



# Prophetic Rhetoric in Ezekiel 16

JASON GILE

In the years before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the prophet Ezekiel charged the people of Israel with grave offenses against God and warned of imminent judgment. Rather than simply relaying information to his fellow exiles in Babylon, Ezekiel employs rhetorical devices to reach his audience at a deeper level, so they would internalize his message and grasp the seriousness of Israel's rebellion against God.

A noteworthy example is the prophet's description of Israel's unfaithfulness in chapter 16, where he uses metaphor, vivid imagery, strong language, and allusions to scriptural texts—all for rhetorical effect.

## A shocking image of sin

Like his prophetic predecessors, Ezekiel portrays idolatry against Yahweh in terms of a wife's adultery against her husband. Building on the metaphor of Israel as Yahweh's wife, the prophet tells a vivid story of Israel's relationship with God. As Ezekiel describes it, "Jerusalem" was a newborn cast into the wilderness and left to die, but Yahweh rescued her and tenderly cared for her, adorning her with the finest clothes and jewelry and feeding her with the finest flour, oil, and honey, so that she rose to royalty (16:3–14). In this story, Israel owes her very existence and all her blessings to Yahweh's abundant grace.

The tone changes dramatically in verse 15: "But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by" (NRSV). Jerusalem forgets all that Yahweh has done for her and turns to other "lovers" (vv. 33, 36). She takes the fine things that Yahweh had given her and uses them in her "fornications" (vv. 15–22).

The prophet's vivid imagery and strong language in this metaphorical story would have shocked his hearers. Ezekiel 16 contains some of the most explicit language in the Bible. The text repeatedly refers to Jerusalem's "whorings," "lewd behavior," "lust," and "insatiable" desire for her lovers.

In verse 25, the prophet says: "At every street corner you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, spreading your legs with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by" (NIV). The language in a similar passage, Ezekiel 23, is even more graphic, referring to the genitals and sexual functions of her lovers (23:20).

Why would Ezekiel describe idolatry in such overt sexual terms? In confronting his hearers with the shocking nature of "Jerusalem's" fornication, the prophet intends for them to be taken aback by the gravity of their own unfaithfulness to God. This rhetorical technique is similar to that in 2 Samuel 12, where the prophet Nathan used a story to infuriate David and show him the severity of his

sin. If Ezekiel's fellow exiles in Babylon were apathetic about Israel's idolatry, perhaps explicit imagery would shock them into remorse.

### Living an ancient oracle

To confront the people of Israel with their sins, Ezekiel also alludes to earlier scriptural texts. In particular, his depiction of the rise and fall of Israel in chapter 16 is a prophetic transformation of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. Ezekiel adopts the structure and themes of this passage and infuses them with the prophetic motif of an adulterous wife.<sup>1</sup>

The argument for Ezekiel's creative use of the Song of Moses is based on the remarkable similarities of plot and themes in Ezekiel 16 and Deuteronomy 32. Both texts exhibit virtually identical plot structures, depicting the rise and decline of Yahweh's people:

- Yahweh discovers destitute Israel in a barren location.
- He delivers her and renders lavish care upon her, so that she prospers.
- Israel in her prosperity forsakes Yahweh, pursuing other gods and forgetting her origins.
- Israel's disobedience provokes Yahweh to anger.
- Israel is punished for her sins
- Finally, Israel is restored by Yahweh.

At the same points in this plot structure, the two texts display parallel language, synonyms, and rare motifs. Significantly, the idea that Yahweh discovered Israel as an infant in a barren location is found only in these two passages in the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy 32, Yahweh's care for Israel is portrayed as an eagle spreading (*פָרַשׁ*; *prsh*) its

wings (*כָּנָף*; *knp*) over its young; in Ezekiel 16, when Yahweh enters into a marriage covenant with Jerusalem, he spreads (*פָרַשׁ*; *prsh*) his "wing"/garment (*כָּנָף*; *knp*) over her.

In addition, both passages speak of Israel eating honey (*דָבֵשׁ*; *dbsh*) and oil (*שָׁמֶן*; *shmn*) while in Yahweh's care, and both describe Israel turning to "strangers" (*זָרִים*; *zrym*) and "provoking Yahweh to anger" (*בָּעֵס*; *c's*). Lastly, both texts speak of Israel's restoration with the word *כַּפֵּר* (*kpr*; "atone")—an uncommon word in restoration oracles—to describe Yahweh's renewal of his people.

Deuteronomy itself suggests that the Song of Moses would testify against Israel in the future. In the narrative framework of the passage, Moses predicts that "when many evils and troubles have come upon [the people], this Song shall confront them as a witness, for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring" (Deut 31:21). Moses' words were fulfilled in the prophetic judgment announced by Ezekiel.

Since the Song of Moses was well-known in ancient Israel, Ezekiel's audience would have recognized his many allusions to it. The song foretells a coming fall into idolatry, and Ezekiel effectively declares that Moses' prediction of sin and punishment has come to pass in the current generation.<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel's hearers surely felt the force of this rhetorical technique, as he applied the judgment in their treasured song to their current circumstances as exiles in Babylon.

### Getting God's message

The diverse rhetorical techniques we find in Ezekiel would have instilled the prophet's message deep in the minds of his

audience. By using explicit sexual language and imagery to portray Israel's idolatry as adultery, Ezekiel caused his hearers to feel the weight of their sins. And by applying the Song of Moses to his own day, he showed that the turn away from Yahweh described in Deuteronomy 32 had come to pass.

Through examining these rhetorical techniques, we learn that Ezekiel's messages were designed not simply to inform,

---

Through explicit imagery and scriptural allusions, Ezekiel caused his hearers to feel the weight of their sins.

---

but to persuade the Jewish exiles to grasp the seriousness of Yahweh's judgment.

<sup>1</sup> Jason Gile, "Ezekiel 16 and the Song of Moses: A Prophetic Transformation?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 87–108.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the Egyptian *Admonitions of Ipuwer*: "What the ancestors foretold has now happened" (in William W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture* [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 1:94).



Jason Gile, Ph.D., is associate dean and affiliate professor of Old Testament at Northern Seminary in Lombard, Ill.