

Concordia Theological Monthly



M A R C H



1 9 5 8



ARCHIVES

The Dumb Prophet

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The prophets were God's spokesmen. He sent them to speak. They were not to be "dumb dogs." But in the case of the prophet Ezekiel, unique among his fellows in a number of other respects, God made it a part of his assignment to be dumb and not to speak.

Ezekiel records the fact that God imposed a restriction on his speaking in these words:

And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people; and I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth, so that *you shall be dumb and unable to reprove them*; for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God"; he that will hear, let him hear; and he that will refuse to hear, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house (3:25-27 RSV) [emphasis ours].

Of what nature was this dumbness? How long did it last?

These questions arise if we remember that the announcement of this impending dumbness is recorded as following immediately upon his call and commission as a prophet (1:1—3:15). Did he become dumb "at the end of the seven days" (3:16) during which, after his call, he "sat there overwhelmed among them [the exiles on the River Chebar]"? (3:15). In the context this seems to be the case.

If it began at this early stage in his career, how long did it last?

In announcing this restriction, God at the same time set a limitation upon it in the words: "But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth" (3:27). It seems natural to understand these words as defining the duration of his incapacity to speak: at some later occasion God would again speak with him, and the dumbness would end.

Ezekiel tells us also that a time did come when he was no longer dumb. In 24:25-27 we read first of all of an announcement that the loosing of his tongue was to be expected soon. "And you, son of man, on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their

joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their heart's desire, and also their sons and daughters, on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news. On that day *your mouth will be opened to the fugitive* [emphasis supplied], and you shall speak and be no longer dumb. So you will be a sign to them; and they will know that I am the Lord." Two years later the fugitive actually arrived, and Ezekiel's dumbness ended: "In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said: 'The city has fallen.' Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; and He had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning; *so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer dumb* [emphasis ours]." (33:21, 22)

The story of his dumbness, then, is complete. It began in the fifth year (3:16) and ended in the twelfth year (33:21). But if he was speechless during all this time, how do we account for the thirty chapters of speeches that intervene between ch. 3 and ch. 33, some of them dated expressly during these years of dumbness? In other words, the problem that faces us is: Ezekiel was bereft of his speech, but before it was restored, he spoke long chapters of sermons.

Among the various solutions suggested for this problem the following three deserve consideration:

1. The dumbness of the prophet was not absolute and continuous, but partial and intermittent.
2. The dumbness is to be understood symbolically and not as actual.
3. The dumbness was absolute and complete, but lasted only for two years at the close of the first period of his activity.¹

¹ One unsatisfactory attempt to explain this phenomenon, among others, accounts for the dumbness by declaring it a result of a serious physical disability of Ezekiel: he was a cataleptic. Loss of speech is but one of the handicaps that was brought on by such seizures. This physical handicap was also linked with a mental disturbance: he was a schizophrenic paranoiac. For the development of this thesis cf. E. C. Broome, "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 65 (1946), 277—292. It is interesting to note that Dr. Georg Kroenert in *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* (Nov. 15, 1956), p. 517, quotes C. G. Jung in defense of Ezekiel's sanity from a purely psychological point of view: "Gegenüber einer solchen an das Pathographische grenzenden Deutung

1

There are several variations to the view that the dumbness was only partial and intermittent. Howie believes that "a period of silence followed each [visionary] experience. Since our prophet was 'overwhelmed' by his first visionary experience, it may well follow that a period of stupor or silence would come upon him after each vision. But when Jahweh spoke to him, his mouth was opened."² If this is the case, his dumbness seems to lack the full significance of a "sign." It is strange also that this dumbness resulted from the visionary experiences during the first part of his prophetic activity and no longer occurred during later visions. Are we to assume that Ezekiel became accustomed to them, or is it because the later visions no longer pronounce doom but are constructive and therefore did not "overwhelm" him?

