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# 1

## YAHWEH'S COMMISSION OF EZEKIEL

1:1—3:27

### SUMMARY

To present a divine message, it is necessary for the messenger to understand the nature of God and His divine perspectives. Thus God revealed His glory to Ezekiel through a vision (1:1-28a) so that Ezekiel might thoroughly grasp the holiness, power, and wonder of a just, loving, and covenant God who was about to exhibit His faithfulness to His covenants with Israel through judgment and blessing. The Mosaic covenant was a conditional covenant. If the nation of Israel obeyed the stipulations of this treaty, she would appropriate the blessings of Yahweh, which were intimately connected to the possession of the land of Canaan and its fruitfulness. On the contrary, if the people disobeyed this Law, they would experience the cursing of God which would be manifested by their expulsion from Canaan and the desolation of the land (cf. Deu 27-28).

Ezekiel, a priest, knew the Law well. He also understood the condition of Israel; she had continually broken the Mosaic covenant. God had already begun to exercise His covenant judgment by removing Judah from Palestine through the Babylonian deportations in 605 and 597 B.C. Ezekiel was carried to Babylon in 597 B.C. The final destruction of Jerusalem and Judah could not be far off. It would be Ezekiel's task to announce it to the captives in Babylon. In order that he might be reminded that this was God's purpose and that He was just and righteous in exercising this discipline upon Israel, God revealed Himself in all His covenant glory to Ezekiel through a vision of symbols.

Having seen the glory of the covenant God, Ezekiel could more easily receive His commission. Yahweh charged him to go to the "house of Israel," the exiles who were already in captivity. These exiles, he was warned, would not be amenable to his message, for they were stubborn and impudent rebels against God, as had been the character of Israel from her inception. Though they would not want to listen, still Ezekiel must speak God's message, a task that would only be possible as he spoke in the authority of God. Then Israel would know that a prophet had been in her midst (1:28b—2:5).

Man is always concerned about how other men will react to his actions and words. Ezekiel was no exception. After all, had not God just declared that Israel would rebel and close her ears to the message he would deliver? Undoubtedly a quiver of fearful reticence and dismay pricked Ezekiel's heart. But God, knowing the natural resistance of man to the things of God, anticipated these anxieties by encouraging Ezekiel not to fear or to be dismayed, regardless of the hindrance and discomfort which might arise from opposition in Israel. He was exhorted to speak God's words, whether they wanted to listen or not (2:6-7).

God promised to give Ezekiel His words, for God never leaves His messenger without a message. But at the same time it was imperative that Ezekiel first hear and assimilate God's words, not his own. "Do not rebel against My word as Israel did," warns Yahweh, "but go and speak that which you receive from Me and thoroughly understand, a message of judgment" (see 2:8—3:3).

*But, thinks Ezekiel, they will not like that kind of message.* God agreed by stating that it would be easier to learn a foreign language and deliver this message to that foreign nation than to penetrate the stubborn deafness of Israel (3:4-7).

God, however, always equips His spokesman for the task to which He calls him. He gave Ezekiel the exact equipment which he would need to meet this challenge: a head that was harder than Israel's in order that he might be able to stand adamantly (3:8-11).

This was enough instruction for Ezekiel to meditate upon in one session. God did not overwhelm him with the entire commission in one sitting, but spread it out over a period of time. Therefore, this initial vision closes as the hand of Yahweh took him to Tel-Abib, the

major settlement of the exiles. There, as Ezekiel mused on the vision, he had feelings of distress and anguish over announcing judgment upon his own people. However, he also had begun to sense the holiness and righteous anger of God. All of this caused him to sit overwhelmed, silently meditating on the task before him and consecrating himself to it. He, of all people, had to uphold God's covenant with Israel, and live and minister in light of it (3:12-15).

Having permitted Ezekiel the time to mull over His initial charge, Yahweh then spelled out his role more specifically. "Ezekiel," He said, "you know how a watchman of a city has the responsibility to warn its inhabitants of any impending danger from the external invasion of an enemy or internal riot or fire. You, too, will be a watchman, not to a city, but rather to a nation—Israel. You must warn them of the impending judgment of God which is on the horizon. If you warn them, and if they respond and turn to Me, they shall live. If you warn them, and they do not repent and therefore die, at least you have been responsible to your job. But if you fail to alert them of the coming judgment and they die as a result, you have committed murder and will be held responsible for the whole nation" (see 3:16-21).

