CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Vol. XLII September Number 8

Yahweh Faithful and Free—A Study in Ezekiel

RALPH W. KLEIN

The author is assistant professor of exegetical theology (Old Testament) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

THIS STUDY IN EZEKIEL SHOWS HOW AN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET, KNOWN FOR his somewhat bizarre symbolism, communicated to God's covenant people in the early exilic period the good news that Yahweh is indeed faithful to His covenant, yet at the same time sovereignly free.

Among those deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 were Jehoiachin the king and Ezekiel, a priest. Although Jehoiachin had ruled for only 3 months, his importance and power continued: archaeologists have found jars in Palestine bearing his name even after his deportation; extant Babylonian prison records refer to him as "king of Judah"; and his parole from prison in 561 is marked with almost messianic joy in 2 Kings 25:27 ff. It should come as no surprise that the 13 dates in the book of Ezekiel are based on his deportation. By tying his chronology to Jehoiachin, Ezekiel in fact may be indicating the vanity of pinning any hopes on Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah, who ruled until the final destruction of Jerusalem.

The dates themselves help us understand Ezekiel and his situation. No fewer than seven of them come from the hectic years 587 and 586 during the final siege of Jerusalem. They tend to underscore the radical fate Ezekiel holds out for Israel. According to modern calculations, the first of the dates given is July 31, 593, the date of his call[1]; the last is April 26, 571. His ministry thus overlaps that of Jeremiah, who lived to the late 580s, and antedates by about 20 years the activity of Deutero-Isaiah. His importance lies in the way he saw no escape from the judgment of deportation and especially in the way he began to pick up the pieces of Israelite theology and weld them into a great new hope.

In that time of radical change, Ezekiel pointed to Yahweh, who was faithful to His promises, but free to change their specific shape and content. No better example of this faithful and free Yahweh could be cited than Ezekiel's last dated oracle (29: 17-21). After a 13-year siege of Tyre, Nebuchadnezzer had not been able to effect the total destruction announced in 26:7 ff. However severely Tyre had been reduced in power, it had not yielded the expected spoil and riches to its besieger. Still Yahweh will remain faithful to that earlier promise, Ezekiel announced, but in His freedom as Lord of history, God has decided that Egypt rather than Tyre will be the nation to surrender totally to the Babylonian king.

[1] Just as Jeremiah had sharply criticized all plans for overthrowing Nebuchadnezzar in 594 (see chapters 27—29), so Ezekiel's call a year later emphasizes the impossibility of Jerusalem escaping God's judgment.

EZEKIEL'S CALL(S)

Ezekiel's call also demonstrates continuity within change. Like other prophets (Micaiah and Isaiah) Ezekiel saw a vision of Yahweh sitting on a throne, but what a throne it was! It was placed on a platform supported by four beasts, each of which had faces of a man, lion, ox, and eagle.[2] Fire and storm accompanied this throne-chariot, and it came from the "north," frequently alluded to in the Bible as God's home (Is. 14:13 and Ps. 48:2). With a delicacy born of priestly training, Ezekiel stops short of claiming he saw God: "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh." The emphasis pervading chapter 1 is mobility. The animals have four wings (whose great noise seems to typify Old Testament theophanies), but the propulsion of the vehicle seems also to be controlled by the "spirit," and the body of each animal terminates in a peglike leg to which is attached a wheel. Tradition is honored by having the prophetic call take place before the enthroned Yahweh, but the new circumstances of Ezekiel's presence in Babylon, an unclean land far removed from cult and temple, necessitate this visual and auditory emphasis on God's real presence. It would have been irrelevant to refer to Yahweh as the one "sitting on the cherubim" or "making His name dwell in the temple"; instead, He has become a sanctuary for Israel in a small way in the land where He has scattered them. (11:16)

