

EZEKIEL: PRIEST - PROPHET

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ezekiel distinguishes itself from other prophetic books in several significant ways. Ezekiel's prophetic tenure is entirely in the exile. There is an unprecedented level of revelation in the visions of God and the angelic host. Ezekiel's name hardly appears in the book; instead, God consistently refers to him as *ben adam* (Son of Man). Ezekiel is surprisingly silent for much of his tenure, often acting out symbolic actions. For the most part, redemption is not contingent on Israel's behavior; rather, God redeems Israel for His Name's sake. Even after Israel is redeemed and returns to her Land, the war of Gog will occur.

It appears that Ezekiel's combination of prophecy and priesthood can explain many of the distinctive aspects of his book. Ezekiel's career is intended to parallel the priestly career he would have had in the Temple in Jerusalem in better times. By serving as a priest-prophet in exile, Ezekiel was able to encourage the Jews at the time of the destruction that God remains with them even in exile. Additionally, the passive nature of Ezekiel's prophecy allows God's personality to occupy center stage.

PRIESTHOOD IN THE TORAH

In a survey and analysis of the priesthood in the Torah, Rabbi Eitan Mayer explains the wide range of priestly functions.¹ Priests offer sacrifices, conduct the Temple service, and bless the people. The High Priest represents Israel before God with his garments bearing the names of the twelve tribes (Ex. 28:11, 21, 29-30). Among its other functions, the priesthood is responsible for teaching (Lev. 10:8-11); judging (Deut. 17:8-11); and mediating through the *Urim ve-Tummim* (Num. 27:21).

Sorting these functions into two broad categories, the priesthood serves as a bridge from God to the people through teaching, judging, mediating, and con-

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ferring the priestly blessing. It also serves as a bridge from the people to God through participation in the Temple service and wearing garments inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes.

Priests had to be passive while serving in the Temple. They were anointed like the utensils during the Tabernacle dedication ceremony (Ex. 29:7, 21; 30:25-33, 40:9-16). The special clothing worn by the priests are mandatory during service (Ex. 28:35; 29:9).

Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of the nature of the priesthood in the Torah is the injunction prohibiting Aaron from mourning the death of his sons Nadab and Abihu during the dedication of the Tabernacle:

And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, 'Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the LORD has wrought. And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the LORD's anointing oil is upon you.' And they did as Moses had bidden (Lev. 10:6-7).

While he performs the service, the priest's personal identity is eclipsed by his position. A bridge between God and the people must stand still in order to function properly.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 1-3

Ezekiel was a priest exiled from Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. along with King Jehoiachin and some 10,000 of Jerusalem's elite citizens (II Kings 24:11-14). Though he could not serve as a priest in the soon-to-be-destroyed Temple, Ezekiel's priesthood plays a central role in his prophetic mission.

A. "THE THIRTIETH YEAR"

In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Khebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin – the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, by the Khebar Canal, in the land of the Chaldeans. And the hand of the LORD came upon him there (Ezek. 1:1-3).

Ezekiel began his prophetic tenure in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile, or 592 B.C.E. To what, however, does "the thirtieth year" refer (1:1)? This enigma generated several lines of interpretation.

Thirty years prior to Ezekiel's prophetic initiation were the Josian Reforms, in 622 B.C.E. However, while that event was important, biblical events generally are dated from the years of a king's reign. The issue of dating notwithstanding, several commentators adopt this interpretation. For example, Radak considers this oblique reference to the reforms as an ominous one. After Hilkiah found the Torah scroll, Josiah tore his garments and Huldah affirmed the sealed decree against Jerusalem (II Kg. 22:11-20). Ezekiel therefore dated his book to the reformation, which marked the first stage of the disaster to follow.

In some Midrashim, Ezekiel's initiation occurred in the thirtieth year since the previous Jubilee year, which coincided with Josiah's reformation (*Arakhin* 12a). Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, and Radak cite this view as well.²

R. Menahem ben Shimon (13th c. Provence) cites a third view that Ezekiel was thirty years old when he received his initiation prophecy. Had he not been exiled, Ezekiel would have begun his priestly service at age thirty, assuming that priests began their service at the same age as regular Levites (see Num. 4:3, 23, 30). Instead of beginning his service in the Temple, Ezekiel's turning thirty was marked by his prophesying from exile about the impending destruction of that Temple. Within this line of interpretation, Ezekiel received the Temple vision (chapters 40-48) twenty years after his initiation (see 40:1, the 25th year of the exile=572 B.C.E.), or at age fifty, when a priest normally would retire from service.³ Though it is difficult to prove this reading over any other, it is possible that Ezekiel's prophetic career fundamentally⁴ spanned the years he otherwise would have served as a priest in the Temple.

