

“CAN THESE BONES LIVE AGAIN?”: A RHETORIC OF THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL 33-37, PART I

ERNST R. WENDLAND
University of Stellenbosch
Stellenbosch, South Africa

Introduction

The book of Ezekiel can probably lay claim to being the least among the Major Prophets as far as recent scholarly interest and output go.¹ This study is intended to rectify this situation to some degree by providing a detailed text-rhetorical perspective on a crucial segment that begins the third major portion of Ezekiel's prophecy: chapters 33-37.² This section is especially appealing because of its “gospel” emphasis and consequent relevance to the entire message of the NT.³ In these five chapters most of the “good news” of Ezekiel's message to Israel (actually Judah) is concentrated, giving the unit a theological significance far beyond its actual size in relation to the rest of the book. My aim is to reveal some of the main compositional techniques used by the prophet to persuade his compatriots to adopt a new attitude along with a “new heart” and a “new spirit” (36:26).

I will begin by describing the major literary and topical markers that serve to delineate chapters 33-37 as a cohesive and coherent text segment within this artfully constructed dramatic prophecy in defense of the justice of God (Part 1). This compositional feature has not always been recognized or

¹For a brief survey of the field, see H. McKeating, *Ezekiel* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), chaps. 4-5.

²The nature and scope of my analysis do not allow me to deal substantially with the outstanding lexical or textual problems in Ezekiel. In any case, these do not affect my presentation in a significant way. On the textual difficulties, I subscribe to the position taken by L. Allen: “In the quest for an eclectic text MT is of such importance that very strong grounds are needed to substantiate other readings. . . . The principle of the harder reading will often induce the retention of MT” (*Ezekiel 20-48* [Dallas: Word, 1990], xxvii-xxviii). The differences between the MT and the LXX are probably best explained as a reflection of the translation process itself or perhaps different underlying literary traditions; thus the LXX probably utilized a variant translational *Vorlage* (cf. L. E. Cooper Sr., *Ezekiel* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 36); see also R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

³Especially Ezek 37:27 = > Rev 21:3, as substantiated in Paul Decock, “The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation,” paper presented at the Annual Congress of the New Testament Society of South Africa, 8 April 1999, 1-25.

fully appreciated, especially with regard to the inclusion of chapter 33.⁴ Part 2 of my study is devoted to an examination of the primary structural and stylistic properties of this pericope. My overview includes a survey of some of the principal literary features that play a prominent role in the prophet's gospel-based rhetorical strategy. I will also consider their chief pragmatic functions in relating a twofold message of comfort and hope to a receptive minority, coupled with a stern warning and rebuke for a rather hardened and hostile audience living in justly deserved exile.

My presentation illustrates the application of a discourse-oriented methodology for analyzing the structure, sense, and significance of a poetic-prophetic text. In the process it reveals the many exegetical and hermeneutical insights to be gained from a careful form-functional investigation of the original biblical message, viewed as a unified whole consisting of an artistic selection and arrangement of thematically interrelated parts.

The Importance of Discourse (Structural) Analysis

My overview of the larger compositional organization supports Joseph Blenkinsopp's contention (with specific reference to Ezekiel) that "since the way a text is structured is an integral part of the total meaning, it is important in the first place to understand how the book is put together."⁵ This is because meaning is always construed in terms of units and relationships that are either similar or different quantitatively (size/scope) and/or qualitatively (salience/significance). A variation in one's hypothesis regarding the total discourse organization of a given passage will conceptually juxtapose correspondingly different segments and linkages, thus giving an alternative perspective on the text's constitution. On its own, a single difference of opinion with regard to textual arrangement may not matter too much. But the combination of a number of divergencies will undoubtedly affect one's overall interpretation and application of the data.⁶

⁴Cf. D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 234-235.

⁵J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 3.

⁶This may be observed, for example, in the editorial decision to group chaps. 33-34 together under the heading "True Shepherd," chaps. 35-36 under "Land," and chaps. 37-39 under "People" (William La Sor, D.A. Hubbard, and F. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 466); or in the opinion that chap. 33 "interrupts" the basic tripartite structure of the book (A. Rofé, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature* [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 41); or in a compositional arrangement based on only two major "parts," which leaves chap.

On the other hand, the search for structure and a unity of discourse form (whether explicit or implicit) is an essential analytical exercise, for in the case of Ezekiel (as with the entire prophetic corpus), "the unique style and use of structuring devices (especially the recognition formula) so permeate the book . . . that it cries out for the commentator to discern an overarching theological conception behind it."⁷ In this case, the reiterated declaration of divine revelation ("then you/they will know that") reinforces the basic nature of the work as a *theodicy*. Furthermore, the highly organized arrangement of the discourse on all levels of composition attests to the surpassingly upright character of the God it proclaims (as epitomized in the prolonged temple vision, chaps. 40-48). Finally, the book's graphic, often shocking and/or surprising imagery intimates the seriousness of the message as well as the perfect holiness (complete "otherness") of its divine Author (e.g., chap. 37).

From a macrostylistic perspective, Ezekiel presents the two prominent features of significant segmentation and parallel paneling. Segmentation refers to the compositional technique whereby many of the larger discourse components of the book are either unexpectedly interrupted or forcefully concluded by some dramatic passage of special importance, which is thereby emphasized.⁸ Perhaps this constitutes a subtle literary means of reflecting the manner in which the Lord suddenly intrudes upon the seemingly relentless cycle of events to demonstrate his supreme righteous sovereignty over human history (by bringing disaster upon a wicked Gog, 39:1-20), as well as his constant and abundant mercy to his people (by undoing their foreign captivity, 39:21-29).

