Ezekiel: A Commentary (Book Review)

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In this relatively short commentary, Paul Joyce—noted Ezekiel scholar and chair of the Society of Biblical Literature’s section on “Theological Perspectives on the Book of Ezekiel”—has given readers an eminently readable, balanced, and useful study of what is arguably the Hebrew Bible’s most disturbing and perplexing prophetic book. To be sure, Joyce’s commentary does not contain the detail and breadth of discussion found in some previous major commentaries, such as the multi-volume works by M. Greenberg (1983, 1997), W. Zimmerli (1979, 1983), K.-F. Pohlmann (1996, 2001), or D. I. Block (1997, 1998), but scholars seeking the most in-depth treatments available of any given passage in Ezekiel will no doubt consult all of these sources anyway. Rather, Joyce sets out to combine a number of techniques, such as close literary readings, sensitive theological analysis, and historical reconstruction, and he does so in such a way as to provide both a solid base of information for the novice as well as some more rigorous commentary for advanced scholars; thus, the book will prove to be just as at home on the shelves of graduate students and clergy as it will be on the shelves of seminary professors and seasoned theologians.

Specifically, Joyce’s book exhibits several strengths that set it apart from previous efforts. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the commentary is its introduction (pp. 1–62), wherein Joyce deftly weaves his way through many topics, summarizing and explaining the most important historical and theological issues in the book and providing a fascinating summary of over two millennia of interpretive efforts. The introduction is both succinct and (at least relatively) comprehensive at the same time, a difficult and noteworthy achievement, and is worth the price of the book (if indeed one can find a copy of it for under $140.00). For example, the section on theological themes (pp. 17–32) is a very thorough and compelling introduction to Ezekiel’s theology. Here, Joyce takes issue with several longstanding (but now mostly abandoned) attempts at characterizing Ezekiel as a champion of individual responsibility and harbinger of the demise of the antiquated concept of “group identity”; rather, Joyce views Ezekiel’s statements on the topic as “typical of the Hebrew Bible as a whole” (p. 25), that is, Ezekiel sees a place both for corporate and individual responsibility. The son may not be doomed to suffer for the sins of the father (Ezek 18:20), but Joyce is surely correct to point out (pp. 25–26) that the vision of the sword wielding deity in Ezek 21:6–10 (who will destroy “both the righteous and the wicked”!) is less than encouraging in terms of the “individual responsibility” theme (or any theme) (see also Joyce’s brief discussion on p. 156).
Following Zimmerli, Joyce’s most persistent theological emphasis involves a recognition of the motif of “radical theocentricity” in Ezekiel, best exemplified by Ezekiel’s frequently used “recognition formula” (with variations), “and you (or they) shall know that I am YHWH” (pp. 27–29). YHWH fears his name has been tainted, and must act out of “divine self-interest” (p. 29) to correct the misconception; the deity does this for his own reasons, superseding all human attempts at either righteousness or infidelity. At other points, Joyce introduces new theological possibilities, such as in his brief discussion of “grace” as a key (even if only implicit) concept of Ezekiel’s vision of YHWH’s actions (pp. 26–27, 57).

On the historical level, Joyce is mostly content to defend the authenticity of the book of Ezekiel as the product of a sixth century, Babylonian prophet Ezekiel; while he is not reluctant to allow certain facets of editorial activity (p. 10), and he is willing to acknowledge the circularity inherent in the attribution of certain dates (p. 12), Joyce clearly defers to the idea of a primarily authentic collection of oracles attributed to the man Ezekiel himself (p. 6). While this may be less than satisfying to stringent source critics, Joyce is able to highlight many of the difficulties inherent in the views of those who would seek to divide the book up into a plethora of redactional layers (pp. 8–16; cf. J. Garscha, Studien zum Ezechielbuch: Eine redaktionskritische Untersuchung von 1–39 [Bern: Peter Lang, 1974], who attributed only 30 verses to the prophet!). On the other hand, Joyce manages to avoid historical credulity and thus avoids slipping (as, perhaps, does Greenberg) “from a healthy agnosticism about editorial layers into an implicit assumption of authorship by the prophet himself,” a view that Joyce finds as “equally unjustified” as theories of extreme editorial fragmentation (p. 15).

Other features of the introduction that cannot be discussed here also deserve praise, such as the brief but solid treatment of Ezekiel in later traditions (pp. 53–60), which touches on everything from the Qumranites to Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film Pulp Fiction, and Joyce’s admirable (though admittedly less than satisfying) attempt to discuss text-critical problems (pp. 44–49, and sporadically throughout the commentary on pp. 65–241).

Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the treatment that invite criticism. The use of the NRSV as a kind of “base translation” for the volume may provide a certain kind of uniformity or ease of use for some readers, but many others will find the tactic unhelpful—especially given the fact that only snippets of each verse are quoted in each discussion, forcing the reader to either use the commentary with an NRSV translation at hand or piece together the sense of each pericope through the sparse phrases that appear in Joyce’s text (to give a random example, the commentary for Ezek 35:1–8 [p. 200] quotes only these fragments of the verses: “Set your face,” “Mount Seir,” “I am against you, Mount Seir,” “You shall know that I am the
LORD,” “Because you cherished an ancient enmity, “Gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity,” “I will cut off from it all who come and go,” and “Its mountains”).

Another problematic aspect of the commentary on specific passages involves the (lack of) space devoted to certain issues. To choose one obvious example: Joyce gives only a tantalizingly brief analysis of the enigmatic and alarming Ezek 20:25–26, wherein YHWH famously claims that he purposely defiled his own people by giving them certain laws that were “not good,” seemingly in the form of a command for child sacrifice. Joyce compares this statement to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the Exodus, and then comments on the phenomenon of child sacrifice in the Bible (citing only a very few key studies on the topic), concluding simply that this passage is “the darkest manifestation of Ezekiel’s radically theocentric perspective” (p. 151).

While it is fair to say that Joyce has not provided readers with an astonishingly detailed or useful commentary on every difficult historical or linguistic aspect of the book of Ezekiel, the commentary should not be judged for what it never sets out to do in the first place; the author explicitly states that his purpose is “to make a distinctive contribution to the interpretation and understanding of the book of Ezekiel, particularly in terms of its theology, grounded in both historical research and literary sensitivity” (p. vii). Paul Joyce accomplishes this task, and does so with a judicious handling of both the primary and secondary materials and with many provocative insights along the way.

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James Robson argues convincingly that word and spirit are so entwined in the book of Ezekiel that they expand the concepts of both words. Encounters with Yahweh’s word and Yahweh’s spirit are central to the prophet Ezekiel’s life and to the book bearing his name, he writes (p. 4).

Robson’s *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel* is a revision of his thesis submitted to the University of Middlesex; his Ph.D. was awarded in 2004. He thanks his supervisor Thomas Renz and readers Gordon Wenham, Paul Joyce, Ronald Clements, Andrew Mein, and Max Turner for their comments and