

DIGLOSSIA, REVELATION, AND EZEKIEL'S INAUGURAL RITE

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The cumbersome and grammatically inappropriate and irritating opening chapter of Ezekiel may be a rhetorical device, where irregular language may attempt to highlight an alleged supremacy of a relatively pristine literary language of classical Biblical Hebrew found in the rest of Ezekiel and the Hebrew Bible (HB). It appears that a dramatic entry of Ezekiel onto the prophetic scene intends at the same time to reaffirm standard literary Hebrew as the only acceptable means to convey God's thoughts to the world. A convergence of factors leads to this suggestion: the nature of prophetic calls, an emphasis on language and speaking in Ezekiel 1–3, the nature of the linguistic corruptions in Ezekiel's inaugural vision, the social crisis of exiled Israel, priestly penchants, and the use of dramatic/rhetorical devices in the book as a whole.

I. SERVANT CALLS

Prophetic and priestly calls occur along with purification rites and statements about language and speaking often enough in the HB to recommend a look into Ezekiel's call and, specifically, God's linguistic concerns in that call. This may be of some help in understanding why such a grammatically anomalous and corrupt text introduces this prophetic book. Form-critical studies on the prophetic call narratives in the HB have revealed some consistencies between calls, including Ezekiel's.¹ They are found in the calls of Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, the high priest Jeshua, and Ezekiel. Two of these common components will be highlighted: (1) the presence of an impediment to the success of the mission to which God is calling the servant, and (2) God's encouragement and rectification of any impediments. For instance, Moses claims he is not eloquent (Exod 4:10), but God's response is that he alone creates the deaf and mute and that his divine presence will teach Moses what to say (vv. 11–12). Gideon claims to be the least man in the weakest clan of Manasseh (Judg 6:15), but God's assurance to Gideon is both his divine presence and Gideon's certain victory (v. 16). Jeremiah claims that his impediment is his immature speech, presumably lacking the stately

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¹ Cf. e.g. N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 297–323; R. Youngblood, "The Call of Jeremiah," *Criswell Theological Review* 5/1 (1990) 99–108.

speech of an experienced prophet (Jer 1:6), so after touching his lips God assures Jeremiah that he is with the prophet and will command him what to say (vv. 7–8). Isaiah objects to his call on the grounds of having “unclean lips,” to which God responds with a purifying ember touching the lips of Isaiah and the encouragement to speak God’s specific words (Isa 6:5–7, 9). In Zechariah’s vision Jeshua’s call as priest into a ruling position is obstructed by Satan, who presumably draws attention to Jeshua’s inappropriate clothing. The Lord rebukes Satan and then clothes Jeshua appropriately and encourages him in his duties as judge and leader.

In all five of these cases there are allegedly reasonable excuses or impediments to the call of leaders and prophets. God is always personally involved, however, in the dispelling of objections or obstacles, and of course he wins the argument. All five cases present a humiliated servant who is embarrassed by speech, or dress, or social position. They then go on to present a sufficient response by their sovereign God. The inadequacy of the servant is corrected by God so that the newly purified or perfectly scripted priest, prophet, or judge is now acceptable and worthy for the assigned mission.

Ezekiel’s call is very similar to the calls of Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Jeshua. Ezekiel also receives an inaugural call that introduces God’s command to him to speak only divine words to Israel. God’s instructions during the call do not stop at purifying or blessing simply the lips, or merely reclothing the subject. Rather, they are the more extreme measure of expecting Ezekiel to actually swallow the scroll that contains the divine revelation to the rebellious nation of Israel. But where is the usual impediment or typical obstacle to fulfilling the commission? Is Ezekiel’s call an anomaly, with no parallel impediment to the five calls of servants discussed earlier? Perhaps pursuing a consistency for Ezekiel here is foolish, a mere hobgoblin of little minds. Is it possible, on the other hand, that a familiar impediment in the other calls—namely, diction—is the very obstacle to Ezekiel’s call as well? Like those of Moses, Jeremiah and Isaiah, could the impediment be of a linguistic nature in Ezekiel, a linguistic problem that God again corrects in another servant? Does he again provide the very words to be spoken, leaving no room for verbal ambiguity or confusion?

