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The Healing of Ezekiel based on the book of Ezekiel by Ralph Milton

Many years ago I spent several weeks getting sunburned in the Badlands of Alberta near Drumheller. I was producing a movie about Ezekiel and in the process fell in love with the old curmudgeon. The movie played a number of times on TV and now lies moldering in the archives. This was adapted from the movie script and presented at a meeting of the BC Conference of the United Church.

The venerable priest walked through the bronze heat of noon with his left eye closed. It helped a little, when your head was throbbing. He rubbed the veins above his ear hard enough to hurt, and knew that before the sun set to begin the Sabbath, he would have a blazing, full-blown migraine.

He had them often now. Almost every week. Almost every Sabbath as it turned out – every Sabbath the old man found himself in a fetal coil of agony lying on a mat in the darkest, coolest room of his stately house, waiting for the pounding pain to stop. “Why God, on the Sabbath when I should be debating the Torah with the elders of Israel?”

His fury blazed right through his headache when he saw them. A group of women – women he knew, friends of his late wife – a small gaggle of ignorant women obviously going together for their silly worship – songs and dancing and carrying-on that was insulting to Yahweh.

“Woe to you, women! Thus says the Lord our God, woe to you. I have called my priests to offer sacrifice in the temple – not women just anywhere at all. It is the priests who read the Torah – not the ignorant – not the sinners – not the women. Thus says the Lord our God...”

The prophet’s voice croaked as he pressed his hand to ease his pounding head. The women gathered their dark shawls around their faces and hurried off.

“He is mad,” whispered one of them beneath her breath.

“He cannot mourn for his dead wife, Peninnah,” said a second woman. “He loved her dearly, but on her death bed she spoke to him of Yahweh whom she honored in her songs and dances with us – how these ways of worship offered life and hope and breath in this alien Babylon. Now he is so angry he cannot mourn.”

“Poor man.” The first woman shook her head in pity. “Poor man. He does not know – he cannot see – the softer side of Yahweh – that through our stories and our dances we can sing our Yahweh’s song in this strange land.”

Ezekiel heard none of this, of course. He was almost running now, as much running as an old man’s strength and pride allow, running from the heat of the sun and the anger in his heart – anger that his wife had died in peace –

“She should have died confessing her apostasy!” – refusing to admit that she understood something that he longed to know but could not let himself admit or look for, hearing over and over the voice of Peninnah on her death bed asking, “My husband, can the dry bones of Israel live without new life and breath?”

Each time he dismissed the memory. “Women are unclean, and that is why they have such unclean visions!” Ezekiel hurried to his house to search his ancient texts for reassurance.

“My scroll!” the priest demanded from the young disciple who opened his door, then threw it to the floor because his hurting head blurred all the letters. A wave of nausea sent him sprawling to his mat where he would writhe until the sun would set tomorrow.

“Why, oh God, do you take away my Sabbath? Why did you take away our temple, my Torah and my Sabbath?”

As the light faded in the tiny window of the room, the disciple slowly closed the door and left the old priest to his misery. Ezekiel, the renowned, respected, much-revered prophet-priest of Judah prepared to spend another Sabbath wrenching, cursing, struggling to survive another migraine.

As evening wrapped the hurting man in cooling darkness, he slept a little. Now and then. And in and through the sleepless dreams and dream-filled sleep – visions of a valley – bones – dry bones – his bones – bones of the priests, bones of Johoiachin the king – bones – fields and fields of bones scattered over rubble and sterile sand.

And then the voice pulsating through the pain, “Ezekiel! Can these bones live? Prophecy to these bones – speak the tender, healing word to them, Ezekiel, that they may have breath and live.”

Ezekiel sat up startled by the vision. He rubbed his eyes against the dream, trying hard not to remember the voice of God which he had heard – yes, clearly it was God – yet, clearly also he had heard Peninnah.

Now the first light of morning broke into the window. A quiet knock. The young disciple came to see the aging priest. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I dreamed...” The ancient priest paused and breathed deep against the pain. “I dreamed of...of Peninnah.”

And then the tears began, slow tears at first, then followed by an earthquake shuddering his body – wracking, heaving sobs that trembled through the old man’s bones, over and over.

The young disciple stood by, anxiously, not knowing what to do or say, then found his strong young arms around the ancient body, holding, cradling, offering a

tenderness he'd never felt to this old man. He offered Ezekiel a cloth to dry the tears that ran great rivers down his beard, and wondered if he really saw a hint of smile behind the waning sobs.

The old priest sat there on the floor in silence, except for now and then an aftershock of sobs. Then he gently touched the hand of the disciple.

“You may go now. My pain is ended. A river of tears has washed my stagnant soul and I will live. God has given me my Sabbath.”

He would not write them down until after sundown at the end of Sabbath, of course, but the words began to form in Ezekiel's mind – a poem to celebrate a voice he had heard in his sobs – a vision he had seen through his tears.

*The angel brought me back
to the entrance of the temple;
there, there,
water flowing from below
from below the threshold of the temple
a river that I could not cross.
The angel said to me:
“The water flows toward the sea,
and when it meets the sea,
the sea of stagnant waters,
it will make them fresh.
Where the river goes,
living creatures all will thrive
everything will live
where the holy river goes.
On the banks,
on both sides of the river,
there will grow
all kinds of trees for food.
Their leaves will never wither,
nor will their fruit fail,
but they will bear
fresh fruit every month,
because the water for them
flows from the sanctuary.
Their fruit will be for food,
and their leaves
for healing.”*

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
all of them available through Wood Lake Publishing.
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