

EZEKIEL: THE BOOK AND CALL

Ezekiel 1—3

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

An Historical Resumé

As in the case of Jeremiah (626-585 BC), the ministry of Ezekiel (592-571 BC) is placed in the same tragic time frame. Judah followed her sister nation Israel in the path of covenant unfaithfulness. The reforms of Josiah (626-609 BC) were only superficially received. His tragic death at Megiddo only hastened the pace of Judah's death march. Babylon in 612 BC captured Nineveh, and the long Assyrian domination (745-612 BC) faded into history. Egypt attempted unsuccessfully to gain ascendancy, and Judah, caught between the larger rival power, shifted her political alliance from one to the other. *Pharaoh Necho* deposed *Jehoahaz* (three-month reign) and placed *Jehoiakim* on the throne as his vassal. When *Nebuchadnezzar* appeared in Palestine (605-604 BC), *Jehoiakim* shifted allegiance only to revert to a pro-Egyptian stance in 601 BC. *Nebuchadnezzar* returned in 598 BC to find *Jehoiakim* dead (assassinated?) and his son *Jehoiachin*, a young king of three months on the throne. *Jehoiachin* surrendered and was promptly exiled to Babylon. *Ezekiel* was among the Jews deported at this time. *Zedekiah* was placed on the throne as a Babylonian vassal king. In 588 BC he too rebelled and turned to Egypt for help. The Babylonian army once again returned; city after city in Judah fell, and finally Jerusalem itself was besieged. A feeble attempt by *Pharaoh Hophra* to lift the siege was but a temporary respite in the ongoing tragedy. *Nebuchadnezzar* soon returned and with brutal savagery captured Jerusalem, deported all but the extremely poor and fugitives, and then totally destroyed the city. Jewish national independence, with but a brief interval in the interbiblical period, disappeared until the present twentieth century.

Just when it seemed that all was lost, God raised up two prophets, one in Palestine, and the other in Babylon: Jeremiah and Ezekiel form an unusual pair. Both interpreted the fall of the nation from the standpoint of divine judgement and purification. Ezekiel was a new type of prophet: he was the first canonical prophet to live and minister on foreign soil. He also introduced a new style of prophecy, the apocalyptic.

As in the case of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the man and prophet, cannot be understood apart from his historical, geographical and cultural background. For example, his ministry is divided into two periods: from 592-586 BC he was a prophet of repentance and judgement; following the

The ministry of Ezekiel is placed in the years _____ BC.

(592-571)

Ezekiel was deported along with king _____.

(Jehoiachin)

Indicate the dates and emphases that divide Ezekiel's ministry.

1. (date and thrust) _____

2. (date and thrust) _____

(Compare your answers with the text)

fall of Jerusalem (586-571 BC) he became a prophet of consolation and restoration.¹ The content, style and mood of his oracles are coloured by his life situation and that of his people.

The Man and Style

Ezekiel's name means "God will strengthen." The text indicates that he was a priest of the line of Zadok (cf. Ezek. 1:3). As a member of the aristocracy, he was exiled in the year 597 BC. In Babylon he lived at Tel-abib (Ezek. 3:15) by the canal (river) Chebar (Ezek. 1:1). The Jewish community was allowed to remain together and enjoyed limited freedoms within their assigned area of occupation. Ezekiel was married (Ezek. 24:16-18), and his house served as a meeting place for the exiles (Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1).

Ezekiel as a prophet emphasized the holiness and glory of God. As a priest he deeply missed the Temple; however, in his inaugural vision he was deeply impressed by the glory of God present in spite of personal physical limitations imposed by the Exile.

Ezekiel was not a "normal prophet" by any sense of the word; however, his "abnormality" is a part of his greatness. He was a visionary whose words at times are difficult to understand. At the same time, he was an ecstatic who habitually preached by means of dramatic or symbolic acts (e.g., Ezek. 3:25,26; 4:1-15; 5:1-4); these actions reinforced the meaning of his words.² He also possessed exceptional powers of perception (telepathy and prognosis). Such a collection of abnormal qualities has led different critics at one time or another to label him as neurotic, psychotic, schizophrenic, and even cataleptic. Any attempt at such a psychological evaluation lacks adequate data for evaluation and is doomed to failure. Regardless, Ezekiel was a mystic, an abnormal person in the spiritual realm; however, he was not a social misfit. He was accepted by his contemporaries and became the founding father of what would later be known as Judaism. He had the unusual and "abnormal" quality of moving between the "mundane and the ecstatic with a facility unequaled by most mystics."³

Ezekiel was primarily a writer. In contrast to Jeremiah, he carefully documented his material in a systematic and chronological style. Since he had no Temple or Judean court in which to minister, he carefully reflected on God's coming judgement and then the restoration.⁴ He was a literary artist whose poetic skill is seldom surpassed in the ancient world (cf. Ezek. 16; 17; 27; 28). His prose, although less brilliant, is clear and precise. He systematically preserved and developed the themes of his prophetic predecessors (e.g., individual responsibility of Jeremiah). At the same time he introduced a new literary style, the apocalyptic, that, when expanded, flourished for about 300 years among Hebrew writers (ca. 200 BC—AD 150).

