies.
He will devote them to destruction -
deliver them to slaughter.
Their slain will be scattered,
the stench of their corpses will rise up and mountains dissolve in their blood.
All the stars in the sky will rot
and the heavens be rolled up like a scroll.
All the host of heaven will wither
like withered leaves from the vine, like withered figs from the tree.* ¹³⁴

This image from Isaiah 34 of a withered heaven and earth is picked up in Isaiah 24. The theme of ritual destruction continues with most of the people consigned to the fire; very few are left.¹³⁵

*The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers and the heavens languish with the earth.*

¹³³ 2 Chronicles 35:25

¹³⁴ Isaiah 34:1-4. Not only are the nations to be delivered to *herem*, ritual total slaughter, but even the stars and heavens will disappear

¹³⁵ The verb for burning used here is only otherwise used in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Job, some Psalms and metaphorically in the Song of Solomon and Proverbs.

*The earth has been polluted by those that dwell on it
For they have disobeyed the laws...
and broken the everlasting covenant.*

*Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.
Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned,
Very few are left.*

...
*The city is left in ruins,
its gate is battered to pieces.
So it will be on the earth
and among all the peoples,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
the gleanings are left when the harvest is done.¹³⁶*

But life did go on; the city may have been deserted and its ruler executed, but there were people left there and they needed to survive and to organise. Shaphan's grandson, Gedaliah, a civil servant from a family of civil servants, was appointed governor of the remaining people. Jeremiah, who was released by the personal order of Nebuchadnezzar and given the freedom of his empire, chose to stay with Gedaliah and thus with the family that had been so loyal to him all his life.

Archaeological evidence from the period confirms the destruction of some major towns in Judah, but there were also many towns and villages, particularly north of Jerusalem that show evidence of continuous occupation. The Babylonians removed their siege engines – possibly taking them to Tyre which was still resisting the best efforts of Nebuchadnezzar's western army to bring that city to heel.

The people who remained in Judah worked the land and what was left of the property, and made some sort of a living out of it. In the old Northern Kingdom, the process of recovery probably continued with the worship of Yahweh surviving rather than losing out to the religions of the relatively small number of imported peoples, a process that Jeremiah celebrated:

*Ephraim is my dear son –
a delightful child.
Though I spoke appropriately against him,
I still remember – I remember him.
And so my inner being thrills in him.
I will meet him - meet him with love¹³⁷*

Whilst Jerusalem was destroyed in August of 586, it was not until December of that year that the news reached Ezekiel: but when it did he found that, as predicted earlier, Yahweh had given him back his speech; he was no longer dumb.

The news of Jerusalem's fall is embedded in the centre of a chapter that includes a recapitulation of some of the key points from Ezekiel's earlier ministry. Ezekiel's appointment as a lookout for Israel was repeated in the same words that he had heard seven years ago when he first heard the call.¹³⁸ Then the theological argument concerning the effectiveness of repentance was repeated – a topic that Ezekiel had explored earlier in the context of his repudiation of the idea that the sins of the fathers would be visited upon the children.¹³⁹ As a result, the final sentence "I judge every man on his own deeds" immediately precedes the news of Jerusalem's fall. Immediately after the news, it was clear that the people were not repenting – they still trusted to the sword, worshiped 'lumps of excrement' and defiled each other's wives. Ezekiel's god concluded "*They will know that I am Yahweh when I make the place a desolation for all the filthy things they have done*". The chapter ended with a reflection on Ezekiel's role as lookout; he was doing his task, but the people listened to him largely for entertainment.

¹³⁶ Isaiah 24:4-13. The dates of 34:1-4 and 24:4-13 are highly uncertain. They are often linked to other apocalyptic material. Isaiah 34:5-17, a condemnation of Edom, is matched by 35, the restoration of Judah. It probably dates from a time when the exiles were at least contemplating return.

¹³⁷ Jeremiah 31:20

¹³⁸ Compare Ezekiel 33:7-9 with 3:17-19.

¹³⁹ Compare Ezekiel 33:10-20 with 18:21-31. Exact word for word duplicates for 33:17-20 can be found in the earlier passage.

