

## **Fire In The Bones Four**

### **The Mortal Ezekiel**

“Cast away all the transgressions

by which you offended,

and get yourselves a new heart

and a new spirit.”

(Ezekiel 18:31)

Ezekiel was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE. As Seeskin points out, the Rabbis doubted whether he should be in the canon, and some wondered whether it was even possible to be a Jewish prophet outside of the land of Israel. The Talmudic masters forbade open discussion of the meaning of his visions, and Heschel does not include him in his own study of the Prophets. Hermann Cohen, the great 19th century Jewish philosopher, however, sees him as the “supreme prophet,” and his legacy profoundly influenced Jewish eschatology and mysticism.

Ezekiel is one with the other prophets in calling for social justice and fidelity to the covenant, but there are unique things about him, including his harsh appraisal of the Holy Land, his psychedelic visions of God and the resurrection of the dead, and his individualist ethics.

## **Jerusalem**

One striking image in Ezekiel's prophecies is his claim that the spirit of YHVH has departed from Jerusalem due to its wrongdoings. The shechinah, he shockingly says, no longer dwells in the Judean capital. This is a blow to the view that Jerusalem is inherently and eternally the "centre of the universe", as some later Rabbis have it, and Martin Buber for one applauded Ezekiel's statement, pointing out that the assumption that the divine presence dwells in Jerusalem regardless of how Jews are actually acting amounts to "false pride and confidence."

Ezekiel's criticism of Jerusalem, which he calls "the bloody city" is the most severe in the Tanakh. Ezekiel says that its destruction is now certain, and the salvation of the Jewish mission lies with the exiles alone. YHVH will save Jerusalem, but not for Israel, who is beyond deserving it, no, only for the sanctity of the Holy Name itself in the world. There is in fact a ferocity, and even brutality, to the depictions of wrath in Ezekiel that is unprecedented (particularly in chapters 16 and 23). That said, Ezekiel, like Isaiah, has a startlingly universalist vision. In his vision of a renewed land of Israel, an angel shows him how the land will be allotted amongst the 12 tribes of Israel as it is supposed to be according to Torah law. The angel then says:

*You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves*

*and for the sojourners who reside among you*

*and have had children among you.*

*They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel.*

*With you they shall be allotted a land inheritance*

*among the tribes of Israel.*

Ezekiel is famous for the fertility of his visionary faculty. Three visions stand out in particular: the vision of the Temple to come (chapters 42-48); the vision of the valley of dry bones (37), and his opening vision of the divine chariot by the River Kebar. Ezekiel's Temple vision proved to be controversial due to the fact that it did not correspond to the actual rebuilt Temple and, more confusingly, for the fact that the festivals and sacrifices he described taking place there depart from the laws described in the Torah. The Rabbis speculated that he was describing a Messianic Temple, and his visions are largely taken now to refer to a future eschatological Temple.

### **The Valley of Dry Bones**

*The hand of the LORD came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones.*

*He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry.*

*He said to me, "O mortal, can these bones live again?" I replied, "O Lord GOD, only You know."*

*And He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!"*

*Thus said the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again.*

*I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am the LORD!"*

*I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone.*

*I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them.*

*Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O mortal! Say to the breath: Thus said the Lord GOD: Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again."*

*I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*And He said to me, "O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.'*

*Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel.*

*You shall know, O My people, that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves.*

*I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil.*

*Then you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have acted”—declares the LORD.*

#### **Parents and Children (18:1-4, 21-24)**

Hermann Cohen loved Ezekiel because he definitively established an individualist ethic for the first time in the Tanakh, being the first to speak a perspective that became normative among the Rabbis:

*The word of the LORD came to me:*

*What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, “Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge”?*

*As I live—declares the Lord GOD—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel.*

*Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die.*

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*The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone.*

*Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die.*

*None of the transgressions he committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness he has practiced, he shall live.*

*Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live!*

*So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, practicing the very abominations that the wicked person practiced, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered; because of the treachery he has practiced and the sins he has committed—because of these, he shall die.*

*Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Listen, O House of Israel: Is My way unfair? It is your ways that are unfair!*

**The River Kebar**

Most famous, though, of all the writings of Ezekiel is his vision at the River Kebar. Ezekiel 1 was chosen as the haftarah for the first day of Shavuot, due to its theme of divine revelation, which is what the festival came to celebrate.