Certainly the importance of specific linguistic and oratorical concerns is obvious in Ezekiel 1–3. And those concerns are continued, since God controls Ezekiel’s speech or muteness through the third chapter, and indeed throughout the book (e.g. 14:27; 22:21–22). Chapters 2–3 tell us basically that Ezekiel is being sent to a rebellious and stubborn people who may or may not listen. Nonetheless the prophet is encouraged not to fear nor be rebellious himself. Rather, he is to speak God’s very words, not his own. This is the familiar commissioning message to Israelite prophets and leaders that we have just surveyed. But there are particularly intriguing lexical parallels between Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel. Each of these prophets of course is sent to Israel to reveal God’s words, and there is naturally a concern that the language they speak be understood and effective. Moses, however, says he is “heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued” (*kēbad-peh ûkēbad lāšôn*) and thus a poor choice (Exod 4:10). Ezekiel on the other hand is encouraged that he is

not going to people who are "heavy-tongued," nor are they "deep-lipped" (*imqê šápâ*), so they should understand Ezekiel's words (Ezek 3:5–6). Isaiah encourages Israel, affirming that those who have been their foreign oppressors, who are "deep-lipped" and whose speech is unintelligible, will no longer be in Zion (Isa 33:19). "Deep-lipped" and "heavy-tongued" speech, needless to say, is a major impediment that both prophet and God want to be overcome.² Unfortunately the exact nature of "deep-lippedness" or "heavy-tonguedness" is hard to identify. The Lord's emphatic statement to Ezekiel is that the words Ezekiel has just digested are to be the very words the prophet speaks, for they are thus guaranteed to be understood by the Israelites, whereas any "heavy-tonguedness" or "deep-lippedness" will not be appropriate and will indeed be an impediment. Why would there be any need to inform or remind Ezekiel that ineffective speech and nondivine words would be unacceptable? What is there in the text that indicates that "deep-lippedness" or "heavy-tonguedness" was in fact an impediment in Ezekiel's case? Perhaps the fact that Ezekiel's account of his inaugural vision is one of the most grammatically corrupt pericopes in the HB is a clue. Perhaps the inaugural rite of imbibing the divine oracles was the corrective measure for this very corrupt grammar, comparable to the touching of lips.

II. LANGUAGE AND SPEAKING IN EZEKIEL 1–3

In the most recent linguistic treatment of the opening vision of Ezekiel, Daniel Block surveys the attempts to explain the reasons for these textual corruptions. He itemizes and categorizes the problems and then offers the first proportionate explanation for the strangeness of the text, proportionate in the sense that the extremity of the grammatical abnormalities is taken seriously by Block. Then something beyond inapplicable textual-critical methods is suggested as a solution to the enigmatic condition of the text.³ For Block, the overwhelming experience of a vision of God and from God was enough to knock Ezekiel's linguistic habits off center. The event had such an emotional impact on Ezekiel that the priest was unable to formulate grammatically correct and smooth sentences. So the account, according to Block, not only conveys the vision but also carries within it tangible evidence of a prophet whose language buckled under the emotional strain. This is a possible solution, and it does more justice to the extremity of the linguistic irregularities than other explanations thus far offered.

² Cf. Isa 28:11 as well for phrases denoting difficulty in speech.

³ D. I. Block, "Text and Emotion: A Study in the 'Corruptions' in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:4–28)," *CBQ* 50 (1988). He states that "it seems that to lay the burden of all of the irregularities on the shoulders of either scribes or redactors is to impose upon them a load which they might have been both unwilling and unable to bear" (ibid. 427–428). For examples of textual- and redaction-critical explanations see W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 55–56; K. S. Freedy, "The Glosses in Ezekiel i–xxiv," *VT* 20 (1970) 131–136; W. Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 100–110; C. B. Houk, "The Final Redaction of Ezekiel 10," *JBL* 90 (1971) 46.

