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EZEKIEL

DANIEL

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations 4

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Corrine L. Carvalho

Introduction 5

Text and Commentary 10

Call of the Prophet (Ezekiel 1:1–3:15) 10

Oracles of Destruction (Ezekiel 3:16–24:27) 16

Oracles Against Foreign Nations (Ezekiel 25:1–32:32) 67

Oracles of Restoration (Ezekiel 33:1–48:35) 85

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Paul V. Niskanen

Introduction 120

Text and Commentary 122

The Exiles of Judah and the Foreign King (Daniel 1:1–6:29) 122

Visions of History (Daniel 7:1–12:13) 145

Stories in Greek (Daniel 13:1–14:42) 162

Review Aids and Discussion Questions 170

Index of Citations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 174

Map 175

ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles

Amos—Amos

Bar—Baruch

1 Chr—1 Chronicles

2 Chr—2 Chronicles

Col—Colossians

1 Cor—1 Corinthians

2 Cor—2 Corinthians

Dan—Daniel

Deut—Deuteronomy

Ecl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes

Eph—Ephesians

Esth—Esther

Exod—Exodus

Ezek—Ezekiel

Ezra—Ezra

Gal—Galatians

Gen—Genesis

Hab—Habakkuk

Hag—Haggai

Heb—Hebrews

Hos—Hosea

Isa—Isaiah

Jas—James

Jdt—Judith

Jer—Jeremiah

Job—Job

Joel—Joel

John—John

1 John—1 John

2 John—2 John

3 John—3 John

Jonah—Jonah

Josh—Joshua

Jude—Jude

Judg—Judges

1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings

Lam—Lamentations

Lev—Leviticus

Luke—Luke

1 Macc—1 Maccabees

2 Macc—2 Maccabees

Mal—Malachi

Mark—Mark

Matt—Matthew

Mic—Micah

Nah—Nahum

Neh—Nehemiah

Num—Numbers

Obad—Obadiah

1 Pet—1 Peter

2 Pet—2 Peter

Phil—Philippians

Phlm—Philemon

Prov—Proverbs

Ps(s)—Psalms

Rev—Revelation

Rom—Romans

Ruth—Ruth

1 Sam—1 Samuel

2 Sam—2 Samuel

Sir—Sirach

Song—Song of Songs

1 Thess—1 Thessalonians

2 Thess—2 Thessalonians

1 Tim—1 Timothy

2 Tim—2 Timothy

Titus—Titus

Tob—Tobit

Wis—Wisdom

Zech—Zechariah

Zeph—Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ezekiel

Corrine L. Carvalho

The book of Ezekiel contains the oracles of the prophet Ezekiel, a priest of Jerusalem, who was deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. The date of his deportation implies that he was part of the elite priests who, along with other ruling members of Judean society, posed a threat to Babylon. The book provides dates for many of the oracles, all during his own exile (593–571). The oracles utilize many prophetic forms: a call narrative, vision reports, symbolic acts, lamentations, riddles, etc. Until recently many scholars thought that the book of Ezekiel was a haphazard collection of oracles from a wide variety of time periods; recent studies, however, suggest that the book is a carefully crafted literary whole. Hints to the literary origin of the book include the length of the oracles, the use of dates to guide the reader, and the presence of overarching patterns within the book.

The book has a clear structure: oracles of destruction before the fall of the city (chs. 1–24), oracles against foreign nations (chs. 25–32), the report to the prophet of the fall of Jerusalem (ch. 33), and then oracles of restoration (chs. 34–48). A recurring vision of God's chariot-throne, which represents God's presence, ties these sections together.

Date, Provenance, and Author

Dates for the writing of the book have been as wide ranging as the Babylonian exile until the Maccabean period. However, since the book reflects no hint of the issues facing Judah in the Persian or Hellenistic periods, it probably stems from the period of the exile, with scattered later additions. Some scholars have suggested that the focus of the book on activities in and around Jerusalem demand an author in Judah. Yet, the author of the book nowhere identifies with those left in Judah after either the first deportation or the fall of the city. Instead, the book focuses on those people with access to power: royalty, scribes and sages, priests, and national prophets, the very people exiled to Babylon.



The author of the book is clearly a learned person. He demonstrates knowledge of both Babylonian and Egyptian theology, culture, and history. He is well versed in a variety of Israelite literary traditions, often deliberately playing on earlier themes and motifs. These elements are fully in line with the book's report that Ezekiel was exiled in the first deportation, i.e., that he was a member of the elite who would have had access to a cosmopolitan education.

Although there are undeniable signs of a later revision, the book is presented as if the author is Ezekiel himself. Is the author of Ezekiel the prophet himself, or is the book the product of an anonymous author, who uses the persona of Ezekiel as a focal point of the book (like the author of Daniel)? While the answer is debated, the figure of Ezekiel serves a literary purpose: he both represents the ideal prophet and serves as the eyes through which the viewer sees God.