Although Ezekiel, the man, can be classified as a priest, a prophet, a pastor, and a writer, little is known intimately about him as a person. Even with the chronolog-

Ezekiel's name means _____

(God will strengthen)

He was a _____ of the line of _____

(priest, Zadok)

Ezekiel was _____

(married)

He emphasized the _____ and _____

of God.

(holiness, glory)

Ezekiel was a _____ and _____

_____ who preached frequently by

means of _____

(visionary, ecstatic, symbolic acts)

Ezekiel became the founding father of what later would be known as _____

(Judaism)

Ezekiel was a careful _____ and _____

_____ developed his theme.

(writer, systematically)

ical confusion, Jeremiah emerges as a person alive with conflicting emotions. In contrast, Ezekiel remains distant and cold. Francisco contrasts the two:

Jeremiah was a prophet of tenderest affections; Ezekiel had the most soaring imagination. Jeremiah was a man of feeling and action; Ezekiel used reason and reflection. We feel we know Jeremiah when we read his book; Ezekiel is little more to us than a name. The prophecies of Jeremiah began and ended with a vision of suffering; Ezekiel began and ended with a vision of glory. Ezekiel was of the line of Zadok; Jeremiah, that of Abiathar.⁵

Authorship and Date

Traditionally the book has been considered to be the product of the prophet, Ezekiel. On the basis of its unity, chronological arrangement, uniform literary style, and historical allusions, S. R. Driver in 1891 wrote, "no critical question arises in connexion with the authorship of the book, the whole from beginning to end bearing unmistakably the stamp of a single mind."⁶ This view is maintained by many today and is the position presented in the following studies.

However, some scholars in the twentieth century questioned the traditional position and suggested alternative dates for the composition of the book.⁷ Exponents of literary criticism unsuccessfully attempted to separate authentic material of Ezekiel from that of later editors (cf. Kraetzchmar, Hermann and especially Hoelscher and Irwin). Also, a presupposition that Ezekiel was essentially a poet led some to sharply reduce his supposedly literary contribution to the book. Dates for the composition have been suggested ranging from pre-exilic days (Hoelscher, a small Ezekielian core) to about 230 BC (Torrey).⁸

In spite of the unsuccessful attempt to dismember the book, one serious question was raised that produced various answers. Where was Ezekiel located when he delivered his oracles? Was he residing in Babylon? in Palestine? or did he travel from one area to the other? The answers varied from (1) a fictitious ministry, (2) an exclusively Palestinian ministry, (3) an exclusively Babylonian ministry, to (4) a double ministry in both countries. There are passages that suggest a physical presence of the prophet in Jerusalem (cf. Ezek. 3:4; 11:13) as well as a detailed knowledge of the Judean affairs (cf. Ezek. 1—24). Would a prophet residing in Babylon preach to those in Jerusalem?

Recognizing the value of the observations, it still seems best to accept the traditional Babylonian setting as implied in the text. Several observations seem to be appropriate. In the first place, Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem; he had intimate knowledge of the city and its internal structure. The vision of judgement involved the city he loved and the people he knew. Secondly, there was a free interchange of

DRAW A LINE to the description that best fits each prophet.

Jeremiah	warm and affectionate
Ezekiel	distant and cold

(Compare your answers with the text)

communications between Babylon and Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 29). It is not illogical that a distant priest could have information about the desecration of the Temple. In the third place, the above observations do not invalidate the realistic significance of divine revelation: God did reveal supernatural truths to His prophets. He was not limited exclusively to the normal experiences of men. Finally, the messages of doom were not delivered exclusively for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.⁹ Ezekiel employed a didactic methodology "of enforcing truth on a present audience by calling to mind and addressing an absent audience."¹⁰ In the projection of his message, his fellow exiles needed to see Jerusalem as it really was.

In conclusion, the book can be safely assigned basically to Ezekiel whose ministry spanned more than twenty years in Babylon. After 597 BC Ezekiel only visited Jerusalem in the Spirit. Nevertheless, the book shows minor evidence for a final editorial process beyond that of Ezekiel.¹¹ The work of the Holy Spirit is evidenced in the formation and preservation of an authentic record of His revelation.

