

**A Problematic Treatment of Ezekiel?
 // Observations on the Relationship between YHWH and His Prophet**

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The Book of Ezekiel is well known for the fact that it is written from the point of the prophet's view to such an extent that deviations from the perspective of the 1st person narrator are regarded as later literary additions. Nevertheless this strong autobiographical tendency fades away in the presence of the ever mightier self of YHWH and the message which should be delivered by Ezekiel.¹ This simple stylistic feature of the book is one of the various reasons why our attention is turned to the specific relationship between God and his prophet.

First of all, this contact is overwhelmingly positive for both sides: YHWH reveals himself to Ezekiel (1:1-3:13) and gives insights into his present and future plans (chs. 8-11; chs. 40-48). He makes known his word to be proclaimed, grants Ezekiel a vocation for prophetism (2:1-3:11) strengthening his mind (3:8f) and banishing fears (2:6; 3:9). On the other hand, Ezekiel acknowledges YHWH as what he is – which could be observed in Ezekiel's prostration before the divine vision in ch. 1 (see v28) depicting all recognition formulas that so often form the ultimate goal of Ezekiel's prophecies. Ezekiel thus differs from his stubborn countrymen as he listens to YHWH and openly receives his word (2:8). The scroll held out by God to be eaten (2:9-3:3) indicates that the message to be announced has certainly been intended as words of doom and woe. Ezekiel has to absorb it deep into his heart, which, together with his prophetic vocation, leads to his total dependency on YHWH. So there is no rejection of, nor even any single objection to YHWH's call. The two texts appointing him as watchman over Israel (3:16-21; 33:1-9) pretend personal freedom of decision to let know or to restrain words of God. But in both cases following texts reveal that God reserved the right to make Ezekiel's tongue stick or to open his mouth again (3:26f; 33:21f). Ezekiel seems to be totally devoid of free will.² On a next stage the prophet's private life is strongly connected with his mission, as indicated by the death of his wife (24:15-27). And generally it could be observed that the Book of Ezekiel consists of a unique sequence of divine orders to proclaim the word of YHWH with only few remarks on their fulfillment by Ezekiel (cf. 11:25; 24:18,24).

Within the scope of this holistic concept of prophecy Ezekiel has also to perform a number of sign-acts (4:1-5:4; 12:1-20; ch. 24) which cannot be summarised only by the observation that they depict the future judgement and conquest of Judah and Jerusalem. They can as well be distinguished in actions, in which Ezekiel represents YHWH judging his people, and acts in which the prophet symbolises his fellow-Judeans being punished. So when he turns his face and raises his arm against the city of Jerusalem scratched on a mudbrick (4:3,8), when he burns, cuts to pieces and scatters his hair into the wind (5:2-4) he performs YHWH treating

¹ R. R. WILSON, *Prophecy in Crisis. The Call of Ezekiel*, in: J. L. MAYS – P. J. ACHTEMEIER (eds.), *Interpreting the Prophets*, Philadelphia 1995, 157-169, 157 already stated that Ezekiel is completely hidden behind his prophetic message.

² Cf. R. R. WILSON, *Prophecy in Crisis*, 165.

the wicked and sinful Israel. When, on the other hand, he lies bound on his left and right side (4:4-8) and lives on uneatable food (4:9-13), when he has to leave his home in the manner of displaced people (12:1-20) or faces the death of the "joy of his eyes" without any sign of sorrow and consternation (24:15-27), Ezekiel symbolises the fate that will fall upon the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem soon. In this way the last sign-act in 4:1-5:4 forms a climax in so far as Ezekiel represents in 5:1-5 both sides in a singular performance: It is his own hair be to mistreated as Jerusalem and Judah will be dealt with. And it is the violent way in which he deals with his hair that depicts divine judgement.

In this context it should not be forgotten that Ezekiel's prophetic mission takes place against the background of his own experience of life: In the course of the first conquest of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. he is taken captive together with others and deported to Babylonia, where he lives in the middle of the exilic community. Thus he will for ever be a member of his people passing through the divine judgement and receiving the word of YHWH. On the other hand, his divine vocation transforms him, making him confront his countrymen impersonating YHWH's opposition and proclaiming the divine words of doom and later salvation.

In this process YHWH provokes Ezekiel from the first moment as he reveals himself to the future prophet at a place which is predominantly limited by its impurity (cf. 1:1-3:13). Only the proximity of the Kebar River diminishes this fact a little bit. For Ezekiel the problem arises when YHWH goes so far in this sort of extravagance that he demands that his prophet leave his priestly purity by baking bread for beleaguered people on human excrements (4:12) – a clear sign of divine passing over Ezekiel's individuality and assigned way of a priestly life. So Ezekiel enters a protest, affirming his continuous innocence by two negative statements³ and attains a divine concession⁴ which replaces the excrements by cow dung (4:15). Here it seems that only owing to Ezekiel's shocked interference does YHWH get his prophet's personality back in sight not overstraining him too much.