The actual commission is typically prophetic in content: lamentation, mourning, and woe. To indicate the fullness of the judgment, the scroll that contains this message has writing on *both* sides — not the usual procedure. The people to whom Ezekiel is sent are called rebels, while Ezekiel's dependence on God's authority is emphasized by his equipment with a hard forehead and by the title "son of man" with which he is addressed. The New English Bible's rendering of this phrase by "Man" accurately catches the emphasis on Ezekiel's native lack of authority. The prophet shows that he is not a rebel by obediently eating the scroll, thus making the message of doom his own. What Jeremiah had said metaphorically ("Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your words became to me a joy," 15:16) is performed literally by Ezekiel, the prophet known for his often somewhat weird symbolic actions. Bitter as the words of judgment are, the fact that God speaks at all seems like sugar in the prophet's mouth.

In addition to his role as prophet Ezekiel received a second call — to be a watchman. This office itself was not a new thing. Whenever an ancient city was threatened, a watchman was appointed by the people to give warning of the approaching enemy. Failure to warn meant execution. Walther Eichrodt has noted the paradoxical fact that in Ezekiel the same God who was sending danger also appointed the watchman, Ezekiel, evidently to give warning of Himself and of the mortal danger He brought with Him. Ezekiel, the responsible watchman, was to give a deep and personal warning to individual wicked men or lapsed pious men. By risking his life the prophet played almost a mediatorial role as he appealed to individuals, telling them

[2] Man's primary place among the animals is matched by the priority of the other three among the wild animals, domestic animals, and fowl. Only the best for Yahweh's throne!

how the people of God was being reconstituted at this moment, and of the responsibility for everyone that arose from this fact. Walther Zimmerli has argued persuasively that the implications of this change in prophetic function are outlined in chapter 18. To those who are cynical and blame their fate on the sins of their fathers (18:4-20) and to those who are resigned to the mediocre achievements of their own lives so far (18:21-32), Ezekiel offers warning and admonishment: "Turn and live."

A New Word

The book of Ezekiel has no clear outline or line of argumentation. It is rather an anthology, perhaps put together by a school of followers. Yet within this collection there is a general principle of organization: chapters 1—24, oracles against Judah and Jerusalem; chapters 25—32, oracles against foreign nations; chapters 33—48, hope oracles. Editors seem to have underscored this outline by the motif of Ezekiel's dumbness. Seven days after his call Ezekiel's tongue was made to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and it was not loosened until a messenger came to him in Babylon informing him that Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed (3:22-27; 24:26-27; 33:21-22). Clearly, this does not mean that Ezekiel was silent during the first 7 years of his ministry — chapters 1 to 24 are full of his words! Rather, it is an editor's way of showing how after the fall of Jerusalem Ezekiel's mouth was opened to speak with boldness a great new word, a word of hope.

At every renewal of the covenant Israel had recalled God's faithfulness in the exodus when He had brought Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Now with Jerusalem fallen and their Babylonian captors claiming that their god Marduk had defeated Yahweh, Israel's appeal to that first exodus of some 700 years before had a hollow ring. Yet, Yahweh remains faithful to that act by freely deciding to effect a new exodus, this time from Babylon (20:32-44). Just as Miriam had concluded her song about the crossing of the Red Sea with the confession, "Yahweh will rule forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18), so Yahweh Himself announces now, "With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, I will be *king* over you." God's kingship is shown precisely in His deliverance of the weak. While the first exodus led from Egypt to the wilderness of Sinai and the death of the over-20 generation, the new exodus will lead from all the nations where Israel has been scattered to the "wilderness of the peoples" (a symbolic name corresponding to the wilderness of Sinai) and a severe judgment in which Yahweh as Judge and Shepherd will make a division among the sheep (compare Matt. 25:31-46). Not everyone who experiences the exodus receives the promise. Note how Ezekiel shows his freedom over against earlier exodus traditions by having the wilderness stage followed not by the conquest but by a procession to God's holy mountain Jerusalem (20:40). In the early days of the exile, Ezekiel's promise was radically new and had to be underscored by an "As I live" oath by Yahweh.