Text

In some places the text of Ezekiel has suffered in transmission. Modern translators have been forced to reconstruct approximately fifty places by comparing the Septuagint, Syriac, and Latin with the Hebrew text. Isolated manuscript discoveries have only been of limited help in the process.¹² Cooke, in spite of some conjectures, offers a good technical analysis of the Masoretic Text.¹³

Rabbinical Interpretations

Although a critical analysis of the book is a product of the modern age, problems in interpretation have long plagued expositors. For Jewish scholars two basic difficulties arose: First, the Torah (i.e., Law or Pentateuch) was considered to be the inalterable norm of Scripture; however, Ezekiel conflicted in several points with the Law (cf. Ezek. 46:6,7 and Num. 28:11; none of Ezekiel 45:18-20 is found in the Law). The Talmud reports that Hananiah ben Hezekiah used three hundred jars of oil in his study prior to harmonizing Ezekiel with the Pentateuch. Another Talmudic source tells that only when Elijah comes (Mal. 4:5) will the discrepancies between the two be explained.¹⁴ Secondly, speculative difficulties were created by the strange symbolism and imagery found in the book. Contemplation often led to fanaticism and esoteric doctrines. Consequently, rabbis prohibited those under thirty years of age to read the beginning and the end of the book. Also, the first chapter was not to be read in the synagogue.¹⁵

Results of the Babylonian Captivity

Largely because of the ministries of Jeremiah and

List four suggestions given supporting a Babylonian ministry for Ezekiel.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answers with the text)

Indicate two basic problems encountered by Jewish scholars in their study of the book.

Relation to the Law: _____

Speculations: _____

(Compare your answers with the text)

Ezekiel, the dark and tragic years of the captivity (586-536 BC) became one of Israel's most productive periods. Among the significant contributions were the following:

1. Monotheism was finally accepted by the general population.
2. The Law became central in the religious life of the people.
3. The foundation for the synagogue was laid.
4. A formal religious education process was introduced.
5. A future messianism developed (eschatology).
6. The process of canonization was hastened.
7. A theological interpretation of history was produced.
8. A new literary style was produced (the apocalyptic).

The Torah replaced the sacrificial ritual; the incipient synagogue replaced the Temple; a future Messiah of the Davidic line would some day rule over a reunited people; a theological interpretation of past history pointed the way to a future eschatology; a new understanding of individual responsibility provided the groundwork for a new covenant as well as the hope for a new exodus and consequently a new Israel. Ezekiel played an important part in this process; also, as an "incipient" systematic theologian he was influential in the preservation and future projection of the faith of Israel.

An Historical Chart¹⁶

- 601 BC Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon and makes an alliance with Egypt.
- 598 BC Death of Jehoiakim; Jehoiachin reigns three months.
Jehoiachin surrenders to Nebuchadnezzar.
Jehoiachin and principle citizens, including Ezekiel, exiled.
- 597 BC Zedekiah placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar.
- 592 BC Ezekiel begins his prophetic ministry in Babylon.
- 588 BC Zedekiah rebels against Babylon.
- 586 BC Jerusalem falls to Nebuchadnezzar and is destroyed.
- 585 BC Jeremiah is carried captive to Egypt.
- 571 BC The last datable prophecy of Ezekiel.
- 562 BC Death of Nebuchadnezzar.
- 560 BC Jehoiachin is released from prison in Babylon.
- 539 BC Cyrus, King of Persia, captures Babylon.
Daniel, carried captive in 604 BC, is promoted by Darius.
- 538 BC The Jews are allowed to return to Judah.
- 536 BC Jews under Zerubbabel make the first return to Palestine.
- 520 BC Haggai and Zechariah urge the people to rebuild the Temple.

List the results of the Babylonian captivity.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

(Compare your answers with the text)

- 516 BC The second Temple is rededicated.
- 458 BC Ezra leads a second group of Jews to return. (The date is questioned by some on the basis of unclear Old Testament chronology. The dates 428 BC and 398 BC have been suggested).
- 444 BC Nehemiah is appointed governor of the Jews in Palestine.

The Apocalyptic

Into the creative pattern a new literary form emerged and merits special attention. The word *apocalypse* means a revelation, and the method generally was used in times of oppression or persecution. It flourished between 200 BC and AD 100 and generally has been called "the child of prophecy." Because of the circumstances, the tragic periods addressed were dealt with symbolically or figuratively because truth could not be expressed objectively and openly. The reader today must not seek an interpretation for all of the details, but should seek to grasp the message projected. The protagonists are frequently presented in strange and grotesque ways.¹⁷ Although Ezekiel is only the forerunner of the Jewish apocalyptic, there are general characteristics of this literary style, some of which are present in the book and should be observed:

1. An element of pessimism about the present evil (or difficult) situation is present.
2. Eschatological dualism is evident.
3. Two ages are recognized: the present evil age will be replaced by a promised new and good age.
4. God is transcendent or removed from the evil present.
5. The course of history has been predetermined both in judgement and victory.
6. Secret (mysterious) elements and figures are present.
7. A major preoccupation with the coming age is evident.
8. Secondary elements are frequently used: e.g., visions, numerology, astrology, and animal symbolism.

