

Another Model for Ezekiel's Abnormalities

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Moshe Held was consumed by a love of texts. His concern was with the literature of the ancient Near East even more, perhaps, than with elements of its daily reality. Though saddened at contributing to a volume in his memory rather than to a *Festschrift* in his honor, I present the following study on a long-standing crux in Ezekiel. It offers a literary model to replace a solution all too often assumed to be part of ancient *realia*. This study is a revision of one section of my doctoral dissertation, the last completed under Professor Held's direct supervision. It is dedicated to his memory.

Ezekiel 3:22–27 recounts an interesting but enigmatic episode in the life of the prophet. It describes a period of “dumbness,”¹ during which he was commanded to refrain from prophesying. Although this brief pericope includes the verses which constitute what Walther Zimmerli calls “one of the most difficult passages in the whole book,”² a solution for understanding this section, or at least a cogent framework for a solution, seems to be closer at hand than previously recognized. The framework suggested derives from Akkadian incantation texts previously neglected in this regard. To begin, however, we present the *NJV* translation of the text, even though certain elements of it will be called into question below:

Then the hand of the Lord came upon me there, and He said to me, “Arise, go out to the valley, and there I will speak with you.” I arose and went out to the valley, and there stood the Presence of the Lord, like the Presence that I had seen at the Chebar Canal; and I flung myself down on my face. And a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet. And He spoke to me, and said to me: “Go, shut yourself up in your house. As for you, O mortal, cords have been placed upon you, and you have been bound with them, and you shall not go out among them [i.e., the people]. And I will make your tongue cleave to your palate, and you shall be dumb; you shall not be a reprover to them, for they are a rebellious breed. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God!’ He who listens will listen, and he who does not will not—for they are a rebellious breed.”

1 The motif of the prophet's dumbness recurs in 33:21–22, a passage which is cited below.

2 Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trans. Ronald E. Clements (Philadelphia, 1979), 158, referring to 3:24b–27. The view of A. Cody, *Ezekiel, with an excursus on Old Testament Priesthood* (Wilmington, Del., 1984), 33, that this section is merely an “interlude” drawn from elements found elsewhere in Ezekiel is refuted by the hypothesis presented below. See also Ernst Vogt, who unnecessarily interpolates 3:25aβ–26a into 24:26 after *bayyôm hahû*³ (and emends

The fundamental questions exegetes have generally considered in their treatment of this unit have been outlined by Zimmerli in his analysis of previous interpretations.³ These concerns may be summarized and formulated as follows.

1. Was Ezekiel's binding and "dumbness" actual or metaphorical?⁴
2. Was his inability to speak—if it was, in fact, an inability—a physical disability or a symbol reflecting a socio-political reality?
3. In what ways are 3:22–27,⁵ 24:27 ("On that day your mouth shall be opened . . . and you shall speak and be silent no longer"), and the following chapters related? The issue is of particular difficulty given the prophecies that appear between 3:26 (" . . . and you shall be dumb") and 33:22 (" . . . and He [God] opened my mouth . . . ; thus my mouth was opened and I was no longer speechless")?

There have been proponents of both a physical understanding of the "dumbness" and a metaphorical one. In response to the first two closely related questions outlined above, some medieval Jewish commentators, such as Rashi and Qimḥi, explain the binding and dumbness as actions symbolic of a period of prophetic reticence. The refrain of their comments is *kēʿillū*, "as if"—the binding, dumbness, and other restrictions are presented *as if* they were real.⁶

Most modern commentators suggest a similar approach, albeit with minor variations. Whether they cite a divine source for the period of Ezekiel's silence,⁷ or consider it to be a reticence that was self-imposed,⁸ assuming it to have been necessitated by the audience (whose opposition to the prophet may be inferred from 2:6), exegetes explain the events as actions *symbolic* of the prophet's inactivity.⁹ This is the case whether the dumbness is assumed to have been for negative reasons (having punitive consequences for the listeners) or even to serve a positive cause (as Ewald has apologetically espoused, the "result of a higher arrangement, for the purpose of preliminary schooling and strengthening by the private exercise of his prophetic foreboding, prediction,

yābōʿ to *ūbēyōm bōʿ*), "Die Lähmung und Stummheit des Propheten Ezechiel," in *Untersuchungen zum Buch Ezechiel*, *An. Bib.* 95 (Rome, 1981), 97–98.

3 Ibid., 158ff.

4 Yehudah Komlosh takes the pericope as a "metaphor" for what will happen to the prophet in the future; "The Silence of Ezekiel at the Beginning of his Prophecy," in B. Luria, ed., *Zēr Ligvūrōt* (Jerusalem, 1973), 297–83 [Hebrew].

5 Most commentators feel that several of the preceding verses (all or part of vv. 16–21) intrude, being a later editor's addition. For the rationale underlying such a view, see Herbert G. May, *IB* 6, *The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction and Exegesis* (Nashville, 1956), 84.

6 Both Rashi and Qimḥi make similar comments, *ad. loc.*, and on 4:8. On the other hand, in his commentary *Mēšūdat Šīyōn*, Jehiel Altschuler seems to stress the physical likelihood of Ezekiel's descriptions, by giving brief "definitions" of the terms in question.