Son of man, your fellow countrymen gather in groups and talk of you in doors and passages saying: "Let's go and hear the message from Yahweh".

So my people will come, crowding in as they do, and sit down in front of you. They hear what you say but will not do it. 'Great words!' they say, but their hearts are set on personal gain. To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a gorgeous voice and plays the harp well; they hear what you say, but will not do it.

But when it comes, as it will, they will know there has been a prophet amongst them.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, after the final destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel's oracles took on a more hopeful tone. No longer did they threaten punishment – there was no need. The exiles were already suffering their punishment and they now knew that it would not end soon. They wanted to know if it would go on for ever. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel saw that it was principally the leadership of Judah, the shepherds of the people, who had failed. 'You shepherds of Israel. You have been feeding yourselves: should not shepherds feed the sheep?' asked Ezekiel. When he lists the crimes of these shepherds, he comforts the people, for Yahweh will become their shepherd:

I will seek the lost; I will recover the strays; I will bandage the hurt; I will strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will leave; I will feed them with justice....

Then I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will care for them and become their shepherd. I, Yahweh, shall become their god, and my servant David will be a prince among them. I Yahweh have spoken.

I shall make a covenant of peace with them; I will rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the wild and sleep safely in the woods.

I will make them and the places around my hill a blessing; and I will cause the showers to come in due season – they shall be showers of blessings.

The trees in the field shall yield their fruit and the earth shall yield its crops and they shall be safe in the land.

And they shall know that I am Yahweh¹⁴¹

In the spring of 585, Ezekiel returned to the subject of Egypt. He was probably aware of the Babylonian creation myth in which Marduk battles with the Chaos Sea dragon. In this myth Marduk destroyed the dragon and 'paused to view her dead body so that he might divide the monster and do artful works. He split her like a shellfish in two parts: half of her he set up and sealed as sky.'¹⁴² Mocking this material, Ezekiel wrote of Egypt "you are like a dragon in the seas, who muddies the waters" and Ezekiel's god would capture this dragon, split the carcass open and offer parts to the birds and beasts.¹⁴³ Ezekiel again predicted the destruction of Egypt by Babylon and composed a dirge to be sung over her which compares her to the fallen Assyria using similar imagery to the earlier poem that condemned Babylon to the underworld.¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile Babylonian forces were still tied down in the siege of Tyre. They would fail to break the city and would eventually decide to lift the siege after 13 years of struggle. Whatever plans Babylon had for invading Egypt must have suffered a severe setback with this failure.

Obadiah: the 'betrayal' by Edom

Individual nomadic Edomites had probably always visited the Negev, but during the Assyrian era they seem to have become a more organised threat to the people of southern Judah. There is a 7th century ostrakon from Arad which orders troops to move to Ramath Negeb 'lest the Edomites come

¹⁴⁰ Ezekiel 33:30-33

¹⁴¹ Ezekiel 34:16-27

¹⁴² The Babylonian myth will be more fully described in the next chapter. The full text of the myth can be found in ANET pp 60-69.

¹⁴³ Ezekiel 32:1-4. The passage continues till verse 16

¹⁴⁴ Ezekiel 32:17-32

there¹⁴⁵ Whatever Judeans believed had been agreed in the conference 594, Edom seems to have avoided angering the Babylonians and stayed out of the rebellion which destroyed Judah. Its citizens may have provided refuge to some of the scattered Judeans escaping from the Babylonian forces, for Baruch reports that refugees returned from Edom and Moab once Gedaliah's governorship was established.¹⁴⁶ The Edomites appear to have sensibly stood to one-side, for there is no non-biblical evidence that they were conscripted by Babylon to take part of the punishment of Judah. But it may have been that whilst some Edomites helped individual Judeans, others seized the opportunity that the sacking of Judah created. It is likely that the area under the administration of Governor Gedaliah was significantly less than that controlled by the former state of Judah. The borders of Edom and Samaria probably moved closer to Jerusalem.