*1 In my 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.*

The location is 200 miles south of present day Baghdad.

*2 On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Yehoyakin—*

Yehoyakin (Jehoiachin), together with his five sons, lived in the Babylonian palace with the other Kings from defeated lands, where they were kept under house arrest, but comfortably in rich surroundings.

*3 the word of the Lord came to Yehezkel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of YHVH was on him.*

*4 I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing stone,*

“Glowing stone” is hashmal, a word unique to Ezekiel which refers in the near east to the use of light-reflecting amber in the statues of gods.

*5 and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures (chayot). In appearance their form was human, 6 but each of them had four faces and four wings.*

Ezekiel is always careful to say his visions “looked like” or were “appearances” or “semblances.” It is interesting that most of the imagery is drawn from common near eastern Temple symbolism like that found among Babylonians, Mesopotamians, Canaanites and Phoenicians, as we shall see. The four chayot correspond to giant human-animal hybrids who guarded Temple entrances in Assyria and Babylon. The number “four”, which recurs, commonly represented the four directions and symbolized complete power, totality, omni-directionality.

*7 Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, 9 and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.*

*10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.*

These animals were commonly used to symbolize strength and power (lion), height and vision (eagle), fertility (ox) and wisdom, or rulership (the human). Temples often had four-legged winged divinities or guardian genii with human faces. Often they had two faces, Ezekiel is unique in having them have four faces.

*11 Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body. 12 Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. 13 The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire*



*moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. 14 The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.*

Fire, light, and lightning were associated with the divine realm.

*15 As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. 16 This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. 17 As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. 18 Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.*

The wheels full of eyes, which have inspired conspiracy theories about alien visitations in recent times (flying saucers) were probably inspired by the tiaras of near-eastern gods, which were covered with “eye-stones.” Here they have become all-seeing wheels.

*19 When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. 20 Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. 21 When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.*

*22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. 23 Under the vault their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. 24 When the creatures moved, I*

*heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.*

*25 Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. 26 Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.*

Heaven was pictured, in Akkadian and Assyrian texts, as having a floor of precious stone as above, and the Assyrian god Marduk sat on a throne of lapis lazuli.

The figure “like that of a man” is understood to be YHVH.

*27 I saw that from what appeared to be his genitals upwards he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.*

A nimbus of divine radiance, called *melammu*, commonly appeared around divine and royal figures in the ancient near east.

*This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.*

*1 He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.”*

Ezekiel is referred to 92 times as *ben-adam*, the “human one” or “son of humankind.” It is likely the meaning here is simply “mortal” to differentiate him from the visionary, divine beings present in his visions. When addressed by divinity, he is never named, but simply called “the mortal.”

*2 As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.*

3 He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. 4 The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says.’ 5 And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 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 be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. 7 You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. 8 But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”

9 Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, 10 which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

3 And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

3 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.

Ezekiel actually has four visions of the chariot; in a later one the vision takes place in Jerusalem, and he shifts his language in an interesting way, as pointed out by Prof. Carl L. Erlrich (York University):

“Focusing on the description of the chariot in chapter 10, we can see a subtle shift in how Ezekiel conceptualizes the creatures that he sees. Throughout chapter 1, Ezekiel refers to them as ḥayyôt, creatures. In his second encounter, he begins to call them cherubim.