7 See e.g., Carl H. Cornill, *Das Buch des Propheten Ezechiel* (Leipzig, 1886), 194; Bert H. Hall, "The Book of Ezekiel," *The Westminster Bible Commentary*, ed. by Charles W. Carter, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, 1965), 380; and John T. Brunn, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. by Clifton J. Allen, vol. 6 (Nashville, 1971), 244.

8 E.g., C. G. Howie, *Ezekiel* (London, 1961), 25.

9 Bernhard Lang views several pericopes (including 3:22–27; 24:15–27; and 33:21f.) as street theater performances in which the prophet interprets events of his personal biography as being symbolic of larger issues; "Street Theater, Raising the Dead, and the Zoroastrian Connection in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in Johan Lust, ed., *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation*, *BETL* 74 (Leuven, 1986), 297–316. Lang also notes that the passage in chapter 33 may be "a reference to a disease involving aphasia?"; 305. That condition is discussed at some length below.

and literary faculty").¹⁰ For the present thesis, all such distinctions are secondary to the notion that Ezekiel's actions were of a symbolic nature.

However, in the late nineteenth century, A. Klostermann proposed an entirely different approach to the text.¹¹ He analyzed the biblical description of the prophet's "condition" as a complex of concrete medical symptoms reflecting a psychiatric disorder known as catalepsy, also known by the term "periodic alalia."¹² That disease "refers to rigid or fixed postures which the patient is unwilling to modify."¹³ Interpretations based upon physiological or psychiatric "exegesis" continued as other critics posthumously diagnosed Ezekiel as an epileptic, "a neurotic, a victim of hysteria, a psychopath, and even a definite paranoid schizophrenic, as well as being credited with powers of clairvoyance or levitation."¹⁴ One of the extreme and oft-cited examples of the psychoanalytic approach is that of Edwin Broome, "applying the well-known principles of abnormal psychology to an Old Testament prophet."¹⁵ He explains, for instance, that "the two elements in conflict here (the narcissistic and the masochistic) are the cause of the prophet's psychosis."¹⁶ However, many such explanations impose psychological interpretations on the text where none is necessary or even appropriate. For example, Broome attributes "feeling that he is a woman" ("perverted feminism") to Ezekiel and suggests that the prophet's eating the scroll (mentioned at the beginning of chapter 3) is a "crass sexual symbol." Or, commenting on 5:1, Broome writes that "a sharp sword is of course symbolic of the castration wish and fancy while the beard and hair of the head suggestive of genital hair growth."¹⁷ Broome's certainty notwithstanding, ritual practices of cutting the hair may, obviously, have many other interpretations.

In contrast to assertions of Ezekiel's mental incapacitation, Carl Howie asserts that "Ezekiel was not a schizophrenic, nor is he to be classed as a psychopathic case of any kind."¹⁸ At this point, a statement of method is in order. It seems a more prudent approach to cast aside all psychological analyses, to reject both attacks on Ezekiel's mental stability and defenses of it based solely on inference. Psychiatric evaluation without in-depth interview, discussion, and testing, is methodologically questionable, if not foolhardy. It is not so much an "unwillingness of students of Ezekiel to admit to the prophet's abnormality"¹⁹ that is at issue here—to respond to Broome's criticism—but rather the pertinence, or even possibility, of dealing with that notion at all. In fact,

10 George H. A. von Ewald, *Commentary on the Prophets of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Frederick Smith (London, 1880), 4:42.

11 A. Klostermann, "Ezekiel. Ein Beitrag zu besser Würdigung seiner Person und seiner Schrift," *ThStKr* 50 (1877), 391–439.

12 Georg Fohrer, *Die Hauptprobleme des Buches Ezechiel*, *BZAW* 72 (Berlin, 1952), 30.

13 Theodore Millon, *Modern Psychopathology* (Philadelphia, 1969), 80.

14 D. M. G. Stalker, *Ezekiel: Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1968), 23.

15 Edwin C. Broome, Jr., "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," *JBL* 65 (1946), 277, n. 1. Also see now Bernhard Lang, *Ezekiel: Der Prophet und das Buch* (Darmstadt, 1981), esp. "Der Kranke Prophet," 57–76.

16 Broome, "Abnormal Personality," 284.

17 *Ibid.*, 285–89. Broome takes the phrase "perverted feminism" from J. H. Masserman, *Principles of Dynamic Psychiatry* (Philadelphia, 1946), 285. He offers this analysis of eating the scroll notwithstanding his own citation of another more readily-apparent understanding of the symbolism of ingesting God's word (p. 288).

18 Carl G. Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel* (Philadelphia, 1950), 101.

19 Broome, "Abnormal Personality," 281.

Broome inadvertently points up the difficulty when he speaks of "establishing a psychotic personality for the prophet."²⁰ Those who follow the psychological approach are trying to *establish* a personality, rather than *analyze* a personality which is hidden from us. At the same time, there is a fine line between the approach set forth in this paper and "the tendency . . . to consider his visions 'merely literary forms'."²¹

