COPING WITH BEING **OVERWHELMED**
BY DAVID F FORD

What place does the Bible have in the public and private lives of those who are representative figures and leaders in the churches? Here, David Ford explores the question by making the actual performance of interpretation, through the book of Ezekiel, his starting point. In doing this, he considers how the many "overwhelmings" experienced by the prophet can nourish and sustain the vocation of those engaged in mission to contemporary culture. It is adapted from a paper given to the annual meeting of leaders of the churches in the North of England, March 1997.

The book of Ezekiel begins with an extraordinary vision of God. At the end of this first vision Ezekiel writes:

> *Then the Spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of the Lord arose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of a great earthquake; it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, that sounded like a great earthquake. The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me; and I came to the exiles at Telabib, who dwelt by the river Chebar. And I sat overwhelmed among them seven days. And at the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel..."* (Ezekiel 3.12–16)

Ezekiel has had a vision of God that is full of overwhelmings: stormy wind, a great cloud, flashing fire (1.4); four strange creatures each with four faces – human, lion, ox and eagle; and wheels within wheels, full of eyes, moving mysteriously in unison (1.5ff); the sound of the creatures' wings, like the sound of many waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult (1.24); and, on a sapphire throne, he saw "a likeness as it were of a human form", gleaming like bronze, fiery, surrounded with brightness like a rainbow (1.26ff). "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking" (1.28).

The message of that voice was also overwhelming. It was about how Ezekiel's own people appeared to God: rebels, transgressors, impudent, stubborn, refusing to listen. He is told to eat a scroll with words of lamentation, mourning and woe on it, and then is sent to speak to Israel whether they are willing to listen or not. That is the point at which, after another evocation of overwhelming, "the sound of a great earthquake" (3.12), he sits overwhelmed among the exiles for seven days.

That reminds us of another dimension of his overwhelming: he is trying to cope with the greatest trauma in his people's history, their exile to Babylon. He and other exiles have suffered the most enormous loss: of their land, of their Temple, of relatives, and of many of the continuities that shaped their social, political, economic and personal identity.

Ezekiel is a priest: he has a public, representative responsibility for the continuity and quality of his people's relationship to God and God's Torah. It may be that the thirtieth year (1.1) refers to himself – thirty is the age at which a priest took up his duties. That sort of responsibility is itself an exposed position; but in addition he is plunged into it at a time of massive crisis when the very *raison d'être* of his whole

calling is in question: the institution of the Temple is no longer functioning. As the book unfolds we see him successively overwhelmed by the reality of God, by the terrible truth of the situation, by his wife's death, by his role in the strategic dramas in which he acts out and embodies the crisis of his people, and ultimately by a vision of hope.

In the midst of that multiple overwhelming come seven days of sitting. From that pivotal point of overwhelming the rest of the book of Ezekiel unfolds, beginning immediately afterwards with the word of the Lord which sums up Ezekiel's vocation as a watchman. Similarly in the life of Jesus, there is the most intimate connection between his immersion in baptism, the coming of the Spirit, and the forty days in which his vocation as Son of God was put under intense pressure. Most of us, in our own stories and the stories of our communities and traditions, have visions of God, times of overwhelming by the reality of God's Spirit. Most of us too have vocations which have meant taking on certain public responsibilities which face us with seemingly impossible tasks and severe pressures and temptations. And we are also acutely aware of the multiple overwhelmings that face our communities and our whole culture and civilisation.

How might we name these? Most of them are perennial overwhelmings of human existence, but are constantly taking on new forms: economic pressures, debt and money; sex, family problems, and a vast range of gender-related issues; concern for the body, together with compulsions and obsessions to do with food, drink, drugs and staying young, fit and beautiful; power and its misuses in domination, discrimination and violence; knowledge and information inundating us from all directions; entertainment and a culture of distraction; a culture of urgency, rapid change and crisis management which rarely lets us have one day sitting down, let alone seven or forty; and the ultimate overwhelming, death. How do we cope with such overwhelmings?