The book of Obadiah is an expression of the resentment against Edom felt amongst the people of Judah, possibly provoked by the Judean's sense of being let down at the time of their destruction. Obadiah, which means '*servant of Yahweh*', can be read as a title as easily as a name. It is the shortest book in the bible but rich in problems for scholars. The first part of the book (vv 2-10 '*Here is what Yahweh says about Edom*') contains material that can also be found in Jeremiah.¹⁴⁷ The middle section, however, has fewer obvious parallels; it reads: -

*For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob
Shame shall cover you and you shall be cut off forever.*

*On the day that you stood aside,
on the day that strangers took his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you too were like one of them.*

*You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune
...
You should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity
You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off those that escaped.
You should not have handed over those that remained in the day of distress¹⁴⁸*

But despite all this, the prophet predicts that a remnant will escape on Mount Zion¹⁴⁹. Then the house of Jacob will be a fire which will burn up the stubble of Edom, and no one will survive.

An addition to Micah

There is a poem that a later editor attached to the prophecies of Micah which seems to come from this time – a time when Judah had lost her king, and Jerusalem her counsellor. But it is a poem of consolation, looking forward to a day when the exiles will return and Jerusalem be restored: -

*In that day, says Yahweh, I will gather the lame
and collect in the strays and those whom I have punished.
From the foot-sore I will make a remnant
and from the exiled a mighty nation
and Yahweh will reign in Zion for ever.
And to you, Migdal Eder, palace of daughter Zion,
to you shall return your former authority,
the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem*

*Why do you cry out now? Is there no king in you?
Has your counsellor perished?
Have pangs seized you like a woman in labour?
Writhe and give birth, daughter Zion, as a woman in labour,
For now you must leave the city*

¹⁴⁵ J.R. Bartlett. ABD article on Edom. (section 2; Edom and the Assyrians)

¹⁴⁶ Jeremiah 40:11-12

¹⁴⁷ Jeremiah 49:7-22. In Obadiah the verses are arranged in a different order.

¹⁴⁸ Obadiah 10-14.

¹⁴⁹ Joel 2:32 will quote this stating 'as Yahweh has said'.

*and camp in open country.
You must go to Babylon, but there you shall be rescued.
There Yahweh will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.¹⁵⁰*

Migdal Eder is normally taken to mean the ‘tower of the flock’, but may have been intended to suggest the ‘pulpit of the flock’. It is an ancient place name used here to refer to Jerusalem¹⁵¹; the image of an ancient capital is thus combined with that of the spiritual shepherd. The line dealing with the restoration of Jerusalem has a parallel line which deals with the restoration of the ruler: -

*And from you, house of Ephrathah, little clan of Judah,
from you shall come a ruler of Israel for me, whose origin is from the days of old.*

And the comment is added, perhaps by someone else: -

*Yahweh will abandon them until she who is in labour gives birth,
and then the rest of his people will return to the children of Israel.¹⁵²*

Ephrathah is an ancient name for the area around Bethlehem, so the ‘house of Ephrathah’ is the Davidic dynasty, whose restoration is here being prophesied. As a word, Ephrathah has associations with both ‘ashes’ and ‘fruitfulness’ thereby linking the place with the destruction caused by the Babylonians and the image of the woman in labour that the poet is employing. A later editor seems to have considered the reference too obscure and therefore added the explanatory gloss of ‘Bethlehem’ to help the reader out. The result was that the translators preparing the authorised version were moved to write ‘*But from thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah... shall come forth to me the one that is to be ruler in Israel,*’

The author of Mathew’s Gospel would suggest that this text was a prophecy of the birth of Jesus¹⁵³, although he does not make the suggestion himself but rather puts it into the mouths of Herod’s advisors. It has been used by Christians as a traditional Christmas reading.

Adjusting Deuteronomistic Content

There was a problem with the Deuteronomistic Historian’s work. His history had ended with a successful Judah, practising a pure religion and extending its power and influence under a king like no other – Josiah. Yet now Josiah had been killed, the country had been put under Egyptian vassalage and then destroyed by Babylon. The DH text had Yahweh saying about the temple ‘I have... put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.’¹⁵⁴ And yet the temple had been destroyed. The text declared that king David had received an apparently unconditional promise from Yahweh saying ‘Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.’ And yet the kingdom was destroyed and the last surviving member of that dynasty, the young Jehoiachin, was in prison in Babylon. Clearly the interpretation that had informed these aspects of the first edition of this history had been faulty. A new interpretation had to be sought, one that would account for all these things that had befallen.

