PRIEST AND PROPHET:
RECONCILING THE TWO HALVES OF EZEKIEL

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Introduction

The priestly character of Ezekiel stands out from the rest of the classical prophets and commentators often refer to the difficulty Ezekiel had in reconciling the two halves of his life—priest and prophet. “Two spheres intersect in the person of Ezekiel, the life of the priest and that of the prophet, so his life is filled with strain and tension between the tradition he inherited and the demands of his call to be a prophet.”¹ The priestly prophet, however, is a more complex literary character than he might seem upon a first reading, and contemporary scholarship has been more comfortable in grappling with Ezekiel’s two halves with less of a concern in trying to identify him as primarily a priest or prophet. Rather, the way in which his priestly background coloured his experience of his call to prophecy has become a more dominant topic. Through this lens, the various points in Ezekiel’s call and career have been reevaluated. In the same way, Ezekiel makes use multiple images that further connect his roles of priest and prophet, including the age of his prophetic call, the length of his career, and his role as watchman over the people. Ezekiel’s life in exile, living without a temple in which to practice his priestly vocation, may have forced him to eschew the role of priest for that of prophet, but his entire prophetic experience is expressed in the only language he knew—that of the priesthood.

Defining Priest and Prophet

Because this paper is concerned with how Ezekiel fits into the dual roles of priest and prophet, a working definition for both terms must be established before moving forward. In the strictest sense, a priest is any person who performs a ritual sacrifice; but in ancient Israel the priests of the Jerusalem temple were also responsible for guarding the sanctuary, dispensing

oracles, teaching and instruction of the Torah, as well as the cultic duties surrounding sacrifices during the high festivals. In addition, the priests mediated the people’s always-necessary encounters with God, for which cultivating and managing a proper ritual purity was a central component. “In a sense, [priests] are mediators of the covenant. The High Priest, bearing the names of the twelve tribes on his breastplate, represents as it were the entire nation. . . . The holiness worship demands is symbolized in the priesthood. . . .”

The priest’s function as the national representative before God takes on an important function when sacrifices are offered. Not only does the priest oversee the proper performance of the sacrifice, but in eating the offered meat, he takes on the guilt or iniquity of the person (or community) offering the sacrifice, thereby absolving it. Moreover, the priests cared for the innocent and homeless by providing sanctuary, and by lending money to the indebted. Thus, the priest was responsible for multiple actions in his daily routine, several of which attend to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the Israelite community.

In contrast to the priest, prophets were understood as “mediator[s] of divine words” who carried out two main functions: intercession with God on behalf of the people, and to uphold law and justice through the proclamation of divinely received oracles. Prophets could be either professionally employed by the court, such as Nathan in 2 Samuel; ecstatic, like the band of

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6 Patton, 723.
prophets in 1Sam 10:10; and prophets who were called by God for life, such as Elijah. However, the classical prophets, including Ezekiel, fit into a fourth category: those called specifically in times of crisis.9 Like the priest, however, the prophets were often responsible for the wellbeing of the people by ensuring that the divine message had been properly conveyed, and though many prophetic oracles of the Hebrew Bible suggest that the prophets were uninterested in the continuation of the cult, the truth is less simple. Rather than arguing for the abolition of the cult, the prophets were concerned with the “true performance” of it.10

**Ezekiel as Priest**

Having addressed the duties of priests and prophets in ancient Israel, it is now possible to look at how Ezekiel functioned in both these roles. That Ezekiel was a priest has not been questioned, though the notice of his profession (in the third person) in Ezek 1:2–3 is the obvious addition of a later editor. However, “even if this . . . is secondary, it does not contradict the portrayal of Ezekiel in the rest of the book. . . . One cannot simply remove the few references to the priesthood in the text and have some sort of classical prophet.”11 The character of Ezekiel is simply too priestly to allow for that.

Much of what ties Ezekiel to the priesthood is his use of the Priestly (P) and Holiness (H) traditions found in Leviticus, though his use of these traditions should not lead to the conclusion that Ezekiel had access to any sort of P or H document. Rather, the opposite should be inferred. While the law code of Ezekiel 40–48 does indeed share much in common with P, “including like terminology and turns of expression”—a correlation that cannot be found elsewhere within the

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9 Patton, 713.
10 Baltzer, 578.
11 Patton, 717.
collection of the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of the Books of Chronicles)\textsuperscript{12}—the two law collections disagree on almost all of their constituent details. Though both feature the centrality of the tabernacle or temple, “Ezekiel’s temple differs very much from that of P, not only in its solid structure and architectural complexity, but also in that there are virtually no traces in it of all those appurtenances that furnish P’s tabernacle and are the subject of cultic sanctity.”\textsuperscript{13}

