



# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2004  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Ezekiel 1–3

## God's Watchman

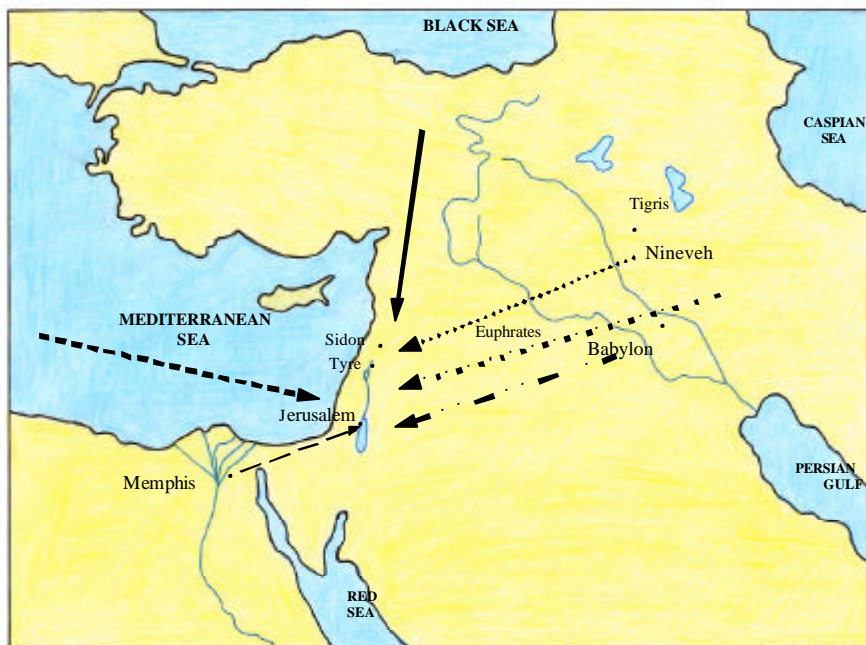
I am tempted to ask how much we all know about the book of Ezekiel? It's hidden away in the Old Testament, pretty long (48 chapters), full of obscure imagery, with a depressing theme (the first two thirds concern judgement – and we do not like to hear about our human sin and God's reaction to it).

*'In the thirtieth year* [we don't quite know what it means by that, but the assumption is that it probably means in Ezekiel's thirtieth year: the year he would have become a priest had he been in the Temple in Jerusalem], *in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.*

*<sup>2</sup>On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin – <sup>3</sup>the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.'* (1:1-3)

### 1) The Book of Ezekiel in the Ancient Near East

I'm afraid we will have to start with a little history and a little geography. So let's look at the map of the Near East.

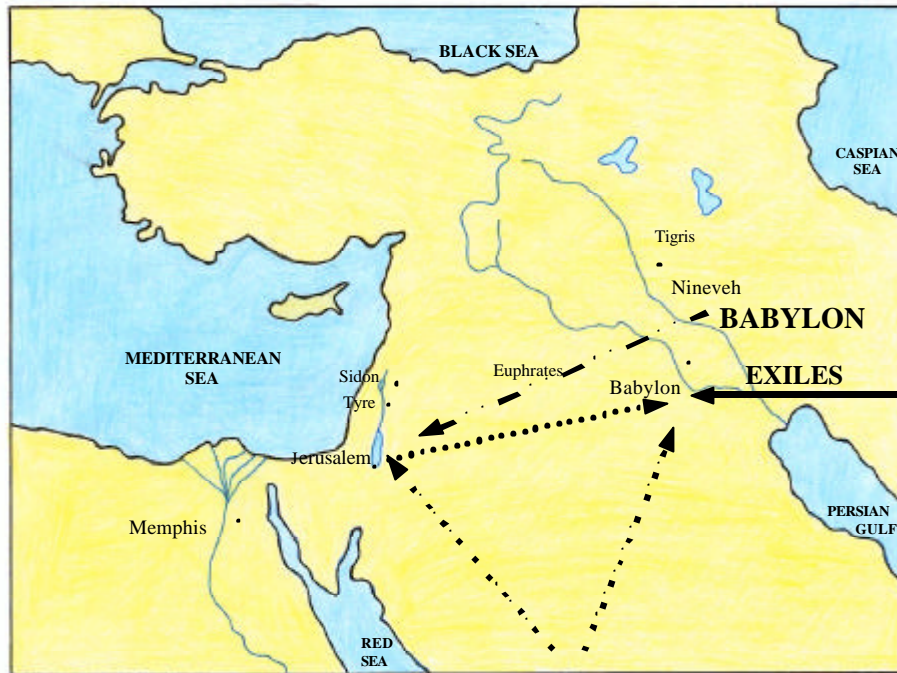


(a) There is Israel, on that little neck of land that connects Africa to Asia and to Europe. A hugely significant place for them to be; and an area that had been fought over again and again and again throughout the centuries, and still is fought over today.