In parallel paneling,⁹ one integral portion of text is later reflected upon by another section, for thematic contrast, reversal, reinforcement, and/or expansion.¹⁰ So it is that the competent and attentive reader or

33 completely detached from chaps. 34-37 (D. I. Block, "Ezekiel: Theology of," *NIDNTT*, 4:617-618); or in a "grand apologetic scheme" that omits any reference to *YHWH's* essential Spirit-directed action of purifying his polluted people (Block, *Ezekiel*, 272; cf. 36:24-27, 31, 33; 37:23, 28).

⁷L. Boadt, "The Function of the Salvation Oracles in Ezekiel 33-37," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1990): 21.

⁸For example, 3:24-27, Ezekiel is stricken with selective dumbness; 10, the divine glory departs; 16:59-63, covenant renewal; 20:39-44, land restoration; 28:24-26, return of the people; 35, judgment of Edom (cf. 25:12-14); 43:1-7, the divine glory returns.

⁹Block calls this stylistic feature "halving" (*Ezekiel*, 310) and points out many instances in Ezekiel, both large and small.

¹⁰For example, the prophetic commissioning of Ezekiel, 2-3 = > his recommissioning, 33; the "mountains of Israel" ruined, 6 = > they are restored, 36:1-15; the Lord's glory

listener encounters many welcome surprises in the form of theological insight and practical life-application in the intricately patterned organization of the message of Ezekiel, whether as a whole or within any of the carefully positioned parts.

The structural study of a complete text, as outlined below (i.e., from the “top down”), is generally carried out before a detailed examination of any of its compositional sections—a constituent pericope analysis (i.e., from the “bottom up”). The second type of analysis is presented in Part 2 of this study, in conjunction with a survey of some of the main stylistic features of the discourse, for example: its prominent inventory of graded prophetic formulae pertaining to direct speech: to indicate an oracular unit beginning, ending, or peak;¹¹ evocative, memorable, message-reinforcing imagery and symbolic actions; different literary genres in felicitous combination; topical (+/- lexical) or intratextual recursion; plus noteworthy intertextual citations of and allusions to other works of the Hebrew canon or its related religious tradition.

The Drama of Prophetic Discourse in Ezekiel

Overall Plot Progression

Figure 1 attempts to depict the larger organizational and connotative “plot” design of the complete prophetic work known as Ezekiel,¹² with

departs from the temple, 10 => it returns again, 43:1-5; prophecy against the nations, 25-32 => against Gog and allies, 38-39; the sheep scattered by their shepherds, 34:1-10 => gathered by their divine Shepherd, 34:7-16 (note the overlapping segment, 7-10).

¹¹See H. van Dyke Parunak, “Some Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotative Formulas in Jeremiah,” in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, ed. R. D. Bergen (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), 489-519.

¹²Evidence in favor of the essentially unitary authorship of the book of Ezekiel, as a text produced (orally and/or in writing) by a seventh-sixth-century B.C.E. Judean prophet by that name, far outweighs the various arguments adduced against such a position. This includes such factors as the book’s well-organized and balanced overall structure, a general uniformity of language and style (also certain linguistic anomalies that reflect great emotional agitation and possibly an in-group, “priestly” register), its strongly autobiographical nature, its extended sequence of dated prophecies, the content progression moving conventionally from condemnation (judgment) to blessing (restoration), and the relatively consistent reflection of a single implied author in terms of character and personality. For further discussion in support of this position, see Cooper, 31-37; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, AB 22B (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 396; J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 14-16; also M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, AB 22A (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 27; M. Greenberg, “The Design and Themes of Ezekiel’s Program of Restoration,” in *Interpreting the Prophets*, ed. J. L. Mays and P. J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 215, 219, 222; J. Rosenberg, “Jeremiah and Ezekiel,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. R. Alter and F. Kermodé

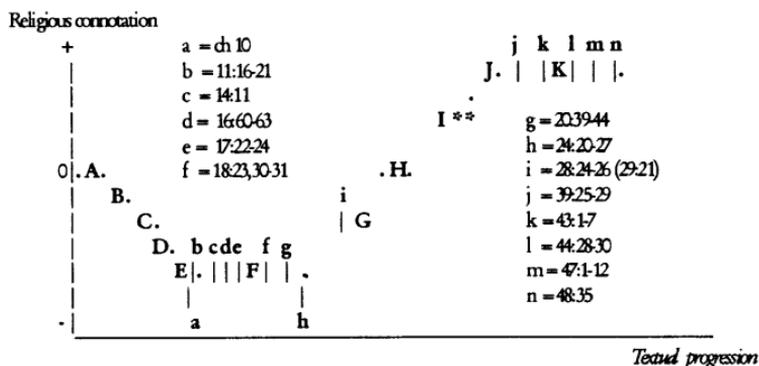


Figure 1. A depiction of the dramatic macrostructure of Ezekiel 1-48 (X = main compositional units, x = focal internal pericopes/passages).

special reference to the crucial kerygmatic core comprising chapters 33-37.

