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3. Type the word or subject you would like to search for.
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5. Type the word or subject you would like to search for.
6. Click “Search” to initiate a search for a particular word or subject.

\*The advanced search options will provide, among other things, the ability to reduce the total search time by using .PDX indexes, as well as the ability to search for a particular word or subject simultaneously across multiple commentary volumes stored on your computer.

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1. Access the Adobe Reader help by selecting “Adobe Reader Help” under the HELP menu option in the tool bar.
2. Under the “Search” tab, type “using the search function” or “search PDX” to access directions on using Adobe Reader’s advanced search capabilities. See especially, “Searching across multiple Adobe PDF documents” or “Searching all Adobe PDF files in a specific location” (you may have to scroll down) to search multiple volumes of the Commentary and “Searching Adobe PDF index files” to take advantage of the increased speed of searches using .PDX files.

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# EZEKIEL

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# EZEKIEL

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As the Smyth and Helwys Commentary series gains in both stature and volume, Margaret Odell now contributes a first rate study of the prophetic book of Ezekiel. Odell is among the most important members of the new wave of Ezekiel scholars who take full account of the peculiarity of the book of Ezekiel, but have the patience and the erudition to engage its stunning and demanding theological claims. In a way characteristic of the series, Odell works with the most technical, even esoteric matters but communicates such work in a way that is accessible and useful for Bible readers. Her work appreciates the literary coherence of the book, focuses on the intense thematic of its theocentricity, and takes seriously its acute moral vision. In a time of Bible reading in a society that is increasingly beset by what is “abominable,” Ezekiel’s vision of a “holy community” summoned to loyalty is an important alternative. Odell invites the reader to face the demand and the possibility of such a God-given alternative life that is wholly focused on the divine reality.

*Walter Brueggemann  
Columbia Theological Seminary*

Margaret Odell has written probably the most broadly useful introduction available to this fascinating yet difficult book. The truly “illuminating” illustrations are a study in themselves. Even more, Odell’s broad learning, her clear and engaging writing, and above all her sensitive theological understanding draw readers into a deeply rewarding engagement with the prophetic message.

*Ellen Davis  
Divinity School  
Duke University*

Margaret S. Odell has brought together many different sources and approaches in order to produce an outstanding commentary on the book of Ezekiel. Odell's many dedicated years of study on Ezekiel are demonstrated in her meticulous attention to detail in the exposition of the manifold issues encountered in the prophetic text. Very readable and exquisitely illustrated, this very impressive volume is a must-have commentary on an important biblical book.

*K. Lawson Younger, Jr.  
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Margaret Odell is a master in leading readers through the difficult terrain of the book of Ezekiel. She weaves literary, historical, and theological reflections together in a clear, compelling, and insightful way.

*Terence E. Fretheim  
Luther Seminary*

Margaret Odell employs an innovative combination of critical methodologies to produce a commentary that is sensitive to literary issues and that situates the book of Ezekiel in the cultural context of ancient Mesopotamia. By emphasizing the influence of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions on the literary presentation of the book, she points to the means by which Ezekiel, once a priest of the Jerusalem Temple and now a prophet of G-d in Babylonian exile, attempts to discern divine presence and purpose in a world that has been completely overturned by the Babylonian empire. Her commentary thereby provides an important vantage point from which to engage the problems of evil, imperial power, religious identity, and divine holiness in both the ancient and modern worlds.

*Marvin A. Sweeney  
School of Theology  
Claremont Graduate University*

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# ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

## *The Old Testament*

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalms (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic



*Abbreviations*

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

*The Apocrypha*

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–4 Maccabees	1–4 Macc

*The New Testament*

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

BC	Before Christ
AD	<i>Anno Domini</i> (“in the year of the Lord”)
v.	verse
vv.	verses
C.	century
c.	<i>circa</i> (around “that time”)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
ch.	chapter
chs.	chapters
d.	died
ed.	edition or edited by or editor
eds.	editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
f./ff.	and the following one(s)
gen. ed.	general editor
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit.	literally
n.d.	no date
rev. and exp. ed.	revised and expanded edition
sg.	singular
trans.	translated by or translator(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

*Abbreviations of Scholarly Works Used in this Commentary*

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6 vols.</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.</i>
<i>ARAB</i>	<i>Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia, 2 vols.</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte

<i>CANE</i>	<i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, 4 vols.</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>ChrCent</i>	<i>Christian Century</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i>
<i>FOTL</i>	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
<i>HSM</i>	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>HSS</i>	Harvard Semitic Studies
<i>IBC</i>	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ISBE</i>	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
<i>KAI</i>	<i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften, 3 vols.</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>NICOT</i>	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
<i>OBO</i>	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
<i>OBT</i>	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>OTG</i>	Old Testament Guides
<i>PTMS</i>	Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series
<i>SAA</i>	State Archives of Assyria
<i>SAAS</i>	State Archives of Assyria Studies
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SBS</i>	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>THAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament, 2 vols.</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When I decided to write my dissertation on the book of Ezekiel, I imagined that it would become a bridge between the connected worlds of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. With Ezekiel, I thought, I could move in two different directions: back into the rich priestly, prophetic, and historical traditions of the Hebrew Bible, and forward into the exotic apocalypticism of the New Testament. After nearly two decades of writing and thinking about this strange prophet and his brainy, enchanting book, I am still on the bridge and, to my astonishment, still enjoying the view.

Contributing to that enjoyment has been the decision on the part of Smyth and Helwys to produce a different sort of commentary. If the assignment has often proved daunting, it has given me room to roam. From ancient Near Eastern inscriptions and throne rooms to early Christian iconography; from ethics to theology; from Ezekiel's dumbness in exile to searching for the right words after September 11, 2001: if I have wandered freely, Ezekiel's vision of a world properly ordered and sustained by the sovereign God has been my compass.

As the project has neared completion, I have been overwhelmed with gratitude for the support I have received. I thank the editors at Smyth and Helwys Press, particularly Sam Balentine, for their constant encouragement; my parents Earl and Margaret Odell, for giving me the predisposition to like details, and my teachers, especially Donald Gowan, for encouraging me to pay attention to them; the Ezekiel Seminar and other program units of the Society of Biblical Literature, where many of the basic premises of the commentary were first presented; and my coffee pals at Goodbye Blue Monday in Northfield, for their endless good humor in making room at the table for the uninvited prophet. St. Olaf College provided the necessary practical support. A sabbatical leave in 1999-2000 allowed me to write a significant portion of the commentary, and creative scheduling by my department chair, DeAne Lagerquist, freed up time for me to write. Sara Leake and her staff in the interlibrary loan department of Rolvaag Memorial Library tracked down arcane journals. The religion department's administrative assistant Jennifer Schultz helped out with typing and artwork. St. Olaf deans Arnie Ostebee and Rick Fairbanks made it possible for me to hire Katharine Monson (St. Olaf '04), to assist with the final stage of manuscript

preparation. Working with Kate was a highlight of the project. I will be forever grateful to her for her professionalism and exquisite sense of style. In addition, a stable of student workers provided assistance, often at a moment's notice: Emily Moen helped with the compilation of the citation index, Janette Herbers completed Emily's work and compiled the first draft of the bibliography, and Bryan Stevenson and Richard Bishop helped with typing at the last minute.

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September 2005



## SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. This commentary series incorporates works of fine art in an accurate and scholarly manner, yet the format remains "user-friendly." An important facet is the presentation and explanation of images of art, which interpret the biblical material or illustrate how the biblical material has been understood and interpreted in the past. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* addresses Christians and the larger church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities are reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular “confession of faith” guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation, not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that

focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*.

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

*The Editors*



# HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

## **Basic Design of the Volumes**

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

## **Commentary and Connections**

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the main focus

of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

### **Sidebars**

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* provides a unique hyper-link format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars, which provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.

## ΑΩ

### **Alpha & Omega Language**

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All non-English terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.



### **Culture/Context**

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, or economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.



### **Interpretation**

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illuminates the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.



### **Additional Resources Study**

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, websites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

### **Additional Features**

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a list of abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* can regularly visit the Internet support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at <[www.helwys.com/commentary](http://www.helwys.com/commentary)>.

Several thorough indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These indexes include:

- An *Index of Sidebars* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- An *Index of Scriptures* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- An *Index of Topics* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- An *Index of Modern Authors* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.



# INTRODUCTION

In the book of Ezekiel, we read of a priest, Ezekiel ben Buzi, one of the Judean exiles deported along with King Jehoiachin to Babylonia in 597 BC. Five years into their exile, visions of God compelled him to relinquish his old way of life as a priest to become a prophet to the exiles. Engaging in a series of symbolic acts, the prophet became a sign prefiguring certain doom for Jerusalem. A year or so later, again in visions of God, he witnessed cultic and political abominations in the Jerusalem temple and, more startling still, its abandonment by its deity, the God of Israel. Fourteen years after the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel was once more taken up in visions of God, this time to walk through the courts of a “structure like a city,” the dwelling place of God in the land of Israel. Again the prophet became a sign, this time of the imminent reconciliation of the people of Israel with this God in the land promised to their ancestors a long time ago. How to make sense of these remarkable visions and the equally remarkable book in which they are found is the task of this commentary.

## **Literary Structure**

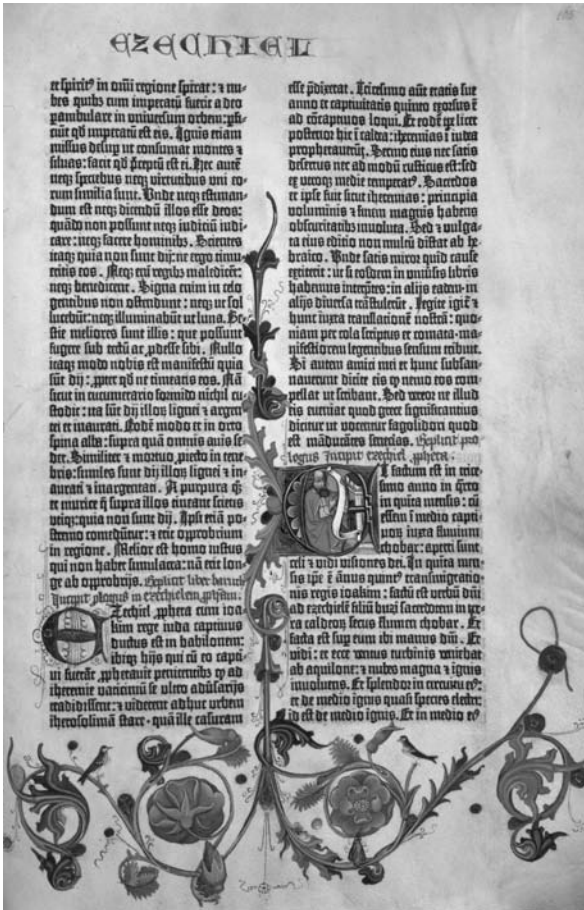
The book of Ezekiel reflects a degree of literary coherence unmatched in the canon of biblical prophets. Organized around three major visions of God (Ezek 1, 8–11, 40–48), the book tells the story of God’s final attempt as their only legitimate king to claim the loyalty of his subjects, the rebellious and recalcitrant house of Israel. The prophet Ezekiel plays a key role in this campaign. Date notices introducing nearly a dozen visions and oracles suggest that the book was structured as a prophetic diary, perhaps to document the prophet’s words on particular occasions (Ezek 24:1; cf. Isa 8:16). Other elements, such as the length of time between his inaugural and final visions, confirm this impression. In both vision and symbolic act, the prophet is so closely identified with divine judgment that his life becomes a mirror of the judgment itself. His first vision gives him a glimpse of the cosmos under the rule of God and inaugurates him into his role as a prophet, a visible sign of the power of God (chs. 1–7). As the book unfolds, the prophet will see visions, the people

will see the prophet, and both spectacles will demonstrate without a doubt that Yahweh is the God of Israel.

The literary distinctiveness of Ezekiel has long been recognized. Well into the nineteenth century, it was a foregone conclusion that

its design was best explained as the work of a single writer. Unlike other prophetic books, whose abrupt shifts in focus and theme eventually led to complex theories of original oral delivery, transmission, and redaction, the book of Ezekiel gave the impression of having been written almost in a single sitting.<sup>1</sup> But eventually the literary integrity of the book came to be regarded as a liability, and if there was a prophet hidden in this baggy book, he needed to be rescued by way of newly emerging methods of critical study. As these methods were developed, each was applied to the study of the prophet, sometimes with disastrous results. At one point, for example, less than 200 verses of the book were regarded as the original words of the prophet.<sup>2</sup> Despite these negative results, twentieth-century studies of Ezekiel also contributed to a clarification of the prophet's Judean heritage. Form- and tradition-critical studies established his essential connections with biblical traditions and demonstrated that much of the book could be

squarely situated within the phenomenon of biblical prophecy. By the middle of the twentieth century, many of the more radical positions had been discarded, though it remained customary to treat the book as a collection of original oracles that could be attributed to the prophet Ezekiel but that had undergone literary reworking, either by Ezekiel himself or a school associated with him. The achievements of the past century of study reached their high point



**Ezekiel from the Gutenberg Bible**

Text printed with moveable letters and hand painted initials and marginalia: page 105 recto, the book of Ezekiel with initial "E" and depiction of the prophet.

Ruth Schacht. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. [Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource]

in the two-volume commentary on Ezekiel by Walther Zimmerli, a commentary that continues to commend itself for careful study.<sup>3</sup>

As significant as these achievements were, the book of Ezekiel resisted critical methods better suited to other books of prophetic literature. Consider this example: one of the tasks of form criticism was to establish the contours of originally oral pronouncements by the identification of introductory and concluding prophetic formulas (e.g., the messenger formula, “thus says the Lord,” or the oracle formula “says the Lord”). These formulas appear in Ezekiel in abundance, and early form-critical studies proceeded with confidence to extract Ezekiel’s supposedly original oracles from their literary contexts. But in Ezekiel these formulas appeared to function not as markers delineating the contours of oral speech but as transitional cues holding literary materials together. Other features called into question the notion that the book was a collection or record of speeches delivered by the prophet.<sup>4</sup> Much of the book is presented as private communications from God to prophet, some of them instructions to pronounce oracles; many of these units lack reports to suggest that Ezekiel followed these instructions. Similarly, although the symbolic acts of chapters 4–5 are often interpreted as public performances, the narratives report only that the prophet was commanded to perform them, not that he did so.

Given these unusual features of the book, some critics have revived the earlier assessment of the book as a product of writing, not of oral prophetic speech, though now with a greater appreciation for the prophet as a writer. Moshe Greenberg paved the way for this assessment, both in his programmatic essays and in his commentary in the Anchor Bible series, which, at this date, remains uncompleted.<sup>5</sup> Ellen Davis provided a theoretical framework for understanding the unique capacities of writing in the transition from oral to literate cultures, as well as the manner in which writing would have enhanced Ezekiel’s role as a prophet in exile.<sup>6</sup> More than the means for recording oral speech, wrote Davis, writing allowed Ezekiel to critique Israelite and Judean traditions at a significantly deeper level than was possible in oral communication. Others have contributed to an understanding of the book’s integrity as a written composition, either by focusing on its rhetorical dimensions, its use of metaphor, or its development of key themes. While some of these critics, particularly Davis and Greenberg, have posited that the prophet Ezekiel was the author of his book, others maintain that the question of authorship cannot be answered definitively.<sup>7</sup>

One question that has emerged from this renewed interest in the literary coherence of Ezekiel is whether it is possible to speak of a genre for the book as a whole. Because there are no adequate parallels in the biblical tradition to explain the structure and coherence of Ezekiel, Robert Wilson has concluded, "As one of the first to produce written prophecy, Ezekiel had few models to guide him in his search for forms appropriate to the new medium."<sup>8</sup> The priestly, Jerusalemite, and prophetic heritage from which he drew was indeed rich; but, as Wilson has intimated, none of it provides adequate models for explaining the unique coherence achieved in Ezekiel's book. Without discounting the prophet's extraordinary creativity, one may nevertheless ask whether Ezekiel's models might not have been derived from other literary sources. One likely source for the design of the book of Ezekiel may be found in the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition, primarily the building inscriptions.<sup>9</sup> These inscriptions typically consist of three parts, a self-introduction, historical survey, and building account, and were frequently used by kings to recount their deeds in behalf of their gods and subjects. Others have demonstrated the pervasive impact of this genre on the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> The overall structure of Ezekiel resembles that of the building inscriptions, and the book as a whole bears even more interesting similarities to one set of exemplars, Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions (c. 680 BC). Like the book of Ezekiel and unlike the other Assyrian inscriptions, Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions revolve around the fate of a single city, which had so angered its gods that they had abandoned it to destruction. After receiving numerous signs of the return of divine favor, Esarhaddon set about to rebuild the city, restore its temples and shrines, and restore the rights of the oppressed Babylonians. More fine-grained comparisons of Ezekiel with Esarhaddon's inscriptions prevent further compelling evidence of a relationship, and they are presented in the course of this commentary.

If the Assyrian building inscriptions help us to solve the problem of the genre of the book of Ezekiel, they raise others. At the most basic level, one needs to ask how Ezekiel, a prophet of the Babylonian exile, came into contact with the literary traditions of the Assyrians, whose empire came to an end with the fall of Nineveh in 612 and whose political control in Syria Palestine is thought to have ended much earlier, possibly as soon as 640. Moreover, a cursory reading of the biblical texts gives the impression that the Assyrians were the enemies of Israel and Judah, the despised instruments of God's wrath (cf. Isa 10:5-15). How, then,

did Ezekiel come to be so deeply influenced by the Assyrian literary and cultural tradition?

### **The Cultural and Historical Context of Ezekiel**

One of the striking features of Ezekiel is its use of date notices to introduce many of the oracles and visions. Most of the dated oracles cluster around the years of Nebuchadnezzar's siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 588–586 BC; other date notices suggest that his prophetic activity began several years earlier (1:1; 8:1) and continued for at least sixteen years after the destruction of Jerusalem (40:1; 29:17-21).

Although much of the critical work of the past century has been devoted to demonstrating the intelligibility of the book within this historical context,<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel's own analysis of the crisis suggests that its roots reach back somewhat further, and encompass the immediately preceding decades of Judean attempts to secure its position within the context of declining Assyrian influence and the ensuing competition between Egypt and Babylon to gain control over Syria-Palestine. Especially revealing in this regard is his political allegory of the fortunes of the sisters Oholah and Oholibah, the adulterous "sisters" Samaria and Jerusalem (Ezek 23). Watching the older sister Samaria lust after the Assyrians, Jerusalem does not read the sister's ensuing destruction as a cautionary tale but engages in a more deadly dalliance. Almost immediately after she takes up with Assyria, Jerusalem is then drawn to other lovers, first the Babylonians (NRSV Chaldeans) and then the Egyptians. By Ezekiel's account, Jerusalem's fate is forged within this deadly triangle of competing allegiances.

Ezekiel's allegory evokes the chaotic bids for security in the last decade of the seventh century. For more than a century before that time, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were firmly under Assyrian control. By 722, the city of Samaria had been destroyed and its people deported to other kingdoms within the vast network of Assyrian vassal states. The kingdom of Judah, by contrast, enjoyed (or endured) a longer association. Second Kings reports that the Judean king Ahaz initiated an alliance with Assyria in 732, though the alliance may already have been in place at the beginning of that decade.<sup>12</sup>

Although 2 Kings barely mentions Assyria after the disastrous invasion of Sennacherib in 701, Judah remained under the control of Assyria for much of the seventh century. The evidence is fragmentary and difficult to sort out, particularly since both the



### The Prophet Ezekiel

Michelangelo (1475–1564). *The Prophet Ezekiel*. Detail of the Sistine ceiling. Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. [Credit: Scala / Art Resource]

biblical and Assyrian texts present “facts” in line with their respective ideological and theological positions. One well-known case in point is Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in 701. Biblical accounts report that the city was miraculously delivered (2 Kgs 18–19//Isa 36–37), while the Assyrian accounts report that Sennacherib trapped Hezekiah in Jerusalem “like a bird in a cage” and imposed additional penalties on top of an already steep tribute (*ANET*, 288). Although the archaeological evidence tends to bear out Sennacherib’s version of a massive destruction from which Judah only gradually recovered, 2 Kings preserves the fiction of a miraculous deliverance of Judah by omitting any reference to subsequent Judean vassalage to Assyria. Nothing is said about the continuing submission to Assyria of Hezekiah’s successor Manasseh, though Esarhaddon reports that as a faithful vassal he contributed labor and supplies for the rebuilding of Nineveh (*ARAB* 2:690). In addition, 2 Chronicles 33:10–13 reports that Manasseh was taken in

chains by the Assyrian king to Babylon. The details are not clear, and the veracity of the report has been disputed, but the purpose of the trip may have been to break an alliance between Judah and Babylon, possibly by using one rebel as an object lesson for the other (just as Ezekiel has done in the case of the two sisters Oholah and Oholibah). In any case, Manasseh's punishment did not result in a further weakening of his power. Rather, after this event, he fortified the defensive walls of Jerusalem and further strengthened the armies in the fortified cities of Judah (2 Chr 33:14).<sup>13</sup>

Reconstructing the period of Josiah's reign (639–609) is even more complicated. Again, 2 Kings makes no mention of Josiah's relationship to Assyria; moreover, Assyrian records omit any reference to Josiah. For that matter, the annals of Assurbanipal end in 639 BC, just a year before Josiah came to the throne.<sup>14</sup> Although the silence from the Assyrian side has led to the suggestion that Josiah was a strong king who took advantage of a weakening and retreating Assyria to press his reforms, recent reconstructions of the Josianic era have painted a more nuanced picture. Piecing together evidence of continuing Assyrian dominance from the Babylonian annals, which report peace and prosperity in the east under Assyrian rule for the years 627–624, Nadav Na'aman has argued that Assyria maintained its hold in Syria-Palestine well into the late 620s. Only when it became preoccupied with crushing revolts in Babylonia in the late 620s did it retreat from Syria-Palestine. Assyria's retreat did not create a power vacuum in the region; rather, at that time, suggests Na'aman, Assyria willingly ceded its western territories to Egypt in exchange for badly needed military assistance in its wars to the south and west.<sup>15</sup> Egypt thus came to exercise its influence in Syria-Palestine, not as a result of a power vacuum left by a weakened Assyria, but by common agreement between the two states, whose partnership appears to have lasted into the next decade. On the evidence of 2 Kings 23:19, where it is reported that Pharaoh Necho went up to Harran to "meet" Assyria in 609, it is possible to suggest, on the one hand, that Assyria continued to defend at least a portion of its holdings in the west even after the destruction of Nineveh in 612, and, on the other, its partnership with Egypt lasted to the bitter end. How one interprets the biblical accounts of Josiah's reign, in particular his cultic reforms, reclamation of traditional Israelite territory, and his fatal encounter with Pharaoh Necho in 609 must take into account the enduring alliance between Egypt and Assyria.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, Na'aman's suggestion that Assyria remained influential in the west well into the 620s gives further credence to Ezekiel's

account of Jerusalem's shifting allegiances in Ezekiel 23. As the brief and ambiguous report of Josiah's death intimates, Assyria remained a part of the international picture until 609, even though Egypt by that time played a more dominant role in Judean affairs (2 Kgs 23:29-35). Just four years later Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish and laid claim to the Syro-Palestinian states, including Judah (cf. 2 Kgs 24:1). The interval between Josiah's death in 609 and the deportation of Judeans to Babylonia in 597 was not long. Ezekiel's allegory of Jerusalem's infidelities expresses what, in his view, was a feverish bid to secure its position in a chaotic world.

Given the long dominance of Assyria in the west, it should not be surprising to find evidence of Assyrian cultural and literary influence in the book of Ezekiel. Two factors, which need not be mutually exclusive, may have contributed to Ezekiel's appropriation of Assyrian literary and political traditions. First, as Mordechai Cogan has suggested, it is possible to speak of a "new cultural and technological koine" created by the establishment of an empire stretching from Egypt to Anatolia;<sup>17</sup> this participation in the larger culture was not forced on Judah, argued Cogan, but was, rather, voluntarily adopted by the Judean elite. Nor was cultural influence a one-way street; Steven Holloway has called it a "bilateral hybridization."<sup>18</sup> Despite evidence that Assyria was despised in some Judean quarters (cf. Nahum, Jonah), its culture had a lasting impact on Judean religious and cultural life. Ezekiel is not unique in this regard; for example, Deuteronomy derives its distinctive understanding of allegiance to God from political metaphors in seventh century Assyrian vassal treaties. Particularly among the elite classes from which Ezekiel and his fellow exiles were drawn, it may be more appropriate to think of Assyrian culture as a penetrating stain than as a thin veneer to be peeled off once Assyria lost political control of its vassals.

Second, Assyrian literary models may have been available to Ezekiel in Babylon. Recently, Mark J. Boda has assembled evidence that Assyrian and Babylonian literary models were appropriated and imitated well into the Hellenistic era.<sup>19</sup> There is good evidence that Assyrian literary models continued to be appropriated even among the Babylonians. Although the building inscriptions of Nabonidus (c. 626–605 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar (c. 605–562 BC) revert to Old Babylonian conventions, at least one of the inscriptions of Nabonidus (c. 556–539 BC) can be shown to have imitated seventh-century Assyrian literary models.<sup>20</sup> Such scribal imitation of Assyrian literary models can also be demonstrated in the compo-



sition of the Cyrus Cylinder, which Babylonian priests composed in order to legitimate the claim of the Persian king Cyrus to rule Babylon (c. 539 BC).<sup>21</sup> That Babylonians should adopt Assyrian protocols either for their own building projects, as in the case of Nabonidus, or to legitimate the claims of a Persian to Babylonian rule, seems strange to us; but our surprise is more probably due to our uncritical adoption of the Bible's presentation of the great empires as the succession of one evil after another (cf. Dan 2, 7). More likely, the impact of Assyrian hegemony reverberated in the cultural traditions of those it affected for many generations to come.<sup>22</sup>

At least for Ezekiel, Babylon could not measure up to Assyria. Babylon was not a new agent of cosmic order replacing the cosmic tree of Assyria. Rather, the Babylonians, rebels themselves, had distracted Jerusalem away from its first lover, Assyria (23:13-14), and now Jerusalem must suffer the consequences of its disloyalty. To appropriate Ezekiel's ugly metaphor of adultery, Jerusalem has made her bed and she must lie in it. Nebuchadnezzar may be Yahweh's loyal servant (29:17-21), but Babylon remains a source of potential rebellion (38-39). Thus unlike his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel does not promote Babylon as a source of peace, at least not in the way that Jeremiah does:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:5-7)

If Jeremiah counseled accommodation to a new life in exile, Ezekiel saw life among the Babylonians as a life of unendurable shame. With the fall of Assyria and the scramble of the other kingdoms to claim their place on the world stage, Ezekiel writes, not in the midst of a crisis, but at the end of history. It is widely recognized that the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC was a catastrophic event bringing all of the Judean institutions to an end and posing the deepest challenge to Yahwistic traditions of promise, protection, and presence. But it was a crisis compounded by the collapse of a larger order made possible by Assyrian hegemony. Out of the rubble, Ezekiel assembled a new vision grounded in the invincible sovereignty of the God of Israel.

## Theological Significance

In the standard textbooks on the history of Western art, a story is often told of aesthetic changes in sculptural representations. From the Egyptians, Greek sculptors inherited a tradition of representing the male figure in a highly stylized form called the *kouros*. As Greek sculptors developed their own aesthetic traditions, the *kouros* stepped out of the Eastern world and became imbued with the individuality and expressiveness so characteristic of Greek sculpture—and familiar to us as essential depictions of the human being.

In a similar way, the book of Ezekiel is a transitional text. All too often, its alien ancestry cannot quite measure up to contemporary judgments of theological adequacy. And yet, it has made the crucial first step from the ancient world of imperial domination and control to a theological vision of the city of God. It has been said that in the Old Testament the God of Israel often sounds like an Assyrian potentate; Ezekiel helps us to see why. In the struggle to extricate his fellow exiles from the entanglements of dead-end politics, Ezekiel presents the God of Israel as the only one who could justifiably claim to rule Israel. In doing so, he employs stock metaphors from Assyrian royal ideology. Assyrian kings claimed dominion over the four quarters of the earth; only God could make that claim. Assyrian kings demanded absolute loyalty, so did Yahweh. Assyrian kings claimed to be shepherds of their flocks; only Yahweh was the good shepherd. Because Ezekiel uses the metaphors of Yahweh's rivals for the hearts and minds of the house of Israel, traces of the struggle remain: "I will be your King"; "You shall know that I am the Lord." But in the process, Ezekiel limns a radical alterity that continues to shape Christian and Jewish visions of a transcendent order.

Coupled with Ezekiel's radical theocentricity is a comprehensive moral vision. As far as Ezekiel is concerned, there is only one kingdom. He does not give his readers the option of rendering to Caesar, or for that matter, of even trying to decide whether Caesar is owed anything. Such an unflinching vision would seem to be totally irrelevant for a life in exile or any life in the real world, but this would be a problem only if it could be demonstrated that Ezekiel was charting a political program for a practical return to the land. Increasingly, however, critics are seeking to understand how the book functioned as a theological manifesto for exiles, strangers in a strange land. For such an audience, the vision of Ezekiel provides the foundation for the reconciliation of a deeply fragmented Judean community.

Many of the questions addressed by Ezekiel reflect a deep conflict between Judeans who retained at least a semblance of political control in Jerusalem, and Ezekiel's audience, the exiles in Babylonia. What is the responsibility of citizens to one another? In what way are the generations linked in cycles of guilt and punishment? Does Yahweh keep covenant, and with whom and for what reason? Underlying all of these questions is the perennial question of the expatriate: what about the land that I have been forced to leave, which my brother has taken from me? Just as Ezekiel shatters the claims of the empires for the allegiance of Israel, he gives no quarter to intramural quarrels. In retelling the history of the exodus; in recounting the responsibility of the Judeans to the exiles and of the generations to one another; and not least in exposing the lie of political and economic power, Ezekiel always turns the question of human shortcomings back to the question of Yahweh's faithfulness. Amid disputes within the community over election, Yahweh declares that all lives belong to him. The God who threatens to purge out rebels in the wilderness of exile is the same God who promises to leave no one behind. Yahweh's determination to be king over the rebellious house of Israel turns out to be an offer of royal magnanimity, which has as its goal the recreation of human community. In the city of Yahweh's own design and in the sanctifying and blessing presence of Yahweh, the slate is wiped clean, and life in community begins again.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Smend, *Der Prophet Ezechiel* (KHAT; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1880), xxi, cited by Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, "Ezekiel Among the Critics," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 2 (1994): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Gustav Hölscher, *Hesekiel, der Dichter un das Buch* (BZAW 139; Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1914).

<sup>3</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983; first published in Germany, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Robert R. Wilson, "Ezekiel," in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. James L. Mays et al (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 588.

<sup>5</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983); and *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy* (Bible and Literature Series 21; Sheffield: Almond, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> For reviews of critical scholarship, see Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Ezekiel Among the Critics," 9-24, and Risa Levitt Kohn, "Ezekiel at the Turn of the Century," *Currents in Biblical Research* 2 (2003): 9-32.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, "Ezekiel," 588.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret S. Odell, "Genre and Persona in Ezekiel 24:15-24," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (SBLSS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 195-220, esp. 208-14.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings*, JSOTSup 115 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), especially chs. 2-4; and Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 8-11; and Karl S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford, "The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian Sources," *JAOS* 90 (1970): 462-485.

<sup>12</sup> M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the 8th-7th Centuries B.C.E.*, (SBLMS 19; Missoula MT: Scholars, 1974), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 67-70, and idem, "Judah under Assyrian Hegemony: A Re-examination of *Imperialism and Religion*," *JBL* 112 (1993): 407.

<sup>14</sup> Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-41.

<sup>16</sup> The historiographical issues were recently addressed in the European Seminar on Methodology in Israel's History (Berlin, July 2002), which convened during the joint meeting of the European Association of Biblical Studies and the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The essays presented in that seminar will be published under the title *Good Kings/Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century* (Continuum, forthcoming). I am grateful to the editor, Lester L. Grabbe, for making the essays available to me.

<sup>17</sup> Cogan, "Judah Under Assyrian Hegemony," 412.

<sup>18</sup> Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 10; Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002), 68.

<sup>19</sup> Mark J. Boda, "From Dystopia to Myopia: Utopian (re)visions in Haggai and Zechariah 1-8," 1-4 and notes. Presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Antonio, November 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Sippar Cyliner of Nabonidus," in *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, 3 vols., ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Leiden, 2000), 2:310-13, esp. 311 n. 2. In addition to internal evidence of the borrowing of Assyrian conventions, the Sippar Cyprus and cylinders both explicitly report that Nabonidus and Cyrus saw the foundation deposits of Assurbanipal. For the Cyrus Cylinder, see *COS* 2.124.

<sup>21</sup> M. Dandamaev, "Assyrian Traditions during Achaemenid Times," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 41-48, esp. 44, as cited by Boda, "From Dystopia to Myopia," 3.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Peter Machinist, "The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective," in *Assyria 1995*, 179-95.

# THE INAUGURAL VISION

## Ezekiel 1:1-28

In his commentary on Ezekiel, Jean Calvin claimed that the opening chapters were fundamental to understanding the rest of the book. What was important was not only the time at which Ezekiel received his call but also the manner in which “God stirred him up.”<sup>1</sup> [“You Are Not Surprised”] The encounter is characterized in 1:1 as *mar’ôt ’ēlohîm*, which NRSV translates “visions of God.” While there is a general consensus that the word translated here as “visions” is a plural of emphasis and should be translated to indicate that Ezekiel had only one vision, the account describes two encounters: one by the Chebar, an irrigation canal outside the city of Nippur (1:1–3:21), and the other in the valley, possibly the alluvial plain in which the Chebar was situated (3:22–5:17).

In 1:4, a storm cloud coming from the north opens to reveal likenesses of four living beings, wheels within wheels, and the “appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (v. 28). This vision is Ezekiel’s first encounter, and he responds with awe by falling on his face. Yahweh acknowledges Ezekiel’s presence and expresses the intention to speak with him. A spirit enters Ezekiel, allowing him to stand and receive his prophetic commission, which consists of three separate sets of instructions (2:1-7; 2:8–3:3; 3:4-11). A spirit returns the prophet to the Chebar, where he sits stunned for seven days (3:12-15). The word of the Lord comes to him a second time, informing him that he has been made a sentinel for the house of Israel (3:16-21).

The second encounter occurs when Ezekiel is told to go out to the valley (Ezek 3:22). Verbal parallels link this account with the preceding vision: the glory of the Lord is like that which the prophet saw at the Chebar; the prophet falls on his face; the spirit sets him on his feet; and Yahweh speaks to him. This time, the prophet is instructed to perform a series of actions to signify the destruction of Jerusalem.

### “You Are Not Surprised”



You are not surprised at the force of the storm—

you have seen it growing.

The trees flee. Their flight

sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:

he whom they flee is the one

you move toward. All your senses

sing him, as you stand at the window.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “Dich wundert nicht des Sturmes Wucht,” trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, in *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 95.

## COMMENTARY

**The Superscription, 1:1-3**

These three short verses introduce both the prophet and his book.

Verse 1, written in the first person and reflecting the autobiographical character of the rest of the book, [Ancient Autobiography] states the year in which the prophet received this vision, its location, and its nature. As Ezekiel recounts, “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month,” while he was among the exiles along the river Chebar, “the heavens were opened,” and he “saw visions of God.” The Chebar was located in the region of Nippur, an ancient Babylonian city once situated on the Euphrates River. When the Euphrates shifted its course, the city suffered a decline in importance. Nippur’s fortunes fluctuated during the centuries of Assyrian hegemony; it occasionally joined resistance coalitions but finally came under strict Assyrian control in the seventh century.<sup>2</sup> When the Babylonian king Nabopolassar began to rebel against Assyrian control, the city of Nippur remained loyal to Assyria, possibly because it hosted a



**The Vision of Ezekiel**

Raphael (1483–1520). *The Vision of Ezekiel*. c. 1518. Oil on wood, 40 x 30 cm. Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy. [Credit: Nimatallah / Art Resource]

large Assyrian military installation.<sup>3</sup> The reason for settling the Judean exiles in Nippur is unknown. The city had suffered a decline in population,<sup>4</sup> so perhaps the Judean settlement reflects the Babylonian strategy of repopulating cities devastated by warfare. Whatever the reason, the resemblance between the Book of Ezekiel and Assyrian traditions may be attributable not only to Ezekiel’s early education but also to continuing contact with Neo-Assyrian scribal activity in the region of Nippur.

Ezekiel’s description of his vision is highly unusual. The expression “the heavens were opened” appears nowhere else in the Old

### Ancient Autobiography



The word “autobiography” should be used with caution when speaking of any ancient literature.

The term first gained currency in the early 19th century and is best used to describe a personal narrative that focuses on one’s inner development and involvement in larger historical events. By this definition, ancient Near Eastern texts and inscriptions employing the first person are not, properly speaking, autobiography.

In nearly all cases, the subject of the autobiographical account is a royal figure. Royal inscriptions typically include a king’s self-introduction and account of past deeds; this serves as a preface to the final section, which may promulgate a law code—as in the case of Hammurabi—or describe a king’s plans to build a palace or to restore an entire city. Such inscriptions were widely known in the ancient Near East and served as the common literary skeleton for a wide variety of historical writings.

The book of Ezekiel resembles these inscriptions primarily in its three-part outline, including a visionary introduction of Yahweh, a prophetic account of Yahweh’s successful campaign to establish his rule over Israel, and a detailed account of rebuilding and restoring the temple, land, and people of Israel. Whereas Mesopotamian building inscriptions are primarily intended as political propaganda in praise of a human king, Ezekiel has appropriated the genre for theological purposes. The one who will rebuild and restore Israel is no human king, but Yahweh—who reveals his universal lordship in the opening chapter, recounts through prophetic oracles the history of his dealings with his people, and finally, unveils to his prophet a divinely constructed temple.

Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dicks, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1:5-6; Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 55; Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings* (JSOTSup 115; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 312; and Edward Greenstein, “Autobiographies,” in *CANE* 4:2423.

Testament and suggests that the prophet is allowed to peer directly into the heavenly throne room. Moreover, Ezekiel’s designation of the experience as *mar’ôt ʾēlohîm* suggests that this is a direct encounter with Yahweh, an event markedly set apart from the visionary experiences of the other prophets. In the biblical tradition, only Moses was also able to make that claim. [Vision or Encounter?]

Written in the third person, vv. 2-3 interrupt the first-person autobiographical tone of 1:1. Possibly an editorial addition, these verses identify the writer of 1:1 as the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi, and correlate the mysterious “thirtieth year” with the fifth year of the reign of the Judean king Jehoiachin. The probable date is 31 July 593 BC.

Ezekiel’s first vision roughly coincides with significant political events in Jerusalem. Sometime in 594–593 BC, diplomats from the neighboring states of Moab, Ammon, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon gathered in Jerusalem to plot rebellion against Babylon (Jer 27; 28:1). In that same year, Zedekiah journeyed to Babylon to meet with Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 51:59). While the reason for Zedekiah’s visit is unknown, he may have gone to reassure the Babylonian king of his loyalty. Judean exiles would have known of both events, and both events would have fanned their hopes for a speedy return to the land of Judah.

Even if the larger political events of 593 BC can be ascertained, there remains considerable disagreement as to the meaning of the thirtieth year. Some have argued that it refers, not to the fifth, but to the thirtieth year of Jehoiachin’s reign, or 568 BC. If this is the

case, the vision would have occurred at the end of Ezekiel's career, rather than at the beginning, and an editor has placed it at the beginning of the book to anticipate its concluding visions of restoration. This position has not received much support, largely because vv. 1-3 clearly indicate that the thirtieth year is equivalent to the fifth year of the deportation, which occurred under Jehoiachin.

Although there remains considerable debate over the meaning of the thirtieth year, the position adopted here is that it refers to Ezekiel's age—that is, he was thirty years old when he received his call. Origen was the first to suggest this interpretation,<sup>5</sup> and while there is no syntactical warrant for such a reading, there are good reasons to follow his lead.<sup>6</sup> The difficulties are mitigated by related textual evidence about the meaning of the thirtieth year in the life of a priest.<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel's thirtieth year would have been important because that was the age at which Levites began to serve in the sanctuary (Num 4:3, 23, 30). Moreover, if Ezekiel were thirty years old in the fifth year of the exile, his final vision of the temple would have occurred in his fiftieth year (Ezek 40:1), the age at which Levites retired from service. The two dates thus suggest that the book presents a memoir of the career of a priest turned prophet.

One can speculate that the age of thirty represented a turning point for Ezekiel. At a time when he could have expected to rise to a state of heightened purity and service, he found himself among exiles in an unclean land. If he had entertained any prospects of returning to Jerusalem, reaching the age of thirty would have forced him to recognize the severity of the situation. This vision occurs at a crucial moment in his life, and a personal milestone becomes a national sign: neither he nor the exiles will ever see the Jerusalem temple again.

### **The Vision, 1:4-28**

This vision introduces Ezekiel's reader to the representation of Yahweh as king of the universe. In subsequent chapters, Yahweh will be revealed through acts of judgment, accounts of past attempts to get the people to honor his reign, and new acts to reestablish his rule. The vision prepares the reader for these disclosures by depicting the possibility of cosmic order under Yahweh's command.

Some expositions treat Ezekiel 1 as a vision emphasizing divine mobility over against the notion that Yahweh could only be



### Vision or Encounter?

**ΑΩ** The phrase *mar'ot 'ēlohîm*, which NRSV translates “visions of God,” is unusual; prophetic superscriptions more customarily use the term *hâzôn* to characterize collections of oracles and visions (cf. Isa 1:1; Obad 1; Nah 1:1; cf. 2 Chr 9:29; 32:33; also Hab 2:2; Isa 29:11). The term *'ēlohîm*, which is often used for the proper noun “God,” is meant here as a general term for divinity. *Mar'ôt*, which NRSV translates “visions,” may be the plural form for the masculine term *mar'eh*, “appearance,” and not for the feminine *mar'â*, “vision,” as is commonly supposed, since references back to 1:1 always use the masculine singular *mar'eh* (Ezek 8:4; 43:3). Unlike the more common term *hâzôn*, which can imply the ambiguity of a message, a *mar'eh* is a more direct type of encounter.

Either the masculine *mar'eh* or the feminine *mar'â* underscores the rarity of Ezekiel’s experience. If the feminine *mar'ah* is intended in Ezek 1, then Ezekiel’s vision is one of a very small number, since that term is used only of the visions of Jacob (Gen 46:2), Samuel (1 Sam 3:15), and Daniel (Dan 10:6, 7, 8; Ezek 1 has probably influenced the usage in Daniel). With the possible exception of Samuel and Num 12:6, to be discussed below, nowhere is *mar'ah* associated with prophetic visions. But even Samuel’s experience may stand above that of other prophets, since the narrative makes it clear that Yahweh “came and stood” before the boy (1 Sam 3:10).

The sense of immediacy may be more profound than is normally conveyed by our translation of the feminine *mar'â* as “vision.” The difference between the masculine *mar'eh* and the feminine *mar'â* is illustrated by their juxtaposition in Num 12:6-7:

If any one among you is a prophet,  
I make myself known to him in a vision (*mar'â*).  
By means of dreams I speak to him.  
Not so with my servant Moses:  
He alone is trusted in all my house.  
Face to face I speak with him,  
In plain sight (*mar'eh*) and not in riddles;  
Only he gazes on the form (*tēmunâ*) of Yahweh. (Num 12:6-7)

According to Num 12:6-7, *mar'â* is associated with prophets and dream revelations, while *mar'eh* is associated with face-to-face encounters lacking the dreamlike ambiguity of prophetic revelation. The contrast between ambiguity and directness may be conveyed by the contrast between masculine and feminine terms in the unit: prophetic revelations are dreams (f.) and visions (f.), while Moses’ encounter (*mar'eh*, m.) is explicitly contrasted with riddles (f.). What is further significant about the contrast is that the latter is associated with seeing the form of Yahweh, a privilege not accorded to anyone else in the Pentateuchal traditions (cf. Deut 4:12, 15; and the prohibition against idols, Exod 20:4; Deut 4:16, 23, 25; 5:8). Since Ezekiel sees a “form” of Yahweh in ch. 1, the term *mar'eh* may connote that experience. The preference for the term *mar'eh* throughout Ezek 1 suggests that the account describes a kind of encounter distinctly different from a prophetic visionary experience. What Ezekiel claims, then, is that he has had a direct encounter with Yahweh, not unlike that of Moses (cf. Exod 3:3).

For the association of prophets with visions (*hâzôn*), see Ps 89:20//1 Chr 17:15//2 Sam 7:17; Jer 14:14; 23:16; Ezek 7:26; 12:24; 13:16; Hos 12:11; Joel 3:1; Mic 3:6; Zech 13:4; Lam 2:9; 1 Sam 3:1; Dan 9:24. W. G. E. Watson discusses the semantic differences of masculine and feminine nouns in “Gender-Matched Synonymous Parallelism in the Old Testament,” *JBL* 99 (1980): 321-41. Others evaluate the evidence somewhat differently; for alternatives to that proposed here, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §6.4.3; and Mordechai Ben-Asher, “The Gender of Nouns in Biblical Hebrew,” 6 (1978): 1-14.

encountered in the Jerusalem temple. According to these interpretations, divine mobility would have been a critical theological principle allowing the exiles to continue to worship the God of Israel. Divine mobility would also have been important for the legitimation of Ezekiel as a prophet, since his exilic location would presumably have cast doubt on his credibility. Both the vision and

the subsequent call narrative (2:1–3:16a) would bolster his authority. However, if Ezekiel 1 were only concerned with demonstrating that Yahweh could appear to an exiled priest in Babylonia, such a vision would seem excessive. Moreover, the mobility of a local god would hardly persuade the Judean exiles to listen to Ezekiel, since the more pressing question in light of the collapse of Assyria and the emergence of Babylonia as the dominant empire would be whether any local god had power or authority of any significance. In answer to that question, this vision asserts that Yahweh holds sovereign sway, not only over the Judean exiles, but over the cosmos itself.

From the outset, Ezekiel's encounter resembles a storm theophany. [Storm Theophanies] Storm theophanies were common in the biblical tradition, and the imagery used here—including clouds, fire, lightning, and brilliance—would have been familiar to Ezekiel's audience. Psalm 18 contains the closest parallels to Ezekiel's vision. In both, Yahweh is encased in thick clouds, is surrounded by brightness, and wields lightning bolts and “hailstones and coals of fire” as weapons (Ps 18:7-15). While biblical storm theophanies frequently depict Yahweh coming to execute judgment, Ezekiel's theophany seems more static. Although there is awesome movement and tumultuous sound, Ezekiel is more concerned with depicting the potential of divine power than its actual manifestation.

Ezekiel describes each element of the vision as it is disclosed to him. First, he sees four living beings, each of which has four different faces, four wings, human bodies, and calves' feet. The living beings flash like lightning and coals of fire, and each is accompanied by a wheel, which contains its spirit and moves with it. As Ezekiel describes their thunderous sound and movement, his gaze is drawn upward by another sound coming from above. Ezekiel then describes a plate or dome above the living beings, and above the dome, a throne of lapis lazuli. Seated on the throne is a figure resembling encased fire from the loins upward, with fire breaking forth from the loins downward. This sight, Ezekiel concludes, is none other than the “appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”

This vision is often compared with throne theophanies like those found in Isaiah 6:1-13 and 1 Kings 22:19-23. [Throne Theophanies] Each begins with a prophet declaring that he has seen the enthroned Yahweh surrounded by heavenly attendants. Though these theophanies initially appear to have much in common with the images described in Ezekiel 1, they are nevertheless more ade-

quately put into the same category as storm theophanies. Both types of visions are narrative accounts that show Yahweh in action, resolving a crisis. They focus on Yahweh's deliberations with his courtiers as they work to carry out the divine decree. The vision in Ezekiel 1, by contrast, is a description of a static image of Yahweh's glory. It is a static portrait, not a dynamic demonstration, of divine power.

If Ezekiel's vision bears some resemblance to biblical storm and throne theophanies, its incorporation of ancient Near Eastern iconography yields a wholly new type of encounter. While the Mesopotamian art of Ezekiel's time has examples of four-winged, humanoid figures with the heads of lions, bulls, and eagles, none of these figures is quite like the living beings of Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel does not simply borrow from or imitate this tradition, but instead deploys it to develop a startling new claim about the power and sovereignty of Yahweh. In doing so, he not only expands on his own traditions, he also creatively adapts symbolism from the dominant theologies of the empires of his time.

Ezekiel's use of this imagery is a form of theological speculation. While some of the symbols were very closely associated with

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### Storm Theophanies



As one of the most prevalent forms of divine self-manifestation in the Old Testament, storm theophanies draw their evocative power from the "most powerful and essential phenomenon in the life of people in a Canaanite agricultural society" (Hiebert). Because storms could be both destructive and beneficial, the imagery is at the same time terrifying and awe-inspiring. Theodore Hiebert observes that the storm theophany is reminiscent of Rudolph Otto's conception of the holy as *mysterium tremendum*, which the worshiper encounters with the feelings of both fear and awe, and of the contradictory impulses of attraction and dread. In storm theophanies, earthquakes, thunder, lightning, wind, dark clouds, brightness, fire, and tempest all signify Yahweh's appearance (Ps 18:6-19; Hab 3:3-15). These elements are variously anthropomorphized; the storm *is* the Divine Warrior, who comes from his hidden abode to do battle against his enemies and the enemies of Israel (Hab 3:3; Deut 33:2-3; Judg 5:4). The thunder is Yahweh's voice, lightning his arrows, brightness his clothing. Yahweh may be accompanied by a great retinue of the hosts of heaven (Deut 33:2; Judg 5:20; Ps 68:17); or he may come alone, carried on the wings of the wind, which can also be mythologically described as a cherub (Ps 18:10).

Storm theophanies appear in a variety of contexts. The imagery is prominent in victory hymns that describe the triumph of Yahweh over Israel's enemies (Judg 5; Exod 15:1-18). Songs of praise extol the powers of the god of the storm (Pss 29; 97; 104). Storm theophany can appear as part of a larger pattern, in which Yahweh defeats the powers of chaos, establishes his rule, and issues divine decrees (Exod 19-24). Possibly because they are associated with the coming of Yahweh in judgment (Amos 1:2; Nah 1), they can also be used to exhort the congregation to true worship (Ps 50). Finally, petitioners seeking divine aid may also employ storm theophanies to call upon Yahweh for deliverance as in the days of old (Hab 3; Pss 68, 77).

Theodore Hiebert, "Theophany in the Old Testament," ABD 6:509; Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12-40.

particular deities, many could be appropriated to express new ideas about divine reality. So, for example, as Mesopotamian religion incorporated new gods into the pantheon or elevated older ones to higher positions, such changes would be reflected in new combinations of symbols.<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel engages in a similar practice as he combines biblical motifs with visual images from the Mesopotamian world. Although the precise meanings of the Mesopotamian imagery, and Ezekiel's appropriation of it, may remain unclear to us, the vision owes its richness to Ezekiel's inventive engagement with these symbol systems.

In any comparison of biblical material with that of the ancient Near Eastern world, a methodology to control the comparisons is essential. It is especially important in the case of Ezekiel 1, when verbal images and metaphors are being compared with sculptural and artistic renderings. The method that guides this analysis is the search for functional equivalence. According to this method, it is insufficient and in fact erroneous to compare figures that have a merely physical resemblance. This is critical to note when one seeks



### **The Vision of Ezekiel**

Paul Falconer Poole (1807–79). *The Vision of Ezekiel*. Exhibited 1875. Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource]

### Throne Theophanies



Although it is customary to speak of throne theophanies in connection with Ezek 1, Isa 6, and 1 Kgs 22:19-22, the concept of theophany is inadequate for the phenomenon that is being described here. A theophany is a divine self-manifestation, and it is usually understood that such self-disclosures are perceived as eruptions into the natural order of things (see **[Storm Theophanies]**). Of the three texts discussed as throne theophanies, those of Isaiah and Ezekiel may be theophanies, because each prophet sees the divine throne in the earthly realm. On the other hand, since these are private experiences, it may be more appropriate to call them visions and not theophanies. Similarly, Micaiah ben Imlah describes a visionary experience in which he is transported into the heavenly throne room (1 Kgs 22:19-22). By definition, then, a vision of the heavenly throne does not necessarily qualify as a theophany.

It is more important to determine the function of the throne motif in each instance in which it is used. In the case of both 1 Kgs 22:19-22 and Isa 6, the purpose of the throne motif is to assert that, contrary to appearances, a transcendent power directs the course of earthly events (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1). In other accounts, human access to the divine throne implies a particular intimacy with Yahweh (cf. Exod 24:9-10), or Israel's unique access to Yahweh's power (Dan 7).

parallels to the four-winged humanoid forms in Ezekiel 1, since such forms abound in Mesopotamian iconography. Many such figures wear a horned cap to signify their divine status. Because the living beings of Ezekiel 1 are clearly described as creatures (i.e., "living beings"), it would be inappropriate to compare them with these figures, who were apparently understood to be lesser deities. In order to control the search for parallels, the function of the elements that appear in the biblical tradition must be established first.

As Ezekiel faces north and peers into the storm cloud, he is given a glimpse into the heavenly throne room. That glimpse does not afford a direct encounter with Yahweh, however. Throne rooms of that period were constructed on a bent-axis pattern, with the entrance placed midway along one of the longer walls and the throne placed at the eastern end. On entering the throne room, a visitor would face not the king, but the area directly opposite the entrance. He would then turn ninety degrees to face the king at the far end of the room.<sup>9</sup> **[Assyrian Palaces]**

In Assyrian throne rooms, the area opposite the entrance was reserved for a highly stylized portrait of the king at worship. In one example, the king is shown in a mirror image flanking a sacred tree and accompanied by protective genies. Above him, in a winged disk, appears the god Ashur. The portrait thus asserts that the king upholds the cosmic order through the worship of his god. An identical portrait over the king's throne reinforced this claim of sovereign piety. These two areas, opposite the entrance and above the throne, served as focal points underscoring a particular under-

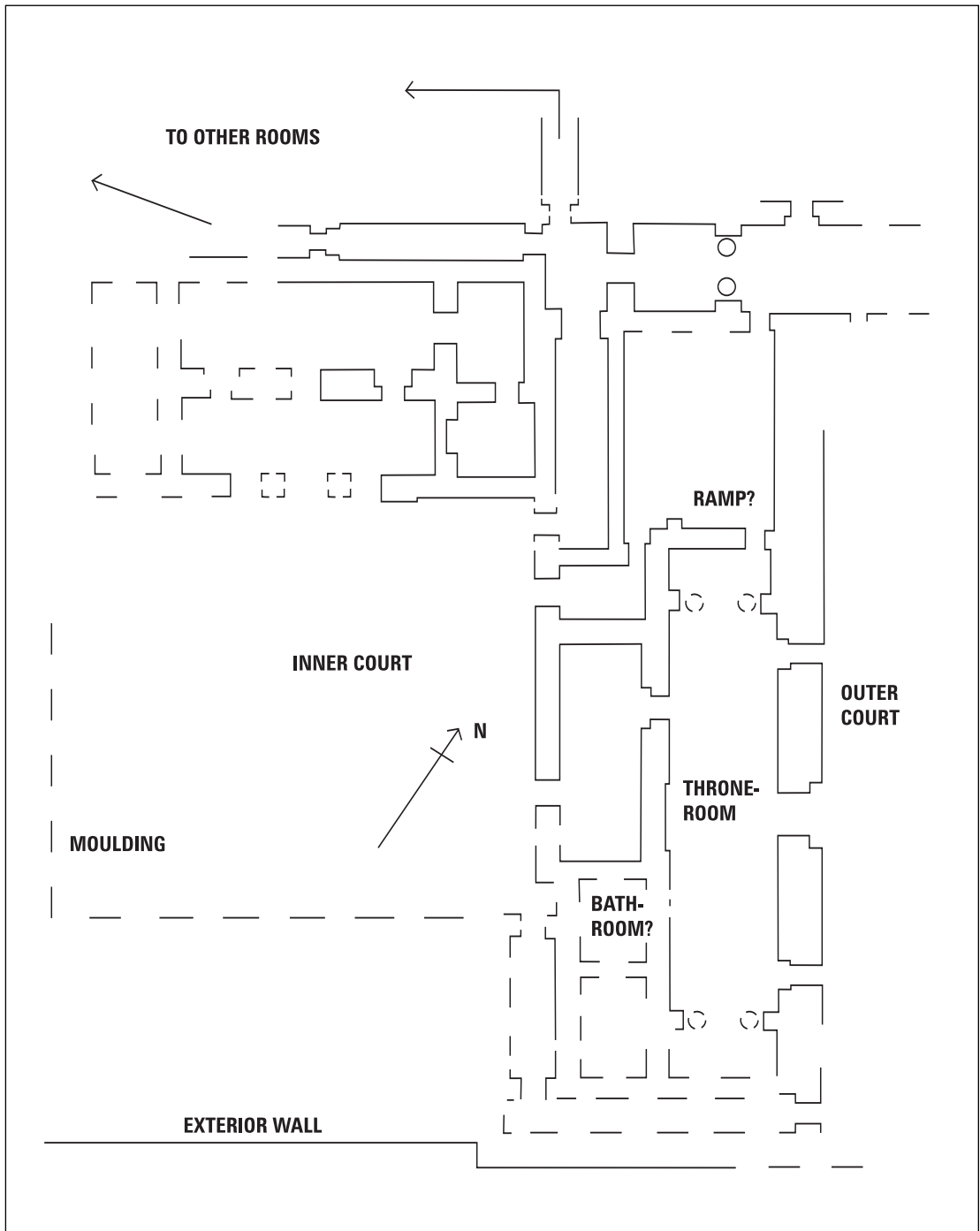
standing of the king as a pious servant of his god.<sup>10</sup> [The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Throne Rooms]

The details of Ezekiel's vision are consistent with the layout and decoration of such throne rooms. First, as he gazes into the cloud from the south as it opens to him out of the north, Ezekiel sees a representation, or depiction, of Yahweh. This is made evident by his use of the terms *dēmût*, "form" (1:5, 10, 13, 16, 22, 26, 28), and *mar'eh*, "appearance" (1:5, 13, 14, 16, 26, 27, 28), throughout the vision. NRSV does not consistently distinguish between these two terms, but instead treats them as synonyms and assumes that both represent efforts to describe a direct vision of Yahweh by means of analogy. But the terms each have a more precise meaning. The word *dēmût* is an aesthetic term used to describe an artistic representation of an object. For example, when King Ahaz sees an altar in Damascus, he sends a *dēmût*, or model, of the altar back to the priest in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 16:10). The word *mar'eh* describes what that object looks like; the word is often used to describe concrete physical objects.<sup>11</sup> This distinction between form and appearance was apparently common in discourse about representational art. Ezekiel employs this convention elsewhere in his description of Oholibah's lusting after the Chaldeans. In that account, the term *dēmût* refers to a concrete depiction of the Chaldeans, which NRSV translates as a "picture of Babylonians." The *mar'eh*, "appearance," of these pictures is further defined by details like flowing turbans, brilliant colors, and waist sashes:

she saw male figures carved on the wall; images of the Chaldeans (*šalmê kašdîm*) portrayed in vermilion, with belts around their waists, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like (*mar'eh*) officers—a picture (*dēmût*) of Babylonians whose native land was Chaldea. (Ezek 23:14b-16)

The context of Ezekiel 23:15b-16 suggests that Ezekiel was familiar with Assyrian representational art and its rhetorical and ideological function of magnifying the power of the Assyrian monarch. That context guides Ezekiel's analogous uses of the terms *dēmût* and *mar'eh* in chapter 1.

The unusual use of the word *ḥašmal* in 1:4 and 27 (cf. 8:2) is yet another indication that Ezekiel's vision would have reminded his contemporaries of artistic representations. The term, which is translated in NRSV as "amber," appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. Recent comparative studies suggest that the term is equivalent to the Akkadian term *elmešu*, which appears in some texts as a quasi-mythical stone and in others as material used for



### Assyrian Palaces



This is the floor plan of the palace of Ashurbanipal (7th c. BC). Note the outer court and the throne room. Entrance from the outer court is along the long side walls. Directly opposite the central entrance is a niche, which would have contained a representation of the king. The king's throne would have been at one of the narrow ends of the room.

As noted in Irene J. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs." *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 10.





[Illustration: Barclay Burns]

### The Upholder of Cosmic Order

Appearing opposite the entrance to the throne room from the court and above his throne, this royal portrait underscored the centrality of the king in maintaining the cosmic order. The sacred tree is the focal point of the orthostat, while Ashurnasirpal appears in mirror images on both sides of the tree. A four-winged human figure, wearing the horned cap of divinity and supporting the king in his sacred duties, flanks the king.

Artist illustration of portrait from Room B, slab 23 (B.M. 124531), as noted in Irene J. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* (1981): 6.

### The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Throne Rooms



The art and architecture of Assyrian throne rooms is closely tied to the ideology of Assyrian building inscriptions (see **[Ancient Autobiography]**). One context for these inscriptions was the Assyrian palaces (see **[Assyrian Palaces]**). The repetition of the inscription on palace walls communicated the royal ideology, not just to those who could read, but to any and all who entered the royal precincts. The transparency of the royal ideology was also achieved by illustrating scenes from the royal inscription sculpturally in low reliefs depicting the Assyrian king at war, performing great feats of conquest of the nations and the natural world, and, finally, receiving tribute from his subject peoples. For diplomatic visitors, there could be no doubt about their place in the Assyrian order of things. They could submit to Assyrian rule, or they could rebel and face certain destruction (see **[Assyrian Throne Rooms at First Glance]**).

The centrality of the king was underscored in the layout and decoration of the throne room. Two focal points interrupted the narrative scenes described above. On the wall

opposite the entrance and then again above the throne itself, space was set aside for identical, highly stylized portrayals of the king tending to his sacred duties and upheld in those duties by protective deities. These stylized scenes provided the interpretive lens through which all the other narrative scenes would be viewed, and asserted that it was through the king's piety and divine support that he was able to achieve the feats depicted in narrative form on the remaining areas of the walls.

John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall: Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 9; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999); Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 34 n. 18; Julian Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," in *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium of Ancient Empires*, ed. Mogens Trolle Larsen (Mesopotamia 7; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979), 330–31.



