

EZEKIEL'S VISION & CALL
EZEKIEL 1:1 - 3:21

¹In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), ³the word of YHWH came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal; and the hand of YHWH was on him [‘me’] there.

These introductory verses provide our first glimpse of the process whereby a prophetic text is later introduced to the community by those responsible for including it among officially accepted texts. Verse 1, and, in all likelihood, the second part of verse 3, appear to be the original introduction coming from the hand of the prophet himself. Ezekiel is recording the exact date of an encounter with YHWH which initiated his prophetic career. This concern for exact dating recurs throughout the scroll. The editors are careful not to disturb Ezekiel’s words. The prophet is about to describe an experience that he had when among the exiles. It happened ‘by the Chebar canal’ – a canal from the Euphrates which ran through the town of Nippur, to the south-east of Babylon. The inclusion of the exact time and place is an indication of the impression this mystical experience had upon the prophet. The majesty and power of the event are highlighted by bringing together ‘visions of God’, the ‘word of YHWH’ and ‘the hand of YHWH’.

When Ezekiel speaks of the hand of YHWH being upon him, he is echoing an expression that we find in 1Kings 18:46 in relation to Elijah, and in 2Kings 3:15 in relation to Elisha. In 8:1 Ezekiel will use the same expression. There, as here, it introduces a ‘vision’.

The reference to ‘the thirtieth year’ is obscure. Joseph Blenkinsopp in his commentary on Ezekiel (part of the Interpretation Series, published by John Knox Press in 1990) speculates that it may refer to Ezekiel’s age at the time of his calling. Since 30 was the minimum age for ordination to the priesthood (see Numbers 4:30), Ezekiel may have had this mystical experience on the occasion of his ordination. Be that as it may, Ezekiel had this mystical experience in ‘the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin’, that is 593, the year following the collapse of the anti-Babylonian conspiracy in which Zedekiah took part. It is interesting that it is King Jehoiachin who is named, not his uncle Zedekiah. The editors did not recognise the Babylonian puppet as the legitimate king.

The first part of verse 3 is a typical heading for a prophetic scroll.

The name of the prophet is given as Ezekiel [יְהִי־עֹזַי], ‘May God make him strong’] (elsewhere in the scroll only 24:24), and we are told that he is a priest. We are also told that Ezekiel’s encounter with YHWH happened ‘in the land of the Chaldeans. Nabopolassar (626-605) and his son, Nebuchadrezzar II (604-562) were Chaldeans who ruled in Babylon in what is known as the neo-Babylonian dynasty.

Babylonian Exile



⁴As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber.

⁵In the middle of it was something like four creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. ⁶Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved.

¹⁰As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; ¹¹such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. ¹²Each moved straight ahead; wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went.

Visions are a feature of the Ezekiel scroll. This is the first of them. It is typical of ancient Near-East mythology to have a god coming in a storm cloud borne by terrifying supernatural beings. Typically God comes 'out of the north' (see Psalm 48:3). The mythical language is taken over into the Torah with the description of YHWH on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), and in Psalm 18.

Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bent the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. YHWH also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.

A comparison with Isaiah 6 is also instructive. Both there and here we encounter a vision of God's throne. What is new here is that whereas Isaiah's vision took place (as one would expect) in the temple, Ezekiel's happens in exile, where worship of YHWH seems impossible. In Isaiah the seraphim declare that 'the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isaiah 6:3). Here this is demonstrated by having four mythical creatures ('four' representing the four points of the compass, and so universal scope) carry God's throne into the wilderness. The four creatures of Ezekiel (identified in Ezekiel 10:20 as 'cherubs') symbolise the transcendence of God, and represent aspects of divine power: intelligence (the man), power (the lion), generativity (the ox), and flight (the eagle).

The movement is being directed by the 'spirit' [רוּחַ] (verse 12).

The description in verse 13 echoes the language of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). We will encounter a similar description in chapter 10.

Away from heaven and from the temple, it is fitting that God's throne be on wheels—something familiar in Near Eastern cult. God's throne throughout the wilderness journey was necessarily mobile, and so it is here.

Ezekiel is drawing on literature surrounding the ark of the covenant, the focus of YHWH's presence among his people, the place where his 'glory' (see verse 28) is revealed (see 1 Samuel 4:4).

The wheels of the chariot are moved by the spirits of the creatures who bear YHWH's throne. The 'eyes' (verse 18) speak of constant divine watchfulness.