As it stood the Deuteronomistic History had ended with the comment on Josiah:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to Yahweh with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses.’

DH needed to adapt his text to the new reality. It seems he did so by picking up his pen again and added

¹⁵⁰ Micah 4:6-11

¹⁵¹ In Genesis 35, it was the place where Jacob pitched his tent after the deaths of Rachel. It was where Isaac died and Reuben slept with his father Jacob’s concubine

¹⁵² Micah 5:1-3 Many translations give simply ‘Ephrathah’ rather than ‘house of Ephrathah’, thereby treating it as a place rather than a dynasty. The editor that added ‘Bethlehem’ as an explanation may have enjoyed the alliterative effect of *bet ephrathah, bet lechem*. There may be reference to Rachel’s labour pains near Ephrathah (or Ephrath), from which she died. She gave birth to Benjamin from whose tribe came the rulers of Judah.

¹⁵³ Mathew 2:5

¹⁵⁴ 1 Kings 9: 3

*... nor did any like him arise after him. But still Yahweh did not turn down the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger had been kindled against Judah, because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him. Yahweh said, "As I have removed Israel, so I will remove Judah out of my sight; and I will reject Jerusalem, this city that I had chosen, and the temple of which I had said, 'My Name shall be there'."*¹⁵⁵

There was the explanation! Manasseh could be said to be so evil that Yahweh's punishment had to be implemented on Judah just as it had been on Israel. All that Josiah's piety had achieved was a postponement. Huldah's prophecy could be incorporated as further evidence to support that idea. Her prophecy was a response to a request from Josiah who, having been read the 'Book of the Law' found in the temple, sent his officials to find out whether the curses contained therein would indeed be carried out. The reply that came back had said that the punishment would be carried out, 'but you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place'. But Josiah died in battle with the Egyptians, rather than in peace.

But, as was noted in the previous chapter, Archaeology does not support the idea that the people turned away from Yahweh to a significant degree during Manasseh's reign. Nor did the people perceive it that way. They observed simply that it was Manasseh, and not Josiah, who had given them a time of peace and prosperity.

F.M. Cross has suggested that most of the references to exile in Deuteronomy were added by his 'Dtr2' writing in exile, but this may be an unnecessary complication. It is possible to argue that exile was always a real threat in the ancient near east, and a punishment that people from Israel and Judah had already suffered by the time the first edition of the Deuteronomistic History was completed. It would have been surprising if a collection of curses compiled in the 7th century had omitted references to it. Furthermore, exile was the most obvious punishment for the failure of the people of Israel to keep to the covenant. They had been given the land; but they had been told they must keep the covenant and worship Yahweh alone; if they worshipped other gods, and that no doubt happened, then the believers amongst them should not have been surprised when they were taken from the land. The author of the Holiness Code had made it clear that if the people defiled the land, or if they failed to keep Yahweh's laws, then the land would 'vomit them out'.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless it is clear that, whether part of the original writing or added after the event, exile was fundamental to the Deuteronomistic story, being threatened or described at least eight times¹⁵⁷.

Various references to exile come in the collections of curses in Deuteronomy 28. The curse that you 'and the king you have set over you' will be sent to a '*nation you have not known*' is one that some scholars suggest might have been attached to the 'Book of the Law' discovered in Josiah's time – possibly accounting for Josiah's extreme anguish on discovery of the book. It does not seem like a post-exilic addition since Babylon was certainly known to the people of Judah. It looks more like a reference to the Assyrian practice of dispersing exiles to lands they did not know. However there is one passage in Deuteronomy 29 that does not just predict exile: it assumes it; -