Ezek 10:1 יחזקאל י: א וְאַרְצָה וְהִנֵּה אֵל הַרְקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל רֹאשׁ הַכְּרֻבִים כְּאֶבֶן סַפִּיר כַּמְרָאָה דְמוּת כֶּסֶף נִרְאָה עֲלֵיהֶם

I looked, and on the expanse over the heads of the cherubs, there was something like a sapphire stone; an appearance resembling a throne could be seen over them.

For the rest of the chapter, Ezekiel will continue to use the word cherubim and not ḥayyôt.

In case the reader has not noticed the change in how Ezekiel is describing the beings, he makes this explicit, multiple times in chapter 10:

V. 15

וַיֵּרָמוּ הַכְּרוּבִים הִיא הַחִזְיָה אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי בְּנֹהַר כְּבָר. The cherubs ascended; those were the creatures that I had seen by the Chebar Canal.

V. 20

הִיא הַחִזְיָה אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי תַּחַת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֹהַר כְּבָר וְאָדַע כִּי כְרוּבִים הֵמָּה. They were the same creatures that I had seen below the God of Israel at the Chebar Canal; so now I knew that they were cherubs.

V. 22

וְדְמוּת פְּנֵיהֶם הֵמָּה הַפְּנִים אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי עַל נֹהַר כְּבָר מִרְאִיהֶם וְאוֹתָם... As for the form of their faces, they were the very faces that I had seen by the Chebar Canal—their appearance and their features....

“Why does Ezekiel switch their names at this point? The key to the change is the setting. Ezekiel’s first revelation takes place on the Chebar Canal, but whereas the second one also begins there, Ezekiel is quickly transported (in his vision) to the Jerusalem Temple, where he had only a few years before served as a priest.”

“One of the features of the Jerusalem Temple with which any priest would have been familiar was the two giant statues of cherubim that stood in the inner sanctum of the Temple (1 Kgs

6:23–28). It would seem that once Ezekiel sees the creatures in the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple, he finally comes to the realization of what they are: these are the cherubs from the Temple come to life. . . . The reason Ezekiel was unable to comprehend that fact the first time he saw them was because the images that he was familiar with (as a Temple priest until his exile to Babylon) were but a pale imitation of the divine reality. Just as a two-dimensional painting is a flat representation of three-dimensional reality, so too were the manmade temple cherubs simply pale three-dimensional representations of a multi-dimensional divine reality.”

## **Women and Prophecy**

The Talmudic Rabbis claim that there were 1, 200,000 prophets during the age of the Tanakh, most of them un-named. The Talmud also names seven prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Huldah, Abigail, Hannah, and Esther. Here we’ll look at female prophets in the Tanakh itself, and then we’ll return to the Talmud’s list.

In the Tanakh, women prophets are mentioned in only a few texts, but Womanist scholar Wilda Gafney points out that each text, no matter how brief, “provides some contextual information for the . . . female prophets it discloses.” Gafney points out that reading between the lines we see that women prophets had an importance in ancient Israel which the Tanakh does not adequately reflect.

*Miriam*

In Exod 15:20–21, Miriam the prophetess leads the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea. Many scholars believe this text is one of the oldest examples of Israel’s literature, and predates Moses’ Song of the Sea (also ancient). Miriam is clearly identified as a charismatic leader who is graced with a magical well that follows them in the desert, and is identified by both the Tanakh and Midrashic tradition as a prophet.

In Num 12:1–16, Miriam and Aaron are involved in a conflict with Moses over his prophetic authority; their challenge concerns Moses’s Cushite wife. This text establishes Moses’s superiority, but it also affirms Miriam’s and Aaron’s prophetic roles. According to Gafney, Miriam is named first in v. 1 because she is an “authentic prophet of YHWH” while Aaron is “merely a prophet of Moses.” It is often assumed that the wife alluded to in Num 12:7 is Zipporah, but Zipporah was a Midianite, not a Cushite. The Cushite may be Moses’s second wife, who, possibly (and sadly if so), was partially elided from tradition by scribes due to her being African.