B. "SON OF MAN"

And He said to me, 'O mortal, stand up on your feet that I may speak to you' (Ezek. 2:1).

After Ezekiel's initial vision, God addresses him. Curiously, God addresses the prophet as *ben adam* (Son of Man). Throughout the Bible, God addresses prophets as *ben adam* 94 times. All but one of those instances are in regard to Ezekiel, with the other lone reference to Daniel (Dan. 8:17).

Rashi and several later commentators suggest that God wanted to remind Ezekiel of his humanness specifically during these exalted visions in the presence of the angelic host. However, Isaiah experienced a similar vision (Isa. 6), and God felt no need to humble Isaiah. Additionally, God consistently refers to Ezekiel as *ben adam*, even when communicating regular prophecies. Clearly, *ben adam* is characteristic of the Book of Ezekiel.

In fact, Ezekiel's name appears only twice in the entire book (1:3; 24:24), and the first reference belongs to the superscription. By way of contrast, Jeremiah's name occurs 129 times in his book, which is replete with personal information and biographical information about Jeremiah. Though Jeremiah also was a priest (Jer. 1:1), that aspect of his pedigree plays virtually no role in his prophetic career. In his prophetic tenure, Ezekiel resembles a priest who does not exert his personality during service.

C. EZEKIEL'S MUTENESS

God repeatedly orders Ezekiel to speak to the people of Israel (2:4, 7; 3:1, 4). However, the prophet silently refuses when he returns to them (3:15). God responds to this surprising silence by exhorting Ezekiel that he is a "watchman" for Israel, and bears responsibility if he fails to warn the nation of their impending doom (3:16-21). However, the prophet *still* does not respond! This continued refusal sets the stage for God's informing Ezekiel that he will be muted:

And a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet. And He spoke to me, and said to me: 'Go, shut yourself up in your house. As for you, O mortal, cords have been placed upon you, and you have been bound with them, and you shall not go out among them. And I will make your tongue cleave to your palate, and you shall be dumb; you shall not be a reprover to them, for they are a rebellious breed. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD!' He who listens will listen, and he who does not will not – for they are a rebellious breed' (Ezek. 3:24-27).

Rashi suggests that Ezekiel's staying home while mute demonstrates that the people did not merit prophetic reproof since they were hopelessly wicked. According to the sequence of the text, however, the Jews did not yet have a

chance to sink further in their rebellion since the prophet had thus far refused to address them. Why would God rebuke the people further?

R. Eliezer of Beaugency maintains that God was responding to Ezekiel's unwillingness to rebuke the people. Initially an act of rebellion, Ezekiel's⁵ silent passivity now was transformed into a defining feature of his prophecy.

EZEKIEL'S PRIEST-PROPHET ROLE IN CHAPTER 4

A. 4:1-3, PLAYING GOD'S ROLE

'And you, O mortal, take a brick and put it in front of you, and incise on it a city, Jerusalem. Set up a siege against it, and build towers against it, and cast a mound against it; pitch camps against it, and bring up battering rams roundabout it. Then take an iron plate and place it as an iron wall between yourself and the city, and set your face against it. Thus it shall be under siege, you shall besiege it. This shall be an omen for the House of Israel' (Ezek. 4:1-3).

In the first symbolic action of chapter 4, Ezekiel makes a brick representing Jerusalem and then holds a metal pan between himself and the brick. Following the interpretation in *Berakhot* 32b, Abarbanel, Malbim, and Yehiel Moskowitz⁶ explain that in this instance, Ezekiel is acting in God's stead. God shields His face from Jerusalem so that the city may be destroyed.