The sequence of principal compositional units is marked by the uppercase letters in Figure 1. The lowercase letters, except for the emotively negative boundary texts of *a* and *b*, refer to periodic passages of covenantal blessing (or "gospel") that fall notably outside the cluster of chapters 34-37 [segment I]. The same basic tripartite macrostructure is found in several other prophetic texts: Isa 1-27, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah (LXX). This arrangement consists of: (a) contemporary judgment oracles against "Israel" (Judah), demonstrating the Lord's justice in dealing with their persistent covenantal violations (chaps. 1-24); (b) corresponding oracles of condemnation upon proud surrounding foreign (pagan) nations, displaying God's righteous impartiality (25-32); (c) salvation oracles (near future) coupled with prophecies predicting blessings for his faithful people (distant future), thus manifesting the Lord's undeserved mercy (33-48). Ezekiel, however, is distinct in that the work evinces a rather more detailed architectonic arrangement, one that assumes the shape of a seminarrative, dramatic plot development as shown in Figure 2.¹³

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 194-195.

¹³P. R. House has similarly, but with considerably more detail, analyzed the book of Zephaniah as "a prophetic drama" on the basis of these criteria: "It has a structure of alternating speeches between characters, a plot construction around a distinct conflict and resolution, a set of developing characters, and a dramatic point of view" (*Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama* [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988], 106). The text of Ezekiel

- A. Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the Lord in exile! (chap.1)
 - B. The Lord calls Ezekiel to be a prophetic "watchman" announcing a message of judgment (2-3)
 - C. Prophetic symbolic actions and their significance with respect to the judgment of Jerusalem (4-5)
 - D. Oracles of judgment against the "house of Israel" (6-7)
 - E. Visions of a defiled Temple and a corrupt leadership (8-11)
 - F. Various symbolic acts, oracles, laments, legal addresses, disputations, parables, allegories of judgment, and priestly regulations—all condemning "Israel" (12-24)
 - G. Oracles of judgment against surrounding pagan nations (25-32)
 - H. The Lord renews Ezekiel's prophetic commission as a "watchman" for the "house of Israel" (33)
 - I. Messianic oracles, parables, and a vision of the return, renewal, and restoration of Israel (34-37)
 - J. Oracles of judgment concerning the pagan prince Gog of Magog (38-39)
- K. Ezekiel's vision of the new Temple and the glory of the Lord, living among his people (40-48)

- A. initial situation (chap. 1)
- B. problem (2-3)
 - C-D. complication (4-9)
 - E. crisis (10: the Lord's *glory leaves* the Temple!)
 - F. deepening crisis (11-24)
 - G. interlude (25-32)
 - H. turning point (33)
 - I. thematic "gospel" peak (24-36)
 - J. reinforcement (38-39)
 - K. denouement/resolution (40-48: the Lord's *glory returns* to the Temple, thus residing once more among his people)

Figure 2. The macrostructural "plot" of Ezekiel.

There is an overall recursive balance in the construction of the book of Ezekiel and also of many of its constituent sections. The beatific vision of the Lord dwelling harmoniously and benevolently among his people in a religious, temple-dominated realm at the end of the book (K, on Figure 1) contrasts markedly with the turbulent, theophanic depiction of God's kinetic glory being manifested to Ezekiel in the place of exile at the beginning (A). The prophet is divinely called into service twice: first, for a ministry of condemnation (B) and then, once the judgment has taken place, to deliver a message of consolation and hope for the future (H). Thus the various oracles, symbolic actions, and visions of indictment, disputation, and reproach that appear in sections C-F correspond by way of reversal to those of comfort, hope, and encouragement in the apical portion I. Finally, the sequence of

manifests these same basic features, but in a considerably more complicated construction, as would be expected in a work that is over ten times as long. The "character" of the Ezekiel prophet, for example, is developed through actions (his own and what happens to him), as well as by his words, which generally express some message from the Lord. The nature of his opposition among the people, on the other hand, is usually revealed by means of a short, internal, characterizing quotation, e.g., 33:24, 30.

standard judgment speeches against seven representative foreign nations (G) is both balanced and rhetorically enhanced by the epiphanic sevenfold prophecy against the alien alliance of Gog et al. in J.¹⁴ In short, within the inclusion formed by segments A and K there is a general unfolding (terrace) pattern of elements that repeats itself in terms of a basic thematic polarity of similarity and contrast, i.e., B + C (D-F) + G :: H + I + J. Obviously, Ezekiel is no hodgepodge collection of oracles; it is rather a skillfully and purposefully constructed prophetic compilation that brings "the word of the Lord" to its addressees of all world ages in a most convincing and convicting manner.¹⁵

As the dramatic plot of Ezekiel unfolds, we find, in addition to the ubiquitous emphasis on the divine word (e.g., כה אמר אדני יהוה), a continuous recycling of the "seven common [thematic] components of prophetic writing":¹⁶ election/covenant = > sin/unfaithfulness = > judgment/punishment = > mercy/recalling = > repentance/recommitment = > redemption/restoration = > testimony/praise. Considered individually and together, these concepts serve to foreground Ezekiel's primary concern: to describe, vindicate, and magnify the awesome grace, glory, and holiness of the Lord.