But it is a matter of fact that it is for the present only Ezekiel's personal affair in which his intercession is granted any success. When he becomes witness of the massacre done to the citizens of Jerusalem (ch. 9), he again sets up a howl of complaint and inquires after the total destruction of the rest of the Israelites (9:8). Maybe Ezekiel was overcome by his feelings,⁵ his intercession, however, was in vain, and this third verbal communication of ch. 9 ends with YHWH's powerful and affirmative restatement and justification of Jerusalem's destruction.⁶ There is no sign that God wasn't willing to listen to the prophetic plea any longer,⁷ but he utilizes this opportunity to confirm the coming punishment in all its inexorability and mercilessness.⁸

³ Along with W. ZIMMERLI, *Ezekiel 1-24 (BK-AT XIII/1)*, Neukirchen Vluyn² 1979, 126.

⁴ See K. W. CARLEY, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel (CNEB)*, Cambridge 1974, 35; L. C. ALLEN, *Ezekiel 1-19 (WBC 28)*, Dallas 1994, 70; W. ZIMMERLI, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 126.

⁵ So G. A. COOKE, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel (ICC)*, Edinburgh 1936, 107.

⁶ Already stated by nearly all commentaries. Cf. for instance H. F. FUHS, *Ezekiel 1-24 (NEB 7)*, Würzburg 1986, 56; D. I. BLOCK, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24 (NICOT)*, Grand Rapids 1997, 309; L. C. ALLEN, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 149; K.-F. POHLMANN, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel. Kapitel 1-19 (ATD 22,1)*, Göttingen 1996, 147; P. JOYCE, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel (JSOTS 51)*, Sheffield 1989, 63.

⁷ Versus J. W. WEVERS, *Ezekiel (NCEB)*, Grand Rapids – London 1969, 72.

⁸ Along with W. ZIMMERLI, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 229; K.-F. POHLMANN, *Hesekiel/Ezechiel. Kapitel 1-19*, 147.

Shortly afterwards, in the face of Petaliah's death Ezekiel reports another personal outcry (11:13), which Daniel Block characterises as a rare emotional outburst expressing the prophet's horror at the ruthlessness of YHWH's judgement.⁹ But this intercession, forming a link to the next literary unit – is answered by YHWH in 11:14-21. And his response is predominantly positive as it indicates that, although idolaters will be punished (v21), YHWH will gather the scattered house of Israel, bring his people back to Israel providing him a new heart as well as a new spirit (v16-21). Thus a remnant of Israel will survive the divine judgement and Ezekiel's questioning cry is replied positively.¹⁰ Unlike Jeremiah, whom YHWH prohibited from pleading for his people,¹¹ Ezekiel seems to be reestablished in his role as intercessor taking advantage of his mediatorship between God and his people.

This position and Ezekiel's double function are finally brought up in 3:14f immediately after the first vision account of the book (1:1-3:13) respectively Ezekiel's vocation to prophecy. Ezekiel narrates here that he was carried away by the same spirit that had lifted him up before. And the next thing to be done by the prophet is to go bitterly in the anger of his spirit (cf. ואלך מר בהמת רוחי). The Book of Ezekiel uses the adjective מר only here and in 27:31, where the mariners are mentioned mourning over Tyre's fall with a bitter wailing (מספד מר). So in both verses מר stands for some frustrated reaction, but in 3:14 as a response not to Ezekiel's call, as Cooper suggested,¹² but rather to the fact that he has to deliver a very calamous message to his countrymen, as Rashi pointed out.¹³ In this way Ezekiel depicts all witnesses of Jerusalem's and Judah's fate, even before he starts to prophesy YHWH's words of doom.

Also the syntagm בהמת רוחי denotes a feeling of great excitement,¹⁴ and it is beyond any doubt that it's Ezekiel who is infuriated here. But if one takes into consideration that in the Book of Ezekiel המה always signifies the anger of YHWH – except for 23:25 – then it's highly probable that this very divine fury was transmitted to the prophet.