### Assyrian Throne Rooms at First Glance



Austen Henry Layard, the adventurer and archaeologist who was largely responsible for the excavation of the Assyrian palaces in the mid-19th century, saw a direct connection between these long-buried sculptures and the imagery in the book of Ezekiel. So strong were the associations, in fact, that Ezek 23:14-15 was quoted in full on the title page of his book, *Nineveh and Its Remains*. In a further discussion of the brilliant use of color on the reliefs, Layard argued that Ezekiel must have seen these palaces before they were destroyed in the late 600s: “There can scarcely be a doubt that he had seen the objects which he describes—the figures sculptured upon the wall, and painted.” Discussing the symbolism of ch. 1, Layard observed that all of the figures represented in Ezekiel’s vision served religious functions in Assyrian iconography. His comments provide an insightful analysis of the appropriation of cultural symbols:

The resemblance between the symbolical figures I have described, and those seen by Ezekiel in his vision, can scarcely fail to strike the reader. As the prophet had beheld the Assyrian palaces, with their mysterious images and gorgeous decorations, it is highly probably that, when seeking to typify certain divine attributes, and to describe the divine glory, he chose forms that were not only familiar to him, but to the people whom he addressed—captives like himself in the land of Assyria. Those who were uncorrupted by even the outward forms of idolatry, sought for images to convey the idea of the Supreme God. Ezekiel saw in his vision the likeness of four living creatures. . . . It will be observed that the four forms chosen by Ezekiel to illustrate his description—the man, the lion, the bull, and the eagle—are precisely those which are constantly found on Assyrian monuments as religious types. The “wheel within wheel,” mentioned in connection with the emblematical figures, may refer to the winged circle, or wheel, representing at Nimroud the supreme deity.”

Layard’s straightforward observations about the relationship between Assyrian architecture and iconography were not completely lost. At the turn of the last century, Charles Toy’s translation and commentary on Ezekiel in the Polychrome Bible series included line drawings of a significant number of parallels in Assyrian iconography. James Smith’s argument that the prophet and his book were to be assigned to an 8th-century, northern Israelite setting depended on these Assyrian parallels. Since that time, as scholars have become increasingly confident of the book’s own claims about its date and setting, the rich Assyrian coloring of the book has faded from view. Now that Assyriologists are beginning to understand the function of these palaces and their inscriptions on their own terms, the time may be ripe to attempt a more mature comparison of Ezekiel and the Assyrian monumental architecture.

Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, new edition, without abridgement, in two combined volumes (New York: Putnam, 1852); Charles H. Toy, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: A New Translation with Explanatory Notes* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1899); and James Smith, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: A New Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1931).

adorning divine statues.<sup>12</sup> Its use in Ezekiel’s vision thus supports the suggestion that Ezekiel is describing not Yahweh, but a *representation* of Yahweh.

As with the Assyrian portraits of the king at worship, the representation in Ezekiel 1 portrays the world as it ought to be—that is, as it is sustained by the king. Here is yet another way in which Ezekiel’s vision differs from the throne theophanies of Isaiah 6:1-13 and 1 Kings 22:19-23. In those accounts, the narrative revolves around deliberations in the divine throne room. The prophets are carried into another world from which they are able to perceive the meaning of events in the earthly realm. By contrast, the tableau in Ezekiel brings those two worlds together, portraying a bi-level universe in which the firmament separates the enthroned glory of Yahweh from the living beings. These living beings are clearly sub-

ordinate to Yahweh. Whereas the seraphs of Isaiah 6 were above him, and the host of heaven in 1 Kings 22 were beside him to the right and left, these four living beings are below Yahweh and separated from him by the great dome or plate. Their subordination is reflected not only in their designation as living beings, and not—as in 1 Kings 22 or Isaiah 6—the host of heaven, seraphs, or cherubs (though they are called cherubs in ch. 10), but also in their perfectly coordinated movement according to the spirit and in their obedience to the voice of Yahweh in v. 25.

### *The Living Creatures, 1:4-14*

There are no direct parallels in either the biblical or ancient Near Eastern traditions to Ezekiel's depiction of the four living beings. Though Ezekiel 10 equates these living beings with the cherubim in the temple, other biblical traditions suggest that Ezekiel's living beings bear little resemblance to them (1 Kgs 6:23-28; Exod 25:17-22). [\[The Search for Parallels to Ezekiel's Living Creatures\]](#)

The vision begins like a storm theophany and continues as such in Ezekiel's description of the living beings. In storm theophanies, Yahweh is depicted riding on a cherub or on the "wings of the wind" (Pss 18:11; 104:3), and Ezekiel adapts this motif. Whereas, for example, Psalm 18 associates coals of fire, lightning, and brightness with Yahweh's appearance, Ezekiel more closely attributes these characteristics to the living beings. In doing so, Ezekiel suggests that they are agents of divine power. This sense of agency is further implied by the pervasive use of the term *rûah*, which can be translated either as "wind" or "spirit." To be sure, *rûah* is not explicitly identified with the spirit of Yahweh; nevertheless, the frequency with which the word is used implies an abundance of power.

If the wings of the living beings derive from Ezekiel's own tradition, their power is augmented by other elements from the Mesopotamian traditions. Each living being has four different faces—that of a human, an eagle, an ox, and a lion. Traditionally, these faces have been interpreted as the lords of creation—the human as lord of all creation, the eagle as lord of the air, the lion as lord of the beasts of the field, and the ox as the most majestic of all domesticated animals.

#### **The Search for Parallels to Ezekiel's Living Creatures**



There are no exact parallels to Ezekiel's living creatures in ancient Near Eastern iconography. Othmar Keel draws attention to their resemblance to throne bearers and sky bearers, the former appearing on pedestals or carved into the base of the throne and the latter depicted with hands stretched upwards, bearing either a winged deity or a plate that represents the sky. But he also notes that neither offers a direct parallel to Ezek 1. The living beings in Ezek 1 are not throne bearers, since they do not bear the divine throne directly, but rather appear under the dome, or firmament. Nor do the living beings hold up the dome, as one might expect of sky bearers. Their hands are not stretched upwards as in the iconographic parallels, and in fact, they are able to raise and lower their wings without disturbing the dome (1:25).

Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst: eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (SBS 84/85; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977).

While there is considerable merit to this interpretation, particularly since it underscores the power of Yahweh as “Lord of lords,” these living beings should be more closely identified with demons of the Mesopotamian traditions (as the term is used here, “demon” signifies a supernatural but not divine being; compare the ancient Greek term *daemon*). Although there is no exact parallel in the Mesopotamian tradition to Ezekiel’s living beings, he may have envisioned an amalgam of four demons. These include a winged human figure (*umu-apkallu*); a bull-man (*kusarikku*), with the legs of a bull and a human face and torso; a lion-demon (*ugallu*), with a human body and a lion’s head; and a griffin-demon (*apkallu-bird*), also with a human body but the head of a bird.

In ancient Near Eastern iconography and texts, these demons were regarded as supernatural powers, but not as gods. Unlike the four-winged genies discussed above, who wore headgear signifying divinity, these demons were not so dressed. Earlier Mesopotamian myths hint that the relationships between the gods and demons were fraught with tension; the names of these demons appeared in written texts in connection with those who attempted to rebel against divine rule. Three of the four demons were associated with the powers of the storm, which the gods had subdued. The remaining demon, the bull-man, was also an adversary of the gods, but he was associated with the mountains, or the distant regions of the earth. In some mythological texts, his defeat is associated with the defeat of the sea.

By the time of Ezekiel, these demons had come to be understood as spirits who stood ready to enact the will of the gods. They served their divine masters by subduing those chaotic forces that remained in the cosmos. Each aspect of their portrayal signified a different element of mastery over the forces of chaos; their faces came to symbolize firmness, in the case of the bull, and in the case of the lion and eagle, aggression in the earth and sky, respectively. The human head, torso, and hands symbolized watchfulness, independence, and agency.<sup>13</sup>

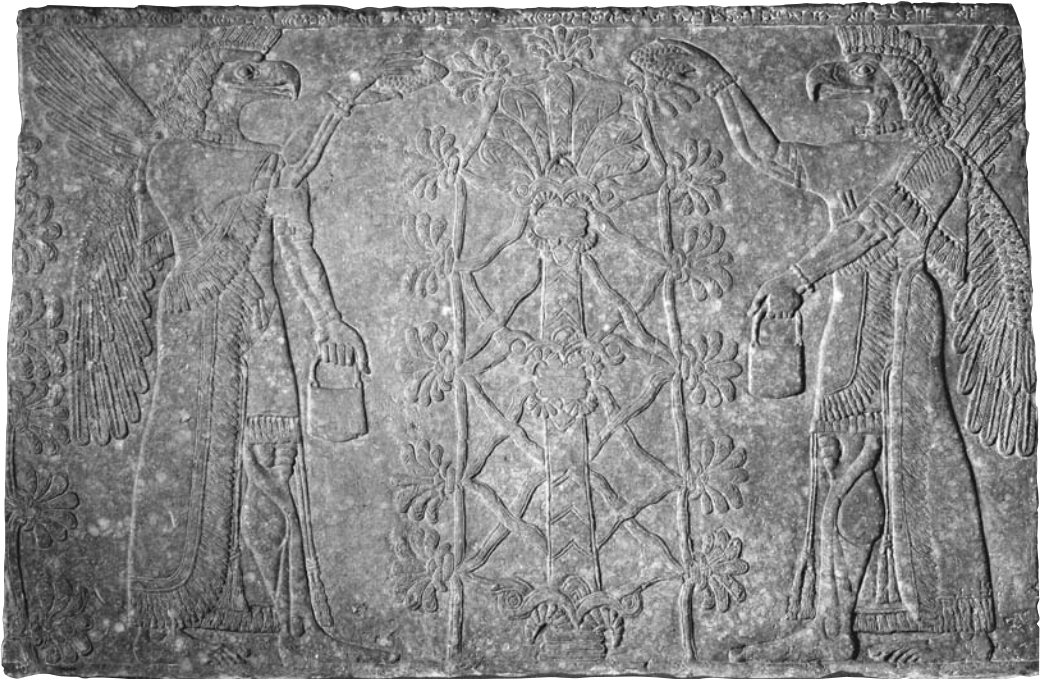
Ezekiel joins the ideas associated with these demons to comparable ideas in the biblical tradition. The idea of power is already inherent in features noted from Psalm 18, such as the wings of the wind, the coals of fire, and lightning. By incorporating the iconography of demons associated with the weather, Ezekiel further enhances the idea of the demons’ power and demonstrates their ability to enact the divine will in earth and sky. These features also accentuate the demons’ agency. Finally, the multiples of four extend the power of these creatures to the four corners of the earth.

Four beings, each with four wings and four faces, convey a fourfold watchfulness over the world.

### ***The Wheels, 1:15-21***

The wheels add a further dimension of power to Ezekiel's portrayal of the living beings. The association between living beings and wheels may already have been well established in the Jerusalem cult, since the cult stands in the Jerusalem temple were not only equipped with wheels (Heb. *ʾōpannîm*) but also had oxen, lions, and cherubs carved on the sides (1 Kgs 7:27-37; for the wheels, see vv. 30-32).

Ezekiel's description of the vision devotes considerable attention to the appearance of the wheels. There is a wheel for each of the four living beings, and each is constructed according to the same model, or pattern (*dēmûṭ*). They have the appearance of polished gemstones (Heb. *taršîš*; NRSV beryl). Their brilliance is enhanced by "eyes" (v. 18), which should probably be understood as round, or eye-shaped, semiprecious stones inlaid in the rims of the wheels. The "wheels within wheels" (v. 16) remains enigmatic; given their



#### **Apkallu-bird**

Stone panel from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Iraq. The winged figures may be supernatural creatures known as apkallu. They wear horned headdresses to show their divinity and carry buckets to sprinkle water on the Sacred Tree, or Tree of Life.

Stone panel from palace of Ashurnasirpal II. 883–859 BC. Neo-Assyrian. British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: HIP / Art Resource)

ability to move in any direction without turning, it is likely that Ezekiel is describing spheres. Since the “spirit of the living creatures” was within the wheels (vv. 20, 21), they appear integrally connected to the living beings and move when and where they move.

It is customary to interpret this vision as a description of a throne chariot. Even if one can discern a cart or a chariot in Ezekiel’s vision, as many have done, the mysterious theophanic character of the wheels should not be overlooked. As with the other features of the vision, the wheels suggest the potential of power, if not its actual manifestation. Wheels are not necessarily benign objects. The crashing sound of chariot wheels is a prominent feature in descriptions of warfare (Nah 3:2; cf. Isa 5:28; Jer 47:3; Ezek 23:24; 26:10), and this carries over into theophanic displays of power as well (Ps 77:18). Furthermore, wheels are associated with the process of executing judgment (see Ezek 10); one biblical proverb is remarkably similar to the contemporary saying, “The wheels of justice grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine” (Prov 20:26; cf. Isa 28:27). In light of this association between wheels and judgment, it is worth noting that the wheels’ great height (v. 18), as well as their placement on the earth (v. 15), suggest that it is the wheels that establish the connection between divine rule and the earthly realm.

### ***The Dome, 1:22-25***

The prophet describes yet another form, or representation, in this verse. Over the heads of the living beings, he sees the form of a dome, or firmament. The word that is used here, *rāqîaʿ*, appears in the Old Testament exclusively as a reference to the sky. Because the concept of firmament does not seem to fit the context of Ezekiel 1, commentators suggest that the term should be understood to refer to a platform on which the divine throne rests. However, if Ezekiel sees a model or representation of reality and not a direct vision of the enthroned Yahweh, then such a suggestion is unnecessary. Ezekiel describes the *rāqîaʿ* as a form or representation; what he has in mind is a model or representation of the firmament.

In Ezekiel’s depiction of the world as it ought to be, the firmament separates the enthroned Yahweh from the living beings. This is consistent with the use of *rāqîaʿ* in Genesis 1, where Yahweh creates the firmament in order to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth. Creation is a process of separation, of making order by means of differentiating between heavenly and earthly elements. As in the creation account of Genesis 1, the

purpose of the firmament in Ezekiel 1 is to control chaos by separating the heavenly realm from the earthly one. In its careful description of the symmetry of the four living beings that are accompanied by the four wheels, the vision conveys the idea of order, as all move together in perfect concord.

The sense of order presented in this vision is enhanced by its accompanying audition, as Ezekiel describes the thunderous beating of the wings of the living beings. Through extensive use of analogy, Ezekiel suggests that the sound is like that of chaos: “and I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters [ . . . ]<sup>14</sup> when they flew, a sound of a noisy multitude like the sound of an army camp.” Ezekiel invokes two analogies here. The image of “many waters” is reminiscent of psalms that associate “many waters” not only with danger for human beings (Pss 18:16; 32:6; 144:7), but also with threats to divine sovereignty (Pss 29:3; cf. 93:4; see [Many Waters]). The noisy tumult of an army camp is similarly ominous. Even so, the movement and sound of the wings are under the control of the *qôl*, or voice, that comes from above the dome (v. 25). In this respect, the vision captures one of the central tenets of the old chaos traditions—that Yahweh’s command transcends and controls the tendency of the natural world to disintegrate into chaos. In Psalm 29, for example, once the seven-fold utterance of the divine voice (*qôl*) subdues the raging elements of nature, the Lord’s enthronement is proclaimed (cf. Ps 93:4).

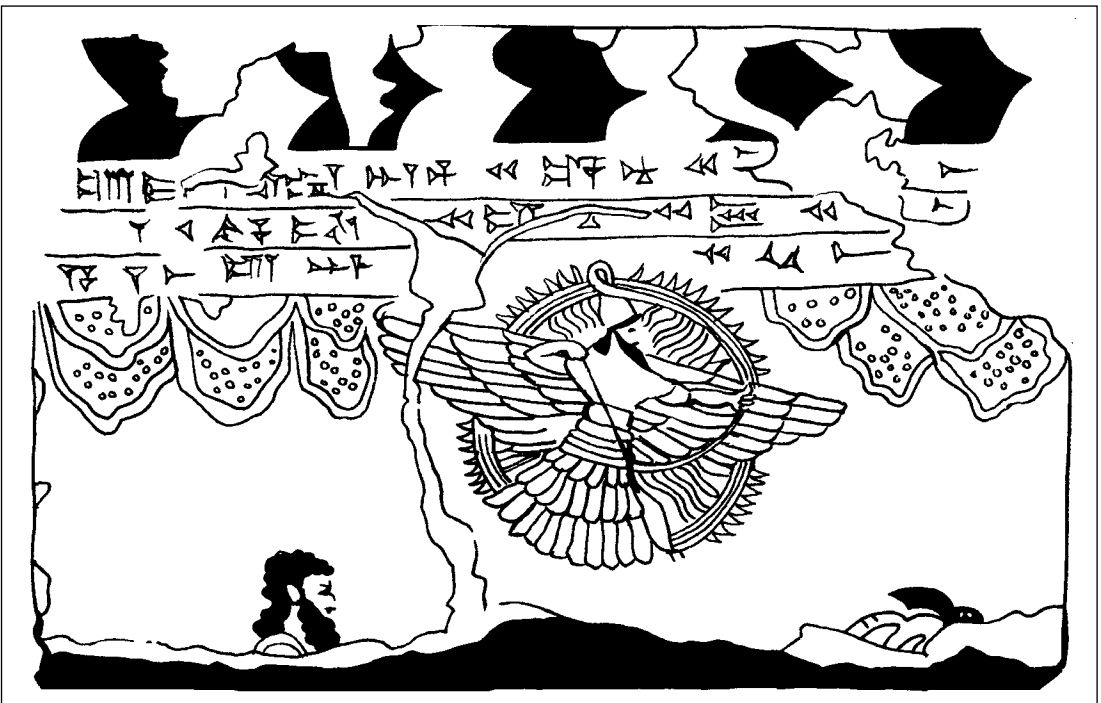
### ***The Appearance of the Likeness of the Glory of the Lord, 1:26-28***

Ezekiel’s account now moves to the figure above the firmament. The terms “form” (*děmût*) and “appearance” (*mar’eh*) appear again, as Ezekiel describes the form of a throne made of sapphire or, more likely, lapis lazuli, and a form resembling a human being seated on the throne. As noted above, the use of these two terms reflects conventions for describing artistic representations. The vision reaches its climax with Ezekiel’s description of the “appearance (*mar’eh*) of the representation (*děmût*) of the glory of the LORD” (vv. 26-28a). The terms do not imply that Ezekiel was reticent about describing his vision. In the dozen or so other references to the glory of the Lord, Ezekiel sees the divine glory and exhibits no restraint in describing it or its movement (see Ezek 3:23; 8:2, 4; 9:3; 10:4, 18, 19, 22, 23; 43:2, 4, 5). Here, however, Ezekiel describes its representation.

Ezekiel’s description bears a striking resemblance to a ninth-century ceramic of the god Ashur, in which the winged god appears

in a sun disk and wielding his bow (see illustration for “The God Ashur”). From the loins upward, Ashur resembles a human being, while from the loins downward, Ashur’s power breaks forth in flames. Similarly, in Ezekiel 1:26-28a, the form seated on the throne resembles a human being only from the loins upward. Here, as in 1:4, the brilliance of the torso is likened to *ḥašmal*, which is translated by NRSV as “amber,” but which should also be understood as a precious material used in the decoration of divine images. From the loins downward, the figure resembles fire. Surrounding the entire figure is a bright aura resembling a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day.

One may note two significant differences between the representation of the god Ashur and Ezekiel’s description of the enthroned glory of the Lord. First, the aura surrounding Ashur resembles the rays of the sun, not the bright colors of the rainbow. By describing the aura as a rainbow in a cloud, Ezekiel appears to draw on traditions associated with storm theophanies; thus the end of the vision recapitulates terminology first used in vv. 4-5, when the storm first came into view. Second, the glory of the Lord is depicted seated on a throne, in control and in command of the forces of the cosmos; the ceramic, on the other hand, depicts the god Ashur going out to



**The God Ashur**

[Illustration: Barclay Burns]

Ashur as a storm god drawing his bow.

do battle, and thus potentially in danger of losing the fight against chaos. Since Ezekiel's vision emphasizes a correspondence between divine rule and the perfect concord of the four living beings, the emphasis on Yahweh's enthronement may derive from biblical traditions. For example, the psalms that depict Yahweh enthroned above the cherubim assert his rulership over the natural order (Pss 80:2 [ET 80:1]; 99:1; cf. Ps 29:10).

## CONNECTIONS

When Ezekiel peers into the storm cloud that comes to him from the north, he sees a model, or a representation, of the divine glory. Throughout the chapter, the vocabulary constantly reminds readers that Ezekiel is not describing the divine glory itself, but the appearance of the glory's form, or representation. Just as a visitor to a royal throne room would first encounter a highly stylized and abstract sculptural rendering of the king and his place in the cosmos, so also is Ezekiel prepared for his eventual encounter with the divine glory by first viewing its likeness. Because Ezekiel sees a representation, and not God, Ezekiel 1 is a theology, albeit in iconographic form, of the manner in which God ought to be perceived, comprehended, and approached. Early Christian interpreters drew heavily on this vision to reflect on the nature of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; [Christ as the Appearance of the Likeness of the Glory of God] contemporary interpreters may find new avenues for theological reflection as well. Three possibilities are offered here.

First, the representation does not present God's characteristics in isolation but situates the enthroned God in a schematic diagram of the universe. Accustomed to Aristotelian notions of divine self-sufficiency and impassibility, today we often find it difficult to appreciate the Bible's continuing emphasis on God's relationality; we often presume that this vision depicts a solitary God accompanied by bizarre heavenly attendants. But Ezekiel's vision is better understood as a highly stylized meditation on God's commanding presence in the world. The living beings, depicted as creatures that inhabit the region below the firmament, represent not only the powers of the created order, but also the possibility that such power can rebel against God. Such potential is merely hinted at in the tumultuous sound of the beating wings. Because the voice of God from above the firmament keeps all in perfect concord, the living



### Christ as the Appearance of the Likeness of the Glory of God



From the earliest Christian centuries, Christian interpreters understood that Ezekiel saw only a likeness of God. This was consistent with the deeply rooted biblical conviction that no one could see God and live. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God put him in a cleft of a rock and shielded his face so that he caught a glimpse only of God's back (Exod 33:17-23). When the prophet Isaiah saw God enthroned in the temple, he cried, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isa 6:5). Other visions and encounters with God in the Old Testament play out this basic conviction. Despite marvelous disclosures of divine presence, God remains beyond human comprehension.

Early Christian biblical interpreters echoed this conviction as they contemplated the significance of Jesus Christ as the means by which God is revealed. The vision of Ezekiel was central in the development of two important themes. First, the four living beings became equated with the writers of the four Gospels. In the earliest version of this tradition, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (c. 180 CE), emphasized the unity of the Gospels. Since each of the Gospels represented only one aspect of Christ, it was necessary to view them as a quadriformity: "For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord" (*Adv. Haer.* III.11.8, see 1.17). Christian artists eventually isolated the four faces of the living beings and rendered them as emblems for each of the Gospel writers. However, other artistic renderings portrayed Christ as the "tetramorph," a single living being with four faces (see Winchester Bible image at "The Christ Tetramorph"). Like Irenaeus's discussion of the fourfold nature of the gospel, this depiction expresses the fourfold unity of Christ while also preserving a distinction between Christ and God. By being portrayed as the tetramorph below the throne of God, Christ is not directly equated with God but nevertheless is presented as the visible manifestation of God's word (see [**Can the Tetramorph Be Reclaimed for Contemporary Christian Theology?**]).

In some early Christian iconography, Christ did become directly identified with the "appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (see "The Ascension of Christ"). Even though these representations would seem to suggest that God was fully revealed in Christ, it is more accurate to say that Christ was understood as a "likeness" of God. Ezekiel's representational language corresponded with New Testament descriptions of Christ as the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) or the "reflection of God's glory" (Heb 1:3). To portray Christ as the one enthroned upon the living beings thus preserves the mystery of God.

Wilhelm Neuss, *Das Buch Ezechiel in Theologie und Kunst bis zum Ende des XII Jahrhunderts; Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Gemälde in der Kirche zu Schwarzheindorf* (Münster: Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912), 42.

beings move together without conflict, and their harmony extends to the wheels that both move with them and touch the earth. No longer acting as the rebels they once were, the living beings have become servants properly subordinated to the enthroned glory, and ready to do its will.

Second, through its emphasis on God's relationship with the whole cosmos, the vision shows that God holds sway even over rebels. John Milton's Satan can decide that it is "Better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven,"<sup>15</sup> but the rebels in Ezekiel's world do not have that alternative. There is no corner of the cosmos where God does not rule. One consequence of this cosmology is that rebels are not destroyed but, rather, pressed into divine service as the powerful, tumultuous beings that they are. God uses them as they are to do God's bidding. The image is comparable to the depiction of Leviathan in Job 41, in which the great dragon is not destroyed but becomes God's plaything. In questions intended to underscore God's overwhelming power over the cosmos, God asks

Job, “Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever?” (Job 41:4).<sup>16</sup> The implied answer is that only God is able to achieve this feat.

### Can the Tetramorph Be Reclaimed for Contemporary Theology?



Can the notion of Christ’s quaternity, as it is expressed by Irenaeus and artistically represented in the Christ Tetramorph, be reclaimed for contemporary theological reflection on the nature of God’s saving work in the world? Despite Irenaeus’s emphasis on God’s work of redeeming humanity, he nevertheless intimated that the fourfold gospel corresponded to the fourfold character of the world. In our focus on personal salvation, we have lost this understanding of the larger biblical vision of reconciling the entire created order. Perhaps a reclamation of the image of Christ as the Tetramorph is one way to return to our home in the world of God’s creation.

Applying this understanding to God’s offer of covenant to Israel, Jon Levenson detects a tension between Israel’s free decision to accept God’s covenant and the practical sense that no other decision is possible: “Israel will live only if she freely makes the *right* choice. Covenant is an offer that the vassal cannot refuse, especially if the suzerain is omnipotent.” Even if the divine command seems to deny Israel any real choice, the covenant must be accepted freely. By insisting on Israel’s freedom in accepting the covenant, Levenson suggests that Israel maintains its own sovereign dignity.<sup>17</sup> [Freedom and Service]

Ezekiel 1 does not present God in abstraction from the cosmos but in relationship to it. In certain respects, this theology resembles the biblical themes of *Chaoskampf*, in which creation does not spring out of nothing, but occurs when God sets the boundaries against the elements of chaos. Even the orderly account of creation in Genesis 1 reflects this notion, as God sets boundaries to hold back the darkness and the waters. Levenson calls this creation tradition the “drama of divine omnipotence,” by

### Freedom and Service



“The obedience YHWH requires of Israel is not the conformity of an automaton with its computer programmed by God, but the obedience of an ancient Near Eastern vassal, that is, a king loyal to a greater king. The covenant that specifies this obedience must not be confused with the bill of sale of a slave or a statement of unconditional surrender on the part of the vassal. Indeed, the very choice of the covenant document as the metaphor by which to render this delicate relationship evidences the free will with which Israel enters into the new arrangement.”

Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 140–41.

which he suggests that divine omnipotence is not guaranteed but must be won again and again. Chaos is always present in the created order; as Levenson notes, its confinement “rather than its elimination is the essence of creation.”<sup>18</sup>

Third, Ezekiel’s vision has interesting implications for theological method itself. Though Ezekiel’s vision may well have been a suprarational experience of divine transcendence, the raw materials for the vision are the cultural icons and political rhetoric of the Assyrian empire, which had exerted control over Israel and Judah for several centuries. Although both Israel and Judah went through seasons of political resistance, both kingdoms were exposed to Assyrian ideology, as were all of Assyria’s vassal kingdoms. The evidence is clearest in the book of Isaiah, which faithfully conveys the ideological

### The Christ Tetramorph

In this illuminated initial at the beginning of the book of Ezekiel in the Winchester Bible, the prophet sleeps by the River Chebar, which is depicted by water flowing out of two jars. The artist's rendering of the vision emphasizes the dominant role of the four living creatures in Ezekiel's vision by filling the space with the wheeled chariot and omitting the throne of God. In addition, the four living beings, while hinted at in the axles of the wheels, have coalesced into a single tetramorph, which typologically links the prophet's vision with Christ. (In the style of the Master of the Morgan Leaf, Winchester Bible, 12th c. AD.)

Walter Oakeshott, *The Artists of the Winchester Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945.)



### The Vision of Ezekiel from The Winchester Bible

[Credit: 12th C. Library of the Winchester Cathedral. The Dean and Chapter of Winchester/Winchester Cathedral Library.]

boasting of the Assyrian kings (see esp. Isa 10:5-15; 36-37). While virtually nothing is known of the years of Manasseh's reign (c. 687-642 BC), these would have been the years when Assyrian influence was most prominent. Given the pervasiveness of Assyrian imagery in the book of Ezekiel, it is unlikely that Josiah's reforms mitigated these influences.

Ezekiel's appropriation of Assyrian cultural materials is radically subversive. In the vision, Ezekiel adopts elements of *royal* ideology, that is, claims about the universal sovereignty of Assyria's *human* kings. For centuries, the Assyrian kings had employed epithets that asserted their universal domination. One particular epithet used frequently in the annals and summary inscriptions, "king of the four quarters," appears to have been explicitly invoked in Ezekiel's vision of the four living beings. The conception of four heavenly attendants is not otherwise known in the biblical tradition, but here it is developed to assert Yahweh's sovereignty over the entire

created order. It is no human king who controls the four quarters of the universe, but Yahweh alone.

Ezekiel's use of this propaganda undermines its credibility. Assyrian royal ideology had long been employed to assert the powerlessness of the God of Israel against the awe-inspiring power of the Assyrian king. In Isaiah 36, for example, the emissary of the Assyrian king declares to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem,

Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The LORD will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the LORD should save Jerusalem out of my hand? (Isa 36:18-20)



### The Ascension of Christ

In the Rabula Gospel (6th c. AD), the ascending Christ is presented as the “appearance of the likeness of the Glory of God.” The tetramorph appears below the orb, with the wheels of the living beings between its wings. On either side of the tetramorph, angels present the ascending Christ with crowns (cf. Heb 1:4). Directly below Christ is his mother Mary—a reminder of his full humanity. The portrayal is thus a meditation on the full humanity and divinity of Christ.

*The Ascension of Christ*, from the Rabula Gospels. Zagba on the Euphrates, Syria, c. 586 AD. Ms. Plut. 1,56. Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence, Italy. [Credit: Scala / Art Resource]

In appropriating this political imagery, Ezekiel asserts that the only effective power in the lives of the people of Israel is Yahweh. No human king can claim sovereignty over these people; rather, their fortunes and misfortunes are the direct result of Yahweh's freedom to transcend and command all forces in the created order. If Yahweh's voice stills the tumult of the wings of the living beings, so it should also command the obedience of his people. The great irony of the book of Ezekiel is that it does not.

For many contemporary readers, the concept of God as king has lost much of its power, and possibly rightly so. Such masculinist, hierarchical imagery raises profound questions about the nature of God, and readers may find it troubling. But in Ezekiel's time, the notion of Yahweh's uni-

versal dominion shattered all other earthly claims over the hearts and minds of the people of Israel.

Although one may concede that the notion of God as king no longer works in today's world of constitutional democracies, one searches in vain for a metaphor that approaches Ezekiel's in its conveyance of divine universal order. In our contemporary ways of speaking about God, no other metaphor has the potential to still the many voices that clamor for our allegiance, or to rebuke the powers that sabotage our dignity. The logic of Ezekiel's theology is to take the metaphors of earthly domination and political hegemony and to transpose them into a transcendent vision of divine rule that relativizes all other claims to power. All other powers are, in effect, no different from the living beings, who must eventually submit to God's rule.

Ezekiel's vision properly turns our attention from the chaotic din of the living beings to the one voice that brings calm and order. The challenge for Ezekiel's readers is to gaze into this vision and see their essential likeness to the living beings. Like them, they are rebels, and like them, their only hope for survival is to submit to the rule of the sovereign Lord. Without that acknowledgment, human life is subsumed by war and chaos.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Steven W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times, c. 755–612 B.C.* (SAAS 4; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1996), 69-80.

<sup>3</sup> Ran Zadok, "The Nippur Region During the Late Assyrian, Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods, Chiefly According to Written Sources," *Israel Oriental Studies* 8 (1978): 266-332, esp. 273-75.

<sup>4</sup> McGuire Gibson, "Patterns of Occupation at Nippur," in *Nippur at the Centennial: Papers Read at the 35th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, 1988* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1992), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 1.4, cited by George A. Cooke, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word Books, 1994); Henry McKeating, *Ezekiel* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 22-24.

<sup>7</sup> James E. Miller, "The 'Thirtieth Year' of Ezekiel 1:1," *Revue Biblique* 99 (1992): 499-503; Walther Eichrodt also considered the possible priestly significance of Ezekiel's thirtieth year; see his *Ezekiel*, trans. Coslett Quin (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson et al., 4 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 3:1841-42.

<sup>9</sup> Irene J. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Winter's study focuses on the first Neo-Assyrian palace, that of Ashurnasirpal II (c. 885–856 BC). For a discussion of the persistence of this pattern in subsequent palaces, see Julian Reade, "The Architectural Context of Assyrian Sculpture," *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 11 (1979): 75-87, esp. 81.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 7 (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 67.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 104 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 82-94.

<sup>13</sup> F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts*, Cuneiform Monographs 1 (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1992), 143-88, esp. 148-49, 179-82, 174-79.

<sup>14</sup> My translation omits the phrase "like the thunder of the Almighty." The Septuagint omits the phrase, which disrupts the grammatical parallelism of the verse. It appears to have been inserted by way of a comparison with Ezek 10:5, where the only simile used to describe the sound of the wings is "like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks." Since, in ch. 10, the living beings act as agents of God, the analogy being invoked is that of divine power, not chaos.

<sup>15</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.254.

<sup>16</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

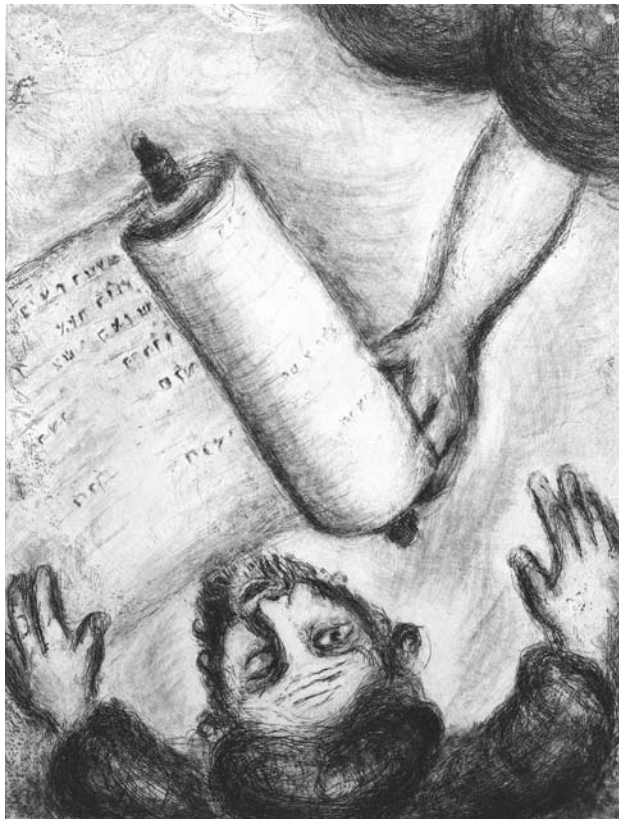
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

# EZEKIEL'S FIRST AUDIENCE WITH THE DIVINE GLORY

Ezekiel 1:28b–3:21

When Ezekiel sees the likeness of the divine glory he falls on his face, and he hears the “voice of someone speaking.” As Moshe Greenberg has noted, the phrase is “oddly vague” about the source of the speech.<sup>1</sup> Earlier, a voice or sound (*qôl*) was heard from above the firmament, but 1:28b does not identify the one speaking with either that sound or the vision. The disembodied voice can, however, be explained in terms of the layout of the throne room. When Ezekiel stands at its threshold, he sees a likeness of the glory of Yahweh in front of him. The voice addressing him comes from elsewhere, quite possibly the throne at the end of the room. Yahweh’s address to Ezekiel may therefore reflect the design and function of bent-axis throne rooms, which would prevent a petitioner from facing the king directly until his presence is acknowledged. See also [The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Throne Rooms].

What follows is an unusually long, five-part commissioning speech. [An Outline of Ezekiel 1:28b–3:21] Although the speech seems repetitive, each section develops a distinctly new aspect of Ezekiel’s role and



**The Calling of Ezekiel**

Marc Chagall (1887–1985). *The Calling of Ezekiel*, 1952–56. [Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource]

contributes to the sense of the enormity of the task confronting him. [Initiation versus Call]

## COMMENTARY

### Sending, 2:3-5

Yahweh's first words to Ezekiel are a commission: I send you. The verb "send" is used frequently in call narratives (cf. Exod 3–4). At this point, the primary interest is in defining Ezekiel's role as prophet. As a result of Ezekiel's mission, the people will know that a prophet has been in their midst.

Yahweh sends Ezekiel to "nations of rebels." The plural "nations" is unexpected. Possibly the reference is to both the northern kingdom of Israel, which had been destroyed in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom of Judah, which was resisting Babylonian control in Ezekiel's time. If this is the case, then the reference encompasses the entire historical sweep of Israel's rebellion, begin-

ning with the ancestors and continuing with the children, who are stony-faced and hard-hearted. Another possibility is that the "nations of rebels" include Judah's allies, who gathered in Jerusalem to plot rebellion against Babylon near the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry (cf. Jer 27). The reference therefore anticipates Ezekiel's oracles against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon (Ezek 25–28, 35). Whether the reference is to Judah alone or to

Judah along with its allies, the term of a "rebellious house" encompasses political as well as religious connotations. [Rebellion]

#### An Outline of Ezekiel 1:28b–3:21



2:3-5 Sending

2:6-7 Reassurance

2:8–3:3 Testing

3:4-9 Advance Warning of Difficulty

3:10-11 Commands to Speak

3:12-21 The Ordeal and Its Result

3:16-21 The Sentinel

### Reassurance, 2:6-7

As is typical of call narratives, Yahweh reassures Ezekiel. The dominant metaphor in this section is "briers and thorns," which, along with "scorpions," signify his hostile audience, according to the NRSV and all other major translations. However, the dominant imagery for the truculence of the people is hardness of heart, face, and forehead, not prickliness. Thus it is unlikely that the briers and thorns are meant as a metaphor for the people. More likely, the verse describes the prophet's own "thorny" ability to protect



### Initiation versus Call



Often it is assumed that call narratives describe a more or less instantaneous transformation. Some call narratives do indeed make this claim: individuals are jarred out of their ordinary routines by a sudden confrontation with Yahweh, who defines the task and answers human objections with words of reassurance and promises of divine assistance. So, for example, Moses' life as a dutiful son-in-law is abruptly interrupted when God speaks to him from the burning bush and sends him back to Egypt to deliver the Hebrews from slavery (Exod 3–4). It has been so customary to read all call narratives in this way that Gerhard von Rad, a major Old Testament theologian of the mid-20th century, could write, "The complete absence of any transitional stage between the two conditions is a special characteristic of the situation. Neither previous faith nor any other personal endowment had the slightest part to play in preparing a man who was called to stand before Yahweh for his vocation." There is a hint of romanticism in this viewpoint, and it continues to play itself out in many contemporary reflections on the experience of being called to the Christian ministry.

While it is no doubt true that such life-changing experiences are possible, it is more often the case that the discernment of a call, not to mention preparation to fulfill it, is an extended process. Because such a process is reflected in the account of Ezekiel's preparation to serve as Yahweh's prophet to the Babylonian exiles, Ezekiel's initial experience should not be interpreted as a call but as an initiation—a prolonged process of transition from one role to another. Identified as a priest in 1:2, Ezekiel does not receive instructions to prophesy until ch. 6, and he does not have an audience until ch. 8. In the intervening chapters, he undergoes a series of experiences that prepare him for this new role.

In anthropological studies, this period of transition is often described as a state of liminality and a process of separation and transition from a previous identity or role to a new one. The concept was first introduced at the turn of the century by A. van Gennep in a seminal study of rites of passage, which included maturational rites at puberty and marriage, separation rites at death, and rites of initiation into specialized communities and leadership roles. Victor Turner further developed van Gennep's concept of liminality by suggesting that the liminal state serves at least two social functions. First, it erases or dissolves elements of the previous identity in order to prepare the individual to take on new responsibilities. This is signified by stripping the person of any indicators of status: ". . . as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands." Second, as a result of having this familiar identity stripped away, the initiand comes to recognize the common lot that is shared with the other members of the community. Thus, while one feature of the liminal state focuses on the individual's preparation for a special role, the other emphasizes the individual's common bonds with others in the community.

As the above discussion suggests, liminality is harrowing, even dangerous, because it entails great loss, even a death of the old self. But liminality is not finality; instead it is a process that allows for the emergence of a new identity from one that for whatever reason is no longer viable.

Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965), 2:58; A. van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Aldine, 1960; orig. published 1908); and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 95.

himself. [Briers and Thorns] He *is* a thornbush, and he is surrounded by another, the scorpion-plant, a type of thornbush whose flowers resemble scorpions.<sup>2</sup> Thus the verse is better translated

Do not be afraid of them,  
and do not fear their words,  
for you yourself are thistles and thorns,  
and you are nestled among scorpion-plants.

As such, the verse resembles a Babylonian incantation:



### Vision and Symbolic Acts at Schwarzrheindorf

The cycle of frescoes devoted to the visions of Ezekiel in the 12th-century church at Schwarzrheindorf (Germany) suggests that our tendency to isolate Ezekiel's call from his symbolic actions is only one possible reading of the text. In a remarkably coherent series of paintings revolving around Ezekiel's visions, the arches flanking the vault on the east and south develop themes from chs. 1–5 and 8–10, while

the vault itself focuses on the vision of chs. 40–43. In the east arch, pictured above, four panels link Ezekiel's initial vision of Yahweh with his symbolic acts. In the south arch, all four panels depict Ezekiel's symbolic act of shaving his head to symbolize the complete destruction of Jerusalem (5:1-4).

For color plates of the frescoes, see Wilfried Hansmann and Jürgen Hohmann, *Die Gewölbe- und Wandmalereien in der Kirche zu Schwarzrheindorf: Konservierung – Restaurierung – neue Erkenntnisse* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002), 14.

[Credit: Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. Photography: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]

I am the spike of a thornbush; you cannot step on me!  
I am the stinger of a scorpion; you cannot touch me! (*Maqlû* III 153-54)<sup>3</sup>

Like the incantation, Yahweh's reassurance attributes to Ezekiel the resistant, protective characteristic of thorns; it also includes a promise of divine protection. Elsewhere in the Bible, other types of thornbushes served as a kind of natural barbed wire in military and agricultural contexts (see Exod 22:5; Isa 10:17). The protective quality of thorns also is evoked in metaphors of divine protection.

**Rebellion**

**ΑΩ** The designation of the house of Israel as the house of rebellion in Ezekiel 2:5—and thirteen times elsewhere in the book—expresses its political as well as its religious identity. The related verb *mārad* refers to the rebellion of vassals against suzerains (cf. Gen 14:4; 2 Kgs 18:7, 20; 24:1, 20); Ezekiel uses it in this political sense in 17:15, where Judah’s rebellion against Babylon is presented as an example of Judah’s rebellion against Yahweh.

In Isaiah, the Holy One threatens to remove the protective thorn hedge surrounding the vineyard Israel:

And now I will tell you  
 what I will do to my vineyard.  
 I will remove its hedge,  
 and it shall be devoured,  
 I will break down its wall,  
 and it shall be trampled down. (Isa 5:5)

The thorn as an image of divine protection is also known in ancient Near Eastern parallels. For example, Gudea of Lagash describes the watchful care of the goddess Gatumdug:

Tonight I lay me down here,  
 you are my great (protective fence) of camelthorn . . .  
 Milady Gatumdug, lend me protection!<sup>4</sup>

Thus not only is the prophet himself equipped with briers and thorns, he is nestled among the thorns of Yahweh’s enveloping care.

**Briers and Thorns**

**ΑΩ** Although NRSV translates Ezek 2:6 to imply that the briers and thorns symbolize Ezekiel’s hostile audience, that reading is based on a misunderstanding of the grammar of this verse. NRSV’s “surround” in 2:6 is a dynamic translation of the commonly accepted literal translation, “briers and thorns are *with you*.” But even this translation is based on a misunderstanding of the grammar in the verse. What is translated “with you” is more properly understood as an emphatically marked pronoun. The line should therefore read, “you yourself are briers and thorns.” NRSV’s rendering of the word that connects the two halves of the sentence is also problematic. NRSV implies that the briers and thorns comprise the threat to Ezekiel, from which Yahweh protects him. It is more appropriate to understand the second half of the verse as the reason why Ezekiel should not be afraid. Thus the entire verse gives the rationale for Ezekiel’s fearlessness: he possesses the qualities of briers and thorns and can therefore ward off any attack.

Margaret S. Odell, “The Particle and the Prophet: Observations on Ezekiel II 6,” *VT* 48/3 (1998): 425–32.

### Testing, 2:8–3:3

Next, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to eat a scroll. When it is opened, he sees that it is covered back and front with writing—“words of lamentation, moaning, and woe” (NRSV). Despite the fact that these do not appear to be words of judgment but rather a response to it, the command to eat the scroll is nevertheless often understood as similar to the call of Jeremiah, in which Yahweh places words in Jeremiah’s mouth (Jer 1:9; 15:16). Thus the words Ezekiel speaks are not his own but have been given to him on the scroll.

This interpretation is problematic. Nothing in this section equates the content of the scroll with Ezekiel’s future message. Eating the scroll and receiving the divine word are two entirely different stages in the commissioning process. The primary purpose of this section is to test the prophet’s obedience: [Swallowing the Scroll]

But you, son of man, hear what I say to you;  
do not be rebellious like that rebellious house;  
open your mouth and eat what I give you. (2:18)

The first two lines establish the idea of Ezekiel’s obedience, while the third states that he demonstrates that obedience by eating the scroll.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the act of eating in 2:8–3:3 differs substantially from the act of receiving the divine word in 3:4–11. When

Ezekiel eats the scroll, he takes it into his belly. By contrast, when he listens to the divine word in order to speak it, he takes it into his heart and ears (3:10). The two types of internalization are not synonymous.

The contents of the scroll are implied by the passive form of the verb “write.” The scroll contains something decreed, fixed because it has been written. The idea that writing fixes a certain aspect of reality is reflected throughout the Hebrew Bible in a variety of literary contexts. In several narratives, written documents have the power to direct the course of future events (2 Sam 11:14–15; 1 Kgs 21:8, 9, 11; 2 Kgs 10:1, 6; Esth 8:8, 10). The Targum of Ezekiel reflects this understanding of the scroll and interprets the writing as a revelation of “what was from the beginning and what is prepared to happen at the end.”<sup>6</sup> What Ezekiel eats,

#### Swallowing the Scroll



As Moshe Greenberg noted, Ezekiel’s act of eating the scroll resembles an ordeal described in Num 5:11–31. In order to determine the guilt of a woman whose husband suspects her of adultery, a priest writes out a series of curses and washes them in holy water, called the “water of bitterness” (vv. 16, 18, 23, 23), which the suspected woman then drinks. If she is innocent, the curse has no effect, but if she is guilty of adultery, the curse causes a prolapsed uterus, and she becomes an execration among her people. While some of the features of Ezekiel’s ordeal are different—he eats the entire scroll, for example, and not just its ink—it functions analogously, as a test of Ezekiel’s obedience to the covenant. Even if Yahweh suspects the entire house of Israel of violating the covenant, Ezekiel’s act of swallowing the scroll establishes his innocence in this regard.

Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:78.

then, is not the message of divine judgment but the judgment itself.

By eating the scroll, Ezekiel takes into his inner being the fate of his people. His act thus retains interesting similarities to the priestly rite of ordination described in Leviticus 8–9. When the priests eat the sin offering, they take on the guilt of the people and thereby absolve it. By ingesting a symbolic representation of their condition, Ezekiel thus retains the priestly dimensions of identifying with his people. But the very fact it is a scroll and not a sacrifice demonstrates what he can no longer do and be as a priest. Separated from the temple, he cannot remove guilt. What was initially sweet will leave him with a bellyful of mourning and pain (3:14–15).

### **Advance Warning of Difficulty, 3:4–9**

Having tested Ezekiel's obedience in 2:8–3:3, Yahweh now commands Ezekiel to "go and speak" to the house of Israel (cf. 3:1). The difficulty in carrying out the task, which was described 2:3–5, is more fully explained. It is not that Ezekiel is sent to a people with obscure speech, or indeed to many nations with difficult languages. The verse aptly captures Ezekiel's cosmopolitan context, as he and his fellow exiles not only live among those who speak the language of Babylon, they also hear the languages of other exiles. But the reference may have mythological connotations as well: the reference to the speech of "many nations" may allude to the raging nations of the Psalms who rebel against Yahweh and Yahweh's anointed king (see Ps 48). In keeping with the image of Yahweh enthroned as ruler of the four quarters of the universe in chapter 1, the commission tacitly suggests that even these alien nations would heed the divine word.

The surprise is that Yahweh's own people refuse to listen. They are "hard of forehead" and "stubborn-hearted"; the expressions are reminiscent of Pharaoh's hardened heart, the "stiff-necked" wilderness generation (Exod 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; cf. Deut 31:27), and Isaiah's commission to harden the hearts of his people (Isa 6:10). That the hearts of Israel, and not the other nations', are hardened is the central irony of the book. The raging winds submit to Yahweh, but Israel does not.

The commission puts Ezekiel in the position of recapitulating Yahweh's failure. The people have already refused to listen to Yahweh, and yet Yahweh requires Ezekiel to continue to speak. Yahweh equips the prophet for this difficult task by making his face

and forehead hard against their faces and foreheads. As with the imagery of briars and thorns in 2:6-7, the protection is hardly comforting. Ezekiel must face the people head on, so to speak, and can only expect resistance.

### **The Commission to Speak, 3:10-11**

The sole reference to the source of Ezekiel's message comes at the end of this long commissioning speech. Whenever the prophet hears Yahweh's word, he must take all of it into his heart and ears and then proclaim it. NRSV's "I shall speak" in 3:10 implies that the divine message will be revealed only in the future. Ezekiel's call thus differs considerably from that of Jeremiah, who received the entire message at the outset:

Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant. (Jer 1:9b-10)

The primary focus of Ezekiel's elaborate call has been not so much to specify the message but to define the relationships associated with the task. The relationship between Yahweh and people already exists and is characterized by the several terms for rebelliousness, as well as by the descriptions of these people as hard of forehead and face. What the commissioning further defines are Ezekiel's relationships. He must demonstrate that he is not like the rebellious people, and yet he must identify with them by consuming the scroll and sharing in their suffering. He must be prepared to endure the rejection Yahweh has endured, yet he must remain in solidarity with the people. As Yahweh reminds him, they are his people ("go to the exiles, to *your* people," 3:11). The extent of Ezekiel's identification with his people will become clear in the account of the symbolic acts, 3:22–5:17.

### **The Ordeal and Its Result, 3:12-21**

The masoretic paragraph divisions do not indicate a break between the command to speak in 3:10-11 and Ezekiel's being carried away by the spirit. The effect is that Ezekiel is immediately ushered away from the divine presence. In 3:12, a spirit lifts Ezekiel up and carries him away (3:14), and the prophet returns to the exiles at the

Chebar. Since no definite article is used with the word “spirit,” (cf. MT with NRSV), the wind of the storm theophany may be what is referred to here. Ezekiel’s return to the exiles is surprising, because it is not clear that he had left them during the course of the vision (see 1:1). Elsewhere, when Ezekiel is carried by the spirit, a change in location is explicitly described (see 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5). Similarly, in 3:12-15, there is the sense that Ezekiel is carried away from the site of his encounter, since he now hears the sound of the wings of the living beings behind him. One may suggest that Ezekiel had been carried into the storm cloud in 2:2 when the spirit lifted him to his feet. Now, a spirit ushers him away from the divine presence and back to the exiles. [Blessings from the Heavenly Throne Room]

Ezekiel sits stunned for seven days. Some have seen in this silent vigil either a stubborn refusal to accept the commission<sup>7</sup> or dismay resulting in a “dispirited silence.”<sup>8</sup> Another possibility is that this period is yet one more stage in the prophet’s initiation. His silence would then be comparable to that of the priestly ordinands in Leviticus 8:33, whose seven-day period of seclusion prepared them for the next stage of their initiation, in which they atoned for the guilt of the people (Lev 9:1-21).

Ezekiel’s role is now defined as that of a sentinel. [Critical Problems in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 3:16-21] The meaning of Ezekiel’s role as sentinel is primarily derived from military contexts. Lookouts were posted to warn a town of a coming invasion (see 2 Sam 13:34; 2 Sam 18:24ff; 2 Kgs 9:17ff; cf. Jer 48:19; Mic 7:4; Nah 2:2). The doublet in Ezekiel 33:1-9 contains the clearest job description: a community selects someone from within its ranks to perform this task. Once the sentinel sounds the alarm, it is up to the inhabitants of the city to respond to it and get out of harm’s way (see Ezek 33:1-6). But the sentinel must first sound the warning; if he fails to sound the warning, the penalty is death.

Whereas in ordinary situations, the sentinel stands under the authority of the community, in 3:16b-21 Ezekiel stands under the command of Yahweh. Whenever Ezekiel hears a word from Yahweh, he must proclaim it whether or not it will be heeded (cf. Jer 6:17). Ezekiel 3:16b-21 thus reiterates the initial terms of Ezekiel’s call, that he is to speak whether or not the people choose to hear. But here Ezekiel’s responsibility for conveying the word is underscored: he stands under penalty of death if he fails to sound the alarm.

Ezekiel’s obligation to the community is worked out in the style of biblical case law, which uses hypothetical examples to explore the

### Blessings from the Heavenly Throne Room

**Ω** NRSV's translation of 3:12 suggests that the divine glory also moves up and away from Ezekiel: "Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of the LORD rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling . . ." This translation is based on a textual emendation that replaces *bārûk* ("blessed") with *bērûm* ("when he arose"). This emendation was proposed a century and a half ago, on strong grounds, and it has been widely accepted. Not only does this emendation appear to make better sense of the verse, it is also consistent with the movement of the divine glory in ch. 10. In addition, the emendation resolves the apparent problem of equating the rumbling of the wings with the blessing, especially since the sound of the wings receives further explanation in v. 13.

But there is no reason to assume that the MT as it stands is in error, and a few modern translations, NIV, NASB, JB, and NJPS, continue to reflect the MT. So, for example, NJPS translates, "and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: Blessed be the Presence of the Lord, in his place, with the sound of the wings of the creatures beating against one another . . ." If MT is correct, Ezek 3:12 asserts that the glory of Yahweh is blessed from "his place," the heavens (for the heavens as Yahweh's "place," see 1 Kgs 8:30; Hos 5:15; see also Isa 6:3; for a comparable blessing, see Ps 135:20). The heavenly blessing underscores the contrast between the splendor of a ruling God and Ezekiel's own situation among rebels in an unclean land, and reinforces the sense that Ezekiel has been taken directly into the throne room of Yahweh, from which he is now carried away.

range of situations in which a legal ruling applies. He is held accountable both for the "wicked man" (*rāšāʿ*) and the "righteous man" (*ṣaddîq*). The terms are polar opposites, the former characterizing someone heedless of communal and covenantal norms, the latter indicating someone who by conforming to these norms lives in right relationship with Yahweh. As opposites, the two terms encompass every individual in the community, and the unit thus asserts that Ezekiel is responsible to all, not just to the few who will listen. Greenberg describes the tension between communal responsibility and individual response: "The prophet is a lookout and gives his warnings to all; their various responses, however, are conveniently discussed in terms of single persons."<sup>9</sup>

Verses 18-19 explore the consequences of Ezekiel's role with respect to the wicked man. In v. 18, Ezekiel fails to convey the warning of imminent death, while in v. 19, Ezekiel succeeds in delivering the message. In both cases, the outcome is the same: the

#### Critical Problems in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 3:16-21



Ezekiel 3:16-21 creates several difficulties for commentators. First, a syntactical difficulty in v. 16, which is smoothed over by NRSV's translation, implies that these verses have been secondarily inserted into their present literary context. Second, the designation of Ezekiel as a sentinel seems like a redundant addition to an already extended call narrative. Third, the literary points of contact between 3:16b-21 and 18:24, 26 and 33:1-9 raise questions about the dependence of these units on one another. Because of these features, many commentators conclude that these verses were added to the call narrative when the book was edited into its final form.



wicked man remains in his wickedness and dies. The only difference is whether Ezekiel has sounded the warning. Since, in the former case, he has not sounded the warning, Yahweh holds him responsible for the wicked man's death.

Verses 20-21 describe the case of the righteous one who is about to sin. As in the case of the wicked man, Ezekiel is held accountable for delivering the warning but not for the person's response. If the righteous one heeds the warning, then Ezekiel saves both his life and that of the righteous one. If Ezekiel does not warn the righteous one of his impending danger, then, again, Ezekiel will be held responsible for that one's death and will also die himself.

In its current context, Ezekiel 3:16b-21 completes the definition of relationships and responsibilities between Yahweh, prophet, and people. Ezekiel's message is that of a sentinel. He stands on the horizon of divine judgment, sees it coming, and sounds the alarm. Ezekiel's role is thus defined less in terms of judgment and more in terms of preserving life among those who heed the alarm and escape.

Critics have variously interpreted Ezekiel 3:16b-21 as heightening the prophet's responsibility by holding him accountable for the deaths of those he fails to warn, and as limiting his responsibility by not requiring that he achieve a particular response from the people. While either interpretation is possible, it seems that 3:16b-21, unlike any of the earlier segments of the call narrative, emphasizes that Ezekiel's mission is a matter of life and death. In the earlier sections, when Yahweh commands Ezekiel to speak whether or not the people hear, there is an almost dismissive air to the proceedings. The people will not listen to Ezekiel because they have not listened to Yahweh; they are a rebellious house; they are hard-faced and stubborn-hearted. Ezekiel 3:16b-21 suggests that the appointment of Ezekiel as sentinel is a final mercy. Ezekiel has been sent to do what Yahweh has failed to do, and the hope is that he will succeed where Yahweh has failed.

## CONNECTIONS

Ezekiel's call is unique in its elaborate definition of his relationships, not only to God, but also to his people. One image in particular is worth further exploration, that of Ezekiel as one whose own "thorniness" ably protects him from attack, but who also enjoys the benefits of a protective hedge of divine concern. The

image poses a marked contrast to contemporary spiritual images of divine comfort and solace, and it is worth asking how this image of thorns might contribute to contemporary spiritual sensibilities.

The urbanization and suburbanization of many parts of the United States has mitigated thorns into minor discomforts on leisure hikes, and the idea of cultivating a thorn hedge for protection makes little sense. Thorn imagery may therefore be far too remote from daily experience to be of much use for spiritual reflection. On the other hand, American southerners who have grown up hearing Uncle Remus stories well understand how a brier patch can be a useful hiding place. In one well-known story, Brer Fox has trapped Brer Rabbit, and it appears that this time, at long last, Brer Rabbit will become dinner for Brer Fox. Ever the trickster, Brer Rabbit agrees to let Brer Fox do whatever he wants. But, he pleads, "Please, whatever you do, please don't throw me in the brier patch." The reverse psychology works, of course, and when Brer Fox throws Brer Rabbit into the brier patch, he bounds into the thicket and out of Fox's reach. "Bawn and bred in the brier patch," Rabbit laughs, as he escapes yet again from his archenemy. The ruse works on the premise that no one would willingly be thrust into such a thicket. That, at least, is how Brer Fox perceives the brier patch, and that is why Brer Rabbit is able to outwit him yet again.

As spiritual imagery, thorns evoke a sense of danger and risk in accepting divine protection. Even as the thorns envelop and protect, they prick, tear at the skin, catch at the hair, and trip the feet. And just when a path through the thicket is found, another branch blocks the way. But that sense of risk is central to the biblical accounts of Israel's encounters with God. Protection often comes in the form of a challenge. The God who prepares Jacob for a reunion with his brother Esau does so by putting his hip out of joint. The God who meets a fearful, self-pitying Elijah at Mount Horeb sends him back into the political quagmire he had hoped to escape. The God who delivers Jonah out of the belly of the fish sends him straight to Nineveh. In point of fact, there are thickets everywhere; the only question is whether one will get mired in a thicket of one's own making or seek protection in God's brier patch.

As the Uncle Remus story about Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox suggests, only certain kinds of creatures find comfort among thorns. Ezekiel was such a one, in fact the only one to enjoy the divine protection of thorns. All the others still wanted to live in the world on their own terms, stubbornly refusing to see what the world was made of or how it was run. To accept the thorns of divine protec-

tion, by contrast, is to embody a spirituality that no longer entertains any illusions about the world's hazards or its wounds. To be such a one is to recognize that the world calls us to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves," and to accept our scratches and scars as emblems of grace.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols., (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:62.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Garfinkel, "Of thistles and thorns: a new approach to Ezekiel ii 6," *VT* 37 (1987): 430-35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> The Cylinders of Gudea iii 10-11, 17; in *The Harps that Once; ...* Thorkild Jacobsen (New Haven, 1987), 391.

<sup>5</sup> For the understanding of parallelism that guides this interpretation, see James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 15-52.

<sup>6</sup> Translation in Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:92.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:141.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:90.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:96.



# EZEKIEL'S SECOND AUDIENCE WITH THE DIVINE GLORY

## Ezekiel 3:22–5:17

Verbal repetitions link this next section to the preceding account of Ezekiel's commissioning. The "hand of the Lord" falls upon Ezekiel, and Yahweh instructs him to go to the valley (3:22; cf. 2:1). [Critical Issues in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 3:22–5:17] It is not clear where this valley is in relation to the Chebar, but it may be the adjacent alluvial plain. There Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord, which resembles what he

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### Critical Issues in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 3:22–5:17



In the latter half of the 20th century, it was customary to treat the accounts of Ezekiel's call in 1:4–3:21 and of his symbolic acts in 3:22–5:5 as two separate units. Thus it was asserted that the former describes Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet, while the latter presents one aspect of his public ministry. One of the factors influencing such a reading has been the assumption that prophetic books were crafted from originally much smaller units. The call narrative in 1:28b–3:21 and the symbolic acts in 3:22–5:5 would therefore have been editorially shaped to reflect different concerns related to the prophet's ministry.

Whether or not this view represents an adequate understanding of the prehistory of the symbolic acts, there are good reasons to suggest that, in their current literary context, the symbolic acts should be interpreted as Ezekiel's preparation to be a prophet and not as a record of his public ministry. First, there is no clear break between the two sections; in fact, literary links between the two units (cf. 1:28–2:2, 3:23–24) suggest that the symbolic acts continue the process of preparing Ezekiel for his work as a prophet.

Second, there is no textual evidence that these symbolic acts were performed publicly. Unlike other symbolic acts, in which the audience asks for an interpretation, no audience here responds to Ezekiel's actions (contrast Ezek 24:15–24). Finally, since Ezekiel does not begin to speak Yahweh's words until the symbolic acts are completed, one may infer that he was not prepared to do so until after he had per-

formed them. One notes, furthermore, that the oracles in chs. 6 and 7 are structured primarily as communications to the prophet, and it is nowhere indicated that they were addressed to the exiles (cf. 6:1–2; 7:1). At least one other commentator has noted this peculiarity; Walther Zimmerli observed, "In the call-narrative it is striking that the prophet was given the scroll . . . but was not called to any specific message. After this we should certainly expect a definite charge to the prophet to preach." The reason for this delay is that Ezekiel is not yet fully invested in his role as prophet. It is only in 8:1 that we see Ezekiel fully engaged with an audience.