The study of Ezekiel will reveal the place he played in history: he was, in the first place, the "father of Judaism" (future legalism). In the second place, he was the first of the Hebrew prophets to use elaborate symbolism as a vehicle of future hope. The Babylonian experience (persecution and foreign living) placed its mark on the new literary style. Also, he was a systematic theologian: as a visionary and literary artist, he painted his thoughts in strange but systematic patterns. For the interpreter, there are many questions to ask. As for the teachings, there is little doubt as to the implications.

The word *apocalypse* means _____ .
(revelation)

THE INAUGURAL VISION AND CALL OF EZEKIEL

Ezekiel 1:1—3:27

The Inaugural Vision (1:1-28)

The theme of the chapter (apocalyptic style) is the holiness and universality of God. Like Isaiah (Isa. 6), Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of Yahweh. Although subject to trances and ecstasy (cf. Ezek. 8:1,2; 11:1,2; 33:1-3; 37:1,2) he was not a psychotic or religious fanatic. God guided His sensitive servant in the use of literary form that most adequately fit the need.

In Ezekiel's day, the people associated a deity inseparably with his people; consequently, national defeat implied impotency for that deity (cf. 1 Kings 20:33). The Babylonian captivity was so interpreted by many Jews; therefore, Ezekiel had the task of correcting that mistaken idea. Since Jeremiah had not been successful in his traditional prophetic approach, it was time for a new method, and to Ezekiel goes the honour of introducing a literary style that employed visions, symbolic imagery, and apocalyptic eschatology.

The introduction (1:1-3)

The dual chronology (vv. 1,2) and the change from first to third person have long received much attention from students of the book. Consequently, two separate call experiences have been suggested,¹⁸ as well as the following explanations for the "thirty years" (v. 1): (1) the age of the prophet at his call; (2) the thirtieth year of the reign of Manasseh (the only king to reign that long close to the time of Ezekiel); (3) the thirtieth year since the reform of King Josiah; (4) a scribal error (it should have been the "thirteenth" year of Nebuchadnezzar), and finally, (5) the year in which Ezekiel and/or his disciples gathered his oracles into a single scroll.¹⁹ Of the conjectures, the last three seem to be the most plausible; however, the last one is the preference presented here.²⁰ Beyond the uncertainty, the introduction indicates the date (592 BC), the place, and the priestly family background of Ezekiel.

The storm and creatures (1:4-14)

The use of the words "wind," "cloud," "fire," along with "storm" (v. 4) suggest an intense thunderstorm with continual electrical activity. As the storm approaches, Ezekiel becomes more and more impressed, and as he looks he sees a glowing mass in the centre. Afterwards he struggles with the limitation of language to describe what he saw. Repeatedly he uses the expression "resembling" and "appearance"; together these expressions appear more than twenty times in the chapter. The prophet himself had difficulty with the experience. Interpretation today must not major allegorically on the creatures but must concentrate on the lesson revealed.

Popular theology of Ezekiel's day equated national defeat with _____ of their deity.
(*impotency*)

The "thirty years" of 1:1 have been interpreted as

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(*Compare your answers with the text*)

Of the most plausible, which interpretation is adopted for the study? _____

(5)

The introduction indicates the _____, the _____ and the _____ family background of Ezekiel.

(*date, place, priestly*)

Terminology of the initial vision suggests an intense

_____ with continual _____

(*thunderstorm, electrical activity*)

The Old Testament teaches God's sovereignty over nature (cf. the plagues in Exodus; the theophany at Sinai, Ex. 19—20; Judg. 5; 1 Kings 19:11). The storm theophany assured Ezekiel that the Lord was present in power in Babylon: His presence was not limited to Zion alone.

The "living creatures" (v. 5) imply *seraphim* (cf. Isa. 6:2), or *cherubim* (cf. Gen. 3:24; Ex. 37:9). If the creatures were cherubim, what were their functions? In Genesis 3:24 and Exodus 37:9 they served as guardians of the holiness of God. Symbolically, each of the four creatures had four faces (v. 10): the lion symbolized the king of the wild creatures; the ox was the king of the domesticated animals; the eagle was king of the feathered creatures, and man symbolized the king, or climax of the created order.

More than being protector of God's holiness, the creatures are presented as His means of traveling from place to place: creation is at work doing the will of God. They transport the chariot of God (Ezek. 1:15-21), "for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels" (v. 21). Their feet are as a "calf's hoof" (v. 7); their hands are like those of man and they have four wings (v. 8). The beings constantly move (vv. 13,14). There is no place on earth where they could not go.