B. 4:4-8, PLAYING GOD'S AND ISRAEL'S ROLES

'Then lie on your left side, and let it bear the punishment of the House of Israel; for as many days as you lie on it you shall bear their punishment (tissa et avonam) . . . Then, with bared arm, set your face toward besieged Jerusalem and prophesy against it. Now I put cords upon you, so that you cannot turn from side to side until you complete your days of siege' (Ezek. 4:4-8).

In the second symbolic action of chapter 4, Ezekiel lies on his sides for a total of 430 days so that he may "*tissa et avonam*." There appear to be multiple meanings of this expression and action: (1) Ezekiel bears Israel's punishment, i.e., he represents Israel who will be besieged. (2) He bears Israel's sin, i.e., Ezekiel represents God Who had patiently borne Israel's sins for many years but now is prepared to destroy them. (3) In 4:7, Ezekiel represents God by staring with hostility and baring his arm against Jerusalem.

(4) In 4:8, Ezekiel's bound state represents the people of Jerusalem who will be paralyzed during the siege (similar to the homebound aspect of 3:24-27). In this symbolic action, Ezekiel represents both God and the people.

C. 4:9-17, PLAYING ISRAEL'S ROLE

'Further, take wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and emmer. Put them into one vessel and bake them into bread . . . you shall bake it on human excrement before their eyes. So said the LORD, shall the people of Israel eat their bread, unclean, among the nations to which I will banish them . . . And He said to me, 'O mortal, I am going to break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they shall eat bread by weight, in anxiety, and drink water by measure, in horror, so that, lacking bread and water, they shall stare at each other, heartsick over their iniquity' (Ezek. 4:9-17).

During the famine that would result from the siege of Jerusalem, people would be forced to combine whatever ingredients they had available. There also would be a shortage of wood, so they would use human excrement as fuel to bake their bread (Rashi, Yehiel Moskowitz).⁷ In this symbolic action, Ezekiel represents the people.

To summarize the symbolic actions in chapters 3-4: In 3:24-27, Ezekiel's role as a prophet of rebuke is transformed into a mission of muteness and passivity; he also symbolizes Israel's paralysis during the upcoming siege. In 4:1-3, Ezekiel represents God by hiding his face from Jerusalem. In 4:4-8, Ezekiel represents God by bearing the people's sins and by glaring at the city with wrath; and the people by lying paralyzed, bearing their punishment. In 4:9-17, Ezekiel represents the people by experiencing their famine. Thus, Ezekiel's unique priest-prophet mission enables him to serve as a bridge between God and the nation.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT REFERENCES

A. AN ANGEL DRESSED AS A PRIEST

In chapter 8, God gives Ezekiel a virtual tour of Jerusalem and its sins to justify the extreme decree of destruction. Ezekiel then experiences a vision of angels destroying Jerusalem followed by God's Presence abandoning the city (chapters 9-10):

Then He called loudly in my hearing, saying, 'Approach, you men in charge of the city, each bearing his weapons of destruction!' And six men entered by way of the upper gate that faces north, each with his club in his hand; and among them was another, clothed in linen, with a writing case at his waist. They came forward and stopped at the bronze altar (9:1-2).

One of the angels is wearing white linen clothing. A Midrash suggests an interpretation of his attire:

R. Berekhiah and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Hⁱyya said: Like the ministration on high so was the ministration below. As in the case of the ministration on high there was One man in the midst of them clothed in linen (Ezek. 9:2) so in the case of the ministration below: He shall put on the holy linen tunic (Lev. 16:4) (*Lev. Rabbah* 21:11).

According to this Midrash, God created the heavenly angelic host in parallel with the Temple and priests. The angel wearing white linen garments corresponds to the priests who wear them in the Temple. If this interpretation can explain the plain sense of the vision,⁹ Ezekiel's priest-prophet mission might impact his perception of the metaphysical arena, also.

B. THE PROHIBITION AGAINST MOURNING

'O mortal, I am about to take away the delight of your eyes from you through pestilence; but you shall not lament or weep or let your tears flow. Moan softly; observe no mourning for the dead . . . Tell the House of Israel: Thus said the Lord God: 'I am going to desecrate My Sanctuary, your pride and glory, the delight of your eyes and the desire of your heart; and the sons and daughters you have left behind shall fall by the sword. Accordingly, you shall do as I have done: you shall not cover over your upper lips or eat the bread of comforters' (Ezek. 24:16-22).