Likewise, both Ezekiel and P propound a hereditary priesthood from within one tribe, but they do not agree on which group it is to be—either the descendants of Aaron for P, or the descendants of Zadok for Ezekiel. These points, along with Ezekiel’s focus on centralization of the cult, put it more in line with Deuteronomistic theology, and suggest that the authors of P and Ezekiel, though coming from a shared tradition, could not have been aware of each other’s writings as they have been handed down to the present.\textsuperscript{14} “Under the impact of his training and without the presence of P, [Ezekiel] fashioned the visionary, utopian, framework of his own law code, a framework which is an alternative to P without contradicting it.”\textsuperscript{15}

The priestly quality of Ezekiel is not limited to the writing style of the legal corpus, but extends through the entirety of Ezekiel’s character. His role as watchman for the people ties in directly with the way in which a priest was responsible for the wellbeing of the community. In Ezek 3:17, God says to him, “O mortal, I appoint you watchman for the House of Israel; and when you hear a word from My mouth, you must warn them for Me” (JPS Tanakh).

Commentators often compare this new role to Ezekiel’s former one as priest. “This function corresponds to the fundamental responsibility of the priesthood to teach God’s requirements to


\textsuperscript{13} Haran, “The Law-Code,” 61.


\textsuperscript{15} Haran, “Ezekiel,” 217.
the people so that they will maintain their holy status,”16 and it is tied to the priestly commands that they teach the people the proper understanding of the law (cf. Lev 10:10–11; Deut 33:10).17 This role is expanded on in Ezek 33:1–20, when Ezekiel is commanded to “draw a picture for his fellow countrymen showing what a watchmen is like and what he is expected to do.”18 So while Ezekiel’s role of watchman is certainly related to his calling as a prophet in that he is to “speak to [his] fellow countrymen” the words delivered to him by God (Ezek 33:2), it is also rooted in his understanding of his role as priest to properly instruct the people. Should he fail to do so, the iniquity of the people will fall on him, rendering him responsible for their guilt: “But if the watchmen sees the sword advancing and does not blow the horn, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and destroys one of them, that person was destroyed for his own sins; however, I will demand a reckoning for his blood from the watchman” (Ezek 33.2; emphasis added).

Ezekiel’s priestly nature is expressed in other ways. As mentioned above, purity was pivotal to the proper practice of the priestly profession. But it was also crucial to Ezekiel’s understanding of his own prophetic calling. In 4:12, Ezekiel is commanded to eat a barley cake baked on human excrement, but Ezekiel objects (Ezek 4:14). And though, Ezekiel never specifically mentions the human excrement as the source of his concern, God’s reply in 4:15—“See, I allow you cow’s dung instead of human excrement; prepare your bread on that”—makes this clear. “Only a priest of some rank would have would have kept such strict purity observation,”19 and God’s provision for Ezekiel allows Ezekiel “to function effectively as divine messenger, in spite of his qualms and limitations.”20

18 Eichrodt, 442.
19 Patton, 718.
20 D. Nathan Phinney, “The Prophetic Objection in Ezekiel IV and its Relation to Ezekiel’s Call,” Vetus
Ezekiel’s concern for ritual purity also extends to blood. The oracle found in 22:1–16 is filled with the image of blood as Ezekiel “arraign[s]” Jerusalem, “the city of bloodshed” and “all her abhorrent deeds.” This preoccupation of blood stems from two sources: Gen 9:4–5, a P passage prohibiting the consumption of blood; and Leviticus 17, also P, which deals with the proper treatment of blood in the sacrificial setting. The former “shows how closely in priestly thinking crimes of blood, the sins of social oppression, and ritual disorder come together, which the modern mind holds apart.”21 The entirely of the oracle is “set under the viewpoint of sacral law. . . . In H, an offense against the correct method of sacrifice can be designated as bloodguilt.”22 For Ezekiel then, the bloodguilt of the city of Jerusalem was intrinsically tied to his understanding of proper sacrifice. Moreover, Ezekiel was likely concerned that the Israelites in his midst were consuming blood in their meals “on the mountains” (Ezek 18:10–13; 22:9), committing a purity violation for which he, as a priest, would have felt responsible.

