

Ezekiel 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 3 You are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel, not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language whose words you cannot understand.

Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me, because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like Emery, harder than flint have I made your forehead.

Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. Moreover, he said to me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears, and go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, whether they hear or refuse to hear.

Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake. Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place. It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake.

[1 : 44] The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. And I came to the exiles at Tel-Abib, who were dwelling by the Kibar Canal, and I sat where they were dwelling.

And I sat there, overwhelmed among them seven days. And at the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity.

But his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity. But you will have delivered your soul.

Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin.

[2 : 51] And his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered. But his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning.

And you will have delivered your soul. And the hand of the Lord was upon me there. And he said to me, Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. So I arose and went out into the valley.

And behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Kibar canal. And I fell on my face. But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.

And he spoke with me and said to me, Go, shut yourself within your house. 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 cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute 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 who will hear, let him hear.

[3 : 58] And he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house. Ezekiel chapter 3 continues and concludes the account of the ordination of Ezekiel as a prophet, with which his book begins.

He saw the vision of the throne chariot in chapter 1, and was given his initial commission in chapter 2. At the end of that chapter, he was instructed to eat whatever was handed to him, and was given a scroll, with words of lamentation, mourning, and woe on both sides of it.

The instruction for Ezekiel to eat the scroll is twice repeated in the opening three verses of chapter 3. The first command focuses upon the eaten word producing the spoken word, the second command upon the internal process of ingesting and metabolizing it.

Ezekiel has to speak the word out, but also to take it deeply in. The notion of feeding upon the word of the Lord is one that we encounter on various occasions in scripture. The words of the Lord are described as sweet as honey in verse 3, referring more specifically to the word of the prophetic message with which Ezekiel was commissioned.

Psalms 19 verse 10 speaks of the honey-like sweetness of God's law in a more general manner. Perhaps a more similar instance to that of Ezekiel's eating of the word of the scroll might be seen in Jeremiah chapter 15 verse 16.

[5 : 33] Verses 4 to 11 replay and develop much of chapter 2 verses 3 to 7, and the initial charge given to Ezekiel there. Perhaps from the repetition we are to infer some reluctance or reticence on Ezekiel's part in taking on the mission appointed to him.

As in chapter 2 verse 7, he is told that he must speak God's words to them. It is important to consider how that ought to have emboldened Ezekiel. The Lord is committed to his word, and as the prophet speaks the word of the Lord, his words won't fall to the ground.

In Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12, with the sign of the almond branch, God declared that he was watching over his word to perform it. On other occasions in scripture, the commission of the Lord has to address some impediment in the speech of the prophet.

Moses is likely a stutterer, and the Lord gives him Aaron as his mouthpiece. Jeremiah's mouth is touched by the Lord in chapter 1 verse 9, in response to Jeremiah's claim that he was but a youth, not knowing how to speak.

Isaiah's cry that he was a man of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips, was answered by the purging of his lips with a burning coal from the altar. Daniel Fredericks suggests that the call of Ezekiel can be also seen to manifest this sort of pattern, detailing some of the weaknesses of previous explanations given for the cumbersome grammatical style of the opening chapter of Ezekiel.

[6 : 57] He proposes that we understand it as an expression of Ezekiel's own awkward vernacular speech. Ezekiel's impediment of speech is rectified by his swallowing of the scroll of divine revelation in chapter 3 verses 1 to 3.

Fredericks writes, The contorted grammar and style of chapter 1, then, is perhaps a rhetorical prop that gives the book a context in which to elevate and authenticate a prophetic message that transcends any deep lipidness or heavy-tonguedness.

A cultic message must only be conveyed in the proper literary language. Eloquence is everything. Ezekiel is sent primarily to the elite of the people, who would expect a prophet to adopt a more elevated style of speech.

The agrarian population would have been less offended by a prophet who spoke in a more vernacular dialect. This is an intriguing suggestion, although one that should be held more as an interesting possibility than as a certain interpretation, especially when we consider Ezekiel's priestly background.

Would he really have been speaking in a vernacular dialect? The Lord's stealing of Ezekiel for his task also recalls the way that he prepared Jeremiah, for instance, in the renewal of his commission in chapter 15, verses 19 to 21.

[8 : 12] Therefore thus says the Lord, If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you. For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord.

I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. The Lord says that he will make Ezekiel's forehead like emery or corundite, an extremely hard rock, harder than any substance is known at the time.

The people may vehemently oppose and resist him, but he will be able to withstand them, invulnerable to their assaults. Ezekiel is specifically sent to the exiles, rather than to the people more generally, many of whom still remained in Judah at this time, prior to the final fall of Jerusalem.

From his visions of God, Ezekiel is snatched up by the Spirit with the sound of a great earthquake and transported to Tel-Abib by the Kibar Canal, where he would begin his ministry among the exiles of Judah.

[9 : 22] Leslie Allen translates the end of verse 12 as follows, As the manifestation of Yahweh's glorious presence rose from where it was situated, the great roaring sound of the wings and the wheels is perhaps like that of an aircraft taking off.

Similar language is used to describe the noise of chariots elsewhere in scripture, in places like Jeremiah chapter 47 verse 3, and Nahum chapter 3 verse 2. As Block notes, this reference to the Kibar Canal does raise a question, as we were told earlier that Ezekiel was by the Kibar Canal in chapter 1 verses 1 to 3.