Carol Meyers argues that Miriam was a woman whose “leadership and prophetic status stand on their own.” Gafney adds that Miriam was so admired by her people, they refused to leave Hazerot without her (Num 12:15). The account of Miriam’s death in Num 20:1 arguably also confirms her as a prophet, since all three prophets of the exodus die in the wilderness. This is also reflected in Mic 6:4, which remembers Miriam as one of YHVH’s chosen leaders in the exodus.

*Deborah*

Deborah, who appears in the Book of Judges, has a name likely meaning “bee,” though some argue her name arises from the Hebrew *dibberah*, “she spoke.” Deborah is the “woman of Lappidoth” often translated, “wife of Lappidoth.” Lappidoth means “torch,” and some commentators believe Lappidoth and Barak (which means “fire”) are the same person. Other argue that “Woman of Lappidoth” is more likely a descriptor which portrays Deborah as a “woman of torches” or a “fiery woman.”

Deborah is called a shofet and prophet of YHWH. In Judg 4:7, Deborah’s statement of the YHVH’s word is made in the first person because it is YHWH who is speaking, not Deborah.

Deborah’s story predates the monarchy and represents an early established tradition of female leadership. She is also the only shofet (judge) in the book of Judges who is actually depicted as judging. She acted as military strategist, a key role for the shofetim. Some scholars claim Deborah was also a warrior who led the chief warriors of Issachar while Barak led the troops (Judg 5:15).<sup>29</sup> Deborah is called a “mother in Israel” (5:7), which, like the title “father,” may refer to leadership in the prophetic tradition, or possibly just leadership (1 Sam 10:12; 2 Kgs 2:12).

### *Huldah*

Huldah’s use of the formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” in the book of Kings and Chronicles identifies her as an official prophet in the royal court. Two separate accounts (2 Kgs 22:8–20 and 2 Chr 34:14–28) report that Huldah was chosen by the high priest Hilkiah to interpret the meaning of the scroll found in the temple, a scroll which turns out to be a lost copy of the Torah

with which Josiah initiates his reform. Through YHWH, Huldah confirmed its authenticity. The text does not explain why Huldah's contemporaries (e.g., Jeremiah or Zephaniah) were not chosen, but the narrator shows no surprise that the "prophet-in-residence" was a woman, and she is treated no differently.

The account in 2 Kgs 22–23 implies that Josiah's reforms were a direct consequence of Huldah's prophecy. The later and more conservative version in Chronicles, however, indicates Josiah began the reforms on his own, prior to the discovery of the scroll, which diminishes Huldah's role.

#### *The Prophetess (Isaiah 8:3)*

This unnamed woman in Isa 8:3 is mysterious. The Prophetess may have been part of the prophetic schools who preserved Isaiah's writings (Isa 8:16).

#### *The Daughters of Your People Who Prophesy (Ezekiel 13:17–23)*

These women mentioned and critiqued by Ezekiel were members of a prophetic school. Ezekiel's criticism of them is set in the context of his larger complaint against all the prophets of his time. Here he accuses them of making charms for magic or divination. Apparently, they were seen as quite powerful and charged fees for their services (v. 19).

#### *Noadiah*



Noadiah was the leader of a group of prophets who opposed Nehemiah (Neh 6:14). She was a significant threat, from which Nehemiah prayed for help. Some speculate that Noadiah was opposed to Nehemiah's building of a wall separating Jerusalem from its neighbors, which was part of the plan to dissolve mixed marriages and exile foreign women and children. It was not Noadiah's identity as a prophet that was disputed; but the interpretation of Torah. Noadiah's presence proves that female prophets continued to have an impact on their communities in the post-exilic period.

### *Prophetesses of the Future*

Joel 2:28 describes a future time when all of Israel will receive God's spirit: young men and young women will prophesy, elders will dream, and young people will see visions. Gafney regards the text as the realization of Moses's hope that all of YHWH's people—men and women, young and old—will be prophets (Num 11:29).