Two final items further cement Ezekiel’s priestly character. The first concerns the scroll in his initial call from 3:1–3. In the same way that the priests took on the guilt of the people by eating sin offerings, Ezekiel consumed the people’s judgment written on the scroll, taking it on himself—the scroll has replaced the priestly breastplate as a symbol for the community.23 The second is the idea that the book is framed around the twenty-year timespan of a priest’s career. Though far from certain, commentators have often conjectured that the reference to the “thirtieth year” in Ezek 1:1 refers to the author’s age.24 According to Num 4:3, 23, and 30, priests in ancient Israel began their careers at the age of thirty, and so Ezekiel’s calling to be a prophet at this age is significant. Moreover, “if Ezekiel were thirty years old in the fifth year of

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22 Ibid.
23 Odell, 244, 247.
24 Eichrodt, 52; Odell, 238.
the exile, his final vision of the temple would have occurred in his fiftieth year, the age of which Levites would retire from service.”25 Thus, the entire book is framed around the priestly career, the significance of which will be explored below.

The priestly expression of the book of Ezekiel is thanks to Ezekiel’s training as a priest—the character of Ezekiel was intimately involved with the priestly profession, even though his formal work was not able to begin before the exile. “The unparalleled nature of Ezekiel’s prophecy manifests itself especially in his being a priest, . . . decidedly, in his ideological trend.”26 His role as watchman for the people of Israel, to watch over and properly instruct the community, mirrors the priestly role; his concern for ritual purity is directly related to the P and H codes found in the book of Leviticus; his consumption of the scroll mimics the consumption of atonement offerings for absolving guilt; and the book is framed in such a way as to present Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry within a priestly framework. Ezekiel’s background as a priest is central to his ideology and behaviour.

**Ezekiel as Prophet**

Despite Ezekiel’s priestly demeanour, the book never actually depicts him as doing anything “particularly priestly. He does not sacrifice, maintain a ritual calendar, or make decisions of purity or cleanness for his community.”27 Rather, throughout the book he is shown to be functioning more as a prophet than a priest, despite the fact his place in the social hierarchy is due to his position as a priest.28 Several factors contribute to Ezekiel being understood in this prophetic fashion.

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27. Patton, 718.
28. Ibid., 713.
One of the most striking parts of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry is his calling in chapter 1, and the vision that accompanied it. Prophecy is often associated with a visionary experience which the prophet cannot refuse;29 and like Isaiah, Ezekiel sees an image of the divine throne room so spectacular that he is unable to fully grasp it (Ezek 1:26–28). Unlike Isaiah, however, Ezekiel does not go through a purification ritual and, perhaps more importantly, he does not clearly protest his calling, as did the prophets before him (e.g. Exod 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10; Is 6:5; Jer 1:6.) Prophetic calls typically involve six elements: 1) divine confrontation, 2) the introductory word, 3) a commission, 4) an objection, 5) a reassurance, and 6) a sign. These elements serve to “legitimate the prophet’s enterprise with the listening/reading populace.”30 The omission of Ezekiel’s objection could place him outside the full spectrum of prophet in the biblical literary tradition, but it has been argued that his objection to eating food cooked on human excrement functions in that manner.31

A prophetic objection consists of three main features: 1) it is brief, generally no more than a single sentence, 2) it is typically introduced by a cry of distress, and 3) it is directly related to the character being called.32 Ezekiel’s objection to eating the bread cooked on human excrement meets all three of these criteria. The objection, however, does not occur during the initial call narrative (Ezek 1:1–3:15) as might be expected. This can be remedied by combining it with the next unit of text, the symbolic actions of Ezek 3:16–5:17. 3:16 lacks any clear introductory formula to differentiate it as a new section, suggesting that the “genres of call narrative and report of symbolic actions have been combined into an extended, coherent composition that focuses on Ezekiel’s inaugural experience.”33 This position is reinforced by the fact that Ezekiel

29 Ibid., 715
31 Phinney, 76.
32 Habel, 318–19.
33 Odell, 230.
does not actually begin his prophetic mission until chapter 6, implying that everything preceding it is part of the call narrative. Using this extended prophetic call, the objection and subsequent reassurance “serves to demonstrate to his audience that Ezekiel is indeed a true prophet,” and allows the prophet to keep his pure status and serve as God’s divine messenger. In addition to the form of the call narrative, Ezekiel conforms to the literary tropes of the prophetical books in other ways. Chapters 25–32 constitute Ezekiel’s oracles against the nations, which are an “established literary genre” for the prophets; and the book makes use of multiple prophetic images, playing both on Isaiah’s call narrative in Isaiah 6, and the image of Israel as God’s wife as found in Hosea.