Overwhelmed by God

Any one of the overwhelmings I have named could take over our lives. Such things grip us, fascinate us, draw out our energies, or depress us and leave us feeling helpless. This is the dynamic of idolatry, which is one of Ezekiel's main concerns. Whatever comes first in our lives, dominates our attention and sets the tone of everything else is our idol. And the most common situation is polytheism, or rather poly-idolatry: multiple idols corresponding to multiple overwhelmings. Ezekiel is perfectly clear about how he copes with this – though "cope" is hardly the right word: he is overwhelmed by visions of God (chapters 1–3, 8–11, 43).

And what a God! Ezekiel actually finds God the most fascinating conceivable reality, utterly compelling. Do we? Ezekiel's is a God that you can imagine adoring, being in awe of, not forgetting from one hour to the next, mobilising all your capacities of heart, mind, soul and strength. What is happening in that opening vision?

First, there are the four living creatures, human in form but each with four faces: human in front, lion on the right, ox on the left and eagle behind. Drawing on the suggestion of I.G. Matthews, and rooting the images in their Babylonian context, they might represent the four chief gods of Babylonia: Nabu (the announcer or revealer with a human face); Nergal (the god of plague and the underworld with a lion's face); Marduk, (the bull-colossus of immense strength with an ox's face); and Ninib (the god of hunting and war with an eagle's face). These were the public faces of the empire, expressing news, revelation and riveting presence; death and

disease; power and energy; speed, violence and victorious domination. But notice what is happening: they are led by the Spirit (1.12) and above them is the throne of the glory of the Lord (1.26–28). Note Ezekiel's careful qualification of his description: he is not claiming any direct, one-to-one correspondence between God and his vision or his language referring to God. But he is affirming the encompassing glory of the Lord, and also that the truth of the most powerful dynamics of our world is that they are under God and energised by God.

Second, Ezekiel holds together within his vision the wildness of darting and leaping (1.14) with the regularity of circles, wheels and peaceful movement (1.15–19). It evokes the image of the dance, but not just one kind of dance, rather a blend of the darting, the wildness and the frequent surprise of improvisation in some modern dances, with the stately movement of more historic dances. Can our vision of what it means to move in response to the moving of God's Spirit embrace both of these?

Third, Ezekiel's vision holds together the power of the vision and the closest attention to detail. Compared with earlier Old Testament visions of God, Ezekiel's is unique in its detail and precision. Ezekiel was a priest, and priests in many traditions are known for attention to detail, of ritual, regulation, imagery, movement and disciplines of many sorts. In Ezekiel we see it especially in his obsession with the precise architectural description and measurement of the Temple (e.g. 41.1–4). His God is interested in every detail – a great encouragement to those whose energies have to go on constructing and maintaining buildings! We see this also in the life and teaching of Jesus: a God of overwhelming generosity, forgiveness and love; yet at the same time every hair on our heads is numbered. Somehow, through the overwhelmings and the details, our lives are shaped. Our vision of God must not be a great big blur. Rather, as in our nano-technology, the significance, precision and often glorious complexity of what is very little is intrinsic to the overwhelming. And, to return to Ezekiel, the union of precision and overwhelming culminates when the vision turns into audition (1.28ff).

Overwhelmed by Responsibility

What Ezekiel hears in this audition leads directly to him sitting overwhelmed for seven days among the exiles. At the end of the seven days comes further clarity. Ezekiel is to be a "watchman for the house of Israel" (3.17), and if he fails to deliver his warning messages he will be answerable with his life. This is his massive responsibility, and his hearers too are faced with life-or-death responsibility for heeding or not heeding what he says.

This note of a man overwhelmed by his own responsibility, and summoning others to radical responsibility before God, sounds through other parts of the book too. The responsibility is both individual and corporate, with no competition between them. Ethics and politics are both inextricably part of God's Torah, and that in turn is unavoidably about worship and holiness, including ritual purity.