The wheels (1:15-21)

The mystery or puzzle of the wheels has never been graphically portrayed. The purpose here is not to give an artist's description or a designer's model for a new chariot. The wheels are projected at right angles to one another (v. 16c): they could go in any direction God wishes to travel (v. 17). The "awesome" rims are "full of eyes" (v. 18): there is no escape from God's sight or pursuit. The locomotion of the chariot is by wings and wheels. The same Spirit impels and coordinates both (v. 20).

The platform (1:22-25)

"Now over the heads . . . something like an expanse . . ." (v. 22) is seen. The platform evidently is over, not connected to, the chariot. The connecting part of the chariot is not a physical axle but rather the four living creatures. From above "the expanse" there comes a voice (vv. 24,25) like the thunder of the Almighty (Heb., *Shaddai*). The four creatures represent the four corners of the earth; Yahweh, enthroned upon them, is the sovereign ruler of all.²¹

The glory of Yahweh (1:26-28)

God is related to the world; however, His glory is enthroned above the canopy of heaven. He is not the God of Israel alone. He is the God of all. His glory is "something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him" (v. 27). The Hebrew concept of glory (*kabod*) is that of the burning presence of God.

Then, as suddenly as the storm appears, a gentle

The "living creatures" served as guardians of the _____ and His means of _____ from place to place.

(holiness of God, traveling)

DRAW A LINE to match the following:

- | | |
|-------|-----------------------------|
| lion | king of created order |
| ox | king of wild creatures |
| man | king of feathered creatures |
| eagle | king of domestic creatures |

(Compare your answers with the text)

There is no _____ where the creatures _____ go.

(place, cannot)

The wheels could _____ in any direction God wished to go.

(travel)

The same Spirit _____ and _____ the wings and wheels.

(impels, coordinates)

The platform was _____, not _____ to the chariot.

(over, connected)

The _____ formed the connecting part of the chariot.

(four living creatures)

God's _____ is related to _____ the _____.

(glory, all, world)

“rainbow” surrounds the “radiance” (v. 28). Hope is still alive for those in captivity!

Ezekiel learned several things that day: God, the sovereign Lord of all the universe, is transcendent; however, with all His transcendent glory, He is readily accessible at any moment, in any place, to those who are sensitive to His presence.

The Call of Ezekiel (2:1—3:27)

The commission (2:1-7)

The vision of God’s presence and glory overwhelm Ezekiel, and he falls prostrate on his face (1:28c). Evidently the young priest feels completely unworthy to receive such a divine visitation; consequently he humbly drops in reverent worship.²²

The divine word (vv. 1,2). “Son of Man, stand on your feet that I may speak to you” (v. 1). “Son of Man” is a characteristic expression of Ezekiel (used 87 times) expressing his human frailty as over against the majesty of God (cf. Ps. 8:4);²³ however, God gave dignity to his humanness by commanding that he stand to receive the divine word. The power of the Spirit brought Ezekiel to his feet (v. 2). Although the image of God in man had been marred by sin, there was still a mark of dignity left from creation. There was hope: God still spoke, and man could respond.

Several lessons are obvious: one, it is a sin to think too little of one’s self just as it is a sin to think too highly. At the same time, a vision of divine glory produces a sense of human sin, need and reverence.

A difficult task (vv. 3-7). The prophet’s ministry would be difficult. Israel was a rebellious, stubborn and obstinate people who would not listen to his words. Nevertheless, the prophet was to speak the divine truth “whether they listen or not.” The principle stated in Amos 3:7 was still in effect: “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets.” The warning came before the destruction; however, then, as today, the words fell on deaf ears.

The prophetic function (vv. 6,7). Nevertheless, in spite of the discouraging prospect, Ezekiel is commanded not to fear the people and coming opposition (v. 6). His function is to be the means by which Yahweh would send the divine message or “words” to the people (v. 7). The success, or failure, does not correspond to the messenger, but resides in the nature of God. Yahweh not Ezekiel, is the principle actor in the drama of Israel’s failure and redemption. The prophetic responsibility is to proclaim the divine message, and so it is today. The results of Ezekiel’s prophetic mission do not depend on his cleverness or personal capability, but rather on the power and will of the sovereign Lord. Nevertheless, the instrument is responsible and has to respond obediently to the divine commission. He surren-

God addressed Ezekiel as _____, a characteristic expression of the book expressing _____ as opposed to the _____ of _____.

(son of man, human frailty, majesty, God)

_____ is given to humanity as Ezekiel is commanded to _____ to receive the divine Word.

(Dignity, stand)

Ezekiel was the _____ by which Yahweh’s _____ would be delivered to the _____.