*"A later generation will say ...when they see the land's plagues and its illnesses... "Why did Yahweh do something like this to the land? Why this great flaring of anger?"
And they will say "Because they left the covenant of Yahweh...and went and served other gods. ...
And Yahweh plucked them from their land in anger and fury and great rage, and he threw them into another land, as it is to this day."*¹⁵⁸

The closing '*as it is to this day*' confirms that these words at least were written after the exile of Judah. As with the passage from Jeremiah quoted above in connection with the resumed siege, this passage and the others like it, it probably owed something to the annals of Ashurbanipal where a similar question and answer structure was employed for a disobedient people. Like the other instances where the idea was employed, the phrase was employed by Baruch – in this case as part of the

¹⁵⁵ 2 Kings 23 25b-28

¹⁵⁶ Leviticus 18:28 and 20:22

¹⁵⁷ Deuteronomy 4:26-27; 28:36,63-64; 29:27;30:17-18;31:16-21 and, by the same author Joshua 23:16 and I Kings 9:7

¹⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 29:21-27. There is an abrupt change of subject in verse 21. The previous verse had been talking about separating an individual from all of Israel as a result of his insincerity when hearing the oath of the covenant. This passage however deals with the comments made by a later generation when they see the devastation of the land – a completely different topic.

adjustments he had to make to his earlier text around thirty years after it was originally written.

This passage immediately preceded the second half of the encompassing reflection that was wrapped around both Treaties and which dealt with the situation of exile as a result of abandoning Yahweh and the prospect of return following repentance. It served several purposes:

- It modified the original text to deal with the situation of the exile
- It bound together the two Treaties – the first encompassing the Ten words given at Horeb/Sinai and the second encompassing the *torah*.

It provided a link to the ancient poem that followed by calling the Heavens and the Earth as witnesses.

It began in Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and concluded in 30:1-20. The two parts echoed one another in the chiasmic manner; thus the sequence of warning followed consolation in chapter 4 was reversed in chapter 30. In order to demonstrate the matched language, the end of chapter 30 has been placed alongside the beginning of chapter 4 (and vice-versa) in the columns that follow:

Deuteronomy 4:25b-26

If you become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Yahweh your God, arousing his anger, I call the Heavens and the Earth as witnesses against you today that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live long there, but will certainly be destroyed.

Deuteronomy 4:29-31

If you will seek Yahweh from there (exile), then you will find him, when you look for him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things befall you then in later days, if you will return to Yahweh your God and listen to his voice.

Then Yahweh your God will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, for he is a compassionate God.

Deuteronomy 30:17-19

If your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will perish ... from the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call the Heavens and the Earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Deuteronomy 30:1-3 (continues to verse 10)

When all these things (the blessings and curses) befall you and you take them to heart...and you and your children return to Yahweh your God and listen to his voice ...

Then Yahweh your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

The large scale chiasmic structure that was thus created encompassed both treaties and the core reflection on the essence of the law as follows: -

If you become corrupt... you will perish (4:25-28)

If you return to Yahweh and listen to his voice. Yahweh will not abandon you (4:29-31)

The Treaty with God incorporating the Ten words (4:44-10:5)

A reflection on the Essence of the Law (10:12-11:1)

The Succession Treaty incorporating the second law – the torah. (11:2-29:20)

When you return to Yahweh and listen to his voice, Yahweh will restore ... (30:1-10)

If your heart turns away... you will perish (30:17-19)

The threat that ‘*you will perish from the good land*’ was used to book-end the structure. These were balanced by passages which, whilst dealing with the reality of exile, offered the promise of redemption through repentance: -

Yahweh will again rejoice in you, just as he rejoiced in your ancestors, when you obey Yahweh your god by observing his judgements and decrees written in this Book of the Law and turn to Yahweh your god with all your heart and with all your soul.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 30:9b-10

Then a new theological idea was introduced. Previously it was believed Yahweh had expected the people to freely choose to be obedient to his judgements and decrees. But now Yahweh would not require obedience from the people, he would ensure it:

*Yahweh your god will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love Yahweh your god with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.*¹⁶⁰