Ezekiel was then led out on the plain to receive the last portion of his commission. Having reminded Ezekiel a second time that this was the work and charge of God through the vision of His glory, God announced the unique manner in which Ezekiel was to carry out his role as a watchman. He was to withdraw from the life of the exiles, obsessed with the impending judgment on Judah. Yahweh would cause Ezekiel to be dumb, except when He opened Ezekiel's mouth to proclaim God's messages (3:22-27).

#### THE VISION OF THE GLORY OF GOD

(1:1—2:2)

Symbolic dream-visions were common to the seventh and sixth century B.C. Mesopotamian culture in which the Israelite exiles found themselves.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising therefore that God chose to reveal many of His messages during the captivity through this literary form, for the

1. A. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*, pp. 179-373.

Israelites most certainly were familiar with it. These dream visions contained two basic sections: (1) the setting of the vision, and (2) the vision proper.

The vision in chapter 1 of Ezekiel follows this pattern. The setting is given in the first three verses, with the usual information of date, place, recipient, and attending circumstances. The date is stated in two ways. First, it is the thirtieth year of Ezekiel's life. An Old Testament priest began his public ministry at the age of thirty (Num 4:23, 30, 39, 43), and Ezekiel was a priest (Eze 1:3). Second, the thirtieth year of Ezekiel's life was also the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin from Jerusalem (2 Ki 24:10-16). Ezekiel was taken to Babylon in that deportation, and the events of his prophecy are all dated from that deportation of 597 B.C. (cf. Eze 40:1). This would specify the date of this vision as 593 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

The place where this vision was received was among the exiles on the river Chebar, a navigable canal of the Euphrates flowing southeast from Babylon in the land of Chaldea.

The recipient, Ezekiel, was the son of Buzi, of whom we know nothing. Ezekiel was declared to be a priest, which is extremely significant to the interpretation of this prophecy. He would look at Israel from a priestly perspective, and this, in turn, will constantly force the reader to turn back to the Mosaic covenant with its liturgical and priestly duties (Ex 20 through Deu).

The only attending circumstance mentioned in this setting is the hand of the Lord upon Ezekiel, demonstrating that the forthcoming vision is uniquely wrapped up in the purposes and work of God for Ezekiel.

The vision itself is recounted in 1:4-28*a*. The interpretations of this vision have often been fanciful, subjective, and confusing. Interpreters have become so engrossed in distinguishing and identifying details of the vision that they have often overlooked its major significance. Divine interpretations are given normally as an inherent part of the dream vision. Thus, it would seem prudent to follow the divine interpretation when it is given. Likewise, one should observe that the divine interpreta-

2. Cf. above in Introduction.

tions usually center on the major import of the vision rather than on details.<sup>3</sup>

When these basic interpretive principles are applied to the vision at hand, it immediately becomes obvious that the point of this vision is not as difficult as some have thought it to be; it portrays the "visions of God" (1:1) and "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (1:28). This, therefore, is a vision of the glory of God, a concept further supported by parallel passages within this book. In 3:12, 23-24 (still part of Ezekiel's commission), he recounted that he once again saw the glory of Yahweh, the same glory which he saw previously on the river Chebar when Yahweh spoke to him. Ezekiel mentioned this again when he saw a similar vision in 8:2-4; 10:1-2, 15-20; and 43:2-4. He was seeing again the vision of God's glory, the glory that appeared in the Holy of Holies of the Temple (Ex 25:15-18; 29:42-46; 40:34-38).

The dream-vision style of Mesopotamia described the recipient recounting exactly what he saw in the vision, often coupled with the "divine" interpretation. Ezekiel followed this pattern. The vision as a whole was perceived as a violent electrical storm from the north. Within the storm he observed two major objects: (1) four living creatures with attending wheels, and (2) one like a man enthroned upon an expanse stretching over the heads of the four living creatures.