Firstly, Egypt dominated the area; as we remember from the book of Genesis. And then, in quick succession, a number of other predatory empires sought to dominate: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians. Then in the Inter-Testamental period, we have the Greek Empire and finally, when you get to the New Testament, the Roman

Empire coming down across the Mediterranean. You can see why the Land of Israel was an unsettled land to live in: swept by whatever power dominated. Which is why, I guess, we find it a scene of Arab and American conflict today.

(b) The next map is the same map (in case you are confused). When Ezekiel was born we were in one of those times of flux when one empire was giving way to another. It was the moment when the Babylonian Empire was flexing its muscles and beginning to assert its control. And so when we get to the beginning of the book of Ezekiel, Babylon has captured Israel, and indeed deported a number of the leading people into exile in Babylon – 597 BC. And probably what Ezekiel is describing there at the beginning of his book is a number of exiles working on some of the irrigation schemes in Mesopotamia (the area which was fought over in the Iraq war of 2003).



(c) There are two foci to the Book of Ezekiel. He is there in exile, where he's probably been for five years, but his heart is in Jerusalem. And this book of Old Testament prophecy is going to move between the Kebar River (probably a canal, part of an irrigation work on the baking plain of Mesopotamia) and Jerusalem where the Temple was: where their God dwelt, where Ezekiel had grown up to believe that he was going to be a priest.

Back to verse 1: *'In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.'* Probably about five years after that first deportation of exiles, and about five years before the Babylonians (in 587 BC) dealt once and for all with Jerusalem. They pretty well razed it to the ground.

I think you'll probably agree that that's about as remote from 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cambridge as we could possibly be.

## 2) Where does it touch us?

Let's try to imagine an exile mindset! That may be easier for some of us from overseas than perhaps it is for those of us brought up in the U.K. I remember living among Polish exiles 50 years ago in Germany after the end of the Second World War. But for a Jew in Ezekiel's day it was not just that they had been violently uprooted, deprived of all land, possessions and status; shattered economically, politically, militarily; and were now probably doing slave labour in the baking sun of the Mesopotamian plain (that date there in verse 1 is reckoned to be the 31<sup>st</sup> July: slap bang in the middle of the hottest weather). But it was their faith that was particularly in ruins. The Jews understood their religion to mean that the true God belonged to them, as it were. Their God was the God. Yahweh was the God of all gods, and the Jerusalem Temple was His dwelling place. But then in 597 BC the Babylonian gods had conquered Jerusalem, and now Yahweh's own people, the Jews, were captive among a triumphant paganism. Babylonian religion exuded power and supremacy. How could an exiled Jew go on believing in Yahweh in the face of such overwhelming and palpable evidence that the claims of Judaism were false? Their God was not LORD of all: He was weaker than the gods of Babylon. He must be subservient to them. Could anything be more obvious, if you were a Jew in exile?

And is not that our experience too? To believe in the Christian God at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is surely to fly in the face of all the evidence. The successful materialistic world out there (as it were) does not need God. What has He got to do with the January Sales? – or capturing Saddam Hussein? Or the world of popular music and films? Or buying a house; pursuing my career; finding a life-partner?

We live today as Ezekiel's contemporaries lived, under the shadow of enormous symbols of antagonistic belief systems. Imagine an effigy of a winged, human-headed bull, over three metres high in real life. It is the sort of image that would have surrounded the Jews in Babylon, trumpeting to them the inadequacy of their religion in the face of the facts of real life. It was these Babylonian gods who had the real power. The Babylonians weren't slaves in exile: they were ruling their world. These gods must be the gods – just as the vast supermarkets of commerce, the towering skyscrapers of big business and the glamorous celebrities of the media boss our world today; convincing us that faith is a merely personal, private and ultimately unimportant thing. Like playing the trombone, it is best practised in private, out of the earshot of others. And, so long as we keep it that way – personal and private – they'll leave us alone. But we'd better not let it out to challenge the thinking of others, or they'll let us know who's really boss.

