

EZEKIEL'S TEARS

By Christine Jeske

Her mother and father carried her in shifts between chained arms when they went up to Babylon. They set her to play with pebbles between their bleeding feet, and her mother bribed soldiers with the last of her gold earrings for barley cakes to feed her.

Aziah's* family set up a house of mud bricks along the shores of the Kezar River, and the Babylonians learned to ignore them. Her father grew millet in a small field, and when the harvests came they gave thanks to no god. They had left their household gods in Israel when they fled, and they lived without gods.

“Our God in heaven has gone,” Aziah's mother would say. “He left because we are a wicked people.” She said it like a refrain, swaying her head and shoulders from side to side, so many times the girl could anticipate its coming and whisper along with rolled eyes.

When the rains came too late, “We are a wicked people.”

When they had no meat for dinner, “We are a wicked people.”

When the baby was sick, “We are a wicked people.”

When new waves of Israelites straggled in, “We are a wicked people.

But Aziah did not feel wicked. She learned to carry water from the well, to find the best sellers at the market, to bounce the baby to sleep, and to help her mother with the cooking. But she loved to linger. She would stop on the way to the market to listen to old men, or fetch the ball of a little boy, or drop sticks into the river in the shade of the willow trees. She knew every corner of the Israelite neighborhood, every house and every resident, and every bit of news.

And so it was that she was among the first to find Ezekiel when he began to speak.

“There’s a crazy man down by the river,” said a man as he tied his donkey, and she was off.

A small crowd had already gathered, shifting their sandals in the soft mud at some distance from the spectacle.

He was skinny, wiry like the beggars who twisted their legs in strange directions as they sat on the side of the road with their chests bare. His chest was also bare, though around his waist was the tattered remains of a priest’s loincloth. He spun in circles with his hands to sky, his eyes open wide without blinking. Like a dead man. Aziah’s hands clenched her dress.

He shouted words mixed with groaning. “A storm... I see... Wheels... Lion... Wings...” He knelt and shook; he sobbed and cried

out in words the people could not understand. Drool ran from his mouth and he held his stomach until he fell to the ground, hiccuping and whimpering like a child after a tantrum.

“We are a wicked people.” Aziah’s mother never lifted her eyes from the cooking pot when the girl came home just before sunset. The girl picked up a broom and said nothing that evening.

But soon everyone, even the girl’s mother, had heard of Ezekiel. It became a game among the children to spot him, then run to tell the others and race back together before he began his explanation.

“He’s digging a hole in the west wall!” a child would shout, feet kicking up dust as he sprinted down the street. Children would pour out of houses to follow him. Adults would set down their spades and water jugs to follow slowly behind, feigning indifference.

And there he would be. Scraping at the mud bricks of the wall with his fingernails, peering over his shoulder like an army were about to overtake him, whimpering like a dog losing a fight. With his lips pursed shut he would work as if blind to the gathering crowd. Then suddenly, like an ox prodded with a stick, he would lurch to his feet.

“Woe to you all!” he bellowed, facing the crowd and waving his arms. “Woe!” His eyes flickered back and forth and his knees shook.

“People will flee from their homes. The city will be destroyed. You will pay for your sins. The Lord is coming in judgment!” He spoke of times like the end of the world, and the people listened as if they had already seen the end of the world and didn’t care. The girl shifted from one bare foot to another as she listened.

“What do you think it means?” whispered a woman with a baby tied to her chest.

“Doesn’t mean nothing,” said a man near her hauling a barley bag. “I carried my four children out of Israel when the Babylonians came with swords. Let God come for me! I’d like to see that!” And those around laughed.

And so it went for a year or more. Someone would spot him cooking bread on an animal dung fire, or waving a sword and stomping his feet in the dust, or packing his cooking pots and marching in and out of his home. Aziah would join other children running, shouting “Ezekiel’s out! Ezekiel’s out!” and a handful of adults would follow to stand around with half smiles on their faces, like parents trying to keep from laughing at a four year-old. The name Ezekiel became a joke in the town. Even, for most people, after he killed his wife.

Later it would be determined that Ezekiel didn’t actually kill his wife, but that’s the way the rumor went up on the day it happened, and so

it stuck in the minds of some for years. It happened that he was blamed because of the strangeness of it, like nearly everything Ezekiel did was strange. In the morning he was in the center of the town shouting “My wife will die! The delight of my eyes! The Lord has decreed it!” As Aziah stood at the well filling her last load of water before sunset, she heard the women discussing it.

