

EZEKIEL

## Ezekiel and the exiles




Ezekiel was feeling very homesick. All his life he had looked forward to his thirtieth birthday, when he would serve in the Temple as one of God's priests.

And here he was, hundreds of miles from his homeland. Ezekiel was one of ten thousand captives taken from the hills and valleys of Judah to work on the plains of Babylonia, when King Nebuchadnezzar first took control of Judah.

Five years had passed since Ezekiel left home.

'How far away the Temple is,' Ezekiel thought.  
'How far away God seems.'



A sudden gust of wind made him look up. Was that a storm coming? A strange dark cloud raced towards him. Lightning flashed. It was so close now that Ezekiel could see into the centre of the storm. There were four creatures like the winged beasts that guarded the box of God's law in the Temple—flying wing to wing—and wheels that could turn every way, and eyes that could see in all directions.

Above the darkness, Ezekiel could see a dazzling blue—far brighter than the sky—shot with all the colours of the rainbow.

Then he heard a voice, a voice that shook the earth. Ezekiel trembled. Could it be God himself, here in the land of Babylon?

'Mortal man,' said the voice, 'I am sending you to warn my people in exile. They have rebelled and turned against me. Tell them to mend their ways. I will give you the words to speak.'

Then the vision was gone. Ezekiel walked trembling back to the camp. God was here—he was everywhere—after all. And he had given him a special job to do—not in the Temple, but in the camp, among the exiles.

God gave Ezekiel many visions after that—terrible and wonderful visions. He showed Ezekiel how Nebuchadnezzar would march into Judah again, conquer Jerusalem and destroy the Temple.

Ezekiel told the others about it—and not just in words. He acted the scene so vividly that no one could forget it.

"This is our own fault," he said. "After all God's love and goodness to us we broke his laws, we did wrong, we even worshipped useless images. This is our punishment."

News came at last that Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem and destroyed the city and Temple, just as Ezekiel had said he would. The exiles were in despair.

"We have no future now," they said. "There is no hope. God has given us up."

Ezekiel did his best to comfort them.

"It's not true," he said. "God still loves us."

But the people would not be comforted.

So God gave Ezekiel a special new vision. He was standing in a valley, and on the ground all around him there were bones—the dry bones of old skeletons.

"Tell these bones that I will make them into living, breathing people," God said.

Ezekiel did as he was told. And as he spoke God's words, a miracle happened. Bone joined to bone. The skeletons stood up. They became flesh-and-blood bodies! And God breathed life into them through his words.

"Tell my people what I can do," God said to Ezekiel. "I will breathe new life into them and make them one nation again. I will take them home to their own land. And this time they will be loyal to me. Tell them it's a promise. They should know that I always keep my promises."

gods—images made of metal, wood and stone—from the cups which belonged to God's Temple.

They were all shouting and laughing and making a great noise when they saw a human hand appear out of thin air. Just a hand. It began to write on the plaster wall. The guests fell silent, and the king went white as a ghost.

'Call my wise men,' he croaked. 'The man who can tell me what this means shall be made Prime Minister.' But none of the wise men knew what the writing meant.

Then the queen mother remembered how Daniel had told King Nebuchadnezzar his dream. So they sent for Daniel.

'Tell me what this means and I will make you rich and powerful,' said the king.

'Keep your gifts,' answered Daniel. 'What I have to say won't please you. You have dishonoured God by drinking to your gods from the cups which belong to his Temple. God says the days of your kingdom are numbered. It will be given to the Medes and Persians.'

That same night Belshazzar was killed. The Medes and Persians captured Babylon, and placed their own leader, Darius, on the throne.

#### The plot to kill Daniel

Darius made Daniel one of his three chief rulers. Daniel was by now a very old man. But he served the king honestly and loyally. And he still prayed to God, as he had always done, regular as clockwork three times a day, kneeling at his open window, facing towards far-off Jerusalem.

The other leaders were jealous of Daniel, and plotted against him. What could they accuse him of? He never put a foot wrong. It would have to be something to do with his religion.

So they persuaded the king to make a new law—one

that could not be changed.

'For thirty days no one must ask for anything from any god. Whoever breaks this law will be thrown to the lions.'