Given the strong literary links between the instructions to perform the symbolic acts and his call, and the absence of evidence that the act were publicly performed, this commentary suggests that the symbolic acts were part of Ezekiel's preparation for his role as a prophet. We are to imagine a protracted process of initiation in which Ezekiel lets go of his former priestly identity and assumes the role of a prophet (see [Initiation versus Call]). Only after Ezekiel has suffered the decreed judgment will he be able to proclaim it. As Calvin observed, the manner in which Ezekiel was "stirred up" is highly relevant to his prophecy among the exiles. As the first to give up cherished hopes of returning to the old life in Jerusalem, it is he who will point the way out of the past and into the future.

Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:176.

had seen at the Chebar. Ezekiel falls on his face, a spirit enters him and sets him on his feet, and Yahweh begins to speak with him.

Yahweh directs Ezekiel to perform a series of symbolic acts. Instructions for each are introduced with the formula “and you, son of man” [Son of Man] or simply “and you” (Ezek 4:1, 4, 9; 5:1). The actions portray the stages of a siege, including the binding and imprisonment of a communal representative (3:25), placing a city under siege (4:1-3), and preparing rations (4:9-17). In the concluding act (5:1-4), Ezekiel shaves his head to represent the complete destruction of the city’s population. [An Outline of Ezekiel 3:22–7:27]

Although the prevailing scholarly consensus regards the symbolic acts as the beginning of Ezekiel’s public ministry, this commentary treats them as a continuation of Ezekiel’s inaugural experience. [Prophetic Symbolic Acts] Anthropologists have suggested that initiations into new roles involve a process of liminality—being in a state between two identities: an older, more established identity and a new role that has not yet crystallized. See [Initiation versus Call]. In traditional societies, rites of passage formally mark transitions through these liminal states. In the transition, distinctive features of the older identity are erased, while others are redefined for the new role. Throughout the process, the initiate’s bond with the community is strengthened.

The symbolic acts accomplish both of these goals. They force Ezekiel to identify with both Yahweh and people. This identifica-

### Son of Man

**ΑΩ** The expression “son of man” (Heb. *ben ’ādām*) is used in such a formulaic manner in Ezekiel that critics may well have overlooked its significance. The term *’ādām*, human being, is by no means evenly distributed throughout the Old Testament. Claus Westermann noted that the highest concentrations are in Ezekiel (132 occurrences, 93 in the phrase *ben ’ādām*), Gen 1–11 (46 occurrences, once elsewhere in the rest of Genesis), and Ecclesiastes (49 occurrences). Secondary concentrations of the noun are in Proverbs (45 occurrences) and Psalms (62 occurrences). Although several lexicographers have observed that the distribution of the noun is noteworthy, none have regarded Ezekiel’s usage as theologically significant. But since Gen 1–11 most likely did not achieve its final form until after the exile, then it can be argued that Ezekiel is the first to make any significant use of the term.

Reflecting the common consensus that “son of man” conveys Ezekiel’s humanity, NRSV translates the term throughout as “mortal.” But in view of the book’s emphasis on Yahweh’s sovereign majesty, the term more likely connotes the human being’s place before God as an obedient servant. In the course of the book, the exiles must acknowledge that they also are *’ādām* and thus subject to God (Ezek 34:35). As a consequence, they will act in obedience to the laws and statutes of their King (see esp. Ezek 20:11, 13, 20).

See Claus Westermann, “*’ādām* Mensch,” *THAT* 1:41-57; V. Maass, “*’ādām*,” *TDOT*, 1:75-87; and Victor P. Hamilton, “*’ādām*,” *NIDOTTE* 1:262-66.

tion is accomplished through the prophet's severe humiliation, which strips him of his former status and dignity as priest. As Greenberg has noted,

The common feature of all these symbolic acts is the affliction of the prophet—by scant food, by prolonged immobility, by the degradation of shaving off all his head-hair (cf. II Sam 10:4f). In view of the ambiguous role of the prophet in these acts—now he seems to be the people, now God, now himself—one is inclined to see in the symbols a mixture of identification with the impending suffering of the people . . . [and] the sympathy with God's passion. . . .<sup>1</sup>

### An Outline of Ezekiel 3:22–7:27



3:22–24 Second Audience with the Divine Glory

3:25–5:4 Instructions to Perform Symbolic Acts

3:25–27 Binding and Dumbness

4:1–3 The Besieged City

4:4–8 Bearing Guilt

4:9–17 Rations for the Siege

5:1–4 The Sword

Explanatory Oracles

5:5–17 This Is Jerusalem!

6:1–14 Against the Mountains of Israel

7:1–27 Against the Land of Israel

### Prophetic Symbolic Acts



It is generally agreed that 3:22–5:3 contain “sign-acts,” and as such, place Ezekiel in a long line of prophets who conveyed their messages through gestures as well as through words (see further **[Prophets as Signs]**). There is less consensus, however, regarding the purpose of symbolic acts in prophetic literature generally and in the book of Ezekiel in particular. In one common view, symbolic acts were enacted prophecies that were in themselves efficacious and necessary to bring about the depicted event. Such an interpretation has been criticized for its quasi-magical understanding of prophetic actions, especially since there is no evidence that the prophets themselves viewed these acts in this way. Certainly the literary structure of Ezekiel does not support this understanding: the scroll in 3:1 already contains the decreed events, and there is no further need to actualize them through symbolic actions.

A second view holds that the symbolic actions are rhetorical in nature, presenting a particular understanding of events in order to inculcate new understanding and behavior in the audience. According to this position, the symbolic actions constitute yet another dimension of Ezekiel's public ministry. There is much to commend this position, since it is consistent with Ezekiel's commission to warn of coming destruction as a sentinel. Moreover, the implied date of the acts, seven days after Ezekiel's call in 593, and thus a full four years before Nebuchadnezzar began the siege of Jerusalem, would suggest that this perspective on the city's fate had yet to be entertained by Ezekiel's audience. The symbolic acts can therefore be construed as the first—and perhaps most graphic—warning from Ezekiel.

The central difficulty with this position, however, is that there is no indication either that Ezekiel performed the acts or that his audience responded to them. While one cannot exclude the possibility that Ezekiel did perform these acts publicly and that they had a rhetorical impact on the exiles, their current literary shaping and placement urge another interpretation. The actions are presented solely in the form of Yahweh's private communication to Ezekiel. Even though the people participate in one symbolic act (3:25) and another is performed in their presence (4:12), the people are not presented as an audience as in other symbolic acts (e.g., 12:9; 24:19). Ezekiel's house does become the location for the prophet's subsequent interaction with the exiles (8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:20); however, such interaction has not yet occurred. Finally, not even the oracles of chs. 5–7 are addressed to the exiles. Rather, they are addressed in turn to the model city of Jerusalem (5:5–17), the mountains of Israel (6:1–14), and the land (7:1–27).

In their current literary form, these oracles and the symbolic acts do have an audience, but that audience consists of readers who are permitted to listen in on the private conversations between Yahweh and Ezekiel. Only in this literary sense can the symbolic acts be understood to have a rhetorical function: to inculcate a certain perspective and shape the behavior of the readers of the book.

For more traditional approaches to the symbolic acts, see Georg Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten*, (ATANT 54; Zürich: Zwingli, 1968), 49–69; and Kelvin J. Friebe, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication* (JSOTSup 283; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). For the distinction between the different layers of communication in the book, see Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

The symbolic acts signify Ezekiel's abandonment of his former identity as priest. Each act hints at this loss: Ezekiel can neither observe purity rules (4:9ff; 5:1-3), nor use priestly purity to absorb and erase their guilt (4:4-8). Ezekiel's only protest in the book occurs in the course of performing these actions, and the protest indicates just what he has lost (4:14; see below). However, even as the acts demonstrate his powerlessness as a priest, they demonstrate his solidarity with the people. As he prepares to take on the task of sentinel, he does so not as one who stands apart, pure and unaffected by the events, but as a full partner in the community of exiles. The symbolic acts thus demonstrate, on a deeply personal level, the process by which he is prepared for his role. At the beginning of his initiation, he had eaten the scroll, the decree that had fixed the fate of his people. Now, at the end of the process, his actions depict first exile, then siege, famine, and destruction. His acts demonstrate that what he has ingested has changed him. He has become one with his people, and he is the first to suffer what is in store for them.

The interpretation of the symbolic actions begins with 5:5-17 and continues through chapter 7, and includes a series of oracles addressed to the model of the city (5:5-17), the mountains of Israel (6:1-14), and, finally, the land of Israel (7:1-27). None of these oracles is specifically addressed to Ezekiel's exilic audience; in fact, no such audience appears until 8:1. These oracles will therefore be treated as Yahweh's initial disclosure to Ezekiel of the content of his message.

Together, the symbolic acts and oracles of judgment disclose the substance of Yahweh's accusation against the house of Israel. In Ezekiel's first encounter with Yahweh, he was told to speak Yahweh's words whether the people heard or not; but he had not yet been given the message. At the close of 5:12-17, the threefold repetition, "I have spoken," indicates that this is the word Ezekiel must speak. Chapters 6 and 7 further underscore the binding character of Yahweh's word (see esp. 6:10).

The symbolic acts serve a dual function: they prepare Ezekiel for his role as sentinel, and they disclose the fate of Jerusalem. The depiction of the city in the symbolic acts may fruitfully be compared to Assyrian historical reliefs and annalistic accounts.<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel draws an outline of the city and then depicts it under siege as it endures famine and finally suffers complete destruction. The tension between chapter 1, which depicts the world as it ought to be, and chapters 3-7, which proclaim Yahweh's vengeance against a city full of rebels, perfectly mirrors the tension between the cultic



ideal and historical reality represented in the wall reliefs of Assyrian throne rooms.<sup>3</sup> See [The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Throne Rooms]. Whether Ezekiel became acquainted with these traditions through the literary, annalistic accounts or from the sculptural traditions is moot, since both convey structurally identical messages.

## COMMENTARY

### Binding and Dumbness, 3:25-27

Ezekiel's first act signifies both the erasure of his former identity and his identification with the people: "Shut yourself inside your house. As for you, they shall place cords upon you, and they will bind<sup>4</sup> you with them, so that you cannot go out into their midst" (Ezek 3:24b-25). Although the binding of Ezekiel is often interpreted to signify popular opposition to his message,<sup>5</sup> that meaning is unlikely. At this stage in the narration, Ezekiel has not yet begun to speak. He has seen a vision of Yahweh and has sat in stunned silence for seven days. Since he has not said anything yet, the episode probably does not symbolize the rejection of his message. A more likely explanation is that the binding signifies the consequences of rebellion.

#### [Binding Enemy Kings]

By binding Ezekiel and confining him to his house, the people allow him to symbolize their own situation in exile and thereby express their willingness to accept him as their representative. The cords with which Ezekiel is bound (*ʿăbôtîm*) further signify Ezekiel's role as a representative. Except in the Samson narratives, such cords are not associated with imprisonment; rather, this noun is used predominantly in the Priestly literature, where it refers to the gold cords that bind the ephod and breastplate of judgment on the high priest (Exod 28:14, 22, 24, 25; 39:15, 17, 18). Since the breastplate of judgment contains stones of remembrance on which are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes, it is

#### Binding Enemy Kings



In the Assyrian annals, the binding of an enemy king often precedes the destruction of his city; an analogous sequence is followed in Ezekiel's symbolic acts. The motif of binding an enemy king appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible, and the verb "to bind" (*ʿāsār*) in Ezek 3:24b-25 depicts the common fate of vassal kings at the hands of their overlords. In the Psalms, the verb signifies Yahweh's triumph over enemy kings (Ps 149:8; cf. Eccl 4:14); it also often depicts the shameful defeat of Judah's kings (2 Kgs 17:4; 23:33; 25:7; 2 Chr 33:11). Indeed, Zedekiah's claim to fame may well be the number of times he is shown bound in chains as a captive of King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 25:7; Jer 39:7; 52:11; 2 Chr 36:6). Finally, the term comes into use in Second and Third Isaiah as a general description of the Babylonian exiles as captives (Isa 49:9; 61:1).

conceivable that these cords symbolically bind the people to the priest and keep them in his memory as he performs his duties.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the imposition of dumbness makes it impossible for Ezekiel to avert the judgment symbolized by his binding (3:26). Here again the act is fruitfully compared with liminal states in which participants are stripped of their abilities. Unable to speak, Ezekiel cannot act as mediator between the people and Yahweh<sup>7</sup> and is thus no longer able either to reconcile the estranged parties or to avert the danger. The effect of this limitation is amply illustrated by the ensuing symbolic acts, which depict the inevitability of the impending siege (4:1-3), famine (4:9-13), and death (5:1-4).

This first symbolic act conveys several key points about Ezekiel, his present situation, and his community. His isolation preserves one formal aspect of his former priestly role—separation for the sake of service—and the use of cords to bind him in his house may be reminiscent of that priestly identity. That the people accept him as a representative is indicated not only by their involvement in the symbolic act, but also by subsequent textual references to visits from the elders (Ezek 8:1; 20:1). The formal dimension of his previous relationship to the people has therefore been preserved; however, its functional dimension has been lost. No longer a mediator, Ezekiel will be unable to restore the relationship between the people and Yahweh, and the people are doomed because of their guilt.

### **The Besieged City, 4:1-3**

For the second act, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to take a brick and draw a model of a city on it. The brick was probably a mud brick, common in Babylonian construction, and Ezekiel would have drawn the city in soft clay before it was left to dry in the sun. In ancient Near Eastern art, there are examples of two different types of city models: maps and frontal views. Neither is specified here; however, given the subsequent enactment of a siege, it is more likely that a frontal view is intended.<sup>8</sup> [City Maps and Models]

The art of the siege, which is best known from Assyrian records and palace reliefs [Cities Under Siege], is accurately represented in Ezekiel. Because fortified cities were often built on hilltops, siege equipment was designed to scale these hills and bring weaponry as close to the city as possible. A siege wall of stone and earth would be built up around the city to cut off escape. Ramps or inclines to bring battering rams and other heavy equipment close to the city

### City Maps and Models



The map of the city of Nippur is preserved on a clay tablet, as illustrated here.

Because the medium of the original drawing was similar to that of Ezekiel's, some have been inclined to think Ezekiel drew a map of the city on his brick.



**Map of Nippur**

(Illustration: Barclay Burns)

would also be constructed of rock and earth and then be overlaid with planks of wood to create a smooth roadbed. Finally, battering rams were used to break through city walls. Because of their bulk, they were difficult to transport. Ezekiel's positioning of these rams all around the city demonstrates an unusual display of force.

Yahweh then instructs Ezekiel to take an iron plate and set it as a wall between himself and the city. Then, setting his face toward the city, he is to enact the siege. Both of these actions indicate that Yahweh is the agent of the siege. The iron plate signifies a barrier that has come between Yahweh and Israel. Some see a parallel with Lamentations 3:44, "You have screened yourself off with a cloud, that prayer may not pass through." There may also be an allusion to Leviticus 26:19, "I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper," though this curse symbolizes drought, not siege. ["A Brazen Heaven"] Ezekiel's facial gesture does evoke another curse, where Yahweh declares his opposition by "setting [his] face" against the Israelites, thereby causing them to be defeated by their enemies (Lev 26:17; cf. Ezek 6:2; 13:7; 15:7). By coupling the iron wall with Ezekiel's glare, the symbolic act demonstrates that the city has come under siege not due to Yahweh's passive neglect, but because of his active intention to destroy it.

The act is then identified as a sign for the house of Israel. [Signs and Faith] Although this is the only symbolic act that is so described, the concept of sign may govern the entire complex of symbolic acts. Elsewhere, Ezekiel performs symbolic acts that portend the people's own imminent experience (12:11; 24:24). Similarly, these

### Cities under Siege



As realistic as Ezekiel's depiction of the siege is, it reflects yet another stereotypical convention found throughout the Assyrian annals and wall reliefs. A common theme of the historical reliefs is enemy cities under siege; battering rams, siege walls, and ramps are included in the constellation of images. Typically these are rebellious cities, whose kings have violated loyalty oaths. Always, the rebel king learns to submit to the awe-inspiring majesty of Assyria; but sometimes not until he has been put in fetters and his city placed under siege. Tiglath-pileser III reports:

Zaqiru of Bit-Sha'alli broke the oath (of loyalty sworn in the name) of great gods and joined with my enemy. I myself captured him together with his nobles. I placed him in iron fetters and I took him to Assyria. The people of Bit-sha'alli were frightened and they made Dur-Balihaya their royal [city], their fortress. I captured that city by means of artificial mounds and siege-works and levelled it to the ground.

The frequent occurrence of this double motif of fettered kings and besieged cities provides a striking parallel to the sequence of symbolic acts in Ezek 3:22–5:4. The captions prepared for Ashurbanipal's wall reliefs illustrate the pervasiveness of the stereotype, while parallel accounts in the longer inscriptions confirm the suspicion that the city mentioned here was placed under siege because its king had violated a treaty oath (*ARAB*, 2:539, 549, 788):

Against Sha-pî-Bêl, the fortified city of the Gambulai, I threw up a ramp (bridge) and Dananu, son of *Bêl-ikîsha*—the splendor of my royalty overwhelmed him and he broke his bow. . . . [Dunanu, son of] *Bêl-ikîsha*, I seized alive with my own hands. [Into bonds and fetters] of iron they cast him and hurried him into my presence. (*ARAB*, 2:1042)

My armies which had marched in the campaign against Elam, (and) had not yet recuperated (rested) from their exertions,—toward Sha-pî-bêl, against Dunanu, I turned them. Over against that city they pitched the camp, blockaded (it) and barred egress from it (lit., seized its egress). (*ARAB*, 2:1061)

These inscriptions indicate that the depiction of a city under siege followed set conventions. The accompanying wall reliefs would serve to warn other vassals of the fate that awaited them if they attempted rebellion.



### Assyrian Warriors

This relief from Sargon's palace in Khorsabad reflects the Assyrian practice of depicting cities under siege.

Assyrian warriors. Relief from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad. Neo-Assyrian, 710 bc. Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Iraq. [Credit: Scala / Art Resource]

For the inscription of Tiglath Pileser, see H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III King of Assyria*, critical ed., with introduction, translation, and commentary (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 162–63. All other inscriptions are from Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (New York: Greenwood, 1968, orig. published 1926). Christoph Uehlinger, "Zeichne eine Stadt . . . und Belagere Sie!" in *Jerusalem: Texte – Bilder – Steine*, ed. Max Küchler and Christoph Uehlinger (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1987), 143, 153.

**“A Brazen Heaven”**

Ezekiel’s allusions to Lev 26:19 and Lam 3:44 signify that a barrier has come between Yahweh and Israel. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’s appropriation of the motif, the “brazen heaven” becomes a symbol of spiritual drought. The poem itself is a remarkable evocation of the human experience of divine absence:

My prayers must meet a brazen heaven  
 And fail or scatter all away.  
 Unclean and seeming unforgiven  
 My prayers I scarcely call to pray.  
 I cannot buoy my heart above;  
 Above it cannot entrance win.  
 I reckon precedents of love,  
 But feel the long success of sin.

My heaven is brass and iron my earth:  
 Yea iron is mingled with my clay,  
 So harden’d is it in this dearth  
 Which praying fails to do away.  
 Nor tears, nor tears this clay uncouth  
 Could mould, if any tears there were.  
 A warfare of my lips in truth,  
 Battling with God, is now my prayer.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “A Brazen Heaven,” *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th rev. and enl. edition, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 27.

symbolic acts convey the consequences of the siege for the people.

[Prophets as Signs]

**Bearing Guilt, 4:4-8**

Next, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to lie on his left side and bear the punishment for the house of Israel for 390 days, and then lie on his right side to bear the punishment of Judah for 40 days. During the 40 days, he must prophesy against the model of Jerusalem. Yahweh will bind him so that he cannot move during the whole time of the siege. Although the references to Israel and Judah appear to signify the respective punishments of the northern kingdom of Israel—which had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC—and the southern kingdom of Judah, that is not likely. Here and elsewhere, Ezekiel uses Judah and the house of Israel interchangeably.

Ezekiel has a personal stake in this symbolic act. The instructions are prefaced by a direct address to the prophet, “and you” (omitted from NRSV in 4:4), and the last words of the section suggest that

### Signs and Faith



In Ezek 4:4, Ezekiel performs an act that is called a “sign” for the house of Israel, and in two other accounts, his actions lead to the designation of the prophet himself as a sign (Ezek 12:1-16; 24:15-24). While two different words are used, *’ōt* in 4:3 and *môpêl* in chs. 12 and 24, the words are synonymous and often appear as pairs, as in the “signs and wonders” Moses performed in Egypt. In fact, the terms are used most extensively in the plague narratives of Exodus (Exod 7:3; 8:19; 10:1-2; Num 14:11, 17, 20; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:2, 3; 26:8; 29:2; 34:11; Josh 24:17; Ps 78:43).

Recent trends in the interpretation of symbolic acts as communicative and rhetorical events have tended to emphasize the cognitive elements of the signs: they are intended to lead to a new understanding of a particular event. Although such interpretations imply that the signs are transparent and comprehensible, that is by no means the case in Old Testament literature. In most cases, a sign acquires its meaning through an arbitrary designation of it as a sign, usually by Yahweh. The lights in the firmament serve as signs (Gen 1:14); the rainbow is a sign (Gen 9:12-13); circumcision is a sign (Gen 17:11); sabbaths are signs (Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:12). Similarly, when prophets give signs, they can specify natural or historical occurrences that will serve to confirm a prophecy (2 Kgs 19:21//Isa 37:30; 2 Kgs 20:8-9//Isa 38:7; Isa 7:11, 14; 38:22; 44:25;

66:19). Such signs can also be supernatural or marvelous occurrences, as in the signs Yahweh gives Moses to confirm that he has been sent by Yahweh (Exod 3:12; 4:1-9, 17, 28, 30). In many cases the sign is confirmed only in the future.

When a sign appears or is performed, the necessary response is not an act of cognition but an act of faith. That is, in order to understand a sign, one must believe it has the meaning attributed to it. Indeed, the pairing of “my signs” and “my glory” in Num 14:17, 20, suggests that to see the signs is to see Yahweh. But again, signs require faith in order to be perceived. Yahweh’s first sign to Moses is little more than a promise: “And this is the sign for you that I have sent you: when you lead the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Exod 3:12). And, when Moses performs the signs for the children of Israel, the appropriate response is belief in the God who had sent him (Exod 4:1, 5, 8, 9, 31). The signs do not always lead to such belief. In Num 14:11, for example, Yahweh complains that the people refuse to believe even though they have seen the signs.

Since signs disclose the activity of Yahweh and require faith to be understood as such, they are not necessarily transparent. What allows the birth of a child (Isa 7:14) or a realistically lengthy period of recovery from invasion (2 Kgs 19:29) to disclose the reality of Yahweh at work is the belief that it is so.

this is Ezekiel’s personal war (“your siege”; the possessive pronoun is singular and refers only to Ezekiel). Moreover, the use of priestly language for guilt and punishment throughout this section underscores the crisis that this act portends for Ezekiel. The expression “you shall bear guilt” (*nāšā’ ’āwôn*) has a wide range of meanings, and an understanding of the nuances of the expression is crucial for understanding not only the symbolic act but also its consequences for Ezekiel. The term *’āwôn*, which NRSV translates throughout this section as “punishment,” (4:4, 5, 6), can also mean guilt or actions that incur guilt. The word thus expresses an inherent

### Prophets as Signs



The designation of a prophet’s symbolic act as a sign is rare, occurring only in Isaiah (20:3) and Ezekiel (4:4); and the designation of a prophet as a sign is equally rare, again occurring only in Isaiah (8:18) and Ezekiel (chs. 12, 24). As signs, prophets disclose divine activity where it has not yet been perceived. At the time when Ezekiel enacts his siege of Jerusalem, the consequences of Israel’s rebellion remain hidden from them. Ezekiel’s sign discloses that the siege is the inevitable outworking of divine wrath.

connection between guilt and punishment, in the sense that unab-solved or unforgiven guilt becomes punishment (see Num 5:31).

The dual meaning of guilt/punishment is reflected in the two phases of this symbolic act. If the houses of Israel and Judah represent the same entity, then the two phases of this symbolic act, of lying on the left side for 390 days and on the right for 40, do not represent penalties inflicted on two different kingdoms, but the entire sweep of Israel's history, from the beginning of its transgression to the end of its exile. The first part of the act, which lasts 390 days, represents the long history of Israel's guilt. The figure of 390 days for 390 years would indicate that Israel's guilt began in 982, or roughly the beginning of the monarchy. This is consistent with Ezekiel's characterization of Israel's history as one long series of rebellions (see Ezek 16, 20, 23). The second part of the act, which lasts for 40 days, signifies Judah's punishment for this long accumulation of guilt. The figure of 40 days/40 years may reflect Ezekiel's understanding that the exile is a second wilderness experience, which will last for an entire generation (20:33-39; cf. Num 14).

What does it mean to say that Ezekiel "bears" the guilt/punishment? Several interpretations are possible. If an individual is forced to bear her own guilt, then she alone suffers the consequences, or bears the punishment. However, since guilt can also be borne by others, the expression can carry the connotation of forgiveness or substitutionary suffering. For example, an ancient formula for Yahweh's kindness declares that Yahweh bears the guilt of the people; NRSV translates this expression as "forgive" (Exod 34:7; cf. Num 14:18). From the perspective of the individual, guilt has indeed been forgiven. However, divine forbearance does not mean divine forgetting. At the heart of this expression is the conviction that Yahweh chooses to take on the individual's burden. A similar logic lies behind rituals of substitution. In rituals of atonement, for example, an individual or the community transfers sin to a sacrificial offering, which the priests then eat. Because the priests are in a state of purity, their consumption of the sacrifice cancels out the effect of the sin (Lev 10:17).<sup>9</sup> In another rite, communal sin is transferred to a scapegoat, which is then sent out into the wilderness (Lev 16:22). By so banishing its guilt, the community is spared punishment.

Since Ezekiel bears guilt that is not his, the logic of substitution is implicit in Ezekiel 4:4-8, and his symbolic act therefore evokes his priestly vocation of identifying with, and suffering for, his people. But in one important respect, Ezekiel's actions are not

substitutionary: his suffering cannot avert the coming disaster. Nothing will be forgiven; and the people themselves will bear the consequences of their long history of rebellion.

The dual meaning of the phrase “bearing guilt/punishment” is uniquely relevant to the interpretation of the symbolic actions as Ezekiel’s initiation into his role. This act shows Ezekiel in his state of liminality, in which his former priestly capabilities have been stripped away. That Ezekiel is no longer a priest becomes abundantly clear as he bears the guilt of his people day after day. He can only reveal their guilt; he can do nothing to relieve them of it.

### **Rations for the Siege, 4:9-17**

Ezekiel’s impotence in the face of Israel’s guilt is underscored in this next act. As with the preceding symbolic action, the literary complexity suggests that there has been some reworking and expansion of an original unit. The section begins with instructions, in vv. 9-11, for Ezekiel to gather grains and legumes into a jar and to make bread from them to last the 390 days the prophet will spend lying on his side. The mixture of grains and beans signifies the scarcity of food during a siege, since there is evidently not enough of any one grain to make a loaf. The vegetarian diet also hints at the lack of meat (see below). The notion of scarcity is further developed in the next two verses. Yahweh commands Ezekiel to ration his food and eat it at set times of the day. The amounts would hardly be enough to stave off either hunger or thirst: about eight ounces of bread and two-thirds of a quart of water per day. The rations are eerily reminiscent of the food available to Jeremiah during the siege (Jer 37:21).

Verses 12-15 shift the focus away from the scarcity of siege food to the uncleanness of food eaten in exile and may therefore be a secondary expansion. As with the possible expansion in 4:4-8, however, the secondary material heightens the involvement of the prophet in the symbolic act. Yahweh tells Ezekiel to cook the bread of v. 9 as barley cakes—that is, as flat bread—using the disgusting and unprecedented fuel of human dung. The use of animal dung for fuel was not unheard of in the Mediterranean world. Its use in cooking was customary, particularly when other fuels were unavailable. A nineteenth-century archaeologist reports,

The men were baking a large round flat cake of bread in the embers of a fire of camel’s and cow-dung [cf. *ugat rēšapîm* “ember-cake,” I Kings 19:6]. Taking it out when done, they brushed off the ashes and



divided it among the party . . . I tasted it, and found it quite as good as the common bread of the country . . . this is the common fare of persons travelling in this manner [a camel caravan from Nablus to Bethlehem].<sup>10</sup>

But the use of human dung as fuel is nowhere attested. That such fuel would render food unclean is implied by Ezekiel's protest, as well as by Yahweh's declaration that the import of this act is that the exiles will eat unclean food in the lands to which Yahweh drives them (v. 13). If further evidence is necessary, it may be found in the Deuteronomic prescription for disposing of human excrement outside the camp (Deut 23:12-14).

Ezekiel's interjection here, the only such interjection in the book, is filled with pathos, and not merely because Yahweh's command forces him to abandon yet another aspect of his priestly identity. In a threefold confession of innocence, he protests that he has neither eaten meat that has died naturally, nor meat killed by beasts of prey, nor has he let carrion flesh come into his mouth. The first two types of defiled meat are prohibited to priests (Lev 11:44; Ezek 44:31), and the violation of these taboos disqualifies a priest from service until he returns to a state of purity. The last type of defiled meat, translated by NRSV as "carrion flesh," may refer to consecrated meat not eaten by the third day after it has been offered in sacrifice (cf. Lev 7:18; 19:7). Such meat was to be burned. The commandment itself is sufficient to set off the meat as unclean; but the underlying motivation for such a command may be the probability that three-day-old meat would have spoiled.

Commentators regularly note Ezekiel's evident desire to maintain purity,<sup>11</sup> but more may be at stake. Since Ezekiel's protest is that he has never come into contact with death, he is concerned with much more than ritual purity. Or perhaps purity signified far more to Ezekiel than we have yet understood. Maintaining ritual purity involved separating oneself from death, with the larger goal of delivering the community from death.<sup>12</sup> That is the logic lying behind the story of the Good Samaritan: when the priest and Levite pass by the wounded man lying by the side of the road, they are careful not to come into contact with the dead and thereby render themselves unclean. Though Jesus' story challenges that notion of purity, the point of the story is not to weigh the evil of the two holy men against the compassion of the Samaritan. Rather, the story weighs two goods and demonstrates that compassion is yet another way to serve the needs of the community (Luke 10:25-37).

Ezekiel's protest reflects a dawning realization of his uselessness in a world filled with dead and decaying flesh. Such a world is but one step away from cannibalism, as the chilling story of Ben-Hadad's siege of Samaria suggests (2 Kgs 6:24-32). Although Yahweh relents and allows Ezekiel to bake his bread in animal dung, Ezekiel is not allowed to escape the larger implications of the impurity. Yahweh's explanation of the act in vv. 16-17, which appropriates language and imagery from the covenant curses of Leviticus 26, underscores the severity of the famine and the inevitability of death: concrete, physical devastations would engulf the people if they defied their covenant with Yahweh. Verse 16 alludes to the Levitical curses of famine. Yahweh himself will "break their staff of bread." What "staff of bread" means is unclear; but the context readily suggests that the result of Yahweh's action will be starvation, as the people eat their bread by measure but never to satiety (cf. Lev. 26:26). Alluding to Leviticus 26:39, v. 17 describes the result of the famine as a "rotting away" in the lands of exile because of their iniquities. The "rotting away" is by no means metaphorical remorsefulness over their sinful past; rather, it signifies a physical wasting away from hunger (cf. Ps 38:7). In Ezekiel 4:4-8, Ezekiel had borne the guilt of Israel/Judah in an act signifying that the current generation would bear the full weight of their long history. By declaring that the people will rot away in their guilt, this final verse links this symbolic act with the preceding one and underscores, yet again, Ezekiel's inability to avert the punishment.

### **The Sword, 5:1-4**

This final act comprises two separate but related actions. For the first, Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to use a sword as a razor and shave his head and beard (5:1). Many commentators understand this act as a dramatization of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:20, in which Yahweh threatens to hire a "razor" to "shave" the untrusting Ahaz, his royal household, and the people of Judah: "On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet [the genitals], and it will take off the beard as well." Ezekiel's act thus signifies yet another "shaving." This time, however, Yahweh is the barber (5:11).

Using a balance to weigh and divide the hair into three equal parts, Ezekiel enacts the coming judgment (cf. Dan 6:27-28). Each section of hair is subjected to a different fate: one third is burned in the fire of the city, presumably on the brick depicting the city (4:1). One third is scattered and hacked with the sword, symbolizing

futile attempts to escape (cf. 2 Kgs 25:4-7). The final third is scattered in the wind, to symbolize the dispersion and eventual disappearance of the exiles from the house of Israel. From this final third, Ezekiel takes a small amount of hair and tucks it in the folds of his garment, symbolizing the survival of a very small remnant. Even this remnant is not immune, since Ezekiel casts even some of this hair into the fire. As with the other symbolic acts, due attention is given to the fate of Jerusalem, on the one hand, and the fate of the exiles, on the other. Though the exiles have escaped the destruction of Jerusalem, their winnowing is not yet over.

Ezekiel has now fully relinquished his role as a priest. The act of shaving the head was associated with mourning rites forbidden to priests (Lev 21:5; cf. Deut 14:1; the prohibition against shaving the head loses its connection with mourning in Ezek 44:20). As in 4:9-17, Ezekiel repudiates his priestly role, and in doing so, subjects



### Sword as a Barber's Razor

This four-part fresco, located in the south arm of the vault in the underchurch at Schwarzrheindorf, depicts the symbolic act of Ezekiel 5:1-4. Counterclockwise from left: Ezekiel cuts his hair with a sword, weighs it, beats it with the sword, and scatters it to the wind.

[Credit: Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. Photography: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]

himself to the waves of death that will wash over his people. As one who had been able to manage death by means of the various purity rules that restricted contact with the dead, Ezekiel's physical transformation and humiliating exposure demonstrate that there are no barriers between himself and the coming doom.

## The Announcement of Judgment Against Jerusalem, 5:5-17

The accompanying oracle discloses the reason for the impending judgment, as well as its intended outcome. The beginning and end of the oracle emphasize Jerusalem's status before Yahweh and in the eyes of the nations. Although Yahweh had placed her in the center of the nations, her rebelliousness provokes his wrath, which will be satisfied only by her total destruction and humiliation. This concern with Jerusalem's public reputation is balanced with an equal concern for the impact of Jerusalem's behavior on Yahweh's sanctuary. [An Outline of Ezekiel 5:5-17]

### *This Is Jerusalem! 5:5-6*

The oracle identifies the city of the symbolic acts in 4:1–5:4 as Jerusalem, and reflects the principle of Zion theology that Jerusalem enjoyed special status and protection. One key aspect of this theology is that the surrounding turbulent, chaotic nations are always poised to disturb Jerusalem's peace (cf. Ps 46:6). Yahweh's

presence keeps the city secure from such attacks. Ezekiel eschews this theology of privilege: because Jerusalem's rebellion against Yahweh's ordinances has made her more wicked than the surrounding nations, Yahweh now turns against her as he would against any enemy.

### An Outline of Ezekiel 5:5-17



5:5-6 Presentation: "This is Jerusalem!"  
5:7-10 First Accusation and Judgment

5:7 Accusation: Worse than the Nations

5:8-10 Judgment: Divine Opposition

5:11-12 Second Accusation and Judgment

5:11 Accusation: Defiled Sanctuary

5:12 Judgment: Destruction

5:13-17 Result:

5:13 Vindication of Yahweh's Word

5:14-15 Jerusalem: An Object Lesson

5:16-17 Yahweh the Avenger of Covenants

### *More Tumult, More Judgment, 5:7-10*

The next section of the oracle is introduced by a messenger formula, "Therefore thus says the Lord," which links the announcement of judgment to the description of the city's rebellion in v. 6. What follows is yet another accusation, "Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are round about you," which culminates in two judgment clauses, each introduced by "therefore," 5:8-9 and 5:10. Using a formula traditionally associated with declaring war against an enemy, Yahweh now declares his opposition to his people. In 5:9, Yahweh declares that he will do what he has never yet done,

and 5:10 elaborates with the image of parents eating their children. NRSV establishes the connection between these two judgments by translating the introductory “therefore” in 5:10 as an emphatic adverb, “surely.”

The use of the noun *hāmôn*, “turbulence,” to describe Jerusalem’s rebellion is unusual.<sup>13</sup> Of the some eighty-five occurrences of this noun in the Hebrew Bible, nearly one-third are found in Ezekiel, where it is used primarily in the oracles against Egypt. It can be used either in a quantitative sense to designate great numbers (i.e., multitudes) or to connote pomp or arrogance.<sup>14</sup> The latter sense seems to be tied to chaos traditions, since *hāmôn* describes both the raging of the sea and the tumult of attacking armies.<sup>15</sup>

Jerusalem’s turbulence is attributed to her refusal to follow either Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances or those of the surrounding nations. NRSV has inaccurately translated 5:7 to suggest that Jerusalem has exchanged Yahweh’s ordinances for those of the nations. Instead, the verse claims that Jerusalem refused to follow *any* statutes, either Yahweh’s or those of the nations. Commentators rightly treat this as a moral failing, but Jerusalem’s actions are more fundamentally problematic than is usually claimed. Ezekiel’s understanding reflects the widespread practice at the time of defining international political relationships through covenants, which stipulated mutual obligations and which were ratified by oaths sworn in the names of the gods of all the parties involved. Ezekiel takes the religious dimension of these treaties quite seriously.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 17, for example, Ezekiel equates Zedekiah’s violation of his treaty with Nebuchadnezzar with his abrogation of the oath he had sworn to Yahweh (17:13-15, 18-19). In effect, political treason amounted to religious apostasy.

Ezekiel 5:7 may express a similar correspondence between Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances and those of the nations (cf. Ezek 23:24). Jerusalem’s turbulence consists in the fact that she cannot live up to her word, to Yahweh or anyone else. In keeping with the terms of such international treaty agreements, Yahweh threatens to come against Jerusalem himself. The emphatic declaration in 5:8, “I, myself, am against you,” asserts his intention to uphold the covenants, even if Jerusalem will not. The moral dimension of Jerusalem’s behavior, then, runs deeper than her refusal of Yahweh’s and the nations’ “statutes and ordinances.” What is at stake is her utter failure to honor any commitments.

Yahweh’s justification for these judgments is mentioned in a final prepositional phrase, “because of all your abominations.” This term is grammatically and structurally parallel with the opening phrase,

“because of your turbulence.”<sup>17</sup> The word translated here as “because” is often employed as a causal conjunction; however, in these two phrases, the word functions as a preposition. The first, “because of your turbulence,” explains why Jerusalem has scorned the ordinances of Yahweh and the nations, while the second, “because of all your abominations,” provides the rationale for Yahweh’s judgment. The two words thus form a frame around this section of the oracle.<sup>18</sup> Given its association with the word “turbulence,” “abominations” conveys the scandal of Jerusalem’s behavior in the eyes of the nations. Her unreliability defies all norms of human behavior.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Defilement and Expulsion, 5:11-12***

The second part of the oracle is introduced with a divine oath, “As I live,” emphasizing the certainty of the coming judgment. This section of the oracle is still concerned with Jerusalem’s violations of the laws and statutes mentioned in 5:6-7; yet now the oracle turns more specifically to the manner in which these actions have directly affected Yahweh, through defilement of the sanctuary. It is unclear whether the defilement of the sanctuary is the result of the actions of 5:6-7 or of separate actions. If the defilement is due to the former, then Leslie Allen’s description of the impact of communal sin is apt: “In priestly thought the sins of the people had the effect of polluting the sanctuary with a miasma of uncleanness, which required removal by sacrifice to save the people from perishing.”<sup>20</sup> Jerusalem’s outward behavior, that is, her detestable lack of integrity in her dealings with her neighbors, thus pollutes her sacred center, the sanctuary. In addition, Jerusalem defiles the sanctuary with her “detestable things” and “abominations” (5:11)—apparently a reference to the introduction of idols into the sanctuary. Again, as in 5:7-10, Jerusalem’s behavior reflects a fundamental lack of integrity in her inability to abide by her covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

Yahweh emphatically declares that he will be the agent of destruction: “I, I myself will shave” (NRSV “I will cut you down”). Alluding to the symbolic act of 5:1-4, the oracle reiterates the threefold destruction described there. The oracle makes no reference to the survival of a remnant, but rather emphasizes that Yahweh will not pity or spare anyone.

### ***Proof of Yahweh’s Intentions, 5:13***

Opening with three parallel declarations that Yahweh’s wrath will thus be satisfied, the verse ends with a proof-saying, declaring that

the people will know Yahweh has spoken “in his jealousy.” The emphasis on Yahweh’s speaking “in his jealousy” suggests that the proof-saying is as much concerned with the nature of Yahweh’s word as with the fact of it. Jealousy here may mean something other than passion for the covenant<sup>21</sup> or the “resentful rage of one whose prerogatives have been usurped.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the expression “I have spoken in my jealousy” underscores Yahweh’s intention to honor his word (36:5, 6; 38:19). Block has defined divine jealousy in these contexts as “zeal for his honor,”<sup>23</sup> and that is probably what is intended here. Unlike the Jerusalemites, who routinely break their oaths, Yahweh declares that he stands by this word of judgment.

### ***Jerusalem: An Object Lesson, 5:14-15***

In v. 8, Yahweh declared that he would execute his judgments against Jerusalem in the eyes of the nations. This was fitting, since Jerusalem’s abominations had included violations of agreements with her covenant partners (see above); the repetition of the phrase “nations round about” in vv. 14-15 reminds the reader of this earlier context. Jerusalem’s judgment will reverse her former proud position as a city in the center of the nations. Among the variety of terms employed to describe Jerusalem’s abasement and humiliation, one hints that her treatment is to be an object lesson to the nations round about (NRSV “warning”; Heb. *mûsār*, “discipline”). The city’s defeat displays to the nations the honor and power of the victor—in this case, Yahweh—and serves as a warning to others.

### ***Invoking the Curses, 5:16-17***

The closing verses return to a depiction of Yahweh as the agent of destruction. The threefold repetition of the word “unleash” (NRSV “let loose, send”) underscores Yahweh’s action of emptying his quiver of its arrows of divine judgment: famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. The oracle closes with an image that has dominated the chapter: a declaration that Yahweh himself will bring the sword against his people (cf. 5:11). Because all of these motifs appear in the covenant curses of Leviticus 26, these verses make it clear that Yahweh’s act of judgment is the consequence of Israel’s covenantal violations. [Parallels Between Ezekiel 4–5 and Leviticus 26]

## Parallels Between Ezekiel 4–5 and Leviticus 26



### Ezekiel 4–5

I am going to break the *staff of bread* in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by *weight* and with fearfulness; and they shall drink water by measure, and in dismay. (4:16)

... one third you shall *scatter* to the wind, and I will *unsheathe the sword* after them (5:2b)

But she has rebelled against my *ordinances* and my statutes, ... *rejecting my ordinances and my statutes* (5:6)

Surely, parents will eat their children in your midst, and children will eat their parents (5:10)

... one third I will *scatter* to every wind and I will *unsheathe the sword* after them (5:12)

Moreover I will make you a desolation and an object of mocking among the nations around you, in the sight of all that pass by (5:14)

... when I loose against you my deadly arrows a famine, arrows for destruction, which I will let loose to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you, and *break your staff of bread* (5:16)

I will send famine and *wild animals* against you, and they will rob you of *your children*; *pestilence* and bloodshed will pass through you, and I will *bring the sword* against you (5:17).

### Leviticus 26

When I *break your staff of bread*, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven, and they shall dole out your bread by weight; and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied. (26:26)

And you I will *scatter* among the nations, and I will *unsheathe the sword* after you (26:33a)

... if you spurn my *statutes*, and abhor my *ordinances*, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and break my covenant. ... (26:15)

... you shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters. ... (26:29)

And you I will *scatter* among the nations, and I will *unsheathe the sword* after you. (26:33a)

I will lay your cities waste. ... (26:31)

... when I *break your staff of bread*. ... (26:26)

I will let loose *wild animals* against you, and they will bereave you of *your children* and destroy your livestock. ... (26:22)

*I will bring the sword* against you, executing vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw within your cities, I will send *pestilence* among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands. (26:25)

Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1990, 1994), 1:92–96, esp. 94.



## CONNECTIONS

Anyone who can afford to buy this book will have difficulty imagining the terror of these symbolic acts, whose significance depends on the very real experience of scarcity and deprivation of a city under siege. [A Deist's Reaction to Ezekiel's Symbolic Acts] The ancient Near Eastern literature is replete with images of starvation, famine, and pestilence. The biblical curses of Leviticus and Deuteronomy share in that tradition, as do many of the prophetic threats of judgment. In one of the earliest studies of ancient Near Eastern treaty curses, one scholar observed that the appearance of famine in treaty curses was “so general and obvious in nature” that it did not deserve study.<sup>24</sup>

One suspects that the lack of interest in the famine motif has as much to do with the prosperity of our time as it does with its pervasiveness in the ancient literature. It is difficult to understand the threat of famine or, for that matter, its inevitable impact on social and cultural mores, in a country that produces too much food—so much food, in fact, that the major threats to health are quite often consequences of obesity.

In the critical discussions of Ezekiel's protest against using human dung for fuel in 4:14, there is a strange absence of analysis of the underlying meaning of his protest. When Yahweh commands him to cook his food over human dung, Ezekiel protests: “Ah! Lord GOD! I have never defiled myself; from my youth up until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by animals, nor has carrion flesh come into my mouth!” This exclamation is a non

### A Deist's Reaction to Ezekiel's Symbolic Acts



At least one modern reader reacted with revulsion, not sympathy or terror, to Ezekiel's symbolic acts. In his first fully developed essay on the principles of deism, Voltaire (b. 1694) cited the account of Ezekiel's symbolic acts as an example of the absurdities that were to be found in the Bible and perpetuated in the Christian church:

Here, my brethren, is one of those lovely and striking prophecies: the great prophet Ezekiel saw the northern gale, and four animals, and wheels of chrysolite all full of eyes, and the Eternal said to him: “Arise, eat a book, and then go off.”

The Eternal orders him to sleep for three hundred and ninety days on his left side, and then forty on the right side. The Eternal ties him up with ropes; certainly this prophet was a man who should have been tied up—but we are not yet finished. Can I repeat without vomiting what God commands Ezekiel to do? I must do it. God commands him to eat barley bread cooked with shit. Is it credible that the filthiest scoundrel of our time could imagine such excremental rubbish? Yes, my brethren, the prophet eats his barley bread with his own excrement: he complains that this breakfast disgusts him a little and God, as a conciliatory gesture, permits him to mix his bread with cow dung instead. Here then is a prototype, a prefiguration of the church of Jesus Christ.

Voltaire, “Sermon of the Fifty,” trans. Peter Gay, in *Deism: An Anthology* (ed. Peter Gay; Princeton, Van Nostrand, 1968), 152–53.

sequitur if the only concern is the ritual purity of the food. But Ezekiel's protest is significantly more profound than that. It calls our attention to what would have been obvious to his audience: all other sources of fuel have disappeared, because all the animals are long dead.

Ezekiel's actions shear away the social constructions that shield him and his people from the deadly consequences of their actions. Purity rules such as the ones Ezekiel invokes signify a profound awe and respect for such powers and for a universe charged with the forces of life and death. They also allow those who live their lives by such rules to believe that the terrifying forces that engulf the world can be managed, at least to some degree.

Such rules require a certain measure of prosperity in order to be maintained. Starving people cannot afford to reject meat that has not been butchered properly or to burn three-day-old leftovers (for that matter, how could such food be burned if fuel is also scarce?). Nor can they long sustain the community bonds that make the observance of such rules possible. In one terse declaration, "Surely, parents shall eat their children in your midst, and children shall eat their parents" (5:10), Ezekiel describes the disintegration of the social fabric that hides their animal hunger. Ezekiel's declaration of imminent cannibalism is strangely devoid of emotion; by contrast, the curse in Deuteronomy 28:53-57 poignantly depicts the fundamental change in behavior of once compassionate and genteel mothers:

She who is the most refined and gentle among you . . . will begrudge food to the husband whom she embraces, to her own son, and to her own daughter, begrudging even the afterbirth that comes out from between her thighs, and the children that she bears, because she is eating them in secret for lack of anything else. . . . (Deut 28:56-57)

That lack of emotion is part of the horror. People will do what they must do to survive, no matter what the cost to their social bonds or to their sense of humanity.

We cannot fathom the extremity of Ezekiel's condition because we are wrapped in the cocoon of our own culture's purity rules—a cocoon carefully spun out of economic prosperity and technical know-how. Though we are occasionally startled out of our complacency, we rarely think about how death supports life, when our meat is packaged in shapes no longer resembling cows, chickens, or pigs, and when none of the packaging explains how these animals are raised, slaughtered, and prepared for market. When our only connections to energy consumption are switches, thermostats, and

a monthly utility bill, it is difficult to remember the coal, gas, and oil that go into producing it—or, for that matter, the human cost of extracting these resources from the earth. Finally, in what is perhaps the most elaborate purity system of all, we do not have to consider the impact of our waste, which is all flushed downstream. The purity rules of our culture create an elaborate baffle not only between us and our consumption of energy, but also between us and the garbage we leave behind.

As with Ezekiel and his purity rules, we can only live this way because we benefit from an economic and social system that privileges us. Unlike Ezekiel, however, our way of life reflects nothing of the awe and respect for the forces that impact daily life. Instead, it indicates the extent to which technical mastery has made the world and its resources into a commodity. There are many who warn that such a lifestyle can no longer be sustained. But like Ezekiel, we protest that we cannot imagine living any other way.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:127.

<sup>2</sup> Irene J. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the active verbs in MT with NRSV's translation, which follows the Septuagint in rendering these as passive verbs: "cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them." For arguments against following Septuagint here, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:102.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:160.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. NRSV "unable to reprove them," which is a somewhat loose translation of the Hebrew, "you shall not be for them an *ʾiš mōkīāh*." This latter term does have the connotation of reproof in some contexts (e.g., Prov 3:12; 9:7, 8; 19:25; 24:25; 25:12; 28:23; 30:6). But since reproving is inconsistent with Ezekiel's call, it is more likely that the phrase means "serve as intermediary." See Robert R. Wilson, "An Interpretation of Ezekiel's Dumbness," *VT* 22 (1973): 91-104.

<sup>8</sup> Christoph Uehlinger, "Zeichne eine Stadt . . . und Belagere Sie!" in *Jerusalem: Texte - Bilder - Steine*, ed. Max Küchler and Christoph Uehlinger (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1987), 141-49.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 637.

<sup>10</sup> E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches II* (London: J. Murray, 1841), 76, cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:107.

<sup>11</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:171.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 637.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret S. Odell, "The City of Hamonah in Ezekiel 39:11-16: The Tumultuous City of Jerusalem," *CBQ* 56 (1994): 479-89.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 104; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 119-20; A. Baumann, "הָמָאֵה *hāmāh*," *TDOT*, 3:414-18; P. Derchain, "A propos de deux racines sémitiques \**hm* et \**zm*," *Chronique d'Égypte* 42 (1967): 306-10; G. Gerleman, "Die Lärmende Menge: Der Sinn des hebräischen Wortes *hamôn*," *Wort und Geschichte*, AOAT 18, ed. H. Gese and H.-P. Rüger (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 71-75.

<sup>15</sup> Jer 5:22; 6:23; 47:3; Isa 17:12; 29:5-8; Pss 46: 3, 6; 65:7 (cited by Bauman, "הָמָאֵה *hāmāh*," *TDOT*, 3:416).

<sup>16</sup> Matityahu Tsevat, "The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Vassal Oaths and the Prophet Ezekiel," *JBL* 78 (1959): 199-204.

<sup>17</sup> Contrast NRSV "Because you are more turbulent. . . ."

<sup>18</sup> Odell, "City of Hamonah," 482-83.

<sup>19</sup> For the association of "abominations" with cultural norms, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Erdmans, 1997), 1:203.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1994), 75.

<sup>21</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:211.

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:115.

<sup>23</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:330.

<sup>24</sup> Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 62.

# AGAINST THE MOUNTAINS OF ISRAEL

## Ezekiel 6:1-14

Although it is customary to treat Ezekiel 6 independently of the preceding and following material, there is good support for interpreting chapters 6 and 7 as the continuation of Ezekiel's preparation for ministry. [Where Is Ezekiel's Audience?] Whereas 5:5-17, which interprets Ezekiel's symbolic act of cutting off his hair, omits an interpretation of the survival of the remnant (cf. 5:3-4), 6:8-9 gives a reason for its preservation. Second, the allusions to the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 in 6:1-14 are of the same type as those found in chapters 4 and 5.<sup>1</sup> Third, the physical gestures in 6:2, 11, are reminiscent of those in the symbolic acts. Although the correspondence may be coincidental, the possibility remains that Ezekiel's act of setting his face toward the mountains in 6:2 complements that of 4:1, where he sets his face toward Jerusalem. That chapter 6 was regarded as a continuation of the symbolic acts may also be reflected in Yahweh's direct address to Ezekiel in 6:2 ("and you; son of man"), a formula introducing each of Yahweh's commands to perform symbolic actions in 3:22-5:4 (3:25; 4:1, 9; 5:1).

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### Where Is Ezekiel's Audience?



For readers accustomed to interpreting all prophetic speech and activity as directly engaging an audience, the opening chapters of the book of Ezekiel pose special challenges. Ezekiel's accounts of symbolic acts contain no report that he actually performed them, chs. 6 and 7 are addressed to merely hypothetical audiences, and a real audience does not appear until 8:1. Although it is customary to posit that the symbolic acts were performed and that these oracles were delivered orally, the literary design of the book is lost when we do so.

Recent studies of the literary shaping of the book are leading to new insights about the book's engagement of its audience. Thomas Renz suggests that we consider the book's multiple levels of discourse in chs. 1-5. Two levels of discourse are evident: that between Yahweh and Ezekiel, and that between the author of the book and its readers. In chs. 6 and 7, three layers of discourse are evident: between

Yahweh and Ezekiel, Ezekiel and the subjects of the oracles (mountains and land, respectively), and, again, the author of the book and its readers.

In Renz's view, the rhetorical power of the book rests upon its ability to engage the readers in increasing levels of participation in the unfolding story of Ezekiel's ministry. Ezekiel's evidently private actions in 3:22-5:4 are presented in narrative form for further reflection and comprehension by the readers, who discern the correspondence between events from their past and the signs that Ezekiel performed. Then, in 6:8-10, the reference to survivors of the judgment allows Ezekiel's readers to locate themselves within the story of Yahweh's judgment of Jerusalem.

Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:139; Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 19-22.

The oracle has two parts, 6:1-10 and 11-14, each of which is introduced by instructions to the prophet to perform a physical gesture. The proof-saying, “And you will know that I am the LORD,” in vv. 7, 10, 13, and 14, indicates that the goal of the judgment is for Israel to acknowledge Yahweh’s claim over their lives.

## COMMENTARY

### Against the Mountains of Israel, 6:1-10

The oracle in vv. 1-10 begins with a number of formulaic expressions typical for Ezekiel. The word-event formula indicates the beginning of a new unit, although the extent to which chapter 6 should be treated in isolation from 3:22–5:17 is debatable. [Uses of the Word-Event Formula in Ezekiel] Next, the prophet is instructed to set his face toward the mountains of Israel and to prophesy against them. [“Set Your Face”]

#### Uses of the Word-Event Formula in Ezekiel



Operating on the assumption that prophetic books were edited collections of originally independent, smaller units, form critics developed a method that allowed them to isolate these smaller units from their larger literary contexts in order to reclaim the original, oral pronouncement of the prophet and to recreate, as far as it is possible, the original experience of the audience’s encounter with the prophetic message. A key element of the method requires the identification of introductory and concluding formulas. One such formula is the word-event formula, “the word of the Lord came to me,” which frequently appears at the beginning of new tradition units. Because this formula appears both in 6:1 and 7:1, the two chapters are usually treated as two separate tradition units.

But this formula is not an unambiguous indication of the beginning of a new unit. Of the forty-eight occurrences in Ezekiel, it introduces a new unit only slightly more than half of the time (7:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:2; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1; 20:2; 21:1; 22:1; 23:1; 24:1, 15; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 29:1; 32:1, 17; 33:1; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 38:1). That it functions as an introduction in these cases is confirmed by other indications of the beginning of a new unit, such as a transition from poetry to prose (e.g., 7:1), the description of a new

scene (e.g., 14:2), or the introduction of a new metaphor or allegory (e.g., 15:1; 16:1; 17:1). In the remaining instances, the formula introduces a variety of subunits, such as a new element in narrative (3:16; 11:14; 12:8; 24:20; 33:23); the divine answer to a previously quoted proverb (12:21, 26; 18:1); and new subunits within a series of oracles (21:6, 13, 23; 22:17, 23; 14:12). Finally, the formula is used to link discrete oracles on the same subject (24:15; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1, 11, 20; 29:1, 17; 30:1, 20; 31:1; 32:1, 17).

One useful example of the formula’s disintegration in function is Ezek 21 [Eng. 20:45–21:32]. As Walther Zimmerli noted in his discussion of this unit, the formula appears four times, in oracles that may have originally been independent, but that have now been brought together into a single extended composition on the theme of Yahweh’s sword. Although the word-event formula continues to hint at an original introductory function, it survives here in a vestigial form almost as a paragraph marker. At least in ch. 21, then, the formula alone is not sufficient to demarcate independent units.

Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:182.

Elevated prose style expands the address to include the mountains and hills, ravines and valleys—that is, the entire land of Israel. The expression “mountains of Israel” is found only in the book of Ezekiel, and it is not clear why Ezekiel has adopted this expression for his homeland. Some have suggested that the flat alluvial plains of Babylonia made the exiles nostalgic for the hillier regions of Judah. Others have suggested that the mountains are addressed because the oracle condemns the high places. High places (*bāmôt*) were platforms on which sacrifices were made, both to Yahweh and to other gods. They could be built anywhere, although they are frequently associated with hill-tops in biblical literature.

The idolatries of the house of Israel are the specific target of this oracle. The oracle closely follows the curses of Leviticus 26:30-31 in declaring that Yahweh sends a sword against the altars, incense stands, and worshipers.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Leviticus 26:30-31 uses a common term, *pēgārim*, to refer to the “corpses” of both the worshipers and the idols, while Ezekiel differentiates between worshipers, who are the “slain” (*hārūgīm*), and the idols, called *gillūlīm*. This latter term may politely be translated as “worthless things,” although it probably has a more scatological meaning. [Gillūlīm] [Thomas Merton on Idolatry and American Politics] Ezekiel’s departure from the wording of the curses in Leviticus 26 is significant in two respects. First, by referring to these votive statues as *gillūlīm*, Ezekiel categorically rejects their use in the cult. Second, by referring to the “slain” that are heaped up around the idols, Ezekiel goes one step further than Leviticus in his execution of the curse. Where Leviticus spoke of a sword “scattering” the people, Ezekiel declares that they, along with their idols, will be destroyed. Continuing to reflect the affinities with the curses of Leviticus 26:30-31, the oracle announces that the devastation will spread out to encompass dwelling places and cities. The account of the destruction concludes with a reference to the slain falling in the midst of the mountains. The recognition formula, “and you will know that I am the LORD,” brings this section of the oracle to a close.

In vv. 8-10, the few spared refugees will come to see Yahweh and themselves in a new light. First, the destruction will bring Yahweh back to mind: “Your fugitives will remember *me* in the nations to

### “Set Your Face”

**ΑΩ** The expression “set your face toward/against” occurs in Ezekiel nine times, always in hostile contexts and always with the command to prophesy against the object of the gaze (6:2-3; 13:17; 21:7 [2]; 21:2 [20:5]; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2). Zimmerli traced the expression to the Balaam narratives (Num 22:41; 23:13; 24:2), where it implies that a curse cannot be properly carried out unless there is direct eye-to-eye contact with its recipient. Whether such ancient prescriptions remained relevant for Ezekiel is doubtful, especially since Ezekiel does not achieve eye contact with the addressees of any of these oracles. It is more likely that the formula “set your face toward/against” is a literary device representing Yahweh’s confrontation with each of his enemies.

Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Heremeneia; Philadelphia Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:182.

**Gillûlîm**

**Ω** Ezekiel's term for idols, *gillûlîm*, categorically rejects the use of idols of any form in Israelite worship. The word occurs thirty-nine times in Ezekiel and only nine times elsewhere, in literature associated with Ezekiel or in the Deuteronomistic literature. Because of its prominence in Ezekiel, it has been suggested that Ezekiel coined the term. Another possibility is that the term was already in use in priestly circles and that Ezekiel appropriated it from that context. Even if that is the origin of the term, it is possible that Ezekiel developed its more pejorative connotations. The word is etymologically related either to the root *gll* l, to roll, or *gll* ll, "to be foul, be dirty," and *gêl*, "dung" (see 4:12, 15). If it relates to the former, then the term simply refers to the pillar-like shape of a standing-stone. The noun *gillûlîm* would then have been artificially formed from *gll* l in association with the noun *šiqqûšîm*, worthless things (cf. 7:20; 20:7, 8, 30; 37:23).

Ezekiel's use of the term likely exploits the root's possibilities for punning with terms derived from *gll* ll, "to be foul, be dirty." Commentators occasionally convey the scandal of this term of opprobrium by suggesting that it be translated as "shitgods." But even this translation gives the idols more than their due. In Ezekiel's view, these are not gods, or even, as Daniel Block has suggested in his commentary, "powerless figments of the human imagination" (1:226), but something considerably less dignified. Unlike Lev 26:30-31, where the idols and monuments are referred to by their proper names, the *gillûlîm* are already things of worthlessness and do not deserve to be recognized at all.

H. D. Preuss, "גילוליות *gillûlîm*," *TDOT*, 3:1-5; Daniel Bodi, "Les *gillûlîm* chez Ézéchiël et dans l'Ancien Testament, et les différentes pratiques cultuelles associées à ce terme," *Revue Biblique* 100 (1993): 410; John Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 7; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), ch. 2; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:226.

which they are carried captive." This is the only place in Ezekiel where it is said that the people remember Yahweh. Elsewhere, Yahweh remembers the covenant (Ezek 16:60), and Jerusalem remembers the days of her youth (16:22, 43; 23:19) or her wicked ways (16:61; cf. 20:43; 36:31). In juridical contexts, Yahweh remembers the people's righteousness or wickedness (3:20; 18:22, 24; 21:29; 33:13, 16; cf. 21:37; 25:10). Remembering may also connote honoring a covenant (23:27). Remembering may be employed here as the reversal of Israel's usual practice of "forgetting" Yahweh (cf. 22:12; 23:35). Memory involves more than cognition; it is deeply personal and relational<sup>3</sup> and requires that the people come to grips with the impact of their actions on the other, as the succeeding verse makes clear: "how I was broken by their adulterous heart which turned away from me and their wanton eyes which went after their idols."