Don't you feel like that at times? I certainly do. And I think, therefore, I see the significance of that word 'There' near the end of verse 3: ***'There*** [in exile in the land of Babylon, under these gods] ***the hand of the LORD was upon him.*** In a land of uncleanness, a land of exile, a land of despair, among a desolate and defeated race, there the hand of the LORD was upon Ezekiel. In a place and at a time when faith was impossible, when an encounter with God was inconceivable, there and then God met him. And so He meets us, and always has.

Notice those creatures in verses 59 of chapter 1: ***'...in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, <sup>6</sup>but each of them had four faces and four wings. <sup>7</sup>Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. <sup>8</sup>Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, <sup>9</sup>and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.'***

But what did Ezekiel discover as this strange vision unfolded? ***'Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. <sup>26</sup>Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. <sup>27</sup>I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. <sup>28</sup>Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking'*** (vv. 25-28).

Behind and above the earthly appearances there was a greater spiritual reality. Looming over what looked like these Babylonian gods, there was a greater spiritual reality: One enthroned above all material and spiritual forces, above the gods of Babylon and above the gods of 21<sup>st</sup> Century materialism. ***'Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.'***

I think there is actually no place for that self-pity which I find myself prone to when I think it is harder to believe today than it was in the past. Harder than it was for Ezekiel and the exiled Jews? I don't think so.

And so let us see now how God dealt with Ezekiel.

### 3) God and Ezekiel

God was there by the Kebar river in the land of the Babylonians, but how was He there? Well, in that mystifying vision there in chapter 1 of which John Calvin wrote, *'If someone asks whether the vision is clear, I confess it is very obscure and I do not profess to understand it'* (and if that was good enough for Calvin, it's good enough for you and me, I suggest!). But in what did this mystifying vision culminate? Look again at the end of chapter 1: ***'This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking. <sup>2:1</sup>He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you."*** <sup>2</sup>***As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me'*** (vv. 1:28b – 2:2). Do you see all that emphasis on God speaking: four times, in two and a half verses?

**(a) God Spoke.** And to hear Him, notice, Ezekiel is to stand upright on his feet. It wasn't that it was wrong to fall prone on his face, prostrate before God, when he saw that glimpse of the likeness of His glory (in chapter 1). But it is the dignity of the human race to communicate with God and to be communicated to by God. And that is symbolised by humanity's upright stance.

Now Ezekiel is to be God's messenger, so that God may speak through Ezekiel to His people. But notice what it is that Ezekiel is to say: *'He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. <sup>4</sup>The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.'<sup>5</sup>And whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them'* (2:3-5). And notice what Ezekiel is to say: *'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.'* But what does the Sovereign LORD say? We are not told. Glance across to chapter 3 verses 10 and 11: *'And he said to me, "Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. <sup>11</sup>Go now to your countrymen in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says,' whether they listen or fail to listen.'*" Go to the last verse of our reading this morning: *"But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house'"* (3:27b). Now we could infer from 2:10 and from 3:16-21 that it's going to be a warning about coming judgement, but that is not spelled out here. The emphasis in Ezekiel's call is on the fact that God speaks, rather than on the content of what He says. That God spoke was more significant than what God spoke: *'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.'*

I think this has a great deal to teach us, because we actually find it harder to grasp that God speaks to us than to accept particular messages from Him. It seems to me that we think the problem is with particular things He says: about judgement or righteousness or holiness. But the fundamental problem in the human heart is that we have a speaking God. And He's addressing you and me and wishes to address every member of His created human race, all the time. Our God is a speaking God. That's the fundamental truth that we've got to grasp.

The debate about, for example, homosexuality in the Church of England at the moment is ultimately a debate about whether God speaks (because if He does, woe betide us if we try to conform His voice to fit our cultural presuppositions). Increasingly those who call themselves 'evangelicals', certainly in this country today, are dividing along these lines: on whether God is actually a speaking God. For those who believe He is, this book is the central, dynamic, living, driving force in the life of the individual and in the life of the Church. As for others, well, they pick it up and put it down again, as and when it seems appropriate. (All, notice, pay lip service to it, but only for some is it central for the life of the individual and the life of the Church).

