2016

Notes on the Literary Structure of the Book of Ezekiel

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Richard M. Davidson has written the most profound study on the literary structure of the book of Ezekiel published to date.\(^1\) He built his outstanding research on the work of other scholars\(^2\) but presented a most compelling work. Even though new studies have appeared on the topic, no recent publication supersedes his contribution.\(^3\) Scholars who deal with the literary structure of the book of

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\(^3\) For recent examples, see Tyler D. Mayfield, *Literary Structures and Setting in Ezekiel* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Mayfield looks for the literary markers and he finds them in the chronological formulas which divide the book into 13 macrounits. He then further
Ezekiel are amazed at how beautiful its literary artistry is, and they agree that Ezekiel’s literary architecture is more advanced than in other prophetic books."4 Such a clear and symmetrical structure is unparalleled as Margaret Odell aptly observes: “The book of Ezekiel reflects a degree of literary coherence unmatched in the canon of biblical prophets.”5 David Dorsey claims that “the Book of Ezekiel has been rigorously designed in a grand sevenfold structuring scheme.”6

Understanding its structure is decisive for interpreting the meaning of the book. The document is marvelously developed on the background of the most tragic event in Old Testament history, namely the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 587/586 BCE. The sanctuary was the place for reconciliation, receiving grace, and worshiping the Lord. With this devastation collapsed the hope and aspirations of God’s people, because they lost practically everything—homes, capital city, independence, autonomy, freedom, and worst of all, the central place of worship, and they were deported into Babylonian captivity. This unprecedented tragic event lies at the organizational heart of this book: chaps. 1–25 run up to this event and

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chaps. 33 to 48 depict messages after this catastrophe. The basic linear progressive structure of the book of Ezekiel is threefold: (1) judgment on Israel—chaps. 1–24; (2) judgment on foreign nations—chaps. 25–32; and (3) comfort and new life for Israel—chaps. 33–48. Each part may be divided in other subunits.

Davidson presents his literary analysis of the macrostructure of the book of Ezekiel on the basis of used vocabulary, conceptual observations, and thematic features, and convincingly demonstrates that the book contains many insightful panel structures. As the culmination of his outstanding work, he draws the chiastic structure of Ezekiel with its center on “Judgment on the Fallen Cherub” with the following 9 parts:

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**The Chiastic Structure of Ezekiel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgment on the Fallen Cherub</th>
<th>28:11–19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Oracles against the foreign nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Jerusalem besieged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Oracles of judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yahweh Comes to His Temple: He comes to the defiled Temple for investigative judgment then departs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E

| D’                            | Oracles against the foreign nations | 29–32 |
| C’                            | Jerusalem falls | 33 |

B’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oracles of restoration</th>
<th>34–39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A’</td>
<td>Yahweh Comes to His Temple: He comes to the restored Temple on the Day of Atonement and does not depart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This symmetric literary structure was a subject of our many conversations. The focus of his structure seemed to me too limited, and I

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7 Chapters 1–24 describe messages of judgment which were delivered before this tragedy *par excellence* in order to prevent it (Ezekiel calls people to repentance and admonishes them to follow God faithfully—Ezek 14:6; 18:30–32; 33:11), and chaps. 33–48 describe new hope for the people after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC when they lost sovereignty and their religion-centered activities were terminated. In the second part, Ezekiel comforts and as a pastor speaks about the restoration and a new future for God’s people.

8 Davidson, "Chiastic Literary Structure," 75.
tried to convince him to enlarge it. I proposed that the central part of the chiasm should be doubly-focused and intermingled with additional elements. There are four reasons why I wanted to improve Davidson’s chiastic structure:

I. To Make It Consistently Theocentric

There is an extraordinary emphasis on God in the book of Ezekiel. The Lord is in the beginning (see the introductory vision about the Lord’s Glory which is a euphemism for God himself), at the center (he judges not only Israel but also the surrounding nations), at the end when God with his glory returns to the new Temple and the city receives the new name “God is there” (Ezek 48:35, a fitting title for Ezekiel’s entire message), and everywhere else in between in the book. Judgments and renewal of God’s people are explained from “God’s point of view.”