How does he witness to this multiple responsibility? The most striking part of his prophecy is its dramatic enactment. He throws himself completely into it so that his message is embodied, vividly and vulnerably (c.f. 3.24 – 26; 4.4 – 8; 24.15 – 18). Before his hearers, Ezekiel exemplifies this extreme responsibility in obedience to God, and so challenges them to choose repentance and obedient responsibility.

I see an even more extreme version of this in the crucifixion of Jesus. His vocation is pursued to the point of death. There he takes ultimate responsibility for others; but at the same time, his death is a call to new responsibility and a sharing of

responsibility. Before that dead face, the right response is to have the mark of the cross on our foreheads, and the resurrection is (in part) about being sent out in cross-centred responsibility for the world. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he takes part in a conspiracy against Hitler's life, working out, in his own life and in the writing that became his *Ethics,* a responsibility that might do justice to the life-affirming ministry of Jesus, and to the death of Christ which faces evil and judges it at maximum cost, and to the resurrection energising a dynamic of multiple transformations.

Shaping a Vocation While Being Overwhelmed

Ezekiel is multiply overwhelmed by God and by responsibilities in a crisis situation. How is his vocation shaped? How, in the midst of the overwhelmings and the details (of visions, Torah and temple) does the shaping occur? I want to suggest four ways in which this happens.

First, there is his innovative communication. The exile was a time of crisis for the communication of what mattered most to Israel's identity, and to this stimulus we owe much of the present form of the Hebrew scriptures. Some scholars believe that Ezekiel may have been the first prophet to write down his own words at length. This partial shift in the medium of communication has some similarities with the Gutenburg revolution and even our own information technology. There are also fascinating debates among scholars about the innovative literary forms in the book. Ezekiel was steeped in his people's literature, but he also improvised freely. He has a dramatist's instincts in a culture where the nearest thing to drama was the cult in which he was a priest. There is something daring, wild and often surreal in his visions, parables and images (c.f. chapters 16, 17 and 23). It is rhetoric of excess which is trying to cope with his overwhelmings, and no previous literature gives anything comparable. But at the same time he engages in long, involved arguments and discussions (e.g. chapter 18) where the ins and outs of responsibility before God are explored with legal precision. He uses many genres and media, and he does not feel any competition between flights of imagination and detailed argument. It is as if these extreme pressures have both sharpened his mind and stretched his imagination in order to do justice to the situation.

Second, there is his recovering of Israel's history. The exiles were understandably gripped by a compulsion to make sense of how they had ended up in Babylon, and they recast Israel's past in the light of their experience. Ezekiel works hard at telling a version of Israel's past in which there is rebellion from the first, without even the honeymoon period described by Hosea and Jeremiah. It is an extraordinarily negative picture of the past which has one big lesson: the only hope was, and is, in God. That hope is most vivid in the valley of dry bones (37.5ff). What stories do we tell of churches and nations? In our public life we hear conflicting stories about the role of Christianity, and it seems to me crucial that we try to tell better ones. Such metanarratives are the ozone layer of our civilisation's spiritual health. But it is not primarily a matter of Christianity in history. More fundamentally, there is a massive inhibition against interpreting history in relation to God – understandably, because it is a dangerous business and there are terrible examples. Ezekiel is risking his prophecy right in the midst of turbulent events. Clearly, after the first disaster of 597 BC there were deep divisions about how to interpret its significance. Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw it as the beginning of something worse, and they were right. But when the worse came in 586 BC, Ezekiel seems to have seen it as the turning point, and he sounds a note of new hope.

Third, this new hope was centred on the building of the new Temple. I suppose the

most common first reaction to those chapters of architectural description is “How boring!”

But most of us spend much of our energies in sustaining institutions, many of them closely identified with particular buildings. One way of reading Ezekiel’s conviction that God is concerned about all those architectural and ritual details is that he is showing us a God of institutional creativity. Ezekiel might encourage us to develop the institutional creativity that can serve God’s purposes for us and our desire for God and what he desires.