Immediately preceding the siege of Jerusalem, God commands Ezekiel to abstain from mourning the death of his wife. This shocking inaction serves as a model to the Jews who similarly may not mourn the upcoming destruction. This commandment resembles God's command to Aaron prohibiting him

from mourning when Nadab and Abihu perished. Ezekiel is essentially in service throughout his tenure as a priest-prophet.¹⁰

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PROPHECY-PRIESTHOOD

Similar to priesthood, prophecy also serves as a bridge between God and Israel. The prophet transmits God's word to the people, and intercedes to God on behalf of the people. Prophecy also generally has a more creative component, where the prophet's personality impacts his message. Jeremiah epitomizes this component, as his book is replete with his personal prayers and biographical information. In contrast, Ezekiel merges the function of priesthood into his prophetic mission. He has little creative personality, thereby functioning as a bridge to represent both sides of the God-Israel relationship.

On one level, Ezekiel's unique prophetic mission is critical because of the historical circumstances in which he lived. The Jews in Babylonia believed that God had rejected them permanently (e.g., 33:10; 37:11). That God could appear to a prophet and serve as a *small sanctuary* (*mikdash me'at*, 11:16) in exile was revolutionary to them.¹¹ By serving as a priest-prophet in the exile, then, Ezekiel played a vital role in encouraging his community that God was indeed with them in their suffering.¹² While of course this *small sanctuary* was no replacement for the real Temple in Jerusalem, Israel's connection with God continued into the exile. As a prophet in Babylonia, Ezekiel functioned as the "priest" of this *small sanctuary*, serving as a bridge between God and the Jews in exile.¹³

On a different plane, Ezekiel's trademark passivity and namelessness keep his personality out of the way of his revelation. In this respect, he becomes a bridge primarily from God to the people. Consequently, readers are exposed to an unparalleled display of God's Presence and emotions.

The metaphysical destruction of Jerusalem occurs several years prior to its physical destruction, when the angels throw coals onto Jerusalem and then God's Presence abandons the city (chapters 9-10). This detailed description occupies two full chapters.¹⁴ In contrast, the report of the physical destruction several years later is described coldly in just two words: *In the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth day of the tenth month, a fugitive came to me from Jerusalem and reported, 'The city has fallen' (hukketah ha-ir)* (Ezek. 33:21). As

noted above, the people were forbidden from showing signs of mourning (24:21-22).

God goes into exile as the Temple is destroyed, and God is the primary subject of redemption as well. Redemption in the Book of Ezekiel generally does not require Israel's repentance as a prerequisite, as God needs to sanctify His Name regardless (e.g., 11:14-21; 14:21-23; 16:59-63; 20:33-44; 36:16-36).¹⁵ This phenomenon also explains why the war of Gog would occur even after Israel's return to her land (see 38:8, 11, 14).¹⁶ The ultimate redemption in the Book of Ezekiel is of God rather than of Israel, and therefore the need to eradicate all human evil and for all humanity to recognize that God is paramount.

CONCLUSION

The unique nature of Ezekiel as a priest-prophet may explain several of the distinctive features of his book. It is plausible that the book is structured around the years of Ezekiel's life when he otherwise would have served as a priest in the Temple. His prophetic tenure in Babylonia functioned as his priesthood in the "small sanctuary" (*mikdash me'at*) of exile.

Ezekiel's namelessness; his muteness as he performed a series of actions symbolizing both God and Israel; and his being prohibited to mourn the loss of his wife all can be explained as aspects of serving as a priestly bridge between God and Israel. The priestly nature of his prophecy also can explain why Ezekiel exhibits little creative personality and that human emotions are all but absent from the book – even when the people learn of the Temple's destruction. Also, Ezekiel perceives one of the angels dressed like a priest.

As a priest-prophet, Ezekiel teaches Israel that God's Presence, prophecy, and some reduced manifestation of priesthood can exist even in the exile. This realization no doubt enlivened a very demoralized group of exiles who believed that their relationship with God had been permanently severed. Moreover, Ezekiel's diminished creative personality enables him to serve as a silent bridge between God and Israel, revealing to his audience a striking and unprecedented display of God's personality.

