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Ezekiel 1:1–3



IN THE THIRTIETH YEAR, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

Original Meaning

THE OPENING THREE VERSES of Ezekiel serve to locate the prophet's ministry in time and space. Verse 1 tells us that the prophet received his call on the fifth day of the fourth month in the thirtieth year, among the exiles beside the Kebar River. This verse may originally have stood simply as the heading for the opening vision, addressed to people familiar with the prophet and his situation. At a later date, when the prophecies were addressed to a wider (Judean?) audience, it became necessary to clarify the details of verse 1. It was at this point that the next two verses were added, either by the prophet or someone else. This addition equates the "thirtieth year" of verse 1 with the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin (593 B.C.), specifies the "I" of verse 1 as "Ezekiel son of Buzi the priest" (see NIV text note), and identifies the Kebar River, where the exiles lived, as being "in the land of the Babylonians."

The original meaning of the "thirtieth year" in verse 1 has been much discussed from the time of the rabbis onward. The text gives us no indication from what datum the thirtieth year is counted. Three major possibilities have emerged.

(1) It is the thirtieth year since a specific event. This method of dating is well attested in the Old Testament (see, e.g., 2 Chron. 23:1, where "the seventh year" is the seventh year since the usurpation of the throne by Athaliah). Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the dates have as their consistent baseline the exile of King Jehoiachin (as in Ezek. 1:2), while Amos dates his prophecy with reference to an earthquake (Amos 1:1).

On the basis of the other dates in Ezekiel, some have thus seen the "thirtieth year" as the "thirtieth year of King Jehoiachin's exile," which would make verse 1 refer to the date of the final prophecy of the whole

book.¹ Other commentators from ancient times have sought an event thirty years previous to 593 B.C. that might serve as a suitable datum point. The identification of Josiah's reform (ca. 621 B.C.) as that "point zero" goes back to the Targum and was held by Jerome,² while David Kimḥi favored the idea of the thirtieth year since the last year of Jubilee.³

(2) It is the thirtieth year in the reign of a specific king. This is the most common dating method in the Old Testament, used not only of the kings of Israel and Judah but also of a foreign king in Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1. Indeed, the references in Nehemiah are of particular interest since the first simply speaks of "the twentieth year," which is not more specifically defined until the next chapter, where it becomes clear that the "twentieth year" in question is that of King Artaxerxes. Some have therefore argued that the dating in Ezekiel 1:1 is based on "Babylonian time," beginning with the accession of Nabopolassar in 625 B.C.⁴

(3) It is the thirtieth year of the prophet's life. This view goes back to Origen and has found several contemporary supporters.⁵ One would normally expect an additional phrase in the Hebrew to indicate it as his age; yet there is a parallel at Genesis 8:13, where the "six hundred and first year" is that of Noah, as 7:11 makes clear. This date would have been significant for Ezekiel, for at that age he would have taken up his priestly ministry in the Jerusalem temple, had it still been standing.

There is no simple solution to this problem (self-evidently, since otherwise it would not continue to be discussed!). Some reference point that was presumably transparently clear to the original audience is no longer available to us. More significant, whoever added the additional notes of verses 2–3 chose not to highlight the "thirtieth year" but rather offer the date from Jehoiachin's exile. It is thus perhaps best to leave the question open and not base our exegesis on inevitably speculative reasoning. What is clear and underlined in the present form of the text is that the opening vision of the

1. Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988), 29; A. D. York, "Ezekiel 1: Inaugural and Restoration Visions?" *VT* 27 (1977): 82–98.

2. See George A. Cooke, *Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 7. In the seventeenth century, this view was advocated by William Greenhill, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994 reprint), 9.

3. So also John Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, trans. D. Foxgrover and D. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.

4. For this view, see Claus von Orelli, *Das Buch Ezechiel und die zwölf kleinen Propheten*, 2d ed. (Munich: Beek, 1896).

5. J. E. Miller, "The 'Thirtieth Year' of Ezekiel 1.1," *RB* 99 (1992): 499–503; Margaret S. Odell, "You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll," *JBL* 117 (1998): 229–48; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1994), 21; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 16; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 82.

prophet Ezekiel is placed in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile, that is, 593 B.C., while the prophet lived among the exiles of Babylonia. Historically and socially, therefore, Ezekiel's message was addressed to those in exile.

There in exile, Ezekiel was confronted by a dramatic spectacle: The heavens were opened and he saw "visions of God" (*mar'ôṭ ʿlōhîm*, 1:1). The prophet was taken behind the scenes, as it were, and given a different, divine perspective on the events unfolding around him. The phrase "visions of God" or "divine visions"⁶ encompasses not only the opening vision of the divine throne-chariot, but all of the visions that play such an important part in Ezekiel's message.

Although Ezekiel, like other Old Testament prophets, hears the word of the Lord, for him the visual aspect of God's revelation has a particularly prominent place. Thus the book is in important ways structured around the vision of God's throne-chariot prepared for action in chapter 1, that of the abominations that cause the glory to depart from the Jerusalem temple in chapters 8–11, the vision of the renewal of the dry bones in chapter 37, and the vision of the new temple in chapters 40–48. God is dramatically at work even in the apparently hopeless situation of the exiles, a work that the prophet is invited to "show and tell" to those around him.

