

Ezekiel

Week 3

The Prophetic Commissioning of Ezekiel

Chapters 2-3

Introduction

What follows is the narrative of Ezekiel's call and commissioning (2:3–3:15). But for that he cannot stay prostrate. So he is told to *stand up* (2:1), in a position ready to hear and obey the word he will hear. In the presence of a king on his throne, prostration was the appropriate posture for submission, but for service standing upright and ready for action was the correct posture.

The account has four sequential movements: First there is the primary declaration of his commissioning to be God's spokesman to the rebellious people of Israel (2:3–7). Then follows a physical or symbolic action which graphically identifies Ezekiel with the message he is to give by eating the scroll on which it was written (2:8–3:3). The commission is then repeated with some further explanation and hard encouragement (3:4–11). Finally, the whole vision recedes and Ezekiel is transported back to his encampment for a week's exhausted recuperation (3:12–15). From this chronological sequence of events we shall consider first of all what is said about Israel (2:1–7; 3:4–7), and then secondly what is said about Ezekiel (2:8–3:3; 3:8–11).¹

As with Jeremiah and Isaiah, Yahweh warns him that the people are rebellious and probably won't listen to him (2:3–8). Yahweh gives Ezekiel a scroll to eat, symbolizing that the word of Yahweh—words “of lament and mourning and woe”—is now within the prophet, and he should now declare it (2:9–3:9).

Unlike Isaiah and Jeremiah, Yahweh calls Ezekiel by the title “son of man” (lit. “son of Adam”), probably stressing his humanness and his frailty (in contrast to the cherubim and Yahweh), and reminding everyone of Yahweh's creation. Then in 2:2 the Spirit (Hebrew *ruah*, lit. “wind,” “spirit,” or “breath”) comes into “the son of Adam” (Ezekiel) and lifts him to his feet. This is suggestively similar to Genesis 2:7, where Yahweh breathes into the first Adam and gives him life. The Spirit (apparently the Spirit of Yahweh, i.e., the Holy Spirit) plays a major role in Ezekiel 2–3, repeatedly lifting Ezekiel up (2:2; 3:12, 14, 24), and then speaking to him at the end (3:24–27).²

Ezekiel's Call (2:1-3:15)

Two topics are in view: the new role Ezekiel is to play and the moral nature of the people of God. First, the verb “send” is emphasized by its double occurrence in vv 2b and 4a. It is a basic and characteristic term in prophetic call narratives (cf. Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7), which

¹ Wright, C. J. H. (2001). *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*. (A. Motyer & D. Tidball, Eds.) (p. 54). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

² Hays, J. D. (2010). *Message of the prophets: a survey of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old Testament* (pp. 202–204). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

identified the human object as the authorized agent of God (cf. Jer 14:14–15). Significantly, Jeremiah’s letter to the hostages in Babylon denounced prophets whom Yahweh had not sent (Jer 29:9, 31). Second, there is a concern for the ultimate recipients of the divine message. They are defined not yet as Judean exiles (3:10) but in wider terms as representatives of “the community of Israel” (בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל), which is a standard designation in the book of Ezekiel for the covenant people, used eighty-three times according to Zimmerli (*Ezekiel* 2 564). The scope of the designation extends not only horizontally from the exiles back to the people in the homeland but also vertically in a series of generations (cf. Jer 3:25). Ezekiel’s message in 20:1–32 is a virtual commentary on their sinful past and present. Their sin is characterized as rebellion, both as an attitude and as a succession of acts that exemplified it. The Hebrew term for rebelling (מָרַד) is a theological metaphor derived from a political act, the refusal of subjects to give loyalty to their king (cf. 2 Kgs 18:7; Ezek 17:15). The present generation is defined as worse than their predecessors, both in external behavior and in internal attitude. Externally, they are marked by brazenness. Literally, they are hard-faced (קָשִׁי פָּנִים), a variation of the usual “stiff-necked” (קָשָׁה עֵרֶף, e.g., Exod 32:9), intended to pave the way for the reaction they will present to the prophet according to v 6 (פָּנִים “faces” twice; cf. 3:8a). Internally, they are strong-willed in their opposition to God.³

Ezekiel is being sent to the Israelites, who are a “rebellious nation” (*gôyim hammôredîm*; Ezek. 2:3). Notice how the traditional language of election has been reversed here, so that the Gentiles have become ‘*am* (a “people”) while Israel has become *gôyim* (“nations”). The chosen nation has become, appropriate to their own action, unchosen. The depth of Israel’s alienation from God further emerges in 3:11, where Ezekiel is sent to “your countrymen in exile.” God is not willing to call them “my people,” a sure sign of disaster to come.⁴

impudent. Lit, “hard of face” (anticipating “face” in 3:8). *stubborn*. Lit, “strong, hard of heart.”⁵

If responsiveness is to be the measure of success, Ezekiel’s mission is declared a failure before it even begins. But Ezekiel’s mission will be judged by another standard, for even though the people will not listen to his words, yet “they will know that a prophet has been among them” (2:5). That is, when the predicted disasters befall Israel, they will recognize that God had previously warned them of what was about to happen.⁶