NOTES

1. E. Mayer, Parsha Themes Tetzaveh, at:

http://www.yu.edu/faculty/emayer/parsha_shiurim/21tetzaveh.html

2. The Jubilee year represents freedom and return to one's ancestral inheritance (Lev. 25:10). According to this midrashic view, perhaps Ezekiel prefaces a gloomy series of prophecies with an allusion to the hope that they will return to their land afterwards. In his prophecies of redemption, Ezekiel calls the Jubilee year "*shenat ha-deror*" (the year of freedom) (46:17). Ezekiel is the only prophet who refers to the Jubilee year. See also 7:12-13.
3. R. Yosef Hayyun (15th c. Portugal) accepts this reading as most likely. See also J. E. Miller, "The Thirtieth Year of Ezekiel 1:1," *Revue Biblique* 99 (1992), pp. 499-503.
4. 29:17-21, an appendix to Ezekiel's prophecies against Egypt, dates to the twenty-seventh year (570 B.C.E.), or two years after the Temple vision in chapters 40-48. Nevertheless, this minor insertion does not detract from the argument that the overall structure of the book spans the twenty year period from 592-572 B.C.E.
5. See further in M. Greenberg, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness," *JBL* 77 (1958), pp. 101-105.
6. Y. Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Ezekiel* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985), p. 25.
7. Y. Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Ezekiel*, pp. 29-30.
8. Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah taken from Soncino, with minor modifications.
9. See, e.g., R. Kascher, *Mikra le-Yisrael Ezekiel 1-24* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 2004) p. 259; Y. Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Ezekiel*, p. 54.
10. For several other illustrations, see A. Mein, "Ezekiel as a Priest in Exile," in *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character, and Anonymous Artist*, ed. J. C. De Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 199-213.
11. Cf. Jeremiah 29:15, where the Jews in Babylonia were pleasantly surprised that prophecy continued in the exile, especially in light of the general consideration of foreign lands to be "unclean" (e.g., Joshua 22:19; Ezekiel 4:13; Hosea 9:3; Amos 7:17).
12. See Psalm 91:14-16; *Megillah* 29a; *Exodus Rabbah* 23:5.
13. On this point, cf. A. Mein, "Ezekiel as a Priest in Exile," p. 213.
14. The painstaking description of God's Presence abandoning Jerusalem inspired one Midrash to depict God as crying and kissing the Temple as He left: "R. Aḥa said: The Shekhinah may be likened to a king who left his palace in anger. After going out, he came back and embraced and kissed the walls of the palace and its pillars, weeping and exclaiming, 'O the peace of my palace, O the peace of my royal residence, O the peace of my beloved house! O peace, from now onward let there be peace!' Similarly when the Shekhinah went forth from the Temple, it returned and embraced and kissed its walls and pillars, and wept and said, 'O the peace of the Temple, O the peace of My royal residence, O the peace of My beloved house! O peace, from now onward let there be peace!'" (*Lam. Rabbah Petihta* 25). While this midrashic reading extends far beyond the biblical text, it poignantly captures the overall spirit of the book.
15. Although the primary prophecies of redemption leave the purification process to God, Ezekiel elsewhere states that some aspects of redemption are contingent on Israel's behavior (18:31-32; 43:10-11). While this remained the idealized vision of Ezekiel, the primary prophecies of redemption assume that Israel would not repent until after God redeems them. For an analysis of the tension between the deterministic and anti-deterministic tendencies in the Book of Ezekiel,

see Y. Hoffmann, "Free Choice and Decree in the Book of Ezekiel" (Hebrew), in *Hagut ba-Mikra* vol. 2, ed. M. Hovav (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1973), pp. 79-89.

16. See e.g., Rambam *Hil. Melakhim* 12:2, who takes for granted that the war of Gog is an earlier stage of the redemption. See also Y. Moskowitz (*Da'at Mikra: Ezekiel*, p. 302) for a list of ag-gadic sources that similarly place the war of Gog before the final redemption.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ 2011

January	Song of Songs	1 – 8
	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 5
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 12
February	Esther	1 – 10
	Daniel	1 – 12
	Ezra	1 – 6
March	Ezra	7 – 10
	Nehemiah	1 – 13
	I Chronicles	1 – 11
April	I Chronicles	12 – 29
	II Chronicles	1 – 15
May	II Chronicles	16 – 36
	Genesis	1 – 8