(means, message, people)

Success resided in _____; _____/ _____ was the principle actor in the drama of salvation; prophetic responsibility was to _____ the _____.

(God, Yahweh/God, proclaim, divine message)

The instrument was to respond _____ to the _____.

(obediently, divine commission)

ders his will, and the Spirit fills his life for ministry.²⁴ The sovereign Lord not only calls but also empowers. The freedom of the human instrument requires obedience and responsible stewardship of the divine gifts.

The message (2:8—3:3)

An ample and adequate message (2:8—3:3). As Ezekiel looks he is presented a scroll written on both sides.²⁵ God gave him adequate material for his oracles or sermons. The word of God is always an adequate text with an ample message for the needs of all generations. Just as Ezekiel fed and filled himself with the scroll of God (v. 3), so should today's messengers study and "digest" God's Word. As with Ezekiel, it is "sweet as honey" to those who seek to understand it (cf. Pss. 19:10; 119:103; Ex. 16:31; Rev. 10:9,10). The prophet made the message his own: there was nothing mechanical in this form of inspiration.

A message of judgement and woe (v. 10). The Word of God is one of judgement and mercy: even though just retribution falls on sin, God's judgement is always redemptive in purpose. He advises prior to the day of His wrath and forgives the penitent. However, divine mercy only follows repentance. Divine patience (love) may delay judgement but never reverses it without a favourable human response (cf. Ezek. 3:17-21; 18:4-32; 33:1-20). Ezekiel's early task was the more difficult one of preaching judgement or woe; after the fall of Jerusalem, he was given the more pleasant task of proclaiming a message of hope or weal.

The mission and source of power (3:4-11)

God always empowers His messenger for the task at hand. Ezekiel is sent to the "whole house of Israel" (vv. 5,7) in general and to the exiles in particular (3:15). The heathen world would have listened, but Israel was hard-headed (v. 7). Consequently, God promises to make Ezekiel even more hardheaded (vv. 8,9): the prophet would need to be more stubborn in his convictions for righteousness (truth) than they were for unrighteousness (v. 9). The emphasis here is on God's making the prophet's "face as hard as their faces" (v. 8). The prophet would need to discern between "divine hardheadedness" and his own "personal hardheadedness" provoked by opposition. The struggle would be to avoid claiming divine authority for personal feelings. His stubbornness must be divinely ordained and not personally produced. Nevertheless, the power comes from the Spirit that energizes and transports the prophet to his place of service (v. 12). Under divine power the prophet becomes that which would have been impossible under normal circumstances.

The prophet on his field of labor (3:12-16)

With the Spirit guiding him, the prophet enthusiastically enters his ministry. With a vivid experience (vv. 12,13), he is sent to the exiles in Tel-abib (vv. 14,15).

The sovereign Lord not only called but also _____ .
(empowered)

Ezekiel was given a scroll with writing on _____
_____ ; he was given _____
_____ for his oracles.
(both sides, adequate material)

God's message is one of _____ and
_____ ; however mercy follows _____ .
(judgement, mercy, repentance)

Ezekiel was sent to the _____ of
_____ .
(whole house, Israel)

The prophet would need to be more _____
_____ in his convictions for
_____ than Israel was for
_____ .
(stubborn/hardheaded, righteousness/truth,
unrighteousness)

There he sits where they live for “seven days . . . causing consternation among them” (v. 15).

The Babylonian expression *til abubi* refers to a low mound where buried cities were found. *Abubi* means “flood” or “deluge.” The cities (mounds) were believed destroyed by the flood. On such a mound the exiles built their town and named it “Tel-abib,” or literally, the “hill of young (green) ears” (i.e., barley or some grain). Tel-abib evidently became Ezekiel’s place of residence (cf. Ezek. 3:24). For Ezekiel, it took “seven days” to recover from his experience. Frequently the question is asked, “Why so long a time?” In Genesis 50:10 seven days represented a time of mourning (cf. Job 2:13). Was it the bitter message or difficult task that produced so profound a reaction? When one lives with and understands one’s people, it is often more difficult to be critical of their failures. It is easier to be critical from a distance; it is harder to denounce loved ones than it is to oppose strangers. Ezekiel wanted to preach “love” and was called to announce “judgement.” Then, too, his reaction could have been one of total frustration because he knew the people and their sin: what good would it do to announce God’s message to them? They would not believe him or respond. His reaction possibly was that of a young idealist who comes face to face with the hard reality of a sinful society. There he sits dumbfounded among them!