Historical Background

The use of explicit dates assumes that they mean something to the book's audience. Unfortunately, even with the dates, the exact event that triggered each oracle often remains a mystery. Only a general picture of major events can be reconstructed from various ancient sources.

The book of Ezekiel is set during the height of Babylonian power. Having recently wrestled control over Mesopotamia from the Assyrians, the Babylonian kings sought to expand their power into the Levant, which is the area bordering the Mediterranean Sea on the East from Turkey to Egypt and includes the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. This expansion led to many conflicts with both Egypt and Phoenicia. The fate of Judah was determined by this conflict. After the death of Josiah in 609, Judah had four kings in twenty-two years, each supported by either Egypt or Babylon. The first siege and deportation in 597 came as the result of a rebellion against Babylon. This deportation consisted of only royalty, the army, skilled workers, and "the chiefs of the land" (2 Kgs 24:15-16); Ezekiel was part of this deportation. He dates his oracles with reference to the accession of the exiled king, Jehoiachin, showing that he considered him the only true king of Judah at the time.

Ezekiel's prophetic activity begins four years after this deportation (593). This was around the time when Egypt made a push to gain allies in the Levant. As a result, Zedekiah, the king installed by the Babylonians after the first siege, eventually rebelled against Babylonian control. Babylon retaliated, besieging the city a second time. Although Egypt came to Judah's aid during the eighteen-month siege, they failed, and the city fell to the

Babylonians in July 587 (2 Kgs 25:1-4). Although the oracles in Ezekiel 1–32 purport to be from the period before the fall of the city, the book as a whole was written after this second exile and reflects the theological challenges this event posed for Israel.

Major Themes

The literary integrity of the book is demonstrated by its consistent and integrated theology. The main themes of the book are the defiling effect of sin, God’s abandonment of the city, and issues about divine power.

The basic outline of the book centers on God’s presence and absence. At the beginning of the book, God still resides in the temple in Jerusalem, seated on a cherubim throne fitted with wheels, poised to leave. In Israelite temple theology, the Lord could only be approached by those in a state of ritual purity. Ritual purity stems from the attempt to keep the world as closely aligned with its pristine created state as possible. The impure results of sin can build up, defiling whole clans, lands, and cities. The city of Jerusalem is in such a state at the beginning of the book: the sins of the people are increasing, and the impurity of the city is building up.

Ezekiel denotes this impurity with the word “abomination.” Outside of Ezekiel, the word denotes violations of ritual purity in Leviticus, especially of the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26). It is also found in the books of Kings to refer to worship of foreign gods, specifically the trans-Jordanian gods Chemosh and Molech/Milcom, who were gods associated with child sacrifice (1 Kgs 11:5; 11:7; 2 Kgs 23:13). The use of the term in Ezekiel most closely resembles both uses: abominations are sins against God through violations of purity regulations and worship of other gods.

In the vision of chapters 8–11, Ezekiel sees that this ritual impurity has reached the temple, rendering it unfit to house God’s presence. As a result, God puts the chariot-throne in gear and flies out of the city. With God gone, the city has been abandoned. In the ancient Near East, when a god leaves a temple, the city is no longer protected by his or her beneficial powers and so is vulnerable to attack, plagues, pestilence, and defeat. When the Lord leaves the city, its eventual fall is unavoidable. Chapters 11–24 recount the disintegration of the city, the result of the increasing degradation of the people. God’s abandonment leaves them in their natural state, a state of utter defilement and debasement.

This view of Israel’s “natural” state pervades the book of Ezekiel. Chapters 16 and 23, which personify the city as a female, portray Israel as essentially defiled, a people who have never done anything to deserve God’s regard. Israel is depicted as a baby wallowing in its own birth-blood, a

defiled creature, unable to purify itself, and even unaware of the need to be cleansed. God sees the baby and purifies it, an act of pure divine initiative. This pattern of divine initiative occurs throughout the book. Israel never purifies itself; even in the oracles of restoration, Israel does nothing to deserve the restoration, nor anything to achieve it. The image of the dry bones illustrates this theme: Israel is as dead as dry bones. God alone acts.

Israel can only respond by acknowledging its own depravity and God's power. A phrase repeated seventy-two times in the book ("that you may know that I am the LORD") conveys this theme. It is clear that this knowledge of God is not an objective recording of facts but a full recognition of the significance of the Lord's character, a transformative awareness of the utterly unbalanced relationship between God and humanity. This "knowledge" of God's greatness will "shame" Israel into righteous behavior.