The Unfolding Good News of Chapters 33-37

A major "turning point" in the progression of Ezekiel is reached with chapter 33 [H]. This transitional and resumptive unit (i.e., following

¹⁴Each of the seven constituent units in chaps. 38-39 is introduced by the citation formula, "Thus speaks the Sovereign Lord" (NIV, כה אמר אדני יהוה): 38:3-9, 10-13, 14-16, 17-23; 39:1-16, 17-24, 25-29. There are other ways of segmenting this section (e.g., Block, *Ezekiel*, 431-432), but the overall emphasis, especially in chap. 39, is on manifesting the Lord God in his great glory and holiness (cf. 38:23; 39:7, 21-22, 27).

¹⁵For a different view of the symmetrical macrostructure of Ezekiel, see W. A. Van Gemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 326. The seemingly sequentially disruptive oracles against the nations (segments G and J) are intercalated between the two distinct periods of YHWH's dealing with "Israel," namely, for judgment: 1-24 | 25-32 | 33, and for blessing: 34-37 | 38-39:20 | 39:21-48. Thus the larger discourse structure itself suggests that God reproves and restores his people as a testimony to the surrounding nations, "so that they will know that I am the Lord!" (36:22-23, 36; cf. *ibid.*, 333). Certain aspects of this work that may make it sound redundant, bombastic, contrived, or clumsily redacted to the modern reader and critic were undoubtedly evaluated differently by those who received the prophet's message aurally and in the original language—whether first- or secondhand, e.g., with regard to the sometimes shocking imagery (e.g., in chap. 16) and the many punctuating discourse formulae, which serve to stress the divine source and authority of Ezekiel's oracles and other speech forms. The well-crafted composition of Ezekiel leads some scholars to conclude that "much of his prophecy . . . is likely to have been *conceived* as literature from the beginning" (McKeating, 13), but the eloquent and dramatic manner of expression of at least some of these oracles (e.g., in chap. 37) would seem to suggest a text of oral origin.

¹⁶House, 113.

logically and temporally from 24:27) reiterates a number of images and topics that appeared in the first half of the book (e.g., Ezekiel's summons to be a "watchman"; cf. 3:17-21/ 33:2-9 [B]), with a special concern for a linkage with autobiographical elements in the text-framing chapters 3 and 24.¹⁷ The fugitive who had escaped the devastation of Jerusalem according to divine prediction (24:25-27) arrives in Babylon to report that "the city has fallen!" (הַכְּתָה הָעִיר, 33:21-22). The preceding evening, in a special visitation, God restored Ezekiel's voice (cf. 3:26 / 24:27 / 33:22), so that he was ready to utter an appropriate prophetic response to the tragic news—that is, he could speak words other than those expressing primarily condemnation and woe in conjunction with a message of righteous judgment from the Lord (2:9-10).¹⁸ In short, he is now able to resume a much more positive pastoral role among his people.

Thus the first half of chapter 33 (vv. 1-20) functions as a formal recommissioning of Ezekiel as a "prophet" among God's flock in parallel with chapters 2-3 (2:5/33:33, cf. Jonah 3:1-2; see also the medial segment of 18:21-32).¹⁹ Ezekiel begins his work anew in the next discourse section (33:21-33), that is, *after* the cataclysmic fall of the sacred city of *YHWH* has been announced. Ezekiel now acts as a messenger of *good* news (of "sweetness," cf. 3:3) and a spokesman of the Shepherd-Lord's future program of gracious restoration (chap. 34). But first, the still-outstanding sins of the nation need to be punished to lead people to complete repentance, especially with regard to their sordid moral and spiritual corruption of idolatry and adultery (33:25-26;

¹⁷The corresponding segments in chaps. 24 and 33 that refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple are an illustration of the structural bounding device of *exclusio*. They serve to *externally* bracket the enclosed foreign judgment oracles section (chaps. 25-32). The operation of *exclusio* is thus similar to that of *inclusio*, except that the former is constituted by a pair of passages that lie just *outside* the initial and final borders of the demarcated unit. Other salient structural evidence must, of course, be evaluated in order to determine precisely which marking device is present in any given instance. Parunak, for example, regards the correspondences in chaps. 24 and 33 to be an instance of *inclusio*, thus enclosing the single discourse block covering chaps. 24-33 (as cited in Allen, xxiii, who disagrees). In this connection it may be noted that it is both structurally and thematically inaccurate to regard 33:1-20 as the "latter half of Ezekiel's concluding prophecy against Egypt" (Alexander, 904).

¹⁸Alexander does not regard 33:22 as the only flashback in time and thus interprets the entire discourse from 33:23 to 39:29 as uttered by Ezekiel the night before the messenger arrived with his sad report concerning Jerusalem (909). Though possible, this does not seem to be a logical perspective on these passages, which follow more naturally upon the news of the city's fall (cf. Allen, 151; Greenberg, *Ezekiel* 21-37, 681-682). For some pertinent remarks on Ezekiel's divinely imposed "silence," see Rosenberg, 200 (cf. Taylor, 27, for further thoughts on his "ritual dumbness").

¹⁹Although it is "not cast in the form of a call narrative" (Block, *Ezekiel*, 235), 33:1-20 clearly corresponds to 3:17-21 in both form and function.

cf. 22:1-16). These spaced autobiographical references (chaps. 3, 24, 33) serve to highlight the tripartite division of the book into its foundational beginning (chaps. 1-3 + 4-24), which covers the Babylonian period prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (586/587 B.C.E.); a temporally diverse, topical bridge (chaps. 25-32); and a triumphant ending that presents a revelational post-586 perspective on the rejuvenated, reconstituted people of God (chaps. 33-48).