It is gratuitous, however, to presume that emotion severely affects grammar. Undoubtedly it affects smoothness in syntax, sentence construction, and coherency of an account. Some of what Block has itemized in very helpful ways as linguistically anomalous might be attributed to emotion, but the very core of a language—its grammatical base—is not so obviously susceptible to emotional impact. On the other hand, in English terminology Block does describe Ezekiel's language in the inaugural vision to be what Biblical Hebrew might refer to as "deep-lipped" and "heavy-tongued." Block uses descriptors such as "cumbersome and difficult," "awkward," "convoluted . . . weighted down with wordiness and repetition." Compared to the call of Isaiah, he concludes, "where the description of Ezekiel's call is beset with grammatical and textual difficulties, that of Isaiah is virtually problem free . . . an exalted style quite appropriate for so sublime an experience."⁴ Compared to the pristine language of Isaiah, this inaugural vision of Ezekiel is expressed in language that if not corrected could well be considered an impediment to revelation. In fact one need not look at Isaiah but simply to the remainder of Ezekiel itself, and specifically chap. 10, where the similar account of the same vision is recounted in more acceptable literary Hebrew grammar and syntax. The implication here is perhaps that what Ezekiel could not do in chap. 1 he is able to do with the best of them after having eaten the scroll. Is it possible then that the missing impediment in Ezekiel's call is as close as the very grammar used to introduce his call?

If the grammatical inconsistencies are not due to emotion or textual/redactional reasons, then what is the reason for the unconventional language in the prophet's call account? Perhaps the reason for the irregular nature of the language in Ezek 1:4–28 is sociodialectal.

Upon looking at the grammar of 1:4–28 one discovers a portion of the irregularities to be those seen by some scholars of Hebrew as possible colloquialisms found elsewhere in the HB. The study of dialect in Biblical Hebrew is still and always will be a very incomplete science, since the formal literary language in which most of the HB is written suppresses any consistent display of distinguishable dialects, including regional and vernacular. For instance, successful attempts to reveal a north-Israelite or non-Judahite dialect are still wanting,⁵ and evidence of a colloquial dialect still

⁴ Block, "Text" 424, 434. The problems abruptly and almost totally disappear in the last three verses, however (Ezek 1:26–28).

⁵ For brief and extended discussions of a possible north-Israelite dialect cf. e.g. C. F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903) 208–209; H. S. Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuche* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1935) 12, 43, 79; M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958) 72, 78, 228; C. Rabin, *A Short History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 1974) 27; R. Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976) 35, 37; W. R. Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985) 38–39, 109, 227, 233–234; G. Rendsburg, "The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew," *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. Levine; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992) 227; "The Northern Origin of 'The Last Words of David' (2 Sam 23, 1–7)," *Bib* 69 (1988) 113–121; *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990); D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating Its Nature and Date* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988) 32–43.

leaves many questions unanswered.⁶ Yet it seems reasonable that at least at times literary Hebrew would let down its guard and allow the vernacular to surface.

The weakening of gender consistency in a sentence between a subject and other parts of speech that refer to that noun is cited at times as an example of the vernacular appearing in classical Hebrew.⁷ The inaugural vision of Ezekiel uses pronominal suffixes in a "totally arbitrary" way.⁸ Indeed, masculine suffixes are attached to prepositions, nouns, and verbal forms that refer to the feminine nouns "fire" (ʔēš) and "living creatures" (*ḥayyôt*) more than twenty-five times. Furthermore, feminine suffixes are likewise used in reference to masculine nouns five times. Appropriate suffixes are used as well, but only half as many times. Granted, the vision is revealed in language that admits only to estimating the identity of the creatures and objects seen. But once they are somehow given a taxonomy it is unlikely that emotion would send the prophet's grammar off the linguistic charts. If, however, Ezekiel defers to the vernacular language, perhaps he should swallow some prescribed divine words to correct the indecency.⁹

The text also reveals masculine verbal forms that refer to the feminine subjects "fire" and "living creatures." In fact in practically all cases masculine verbs refer to both feminine and masculine subjects. The feminine noun "wing" (*kānāp*) is also ambivalently referenced by both the feminine and masculine forms ʔiš (1:9, 11, 23 [twice]) and ʔiššā (1:9, "each one")—and even in the same verse (1:9).

