John F. Evans

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

Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 25


Julie Galambush
The College of William and Mary

In a revision of his Stellenbosch dissertation, Evans examines Ezekiel’s use of the so-called recognition formula, “You/they shall know that I am Yahweh.” Seeking to determine “the literary and theological function of the recognition formula in Ezekiel,” Evans argues that Ezekiel, while following his own literary and theological agenda, is directly dependent on Exodus as the source of the formula. Evans also states at the outset of the study that he seeks “to be critically engaged” while “maintaining an evangelical faith commitment and high respect for Scripture” (23). This is an important acknowledgement that would be more helpful if he were to let the reader know how his faith commitment interacts with his critical scholarship.

Chapter 1 explores the extent to which the so-called writing prophets were dependent on an already-existing and already-authoritative Torah. Evans succinctly reviews the case for a preexilic P source, noting that, although the question is not fully settled, “the position that Ezekiel draws on Pentateuchal materials, including P” is “one of the central theses” of the study (28). The chapter concludes with an extensive methodological discussion. Evans’s goal is to follow Richard Hays in retaining diachronic concerns without making them the focus of his analysis.
Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of past scholarship on the recognition formula. Chapter 3 engages the question of what “counts” as a recognition formula and includes a helpful list of its occurrences in Ezekiel, including variant forms. The mere fact that the recognition formula appears over seventy times in Ezekiel and ten times in Exodus, but only nine times in the rest of the Old Testament, suggests the formula’s special importance for both authors. An appendix of graphs and charts provides a digest of all occurrences of the recognition formula and related sayings throughout the Old Testament.

Chapter 4 expands on the discussion of the formula’s origin. Ezekiel, Evans concludes, draws on Exodus as “an authoritative ‘hard text’” (127), as opposed to a “tradition,” reworking it to meet the needs of the exilic community. Evans explicates the verbal and thematic parallels between Exodus and Ezekiel, paying particular attention to the possibility that the figure of Ezekiel is modeled on that of Moses, and to well-documented evidence that Ezek 20 is directly dependent on Exod 6. His conclusion, that “Scripture” played an important role in “shaping the prophets’ messages” (128), is simultaneously well-argued and confusing, as he does not address the substantial problem of what, exactly, constituted the category scripture in this period and what portion of Israel accepted any given text as such.

Evans notes the distinctive uses of the recognition formula in Exodus and Ezekiel. In only these two books, the recognition formula appears as an announcement of judgment (“I will destroy the Egyptians, and they shall know…”) as well as of salvation (“I will bless you, and you shall know…”). Both Yahweh’s salvation and his judgment bring people to know or acknowledge him. In Exodus, Israel knows Yahweh through his salvation, while the Egyptians know Yahweh when he destroys them. In Ezekiel, the situation is more complex. Israel will know Yahweh through both divine punishment and divine salvation. The nations know Yahweh not only when he punishes them but also when he saves Israel. This discussion could be enriched if Evans were to comment on how the different uses of the recognition formula reflect the different plot lines of Exodus and Ezekiel. In Exodus, Yahweh must establish his status as a god worthy of the Egyptians’ respect and the Israelites’ worship by bringing his people out of slavery. He is, so to speak, always the good cop, saving his people and destroying their enemies. In Ezekiel, Yahweh’s own people have dishonored him, and he must vindicate his honor first by punishing them and only then by saving them. Yahweh therefore says in Ezekiel that Israel will know him as the result of both punishment and restoration, whereas in Exodus they will know him exclusively as the result of salvation.

Chapter 5 asks how the recognition formula reflects Ezekiel’s sociohistorical and religious context, focusing almost exclusively on trauma theory and its application to Ezekiel.
Chapter 6 returns to the central question of the book: the relationship between the recognition formula in Exodus and in Ezekiel. Evans finds both “disjunctions” and “conjunctions” in this area. Ezekiel 20 in particular employs inversions of the Exodus narrative. For example, while Yahweh saves Israel “with an outstretched hand” in Exod 15:12, in Ezek 20:33–34 he stretches out his hand to destroy them. Evans next examines the question of what it means to “know” Yahweh and whether the term means the same or different things when applied to the nations or to Israel. He concludes that knowing Yahweh is effectively functional in the case of the nations (they will know Yahweh “specifically as the God of Israel,” 231) and existential in the case of Israel (“God’s acts and self-revelation grip the whole person…, lead to conversion and begin to inform all of life,” 228).

Finally, Evans addresses Yahweh’s concern for his honor and the holiness of his name, drawing the connection between Yahweh’s self-vindication and the recognition formula. In this context, Evans briefly addresses the role of “knowing” in ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, as well as two Neo-Assyrian texts in which Assur and Ishtar claim that, after they have acted on behalf of their people, the people will know “that I am Assur/Ishtar” (239–41). It is surprising that Evans presents this evidence of other gods acting so that their people will “know” them only at the conclusion of the book, rather than in the section on Ezekiel’s sociohistorical context. Evidence that divine honor was culturally enacted by people acknowledging that “I am [divine name]” puts a very different light on the recognition formula, whether in Exodus or in Ezekiel. It is regrettable that Evans forgoes the chance to explore this and other relevant ancient Near Eastern texts in his study.

All in all, the book provides a useful examination of issues related to the recognition formula in its various forms and contexts. The charts in chapter 3 are particularly clear and helpful. Evans addresses a wide range of questions that confront any effort to reach a definitive conclusion as to the meaning and role of the recognition formula in Ezekiel: Why is the formula used so much more often in Ezekiel than elsewhere? What exactly does it mean to “know that [Yahweh is] Yahweh”? Does this knowledge differ, depending on who (Israel or the nations) comes to know it? Does the knowledge differ depending on how one gains it (by being blessed or by being killed)? Finally, how ought we to construe divergences between uses of the recognition formula in Exodus and in Ezekiel?

For all the book’s merits, some readers will find it more frustrating than satisfying. At times Evans’s avowed religious commitment seems to take precedence over his critical engagement, and important interpretive possibilities are dismissed out of hand. To cite only one example, Evans steers clear of the well-documented likelihood that Israelites had a wide range of gods to whom they might turn. Relegating discussion of Israelite
polytheism to a footnote, he dismisses its existence on the sole grounds that “in such a reconstruction of Israel’s religion, Ezekiel’s prophecy will not be heard as Scripture” (185 n. 88). Remarkably, he disallows the possibility of Israelite polytheism as normative for at least some groups, even as he asserts that the people had “an unbroken history of idolatry” and were “infected with heathenism at their very roots” (190), traits that suggest a long and embedded polytheistic tradition. By discounting Israelite polytheism as deviance, he precludes serious consideration of the dishonor facing a god who has been bested by armies loyal to a different deity or of the dilemma that would have faced those Israelites who wished to remain loyal to their defeated god. Evans’s apparent assumption that the people, as opposed to some people, knew and accepted a common, authoritative Scripture along with normative monotheism nullifies an important aspect of the exilic experience and detracts from an otherwise interesting and useful study.