Where the exiles could interpret their expulsion from the land as Yahweh's failure to live up to his obligations to them, Yahweh declares that they must accept the consequences of their own disloyalty. This includes not merely accepting their reduced status as refugees, but also contemplating the impact of their actions on Yahweh. Their crime is a crime against the relationship. Employing



### Thomas Merton on Idolatry and American Politics



In the following journal entry from 7 November 1964, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton does not make an explicit connection between the political campaign just concluded and his reading of Ezekiel 6; however, the juxtaposition of the two ideas implies a connection. His concern that one candidate's platform claims to identify with Christian principles is eerily prophetic:

The election campaign was hot and dirty. One of the disturbing things about it was the quasi-religious character of the zeal for Goldwater. I am surprised he did not get more votes. For many people apparently Goldwaterism was Christianity—or *is*. Because I don't think we have done with it!

Reading Ezekiel 6. This is about our idolatry as well as Israel's. Idolatry is the basic sin. Therefore that which is deepest in us, most closely related to our final sin, is most likely to deceive us under the appearance of true worship, or integrity, or honesty, or loyalty, or idealism. Even Christianity is idolatrous without realizing it. The sin of craving a God who is "other" than He who cannot be made an idol—i.e., an object.

Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, *Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 163.

the imagery of heart and eyes, v. 9 emphasizes the impact of Israel's ways on Yahweh. In biblical anthropology, the heart is the seat of human reason, will, and emotions, while the eyes are directed to the external world. Their hearts have turned away from Yahweh, and their eyes have sought out other lovers, the idols, with the result that Yahweh has been broken by the experience. If there is a connection between Yahweh's acts of judgment in 6:1-7 and the content of the refugees' memory, it may well be established by the verb "to break." [Divine Brokenness] Just as Israel has "broken" Yahweh by its illicit affections, so also has Yahweh "broken" the object of their affections, the idols (6:6). Herein lies the beginning of moral self-examination: Israel must accept responsibility for the impact of its actions on the Other.<sup>4</sup> The refugees must be able to take Yahweh's perspective on their behavior and to feel Yahweh's pain.<sup>5</sup>

Memory yields to loathing and disgust. This expression of remorse and shame occurs also in 20:43 and 36:31 and is unique to Ezekiel. [Shame in Ezekiel] The theme of shame and humiliation is developed elsewhere in the book (see ch. 16); this verse seems harsher in that it conveys not only the experience of shame but also an accompanying moral evaluation culminating in self-hatred.

The end result of this self-awareness is knowledge of Yahweh. The recognition formula, "They will know that I am the LORD," occurs some fifty-five times throughout the book of Ezekiel, always at the conclusion of an oracle. As such, the formula functions as a proof-saying, indicating that the goal of the judgment is for Israel to see that Yahweh has been disclosed in the event. This recognition, like the memory described above, is not simply a cognitive process but also involves an acceptance of Yahweh's claim on their lives.

### Divine Brokenness

**Ω** The verb “I was broken” (NRSV “I was crushed”) is a crux. Some, like Zimmerli, follow other manuscript traditions and emend it into an active verb, “I have broken their heart.” Neither translation is entirely clear. The MT/NRSV reading (“I was crushed”) is unusual, because in Ezekiel Yahweh more typically hides behind his rage rather than admit to injured feelings. But the emendation is even more implausible, since Ezekiel’s use of the verb elsewhere nearly always involves breaking an object, like the ship of Tyre, or Pharaoh’s arm (Ezek 4:16; 5:16; 14:13 [cf. Lev 26:19]; 27:26; 30:18, 21, 24; 34:27 [cf. Lev 26:13]; nifal: 6:4, 6; 26:2; 27:34; 29:7; 30:8; 30:22; 31:12; 32:28; 34:4; 16). Breaking human hearts is not included in Ezekiel’s vocabulary. Given the difficulties, it seems preferable to follow the MT.

Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols.; trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:180; and Jacqueline Lapsley, “Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel’s View of the Moral Self,” in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, SBLSS, 9, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 154 n. 38.

Many of the proof-sayings in Ezekiel are expanded, usually by the addition of a temporal clause summarizing or recapitulating the act that will lead to this knowledge of Yahweh (cf. 6:13). The expansion in v. 10 is unusual in its reference to the vindication of Yahweh’s word (NRSV “I did not threaten [Heb. “speak”] in vain to bring this disaster upon them”). A reference to Yahweh’s

### Shame in Ezekiel



Nearly all the occurrences of loathing or shame in Ezekiel appear alongside covenantal language (16:59-62; 20:33-44; 36:22-32). The exceptions—responses to military failure (32:24, 25, 30) or the shame of exile (34:29; 36:6)—may also be associated with the covenantal relationship. Ezekiel’s claim is that Yahweh remains faithful to the covenant even when Israel has violated it time and again. Yahweh’s command that Israel (or Jerusalem) be ashamed must be understood within the context of this covenantal dynamic.

Saul Olyan drew attention to the experience of honor and shame in the context of the covenant, and T. R. Hobbs further refined Olyan’s observations by noting that what undergirds covenantal relationships is a pattern found in nearly all patron-client relationships. In such relationships, both partners owe loyalty to one another, though the manner in which they display their allegiance and their expected benefits depends on their respective positions. Honor accrues to each partner to the extent to which they fulfill their obligations to one another. The patron acquires honor through his ability to provide for his clients, while the client gains honor and prestige by association with such a generous and powerful patron. Shame is experienced when one or the other partner fails to fulfill the expectations of the relationship. But shame differs from guilt, in

that it is not the disloyal partner who experiences the shame, but the partner who is betrayed.

Expulsion from the land was a shameful experience for the exiles (cf. 36:20), especially since it exposed them to the insult and reproach of the nations (36:7, 15). In the system of relationships defined above, the house of Israel would believe that their shame arose from Yahweh’s failure to protect them from attack. As Hobbs notes, “The ‘shame’ of Israel/Judah in exile, which is also widely acknowledged by the nations who mock the exiles . . . is a result of their Patron *par excellence*, Yahweh, not being able to sustain his clients” (503).

In each case where shame language is used, Ezekiel reverses the implied charge that Israel experiences this reproach because their patron deity has failed them. In each instance where Israel is commanded to feel shame, Yahweh asserts that he has indeed been loyal to the bonds of the covenant. The shame of the military defeat and exile is entirely due to Israel or Jerusalem’s violation of the covenant.

Saul M. Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 201-18; T. R. Hobbs, “Reflections on Honor, Shame, and Covenantal Relations,” *JBL* 116 (1997): 501-503; Margaret S. Odell, “An Exploratory Study of Shame and Dependence in the Bible and Selected Near Eastern Parallels,” in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective, Scripture in Context 4* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 11; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 217-33; idem, “The Inversion of Shame and Forgiveness in Ezekiel 16.59-63,” *JSOT* 56 (1992): 101-12.

speaking occurs in such an expansion elsewhere in Ezekiel only in 5:13. This double occurrence supports the suggestion made above that 6:1-14 interprets Ezekiel's symbolic acts, the first disclosure of Yahweh's word to Ezekiel. The vindication of this word will only occur among the refugees when they remember and reflect on their experiences.

As an oracle addressed to the mountains, chapter 6 implicitly engages the readers in reflection, memory and shame, and finally, the recognition of Yahweh. In doing so, the oracle establishes a pattern of rehabilitation for the exiles, which will be rooted in remembrance and recognition of the ways in which they had betrayed their covenant with Yahweh.

### **Against the Abominations, 6:11-14**

In its recapitulation of 6:1-10, these verses recall the opening address against the mountains in 6:3 as well as the grisly fate of the worshipers (6:13; cf. 6:4, 5, 7) and the desolation of the settlements (6:14). These verses also recapitulate terms and motifs that were introduced in 5:5-17. Sword, famine, and pestilence appear again as the weapons of divine judgment (6:11-12; cf. 5:12), and Yahweh once again declares that this is how he will expend his fury (6:12; cf. 5:13). The unit also reinforces the claim that the purpose of the judgment is to lead Israel to an acknowledgment of Yahweh.

## CONNECTIONS

Our first, albeit refracted, glimpse of Yahweh in Ezekiel was the stupendous display of light and sound in chapter 1. Now, in speaking of his dealings with Israel, Yahweh admits that his people have crushed him. The idea that Yahweh can be so deeply wounded by human actions is central to the notion of the covenant,<sup>6</sup> and the accompanying effects of honor and shame further indicate Yahweh's attachment to Israel. What is equally important is that this idea of divine suffering remains in tension with the assertion of God's universal sovereignty. The juxtaposition of sovereignty and suffering presents us with a paradox that is not easily sustained, but is central to biblical religion.

That tension has not always been sustained in the history of Christianity. As biblical conceptions of God came into contact with

Western philosophical traditions, the notion of divine sovereignty incorporated philosophical conceptions of immutability and impassibility (i.e., unaffected by passions). In this cultural crucible, the notion of divine sovereignty came to signify a distant, remote God unaffected by events in the created order. For a number of cultural and historical reasons, that notion of sovereignty went out of fashion after World War II, while conceptions of divine vulnerability and suffering have been in vogue.<sup>7</sup> Theologies of divine suffering bring God near: God is not merely present in the world but is affected by—and indeed changed by—participating in it. God is no longer far off, an unmoved Mover, having little to do with the world once it has been created, but one who fully participates in creation.

For biblical theologians, this emphasis on divine vulnerability would appear to be a welcome turn of events, particularly since the notion of divine impassibility never really supported the personal dimensions of the biblical God. But one wonders whether divine suffering without divine transcendence adequately captures the biblical witness—or, for that matter, whether it counts for much. Does it make sense, for example, to speak of divine vulnerability in the New Testament, without also grounding it in Jesus' proclamation of the reality and certainty of the kingdom of God?<sup>8</sup> The conviction that God is sovereign not only makes vulnerability possible, it makes it redeeming and redeemable. Otherwise, divine suffering is just a muddling along with the rest of us.

If contemporary theology has lost the tension inherent in the paradox of divine sovereignty and suffering, it may nevertheless be the case that Ezekiel has gone too far in his emphasis on God's power. Does Ezekiel's God hide his brokenness behind force in order to get what he wants from a hard-hearted people? Maybe; certainly much of the rhetoric suggests that God would if God could: "As I live, says the LORD God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you" (Ezek 20:33). But there are intriguing hints that Yahweh cannot get what he wants through force. He can set up the conditions for human beings to recognize their sins and repent, but in the last analysis, Ezekiel's God must reckon with human freedom. It has always been so (Ezek 20), and it remains so during the exile. In Ezekiel 6, Yahweh declares that these people will finally understand what they have done—but still, he must wait for them to see that. God has Ezekiel perform signs in the hope that the people will finally get it—but again, the recognition must come from within human hearts. And God can offer life, but the people must

choose to accept it. In Ezekiel's portrayal of divine sovereignty, then, one detects cracks in the façade—the possibility that here is a king ultimately vulnerable to the whims of human hearts and, therefore, potentially a king without a people, a king who can cease to exist if his people do not acknowledge him. [A God without a People] How Ezekiel resolves that problem will be the test of whether the paradox of divine sovereignty and suffering is sustained.

### A God without a People



"So you are My witnesses  
—declares the Lord—

And I am God." That is, if you are My witnesses, I am God, and if you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.

*Sifre Deuteronomy* 346. Cited by Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 139.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:218-19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:225-26.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Eising, "זָכָר zākhār," *TDOT*, 4:64-82.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacqueline Lapsley, "Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (SBLSS 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 150-52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-44.

<sup>6</sup> For the classic exposition of divine emotion in the Old Testament, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Theology of Pathos," in *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 2:1-25.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 103 (16 April 1986): 385-89.

<sup>8</sup> See the otherwise intriguing study of New Testament narratives of divine vulnerability by William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).



# THE END!

## Ezekiel 7:1-27

Although introductory formulas identify this unit as Yahweh's address to the land of Israel, the chapter as a whole doubles back to themes first introduced in the oracle against Jerusalem in 5:5-17 and establishes a link between the land and the city (cf. 7:23). The judgment of the city becomes the focus of the oracle especially in vv. 10-27, as the sword devours those on the outside, while famine and pestilence consume those inside (7:15). Because the chapter does not refer to a plurality of cities, Jerusalem is the most likely referent. In addition, a term that had been used in 5:7 to describe Jerusalem's unprecedented rebelliousness, *hamôn*, reoccurs in chapter 7 in the refrain, "for wrath is upon all its *hamôn*" (7:12, 14; cf. 7:13). The refrain conveys the idea that this turbulence has spread out from the city to the land. Finally, the unit alludes to the temple as the treasured place that has been profaned by the idols and that Yahweh will now hand over to the enemies for further desecration (7:21-22). Thus, even though the chapter depicts the comprehensive judgment of the entire land of Israel, the city and its crimes remain a central concern.

In addition to developing the theme of the previous chapters, Ezekiel 7 also establishes a formal connection with the symbolic acts of 3:22-5:4. In 7:23a, the command to perform a physical gesture, "Make a chain!" (cf. 6:1, 11), interrupts Yahweh's declaration of his intentions to destroy the city. The command may be addressed to Ezekiel; if so, it may be regarded as a symbolic act and read as the last of a series of actions recapitulating the stages of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem. The binding of Ezekiel in 3:22-27 represented the deportation of 597, which had removed the upper echelons of Jerusalemite society. The goal of that deportation had been political control rather than destruction. The chains in 7:23 signify Nebuchadnezzar's second and final siege, as well as the punishment of the rebellious Zedekiah (cf. Ezek 12:8-13; 2 Kgs 25:11).

Ezekiel's condemnation of the land reflects two concerns. First, and primarily, the land has become defiled by the crimes of its inhabitants. The idea may reflect the flood traditions, in which human wickedness results in a curse of the land (cf. Gen 8:21; 6:13). The consequence of such a judgment is profound, as Ezekiel 7 depicts the collapse of the entire social order. A second

concern may have to do with exilic debates about the status of the exiles compared with that of the remaining inhabitants of Judah. Those left in the land had evidently believed that the covenantal promise of land had passed to them. Ezekiel quotes their invocation of the Abrahamic traditions: “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given to us to possess” (Ezek 33:24). Ezekiel’s condemnation of the land forestalls any attempt to claim election through squatters’ rights. The land has come under judgment because of the pride and arrogance of those who have continued to dwell in it. If there had been any special claim of election attached to possession of the land, that claim is now denied (see Ezek 33:25-29).

## COMMENTARY

### **The End! 7:1-4**

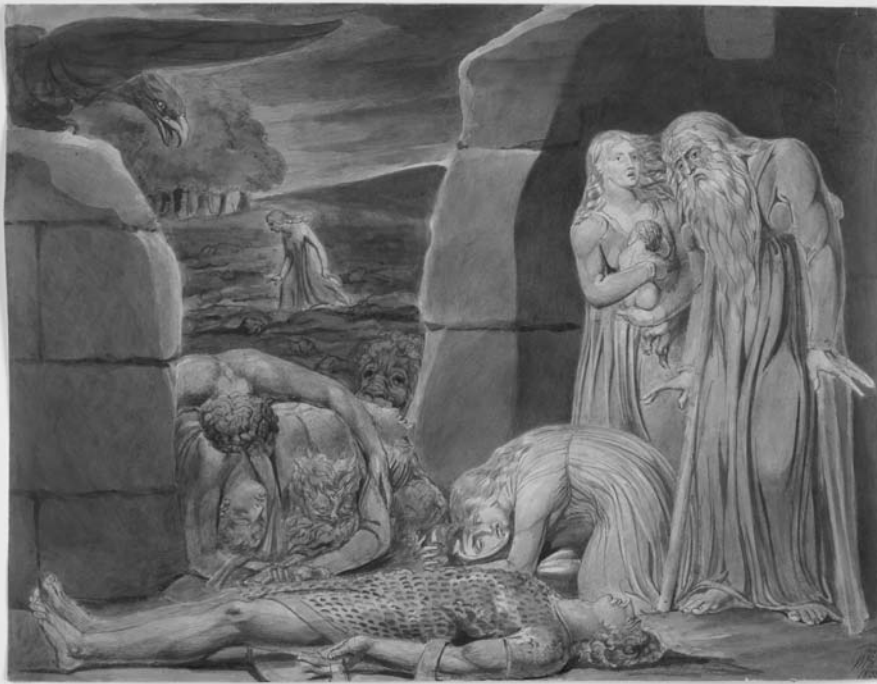
A formula for the reception of the divine word, an address to the prophet, and a messenger formula introduce this oracle addressed to the land of Israel. Curiously, there is no command to the prophet to speak. Chapter 7 thus continues in much the same vein as chapters 5 and 6, as disclosures of Yahweh’s word to the prophet, but not yet as instructions for him to speak it.

The oracle begins abruptly with the exclamation “An end!” The ensuing clause proclaims an end upon the “four corners of the land.” Although this expression has universal connotations in other contexts (see Isa 11:12; 24:14; Job 37:3), it refers here only to the totality of the land of Israel. Verses 3-4 describe the end in terms of the judgment that had been announced in 5:5-17: the land will be judged without pity and punished for its abominations. The concluding recognition formula, “And you will know that I am the LORD,” is addressed not to the land but to an unnamed third party, presumably Ezekiel’s readers. [\[Text and Interpretation\]](#)

### **A Disastrous End! 7:5-9**

Although introductory and concluding formulas set these verses apart as a separate unit, this section mirrors what has already been declared in 7:1-4. NRSV’s “disaster after disaster!” is more accurately translated, “Disaster! An exceptional disaster!”<sup>1</sup> In a series of pounding, repetitive clauses, the end is numbingly declared:





### War as a Means of Disastrous End

William Blake. *War*. 1805. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943. [Credit: Fogg Art Museum]

“Behold, it comes! / The end is coming / Comes the end / It awakens upon you / behold it comes!” Even the apparently innocuous declaration “It awakens upon you” announces the end, since the verb that NRSV translates as “awakens” is etymologically related to the noun *qēš*, or end. The sentence may be more accurately translated “The end dawns upon you.”

The theme of the end is further developed by reference to the Day of Yahweh, a classic prophetic motif that first appears in Amos and conveys the idea of a decisive encounter with Yahweh. [The Day of Yahweh] Although the motif comes to be used in eschatological and apocalyptic contexts to designate the end of all of human history, in Ezekiel 7 it refers more specifically to the collapse of social and political life in the land of Israel.

Ezekiel also associates the “end” with the time of harvest. This connection had already appeared in Amos, where a basket of summer fruit (*qāyis*) becomes the basis for Yahweh’s declaration that the end (*qēš*) is coming to Israel (Amos 8:2-3). Agrarian minds have no difficulty making this connection, since the time of harvest simultaneously invokes images of ripeness, suddenness, and decay—since that which is ripe can also soon spoil. The imagery in Ezekiel 7:5-9 plays on the association of the end with the harvest and is most clearly seen in 7b: “The time has come, the day is

near—of tumult, not of reveling on the mountains.” What should have been rejoicing at the harvest now becomes mayhem as the full significance of the end becomes clear.

The inversion of expectations spelled out in 7b is also reflected in the difficult word in 7a, which NRSV translates as “your doom.” It is generally acknowledged that this translation is little more than an educated guess based on what is required by the immediate context.<sup>2</sup> The word is rare, appearing elsewhere in 7:10 (in an equally difficult context) and Isaiah 28:5. In Isaiah 28:5, the word signifies a garland or crown, and it has been difficult to understand how the word can have this meaning in Ezekiel 7:7, 10. Commentators have sought a way out of the difficulty by suggesting that the root meaning of the word is “circlet.” The word can then be understood as an expression of the fulfillment of time, as in “your deeds have come full circle.”

The difficulty of the word in this context may be due to its use as a pun. While the people complacently assume that Yahweh’s day brings triumph and blessings, like that symbolized by a garland of glory, they will instead be “crowned” with a net or a lasso that will carry them off into exile, as M. Masson has suggested.<sup>3</sup>

Verses 8-9 repeat many of the formulaic expressions for mercilessness that also occur in chapters 5-6, and recapitulate Yahweh’s declaration that he will judge the land.

## The Effects of the End, 7:10-27

This section alternates between direct address and indirect description (cf. vv. 10-11). Although the profusion of imagery makes it

### Text and Interpretation



Many of the critical issues of Ezek 7—including such wide divergences between MT and LXX that it is possible that two separate versions were known in antiquity—are of a technical nature beyond the scope of this commentary. The major commentators weigh in on these issues, and the curious reader is encouraged to consult them. NRSV, which reflects MT, is the focus of the present discussion.

The chapter shifts back and forth from Yahweh’s direct address to a less personal, detached description of disaster. While such shifts may indicate that a text has undergone literary reshaping, other conclusions are possible. For example, Thomas Renz’s theory of the multiple levels of discourse explains these features well: the primary level of discourse involves Yahweh’s direct denunciation of the land. This is

sustained throughout the chapter, as the gender and number of the pronouns consistently convey direct address to a female subject (the land). Only once is an inhabitant of the land addressed directly (7:7); otherwise, the inhabitants are described in the third person. Other levels of discourse engage the prophet (7:23a) and Ezekiel’s exilic readers (7:4, 9).

Yet a further difficulty is that the chapter contains an unusual number of terms appearing only here in the book. Since these are combined with motifs introduced in chs. 5 and 6 (e.g., the trio of sword, famine, and pestilence, as well as the withholding of pity), one again suspects that an originally separate version was reshaped to fit its present literary context.

For a discussion of the larger rhetorical unit of chs. 5–7, see Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, (SBLSS 9; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 19–22.

difficult to discern a coherent pattern or progression of ideas, Greenberg has suggested that two cycles of imagery describe the deepening impact of the day of Yahweh on the social order (7:12-18, 19-27).<sup>4</sup> There is some merit to his suggestion, although there is no clear break between the first and second cycles, and, in fact, the actions in the second cycle appear to be connected integrally to those in the first. For example, shame in vv. 17-18 leads directly to the actions in vv. 19-21. The two cycles thus inscribe a deepening sense of despair on the day of the end.

### ***Behold, It Comes! 7:10-11***

This third announcement is linked to the preceding oracle in its use of both the catchword “it comes” and the ambiguous term *šēpīrâ*, which NRSV translates as “doom” but which is more likely a double entendre playing on the ambiguity of terms for “net” and “crown” (see above). The allusion to a crown in this context invites speculation concerning the possible royal connotations of other imagery in the verse. Verses 10b-11a employ imagery from the natural world to describe the fruition of Israel’s sin:

The rod (*matteḥ*) has blossomed,  
pride has budded,  
violence has grown into a staff (*matteḥ*) of wickedness.

It is unclear whether the rod is a reference to the sins of Israel or to the power of Babylon (cf. Isa 10:5).<sup>5</sup> Apart from the expression “staff of bread” (Ezek 4:16; 5:16; 14:13; cf. Lev 26:26), the word

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### **The Day of Yahweh**

**ΑΩ** The earliest biblical use of the term “Day of Yahweh” in Amos assumes that the prophet’s audience was already well acquainted with it (Amos 5:18-20). Some have argued that the Day of Yahweh was celebrated liturgically in an annual celebration of Yahweh’s enthronement at the new year, which would have occurred at the time of the harvest. Others have traced its origin to traditions about the wars of Yahweh. Whatever its origin, prophets understood that the Day of Yahweh would shatter all human expectations and any illusions of human control. Amos, for example, refutes its desirability; any encounter with Yahweh will instead be dreadful:

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!  
Why do you want the day of the LORD?  
It is darkness, not light;  
as if someone fled from a lion,  
and was met by a bear;  
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,  
and was bitten by a snake.  
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20)

*matteh*, “staff” or “rod,” occurs elsewhere in Ezekiel only in an allegory about the arrogance and rebellion of a scion of the Davidic dynasty. In that allegory, the strongest staff or branch of a vine becomes a ruler’s scepter and vaunts itself above the other branches only to be cut down and transplanted in a dry wilderness. All the other branches are destroyed by fire coming out of the strong branch (Ezek 19:11-14). The allegory thus attributes the demise of the Davidic dynasty to the arrogant pride of the scion—the one strong rod or staff.

The rod in 7:10-11 may also symbolize the arrogance of Judean political power. In stair-step parallelism, the lines convey the growth of arrogance into wickedness. Although 11b is nearly unintelligible, NRSV’s translation captures the doom that is in store: none of those who hold power will remain. Subsequent references to the despair of the king, prince, and people of the land (v. 27) support this reading. The description of disaster begins with the source of the rebellion and circles back to expose the dismay of the leaders at their downfall.

### ***First Cycle of Effects, 7:12-18***

The impact of the approaching day of doom is seen first in a frantic attempt to gain security through the sale of property. Because this unit as a whole is concerned with the land of Israel, the commercial activity described here quite likely revolves around the sale of ancestral land. Verses 12-13 assert that all such efforts are permanent and irrevocable. The command “Let not the buyer rejoice, nor the seller mourn” reflects conventional attitudes toward buying and selling in the ancient world. The Talmudic proverb “People say, if you’ve bought, you’ve gained, if you’ve sold, you’ve lost”<sup>6</sup> expresses the underlying reason for such emotions. Selling property is not an occasion for making a profit, as in our capitalistic culture, but a means of raising much-needed funds during times of economic hardship. Thus the seller mourns when he has to part with his property.

Buying and selling land during the siege of Jerusalem is attested in Jeremiah’s purchase of family land in the village of Anathoth (Jer 32); other more desperate sales are recorded in ancient Near Eastern documents.<sup>7</sup> The extremity of this situation renders the normal emotions associated with buying and selling irrelevant. The declaration “Sellers shall not return to what has been sold as long as they remain alive” may be a legal stipulation stating that the sellers cannot back out of their agreements.<sup>8</sup> What makes the bill of sale permanent is the corresponding irrevocability of Yahweh’s judg-

ment decree, “for the vision is upon all their multitude.” The term “multitude” may refer to the population of buyers and sellers, or it may refer to the wealth that is changing hands in the transaction. In any case, the vision of divine judgment encompasses all of it. As *Kimhi* commented, “Whoever sells an estate in the land of Israel has nothing to mourn over, for even if he will not sell it, it will not be his for long, since he will soon go into exile and have to abandon it. Nor has the buyer reason for rejoicing, for he will retain possession only briefly.”<sup>9</sup> The desperate attempt to seek security through buying and selling is stopped dead in its tracks when, in the next verses, paralysis prevents a proper defense. Verses 14-16 draw on imagery from chapters 5 and 6, as the now familiar sword, famine, and pestilence mow down both those outside the city and those inside.

The imagery in vv. 16-17 emphasizes the effect of the judgment. If fugitives escape, they are found in the mountains moaning in their iniquity like doves. The image evidently revolves around the similarity of the sounds in the words for “valley” and “moaning.”<sup>10</sup> Trembling in fear, the survivors lose control of their bladders, and urine runs down their knees. Greenberg has noted that the combination of these apparently unconnected motifs of flight and fear is attested in Assyrian annals: “Their hearts beat like that of a fledgling dove chased away, they passed hot urine” (*ARAB*, 2:128). The survivors adopt physical symbols of mourning and shame by donning sackcloth and shaving their heads (cf. Amos 8:10; Isa 22:12; Ezek 27:31). This, then, is the “crown” that has come out to them (cf. 7:10-11): all of their power has come to nothing.

### ***Second Cycle of Effects, 7:19-27***

The second cycle recapitulates the motifs of 7:12-18. While the first cycle focuses on the physical effects of the day, the second probes more deeply into the spiritual causes and effects of the disaster.

Although buying and selling had continued in the first cycle, albeit under severe conditions, in vv. 18-20 silver and gold lose all value. This imagery combines two separate prophetic motifs. In Zephaniah 1:18, silver and gold is thrown into the streets because it cannot deliver the people from the day of Yahweh. That notion is developed in Ezekiel 7:19a with reference to the ravages of famine: silver and gold will not fill their bellies or satisfy their hunger. The second motif probes the economic imagery for the more fundamental question about the nature of Israel’s trust. Gold and silver has become the “stumbling block” of their iniquity (7:19b). This

phrase is unique to Ezekiel and is nearly always used to describe Israel's erroneous trust in its idols (14:3, 4, 7; cf. 44:12).<sup>11</sup> Gold and silver has quite literally become a stumbling block because Israel has used it to make idols—or as Ezekiel puts it, images or representations of its abominations and worthless things (7:20). A nearly identical accusation appears in Ezekiel 16:17, where Jerusalem uses ornaments made from Yahweh's gold and silver to fashion male images with which she commits adultery. In 7:18-20, it is not clear whether the silver and gold comes from Yahweh; but without a doubt, it has been misused to fashion worthless representations of nonexistent gods.

This idolatry elicits a corresponding reaction from Yahweh. The people made idols that were abhorrent to him, so Yahweh makes the idols abhorrent to Israel by turning them into unclean things. The term for uncleanness employed here, *niddâ*, is associated almost exclusively with menstrual impurity, though it does have a more general meaning of impurity in a few contexts like Ezekiel 7:18, 20.<sup>12</sup> The root meaning of the term is “distancing,” in either a physical (i.e., “to flee from”) or a moral sense (“to find abhorrent, recoil from”).<sup>13</sup> Both senses are expressed in 7:18-20—the former when the Israelites' physically throw away their gold, the latter when Yahweh renders the idols as abhorrent to Israel as they are to him.

The imagery becomes more martial as Yahweh hands Israel's wealth over to the nations to be defiled. Yahweh also averts his face so that the nations will enter and profane even his sanctuary. The motif of hiding the face refers to the withdrawal of divine protection. Its use seems odd here, especially since the entire chapter has emphasized Yahweh's active presence in judgment. But it is worth noting that the expression is used only in connection with Yahweh's sanctuary, not with any other aspect of defending the land or population. Furthermore, this expression continues to develop the theme of distancing that had been introduced with the idea of *niddâ*, or impurity. Yahweh had been the source of Israel's silver and gold, which Israel had turned into idols. In the judgment, Yahweh not only turns the idols into impure things, he also allows his dwelling place to be profaned. The two actions mirror one another in their effects: just as the people will distance themselves from their idols, Yahweh will remove himself from his desecrated, desolated people. Stripped of their false confidence and their only hope, they have never been more alone.

In v. 23a, the tone shifts from impersonal declaration to personal command: “Make a chain!” This command can be understood as

an order for Ezekiel to perform a symbolic action. The word *rattôq*, “chain,” appears only here, although it is etymologically related to other equally rare terms for chains and chained bondage (1 Kgs 6:21; Isa 40:19; Nah 3:10). One may ask whether the chain is for anyone in particular. In Nahum 3:10, the nobles (“great ones”) had been bound in fetters to be taken into exile. Ezekiel 7 may similarly be targeting the city’s leaders. This is suggested by the reason for the chain: “for the land is full of bloody crimes; the city is full of violence.” The expression “bloody crimes” is better translated “judicial murder,”<sup>14</sup> a reference to legally sanctioned abuses of power that harm the weaker members of the community. Those responsible for such crimes are the political elite who use the legal system to their advantage (cf. 9:9; 11:1-3; 22:6, 12a, 27). The next verse condemns the agents of these crimes. Yahweh declares that he will bring an end to their arrogance (v. 24b). NRSV has followed a widely accepted emendation resulting in the translation “I will put an end to the arrogance of the strong.” A more sinister quality to the strength of these leaders may be implied.<sup>15</sup> In any case, both their proud confidence and the power structures they trust will come to an end: “I will put an end to the arrogance of the strong [ones] and their holy places shall be profaned” (7:24b). It is these strong ones for whom the chain is forged. Their houses are given to others, and they are expelled from the land. As the closing verses indicate, arrogance has indeed come to an end, as all the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem tremble.

In these final verses there is an interesting division of labor between those who advise and those who rule. The advisors include prophets, skilled in seeking visions and divine revelations; priests, skilled in interpreting the traditions; and elders, whose purview may be that of practical wisdom. Their silence is a direct result of Yahweh’s withdrawal. The rulers include the king, the prince, and the people of the land. These references may be to Jehoiachin, whom Ezekiel apparently regards as the legitimate king (cf. 1:1) and Zedekiah, who had been installed as Nebuchadnezzar’s *nāšî*, or prince (cf. Ezek 12:10, 21:30). The “people of the land” are land-owning citizens with military responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> Because the advisors fall silent, the rulers mourn.

## CONNECTIONS

This chapter's poetry is magnificent even in translation. Through its imagery of mounting fear and horror, the poem recreates for its readers the experience of Yahweh's day of judgment. It is a terrible beauty; and while modern readers are often unwilling to contemplate its aesthetic, it deserves further consideration for its potential contribution to an understanding of the moral life.

The basic message of Ezekiel 7 can be described as a doctrine of retribution, or the principle that punishment is imposed in accordance with a clearly established set of norms.<sup>17</sup> At issue for contemporary reflection is how the retribution is carried out. In the common Western understanding of Old Testament retribution, God stands outside and above the world and imposes judgment externally<sup>18</sup>—which implies that human behavior is regulated from the outside, not from within. This way of thinking about retribution survives in popular culture and is reflected in such statements as “God will get you for that!” The very humorous tone in which such a statement is made, often for trivial offenses, shows how meaningless this concept of retribution has become in the modern world. But if the concept is not meaningless, it runs the risk of infantilizing the moral life. As long as punishments are perceived to be separate from the actions themselves, people do not learn to see the consequences of their actions.

Working to refine this unexamined but widely accepted definition of retribution, Klaus Koch argued that a far more organic connection between sin and punishment is attested throughout the Old Testament. He claimed that ancient Israelites saw punishment as the built-in consequence of wrongdoing; in other words, sin is its own punishment and, conversely, virtue is its own reward. In both cases a seed that is planted will eventually bear fruit—either blessing or disaster. Although Yahweh did take an active role in the process, his divine intervention was better understood as a “*setting in motion and bringing to completion the Sin-Disaster-Connection on the one hand and the Good Action-Blessings-Connection on the other*” (italics Koch's).<sup>19</sup> Retribution, then, can be understood entirely in terms of this-worldly processes upheld and sustained by God's oversight and intervention.

Although Ezekiel 7 appears to refute Koch's argument, particularly in vv. 1-8 where Yahweh appears as the agent of judgment, other images in the chapter depict the judgment as an impersonal, organic process. The end “comes”; it “awakens”; pride “blossoms”; and so on. [External Punishment versus Internal Consequences] Thus, while Yahweh actively executes judgment, one can also read this judg-



### External Punishment Versus Internal Consequences

**ΑΩ** The sense that Judah's sins *are* her punishment has been obscured by NRSV's dynamic translation of certain difficult lines. For example, NRSV's "I will punish you for all your abominations" in 7:3b-4 implies that Yahweh imposes a penalty for those abominations. By contrast, the Hebrew conveys the idea that the abominations themselves will be the punishment: "I will set against you [Heb. *ntn* 'l] all your abominations." The idiom of this declaration may have its basis in the *lex talionis*, "you shall give [Heb. *Ntn*] life for life" (Exod 21:23), in which case the principle is that Yahweh will not shield the people from the consequences of their abominations.

Cf. E. Lipiński, נָתַן, *nātan*, TDOT, 10:96–97.

ment as Yahweh's refusal to avert the disaster that Judah's behavior has unleashed: "My eye will not spare you, I will not pity, for I have set your ways against you,<sup>20</sup> and your abominations shall fester within you."<sup>21</sup> If anything, Ezekiel 7 suggests that the divine punishment was understood as a combination of externally imposed judgment and internally triggered disasters.

Although Koch can be faulted for drawing too sharp a line between these conceptions of punishment, one effect of his argument is to highlight human beings' responsibility for their own destiny. Deeply concerned about the breakdown of moral norms in the modern world [*Moral Nihilism, Then and Now*], he pointed out that the prophets addressed a comparable, "practical nihilism."<sup>22</sup> The solution offered by the prophets was to posit an essential connection between present behavior and future consequences, a connection that was possible, Koch argued, "only by presupposing God."<sup>23</sup> In ancient Israel, God's work within the forces of history lent integrity to human actions by ensuring that they had logical, *moral* outcomes. In this way, God "allows every member of this people to achieve his or her appropriate destiny."<sup>24</sup> One suspects that Koch longed for a comparable willingness to intuit divine processes at work in the contemporary world.

This sense of the interconnectedness of human actions and their consequences is reflected in Ezekiel 7. Using metaphors that capture the irony of human pretensions to power and security, the oracle clearly suggests that these pretensions will be their downfall. The "crown," their very longing for power and supremacy, is the noose that strangles them (7:7, 10). Getting and spending turn into worthlessness and waste. Though Yahweh clearly intervenes, he does so as

### Moral Nihilism, Then and Now



For the average man or woman, the abstract assertion of human responsibility is no longer plausible, even by way of some kind of success in future life; so the moral norms threaten to become mere rule-of-the-road, if not actually manipulations. This can even be seen from the way our proverbs have changed. Our ancestors used to weave into what they said phrases like "Honesty is the best policy" or "Pride goes before a fall"; and these phrases were perhaps even given a metaphysical justification: "The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding small." What one hears on the street nowadays are only sayings like "Do what you like—just don't get caught", because "You have to look after number one". The only metaphysical echo is at most, "There's no gratitude in this world."

Klaus Koch, *The Assyrian Period*, vol. 1 of *The Prophets*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; first published in Germany in 1978), 3.

a facilitator of the disaster that the people have already brought upon themselves.

In Ezekiel 7, the moment of judgment consists of a dawning recognition that the people have brought this disaster on themselves. In this respect, the day of Yahweh can be compared to the moment of catharsis in a Greek tragedy, when the audience comes to recognize, with pity and fear, the complex *human* motivations that have contributed to the disaster. Until that moment, the audience perceives the actions of the characters on a superficial level. At the moment of catharsis, the disclosure of key information fundamentally changes the meaning of everything they thought they had understood. The feelings of pity and fear, invoked by such a dramatic moment, are the first step toward recognizing the complex interplay of human autonomy and destiny, in which actions freely undertaken eventually coalesce in destiny or fate. This recognition does not result in paralysis but in the full acceptance of human autonomy and its limitations.

For modern readers, Ezekiel 7 can function in a similar fashion. Through its use of ironic inversions, puns, and proverbs, it turns the world of human perception and action upside down. Far more terrifying than the outpouring of divine wrath is the recognition that our every attempt at security only heightens our vulnerability. Indeed, the spheres of action condemned in Ezekiel 7 are deeply relevant to modern world. After September 11, 2001, Americans are well acquainted with the use of force to secure our boundaries, and some of us are troubled that our show of power does not make the terror go away. Will we, like the people of Ezekiel's time, find that our assertion of power becomes our downfall? Ezekiel 7 calls us to ponder our own situation and to approach it from a radically different perspective. If we see well and truly, we may also find ourselves gripped in a catharsis of pity and fear. But such an experience of terror is not the end. It is only the beginning, a first step toward recognizing our limits and accepting responsibility for the decisions we make and the kinds of people we decide to be.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:250 n. 37; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:147-48. The crux is the interpretation of the connecting word. MT has *’ahat*, “one,” while NRSV has translated an emended text, *’ahar*, after.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:148.

<sup>3</sup> M. Masson, “*Ṣṣpîrâ* (Ezéchiel vii 10),” *VT* 37 (1987): 301-11. Masson notes that Ezekiel is acquainted with the use of nets and ropes for deportation (7:23; 12:11-13); the syntax of both vv. 7 and 10 allow this rendering; and the double entendre explains the divergent translations of the ancient versions.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:158.

<sup>5</sup> Attempts to connect this imagery to the rod of Aaron are strained (Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:149; Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:255).

<sup>6</sup> BT *Baba Mesî’a*, cited in Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:149.

<sup>7</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, “‘Siege-Documents’ from Nippur,” *Iraq* 17 (1955): 69-89.

<sup>8</sup> Meindert Dijkstra, “Legal Irrevocability in Ezekiel 7.13,” *JSOT* 43 (1989) 109-16.

<sup>9</sup> As cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:149.

<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:151-52.

<sup>11</sup> The one exception is 18:30, where “stumbling block” designates an unrepented transgression.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 744-45, 766-67, 948-52; idem and David Wright, “*נִדְדָא* *niddâ*,” *TDOT*, 9:232-34.

<sup>13</sup> Moshe Greenberg, “The Etymology of *נִדְדָא* (Menstrual Impurity),” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Z. Zevit et al. (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 69-77.

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:155; cf. Isa 13:11; 59:4.

<sup>16</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:209. Zimmerli follows E. Würthwein, *Der ’amm ha’arez im Alten Testament* (BWANT 4, 17; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936).

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?,” trans. Thomas H. Trapp, in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; first published in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 [1955]: 1-42), 57.

<sup>18</sup> Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, vol. 1: *The Assyrian Period*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; first published in Germany in 1978), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Koch, “Doctrine of Retribution,” 62.

<sup>20</sup> Contrast NRSV “I will punish you for your ways.”

<sup>21</sup> The translation of the last line is Greenberg’s, *Ezekiel*, 1:147.

<sup>22</sup> Koch, *The Prophets*, 1:5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



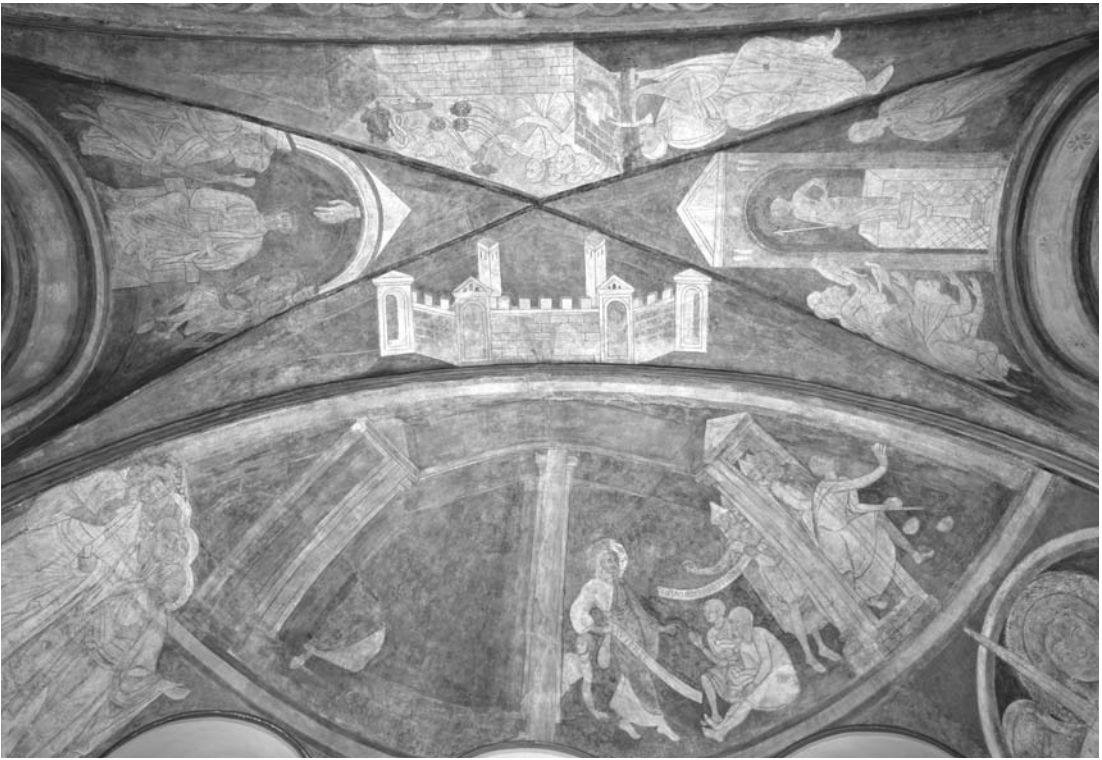
# THE VISION OF THE TEMPLE: ABOMINATIONS AND ETHICAL ABUSES

## Ezekiel 8:1–11:25

In chapters 8–11, Ezekiel engages in public activity for the first time. In the first of several visits, the elders come to inquire of Yahweh, thus indicating that at least some of the exiles regard Ezekiel as a prophet and accord him a degree of authority (cf. Ezek 14:1; 20:1). The subject of the inquiry is not stated, but one can infer that the vision is an answer to the elders' questions (8:18; cf. 11:14-21). While the elders are with him, Ezekiel is carried in visions of Yahweh to the temple in Jerusalem, where he becomes a witness to the city's abominations (ch. 8) and Yahweh's judgment (chs. 9–10). Although Yahweh makes provisions to save those who are aggrieved over the abominations of the city, the narrative leaves unstated whether anyone deserving of deliverance was found. In fact, the prophet's protest in 9:8 implies that no one escapes execution. Destruction spreads from the temple itself, as Yahweh instructs one of the heavenly executioners to take coals from the altar and scatter them on the city. The divine Glory leaves the temple, indicating that destruction is inevitable.

Chapter 11 is occasionally singled out for special treatment as intrusive material, partly because it differs in literary style but also because 11:14-21 is assumed to reflect concerns of the exiles after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. For commentators who wish to identify the original layers of the composition, such observations have their place in tracing the literary history of the book of Ezekiel. Like all of the extended literary units in the book, these four chapters are made up of formally distinct materials that have been brought together to form a coherent, if complex, rhetorical unit. Even so, the elegant, sustained narrative perspective is striking. Ezekiel is carried in visions of Yahweh to Jerusalem (8:1-4), where he witnesses a series of interconnected events, including those reported in chapter 11; and it is not until the end of chapter 11 that he is returned to the exiles and the vision leaves him.

The more important question is why the dispute in chapter 11, which revolves around ethical and legal concerns, became attached to



### Cleansing the Temple

The cycle of frescoes at Schwarzrheindorf connects Ezekiel's vision of the abominations with Jesus' cleansing of the temple, a typological connection that is rare in medieval painting and attested only in illuminated manuscripts. In the panel on the left, Ezekiel is presented seated among the elders. In a twist on the medieval convention of representing the divine presence as *dexter domini*, the right hand of God, this fresco represents divine presence as the left hand of God, thus indicating impending judgment and doom. The top panel shows Ezekiel digging through the wall (see "Digging Through the Wall"). (For a detail of the panel to the right, see "The Image of Jealousy.")

For additional information, see Ann Derbes, "Frescoes of Schwarzrheindorf, Arnold of Wied and the Second Crusade," in *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*, ed. Michael Gervers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 140–54. Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. [Photo Credit: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]

the vision of chapters 8–10, which is centered in the question of the proper worship of Yahweh. However, there is no need to make a sharp distinction between worship and ethics, especially since Ezekiel invokes the connection within the framework of the vision proper (8:17).

One element connecting chapter 11 to the vision of chapters 8–10 is its quotation of the Jerusalemites. In chapters 8–9, these quotations reveal the Jerusalemite conviction that Yahweh has abandoned them (8:12; 9:9); in chapter 11, they reflect the Jerusalemite opinions regarding the status of the exiles (11:3, 15). By juxtaposing these quotations, the vision introduces one of the central questions of the exile: who has a right to Yahweh's land? Whereas the Jerusalemites believe that their physical proximity

indicates a special closeness to Yahweh and therefore justifies of their possession of the land—even land owned by the exiles—the vision contends that their idolatry and injustice has actually distanced them from Yahweh, who will, as a result, expel them from the land. The literary framework of the vision thus brings the absence of Yahweh and the exiles together in a sophisticated analysis of theology, ethics, and communal solidarity.

## COMMENTARY

### Visions of Yahweh, 8:1-4

A date formula indicates that the vision occurred on the fifth day of the sixth month of the sixth year of the deportation, or 18 September 592. The setting for the vision has been described above: while Ezekiel is sitting in his house with the elders of Judah, he is carried in divine visions to Jerusalem. As in 3:14, Ezekiel feels the hand of Yahweh upon him and is carried away by a spirit; 8:2 elaborates by describing the form and appearance of the angelic agent. NRSV follows a widely accepted emendation and states that Ezekiel saw the form of a human being (Heb. *ʾîš*); however, MT describes the form more mysteriously as that of fire (Heb. *ʾēš*).

#### The Temple

**ΑΩ** When King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (2 Kgs 8:27). Although Solomon’s prayer represents a relatively advanced belief that divine presence cannot be confined to any particular location, the vocabulary for temples suggests that they were conceptualized as earthly dwelling places for the gods. The Hebrew term *hêkāl*, for example, is derived from an Akkadian term meaning “big house.” The familiar phrase “house of the Lord” also conveys the idea that the temple was Yahweh’s dwelling place. Set apart from secular space, temples signified the intersection between the heavenly and earthly realms. Gathering for worship occurred in the courts surrounding the temple, and the expression “to come before Yahweh” conveys the idea that it was a matter of drawing near to divine presence.

Little is known about the temple precincts of Ezekiel’s time. There are detailed descriptions of the temple and its furnish-

ings in 1 Kgs 6–7 (//2 Chr 2–4); however, these accounts say nothing about the temple’s geographical orientation or its courtyards and gates. The historical books record two renovations, that of Ahaz’s introduction of a Damascene altar, and Josiah’s extensive renovations during his reform; but it is impossible to know whether other renovations were undertaken during the temple’s long history. Because the site of the temple has remained in continuous use as a holy site and is now also revered by Muslims as the site where Mohammed ascended to heaven, archaeological investigations cannot be conducted to answer these questions.

The only biblical account of temple courts is in Ezek 40–48. As a visionary account, it is only partially helpful in reconstructing the dimensions and layout of the actual temple. Nevertheless, one may assume that Ezekiel’s imagination was partially dependent on actual experience. For example, he notes that the temple faced east (47:2); this orientation is consistent with his description of the twenty-five men who bow down to the sun with their backs to the temple.

Although the figure resembles the likeness of the divine Glory in 1:26–28, it is identified as “the spirit” (8:3) and not the Glory, which Ezekiel encounters only on his arrival in Jerusalem (8:4). The spirit carries Ezekiel to the southern entrance that opens north to the inner court of the temple. [The Temple] In this and each subsequent scene, Yahweh directs Ezekiel to look at a particular ritual. As Ezekiel describes each act, Yahweh condemns it and warns Ezekiel that he will see yet more horrible abominations.

A common interpretation of this chapter is that the various abominations are examples of the idolatries of the house of Judah. [How Reliable Is Ezekiel’s Vision for Reconstructing Sixth-Century Judean Ritual?] But in each of the four scenes, it is possible to detect traces of genuine Yahwistic devotion. Moreover, the announcement of judgment in 8:17–18 does not condemn Judah’s idols so much as its prayers: “though they cry with a loud voice in my ears, I will not listen to them” (8:18b). This commentary will therefore suggest that the abominations represent separate stages of a coherent ritual of complaint. The purpose of the ritual is to implore the return of Yahweh, whose absence has brought on national distress. Yahweh’s absence demands the highest expression of devotion and piety, and that devotion begins with the image of jealousy.

### The Image of Jealousy, 8:5–6

In 8:3, Ezekiel is set down in a doorway that opens north. [Entrances to the Temple in Ezekiel 8 and 40–48]. Ezekiel identifies the doorway as the

#### How Reliable is Ezekiel’s Vision for Reconstructing Sixth-Century Ritual?

**ΑΩ** Does Ezek 8 describe a single ritual or a miscellaneous collection of idolatrous practices, which may or may not have been practiced in Ezekiel’s time? Because past efforts to describe a coherent ritual have not generated critical acceptance, it has become customary to regard these scenes as a collage of Israel’s idolatries. The question arises as a result of the fragmentary and contentious nature of the evidence. Nothing is known of Jerusalem cult practices outside of biblical accounts, which are often highly polemical. Ezekiel’s description of cult installations as *gillûlîm*, “dungballs,” defies historical reconstruction, and the situation is not much better for other biblical accounts of ritual practice.

Although this consensus has the advantage of scholarly caution, it has had the unintended consequence not only of divorcing the individual scenes in Ezek 8 from one another, but also of isolating the entire chapter from its literary

context, with the result that no interpretation of any particular episode adequately reflects any of Ezekiel’s larger themes. The interpretation offered here seeks a solution to this question by keeping the episodes in Ezek 8 together and by teasing out overlooked evidence from other sections of the book of Ezekiel.

For a discussion of the historical reliability of the vision, and bibliography, see Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (VTSup 56; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 65–68. For attempts to reconstruct the ritual or rituals in Ezek 8, see Thomas H. Gaster, “Ezekiel and the Mysteries,” *JBL* 60 (1941): 389–420; Herbert G. May, “The Departure of the Glory of Yahweh,” *JBL* 56 (1937): 309–21; Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 40–41; Leslie A. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1994), 138–41; Joseph A. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (IBC; Louisville KY: John Knox, 1990), 53–54; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:283–300; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:201–02; and Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols.; trans. R. E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:237–38.



### Entrances to the Temple in Ezekiel 8 and 40–48

**ΑΩ** Because there is no evidence for courtyards surrounding the Jerusalem temple before the exile, the locations described in ch. 8 remain a *crux*. Without relying too heavily on the visionary temple in ch. 40, one may nevertheless draw on correspondences between the two visions to explain Ezekiel's movements. For the present discussion, it is not necessary to ask whether the temple in ch. 8 had an outer court, as in Ezek 40–42, since the correspondences between chs. 8 and 40–42 with respect to the inner court, its gates and their geographical coordinates, and their size are all that is needed to reconstruct Ezekiel's vision in ch. 8.

In Ezek 40–42, each gate is a large room measuring 25 by 50 cubits (approximately 40 by 80 feet), with steps leading up from the outer court and opening on the other end into the inner court. The focal point for all three gates is the altar. The east gate remains closed, while the north and south gates become the main passageways into the inner courtyard of the temple. Ezekiel's vision in ch. 8 touches all three geographical points. The northern (8:14) and eastern (8:16) points are self-evident, but the southern point of entry deserves further comment. At the beginning of the vision, Ezekiel stands at the opening of the gate

facing north (8:3). Because this first gate is different from the one where Ezekiel sees the women (8:14), one suspects that it is the south gate at its northern entrance into the courtyard ("the entrance, the inner gate that faces north"). When Ezekiel looks north from this position, he sees the altar gate, the seat of the image of jealousy. The placement of the gate in relation to the altar is thus consistent with Ezekiel's description of the gates to the inner courtyard in ch. 40.

Yahweh then takes Ezekiel to the court entrance. Whether this is the inner or outer court is not clear; one possibility is that Ezekiel moves to the other entrance of the same gate, the one opening into the outer court (or, in the case of Solomon's temple, into the royal precincts, perhaps). After he digs a hole, he sees the passageway from the outer court into the inner court, the dimensions of which would allow for an assembly of seventy men (8:11). The walls of such a room would be decorated: in chs. 40–42, these walls are adorned with palm trees and cherubim, while in ch. 8 they are filled with carved images of "creeping things," possibly composite figures like those typically found at entranceways in Assyrian and Babylonian architecture. Again, what Ezekiel describes is consistent with the function of a passageway into the inner court.

location of the *môšāb*, or "seat" of the image of jealousy (8:3), and observes that the divine Glory was also there (8:4). When Yahweh tells him to look toward the north, he sees the image of jealousy at the altar gate. The conventional interpretation of the image of jealousy is that it is an idol of another god, which, in keeping with the prohibitions against worshiping other gods and making idols, has provoked Yahweh's jealousy (cf. Exod 20:5). [*Was the Image of Jealousy an Image of Asherah?*] Because Ezekiel's description of the image assumes his readers are familiar with its nature and purpose, it lacks the detail a historian would need to confirm this or another interpretation. Even so, one may suggest on the basis of the Phoenician and Punic evidence that the image of jealousy was not an idol but a votive statue; [*If the Image of Jealousy Was Not an Idol, What Was It?*] even its designation (Heb. *semel haqqin'â hammaqneh*) suggests that it was a monument symbolizing human devotion. Thus, although NRSV translates the phrase to imply jealousy, it is more appropriate to think of it as an image representing human zeal or devotion to Yahweh. [*The Image of Zeal that Ensures Blessings*]

The "seat" of the image of zeal is in the doorway, but Ezekiel sees it near the altar gate as he looks to the north from the doorway

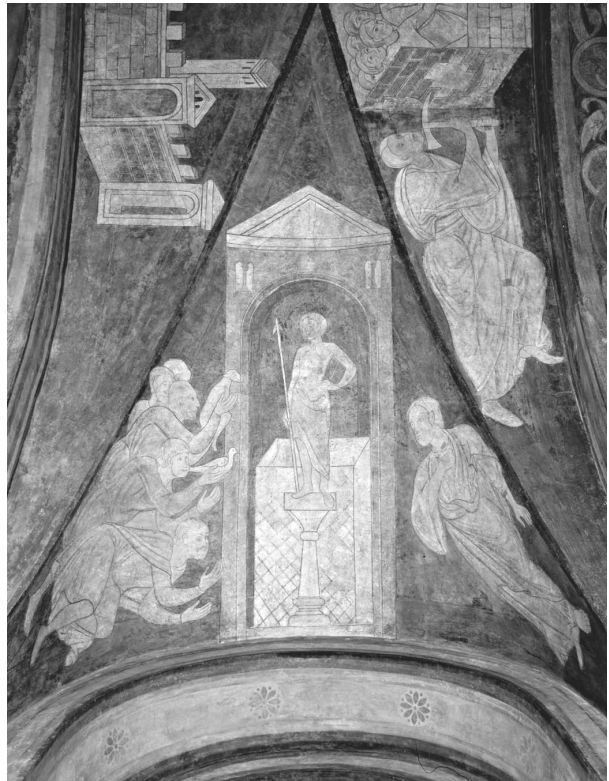
### Was the Image of Jealousy an Image of Asherah?

Ω The prevailing scholarly consensus is that the image of jealousy is a statue of another god, possibly the Canaanite goddess Asherah. Walther Eichrodt put forward this position in his commentary, and scholars concerned with retrieving feminine aspects of popular religion have revived that position. However, there are good reasons to question this emerging line of interpretation.

First, the textual evidence yields at best an uncertain connection between the image of jealousy and Asherah. Ezekiel's term for image, *semel*, is used only three times elsewhere in the Old Testament, in contexts suggesting that the noun was not necessarily associated with the goddess (Deut 4:16; 2 Chr 33:7, 15). In Deut 4:16, for example, the term is employed in the prohibition of images of Yahweh. 2 Chr 33:7 appears to substitute the word *semel* for a parallel reference to Asherah in 2 Kgs 21:7, but v. 15 makes a distinction between the *semel* and the other foreign gods.

Second, evidence within Ezekiel makes the identification of the *semel* in 8:3-5 with Asherah even more unlikely. Nowhere does Ezekiel condemn the worship of Asherah. Admittedly, his polemic against the *gillûlîm* and *šiqqûšîm* includes no references to specific gods and goddesses. Even so, the gist of Ezekiel's polemic leads one to suspect rival male deities and powers, as Yahweh's "wife" Jerusalem prostitutes herself to her implicitly male "lovers." Even when women are depicted at worship, as in 8:15 where they are "weeping the Tammuz," they do not venerate a goddess.

Finally, Ezek 8:3-4 itself implies that it is not an idol. Unlike the other sections of the chapter where people are engaged in specific rites, no one venerates the image of jealousy. In addition, this is the only instance in which Ezekiel refrains from using his preferred terms *gillûlîm* and *šiqqûšîm*, "dungballs" and "worthless things," to refer to cult images. Whatever it is, the image of jealousy is not a representation of Asherah or, for that matter, any other god.



### The Image of Jealousy

This detail from the western arch of the vault in the church at Schwarzrheindorf depicts the image of jealousy. The artist portrays idolators making offerings of sacrificial animals to the image; Ezekiel, by contrast, depicts them with censors and offering prayers.

Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. [Photo Credit: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]

For the interpretation of the image of jealousy as an idol of Asherah, see Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, trans. Coslett Quin, (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 122; Christoph Dohmen, "Heisst lms 'Bild, Statue'?" ZAW 96 (1984), 265; Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellenden Kunst im Alten Testament* (OBO 74; Fribourg & Göttingen, 1988), 41; Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 46 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 40–41 n. 14; Meindert Dijkstra, "Goddesses, Gods, Men and Women in Ezekiel 8," in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes*, ed. Bob Becking and M. Dijkstra (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 91–92; H. C. Lutzky, "On the 'Image of Jealousy' (Ezekiel viii 3, 5)," VT 46 (1996): 124. For a critique of this interpretation, see Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 61. For the unique vocabulary in Ezekiel's condemnation of idolatry, see John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California at San Diego 7 (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 28–42.

(8:5). It is not the image itself but its location that provokes Yahweh's question: "do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that they are committing here, so as to drive themselves far from my sanctuary?" NRSV translates this sentence to imply that the abominations drive Yahweh from the sanctuary, but Hebrew usage elsewhere suggests that the abominations have an impact on the people, not Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> The force of Yahweh's question depends on irony. The image of zeal has "drawn near" to the altar, but Yahweh claims that this act will actually drive the house of Israel far from the sanctuary.

If the statue is only a votive statue and not an idol, what is abominable about it? Because Ezekiel assumes that his readers know what it is, the question is not easy to answer. If, however, the rest of the chapter revolves around a complaint ritual that implores Yahweh to return to his people, then one may suggest that the image of zeal embodies the highest possible expression of human zeal, the sacrifice of a child. Elsewhere in Ezekiel, child sacrifice is closely associated with the abominations of Israel. Yahweh apparently commanded the practice of child sacrifice in response to Israel's rebellion in the wilderness (Ezek 20:25-26), and it is cited twice as an emblem of Jerusalem's wanton behavior (16:20-21; 23:37-39). When child sacrifice plays such an important role elsewhere in Ezekiel's condemnation of the house of Israel, it would be strange if it were absent from this vision of the abominations in the temple. But since no one has yet attempted to explain the image of jealousy in connection with child sacrifice, the burden is on this commentator to present the evidence. Detailed arguments are presented in the sidebars, while the conclusions are presented below.

#### If the Image of Jealousy Was Not an Idol, What Was It?

**ΑΩ** If *semel* does not refer to an image of a divine being, one other possibility exists. Outside of the Bible, cognates of the word *semel* appear only in Phoenician and Punic inscriptions, where it refers to anthropomorphic statues not only of deities (KAI 12, 3; 26 C IV 13ff; 33) but also of human beings (e.g., "this is my own image," KAI 43, 2; cf. 40, 3). Although the biblical contexts in which the term appears have led to the assumption that it was appropriated solely as a reference to statues of divine beings, it is equally possible that the *semel* in Ezek 8:3-5 was a representation of a human being.

Efforts by biblical scholars to establish whether the term *semel* referred to idols have obscured one other important question: what was the function of these statues? Idols are

statues constructed according to culturally prescribed rules and consecrated as representations of the deity on earth. The idol disclosed the transcendent reality of the god and allowed the worshiper to "meet" with the deity. As votive statues, *semels* had an entirely different function. Where the idol represented the deity to the worshiper, the votive statue represented the petitioner to the deity, signifying one's faithfulness to the god and thanksgiving for blessings received (KAI 33, 40, 41, 43).