After chapter 33, Ezekiel's proclamation is progressively focused on the blessings for the Lord's followers in both the near and distant future. The first setting undoubtedly has reference to a return of the Jews to Palestine after their captivity in Babylon. The second age, however, may be posited, on the basis of earlier prophets such as Isaiah, as a prediction of the incorporation of individuals from all nations into the holy people of God, that is, "Israel" of Messianic times (e.g., 34:11-16; 36:24; 37:21-23; cf. Isa 11, John 10; see also 39:25-29; cf. Matt 25:31-46; Rev 7:9-17, 20:11-15). The generally optimistic atmosphere of Ezekiel's all-encompassing "gospel" is occasionally interrupted by retrospective judicial reminders of the nation's apostate past and present, giving detailed reasons why a complete renewal and divine restoration are necessary (e.g., 36:16-23).²⁰ The different aspects of the broken covenant needing repair are briefly summarized in 37:23-24 (cf. 18:30-32, 20:32-44). These involved, for example, a penitent recognition of the absolute sovereignty of *YHWH*, a complete religious transformation and purification of the people, an empowering outpouring of the divine Spirit upon them, and the "return" to a blessed state of fellowship with the Lord.

The wondrous results of this return of a "remnant" to the Lord (cf. 11:13, 16-21; 14:22-23) are revealed in a manner that impressively reverses the former images of death and devastation. God's regathered, chosen people receive a new land, a new Shepherd-King, a new sanctuary, a new heart and spirit, and a new covenant (chaps. 34-37). However, *YHWH* stresses that his merciful acts of restoration and renewal are effected solely for the sake of his "holy name" (= ethos/personality/character) and to manifest his glorious omnipotence before all nations (36:22-23), as notably expressed in the book's reiterated

²⁰The universalism of a prophet like Isaiah is often contrasted with the alleged ethnic "parochialism" of Ezekiel, who is viewed as focusing his hope "on peace for the restored nation of Israel" (Cooper, 43; cf. Block, "Ezekiel, Theology of," 47). Such a contrastive hermeneutical perspective depends, of course, on one's interpretation of the reference underlying the key term "Israel" in Ezekiel, that is, whether broader or narrower in scope. I adopt a wider, accommodative, "Messianic" viewpoint based on Ezekiel's assumed familiarity with the prophecies of Isaiah and their incorporative nature, e.g., chap. 56; see Ezek 47:22-23 (cf. Taylor, 253, which reflects E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 247-248. This position is echoed by C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 249; see also the relevant remarks in Van Gemeren, 335-337).

leitmotif, e.g., "Then you will know that I am the Lord" (36:11). This "divine recognition formula," which underscores the fundamentally *theodicidal* character of Ezekiel's message, occurs in this or some variant form sixty-six times throughout the text.²¹ The central edifying and encouraging truths contained in chapters 33-37 are prophetically heightened (but not necessarily clarified) in terms of their temporal as well as spatial scope by means of the militant, apocalyptic, battle imagery of the paired judgment speeches found in chapters 38-39.²²

Within the book's final third portion, important backward and forward references function to demarcate its dynamic good-news nucleus. For example, the prophecy concerning the Lord serenely dwelling in his sanctuary at the end of its climactic segment (37:28; cf. 24:21) anticipates the impressive temple vision of chapters 40-48 (note 48:35), hence functioning also as an externally defining *exclusio* for the eschatological overview and powerful divine warrior scenery of chapters 38-39. There is also a double reference to "Meshech and Tubal" (38:2; cf. 32:26), which serves two purposes. Thematically these names incorporate Japhethites together with the previously mentioned Shemites and Hamites into Ezekiel's expansive revelation of the future of all nations. Structurally they create another *exclusio*, this time around the dramatic peak of chapters 33-37. The book's concluding section recounts an architectural vision of the holy perfection of the restored temple and its sacred precincts (chaps. 40-48).²³ This includes several strong, intertextually resonant depictions of salvation (e.g., 44:28-30, priesthood; 47:1-12, river of life) plus a vital image of reversal as the Lord's radiant glory is seen to reenter the temple (43:1-7; cf.

²¹Note esp. 20:5, 7, 12, 20, 26, 38, 44; cf. Exod 6:2, 7:17, 10:2. For this reason the following conclusion by McKeating concerning the Lord's motivation would seem to be in error: "The origins of the Lord's interest in Israel are in the book of Ezekiel left totally unexplained" (80). Then, as now, God's manifestation of saving mercy to his people is motivated solely by grace (cf. Rom 1:16-17, 3:21-26).

²²This complex "proof oracle" of apocalyptic judgment is progressively developed in two stages (chaps. 38-39). It shows by vivid, panoramic (at times grotesque and subtly ironic) imagery that *YHWH* in his supreme sovereignty also controls the distant, unforeseeable future and will most certainly defeat even the most formidable foe of his faithful flock in order to allow his manifold promises to be realized.