For the Jewish exiles, the great rediscovery was not that God had some particular message for them, but that God was speaking: that He was a living, talking, speaking God – addressing them even there in Babylon. And that is what the human heart finds so difficult to grasp and accept. For the Jewish exiles they were going to discover through Ezekiel that God was speaking to them – that a prophet had come among them: *'And whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them'* (2:5). God was sending them a prophet so that they would know that they had been sent a prophet. Is that circular or is that circular? God was speaking. God speaks. And that is what we need to remember again and again every day as you and I wake. We need to remember there is a speaking God addressing you today and addressing me today, with a living and a dynamic voice. It is not something contained and trapped from years ago, but relevant to your heart and my heart at this point in our lives.

**(b) The Watchman.** *"And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. <sup>7</sup>You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. <sup>8</sup>But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you"* (2:6-8). That theme is going to continue in chapter 3 verses 4-9; and then in 3:16-21 God tells Ezekiel that he is to be a watchman for the house of Israel. That picture of the watchman, or the sentry, explains why Ezekiel does not need to be afraid or terrified, though they are a rebellious house (2:6; 3:9). In ancient warfare (or modern, for that matter) sentry duty was (and is) an awesome responsibility. But it is a limited responsibility. The sentry does not have to defend the city or the army. He only has to warn them. You do not put your best warrior on sentry duty, your best fighter. A small boy could do the job if he's alert and 'on the ball'. The watchman was not judged by his success (did he save the army?) – only by his faithfulness (did he warn the army?)

So when a man or a woman speaks for God today (you and I, if we are Christian believers) we are not responsible for the result. We can't change human hearts. We can only faithfully pass on what God is saying. So (speaking now to those who are Christian believers) in our evangelism – these 'Arena' courses we run here at St. Andrew the Great, or in 'Two Ways to Live' for example, we do not believe that they will change human hearts. We pray that God would change hearts. That's the limit of our responsibility.

**(c) The Scroll.** *"But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you."<sup>9</sup>Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll,<sup>10</sup> which he*

*unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe* [from that we can surmise what the message was going to be like]. <sup>3:1</sup>*And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.”*<sup>2</sup>*So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.* <sup>3</sup>*Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.*’ (2:8 – 3:3). Notice there the emphasis on God’s provision. He offers this scroll. He says, *“open your mouth and eat what I give you . . . eat what is before you, eat this scroll.”* The phrase, ‘ . . . *he gave me the scroll to eat*’ (3:2) could well be ‘he caused me to eat the scroll’. The emphasis is there on God’s provision. What God provided for His prophet was His own word in written form. And it was complete: notice from 2:10 that it was written on both sides. There was no need for Ezekiel’s own additions – a few personal conjectures about the value of hope, or a couple of pet hobby-horses about the need for encouragement in the spiritual life. No, the scroll indicates to us the objective and non-negotiable nature of Ezekiel’s message.

Notice also that we hear no response to his call from Ezekiel’s own mouth. It almost sounds from God’s urgency as though He is trying to pre-empt any reluctant or disobedient response from Ezekiel: ***“Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”*** And then He urges him repeatedly: eat it, eat it, get it down. It’s probably quite hard to speak with your mouth full of papyrus (I’ve never tried it), even if it does taste like honey. So Ezekiel’s chance to respond to God seems hardly to be there at all. We don’t really know what his reaction was. Just glance, finally, at verse 14 of chapter 3, because here we are given a little insight into him. But the commentators are divided on what this verse actually means: ***‘The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD upon me.’*** The commentators divide on whether that means that Ezekiel was bitter and angry at being called to the isolated and unpopular role of the prophet (when perhaps he had always hoped, on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday to become part of the religious establishment as a priest), or whether he was filled with God’s bitterness and anger at the rebellion of the house of Israel. Whichever is right, the verse speaks of God’s Spirit and man’s spirit interacting: ***‘The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD upon me’*** (3:14).

As we close and as we start a new year, let’s be thankful for such a God: a God who takes our human spirit and longs to engage with it. If you are not a Christian this morning, He longs to bring His Spirit to bear on your spirit. If we are Christians, then He longs to be speaking to us even here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cambridge, among all the idols of our age and the pride and arrogance of human achievement.

And through His Son, Jesus, He longs to take us as we are and use us for His own purposes in ways we could never imagine, just as He is going to use Ezekiel.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*