This impression is further intensified by the fact that the whole phrase ואלך ... בהמת רוחי appears closely related to Lev 26:28, where YHWH proclaims to his people in the case of disobedience: "and I will go with you contraveningly in anger (וההלכתי עמכם בהמת קרי)", thus introducing the following predictions of punishment. הלקך together with בהמת occurs only twice in the OT, namely in Ezek 3:14 and in Lev 26:28. And as there are far more verses in which Ezekiel had Lev 26 before him,¹⁵ Ezek 3:14 is a further example of it and illustrates in this way that Ezekiel was addicted to his prophetic ministry as well as to YHWH so generally that he could be depicted more or less literally as executor of the divine judge himself. From this point of view 3:14 doesn't indicate any problematic treatment of Ezekiel by God. The verse rather illustrates that their relationship had become so close that Ezekiel could deliver words of YHWH at the most. And when the last part of v14 shows the hand of YHWH becoming strong upon Ezekiel (cf. (יודייהוה עלי חזקה), this is a recollection of similar personal experiences

⁹ D. I. BLOCK, *Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24*, 338.

¹⁰ This point was already observed by F. L. HOSSFELD, *Die Tempelvision Ez 8-11 im Licht unterschiedlicher Zugänge*, in: J. LUST (ed.), *Ezekiel and His Book. Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation (BETHL LXXIV)*, Leuven 1986, 151-165, 155.

¹¹ Cf. Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11.

¹² L. E. COOPER, *Ezekiel (NAC 17)*, w. P. 1994, 93.

¹³ See S. FISCH, *Ezekiel (Soncino Books of the Bible)*, London – New York 1952, 15.

¹⁴ This was already stated by C. A. COOKE, *Ezekiel*, 42; K. W. CARLEY, *Ezekiel*, 25; J. W. WEVERS, *Ezekiel*, 51.

¹⁵ See J. MILGROM, *Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel*, in: C. A. EVANS – S. TALMON (eds.), *The Quest for Context and Meaning. Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, Leiden – Köln – New York 1997, 57-62.

of God's presence granted to Ezekiel and normally expressed by the phrase "the hand of the Lord has fallen upon me" (1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 33:22; 40:1) and also a recollection of events in Israel's history in which YHWH acted for the benefit of his people using his strong arm (זרקה [ב-]יד).¹⁶ But additionally this statement could also be understood as fulfillment of God's promise to strengthen Ezekiel's face and forehead (3:8), which was delivered quite recently before v14. So in this whole verse the reader becomes acquainted with YHWH confirming and supporting his prophet.

Finally v15 tells that Ezekiel went back to the exilic community near the Kebar River and sat down seven days (משמים). Many commentaries read this participle in accordance with Ezra 9:3f as Polal (משמים) and take this remark as an allusion to some kind of stunning or paralepsis of Ezekiel.¹⁷ But due to the methodological criteria of textual criticism the *lectio difficilior* has to be preferred and משמים interpreted as an intransitive Hiphil¹⁸ and describes as in Ezek 32:10, where שמים hi. occurs parallel to שער („to tremble“), the appalled reaction to the divine judgement.¹⁹ With regard to the usage of שמים hi. to describe YHWH's devastating actions within his punishments (see 14:8; 30:12.14) משמים in 3:15 could also slightly indicate how disastrous the impact of Ezekiel's prophetic messages will bear on Jerusalem's and Judah's future. Again we observe the coincidence of the two positions Ezekiel had to hold during his life: as a member of the exilic community he is passive, shocked and stunned by the coming reality of doom. But as a prophet of YHWH's word he adopts an active role representing and disseminating YHWH's judgement on Judah, Jerusalem and the foreign nations.

In the end, there is no problematic treatment of Ezekiel by the God of Israel. It is rather Ezekiel's position between the two opponents YHWH and Judah that causes his troubles: as a prophet Ezekiel is emissary and addressee at the same time. All relevant texts in Ezek illustrate this fact and possibly invite us to rethink our own life accordingly.

¹⁶ Cf. Exod 3:19; 6:1; 13:9; 33:11; Num 20:20; Dtn 4:35; 5:15; 6:21; 9:26; 26:8; Ps 136:12; Jer 33:21; Dan 9:15 and especially Ezek 20:33f.

¹⁷ See for instance G. FOHRER, *Ezechiel (HAT 13)*, Tübingen 1955, 22; H. F. FUHS, *Ezechiel 1-24*, 29.

¹⁸ Already stated by D. I. BLOCK, *Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24*, 137; E. VOGT, *Untersuchungen zum Buch Ezechiel (AnBib 95)*, Rome 1981, 19.

¹⁹ Along with S. FISCH, *Ezekiel*, 16; J. W. WEVERS, *Ezekiel*, 51; M. GREENBERG, *Ezekiel 1-20 (AB 22)*, New York etc. 1983, 72.