“Shouldn’t someone do something about this man? Hasn’t he gone too far? His wife is dead!”

The girl remembered seeing Ezekiel’s wife only a few times. The old woman sat outside their home selling dried figs, and she would beckon to people in the street with crooked fingers, gazing upward with soft eyes.

A woman leaning outside her home sopped the last drops of lentils from a plate of food and stuffed the bite of bread into her mouth. “I say she’s better off now not having to listen to that old crazy! I’d want to get put out of my misery, too, if I had to listen to him all day.” And the women laughed.

As Aziah walked home, breathless and laughing with a girl friend at her side, they saw Ezekiel dragging his wife, wrapped in linens and draped on a pallet.

But there was something wrong. The girls stopped and touched each other's hands.

"Look what he's wearing," the friend whispered.

No one carried the dead without preparation. To touch the dead without changing one's appearance was to tempt death to find you and take you too. A mourning husband especially should be careful. He should take off his head wrap and sandals and cover at least his beard so that death could not recognize him. He should show respect to death. And he should wail the customary song of the mourners.

Ezekiel did none of these. He did not even cry.

"Let's go," the friend tugged at Aziah's dress, but Aziah had set down her water jug. Her mouth hung open.

Slowly, Ezekiel lay down his pallet, and the girl knew he was about to speak. For a moment their eyes met. He stood above her like a stone god, and the sun behind him made his cheeks shine with a yellowish glow. His cheeks quivered with the energy of something ready to burst, as if the turban on his head, the beard uncovered on his face, and the sandals on his feet might all suddenly fly off into the sky.

"Our people will not mourn," he whispered, and for that moment his words were for Aziah alone. "They will lose the delight of their eyes, the very temple of their God, and they will not mourn." His eyes lifted

slowly to the sky, red but not wet, and he sunk to the ground, his knees crashing into his chest and his head resting sideways like his own neck was broken.

Aziah had once helped her father carry home a sheep whose leg was torn by a lion, bleeding out its life while its glazed eyes pleaded with them for help they could not give. The sound of the sheep was the sound she heard now. Ezekiel sat rocking, whimpering. And something happened in the girl.

She began to weep. It was as if all the tears stored up in that crazy man came out through her. She cried until her friend wrapped her arm around her shoulder and dragged her home, leaving their water jugs in the street. She cried at home, crouching in a corner while her mother scolded her, "We are a wicked people." She cried until she slept, then awoke and cried again.

In her sleeping dreams came like visions. She saw Ezekiel's wife on her blanket with a piece of unfinished clothing on her lap, her arms beckoning like a mother calling her children home. Her lips moved but made no sound.

Then the mouth of Ezekiel's wife grew wide and her arms grew long, and the arms became the pillars of a temple and the mouth its opening. Aziah had seen the temple only once as a child before her

family came to Babylon, and she was there now as baby, crawling on the temple steps. The temple pillars were the outstretched arms of a woman, and its mouth called to her. Up and up she climbed while men came down laughing with blood on their hands. She shouted to them for help, but they stumbled over her without seeing, crushing her fingers under their sandals.

Then their laughter changed and became the laughter of her baby brother. He was playing in the street and chariots were racing by. Women screamed and people raced out of their homes, but the baby brother only laughed louder, a horrid and crazed laughter, looking up as soldiers in the chariot swung swords and slaughtered people. The baby stood up and doubled over with laughter. He vomited blood and still he laughed, and his eyes went still with the look of death, but still he laughed.

Aziah was screaming and her mother wiped her face.

Days and years passed. News came that the temple in Israel was finally burned to the ground. Aziah married. News came that wild animals roamed in the fields outside Jerusalem. Aziah had her first son. The land of Israel slept among weeks, and the woman's children grew and had children of their own. News came that a new king had

conquered Babylon, and one day news came that the people should go home.

Home to Israel they went.

We were among those who went. Aziah was my grandmother. We carried her on a pallet to the home of her birth, and she laughed and wept, mumbling words we could not understand. When we reached Jerusalem she climbed from her pallet, lay down on the broken stones where the temple had stood, and wept the tears of Ezekiel.

*Aziah and her name are fictional. Names without an asterisk are Biblical.