It seems much better to assume with others that Ezekiel was unable to speak at all during these years except when at given intervals God opened his mouth and enabled him to proclaim His messages. In this way he would be a sign to the people: each time they should be aroused to particular interest. His silence would likewise become very eloquent.

As an exponent of this view among the older commentators we may refer to Keil. In commenting on this question, he says: "It is also to be noticed that the prophet is not to keep entire silence, except when God inspires him to speak; but that his keeping silence is explained to mean, that he is to be to his contemporaries no מְבַיֵּן שׂוֹמֵר, 'reprover,' and consequently will place their sins before them to no greater extent, and in no other way, than God expressly directs him."³ The same view is reflected in a recent commentary: "The dumbness of the prophet and the

schreibt heute C. G. Jung über Ezekiel: 'Als Psychiater musz ich ausdrücklich hervorheben, dasz die Vision und ihre Begleiterscheinungen nicht unkritisch als krankhaft bewertet werden dürfen. Es ist ein Irrtum, anzunehmen, eine Vision sei *eo ipso* krankhaft. Sie kommt als Phaenomen bei Normalen zwar nicht häufig, aber auch nicht selten vor (*Antwort auf Hiob*, Zuerich, 1952, p. 96).'

² Carl Gordon Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel*, Journal of Biblical Literature Series, Vol. IV (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1950), 90.

³ *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Ezekiel*, Carl Friedrich Keil, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, n. d.) I, 68.

ability to speak only when the Lord opened his mouth was a further sign to the rebellious house that the words were indeed the words of the Lord.”⁴ The same contributor finds in the “cleaving tongue” a rebuke for Ezekiel. “As with Zacharias (Luke 1:22), who disbelieved the words of the angel, there seems to be a rebuke here for Ezekiel’s refusal to speak when bidden.”

Since the dumbness disappeared after the fall of the city, it was to be an added sign that Ezekiel’s words of doom upon the city had divine authority and sanction, for it was this message that his hearers found particularly distasteful and unthinkable. When the news of the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s words came to them, there could be no doubt that he was the bearer of divine words. From this point on Ezekiel had no limitations of speech, especially also because now he preaches hope and comfort.

“When I speak with you, I will open your mouth” (3:27) refers, according to this view, not only to the final lifting of the ban but also, or rather, to each time that Ezekiel was enabled to speak what God wanted him to say. Otherwise he remained speechless.

2

According to a second view, the dumbness of Ezekiel is merely a symbolical or figurative way of saying that his message was to be ineffective before the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel had the normal capacity of speech, but he might as well have been dumb because after he had made his proclamation, his hearers would act and think as if he had said nothing at all. Dumbness then is a very drastic way of describing the difficulty of the prophet’s task. It underscores what God had told him when He sent him to “a rebellious house” “who will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to Me” (3:7 ff.). After his message had been vindicated by the fall of Jerusalem, this resistance to his words would come to an end; he would no longer be dumb, because people will listen to what he said. What he had said without effect upon his hearers became a sign of his truthfulness when the predicted doom became a reality.

⁴ *Seventh Day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956), 4, 587.

This interpretation has much to commend it. Herbert G. May, who contributes the exegesis for the Book of Ezekiel in *The Interpreter's Bible*, believes that a symbolical interpretation of the dumbness alone explains all the passages under discussion. In commenting on 3:22-27, he says: "The dumbness of Ezekiel appears again in 24:25-27; 33:21, 22; and possibly 29:21. To be consistent with 3:17-21, the dumbness here must be interpreted symbolically as the period when Ezekiel could not be a reprover, e. g., a preacher of repentance, but could only utter doom."⁵ The contrast between a reprover and a preacher of doom may be overdrawn here, but a figurative meaning of dumbness may be valid. Howie gives this interpretation as an alternative although he prefers to think of Ezekiel as overcome by recurring periods of inability to speak.⁶

3

Interesting and worthy of consideration at least is the view that the dumbness was actual and absolute, although of a comparatively short duration. As a sign it lasted only the two years from the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem until the news of its fall was received. Basic to this interpretation is a rearrangement of sections of the text as we have it now. Since Eissfeldt is perhaps the most insistent exponent of this interpretation, we will follow his reasoning to see what is involved.⁷

⁵ *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), VI, 84.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 90.