²³Israel's hope was assured in the final extended vision of a new country, city, sanctuary, and cultus of the Lord (chaps. 40-48). This quartet of powerful traditional symbols stood as God's guarantee of all his covenantal commitments, made on behalf of a renewed community of faith among whom his glory would forever dwell (43:1-7) and from whom the river of lasting life is continually dispensed (47:1-12). It is an ideal place where everything is in order and every person has his or her place—with the Lord (47:13-48:35). In this way the initial crisis of the prophecy is resolved on a familiar note, with some powerful consolatory imagery which evokes concepts that are found both at the beginning and ending of Holy Scripture (47:1-12; cf. Gen 2:8-14; Rev 22:1-5).

10:18-19).²⁴ Ezekiel's prophetic corpus now comes to a most satisfying "narrative" close (resolution) as *YHWH* is once more portrayed as tabernacling in peace among his obedient people and for their eternal well-being (וַיָּשׁוּב; 43:7; 44:28-30; 47:9-12; 48:35b; cf. 37:26-28; Ps 46, esp. vv. 7,11).

Chapters 33-37 as a Compositional Unit

As we shall see in Part 2, the section covering chapters 33-37 includes numerous structurally cohesive and thematically emphatic reiterations of sayings that occur earlier in the book (i.e., *intratextual* recursion—that is, along with the numerous consequential *intertextual* allusions, especially to prominent covenantal passages such as Lev 26). There are a number of demarcative features, however, in addition to the semantic focus on return, renewal, and restoration that function to set this portion off as a distinct compositional unit within the book. The principal division that precedes it—a series of "oracles against the nations"—obviously begins at chapter 25 and ends at the close of chapter 32. There is an elaborate structural pattern that functions to reinforce this major break in the text: Seven distinct nations are included in this ethnic catalogue or religious rogue's gallery (Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt; cf. Deut 7:1). The last section is clearly divided (especially by apertures of time setting) into seven segments (29:1-16, 29:17-21, 30:1-19,²⁵ 30:20-26, 31, 32:1-16, 32:17-32). The final mock lament for Egypt manifests (by key, repeated opening and closing expressions) a further seven strophes (32:17-21, 22-23, 24-25, 26-27, 28 + 31-32 [a disjunctive judgment against Pharaoh], 29, and 30). The recursive number seven in this section may serve to emphasize the completeness of the Lord's condemnation of *all* possible forces of wickedness in the world that would oppose the execution of his gracious covenantal plan (cf. 28:24-26).²⁶

²⁴The two dominant pericopes of this final unit—the vision of the return of God's glory to the temple (43:1-9) and that of the river of life (47:1-12)—appear to divide chaps. 40-48 into three sections: 40:1-43:9; 43:10-47:12; 47:13-48:35 (for a different structural perspective, see Block, *Ezekiel*, 498). Block notes some interesting parallels between chaps. 40-48 and the "Exodus narratives" on the one hand, and Rev 21-22 on the other (*ibid.*, 499-503). Ezekiel's priestly role in relation to the crucial manifestation of the "glory of the Lord" is considered in M. A. Sweeney, "The Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel," in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*, ed. S. L. McKenzie and M. P. Graham (Louisville: John Knox, 1998), 91-92.

²⁵There is no distinctive time setting at the onset of this particular oracle, perhaps due to the presence of the striking contrastive prophecy of a positive nature concerning "the house of Israel" + "on that day" in the passage that precedes it (29:21).

²⁶For some evidence of the importance of "structural sevens" in the composition of biblical discourse, see E. R. Wendland, "7 X 7 (X 7): A Structural and Thematic Outline of John's Apocalypse," *OPTAT* 4 (1990): 371-387. The considerable influence of Ezekiel in the book of Revelation has already been noted.

It is clear, then, that at 32:32 the discourse section covering chapters 29-32 (the composite oracle against and lament concerning Egypt and its Pharaoh) comes to an end. The onset of Ezekiel's gospel-oriented kernel in chapter 33 is marked by a key-word overlap (i.e., *anadiplosis* with כרף "sword," 32:31-32/33:2-3; cf. also 24:21)²⁷ plus several initial markers: the "word-event [prophetic word] formula"—"And the word of the Lord was to me saying"—which usually begins a high-level discourse unit; (cf. 33:23; 34:1); a vocative of address; and the command to "speak!" (33:1-2). The expected date notice, which normally signals the beginning of a significant segment of text, is rhetorically postponed for special effect to 33:21, where it is especially relevant. No other temporal setting of this nature is given until the book's final major constituent (chaps. 40-48), that is, at 40:1. The section covering 33:1-20 reiterates and reinforces God's call to Ezekiel to be a prophetic "watchman" for his people (cf. 3:16-27); it thus serves as a transitional introduction to the main division that follows.

The close of the unit spanning chapters 33-37 is also quite patently indicated in the text. After its dramatic and distinctive opening vision (vv. 1-14), the climactic chapter 37 concludes (vv. 15-28) with the last, and only connotatively positive, in the series of twelve prophetic displays that are scattered primarily throughout the first half of the book. This particular symbolic action portrays two sticks of wood ("Judah" + "Ephraim") dramatically joined together to form one. It is compositionally significant that the preceding picturesque narrative event of this type occurs in 24:15-24, at the conclusion of the book's first principal division (an instance of structural *epiphora*, or similar discourse unit endings).