Previously the people had been commanded to ‘circumcise the foreskin of your hearts’ Such a command was central to the reflection on the essence of the law which was written earlier and in Jeremiah’s book of 604 where the men of Judah were commanded to do so in order to avoid exile. Now that the exile was a fact, however, it was Yahweh who would do the circumcising. As noted earlier, this image of ‘circumcising the heart’ - unique to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah – illustrates the involvement of the Baruch/Jeremiah partnership in the post exilic adjustments to Deuteronomy. But it is not the only evidence of their involvement. The sentiment of Deuteronomy 4:29 quoted above matches that of Jeremiah 29:13 “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*”

The opening and closing verses of the chiasmic structure quoted above both called the Heavens and the Earth as witnesses – an idea that links with the opening of the ancient poem¹⁶¹ that followed: -

*Give ear, Heavens, and I will speak;
Listen, Earth, to the words of my mouth*

In this poem, Yahweh is compared to a Rock; his work is perfect; all his ways are just. But his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him.

As well the additions to Deuteronomy referred above, the Deuteronomic History also needed some adjustment. The final speech of Joshua had ended on a with a warning that if the people intermarried with the people amongst whom they were living then Yahweh would not drive these people out. Now he added:

They will become a snares and traps to you; scourges in your sides and thorns in your eyes until you perish from this good land that Yahweh your god has given you.

And finally he ended with a reminder that Yahweh had kept all his promises and that just as all the good things that Yahweh had promised had been brought about: -

*so he will bring on you all the bad things, until Yahweh your God has destroyed you in this good land he has given you. When you pass over the covenant of Yahweh your God, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, Yahweh will become incensed with you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.*¹⁶²

The phrase ‘*you will quickly perish from the good land*’ is used here to book-end the insertion, just as it was in the large-scale chiasmus in Deuteronomy itself.

The promise to Solomon following the dedication of the temple also needed modification. In the first edition of the history Yahweh was recorded as saying to Solomon:

“I have consecrated this house that you have built to place my name there forever, and my eyes and my heart shall be there for all the days.”

And: -

“You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.”

These lines were addressed to Solomon personally. Now he added some lines apparently addressed to the plurality of the people. He wrote: -

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, ..., but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them; and I will cast out

¹⁶⁰ Deuteronomy 30:6

¹⁶¹ Deuteronomy 32:1-43

¹⁶² Joshua 23:15-16

*of my sight the temple that I have consecrated for My Name...And this house shall be a ruin*¹⁶³

The author then added the third instance of the lines containing the idea that all who passed by would wonder why such an awful thing had happened and would be told that it was because the people broke the covenant with their god.

Earlier it was implied above that the author in Josiah's time of the first edition of the Deuteronomic history (Cross's Dtr1) and the author of the exilic revision of that history (Cross's Dtr2) were the same man. These events all took place within the lifetime of Jeremiah and his friend Baruch. Since it is widely accepted that the author of the prose narrative in the book of Jeremiah was Baruch, and the style and phraseology of all these texts are virtually indistinguishable, then it is plausible that Baruch was responsible for both editions.

Thus it was probably also Baruch who, after 579, added the reference to Manasseh and the account of the reigns of last four kings of Judah found at the end of 2 Kings. It is sometimes remarked that one of the features of the judgements made of the four kings after Josiah is that no comment is made about their actions with regard to the '*bamah*' - the illegitimate sanctuaries. But the question of the '*bamah*' was not always raised in the judgements made about kings prior to Josiah - in fact it was only raised in about of a third of them. During the reign of the last four kings, the Jerusalem Temple was no fit place for the worship of Yahweh - contaminated as it then was with altars to other gods. In these circumstances worshipping at the temple was not much better than worshipping at a '*bamah*'.

In these chapters at the end of Kings, the events leading up to the great siege and the siege itself are dealt with tersely. The stripping of the temple was described, followed by the arrest and execution of the leaders of Judah. If exile seems inevitable to the modern reader, that is no doubt because it seemed so to Baruch and Jeremiah.