The prophetic responsibility (3:16-28; 14:12-23; 18:1-32; 33:1-20)

At the end of the seven days God renews the call and gives Ezekiel a new understanding of personal responsibility.²⁶ God appoints him as a “watchman” (v. 17) to announce the divine Word to the people. Actually God is the watchman on the outpost, and the prophet is functionally His messenger. A watchman’s task was to warn a city of imminent danger (cf. Hos. 9:8; Isa. 21:6-10; Jer. 6:17). The watchman was not responsible for the people’s reaction to his warning: he was responsible for proclaiming clearly the danger. In the passage, four situations are projected: (1) to fail to warn the wicked places responsibility on the watchman (messenger); (2) once warned, responsibility for repentance rests on the (wicked) hearers; (3) to fail to warn the righteous who have fallen in sin also places responsibility on the watchman; (4) once warned, if the righteous repent, both watchman and penitent will live.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the related passages:

1. *Each person is responsible before God.* Ezekiel 18:1,2 quotes a popular refrain that denied personal moral responsibility: the sins of the children were the responsibility of the fathers. The collective responsibility of the past does bear an influence on the present; however, the individual is responsible for his or her actions (18:19,20). The one who repents will “surely live” (18:21). God’s judgement comes related to the present situation not based

Teachings on prophet responsibility are found in _____ ; _____ ; _____ ; _____ .

(Compare your answers with the text)

When did God renew Ezekiel’s call? _____

(after seven days)

God placed his prophet as a _____ for the people.

(watchman)

The watchman’s task was to _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

on past evil or goodness (18:23,24).

2. *God does not desire the death of anyone (33:11).* By means of repentance, or “turning back,”²⁷ a person can find forgiveness. God, in human terms, anxiously awaits the cry of repentance. God will do all possible to save the lost—even to His self-sacrifice on the cross.

3. *The prophet is responsible for proclaiming the full divine message which includes both wrath and mercy (3:18; 33:6).* As a faithful messenger, Ezekiel was responsible for his people individually and was to warn each one (3:18, singular); they then were morally responsible as individuals and not simply as a unit (3:19). In the failure of the social unit the individual still is a responsible member of the society.

In conclusion, this concept of individual responsibility goes a step beyond the concept found in Jeremiah. It is revolutionary and marks an important step in the process of divine revelation. Furthermore, it is basic for understanding Ezekiel’s later hope of a new Israel that would be born from the ashes of the failure of collective Israel. From the Christian perspective, it is even more remarkable to see the justice and mercy of God expressed in the cross of Calvary. God Himself suffered in man’s place; the just for the unjust—and so marks the way of God.

What four conclusions can be drawn from the passages on prophetic responsibility?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answers with the text)

The doctrine of individual responsibility is basic in the understanding of Ezekiel’s latter hope for _____ that would be formed from the ashes of the failure of collective _____ .
(new Israel, old Israel)

Endnotes

- ¹Clyde T. Francisco, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977), p. 214.
- ²The symbolic acts were used for more than attracting attention or even giving object lessons: in that day the act followed by the spoken word was thought to have a magical quality of assuring the fulfillment of the action. For Ezekiel, Yahweh provided both the message and method (action) of presentation; cf. John T. Bunn, “Ezekiel,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6, ed. by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 231.
- ³Norman K. Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1959), p. 386; also, cf. C. G. Howie, *Ezekiel Daniel*, Vol. 13 of *The Layman’s Bible Commentary* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1961), p. 15.
- ⁴Francisco, *Introducing the Old Testament*, p. 214.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ⁶S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), p. 279. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), p. 279.
- ⁷For detailed analysis of the authors and specific theories see the following: R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 823-32; Herbert G. May, “Ezekiel,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VI, ed. by Nolan B. Harmon *et al.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 41-56; “Jeremiah the Prophet,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. II, ed. by George A. Buttrick *et al.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 206-08.
- ⁸Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations*, p. 382-83; also G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Ezekiel,” *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, ed. by D. Guthrie *et al.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 664.
- ⁹Even if delivered exclusively for Jerusalem, the physical presence of a prophet was not required for an oracle to be valid.
- ¹⁰Beasley-Murray, “Ezekiel,” p. 665.
- ¹¹Cf. Bunn, “Ezekiel,” pp. 230-31.
- ¹²The Scheide papyri contains Ezekiel 19:12—39:29 with the omission of 36:23b-38; the Chester Beatty papyri contains portions of 11:25—17:21. Cf. Bunn, “Ezekiel,” p. 231, and May, “Ezekiel,” p. 63.
- ¹³G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel*, of the *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1937).
- ¹⁴Cf. May, “Ezekiel,” p. 41, for a summary of Talmudic sources.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*
- ¹⁶For a list of the kings and prophets, see The Historical Background Chart prepared for Jeremiah.
- ¹⁷Parables use normal patterns and expressions; fables use plants and animals in teaching situations; metaphors are comparison (e.g., Jesus is the Lamb of God); however, the apocalyptic uses strange symbols (e.g., the lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (Rev. 5:6; cf. Dan. 8:3ff.; Zech. 3:9; 4:10).
- ¹⁸See Bunn, “Ezekiel,” p. 237, for a discussion.
- ¹⁹Cf. Howie, *Ezekiel Daniel*, p. 22.
- ²⁰Eichrodt considers it most probably to be the age of Ezekiel. Cf. Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, of *The Old Testament Library*, trans. Cosslett Quin (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 52, where he suggests this is the age of entering the priestly office. Ezekiel was on “unclean heathen soil,” a major disappointment in his life.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ²²The calls of Isaiah and Jeremiah also were accompanied by visions. Isaiah reacted with a deep feeling of uncleanness and personal sin (Isa. 6); Jeremiah protested, saying that he was young and inexperienced (Jer. 1); cf. the excuses of Moses in Exodus 3:11,13; 4:1,10.