Commentators differ over whether or not the twofold prophecy concerning "Gog" (divided roughly in the middle by analogous discourse openings, 38:1-4 and 39:1-2, i.e., structural *anaphora*) should be included as an integral part of the section beginning in chapter 33.²⁸ Despite the presence of several clear ties between chapters 38-39 and 33-37,²⁹ there are

²⁷For a definition and illustration of some of the major demarcative devices of Hebrew literary discourse, e.g., "anadiplosis," see E. R. Wendland, *The Discourse Analysis of Hebrew Prophetic Literature: Determining the Larger Textual Units of Hosea and Joel* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1995), chap. 2.

²⁸For example, Cooper (291) and Block (*Ezekiel*, 273) do include chaps. 38-39 in the section beginning at chap. 33 (or 34), while Allen (xxiv) and Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37* (760) do not.

²⁹Note, for example, the several references to the metonymically symbolic "mountains of Israel" (e.g., 38:8; 39:2,4; cf. 36:1, 4, 6, 8, etc.), the mass judicial slaughter that will take place there (e.g., 38:22; 39:4; cf. 37:1-2), the need for a similarly great purging and cleansing of God's people (e.g., 39:12-16; cf. 36:25,33; 37:23), and particularly the words predicting a return and spiritual restoration of the "house of Israel" (39:25-29; cf. 34:13; 36:24,27; 37:12-14,21). We also observe that the next major dating formula occurs at 40:1 (cf. 33:21).

a number of important distinguishing features and supporting evidence that would justify a decision to retain chapters 38-39 as a separate and discrete compositional unit.³⁰ According to this vision, *YHWH* will mightily reveal his holiness and omnipotence in the eyes of everyone on earth, that is, "Israel" (= the people of God) and all heathen nations in the world (38:23; 39:27; as metonymically represented in geographic relation to the land of Palestine: "Meshech and Tubal" + "Gomer" = *N*, "Persia" = *E*, "Cush" = *S*, and "Put" = *W*; 38:2, 5-6).

In addition to the boundary markers listed earlier, the composite pericope of chapters 33-37 is set apart by means of a major *inclusio* through its topically contrastive beginning and ending. In 33:2 *YHWH* instructs Ezekiel to tell "[his] countrymen" (an expression of interpersonal estrangement) that he is about to bring destruction upon the "land" (of Israel) and its "people" as their righteous Judge (cf. 33:20). In 37:27, on the other hand, the word of *YHWH* is transformed into one of blessing for "[his] people" (personal fellowship), namely, that he will be "their God" and will settle "among them" (in the land) as their benevolent covenantal Lord. The coming "sword" of the Lord (חָרֶב, 3x in 33:1-3) will one day—and "forever" (לְעוֹלָם, reiterated for emphasis)—be replaced by his divine "sanctuary" (מִקְדָּשׁ, 3 times in 37:27-28). Then there will no longer be any need for a prophetic "watchman" (צַפְרָה, 33:2); instead, the Davidic (Messianic) servant of the Lord will be their protective "monarch" (מֶלֶךְ) and guiding "shepherd" (רֹעֵה, 37:24).

So it is that the solemn warning in 33:4-6, enjoining each and every individual to watch out for his or her "life" (נַפְשׁ + דָּם), is topically counterbalanced by the obvious stress throughout chapter 37 upon a harmonious "living" (חַיִּים) and "dwelling" (יָשׁוּב, with *YHWH*) on the part of the entire resurrected community (e.g., vv. 5-6, 9-10, 14, 25, 27). In this connection we observe the alternating pattern of judgment and blessing that

³⁰Note, for example: the previously mentioned *exclusio* involving the Lord's sanctuary/temple, where he will dwell among his people forever (37:26-28/40:2, 5; cf. 43:7); the prominent, repetitious sectional aperture that includes names mentioned nowhere else in the book (38:1-3); the exaggerated, apocalyptic and mythopoetic imagery, which is "unlike anything else in [Hebrew] prophecy up to the exilic period" (e.g., 38:4-9, 19-23; 39:17-20; McKeating, 114; see also Boadt, 17-18; D. S. Russell, *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream: Protest and Promise* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 30-32); an apparently different, eschatological temporal setting *after* the initial restoration of "Israel" (38:8, 11-12, 14—a time frame which varies in turn from that suggested at the end of the unit in 39:22-29, which harks back to the Messianic temporal setting featured in chaps. 33-37); the distinct possibility that the prophecy against "Gog" in chaps. 38-39 also represents a "heavily coded message predicting the demise of the Babylonian power" (McKeating, 122; see also P. C. Craigie, *Ezekiel*, Daily Study Bible [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983], 266-267), which is surprisingly not included in the catalogue of nations denounced in chaps. 25-32; the depiction of a complete destruction and burial of the enemy (Gog's forces) *within* the land of Israel (38:16; 39:2-4, 11); and finally, the fact that chaps. 38-39 occur in a displaced position in some LXX manuscripts (i.e., after chap. 36; Taylor, 241; Allen, xxviii).

runs throughout chapters 34-37 (extending also into chaps. 38-39) and indicates the two possible consequences of the human response to the Lord's call to "repent" in 33:11. This contrastive sequence, as shown below in Figure 3, begins after Ezekiel's own commission has been renewed (33:1-20), prior to an announcement of the fall of Jerusalem (33:21-22), as a testimony to God's people "that a prophet has been among them" (33:33).

<u>Judgment</u>	<u>Deliverance</u>
33:23-33	
34:1-10	
	34:11-16
34:17-21	
	34:22-31
35:1-15	
	36:1-15
36:16-21 (22-23)	
	36:24-38
(37:1-3)	
	37:4-14
(37:15-18)	
	37:19-28
38:1-16	
	38:17-23
	39:1-29

Figure 3. The alternation of judgment and deliverance speeches in Eze 33-39. (Debatable passages are indicated in parentheses.)