DH had made clear his reservations about kings. In Deuteronomy, the 'rule of the king' limited the power of the king - he should not have many horses, or wives or wealth. And he must read this rule every day of his life. When the people sought a king, the great prophet Samuel advised against it, explaining that tyranny would result. And when the people wilfully persisted in their desire for a king, the author of that part of Samuel alleges that Yahweh said, "They have rejected me!" When the building of a temple was proposed, DH quoted Yahweh as saying that he had always tented with his people, and had never asked for a temple to be built. DH was uncomfortable with the notion of a 'house of God', insisting that God cannot be located geographically; therefore all that the temple could be was a 'house for the name of god'. There was a concern about the elaborate rituals of temple sacrifice lest they became a substitute for obedience to the covenant. The condemnation of empty ritual echoes down the prophetic line all the way to Jeremiah who, in his temple sermon, quoted Yahweh as saying "in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, but this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice!'"¹⁶⁴

Now the temple was destroyed and there was no King over Israel. By means of Solomon's vision, the final version of the Deuteronomic History made it clear that the promises of temple and dynasty only had meaning as long as the king and people remained faithful to the covenant.

Demonstrably, time and again, the people and their king had turned aside from following Yahweh, despite the urgent warnings of all the prophets right up to the very moment when the Babylonians were at the gate and Jeremiah was calling upon them to repent; but they would not.

*So Judah went into exile out of its land.*¹⁶⁵

Last words of the Deuteronomists

As well adding material into the content of the history, it was also necessary to bring it up to date. The Governorship and murder of Gedaliah were dealt with by Baruch mainly in the history now incorporated in Jeremiah, but he also added a summary to the end of his interpretive history. Baruch concluded it by stating that *all the people, high and low, and the captains of the forces set out and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans*¹⁶⁶

Jeremiah was forcibly taken with them and predicted that all those who had run to Egypt *will die by the sword and by famine and shall become an object of execration and horror, of cursing and*

¹⁶³ 1 Kings 9

¹⁶⁴ Jeremiah 7:22-23

¹⁶⁵ 2 Kings 25:21

¹⁶⁶ 2 Kings 25:26

*ridicule.*¹⁶⁷ And in Deuteronomy, an addition may have been made to the curses, an addition which ends: -

*Yahweh will bring you back to Egypt in boats, by the route I promised you would never see again, and you will sell yourselves to your enemies as slaves, but no-one will buy.*¹⁶⁸

Baruch and Jeremiah had striven to demonstrate that obedience to the covenant was crucial to the well-being of the people of Judah, but this remnant would have none of it: -

“We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of Yahweh!

*We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.”*¹⁶⁹

Their observations were accurate. Under Manasseh they were indeed well-off and at peace. But since the reforms of Josiah were completed, they had suffered war, siege, exile, disease and periodic starvation.

An alternative Understanding

It was not only the ordinary people who rejected the initial Deuteronomic explanation of the Babylonian invasion. Another explanation, originating between 598 and 586, can be found today's 2 Kings 20. There it is argued that the root cause of the invasion was a combination of Babylonian greed and Judean political incompetence. According to this idea, the motivation for the invasion was established following a foolish decision made by Hezekiah almost 100 years earlier when a Babylonian delegation had visited Hezekiah after the siege of Jerusalem whilst he was recovering from an illness. Hezekiah had proudly showed the delegation all the gold, silver and other treasures he held. In this theory, it was the sight all this Judean wealth that tempted the Babylonians to invade Judah a century later. The story was enhanced by a comment supposedly made by Isaiah when he heard of the treasure tour offered to the Babylonians; the prophet was alleged to have said, *‘in days to come, everything in your residence that your ancestors have amassed will be carried off to Babylon’*. Attractive as this idea is, it involved a re-ordering of history. It will be recalled that the evidence from Assyria is that Hezekiah bought off the Assyrian invasion of 701 by giving them all the treasure he could find – an action that DH included in his account of the events of the time. If this is what happened, then there would have been no treasure for later visitors to see. Modern scholarship suggests that the alternative explanation could have been added between 598 and 586.¹⁷⁰

In reality, Merodach-Baladan had only stably occupied the Babylonian throne between 721 and 710, although in 703 he managed to regain the throne for just 9 months. It may have been a desire to deal with the Merodach-Baladan threat once and for all that precipitated Sennacherib's decision to abandon the siege of Jerusalem: it was certainly a major concern on his return north. In 700 Sennacherib took Merodach-Baladan's capital and the man himself retreated to Elam where he died a few years later. The only time when Merodach-Baladan might have visited Judah in person would have been between 722-710 when his hold on the throne of Babylon was relatively secure, although the possibility cannot be ruled out that he sent secret emissaries after the death of Sargon in 705.