Bridging Contexts

GOD'S WORD FOR the exiles. One common mistake in interpreting the prophets (and perhaps esp. Ezekiel) is to get bogged down in the minor details and thus attempt to overinterpret the text.

For instance, some commentators build extensively on the "thirtieth year" of verse 1, speaking of that as the time when the prophet would have expected to enter priestly service had he been at home in Jerusalem. Yet the presence of Ezekiel 1:2–3 already serves to play down the importance of the exact identity of the thirtieth year. If verse 1 is the original heading of (part of) the prophecy for the original audience, verses 2–3 are the heading for the wider audience, that is, for *us*! They address those who do not know what the thirtieth year is, need to be informed which prophet is speaking, and cannot be expected to know that the Kebar River is in Babylonia unless that fact is made clear.

The basic point, then, of the introductory verses is that *God's word comes to the exiles*. Now it may seem self-evident to contemporary readers that God can address us and we can come to him wherever we are. The prophet's original

6. On *ʿlōhîm* as an appellative ("divinity") in this phrase rather than a proper noun, see Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 85.

hearers, however, had a different understanding of their relationship to the place where they lived. If we are to understand Ezekiel's message, we must seek to understand what it meant to the people of his day to be in exile. It was not merely that they happened to be living somewhere other than they would have preferred to be; rather, their entire world had caved in upon them. In the same way that contemporary Jewish theology can be described as "Theology after Auschwitz," because every understanding of God and the world has to take into account the experience of the Holocaust, so also this part of Old Testament theology must be designated the "Theology of Exile," because of the radical impact of that earlier holocaust. Tamara Eskenazi expresses it thus:

Exile. It is not simply being homeless. Rather, it is knowing that you do have a home, but that your home has been taken over by enemies.

Exile. It is not being without roots. On the contrary, it is having deep roots which have now been plucked up, and there you are, with roots dangling, writhing in pain, exposed to a cold and jeering world, longing to be restored to native and nurturing soil. Exile is knowing precisely where you belong, but knowing that you can't go back, not yet.⁷

Weeping and dreaming. What do you do in exile? The first thing that you do is sit down and weep. As the psalmist put it in Psalm 137:1–4:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?

In exile, life cannot be "business as usual." How can there be joy in exile? How can there be joy when the memory is still filled with the demolition of all that is precious: Jerusalem's stones torn down, her infants slaughtered (Ps. 137:7–8)? In view of God's apparent rejection of his people, who can but pour out tears unceasingly (Lam. 2:18; 3:49)? Joy is gone and dancing turned to mourning (Lam. 5:15).

This mourning is not simply grief at the random sorrows of life, the "slings and darts of outrageous fortune," to use Shakespeare's phrase. Rather, in the

7. "Exile and Dreams of Return," *CurrTM* 18 (1990): 192.

midst of the pain, there is a recognition of the cause of that pain. Judah's calamity is a consequence of her own sin (Lam. 3:42; 4:13). Paradoxically, though, in the midst of that recognition is also the beginning of hope. If tragedy is not a random event but the result of God's sovereignty, then there may be hope of a new beginning.⁸ The one who has bruised can also bind up; the one who has rejected his people can restore them to himself (Lam. 5:21). God's covenant love, his *hesed*, is the basis for hope in the midst of tears.

Just as Moses appealed to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so that God would not destroy his people utterly after the incident with the golden calf (Ex. 32:13), so also in the Exile, God's commitment to the covenant brought hope. Added to this self-commitment was the basic character of God as gracious and compassionate, again as he had revealed himself originally to Moses (Ex. 34:6). Because of those facts, the possibility of forgiveness and restoration was real. Thus the book of Lamentations closes: "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure" (Lam. 5:21–22).

Such a restoration could not be claimed presumptuously, however. The temptation, even in exile, was to hang on to glib hopes rather than truly to mourn and repent. Thus Jeremiah wrote to the exiles furiously denouncing those who promised a quick end to their troubles (Jer. 29:15–23). Such prophets found a ready audience for their words, but Jeremiah criticized them for failing to listen to God's words through the prophets, words that spoke of the sword, famine, and plague (29:17–19). Until the dregs of the bitter cup of exile had been drained, there could be no talk of a new future. For the foreseeable future—for seventy years, which in most cases was far more than their life expectancy, their future lay in Babylon. Only after the cup of wrath had been drained would a new future be possible for Israel; only after the sin had been paid for would it be possible to speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim her comfort (Isa. 40:1–2).

In the meantime, alongside weeping, there was also room for dreaming.⁹ According to Psalm 126:1, "When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed." The dreaming actually started a long time before the captives began to return. When everything has been torn down to the foundations, when nothing remains of the structures of the past, but when at the same time there is confidence that the nation will rise again, phoenix-like, from the ashes, visionary dreams can flourish. There can be dreams of a future that will preserve the best of the past while avoiding the worst.

8. *Ibid.*, 197.

9. *Ibid.*, 198.