Daniel knew that the king had signed the order. But he still prayed to God, openly, three times a day.

Daniel's enemies were delighted. Their plot had worked. They hurried to tell the king.

Darius was angry and upset. He thought very hard, but he could find no way to save Daniel.

That night Daniel was thrown into a deep pit full of hungry lions.

The king couldn't eat his supper. He sent all the royal musicians and entertainers away. He did not sleep a wink. As soon as it began to grow light he hurried to the lion-pit.



'Daniel,' he called out. 'Was your God able to save you from the lions?' He did not expect a reply.

But to his amazement Daniel's voice answered, 'Yes, your majesty. The lions have not hurt me. God knew that I was innocent. I have done you no wrong.'

'Set him free at once,' Darius cried. 'And throw the men who accused him to the lions!'

So Daniel came out unhurt, because of his trust in God.

King Darius made a new law.

'Let everyone in my kingdom tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, who saved him from the lions. He is the living God, for ever and ever.'



## A girl named Mary

In the town of Nazareth in the north of Israel (the district called Galilee) there lived a girl named Mary. She was just an ordinary girl. She helped her mother bake the bread and spin the wool and fetch the water like the other girls. When she was old enough her parents arranged for her to marry Joseph, the town carpenter. But then, one day, something quite extraordinary happened.

Mary was busy with the day's jobs as usual, her mind full of the coming wedding, when she looked up and saw a stranger standing watching her. Before she could say a word, the man spoke:





'I am Gabriel, one of God's messenger-angels,' he said. 'I have a message for you from God.'

Mary could hardly believe her ears. She felt scared, and she wondered what the angel could mean.

'Don't be frightened,' the angel went on. 'God knows all about you and he loves you. He has sent me to tell you that he's chosen you for a very special honour. You are to be the mother of God's promised King. The baby will be God's own Son.'

'But I don't understand,' Mary said. 'I'm not even married yet . . .' Her head was buzzing with questions.

'This is something God will do. Nothing is too hard for him. You remember your cousin Elizabeth? Everyone thought she could never have children. But now she is expecting a baby. You see, there is nothing God cannot do.'

When Mary heard this, she knew that she could trust God to do whatever he said. She did not have to understand it all.

'I will do whatever God wants,' she said.



## 'His name is John'



As soon as she could, Mary set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth. It was a long journey, but at last she arrived at the house where Elizabeth lived with her husband Zechariah.

'As soon as I heard the news, I had to come,' Mary said. And she began to tell Elizabeth all that had happened. But to her surprise, Elizabeth already knew.

'It's a wonderful thing,' Elizabeth said, 'that God has chosen you to be the mother of the King.'

And she began to tell Mary her own surprising story . . .

Elizabeth and Zechariah had longed for a baby. They had asked God about it in their prayers. But the years passed and no baby came. They began to grow old, and they gave up hope.

Zechariah was a priest, and his turn came to go to the Temple at Jerusalem and take part in the daily service. He was specially chosen to go inside the Temple and burn the sweet-smelling incense on the altar.

While he was there, alone, God's messenger-angel, Gabriel, came to him.