In verse 22 we are taken back to the Genesis account of creation. YHWH is envisaged as enthroned above the vault of the heavens.

In verse 24 the sound is compared to a cataract, 'like the thunder of the Almighty [יְהוָה]. This evokes the image of an army.

The sound of the moving wings of the cherubim gives way to the 'voice from above the dome', the voice of YHWH. The cherubim are silent as we await the divine communication.

¹³In the middle of the creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire. ¹⁴The creatures were darting to and fro, like lightning flashes.

¹⁵As I looked at the creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹⁶As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. ¹⁸Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all around.

¹⁹When the creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. ²¹When they moved, the others moved; when they stopped, the others stopped; and when they rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels.

²²Over the heads of the creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³Under the dome their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another; and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body. ²⁴When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings.

²⁵And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads; when they stopped, they let down their wings.

²⁶And above the dome over their heads there was, in appearance like sapphire, something like a throne; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. ²⁷Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around.

²⁸Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH.

When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

This is the high point of the ‘vision’. God appears to Ezekiel in a form resembles ‘a human form’ (verse 26). The shimmering of silver and gold offers a stunning image of glory and transcendence. The description borrows from ancient Near Eastern mythology which pictures a god against the background of the sun.

Two important words are used in verse 26. The first is מְרֹאָה, ‘appearance’; the second is דְּמִיּוּת, ‘something like’. We are surely meant to recall the words of God in Genesis:

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness [דְּמִיּוּת].

– Genesis 1:26

מְרֹאָה is found in the following key texts, where it is translated ‘vision’ or ‘sight’:

When there are prophets among you, I YHWH make myself known to them in *visions*; I speak to them in dreams.

– Numbers 12:6

Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

– Exodus 3:3

Are we meant to link Ezekiel’s experience with the key texts of creation and redemption? Is God calling his people in exile to a new redemption and a new beginning?

The reaction of Ezekiel to the theophany is expressed in traditional language. Overwhelmed, he falls down in adoration and awe.

YHWH is not named in verse 1 – with the effect of underscoring the transcendence and mystery of the divine. Ezekiel is addressed as ‘son of man’. We will hear this expression 92 more times in the scroll. He is being addressed as a member of the human race. He must be empowered to be able to be a recipient of divine revelation. Hence the reference to the ‘spirit’(verse 2; see 1:12, 20, 21).

Verse 3 clearly states the key criterion of genuine prophecy: ‘I am sending you’ (compare Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 1:7). He is being sent to ‘the people of Israel’ wherever they are. The fact that Ezekiel is sent by YHWH will be clear to the people ‘whether they hear or refuse to hear’(verse 5).

Ezekiel is forewarned. He will have every reason to be afraid for he will be addressing YHWH’s words to people who, for the most part, will remain stubborn in their rebellion. But he must not let himself give in to fear.

Ezekiel must stand out in sharp contrast against the rebellious people to whom he is being sent. He is to take in God’s word and digest it. God’s word fills the scroll, written on both sides. Ezekiel is to welcome God’s word in its entirety, in spite of the fact that it threatens punishment against the rebellious, which will cause ‘lamentation and mourning and woe’(verse 10).

¹He said to me: O son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. ²And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.

³He said to me: Son of man, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord YHWH.”

⁵Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

⁶And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though bribers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.

⁷You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.

⁸But you, son of man, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. ⁹I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. ¹⁰He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

¹He said to me: Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. ³He said to me: Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

⁴He said to me: Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. ⁵For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel— ⁶not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to them, they would listen to you. ⁷But the house of Israel will not 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. ⁸See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. ⁹Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not fear them or be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.

¹⁰He said to me: Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; ¹¹then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, “Thus says the Lord YHWH”; whether they hear or refuse to hear.

YHWH wants Ezekiel to welcome God’s word, which he found to be ‘as sweet as honey’ (verse 3). We recall a similar experience had by Jeremiah, who was also told to consume God’s word. When he did so he exclaimed: ‘Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart’ (Jeremiah 15:16). The Psalmist exclaims:

Your words are sweeter than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

– Psalm 19:10

I will delight in your statutes; I will
not forget your word.

– Psalm 119:16

Up to chapter 33, the content of the revealed words will mostly be bitter, but they are in view of repentance and a new beginning, and they are the words of YHWH.