Infinitive absolutes with *wāw* that are used to continue finite verbs are relatively rare in literary Hebrew, and it has been suggested that they represent a vernacular substratum.¹⁰ Though the word order is inverted (the infinitive following the subject in this case), v. 14 does begin with this consecutive construction. In fact it is a *wāw*-consecutive infinitive absolute following even another infinitive absolute that piques our interest.

Diglossia research, however, will not explain all of the abnormalities in Ezekiel 1. For example, rather than the more efficient suffix forms for feminine plural pronouns the full independent pronominal form is attached to

⁶ Discussions on a colloquial dialect seen in Biblical Hebrew vary in length from published dissertations to articles, brief comments and notes: G. Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1990); G. R. Driver, "Colloquialisms in the Old Testament," *Mélanges Marcel Cohen* (ed. D. Cohen; The Hague: Mouton, 1970) 232–239; J. MacDonald, "Some Distinctive Characteristics of Israelite Spoken Hebrew," *BO* 32 (1975) 162–175; G. Abramson, "Colloquialisms in the Old Testament," *Sem* 2 (1971–72) 1–16; R. C. Steiner, "A Colloquialism in Jer. 5:13 from the Ancestor of Mishnaic Hebrew," *JSS* 37 (1992) 21–26; Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language* 36–46.

⁷ Rendsburg, *Diglossia* 25–62; Driver, "Colloquialisms" 234.

⁸ Block, "Text" 420. See also M. F. Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition* (JSOTSup 90; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 78–81. The linguistic observations in this article are based on Block's thorough study.

⁹ Though God himself is recorded to have used some of the freedom in Ezekiel 34 (Rooker, *Transition* 79 n. 44).

¹⁰ A. Rubenstein, "A Finite Verb Continued by an Infinitive Absolute in Biblical Hebrew," *VT* 2 (1952) 361–367.

prepositional *lāmed* twice (*lāhēnnā*, vv. 5, 23) and to a masculine noun (v. 11). Though consistent in gender, it is irregularly lengthy in form.

Garbled identification of these creatures as many creatures or one creature (vv. 20–22) adds to the confusion of the revelation, as does the annoying alternation of the number of the heads referred to: Is there one head, or are there many heads (vv. 22–26)?

Block includes examples of “stylistically irregular” features as well: asyndetic constructions,¹¹ exegetical enigmas, clear and verbatim repetitions of phrases that appear dittographic, unnecessary repetitions of detail, and an alleged overall disorganization of the material and its presentation. Some of his assessments are subjective as to whether the grammar and style are truly irregular, but most are accurate in substance and lead to a compelling argument: The language of the inaugural vision is indeed deficient beyond any textual-critical rationale.

If it is reasonable to consider the enigmatic language in Ezekiel 1 as an impediment that we would expect based on other prophetic calls, and since there is typical corrective action taken by God in chap. 2, are there any other circumstances related to Ezekiel to support this hypothesis?

III. A CULTURE IN CRISIS

In a time of geographical, political, cultic and social crisis it is not surprising to see some effect on the linguistic consciousness of the social leaders. For instance, Nehemiah is annoyed by the influence of foreign languages on the language of his people (Neh 13:24). Furthermore, during the growth of Aramaic as the lingua franca of the Middle East we see a dramatic phase in the diachronic development of even literary Hebrew.¹²

This cultural crisis was at its peak during the exile when Ezekiel spoke. It was a time of ethnocentric despair. No sacrifices because of the temple’s destruction, no Davidic lineage as royalty (and thus a covenant apparently breached), prophetic integrity constantly in question due to rampant false prophecy, a promised land vacated by God’s people—surely this was Israel at its greatest crisis.¹³ The crisis of prophetic authority was acute, and the scathing revelation God had in mind for Israel through Ezekiel demanded that his voice and message be credible. Ezekiel’s message of deliverance

¹¹ Perhaps conjunctions would have been smoother in three of the cases (vv. 12, 16, 24), but we should expect an asyndetic form in v. 4, which is consistent with the late Biblical Hebrew that Ezekiel’s literary language can tend toward at times; see A. Kropat, *Die Syntax des Autors der Chronik* (BZAW 16; Töpelmann: Giessen, 1909) 62; Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language* 139.