This theology makes sense when read in light of the historical backdrop of the book. This was a community for whom the very concept of the Lord's power was in question. They had been deported to Babylon, seen their city destroyed, its temple burnt down, their fellow citizens killed, maimed, assaulted, enslaved. The burning question in their minds was where was the Lord when this was happening? Why couldn't God save them? Ezekiel's book addresses this theological crisis by highlighting those elements of Yahwism that allowed the religion to survive. The author's stress on traditions from the past shows that he wants to maintain continuity with Israel's past, even as he plays with those traditions in an attempt to reconceive the implications of God's power.

The Lasting Influence of the Book of Ezekiel

The book of Ezekiel was enormously influential almost from the beginning. Elements of the prophet's visions are echoed in Zechariah in the Old Testament and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Influence on the New Testament is best seen in the depiction of the holy city in Revelation. Jewish mystical thought found the image of the chariot throne, the *merkabah*, fertile ground for reflection on the experience of the Divine. Christian tradition sees the vision of chapter 1 as a symbol of the Bible itself, the four beings representing the four parts of both the Old and the New Testament, and their four faces allegories for the four gospel writers (Matthew is the angel/human, Mark the lion, Luke the ox, and John the eagle).

The Book of Ezekiel

I. Call of the Prophet

1 **The Vision: God on the Cherubim.** ¹In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I saw divine visions.—²On the fifth day of the month—this was the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile—

³the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar. There the hand of the LORD came upon him.

⁴As I watched, a great stormwind came from the North, a large cloud with flashing fire, a bright glow all around it,

PART I: CALL OF THE PROPHET

Ezekiel 1:1–3:15

The book begins with an elaborate call narrative, which includes a narrative prologue (1:1-3a), a description of the vision (1:3b-28), an account of God’s speech from the apex of the vision (2:1-3:11), and a narrative epilogue that describes the prophet’s reaction (3:12-15). This passage contains echoes of the call in Isaiah 6. In both calls the prophets have a vision of God enthroned above angelic beings. In both, the prophets are given judgment oracles to deliver to the nation, and in both the prophets address a community that experiences a siege of Jerusalem. Ezekiel’s call narrative, however, expands the description of the vision of God’s presence.

The call narrative introduces the reader to the main characters of the book. First, it introduces us to Ezekiel, a priest living in exile. His epithet, a derogatory “Son of man” (2:1, 3, 6, etc.), which can also be translated as “mere mortal,” shows that the text does not intend to glorify him. The book consistently keeps its focus on the second character introduced, the Lord God, in Hebrew *‘adonai Yhwh*, literally translated “my master, YHWH,” or in the NABRE, “the Lord GOD” (2:4). Because of the convention of translating “Yahweh” as “LORD,” the translation can be misleading. The first word, “Lord,” is a title, not the divine name, stressing the higher status of the one

and something like polished metal gleamed at the center of the fire. ⁵From within it figures in the likeness of four living creatures appeared. This is what they looked like: ⁶They were in human form, but each had four faces and four wings, ⁷and their legs were straight, the soles of their feet like the hooves of a bull, gleaming like polished brass. ⁸Human hands were under their wings, and the wings of one touched those of another. ⁹Their faces and their wings looked out on all their four sides; they did not turn when they moved, but each went straight ahead.

¹⁰Their faces were like this: each of the four had a human face, and on the right the face of a lion, and on the left, the face of an ox, and each had the face

of an eagle. ¹¹Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above. On each one, two wings touched one another, and the other two wings covered the body. ¹²Each went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they went; they did not change direction when they moved. ¹³And the appearance of the living creatures seemed like burning coals of fire. Something indeed like torches moved back and forth among the living creatures. The fire gleamed intensely, and from it lightning flashed. ¹⁴The creatures darting back and forth flashed like lightning.

¹⁵As I looked at the living creatures, I saw wheels on the ground, one alongside each of the four living creatures.

¹⁶The wheels and their construction

addressed. The second word is the divine name “YHWH,” translated as “GOD” in the NABRE. The juxtaposition with the derogatory “Son of man” constantly emphasizes the unequal status of God and Ezekiel.

Before “the Lord GOD” speaks, the text’s opening vision conveys much about God’s character: majestic, loud, bright, enthroned, movable, and ultimately indescribable. This is a god who must be obeyed, whose will cannot be opposed. The interaction between god and human occurs through the “spirit,” a divine element that can control human action: setting Ezekiel on his feet (2:2), lifting him up (3:12), and seizing him (3:14). It is paralleled in 3:14 with the “hand of the LORD,” an image used to connote divine power.

The last character introduced is “Israel.” Its meaning in the book is ambiguous, however. Sometimes the word means the original twelve tribes of Israel. This is especially true in the restoration chapters (34-48) that imagine the reassembly of the whole nation. Most often, especially true in the oracles of condemnation, the prophet speaks only to the citizens of Jerusalem. In this oracle both groups are the subject of God’s message of “Lamentation, wailing, woe” (2:10).