J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (HdO; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 792; cf. John W. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians, 732–698 BC* (SBT, Second Series; London: SCM, 1973), 22–23, 92–93; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:168. For the definition of idol adopted here, see Richard J. Clifford, "Idol," in *HBD*, rev. ed., ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 448–50.

### The Image of Zeal that Ensures Blessings

**AΩ** That the statue in Ezek 8:3 functioned as a type of votive statue is indicated by its designation as *semel haqqin'ā hammaqneh* (NRSV “image of jealousy that provokes to jealousy”). *Qin'ā*, or zeal, appears more frequently as a characteristic trait of Yahweh, but it is also attributed to human beings. In the Baal-Peor incident, Phinehas averts Yahweh's zeal, which has broken out in the form of a plague, by running his spear through an Israelite and his Moabite lover. The reward for Phinehas's zeal is Yahweh's covenant of peace and the promise of perpetual priesthood (Num 25:10-13). Elijah proclaims that he has been very zealous for Yahweh even as his enemies seek to slay him (1 Kgs 19:4). In the face of this opposition, Yahweh appoints Elijah to set events in motion that will result in further bloodshed as Israel is cleansed of its idolatry (1 Kgs 19:15-17). In his zeal for Yahweh, Jehu slaughters all the sons of Ahab—and, not incidentally, claims the throne (1 Kgs 9:10). In all of these accounts, the human display of zeal is not an ordinary, everyday act of

piety, but an expression of extreme devotion to Yahweh in times of Israelite apostasy.

The second term in 8:3, *hammaqneh*, expresses the intended outcome of the human display of zeal. The term is widely translated “provokes to jealousy,” as in NRSV. However, this translation rests on the tenuous assumption that the verbal form (*qnh*) is a variant spelling of the root *qn'*, “to be jealous.” Such an argument is not compelling when both roots appear together, as in MT Ezek 8:3. Moreover, since no other such spelling of *qn'* is attested, the term should be translated as a Hiphil participle of *qnh*, “create.” As such, it reflects ancient traditions associating creative activity with Yahweh, whose central act of salvation is to “beget” or acquire the people of Israel (Exod 15:16; Deut 32:6; Pss 78:54; 139:13; cf. Gen 4:1; 14:19, 22). The Hiphil form suggests that the *semel* itself did not embody this creative function; rather, through its symbolic expression of human zeal, it appealed to the deity to continue to function according to these ancient attributes.

Because Ezekiel sees a “likeness” of zeal, and not the thing itself, it may be that the image of zeal indicates the failure to perform the required child sacrifices. [The Case of the Missing King's Missing Corpse] In this connection, it is worth noting that all of Ezekiel's references to the practice of child sacrifice involve the construction of images. Jerusalem crafts “male images” (*šalmê zākār*, 16:17) to which she makes offerings. Rather than observing the “not-good” laws, which demanded child sacrifice (20:25-26), Israel defiles itself with its *gillûlîm* and its offerings (20:31); in other words, in the very act of making its offerings, Israel defiles itself by constructing monuments. All of these references to images may suggest that Israel used monuments as substitutes for the actual sacrifices Yahweh required. Because these monuments constitute an evasion of Yahweh's demand for real devotion, they are, quite literally, *šiqqušîm*, worthless things. [Semels as Substitute Offerings]

### The Lord Does Not See Us, 8:7-13

Yahweh directs Ezekiel to a more appalling scene. The directions in this scene are obscure, as Ezekiel digs through a hole in the wall but then discovers an opening. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine where this room might have been in the temple precincts. The room is large enough to hold the seventy elders of Israel, it has carved reliefs on the walls, and it is completely dark during the

ritual. Unlike the image of jealousy in 8:5, which stands alone near the altar, these images are a vast proliferation of every conceivable kind of creature. They may be representations of composite animal figures, like those positioned at thresholds in seventh- and sixth-century Assyrian and Babylonian architecture to protect the building from evil forces.<sup>2</sup> The presence of these carved figures in a room connected to the temple may reflect a Jerusalemite familiarity with—and appropriation of—these iconographic trends.

Ezekiel calls them the idols of the house of Israel, but the elders may have regarded them as intermediaries between the people and Yahweh, since they do not invoke them by name but speak to them about Yahweh: “The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.” Yahweh is still the subject of the entreaty. The number of elders is reminiscent of the seventy elders who represented Israel along with Moses, Aaron, and Abihu in the ratification of the

### The Case of the Missing King’s Missing Corpse



Although Ezek 43:7-9 is not usually discussed in connection with Ezek 8, a number of clues

suggest that it can be read as its counterpart. The opening verses of ch. 43 explicitly link it to ch. 8, and both 43:7-10 and 8:5-6 revolve around themes of drawing near and distancing. What the people had done in 8:3-5 to draw near to Yahweh compelled his departure, while in 43:7-10, Yahweh’s return requires the reversal of those earlier conditions. Furthermore, the offense in both visions consists of the presence of cult statues. In ch. 8, the statue in question is the image of zeal; in 43:7-9, the offensive objects are *pigrê malkêhem*, which NRSV translates as “corpses of their kings.” Since *peger* appears to refer to corpses elsewhere in the Old Testament, Ezek 43:7-10 seems to depict royal tombs that have defiled the temple. Since no archaeological or other evidence supports this interpretation, other explanations have been sought.

On the basis of Ugaritic parallels, David Neiman suggested that *peger* refers to funerary monuments. One difficulty with Neiman’s suggestion is that the Ugaritic inscriptions on which the argument is based do not refer to monuments of human beings or, for that matter, to funerary monuments, but rather to monuments commemorating offerings. In line with this usage of *pgr*, one suspects that the expression *peger melek* in Ezekiel 43:7, 9 refers not to a monument of a king but to a type of offering commemorated by the monument. If that is the case, then the word usually translated as “king” (Heb. *mlk*) points us in the direction of a handful of difficult biblical texts that refer to “offerings,” *lmlk*. Though the precise interpretation of these texts remains a matter of debate, scholars generally agree

that the Phoenician term refers to a type of sacrifice (*molk* or *mulk*) that included child sacrifice as well as substitutive offerings of lambs in place of children.

With respect to monuments commemorating *mlk* offerings, Phoenician dedicatory inscriptions reflect two distinct patterns. In one, the inscription refers to the offering but not to the monument (KA/ 107); in a handful of other instances, the inscription refers to the monument in such a way as to suggest that it served as a substitute for the required sacrifice (KA/ 61, A, B).

Because the phrase *pgr mlk* is semantically equivalent to the self-designation found on the latter type of dedicatory inscription, one may suggest that the monuments in Ezek 43:7, 9 served a similar function—that is, as substitutions for the required sacrifice. In that connection, it is worth noting that Yahweh condemns not the sacrifices but the monuments. Yahweh has asked for hearts, and the people have given him stones (cf. Matt 7:9).

David Neiman, “PGR: A Canaanite Cult-Object in the Old Testament,” JBL (1948): 55–60; Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1955), 69, 2, 3; Joseph Aisleitner, *Wörterbuch der ugaritischen Sprach* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963), 2189; Otto Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen und Hebräischen und das Ende des Gottes Moloch*, Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums 3 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1935); George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTS 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).



**[Semels as Substitute Offerings]**

The strongest evidence of the practice of child sacrifice has been found in cemeteries of the Phoenician colonies in Carthage, North Africa, and Spain, where it is possible to trace the increasing popularity of child sacrifice by comparing the quantities of human bones (primarily of children under the age of two) against that of animal bones. The accompanying stele indicates that these are the remains of sacrifices and not infant burials.

Unlike these stelai, *semels* have been found in or near temples, without sacrificial remains. In an excavation of the temple of the Phoenician god Eshmoun in Sidon, eleven such statues have been found. These skillfully carved statues portray infants aged eighteen months to two years, though the faces bear a dignity and repose more typical of adult, even royal figures. At one time, the statues had been displayed just north of the temple on plinths, some of which bore carefully engraved dedicatory inscriptions. One such inscription (c. 400 BCE) refers to the statue as a *semel*

of an heir to the Sidonian throne: “This is the statue (*semel*) which Ballshillem son of King Ba’na, king of the Sidonians, son of King Abdaumun, king of the Sidonians, gave to his lord Eshmun at the *Ydl*-Spring. May he bless him!”

Commenting on this inscription, J. C. L. Gibson conjectured that the occasion for erecting this statue was the prince’s recovery from an illness. If Gibson is correct, then implicit in this *semel* offering is the conviction that the prince belonged to the god, who could have claimed him in death through illness. Since the son was spared, the king gave the god a *semel*, a simulation, of the child instead.

M. Dunand, “Nouvelles Inscriptions Phéniciennes du Temple d’Echmoun à Bostan Ech-Cheikh, près Sidon,” *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 18 (1965): 105–09; John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 3, Phoenician Inscriptions, including inscriptions in the mixed dialect of Arslan Tash (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 114–15.

covenant at Mount Sinai (Exod 24:1). The elders now make claims against that covenant, asserting that Yahweh has forsaken his land. Such claims are entirely possible within the framework of Yahwistic petition and complaint. In fact, the bond between people and Yahweh is sustained and even strengthened when petitioners challenge Yahweh with such questions as “Why have you abandoned me?” (Ps 22:1) and appeals to “look on my sufferings” (Ps 9:13) or “Do not abandon me; do not be far from me” (Pss 38:21; 71:12). In vv. 7-13, however, the elders do not address their concerns directly to Yahweh, but instead complain about him to these intermediaries. This particular act literally “puts distance between” themselves and Yahweh, this time by bringing in idols as intermediaries (cf. 8:6).

**The Tammuz, 8:14-15**

For this third, very brief scene, Yahweh carries Ezekiel to the northern gate of the court and tells him to observe the women “weeping for Tammuz” (NRSV). NRSV and many commentators construe the women’s act as a veneration of the dying and rising vegetation deity Tammuz. Disagreeing with this interpretation, Daniel Block pointed out that the definite article attached to the deity’s name suggests that the women sing a song *called* “The Tammuz.” This song would have syncretistically incorporated

distant associations with the myth of the dying and rising god into the Jerusalem cult.<sup>3</sup>

If the women do not weep for a dying god, it may be that they weep for a dying child, and the reference to the Tammuz may indicate the status of the child being mourned. Levenson argued that child sacrifice was not widely practiced in Judah, but was restricted to the sacrifice of the “beloved son,” a term he associated with the royal heir.

[The Logic of Child Sacrifice] The unusual reference to a song called “The Tammuz” may further corroborate Levenson’s suggestion, especially if such a song was associated with Jerusalemite royal theology. If the women were mourning the death of an heir to the throne, then they may indeed have believed that they were mourning the death of a Tammuz, a “son of God” (cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7).

### Awaiting the Divine Return, 8:16-18

Yahweh brings Ezekiel back to where he began—the inner court of the temple. Unlike the first scene, in which the court was devoid of all but the image of zeal, there are now twenty-five men between the vestibule and the altar. The scene is reminiscent of the national lament described in the book of Joel (Joel 2:17). Far from a rejection of Yahweh, this prostration toward the east reflects the associations between Yahweh and the sun that appeared with increasing frequency during the monarchy.<sup>4</sup> The act of awaiting the appearance of the sun is the climax of the ritual, which had begun with the elders’ entreaties in their darkened room and which will end in the morning, when Yahweh’s appearing is as “sure as the dawn” (Hos 6:3; cf. Pss 44:3b; 80:1b, 3, 7, 19; 89:15; 90:14; 130:5-6).

From beginning to end, the ritual expresses confidence in Yahweh’s faithfulness to Israel—and misplaced confidence in Israel’s faithfulness to Yahweh, as it enacts its devotion by way of the image of zeal. Yahweh’s reaction draws attention to the social and political consequences of the cultic abominations. It is not enough that they have defiled the sanctuary;



#### Votive Stele Commemorating a Sacrifice

Priest carrying a child. Engraving on a votive stele. Dark limestone from the Tophet of Carthage. 3rd C. bc.

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing. Musee National du Bardo, Tunis, Tunisia / Art Resource]

### The Logic of Child Sacrifice



Reading the law of the firstborn in Exod 22:29-30 as an unambiguous declaration that all firstborn males, both animal and human, shall be “given” to Yahweh in sacrifice, Jon Levenson asked why there is not more widespread biblical evidence for the actual sacrifice of children. His answer was drawn in part from his understanding of the function of ancient Near Eastern law codes, which articulate cultural norms in the form of apodictic laws. For example, even if the law mandating the jubilee year—the repossession of ancestral lands during the seventh sabbatical year (Lev 25:8-17)—was never actually observed, its underlying principle was to shape the life of the community. The land belongs to Yahweh, it is intended for the common welfare of the community, and its blessings are to be shared equitably. The law of the firstborn also articulates a fundamental principle: the firstborn belongs to Yahweh, who may or may not demand that the child be sacrificed. But if Yahweh should require the child, as in the case of Isaac in Gen 22, he is to be willingly given back to Yahweh. Dismissing many contemporary readings of Gen 22, which explain the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as a rejection of child sacrifice in ancient Israel, Levenson argued to the contrary that it reinscribes the conviction that the beloved son belongs to Yahweh. Yahweh’s response in Gen 22:16-19 authorizes neither a substitution nor a redemption but rewards Abraham for his willingness to give up his son.

The story of Abraham’s binding of Isaac, the report of Mesha’s sacrifice (1 Kgs 3:26-28), and the rhetorical question of Mic 6:6-8 all reflect this logic: the human willingness to give up that which is dearest ensures divine blessing and aid.

The same demand is inherent in the “not-good” laws of Ezek 20:25-26, where the purpose of the law is that the people come to recognize Yahweh’s claim on all Israel: “I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their first-born in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD” (20:26). In Ezekiel’s formulation of the law, Yahweh’s requirement is absolute. Other pentateuchal legislation allows for substitutions and redemptions of human males (Exod 13:13; 34:20), but Ezek 20:26 and Exod 22:28-29 do not.

That this law was never observed is the burden of Ezekiel’s accusation in the references to child sacrifice in 20:30-32, 16:17-22, and 23:38-39. The precise nature of Judah’s failure may be more clearly reflected in the references to the image of zeal in 8:3, 5 and the *pgr mlk* in 43:7, 9 (see [The Case of the Missing King’s Missing Corpse]). Acting in the spirit but not the letter of the law, the Judean cult erected effigies of its offerings but held back from making the offerings themselves (see [Semels as Substitute Offering]).

Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3–17.

they have also filled the land with violence. This violence makes it impossible for Yahweh to answer their complaint, and Yahweh closes with the now familiar declaration that he will act in wrath and spare no pity. In direct response to the ritual Ezekiel has just witnessed, Yahweh declares, “though they cry with a loud voice in my ears [NRSV: “in my hearing”], I will not listen to them.” The ritual fails, and Yahweh prepares to abandon the city to destruction. [Worship and Justice]

### Executioners or Overseers? 9:1-2

Yahweh summons the “executioners of the city” (NRSV), and six men appear carrying weapons. Accompanying them is a seventh, a figure clothed in linen and equipped with a writing kit. Although there are minor points of contact between these figures and earlier biblical tradition, particularly in vocabulary shared with the Passover narrative of Exodus, clearer parallels are found in ancient



Near Eastern iconography. [The Executioners and Ancient Near Eastern Parallels] Since all of these parallels involve heavenly *deities*, not simply supernatural powers, as in Ezekiel 1, one must address the question of why Ezekiel would draw on ancient Near Eastern depictions of gods when he so vehemently rejected the idolatrous worship of the house of Israel.

Ezekiel does not deny the existence of these heavenly powers; he simply asserts that they are not gods in their own right. Designated as *pēquddôt*, a noun derived from a verbal root having a notoriously wide array of meanings (*pqd*), the “executioners” (NRSV) serve a broader function as the city’s “overseers.”<sup>5</sup> Following E. A. Speiser’s reasoning that the verbal root has the basic meaning of “to attend to with care,”<sup>6</sup> one may suggest that the basic meaning of the noun *pēquddâ* is to be a caretaker.<sup>7</sup> In Chronicles, the king regularly appoints priests and defines their responsibilities; in Isaiah 60:17, Yahweh exercises this royal prerogative when he appoints “Peace” as Jerusalem’s overseer.

Although there is a wide range of meanings for the verbal root and its related nouns elsewhere in the Bible, its use in Ezekiel is fairly uniform (23:21; 38:8; 44:11), and two instances are especially helpful in discerning the significance of the term in 9:1. In Ezekiel 38:8, a passive form of the verb indicates that Gog is “appointed” to carry out a task for Yahweh. Similarly, in 44:11, Yahweh charges the once rebellious Levites with the responsibility of guarding the altar gates. In both cases, Yahweh demonstrates his sovereignty by assigning rebels to specific tasks. One might question the wisdom of such a course of action, but the underlying logic is that even rebels must eventually acquiesce to royal authority.

In Isaiah 60:17, the *pēquddôt* are overseers of the city of Jerusalem; in Ezekiel 9, the *pēquddôt* may serve an analogous function. At Yahweh’s command they come not from the east, from which the Jerusalemites seek help, but from the north, a region long associated with Yahweh’s theophanic manifestation. Far from being divinities in their own right, they are now revealed to be Yahweh’s subordinates.

### **Ridding the City of Evil, 9:3-7**

Ezekiel next describes the movement of the glory of Yahweh to the threshold of the temple. The reference to the cherub is difficult. Commentators who see this as an allusion to the cherub throne in the inner room of the temple imagine Yahweh emerging from this

### Worship and Justice



Ezekiel shares with the prophets the conviction that worship and ethics are integrally linked. The connection is clearest and best known from the prophecy of Amos, who scathingly condemns the Israelites for their hypocrisy. In the very act of making their pilgrimages to the celebrated Israelite sanctuaries of Bethel and Gilgal, the Israelites multiply their sins (Amos 4:4-5). For all of their religiosity, Israelites scorn justice at the gate (Amos 5:10, 12, 15), cheat at commerce, and sell the needy into slavery. Amos contends that worship cannot make amends for these betrayals. In what is perhaps the best-known passage from all of prophetic literature, Amos declares:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn  
assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt  
offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your

fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your  
songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your  
harps,

But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-  
flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

For Amos, then, there can be no true worship without the establishment of just and righteous dealings with all in the community.

So also for Ezekiel: Yahweh has not fully disclosed the abominations in the temple until he has also shown Ezekiel the perversion of justice at the temple gate. Ezekiel, like Amos, thus continues to stress the vital importance of the practice of justice within the community. Ezekiel's emphasis differs from Amos, however, in the assertion that without true worship there can be no justice. And the heart of true worship, of course, is the knowledge of Yahweh.



### From Judgment to Restoration

This view of the vault at Schwarzrheindorf suggests an essential link in Ezekiel's visions between judgment and restoration. At the top of the photograph, the western arch presents Ezekiel as a witness to the temple's abominations (chs. 8–11), while the dome, portrayed in the lower part of the photograph, portrays him as a witness to its restoration. Once the temple is cleansed, the divine glory returns to the temple, and worship can begin again.

### The Executioners and Ancient Near Eastern Parallels



More than a century ago, Hermann Gunkel proposed that the seven figures in Ezekiel 9 represented the seven planetary deities, including the sun god Shamash and the god Nabu, the latter being keeper of the heavenly destinies and often depicted with a stylus in hand. This explanation was compelling because it shed light on the unique function of the man clothed in linen. Like Nabu, the linen-clad figure is a scribe who fixes the destinies of human beings by noting their righteousness and wickedness. The central problem with Gunkel's proposal is that in Ezekiel, only Nabu has a clearly distinct role, while the other six have undifferentiated characteristics. If these seven figures were patterned after the planetary deities, then one would expect greater differentiation among them since their characteristics remain distinct in the Babylonian ritual and hymnic texts.

Others have proposed that the seven men are patterned after the Sebetti or Divine Seven, a group of seven gods who always appear in concert. Commentators who have made this suggestion compare Ezekiel 9 with the Divine Seven in the Epic of Erra, which, it has been argued, contains many parallels to the book of Ezekiel. In the Erra Epic, as in Ezekiel 9, the Divine Seven are the agents of destruction called forth to destroy the city.

While it is more likely that the seven figures in Ezekiel 9 are patterned after the Divine Seven, this identification is not without problems. The central difficulty is that it does not allow for the unique role of the man clothed in linen. In addition, the parallel with the Erra Epic has led too quickly to the assumption that the Divine Seven are agents of evil. In the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, however, the Divine Seven were regarded as beneficent deities and were frequently depicted in reliefs at entrances and doorways, evidently to protect buildings against evil powers. In the Palace of Ashurbanipal, for example, they are depicted as undifferentiated warriors with clubs and spears in their hands, as in Ezekiel 9:1-3. Ezekiel may have been acquainted with the appearance and function of the Divine Seven through such sources as these; moreover, his depiction of the "creeping things" in 8:7-13 may reflect a Judean appropriation of this iconographic tradition.

Hermann Gunkel, "Der Schreiberengel Nabû im A.T. und im Judentum," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 1 (1898): 294–300; Eberhard Schrader, *Die Keilschriften und das Alte Testament*, 3rd ed., ed. H. Winckler and H. Zimmern (Berlin: Verlag von Reuther and Reichard, 1903), 399–408; Daniel Bodi, *Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, *Orbis biblicus et orientalis* 104 (Freiburg: Göttingen, 199), 95–110; Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: British Museum, 1992) s.v. Seven (gods).

room to the outer threshold of the temple. [The Cherub Throne] According to this interpretation, the movement of the divine Glory reveals that Yahweh had not abandoned the city, as the Jerusalemites claimed. However, since Ezekiel refers to a single cherub, and since the divine Glory has been in the court since the beginning of the vision, it cannot now emerge from the inner room. Verses 3-4 simply present Yahweh moving from the place where he had been in the courtyard to the threshold of the house.

From there, Yahweh charges the linen-clad man to go through the city and mark the foreheads of all those who have groaned and sighed over the abominations. The mark is a *tau*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and is drawn in the shape of an x. The protective mark is reminiscent of the mark of Cain (Gen 4:16), as well as the blood smeared on the doorposts and lintels in the Passover narrative (Exod 12:22-23).

Yahweh then commands the others to go through the city and kill all who do not have the mark. If the seven are reflexes of the Divine Seven, their role as guards against evil is evident here. Where one would expect them to protect the city from outside evil

### The Cherub Throne



Although biblical writers are careful to avoid equating the cherubim with the presence of Yahweh, the ancient epithet “he who sits enthroned upon the cherubim” (e.g., 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps 80:1) suggests that they formed a throne for the invisible deity. The account of Solomon’s temple suggests that the two cherubim were colossal: carved from olive wood and covered in gold, the cherubim’s wings touched one another, forming a canopy for the ark that spanned the width of the room (1 Kgs 6:23-28).

In discussions of Ezekiel’s vision, it is occasionally suggested that the cherub in 9:3 refers to the cherubim in the inner room of the temple. One notes, however, that when the divine Glory appears in the temple, it is never associated with the inner room or the cherubim in the inner room; rather, the Glory fills the entire house (1 Kgs 8:10-11; Ezek 11:4; cf. Isa 6:1).

forces, they root out the evil from within (cf. Ezek 5:5). No one is to be spared, not even the apparently innocent “old men and young women, little children and women” (9:6). At the command, “Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain; Go!” (9:7), the men immediately go out and kill. The scene recalls the threat in 6:4-5 that Yahweh would pile the corpses of Israel in front of its idols. The irony is that the corpses begin to accumulate here, in Yahweh’s own sanctuary.

### Ezekiel, the Remnant, 9:8-11

NRSV implies that Ezekiel is left standing alone when the executioners go out to fulfill Yahweh’s command. But the verb connotes something much more significant: only Ezekiel is preserved from the massacre. The verb is a passive form of the root from which the noun “remnant” is derived (“all who remain,” 9:9 NRSV). It is associated with divine catastrophes such as famine, flood, or warfare, and it signifies the survivors who form the nucleus of Yahweh’s future redemptive activity. Thus the verse is better translated “and it happened, as they were killing, I alone was left.” His observation is reminiscent of Elijah’s protest that he alone was left of the prophets (1 Kgs 19:10).

Prostrating himself, Ezekiel protests: “Ah Lord GOD! will you destroy all who remain of Israel as you pour out your wrath upon Jerusalem?” This is the only instance in the book in which Ezekiel attempts to act as an intercessor. Ezekiel’s question reveals his assumptions concerning the status of the exiles and the Jerusalemites. Those who “remain of Israel” do not include the Babylonian exiles, but only those left in Jerusalem. The vision takes up the status of the exiles in chapter 11; for now, Yahweh tells Ezekiel that the crimes of Jerusalem are exceedingly great. As in 8:12, Yahweh blames these crimes on the Jerusalemite claim that

Yahweh has abandoned them and does not see their plight. Yahweh has indeed seen their crimes, and now, ironically, his “eye” will not spare them as he avenges their deeds.

### **Holy Fire, 10:1-8**

Ezekiel 10:1-8 is rich with theophanic imagery of clouds, brightness, fire, and the thundering sound of the wings of the cherubim. In the biblical tradition, the cloud of the divine glory is associated with the manifestation of Yahweh in judgment before all Israel at the entrance to the temple (Num 14:10; 16:19); in this respect, the vision develops a well-known biblical tradition.

It is a matter of some debate whether chapter 10 depicts judgment or cleansing. Some have seen the man clothed in linen as a priestly figure and have interpreted his strewing coals upon the city as an act of purification.<sup>8</sup> But since, in the biblical tradition, fire from heaven is associated with the judgment of wicked persons (Pss 11:6; 140:11) and cities (Gen 19:24), it is more likely that the actions of the linen-clad man portend the city’s impending destruction, not its purification.<sup>9</sup>

The opening verses of chapter 10 present several difficulties. First, there is an apparent repetition in 10:4 of the movement of the divine Glory from the cherub to the threshold of the house. Since the divine Glory had already taken that position in 9:3 and has not moved from there in the meantime, the identical movement in 10:4 is problematic. The difficulty is resolved if one reads 10:4 as a continuation of the circumstantial clause of 10:3. One factor in favor of this reading is that the narrative action stops after v. 2 and does not resume until v. 6. The tense of Ezekiel 10:4 can then be coordinated with the implied tense of 10:3,<sup>10</sup> and all of 10:3-5 can be read as a description of theophanic elements that have been present ever since the divine Glory first moved from the cherub in 9:3:

Now the cherubim had been standing to the south of the house when the man went in. And the cloud had filled the inner court. And the glory of the Lord *had* gone up from the cherub to the threshold of the house and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far as the outer court, and the sound was like the voice of El Shaddai when he spoke.

The placement of the theophany at this particular point in the vision, and not at 9:3, differentiates the manifestation of Yahweh

from the action of the executioners; a similar disjuncture is evident in the report in 10:3 that the cloud fills the temple when the man enters, even though the man's entrance is not reported until 10:6. In both cases, the effect is to deny theophanic significance to the executioners and to associate it primarily with the cherubim and their location in the court.

This structuring of the narrative may also explain why the cherub throne is introduced only at this point in the vision. Ezekiel had, until this point, spoken simply of seeing the divine Glory in the courtyard (8:4), or of a single cherub on which Yahweh rested (9:3). Now, for the first time in the vision, Ezekiel speaks of the throne above the cherubim, in language that evokes the vision of 1:26 (10:1). Although it is unclear why Ezekiel would introduce the wheeled cherubim throne only here and not earlier, one may suggest that it becomes instrumental to the narrative only at this point. On a theological level, however, the reference to the throne establishes a tight connection between the cherubim and Yahweh and implies that the cloud filling the court is a manifestation of *Yahweh's* power.

Amid this display of divine power, the man clothed in linen disappears from the narrative, being seen for the last time when he goes out from the cherubim (10:7). He is not seen fulfilling Yahweh's second command, nor is he heard reporting that he has completed his task (cf. 9:11). The unique structuring of 10:1-8 thus continues to deny autonomy or independent power to the seven overseers of the city. Divine power resides solely in the divine Glory.

### **The Cherubim, 10:9-14**

Ezekiel looks again and sees the wheels beside the cherubim. The ensuing description both recalls and diverges from the initial account of the living beings in chapter 1.<sup>11</sup> Only a few of the significant differences will be mentioned here.

First, the description lacks the convoluted analogical language characteristic of chapter 1. One gets the impression that Ezekiel sees the cherubim clearly and can therefore describe them explicitly. He no longer speaks generally of them as living beings but now calls them cherubim. The prophet hears Yahweh call the creatures cherubim (10:2, 6), but his certainty is also probably due to seeing them in a familiar context.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the cherubim look less like heavenly beings and more like cult furniture. Chapter 1 describes a bizarre configuration of

living beings, wheels, and fire, and the same elements are present in this vision. The cherubim and wheels begin to merge together and both are studded with eyes, while the wheels appear to have bodies that include rims, spokes, wings, and faces (10:12-14). This kind of transformation is plausible if Ezekiel is describing a wheeled cult stand. In addition, the inexplicable and mysterious fire flashing forth between the living beings in chapter 1 is now more realistically described as coals. Thus one can suggest that when Ezekiel is in the more familiar context of the temple, the obscure imagery of chapter 1 settles into the more familiar form of a cult stand that is equipped with a brazier holding burning coals.

### **Preparation for Departure, 10:15-22**

The divine Glory moves from the threshold of the temple to the throne above the cherubim. Moving in perfect concord as in chapter 1, the cherubim lift up their wings and move to the east of the temple and stop at the eastern gate, where the vision will reach its climax in chapter 11. In ancient Near Eastern thought, a city could not be destroyed unless its god had abandoned it. Yahweh still remains in the vicinity of the temple, though his departure is imminent and his overseers are left to complete their mission. Ezekiel concludes this section of the vision by confirming that the cherubim were the same creatures that he had seen by the Chebar (10:15, 20).

### **Who Is the Remnant? 11:2-12**

In the eastern gateway of the city, Ezekiel sees twenty-five officials of the people, two of whom are named: Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah. Although today it is not possible to identify these men, the fact that Ezekiel names them suggests that they were well known and possibly controversial leaders. In several of the narrative accounts of the siege of Jerusalem in Jeremiah, comparable officials wield considerable power, sometimes in opposition to the king (see esp. Jer 38:24-28; 26:10-24).

Yahweh informs Ezekiel that these are the ones who devise wickedness in the city. As evidence, Yahweh quotes them as saying, “The time is not near to build houses; this city is the pot, and we are the meat” (11:3 NRSV). To modern ears, the saying seems neither dangerous nor wicked, and commentators remain puzzled over its meaning. The crux is the word *qārôb*, which NRSV and most others translate in a temporal sense, “the time is not near.”

Refraining from building houses is then interpreted as a reference either to the need to invest the city's resources in its defense or to the fact that these officials have appropriated houses that belonged to the exiles. According to this latter reading, the saying asserts that there is no need to build houses because there are plenty of vacant ones ready for the taking.

Because the latter interpretation is the more morally ambiguous of the two, many commentators favor it as an explanation of the apparent miscarriage of justice. In this interpretation, the Jerusalemites may have believed they were acting legally. Leviticus 25:29-30 stipulates that those who sell houses located within city walls have only one year to buy them back again. At the end of that year, the house becomes the permanent possession of the purchaser (Lev 25:29-30). Since the original owners had been in Babylonia for six years by this time, the current leaders of Jerusalem may have argued that it would be fully legal to appropriate the houses. Yahweh's quotation of the saying probes beneath its purported legality to expose its moral ambiguity.

Commentators often mention but do not explore another possible interpretation of the word *qārôb*. The root meaning of the word is "nearness," and its primary sense is not temporal (i.e., "the *time* is near") but relational, as in "near relations" or "next of kin" (cf. Lev 21:2, 3). Even though this latter connotation of the term is rarely considered in the critical discussion of this saying, it may hold the key to the interpretation of the chapter.

In laws concerning inheritance rights and protection of family property, the next of kin, or *qārôb*, is named as the one who inherits family land (Lev 25:25). For example, in the story about the daughters of Zelophehad, the principle of keeping land in the family is strictly set forth as a "statute and an ordinance" in Israel (cf. Ezek 11:12). The implication of the Zelophehad story is that someone can always be found to serve as next of kin, even if the search must go pretty far out a branch of the family tree (Num 27:1-11, esp. vv. 8-11). [Case Law and Inheritance]

If the saying concerns inheritance rights, then "building houses" in 11:3 refers to establishing families, and the saying should be translated, "With no one serving as next of kin to build up families (lit., houses), it (the city) is the pot, and we are the flesh." The saying reflects the conclusion drawn by some Jerusalemites that certain families have simply died out in Judah. With no one serving in Jerusalem as next of kin to represent the families of the exiles, those who remain have become the elect.



The statement is offensive because it implies that the officials are innocent beneficiaries of circumstances beyond their control. But because they have failed to search out remaining kin, they have defied Yahweh's statutes and ordinances to perpetuate families in Israel. Yahweh therefore declares that in fact the officials have blood on their hands because they have been busily filling up the "pot" of Jerusalem with the flesh of innocent people. Indeed, this accusation may go so far as to blame the Jerusalemites for handing the exiles into the hands of the Babylonians. In any case, these leaders' claim that they are the only ones left conveniently omits the fundamental fact that they are responsible for the city's depopulation.

The ensuing oracle follows the form of a disputation and rebuts the claim quoted in v. 3. Although NRSV's translation of 11:5 implies that the saying is a privately held thought, the wording of v. 3 suggests it is a public statement. Verse 5 should therefore be understood as an exposé of the private thoughts that lie behind the public statement: "So you *say*, O House of Israel, but I know the *thoughts* that come into your mind." Yahweh thus exposes the apparently innocent statement for what it is, a cover-up for a strategy to profit from the deportation of the city's leading citizens.

### Case Law and Inheritance



In Old Testament legal traditions, there are two types of laws. Apodictic laws are stated in the imperative, and the best-known examples of these are the Ten Commandments (e.g., "You shall not covet your neighbor's house"). Casuistic, or case law, illustrates a general legal principle and provides guidelines to the elders as they resolve disputes within the community. Many of the laws in the so-called Covenant Code are examples of this kind of law (Exod 20:22–23:33). Rather than cover every conceivable situation, case law defines the limit and extent of personal responsibility by providing examples of extreme situations.

Although the story of the daughters of Zelophehad involves a specific legal situation, it appears to have been preserved as case law to establish guidelines for determining inheritance rights (Num 27:1–11). On the eve of entering the land of Canaan, Moses apportions the land according to heads of family within the separate clans. One man, Zelophehad, had died in the wilderness and left five daughters but no sons. When the daughters are not given land, they take their case to Moses, the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation. They ask, "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's

brothers." Moses takes the case to Yahweh, who rules in favor of the daughters of Zelophehad. The incident then becomes a precedent for other such situations, and the principle is declared as follows:

You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Num 27:8–11)

The principle establishes inheritance in terms of patrilineal descent. Within that understanding, this ruling specifies a general principle: land stays in the family, which is defined as going back one generation, to the uncles of the deceased. If there is no one who can inherit within the immediate family, then the land passes to the nearest kinsman in the clan. Since there is no provision for inheritance outside the clan, the assumption is that there will always be a "next of kin" within the clan.



### The Vision of Ezekiel

Four animals and four wheels.

Ste. Chapelle, Paris, France. [Credit: Art Resource]

The judgment follows from the accusation. First, Yahweh denies the leaders' claim to be passive victims. They are the evildoers, not the victims, and they have filled the pot with the slain. Second, Yahweh dis-elects them by casting them out of the pot. By throwing them out at the border of Israel, Yahweh explicitly overturns their legal claim to the land. Finally, the judgment ends with a recognition formula that is expanded to reiterate the leaders' legal culpability. When all of this happens, they will finally come to know the God whose statutes and ordinances they have defied.

While Ezekiel is prophesying, Pelatiah son of Benaiah dies. Pelatiah's name is ironic: "Yahweh rescues,' son of 'Yahweh builds.'" If Yahweh does either of these things, it will not be for the remnant in Jerusalem. Ezekiel falls on his face and cries, "Ah! LORD God! You will make a full end of the remnant of Israel!" (contra NRSV, which makes this declaration a question). The statement is similar to Ezekiel's question in 9:8, but it is not an attempt to intercede. Rather, the statement is Ezekiel's answer to his own earlier question. Understanding the implications of the vision, Ezekiel concludes that there will be no remnant from Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> The

question whether there will be a remnant at all will be addressed in the next disputation.

### Who Will Inherit the Land? 11:14-21

The next section of the chapter is set off from the preceding by a word-event formula. Form critics often take this as an indication of an entirely new unit. However, in the present context, the formula indicates that the word is a response to Ezekiel's expression of alarm in 11:13. The speech in 11:14-21 explains why the Jerusalemites stand condemned and promises that a remnant will be forged from among the exiles, among whom Yahweh has been a "small sanctuary."

In vv. 14-15, the significance of the officials' saying in 11:3 is disclosed. They had claimed that certain families had been extinguished from Israel and that they were the only ones left in the "pot" of Jerusalem. Yahweh exposes their shrewd self-interest: "Mortal, your kinsfolk, your own kin, indeed your next of kin [NRSV "your fellow exiles"], the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, "They have gone far from the Lord; to us is this land given for a possession." The words "next of kin" (*qārôb*, 11:3) and "men of your redemption" (*ʿanšê geʿullāteka*, 11:15, contrast NRSV "fellow exiles") establish the connection between 11:3 and 11:15: the next of kin are supposed to act as redeemers, that is, to purchase land to keep it in the family. But according to the Judean officials, those who could serve as next of kin for the exiles have "gone far from" Yahweh. This statement expresses the conviction of the Judean officials that the exiles themselves have broken the covenant with Yahweh and have thereby forfeited their right to the land. The Jerusalemites also take refuge in the exculpatory passive voice: they have not stolen the land; it has *been given* to them. The claim is that Yahweh has given the land to them, and they believe that they are the chosen remnant. Yahweh rebuts the claim that the exiles have "gone far from" him by asserting that he was the one behind their departure and, moreover, has remained with them in exile as a "sanctuary in small part" (11:16). Even if the exiles left the land and thus appear to have abandoned Yahweh, Yahweh has not abandoned them.

In 11:17, Yahweh addresses the exiles directly: "I will gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." This section of chapter 11 is often seen as a later addition to the book,

reflecting later concerns than those expressed in vv. 1-13. If, as Thomas Renz has argued, the book was produced for the second generation of exiles, there is no reason to dispute that claim.<sup>14</sup> In its current position in the book, it implies that Yahweh always intended to forge the remnant from the exiles.

Having spoken directly to the exiles in vv. 16-17, Yahweh now speaks about them; this shift suggests that the restored remnant represents neither the actual Jerusalemites nor Ezekiel's exilic audience, but a third, hypothetical group in whom the ideals of covenantal commitment will be fully realized. When "they" are restored to the land, they will cleanse it of its abominations.

Yahweh promises to transform the returned population by giving them "one heart" (11:19-20). Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the promise is a "new heart" (Ezek 18:31; 36:26), but "one heart" fits the context of chapter 11 well. A spirit of divisiveness, in which the Jerusalemites had pitted their interests against the interests of the exiles, had torn the community apart. The gift of "one heart" is a gift of unity that heals communal rifts (cf. 37:15-23). Once united, Israel will follow Yahweh's statutes and ordinances, which in this context are concerned with the protection of the rights of all the families of Israel. The result of this obedience to Yahweh's statutes is expressed fully by the covenant formula: "Then they will be my people, and I will be their God." For Ezekiel, there is no more concise or eloquent way to express the foundation of unity than this ancient formulation of a community centered in obedience to Yahweh.

The speech now turns back to the actions of the Jerusalemites: "But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their heads" (11:21). This concluding declaration does not condemn all Jerusalemites, nor does it exonerate all exiles. Rather, it locates the basis of Yahweh's decision to condemn or to redeem in the quality of the heart.

Ezekiel's response to the destruction of Jerusalem reflects what must have been a common assumption: only those who remained in the land were considered the remnant, while those who had been deported had already fallen victims to divine judgment (cf. 9:8; 10:13). Yahweh's speech in 11:14-21 redefines the remnant in terms of qualities of the heart. The chapter shatters the assumption that there is a connection between inner waywardness (11:21) and external scattering (11:17). External, physical circumstances yield no reliable data concerning the heart's true condition.

### **The Departure of the Divine Glory, 11:22-25**

The cherubim lift up their wings and the divine Glory ascends above the city and heads east, stopping at the Mount of Olives. Meanwhile, the spirit lifts Ezekiel up and carries him back to the exiles, where the vision leaves him, and he tells the exiles all that he has seen.

The mention of this report suggests that the vision was a response to an inquiry by the elders in 8:1. The elders of Judah had come, evidently seeking an answer concerning their status as exiles. An elaborate vision exposes Jerusalem's worship as idolatry and the officials' actions as injustice. The answer to the exiles' question emerges from these disclosures. If there is to be a remnant of Israel, it will be forged from those who have been expelled from the land of Judah. But just as location does not ensure salvation for the Jerusalemites, neither does it guarantee salvation for the exiles. What matters is not location but orientation: those whose hearts continue to turn to idols will not inherit the land.

## CONNECTIONS

Theology is occasionally defined as a second-order reflection on the truthfulness of our language about God.<sup>15</sup> As opposed to the concept of truth, which posits absolute, timeless certainty about the facts of the matter, the concept of truthfulness is more contextual: it requires not only that we be faithful to Scripture and traditional church teaching, which we accept as valid testimony to the character and saving work of God, but also that we be attentive to the needs of our time. According to this definition of theology, truthfulness requires that we acknowledge the historically conditioned character of biblical and theological traditions, even as we articulate their continuing relevance.

The struggle of nineteenth-century American Protestant churches over the issue of slavery is but one example of the tension between traditional doctrine and contemporary concerns. The question facing the American church was not whether the Bible condoned slavery—everyone knew that it did—but whether the Bible should be invoked in support of its current American manifestation. This question struck at the heart of the conflict between biblical revelation and other modes of divine discernment: if the Bible condoned slavery, was it therefore a divinely ordained

institution that should not be abolished? Or did the new circumstances require a revision of the older ethic? On the other hand, if it was concluded that slavery was inimical to the will of a gracious and merciful God, what was one to make of scriptural authority? Although the answer to the question of slavery now seems obvious, the reader will have no difficulty coming up with a long list of moral problems that create comparable dilemmas for us today. The question that must keep being asked is whether we recognize the need to evaluate our inherited traditions as we seek to speak truthfully about God.

The vision of Ezekiel 8–11 engages in just such an evaluation. If, as it has been argued in this commentary, Ezekiel's vision describes Yahwistic practices and not the worship of alien gods, then his critique of Judean worship strikes alarmingly close to home. Ezekiel sees his fellow Judeans worshipping a "feel-good" God, one who had promised never to leave them. This is the God we now worship as the Shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures (Ps 23), a God anyone would want to have on her side. The Judean worshippers are not crass idolaters, and what they celebrate is the truth as they know it: this is a God they can count on. Their worship, an ardent appeal for divine assistance, also makes perfect sense in light of what they knew to be true about God. After all, the ancestors trusted in this God, and they were never disappointed (Ps 22:2-4); without this God, they would never have become a people. And what would such a loving God require? Certainly a token of their devotion would be enough: the Old Testament legislation is filled with evidence of acceptable substitutions for Yahweh's absolute claim on all human and animal firstborn. Their offering of a "likeness" of zeal, a representation of the child that Yahweh demanded in sacrifice, seems eminently reasonable. Surely prayer instead of whole offerings, a permanent—not to mention costly—monument of devotion, would satisfy this loving God. But in Ezekiel's context, these convictions have proven false, and the Judeans' worship will be the very thing that alienates them from their God.

Closer to home, but still enough in the past that we can disassociate ourselves from its implications, we see in the frescoes at Schwarzhendorf a remarkable artistic rendering of the visions of Ezekiel. The two-tone reproductions here do not do justice to the brilliant blues and greens used to convey the mingling of heaven and earth in these paintings. Nor does the two-dimensional reproduction capture their effect of enclosing the viewer in an all-encompassing reality while drawing the eye upward to a transcendent vision of the kingdom of God. Unlike so much of

Western art, which has selectively focused on at most one or two scenes from the book of Ezekiel, this cycle of frescoes seems to have gotten it right and to have faithfully rendered the whole of Ezekiel's book. The cycle's coherence is unmatched in the history of Western art, and there is little in the interpretive and iconographic traditions of medieval Christianity to explain its unique emphases.

Asking what accounts for this unprecedented development of a single, coherent theme, art historian Ann Derbes established a compelling link between the Ezekiel cycle at Schwarzhendorf and the aftermath of the Second Crusade, the failure of which eventually resulted in the establishment of crusading as a central institution of medieval Christianity. Derbes pointed out that the frescoes' focus on Jerusalem, in particular the emphasis on ridding the city of its "pollutions" and "abominations," reflected themes from the crusade sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, which in turn bore striking verbal and thematic connections to the Vulgate's translation of the book of Ezekiel.<sup>16</sup> Never simply beautiful adornment, the paintings were an aesthetic rendering of a coherent doctrine ideologically geared toward stimulating crusade fervor. One is tempted to think of these frescoes as a medieval version of the "Uncle Sam Wants You" posters used to recruit American troops for World War II.

Once the Schwarzhendorf frescoes are situated in their medieval context, the problem of truthfulness becomes readily apparent. At first glance, they appear to be an aesthetically satisfying recreation of Ezekiel's visions; in fact, one can say that they are *uniquely true* to Ezekiel's book in the history of Western art. And, if Derbes's historical reconstruction is correct, one can also say that they were highly relevant for the time in which they were produced. The artist articulated stunning correspondences between Ezekiel's world and his own: the Muslim "infidel" could be accused of perpetuating the "abominations" of Jerusalem, while the peasant worshipers could imagine themselves marked with Ezekiel's *tau*—the crusaders' cross—and thus be inspired to participate in the campaign to cleanse the Holy City.<sup>17</sup> But the use of Ezekiel's visions to justify the Crusades illustrates just how difficult it is to apply Scripture to current issues. From the perspective of hindsight, the use of Ezekiel to justify the Crusades hardly satisfies the criterion of truthfulness.

In the case of Ezekiel 8–11, the truthfulness of Judean traditions suffers a triple distortion. First, the Judeans' trust in Yahweh ironically leads to their betrayal of him. Although the complaint of 8:12 is a legitimate expression of dependence on Yahweh, it betrays that

trust when it is addressed to heavenly intermediaries. Second, the complaint indicates that the Judeans have a distorted understanding of the character of God. Ezekiel would say that the Judeans profane Yahweh’s holiness—which is to say that they fail to acknowledge Yahweh’s transcendent power over every dimension of their lives. This failure to “know” God—yet another major theme of Ezekiel—leads to a third distortion resulting in the mistreatment of fellow Judeans. In effect, poor theology justifies inadequate ethics.

The character of God is considerably more transcendent in the paintings at Schwarzhendorf, and it would therefore seem that the artist has avoided the distortions evident in Ezekiel 8.



### **Digging Through the Wall**

This Schwarzhendorf fresco detail shows Ezekiel digging through the wall and seeing the elders with their censers praying to the images of creeping things on the walls. Panels to the right and left depict the elders of Judah and the image of jealousy, respectively.

Bonn-Schwarzhendorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. [Photo Credit: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]

Structured around a vision of the exalted Christ, these paintings express the conviction that God alone guides the course of history. Standing under the vault, worshipers would see the consummation of history and be able to imagine themselves contributing to the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Yet this heightened sense of awareness of participating in the consummation of salvation history suffers from the all-too-human distortion of triumphalism. As in the Judean worship in Ezekiel 8, the frescoes not only encourage the worshipers to see themselves as inhabiting the center of God’s universe, they also perpetuate the demonization of others. The paintings at Schwarzhendorf thus appear to have misused the biblical message in the same way and for the same reasons as the Judeans misused their Yahwistic traditions: to justify their narrow vision of the world and to harness divine power for their own ends.

What is truthful theology? The Schwarzhendorf paintings at least



help us to see what it is not. Reciting familiar prayers and Bible stories is no guarantee that we are being truthful stewards of our traditions. Meanwhile, Ezekiel's temple vision leads us to reflect further on two elements of theology: the use of human images in the worship of God and the interrelationship of theology and ethics.

As the narrative shifts from Ezekiel's description of the abominations to the arrival of the executioners, it behooves us to recognize the inadequacy of human imagery and symbols to express the transcendent freedom of God. Students of the Old Testament may find the explanation given here for the executioners unsettling. If, as it has been argued, they are modeled after the Divine Seven, Assyrian deities charged with protecting cities and buildings against evil, one might rightly ask, what has happened to radical monotheism, the conviction that there is only one God? And besides, hasn't Ezekiel condemned the worship of alien gods? Like Paul, we are willing to grant Ezekiel's claim that the idols do not exist (cf. 1 Cor 8:4–6). So what are we to think when cosmic agents of the divine wrath—regarded as deities in their own right in Ezekiel's Mesopotamian milieu—turn up in chapter 9?

The question can be addressed from the perspective of the history of religion; in fact, many historians would argue that genuine monotheism—the belief that there is only one god—did not emerge until after the exile. For much of the history of Israel, it is more appropriate to describe Yahwism as henotheism, the belief that Israel is to worship only their god, Yahweh, to the exclusion of all the other deities known to exist (cf. Exod 20:1–3). In this connection it is worth noting that Ezekiel condemns the construction of monuments—the *gillûlîm*, the image of jealousy, and the *pigrê molkêhem*—and not necessarily the *worship* of other gods. We assume that Ezekiel condemns the worship of gods represented by these idols, but that assumption is founded on the wholesale condemnation of the worship of the Baals found elsewhere in the Old Testament. To be sure, Israel has violated its covenant with Yahweh, but the problem is not their *belief* in the existence of other gods; it is their use of these monuments in their worship of Yahweh.

Although the pejorative connotations attached to Ezekiel's *gillûlîm* makes us think that they are entirely different from the executioners who act at Yahweh's command in chapter 9, their iconographic placement at doorways suggests that they are the same entities. One may therefore argue that chapters 8 and 9 examine the same reality from two perspectives: that of the human worshipers and that of divine reality. In their attempt to approach

the deity, the Jerusalemites create idols. Having convinced themselves that they may approach their deity through these representations, they find, to their dismay, that they are playing with fire. Thus construed, the contrasting scenes in chapters 8 and 9 yield a profound commentary on the inadequacy of human representations to express the reality of the living God.

Elizabeth Johnson uses the language of idolatry to describe limitations in theological discourse. Any attempt to define God and thereby limit divine mystery is, in her opinion, idolatry: “Prophetic thinkers have challenged the propensity of the human heart to evade the living God by taming the wildness of divine mystery into a more domesticated deity.”<sup>18</sup> Even if Johnson appears somewhat sympathetic to the dynamics contributing to idolatry, nevertheless she acknowledges that all attempts to domesticate God have much in common with John Calvin’s harsher assessment of idolatry as the product of the twin sins of arrogance and ignorance:

the mind of man is, if I may be allowed the expression, a perpetual factory of idols . . . the mind of man, being full of pride and temerity, dares to conceive of God according to its own standard and, being sunk in stupidity and immersed in profound ignorance, imagines a vain and ridiculous phantom instead of God.<sup>19</sup>

Where Johnson sees idolatry as a shortcoming of the human imagination, Calvin considers it evidence of the arrogance that is fundamental to our fallen nature. Neither a distortion nor an inadequate representation, an idol is simply false.

Is Ezekiel’s assessment of the idols more like that of Johnson or Calvin? Some interpreters are more likely to see a direct line between Ezekiel’s denunciation of the *gillûlîm* and Calvin’s wholesale rejection of the idols. On the other hand, if one sees a correlation between the *gillûlîm* in chapter 8 and the executioners in chapter 9, Ezekiel’s critique may have more in common with Johnson’s assessment of idolatry as a vain attempt to tame God. The problem with the creeping things is not that they are phantoms or feverish products of Israel’s imagination, but that they fail to express the fullness of divine mystery and freedom. It is for this reason that they contribute to the mistaken belief that the living God can be manipulated—even by devout, well-intentioned prayers of the faithful. Ezekiel’s vision exposes the folly of such a belief. In chapter 8, the elders petition their intermediaries, and in chapter 9 the intermediaries do indeed come: not as the kindly spirits the elders expect but as Yahweh’s deadly executioners.

Taken together, chapters 8 and 9 suggest that those who cherish idols might as well prepare to be blindsided. To invoke divinity without acknowledging the limits of human understanding is to invite danger. I am reminded of the time my computer was damaged during a thunderstorm. Having taken the precaution of plugging it into a surge protector, I had not considered the possibility that lightning could get at it through the cable modem. The experience suggests an analogy, albeit a trivial one: surge protectors are to storms as human representations of God are to divine reality. While surge protectors may shield us from some of the inevitable hazards associated with electrical current and thereby allow us to channel it with reasonable reliability, they can only do so much. So also our representations of God: to the extent that they allow us to approach divine mystery, they are an inevitable part of our religious practice. But to think that our images capture all there is to know about God, or to think that “image and gesture” can bind God to us, is to betray not only our arrogance but also our ignorance. [“No Miracles, Please”] We would do well to recognize the limits of our images and symbols for God; to do otherwise is to invite the storm.

Second, in its association of idolatry with violence in 8:17 and its further exploration of the character of that violence in chapter 11, Ezekiel’s temple vision establishes a tight connection between theology and ethics. Getting our language about God right is directly associated with getting our ethics in order. Isaiah condemned those who “joined field to field”; Ezekiel condemns the heartless casuistry of citizens willing to cut ties between themselves and their exiled, homeless relatives for the sake of real estate. In keeping with the conception of justice as a reversal of fortunes, Yahweh resolves the dispute by promising to give the land back to the exiles and to expel the Jerusalemites.

Ezekiel’s commitment to justice is grounded in that most basic network of relationships, the family. Whether Yahweh finds a way to save every family in Israel remains to be seen (cf. 39:28); for now, it is sufficient to say that human attempts to exclude others by denying common ties to the human family will only backfire. One of the questions that cannot be answered is whether Ezekiel’s appeal to kinship is metaphorical or whether it reflects a concrete knowledge of divi-

### “No Miracles, Please”



All who seek you  
test you.

And those who find you  
bind you to image and gesture.

I would rather sense you  
as the earth senses you.  
In my ripening  
ripens  
what you are.

I need from you no tricks  
to prove you exist.  
Time, I know,  
is other than you.

No miracles, please.  
Just let your laws  
become clearer  
from generation to generation.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “Alle welche dich suchen, versuchen dich,” in *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. Anita Barrow and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 115.

sions between families. The latter is possible, since 14:22 and 24:21 speak of sons and daughters left behind in the exile. Actual family disputes over land would make this particular disputation all the more compelling. Invoking the highest goods of religion and national security, the Jerusalem elders seem to have convinced themselves that the redistribution of the land among themselves was both just and necessary. But in the process they appear to have forgotten, hidden, or otherwise rejected basic kinship ties with the exiles.

While it is true that we cannot choose our family, we can treat it badly if we forget where we came from. Whereas the Jerusalemites invoked abstract legal principles to justify their actions, Ezekiel insisted that family is forever. If Ezekiel appealed to kinship ties known to exist between the exiles and the Jerusalemites, it is also the case that he did so within a complex and cosmopolitan urban culture, in which other associations and roles could easily trump these more fundamental relationships. Despite this social complexity, Ezekiel did not invoke the concept of neighborliness, which might be more relevant to urban contexts, but to unbreakable family obligations. Ezekiel's concept of family encourages us to reflect on the web of relationships tying whole communities together. As the narrative about the daughters of Zelophehad suggests, the community must maintain these connections in order to ensure justice. Ezekiel's juxtaposition of justice and family raises the question of whether justice can ever exist if it is not exercised for the sake of the family.

“—tell me if it is not true you still live in that city.” While it is easy to remain detached from the disputes going on in Ezekiel's Jerusalem, Adrienne Rich's poem, “Rusted Legacy,” forces us to acknowledge that this city is where we live.<sup>20</sup> Sibling-rejecting casuistry we understand very well; we've been engaging in it ever since we first said, “Mom, he hit me first!” And we have been evading filial responsibility ever since our first brother asked, “Am I my brother's keeper?” The ethicist Susan Moller Okin argues that justice is learned in families;<sup>21</sup> that being the case, is it any wonder that our dealings with the human family are little more than puerile attempts at self-preservation?

Perhaps the question God keeps asking Ezekiel is the one we should ask ourselves. “Do you *see* what they are doing?” Well, do we? And do we see what *we* are doing? For that matter, when do we ever fully understand the impact our theologies and our doctrines have on our life in the world? Too often, we are so convinced of the correctness of our doctrines that we fail to see that even faith—if it

is a too-narrow certainty about what we know to be true about God—can shatter even hope and love.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:168-69; Ke Leung Wong, "A Note on Ezekiel viii 6," *VT* 61 (2001): 396-400.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 vols., ed. Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Scribners, 1995), 3:1847-49.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:294-96.

<sup>4</sup> Mark S. Smith, "The Near Eastern Background of Solar Language for Yahweh," *JBL* 109 (1989): 29-39.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Block observed, "The present context requires that *pequddôt* be understood as a quasi-legal designation for agents who are charged with the execution of a sentence" (*Ezekiel*, 1:303). This interpretation can be supported by the prophetic motif of the day of "visitation" (Isa 10:3; Jer 8:12; 10:15; 11:23; 23:12; 46:21; 48:44), though it is worth noting that in all of these instances, the word refers to a particular time and not to an agent or official designated to carry out the judgment.

<sup>6</sup> E. A. Speiser, "Census and Ritual Expiation in Mari and Israel," *BASOR* 149 (1958): 21, cited by Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:304 n. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Jer 52:11; Ezek 44:11; 1 Chr 23:11; 2 Chr 17:14; 26:11, muster, care; Num 3:32, 36; 4:16 (2 times); Isa 60:17; 1 Chr 24:3, 19; 26:30; 2 Chr 24:11; Ps 109:8; 2 Chr 23:18.

<sup>8</sup> John T. Strong, "God's *Kabôd*: The Presence of Yahweh in the Book of Ezekiel," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, SBL Symposium Series 9, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 69-96, esp. 85-88; and Cornelius Houk, "The Final Redaction of Ezekiel 10," *JBL* 90 (1971): 42-54.

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:181.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §37.7.2.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed comparison, see Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:316.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:183.

<sup>13</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:338-39.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Schubert Ogden, "Toward Doing Theology," *JR* 75 (1995): 1-14.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Derbes, "Frescoes of Schwarzrheindorf, Arnold of Wied and the Second Crusade," in *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*, ed. Michael Gervers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 142-44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 39.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster), 1:11.8, cited by Johnson, *She Who Is*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Rusted Legacy," *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995–1998* (New York: Norton, 1999), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic, 1989).

# ZEDEKIAH BETRAYS THE CITY

## Ezekiel 12:1-28

Consisting of a report of symbolic acts (vv. 1-20) and the disputation of proverbs denying the relevance of prophetic visions (vv. 22-28), chapter 12 anticipates the siege of Jerusalem and declares that Ezekiel's vision of destruction will soon be fulfilled. The symbolic acts vividly portray the chaos of the siege as Ezekiel prepares a pack, digs through a wall, and seeks to escape. Although the actions would seem to be generally applicable to any fugitive, the accompanying interpretation indicates that it more specifically signifies the futile, not to mention cowardly, attempt of Zedekiah to escape his besieged city. When it is recalled that Zedekiah occupied the Judean throne by Nebuchadnezzar's decree (the true king Jehoiachin being exiled in Babylonia) and in all likelihood caused the siege by his rebellion in 592 BCE, his attempted escape is all the more shocking.

The chapter begins with a reminder to the prophet that he lives in the midst of a "rebellious house." This phrase dominated the account of Ezekiel's call and his first symbolic acts (chs. 2–5), where rebellion was construed as the result of Israel's stubbornness. Here, cause and effect are reversed, and Israel's flawed perception is now attributed to its habitual rebelliousness. [Sensory Failure] Despite Israel's dullness, Yahweh urges Ezekiel to perform these actions in their sight in the slight hope that they will understand the consequences of their actions.

A conventional interpretation of chapter 12 is that the exiles are collaborators with Zedekiah's rebellion in Jerusalem. As long as Jerusalem stands, they hold on to the hope of return. As a "house of rebellion" (12:2-3), the exiles would need to see that Zedekiah's rebellion—and their hope of a speedy return—is futile. However, since the symbolic act appears to have incorporated an *ex eventu* interpre-

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### Sensory Failure



The motif of dulled perception appears elsewhere in prophetic literature (see esp. Isa 6:9 and Jer 5:20). In Isa 6:9, the failure of hearing and seeing is a precondition of impending judgment. In order to complete the judgment, Yahweh instructs the prophet Isaiah to make his hearers unable to understand so that they will not repent and manage to avert judgment. The motif continues to exert its influence in the Gospels as an explanation for Jesus' teaching in parables.

tation reflecting subsequent historical knowledge of Zedekiah's fate (12:7-14; cf. 2 Kgs 25:4-7), the present form of the chapter raises a more interesting question: once the symbolic act has been fulfilled, does it have anything more to teach Ezekiel's audience? In the motif of seeing in vv. 1-20, as well as in the exiles' reactions to Ezekiel's visions in vv. 21-28, chapter 12 suggests that blindness is never cured, not even by hindsight.