¹² Studies include Kropat, *Syntax*; Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew*; A. Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew* (Tel Aviv, 1967 [Hebrew]); A. Hurvitz, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition: A Study in Post-Exilic Hebrew and Its Implications for the Dating of Psalms* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1972 [Hebrew]); *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (CahRB 20; Paris: Gabalda, 1982); *A History of the Hebrew Language* (ed. E. Y. Kutscher; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982); Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language*; Rooker, *Transition*.

¹³ See explanations of this cultural crisis in R. R. Wilson, “Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel,” *Int* 38 (1984) 117–130; J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 9–11.

from a foreign power and land parallels Moses' message of the earlier exodus, as does his extensive discussion on the temple and its accompanying cult. Likewise a lack of eloquence on Moses' part is paralleled by the lack of eloquence in Ezekiel's first attempt at relaying a vision in his own language.¹⁴

One would expect, then, that conservatism in language would rule where there was little tolerance for any pollution of especially the literary language. The exact identity of the abnormal language that is used in chap. 1 cannot be determined, but it is understandable and expected that an extreme measure was necessary to rectify the impediment. It was critical that the message not be confusing, vulgar, or unattractive to the ears, since the message had such historical significance in setting the record straight on the reasons for the exile. At the same time the message must offer hope for Israel's future reconciliation. A nation without its cultural moorings still needed both admonition and encouragement, and every vestige of the true culture that remained, including the official prophetic and literary diction, had to be retained for the credibility of the message. If Ezekiel's message is pivotal in Israel's history, the delivery of the message itself had to be beyond reproach even in its grammar and coherence.¹⁵

It is possible as well that prophetic standards of good practice had deteriorated to some extent, as had the rest of the culture. False prophecy could well have been couched in poor, unacceptable diction, a habit of the sort only a dramatic inaugural rite could break.

IV. MOSES AND EZEKIEL: PRIESTS AND PROPHETS

Who was more likely to spearhead the conservation of appropriate language and diction than the priestly guild, the guardians of the culture? Such conservation abounds even today with the use of archaisms in our contemporary religious and liturgical language. Ezekiel, like Moses, was a prophet. Even more than Moses, he was an official priest as well. His priestly background explains his qualifications to speak about temple and cult among other matters. His prophetic call finalizes the authority of his message, which he delivered to an exiled population whose culture had been stripped of its most significant visual aids.¹⁶ If the message is so significant, then it

¹⁴ "The striking call vision and the picture of Ezekiel that it contains are designed to undergird his authority so that his fellow exiles would heed his oracles. Such support was especially needed in Ezekiel's case, for his message cut deeply into the strongly held religious beliefs of his audience" (Wilson, "Prophecy" 130).

¹⁵ Again, this is not to say that Ezekiel avoids the grammatical/lexical features that betray its movement toward late Biblical Hebrew (Rooker, *Transition* 185–186). But even the book's diachronic progression in language contrasts with the highly irregular nature of this throne vision.

¹⁶ "As both prophet and priest, Ezekiel had access to a wide variety of traditional forms of speech. He makes full use of prophetic speech formulae, such as 'Thus says Yahweh' and 'The word of Yahweh came to me,' and of such traditional genres as the judgment oracle, with its bipartite indictment-verdict form, and the vision report. . . . His priestly connections are equally apparent at the literary level. His use of legal formulations (e.g. 18:5–24), the case history (14:12–20), and declarative formulae of the kind found in the collections of ritual law in the Pentateuch all point in this direction" (Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* 7).

is understandable to highlight the equal significance of it being carried in the most eloquent and persuasive manner—which of course meant in the standard literary language of the day. The contorted grammar and style of chap. 1, then, is perhaps a rhetorical prop that gives the book a context in which to elevate and authenticate a prophetic message that transcends any “deep-lippedness” or “heavy-tonguedness.” A cultic message must only be conveyed in the proper literary language. Eloquence is everything.