Each of the four living creatures (1:4-14) had the likeness and the general appearance of a man within the bright glow of sparkling burnished bronze, lightning, and torches (1:4, 5, 7, 13, 14). Each creature had four faces (that of a man, lion, ox or cherub, and eagle), with the man's face being most prominent (cf. 1:6-10; 10:14, 22). The living being had four wings, two joined together and two covering the body (1:9, 11, 23). The wings had a sound like the voice of God when they flapped. Each living being had a man's hands under his wings, and straight legs with calf's soles. A high, frightful, whirling wheel, sparkling like a precious stone and full of eyes on its rim, stood next to each creature (cf. 10:2). The arrangement of the four wheels caused them

3. Ralph H. Alexander, "Hermeneutics of Old Testament Apocalyptic Literature" (Doctoral diss., Dept. of Semitics and O. T., Dallas Theol. Sem., 1968), p. 161.

to appear as if each wheel had a wheel in it. The movement of the living creatures and their wheels was coordinated. Together they moved as the spirit of the living creature directed (cf. 1:9, 12, 14, 17, 19-21). Coals of fire lay between these four living creatures (cf. 10:2, 7).

These living creatures were later identified by Ezekiel in chapter 10 as cherubim (cf. 10:20). Many argue that these cherubim formed a throne chariot upon which the glory of God rode (cf. Ps 18:10). There appears to be some substantiation of this in 1 Chronicles 28:18. Ezekiel, a priest, would be acquainted from his Temple training with cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant and those worked into the design of the veil (Ex 25:18-22; 26:31). Normally cherubim accompanied the manifestation of the glory of God. To say any more than that seems to be risky and speculative, since the divine interpreter does not do so. The cherubim are seemingly angelic creatures who escort the holiness and righteousness of God's glory.

The second major aspect of this vision of God's glory involved a "firmament" or "expanse" with the appearance of sparkling ice upon which there was a similitude of a throne with the likeness of a sapphire stone. The likeness of a man, sparkling like amber and possessing the appearance of the brightness of a burning fire and a rainbow, was seated upon this throne. He is declared to be the appearance of the glory of God (Eze 1:28), speaking with a great rumbling voice.

This vision, therefore, represented the majestic and awesome glory of God, a picture similar to that which was given at the very beginning of the nation (cf. Ex 19 and 24) and which continued to represent Yahweh even in Ezekiel's day. How appropriate that the same manifestation of God that occurred at the giving of the Mosaic covenant should appear when He executed the judgments and promises of that covenant to the people with whom the covenant was made. Certainly there are variations in the picture of God's glory throughout the Old Testament, yet that should not be a concern because God's glory has no limitations. One should not expect the theophanies of God always to be identical. Yet the similarity of the basic figure of God's glory pervades not only the Old Testament but also finds its likeness in the Revelation to John (Rev 4). Surely this common manifestation is to facilitate the ease with which the student of Scripture might be able to recognize the appearance

of the glory of God throughout the Bible. Because of His holiness and righteousness, this glorious God must execute His promised judgment and discipline upon rebellious Israel.

This concept of the glory of God played a most important role in the whole thrust of Ezekiel's prophecy. God's glory began the message, showing the glorious God of judgment. God's glory was to reside in the Temple; but because of the discipline of Israel at that time through the Babylonian captivity, the glory of God would leave the Temple, Jerusalem, and Israel (cf. 8:8; 9:3; 10:4, 18, 19; 11:22-23). The glory of God will not return to the land of Canaan until God Himself restores Israel to the land in that ultimate time of blessing, the Millennium (cf. chaps. 43-44), when Jerusalem and the new Temple are rebuilt. This, therefore, provides the basic scheme of Ezekiel's message. It is from a priestly perspective. The glory of God which was over the cherubim in the Holy of Holies would leave because of judgment upon Israel, but it will return to its rightful place in the future restoration of Israel, according to the promises of the Mosaic covenant. Seeing God's glory, Ezekiel fell prostrate before God, as Israel should have done.