Yet another notion has been endorsed by Moshe Greenberg,²² offering a different framework in which to view the description of the prophet's dumbness. Greenberg articulates the understanding espoused by the 12th century French exegete Eliezer of Beaugency, that the period of Ezekiel's dumbness did not reflect a complete cessation of prophetic activity. It was, rather, a time in which the prophet could speak only of the impending doom of the nation—a message he had already received (in 2:10). His "silence" was, therefore, relative; further pronouncements, that is, those with a message of different content, had to await a new "word of God" to the prophet.²³ Adduced as support for the feasibility of this interpretation, Greenberg makes reference to a passage from Josephus' *Wars* (VI.5.3). This attests a period (roughly seven and a half years—similar to the time calculated to be the length of Ezekiel's restricted prophecy) during which Jesus son of Ananias bemoaned the fate of Jerusalem. Greenberg calls the events described by Ezekiel and Josephus "a remarkable, yet genuine historical coincidence" and "not a fabricated echo."²⁴ The question of whether this is coincidence or fabrication cannot be resolved here, as the determination is based largely on one's assumptions.²⁵

However, whether or not the passage from Josephus is historically accurate and whether or not it has a direct bearing on Ezekiel's dumbness, its citation does encourage one to consider the possibility of literary borrowing (even if that is, in Greenberg's words, "tenuous speculation"). Therefore, the hypothesis of this paper is that we will benefit from looking for another literary parallel—or, in fact, an earlier literary "model"—for Ezek. 3:22ff. It is with this understanding that we turn to the Akkadian incantation texts, which offer an illuminating background against which to evaluate Ezekiel's dumbness.

At first sight, invoking parallels from incantation texts might seem to support a medical interpretation of the phenomena described, given the nature of such texts. However, I suggest that the medical descriptions are a function of the model (i.e., the

²⁰ Ibid., 279.

²¹ Herbert W. Hines, "The Prophet As Mystic," *AJSL* 40 (1923), 52 (emphasis added). Hines tries to establish the psychological background of prophets, taking "psychological consideration of the religious atmosphere the prophet breathed" (pp. 49–50), without detailed psychoanalyses. He deals with Ezekiel primarily on pp. 50–56, 60–65, 70–71.

²² M. Greenberg, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness," *JBL* 77 (1958), 101–5; and now in more complete fashion in *Ezekiel 1–20* (Garden City, N.Y., 1983), 120–23. Based on a structural analysis of pericopes relating to the prophet's dumbness, R. R. Wilson reached a similar conclusion, "An Interpretation of Ezekiel's Dumbness," *VT* 22 (1972), 91–104.

²³ See also Nicholas Tromp, "The Paradox of Ezekiel's Prophetic Mission: Towards a Semiotic Approach of Ezekiel 3,22–27," in Johan Lust, ed., *Ezekiel and His Book*, 201–13.

²⁴ Greenberg, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness," 104–5. For the suggestion that the prophet was silent for a much shorter period, from 587 to 585, see Donald E. Gowan, *Ezekiel* (Atlanta, 1985), 26.

²⁵ For the impropriety of challenging a set of conclusions when, in fact, the basis of disagreement stems rather from different assumptions, see Edward L. Greenstein, "Theory and Argument in Biblical Criticism," *HAR* 10 (1986), 77–93.

incantation texts), and that the prophet put the "medical" data to a different usage. Therefore, this portion of the text of Ezekiel may be seen primarily as a literary borrowing, without the application of any psychological or medical conditions described. Several of the texts that follow should elucidate the nature of such literary influence.

The biblical pericope begins with *yad-YHWH*, "the hand of the Lord" upon the prophet. Without a doubt, the phrase is common enough in the Hebrew Bible. It appears roughly 200 times, including suffixed and absolute forms of *yad*,²⁶ and is even attested numerous times in Ezekiel itself. However, its use in 3:22 (and 33:22) is at least a bit anomalous, and Zimmerli's attempt to explain the phrase points up its apparent incongruity rather than its appropriateness. Nonetheless, the prophet's use of *yad-YHWH* in 3:22 is not at all inappropriate if it is read in conjunction with a Mesopotamian incantation such as "An Incantation of the Maqlû Type,"²⁷ published by Lambert thirty years ago. A pertinent passage from that text follows:

miqit lême šinūt lême qāt ištār qāt ili qāt ešemmi qāt amēlūti qāt māmūti šēd lemuttim mukil rēš lemuttim iškunūnimma piya ušabbitū kišādī utarrirū pī ubbiṭu amāti illududū irtī id²⁸ ipū²⁸

Loss of reasoning, loss of mind, the "hand" of a goddess, the "hand" of a god, the "hand" of a ghost, a human "hand," the "hand" of a broken oath. They have established for me an evil spirit, an evil demon (lit., who provides evil), and so they "seized" my mouth, made my neck tremble. They have caused me to be "tongue-tied" (lit., tied by the mouth); they have taken away my speech; they have compressed by chest.

After mentioning the "hand of a goddess" (*qāt ištār*) and the "hand of a god," (*qāt ili*) the incantation continues with several references to loss of speech. We read first of *šibit pī* (literally, "seizure of the mouth" or "paralysis of the mouth").²⁹ *Šibit pī* is, in fact, taken throughout Akkadian incantation literature to be a speech impediment similar to aphasia, the essence of which is "the loss of memory for the meaning of language and its production."³⁰ Although various forms of aphasia exist,³¹ it is

26 Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 1, 117–18, cites a variety of uses and contexts as a prelude to the somewhat unusual use in our verse. See also J. J. M. Roberts, "The Hand of Yahweh," *VT* 21 (1971), 244–51, whose study deals with the implications of extra-biblical parallels. Roberts' work deserves further analysis particularly in relation to the degree to which *yad-YHWH* suggests an element of pathology.