Ezekiel is fully briefed on the negative reactions of his audience, so that their antagonism would be no shock that reduced him to panic and consequently to abandonment of his prophetic task. He is strongly urged—even ordered—not to succumb to the fear that would be a natural reaction to so daunting an audience as their characterizations in vv 4a and 5aβ had indicated they would be. Unlike Jeremiah at his prophetic call (Jer 1:8, 18), he is not comforted with the promise of Yahweh’s presence or enabling: the latter assurance will,

³ Allen, L. C. (1998). *Ezekiel 1–19* (Vol. 28, pp. 38–39). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

⁴ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 68). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁵ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1311). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

⁶ Duguid. 68

however, be given in 3:8–9. At this point, to be forewarned is to be psychologically forearmed. Thorns are a standard metaphor of hostility (cf. 28:24; Mic 7:4), while sitting on scorpions vividly conveys a sense of shock. Their opposition in demeanor and verbal retort was grounded in their basic antagonism to Yahweh, as a “rebel community” (cf. 3:7). It was no reason for Ezekiel to fail to discharge the mandate of vv 4b–5. He must present God’s message in a forthright, take-it-or-leave-it fashion.

Ezekiel undergoes a symbolic rite of ordination. Divine word and prophetic narrative of a visionary, symbolic event alternate in a triple sequence of explanation and deed (2:8 + 9–10; 3:1 + 2; 3:3a + 3b; cf. Hos 1:2–3).⁷

The nation of 3:5 is presumably Babylonia: the first phrase, rendered “whose speech is incomprehensible,” occurs in Isa 33:19, where it refers to the dominant nation of Assyria. Correspondingly the “many peoples” of v 6 seem to refer to ethnic groups of exiles who had been concentrated in the Nippur region (cf. Zimmerli 137). By comparison with God’s people, all such would have made the effort to overcome the language barrier and understand what the prophet was saying. Jesus made a similar point concerning the rejection of his miracles in local towns: Tyre and Sidon would have repented, whereas Chorazin and Bethsaida had not. Even Sodom would have survived, had it seen the miracles that Capernaum despised (Matt 11:2, 23)! Within the OT, in the book of Jonah the people of Nineveh are portrayed as responsive to God’s word, while the prophet had been recalcitrant.⁸

God promises to equip Ezekiel with the same unyielding determination as his foes show (cf. Jer 1:18, Jeremiah’s call). *hard*. From Hbr word for “strong,” repeated three times in vv 8–9, and also found in Ezekiel’s name, which means “God will strengthen.” Deliberate wordplay. Ezekiel’s “strong” name will characterize him.⁹

Ezekiel also had a part to play in this partnership with Yahweh. His prophetic ministry must be in tune with his rite of ordination. Two lessons are drawn. First, the once-for-all command to digest the scroll in 3:3a was to find a constant counterpart in his inner acceptance of God’s messages. Second, the command to “hear” in that sacramental rite, which was symbolically interpreted as eating with one’s mouth (2:8), must be a watchword for his future ministry.¹⁰

Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place! Could imply that the glory had stood still on the ground since 1:24 until now. More likely, this is a spontaneous salute to the departing glory, spoken by heavenly, angelic creatures. Cf 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22.¹¹

⁷ Allen. 39-40

⁸ Allen. 42

⁹ Engelbrecht. 1312

¹⁰ Allen. 42

¹¹ Engelbrecht. 1312

Technically, the name Tel Abib (Babylonian *til abubi*) means a place created by the flotsam and jetsam of a flood. A “tell” is the term used for any ruined city site. Thus the exiled families of Judah might have been set in a place that had been destroyed, either by war or flood, and expected to rebuild it and bring the Nippur area on the canal Kebar back into production. There is also an excellent dual meaning, since the people of Judah had been swept here by the tide of Babylonia’s military victory.¹²

Ezekiel’s proclamation is not delivered from the safety and comfort of an ivory tower but flows out of personal experience of the suffering of his people. Indeed, it may not be too strong to say that he has already ingested their suffering, in the form of the scroll covered with words of lament, mourning, and woe, just as in the temple ritual the priests would ingest the sin offering and thus absolve the guilt of the people. But in the absence of the temple, there is no sacrifice to take away the guilt of the people, only a scroll that records it. In the meantime, these feelings of wrath and desolation must remain inside the prophet until the Lord opens his lips and gives him the words to say (3:16).¹³

A Watchman for Israel

AT THE END of Ezekiel’s seven-day waiting period (3:16), the prophet receives a further communication from God. His prophetic commissioning continues in two sections. The first outlines his responsibility as a “watchman for the house of Israel” (3:17–21), while the second unfolds further the limitations that his calling will place on him as he becomes, literally, the mouthpiece of God (3:24–27). The intervening reprise of the vision of chapter 1 in 3:22–23 ties these two sections together with the opening call vision, a link underlined by the common themes of “the hand of the LORD” (3:22; cf. 3:14), the appearance of “the glory of the LORD” (3:23; cf. 1:28), and the Spirit’s setting Ezekiel on his feet.