Related to this exodus motif is the present form of the symbolic action in 4:4-8. There Ezekiel is commanded to lie on his left side for 390 days (= 390 years) to bear the punishment of Israel, and then to roll to his right and bear the punishment

of Judah for 40 days (= 40 years). So after 430 years an end of punishment and a change of fortune is expected, just as Israel escaped from Egypt after a 430-year captivity (Ex. 12:40). Scholars have proposed to begin the 390-year period with Solomon or with the founding of the temple, although a certain unevenness in the Hebrew text and a divergent number in the Septuagint make caution necessary. Of one thing we can be relatively sure: the number 430 would have radiated good news. After 430 years, God will again faithfully perform an exodus.

The faithful God was confronted with a people in the exile who recognized their own hopeless situation. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost" (37:11). To tell such a people about God's actions in the past might only have contributed to their despair. Therefore in one of his visions (37:1-14) Ezekiel testifies to Yahweh's new, almost creative act. Employing a metaphor remarkably similar to the creation narrative of Gen. 2:7, Ezekiel sees God put flesh on the disarticulated bones of the nation Israel and breathe into them the spirit of life. Because the situation is so desperate, this "gospel" is cast into the form of a new creation; yes, the rebirth of the nation is seen under the category of resurrection from the dead. By these two theological categories, new creation and resurrection, Ezekiel makes clear that the future of the nation Israel is totally dependent on God's grace.

This pericope also contains three examples of the form called "proof word" *(Erweiswort):* "You shall know that I am Yahweh" (37:6, 13, 14). Walther Zimmerli's studies have shown the significance of this formula in understanding the goal of Yahweh's actions. When it is used in connection with words of judgment, it shows that the ultimate purpose of God's wrath is to lead to repentance and recognition of Him (5:13). When it is used as it is in chapter 37 with words of promise and hope, it shows that the ultimate purpose of God's saving actions is not merely release from exile but that all men may know and acknowledge Him by that name in which He has disclosed the secret of His being—Yahweh. By saying "I am Yahweh," God steps out of His hiddenness and lets Himself be known.

That name, first revealed to Moses at the time of his call, connotes God's reputation or renown. In fact, the exile created a serious theological problem for Yahweh's name and reputation. The nations had scornfully observed: "These are the people of Yahweh, and yet they had to go out of His land" (36:20). God has to act, not because of the merit of Israel, but because His own reputation has been profaned. By gathering Israel from the nations and bringing them into the land—by new and free actions—God keeps faith with His name. But neither the rescue of Israel nor God's self-interest in His own name can fully account for these daring new actions. They are also done so that the nations will know that He is Yahweh (36:23). That concern for the nations, first sounded in the call of Abraham and repeated again in the vocation of the Servant and the message of Jonah, is a constantly recurring theme in the Old Testament. But however constant it may be, Yahweh and Israel are always pictured as adapting their actions to new situations. Abraham and his seed effect material blessings and pray for the nations; the Servant suffers for them;

Jonah preaches to them and resents their conversion. Despite this concern for the nations, Israel still lived before the eschatological divide of the resurrection of Jesus and the missionary journeys of Paul. There God's faithfulness to His promise to the nations is matched by His freedom to act in a way sufficient to incorporate them into His people.

An Eternal Covenant

No Biblical word embodies continuity and change more than the word *covenant.* For some it denoted that unilateral agreement with the patriarchs that was fulfilled in God's covenant with David (see Gen. 15 and 2 Sam. 7 and 23); for others God's agreement with the patriarchs eventuated in the covenant at Sinai, a covenant to which David and the monarchy were subservient (Deut. 17); for still others God's eternal covenant, which He had unilaterally given or established after the flood with Noah and with Abraham, the father of the nation, could not really be broken by sin or exile but would always exist *de jure* and could be realized *de facto* when God's presence with His people was celebrated and His worship properly carried on (Gen. 9 and 17, and Ex. 25 ff.). The prophets had been announcing for two centuries that the curses attendant on the Sinai covenant were about to be unleashed. Hosea had laid it on the line: "You are not My people, and I am not your God." (Hos. 1:9)

Already Jeremiah had proposed a remedy for this broken covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). It would be initiated by God's forgiveness and would be welded to an innate desire to do God's will. The fact that this "faith" would be "active in love" is emphasized by the words "I will put My law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts. . . . No longer shall man teach his neighbor and teach his brother, saying, 'Know Yahweh,' for they all know Me, from the youngest to the oldest."