1:1-28 God above the cherubim

The vision of God’s presence above the cherubim unifies the book. In chapters 8-11, Ezekiel sees the vision abandon the city before its fall, and

sparkled like yellow topaz, and all four of them looked the same: their construction seemed as though one wheel was inside the other. ¹⁷When they moved, they went in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. ¹⁸The four of them had rims, high and fearsome—eyes filled the four rims all around. ¹⁹When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved with them; and when the living creatures were raised from the ground, the wheels also were raised. ²⁰Wherever the spirit would go, they went. And they were raised up together with the living creatures, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. ²¹Wherever the living creatures moved, the wheels moved; when they stood still, the wheels stood still. When they were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up with them. For the

spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²²Above the heads of the living creatures was a likeness of the firmament; it was awesome, stretching upwards like shining crystal over their heads. ²³Beneath the firmament their wings stretched out toward one another; each had two wings covering the body. ²⁴Then I heard the sound of their wings, like the roaring of mighty waters, like the voice of the Almighty. When they moved, the sound of the tumult was like the din of an army. And when they stood still, they lowered their wings. ²⁵While they stood with their wings lowered, a voice came from above the firmament over their heads.

²⁶Above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne that looked like sapphire; and upon this likeness of a throne was seated, up above, a

in chapters 40–48, he witnesses its return to the new temple. The book explores the effect of God’s presence and absence on Jerusalem and the nation.

The chapter begins with a typical superscription, telling the reader who Ezekiel was and when he lived. Here we discover that Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon in the first deportation under Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C., which suggests he was among the elite of the city. The reader is also told that he is a priest, presumably from among the priestly family in control of the Jerusalem temple. Although this fact is never explicitly confirmed, three factors support this conclusion. First, unlike Jeremiah who was from an outlying priestly family, Ezekiel is identified with those leaders who would be a threat to Nebuchadnezzar. Second, the end of the book glorifies the Zadokite priests, the priestly family most often associated with control of the temple. Third, the book shares the theology and ideology of other texts that arise within the Jerusalem priesthood, such as the Priestly source of the Pentateuch, the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), and the books of Chronicles.

► This symbol indicates a cross reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 174 for number citations.

figure that looked like a human being.
²⁷And I saw something like polished metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed on all sides, from what looked like the waist up; and from what looked like the waist down, I saw something like the appearance of fire and brilliant

light surrounding him. ²⁸Just like the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day so was the appearance of brilliance that surrounded him. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speak.

The meaning of the reference to the “thirtieth year” in Ezekiel 1:1 is debated. While this may be a date displaced from the end of the book, or a reference to the age of Jehoiachin, interpreters as early as Origen favor the view that this refers to the age of the prophet. According to Numbers 4, men from priestly families were ordained into official service at the age of thirty. If this reading is correct, this marks the first of many instances of irony in the book: just when Ezekiel should have been ordained into service at the temple, he finds himself sitting next to a canal in Babylon. Nevertheless, he has an unmediated experience of God’s real presence, an experience thought to be limited to the high priest serving at the Jerusalem temple.

The vision itself begins with a “stormwind,” a visible manifestation of God also evident in the stories of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11), Job (38:1), and Jonah (1:4). The creatures described at the beginning of Ezekiel’s vision, although not named here, are identified as cherubim in Ezekiel 10:4. These heavenly figures were common in ancient Near Eastern art: winged guardians of entrances and thrones who were part human and part animal. In ancient Israel, they guarded the entrance to Eden (Gen 3:24) and the ark of the covenant. Each of Ezekiel’s cherubim has one head with four faces and three pairs of wings.

As the prophet’s vision travels up this figure, it becomes clear that the cherubim are not the focal point of the vision. Instead, it is God’s presence above them. This follows a west Semitic tradition of representing a deity’s presence in a temple with an empty throne. God hovers or sits above that throne, as is clear in Exodus 25:22 and 40:34–38; 1 Samuel 4:4; and Isaiah 6:1. The throne in Ezekiel is portable, as it is in 2 Kings 2.

As Ezekiel’s gaze travels up to God, the prophet’s speech becomes increasingly inadequate. The Hebrew text reflects the confusion. Ezekiel is unable to give an exact description of what he sees, and instead uses qualifiers to give the reader a general notion of this vision. What is clear is that God’s presence is associated with light and splendor. This divine light, called God’s *kabod* or “glory” in Ezekiel 1:28, is evident in such diverse places as Exodus 16:9-10, 1 Kings 8:10-11, Isaiah 6:3, and Psalm 29.