The idea of the prophet as a “watchman” is a familiar one in the Old Testament (see Isa. 56:10; Jer. 6:17; Hos. 9:8). A watchman was someone appointed as a lookout to provide the people with advance warning of the coming of an enemy so that they could run to shelter (Ezek. 33:2–3). It was the Old Testament equivalent of the Second World War’s “Air Raid Warden,” the person who sounded the alarm as bombers approached so that the people could flee to the safety of the shelters. In this case, the “enemy” of whom the people have to beware is none other than God himself!

By giving Ezekiel the revelation of chapter 1, where the Lord is depicted as the divine warrior coming to judge his people, Ezekiel has been shown the reality of judgment to come. That vision was not given to him for his own personal edification but in order to share it with others. His mission is a matter of life or death. To those who heed his warning of judgment, it will be a message of life; to those who refuse him, it will be a message of death. In either case, his responsibility is the same: to sound the warning note clearly so that he discharges his own obligation. Otherwise, he too will share in the judgment.¹⁴

¹² Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 3:15). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹³ Duguid. 70

¹⁴ Duguid. 78

Four examples are given in “if ... then” form. Each case involves individual accountability before God, both for the speaker (the prophet) and the listener. Each example classifies the listener as either wicked or righteous. (The word “wicked” was used rarely in the ancient Near East outside of Israel.) Great care must be taken that the distinction between “righteous” and “wicked” is heard in full biblical context. Ethics will be involved, but that is secondary. The starting point is one’s standing before the heavenly throne, whether one has been declared guilty or not guilty, depending on believing or rejecting the promise (the Gospel fulfilled in the Messiah as Savior). If, in the OT, the final judgment were based on works, not grace, the religion of the OT would have been diametrically opposed to the NT, and the OT would not belong in the Bible.

tongue cling ... unable to reprove them. Ezekiel’s muteness is not an unalterable, permanent condition, but is lifted whenever God speaks to him. It is made plain in 24:27 and 33:22 that his ordinary speechlessness was permanently lifted when his basic prophecy came true, i.e., when Jerusalem fell.

He who will hear, let him hear. Our Lord Jesus uses almost exactly the same formula (e.g., Lk 8:8; Rv 22:15–20). God calls all to repent and believe, but, unfortunately, not all will respond positively. We do not by nature have the freedom to come to faith, but we are “free” to spurn it.¹⁵

ThemesApplication

The prophet himself is to provide an alternative model of behavior. Unlike Israel he is to listen to what the Lord says to him and not to rebel as they do (2:8). Throughout the vision, Ezekiel is the very picture of compliant obedience to the Word of God. When he comes face-to-face with the glory of God, he falls face down in humble submission (1:28); he is not obstinate in God’s presence. When God speaks, he listens; when he is commanded to stand, he rises to his feet (2:1–2). However, this obedience comes not because of some special measure of holiness intrinsic to Ezekiel but because of an infusion of divine Spirit (*rûah*; 2:2). The entry of the Spirit not only raises him to his feet but enables him to hear God’s speech (2:2). God not only hands the scroll to Ezekiel, he causes him to eat it (3:2). He is the One who will strengthen Ezekiel to make him as tough as his opponents. When the vision and commissioning are over, the Spirit lifts Ezekiel up and deposits him among the exiles again, where he sits motionless. Without God’s power, Ezekiel literally can do nothing.¹⁶

In the book of Acts, a prominent theme is the fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit gives believers power to witness about Jesus Christ. As was the case for the prophet Ezekiel, the major impediment in that task is not merely linguistic (though the Holy Spirit deals with that problem as well in Acts 2:4!). It is the fact that we are trying to communicate the gospel to people who are “dead in ... transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). What people need is not simply new information but new life. The essence of human sin continues to be rebellion against God’s sovereignty, a state in which people desire to suppress the truth about God (Rom. 1:18).

¹⁵ Engelbrecht. 1313-14

¹⁶ Duguid. 68-69

Whereas Ezekiel was called to bring this message to Israel, God's chosen people, we bring the message to the Gentiles as well. They too, though once "far away," now have access to the Father by the same Spirit that Israel does, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:17-18. The process of bringing that gospel to the nations is often a painful one, however. God continues to use as his messengers not the strong but the weak, placing his treasure in clay pots to show that strength really belongs to him (2 Cor. 4:7). Like Ezekiel, we need to fall on our faces in God's presence, recognizing that we have no strength, no gifts, nothing that we can contribute to the task, and pleading with him to fill us with his Spirit so that we can be faithful servants. Like Ezekiel, we must be willing to die to ourselves and to our desires and comfort to be useful to God. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:5, hitting both themes of weakness and self-denial: "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."¹⁷

¹⁷ Duguid. 71