⁷ Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* 2d ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), pp. 443 ff. Fohrer agrees with the necessity of a shift of these sections: "Die Berichte in 3, 22-27; 24, 25-27; 33, 21-22 gehören vielmehr an das Ende der ersten Periode der Verkündigung Ezechiels und bilden zusammen den Bericht über eine symbolische Handlung des Propheten, die er während der Belagerung Jerusalems vollzogen hat, um durch sein Stummwerden das Verstummen und Sichabwenden Jahwes darzustellen," *Die Hauptprobleme des Buches Ezechiel*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 72, Georg Fohrer (Berlin: Toepelmann, 1952), p. 30. Walther Zimmerli solves the problem of sequence by reducing 3, 25-27 to a commentary on 3, 24 b originating in Ezekiel's *Jüngerkreis*. He believes "dass wir es in 3, 25-27 mit einem Element der Nachinterpretation im Rahmen der Tradition des Prophetenwortes im Jüngerkreise zu tun haben" (*Biblischer Kommentar: Ezechiel*, p. 111). At this time only the first fascicles of this commentary have been published.

He and others believe that the following sequence must be established as the right order of events for the beginning and end of the first period of Ezekiel's career:

At the beginning: 1) 1:1-3, 15: The call and the commissioning of the prophet. 2) 3:16a and chs. 4 and 5: After seven days, the command and the execution of the first symbolic acts.

At the end: 1) 3:16b-27; 4:4-8: The dumbness is announced. 2) 24:26, 27: The end of the dumbness is announced. 3) 33:21 and 22: The dumbness is ended.

The shifts in sequence therefore involve a removal of parts of chapter three and four to a much later place in the book (ch. 24) and the immediate continuation of these sections in turn in a still later part (ch. 33).

Before we examine the specific implications of such a shift of sections in the text, a few general remarks are in place regarding the composition of the book as a whole.

There is no doubt that a chronological sequence serves as a framework for the parts of the book. The dates in chs. 1—24 (fifth year to the ninth year) and the dates from 33:21 to the end (twelfth year to the twenty-fifth year) follow in good order.

The so-called foreign-nations oracles (chs. 25—32), however, do not observe a strict chronological sequence among themselves nor in relation to the messages to Jerusalem-Judah just mentioned. According to the Hebrew text, they are dated as follows: *11th year* (26:1); *10th year* (29:1); *27th year* (29:17); *11th year* (30:21; 31:1); *12th year* (32:1; 32:17). The reason for the breakdown of the chronological sequence is apparent. All the oracles dealing with the same country are placed together regardless of the date. We can conclude, then, that also a topical sequence was observed in the arrangement of the book.

Not only are the foreign-nations oracles grouped as a unit (cf. Isaiah and Jeremiah), but other larger sections also reveal a similar central theme as their unifying principle. In chs. 15 to 19, e.g., we have six undated discourses of a parabolic or allegoric content following one another without a break.⁸ The date that precedes

⁸ The wood of the vine (ch. 15); the adulteress (ch. 16); the two eagles and the vine (ch. 17); the sour grapes (ch. 18); the lioness and her whelps (19:1-9); the dried vine (19:10-24).

this group is found many chapters earlier (8:1). It is quite possible, then, that these oracles follow one another in the text because of their content and form of presentation and are no longer dependent on the previous date which marks Ezekiel's visionary visit to Jerusalem.

Did Ezekiel himself put his oracles in this order? On the one hand there is no reason why Ezekiel could not have devised this combination of chronology and content matter as the principle according to which he wanted his messages to be arranged. Could only a later editor have been so ingenious as to recognize that certain sections deal with a certain topic?