Fourth, there is the culmination of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple (chapter 24). From the heart of the Temple a stream flows out to water the barren areas of the Dead Sea valley. The abundance of God is the ultimate truth for Ezekiel: water is a symbol of blessing, prosperity and fertility; and here it turns stagnant waters fresh, nourishes thriving life and irrigates the fruit of the trees whose leaves are for healing (47.12). The most striking thing about this stream is that it gets steadily deeper, yet without any tributaries or other sources (47.5). This is a marvellous picture of gentle, good overwhelming, generated where God is worshipped, and directed towards the healing and flourishing of the whole country. This is the ultimate shape of living, on which the final vision of the book of Revelation improvises further by giving a more explicit political and international twist to it (Revelation 22.2).

Practices of Excess

I have suggested that we are in the midst of multiple overwhelmings and that we need wisdom for coping with that. That is what life is about, in good as well as bad ways. We are created to be overwhelmed – by God, by creation, by beauty, goodness, truth and love. The basic wisdom is the reality of an overwhelming God and the response to God in love and worship. But if that God is the God of Ezekiel and of Jesus Christ, then being overwhelmed in adoration is inseparable from radical responsibility, both ethical and political, for the worshipping community and for the world. With a God like this in a Church like this and in a world like this, we should be overwhelmed – otherwise we are not facing reality.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest some of the practices that might help us to cope as we try to live in this situation. In doing so, I recognise that most of the practices that shape us become routine, and rightly so; we build up patterns, habits, disciplines and other regularities which form the rhythm and tempo of our lives. They are vital in resisting the bad types of overwhelming. But in themselves they are not enough to cope. We need something more appropriate to the extreme, the excessive, the inundatory character of God. I suggest that we call them “practices of excess”. Ezekiel was a specialist in them, and we might find it helpful to adapt some of his practices: seven days silent sitting; the dramatic acting out of our situation; developing new forms of expression which stretch our language and imagination; attending passionately to argument and persuasion; sensationally confronting some of the ethical, political and religious evils that surround us; energetically envisioning a radically hopeful future for our institutions and our country.

The Bible

First, all I have said about habits and regular disciplines applies to our use of the Bible. But it is also worth allowing ourselves to become more intensively involved with some particular part of the Bible from time to time: read it slowly and

repeatedly, meditate long on particular verses, themes or images; study it alone and in groups, link it up with all the major doctrines of the Christian faith, range through the commentaries over the centuries and from different traditions (where relevant looking at Jewish authors), let it enter your prayer, your imagination, your conversation, and your sermons. In short, try to inhabit the text in every way possible.

Without this sort of immersion, we cannot be gripped sufficiently by the Bible today, particularly in the culture we inhabit where the Bible is like a foreign language. We should not underestimate the erosion of Christian imagination and understanding that is taking place, even among faithful churchgoers, because of the flood of powerful ideas, images and stories that wash over us daily. In the face of such excesses, the least we need is a practice of excess that gives some chance of us being shaped even more comprehensively, imaginatively and intelligently by biblical ideas, images and stories.

Frances Young, who is mainly a scholar of the Early Church, argues that one of its most important achievements was to find ways in which, in the sophisticated and pluralist culture of the Roman Empire, it could enable a habitable biblical ethos and world of meaning. How can we do this today? I do not think that our task is necessarily any greater; and we are by no means starting from scratch – we are surrounded by benchmark practices and achievements. We get often quite thrilling glimpses of them in liturgies, study groups, hymns, dances, cartoons, films, buildings, courses, television, schools, families and in that much underestimated medium, sermons.

I trust that those of you who preach regularly see the sermon as a major art-form, to be given the sort of dedicated and even obsessive attention that we find in serious artists.

I have been impressed by *The Open Book* project, the major inter-church initiative being project-managed by Bible Society. A great deal of resources are being put into opening the Bible to more people in our culture, concentrating first of all on the spheres of education, the media, the arts and politics. It is no accident that this vision is being worked out by a society that has a worldwide perspective on how the Bible figures in culture. All this is by no means irrelevant to us as we embark upon a new political future: it is of the utmost importance to a healthy spiritual, intellectual, imaginative and moral ecology in our culture. I believe passionately that the main priority for all the churches is in the long-term formation of this sort of ecology in which people in their communities and nations can thrive.