Moses certainly thought so as well, and it is his self-effacing admission of lack of eloquence that forms an important parallel with Ezekiel, who also begins his prophecy in a noneloquent way. In fact God strikes poor Ezekiel dumb, allowing him to speak only the proper words at the proper time. Rather than a brother to help speak the words of God, as Moses was afforded, Ezekiel swallows those divine words. Unlike Moses’ impediment, however, which is only referred to as *kēbad lāšōn*, Ezekiel’s first attempt at relaying a divine vision is itself related in and is public evidence of *kēbad lāšōn*.

Further parallels between Moses and Ezekiel have been offered that would give greater reason to see Ezekiel 1 as an auditory aid to any conscious paralleling of Moses’ and Ezekiel’s calls to their prophetic roles. Such parallels would give Ezekiel the credibility he would need to address a discouraged people. The vision of God itself “makes clear that Ezekiel came as close as any Israelite since Moses to seeing the face of God, and the prophet’s message must therefore have divine authority.”¹⁷ H. McKeating notes numerous parallels between Ezekiel’s message and that of Moses and concludes: “What Moses does for the first tabernacle and the first settlement, Ezekiel is attempting to do for the second temple and for the restoration.”¹⁸ Lack of eloquence, then, is only one of several parallels between the two prophets.

One might object that since Ezekiel was a priest and part of the elite he would not have had any tendency toward the colloquial in the first place. But by colloquial I do not mean crass slang or street language. Rather, I refer to the ordinary language of day-to-day conversation. It is furthermore an assumption that priests and the higher echelon did not speak in standard literary Hebrew diction, so Ezekiel would have had a diglossic mode of verbal communication. The question is whether this diglossia is evident as we move from his initiation vision to his inaugural rite. Given the sorry state of Israelite prophecy at the time, pristine prophetic conveyance may not have been a priority even for Ezekiel.

V. OTHER CREATIVE ELEMENTS IN EZEKIEL

It might be helpful for a moment to remember that Ezekiel is one of the most creative books in the HB. Songs, narratives, parables and riddles make

¹⁷ Wilson, “Prophecy” 125. He continues: “In a chaotic age, when prophets were making conflicting claims, Ezekiel met all of Jeremiah’s criteria for a true prophet.”

¹⁸ H. McKeating, “Ezekiel the ‘Prophet Like Moses?’”, *JSOT* 61 (1994) 103. See also J. D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976).

their way into the prophecy in ways combined nowhere else. Dramatizations of Israel's circumstances even include simple or elaborate props. Dramatic scenes are depicted in Ezekiel to make God's points, from feigning anxiety while eating and drinking to moving small objects like children would move their toys. Carrying baggage as if going into exile, clapping hands and stamping feet, eating a scroll—all of this speaks to a creative telling of Israel's past, present and future in the most entertaining of ways. These modes of delivery of the divine message are numerous in Ezekiel. So to add the jarring poor grammar and confusing style of Ezekiel 1 to exemplify inadequate speech is not outside the realm of possibility in this unique book of prophecy.

Corrective measures to smooth the style and make gender-consistent grammar were certainly possible within the scribal transmissions in subsequent editions, especially in a text describing a vision of God himself. The question remains whether the heavily corrupted text is perpetuated by scribes for an understood reason—that is, an intentionally dramatic and esthetic reason. It is suggested, then, that Ezekiel 1 is a rhetorical device that reinforces the supremacy of literary Hebrew as the medium for revelation.

VI. LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Admittedly this argument would be more convincing if the aberrations of Ezekiel 1 could be attributed confidently to a well-known dialectal source. Unfortunately, in spite of some evidence of diachronic and synchronic developments the literary language of the entire HB is so dominant that no regional or social linguistic grouping can make a solid name for itself. It is equally difficult to define exactly what is “deep-lipped” and “heavy-tongued” language. Only options can be suggested and left to those with continued interest in the subject. This is a necessary step since the pervasive presumption that “deep-lipped” and “heavy-tongued” can only mean a foreign language is not clearly the only or even most appropriate interpretation.¹⁹ As we noted before, Moses tries to excuse himself for “heavy-tonguedness” and could hardly be referring to a foreign language. Though the context of the only other use of either phrase might infer a foreign language, it does not demand that translation (Isa 33:19). Rather, foreign languages are one type of unintelligible language and do not exhaust the realm of denotation of what the Hebrew refers to by “deep-lipped” or “heavy-tongued” diction. Indeed, Biblical Hebrew has a term for a foreign language—simply “another tongue” (*lašôn ʾaḥeret*, Isa 28:11). “Stammering lips” (*laʿāgê šāpā*) are also mentioned in 28:11 (cf. also 33:19), but that term too is not clear in denoting specifically and only a foreign tongue as opposed to any generally unintelligible language regardless of ethnic attachment. One might argue that it would be senseless to tell Ezekiel that he was going to Israelites who