### *Other Women Who Prophesied*

Several other women who are not called "prophetesses" nevertheless communed with YHVH. Sarah spoke with, and even argued with, YHVH. Rebekah inquired of YHWH and received a direct answer (Gen 25:21–23); in Josh 2:9–11, Rahab delivered a prophetic oracle predicting Israel's victory. Samson's mother (known only as the wife of Manoah, Judg 13:1–23) received a divine message concerning her pregnancy; she alone (not her husband) was able to interpret it. Hannah prays and receives a response, and her words become the archetypal prayer liturgy for the Jewish tradition. In 1 Sam 25:28–31, Abigail correctly predicted David's destiny in a

three-fold prophecy that was later repeated by Nathan (2 Sam 7:8, 9, 16). Countless Israelite women were members of mixed-gender and all-female prophetic schools. The Talmud also affirms Esther as a prophetess, a mysterious assertion until we understand that this because they believed that she herself had written the book of Esther.

Although we tend, with good reason, to regard the Tanakh as a patriarchal text, we should more accurately regard it as a snapshot of a world that was moving from a more egalitarian place to a more patriarchal one. The New Testament continues in the footsteps of the Tanakh, featuring women in named and prominent, if secondary, roles; The Mishna, by comparison, contains no female voices; the Talmud very rarely cites women as authorities in its 71 volumes. The Quran, written at the same time as the Talmud, mentions only one woman by name (Mariam, mother of Issa) and at no time depicts a woman being a prophet or speaking to God.

### The Prophets Today: Some Personal Thoughts

The works of the prophets are difficult reading. On the one hand they are poetic, historically interesting, and most importantly filled with uncompromising moral passion. On the other hand the prophets shared a vision of YHVH often filled with wrath and punishment, and one which may inspire us to question the paradigm in which they understood YHVH. Certainly the Jewish tradition moved beyond that paradigm, coming to view YHVH as either not in the business of punishment at all, or taking the approach of restorative justice, where any suffering allowed or brought on us has the purpose of transformation and is rooted in love.

That said, I myself draw inspiration from an odd mixture of the hermeneutics of Spinoza and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Spinoza argued that the prophets' visions were truths filtered through their imaginations, or visionary faculties, which were formed and limited by their cultural context. Heschel argued that the Prophets were authentically called by the divine, and that their visions flowed from their sympathy with God's moral passion, while leaving open the possibility that their understanding and communication may have been limited or distorted by their personal cultural and theological biases. Reb Zalman argued that our understanding of YHVH has evolved throughout Jewish history as our *kelim*, our vessels, have grown larger and more refined through the evolution of Torah, human experience, and intercultural dialogue. Perhaps we can read the Prophets for their understanding of Torah and their sympathy for the pathos of YHVH without accepting their belief in the violent, personal and deliberate wrath of YHVH.

To me, though, the greatest lesson of the prophets lies in two things:

1) their articulation of the central ethical principles and visions of the Tanakh. Reading the laws of the Chumash together with the words of the prophets shows us a remarkably consistent ethical and political vision which permeates the Tanakh.

2) The Prophets who were sanctified by tradition were fierce critics of the Jewish establishment. Jewish Kings, the Jewish priesthood, and mainstream Jewish society are all consistently critiqued by them over a period of centuries, probably around 400 years. This suggests that we should be careful about judging and excluding those the mainstream of Jewish society deems as unacceptable today for their critiques of Jewish power. Are we so sure that we are immune to the self-delusions that mainstream Jewish society suffered from in the days of the prophets?

## **Further Reading**

Thinking About The Prophets; Kenneth Seeskin.

The Jewish Study Bible

The Prophets; Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Other sources:

The works of Wilda Gafney; thetorah.com.

Zondervan publishes a series of excellent historical/anthropological guides to the Prophetic works. Despite being a Christian publisher there is a tremendous amount of info useful to the Jewish reader.