#### RECIPIENTS OF EZEKIEL'S MESSAGE

(2:3—3:14)

Those who were to hear the message of Ezekiel were the "children of Israel" (2:3), referred to literally in the Hebrew as "nations." One might immediately wonder how the nation of Israel could be referred to as nations, in the plural. This is more readily understood when the historical background is explained. With the death of Solomon (*c.* 931 B.C.) the nation of Israel split into two nations: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. With the deportation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 B.C., the Southern Kingdom gradually became known again by the term Israel as well as by the name Judah. However, the reunion of the twelve tribes, or the two nations of Israel and Judah, began, it appears, in Babylon. This is what Ezekiel meant in reference to "nations" in the plural when speaking of the children of Israel in exile. The full and complete reunion of the two nations will take place in the final restoration of the end times (cf. 35:10; 36:13-15; 37:22).



The very use of the word "nation" pictures Israel as being regarded by God from the outside, rather than looking upon her more intimately as His "people" (cf. Ex 19:3-6; Deu 7:6-7). In no way, however, was God referring to His people as He would to Gentiles (*goyim*, Heb.), but He was making it clear that they were not acting like His covenant people.

The most frequently used phrase to describe the character of Ezekiel's audience is "a rebellious house." Nine times in Yahweh's commission to Ezekiel some form of the word "rebel" is used to depict Israel. The term implies bold and audacious acts of rebellion against Yahweh (2:3; 3:7). It manifests itself in the obstinance and impudence of these people. They were "hard-faced" and "strong-hearted," phrases employed to portray their stubborn, determined opposition to Yahweh and His message. They would refuse to listen to Yahweh (3:7) or Ezekiel, His messenger (2:5; 3:7, 11). Instead they would "prick" and "sting" Ezekiel like scorpions (2:6). They transgressed against Yahweh by refusing to subject themselves to His rightful authority as revealed in the Mosaic covenant. It would have been easier for Ezekiel to learn a foreign language and proclaim his message to a foreign people than to break through the obstinance of Israel (3:4-7).

This is a significant description of Israel, for here God set forth the reason for the judgment which Ezekiel would announce upon this people. *They had rebelled against God and broken His covenant.* This was not a recent development. It had been a characteristic of Israel from her birth (cf. 2:3 with Num 17:10; Deu 31:24-29; Pr 17:11; Is 30:8-14). Now the promise of discipline had arrived (Deu 29-30).

#### EZEKIEL'S CHARGE

(3:15-27)

God called Ezekiel to be a watchman to the house of Israel to warn them of the coming judgment (3:15-21). A watchman's task involved keeping a vigilant eye upon the horizon and upon the city itself to observe any dangers which might come to the town, whether from the enemy outside or from fire, riot, or disturbance within (cf. 2 Sa 18:24-27; 2 Ki 9:17-20). Ezekiel's main task as a watchman was to announce the imminent judgment of God upon Judah and Jerusalem, which was on the horizon. Just as the watchman of a city is liable when he fails to

warn its inhabitants, so Ezekiel would be responsible if he failed to warn Israel. If he warned the wicked one of the house of Israel that he would die, or the righteous one who turned from his righteousness that he would die, and they did not turn from their ways, and therefore died, Ezekiel had fulfilled his duty and was innocent of their death.

On the contrary, if he failed to warn the righteous or the wicked so that they likewise died, but without warning, then Ezekiel would be responsible for the spilling of their blood, and he would die ("their blood required at his hand"; cf. 2 Sa 4:5-12; Judg 9:24; and Eze 18, 33). The seriousness of his mission was clear. The false prophets who failed in their responsibility to warn Israel, but rather said "Peace" when there was no peace, suffered the consequences of God's judgment of death (cf. 13:1-23; 14:9-11).