¹⁹ E.g. G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936); J. W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 50; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 68–69.

could speak and understand Hebrew. But it would be helpful to remind him that he was being sent to people who were expecting a prophet to speak in the more elevated tongue, at least when prophesying on the part of God, and with greater oratorical skill than first demonstrated in Ezekiel's inaugural vision account: That kind of admonition would make sense. Since the population to which he spoke was to a significant degree the elite of Judah who were at least the first to be deported in the late seventh century, this social stratum would especially have expected elevated prophetic diction. To a large extent it was the agrarian people left behind who presumably would have been less offended by a nonliterary, nonconventional prophetic diction.²⁰

VII. CONCLUSION

What sort of language is reflected in Ezekiel 1? First, it is possible that Block is correct and that the language is "heavy-tongued" because of the emotional effect of Ezekiel's experience on this discourse. Those who believe that emotion can significantly affect grammar might find a synthesis here. Second, having said that "heavy-tongued" need not mean a foreign language it could still refer to a garbled attempt to form grammatically correct sentences by a foreigner. The lack of gender consistency and eloquence in Ezekiel 1 is like a foreigner trying to speak Hebrew without adequate mastery of the grammar. Why Ezekiel would recount the vision in the clumsy speech of a foreigner would be hard to understand, however. Third, if the divergent grammar and language is not at all identifiable, perhaps it is an intentional, artificial corruption of the language designed to contrast with an acceptable literary language—a rough form of grammar and syntax.

Finally, "heavy-tongued" could refer to the looser grammatical conventions of the daily language, a vernacular dialect. For lack of any better identification of the source of this divergent diction of the inaugural vision, this would be the preferred hook on which to hang the hypothesis. But such a preference can be held only tentatively.

Whatever sort of language Ezekiel 1 is, and regardless of any definitive or identifiable source, one thing is certain: Its source is not the honeycomb to which Ezekiel compares the ingested words of God: "Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in the mouth" (Ezek 3:3). Immediately after Ezekiel's comparison with sweet honey, the Lord emphasizes that Israel expects more than noneloquent or sour words spoken grammatically incorrectly and stylistically clumsily.

What appears to be happening in Ezekiel 1–3 is a reaffirmation of an official, literary language that tolerates no deviance from the norm. God himself must go to the extreme of forcing the consumption of the revelation as well as holding Ezekiel's tongue captive, only to let it loose to speak the

²⁰ "The elite, who fostered biblical Hebrew, were mostly killed or exiled, leaving in the country mainly lower classes and villagers" (J. Fellman, "Biblical Hebrew: A Sociolinguistic History," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (1995) 25).

divinely dictated words. Evidently in Ezekiel's case there was no room for the more organic or dynamic inspiration of the revelation of God that allowed for the synergy of human experience and divine message to combine and convey authoritative pronouncements. With Ezekiel the risk seemed too great to do anything else than to control all of his body movements, including his tongue. There was only one way to speak and reveal God's mind, and that way included standard literary conventions. A. Cody remarks that Moses' (Exod 33:1-4) and Isaiah's calls (Isa 6:1-7) "contain imagery expressing God's powerful separation from this profane and common world."²¹ Is this not exactly what we see as we proceed from Ezekiel 1 to chaps. 2-3—a clear separation of noneloquent speech from the holy words of God's own prophecy written on a scroll?

²¹ A. Cody, *Ezekiel* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1984) 24.