27 W. G. Lambert, "An Incantation of the Maqlû Type," *Afo* 18 (1957/58), 288–99. The numerous similarities between this particular incantation and Ezekiel are striking; it was they that prompted the author to pursue study of the incantation genre in general as a context in which to read the pericope in Ezekiel. For another hypothesis about the use of "the hand of the Lord," see below.

28 *Ibid.*, 290:13b–17. Lambert transcribes the beginning of line 16 KA.mu, without translating; CAD K, 447a, sub *kišādu*, transcribes [KA.MU] *ušabbitū* GU.MU *utarrirū*; note CAD E, 14a [*piya*] *ušabbitū*. Earlier publications of these lines (H. F. Lutz, *PBS* 1/2, no. 133; S. Langdon, *PBS* 10/2, no. 18) have slightly different or less complete readings. On l. 15, cf. *Maqlû* II, 62; on l. 16, cf. *Maqlû* I, 97.

29 The phrase is evidently interpreted more by its similarity to other physical conditions such as *šibit appi*, "sneeze"; *šibit barbari*, "lycanthropy"; *šibit benni* (*šibtu bennu*), "epilepsy"; *šibit libbi*, "belly disorder"; *šibit li'bi šadī*, "mountain fever"; *šibit rēš libbi*, an epigastric disorder; or simply *šibtu*, "epilepsy," i.e., seizures; than to its use in phrases such as *pā šabātu*, "to silence, to interrupt (a person)," CAD S, 29b.

30 G. E. Arnold, "Speech, Physiology of," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Macropaedia, Vol. 17, esp. 489b).

31 See *ibid.*, s.v. "Aphasia" (Micropaedia, Vol. 1, 442a and refs.); and John Lyons, "Linguistics," (Macropaedia, Vol. 10, esp. 1010b).

likely that the incantation texts—and, by extension to our biblical passage, Ezekiel, as well—deal with motor (ataxic) aphasia rather than sensory (auditory) aphasia.³² Ataxic aphasia is the inability to articulate the correct sounds when attempting to speak; it is contrasted with an auditory form of the disease, which entails the inability to understand sounds correctly when spoken by others. Thus, ataxic aphasia would certainly be appropriate to the circumstances of Ezekiel's predicament.

Aphasia, a nervous system disease, is often of a temporary nature. The following Akkadian curse is, therefore, all the more striking:

*ilāni rabūti . . . šimat lā naṭāli sakāk uznī u šibit pī ana šāt ūmī lišimūšu*³³

May the great gods . . . allot blindness, deafness and "dumbness" to him as a *permanent* fate.

It is quite plausible that the "temporary aphasia" implied in the incantations served as an excellent parallel to the plight of Ezekiel—unable to speak his message, at least for a delineated period of time, until the Lord's hand was to come upon him once again (33:22).

Just several lines prior to the incantation text quotation cited above we encounter another term used to describe a speech disorder, *kadibbidû*:

*[ana y]āši kišpi ruḥē rusē up[šašē rā]ma zēra dipalā zikurrudā kadibbidā [. . .]*³⁴

They have practiced [against m]e witchcraft, magic spittle, magic dirt, machinations, love-magic, hate-magic, perversion of justice (*dipalû*), pernicious magic (lit., "cutting of the breath"; *zikurrudû*), aphasia (*kadibbidû*) [. . .]

Kadibbidû, the Akkadian loanword from Sum. KA.DIB.BI.DA, is the exact literal equivalent of *šibit pī*,³⁵ and is attested in several texts in conjunction with *dipalû*, *zikurrudû*, and several other ailments to which we shall return below. The sequence may be considered simply as a series of stock phrases (rather than a precise medical record), attested frequently in *Maqlû*³⁶ and elsewhere.³⁷ They are also used in connection with *šūd panī*, "vertigo," an illness which, itself, is attested in several texts along with immobility of the entire body, perhaps not unlike the condition cited in Ezekiel. The combination is found in the following Neo-Babylonian text, entitled a "Fragment of a Kudurru of the Epoch of Marduk-apal-iddin":

32 One aspect of motor aphasia entails the patient responding to questions only by repetition of a few of the words he hears (ibid., H. H. Merritt, "Nervous System Diseases" (Macropaedia, 12, esp. 1041b). It would be comic misinterpretation to assume that biblical respondents such as Rebecca (Gen. 24:58), Esau (Gen. 27:24), Jacob (Gen. 37:32–33) or others were aphasics based solely on this criterion. For this form of affirmative responses, see *GKC* §150n.

33 *MDP* 2, 110:26, 35–40 (= pl. 23).

34 *Afo* 18, 289:11–12.

35 René Labat, *Manuel d'épigraphie akkadienne* (Paris, 1976), No. 14, gives both *šibit pī* and *kadibbidû* as readings for the logogram KA.DIB.BI.DA. KA.DIB.BI.DA probably replaces *šibit pī*; note, however, that the reading of the logogram as *kadibbidû* is conjectural only; see *CAD* K 31b. That it means a "particular type of aphasia which is caused by mental diseases such as epilepsy" is not essential to our comparison, especially given the literary, rather than medical, role for which we look to the incantation texts.