Ezekiel now rings the changes on these old covenant ideas. Unlike the reference above to that eternal covenant made with the patriarchs or with David, Ezekiel's eternal covenant will be "cut" in the future. Like Jeremiah's new covenant it emphasizes forgiveness and new obedience. Yahweh remains faithful to forgiveness as the *sine qua non* of a new covenant, but He is free to conform Himself to the priestly propensities of Ezekiel when He says: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you" (36:25). This same fidelity and freedom toward the covenant climaxes in God's gift of the eucharist in which He gives us the body and blood of His new "testament" and the forgiveness of sins.

Like his older contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel was aware of the necessity for covenant obedience. Jeremiah solved the problem of recalcitrant Israel by announcing that Yahweh would inscribe the heart with law; Ezekiel promises a whole new heart and a new spirit. Gone forever will be the hardened heart of stone, and in its place will be a heart of flesh. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem to be saying that God expects a change in behavior from those who love Him, and they recognize that such good deeds can only be done with the aid and help of God.

Every reader of Deuteronomy knows that those within the covenant experience

covenant blessings: long life, many children, good crops, and the like. Ezekiel announces that the new eternal covenant will be a covenant of peace. Wild animals (a metaphor for invading nations? See 34:8) will be banished from the land so that everyone can stay in the wilderness or woods without fear. "There will be showers of blessings" and abundant produce everywhere. (34:26-27)

A New David

Of one thing an Israelite could be sure: there would always be a David. Even that promise must have been rocked when Jehoiachin was imprisoned in Babylon and when Zedekiah was cruelly blinded. His last earthly sight was the execution of his own two sons. Pious Israelites had previously been bitterly disappointed by the likes of Manasseh and Jehoiakim. Ezekiel reasserted the promise to David by announcing one king who would rule the reunited kingdom. After God told him to take two batons and to write "belonging to Judah" on one and "belonging to Joseph" on the other, he symbolically joined them in his hands in order to symbolize and actualize the unity God seeks among His people. "When I am their God and they My people, they will have one king." (37:15-23)

Elsewhere Ezekiel proclaims the continuity of the Davidic line, but he very carefully sets limits on the pretensions of the royal leader and avoids the word "king." Instead, he is called "My *servant,*" and his title is "prince" (34:20-24; 37:25), a title steeped in Israelite tradition of the premonarchical period. Thus the covenant with David is kept and a new *David* is expected, though his functions and importance in Ezekiel's view of the future are strictly limited. Even in the most "messianic" of his passages, 17:22-24, the exaltation of the tender twig of the royal line into a noble cedar, Ezekiel seems to be hoping primarily that the nations will recognize that "I Yahweh bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree." Thus the coming king plays a minor role compared with the promises of Isaiah, Micah, and Zechariah. He is the foil to the former evil kings (34) or the emblem of unity. (37)

Yahweh is There!

Ezekiel's real emphasis lay with the promise of God's presence among His people. In chapter 37 Ezekiel ups the ante on the old promises: the people will dwell in the land *forever;* David My servant will be prince *forever;* My covenant with them will be *forever;* and finally, I will set My sanctuary in their midst *forever.* Just as God's tabernacling with His people was the sign of God's goodness and the guarantee for the future in the eyes of the priestly redactors of the Pentateuch, so this priestly prophet sees God's faithfulness most clearly in His free decision to dwell among His people forever.

The shape and form of that presence is outlined in Ezekiel's great blueprint for the future in chapters 40—48. Although contemporary scholarship has detected various strata within these chapters, there is little here that cannot be integrated into Ezekiel's theology itself or at least understood as the logical extension of his thought.

