John F. Evans

You Shall Know That I Am Yahweh: An Inner-biblical Interpretation of Ezekiel’s Recognition Formula

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This monograph, a revised version of John F. Evans’s dissertation written under the supervision of Hendrik Bosman, in Stellenbosch University, traces the signification of the extensively used recognition formula (RF) “you/they shall know that I am Yahweh,” which is repeated more than seventy times in the book of Ezekiel. In a nutshell, this book argues persuasively that the literary-theological intent of the RF in Ezekiel is based on the RF in Exodus and is primarily used to reinforce Yahweh’s role in the restoration of the nation.

The book opens with an introduction, which is followed by seven chapters. In the introduction Evans presents ten reasons for undertaking this study, including the absence of a specific study of the RF formula in Ezekiel, the need for a fresh synchronic-hermeneutical approach to the RF alongside the existing diachronic one, the exigency of uncovering the relationship between Ezekiel’s RF and the Exodus scriptural traditions, and the need to illuminate Ezekiel’s purpose in repeatedly employing the RF. Evans is situated in the more traditional stream of Ezekiel research that maintains that Ezekiel shows an acquaintance with Israel’s sacred literature.

In addressing the relationship between Ezekiel and the law, chapter 1 outlines the underlying assumptions and historical-critical methodology of this study. Evans argues that, given the extensive nature of the parallels between Ezekiel and Exodus, the prophet is “citing an earlier text from a fixed literary base” (31), thus identifying and interpreting the intertextual relationship
between Ezekiel and Exodus. The second chapter reviews the main twentieth-century scholarship on Ezekiel's RF, paying special attention to Walther Zimmerli’s work. Evans here makes a unique contribution by clarifying unresolved matters with regard to the RFs in Ezekiel: the number of occurrences of the formula, the biblical source for its use by Ezekiel, and a theological interpretation of Ezekiel’s RF. The third chapter lists and examines the subjects and genre, syntax, and literary context of the occurrences of the RF (and related phrases) in Ezekiel. Here, after laying out the differences between the forty-six shorter forms (“strict form”) out of the seventy-two total RFs, including those with “expansions,” Evans compares the RFs in Ezekiel with other RFs (in all their variations) found throughout the biblical sources, all listed in the appendix to this chapter. He notes there that in Ezekiel the RF always appears in the context of oracles that proclaim divine action. The fourth chapter examines the parallels between the RFs found specifically in Exodus and those in Ezekiel and argues that the Ezekiel’s RFs were borrowed from Exodus texts (and not just the exodus story). Here Evans builds on earlier studies that, based on linguistic and terminological parallels, demonstrate the broad dependence of Ezekiel on the book of Exodus. Further support for Evans’s argument of dependence on Exodus comes from the fact that in Leviticus there is only one occurrence (23:43) of “a phrased related to the recognition formula” (120). This provides new insight into Ezekiel and supplements the longstanding scholarship that studies the many links between Ezekiel and the Holiness Code in particular.

Taking these parallels a significant step forward, Evans goes on to compare Moses and Ezekiel: their biographies and their call narratives. “Both are commissioned by God to go to a people steeped in idolatry and held captive in a foreign land, and they act as mediators to reintroduce Yahweh to his chastened people…. Both priest-prophets faced a rebellious nation…. Both urged Israel to hope in Yahweh, that God would take them from their captivity and lead them as his people into the land” (140–41). Building further on the criteria for literary dependence as previously laid out by Richard Hays and Richard L. Schultz, and as implemented by researchers in previous studies on the book of Ezekiel, Evans concludes that there is cumulative evidence for literary dependence that “was a powerful appeal to a generation of exiles familiar with Scripture” (161).

Chapter 5 explores further reasons for Ezekiel’s use of Exodus in particular. Evans surveys his perception of the sociohistorical and religious context of Ezekiel’s oracles. He first describes the circumstances in which Ezekiel prophesied, framing Ezekiel as “trauma literature” that includes memories of a “most sorrowful journey” (175) and “past sufferings of Jewish prisoners in the 597 exile” (173), concluding: “Thus, there is a strong note of discontinuity between political life before and after the deportation in 597, and remarkably there is a return in Babylon to a leadership pattern said to be more characteristic of the period of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings” (176). For these reasons Evans concludes that Ezekiel’s responses to the trauma of the Jewish exiles rely on the RFs spoken to Israel in Egypt, in the book of Exodus. Due to the distinction between the community in exile from those remaining in Judah after 597, and in addressing the nation’s ongoing idol worship that caused their defilement, the RFs aimed to emphasize the continued
relevance of “Yahweh is God” in Ezekiel’s day. Chapter 6 demonstrates the intertextuality and theological interpretation of the RF in Ezekiel. On the one hand, the prophecy in Ezekiel uniquely and repeatedly declares that Israel “shall know that I am Yahweh” in judgment, unlike elsewhere in Scripture, where the formula typically sounds a positive note when spoken to God’s covenant people; on the other hand, Ezekiel reuses the RF from Exodus, and Ezekiel’s RFs are included in Yahweh’s promises to restore his people in a covenant context, thereby echoing the Exodus formulas. In chapter 7 Evans concludes that the RFs in Ezekiel mark a “theological nexus between the prophecy and the book of Exodus” (242). Evans concludes with six rationales for the rhetorical purposes for the use of the RF in Ezekiel, all with the intent to highlight: “the divine intention ultimately to redo an exodus-like redemption of Israel and renew the covenant with an outcome never before enduringly realized: Israel and the nations ‘shall know that I am Yahweh’” (248).

Evans’s timely research presents a solid, systematic, and comprehensive analysis of the RFs in Ezekiel. Biblical scholars and Ezekiel scholars in particular will find this book useful for examining biblical formulas, inner-biblical exegesis, and evaluating Ezekiel’s theological message. However, Evans’s theological conclusions based on understanding the lives of the exiles as posttraumatic are not unequivocal. Evans rightly notes: “Though the deportees of 597 never faced the full horrors of a prolonged siege, they had faced the prospect with dread” (174). For this reason, among others, one can argue rather that the fate of the exiles was not as traumatic, especially as compared to the fate of Jerusalem’s inhabitants after the 597 exile. This suggests that, alternatively, there may have been other or even additional motives for the wide use of the RF in Ezekiel, such as the exiles’ perception that God had abandoned them or to counter the premise that it was not possible to receive prophetic messages in exile.