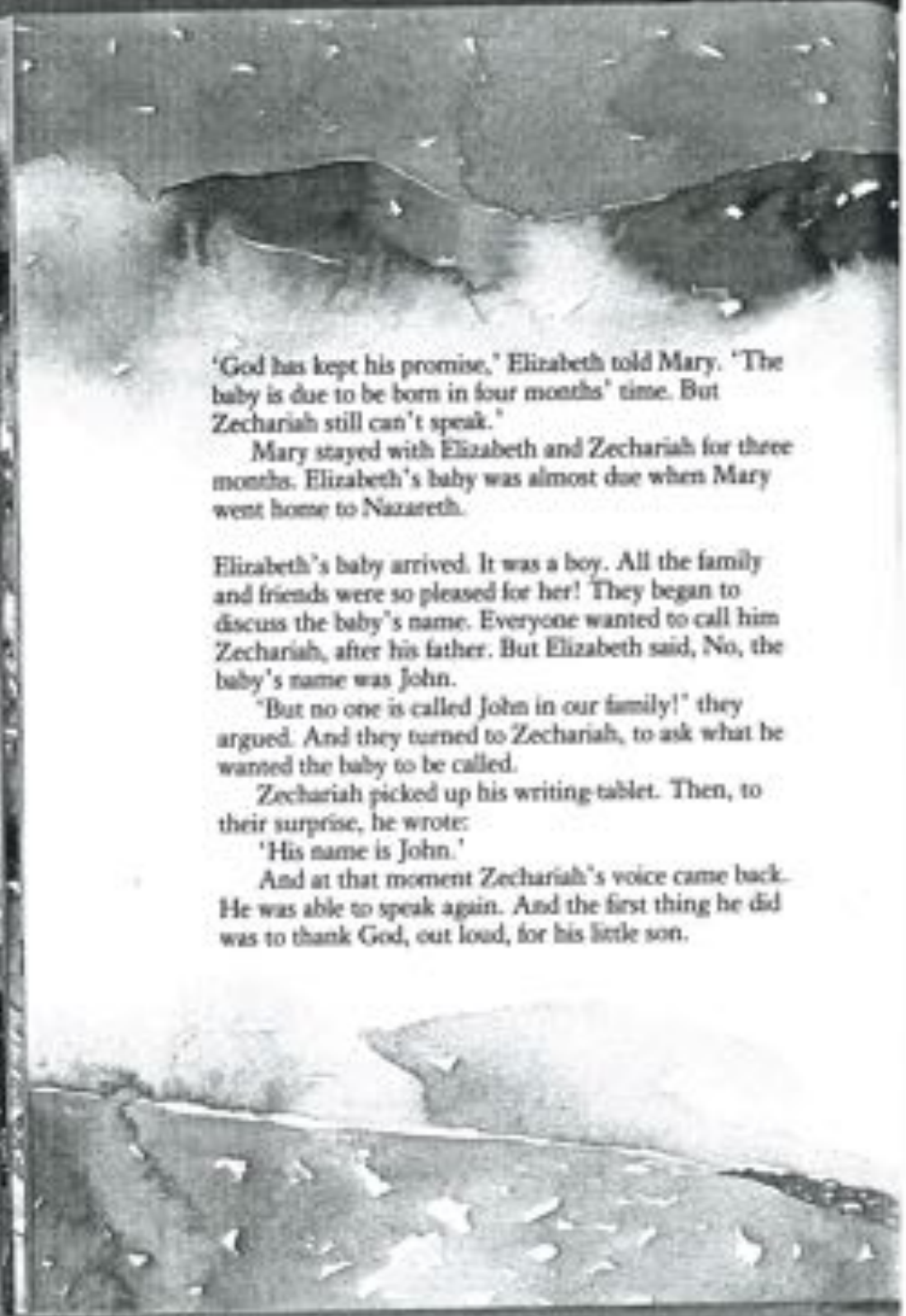
'Don't be afraid, Zechariah,' the angel said. 'God has sent me to tell you that he has heard your prayers for a baby. You and Elizabeth will have a son. You are to call him John. He will grow up to be a great man and make you very happy. God has chosen your son to tell his people that their King is coming. John will help them get ready to welcome him.'

But Zechariah really couldn't believe it. He and Elizabeth were too old to have a baby!

'Because you have not believed God's word,' the angel said, 'you won't be able to speak, from this moment until the day God's promise comes true.'

When Zechariah finished his duties in the Temple he went home. He couldn't speak a word. Elizabeth couldn't think what had happened to him. She was very worried. Then Zechariah wrote it all down, to explain . . .





'God has kept his promise,' Elizabeth told Mary. 'The baby is due to be born in four months' time. But Zechariah still can't speak.'

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months. Elizabeth's baby was almost due when Mary went home to Nazareth.

Elizabeth's baby arrived. It was a boy. All the family and friends were so pleased for her! They began to discuss the baby's name. Everyone wanted to call him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, No, the baby's name was John.

'But no one is called John in our family!' they argued. And they turned to Zechariah, to ask what he wanted the baby to be called.

Zechariah picked up his writing tablet. Then, to their surprise, he wrote:

'His name is John.'

And at that moment Zechariah's voice came back. He was able to speak again. And the first thing he did was to thank God, out loud, for his little son.