Yet despite these literary connections, there are several ways in which Ezekiel does not behave as a prophet in the classical sense. Ezekiel is never identified as a prophet in the text, and he is exclusively referred to as “mortal” instead of the more usual “man of God.” In this vein, he also fails to fit into any of the typical categories of prophet found elsewhere in the Bible, whether it be the professional court prophets from the Books of Kings, or the “life-long” type of Elijah. In addition, Ezekiel is much less critical of the priesthood and the cult than some of the other classical prophets—where Amos and Isaiah “loathe [and] spurn [its] festivals” (Amos 5:21; cf. Is 1:11) and speak ill of the priesthood (Is 28:7), Ezekiel “projects an idealization of the priesthood” with a new temple, in which there is no “High Priesthood as a separate grade of ritual functioning.” Nonetheless, the book focuses on God’s commanding Ezekiel to speak the words given to the prophet, which is one of the key definitions of prophetic activity. Moreover,

34 Ibid., 235.
35 Phinney, 86, 77.
37 Patton, 716; Ezek 16:32.
38 Ibid., 716.
39 Patton, 701–02.
40 Haran, 212.
Ezekiel’s function as the watchman who delivers the word of God for the instruction of the people, mentioned above, also fits within this aspect of prophetic calling; and the simple fact that God has chosen Ezekiel to deliver his word is enough to place Ezekiel within the category of prophet.

**Ezekiel as Priest and Prophet**

Thus far, Ezekiel has been seen as straddling two different worlds—that of priest and prophet. While some have argued that he fits into one category more easily than the other, a richer understanding of Ezekiel is one that sees him as both priest and prophet, rooted in the P tradition of writing, but living into his prophetic calling. “Ezekiel was a priest and a priestly scribe, with the result that when he became a prophet he wrote his prophecies in the language to which he was accustomed. This literary language is the basic bond linking his law code (as well as his prophecies) with P.”

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Ezekiel’s call to be a watchman is one example of how the prophet fits into both these categories. As a priest, Ezekiel fulfills his duty to properly instruct the people in order that they may be right before God; but as a prophet, he is no longer simply transmitting rules about ritual purity. Rather, he speaks the divine words of God to the community. This amalgamation of roles typifies Ezekiel’s experience as a prophet. In the same way, the eating of the scroll also melds Ezekiel’s two worlds into one. As a priest, he would have consumed atonement offerings to absolve the people of their guilt, but Ezekiel is now a priest in a foreign land, and without a temple. By consuming the scroll containing the judgments of God on the people, Ezekiel—by virtue of his new prophetic calling—is able to function in the priestly vocation denied to him.

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41 Ibid., 214.
42 Odell, 243.
“In this respect it is interesting to speculate on the absence of the breastplate of judgment. Ezekiel does not need to wear such a breastplate, because he has internalized the judgment by eating the scroll. What was once symbol in the priestly vestments has become a reality in exilic life. . . .”

Ezekiel also conflates his call to be a prophet with the age he would have begun his priestly ministry in Jerusalem. “One can expect that the age of thirty represented a turning point of sorts for Ezekiel. At a time when he should expect to rise to a heightened state of purity, separation, and service, he find himself among exiles, in an unclean land.” It should come as no surprise that the priest, denied his vocation, framed his new calling as a prophet in language and ideology he could more easily comprehend. This, combined with the notion that his prophesies would have ended around his fiftieth year (the age of a priest’s retirement) marks the book as a larger literary framework centered on central moments in the priest’s life.

As observed above, Ezekiel’s objection, which comes later in the call narrative, is different from that of his predecessors. Moses and Jeremiah object because they are unable to speak properly, and Isaiah objects because he is unclean and living among unclean people; but Ezekiel objects for the opposite reason: he is too pure to do what God asks—he cannot risk ritual impurity. “It is logical that while other concerns . . . about communicating the divine word might not trouble a priest already accustomed to public performance and a certain amount of leadership, commands that cause him to violate purity standards so central to his office would be a unique source of concern.” Ezekiel cannot conceive of serving God while sacrificing his long-cultivated ritual purity.