## COMMENTARY

### **Against Prince Zedekiah and his Allies, 12:1-16**

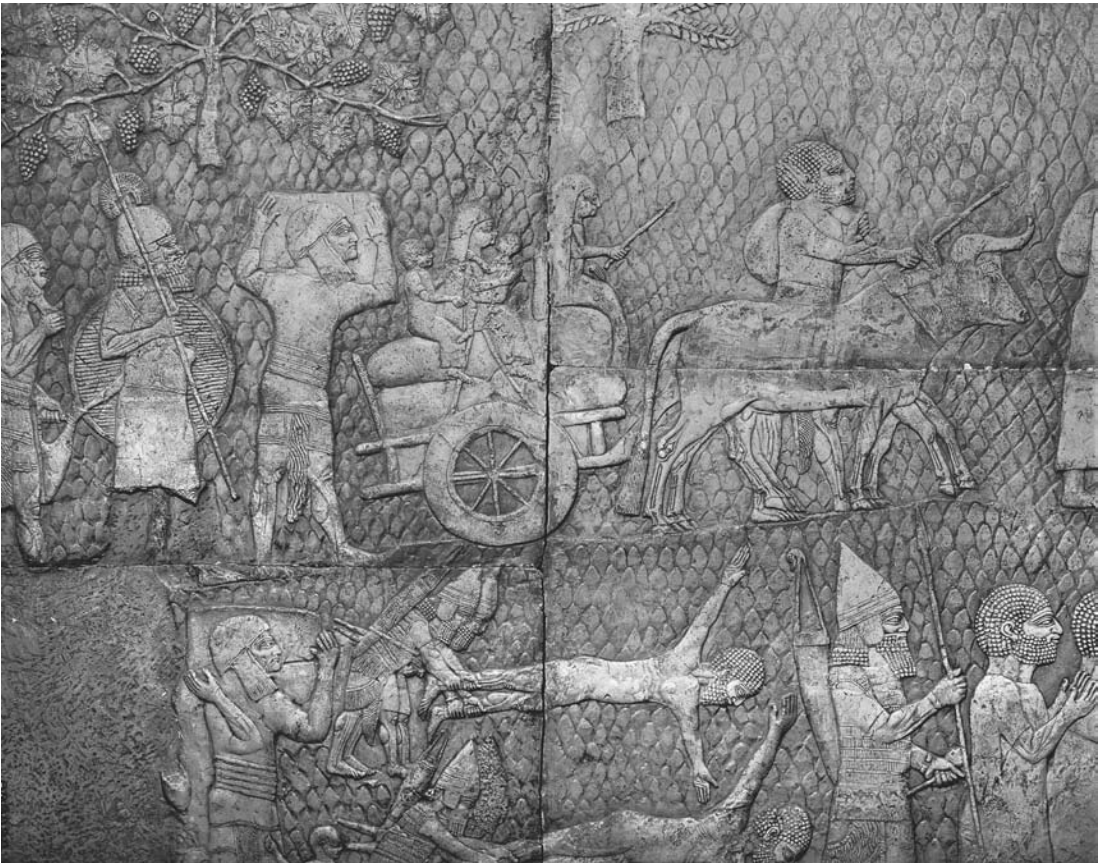
These verses contain a three-part oracle of judgment in the form of a symbolic act. It can be identified as an independent unit by the presence of the word-event formula in 12:1 and 17; however, the oracle should not be too completely isolated from its context. In 11:25, Ezekiel reported the details of his vision of Jerusalem to all the exiles; now, in 12:1-2, Yahweh informs Ezekiel that they have not yet understood what they have heard.

With this symbolic act, Ezekiel is to be their *môpēt*—their “sign.” A sign is a supernatural omen or portent that discloses the presence and activity of Yahweh in history. Like Ezekiel's vision, the sign provides the exiles with direct sensory experience. In the instructions to perform the act, Yahweh repeats six times that Ezekiel must perform these actions *in the sight* of the exiles. When Ezekiel reports that he has done as he was commanded, he reiterates that he did these things “in their sight.” The goal of the symbolic act, then, is to create an experience for the exiles that will bring understanding and insight.

### ***Enacting Escape, 12:3-7***

Unlike the symbolic acts of 3:22–5:4, this symbolic account contains a report that Ezekiel performed the sign in the sight of the exiles, in addition to Yahweh's instructions to perform the act (vv. 3-6). Not all of the actions are entirely clear. Ezekiel packs an “exile's pack” containing only a few belongings and carries it out of his house by day. An early commentator, Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba, conjectured that the pack contained a skin, a mat, and a bowl, each of which would do double duty in the hardship of exile.<sup>1</sup> The





### Baggage for Exile

Judean exiles carrying provisions during the Assyrian conquest of the Jewish fortified town of Lachish.

Detail of a relief from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Mesopotamia. 701 BC. [Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

Assyrian reliefs contain several representations of exiles leaving with their packs. For Ezekiel, the exile's pack may signify the degrading circumstances of leaders forced out of their city.<sup>2</sup>

Once Ezekiel carries his pack out of his house, he must dig a hole through the wall. This would be possible in Mesopotamia, since houses were made of mud brick, a relatively soft building material. Whether he is to make a hole from the inside or from the outside is uncertain. If the former, then the act symbolizes an attempt to escape. However, since Ezekiel is to do this in the sight of the exiles, and since he is already outside when he begins this action, it is more likely that he is to dig through the wall from the outside. This part of the symbolic act thus depicts the Babylonian siege, which is successfully completed when the city walls are breached (cf. 2 Kgs 25:3-4). Once Ezekiel has dug the hole, he then resumes the role of escapee. He lifts the pack onto his shoulder and carries it out in the dark, with his face covered so that he cannot see the

land. The complexity of the act, in which Ezekiel plays the role of both deportee and invader, is comparable to that of the symbolic acts of chapters 4–5, where he portrayed first Yahweh, then the Jerusalemites.

***Interpretation of the Symbolic Act, 12:8-16***

The next morning, Yahweh provides Ezekiel with an answer to the exiles' question, "What are you doing?" Although the act itself had seemed to depict the deportation of the general populace, the interpretation in 12:8-14 stresses that it concerns Zedekiah. The interpretation begins with a startling declaration: "The prince is this burden in Jerusalem, and all the house of Israel in it."<sup>3</sup> Through word play, Yahweh reveals to Ezekiel that the exile's pack is a symbol of King Zedekiah. The word "prince" (*nāšī'*) and the word "burden" (NRSV "oracle" *mašša'*) are both derived from the root "to lift up" (*nāša'*). A prince is "lifted up" to his position of power; but, Ezekiel now claims, this prince has become a burden (cf. Jer 23:33).

The leaders of Jerusalem were already condemned in the oracle of chapter 7 and 11:14-21 more specifically charged them with taking advantage of the crisis to enhance their own political and economic standing. Here in chapter 12, the focus narrows to Zedekiah, the leader most responsible for the fate of Jerusalem. This unit, placed just after the vision of chapters 8–11, recalls the events of that time for Ezekiel's readers: around this time, Zedekiah and the neighboring kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Edom had plotted rebellion against Babylon (see Jer 27–28). Ezekiel's symbolic act discloses a particularly unsavory side of this ruler. Rather than face the consequences of his rebellion, he will abandon his city under cover of night in a futile attempt to save his own skin.

Commentators have already detected the theme of rebellion in chapter 12 in the declaration that the king would not see the land (12:6, 12). Ezekiel symbolizes this by covering his face, which can signify shame or mourning in other contexts. Yet here, because the oracle explicitly states that the reason for covering the face is to prevent seeing the land, commentators have concluded that the motif resembles one of the treaty curses from that era:

[If Mati'ilu breaks the treaty] then, just as this spring lamb, brought forth from its fold, will not return to its fold, will not behold its fold again, alas, Mati'ilu, together with his sons, daughters, officials, and the people of his land [will be ousted] from his country and will not return to his country and not behold his country again.<sup>4</sup>

If the symbolic act contains an allusion to such a curse, then the act of fleeing with covered face combines both Zedekiah's attempt at rebellion and his punishment for it. Zedekiah will never see the land of Israel again.

Other dimensions of the symbolic act contain motifs associated with the rebellion of a vassal against his overlord. Zedekiah is called a prince, not a king; such a title reminds readers of his obligation to Nebuchadnezzar, who appointed him to this position. In addition, the very act of attempting escape is a well-known motif associated with rebellion. The motif is most clearly illustrated in the Assyrian annals, which frequently depict rebellious vassals escaping their cities to avoid punishment for violating their treaties with Assyria.<sup>5</sup>

When a king abandons his city, he leaves it vulnerable to attack. And inevitably, his escape fails. One Assyrian account of attempted flight contains a striking parallel to Ezekiel 12: "Those of them who fled before the murderous iron dagger, famine, want (and) flaming fire, and found a refuge,—the net of the great gods, my lords, which cannot be eluded, brought them low." So also in Ezekiel 12: even if Zedekiah escapes the Babylonians encircling the city, he cannot evade Yahweh's net. The rebellion is crushed when Yahweh scatters Zedekiah's helpers and troops. The term "helpers" is used of treaty partners;<sup>6</sup> the reference may allude to Zedekiah's allies in the rebellion.

In v. 11, Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to explain to the exiles that he is a sign for them. The shift in pronouns is significant: As a sign *for the exiles* (NRSV "for you [plural]"), Ezekiel discloses the fate of the



#### Yahweh's Net

This fragment from the victory stele of Eannatum of Lagash (the "Stele of the Vultures") contains an especially clear representation of a warrior's net holding numerous captives.

Stele of Eannatum (of the Vultures). Detail: *The God Ningirsu Captures the Men of Umma in His Net*. Early dynastic period, 25th C. bc. Location: Louvre, Paris, France. [Credit: Giraudon / Art Resource]

Jerusalemites (“them”). As Ezekiel has done, so it will be done to them. The passive voice hints at the helplessness of the Jerusalemites. Although their attempts to escape may seem like autonomous acts, they are nevertheless under Yahweh’s control.

### ***The Acknowledgment of Yahweh, 12:15-16***

The oracle concludes with a formula of recognition. The subjects of this recognition are not the exiles, but rather those who attempted rebellion. All those who aided Zedekiah, including his foreign allies, will recognize Yahweh’s sovereignty when they are scattered among the nations. The oracle concludes with the declaration that Yahweh will spare some of them, so that they can tell of their abominations in exile (cf. Ezek 6:9). Rebellion is thus recast as a sad confession of sin.

### **The Consequences of Rebellion, 12:17-20**

The second symbolic act in this chapter further elaborates the consequences of Zedekiah’s rebellion, which is certain to bring on a siege and its attendant miseries, famine and plague (cf. 2 Kgs 24:20b–25:3). Ezekiel must eat and drink in fear and trembling. The accompanying interpretation of the oracle is addressed to the “people of the land” (12:19). It has been noted elsewhere that this phrase designates landowners, or members of the ruling class. Whether this oracle is addressed to “people of the land” who are now in exile is unclear; in any case these addressees are differentiated from the subjects of the oracle, who are identified as the “inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel.” This symbolic act may give assurance to the exiled “people of the land” that the acts of the Jerusalemites with respect to the land will not go unpunished (cf. 7:23; 11:3, 15). When the land is stripped of all it contains, and when the famine comes, the Jerusalemite claims to possess the land will be meaningless (cf. 7:11-13; 11:15).

### **The Certainty of Yahweh’s Word, 12:21-28**

This section contains two disputations regarding the reliability of the prophetic word concerning the land of Israel (12:22). In the disputations of chapter 11, Yahweh challenged Jerusalemite claims to ownership of the land and asserted that the exiles, not the Jerusalemites, would constitute the restored remnant. The disputation of 12:21-28 resumes that debate and reflects the skeptical response of the exiles to Yahweh’s promises.

In each disputation, Yahweh quotes a proverbial saying of the exiles. The geographical location of these sayings is disputed. Greenberg and others take the prepositional phrase of 12:22 in the locative sense, “in the land of Israel” (Heb. *‘al-ʾadmat yisrāʾēl*; contrast NRSV, about the land of Israel), and thus argue that the proverbs were spoken in Israel, not in Babylonia. Greenberg’s arguments are weak. The speakers of these proverbs are Ezekiel’s fellow comrades in exile. Ezekiel is included among the speakers of the proverbs in 12:22, “this proverb of yours” (plural); and Ezekiel is the subject of the proverb in 12:26. Commentators have construed the proverbs as expressions of hostility toward the prophet’s message of judgment,<sup>7</sup> desuetude resulting from long generations of experience with unfulfilled prophecies,<sup>8</sup> and callous indifference.<sup>9</sup> These inferences rest on the assumption that the exiles shared the perspective of the Jerusalemites, and that a proclamation of judgment against Jerusalem was inherently a proclamation of judgment against the exiles.

The current structure of the book calls these inferences into question. Since in chapter 11 a distinction was made between the exiles and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, subsequent oracles of judgment acquire a different nuance. Even though they are not the targets of divine judgment, the exiles continue to warrant the title “house of rebelliousness” and must evaluate themselves in light of the messages of judgment against Jerusalem and its leaders.

The disputation addresses the question of whether Ezekiel’s visions have any further relevance. By this time, some of the events of which Ezekiel had spoken lay in the past. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and Zedekiah and his allies had been punished for their rebellion. But the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to restore the exiles to the land remained uncertain. Within the context of the second generation, the sayings reflect not hostility, but skepticism that the visions continue to hold meaning for the exiles.

### **“Nothing happens,” 12:21-28**

The disputation begins with the notice that Ezekiel has received a new word from Yahweh, who asks about a proverb circulating among the exiles concerning the land of Israel: “The days are long, and every vision comes to nothing.” Yahweh asks why this proverb is being uttered. One may suggest that, in the present literary context, the proverb is a reaction not only to the oracle of chapter 7, which had been explicitly labeled a vision (*ḥāzôn*, 7:13), but also

to the promise of restoration in 11:14-21. The proverb expresses doubt that any such vision will ever be fulfilled.

Yahweh refutes the proverb and declares that its use in Israel will come to an end. Yahweh recasts the proverb to assert the nearness of the vision's fulfillment. Instead of the days growing long, they are actually drawing near; the vision will not come to nothing, but will in fact produce an event. The meaning of the proverb is therefore reversed, as follows:

The days *grow long*,  
and every vision comes to *nothing*. (12:22)  
The days *draw near*,  
and the *event* (i.e., fulfillment) of every vision. (12:23)

The disputation further supports the new proverb with two complementary causal clauses: there will no longer be any worthless vision, and the words that Yahweh speaks will come to pass. This latter declaration is grounded in the identity of Yahweh: "For I, Yahweh, will speak the word that I speak; and it will be fulfilled." The final declaration that the vision is hastening toward its fulfillment, and that it will be fulfilled "in your days," underscores the reliability of the divine word. For readers in the second generation of exile, the assertion of the immediacy of fulfillment has continuing relevance. The message of Ezekiel has not come to nothing, nor is it for distant times. Rather, Ezekiel's readers can expect the fulfillment of Yahweh's word in their generation.

## CONNECTIONS

The trouble with blindness is that you don't see it coming. People getting eyeglasses or contact lenses for the first time will often say they didn't realize they were missing so much detail. Suddenly tree branches and road signs look sharper; even colors are brighter.

Chapter 12 addresses the spiritual blindness of the exiles. Their blindness is not congenital but habitual: long years of rebelliousness lead them to see the world in a particular way and prevent them from seeing their actions from any other perspective. Nor is it apparent to them that they are blind; they do, after all, have eyes.

In order to break through the blindness, Yahweh makes Ezekiel a sign, a visible portent of God's activity in the events of their day. In effect, God forces the divine perspective on them with an "in your

face” insistence that Ezekiel perform the sign in their sight. The symbolic action ironically exposes the nature of the blindness. As Ezekiel enacts preparations to escape the city, it remains possible to perceive the act as an expression of human agency, of the belief that Zedekiah is still in control of his destiny. The exiles do perceive that there is something more to Ezekiel’s act, but they cannot figure it out. So they ask, “What are you doing?”

The inner meaning of the action, Zedekiah’s actual helplessness and Yahweh’s ultimate control of his actions, cannot be guessed from the simple contours of Ezekiel’s actions. But the meaning is revealed through a divine word that accompanies the symbolic act and answers the audience’s somewhat dull-witted question (12:10). Even then, prophecy itself is not enough. The chapter closes with the audience’s skeptical response that the visions are either for distant times or are meaningless.

The proverbs express the source of the exiles’ spiritual blindness. When they say, “The vision is for distant times,” what they really means is, “This prophecy is not about us.” It is worth noting that the Hebrew expression, which is usually understood to refer to the future, may refer either to the past or to the future. If the reference is to the past, then the proverb implies that the symbolic act is fulfilled with Zedekiah’s capture and imprisonment. If the reference is to the future, then the proverb expresses diminishing hope that the exiles will ever see the land of Israel again. In either case, the proverb suggests that Ezekiel’s visions have nothing to do with the exiles’ current existence. If the exiles were supposed to learn about themselves by contemplating Zedekiah’s flight from Jerusalem, their proverb asserts, “This act is not about us or about what we have tried to do to control our destiny; it is about somebody else—Zedekiah.” Given the tendency of the exiles and the Judeans to blame one another for the current crisis, the exiles’ rejection of the symbolic act underscores their complicity in the disaster.

The disputation rejects this interpretation. By calling the audience the “rebellious house,” Yahweh reminds the readers of their essential link to the past, and to Zedekiah. They, too, had participated in the rebellion. As long as they fail to see the continuing traits of rebelliousness in their lives, they will stand under divine judgment. In addition, the refutation of the proverbs makes the visions relevant by insisting that the divine word is always current. The vision is “for your days, O rebellious house.” The cure for their blindness, then, is to see themselves in light of the word of God.

The disputation contains the nucleus of a hermeneutical principle that will guide the shaping, reading, and interpretation of

Scripture for many years to come. Like the book of Ezekiel, all Scripture concerns the past, things of distant times, and our temptation is to read it as a record of attempts to discern the ways of God in events long gone. But this disputation insists that the word of God is always “for our days,” for the present circumstances of every generation of readers. How Scripture is to be applied to future settings remains the question; in the commentary on chapter 38, it will be argued that Ezekiel rejects certain types of applications of Scripture to future events. Here, however, the chapter raises questions that are perennially relevant: How do our habits blind us to the consequences of our actions? In what way are leaders responsible for their communities—and communities responsible for the limitations of the leaders they choose? If Ezekiel’s audience could be blind to the implications of his message for their time, so can we; in fact, we have even more warrant for saying that the pantomime of a king abandoning his city to save his own skin has nothing to do with us. On the other hand, which of us has not observed the public good suffer the damaging effects of political egotism, or as citizens have turned a blind eye to political crisis? By bringing together these two apparently disparate responses to the city’s imminent demise, Ezekiel suggests that it is civic blindness that allows political egotism to flourish.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Lamentations Rabba* 1:23; cited by Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:209.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ezek 7:23 and comment; Nah 3:10.

<sup>3</sup> Contrast NRSV “This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel in it.” NRSV has followed an ancient version (the Targum) in its rendering of the noun *maššā’* as “oracle.” However, Ezekiel nowhere else uses this term to refer to oracles. See the discussion of Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:372-74.

<sup>4</sup> *ANET*<sup>3</sup>, 532, cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:211.

<sup>5</sup> For the reign of Sennacherib, see Luckenbill, *ARAB*, 2:236, 237, 241, 246, 249, 250; for the reign of Ashurbanipal, see *idem*, 2:704, 775, 876, 791, 802.

<sup>6</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:378.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:387-88.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:227.

<sup>9</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:284.



# FALSE PROPHETS BETRAY THE CITY

## Ezekiel 13:1-23

Even if the book of Ezekiel reeks with invective against the whole house of Israel, chapter 13 defends them against the destructive messages of the prophets. While the denunciation of the prophets is motivated partly by a sense of jealousy that their message has controverted his will, Yahweh is also angered that their soothing messages lead to the people's destruction.

The juxtaposition of this chapter with the condemnation of the prince in Jerusalem (ch. 12) suggests that the prophets were associated with Zedekiah's rebellion against Babylon. Even so, the chapter avoids speaking of precise historical circumstances. This is in contrast with the book of Jeremiah, which speaks in considerable detail about Jeremiah's conflicts with Hananiah and Shemaiah, prophets who supported Zedekiah's rebellion (Jer 28–29). The lack of specificity in Ezekiel is somewhat surprising, especially when other officials are named in chapters 8–11. Rather than dealing with specific issues or persons, the chapter elucidates a general principle hinted at in the disputation of 12:21–28: "There shall no longer be any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel" (12:24). But this does not mean that prophecy will cease. Once this falsehood is eliminated, it will again be possible to trust in prophetic visions.

Some commentators call the men in vv. 1–16 "false" prophets and label the women in vv. 17–23 sorcerers or witches; this commentary refrains from doing so. Despite Ezekiel's polemic, there are hints that both the men and the women speak in prophetic idiom and articulate a Yahwistic message, and nowhere is the activity of the women characterized as witchcraft (cf. esp. 13:23).<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel does oppose them, of course, and we shall seek to explain that opposition.

## COMMENTARY

**Against the Male Prophets, 13:1-16**

The oracle against the prophets blends two prophetic genres: the proof-saying and the woe oracle. Consisting of three parts, the proof-saying includes a description of wrongdoing (13:3-7), the announcement of judgment (13:8-14a), and a statement that the goal of the judgment is knowledge of Yahweh (13:14b). Elements of the woe oracle, which is derived from the setting of funeral laments, are incorporated into the description of wrongdoing (see especially 13:3). The oracle envisions the complete demise of these prophets.<sup>2</sup>

As is typical of many units in Ezekiel, the announcement of judgment is doubled by linking two structurally similar oracles (vv. 2-9, 10-16), each of which employs a metaphor revolving around the strength of a wall. [*Walls and Building Inscriptions*] In vv. 2-9, the prophets are compared to jackals among ruins, while in vv. 10-16, the prophets are compared to bad builders whose finishing work fails to buttress the wall against Yahweh's wrath.

***Jackals Among Ruins, 13:2-9***

The oracle alternates between speaking to the prophets directly in the second person (vv. 5, 7, 8) and speaking about them in the third person (vv. 3, 4, 6, 9). Attempts to explain this peculiarity as the fusion of two originally separate oracles have not been convincing. Another possibility is that the oracle envisions two audiences: the community of Israel, which has fallen victim to the prophets' lies, and the prophets themselves.

Concluding their oracles with the familiar "says the Lord," the prophets speak in the prophetic idiom. Waiting patiently for the fulfillment of their prophecies (v. 6; cf. Hab 2:3; Pss 69:3; 71:14), they are models of hope and trust in Yahweh.<sup>3</sup> But Ezekiel accuses them of having heard and seen nothing from Yahweh. Rather, they speak out of their own "imagination" (Heb. *lēb*, "heart") and follow their own "spirit" (Heb. *rûah*). He disparages their piety as yet another instance of self-delusion, and condemns their message as falsehood and lies.

The prophets are likened to jackals among ruins (13:4). The imagery of v. 5 suggests that the imagined ruin is a defensive wall unable to withstand enemy attack. Like jackals that roam amid the ruins, thereby contributing to further deterioration (Cant 2:15;

### Walls and Building Inscriptions



A primary structuring element of the book of Ezekiel is the appropriation of the neo-Assyrian genre of building inscriptions. The book closely resembles one exemplar of this genre, that of Esarhaddon's inscriptions commemorating his rebuilding of Babylon. Ezek 13 develops three motifs that illustrate the nature of Ezekiel's appropriation of Esarhaddon's inscription.

(1) Who Builds? Ezekiel has portrayed the prophets as those who fail to repair walls or to build them adequately. The metaphor is intriguing, particularly since kings held this responsibility in the ancient Near East. However, the book of Ezekiel develops the claim that Yahweh alone is Jerusalem's builder. That claim is most clearly evident in chs. 40–48; but it can be argued that the entire book is structured around this claim.

The peculiar reference to building in 13:10 may reflect the idea that Yahweh is the city's builder. Translated literally, the verse states, "One [Heb. *hû*] builds a wall, but behold, they smear it with whitewash." The grammatical construction calls attention to the contrast between the two subjects but leaves the subject of the first clause unstated. NRSV has taken the subject to refer to human beings ("when the people build a wall"), and this translation is widely accepted; in fact, it has never been questioned. But if the prophets are mediators of divine activity, it is possible that the implied subject of the first clause is Yahweh. As Yahweh's intermediaries, they are to finish the wall. But because their work is defective, the builder will have to tear down the building and start again.

(2) What Weakens the Wall? By exposing factions within the community, Ezekiel suggests that Israel's rebelliousness pervades not only its relationship to Yahweh but also to other members of the house of Israel. This argument bears a striking resemblance to the reason given in Esarhaddon's account of the destruction of Babylon: "The

people who dwelt in Shuanna (Babylon) split into factions (lit., answered each other "nay"), plotting rebellion the while" (*ARAB*, 2:642; cf. 649, 659). Ezekiel develops the theme of faction and rebellion through the use of a number of different literary genres. Disputation (ch. 11), symbolic act (ch. 12), and oracles of judgment against the prophets (ch. 13), explore the full range of this tendency within the community. Thus, where Esarhaddon's building inscriptions describe Babylon's civic health bluntly and succinctly, Ezekiel deploys the full arsenal prophetic tradition to expose every dimension of the malaise affecting Jerusalem.

(3) What Destroys the Wall? In both Ezekiel and Esarhaddon's building inscriptions, the rebellion of the people leads to the divine abandonment of the city and its consequent destruction. In its use of flood imagery, ch. 13 may reflect yet another appropriation of this motif. Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the agents of destruction are Yahweh's sword, famine, pestilence, and war (cf. ch. 7). The use of a flooding rain to destroy the wall in ch. 13 is unusual for Ezekiel; and yet it has a parallel in Esarhaddon's inscription:

Anger seized the lord of the gods, Marduk. For the overthrow of the land and the destruction of its people he devised evil plans. The Arahtu Canal, a river of abundance, whose floods were high, like unto the deluge, was brought up and it poured [its waters] into the city of his abode and his sanctuary, and made it like unto a ruin heap. (*ARAB*, 2:642)

The clustering of all of these elements around the metaphor of a wall suggests that Ezekiel was acquainted with the metaphor and possibly also with its source in Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions.

Neh 3:35), the prophets have only caused further destruction. To render the simile in terms of prophetic activity, they have failed both to issue warnings of impending danger and to intercede in order to avert it.

Although they assert intimacy with Yahweh by claiming to speak in his name, Yahweh utterly rejects them and declares his categorical opposition to them with the challenge formula "Behold, I am against you." Their exclusion from the community and the land is then described in three parallel clauses.<sup>4</sup>

In Hebrew poetry and prose, parallel clauses or expressions do not simply restate an idea, but extend and develop it. Accordingly, with each successive clause in this announcement of judgment, the prophets' privileges are gradually stripped away until they are completely excluded from Israel. In the first clause, the prophets are excluded from the "council of Israel." This phrase is unique to Ezekiel. The word "council" implies a secret, intimate association of close friends and confidants. The word calls to mind Jeremiah's denunciation of the prophets who claim to have stood in Yahweh's council and thus know Yahweh's secret plans (Jer 18:22). Ezekiel does not exclude these prophets from the council of Yahweh, because they have never been invited into that fellowship. Rather, he excludes them from the council of Israel; perhaps Ezekiel has in mind a close circle of political leaders. The prophets who speak falsely in Yahweh's name are now excluded from this leadership loop. [Political Wisdom]

In the second clause, their names are not written in the "register," or census, of Israel. It is difficult to know the precise import of such a register. There is evidence of population lists in the ancient Near East, but there do not appear to have been comprehensive lists of entire populations.<sup>5</sup> Lists were used in a number of different ways. David's census was used for military conscription (2 Sam 24); other ancient Near Eastern population lists supported land distribution and taxation.<sup>6</sup> In the case of some prominent cities in Assyria in the seventh century, lists enumerated tax-exempt families and properties. In these latter instances, inclusion on a population list implies membership in a privileged subgroup.<sup>7</sup> The lists of returning exiles in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 function analogously to these latter population lists, since they ensure such privileges as service in the

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### Political Wisdom



T. S. Eliot's cynical assessment of the British nobility and its governing bureaucracies provides a useful complement to Ezekiel's analysis of prophetic ineffectiveness:

Cry what shall I cry?  
 All flesh is grass: comprehending  
 The Companions of the Bath, the Knights of the British Empire, the Cavaliers,  
 O Cavaliers! of the Legion of Honour,  
 The Order of the Black Eagle (1st and 2nd class),  
 And the Order of the Rising Sun.  
 Cry cry what shall I cry?  
 The first thing to do is to form the committees:  
 The consultative councils, the standing committees, select committees and sub-committees.

T. S. Eliot, "Difficulties of a Statesman," ll. 1–9, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1971), 87.

priesthood (Ezra 2:62//Neh 7:64).<sup>8</sup> It is possible that Ezekiel has some such list in mind for the prophets.

Finally, Ezekiel denies the prophets the privilege of entering the land. In this third and final clause, exclusion from the land cuts the prophets off from Yahweh's covenantal promises. Like chapter 11, this oracle addresses the question of who constitutes the remnant. Having said much but seen nothing, the prophets have no share in the future community. They are now cut off from those who have been most hurt by their lies—Yahweh's people.

### ***Builders of the Wall, 13:10-16***

The second oracle follows the proof-oracle structure and again condemns the prophets for misleading Yahweh's people with their false prophecy. In vv. 2-9, the prophets were condemned for seeing worthlessness and making false divinations. The specific content of their message is disclosed in vv. 10-16: they declare peace when there is no peace (cf. Jer 6:14; 8:11; 28:9).<sup>9</sup> Such prophecies were rooted in Zion theology, or the belief that Yahweh would protect his chosen city and its inhabitants from harm. Applied to the crisis at hand, this theology inculcated hope for a positive outcome in the war against Babylon.

Ezekiel condemns this message as worthless, likening it to a poorly finished wall that is unable to withstand the rains. Drawing on rare building terminology in its puns and wordplay, the metaphor of the wall remains obscure to modern interpreters, and a number of interpretations are possible.

The word "wall" in 13:10, *ḥayis*, is used only here in the Old Testament. Its use elsewhere in post-biblical Hebrew suggests that it refers to an unfinished wall, possibly constructed simply by piling stones on top of one another without mortaring them into place.<sup>10</sup> Finishing the wall involved plastering it over with a somewhat thick layer of mud or lime plaster, which would protect the wall from the deterioration of rain and damp.

The action of the prophets is described as a kind of daubing or smearing, but the difficulty comes in translating the substance used (Heb. *tāpēl*). NRSV follows a widely accepted rendering of the noun as "whitewash," that is, a very thin layer that does little more than improve the wall's appearance. Others suggest that the substance is an untempered or poorly prepared plaster. Either alternative fits the context, since both materials would be insufficient to withstand the onslaught of a driving rain.

Ezekiel may also have intended to establish a wordplay between two nouns, *tāpēl* I, "plaster," whose meaning has been discussed

above, and *tāpēl* II, “that which is insipid, worthless.”<sup>11</sup> The latter term is used elsewhere in denunciations of prophecy. In Lamentations 2:14, for example, *tāpēl* is parallel with “vanity,” and both terms express the worthlessness of the prophetic message: “Your prophets have seen for you vanity [*šāw*, cf. Ezek 13:6, 7] and nonsense (*tāpēl*).” There is, in addition, a second wordplay between *tāpēl* (plaster/nonsense) and what happens to the wall; it falls (*tippolnā*). The word *tāpēl* thus develops a double pun: worthless divination (*tāpēl* II) is whitewash (*tāpēl* I); worthless divination itself will fall (*tippolnā*). The pun is driven home by the question “When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, ‘Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?’” (13:12).

Yahweh exposes the wall’s weakness by sending torrential rains and hailstones that wash away the prophets’ lies and tear down the wall to its foundations. Yahweh’s wrath is the power in the storm. The destruction is analogous to that of Micah 1:6:

Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,  
a place for planting vineyards.  
I will pour down her stones into the valley,  
and uncover her foundations.

The close of the oracle thus suggests that the wall is a part-for-whole metaphor of the city. The result of the destruction is that neither city nor prophets will be left. Repeating the accusation of v. 10 that the prophets proclaimed peace when there was no peace, vv. 15-16 close the oracle with an ironic observation: no wall, no prophets, no peace.

### **Against the Women Prophets, 13:17-23**

The second part of the chapter condemns the practices of the women prophets. As in the first section, the address contains two structurally similar oracles of judgment combining the proof-oracle form with elements of the woe oracle. In contrast with the judgment of the men prophets, these oracles do not end with a death decree (cf. 13:13) or the women’s exclusion from the community (cf. 13:9). Though they are not killed, they do deserve to die: “Will you hunt down lives among my own people, and yet maintain your own lives?” (13:18). The women will, however, be shut out of the prophetic community: “you shall no longer see false visions or practice divinations” (13:23).

Because the women engage in practices that appear alien to prophecy, it has been suggested that they were performing occult acts more closely resembling magic.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies have challenged the distinctions between magic, religion, and divination; moreover, since the women's activity is partially described in terms of traditional prophetic activity, they should be regarded as prophets, not as witches or sorcerers.

Although a handful of women prophets are named in the Old Testament (e.g., Miriam, Exod 15:20; Deborah, Judg 4–5; Huldah, 2 Kgs 22:14; the wife of Isaiah, Isa 8:3), not much is known of female prophetic activity. Ezekiel 13:17–23 is one of the few passages to speak concretely of their roles. He avoids calling them prophets but does say that they prophesy (13:17; cf. 13:2), and their punishment implies that they saw visions and practiced divination as the male prophets did (13:23; cf. 13:6, 7). Even so, the oracle is so polemically worded that it is impossible to discern the nature and intent of their activity. Ezekiel has engaged in this kind of rhetoric before. The male prophets did not escape his scorn, and in chapter 8, his description of the abominations in the temple makes it nearly impossible to discern the ritual significance of those actions. Given Ezekiel's penchant for ridiculing practices that he condemns, one should avoid reading his oracle as a transparent report of the women's activity.

Ezekiel accuses the women of “sewing bands on all wrists” and “making veils for every height.” The imagery remains obscure. If any actual practice can be discerned behind the polemic, it consists, first, in the use of these bands in rituals involving “binding” and “loosing,”<sup>13</sup> which appear to be healing rituals or, as Ezekiel puts it, rituals related to the question of who lives and dies.<sup>14</sup> [Prophecy and Healing] The language of binding and loosing is reminiscent of the authority granted to the church in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 18:18) and hints at the basic problem for Ezekiel: the women bind and loose on their own authority (13:17, “out of their own imaginations”).

Ezekiel says that the women have usurped Yahweh's prerogative. Yahweh's people pay trifling sums to these women—handfuls of barley and pieces of bread—for rulings in matters of life and death (cf. 13:19). By their actions, the women give the impression that Yahweh can be bought, and that his will regarding life and death can be changed for a fee. Yahweh is thus “profaned” or belittled in the eyes of his people.

Interestingly, the women are not condemned because their rituals are ineffective. Rather, the problem is that their activity under-

### Prophecy and Healing



Ezekiel 13:17-23 suggests that women played an active role in the healing arts; however, Ezekiel's polemic makes it difficult to see how such a role was either normative or prophetic. Other healing accounts do, however, suggest that prophets were experts in the arts of healing. These arts included not only prayers and intercession, but also sympathetic magic and the prescription of salves and ointments.

Prophetic healing narratives are rare, being found primarily in the historical books (1 Kgs 14; 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 1:1-18; 5; 8:7-25). All of these accounts establish a favorable connection between prophecy and healing. Elisha's curing of Naaman the Syrian, for example, becomes proof that "there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:8). The story of Hezekiah's illness illustrates the manner in which the prophet's role as a mediator between the divine and human realms effects healing (2 Kgs 20:1-11//Isa 38:1-22). Although these narratives reflect techniques typically associated with the prophetic activity of intercession, they suggest that prophets also employed quasi-magical techniques. For example, Elisha effects Naaman's cure through a ritual act of bathing in the Jordan seven times (2 Kgs 5:10), while Isaiah prescribes a poultice of figs for Hezekiah's infection (2 Kgs 20:7//Isa 38:21). Ritual and other actions thus complement prophetic intercession.

Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (HSM 54; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 260-77.



### Healing from Leprosy

The prophet Elisha cleanses the Syrian captain Naaman of leprosy.

Cornelis Engebretsz (1468-1533). Small altar, center and inner wings. 1520. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. [Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

mines Yahweh's will, which is to be effected by his sentinel, Ezekiel.<sup>15</sup> What the women perceive as life-giving ritual is, accordingly, condemned as a deadly hunt for human life. In the announcement of judgment, Yahweh declares that he will free his people from their lethal snares.

The final oracle (13:22-23) condemns the women for their fatal inversion of the divine will. They have discouraged the hearts of the righteous, even though that has not been Yahweh's intention. Meanwhile, by strengthening the hands of the wicked, the women have prevented their repentance. The punishment is that they will no longer experience divinations or see visions.



## CONNECTIONS

Chapter 13 is part of a longer response to the exiles' skepticism regarding the fulfillment of visions (cf. 12:21-28; 14). As part of the assurance that Yahweh's word would be fulfilled, Ezekiel 12:24 promised that there would no longer be any lying vision or flattering divination. This chapter suggests that one solution to confusion and skepticism is to eliminate rival prophets.

It has been noted that Yahweh's goal in the restoration is to heal the division within the community by giving the people "one heart." Those whose hearts continue to go astray after their abominations cannot expect to participate in this communal transformation, while those who participate in the restoration must acknowledge that this unity is a gift from Yahweh. Chapter 13 exposes the dirty underside of this vision of unity. The prophets are Yahweh prophets, they speak in Yahweh's name and in the context of the traditions they have inherited, and they exhibit confidence in the God of their traditions. Yet they are condemned for their articulation of this theology. Their visions are deadly lies that lead the people astray (13:10) and snare them in their own desperate delusions (13:19). In an academic and intellectual climate that encourages the diversity of theological voices, it seems unlikely that this chapter has anything meaningful to say to us as we seek to articulate theology that is truthful for our time. Is it possible, however, to arrive at a sympathetic understanding of Ezekiel's condemnation of the prophets?

One possibility is to evaluate Ezekiel's condemnation in terms of the conflict between the Jerusalemites and the exiles. The prophets deserve Ezekiel's condemnation because they have contributed to the divisiveness that Ezekiel and Yahweh abhor. Evidence of the prophets' role in the conflict is clearest in the accusation against the women prophets: by their actions, they have discouraged one group (the righteous) and encouraged another (the wicked). The exclusion of the male prophets from council, community, and land suggests that they also played a role in the disputes concerning the status of the exiles. If, by speaking in Yahweh's name, they had shaped the Jerusalemite stance with regard to the exiles in chapter 11, then their message has contributed to the fractures within the community.

Our sympathy for the exiles may therefore allow us to justify Ezekiel's condemnation of the prophets; but the problem for contemporary theology is still not resolved. The chapter asserts that certain theological perspectives are right and others wrong, and we would intuitively agree with that. Certainly as we look back on the

conflict between the Jerusalemites and the exiles, we consider it unjust that the Jerusalemites should benefit from the exiles' absence. But as we seek to interpret the ways of God in our own time, we should be wary of attempts to stifle theological diversity in the name of church unity. We do sense that some theological perspectives are truer than others, but we rightly shudder when some voices are silenced in the theological conversation. What remains problematic is the issue of when and why some theological perspectives ought to be rejected.

Ezekiel condemns both the men and women prophets because they speak "out of their own imaginations." While this statement may simply mean that the prophets fabricated their messages out of whole cloth, it also implies that their prophetic message comes from their core identity—a constellation of past memories and experiences, as well as of emotions and hopes. By prophesying out of their own hearts, the prophets continue to discern their present situation in terms of past experiences. In the past, their fears had been put to rest with comforting words of assurance, such as those found in the psalms: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps 30:5). Moreover, since the prophetic and historical literature reflects the experience of past crises dissipating "like a dream, a vision of the night" (Isa 29:7), the prophets of Ezekiel's time would have had good reason to assume that the traditional, optimistic solutions to crisis remained viable. It would therefore have seemed perfectly reasonable to them to speak words of peace to the people.<sup>16</sup>

Alan Cooper has observed that the extent to which the imagination can produce something truthful has always troubled interpreters of poetry and philosophy: "The more basic question is . . . whether the imagination can be a source of truth. The pendulum has swung back and forth on that question throughout the history of philosophy and poetics."<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel's reason for condemning the work of these prophets is that Yahweh did not speak to them. From the perspective of the imagination, one may also say that the prophets were, for whatever reason, unable to perceive that their present situation required a radical break with the past—and with their old identities and imaginations.<sup>18</sup> If, as Ezekiel says, Yahweh was about to do what had never yet been done (Ezek 5:9), one must concede that Yahweh's actions would have been utterly unimaginable. The old verities that filled the prophets' imaginations could not prepare them for this.

All theological reflection is a work of the imagination, and in that respect, theology falls prey to the dangers that these prophets expe-

rienced. Ezekiel condemns the prophets for speaking out of their imaginations, but he does not give us a model for dealing with theological conflict or contradiction. Rather, he poses a question: In what way can the human heart, which has been shaped, trained, and, yes, battered by its education and experience, continue to be open to the new winds of the divine spirit?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to Deut 18:10, which explicitly condemns the practice of divination, Ezek 13 speaks of prophecy and divination as related practices (13:6, 7, 23). For a review of recent assessments of the relation of prophecy to divination, see Martti Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources*, SAA 7 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:394-95.

<sup>3</sup> In many contexts, NRSV translates the verb *yaḥal* "to wait" to convey the idea of hope (Pss 119:43, 49, 74, 81, 114, 147; 131:3; 147:11).

<sup>4</sup> The rejection of the prophets from the community has parallels in the Assyrian treaty curses. Those who violate a loyalty oath are expelled from the palace, their names are deleted from Assyria, and their seed is cut off from the land. For texts and discussion, see Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources*, 110-18.

<sup>5</sup> F. M. Fales, "Census, Ancient Near East," *ABD* 1:882-83.

<sup>6</sup> Graham I. Davies, "An Archaeological Commentary on Ezekiel 13," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence E. Stager (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 114.

<sup>7</sup> Fales, "Census, Ancient Near East," 882-83.

<sup>8</sup> Davies, "An Archaeological Commentary on Ezekiel 13," 114.

<sup>9</sup> The expectation of peace may have connections with the waiting of Ezek 13:6; cf. Jer 8:15; 14:19.

<sup>10</sup> Mishnah, *Shebi'it*, 3:8. See the discussion in Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols.; (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:237.

<sup>11</sup> William H. Propp, "The Meaning of *Tapel* in Ezekiel," *ZAW* 102 (1990): 404-408; cf. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Heremeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:287.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marjo C. A. Korpel, "Avian Spirits in Ugarit and in Ezekiel 13," in *Ugarit, Religion, and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion, and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994*, Festschrift J. C. L. Gibson, ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson, and J. B. Lloyd (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), 99-113. Korpel argues that the women's craft "consisted in necromancy, the ability to consult the spirits of the dead and to make them do what their medium wanted" (p. 109).

<sup>13</sup> Davies, "An Archaeological Commentary on Ezekiel 13," 121-22. Attempts to interpret these terms by way of later rabbinic terminology remain unconvincing; cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:244.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy R. Bowen, "The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17-23," *JBL* 118 (1999): 417-33.

<sup>15</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:244.

<sup>16</sup> This reflection is indebted to the essay by Alan Cooper, "Imagining Prophecy," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 26-44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bowen, "The Daughters of Your People."

# NO INTERCESSION FOR JERUSALEM

## Ezekiel 14:1-23

In vv. 1-11, the elders of Israel come to Ezekiel in order to inquire of Yahweh. While the subject of the inquiry is not stated, one may infer from the chapter that it concerns the welfare of Jerusalem (cf. vv. 21-23). Yahweh rejects the inquiry and employs rhetorical strategies from case law to explain why. In the second subunit, vv. 12-23, case law is employed again to foreclose any possibility of intercession for Jerusalem. Whereas vv. 1-11 reject the cultic practice of using the *gillûlîm* as intercessors (cf. 8:7-13), vv. 12-20 also reject the better known tradition of intercession by righteous individuals. Though Yahweh has delivered the unrighteous in the past because of the intercession of righteous individuals, in the current crisis Yahweh will reject such pleas. If the unrighteous do escape the destruction of Jerusalem, they will serve only to testify concerning their guilt to the exiles. The exiles will thereby be consoled and will understand that Yahweh did not destroy Jerusalem without cause.

Form-critical treatments of chapter 14 typically treat the two subunits, 14:1-11 and 12-23, independently of one another, on the assumption that 14:1-11 concludes a larger section dealing with prophecy and 14:12-23 introduces a new theme. But there is good reason to regard the entire chapter as a coherent literary unit.<sup>1</sup> [The Literary Context of Ezekiel 14:1-11] Both sections of the chapter are concerned with intercession, and both redirect the readers' attention from the fate of Jerusalem to their own.

The chapter combines vocabulary and rhetorical styles from a wide range of contexts. This is most evident in vv. 1-11, where cultic legal terminology defines Yahweh's exclusive claim to Israel; language from the realm of cultic intercession redefines the prerogatives of petitioners and petitioned; challenge formulas from the setting of warfare establish the deadliness of Yahweh's ultimatum; and omen language imbues all of it with the numinousness of divine encounter. The second section of the chapter is more straightforward but no less dramatic. Invoking three well-known models of intercession, Ezekiel hammers home the impossibility of interceding for Jerusalem.

## COMMENTARY

**The Hearts of the Inquirers, 14:1-11**

Certain elders of Israel come to inquire of Ezekiel in his house. In chapter 8, the exilic leaders were called the “elders of Judah,” while those in Jerusalem were identified as the elders of Israel. The reference to the exilic leaders as “Israel” may imply their newly acquired status as the remnant from which Yahweh would restore Israel (cf. 11:14-21); on the other hand, since they are accused of using their idols in the same way the Jerusalemite elders did, it is more likely that the title highlights the essential likeness of the two groups of elders. The subject of the inquiry is not identified, but the context implies that the exiles have come to inquire about Jerusalem, possibly also to lodge a complaint against Yahweh for his treatment of the city. [Inquiring, Answering, and the Character of Yahweh]

**The Literary Context of Ezekiel 14:1-11**

A well-established consensus reads Ezek 14:1-11 as the conclusion to the larger unit of oracles against false prophecy (12:21–14:1). Among recent proponents of this position, Shemaryahu Talmon and Michael Fishbane argued that interlocking vocabulary and motifs hold these disparate oracles together. However, even they acknowledge that Ezek 14:1-11 shares neither metaphors nor vocabulary with the preceding oracles on prophecy.

The method employed by Talmon and Fishbane looks for connections between and among oracles in sequence; other methods identify the repetition of patterns across larger segments of the book. For example, Daniel Block noted significant structural similarities between chs. 8–11 and 14:1-11. Each unit contains an inquiry from the elders (8:1; 14:1), Yahweh’s private disclosure to Ezekiel about the people’s spiritual condition (8:1-18; 14:3), his response to this condition (8:17; 14:3), and his resolve to execute judgment, even while offering hope of deliverance to some (9:1-11; 14:4-11).

Working independently of Block, Thomas Renz took the identification of larger complexes one step further. Again identifying the repetition

of patterns, Renz identified several macro-units in the book (e.g., chs. 1–7, 8–13, 14–19, 20–24, etc.). Each such unit advances the argument by increasingly involving the readers. According to Renz, then, chs. 1–7 state the basic theme, 8–13 present the destruction of Jerusalem as a fait accompli, and the rhetorical unit beginning at 14:1 urges the exiles to avoid the city’s fate by repenting of their idolatry. The chapter establishes the essential likeness between the exiles and the inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem, since both groups can be accused of idolatry. Urging them to repent of this idolatry and to accept the inevitability of Jerusalem’s destruction, the chapter forces the exiles to separate not only from the past but also from their fellow Jerusalemites. By Renz’s account, subsequent chapters in this macro-unit continue to urge repentance in light of Jerusalem’s impending destruction.

Shemaryahu Talmon and Michael Fishbane, “The Structuring of Biblical Books: Studies in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 10 (1975/76): 129–53, esp. 137; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Erdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:422-23; and Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 74–75.

Yahweh deflects the question by asking instead about the ritual practices of the inquirers (14:3). Pointing out that they continue to treat idols as objects of devotion, Yahweh asks Ezekiel why he should accept their inquiries. Yahweh's response can be divided into three parts, a private communication to Ezekiel in which the offense is identified (14:3), a two-part oracle coupling a legal ruling with a call to repentance (14:4-8), and a warning concerning prophets who claim to speak in Yahweh's name (14:9-11).

### ***Shall I Let Myself Be Consulted? 14:3-8***

Communicating directly with the prophet, Yahweh deflects the exiles' charge that their situation is the result of divine abandonment (cf. Ezek 8:12). The counter-charge is delineated in two parallel clauses, which employ Ezekiel's characteristically polemical terminology for idolatry. The first clause accuses the elders of causing idols to come "upon" (Heb. *ʿal*) their hearts (NRSV "these men have taken their idols into their hearts"). Although some critics have interpreted this clause literally to suggest that the men wear amulets over their hearts,<sup>2</sup> Walther Zimmerli and others have argued instead that the idiom describes the internalization of idolatrous practices.<sup>3</sup>

As is typical of Hebrew parallelism, the second clause does not simply restate the meaning of the first but extends its meaning. Not only do the men think of the idols as objects of devotion, they also set them as a "stumbling block of iniquity" before their faces. Whether this clause reflects internal spiritual attitudes or ritual practices depends on one's interpretation of the phrase "stumbling block of their iniquity" (Heb. *mikšôl ʾawônām*). If one accepts the

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#### **Inquiring, Answering, and the Character of Yahweh**



Although the chapter does not make this point explicit, the exiles' inquiry revolves around the question of the character of Yahweh. The language of inquiring (*dāraš*) and answering (*ʾānā*), as well as the theme of intercession, situates the chapter within the context of forensic disputes over the integrity of covenant partners. Within the realm of divine-human relationships, such language is widely attested in the complaint psalms, where petitioners attribute their suffering to Yahweh's inexplicable absence or anger. When petitioners seek or call on Yahweh (*dāraš*) in such situa-

tions, they expect him to answer. Psalms of thanksgiving regularly praise Yahweh for answering worshipers in their hour of need.

The impending destruction of Jerusalem may have called Yahweh's character into question (cf. 8:12). As in the case of the destruction of Sodom, the exiles could easily have asked, with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:25). Yahweh's refusal to answer such a question can only have kept the questions alive. Hence the chapter ends with an answer about Yahweh's justice: the exiles will understand the ways of Yahweh when they see the ways of the survivors of Jerusalem.

abstract interpretation of the first clause, then the emphasis is placed on iniquity, and the “stumbling block” is construed as a metaphor for the manner in which iniquity will cause the downfall of the elders.<sup>4</sup> NRSV follows this line of interpretation and renders the phrase to suggest that the iniquity has become a stumbling block.

One suspects that the primary reason for following a spiritual line of interpretation is that it is difficult to imagine exiles engaged in idolatrous practices that would be more at home in the sanctuaries of Judah. But a more concrete meaning may be implied by both clauses of v. 3. First, the expression “take idols into their hearts” requires a more subtle understanding of the relationship between internal attitudes and cult objects. With one exception, all of the uses of the idiom (Heb. *ʿālāh ʿal lēb*) employ a cult object or cult practice as the focus of the heart’s devotion (2 Kgs 12:5; Jer 3:16; 44:21; 51:50; cf. Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; the exception is Isa 65:17). Even if idolatry is a spiritual issue, the actual use of cult objects remains crucial to the meaning of this idiom.

That the “stumbling block of their iniquity” refers to cult objects and is not a metaphor for the fatal consequences of sin is suggested by Ezekiel’s use of the phrase elsewhere. [\[The Stumbling Block of Iniquity\]](#) Moreover, the clause, “and [they] placed the stumbling block of iniquity before their faces,” more explicitly describes the manner in which these idols interfere with the proper worship of Yahweh. It may be recalled that in the commentary on 8:7-13, it was argued that the *gillûlîm* were not presented as rival deities but as intermediaries to whom the elders complained of Yahweh’s absence. Ezekiel rejects them, of course, but it is important to keep in mind that the ritual portrayed in Ezekiel 8:7-13 was thoroughly Yahwistic. The elders did not worship these *gillûlîm* in their own right but rather continued to speak to them of their desire for Yahweh’s presence. Not only is Ezekiel 14:3b intelligible within this general framework, it also illustrates why the use of divine intermediaries can be construed as idolatry, or the displacement or rejection of Yahweh.

In valid petitions of complaint, the individual comes directly into the presence of Yahweh (Heb. *nōkah pēnē yhw̄h*, Jer 17:16; Lam 2:19); by contrast, these elders do not come face to face with Yahweh but rather put their stumbling blocks, or idols, before their faces (Heb. *nōkah pēnē yhw̄h*). The expression is not an exact parallel, but it is reminiscent of the injunction of the first commandment (“you shall have no other gods before me,” Heb. *ʿal-pānāy*, Exod 20:3). Theoretically, they function as intercessors; practically, they become the more immediate focus of human devo-



### The Stumbling Block of Iniquity



The motif of the stumbling block is well known in the Old Testament and has both literal and metaphorical connotations as an obstacle that impedes one's progress (cf. Lev 19:4; Isa 57:14; 1 Sam 25:31; Isa 8:14; Jer 6:21). But the notion of a stumbling block of *iniquity* is unique to Ezekiel. Critics interpret the stumbling block metaphorically as the beginning of transgression; however, support for this reading is slim and rests primarily on Ezek 18:20, which identifies the stumbling block as transgressions.

Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the motif of the stumbling block is more closely associated with idolatry. In 7:19, the stumbling block is identified as silver and gold, which is then interpreted as the source of idolatry (7:20). Similarly, in 44:12, the idols are identified as the stumbling block. Given the juxtaposition of the stumbling block with idols in 14:3, it is likely that it refers to the use of cult objects in Judean worship.

tion. It is not so much that the exiles turn away from Yahweh to other deities as that they fail to come directly into Yahweh's presence. The use of intermediaries is thus rejected as a violation of Yahweh's exclusive claim of allegiance. Yahweh reacts with an unqualified vehemence. Yahweh reveals his displeasure with the rhetorical question "Shall I let myself be inquired of by them?" The personal pronoun makes it difficult to determine whether Yahweh rejects the inquiry made by the intermediaries or by the elders; either is possible. [Inner Motivations and External Works]

Yahweh next turns the tables on the inquirers. This section of the oracle has two parts that relate to one another in theme and style. In the first (14:4-5), Yahweh declares his opposition to all who take idols into their hearts. In the second part, a call to repentance is offered in the context of Yahweh's imminent act of judgment. Presented in the style of a hypothetical legal case, the argument establishes a general principle extending beyond the present occasion. As if to demonstrate his requirement of direct communication, Yahweh interrupts the enunciation of legal principles with a very personal reaction to the inquirers' use of the *gillûlim*. Rather than answering their query, Yahweh declares that he himself will require an answer from them about their use of idols. [Does Yahweh Expect to Answer or Be Answered?] Ezekiel thus manipulates the conventional language of inquiring and answering not only to reverse the complaint but also to insist on direct communication. In the end, Yahweh wishes to dislodge the idols from the hearts of the exiles and reclaim their hearts for himself alone (14:5).

In the second part of the oracle (14:6-8), v. 7 reiterates the legal principle first stated in v. 4. That principle is now framed by a call to repentance (v. 6) and a threat of judgment (v. 8). Standing between these two possibilities, the legal principle becomes the reason to repent (cf. "for," v. 7) as well as the justification for

### Inner Motivations and External Works



Ezek 14:1-11 hints at an intriguing shift in focus from external acts to internal motivations. The exiles are not condemned for idolatrous practices, presumably because their absence from the Jerusalem temple rendered the use of idols impossible. But the habit of idolatry persisted, and Ezekiel challenges the exiles to examine the state of their hearts. One may compare this insistence on the condition of the heart to prophetic calls for justice and righteousness. Though they did not condemn cultic worship, the prophets did urge a redirection of Israelite piety away from expressions of devotion in acts of worship to expressions of devotion in all of one's social and economic life (cf. Mic 6:6-8). These prophetic calls to justice and righteousness urge a shift from one form of external behavior (i.e., worship) to another (economic life); nevertheless, the underlying assumption is that such a shift would reflect a more wholehearted commitment to the will of Yahweh.

The examination of inner attitudes and motivations continues throughout the biblical tradition. For example, in his discourse concerning the law in Matt 5:21-48, Jesus deepens its requirements to include inner attitudes that contribute to external actions. In this case, Jesus does not value inner spirituality over external expressions of righteousness, but rather draws attention to the inherent connection between inner thoughts and external acts.

What these messages have in common is a demand for human integrity. For the prophets, this integrity was evident in the consistency of external acts of worship and social life. For Matthew's Jesus, it is evident in the coherence of inner motivations and external expressions. So also for Ezekiel: the covenant with Yahweh required wholehearted devotion. As long as the exiles harbored their idols in their hearts, there could be no covenant.

Yahweh's announcement of judgment. Standing in this position between repentance and judgment, the principle is expanded to stipulate the penalty in such cases: any person who inquires of Yahweh while continuing to worship idols will be "cut off" from Israel. Such a penalty is imposed by Yahweh, and not a human court of law, and involves a sudden, fatal catastrophe that quite literally cuts someone off from the community of Israel. Regarding the unexpected offer to the exiles to repent of their idols and turn from their abominations, Zimmerli observes, "It must be noted in reflection upon the oracle 14:1-11 how strangely here, in the middle of a severely critical oracle, there emerges a call of invitation, which can only be understood against the background of a new divine act of deliverance."<sup>5</sup> But it must also be noted that the call to repentance is couched not in the language of mercy but in the declaration of Yahweh's right to the hearts and minds of his people. Commentators note that the legal terminology of 14:4-8 most closely resembles that of Leviticus 17, a section of the Holiness Code that sets forth the absolute legal requirement of slaughtering all animals in ritual sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> While the connection between idolatry and blood sacrifice is not immediately apparent to modern readers, Ezekiel 14 and Leviticus 17 share an underlying conviction that all life belongs to Yahweh.<sup>7</sup> In Leviticus 17, that

### Does Yahweh Expect to Answer or Be Answered?



NRSV's translation of Ezek 14:4, 7 ("I myself will answer them") follows a long and respectable tradition of interpretation and translation. Recent commentators, as well as the standard lexicons, all interpret the niph'al form of *'anâ* in Ezek 14:4, 7 as a special reflexive form. But such a form of *'anâ* is otherwise unattested in the Old Testament and is unnecessary in the present context. The situation of asking or inquiring and expecting an answer lies behind the use of niph'al *'anâ* in Ezek 14:4, 7, as well as in the remaining three instances of niph'al *'anâ* found elsewhere in the Old Testament (Prov 21:13; Job 11:2; 19:7; cf. conjectural reading of Job 9:15). Someone speaks and expects to be answered; indeed, even the more specialized sense of responding to a petitioner's cry is reflected in these passages.

Given the context of Ezek 14, in which the exiles have inquired but Yahweh has already refused their inquiry, it makes little sense to suggest that Yahweh now answers them. Instead, Yahweh counters the exiles' inquiry with one of his own. If the question is the betrayal of the covenantal relationship, Yahweh has abundant evidence that the people are at fault, and he expects the exiles to answer for their ways.

conviction is expressed in the demand that all slaughtered animals be brought to Yahweh's sanctuary, and in Ezekiel, in the requirement of undivided, wholehearted allegiance to Yahweh.

Embedded within Yahweh's announcement of judgment is the declaration that those who are cut off will become both a "sign" and a "byword."<sup>8</sup> As a sign, the judgment of the idolaters discloses the work of Yahweh in history. This sign becomes evidence against any claim of divine absence. A byword or proverb, meanwhile, indicates that such a sign has been incorporated into the wisdom of human experience.<sup>9</sup> This section of the oracle thus closes with an object lesson for the exiles' further contemplation.

### *The Deceived Prophet, 14:9-11*

Ezekiel 14:9-11 does not easily fit its context. A recognition formula in v. 8 suggests that the oracle against the inquirers has come to an end. On the other hand, the lack of introductory formulas would suggest that these verses represent a continuation of the previous speech. Moreover, like 14:4-8, vv. 9-11 contain verbal parallels with Leviticus 17 (e.g., "bear their punishment," v. 10, cf. Lev 17:16). Finally, the concluding statement of purpose, which ends with Yahweh's declaration of the covenant formulary, "Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God," completes the deliberations against the exiles' spiritual condition by yet again insisting on Yahweh's exclusive claim to Israel. As long as they harbor idols in their hearts, there can be no covenant. But even in the midst of this situation, Yahweh uses the prophets to bring about the rehabilitation of the people. The divine strategy is the use of deception. In contrast with the oracles of chapter 13, which con-

demned prophets for lies and deceptions fabricated from their own imaginations, 14:9-11 asserts that Yahweh is behind the false messages. The notion of the deceived prophet is inherently connected to the idea of divine omnipotence, since it attributes all revelations to the sovereign rule of Yahweh in history. Such a conception is implicit in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah, a classic tale of divine deception (1 Kgs 22:19-23). It is also a fitting response to the elders' use of *gillûlîm* as intermediaries: Yahweh counters their indirection with misdirection, all with the aim of bringing the people to recognize his sovereign claim.

### **The Futility of Intercession, 14:12-23**

The formula for the reception of the divine word in v. 12 sets the next section off as a new unit in the chapter. Because there is no new messenger formula, however, one may suggest that this oracle continues to address the question that the elders of Israel had put to Ezekiel in 14:1. There is also a thematic connection of examining the consequences of betraying Yahweh. Ezekiel 14:1-11 described that betrayal as the use of intermediaries (the idols) to consult Yahweh. Although such specificity is absent from 14:12, the phrase that NRSV has translated "act faithlessly" is frequently associated with idolatry (1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 33:19; 36:14; Num 31:16) and in at least one context signifies the practice of seeking guidance from beings other than Yahweh (1 Chr 10:13). The theme of covenantal disloyalty described in 14:1-11 is thus resumed in 14:12-23. [Sin]

The subunit is divided into two parts. The first (14:12-20) describes the hypothetical situation of a land that has sinned against Yahweh. In quasi-legal fashion, this section explores the impossibility of averting punishment, even if the three great paragons of righteousness, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were to intercede for the land. Neither the land nor their children would be spared, and they alone would be delivered from the disaster. The second subunit (14:21-23) applies this ruling to Jerusalem, though with some intriguing twists.

#### ***Noah, Daniel, and Job, 14:12-20***

In a hypothetical case concerning a land's betrayal of Yahweh, attempts to avert judgment are rendered futile. The unit recapitulates the four acts of judgment that been decreed for the city of Jerusalem earlier in the book: Yahweh stretches forth his hand and breaks the staff of bread (14:13; cf. 4:16; 5:16), sends wild animals

## Sin

**ΑΩ** The verbs in Ezek 14:13, *ḥāṭāʾ*, “sin,” and *māʾal*, “act faithlessly,” both signify the violation of a relationship. The NRSV translation is accurate; but because the English words “sin” and “faith” are commonly associated with religious life, the connotations of betrayal and personal violation have been lost. The verb *ḥāṭāʾ* acquired its religious connotation in antiquity, but a few passages in the Old Testament still reflect the social dimensions of the concept. A sin is primarily an offense against another person with whom one is in a relationship. So, for example, the rebellion of a vassal against his overlord (2 Kgs 18:14) or the mistreatment of a subordinate (1 Sam 19:4f) can both be labeled sins, because both defy institutionally defined norms for behavior with respect to the other.

Because sinning involves the violation of a relationship, sins have victims. In Ezek 14:12, the sin affects Yahweh personally, and this is indicated by the use of the prepositional phrase “against me.” The parallel verb *mʾl* underscores the personal dimension of the sin; but again, NRSV’s use of religious language to translate the phrase makes that difficult to see. Elsewhere, the verb is used of marital infidelity (Num 5:12), and of the deception of a neighbor (Lev 5:21 [6:2]). The verb thus designates a type of betrayal that fundamentally destroys the possibility of life together.