36 *Maqlû* I, 90f.; ibid., IV, 14f.; ibid., V, 62f.; ibid., VII, 79f.; ibid. VIII, 97.

37 See, e.g., Ebeling, *Handerhebung*, 58:20–21; ibid. 74:1; 82:108.

*šamaš dayyānu rabū ša ilī rabūti šūd panī sakāk uznī u ubbur mešrēti [ana še]rikti lišrukšu*³⁸

May Šamaš, the great judge of the great gods, bestow upon him “as a present” vertigo, deafness, and³⁹ paralysis.⁴⁰

Such paralysis (or, more precisely, immobility by limb-binding) referred to in Ezek. 3:25 and 4:8, is further elucidated by a description of binding the arms, knees, and feet. It, too, is from the *Afo* 18 incantation text previously cited:⁴¹

*libbī unnišū idēya iksū birkēya iksū šēpēya ālikāti ukassū [ešenšē]ri*⁴² *ikpupū panīya uššanadū*
[. . .] *manga luṭu umallūṭinni*

They have weakened my heart, have bound my arms, have bound my knees, have bound my mobile feet, have “bent my spine,” have affected me with dizziness. They have filled [me] with paralysis and debility.

The use of *kasū* in this text, denoting binding or putting one in fetters, figures prominently in numerous other passages, though the following examples will suffice for the current discussion:⁴³

kaššaptu ašbat pīki ašbat lišānki ašbat īnēki nāṣilāti ašbat šēpēki allakāti ašbat birkīki ebberēti
*ašbat idēki muttabbilāti aktasi idīki ana arkīki*⁴⁴

Witch, I have seized your mouth, seized your tongue, seized your watching eyes, seized your walking feet, seized your marching knees, seized your active arms; I bound your arms behind you.

*minātīki ubbir mešrēti ki ukassi*⁴⁵

I bound your figure; I paralyzed your limbs.

This process of binding may be accomplished by means of a rope, as made explicit by a simile in a passage from the Šamaš Hymn, a popular text which “ranks as one of the better products of Mesopotamian religious writing”:⁴⁶

[šamaš] *kīma qē kasāta kīma imbari [ka]tmāta*

[Šamaš,] you fetter like a rope, you cover like a fog.

38 *MDP* 6, 40 iii, 3–5.

39 In an identical passage, *Afo* 23, 14:5–8, Borger incorrectly takes the phrase asyndetically, reading *ū-ub-bur*.

40 Literally, “binding of the limbs.”

41 *Afo* 18, 290:18–19.

42 *CAD E*, 344a, cites *Maqlū* I, 98, GÜ.SIG₄-ia₅ (*ešenšēriya*) *ikpupū*; Meier, 11, however, reads *ešemti-ia₅ ikpupū*. The context is very similar to *Afo* 18:290. *CAD K*, 175b, reads *ešenšēru* in both the *Maqlū* and *Afo* 18 passages.

43 See also, e.g., *ukassi aḥēya . . . birkēya umalli mung[a]*, “he paralyzed my arms . . . filled my knees with ‘stiffness’” (Ebeling, *Handerhebung*, 86:23–24); *birkāya ša uktassā būši[s ubbu]tā*, “my knees, which had been fettered, were b[ound like] those of the *būšu*-bird” (*BWL* 54:h); *aššu ḥatām pī muštarḥi kās puriddī qardammi*, “in order to muzzle the mouth of the boastful, to fetter the feet of the wicked” (*TCL* 3,9).

44 *Maqlū* III, 94–99.

45 *Maqlū* VII, 71; cf. 63–64.

46 *BWL* 123; the textual citation is 128:39. Lambert, 121, explains that it “seems never to have been used as an incantation” though “undoubtedly the hymn had a liturgical use.”

The binding technique used by the Sun god is, in fact, reminiscent of Ezek. 3:25:

wēʾattā ben-ʾādām hinnēh nātēnū ʾālēkā ʾābôtīm waʾāsārūkā bāhem wēlōʾ tēšēʾ bētōkām

And, as for you, mortal, behold, they put cords on you and bind you in them, and you shall not go out in them.⁴⁷

As for the ʾābôtīm—cords, bands or fetters—placed on Ezekiel, exegetes generally have little to say. Presumably, they find no reason to question the time-honored etymology deriving ʾābôtīm from the root *ʿbt, “to wind, weave,” which is also related to ʾābôt, “having interwoven foliage, leafy.”⁴⁸ The word ʾābôt in Ezek. 3:25 is, in turn, translated “(twisted) cord, rope; cordage; interwoven foliage(?)”.⁴⁹ Although this is not the place for a detailed study of all uses of ʿbt, even a cursory examination seems to suggest the existence of homonyms, one with floral denotations⁵⁰ and the other meaning “cord” or “fetter.”⁵¹ Several other references cited in the standard lexica do not apply here, as they derive from ʿāb, “cloud.”⁵²

At this point it seems appropriate to suggest a relation between Hebrew ʾābôt and Akkadian *ebētu*/**ebētu*, as a further etymological hypothesis. Although the verb is somewhat problematic in Akkadian itself,⁵³ one certain meaning is “to bind.” In the medical texts, we read of numerous parts of the body which experience cramps or which are cramped, i.e., “bound” in some fashion.⁵⁴ Not unlike *kasû*, as above, *ebētu* is used with many parts of the body.⁵⁵ The citations which follow reflect binding similar to that imposed upon Ezekiel:

47 Cf. *NJV*, ad loc., “As for you, O mortal, cords have been placed upon you, and you have been bound with them, and you shall not go out among them [note: the people]”; Moshe Greenberg, too, translates “among them,” *Ezekiel 1–20*, 98. While that translation is certainly possible, it does not deal directly with the lack of an antecedent for the suffix. Greenberg, 102, does suggest that the suffix “requires the verbs to be taken as third-person plural actives, not as expressions of the passive.”