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43 Ibid., 247.
44 Ibid., 239.
45 Miller, “The ‘Thirtieth Year’ of Ezekiel 1:1.” This is central argument of Miller’s article.
46 Phinney, 83.
47 Ibid., 78.
As mentioned above, Ezek 1:1–5:17 can be viewed as one large literary unit containing the whole of Ezekiel’s call to prophecy. The second half of this unit, the symbolic acts, forms an important part of that call, as they help Ezekiel transition into his new role as prophet. Ezekiel’s objection in 4:14 is rooted in his need to maintain his ritual purity, and the fact that God provides an alternative allows Ezekiel to partake in the symbolic act of eating the bread while maintaining his pure status. Such symbolic actions provide Ezekiel with a departure from his previous life, moving him into a liminal state in the long transition from priest to prophet, properly assumed in chapter 6. This transition follows key points in the ordination process of Levitical priests. As observed above, Ezekiel’s call at the age of thirty corresponds to the beginning of priestly service. After his initial vision, Ezekiel sits alone for seven days, mimicking the seven-day isolation period at the conclusion of a priest’s ordination (Ezek 3:15b–16; Lev 8.33), and commenting on Ezekiel’s current situation.

This transitional period accomplishes two things: “first, it erases distinctive features of an older identity in order than an individual may take on a new role. Second, it reminds the individual of his or her ties to the community. . . . Ezekiel’s first act exemplifies both of these features.” When Ezekiel binds himself up in his house, he is symbolically showing that he is bound up in exile alongside his community (Ezek 3:25). But where his expected priestly function would be to help mitigate the judgment of the people, Ezekiel is struck dumb, unable to speak, thus disconnecting him from his old way of life. With each of the symbolic acts, Ezekiel gives up another aspect of his priestly identity, forcing him “to engage in explicitly anti-priestly

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48 Odell, 229.
49 Ibid., 235.
50 Ibid., 236–37.
51 Ibid., 245.
52 Ibid., 246.
behavior.” In 5:1–3 he cuts off his hair, despite the prohibition against this in Lev 21:5; and he is forced to eat the same mixed grains as the people in 4:9, despite the pure grain offering promised to him in Leviticus 3. All these acts move him further and further away from his role of priest while simultaneously drawing him closer to the exilic community until he is no longer separated from them by his priesthood.

Ezekiel’s experience is couched in priestly terminology, not because he was unable to let go of his role of priest, but because it was the only framework he had with which to properly express his new calling. The new prophet had spent his entire life preparing to serve God as a priest, and so his new, unexpected service, took on a priestly expression. The way in which the watchman motif fulfills both his priestly prophetic roles exemplifies this, as does his consumption of the scroll bearing God’s judgments on the people. His objection to eating the grain cooked on human excrement underscores the validity of his calling as the objection is part of the necessary literary form of other prophetic call narratives. Moreover the many symbolic acts further legitimizes his prophetic call by drawing him closer to his community, while at the same time highlighting the priestly life he is leaving behind. What other prophets expressed in prophetic terms, Ezekiel presents in priestly terminology, further highlighting the ambiguity between his two roles. Only by embracing this ambiguity can Ezekiel can properly understood.

**Conclusion**

Ezekiel’s importance in the history of Judaism should not be understated. “More than anything else . . . he was the one who at a critical juncture in Jewish history through his

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53 Ibid., 247.
54 Ibid., 247.
55 Ibid., 248.
56 Patton, 722.
prophecies enabled Judaism to survive over the millennia as a Diaspora religion."⁵⁷ While the priestly conception of the divine insisted that God was only knowable at the temple in Jerusalem, Ezekiel showed his fellow exiles that God could be experienced both outside of those rigid bounds and in a foreign land. Ezekiel both conforms to and overhauls the priestly expectations as “the cult as such is not rejected; what we have is a critical evaluation from the point of view of the will of Yahweh. . . .”⁵⁸

Though Ezekiel’s call to a prophetic ministry was by no means a typical one, it nonetheless conforms to certain literary expectations of the prophets. The expanded call narrative of Ezek 1:1–5:17, with its belated prophetic objection, serves to highlight how Ezekiel fits into the established prophetic call pattern while at the same time eschewing the typical expectations of what it is to be a biblical prophet. Ezekiel manages to both stand out for being unique and meeting the expectations of a classical biblical prophet. It is this apparent contradiction that makes the prophet so exciting to read. “The drama [of the book] is rooted in Ezekiel’s background as a priest and the impossibility of continuing in that role apart from the temple.”⁵⁹ His solution was to experience his prophetic call through the lens of the priesthood, the only way of approaching God he understood. Ezekiel “appears in the figure of a priest and a prophet at one and the same time, with no separation between the two traits—a prophet who is a priest, a priest in the role of a prophet.”⁶⁰ This is the only way to understand Ezekiel fully. To do otherwise diminishes his character and limits the book’s scope.

⁵⁷ Ehrlich, 119.
⁵⁸ Baltzer, 580.
⁵⁹ Odell, 248.
Works Cited