These and many other subtle, less apparent literary features enable us to read and interpret chapters 33-37 as a consciously composed (or compiled)

unit of prophetic discourse and hence also to discern its crucial thematic and rhetorical function as an integral part of the complete text of Ezekiel.

The Rhetorical Purpose of Ezekiel's Prophecy

A closer look at the texture of chapters 33-37 (Part 2 of this article) helps to determine how its diverse stylistic devices, coupled with significant theological content, function together in elegant combination to promote the practical rhetoric of this section as a discrete unit within the book.³¹ It shows how the prophet (or a close associate-disciple-redactor), acting as a spokesman for the Lord, strategically shaped the central argument of his momentous message to perform a number of closely related communicative functions in relation to its intended audience: reproof, warning, appeal (for repentance), instruction, revelation, exhortation, and encouragement. It is clear, however, that such a specification of illocutionary purposes is only as valid as the degree to which the analyst is able to posit a plausible hypothesis concerning the original setting of message transmission and reception. In the case of much of the literature of the Scriptures, this task is not always so easy to accomplish with certainty, due to a considerable lack of reliable information regarding the initial circumstances for a particular text.

As far as the book of Ezekiel is concerned, there is not much information other than what is stated in the text. However, in contrast to Jeremiah, his prophetic contemporary, there are many precise dates and a number of diachronically arranged narrative segments included. These allow for a fairly accurate guess as to the external historical setting in which the prophet was working, shortly before and for some years after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (586 B.C.E.). Such contextually-related information, when linked with various other current sources, makes it possible to assume a rhetorical situation (exigency) that involved, among other tensions, a severe crisis of faith for all Jewish survivors of the national calamity, those who remained in the land, but especially those who were taken captive into Babylon (Ezekiel focuses on the latter group, where the spiritual future of Israel lay; 11:14-21; 33:23-29; cf. Jer 24:1-10). There were five main options open for enabling people to deal with this overwhelming threat

³¹The detailed textual study also leads to an evaluation concerning the book's style that is very different from the following: "As a writer Ezekiel is often ponderous and repetitive. . . . For the most part he writes in prose; not a colorful, descriptive prose, but a sombre prophetic prose" (Taylor, 28; cf. also McKeating (17) on the "wordy and repetitive" prose style of Ezekiel. Indeed, the man seemed to have been one of the most popular litterateurs of his day—but sadly to little religious effect (cf. 33:30-32). In those places where the text may sound relatively "stiff, if not monotonous" (e.g., chap. 45), there is usually some generic explanation, such as discourse that is "characteristic of formal ritual prescriptions" (Block, *Ezekiel*, 660).

to their conceptual worldview and religious perspective.³²

a. *Accommodation.* The “pragmatists” would swiftly shift their fickle allegiance to the seemingly more powerful Babylonian gods and serve them, either instead of, or syncretistically alongside, *YHWH* (cf. 8:14-15).

b. *Nationalism.* The “radicals” maintained that their recent defeat and exile were only temporary and that God would soon act to miraculously overthrow Babylon and enable them to return home to their former lives (cf. Jer 28:1-4).

c. *Resistance.* The “fanatics” were convinced that their future lay in the eyes of optimistic magicians and diviners who were urging them not to submit to Babylonian rule, but rather to resist and seek freedom through military means (cf. Jer 27:8-15).

d) *Fatalism.* The “pessimists” concluded that all was lost, that there was no hope left for the people or their religion; they were all as good as dead and might as well be buried—along with *YHWH*, their God (37:11).

e) *Reformation.* The “penitent” among the people were moved to take Ezekiel’s message to heart, acknowledge their sins, and “return” to a renewed commitment to serve *YHWH*, their covenant Lord (36:26-28), trusting that he would one day work saving wonders on their behalf for the sake of his holy name (36:22-23).

It was Ezekiel’s divinely-given task to stimulate and encourage this last, unpopular, position. The majority of the people did not seem to get the point of his message. If they did, they stubbornly refused to accept its pressing import and implication—despite the indisputable correctness of the prophet’s argument regarding the reason for their national disaster and current slavery. For the faithful remnant, however, Ezekiel sought to promote a clear(er) understanding of, and a total commitment to, the Lord’s desire for a restored spiritual relationship with a cleansed covenantal people: “Then [everyone] will know that I *YHWH* am the One who makes Israel holy” (37:28).

This was the central focus of Ezekiel’s twofold, mutually interactive prophecy: an announcement of God’s righteous judgment (law, foregrounded in chaps. 1-32) coupled with promises of providential blessing (gospel, chaps. 33-48). God’s longsuffering spokesman faithfully carries out his challenging mission—exalted (with respect to *YHWH*), but humbling (with respect to himself)—under the inspiring guidance of the Spirit of God (2:2; 37:1), who activated and animated all the verbal (homiletical and visionary) as well as nonverbal (representational) rhetoric at his disposal (3:1-3). Ezekiel proclaims an intensely dynamic prophetic Word concerning the Lord’s surpassing glory, perfect justice, and utter holiness.

³²Cf. T. C. Butler, *NIV Disciple’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman, 1988), 982.