We are reminded by the reference to ‘obscure speech and difficult language’ (verse 5) that the exiles from Judah found themselves living among exiles from other nations.

So stubborn and rebellious are the exiles from Judah that the foreigners, who cannot understand Hebrew, are more likely to listen to Ezekiel than his own people. The experience of 598 led to a general disillusionment with prophecy (so many of the prophets foretold peace not defeat). In hardening their hearts to real prophecy, the people were hardening their hearts against God.

However, God is strengthening Ezekiel against them. If they are hard, he will be even harder. Jeremiah received a similar assurance (Jeremiah 1:18).

Ezekiel must continue to listen: to receive YHWH’s word ‘in your heart’. God will give him the words to communicate with the people.

Overwhelmed by his initial vision, Ezekiel stated: 'I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking' (1:28). Now, having been commissioned, the vision ends and he rises up, empowered by God's spirit (3:12), 'the hand of YHWH being strong upon me' (3:14; see 1:3).

For the first and only time in the Ezekiel scroll the place of exile is named: 'Tel-abib'. It is an ancient mound ('tel') that was thought to go back to the time of the great Flood ('abib'). Other diaspora settlements are mentioned in Ezra (2:59; 8:17): Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, Immer, Casiphia. Tel-abib (as with the other settlements beginning with 'tel') seems to have been an uninhabited mound, the site of an ancient town, long buried under the sand.

At the close of this first section of the Ezekiel scroll we are left with a powerful reminder of YHWH's faithfulness to his people. They have abandoned YHWH, but YHWH has not abandoned them. He continues to reveal himself to them even in exile, and to call them through his prophet, no matter how stubborn and hard-hearted they have proved to be. YHWH will not give up on his people.

¹²Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of YHWH rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling; ¹³it was the sound of the creatures' wings beating against one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, that sounded like a loud rumbling.

¹⁴The spirit lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of YHWH being strong upon me.

¹⁵I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who lived by the Chebar canal. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days.

16At the end of seven days, the word of YHWH came to me:

17Son of man, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

18If I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," and you give them no warning, or speak to warn the wicked from their wicked way, in order to save their life, those wicked people shall die for their iniquity; but their blood I will require at your hand. 19But if you warn the wicked, and they do not turn from their wickedness, or from their wicked way, they shall die for their iniquity; but you will have saved your life.

20Again, if the righteous turn from their righteousness and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before them, they shall die; because you have not warned them, they shall die for their sin, and their righteous deeds that they have done shall not be remembered; but their blood I will require at your hand.

21If, however, you warn the righteous not to sin, and they do not sin, they shall surely live, because they took warning; and you will have saved your life.

Like prophets before him (see Hosea 9:8, Jeremiah 6:17), Ezekiel is likened to a sentinel [נֹשֵׂא דְבָרָא], who must be alert to YHWH's word and prompt in sounding the alarm. If he fails to do so, he will be held responsible. We are here at the beginning of the first phase of his ministry, building up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587. The idea will be repeated in chapter 33 to introduce the second phase of his ministry in which he speaks words of encouragement, promising a new beginning.

Four times in these verses we are told of the prophet's duty to 'warn' (וָדַעַת). We will find the same instruction in chapter 33. It is a rare verb in the Hebrew Scriptures. Apart from Psalm 19:11, Ecclesiastes 4:13 and 12:12, and Ezra 4:22, it is found in three key texts. One is in connection with Moses (Exodus 18:20); another concerns the prophet Elisha (2Kings 6:10); and a third in relation to the duties of priests (2Chronicles 19:10). In all of these the translation 'warn' fails to pick up the richness of its meaning. The fact that the cognate noun is translated 'brightness' (see Ezekiel 8:2 and Daniel 12:3), encourages a translation such as 'enlighten'.

The duty of a prophet is firstly to 'see', and then to reveal to others that they in turn may see. There will be times when this includes a warning, but more can be revealed than threats.

Behind verses 18-19 lies the conviction that YHWH does not give up on the sinner but continues to call the sinner to repentance. The prophet is responsible to convey this to the sinner. Of course, sinners who fail to heed the warning will 'die for their iniquity.'

Verses 20-21 repeat the obligation laid on the prophet to warn the sinner. They make clear that being just is not something that can be taken for granted. It can be lost by sin. It is assumed that if there is a 'stumbling block' causing the just man to stumble, God, who controls everything, must have put it there. We looked at this faulty theology in the Introduction.