

CHAPTER III
GOD'S SERVANT

EZEKIEL'S COMMISSIONING (2:3 - 3:14)

EZEKIEL is addressed as "Son of man." This cannot be linguistically equated with the title "The Son of Man," which our Lord used of Himself. Something of the meaning of the former may be in the latter, but the latter far transcends it, involving as it does a self-identification with the Messianic figure of Dan. 7: 13 and a claim to be the one true and representative man. A more idiomatic rendering of Son of man would be "child of man"; it really means no more than "man"; it stresses his insignificance compared to the glory he has just seen, but it is in no way depreciatory, for man, in spite of his fall, is and remains the climax of God's creating.

The story of the actual commissioning gives the impression of being spread over a period of time. In a trance-vision "time" takes on a meaning rather different to that which it generally bears; it is no longer "clock time," open to human measurement. But however the passage of time is to be measured, God, as always, instructs His servant step by step. The whole burden, the whole message, does not become his at once. He has to adapt himself and assimilate before the message is continued. Why, even the explanation of the special form of his prophetic activity is delayed to a slightly later season (3: 15-21). This is always God's way, though in normal experience the learning is spread over a "longer" time.

In 2: 3-7 Ezekiel is introduced to those to whom he was to prophesy, "nations that are rebellious" (v. 3, RV), i.e. both Judah and Israel. The term "Judah" is very seldom used in Ezekiel, and where it is, apart perhaps from 8:17, it means the Southern Kingdom as distinct from the Northern, or the tribe of Judah as distinct from the other tribes. Normally, as the context shows again and again, "the House of Israel" and "the children of Israel" refer in the first place to the citizens of the Southern Kingdom, whether in exile or in Judæa; when it is otherwise the context makes it clear. This choice of name is due to two obvious reasons. In exile the captives who were removed with Jehoiachin will to some extent—how far we do

not know—have come into contact with the descendants of captives from the North, and the message was intended for them as well. Then Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, was of the tribe of Levi, and so the use of Israel was the more natural for both of them (cf. also p. 131f.).¹ God's opening charge did not fully reveal how Ezekiel's message would be received, but it was made clear enough that great difficulties were to be expected.

There follows a symbolic picture of the source of Ezekiel's message and inspiration (2:8-3:3). No such picture is to be found in the earlier prophets, for it would have ill-fitted the relationship in which they knew themselves to be with God, but for all that Ezekiel's picture fits all prophecy. It may have been Ezekiel's priestly outlook that made him more conscious of the distance between him and God, and hence made this symbolic picture more suited to him. It strikingly illustrates the union of the Divine and human in the prophetic message. The message is clearly Divine, from God, for the roll is already written, and that "within and without," i.e. there is no room for any additions by the prophet himself. But the prophet does not merely take it with him to Tel-Abib and read it to the exiles. He has to eat it, to assimilate it, to make it a living part of himself; this is the human part of the message. The effect of the assimilation is interestingly indicated in 3: 3, 14. First the word of Jehovah is received and is very sweet. But as it is assimilated and becomes part of the prophet, it dominates him and makes him share on a human level Jehovah's attitude towards a sinful people (cf. Jer. 6: 11, especially the punctuation in RSV). The roll contained only "lamentations, mourning and woe" because Ezekiel received a virtual re-commissioning (33: 1-20) before he began his work of building up and comforting.

Once Ezekiel receives God's message, it is made clear to him that it will be refused, and that deliberately and without excuse, though presumably 3: 11 held out some hope that some might accept. Though Ezekiel's message was to the exiles in general, it was to be spoken particularly to those among whom he lived (3: 11), and this was underlined by the Spirit's returning him to his home (3: 12-15).

"The spirit lifted me up" might be interpreted in a purely natural sense, were it not for 8: 3. The two passages must surely be interpreted identically, and a purely natural inter-

¹ Though Israel in Jeremiah normally means or includes the Southern Kingdom, there are passages where it must either mean those left in the area of the Northern Kingdom, or the descendants of those who had gone into exile from Samaria.

pretation is excluded in the latter. We shall deal with the deeper implications of the "levitation" when discussing ch. 4. For the moment it is sufficient to say that since few, if any, will argue for a literal physical levitation, we were justified in using the term trance for the whole experience of 1:3-3:14.

EZEKIEL THE WATCHMAN (3: 15-21)

It is often said that "God's appointing is God's enabling." This is true enough, but life is not as simple as all that. The application of God's words to human sin and need is more than "and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness," or "in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit." When Ezekiel returns to his familiar surroundings and looks on them with new eyes, he sits astounded (RV, RSV "overwhelmed") for seven days. He needs time to get adjusted to the new circumstances.

In the seven days symbolism breaks through again. Seven days were the time of mourning for the dead (cf. Gen. 50: 10; Num. 19: 11; Job 2: 13); Ezekiel is a new man, for the Spirit has entered into him, but the week of impurity for the corpse of the old must pass before he begins his work. Seven days were the period of consecration for the priest (Lev. 8: 33). Ezekiel is to carry out his priestly work as a prophet, so before his work begins the week of consecration must elapse.

When the period of waiting ended, God made his commission clearer to Ezekiel. He was to be especially a watchman. This was not an entirely new name for a prophet. Watchman may be so used in Isa. 21: 6; 62: 6; and Hab. 2: 1, though such an interpretation is not necessary and at least in one case improbable. It is rather more likely in Isa. 52: 8, and virtually certain in Jer. 6: 17. But the very paucity of references is evidence enough that it was neither a normal name nor function for the prophet. But in Ezekiel we find it both at the beginning of the prophet's activity and at his re-commissioning (33: 1-9). Evidently it expressed a feature of his work that either did not appear or was not prominent in that of his predecessors.

In the old dispensation a most important part of the priest's work, though we often forget it, was that of "pastoral oversight." It was the priest's task to try and see that the Law was known and kept (cf. Lev. 10: 11; Deut. 24: 8; Mal. 2: 7; II Chron. 17: 7ff.). Ezekiel is not to be merely God's spokesman to the people in general; he is to be God's messenger to the individual in particular. The use of the singular in this passage is not merely an example of the vivid concreteness of Hebrew,

but does definitely envisage Ezekiel's speaking to individuals as he sees their work and daily life. The fact that only his public ministry has been preserved for us does not nullify this conclusion.

It has been said epigrammatically, "Jeremiah was a prophet who happened to be a priest; Ezekiel was a priest who happened to be a prophet." If we allow for the inevitable exaggeration of epigrams, this is very true. Though Ezekiel is a genuine prophet, yet he is carrying out his priestly functions by so acting; he is above all the pastoral prophet caring for the souls of the individuals. This explains, if we accept the suggestion on p. 16, why the call should have come just when he was thirty (1: 1).