In Ezekiel's 25th year he is led around in a vision by a man with a measuring reed. Precise measurements are noted as

the ground plan of the temple complex is marked off.[3] Even here continuity and change seem to be the order of the day. On the north, east, and south are set a pair of outer and inner gates whose descriptions are sufficiently clear that modern architects can correlate them with excavation results. Twentieth-century archaeologists have unearthed this style of gate in tenth-century contexts at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer, three cities whose fortification is ascribed to Solomon in 1 Kings 9:15. What is more, we are told in the latter passage that Solomon also fortified Jerusalem. Since we know that building styles changed in succeeding centuries, it is clear that Ezekiel's picture of the eschatological Jerusalem keeps faith with the past by installing Solomonic gates. But with a change! There are no gates in the west. Instead, behind the temple, which faced east, is installed a new building for which there seems to have been no precedent in preexilic Israel. Walther Zimmerli has integrated this blocking of western access to the temple into Ezekiel's theology. In an earlier vision (ch. 8) Ezekiel had visited Jerusalem and had seen the abominations there that necessitated its destruction. Men gathered in a room of the temple that was filled with pictures of all kinds of creeping things, perhaps observing the worship of Osiris, as Albright suggests. Women — right in the temple — were bewailing Tammuz, the young god of the herd, whose death was observed in yearly rites. Finally, 25 men with their backs to the temple were worshiping the sun! The new temple, Zimmerli reminds us, will be able to be approached only from north, south, and east, but not from the west. Instead, the orientation of the worshiper is toward the west and the Holy of Holies located there. Perhaps by making impossible an approach to the temple with one's face towards the sun, Yahweh is showing again His faithfulness and freedom. The new community will be protected by the architecture itself from one of their fathers' most heinous sins.

[3] Zimmerli has pointed out that all the dimensions are multiples of the number 25 — the vision itself is dated to the 25th year. He has suggested that priestly theologians hoped that the 50th year would be a year of jubilee and release. Thus, by dating his vision to the 25th year and coordinating all dimensions to that figure, Ezekiel is announcing, "We're halfway to God's new day."

A New Land

This same kind of protective structuring is explicit in 43:6-9 when the palace and the syncretism it stood for is separated from the temple precincts. Ezekiel is a realist about preexilic monarchy. The same providential care can be seen in the parceling out of the land according to the following scheme (48):

		Dan	
		Asher	
		Naphtali	
		Manasseh*	
		Ephraim*	
		Reuben*	
		Judah*	
Holy Area	Prince	Priests	Prince
		Levites	
		City	
		Benjamin*	
		Simeon*	
		Issachar*	
		Zebulun*	
		Gad	

The straight line down the right side of the drawing symbolically represents the Jordan River. That is, in the new Israel the trans-Jordanian regions will not be

included. While this may represent Ezekiel's appeal to authentic patriarchal promises according to which only the land west of the Jordan was promised to the fathers, it also may reflect the fact that these territories were always more open to (the suspicion of) syncretism and apostasy (Num. 32:7,9 and Josh. 22:18 f.). If so, Yahweh is again demonstrating His faithfulness by freely altering the dimensions of the land as symbolical protection against falling away.

Other reforms and prophylactics are apparent. In addition to the city being separated from the temple, which is probably to be located in the priests' section of the holy area, it is no longer known as the exclusive possession of the king (city of David) and is in fact populated by workers from all the tribes of Israel (48:19). Throughout these chapters the prince is ascribed no special sacerdotal importance but is merely a leading member of the worshiping community. Of course, the prince must be provided with necessary income, but in another dramatic defense against the kind of exploitation represented by 1 Sam. 8:11-17, he is provided with adequate but carefully restricted parcels of land.