Klaus Koch, “כחַטָּא *chātāʾ*,” *TDOT*, 4:309-19.

against the land (14:15; cf. 5:17), unleashes the sword (14:17; cf. 5:12), and sends pestilence and bloodshed (14:18; cf. 5:17). In each case, it is asserted that not even the legendary intercessors, Noah, Daniel, and Job, would be able either to avert the disaster or to save their own children. Only they themselves would be saved. As with the terms designating sin in 14:12, the concept of righteousness is primarily relational. [Righteousness]

For modern readers, the juxtaposition of Noah, Daniel, and Job creates difficulties. In the biblical tradition Noah and Job, as non-Israelites, are the stuff of legend: Noah saves his family and the birds and the beasts of the field from the prehistoric flood (Gen 6–9), while Job suffers within history in the land of Uz, among the peoples of the east. Moreover, the legends associated with these men are preeminently concerned with the preservation of their children. Though Noah’s sons eventually prove to be wicked, Yahweh’s rescue of Noah also results in the deliverance of his sons. Job, meanwhile, believes that his righteousness can protect his children from harm, even if they should unwittingly sin against Yahweh (Job 1:1-5). Ezekiel’s allusion to the righteousness of these heroes is perfectly consistent with the legends that accumulated around them.

It is odd that Daniel, familiar to readers of the Bible as one of the Babylonian exiles but not as a righteous father, is included with Noah and Job. How could Ezekiel include one of his contemporaries alongside these other two legendary figures? One solution to this puzzle has been to suggest that Ezekiel was not referring to the

### Righteousness

**ΑΩ** Righteousness (Heb. *sēdāqâ*) is the opposite of sin and betrayal as defined in [Sin]. Primarily, the term indicates the honoring of relationships according to institutionally defined norms. Modern readers tend to overlook this relational quality and assume that righteousness is a term for moral uprightness. In some respects, that interpretation is supported by the biblical descriptions of righteousness. For example, in Ezek 18:5-9, a righteous person is defined as one who obeys Yahweh's statutes and ordinances. Modern readers thus tend to equate righteousness with an individual's adherence to legal or moral norms, and not with the relationship that such norms define. It would be mistaken to overlook the demand for moral uprightness, but it is equally problematic to ignore that these moral requirements are rooted in relationships with God and one another.

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biblical Daniel but to another Daniel of legend (spelled Dan'el), who, like Noah and Job, was not an Israelite and, furthermore, whose life revolved around his desire for a son. An allusion in Ezekiel 28:4 likens the king of Tyre to a wise figure named Daniel; thus it has been suggested that the hero was of Phoenician or Canaanite origin. A corroborating source for this identification is the Ugaritic legend of Aqhat. In this legend, the prayers of the righteous king Dan'el for a son are heeded by the god Baal. When the boy Aqhat is grown, however, the goddess Anat sends vultures to kill him in order to steal his bow.<sup>10</sup> Dan'el then prays to find the remains of his dead son so that he may give him a proper burial.

Because Dan'el does not intercede for his son and in any case is unable to bring him back from the dead, some scholars have doubted that this legend adequately explains Ezekiel's allusion to Daniel. However, the legend's overarching theme of the father's longing for the son sheds light on the emotional impact of Ezekiel 14:12-23. A motif running throughout the oracle is that even the exemplary righteousness of fathers cannot spare the children. The theme of righteousness across the generations will be further developed in Ezekiel 18; here, the question is whether salvation without the deliverance of one's children is worth anything. Children are the future; if the children die, the fathers have are for all intents and purposes cut off from Yahweh's promises.

### *Consolation over the Destruction of Jerusalem, 14:21-23*

All of the preceding is now applied to Jerusalem. The transitional phrase "how much more" suggests that Jerusalem is unlike the hypothetical land of 14:12-20 in that it has no righteous intercessors at all (cf. Jer 5:1). Another difference, contrary to the assertion in 14:12-20 that children will not be spared, is that sons and daughters remaining in Jerusalem will indeed be brought out to the exiles. Ezekiel studiously avoids describing this as either deliverance

or salvation; Greenberg notes that the children have been preserved for the “grim, didactic” purpose of vindicating Yahweh’s judgment.<sup>11</sup> Once the exiles see the ways of the survivors, they will be consoled over the destruction of Jerusalem, and see that Yahweh did not act without cause.

The chapter thus ends on a note of affirmation about divine justice. The exiles’ inquiry had most likely challenged that conviction, especially as it related to the impending fate of Jerusalem. Yahweh rejected their accusation, because the people themselves had betrayed the covenant through their use of the *gillûlîm*. The entire chapter thus reverses the people’s implied accusation of Yahweh and urges the exiles to consider their own commitment to the covenant.

The chapter is unlike anything that we have yet encountered in Ezekiel. By couching the announcement of judgment in hypothetical legal terms, the chapter creates space for personal reflection. Rather than facing the divine accusation directly, the exiles hear the indirect declaration of law. “Anyone who takes his idols into his heart” can expect to be cut off from Israel. They can apply this law to themselves and act accordingly.

Yet Yahweh remains in direct communication with the exiles. Although nearly all of the chapter is styled in the indirect language of law and hypothetical situations, the exiles hear the call to repentance as a personal appeal from their God to avoid certain destruction. Finally, they receive an answer to their inquiry in v. 23, when Yahweh again addresses them directly and tells them that they will come to understand his justice after Jerusalem is destroyed. Whether this is to be understood as divine mercy or as a conquest of human hearts, Yahweh’s intention for the exiles is to make them his people once again.

## CONNECTIONS

With its intricate combination of idolatry and intercession, this chapter suggests two areas for further reflection. First, what is the nature of the human heart? Second, what harm can it do to rely on mediators in our search for God?

The motif of the human heart appears frequently in Ezekiel. Perhaps the best known use of the motif is in Ezekiel 36, when Yahweh promises to remove the hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh, which will be able to respond to God’s grace and

willing to observe God's commandments. While it is true that Ezekiel's image implies that hardened hearts cannot be softened and require a complete replacement, it also suggests that there is nothing inherently defective in the human ability to hear and respond to the divine word. Properly functioning, the human heart is perfectly capable of responding to God.

In this chapter, Ezekiel speaks of the heart as a kind of repository for objects of human devotion, in this case the *gillûlîm*, or idols. The metaphor is a powerful one, and it can be used to explore the nature and capacity of human affections. For Ezekiel, of course, the presence of idols in the hearts of the exiles is a sign not of enlarged affections but of displaced ones.

Poets employ the metaphor of the heart as a treasury to explore this displacement of God from human affections in any number of ways. Addressing the crucified Jesus, the seventeenth-century

Anglican poet George Herbert asks why his only lodging on earth turned out to be a tomb: "Whither art thou thrown? No lodging for thee but a cold hard stone?" This despite the abundant places where Jesus would have chosen to dwell: "So many hearts on earth, and yet not one receive thee?" Herbert observes, ironically, that the heart's capaciousness, as evidenced by its ability to store up transgressions and distractions, is no sign of its ability or willingness to invite God in. Yet God has worked with stone before, and not even these cold, murderous hearts can keep God from working with stone again. ["Sepulchre"]

The midwestern American singer-songwriter Greg Brown offers a more contemporary (and playful) exploration of the motif of the heart in his song "Lord, I have Made You a Place in My Heart." Confessing to filling his heart with old and useless junk, he only halfheartedly invites God to visit:

But if I open the door, you'll know that I'm  
poor and my secrets are all that I own.  
O Lord, I have made you a place in my heart,  
and I hope that you'll leave it alone.

### "Sepulchre"



O blessed body! Whither art thou thrown?  
No lodging for thee, but a cold hard stone?

So many hearts on earth, and yet not one  
Receive thee?

Sure there is room within our hearts' good store;  
For they can lodge transgressions by the score:  
Thousands of towys dwell there, yet out of door  
They leave thee.

But that which shows them large, shows them unfit.  
What ever sin did this pure rock commit,  
Which holds thee now? Who hath indicted it  
Of murder?

Where our hard hearts have took up stones to brain  
thee,

And missing this, most falsely did arraign thee;  
Only these stones in quiet entertain thee,  
And order.

And as of old, the law by heav'nly art  
Was writ in stone; so thou, which also art  
The letter of the word, find'st no fit heart  
To hold thee.

Yet do we still persist as we began,  
And so should perish, but that nothing can,  
Though it be cold, hard, foul, from loving man  
Withhold thee.

George Herbert, "Sepulchre," in *The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater, Everyman's Library (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 38.



For Brown, the heart is a cluttered archive of longings, hurts, and fears. Even though such hearts may be more heavy than hard, they nevertheless leave no room for God. Though Brown might think that he would like to invite God into his life, he is as unwilling to clear away the clutter as he is ashamed of it. The invitation turns out to be a mere formality, as Brown blurts out his real wish: just leave me alone!

Refusing to accept any inquiries as long as the exiles continue to cherish their *gillûlîm*, Yahweh insists that the covenant requires their wholehearted, exclusive devotion to Yahweh alone. While conventional interpretations of Ezekiel construe the issue as a matter of competing claims between rival deities, this commentary has followed a different line of inquiry in its suggestion that the *gillûlîm* were representations of intermediary beings, divine intercessors who would hear the complaints of the people and then communicate them to Yahweh (cf. 8:13-17). Yet even as intermediaries, they are rejected.

An analogy from the sphere of human relationships may help to explain why. The problem is triangulation, a phenomenon basic to family and group dynamics.<sup>12</sup> In triangulation, one or both partners in an unstable or unhealthy relationship may recruit a third party in an attempt to stabilize the relationship. A child may recruit the more approachable parent to get a favor from the more remote one; an unhappy spouse may confide in a child instead of dealing directly with the disappointing partner; or two coworkers may complain to one another about a difficult supervisor. While such strategies can occasionally provide stability, they more often weaken the original relationship, as well as create further unhealthy dynamics. At the very least, one of the three parties to the triangle is pushed out. Even in cases where individuals are recruited to serve as intermediaries, distance between the two original partners remains, if it is not exacerbated.

When this model is applied to Ezekiel 14, it becomes evident that what is rejected is not simply the *gillûlîm* but any form of intermediation; it is for this reason that Yahweh rejects the intercession of even righteous individuals along with the more scandalous innovation of employing divine intermediaries. In either case, the intended effect, to establish reconciliation between the estranged parties of the covenant, is obviated by the introduction of an intermediary.

While it is customary to interpret this chapter as further indication that judgment is inevitable and that it is therefore useless to intercede on Jerusalem's behalf, the more pressing concern appears

to be to establish Yahweh's exclusive claim to the hearts of Israel. For this reason, the oracle issues an invitation to return to Yahweh, as well as the affirmation that Yahweh's goal is the reestablishment of the covenant. As the covenant formulary makes clear, there is no room in this relationship for anyone other than Israel and its God. Two's company, three's a crowd.

If this interpretation of the nature of the *gillûlîm* and other intercessors of the house of Israel is correct, then the implications for contemporary devotion are somewhat different from traditional observations concerning the hazards of idolatry. If the reader disagrees with the interpretation offered here, he is encouraged to develop the more traditional critique of idolatry by exploring the manner in which God is displaced in human affections. One may think of idolatry as a metaphor for other goods—anything of value, worth, or power that becomes our ultimate concern to the exclusion of God. If, on the other hand, the reader wishes to pursue the implications of the exegesis offered here, then she may wish to consider how our means unwittingly become our ends in our search for God. It is not that we intend to create rivals to God's affections; rather, as our means of seeking God become familiar to us, we end up holding on to them rather than venturing out into mystery. Indeed, the virtue of intermediaries is that we need help moving beyond the limitations of our imagination and experience. But even the intermediaries can get in the way. In this respect, Christians may wish to reflect on the extent to which devotion to Jesus runs the risk of displacing the worship of God. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity makes it abundantly clear that to know God's Christ *is* to know God; even so, there is a tendency in popular forms of Christian devotion to think of Jesus and God as separate entities. But even Jesus instructed his followers to seek the kingdom of God and to pray directly to their father in heaven.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 72-81.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., J. Schoneveld, "Ezekiel XIV 1-8," *OTS* 15 (1969): 193-99.

<sup>3</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., Hermeneia, trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:306-307; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:4425-26; and Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:248.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:152-53.

<sup>5</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:308.

<sup>6</sup> The parallels include Yahweh's instruction to Moses to speak to the House of Israel (14:4; cf. Lev 17:1-2), the opening formulation "anyone of the house of Israel" (*šš mibêt yisrā'ēl*, 14:4; cf. Lev 17:3, 8, 10, 13), the inclusion of aliens (14:7; cf. Lev 17:8, 10, 13), and the penalty, "I will set my face against that person, and will cut that person off from the people" (14:8; cf. Lev 17:10). See Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:423; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:252. Both note an additional parallel between Ezek 14:9-11 and Lev 17:16; this parallel will be taken up in the discussion of 14:9-11.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1452.

<sup>8</sup> Heb. *mēšālīm*; the plural here is unusual and is probably a plural of emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Timothy Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mēšālīm*: On reading the *mašal* in Scripture," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 564-83.

<sup>10</sup> "Aqhat," in *Stories from Canaan*, ed. and trans. Michael D. Coogan (Louisville KY: Westminster, 1978), 33-47.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:261-62.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful review of the dynamics of triangulation, see Linda G. Bell, David C. Bell, Yojiro Nakata, "Triangulation and Adolescent Development in the U.S. and Japan," *Family Process*, Summer 2001, <<http://static.highbeam.com/f/familyprocess/june222001/triangulationandadolescentdevelopmentintheusandjap/>>.



# THE USELESS WOOD OF THE VINE

## Ezekiel 15:1-8

Speaking in the third person about Jerusalem, but employing the second person plural in the recognition formula of 15:7 (e.g., “you [pl.] will know. . .”), Ezekiel 15 presents a parable about a pruned vinestock. The parable revolves around the metaphor of Israel as Yahweh’s pleasant planting, which is closely associated with election traditions and is used elsewhere in biblical prophecy. [\[Vineyard Imagery in the Bible\]](#)

The formula for the reception of the divine word introduces the unit, and linguistic and stylistic parallels with 14:12-23 suggest that this brief chapter continues the argument begun there.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 14, Yahweh protests against the elders’ inquiries and challenges them to see that their idolatry renders futile any intercession in behalf of Jerusalem. Yahweh’s speech in Ezekiel 15 begins with a series of questions about the nature of the wood of the vine. These questions require audience participation, and the readers must come to their own conclusions about the analogy being drawn between pruned branches and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The oracle has two parts. Verses 1-5 develop the parable of the wood of the vine, while vv. 6-8 draw the connection between the vine and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Both have been severed from that which gives them life: the vine from the plant and the Jerusalemites from their covenant with Yahweh. Since neither the vine nor the Jerusalemites serve any useful purpose, both will be destroyed.

### **The Destiny of the Pruned Vinestock, 15:2-5**

The metaphor of the pruned vinestock is developed in a series of rhetorical questions in 15:2-5. NRSV translates the first question as a comparative one: “How does the wood of the vine surpass all other wood?” However, the question is better understood as a question about destiny. The underlying Hebrew expression (*hāyâ min*) does not express comparison or superiority, but is instead employed in questions about the impending fate of an object or person.<sup>2</sup> Its use in 15:2 concerns the fate of the vine branch, not its status relative to the



### A Vineyard in the Eshkol Valley, North of Hebron and Beth-zur

*Eshkol* is Hebrew for “bunch of grapes.” The scouts Moses sent to Canaan brought back grapes from Eshkol.

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

### Vineyard Imagery in the Bible

**AΩ** Vineyard imagery plays a prominent role in both Old and New Testaments. The spies who went into the land of Canaan brought back an enormous cluster of grapes as evidence of the fruitfulness of the land (Num 13:23). Israel is often described as a fruitful vine, and plentiful grape harvests are regarded as a sign of divine favor.

Vineyard imagery also expresses the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In Ps 80, Yahweh is the vinedresser who has brought the vine from Egypt and transplanted it in a new land which he has cleared and around which he has built a protective wall. Under Yahweh’s care, the tender shoot spreads throughout the land and becomes a mighty world tree. When it comes under attack, the psalmist complains that the vinedresser has neglected his obligation to protect the vine (Ps 80:12-13). A similar description of the vinedresser’s care for the vineyard can also be found in Isa 5:1-7, the well-known “song of the vineyard.” In Isaiah’s prophetic appropriation of the metaphor, the vineyard is held accountable for its failure to produce good grapes. Fed up with the perversity of the vine, the vinedresser tears it down and resolves not to waste any further labor on the vines.

The imagery of Ezek 15 depends on one particular aspect of viticulture: pruning. This activity occurs twice each year, once in the late winter, when unproductive branches are cut off, and again in late summer, when smaller shoots are trimmed in order to encourage the development of grapes on the main branches. The latter stage of pruning is reflected in Isa 18:5, and both aspects are featured in Jesus’ discourse about the vineyard of the new community in Jesus, which is tended by God: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (John 15:2). Pruning is thus a necessary aspect of cultivating grapevines. By discarding useless branches, the vine is strengthened so that it can bear fruit (cf. Isa 5:6).

Ezekiel’s appropriation of vine imagery focuses on what will happen to the branches that are pruned away. These branches have already been rejected; but since in any agrarian culture, there is little or no waste of any agricultural product, the parable asks what is to be done with this wood. It cannot be salvaged or put to any useful purpose. It is not even adequate as fuel, since the green branches do not burn completely. In Ezekiel’s hands, then, the metaphor becomes an ironic parable of Israel’s uselessness.

Victor H. Matthews, *The Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001); and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols.; (AB; Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1970), 2:675, citing G. Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (Gütersloh: Bertelsman, 1935), 4:312-13, 331.

other trees. The branch has already been pruned away from the vine, as indicated by the use of the expression *‘êš hazzēmôrâ*, “pruned wood” (NRSV “wood”).<sup>3</sup> Verse 3 considers whether anything useful can be made from the branch, and concludes that it cannot be used even as a peg for hanging pots.

Basing his argument on Ezekiel 15:6, Greenberg suggests that the parable demonstrates that the vine branch is suitable only for use as fuel and that, in fact, this is its “destiny.”<sup>4</sup> If this interpretation is correct, then the parable anticipates the impending destruction of the city by invoking the common sight of vineyards devastated by war. However, this argument is based on the assumption that the noun *‘ākelâ* is a common term for fuel. The root meaning of the term is food, and Ezekiel’s use of the noun is nearly always negative: the sheep of Yahweh’s flock have become food for the ravaging leaders and wild beasts (Ezek 34:5, 8, 10; cf. 35:12), and Yahweh allows the enemies of Israel to be devoured by wild animals (Ezek 29:5; 39:4). The noun thus connotes something that is utterly consumed, whether by wild beasts or by fire (Ezek 21:37 [ET 21:32]).

It is possible that the parable rests on the observation that vines are worthless even as fuel. In v. 4, the branch is thrown into the fire, and the grammatical construction calls attention to the fact that only the ends burn, since the wood is still green. Even though one might reasonably assume that the charred piece would again be thrown into the fire, the parable does not move in that direction. Instead, it closes with the observation that the branch was useless when it was whole and is even more useless once it has been burned. If, then, the vine branch is destined to be utterly consumed by the fire, it fails even in this regard. Of all the wood of the forest, the wood of the vine is utterly without merit.

### **So Also the Inhabitants of Jerusalem, 15:6-8**

A messenger formula and the particle “therefore” draw a connection between the vine and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Just as the vine-wood is destined for fire, so also are the inhabitants of Jerusalem destined for destruction. Yahweh declares his enmity with the Jerusalemites, declaring twice that he will set his face against them. Even if they should escape the fire, it shall yet consume them. The application of the parable envisions successive burnings, or wave after wave of disaster.

Ezekiel 14:21-23 decreed the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. 5:4; 6:11-14; 7:4, 9; 9:9-10); now, chapter 15 considers whether any remnant will survive. The metaphor of the pruned branches

implies that the inhabitants have already been “cut off” (cf. Ezek 14:8).<sup>5</sup>

By incorporating terminology from 14:12-23, the recognition formula in v. 7 brings the argument of chapter 14 to a close by underscoring Yahweh’s abhorrence of faithlessness (*ma‘al*, v. 8, cf. 14:12). In chapter 14, Yahweh refused their inquiries because of their faithlessness (14:1, 12, 21-23) and threatened to cut off all who persisted in their idolatry (Ezek 14:8). With the parable of the vinestock, the exiles get a glimpse of the fate of those who are cut off.



### Vineyards, Landmines, and Cooking Fuel

This photograph, taken in Kabul, Afghanistan, in November 2001, depicts the end result of nearly five years of warfare in and around the city. As the Taliban and the United Islamic Front fought to control this area, vineyards and fruit trees were cut down. Unable to irrigate the fields for the past five years, the farmers resorted to cutting down the vines to sell in Kabul for fuel.

Gwen Florio, “War’s harvest: Vineyards give only firewood,” *Denver Post*, November 2001. [Photo Credit: Karl Gehring]

## CONNECTIONS

After five years of shifting battle lines between the Taliban and the opposing United Islamic Front, the luxuriant fields outside of Kabul, Afghanistan, had by 2001 become “a post-apocalyptic vista of bombed-out homes, seared vineyards, and fallen fruit trees partially covered by earth powdery from five years without irrigation.”<sup>6</sup> Although many of these vineyards were marked with red paint to warn of the presence of landmines, there was still enough value in the desiccated vinestocks for the Afghans to risk their lives to gather up what was left. By contrast, Yahweh cannot wait to dispose of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They are good for nothing, and even destroying them is a bother.

With such a troubling image of divine rejection, contemporary readers may well be at a loss for turning these dead vines into fruitful metaphors. We may begin simply by admitting that we don’t



like this metaphor very much. Even if we concede that it is the vinedresser's prerogative to dispose of pruned vines, we can surely question the vinedresser's method in this particular case. Does there not come a point when pruning becomes so drastic that it does not strengthen the vine but kills it? And, even if God may dispose of the vine in any way God pleases and for any reason, may we not point out, as Job does, that sometimes divine justice simply looks like the brute exercise of power (Job 14)?

This line of inquiry obviously cuts against the grain of Ezekiel's metaphor, especially since Ezekiel uses it to turn the tables on those who have already questioned God in chapter 14. But other voices in exile do raise the question of divine justice, and it is appropriate to bring these voices into the conversation. Readers may wish to consider other texts where the questions of justice and value are raised (e.g., Lamentations, Jeremiah). At the very least, these voices would inform us that Ezekiel's audience was no less shocked then than we are now.

As in so much of Ezekiel's prophecy, the message hinges on overturning a familiar metaphor—this time, a metaphor of election. By virtue of their status as God's elect, the people have a right to appeal to God, in effect, to urge God see them as they see themselves. Ezekiel's argument in the previous chapter was that they abandoned that status when they placed their idols between themselves and God. Ezekiel's metaphor of the pruned vinestock reminds the readers that their worth comes only from God. Ezekiel is not alone in this conviction of the nature and origin of human worth; Deuteronomy reminds Israel that their election is completely undeserved and comes solely from God (Deut 8:17; 9:4). If human beings have any honor, power, or esteem, then it is entirely the result of divine grace.

Grasping at our shreds of self-importance, we are not much different from Ezekiel's audience. If anything, our culture of positive self-regard makes it even more difficult to take up our images of ourselves as the beloved of God and turn them inside out. We would come undone if we were to think less of ourselves than we do already. Rather than stay with the prophetic challenge to examine ourselves fully and completely, we would much prefer regarding this text as yet one more example of an old covenant that has been surpassed by the greater love of God in Christ.

But clinging to our images of self-esteem may turn out to be about as helpful as gathering dead vines to stave off the winter cold. There is value in thinking well of ourselves, but not much. As long as we keep gathering up these dead vines of self-affirmation, we

remain cut off from our only source of value. This insight is developed in John's gospel, which imagines the Christian life as "abiding" in the vine of Christ and bearing fruit. In his use of the vine metaphor, the evangelist encourages us to see that all that is good and lovely in us is of God. If there is worth, it is a product of God's cultivation and care. While we would like to think that election is contingent on our value and worth to God, we must learn that it is the other way around. Martin Luther understood the distinction quite well: "sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive."<sup>7</sup> For Luther, there is no intrinsic self-esteem; to rely on such positive self-regard is to deceive oneself. But that is not to say that the esteem never comes. Sinners are made attractive; vines become productive, cities are built, and all become testimony to the work of the One who plants and prunes.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:454.

<sup>2</sup> Block cites analogous uses of the idiom in Gen 37:20; Judg 13:12; 1 Kgs 14:3; Eccl 6:12; 11:2 (*Ezekiel*, 1:456).

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:263. The verb from which this noun is derived refers exclusively to pruning (Lev 25:3, 4; Isa 5:6). Other uses also signify a branch that has been cut off from the tree or vine (Num 13:23; Isa 17:10; Nah 2:3).

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:268, cf. 265-66.

<sup>5</sup> For the use of the verb "cut" with vine branches, see Num 13:23.

<sup>6</sup> Gwen Florio, "War's Harvest: Vineyards Give Only Firewood," *Denver Post* (20 November 2001), 15A.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), §28.

# JERUSALEM, YAHWEH'S FOUNDLING BRIDE

## Ezekiel 16:1-63

In chapters 1–7, Yahweh announced to the prophet his intention to judge Jerusalem, the land, and inhabitants of Israel. Then, in chapters 8–11, Yahweh disclosed the abominations of Jerusalem to Ezekiel and thereby made the prophet an eyewitness to Yahweh's charge. Arguments against intercession in chapters 12–15 forestall any intervention on behalf of the city and establish that Ezekiel alone among the prophets speaks for Yahweh. Now in this, the longest chapter of Ezekiel, Yahweh begins at last to publicize his case against Jerusalem.

What Yahweh has known, and what Ezekiel has learned, is now fully disclosed, as Yahweh commands Ezekiel to “make known to Jerusalem her abominations” (16:2). The word “abominations” has been used extensively before chapter 16;<sup>1</sup> it appears here for the first time in conjunction with the command to declare publicly Jerusalem's crimes. The phrase occurs four more times in chapters



### Cities as Women

In this silk batik, the artist Irena Saparnis depicts a woman of uncertain nationality whose turban binds her head in battlements. At the nape of her neck, a rope ladder allows her to escape. Although this portrait is the work of a contemporary artist unacquainted with Ezekiel 16, it provides a compelling starting point for this chapter, which revolves around the ancient Near Eastern metaphorization of cities as women wearing their city walls as crowns (see [\[The Personification of Jerusalem\]](#)).

[Credit: Courtesy of Irena Saparnis]

17–23, suggesting that these chapters form the heart of Yahweh's announcement of judgment against the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (20:4, 11; 22:2, 26; cf. 23:36).

The core of Yahweh's indictment of Jerusalem is framed by an elaborately developed metaphor [*Metaphor and Reality*] of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife (chs. 16, 23). [*The Personification of Jerusalem*] Chapter 16 lays the groundwork for this metaphor, describing Jerusalem as a rejected foundling child whom Yahweh adopts and then marries once she reaches the age of sexual maturity. Jerusalem squanders the honor and beauty that Yahweh has bestowed upon her. She gives away Yahweh's gifts to her many lovers and descends into ever deeper degradation. Shamed by his wife's behavior, Yahweh seeks to vindicate his honor by subjecting her to the legally prescribed punishment of public exposure and execution, in this case ironically and cruelly at the hands of her faithless lovers. Chapter 23 recapitulates the imagery, heightening its intensity with even more strikingly pornographic language, and closing with a summons for the armies to begin their attack. The identification of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife is further advanced in chapter 24, when the death of Ezekiel's wife becomes a sign of Jerusalem's destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel 16 constitutes an elaborate refutation of the complaints of the exiles over Yahweh's treatment of Jerusalem. Such complaints have been cited earlier in the book (cf. 8:12), and it has been argued in this commentary that the inquiry of the elders in chapter 14 voiced a similar complaint. The female personification of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 further supports this suggestion. In the ancient Near Eastern genre of the city lament, a female figure, usually the city's patron goddess, laments the destruction of her city. The biblical book of Lamentations has connections with this genre<sup>3</sup> and illustrates well the manner in which Lady Jerusalem (not a goddess, but a personification of the city) mourns her destruction at the hands of Babylon. Though she acknowledges her guilt and concedes that her destruction is well deserved, she protests Yahweh's treatment of her. She questions Yahweh's fidelity, expresses her shame at having been so humiliatingly abandoned to her enemies, and wonders whether he has forsaken her forever.

By contrast with the Jerusalem of Lamentations, the Jerusalem of Ezekiel 16 is strangely silent. Not once does she voice her complaint or give expression to her humiliation, though Jerusalemites do lodge complaints against Yahweh elsewhere in Ezekiel (see esp. Ezek 8:12). In this chapter, however, Jerusalem is not heard but seen, and seen only through the eyes of Yahweh, whose slant on her

### Metaphor and Reality



One of the most fruitful contributions of recent work in Ezekiel has been the reexamination of the function of metaphor in Ezek 16 and 23, where the problem of differentiating between the levels of metaphorical, historical, and literal language has been acute, especially for feminist readers. When, for example, Yahweh says that he will allow Jerusalem to be judged as “women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged” (Ezek 16:38), this apparent description of the abusive punishment of real women becomes a stumbling block for interpretation. Or consider the conclusion in Ezek 23:48, that “all women” will take warning from Oholibah’s punishment: has the real-life judgment of adulterous women, which forms the basis for the metaphor of Jerusalem’s punishment, now been reinscribed as scriptural authorization for the patriarchal control of women?

The feminist interpretation of metaphor has sought primarily to break this pattern of the literal reading of Ezek 16 and 23. Much of this work has rested on Julie Galambush’s classification of these chapters as “metaphorical narratives.” Galambush pointed out that the terminological starting point for most contemporary theorizing about the function of metaphor was provided by the philosopher I. A. Richards, who contended that metaphors consist of two parts. The underlying concept or idea expressed by the metaphor is the tenor, while the figurative language of the metaphor is its vehicle. Subsequent metaphorical theory describes the interaction between these two elements. The task of interpretation is not to strip the vehicle from the tenor as one might husk an ear of corn; rather, the challenge is to see how the two aspects interact and inform one another, often in richly indeterminate ways.

One important difficulty is that the tenor of Ezek 16 and 23 is left unstated in the metaphor. Throughout, Ezekiel charges Jerusalem with “whoring,” and it is left to the reader to determine the tenor of this emotionally charged vehicle. Once it is recognized that “whoring” is the vehicle that characterizes the tenor of Jerusalem’s “breach of covenant,” then it becomes possible to see how the vehicle functions, in Max Black’s words, to reorganize the reader’s perception of the tenor. Where Jerusalemites thought that their forging and breaking of international treaties was a practical fact of *Realpolitik*, Ezekiel exposes its immorality by invoking categories of betrayal and illicit intimacy that are bound up in the Hebrew verb *zānā* (see commentary on 16:15-34). So far so good; but how does the reader know what is the vehicle and what is the tenor, especially in extended metaphorical narratives like Ezek 16 and 23? Although theories of metaphors urge a much more

complex understanding of the interaction of tenor and vehicle, the tendency in the interpretation of Ezek 16 and 23 has been to assume that any references to laws concerning adultery, women, or other “real life” situations somehow continue to invoke the vehicle. Thus despite the use of metaphorical theory to address the rich cultural complexity of the chapters, modern readers remain literalists at heart.

One particularly intriguing example of the confusion of tenor and vehicle in contemporary interpretation has been discussed by Peggy Day, who focuses on commentators’ treatment of Jerusalem’s punishment in 16:35-43. Noting that many commentators take these verses as a self-evident description of the judgment of female adultery, often without textual support from biblical or ancient Near Eastern law, Day argues that the problem rests in the commentators’ failure to identify the intrusion of the tenor, “breach of covenant,” at precisely this point in the narrative. Both the reference to Jerusalem’s “lovers” and the description of her wholesale destruction at their hand has more in common with commonplaces and provisions of ancient Near Eastern treaties than with laws regulating the sexuality of women. For Day, the successful reading of the metaphor depends not only on recognizing the presence of the vehicle, but also on attentiveness to the tenor’s impact on its development. In this case, the tenor, punishment of treaty violations, has profoundly contributed to the delineation of the vehicle, the punishment of the woman as an adulteress. The vehicle of the adulterous woman no longer bears any resemblance to the ancient reality of adulteresses and prostitutes and their punishment (or toleration) in ancient Near Eastern societies. If anything, the effectiveness of the metaphor depends on the exaggeration of the woman’s punishment, and not on any correspondence to real life.

For specific treatments of the harlotry metaphor in Ezekiel, see Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh’s Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), and Peggy L. Day, “Adulterous Jerusalem’s Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI,” VT 50 (2000): 285–309. For the rich connotations of the metaphor *znh*, see Alice A. Keefe, *Woman’s Body and the Social Body in Hosea*, JSOTS 338, Gender, Culture, Theory 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 104–39. For the literary theory supporting Galambush’s analysis of metaphor, see I. A. Richards, “The Philosophy of Rhetoric,” *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. M. Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981), 48–62, and Janet Soskice, *Metaphors and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 49.

### The Personification of Jerusalem



Traditional scholarship has conjectured that Ezekiel appropriated the metaphor of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife from Hos 1–3, in which Hosea's marriage to Gomer becomes a symbol of Yahweh's covenantal relationship with faithless Israel. According to this line of interpretation, Gomer's harlotries signify the religious apostasy of Israel, which has abandoned Yahweh in order to worship the Canaanite fertility gods, the baalim. Recent scholarship allows for a more nuanced understanding of Ezekiel's appropriation of Hosea's metaphor in two respects. The first concerns the use of feminine imagery, while the second concerns the symbolic meaning of "harlotry" (see **[Covenant Love and Harlotry]**).

Where Hosea employed the metaphor to speak more generally of Israel, Ezekiel speaks more specifically of the city of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife. Most of the imagery in Hosea associates the woman with the land, her destruction with drought and devastation of fields and crops, and her restoration with the renewal of the fertility of the land (Hos 2:3, 12, 15, 21-23). By contrast, the imagery in Ezekiel is primarily urban and international. Jerusalem is a city; her wealth is depicted not in terms of the fertility of field and farm but in terms of architectural adornment; her "harlotry" reflects the practices of international commerce and diplomacy; and her destruction involves the razing of city walls. The shift in the application of the metaphor from land to city may simply reflect the differences between the respective social locations of Hosea, a landed farmer, and Ezekiel, a city priest. Or the difference may be due to the increasing urbanization of the kingdom of Judah.

Whatever the explanation, the application of feminine imagery to Jerusalem is not unique to Ezekiel. His personification of the city reflects a widespread cultural idiom. In the ancient Near Eastern context, the idiom rested on the equation of the city with its patron goddess. Although the biblical appropriation of this idiom does not reflect any such deification of the city, the female Jerusalem functions in analogous ways. Like the Near Eastern goddesses, for example, she laments the destruction of the city (cf.

Lamentations). In contrast with Hosea's use of the metaphor, which focuses solely on illicit sexual activity, biblical references to cities as women reflect a wide range of positive and negative connotations. Jerusalem is addressed as daughter (Isa 1:8), virgin (Isa 37:22), and mother (Isa 66:8), as well as adulterous wife. Ezekiel's metaphor of Jerusalem as woman depends on its capacity to express this range of positive associations. Otherwise, Jerusalem's behavior would not be shocking but merely routine.

Despite the widespread cultural evidence that cities were metaphorized as women in the ancient Near East, in Ezekiel not all cities are characterized as women. Jerusalem has "sisters," the Philistine cities, Sodom, and Samaria, and Sodom and Samaria have "daughters"; but this imagery is restricted to chs. 16 and 23. Tyre has "daughters" (NRSV "daughter-towns," 26:6, 8), but Tyre itself is not depicted as a woman. Finally, even though the cities of Babylon and Nineveh are metaphorized as women elsewhere in the prophetic literature (Babylon, Isa 47:1-7; Nineveh, Nah 3:1-6), they are not so depicted in Ezekiel; indeed, the cities themselves are not mentioned. All of this would suggest that the female personification of Jerusalem was not simply an appropriation of a cultural idiom but was, rather, a deliberate rhetorical choice. As with Hosea's use of the metaphor for Israel, the personification of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife may be directly connected to the evaluation of her violation of her many covenants.

For an analysis of the differences between Hosea's metaphor and Ezekiel's see Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 44–52. For the metaphorization of cities as women, see Mark E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Lawson Younger Jr. et al. (*Scripture in Context 4, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 11*; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 173–94.

pitiful vulnerability and fevered search for protection is that of an outraged, cuckolded husband.

The point of view that the readers are urged to adopt remains a matter of conjecture among interpreters. Because Jerusalem is viewed primarily from Yahweh's perspective, the chapter forces a nearly total identification with Yahweh. Feminist interpretations of the chapter point out that gender dynamics contribute to this iden-



### The Goddess of the City

In this mosaic, the goddess Fortune (Tyche) wears the city, whose crenellated battlements and turrets serve as her crown. Originally the floor of a small theatre built in the city of Beth-Shean, one of the best preserved Roman-Byzantine cities in Israel, the mosaic illustrates the longevity of the association between goddesses and cities.

A mosaic showing Tyche, goddess of fortune, from the semi-circular exedra off Paladius Street. Beeth Shean (Scythopolis), Israel.  
[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

tification.<sup>4</sup> Men of Ezekiel's time, accustomed to viewing women as under their control, would identify with Yahweh's rage and look approvingly on Jerusalem's public shaming and punishment. They perceive Jerusalem as the unclean Other and distance themselves from her in disgust.

This perspective is complicated by the fact that Ezekiel's audience is made up of former leaders of Jerusalem, whose continuing relationship to the city constitutes an ongoing problematic in the book. At times, they are portrayed as victims of Jerusalemite politics (11:3, 15), whom Yahweh will reward with the gift of the land and from whom Yahweh will forge the new covenant people (11:18-21). Because they have suffered at Jerusalem's hands, one can conjecture that they would exult with Yahweh at Jerusalem's shaming and demise. At other times, however, Ezekiel's audience is clearly identified as members of the rebellious house (12:1-6) who, like Jerusalem, persist in their propensity to follow after idols (14:1-11). Before the exile, they had been the agents of Jerusalem's



many infidelities. Because they participated in Jerusalem's crimes, they cannot escape the horrifying realization that they *are* the Other whom they despise. Gender dynamics are again at work. Accustomed to being cast in the dominant, judging, male role, the readers now see themselves as the ungrateful, unfaithful and condemned Woman Jerusalem.

Under ordinary circumstances, this inversion of gender roles would itself have been humiliating; but it has an underlying horror in real life. Corrine Patton has suggested that the experience of the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem quite likely involved the rape of both men and women; she also suspects that Jerusalem's warriors experienced both psychological and physical emasculation at the hands of their enemies. War had thus already made them into "women," objectified by their enemies and subjected to the grossest of humiliations. Far from wishing this experience on the readers, Ezekiel 16 portrays what will in fact happen. As Patton has put it, the readers come to realize "they are the whore and should be treated as one."<sup>5</sup>

Ezekiel 16 has always been an offensive text. In the first century of the common era, Eliezer b. Hyrcanus banned its public reading because it cast doubt on Israel's noble lineage. In the last several decades its offensiveness has been predicated upon its patriarchal assumptions about women as property. [Feminist Biblical Interpretation and Ezekiel] One is tempted to read this chapter as a historical artifact and reject its theological claims while accepting its witness to the exiles' struggle to understand their relationship to Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> But the importance of this text lies in the very thing that Eliezer found repugnant: its portrayal of Jerusalem as totally Other. Jerusalem's origin is among those who hate and despise her. Her sense of identity is so uncertain that she remains unable to form any lasting attachment to the one who truly loves her. Consequently, she seeks love from those who have always despised and rejected her. If Jerusalem has failed to know Yahweh, then she has also failed to know herself. As a phenomenon of human existence, the problem of lost identity and mistaken love is not an artifact but a continuing source of human pain. Despite the chapter's brutality, or even perhaps because of it, it deserves continued attention and reflection.

The chapter can be roughly divided into two parts. The indictment proper (16:1-43) publicizes Jerusalem's abominations. Setting these abominations against the backdrop of her origin as an abandoned infant, whom Yahweh adopts and eventually marries (vv. 3-15), the indictment accentuates the scandal of Jerusalem's crimes.



### Feminist Biblical Interpretation and Ezekiel



Feminist biblical interpretation is rooted in the emerging feminist movements of the 1960s, which sought to address the cultural and political structures that reinforce inequities between women and men. Exposing the ways in which society perpetuates hierarchical structures of domination that limits women's full participation in society, feminism presses for the full equality of women and men. Religious institutions have not been immune to the feminist critique, and one feminist option has been to reject the church and Christianity as hopelessly irredeemable patriarchal institutions. Other feminists remain committed to the church and seek to reform it from within. It is not an overstatement to say that feminism has transformed many Protestant churches, as the full ordination of women to the Christian ministry is for many denominations no longer a matter of contention.

For those who accept the feminist critique of contemporary society but remain committed to the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, the Bible poses a special problem. As Scripture, the Bible is a primary source of authority in matters of doctrine and ecclesiology. However, because it was written in a strongly patriarchal environment, it is saturated with patriarchal bias. For those who continue to view the Bible as an authoritative voice in contemporary life, the question is whether that patriarchal bias is integral to the Bible's message or whether it obscures a more central, liberating message. Feminist solutions to that problem are by no means univocal. For some, the Bible cannot be rescued from its patriarchy; others, however, retrieve aspects of the biblical tradition in ways that will be liberating for both women and men.

One distinctive feature of all of feminist biblical interpretation, whether it rejects or embraces the Bible, is that it treats the Bible as of profound importance for contemporary life. It matters to feminist biblical interpreters that they understand the texts dealing with women. In this respect feminist interpretation reflects a basic premise of recent intellectual history that there are no disinterested questions. The questions that the interpreter asks are shaped by his/her context as well as by his/her theological and ideological commitments. As opposed to much scholarship of the 20th century, which presented itself as objective and impartial, feminist scholars make explicit their ideological commitments, which usually revolve around some conception of women's flourishing. This commitment to the contemporary situation of women shapes the questions that feminist biblical interpreters ask of biblical texts, and of ongoing interpretations of biblical texts.

Feminist biblical interpretation is also characterized by an eclectic use of theories from a wide range of academic disciplines, including but not limited to literary criticism, cultural anthropology, and ritual studies. Feminist biblical criticism is not unique in this regard, since the entire field of biblical studies now enjoys a rich plurality of methodological approaches to the study of the Bible. Feminists use these diverse approaches to sharpen their questions about the women in (and absent from) the texts, as well as to explain the gendering of language and culture.

Within the larger feminist project, Ezek 16 and 23 have at times been regarded as among the more dangerous and hopelessly patriarchal texts. Yet even here there is no agreement as to the exact way to proceed. Some interpreters treat these texts with sensitivity to Ezekiel's context, even while they reject any relevance for contemporary ethics or theology. Others roundly reject both the ancient message and its contemporary consequences, while yet others reject only interpretations that perpetuate patriarchal bias.

For a radical feminist critique of Christianity, see, e.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973). For explorations of feminist method in biblical interpretation, see Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 113–26; Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985); Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Biblical Scholarship in North America 10; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985); Luise Schottruff, Silvia Schroer, and Marie-Therese Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective*, trans. M. and B. Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). For specific discussions of Ezek 16 and 23, see Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Teaching Troubling Texts: Ezekiel's Justifications of God," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 97–117; Julia Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Mary Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *Journal of the Feminist Study of Religion* 14 (1998): 5–18; and Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *VT* 50 (2000): 285–309.

Forgetting her beginnings, she trusts in her own beauty. Jerusalem initiates cultic innovations and political alliances, which Yahweh condemns as prostitution and fornication (vv. 16-34). She is so brazen that she outdoes ordinary prostitutes. Yahweh thus judges Jerusalem as adulterous women are judged, bringing her lovers against her, exposing her nakedness, and destroying her (vv. 35-43).

The second part of the chapter develops the theme of Jerusalem's shameful behavior (vv. 44-58) and closes in a reprise that brings together the themes of covenantal fidelity and shame (vv. 59-63). This final section moves toward a resolution. The damaged covenant is replaced with a new, everlasting covenant, and Jerusalem's shame becomes the basis for a new identity and new relationships with both Yahweh and her sisters the surrounding kingdoms.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Indictment, 16:3-43**

The indictment opens with Yahweh's command to Ezekiel to make known to Jerusalem her abominations. Often appearing in juridical contexts,<sup>7</sup> the verb "make known" introduces Yahweh's charge against Jerusalem. In Ezekiel, abominations can refer either to cultic sins (see esp. 8:6, 9, 13, 15, 17) or to sins of a more general, undefined nature (18:12, 13, 24). Here the term refers to Jerusalem's rebellion against Yahweh, which is metaphorically described as the behavior of a prostitute. Although commentators often interpret Jerusalem as a figure for Israel,<sup>8</sup> the charge is leveled against the city alone as the center of political and cultic life (cf. 5:5-17).

### ***Jerusalem's Abandonment and Adoption, 16:3-15***

The indictment begins with a story that closely resembles a folktale in its depiction of Jerusalem's humble origins and rise to greatness.<sup>9</sup> A well-known Mesopotamian parallel is the legend of Sargon of Agade, who was rescued by a shephard from abandonment and raised in obscurity, where his gifts for kingship were quickly revealed. [[The Foundling's Rise to Greatness](#)] Like the tale of Sargon, which attributes Sargon's greatness to the blessings of the gods, Ezekiel

### The Foundling's Rise to Greatness



The legend of Sargon, which is also often cited as a parallel to the account of the birth of Moses (cf. Exod 2:3-4), narrates a foundling child's unexpected rise to greatness. Sargon is not acknowledged by his birth parents, but is favored by the gods, whose patronage results in Sargon's kingship:

Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I.  
My mother was a changeling, my father I knew  
not.

The brother(s) of my father loved the hills.

....

My changeling mother conceived me, in secret  
she bore me.

She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen  
she sealed my lid.

She cast me into the river which rose not (over)  
me.

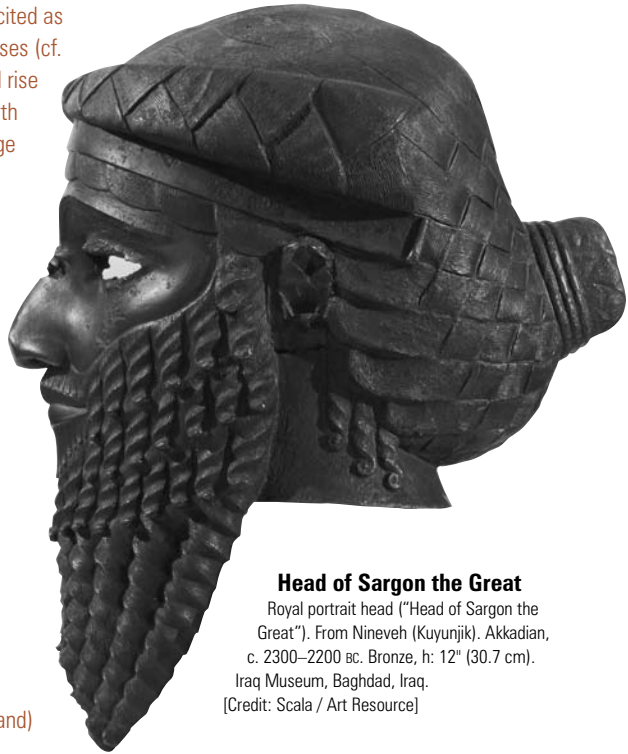
The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the  
drawer of water.

Akki, the drawer of water lifted me out as he  
dipped his e[w]er.

Akki, the drawer of water, [took me] as his son (and)  
reared me.

Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener.

While I was a gardener, Ishtar granted me (her) love,  
And for four and [ . . . ] years I exercised kingship. (*ANET*, 119)



#### Head of Sargon the Great

Royal portrait head ("Head of Sargon the Great"). From Nineveh (Kuyunjik). Akkadian, c. 2300–2200 bc. Bronze, h: 12" (30.7 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Iraq.  
[Credit: Scala / Art Resource]

So also in Ezek 16: Jerusalem's parents abandon her, but Yahweh makes her into a queen.

16:3-15 asserts that all of the foundling's beauty and wealth come from Yahweh.<sup>10</sup> Abandoned at birth by her Hittite father and Amorite mother, she is adopted by Yahweh, who marries her when she reaches sexual maturity. Yahweh dresses her in fine gifts of clothing, silver, and gold. These attentions make her both beautiful and competent: she is "fit to be a queen," and her fame spreads among the nations (16:3b-15).

Some commentators suggest that the description of Jerusalem's Canaanite origin constitutes the beginning of the accusation, on the assumption that it exposes Jerusalem's false pretensions and lays bare her pagan past. In contrast with the genealogy of Abraham, which traces the children of Israel back to Noah's son Shem, this genealogy traces Jerusalem's origins to Canaan, who was cursed for his father Ham's act of uncovering Noah's nakedness (cf. Gen 9:18-

27). Jerusalem's sexual proclivities are thus genetic, and like Canaan, her fate is sealed.

The dominant tone of sympathy for the abandoned child makes this interpretation unlikely. Yahweh will eventually charge that Jerusalem is no better than her mother (16:44-45); but the rhetorical effect of such an accusation depends initially on the establishment of emotional rapport with the foundling child, who has been so unnaturally mistreated by its mother. [Birth Narratives and National Destinies]

The account of Jerusalem's origins is historically accurate, since Jerusalem remained in Canaanite hands well after the conquest and did not become an Israelite possession until the time of David (2 Sam 5). The account is also symbolically significant since the terms *Hittites*, *Amorites*, and *Canaanites* continue to be employed as



**Lot and his daughters**

Albrecht Altdorfer (1480–1538). *Lot and His Daughters*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. [Credit: Nimatallah / Art Resource]

### Birth Narratives and National Destinies



The story of Jerusalem's birth is reminiscent of the narratives of Genesis, in which birth accounts delineate the relationships among the descendents of Abraham. Jacob and Esau, the eponymous ancestors of Israel and Edom, struggle even in the womb; thus relations between Israel and Edom will be fraught with conflict.

A more compelling example for the present argument is the brief story of the origin of the countries of Moab and Ammon (Gen 19:30-38). After Lot and his daughters have escaped the destruction of Sodom, the daughters seduce their father in order to conceive, and their sons Moab and Ben-Ammi become the ancestors of the nations of Moab and Ammon. This story could hardly have been told by Moabites and Ammonites, since it implies that the nations are descended from incest. But the story clearly establishes Israel's attitude toward these two kingdoms: though they may be distantly related through Abraham's nephew Lot, their abominable practices make them distinctly Other, beyond the pale of civilized society. Like this story of the origins of Moab and

ethnographic terms for the Syro-Palestinian regions around Judah, and moreover, are used elsewhere in the Bible to designate Israel's enemies.<sup>11</sup> If Jerusalem is set apart from the nations, it is not because she has fulfilled her destiny as Yahweh's "kingdom of priests" (cf. Exod 19:6), but because no one, not even her parents, wants to have anything to do with her.

Verses 4-7 describe the transfer of legal responsibility from Jerusalem's natural parents to Yahweh. The parents renounce their legal claim in several distinct and culturally identifiable ways, beginning with their failure to care for her at birth (16:4). These acts were deemed so crucial for the survival of a newborn that Talmudic rabbis permitted them even on the sabbath.<sup>12</sup> Her navel cord was not cut, she was not washed or rubbed with salt, and she was not bound with cloth. The necessity of the first two acts for the infant's proper care is self-evident. Rubbing a baby with salt served either to toughen its skin or to guard against infection, and binding the arms and legs in swaddling clothes for a period of forty days to six months was believed to encourage them to grow straight.

Second, by casting the infant into the open field, the parents allow for her legal adoption by another (16:5). The verb employed here (NRSV "thrown out," Heb. *šlk* hiphil) is found in other contexts of child abandonment (Gen 21:15; Exod 1:22; metaphorically Ps 22:10)<sup>13</sup> and signifies that the child has been transferred to an ownerless domain.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the parents "abhor" her, which probably involves a formal act of renunciation (16:5). The verb elsewhere is used in connection with the covenant (Lev 26:11, 15, 30, 43, 44). When Israel spurns Yahweh's statutes, Yahweh abhors Israel in return. Conversely, when Israel abides by Yahweh's statutes, Yahweh promises not to abhor them (26:11, 44).<sup>15</sup> The parents' abhorrence of Jerusalem thus constitutes a formal rejection of any legal responsibility for the child.

When Yahweh passes by, he sees the infant flailing in her blood and declares, "Live in your blood" (16:6).<sup>16</sup> Mesopotamian legal formulas suggest that the reference to the blood establishes Yahweh's full legal claim over the child. The parents have renounced their claim by leaving her unwashed and flailing in her birth blood; by adopting her from that state, Yahweh assumes full responsibility for the child.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Yahweh claims the child as his own, he does not raise her. She grows up in a state of liminality, as suggested by her wild growth and nakedness. The narrative also implies that she remains in a bloodied state, since there is no reference to her being

cleansed of blood until her marriage.<sup>18</sup> When Yahweh passes by again and sees that she has reached sexual maturity (NRSV “you were at the age for love”), he marries her, covering her nakedness with his cloak (cf. Ruth 3:9) and pledging a covenant with her. It is only at this point that Yahweh activates his legal claim over the girl: “you became mine” (16:8). Yahweh now provides for her in ways that her parents had failed to do at her birth. For the first time, the girl is cleansed of her blood. She is also adorned as a bride, anointed with oil, clothed in fine linen, gold and silver, and given choice flour, honey, and oil for food.

The vocabulary of the girl’s adornment is extraordinarily rich. These initial verses are replete with specialized terminology, first for adoption, and then for the adornment, not of a real woman, but of a city. Julie Galambush points out that the terms for the woman’s clothing appear elsewhere only in descriptions of the tabernacle and temple: the cloth is used for the tent covering; the gold and silver for the vessels; and the flour, honey and oil are offered as sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> We are thus reminded that the metaphor involves the personification of a city by them.

Here, then, is Jerusalem’s beginning: born of her enemies, she is rejected and mistreated from the very beginning. Yahweh assumes a double responsibility for her, first in allowing her to live and then in entering into a covenant with her. She has neither identity nor existence apart from Yahweh’s assumption of these obligations. This resolve on Yahweh’s part, however, does nothing to heal Jerusalem’s originary pain. Having been abandoned by those who should have loved her, Jerusalem is incapable of forming any lasting attachments. Spurning Yahweh’s gifts, she continually seeks love from partners who will only use her and then destroy her. Recapitulating her primal narrative over and over again, she ironically fulfills her parents’ death wish, and her life ends as it had begun: exposed, bloodied, and humiliated.

### ***Jerusalem’s Regression, 16:15-34***

Jerusalem immediately squanders her heritage. Trusting in her own beauty and trading on her fame,<sup>20</sup> she needlessly seeks security outside of Yahweh’s blessings. She uses Yahweh’s gifts, first, to establish an illegitimate cult (vv. 15-22), and second, to secure political alliances (vv. 23-34). In a striking contrast with the rich vocabulary of 16:3-15, Jerusalem’s behavior is monotonously described as that of a prostitute. The verb root *zānā*, to fornicate, and its nominal derivatives appear more than fifteen times in the chapter. The verb itself is used of ordinary female prostitution<sup>21</sup> and illicit female

sexual activity—illicit because it is not properly under control of a man.<sup>22</sup> The term is used metaphorically here, as in other prophetic contexts, to designate Jerusalem's violation of her covenant with Yahweh.<sup>23</sup>

One problem in interpreting the significance of *zānâ* is that its emotional freight often obscures its functional meaning. Prostitution is an economic exchange of sexual services for material goods. Although this economic connotation is not common, it is attested in the Old Testament. The verb is associated with trade in an oracle concerning the merchant-city of Tyre in Isaiah 23:17, where no negative connotations attach to Tyre's "harlotrous trade." One may therefore suggest that *zānâ* connoted exchange. The frequent use of the verb in connection with the worship of other gods quite possibly implies a form of divine-human intercourse that imparts some human control over the transaction.<sup>24</sup> Jerusalem's "prostitution" is thus problematic not only because she has defied Yahweh, but because she believes that she has anything of value to trade for things that come to her as gifts.

### ***Jerusalem's Illegitimate Cult, 16:15-22***

Jerusalem's first crime is to take the initiative in establishing her cult also. In the ancient Near Eastern context, only kings and gods build temples. If Yahweh has already adorned Jerusalem with finery that is associated with the construction of the temple, then he has already established her as his sanctuary. Jerusalem need do nothing else. Nevertheless, Jerusalem acts on her own to build shrines, make idols, and establish rituals for their care and feeding. Her crafting of male images follows well-known procedures for constructing divine images in the ancient Near East: She forms them from precious metals, clothes them, and offers them food to eat. Her devotion to these idols reaches its climax when she offers them her own children—children that Yahweh has given her.

Throughout the accusation, the interplay of pronouns charges Jerusalem with misappropriation, of thinking that Yahweh's gifts belong to her to do with as she pleases. The root of her abomination is expressed in v. 22: she did not remember the day of her birth, when she floundered in her blood. The sacrifice of her children exemplifies the consequence of her forgetting. If she had remembered the days of her youth, she would have remembered that Yahweh did not seek the death of any one, certainly not the death of children. **[Become as Little Children]**

### Become as Little Children



Asked who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The gospel tradition equates childhood with humility; but Jesus may have been talking about vulnerability. Only in a modern, post-industrial context, when child-killing infectious disease is kept at bay through antibiotics and vaccinations and exploitation is curbed by child labor laws, can childhood be regarded as a time of carefree innocence. In much of the rest of the world, however, children remain profoundly vulnerable.

The ancient practice of infant exposure exemplifies the absolute dependence of human infants on adult decisions. Although biblical accounts of infant exposure are rare, the practice was not unknown to ancient Israel (cf. Gen 21:15-16; Exod 2:2-4). The evidence of the practice extends from the 2d millennium BCE in Mesopotamia through the Hellenistic era in the Mediterranean world. The classical sources encourage the practice if the child is deformed or sick. An often cited letter from a 1st-century Egyptian laborer to his pregnant wife reflects an almost matter-of-fact attitude toward the question whether a child should live or die: “If by chance you bear a son, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out [to die].” Frequent prohibitions against infanticide in the *Qur’an* suggest that the practice persisted into the 6th and 7th centuries CE in pre-Islamic Arabia.

The vulnerability of infants becomes a symbol of trust in God well before Jesus commands the little ones to come to him. In Ps 22, a petitioner expresses his utter dependence on God by claiming that he has been “cast” on Yahweh from his birth (Ps 22:10). The verb is the technical term for infant exposure, and implies that Yahweh is the only one who cares for him. Without Yahweh’s aid, the psalmist will surely die.

The classical references to child exposure are Plato, *Republic* 5.459-61; and Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 16; for further discussion and references to *Qur’anic* sources, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:477 n. 79. The letter from the Egyptian laborer to his wife may be found in John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters, Foundations and Facets, New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 111–12. This discussion is indebted to the work of John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 20.

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### *Jerusalem’s Costly Political Alliances, 16:23-34*

Having established an illegitimate cult, Jerusalem now proceeds to enhance her political and military security. Ezekiel describes Jerusalem’s quest for security in pornographic terms, which NRSV has euphemistically softened. The sheer number of “platforms” and “shrines” needs little comment, except to point out that Ezekiel invests them with the public notoriety of the prostitute’s known places of commerce. From these public places, Jerusalem invites lewd congress: NRSV’s “you offered yourself to every passer-by” does not quite capture the scandal of MT’s “you spread your legs” (16:25). NRSV’s “the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors,” in 16:26 omits MT’s reference to the Egyptians’ physical endowments (“large flesh,” i.e., penises). Naming the great kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, and Chaldea as her lovers, the account characterizes as lust Jerusalem’s desperate search for potency, which is graphically indicated by the Egyptians’ physical endowments. Although Ezekiel’s scornful rhetoric makes it difficult to identify any precise historical incidents behind these allusions, the frantic years of Ahaz’s and



### Historical Allusions in Ezekiel 16



Because the rhetorical emphasis is on the sheer wantonness of Jerusalem's alliances, it is difficult to determine whether the allusions in Ezek 16 have any historical basis. However, since Jerusalem enters into all of these relationships voluntarily, the allusions may be to Judean international politics in the late 8th century BCE. Ahaz voluntarily sent tribute to the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser in a desperate attempt to ward off attack from Syria and Israel (2 Kgs 16:7-9; cf. 2 Chr 28:16-21). Several decades later, Hezekiah sought to throw off his obligation to Assyria by initiating alliances with Egypt and Babylon. All of these alliances were economically and politically costly. By the end of the 8th century BCE, the kingdom of Judah had suffered terrible losses. The prophet Isaiah says of that time,

And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard,  
 like a shelter in a cucumber field,  
 like a besieged city.  
 If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors,  
 We would have been like Sodom,  
 and become like Gomorrah. (Isa 1:8-9)

Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:283.

Hezekiah's reigns in the late eighth century BC may have inspired this account. [Historical Allusions in Ezekiel 16]

The accusation culminates in the withering charge that, by these actions, Jerusalem reveals that she is not like other harlots, who receive pay from their lovers. On the contrary, Jerusalem bribes her lovers with gifts (16:33). This charge parodies the high cost of such political alliances, since Jerusalem paid Assyria and Egypt dearly for their promises of protection with annual tributes. Since her lovers give nothing to Jerusalem in return, Jerusalem's prostitution turns out not to be a fair exchange (16:34).

As feminist critics have noted, such language objectifies the female and virtually ensures that readers will distance themselves from her and join Yahweh in heaping scorn. However, to the extent that Ezekiel's readers had formerly identified with Jerusalem as its leaders, they now find themselves in the uncomfortable position of seeing their routine political strategies exposed in an unprecedented harsh light. Even as they distance themselves from Jerusalem, they must acknowledge, not only their own culpability, but also the futility of thinking that anything could come of such dangerous liaisons.

### *Jerusalem's Punishment, 16:35-43*

The indictment closes with the familiar two-part oracle of judgment. The opening motivation clause focuses on her actions: she has poured out her lust, uncovered her nakedness with her lovers,

constructed abominable idols, and sacrificed her children (16:36). The closing motivation clause attributes these actions to her failure to remember the days of her youth (16:43). Political infidelities and cultic transgressions are thus rooted in a fatal amnesia.

The rhetorical power of this subunit consists in the alternation between seeing Jerusalem as woman and as city. Yahweh judges Jerusalem as an adulterous woman, stripping her naked and stoning her. She is also clearly a city, whose houses, buildings, and walls are torn down and burned. But since the reader's gaze remains fixed on the battering, not of a city of brick and stone, but of a woman of flesh and blood, the horror remains deeply personal. The woman ends as she began. Knowing rejection and scorn from birth, she has secured love that is only counterfeit. That her lovers cannot and will not save her becomes clear, however, only as her lovers begin to scale her walls.

### **Worse than Sodom and Samaria, 16:44-58**

The indictment and proclamation of judgment is now complete. The second half of the chapter comments on the significance of the judgment. Because she has surpassed even Samaria and Sodom in her wickedness, her behavior passes into the collective wisdom of humanity as a byword or proverb. [Sister Cities] Despite Jerusalem's new preeminence as the most shameful of cities (16:44-58), Yahweh will reestablish his covenant with her. The renewed covenantal relation, however, is yet further occasion for shame, as Jerusalem remembers her ways and finally comes to recognize that her status comes from Yahweh alone.