On the other hand, it is true that the individual oracles were not bound into a book, nor need they all have been written on a single scroll as they were received. If they were in a "loose-leaf" form, the present sequence may have come about when they were assembled into a "book" in order to preserve them. In any event, the authority of the messages is not dependent wholly upon the order in which they are arranged.

After this excursus, we are ready to return to the specific problem: Does the suggested rearrangement of the book give us the answer to the question regarding the nature and the duration of Ezekiel's dumbness?

We notice, first of all, that the announcement "you shall speak and be no longer dumb" (24:27) is found at the end of the chapter in which Ezekiel is told to mark carefully the ninth year, the tenth month, the tenth day of the month (January 15, 588) because "the king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day" (24:1, 2).

The prophet is also told at the same time how long it will be before he will be able to speak again, namely, "when a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news" of the fall of Jerusalem (24:26). When did this happen? Almost exactly two years later the fugitive arrived, and "my mouth was opened, and I was no longer dumb" (33:21, 22).

Two facts emerge, say Eissfeldt and others. The dumbness lasted from the beginning of the siege until the news of the fall arrived. His silence was real and served the purpose of symbolizing that

the time of speaking had passed. God's act of wrath spoke louder than the prophet's words of threat and denunciation.

Furthermore, the promise of relief from the dumbness in ch. 24 and the fulfillment of that promise in ch. 33 are parts of one and the same account. But in the present arrangement of the text they are separated by eight chapters which are filled with the foreign-nations oracles. The latter begin at ch. 25 immediately after the words in 24:27 which contain the promise of the restoring of Ezekiel's speech.⁹

By linking the last words before the intrusion of the foreign-nations oracles with the first dated oracle after them, we have a connected account of the end of Ezekiel's dumbness. From this account we also gather that it had lasted two years.

One step remains. Ch. 3:16b-21, 22-27 and ch. 4:4-8 are the announcement of the imposition of this dumbness and must be moved from their present position to precede 24:21. The dumbness of the prophet was given a place in connection with his call as a significant aspect of the difficulty of his task. In other words, here again subject matter rather than chronology was the deciding factor in the arrangement of the text. If we take it out of its topical sequence and put it into a chronological order, the story is complete and makes good sense.

This view is attractive. One serious objection, however, remains. At least some of the foreign-nations oracles are dated during the two years when Ezekiel, according to this view, was dumb. If the dumbness was complete and actual, how did these sections originate?¹⁰ A plausible explanation might assume that they were originally written and not spoken. Ezekiel did not "publish" them

⁹ Why were the foreign-nations oracles inserted at this point? We can only surmise the reason. We may suggest that they fit here when the fall of Jerusalem is imminent as an appropriate reminder of the universality of God's power. Although the Babylonian conquerer is not included in these oracles, they are the assurance that no human power can thwart God's ultimate plan of salvation. In addition to the foreign-nations oracles, 33:1-20, an undated oracle, also intervenes before the fulfillment of the promise is recorded in 33:21, 22. This section may also have been placed here for other reasons than a chronological order.

¹⁰ Eissfeldt is very emphatic in maintaining that the foreign-nations oracles existed as a separate collection from the very beginning and were also dated as a separate series.

till after the fall of Jerusalem in order not to strengthen the false hopes of the exiles. But this can be established as little as we can be certain that those oracles written after the fall of Jerusalem were first written and then spoken or "published."

Which of these three interpretations of Ezekiel's dumbness is the most acceptable? All factors involved seem to fall into a consistent pattern most readily if the first is adopted: Ezekiel was dumb during the first years of his activity and was able to speak only when spoken to by God.¹¹

But Ezekiel's dumbness is not merely a *curiosum* of an ancient and queer prophet that serves no other purpose than to challenge the ingenuity of the interpreter. No matter which of the three interpretations is adopted, his silence speaks volumes to those who today have dedicated themselves to serve as God's spokesmen. These lessons are not peripheral but basic. Nor are they easy assignments easily learned but require a lifetime of application and are never fully mastered. We will indicate them briefly.