The entire picture of the land division is not a realistic blueprint, but it symbolizes God's saving plan for His people. Consequently no irregularities of geography are taken into account in the tribal divisions, but each tribe is ascribed an equal portion. No doubt we can see here a reaffirmation of the egalitarian principles of early Israel in which all things really belong to Yahweh and one is not to accumulate riches at the expense of his neighbor. The order of the tribes in the land also bears little resemblance to the divisions of the tribal league. Dan is still in the north, and seven of the twelve tribes are north of the temple, thus approximating the Northern Kingdom's greater size, but the general organizing principle is different. The entire land finds its focus on the temple and the temple's guarantee of God's presence. Next to the sacred area ascribed to priests, Levites, and city are four tribes on each side that we have marked with an asterisk. What they have in common is that these "sons of Jacob" were born to one of his wives, Leah or Rachel. The other four tribes resulted from the union of Jacob with Bilhah and Zilpah, his wives' maids. Thus degrees of "holiness" are laid out: first the sacred area, then that of the "full-born" sons, then that of the sons of concubines. Ezekiel is placing lavish emphasis on the centrality of the temple and God's presence.

In chapter 10 Ezekiel described how the glory of Yahweh had lifted up from the first temple and headed off toward Babylon, thus showing God's disgust with the syncretistic activities described in chapter 8, His decision to destroy the temple, and His presence with His exiled people. In chapter 43 Ezekiel sees that glory of Yahweh return, accompanied by all the noise and clatter of theophany. When Yahweh reenters the temple through the east gate, the gate is permanently sealed (44:1-2). No human would ever tread that sacred path, and Yahweh's abiding presence with His people is guaranteed, almost "locked-in."

It was customary in Israel to associate streams and rivers with Yahweh's sanctuary. The image of the "river whose streams make glad the city of God" (Ps.

46:4) is familiar to many readers of the Bible. When Yahweh will dwell in His new temple in the idealized land, that tradition will be maintained and freely elaborated. Ezekiel follows the trickle of water coming from the temple through the Judean desert until it becomes a river deeper than his head (47). Along the banks of that stream trees flourish abundantly — in the desert! — and when it empties into the Dead Sea, there is life. Fishermen stand by the sea and catch fish! The meaning is clear. God's presence with His people brings life, a life that can heal and transform things as dead as the Judean wilderness and as lifeless as the Dead Sea — or even by implication as lifeless as defeated Israel. This theme becomes somewhat of a favorite in later writers (Joel 4:18-21, Zech. 14:8, Rev. 22:1 ff.) and may even partially explain the imagery in John's Gospel of the water that flows from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus.

The final verses of the book develop the imagery beyond what may have been Ezekiel's original plan but in a way congruent with his theology. The city itself is given a name that emphasizes this priest's hope and confidence for the future. Even here the city is no mere "City of David" or Jerusalem, but the book ends with the triumphant words "the name of the city henceforth shall be 'Yahweh Is There.'"

Ezekiel in a time of radical change faithfully executed the hermeneutical task. Picking up the pieces of the Israelite faith, he forged them into great good news for the early exilic period. The heuristic value for us and our hermeneutics seems limitless. We note how God remained faithful, for example, to His messianic promises to ancient Israel, but freely combined them with the hope of the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man in the one whom we confess as "His only Son our Lord." Ezekiel's vision of what God's presence would mean to His people has been fulfilled with sovereign freedom and benefits beyond Ezekiel's wildest imagination in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Christ. Truly He makes all things new. The living and life-giving streams issuing from God's presence take shape with recreative powers under the Trinitarian invocation at Holy Baptism. Yahweh is faithful and free! [4]

St. Louis, Mo.

---

[4] I am greatly indebted to the commentary by Walther Zimmerli (*Biblischer Kommentar XIII* [1969]) which is scheduled for an English edition in 1972 in the magnificent *Hermeneia* commentary series to be issued by Fortress Press in Philadelphia. Zimmerli's commentary runs to more than 1,400 pages. He is meticulous, critical, and deeply evangelical. I have also learned much from Walther Eichrodt's commentary, originally published for the series *Das Alte Testament Deutsch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1959 and 1966), but now available in English from the Westminster Press in Philadelphia (1970).