48 *BDB*, 721.

49 *Ibid.*, 721b, sub ʾābôt.

50 Lev. 23:40; Ezek. 6:13; 20:28; Neh. 8:15.

51 If the two terms are not homonymic, the meaning “cord” may be a secondary development from the “foliage” usage. For “cord,” see Judg. 15:13, 14; 16:11, 12; Isa. 5:18; Ezek. 3:25; 4:8; Hos. 11:4; Ps. 2:3; 129:4; Job 39:10. The word ʾābôtīm in Ps. 118:27 seems to mean “cords” but could be “foliage.”

52 2 Sam. 23:4; Ps. 77:18. *BDB*, 721b, takes ʾābôtīm in Ezek. 19:11 as “clouds,” though the context more easily supports the meaning of “foliage.” Note that in Ezek. 31:3, 10, and 14, LXX reads ʾābôt, “clouds.” Even if the meanings of “cloud” and “vegetation” ultimately relate to ʿby (“to be thick”), as E. Greenstein has suggested in a private communication, based upon their semantic ranges we shall keep the terms separate to avoid clouding the issue.

53 *AHW.*, 182b–83a, subdivides the vocable into two homonyms (both definitions being introduced by *etwa*). *Ebētu* I is “to swell up from cramps”; *ebētu* II is “to bind.” *CAD* E, 13a–14b, while providing similar meanings, cites both under the same entry. At least one text von Soden categorizes as *ebētu* II (*ZA* 45, 204:15) appears in *CAD* sub “to have cramps.” The issue becomes even more complex at von Soden’s hint that *ebētu* II may be *ebētu*.

54 R. C. Thompson, *RA* 26 (1929), 54n, links the two definitions, indicating that “the usual meaning given to the verb [*ebētu*] is ‘to fetter’ which will give a fitting meaning in *AM* as ‘cramped.’” His position supports the entry as found in *CAD*.

55 It is attested with *libbu*, heart (*YOS* 10, 42 i 11); *panū*, face (*TDP* 72:22); *pūtu*, forehead (*Kraus, Texte*, 5:3); *qātu*, hand (*TDP* 122 iii:16); *qerbū*, intestines or bowels, both as a verb (*itēnenbiū*, *TDP* 82:19) and as an adjective (*ebtu*, *ibid.*, 218:7); *rēš libbi*, epigastrium (*ibid.*, 112:16’); and *šepu*, foot (*TDP* 122 iii:16). For additional references, see *CAD* E, 13a–14a.

*qātišu uššilū šēpēšu ubbiṭū*⁵⁶

They [the demons] immobilized his hands, tied his feet.

Even more elucidative for the Ezekiel pericope is the use of *ebētu* with the tongue and mouth,⁵⁷ or tongue and teeth, indicating an inability to speak:

[šī]nnāya ša ittašbatā ištēniš inne[bṭā]
[ip]te birissināma irdāšin⁵⁸ uštam[. . .]
[i]šānu ša innebṭa šutābulu lā i[le⁵⁹ū]
[imš]uš tupuštašāma [x]dad atmū⁵⁹

As for my [te]eth, which were clenched and bound to[gether],

[He o]pened their clasp and [. . .] their roots.

As for my [to]ngue, which was bound (and) un[able] to converse,

[He wipe]d off⁶⁰ its . . . and my speech became . . .

These texts might even tempt one to suggest that in Ezekiel the bands are fetters for the mouth, teeth, or tongue, linking Ezek. 3:25aβ (*hinnēh nātēnū ʿālēkā ʿābōtīm*) with v. 26a (*ūlēšōnkā ʾadbīq ʾel ḥikkekā wēneʾēlamtā*), rather than with v. 24. In fact, the Massoretic “paragraph” division reflects this coupling.⁶¹ However, MT may be understood at least as well, if not better, by relating the fetters to the initial command of the pericope—that the prophet be shut up in his house (v. 24b).⁶² Even if the Akkadian texts are not able to assure our understanding of the stich division, they do shed light on their section of Ezekiel (3:25–27) as a whole.

At this juncture, let us consider two additional citations taken from the well-known Akkadian work *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* which may have served as a literary paradigm or source for Ezekiel. Even if he did not have direct familiarity with the technical, and presumably somewhat esoteric, incantation literature (such as the *Afo* 18 text), he might well have had access to the popular poem *Ludlul*—a “classic of

56 *Šurpu* VII, 23.

57 See *Afo* 18 (1957–58), 290, 16–17; cf. *TDP* 72:22.

58 *Irdu* is a variant of *išdu*; see *BWL*, 298; cf. *GAG* §30j*.

59 *BWL* 52:26–29. This section of *Ludlul* III credits the god with curing various head ailments, mentioning afflictions of speech-producing organs in 52:22–54:33. In addition to *ebētu*, note also *šabātu* and *birītu*.