However, as he observes, There are various ways of understanding the statement. Perhaps the location is a more general designation in one or both instances here. Besides, it seems probable that Ezekiel and the exiles are in different places on the same canal.

The rapid movement of Ezekiel from one location to another is the first of several such occasions within the book. We might also think of Elijah being taken up by the chariots of fire in 2 Kings chapter 2, or of Philip the evangelist being transported to Azotus by the Spirit at the end of chapter 8 of Acts after the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Ezekiel describes himself as being in bitterness and angry in his spirit. This is connected with the hand of the Lord being heavy upon him. Perhaps we could understand this as the zeal that he is feeling for the Lord.

[10 : 43] Alternatively, it may be his anger and resistance at the Lord's calling. When he comes to the exiles at Tel-Abib, he is so stunned and psychologically overwhelmed by what he has witnessed and experienced that he sits seemingly without communicating for seven days.

One might perhaps compare this to the seven days and nights of silence that Job sat in with his three friends before he broke the silence in his curse and lament of chapter 3. Already we are seeing that the encounter with the Lord and his glory has transformed Ezekiel and in some sense has made him strange and alien to his own people.

He is now a participant in a reality that is foreign and inexplicable to them. As Bloch writes, physically he lived among his own people but spiritually he would operate in another realm, a zone governed by divine realities.

In the end he emerges a conscript for the kingdom of Yahweh, a man totally possessed of the spirit of God. Ezekiel's stunned silence lasts for seven days after which the word of the Lord comes to him, appointing him as a watchman for Israel.

This is a personal commission. In chapter 33, Ezekiel receives a similar word from the Lord as a message to the people and to their leaders which expands upon what we see here.

[11 : 56] In chapter 33, there is also more of an indication of the promise of life held out for the faithful and penitent persons. Bloch argues that this unit, with the repeated call and commission elements that precede it, represent Ezekiel as a resistant prophet who has to be sternly charged concerning responsibilities that he is reluctant to assume.

Ezekiel is appointed as a watchman, bearing a peculiar responsibility for the security of the people, there to alert them of the approach of any danger. He is established in this role by the Lord, but it is also about the Lord's judgment that he is responsible to warn the people.

Like a sentry posted on the lookout towers on the walls of a city, he must raise the alarm whenever the people are in peril. We encounter a similar image of the guardians of the people in Jeremiah chapter 6 verse 17.

I set watchmen over you, saying, Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not pay attention. Commenting on the resemblances between the two prophets, Bloch observes the overlap in the period of their ministries and the fact that Jeremiah also corresponded with the exiles in Babylon.

Ezekiel was most likely aware of Jeremiah and his prophecies and may even, given their common priestly background, as Bloch suggests, have known each other prior to Ezekiel's exile to Babylon with King Jehoiakim.

[13 : 16] The Lord presents four different scenarios in which Ezekiel's faithfulness as a watchman would be tested. The wicked person who is not warned and does not repent. The wicked person who is warned but does not repent.

The righteous person who turns from his righteousness and is not warned and does not turn back. The righteous person who is faithfully warned by Ezekiel and does not sin. Throughout, the Lord highlights the question of culpability.

The sternness of the Lord's charge here might again suggest some sort of resistance on Ezekiel's part. The guardian of the people has a daunting task with immense responsibility. He has to give an account for the lives under his oversight, ensuring that no one has been left ignorant of any danger that he is in.

This is also the duty of the Christian minister, as we see in Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.

Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. The final instance, where the righteous person faithfully heeds the faithful prophet's warning and does not sin, breaks the expected pattern.

[14 : 26] We might have expected the fourth case to refer to the impenitent backslider, not responding to the faithful prophet's warning. In all of the other cases, the person addressed by the prophet does not repent.

In the fourth case, he does. The hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel again and he is instructed to go out to the plain. There he once again sees the glory of the Lord as he had in the first vision.

The Lord instructs Ezekiel to shut himself within his house. In a perplexing and much debated passage, he is told that cords will be placed upon him and his tongue will cling to the roof of his mouth.

Elsewhere in Ezekiel, we read of this dumbness in places like chapter 24, verse 27. On that day, your mouth will be opened to the fugitive and you shall speak and be no longer mute.

So you will be assigned to them and they will know that I am the Lord. Block also raises the possibility that Ezekiel is being restricted in his capacity to act as an intercessor for the people.

[15 : 24] The prophet Jeremiah also experienced a restriction on this front in chapter 7, verse 16 of his book. As for you, do not pray for this people or lift up a cry or prayer for them and do not intercede with me for I will not hear you.

In Luke chapter 1, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, was struck dumb as a sign for his unbelief. Ezekiel was silent for seven days after his vision and calling. Block wonders whether the silence that the Lord imposes on Ezekiel, a silence that ends up lasting for seven years, corresponds with the resistant silence that he has after his initial commission.

Perhaps the prophet's resistance should also be connected with the people's resistance. In the next chapter, he will symbolically bear their exile. While he has denied the chance to plead for the people, he will occasionally have his tongue loose to declare a prophetic warning to them.

Because he was resistant to speak what the Lord gave him to speak, he will now only be able to speak what the Lord gives him to speak. Jeremiah also found speaking the word of the Lord a difficult and painful experience, but also found that resisting it was even more painful.

In Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 9, he declares, If I say, I will not mention him or speak any more in his name. There is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

[16 : 49] A question to consider. How can the calling of Ezekiel help us to reflect upon the duties of the Christian minister?