

Homily for Wednesday in the Twelfth Week after Pentecost  
August 12, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year 2, Proper 14: Ezekiel 9:1-11; 10:18-22\*; Psalm 113; Matthew 18:15-20*

Today's gospel will be heard at the Sunday Eucharist on Labor Day weekend. So instead, I'm going to say a few words about the historical setting of Ezekiel and his book.

In the year 605 BC, the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish—in Turkey, along the border with Syria.<sup>1</sup> Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, was a vassal of the Egyptians. After Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar II laid siege to Jerusalem. To save Jerusalem, Jehoiakim switched sides. He paid tribute to the Babylonian king. Hostages from the royal family and nobility were taken to Babylon.

Four years later, the Babylonians were defeated by the Egyptians. Jehoiakim switched sides again. In 598, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem a second time. Jehoiakim died during the siege. Jehoiakim's son Jeconiah was king for three months. The city surrendered on March 16, in the year 597 BC.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Carchemish>, (accessed 12 August 2020).

Jeconiah was deposed and taken to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah, Jeconiah's uncle, king.

Scholarly opinion seems generally to regard Ezekiel as one who was among those sent into exile with Jeconiah.<sup>2</sup> He was part of a lineage of priests descended from Zadok, priest when David and Solomon reigned.<sup>3</sup> This priestly tradition preserved the parts of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the "Holiness School."<sup>4</sup> Stephen Cook, who teaches Old Testament at the Virginia Theological Seminary writes, "The priestly theology of the Holiness School thoroughly infuses the book of Ezekiel."<sup>5</sup>

In the year 587 BC, Zedekiah revolted. Nebuchadnezzar returned. In 586, the city fell. Its walls and temple were destroyed, and all but the very poor were sent into exile. Zedekiah and his sons escaped but were captured. In Nebuchadnezzar's

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen L. Cook, "Ezekiel," *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1159.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. See also: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cohen#ref197607>, (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Cook, 1159.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

presence, the Zedekiah's sons were killed and he was blinded. Zedekiah spent the rest of his life imprisoned and in chains.<sup>6</sup>

Today's lesson was all of chapter nine. Its subject was the punishment of the guilty, of those who have not been faithful to the God of Israel. We also heard the last four verses of chapter ten, in which the prophet is given a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple. Ezekiel sees the cherubim and their wings and the four faces each has. Professor Stephen Cook wrote, "The *cloud* filling the temple conceals and reveals the divine presence."<sup>7</sup> Then, the cloud was gone.

The most familiar passage from Ezekiel is the prophet's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones.<sup>8</sup> It is read at the Great Vigil of Easter and during Easter Week. In Year A, it's also read on the Fifth Sunday in Lent. In the Daily Office Lectionary, it is appointed as the first reading on Thursday in Easter Week. (I think hearing it so much is not helpful.)

My favorite reading from Ezekiel is the shorter reading from Ezekiel that is appointed for the Easter Vigil. It

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zedekiah>, (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Cook, 1172–72, n.3–4.

<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel 37:1–14.

is a prophecy for the Hebrews in exile, a prophecy of God's will for their future. We Christians can say it's about the grace that comes to us through the Paschal Mystery. I conclude with this short lesson:

*Thus says the Lord GOD, For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.<sup>9</sup>*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 36:24–28.