James Hamilton states that “the Glory of God in salvation through judgment is the centre of biblical theology.” People are always described in their relationship to God and the Lord wishes that “they will be my people and I will be their God” (11:20; see also 14:11; 34:30; 36:28; 37:27). Depending upon their attitude toward God, they would either prosper or undergo the covenant curses. The whole book is a metanarrative about God. It is a bittersweet story because his people were stubborn and/or indifferent, did not repent, and did not faithfully follow the Lord; consequently the covenant lawsuit curses occurred. All three visions (1–3; 8–11; 40–48) are focused on God himself and his activities. In chap. 37 God demonstrates that Israel can live only by his word and Spirit, because God’s Presence gives life where before, death reigned. Joyce rightly speaks about “the radical theocentricity of Ezekiel.” Greenberg explains in his commentary on Ezekiel that the author of the book emphasizes the Majesty of God (see 1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 10:4, 18–19; 11:23; 43:2, 4–5).

Many repetitious phrases reveal this, as well, for example: “The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel/me” (used 50 times in the book: 1:3; 3:16; 6:1; 7:1; 11:14; 12:1; 33:1; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 37:15; 38:1; etc.); “hear the word of the Lord” (84 times in the book: 1:3; 3:23; 6:1; 7:1; 11:14; 12:1; 33:1; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 37:15; 38:1; etc.).

9 Bible quotations are from NIV translation unless it is indicated otherwise.
12 Paul M. Joyce, Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel, JSOTSup 51 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 89.
13 Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 80.
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(Sovereign) Lord” (attested 10 times: 6:3; 13:2; 16:35; 20:47 [=21:3]; 25:3; 34:7, 9; 36:1, 4; 37:4; see also similar phrasing in 2:8; 3:10; 33:30; 40:4; 44:5); “I the Lord have spoken” (employed 14 times: 5:13, 15, 17; 17:21, 24; 21:17 [22], 32 [37]; 22:14; 24:14; 26:14; 30:12; 34:24; 36:36; 37:14); “I am the Lord your God” (stated four times: 20:5, 7, 19, 20); “I am the Sovereign Lord” (used five times: 13:9; 23:49; 24:24; 28:24; 29:16); “I am your God” (occurring only once in 34:31); “I am the Lord their God” (used four times: 28:26; 34:30; 39:22, 28); “this is what the Sovereign Lord says” (occurring 126 times: 2:4; 3:27; 5:5, 7, 8; 6:11; 38:3, 10, 14, 17; 39:1; etc.); “declares the Sovereign Lord” (attested 81 times: 5:11; 11:8, 21; 12:25, 28; 13:8, 16; 14:11, 14, 16, 18; etc.); “declares the Lord” (employed four times: 13:6, 7; 16:58; 37:14); “the hand of the Lord was upon him/me” (stated seven times: 1:3; 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1); “visions of God” (used three times: 1:1; 8:3; 40:2); “He/the Lord said to me” (used 36 times: 2:1; 3:1, 10, 22; 4:16; 8:5; etc.); “they will know that I (am) the Lord” (occurring identically 25 times: 5:13; 6:10, 14; 7:27; 12:15, 16; 24:27; 25:11, 17; 26:6; 28:22, 23; 29:9, 21; 30:8, 19, 25, 26; 32:15; 33:29; 34:27; 35:15; 36:38; 38:23; 39:6; see also 18 similar phrases in 17:24; 20:12, 26; 21:10; 25:14; 28:24; 29:6, 16; 34:30; 36:23, 36; 37:28; 38:16; 39:7, 22, 23, 28); “you will know that I (am) the Lord” (used identically 21 times: 6:7, 13; 7:4, 9; 11:10, 12; 12:20; 13:14; 14:8; 15:7; 17:21; 20:38, 42, 44; 22:22; 25:5; 35:9; 36:11; 37:6, 13, 14; see also 13 similar phrases in 13:9, 21, 23; 14:23; 16:62; 20:20; 22:16; 23:49; 24:24; 25:7; 35:4, 12; 36:32); “making Myself known to them” (employed only once: 20:5); God’s knowing (attested twice: 11:5; 37:3); and “the Spirit” or “the Spirit of the Lord/God” (used 20 times: 1:12, 20 (twice); 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 19, 24 (twice); 18:31; 36:26; 36:27; 37:1, 14; 39:29; 43:5). All these facts very powerfully testify that the book of Ezekiel is consistently God-centered.14