Some have looked to this passage for support against the eternal security of the believer. The "righteous" man, they say, can turn from his righteousness and die an eternal death. It is necessary, however, that the reader understand the context of Ezekiel's writing and the usage of the term "righteous" in the Old Testament. Israel was supposed to *do* the righteousness contained in the principles of the Mosaic covenant (cf. Deu 16:20; 1 Sa 24:17; 1 Ki 8:32; Ho 14:9; Ps 119:7, 106, 121, 144, 160, 172; Is 58:2). To do all the stipulations of the Law was to be righteous and thereby to *live* in the land of promise (cf. Deu 6:25; 16:20). The Mosaic covenant pointed one to the Messiah and set forth a way of life for the believer in the Messiah through its commandments, but just the following of these commandments alone never gave anyone eternal life. Eternal righteousness and salvation are only by faith—a message proclaimed throughout the *entire* Scriptures. The "righteous" in this section was the believer in the Messiah who had been righteous in his following of the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant, but then turned from them. Ezekiel announced the judgment of God upon the nation of Israel because she had failed to keep the Mosaic covenant and thereby act righteously.

Ezekiel's message to the house of Israel may be concisely summarized as a warning of judgment, at least in the first twenty-four chapters of this book. It would consist of dirges, moanings, and lamentations (2:10) as well as a warning to listen and cease from iniquity (3:27). This

was Yahweh's message and was to be communicated with God's authority (2:2-5, 7; 3:27). Ezekiel himself was cautioned not to rebel against the Lord's message as Israel would, but rather to hear it, accept it, and, having thoroughly understood it, to proclaim it whether or not Israel wanted to hear it (2:7—3:3, 10). By being required to eat the scroll upon which God's message was written, Ezekiel was demonstrating his acceptance of that message without alteration, as well as the necessity to completely assimilate God's message first before proclaiming it to His people. Even though it was a message of woe, because it was God's message, it was as sweet as honey (3:3).

God's statement to Ezekiel in 3:24-27 initially appears contradictory to the charge to warn the nation. How could Ezekiel be dumb, bound in his home, and not be a reprover to Israel if he was to be their watchman? Two items are involved: (1) the rejection he would receive from the exiles, and (2) the manner of his ministry as revealed by God. Verse 25 makes it very clear that the ones who would bind him and thereby cause him to be shut up in his home away from the people are "they," contextually the Jewish exiles. Verses 26-27 then declare that God would still work in this situation to use him in a unique way as a watchman.

Numerous explanations have been created to explain the prophet's dumbness. According to the rest of the prophecy, Ezekiel remained dumb for seven and one half years until the fall of Jerusalem (cf. 33:22). Yet, between chapters 3 and 33 Ezekiel uttered many messages (cf. 11:25; 14:1; 20:1). The solution lies in an understanding of his dumbness. When Ezekiel's total ministry is examined, the student sees that he never ministered in the streets and assemblies of the people as other prophets did. The normal prophet moved among his people, reacting to the issues of his day right on the spot. Not Ezekiel. He ministered through a strange immobility. The elders and people came to him to inquire from the Lord (cf. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:30-33), and then he spoke only when the Lord opened his mouth to proclaim, "Thus says the Lord GOD [Yahweh]." In other words, these verses declare that Ezekiel would spend the seven and one-half years until the fall of Jerusalem (cf. 33:22) withdrawn from the community of the exiles and muted by God except to announce the warnings of God's judgments, which God would enable him to recite, to those who came to him. Israel initially rejected

him, but later the elders of Israel sneaked away to the prophet to inquire of God's workings. Thus he would not be a direct reprover to the whole nation.

#### ENCOURAGEMENT AND PREPARATION

It is God who always sends forth His spokesmen (2:3). When Ezekiel fell prostrate before the Almighty God, or when he had to stand before men, it was the Spirit of God who enabled him, and the hand of Yahweh which strengthened and consoled him when the anguish of his task became too great (1:3; 2:4; 3:12-14, 22-23). God never sends forth His servant without the necessary equipment for the mission. God told Ezekiel that He would give him a hard head and face, harder than that of rebellious Israel, to enable him to stand against her obstinance and stubbornness (3:8-9). As a result, there would be no need for Ezekiel to fear the people or their words, though they would continue to prick him and sting him like scorpions (2:6). Neither would he need to be dismayed and give up when he stood before them and they rebelled (2:6). "God will strengthen" Ezekiel (the meaning of his name).