Ezekiel: Responses to Questions

*My question is not specifically about Ezekiel but about my observations regarding the prophetic literature we have read to date. I am overwhelmed by the sobering nature of the judgments and destruction God brings upon Israel and Judah. How is it that so much of this material was adopted by Israel as Scripture despite the fact that it chronicles Israel’s constant failure to follow God? Of course, I know the judgment/destruction enhances the resulting revitalization of Israel but how did these books survive until this became apparent to the Israelites? I am guessing the short answer is that God watched over the process of composition and protection of His words (inspiration and canonization). I can accept that. But is there more that is helpful to understanding this issue?*

\*\*Do you mean it is odd for people to preserve declarations of judgment against themselves? I imagine the reason is that the prophets were proved right. In a strange way, they provide comfort in the context of an event such as the fall of Jerusalem, because they show why it happened and thus encourage people to take seriously the same prophets’ promises that this is not the end. I presume that in the short term it was the few people who did take the prophets seriously who preserved their words until the time they were vindicated (see Isa 8:16-18, also Jer 36)

*Did he have these bizarre experiences or did he make them up? What do scholars think?*

\*\*I don’t see reason to question the bizarre experiences. I don’t think what scholars think about it is any more plausible tha what you might think…

*How would his prophecy have reached Jerusalem?*

\*\*Jeremiah suggests there was correspondence and movement between the two, but maybe they wouldn’t get back there until Judahites returned beginning in 537. But do you imply that they were meant for the Jerusalemites? Actually they were meant for the Judahites in Babylon, so that they knew what was going to happen to their city, with its implications for these hearers themselves.

*What’s the significance of the fact that much of the imagery and language reappears in apocalypses including Revelation?*

\*\*That Ezekiel is more or less the beginning of this way of picturing things. Revelation in particular is inspired by Ezekiel, among other OT books.

*I: Can God’s glory appear in this way, or is this idea just Ezekiel? Why the stress on the wheels?*

\*\*The idea comes only in Ezekiel, but I assume that it really happened. The wheels mean the limo can go in any direction. But the extraordinary nature of this vision led to the Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1) requiring that people should read it only under the supervision of a scholar (and there’s a nice story in the Talmud (Hagigah 14b) about not reading it when you are sitting on a donkey).

*2: Why does God address Ezekiel as “mortal” here and throughout the book?*

\*\*That’s just NRSV, and it’s misleading. The Hebrew is literally “son of man,” which is a way of saying “mere human being” (compare Psalm 8).

*3:14: What’s the bitterness?*

\*\*The things that the scroll speaks of are tough and hard in what they will mean for the people.

*3:18-20; 33:6-8: So does failure to spread the gospel put blood on our hands?*

\*\*It would be wise to assume so. But Ezekiel is talking about speaking to God’s people, so it might raise a question about a preacher’s ministry in the church. Compare 1 Cor 3.

*4: Ezekiel is told to lie down for 390 days, which refers to the length of the first siege? But what is the correlating 390 year punishment in 4:5? In 4:6, Ezekiel lies down a second time—40 days—and there also mention that the house of Judah will be punished for 40 years. Do the days refer to the length of the siege, and do the years look backward to a significant point of departure in Israel’s past? This is Calvin’s interpretation, is there a better one? And did Ezekiel literally do it?*

\*\*The 390 years might make the audience think first of the whole history of the temple, then when Ezekiel goes on to refer to Judah as opposed to Ephraim it might make them also think of the whole history of Ephraim’s independent existence (periods which actually began about 970 and 930, though such knowledge on their part could not be presumed). Both are long years of guilt and liability to punishment (‘awon covers wrongdoing, guilt, and punishment). Ephraim’s years of actual punishment might be seen as beginning with the state’s subservience and fall between 733 and 721; thus LXX reads 190 years here. The imminent 40 years for Judah takes up a standard symbolic/round figure. There may also be a symbolism about the 390 years, for 390 and 40 add up to the 430 years of Egyptian oppression (Exod 12:40-41). It is characteristic of biblical numbers to reflect resonances such as this at least as much as to imply precise historical calculation.

Neither figure should thus be pressed chronologically. Both will end at the same time, when both peoples are restored (cf. ch. 37), though in Ezekiel’s dramatization they were dramatized separately (4:6). The effectiveness of the drama does not require his literally lying on his side for the whole of 390 days. In a film or play, dramatic time and real time do not coincide, and we have ways of conveying the faster passage of the former. The focus remains the threatened siege of Jerusalem which will end the 390/190 years and begin the 40 years; that is the central topic.

*4:9-15: What does it say about the commandments if God can suspend them for his own purposes? Does God do it often?*

\*\*I don’t think he is suspending a commandment—there’s no commandment about that. But it does show you can try to negotiate with God about anything. The differences between the sets of instructions within the Torah show that God often changes the rules. But the spectacular example is in Acts 10.

*5:10: Children and parents eat each other?*

\*\*Presumably their dead bodies. Cf. Lamentations. It’s the result of the terrible deprivation of a siege.

*8:14-15: What’s this about, and why is it detestable?*

\*\*In Mesopotamian stories, the god Tammuz dies in the withering hot summer (as nature dies). So these are people grieving over the death of nature and taking part in prayer to deities other than Yahweh for the renewal of the world’s life.

*18: So now Yahweh is judging individuals not generations?*

\*\*It doesn’t focus on individual persons but on individual generations—it’s saying that the present generation neither need not nor may not say that it’s hopeless for them to turn back to Yahweh because he is punishing them for the previous generation’s sin. They can turn back, and Yahweh respond. There’s nothing new about that idea—he’s needing to correct a misunderstanding of the implications of the fact that one generation’s sin does affect the next.

*18:6: What’s wrong with intercourse during menstruation?*

\*\*It’s forbidden by Lev 15 and 18. I think the best theory is that it’s related to a reverence for blood and a sense that menstrual blood is a mystery and rather awe-inspiring—losing blood is a sign of death, yet menstrual blood is a sign of being able to give birth to new life.

*33:15-16: If God can forgive sins here, why did Jesus need to come?*

\*\*Jesus’ work operates backwards as well as forwards. He pays the price for sin that has preceded as well as what will follow. Another way to put it would be to say that God has been paying the price for Israel’s sin all through its story; Jesus is the climax of that story. If God hadn’t been the kind of God who would give himself in the way he did in Jesus, he wouldn’t have been forgiving Israel.

*34: Is this a prophecy about Jesus?*

\*\*It’s a promise that God will see to the shepherding of his people, through a son of David. Jesus is God’s way of fulfilling that promise.

*36—37: Is this about the church or Israel?*

\*\*Ezekiel is explicit that it’s about Israel. But when Gentiles are grafted or adopted into Israel, it can come to apply to that Jewish-Gentile body, the church.

*36:32: “Not for your sake”?*

\*\*That is, the thing that matters more is Yahweh’s own reputation.

*37: What do the bones symbolize?*

\*\*In the vision, the bones are the remains of an army. They stand for the Israelite people, which is as good as dead (see v. 11).

*40—48: Will a new temple be built along these lines?*

\*\*There are people who plan to build it; the action would likely provoke the Third World War. But much of the chapters requires geophysical transformation, which suggests it’s a vision of something that God intends (not necessarily literally) not a set of architect’s drawings.