II. To Underline the Vindication of God’s Holiness

The vindication of God’s holy character through his judgments and through his people is a pivotal concept and lies at the center of the book. God’s judging presence is a dominant feature in Ezekiel, and God states that he “will gain glory” through judging Sidon (28:22). Ezekiel 28:20–26 is the only passage with the double contrasting emphasis on God’s vindication in the book. This intensification in vv. 22 and 25 highlights the importance of this truth and the crucial position of this passage. The Hebrew phrase

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niqdashti bah (“I show myself holy within her,” v. 22) points to God’s vindication through his judgment on Sidon, and the statement niqdashti bam (“I will show myself holy among them,” literally “through them,” v. 25) focuses on God’s vindication through God’s people. They will give him glory when they live according to his word and law and when the Lord brings them back to their homeland from Babylonian captivity. The identical term niqdashti is also used in two other places, namely in Ezek 20:41, niqdashti bakem (“I will show myself holy among you,” literally “through you”), and in 39:27, niqdashti bam (“I will show myself holy through them”), and both occurrences speak about God’s vindication through his people “in the sight of many nations” (39:27).

Ezekiel 36:23b and Ezek 38:16 employ the nifal infinitive prepositional phrase behiqodshi bakem/bka which is mentioned in the entire Hebrew Bible only in these two places. In both verses, the ESV translators use the verb “vindicate.” Each occurrence explains vindication from a different angle: one defends God’s honor through a positive action and the other through God’s negative judgment. The first one stresses that God’s name will be glorified and his reputation restored through his people when they live holy lives in correspondence to his standard of holiness and when they respond to God’s grace and return home. The second text underlines God’s condemning judgment upon Gog and his allies. Thus, God’s vindication of his holiness is demonstrated in his judgment over his enemies—Gog and his allies who are a type for Satan and all antagonistic evil forces. However, God’s character is also vindicated through his people when they allow themselves to be transformed by his grace and live according to the principles of love, when they follow him, and when they can finally return home and live according to his laws (see 36:22–32). God wants to be known as a loving and just God among the nations (20:41; 39:27). The expression le’eyneyhem (“before their eyes”) is used 15 times only in Ezekiel (4:12; 12:3 [twice]; 12:4 [twice]; 12:5; 12:6; 12:7; 20:9; 20:14; 20:22; 21:11 [6]; 36:23; 37:20; 38:16; 43:11), and this can be true only when his followers consistently live in harmony with his revelation. In this way they are responsible for God’s honor and his “life and death” among the Gentiles.

15 It is crucial to note that outside of the book of Ezekiel the Hebrew word niqdashti is employed only in Lev 22:32: “Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites [niqdashti betok = ‘so that I may be honoured as holy among the Israelites,’ as the NJB translates]. I am the Lord who makes you holy (meqaddishkem = lit. ‘sanctifies you’).”
16 See also Ezek 39:7.
God declares that he will vindicate his character by stating, “I will show the holiness of my great name” (Ezek 36:23a). This phrase *qiddashti ‘et shmi haggadol* is a *hapax legomenon* and stresses God’s care for his reputation, his name. It is important to note that Ezek 36:23 is the only biblical text with the double positive emphasis on the vindication of the Lord’s holiness, his character, mentioned in the beginning and at the end of this verse. The previous verse also mentions that the Lord is concerned about the holiness of his name: “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations” (Ezek 36:22). The true picture of a loving God needs to be known to all nations otherwise no one would be attracted to him.

God’s character is vindicated through Sidon’s and Gog’s actions before the nations, because he exposes their work, course of action, and unmasks their awful character. Their activity is a type of all antigodly behavior. In this way, God’s action against them is justified and he is vindicated as the God of love, truth, and justice. Thus, God’s vindication is a central thought in the book of Ezekiel, as it is presented in the heart of the book, and it is expressed twice in our central passage (28:20–26), the only such passage in the entire Hebrew Bible! This double emphasis is intentional and without doubt reveals its cruciality.