According to the first interpretation, Ezekiel is permitted to speak only what God orders him to say. In the pulpit, too, man must be dumb and God alone vocal. The preacher's tongue should cleave to the roof of his mouth unless he can preface every statement with "Thus saith the Lord." As in Ezekiel's case his eloquence is to serve only one purpose: to make known the God who kills and makes alive. The preacher of the New Testament era has the added advantage that God has spoken more to him. He can speak from the vantage point of the fulfillment of what Ezekiel saw in spirit. Like Paul, then, he must be dumb and know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified, "a savor of life unto life" and "a savor of death unto death" (2 Cor. 2:16). There is no Babylon

¹¹ A slight variation of this interpretation is suggested by H. L. Ellison: "It seems probable that Ezekiel's dumbness was no actual inability to speak, but a refusal to speak on ordinary matters with those who had refused to hear him as God's messenger, combined with a relative rarity in divine relations." In this way Ellison seeks to account for the fact that there are indications that his dumbness was not absolute. "It could be urged that in all these cases [where Ezekiel does not speak during this time] God has suspended the dumbness as promised in 3:27. But in fact there is no hint that this was the case. Passages like 8:1; 14:1-4; 20:1 suggest that the elders expected him to be able to speak." H. L. Ellison, *Ezekiel: The Man and His Message* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1956), pp. 31 f.

today, but in the Babel of modern confusion and in the captivity of terror and fear — at a time when man's "joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, and their heart's desire" have disappeared as a prop for security — hope and help come only if man is silent and God speaks. Would that God struck every preacher dumb like Ezekiel!

If Ezekiel's dumbness was a figurative way of saying that his most urgent pleading with his people would go unheard and unheeded, the present-day preacher may take comfort. In many instances and perhaps in many areas of his concern a like lot befalls him. To him God says as He did to Ezekiel: "They will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to Me" (3:7). But we should not overlook the fact that Ezekiel continued to function as a dumb speaker when nothing seemed to be gained by wasting words on the "rebellious house." No amount of opposition, no discouraging experiences were to relieve him of the duty: "You shall speak My words to them whether they hear or refuse to hear" (2:7). As a watchman he is to sound the alarm regardless of results. When no one heeds it, the preacher may easily be tempted to cease being vocal for God. Ezekiel was human like that. There is good reason therefore why he had to be reminded of this responsibility in repeated admonitions. These duplications are not literary doublets but arise from real life situations and meet the recurring temptation of the preacher to "be afraid of them" (2:6) or to be discouraged because "the people are impudent and stubborn" (2:4). If Ezekiel needed to be warned and encouraged in duplicate, how often must I be reminded to speak the Word in season and out of season? I fear every day.

Finally, if Ezekiel's dumbness consisted in complete loss of speech and he uttered no words during a two-year period, there is comfort here too. It is as if God were saying to Ezekiel: You have done your duty, now leave the rest to Me. You have spoken; I will act. While Ezekiel was dumb, God was destroying Jerusalem and thus removing the cause of the people's false hopes and the reason why Ezekiel's ministry appeared to be that of a dumb prophet. God Himself broke down that hard resistance, and now Ezekiel's tongue could be loosed: his words would find men ready to accept them. And so it was. In spite of no apparent success in the early years of his ministry, Ezekiel's words bore fruit: he kept

alive the faith in the true God in Israel during the Exile. Modern Ezekiel, take comfort from this dumb preacher of old. God's way with him tells you that He does not expect the impossible from you. If you have spoken, you have done your duty. You are not responsible for results. God acts in His own appointed time and manner. Speak and speak again, and then wait for God to find the time and the circumstances to give ingress to His words into the hearts of men. "They will know that there has been a prophet among them" (2:5).

Here ends the lesson of the dumb prophet.

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