Prayer

If the only hope of coping with the other overwhelmings is to be thoroughly overwhelmed by God, then we need practices of excess in prayer too. Routines of worship are themselves a form of excess, apparently superfluous repetitions which yet have extraordinary long-term formative effects on people and communities. But I am also suggesting the need for practices which go to extremes which probably do not become routine. There is no evidence that Jesus fasted for forty days more than once.

Praying for as long as it takes is just one possibility. In a culture of busyness and addiction to urgency, it is easy for believers just to give God some slots in the diary and then go on to the next thing. But from time to time when we go into our room, shut the door and pray in secret, it is a good idea to allow God as long as God

wants. How long is that? Who knows? But it would be surprising if a God of such abundance, who longs to communicate in love, could be satisfied with brief set times. It is easy to find ourselves treating God less generously than we treat our best friend, our spouse or those we serve in our work. In all those relationships we recognise occasions when whatever is going on has to take as long as it takes. This is part of the unpredictability of life: we are not in control, and if we try to set limits in advance and cut off too soon we may miss something vital.

Every now and then it is worth having open-ended prayer in secret. This could mean clearing a day and starting to pray the morning, or srarting in the evening and being willing to go on all night. People do it for parties or televised live sporting events, and parents are frequently up for as long as it takes to get the baby settled. So why not with God too? Jesus' nights in prayer do not seem to have been regular, but given his intimacy with God there is something natural about them.

The Shaping of Society

We all have views about which are the most serious overwhelmings in our society. One easy and increasingly popular approach is to focus on a single issue and give obsessive attention to that. The recent Roman Catholic Bishops' report *The Common Good* resists this and patiently offers a whole "ecology" which has spiritual, moral, economic, political, cultural and other dimensions interwoven. It clearly calls for comparably patient, habitual thought and activity in order to follow this through in every area of life. But are there appropriate practices of excess for our situation?

In the sphere of justice, it would be codes and penal practices that insist on rehabilitation as well as punishment, that allow for something beyond strict equivalence or retribution, and have room for compassion. In economics, the most striking possibility here is in the forgiveness of debts – and not just those in the two-thirds world. The idea of the year 2000 being a Jubilee Year is one of the most attractive I have heard among all the millennium proposals. In politics, perhaps it is a matter of being willing to risk reallocating responsibility to the many who have been deprived of it, and accepting the consequences in terms of the required quality of education, public debate and multiple accountability. In family life, I see the main form of excess here the practice of vulnerable trust and love – beyond all proof of certainty and beyond anything specifiable in a contract – between husbands and wives, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and between siblings. In culture, I see civilisation itself as the great excess, the unnecessary abundance of civility, courtesy, hospitality, conversation, respect, beauty, imagination, creativity, the arts, and the multifaceted flourishing of people, groups, institutions and traditions. I like the title of Josef Pieper's little book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture.* Leisure is that excess of time which allows us to do apparently useless things, just for the enjoyment or fascination of them. I am intrigued that Ezekiel mentions so often, as something terrible, the failure to keep the Sabbath. We cannot remember too often that, in Genesis, the first day human beings were alive was the Sabbath. I suspect that, faced with the idolising of urgency, efficiency, problem-solving, successful achievement, money, practicality, crisis management and all those other compulsions that never let us take time off with good conscience, the Sabbath is not just the secret of resistance (which it is) but a practice of celebration that puts everything else in a new perspective.

Sitting Overwhelmed

My final suggestion for a practice of excess comes back to my key text from

Ezekiel. He sat in silence for seven days among the exiles. Perhaps this is a practice that we should develop amid the demands and responsibilities of ministry and leadership, and learn how to sit overwhelmed in the face of our immediate circumstances. In that sitting overwhelmed, we may begin to see a vision of God and a vision for the future for our lives, our churches and the world.

David F Ford is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge. The themes in this article are developed further in his most recent book *The Shape of Living* (Fount) which will be published this month. It is the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 1998.

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