**III. To Stress the Restoration of God’s People and Their Positive Role**

Israel, the prototype of God’s faithful followers, is mentioned in Ezek 28:20–26 in the midst of the prophecies against the foreign nations. This is a surprising and exceptional appearance and needs to catch our attention and be capitalized. This unusual and unique feature emphasizes God’s action for his people who is defined in their relationship to him. It is also worthwhile to notice that four times in this center and culminating passage the staccato phrase, “They will know that I am the Lord” (28:22, 23, 24, 26), is used. This personal pronoun “they” points mainly to the Gentile nations who will recognize the sovereignty of God, but at the end of this passage, it is more universalized and includes even God’s people. The recognition formula climaxes with the specific addition in the last phrase: “They will know that I am the Lord *their God*” (28:26).
IV. To Get a Doubly-Focused Theme with Cosmic Dimensions at the Very Center of the Book

The center of the book relates to negative and positive judgments: (1) God’s judgment on the fallen cherub, Satan (28:11–19);17 and (2) God’s vindication of his character (“they will know that I am the Lord God”; 28:20–26). The cosmic dimension gives the message a new importance and urgency. Two cosmic opposites are presented—a patron of evil on the one side, and the Sovereign God (a Patron of ultimate good) on the other; two unequal parties are in focus at the chiastic climax of the book. One picture is destructive, and the other very affirmative. God’s holiness through his judgments is uplifted and vindicated, and his people are restored to him. Nevertheless, in the cosmic drama, it is unfolded that at the very end the fallen cherub will be totally destroyed (28:19). However, a life of security and peace for God’s people is projected, because there will be no disturbance but only peace, safety, and abundant, blessed life under God’s protection and leadership (28:25–26). The eternal covenant of peace will be secured (34:25; 37:26) and God’s victory manifested; the Lord will be their God and they will be his people (11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27).

Conclusion

I had incorporated these elements into the literary structure of Ezekiel that I had published in an article in 2007:18

I. God judges Israel: the glory of the Lord departs from the defiled temple (1–11).

II. God judgments against Israel explained (12–23).

III. God’s impending judgment: siege of Jerusalem and prediction of the destruction of the temple (24).

IV. God judges foreign nations (25–32).

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V. God’s actual judgment: fall of Jerusalem reported (33)
VI. God comforts, gives hope, and promises restoration of Israel (34–39).

VII. God’s vision for the restored community—the new temple and city: the glory of the Lord returns to the temple (40–48).

In footnote no. 7, I specified important details: “At the very center of the literary structure are two panels reflecting the spiritual warfare: (1) God’s judgment upon the anointed cherub (Ezek 28:11–19); and (2) God’s vindication of His holiness and restoration of the people of Israel (Ezek 28:20–26).”

After engaging and friendly discussions with Professor Davidson, we both agreed on the macrostructure of the book of Ezekiel that was published in the Andrews Study Bible. We have implemented into the chiastic structure of the book of Ezekiel the four points mentioned above and augmented it with some finer details, so the final table is presented as follows:

A. God judges Israel: the glory of the Lord comes to his defiled temple for a covenant lawsuit and departs from the temple and city (1:1–11:25)

B. God’s judgment against Israel explained (12:1–23:49)

C. God’s impending judgment: Jerusalem besieged and the destruction of the temple predicted (24:1–27)

   E. God judges the fallen cherub (cosmic “king” of Tyre) (28:11–19)
   E’. God vindicates his holiness and promises hope and restoration for Israel (28:20–26)

D’. God judges foreign nations (Part 2) (29:1–32:32)

C’. God’s actual judgment: fall of Jerusalem reported (33:1–33)

B’. God comforts, gives hope, and promises restoration of Israel (34:1–39:29)

A’. God’s Day of Atonement vision for the restored temple, city, and land: the glory of the Lord returns to his temple and remains in his city (40:1–48:35)

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19 Moskala, “Toward the Fulfillment,” 45.
20 Andrews Study Bible (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010), 1043.