60 Cf. *BWL*, 54j.

61 The beginning of v. 25 would then serve to separate the continuation of the topic from v. 24, since the phrase *wēʾattā ben-ʾādām* regularly appears at the beginning of a unit in Ezekiel (as the word *hinnēh* often does, as well). In that case, “and you shall not go out *bētōkām*” would not refer to going out among the exiles (as in Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, trans. Coslett Quinn [Philadelphia, 1970], 74; and *NJV*, ad. loc., with note), but rather going out while “in the bonds.”

62 In other words, against the Massoretic division, the unit of thought would be formed by 3:24b (*bōʾ ḥissāgēr bētōk bētekā*) and 3:25, rather than by 3:25 and 3:26. Cf. the unsupported suggestion that v. 26 preceded v. 25 in the “original order” of the passage; William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (Waco, Texas, 1986), 56.

However, it is more likely that restrictive fetters would be those for the feet (cf. *šēpēya ālikāti ukassū*, “they have bound my mobile feet,” cited previously) than for the mouth, though the use of *bētōkām* is awkward. It must have a presumed antecedent or refer back all the way to the logical, if not also grammatical, antecedent (*bēt yisrāʾēl*) in v. 17. This would be identical to the use of *bētōkām* in 29:21, which also deals with the prophet’s inability to speak. For some reason, this verse is frequently ignored in discussions of Ezekiel’s dumbness.

Babylonian literature in the seventh century B.C.”⁶³ Sections of that poem are clearly “reminiscent of incantations”; the “chief formal difference is that the incantations are written in the third person.”⁶⁴

The appearance in popular literature of various motifs similar to those found in *Ludlul* makes their availability to, and utilization by, Ezekiel even more likely. The themes we find together in *Ludlul* include paralysis, binding of various body parts, and inability to speak. Though the order of afflictions is not precisely as in Ezekiel, they occur with variation even within *Ludlul* itself. It is worth citing the relevant lines for purposes of comparison:⁶⁵

*muttallu pīya apāiṣ*⁶⁶ *īleš*⁶⁷
šaptāya ša ittaṣbarā ḥašikkiš ēme
*šapūtu(m)*⁶⁸ *šagīmāti šaqummeš* [*ušemū*]⁶⁹

*šaddiḥa aḥāya kilattā itaḥzā*⁷⁰

kal pagriya itaḥaz rimūtu
mišittu imtaqut eli šīriya
mangu iṣbat idīya
lu⁷tu imtaqut eli birkīya
mašāma nammušīša (var. *namšīša*) *šēpāya*

ina pīya naḥbalu nadīma
*u napraku sēker*⁷¹ (var. *sāker*) *šāptēya*

āḥuz erši mēširu mūšē tānē [*hu*]
ana kišukkiya itūra bītī (var. *bītu*)
illurtu šīriya nadā idāya
maškan ramniya (var. *ramaniya*) *muqqutā šēpāya*

They have taken hold of my noble mouth as with . . .
 My lips, which used to prattle constantly, have become like (those of) a deaf-mute.
 My loud outcry [they turned into] silence.

My arms, once outstretched, have both become paralyzed.

Paralysis has seized my entire body;
 Stroke has fallen upon my flesh;
 Stiffness has seized my arms;
 Debility has afflicted my knees.
 My feet have forgotten (the art of) mobility.

63 *BWL*, 26, where Lambert also indicates that “the copies from Babylon and Sippar are probably later.”

64 *Ibid.*, 22; 26–27.

65 *Ludlul* II, 75–79, 84–85, 95–98.

66 *BWL*, 285, takes as *appatu*, which is contextually feasible and not the sole defective writing of the vocable. *AHw.*, 57b, suggests a form of *apū*, “cloudy”; cf. *CAD* A/2, 168a.

67 Note that the lexical texts (cited in *CAD* E, 364a) equate *išē³u* with *šabātu*, but neither the meaning nor the etymology is firmly established; see *AHw.*, 1205b.

68 Cf. *En. El.* VI, 125, (Marduk) *ša . . . ikmū šapūti*.

69 Restoration of M. Held conjectural; cf., e.g., *CT* 16, 20: 96–97, *šaqummeš īme*.

70 *Ludlul* I, 70–72, 76.

71 *BWL*, 293, prefers taking *se-ke-er* as infinitive, but see Borger, *JCS* 18 (1964), 51. *AHw.*, 1035b, (2), takes it as “active state,” but vocalizes *sēker*, sub *napraku*, 740a.

A snare is laid on my mouth,
And a bar blocks my lips.

.....

I took to a bed of bondage, to a corridor of pain.⁷²
My house has turned into a prison for me.
My flesh is a manacle; my arms are inactive.
My own fetters are my collapsed feet.

One may wonder if the initial command to Ezekiel to remain closed up in his house does not derive, in some manner, from such a depiction of the house as a prison.⁷³ As such, the limits and restraints of which the *Ludlul* passages speak may have found an additional context in the message of the Judean prophet. There is yet one additional consideration⁷⁴ that contributes to the possibility that Ezekiel modeled the episode of his dumbness on Akkadian incantation texts or on a popular literary work based on the incantations.