Under administration 586 to 579 (the third exile and beyond)

Gedaliah, the governor appointed by Babylon, had established his headquarters at Mizpah, just outside Jerusalem, and from there carried through some land reforms that provided the people with at

¹⁶⁷ Jeremiah 44:12

¹⁶⁸ Deuteronomy 28:63-68

¹⁶⁹ Jeremiah 44:16 & 17b-18

¹⁷⁰ 2 Kings 20:12-19. Cogan and Tadmor (1988) hold that this alternative view also came from the Jeremiah/Baruch team. They argue that the language used was typical of the book of Jeremiah. (p 259 note on v 17-19). See p 260-3 for discussion of the dates.

least one reasonable harvest. But the deeply fractured state was vulnerable to the ambitions of its neighbours and to the still unquelled fanaticism of the nationalists. The King of Ammon was able to stir up some dissidents to assassinate Gedaliah and abduct Zedekiah's daughters. But the plotters were discovered and Zedekiah's daughters rescued.

The idea that a physical building was not a requirement for the worship of Yahweh emerges in a story in Jeremiah that relates to this time. A group of pilgrims came from Shiloh, Shechem and Samaria to present offerings at the site of the temple. It may well be that the destruction of all the altars to foreign gods that accompanied the physical destruction of the temple had made the site more, rather than less, acceptable as a place of pilgrimage.

Unfortunately for this group of pilgrims, they arrived in Mizpah the day after the murder of Gedaliah, and many of them were killed in the mayhem that had ensued.

After Zedekiah's daughters had been rescued, their rescuers appealed to Jeremiah and asked him to pray to Yahweh to find out what they should do. Jeremiah's response was that they should remain in Judah. But this was not what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah and Baruch were accused of plotting with the Babylonians to have them killed and were forcibly taken to Egypt.¹⁷¹

Josephus records that the Babylonians attacked and conquered both Ammon and Moab in 581/2, but this is not confirmed from other sources. And Tyre was still holding out, tying down Babylonian troops. Perhaps that was why there was no response from Babylon to the assassination of their appointed governor until 579. But in that year, a Babylonian force entered Jerusalem and exiled a further 745 of the remaining citizens.

It was probably seven years later, in 572 that the Babylonians finally gave up their thirteen-year siege of Tyre. Without the ability to prevent the re-supply of the city by sea, the Babylonian army had failed to break the resistance of the defenders. The Babylonian siege engines were not able to engineer a sufficient breach of the defences; no effective attack was ever pressed home. An agreed settlement was reached, the Babylonian forces retired and Tyre returned to its normal business of making money.

Ezekiel had the grace to recognise that his prophecies with regard to Tyre had been incorrect. In 573 he therefore issued a revision to his former oracles: he claimed that he heard Yahweh pronounce:

Son of man, Nebuchadrezzar has kept his army in the field against Tyre for a long time – till every head had become bald and every shoulder chafed – but neither he nor his army has gained anything from Tyre to pay for their prolonged effort. Therefore Lord Yahweh says 'I am giving Egypt to Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon. He shall plunder and despoil it and take its wealth as wages for his army.'¹⁷²

As he had shown before, Ezekiel proved a good judge of Nebuchadrezzar's intentions. In 568, the Babylonian ruler did make one last attempt to invade Egypt. But it was unsuccessful. Egypt's defences were to remain sound for a few years yet. Despite Ezekiel's prophecies, she would never fall to Babylon.

¹⁷¹ Jeremiah 40 & 41

¹⁷² Ezekiel 29:18-19