²³Later Old Testament usage gives the term "son of man" a different meaning: Daniel 7:13 refers to one who appears before the Ancient of Days. The term had become messianic in connotation.

²⁴The Pentecost experience in Acts 2 was also an empowering for ministry and was repeated (cf. Acts 4:8ff.; 4:31ff.). The uniqueness of that experience is seen in the "filling" of all those present, fulfilling the prophecy of Joel 2:28,29. In contrast, the Old Testament empowering, as seen in Ezekiel, was upon an isolated or selected instrument.

²⁵Revelation 5:1 has a similar expression. Could it be a reference to the same scroll?

²⁶The section is difficult to interpret within the context of the other section on prophetic responsibility. What is the relationship of 3:16-21 to 33:7-9? How do verses 22-26 (chapter 33) fit chronologically? Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, pp. 75ff., suggests that the passage from chapter 33 was quoted here at the beginning of his ministry. The position here is that "the glory of the Lord" once again confronted Ezekiel and renewed the call (cf. Bunn, "Ezekiel," pp. 243-44).

²⁷The biblical concept of repentance (*shuv*) is an act of the will that changes direction. In army terminology the implication is better seen in "to the rear march" than in "about face."

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. Name two ways in which Ezekiel was a new type of prophet.

2. Where did Ezekiel live in Babylon?

3. Why is Ezekiel considered to be the founding father of Judaism?

4. Describe the attempts to psychologically evaluate the prophet.

5. Contrast Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

6. Why have some authors questioned the place of Ezekiel's residence?

7. Name four suggestions made with reference to Ezekiel's residence, or place of ministry.

8. What are two lessons Ezekiel learned from his call vision?

9. Indicate Ezekiel's reaction to the storm theophany.

10. What are two lessons found in Ezekiel 2:2-7?

11. Why would the prophet need to discern between "divine hardheadedness" and his "personal hard-headedness"?

12. How was the prophet transported to his place of work?

13. What was Ezekiel's reaction in his place of ministry?

14. Why do you think he reacted as he did?

15. Indicate the four situations projected related to the watchman's responsibility.

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Volume 6, pages 224-227, and answer the following:

1. From the internal evidence, what is known about Ezekiel?
2. What were the two greatest tragedies in Ezekiel's life? When did they occur?
3. How does Ezekiel combine an evangelistic and pastoral ministry?

4. Evaluate the interpretation of hardness in Ezekiel's life and ministry.
5. How does Ezekiel demonstrate a broad knowledge of contemporary history and geography?
6. How does Ezekiel demonstrate interest in priestly affairs and cult?
7. Discuss the psychic aspects of Ezekiel. Evaluate the texts that indicate abnormality.
8. What influence does the Spirit play in the revelatory process?
9. Compare the symbolic acts of Ezekiel with those of Isaiah.
10. Compare the personality of Ezekiel with that of Jeremiah.

Advanced activity (Level 3). Read articles on "Babylon" in a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary and answer the following:

1. Locate Babylon on a map. Where is its location in relation to Palestine?
2. Why was Babylon continually interested in Palestine?
3. What was Babylon's relationship to Assyria?
4. What was Babylon's ethnic background?
5. Describe briefly the history of Babylon.
6. What was the date and importance of the Neo-Babylon Empire?
7. Name and evaluate the capital city of Babylon. Where is it first mentioned in the Bible?
8. Discuss the religion of Babylon.
9. Evaluate the deportation policy practised by Babylon.
10. When and how was Babylon destroyed?

Optional Supplementary Reading

Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pages 246-267.

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the nature of the theological crisis of the Exile. (Cf. crisis of the Covenant; institutions; nature of God, theodicy; contrast with world cultures.)
2. Discuss the nature of apocalyptic literature. (When does it appear in Israel? What are the physical circumstances? What is its purpose? What are the literary characteristics? How is it to be interpreted?)