What would prompt the prophet to take this genre, or even these texts specifically, as a model for his period of restricted activity? Based on the presumption that Ezekiel felt the resentment—if not outright hatred—of the exiles to whom he was speaking,⁷⁵ he may well have perceived an adversary relationship not unlike that of the speaker and the demon in the *Afo* 18 incantation text. Alternatively, the prophet's solitude among his fellow exiles may have been similar to the speaker in *Ludlul*. His complaint was that in trying to make known the gods' desires, for the good of the land, the populace rejected his views and turned against him. With only slight modification, we could easily imagine the following passage from *Ludlul* representing Ezekiel's thoughts:⁷⁶

ālī kī ayyābi nekelmanni tušāma nakrāti nandurtu [for *nandurat!*] *māti*⁷⁷

My city looks at me evilly like an enemy; my people rage (against me) as if they were (my) foes.⁷⁸

In fact, we may seek a similar source for the speaker in *Ludlul*'s and the prophet Ezekiel's poignant estrangement from other people. The following line may provide the common provocation:

72 The verb may be omitted in the B clause; see Edward L. Greenstein, "Two Variations of Grammatical Parallelism in Canaanite Poetry and Their Psycholinguistic Background," *JANES* 6 (1974), 90, n. 12.

73 See also *Ludlul* I, 50; cf. I, 79, 90.

74 We commend the reader to consider also the possibility of a relation between the opening phrase of the pericope, 3:22 (mentioned in n. 23, above as being unusual) and the catch-line of *Ludlul* II (appearing in Lambert as the incipit to Tablet III):

*kabtāt qassu ul ale*⁷⁷ *našāša*
His hand was heavy; I could not bear it.

Lambert's translation, "His hand was heavy upon me," brings the text even closer to Ezek. 3:22, but is not supported by text or variants as being anything more than interpretive. His explanation that the pronominal suffix refers to Marduk also accords well with Ezek. 3:22, and suits the context of *Ludlul*; cf. *BWL*, 23.

75 See Ezek. 2:3-7; 3:7-9.

76 Of course, elsewhere in the texts there are theological differences between the two, deriving from different outlooks and different literary purposes.

77 *Ludlul* I, 82-83. A similar theme appears in I, 53-69, and can also be found in Job 30:9-19. This is much like Jeremiah's predicament as well (cf. Jer. 15:10; 18:18; 26:11). Lambert, *BWL*, 293, also draws a parallel between Jer. 5:21 and *Ludlul* II, 73-74.

78 On these lines, see M. Held, "A Faithful Lover in an Old Babylonian Dialogue," *JCS* 15 (1961), 22.

ūšar⁷⁹ ana mātiya mē ilī naṣāri⁸⁰

I counseled my people to observe the gods' rites.

Since the premises and circumstances of Ezekiel were so much like those of the *Ludlul* speaker, the outcomes might, equally, be similar. Ezekiel's use of *Ludlul* themes or the genre of incantation literature, therefore, would not be at all surprising. It would be, rather, a very logical resource from which to draw.

It should be pointed out that, despite a different emphasis between the two,⁸¹ Akkadian incantation literature left its mark firmly on at least one other corpus in the ancient Near East—Aramaic incantation texts. The theme of binding, for example, becomes so common in the Aramaic texts that ʾīś(ū)rāʾ (literally, "binding") is a term used for the charm itself. Demons who were conquered were considered "bound" or "sealed." We cite just one example from this corpus illustrating the themes of confinement, restricted mobility, and inability to speak:⁸²

ʾsyryn wpkyryn whytymyn skyryn pwmhwn {wmṭršn} wʿwryn ʿynyhwn wmṭršn ʾwdnyhwn . . .
ʾsyryn mn ydhwn dlʾ yhlkwn wpkyryn mn ryglhwn dlʾ yšpwn

They are bound, tied, and sealed. Their mouths are shut {and deafened}, their eyes are blinded, and their ears are deafened. . . . They are bound by their hand so that they may not walk [sic!] and they are tied by their foot so that they may not move [lit., 'skip'].

We find evidence that the Akkadian themes and formulations, even if originating in earlier texts, retained currency through the period of Ezekiel, and beyond. Therefore, even without reliance upon the psychological or medical testimonies about Ezekiel, which are—in reality—unavailable or uninterpretable, we have found a model that contributes to our understanding of the pericope of Ezekiel's dumbness. Ezekiel may, indeed, have borrowed and modified the description of dumbness and immobility found in the Akkadian incantation texts or their popularized form.⁸³ After all, his restraint was, in many senses, the work of a spirit.

79 Neither the exact meaning nor the etymology of this word has ever been established. Borger (*Esarh.*, 104; cf. *AHW*, 1285) derives our verb from *šurru*, "to descend, bend over," but this derivation is revoked by Borger in his review of *BWL* (*JCS* 18, 51). The translation, "I counseled" is based on context as well as the Arabic verb *šāra*, "to advise, to instruct"; oral communication from M. Held.

80 *Ludlul* II, 29.

81 According to James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, PBS 3 (Philadelphia, 1913), 56, Babylonian magic stressed praxis, while Aramaic bowl-magic stressed the text.

82 Charles D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (Missoula, Montana, 1975), 43:1–2.

83 For another example in which the text of Ezekiel may reflect Akkadian incantation literature, see S. Garfinkel, "Of Thistles and Thorns: A New Approach to Ezekiel ii 6," *VT* 37 (1987), 421–37.