The central theme of 16:44-58 is that Jerusalem has become a byword among the nations (cf. 5:15). Those who use proverbs will say of her, "Like mother, like daughter." Jerusalem's mother and sisters had despised their husbands and children, and Jerusalem has proven to be no different. In contrast with the more typical accusation that Jerusalem has become like the nations, Ezekiel charges

#### **Sister Cities**



Jerusalem is Sodom's sister-city,  
but the merciful salt didn't have mercy on her  
and didn't cover her with a silent whiteness.  
Jerusalem is an unconsenting Pompeii.  
History books that were thrown into the fire,  
their pages are strewn about, stiffening in red.

Yehuda Amichai, "Jerusalem, 1967," §22, ll. 1-6, in *The Selected Poems of Yehuda Amichai*, newly rev. and expanded ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54.

that Jerusalem has never differed from them. However, because it is in the nature of her mother and sisters to reject her, Jerusalem's behavior ironically perpetuates her own isolation. She may be like the nations, but she can never enjoy any familial sympathy from them.

Comparisons with Jerusalem's big sister Samaria (NRSV "elder") and little sister Sodom (NRSV "younger") accentuate Jerusalem's wickedness.<sup>25</sup> Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, had been destroyed in 722 BC and had served from that time on as an object lesson to the southern kingdom of Judah. Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel asserts that Jerusalem has outdone Samaria in her rebellion against the covenant (cf. Jer 3:6-11).

The more shocking comparison is with Sodom. In earlier prophetic allusions to Sodom, the shame of the comparison had been in the extent to which the city had suffered destruction (Isa 1:7-9). By contrast, Ezekiel draws attention to Jerusalem's moral failings. As a Canaanite city, Sodom's role in the biblical tradition was that of the evil Other (cf. Gen 18-19). Ezekiel asserts that Jerusalem's crimes are so much worse that she makes Sodom and Samaria appear righteous by comparison.<sup>26</sup> When Yahweh restores these cities, Jerusalem becomes the paradigmatic example of divine judgment against all unrighteousness.

### **A New Covenant and the End of Idolatry, 16:59-63**

Ezekiel 16:59-63 brings together the themes of covenant (16:1-43) and shame (16:44-58). Verse 59 is retrospective: Because Jerusalem has scorned the oath and overturned the covenant, Yahweh is no longer under any obligation to protect her. He will therefore do to Jerusalem as she has done. But that turns out not to be the end of the story: even though Jerusalem has broken the old covenant, Yahweh remains faithful to it and establishes a new one. This time, he declares, the covenant will be an everlasting one. Yahweh's decision to restore Jerusalem to a position of prominence among her sisters reflects this new covenant (16:61-62). Jerusalem must recognize that her newly acquired status is Yahweh's doing. The text pointedly says this is done not on account of Jerusalem's covenant (NRSV "your covenant"), but because of Yahweh's covenant. The reference to Jerusalem's covenant may allude to those she initiated during her indefatigable but fruitless forging of political alliances (16:23-34). Yahweh thus reverses the effects of her harlotrous initiatives by reasserting the primacy of his covenant.

The English translation of Ezekiel 16:63 intriguingly asserts that Yahweh's forgiveness will result in Jerusalem's shame. Because it is then assumed that this reference to forgiveness involves Yahweh's pardon or absolution of Jerusalem's wrongdoing, virtually insuperable theological problems arise, and it becomes difficult to explain why such forgiveness should result in Jerusalem's shame. [Shame]

The problem may be resolved through a reexamination of the Hebrew term that is translated as "forgiveness" (*kpr piel*). The root meaning of the verb is "to wipe or rub clean."<sup>27</sup> In cultic contexts the verb refers almost exclusively to acts of purification, usually of the temple. Purification may be effected either through the use of a cleansing agent, for example the blood of the sin offering, or through the transfer of the impurity to a substitutionary animal,

### Shame



Like all emotions, shame is invested with cultural meanings. While most Westerners experience shame as a profound feeling of inadequacy, that is probably not its primary connotation in the biblical texts. More likely, the primary experience of shame occurs in contexts where one is affected by others' failures. In many of the contexts where shame language appears, one person has pledged loyalty to another in exchange for that person's recognition, protection, or security (cf. Judg 18:7; 1 Sam 25:7, 15). When that person fails to deliver what is expected of him, then the other person feels shame. It is the one who is wronged, not the wrongdoer, who suffers shame.

The complaint psalms reflect an analogous understanding of the dynamics of shame in the divine-human relationship. In these psalms, the plea not to be put to shame is often combined with the psalmist's confession of trust in God (Pss 25:2, 20; 31:2). The plea, "I have trusted in you; let me not be put to shame," urges God to honor the petitioner's dependence. If the psalmist should experience distress, sickness, or the scorn of the community, then that is because God has failed him. Even though this experience can lead to the conclusion that the individual has sinned and deserves this treatment, the psalmist does not initially feel shame because of something he has done. Rather, he feels shame because he perceives that God has abandoned him.

In both social and ritual contexts, then, shame was experienced in the context of relationships. The dependent one in the relationship was entitled to certain kinds of benefits, while the more powerful one was entitled to loyalty. In the case of Ezek 16, Jerusalem would have expected protection and security from Yahweh, as well as the generous gifts that indicate Yahweh's ownership. Yahweh,

meanwhile, would have expected loyalty from Jerusalem. When Yahweh is cuckolded instead, it is he who feels shame, not the adulterous wife Jerusalem. In fact, her shamelessness is part of the problem.

Because shame is such a pervasive theme in Ezek 16, one may suggest that the chapter was a response to the exiles' experience of abandonment by Yahweh. Shame was already a fact of life among the exiles, and the reproach of the nations is cited frequently in both judgment and restoration oracles (Ezek 5:14, 15; 16:57; 22:4, 5; 34:29; 36:6, 15, 30). Complaint-like statements are also attributed to the Jerusalemites: in Ezekiel's vision of the abominations in the temple, for example, he hears them say, "The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land" (Ezek 8:12). From Jerusalem's perspective, then, Yahweh's apparent abandonment has put them to shame.

Ezek 16 presents Yahweh's counter-argument. Yahweh has always been faithful to the covenant. He adopted Jerusalem, clothed her, pledged his covenant to her, and, even after her outrageous behavior renders it null and void, Yahweh continues to act on the basis of his ancient oath. Even though Jerusalem's behavior nullifies Yahweh's covenant, Yahweh demonstrates his fidelity to his oath by pledging a new one. Within the dynamics of honor and shame, Yahweh's actions trigger in Jerusalem the awareness of her own failure to honor the covenant. She alone is to blame for her humiliation and shame.

Margaret S. Odell, "An Exploratory Study of Shame and Dependence in the Bible and Selected Near Eastern Parallels," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Lawson Younger Jr. et al., *Scripture in Context* 4, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies* 11 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1991), 217-34.

which is then expelled from the sanctuary and driven into the unclean wilderness. Within this general framework, Galambush notes that the particular formulation in 16:63 (*kpr piel* with preposition *l*) is used of people only twice (Deut 21:8; Isa 22:14). Moreover, she notes that the closest parallel to Ezekiel 16:63 is Numbers 35:33, which, like the priestly usages described above, is concerned not with forgiveness but with cleansing the land of impurity. Galambush concludes that Ezekiel 16:63 concerns the cleansing of Jerusalem “as the locus of the temple,” and not the forgiveness of the people.<sup>28</sup>

If Galambush is correct, then Ezekiel 16:63 does not pardon or excuse Jerusalem’s deeds, and the apparent contradiction between the gift of forgiveness and the experience of shame is resolved. One notes, furthermore, that the procedure for cleansing the land in Numbers 35:33 exacts the full penalty for bloodguilt. If that understanding lies behind Ezekiel 16:63, then the source of shame is something other than the absolution of guilt. More likely it stems from the recognition of her utter failure in her covenantal relationship with Yahweh. When she recognizes the extent to which Yahweh has held the relationship together in spite of her, she will see her past actions in a new light.

As a result of her shame, “there shall be no more mouth openings.” NRSV’s translation, “[you will] never open your mouth again because of your shame,” implies that Jerusalem’s silence is a result of her humiliation and embarrassment. But since the nominal construction of this rare phrase, which occurs elsewhere only in Ezekiel 29:21, suggests that it is a technical term,<sup>29</sup> it should not be construed as an ordinary type of silence due to embarrassment. The one other use of *pithôn peh* also occurs in the context of the demonstration of Yahweh’s loyalty to covenant partners (in this case, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, 29:17-20); the expression may refer to the practice of making appeals to the suzerain in the covenant relationship. In chapter 16, Jerusalem will no longer make such appeals because she will finally recognize that Yahweh has never abandoned her.<sup>30</sup>

Verses 59-63 assert that Yahweh’s actions reverse the consequences of Jerusalem’s abominations. By restoring Jerusalem to a position of preeminence among the sister cities, Yahweh returns Jerusalem to the fame and renown originally intended for her. Her preeminence now no longer rests on the alliances she forged, but on Yahweh’s ancient and longstanding intention to honor the covenant. Paying the full penalty for her ways, Jerusalem is forced

to recollect and remember her past. Fully cleansed of her impurities, however, her past has come to an end.

## CONNECTIONS

Ezekiel 16 has always been an offensive text. In the first century of the common era, Eliezer b. Hyrcanus forbade the reading of Ezekiel 16 in liturgical contexts because it called Israel's honorable genealogy into question (Ezek 16:3).<sup>31</sup> Today, the chapter poses other difficulties. The patriarchal perspective has proven especially offensive to feminist readers, but there are other problems as well. One set of problems revolves around the use of familial metaphors to define Jerusalem's relation to Yahweh. On the one hand, these are a welcome relief from the depiction throughout Ezekiel of Yahweh as Israel's liege lord, a depiction that depends primarily on ancient Near Eastern political conventions and which implies a vast distance between the divine and human realms. By contrast, the metaphor of Jerusalem as an infant utterly dependent on the care of its foster parent captures a more intimate dimension of Yahweh's relation to his people. Such care is poignantly expressed in Psalm 22, which describes the psalmist's dependence on God from birth:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
     you kept me safe on my mother's breasts.  
 On you I was cast from my birth,  
     and since my mother bore me  
     you have been my God.  
 Do not be far from me,  
     for trouble is near  
     and there is no one to help. (Ps 22:9-11)

This care for the infant strikes us as a beautiful, tender portrayal of God's love. However, the portrayal of human beings as utterly dependent on divine care may undercut other biblical emphases on spiritual growth and maturity. If we are utterly dependent on God, then we are no more responsible for our actions than a newborn is. Is there a way to conceptualize dependence on God without necessarily keeping God's people in a state of spiritual immaturity?

A second set of problems is associated with the chapter's use of honor and shame language. Having been shamed by Jerusalem's wanton behavior, Yahweh vindicates his honor by shaming her.

The honor-shame dynamic continues in Yahweh's invidious comparison of Jerusalem with the notoriously wicked Sodom and fatally rebellious Samaria, both of whom had formerly served as object lessons for Jerusalem. When Yahweh forgives Jerusalem and reestablishes the covenant, her past will continue to shame and humiliate her.

The honor-shame dynamic creates both theological and anthropological problems. On the theological side, this conception of God is alien to Western Christians, who are accustomed to thinking of God as unaffected by human actions. Thus it is strange to think that Yahweh feels shamed or somehow diminished because of Jerusalem's behavior. On the anthropological side, the idea that forgiveness requires a sense of shame is offensive to many readers. One wonders why Jerusalem must carry the baggage of her shameful past into the future.

In recent years, two scholars have addressed these problems by examining the potential for moral development that is embedded in shame language. Ellen Davis posited that shame is "one of the most profound biblical insights into the affective logic of reconciliation":

Only God's *prior* act of deliverance from the effects of sin makes it possible for Israel to stand at some critical distance from its own conduct. Encouraged by the demonstration of God's undeserved favor, the nation can begin to make proper use of its memory by entering into an honest assessment of the past and assuming full responsibility for what it has done.<sup>32</sup>

For Davis, then, the experience of shame moves the nation toward an acceptance of responsibility for its past. Grace precedes memory, and memory, in turn, allows the nation to see its past actions clearly and take responsibility for them. One notes, however, that Davis hardly described the experience of shame, much less its affect, when she spoke of Israel standing at a "critical distance from its own conduct." Shame is, if anything, an overwhelming sensation of dismay that the consequences of one's conduct are inescapable. Although she asserted the significance of the affective element of this passage, Davis focused primarily on the cognitive processes of memory, not the emotive experience of shame. [The Use of Memory]

Following up on Davis's observation, Jacqueline Lapsley asked how the experience of shame might lead to the acceptance of moral responsibility.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing that the concept of shame itself is not well understood, at least in cultures where English is spoken and

### The Use of Memory



There are three conditions which often look alike

Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:

Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment

From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference

Which resembles the others as death resembles life,

Being between two lives—unflowering, between The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory:

For liberation—not less of love but expanding

Of love beyond desire, and so liberation

From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country

Begins as attachment to our own field of action

And comes to find that action of little importance

Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,

History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,

The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,

To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," III.1–16, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1971), 142.

shame vocabulary is limited, Lapsley mined current anthropological and psychological literature in order to describe internal and external states of shame, gendered experiences of shame, and the apparently contradictory fact that shame encompasses both dishonor (i.e., "shame-as-disgrace") and honor (i.e., "shame-as-discretion").

Although Lapsley intimated that the gendered experience of shame may prove fruitful for the interpretation of Ezekiel 16 and 23, the more important distinction for her is that between internal and external experiences of shame. The external experience of shame occurs when a person violates community sanctions and is reproached for it, while the internal experience of shame is the feeling of being inadequate when one is publicly shamed. This latter experience is necessary for moral development; as Lapsley puts it, "the question is, does the person feel the shame?"<sup>34</sup> Lapsley notes that while Ezekiel is fully aware of the external experience of shame, it is the inner experience that really matters, because it is only the internal experience of shame that allows the person to see his/her behavior as it really is. Such shame

results in a "painful self-awareness," and it carries with it a "peculiar capacity for self-knowledge," and a "devastating clarity of self-perception."<sup>35</sup>

For Lapsley, cognitive moral development, as evidenced in a new knowledge of the self, is triggered by a prior, painful emotional experience. This emotion shatters the illusions of a false self and allows for a truer self-understanding. Like Davis, Lapsley understands shame as the consequence of this divine action. If Jerusalem protests being subjected to the external experience of shame, the morally productive experience must be forced upon her. In Lapsley's view, Jerusalem's experience of this kind of shame is a gift of God that leads to self-knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

The observations of Davis and Lapsley may eventually prove to be theologically fruitful explorations of the role of emotion in moral and spiritual development. Even so, one may question whether Ezekiel 16 intends to outline a moral psychology. After all, the subject of the oracle is a city, not a person. While one might



conjecture that what is said of a metaphorized city-as-woman might also be said of real people, feminist scholars have cautioned against reinscribing the metaphor as a stereotype of female behavior and experience. Peggy Day argued, for example, that there is no evidence in biblical or ancient Near Eastern law that supports the interpretation of Jerusalem's judgment in analogy with the punishment of adulterous women. See [Metaphor and Reality]. Rather, the judgment of Jerusalem is drawn entirely from the terminology of punishment for treaty violations. The failure to note this, she concluded, has resulted in the death of the metaphor, as scholars read Jerusalem's punishment all too literally as the punishment of adulterous women.<sup>37</sup>

If one must exercise caution in the interpretation of the punishment of Jerusalem, then it seems reasonable to call for caution in the interpretation of the city's rehabilitation. That is, if Ezekiel speaks metaphorically of Jerusalem's punishment, then does he speak metaphorically of its experience of shame as well? Following Day's lead, one notes that shame language is always associated with the restoration of the covenant; since that is the case, it seems preferable to understand the function of shame within the covenantal context of obligation and duty. While Lapsley accurately pointed out that Ezekiel's use of shame language presses Jerusalem toward an internal commitment to the covenant, it is doubtful that the function of shame here should be generalized to all moral and spiritual development. Lapsley's own cautions about the great range of meanings attached to shame—particularly the different ways in which men and women experience it—would suggest that considerably more needs to be said before we can derive a moral psychology from this passage.

In light of this caution, one notes that one of the more intriguing terms for divine action and human response is closely connected to Jerusalem's identity as a city and thus should be applied to moral psychology with caution, if at all. The first such term is the one that causes so much difficulty in the first place: forgiveness. Following Block, Lapsley noted in passing that the verb is more accurately understood as "purify."<sup>38</sup> Block, in turn, had observed that the verb is more regularly used to describe the purification of objects.<sup>39</sup> Although Block conjectured that Ezekiel adapted the term to refer to the purification of the people, it is more likely that here, as elsewhere in the unit, Ezekiel reverts from the vehicle of the metaphor (the woman) to its tenor to describe the cleansing, not of a human being, but of the city.

A second term, which initially appears to be useful as the basis for a moral psychology, is also problematic. Verse 63 reads, “You will no longer have mouth openings on account of your shame, when I purify you from all that you have done.” As I and others have argued elsewhere, the expression Ezekiel uses here is a technical term that refers to a practice in the cult; it is not, as is usually maintained, a description of human silencing, but rather, the termination of a cult practice. This verse alludes to Jerusalem’s perennial complaint that Yahweh has shamed Jerusalem by abandoning her. In response, Jerusalem has crafted idols, to whom she complains that Yahweh has abandoned her (cf. 8:12). By reestablishing the covenant, Yahweh definitively affirms that he is, always has been, and always will be faithful to Jerusalem. Yahweh’s anomalous constancy does force Jerusalem to “remember and be confounded” (16:61). She does need to recognize that she, not Yahweh, is the one who has strayed. She does need to piece together the shards of her past and to see that she is responsible for her destruction. But if she no longer opens her mouth in shame, it is because Yahweh’s renewed presence obviates any future need for such complaints. Elements of emotion and memory are present in this strange little passage; but in no way does Yahweh’s forgiveness trigger shame. If anything, Yahweh’s cleansing removes the occasion for any future experience or expression of this confounding emotion.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the preliminary oracles outlining Yahweh’s accusation: Ezek 5:9, 11; 6:9, 11; 7:3, 8, 20; in Ezekiel’s firsthand vision of the abominations of Jerusalem: 8:6 (twice), 9, 13, 15, 17; 9:4; in speeches describing the exiles’ newly acquired consciousness of their abominations: 11:18, 21; 12:16; in the demand that the exiles separate themselves from their abominations, 14:6.

<sup>2</sup> For the significance of feminine imagery throughout the book, see especially Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh’s Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mary E. Shields, “Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16,” *JFSR* 14 (1998): 5-18.

<sup>5</sup> Corrine L. Patton, “Should Our Sister Be Treated Like a Whore? A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23,” in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (SBLSS 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 227-38, esp. 232.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Pamela Gordon and Harold C. Washington, "Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible," in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Feminist Companion to the Bible 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 308-24; cf. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, "Teaching Troubling Texts: Ezekiel's Justifications of God," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 97-117.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:273.

<sup>8</sup> So Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:273.

<sup>9</sup> Hermann Gunkel was the first to propose that this story was adapted from a folk-tale (*Das Märchen in das Alten Testament* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1917], 115f; translated and cited in full by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:300). For a full discussion and evaluation of Gunkel's hypothesis, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:300-301; cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:471; and Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Heremeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:339.

<sup>10</sup> "While I was a gardener, Ishtar granted me (her) love, and for four and [. . .] I exercised kingship" ("The Legend of Sargon," *ANET*, 119).

<sup>11</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:474.

<sup>12</sup> BT *Shabbat* 129b; as cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:274.

<sup>13</sup> Cogan, "A Technical Term for Exposure," *JNES* 27 (1968): 133-35.

<sup>14</sup> Meir Malul, "Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents: A Study of Some Legal Metaphors in Ezekiel 16.1-7," *JSOT* 46 (1990): 102-104.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. H. Fuhs, "גַּא'ל, *ga'al*," *TDOT*, 3:45-48.

<sup>16</sup> NRSV takes the prepositional phrase as a circumstantial clause and moves it to the beginning of the verse. The translation thereby suggests that while the child is still in her blood, Yahweh declares, "live." However, "in your blood" is part of Yahweh's declaration.

<sup>17</sup> Malul, "Adoption of Foundlings," 109, 111-12.

<sup>18</sup> Commentators wonder whether the blood from which she is cleansed is menstrual blood or the blood of first intercourse. The narrative does not require this specificity of detail, but rather implies a continuity between her states at birth and maturity.

<sup>19</sup> Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> I have rendered the Hebrew *zānâ* to reflect the idea of economic transaction. The text literally says that she prostitutes her name.

<sup>21</sup> Gen 38:24; Lev 19:29; 21:9.

<sup>22</sup> Deut 22:21; Gen 38:24; Judg 19:2.

<sup>23</sup> For the metaphorical use of the verb root *zānâ* to refer to religious apostasy, see Phyllis A. Bird, "To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 75-94.

<sup>24</sup> Exod 34:15; Lev 17:17; 20:5, 6; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33.

<sup>25</sup> For the translation of the Hebrew terms *gēdôlâ* (NRSV "elder") and *qētannâ* (NRSV "younger") in connection with Samaria and Sodom, see Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:507. As the capital of ten tribes, Samaria probably was larger than Jerusalem, while Sodom, which had been destroyed more than a millennium before the Israelite possession of Jerusalem, had probably been a less significant city.

<sup>26</sup> Despite Ezekiel's prodigious use of sexual imagery in his condemnation of Jerusalem, he does not allude to the rape of the two angelic visitors by the men of

Sodom (Gen 19:1-11). For Ezekiel, the crime of Sodom is not male homosexuality but pride.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1079-84; cf. B. Lang, “כִּפֶּרֶת *kipper*,” *TDOT*, 7:289-303.

<sup>28</sup> Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that the term was a technical term referring to complaint rituals. See Odell, “The Inversion of Shame and Forgiveness in Ezekiel 16.59-63,” *JSOT* 56 (1992): 105-107.

<sup>30</sup> For an alternative interpretation of the expression *pithôn peh*, see James Kennedy, “Hebrew *pithôn peh* in the Book of Ezekiel,” *VT* 41 (1991): 233-35. Though Kennedy and I disagree on the exact meaning of the phrase, both of us concur in regarding it as a technical expression associated with the cult.

<sup>31</sup> *m. Meg.* 4:10; cited by Marvin H. Pope, “Mixed Marriage Metaphor in Ezekiel 16,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 389-90.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy* (Bible and Literature Series 21; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 115.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self,” in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, SBLSS 9 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 143-73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>37</sup> Peggy L. Day, “Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI,” *VT* 50 (2000): 308.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-66.

<sup>39</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:520.

# A PARABLE OF THE CEDAR AND THE VINE

## Ezekiel 17:1-24

Chapter 17 presents a fable from the plant and animal world that is both a riddle (*ḥidā*) and a parable (*māšāl*). The chapter contains three sections: the allegory proper (vv. 3-10), a decoding of the allegory, which ends in a dual announcement of judgment (vv. 11-21); and a poetic declaration emphasizing Yahweh's agency in a future act of restoration (vv. 22-24). There is considerable disagreement over the literary integrity of the chapter. Since the prose interpretation interrupts the poetic material of 17:3-10 and 22-24, it has been suggested that it reflects a later, *ex eventu* interpretation of the riddle. Others have, however, argued on historical and literary grounds that the interpretation is integral to the riddle itself. Ezekiel 17:22-24 presents further difficulties: though it resumes the use of poetic devices and metaphors of 17:3-10, its intelligibility depends on the interpretation of vv. 11-21. Since the present commentary interprets the book in its final form as an appeal to the second generation of exiles, I will start with the premise that the chapter in its present form reflects an extended process of communal reflection on the meaning of Ezekiel's riddle.

Using the figures of two eagles, a branch from the top of a cedar, and a vine, Ezekiel leads his audience to consider the consequences of royal politics. A great eagle takes the topmost branch from a cedar and transplants it to the "land of trade." Then the eagle plants native seed by abundant waters, where it flourishes as a luxuriant, spreading vine. When, however, a second, less magnificent eagle appears, the vine inexplicably reaches toward this second eagle and seeks to be transplanted by this second eagle's waters, with the expectation that this eagle can also provide nourishment. The allegory ends with the question of whether such a transplanted vine can thrive.

A second formula for the reception of the divine word introduces 17:11-21, suggesting that this section developed as a separate revelation supplementing the initial riddle. After a question that pointedly implies that the exiles should know what the fable means without having to be told, vv. 11-15 retell the parable in the more direct style of historical narrative. As these verses make clear, the eagles represent the kings of Babylon and Egypt, while the cedar and vine represent

different branches of the Davidic dynasty. The great eagle (Nebuchadnezzar) transplants a shoot from the top of the cedar (Jehoiachin) to Babylon and plants a native vine (Zedekiah) in its place. Although the eagle gives the vine every opportunity to grow, it perversely and inexplicably turns to another eagle (Egypt), in the hope that this one will water it and make it fruitful. Rhetorical questions at the end of the parable ask whether the vine can survive, and suggest that its transference to the other eagle's care has so weakened it that very little effort will be required to uproot it. Two separate oracles of judgment—one focusing on the historical plane (17:16-18) and the other on the heavenly plane (17:19-21)—follow the interpretation.

The concluding verses of the chapter (vv. 22-24) resume the poetic diction and motifs of vv. 3-10 and promise that Yahweh himself will take a branch from the cedar and plant it on his holy mountain. The concluding recognition formula continues the conceit: all the trees of the earth will acknowledge that it is Yahweh who humbles the mighty and exalts the lowly.

In the present literary context, 17:22-24 constitutes an additional phase of divine activity and can therefore be interpreted as a continuation of the announcements of judgment in vv. 15-21. On the other hand, its similarity of style to vv. 3-10 suggests that it may have been part of the original riddle. Where vv. 3-8 imply that the first eagle represents Babylon, vv. 22-24 reveal that the eagle is Yahweh, whose role in history will be revealed when one of the descendants of Jehoiachin is transplanted to Yahweh's holy mountain.

As a parable of the respective fates of two Davidic descendants, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, the chapter endorses the former against the latter, who is condemned for breaking his treaty with Nebuchadnezzar. But the chapter moves beyond political considerations to examine the theocentric character of history. The argument hinges on the ancient Near Eastern practice of forcing vassals to swear oaths of allegiance in the name of their own gods. Since Zedekiah had sworn an oath in Yahweh's name to uphold his treaty with Nebuchadnezzar, his obligation to Nebuchadnezzar was simultaneously an obligation to Yahweh.<sup>1</sup>

In his insistence on taking Zedekiah's oath at its face value, Ezekiel takes exception to the political conventions of his day. In the swirl of international politics of the time, treaties were evidently made to be broken. It has been suggested that vassals rarely took these oaths seriously; in fact, rebellions appear to have occurred whenever the balance of power shifted. Against this rather oppor-

tunistic attitude toward treaties and alliances, Ezekiel urges integrity of word and deed in the intertwined realms of piety and politics.

The chapter characterizes the fable as a *māšāl* and a *ḥîdâ*, a parable and a riddle. Elsewhere the two terms appear in conjunction in introductions to wisdom speech (Prov 1:6; Ps 49:4) and in a historical psalm that presents the history of Israel as a riddle (Ps 78). Employed together, the two terms imply that the fable is incomprehensible without an interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Several elements contribute to its ambiguity. First, although many of the motifs resemble elements from Israel's salvation history, they are used here in an anomalous way. Second, no reason is given for the vine's actions; in fact, one may suggest that the willfulness of the vine *is* the riddle. Third, the parable appears more deeply ambiguous even after it has been decoded in 17:11-15. Until it is disclosed that Yahweh alone is the planter and nurturer, the riddle has not yielded its mystery.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMENTARY

### The Parable, 17:3-10

Yahweh commands Ezekiel to “propound a riddle and speak a parable.” As is typical of Hebrew parallelism, the two commands are complementary. Both riddles and parables lead to insight by way of an initial confusion or incomprehension. [Parables and Riddles] Riddles confuse by deliberately misleading the hearer into thinking she understands what is being asked of her, parables by proposing similarities between two disparate objects. Both strategies are evident in chapter 17.

In balanced poetic lines, the fable draws attention first to a great eagle, whose magnificence is described in considerable detail. The eagle comes to the Lebanon and takes the topmost branch from a cedar tree and plants it in the land of Canaan (NRSV “land of merchants”). Although NRSV and commentators take this as a reference to Babylon as a peace-loving kingdom of traders, it is more likely that the reference to Canaan is part of the riddle. Although the cedar has been taken out of its land, it has, paradoxically,

### Parables and Riddles

**ΑΩ** As with other word pairs, the words *māšāl* and *hîdâ* amplify one another. *Māšāl*, translated in 17:1 as “allegory,” has the basic meaning “to be like.” The word has several connotations, all of which are attested in Ezekiel. A primary meaning of the term is “proverb,” or a wisdom saying that encapsulates observations on human experience in a short, memorable expression. Ezekiel has two examples of such wisdom sayings. In Ezek 16:44, the proverb “Like mother, like daughter” expresses the almost universally recognizable tendency of children to model their behavior after that of their parents. In Ezek 18:2, the proverb “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” expresses the truism that children often suffer the consequences of their parents’ actions. A *māšāl* can also signify ridicule (cf. 69:12); for example, although the proverb in 16:44 is potentially a morally neutral observation, in its context it is highly derisive. Ezek 14:8 contains a slightly different nuance of *māšāl* as a taunt; here the people themselves become the *māšāl*, or object lesson. Finally, the usage in Ezek 17:2; 21:5 (Eng. 20:49), and 24:3 reflects the basic meaning of *māšāl* as a comparison. In 17:2 and 24:3, Ezekiel speaks a *māšāl*, figurative language likening military and political events to experiences in everyday life.

When *māšāl* is combined with *hîdâ*, or riddle, its potential for ambiguity is accentuated. (Contra Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. [AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997], 1:309; and Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*:

*Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel’s Prophecy*, JSOTS 78, Bible and Literature Series 21 [Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989], 95, who emphasize the contrast between the two terms. In their treatment of Ezek 17:2, the intention of the *māšāl* is to clarify, while that of *hîdâ* is to confuse.) The term *hîdâ* occurs only eighteen times in the Old Testament, about half of them in the story of Samson’s riddle (Judg 14:12-19). The terms appear together elsewhere only in Prov 1:6; Pss 49:3-4; 78:2. In Prov 1:6 and Ps 49:3, the context suggests that by deep reflection and study human beings can learn to understand both proverbs and riddles. The ability to do so demonstrates an exceptional, if human, capacity for discernment into the mysterious workings of human life (cf. 1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chr 9:1).

Ezekiel’s usage in 17:2 differs slightly from these wisdom passages, in that he associates riddles with the workings of history. In this respect, Ezek 17:2 has more in common with the conjunction of riddle and proverb in Ps 78:2. The entire psalm is a historical survey of Israel’s rebellion, presented as a proverb and riddle. The riddle is that Israel continues to rebel despite the constancy of Yahweh’s mercy. Or perhaps the paradox is the other way around: given the regularity of human rebellion, divine mercy becomes a riddle. In order to understand such a riddle, something beyond human intellection and discernment is needed. In the psalm, Yahweh disclosed the answer to this riddle long ago to the ancestors; that answer is now passed on as part of Israel’s revelatory tradition.

cally, been planted in a place that is designated by a term long associated with the land of divine promise. [Ezekiel’s “Land of Merchants”]

The great eagle then takes “seed from the land” and plants it in rich soil with access to plentiful water. The phrase “abundant water” (Heb. *mayîm rabbîm*, “many waters”) is often overlooked as a naturalistic element in the allegory. But the phrase has mythological connotations and elsewhere in Ezekiel signifies the primordial waters of chaos (Ezek 31:5, 7). Held in check by the rule of Yahweh, these waters become the source of power, majesty, and natural abundance in the created order (see [Many Waters]).

The beneficial effect of feeding from these waters is evident in the allegory, as the vine produces rich foliage and shows every sign of prospering. When a second eagle appears, however, the vine unaccountably turns from the first eagle and seeks to be transplanted to another source of abundant waters (17:8). As in 17:5,



### Ezekiel's "Land of Merchants"



Only in Ezekiel (16:29; 17:4) is the phrase *ʾereṣ kēnaʿan*, "land of Canaan," rendered "land of merchants" and taken to refer to Babylon. For the most part, both biblical and extra-biblical sources speak of Canaan as a geographical region along the eastern Mediterranean Sea. In Num 34:1-12, the precise boundaries of the land of Canaan are given and explicitly identified as the land Yahweh had promised to Abraham. Ezekiel adapts this tradition in 47:15-20; 48:1-28 and refers to analogous boundaries. Although he does not call this land Canaan, he does identify it as the land promised to the ancestors, as in Num 34:1-12.

Given this very clear association of Canaan not only with the geographical region of Syria-Palestine but also with the land promised to Israel, it is not clear why Ezekiel would have called Babylon "the land of Canaan." Commentators regularly point out that the gentilic "Canaanite" and the geographical "Canaan" had acquired the secondary meaning of "trader," evidently because of the strong association of Canaanite cities with trade (Hos 12:8; Zech 1:11; 14:21; Job 40:30; Prov 31:24; Isa 23:8). On the basis of this evidence, they then suggest that Ezekiel has appropriated this usage in his reference to Babylon as a trading center.

But all of these other references are to people, not lands; Ezekiel is still unique in equating the "land" of Canaan with Babylonia. Since one of these occurrences is found in a riddle, one wonders whether the allusion is part of the riddle, and that its function is to overturn audience assumptions. The exiles live as aliens in a strange land (cf. Ps 137); but Ezekiel calls it the "land of Canaan," which according to their traditions is the land of promise. Just as Yahweh has assured them that he will be a "small sanctuary" among them, so also does the alien land become a land of promise. It is from this symbolic "land of Canaan," not the geographical land, that Yahweh will take a cutting and reestablish the kingdom.

Anson F. Rainey, "Canaan, Canaanites," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 213; cf. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:361-62.

the phrase *mayîm rabbîm* is used, suggesting that source of the water is, again, the primordial waters of chaos. Since the vine will derive its strength from ultimately the same source, its act is needlessly disruptive. The fable ends with a series of rhetorical questions leading to the conclusion that the vine causes its own destruction. No strong army will be needed to uproot it; when the east wind strikes, it will wither away.

Cedars, vines, and eagles are common enough images that it may not be necessary to seek allusions in the biblical tradition or in ancient Near Eastern iconography. However, as Greenberg has noted, Ezekiel's Judean readers may well have associated these motifs with similar ones in the salvation traditions.<sup>4</sup> In the exodus traditions, Yahweh brings the Israelites out of Egypt "on eagle's wings" (Exod 19:4; Deut 32:9) and transplants the choice vine Israel from Egypt to a cleared and fertile land (Ps 80:8-11; cf. Isa 5:1-5). Cedar, plentiful at that time in the Lebanon mountain range, symbolized royal majesty in general (Judg 9:15; 1 Kgs 5:13) and the Davidic dynasty in particular (cf. 2 Kgs 14:9; Isa 10:33f).<sup>5</sup>

The fable thus employs election imagery from both the exodus and royal traditions.

If the fable alludes to these traditions, inversions abound. As majestic as the first eagle is, it is not, on first reading, a figure of Yahweh. The cedar is cut off from its high place and carried away to an alien land; but because that land is identified as the “land of Canaan,” being cut off is not expulsion so much as it is a kind of election, since it implies that the cedar has been chosen to receive divine care and sustenance. Meanwhile, though the vine is planted in the geographical land of promise and springs from “native seed,” its location signifies only a contingent privilege. When it turns to Egypt and seeks to be transplanted there, it forfeits this privileged status and begins a reverse exodus implying certain destruction.

The fable closes with a series of questions that invite, even demand, the audience’s reflection and judgment. In this respect, the fable is like Nathan’s parable of the ewe lamb, which elicits David’s sympathy and leads him to pass judgment on himself (2 Sam 12). Ezekiel’s readers are led to see their situation and that of Zedekiah in a new light. Jehoiachin’s land of exile ironically becomes the land of promise, while Zedekiah’s prominence will soon wither.

### **The Interpretation of the Parable, 17:11-21**

This section offers Yahweh’s answer to the riddle. Because the focus is on the consequences of the vine’s behavior, one may suggest that the riddle centers on the absurdity of a vine’s desire to transplant itself.

Verses 11-15 summarize the events of 597. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, deported Jehoiachin to Babylon, and installed Jehoiachin’s uncle Zedekiah as his vassal (cf. 2 Kgs 24:8-20). [*Judah in the Shadow of Babylon and Egypt*] Ezekiel 17:15 alludes to Zedekiah’s attempt to rebel several years later by seeking military aid from Egypt. The verse may reflect knowledge of Zedekiah’s summit of neighboring nations in 593 (cf. Jer 27), as well as optimism in a renewed alliance between Egypt and Judah from roughly the same time.<sup>6</sup>

The centerpiece of Ezekiel’s account of this event is Zedekiah’s oath, which is known only from Ezekiel.<sup>7</sup> As noted earlier, Ezekiel is unique among the prophets for condemning the violation of treaty oaths. Matityahu Tsevat has suggested that the priestly legislation upholding the sanctity of personal oaths lay behind Ezekiel’s understanding of political oath-taking. Ezekiel’s interest in



### Judah in the Shadow of Babylon and Egypt



The use of two eagles in this allegory expresses well the appearance of parity between the two kingdoms of Egypt and Babylon, at least in the eyes of the Judean kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. When Assyria began to lose its control of Syria-Palestine, Egypt quickly moved in to reclaim the region. At the same time, Babylon sought to gain control over territories formerly under Assyrian power. Although Nebuchadnezzar had initially made a great show of strength in the region and brought many of the Syro-Palestinian states, including Judah, under its control in 604, his attempt to invade Egypt in 601 failed miserably, and it took him several years to rebuild his army. The following is a brief outline of events leading up to the Judean deportation in 597 and siege of Jerusalem in 589:

- 609 Necho gains control of Syria-Palestine, deposes Jehoahaz, and appoints Jehoiakim as king of Judah. Jehoiakim taxes the people heavily to pay tribute to Egypt (2 Kgs 23:33-35).
- 605 Nebuchadnezzar defeats Necho at Carchemish, and Jehoiakim becomes a vassal to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs

24:1). For the next four years, Nebuchadnezzar conducts annual campaigns in Syria-Palestine.

- 601 Nebuchadnezzar attempts to invade Egypt; Necho inflicts heavy casualties on the Babylonian army. Necho's success against Nebuchadnezzar encourages Jehoiakim to rebel (2 Kgs 24:1).
- 597 Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem, Egypt fails to send aid, Jehoiakim dies, and Nebuchadnezzar deports Jehoiachin to Babylonia and makes Zedekiah king of Judah (2 Kgs 24:7, 10-12, 17).
- 593 Zedekiah convenes a meeting of neighboring kingdoms to plot rebellion against Babylon (Jer 27; 2 Kgs 24:20b).
- 592 Psammetichus II tours Syria-Palestine, implying but not asserting a claim to territories controlled by Nebuchadnezzar.
- 589 Nebuchadnezzar begins siege of Jerusalem.
- 587 Jerusalem falls. Sentenced at Riblah, Zedekiah watches the execution of his sons and is carried, bound and fettered, to Babylon (2 Kgs 25:7).

See further Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:12-13.

upholding oaths may lie behind the historical information preserved here.

Zedekiah's treason provokes both human and divine consequences. First, from a purely political perspective, Zedekiah's violation of the treaty oath invites Nebuchadnezzar's retaliation (17:16-18). In line with the principle of proportional retribution, Zedekiah will die in Babylon, the land of the king whose oath he scorned. But, since Zedekiah swore this oath in Yahweh's name, he also stands under divine judgment. It is Yahweh, not Nebuchadnezzar, who will capture him in his net and carry him to Babylon for judgment.

### The Future of the Cedar, 17:22-24

The closing verses return to the poetic imagery of 17:3-10. Personal pronouns emphasize Yahweh's agency in taking a cutting from the transplanted cedar and planting it in Israel. The "mountain height" alludes to Zion, though it is worth noting that Ezekiel refrains from saying so. The cutting will then become a cosmic tree, supporting all the birds of the air and field. Ezekiel employs this imagery only once elsewhere, in a condemnation of Assyria that nevertheless extols that kingdom's greatness. [[The Cosmic Tree and the Assyrian Throne Room](#)]

As the motif is employed in vv. 22-24, the cosmic tree makes all other powers subordinate to Yahweh's care of the tree. Unlike other cosmic trees, which support both birds and beasts, Ezekiel's tree supports only birds (17:23; contrast 31:6). In the present context, this adaptation pointedly comments on the place of the two eagles in Yahweh's well-ordered cosmos. They do not act on their own, but instead rely on Yahweh's nurturing care (cf. 31:6b).

#### The Cosmic Tree and the Assyrian Throne Room



The cosmic tree symbolizes the entire cosmos in its political and natural order. Elsewhere, Ezekiel invokes the motif in a surprisingly positive assessment of Assyrian rule (Ezek 31:2-9). The cosmic tree unites the heavens and the earth, draws its sustenance from the waters of the underworld, and provides nourishment and protection for all the birds and beasts of the earth.

The cosmic tree appears in a variety of contexts in Assyrian and Mesopotamian art, and its function is not always clear. Significantly, it was the focal point of the Assyrian throne room. A visitor entering the throne room would first see a highly stylized representation of the Assyrian king tending the cosmic tree while accompanied by winged genies and his god Assur.

In its insistence that it is Yahweh who tends the cedar, Ezek 17 appropriates the symbolism of the Assyrian throne room and once again asserts that it is Yahweh who rules the cosmos.

## CONNECTIONS

Ezekiel 17 stands in a long tradition of political fables (Judg 9:8-15; 2 Kgs 14:8-10; cf. Ezek 15) and apocalyptic surveys of history (cf. Dan 8; 10-11). Like the later apocalyptic treatments of history, Ezekiel 17 posits a correspondence between earthly and heavenly reality. Greenberg argued that the *māšāl* (“parable, likeness”) of Ezekiel 17 seeks primarily to establish an analogy between these two spheres. In the same way that Zedekiah violates his oath with Nebuchadnezzar, so also he is unfaithful to Yahweh. And, just as Nebuchadnezzar will not tolerate Zedekiah’s treason, neither will Yahweh condone the nation’s infidelity.<sup>8</sup> The fable may urge an even closer correspondence: faithfulness to one’s word in matters of the world *is* faithfulness to Yahweh, and vice versa, and the succeeding announcements of judgment are different facets of the same event.

This understanding of the unitary nature of human experience is also reflected in the odd dual reference to abundant waters (17:5, 8). The vine is planted by “abundant waters,” but then seeks to be transplanted to “abundant waters.” If the phrase *mayîm rabbîm* has mythological connotations, as has been suggested, then the vine’s action is unnecessary not simply because it already has access to plentiful water, but because all such waters derive from the same source.

Finally, the allegory suggests that it is ultimately Yahweh who engages in all of the actions of planting and transplanting. As noted above, the figure of the eagle is often associated with Yahweh in the exodus traditions. In the allegory, the introduction of a second eagle encourages readers to decode the two eagles as historical

### Biblical Personalism and Ultimate Reality



“Religiously speaking, this means that our encounter with the God who is a person includes the encounter with the God who is the ground of everything personal and as such not a person. Religious experience, particularly as expressed in the great religions, exhibits a deep feeling for the tension between the personal and the nonpersonal element in the encounter between God and man. The Old as well as the New Testament has the astonishing power to speak of the presence of the divine in such a way that the I-thou character of the relation never darkens the transpersonal power and mystery of the divine, and vice versa. Examples of this can be found in the seemingly simple words of Jesus about the hairs on our head, all of which are counted, and the birds which do not fall without the will of God. These words imply that no single event among the infi-

nite number of events that happen in every infinitely small moment of time happens without the participation of God. If anything transcends primitive personalism, it is such a saying. And it is only a continuation of this line of biblical religion when Luther, who was very suspicious of philosophy, speaks of God as being nearer to all creatures than they are to themselves, or of God being totally present in a grain of sand and at the same time not being comprehended by the totality of all things, or of God giving the power to the arm of the murderer to drive home the murderous knife. Here Luther’s sometimes unreflective biblical personalism is transcended, and God as the power of Being in everything is ontologically affirmed.”

Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 83-84.

agents, the kings of Babylon and Egypt respectively. But the concluding section, 17:22-24, suggests that the first eagle should ultimately be understood as the power of Yahweh at work in history.

### Theology and Ethics



“Biblical ethics is not a system of virtues and vices, of laws and counsels, of rewards and punishments. All of this is not lacking, but it appears within a framework of concrete, personal decisions. Every decision is urgent; it has to be made now. When it has been made, it has far-reaching consequences. It is always an ultimate decision—a decision of infinite weight. It decides man’s destiny. It decides the destiny of nations, the selected one as much as the others. Every generation in every nation has to decide for or against righteousness, for or against him who is the God of righteousness. And in every nation, including the selected one, the decision against righteousness means self-destruction.”

Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 45.

Ezekiel’s metaphor uniquely combines the personal and transpersonal elements of divinity: the eagle as the One who tends the vine and determines where it will grow and the abundant waters that nourish it. The resulting coherence in the universe defies compartmentalization. Ezekiel’s ability to bring together these two dimensions of divinity is instructive for contemporary theology, which often finds itself having to choose between personal and transpersonal metaphors for God. Both are potentially limiting: personal metaphors like “Father” or “King” or “Man of War” may introduce stereotypes of gender and hierarchy and lead us to think of God as *a* person, while transpersonal ones may introduce notions of pantheism—never an acceptable option in biblical faith,

which maintains a clear distinction between God and creation. Yet both are necessary for expressing the unique character of Israel’s testimony to its experience of its God. [Biblical Personalism and Ultimate Reality]

The implication of Ezekiel 17 for ethics is also worth noting. Throughout this commentary, it has been observed that theology and ethics are never divorced from each other. One reason for this is the Bible’s emphasis on the personal dimension of the covenantal relationship. Never merely “participating” in reality as its ground of being, Israel must always choose. This particular parable of a cedar, which chooses to transplant itself, suggests that Israel often chooses poorly—even absurdly—to remove itself from the ground of its existence. Though the nurturing waters are always present, the vine’s decision to remove itself from one outlet to another causes it to wither and dry up. Unlike the flora and fauna, creatures who either stay put or conform to the laws of nature (cf. Isa 1:2-3), Israel must choose. Because this choice ultimately concerns Israel’s existence, it is fundamentally an ethical, as well as a religious decision. [Theology and Ethics]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matityahu Tsevat, "The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Vassal Oaths and the Prophet Ezekiel," *JBL* 78 (1959): 199-204.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:524-25.

<sup>3</sup> For the theological ambiguity of the riddle, see Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, JSOTS 78 (Bible and Literature Series 21; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 94-105, and Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:320-24.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:322.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:310.

<sup>6</sup> *Letter of Aristeas*, 3; cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:13.

<sup>7</sup> Contrast 2 Kgs 24; the account in 2 Chronicles is probably dependent on Ezekiel; see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:315.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:322-23.





# A CHALLENGE TO THE SECOND GENERATION

## Ezekiel 18:1-32

Ezekiel 18 has several unusual formal characteristics. First, although a formula for the reception of the divine word introduces the unit, it lacks many other typical elements, including the instruction to the prophet to speak and the generally ubiquitous recognition formula. [An Outline of Ezekiel 18] Second, neither the topic of the chapter nor its literary strategy fits its context. Chapters 17 and 19 are concerned with the fate of the Davidic dynasty and involve the audience in puzzling out metaphors, while chapter 18 addresses the entire house of Israel and employs a more direct method of argumentation in the form of a priestly-legal disputation. The world of ambiguous metaphors appears to have been left behind.

Finally, the aim of the argument remains obscure. [Individualism?] The chapter refutes the popular proverb “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Yahweh’s counterthesis to the proverb is stated in two propositions, “All lives are mine,” and “only the person who sins shall die” (18:4). The disputation elaborates on these propositions through three test cases, that of a righteous father, his depraved son, and the righteous grandson. Although the argument is easily restated, it is more difficult to explain what concerns it is intended to address. It is commonly

### An Outline of Ezekiel 18



- 18:1-4 Initial proposition and rebuttal
- 18:1-2 Fathers sin, children suffer
- 18:3-4 Refutation: All lives belong to Yahweh; only the one who sins shall die
- 18:5-18 Three test cases
  - 18:5-9 The righteous father
  - 18:10-13 The murderous son
  - 18:14-18 The reflective, repenting grandson
- 18:19-24 First objection and rebuttal
  - 18:19b Objection: “Why shouldn’t the son suffer?”
  - 18:19b-20 Reiteration of the principle: Only one who sins shall die
  - 18:21-24 Extension of the principle: No one’s past determines his future
- 18:25-29 Second objection and rebuttal
  - 18:25 Objection: “The way of the Lord is inscrutable”
  - 18:26-29 Rebuttal: Your ways are inscrutable
- 18:30-32 Coda: Declaration of judgment and call to repentance

**Individualism?**

In the last century, the concept of individualism has often been read into Ezek 18, and the chapter's supposed breakthrough from a more primitive conception of a so-called "corporate personality" has been cited as Ezekiel's highest and most important contribution to the history of Israelite religion. Such a viewpoint has been discarded as erroneous. The focus of the chapter is primarily on the responsibility of generations, not individuals, and even though repentance is offered to individuals, this call to repentance is set in the larger context of the reconstitution of the house of Israel.

For a bibliography of scholarship emphasizing the theme of individualism, see Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOTSup 51; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 36. For an analysis of this scholarship, see Gordon H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (SBLDS 126; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 113–25.

assumed that the exiles identify with the children in the proverb and use it to protest their being punished for their ancestors' sins. The proverb thus would resemble in tone and intent the complaint of Lamentations 5:7: "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities." If this is what the exiles meant by the proverb, however, they should find comfort in the counter-claim that "only the one who sins shall die." When, however, Ezekiel refutes the proverb by declaring that Yahweh prefers saving lives to punishing sin, the people complain, "Why should not the son suffer for the sins of the father?" (18:19), and again, "the way of the Lord is inscrutable" (NRSV "unfair," 18:25). Rather than expressing relief that the doctrine of transgenerational retribution no longer applies, the exiles seem unwilling to give it up. ["All lives are mine!"]

The inconsistency of these statements is only apparent, however, and is based on two unexamined assumptions: that the exiles identify with the children in the proverb, and that it is applied to the present experience of exile and the anticipated destruction of Jerusalem. But the chapter does not necessarily support these assumptions. Because the occasion that gave rise to the proverb is not identified, the actual application of the proverb remains uncertain.

**"All lives are mine!"**

What is Yahweh to do? As lord of the cosmos and king of this rebellious people, he has every right to condemn Israel for its betrayal of the covenant. But what is a king without a people? If Yahweh destroys his kingdom, then there is no one left to serve him. The dual propositions of 18:3-4 thus establish a tension between Yahweh's justice and Yahweh's mercy. The one who sins shall surely die; nevertheless, since it is in Yahweh's interest to have a kingdom in the land of the living, it behooves him to be merciful to his subjects. Mercy will win out.

The divine impulse to be merciful is, of course, a constant theme throughout the Bible. One is reminded of Paul's agonizing questions over the status of the Jewish covenant in Rom 9–11, in which he concludes that it is in God's character to remain faithful to ancient commitments even when and as God makes new promises to other people.

For Paul, divine mercy was rooted in God's character as one who makes promises; for Ezekiel, this mercy is rooted in God's character as sovereign lord of the universe. The impulse to save is inherently ecological, in that nothing should be lost or destroyed from God's creation.

Another reading of the proverb and its refutation is possible. Elsewhere in Ezekiel, popular proverbs and sayings, which are truthful in other contexts, become self-serving distortions of theology (see 8:12; 9:9; 11:3, 15; 12:22, 27; 13:10; 33:24; but cf. 37:11). For example, the complaint in 18:12 that Yahweh has abandoned his land, a potentially valid appeal to Yahweh to look with favor on the petitioner, is offensive because it is used to justify attitudes and actions that Yahweh repudiates. The proverb in 18:2 is similarly truthful yet susceptible to misuse. No one would disagree with the truism that children often suffer from their parents' mistakes. Collective experience provides a wealth of supporting evidence; that is why the saying is a proverb. As an implicitly theological statement, the proverb also reflects the commonly held belief in retribution, in which actions have inherent consequences that may not be immediately evident, but which ultimately testify to a divinely and justly ordered universe. Although the proverb expresses this relationship between actions and consequences in an entirely secular manner, it is consistent with one of the basic Israelite convictions about the character of Yahweh. For example, Exodus 34:6-7 balances Yahweh's steadfast love for the faithful with the intention to punish sin:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation.

As a description of human experience, then, the proverb is neither inherently false nor theologically inadequate.

What Yahweh rejects is the application of the proverb to a particular situation. He asks, "What do you mean by repeating this proverb *concerning the land of Israel?*" (emphasis added). The proverb itself has nothing to do with the land of Israel; yet Yahweh's question suggests that the exiles have applied it to a question concerning the land. The proverb may therefore have been employed in the ongoing debate between the exiles and Jerusalemites concerning the inheritance of the land. The Jerusalemites had laid claim to the land in 11:15, declaring that the exiles had abandoned Yahweh and had therefore forfeited their right to the land. The debate resurfaces in chapter 33, when the inhabitants of the "waste

places” invoke the tradition of Abraham to claim that they will inherit the land (33:24). The proverb in 18:2 is part of that debate, and its function is in line with that of these other sayings. By using the proverb, the exiles seek to establish their own claim to the land over against that of the Judeans. Even if Judeans have illegally confiscated land belonging to the exiles, their descendents will not benefit from this crime.

At what point would such an issue have been relevant to the exiles? The dispute may have arisen at the time of the publication of the book of Ezekiel, in the second generation of exile. Evidence for this context is lacking, but it is worth noting that this proverb is cited elsewhere only in Jeremiah, in the context of restoration promises (Jer 31:29). It is in such a context of restoration that the call to repentance in Ezekiel 18 becomes intelligible. Repentance cannot avert the certain destruction of Jerusalem, but it is an essential step in rebuilding the community. It is therefore plausible to suggest that the proverb became current in the second generation as the exiles and Jerusalemites began to debate membership in the community of Israel.

If Ezekiel 18 is interpreted as a unit concerned with the reconstitution of Israel, then its apparent lack of fit with its literary context is resolved. The preceding chapters situate promises of restoration in the context of past judgment. Chapter 16 reaffirms Yahweh’s covenantal commitment to Jerusalem despite her wanton betrayal of the covenant. In chapter 17, Yahweh promises to reestablish the Davidic dynasty despite its transplanting to Babylon. Now in chapter 18, Yahweh reiterates his commitment to the whole house of Israel.

It now becomes apparent that the chapter is every bit as ambiguous as those chapters devoted to puzzling out metaphors. With its elaboration of three generations and not two, the disputation undermines the proverb’s predictable calculus of cause and effect. Moreover, it invites the audience to compare itself to the respective generations. Are they the sinful second generation, or the repentant third? That the people would prefer the certainty of the proverb is suggested by their final protest, “The way of the Lord is inscrutable” (NRSV “unfair”; see below).

## COMMENTARY

**A Self-serving Proverb and Its Refutation, 18:1-18**

The introductory formula for the reception of a divine word identifies the unit as a private communication to Ezekiel; however, the plural pronouns indicate that Yahweh's speech is addressed to the exilic community as a whole. Including Ezekiel among the group to be reprimanded,<sup>1</sup> Yahweh asks them what they mean by applying a particular proverb to the land of Israel. Although it is commonly assumed that the exiles identify with the children in the proverb, it is more likely that they identify with the elder generation, since elsewhere in Ezekiel the exiles are addressed as parents who survive to see their children destroyed (24:21; cf. 14:12-23, esp. 16, 18, 20, 22).

If the proverb is applied to the question of inheritance rights, then v. 2 implies that the "fathers"—elders of the current generation—have prematurely confiscated lands that do not belong to them. Instead of inheriting this land and prospering from its produce, the children will experience hardship with their teeth "set on edge," which is to say that they will go hungry. In their use of this proverb, the exiles thus lay claim to a basic principle of retribution. Though they have been deprived of their land in the current generation, the wheels of justice will eventually return it to their children.

Ezekiel 18 dispels the exiles' conviction that children not only do suffer for the sins of their parents, but that they ought to. Ezekiel's generation held on to this conviction not because it allowed them to wallow in their victimization, as is commonly assumed, but because they believed it allowed them to reclaim their land. Yahweh rejects the proverb by moving the discussion to the transcendent level of the divine claim over all life. All human disputes over possessions and rights thus dissolve in the face of Yahweh's ultimate ownership, not of territory, but of human lives. Such a proverb will therefore no longer be used in Israel.

The disputation repudiates the proverb by positing not two, but three generations, none of which conforms to the premise of the proverb. Far from being wicked, the first generation is a model of righteousness (18:5-9). The next generation does not suffer from the sins of the first generation but rather shapes its own destiny through its active pursuit of wickedness (18:10-13). Nor is the destiny of the third generation determined by the actions of this

second generation; rather, this last generation sees and comprehends the sins of the previous generation and acts with righteousness (18:14-17). Each generation determines its own destiny through its own decisions.

The cases posed in this chapter are hypothetical, since in Ezekiel's world, children are no less wicked than their parents, and in fact learn how to be wicked from them (2:3; 16:3, 45; 20:18, 24). The argument does not intend to exonerate any single generation. For Ezekiel the generations are bound together. Just as the ancestors did not escape punishment, neither will the current generation (20:36), because each generation bears its own guilt. But what Ezekiel does suggest is that each generation begins its history with Yahweh afresh (cf. Ezek 20).

The English translation obscures important nuances of the proverb. The noun translated as "sour grapes" (*bōser*) is more appropriately rendered as "green" or "unripe grapes." Certainly unripe grapes are sour to the taste, but since the proverb concerns an action that has consequences over time, it is better to translate the term to connote unripeness.

Greenberg has called attention to widespread early and late evidence that green grapes (and other unripe produce) were a popular food. He suggests that the first half of the proverb describes a "commonplace, innocent event."<sup>2</sup> Certainly the sampling of ripening fruit is an innocent, even joyful pastime, particularly because it is done in anticipation of riper fruit to come. But such practices were subject to certain restrictions. The Mishnaic tractate *Shebi'it*, for example, specifies that during the sabbatical year a farmer may eat unripe fruit (figs and grapes) in the field with his bread. He is not permitted to harvest it, however, until it is fully ripe (*Mishnah* Sheb. 4.8). At least during the sabbatical year, then, a farmer may sample but not devour or harvest unripe fruit. A more relevant text may be Deuteronomy 23:24, which limits the number of grapes that anyone may sample from a neighbor's vineyard. This latter text recognizes the need to protect ownership rights while also acknowledging that the bounty comes from Yahweh and is to be enjoyed by the entire community. In contrast with either of these situations, Ezekiel 18:2 describes an untimely and rapacious devouring of all of the grapes before they have fully ripened.<sup>3</sup>

That the children suffer as a result is surely the meaning of the second line, but the nature of the suffering can be interpreted in at least two ways. The traditional interpretation, evident in English translations since the fourteenth century, takes the verb to refer to

the aching sensation of teeth after something bitter has been eaten; hence, the children's teeth are "set on edge."<sup>4</sup> The verb may be a by-form of *khy*, however, in which case it connotes a languishing weakness.<sup>5</sup> Basing his interpretation on the verb's derivation from this latter root, Tur-Sinai suggests that the verb means "have nothing to eat," and that the proverb should be construed to mean that because the fathers have eaten grapes before their time, the children have nothing left.<sup>6</sup> Such a rendering of the proverb would be consistent with the two remaining references to green grapes in the Bible, both of which describe the untimely destruction of the harvest (Isa 18:5; Job 15:33). Job 15:33 is especially relevant, since the reference to green grapes drives home the declaration that greedy people are repaid for their rapacious ways by deprivation. The proverb in Ezekiel 18:2 expresses an analogous situation, but spreads the retribution over two generations. Greedy fathers end up with hungry children.

### ***The Rebuttal, 18:3-4***

Swearing an oath, Yahweh declares that this proverb will no longer be used "in Israel." Although NRSV has translated the preposition to imply that the proverb is spoken "in" Israel, it is clearly a proverb that is circulating among the exiles, and not in Judah. The preposition more likely indicates that the proverb is spoken "about" Israel. The rest of the disputation posits a vision of the community of Israel that departs radically from the divisiveness suggested by the exiles' use of the proverb.

Yahweh refutes the proverb with two radical propositions. First, he declares, "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of child is mine." Yahweh's claim to the lives of all Israelites is already well known from the book of Ezekiel. The function of the proposition in the present context is to claim Yahweh's prerogative in matters of judgment. The proverb of 18:2 may express a truthful observation about human experience, that children often do suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. But the proverb does not give human beings the right to determine the course of human affairs. Because Yahweh owns all life, Yahweh remains sovereign over it.

The corollary proposition, "it is only the person who sins that shall die," is also not new. Deuteronomy 24:16 stipulates that fathers shall not die for their children's sins and vice versa. In the present context, the doctrine is stated as a juridical principle that needs no defense. Theology and divinely decreed law thus replace human observation as the basis for determining the future of Israel.

***Three Test Cases, 18:5-18***

Three test cases demonstrate the principle that “it is only the person who sins that shall die.” The style is reminiscent of priestly-legal case law, wherein a hypothetical situation is proposed and a verdict is announced (cf. Ezek 14:4-8, 12). The three cases differ from case law, however, in that the three individuals are linked as father, son, and grandson. The verbal parallels are extensive, with only minor variations. [Three Test Cases] Taken as a whole, the series affirms the principle of retribution but refutes its transgenerational application.

The cases employ virtue-and-vice lists in order to illustrate each person’s righteousness or wickedness. Such lists are found in a wide variety of cultic, prophetic, and pedagogical settings,<sup>7</sup> and all are, as Greenberg notes, concerned with gaining life or well-being within the community. Because many of these lists are found in cultic settings, Moshe Weinfeld argued that the enumeration of behaviors in Ezekiel 18 resembles the so-called “entrance liturgies” (cf. Pss 15, 24), which begin with a question about who is worthy to dwell in Yahweh’s “holy mountain” or to enter the temple courts, and answer that question with an enumeration of traits of righteousness. Although Weinfeld’s suggestion is especially intriguing in light of the book’s concern about reentry into the land of Israel, solid evidence for Weinfeld’s reading is lacking. Other proposals for an original setting for such lists are similarly intriguing, but problematic. Ezekiel may have been acquainted with these virtue lists by way of his priestly education, but he has adapted them for his own purposes.

A comparison of the virtue lists in Ezekiel 18 with the lists cited above reveals that each emphasizes a different clustering of virtues. In one list, integrity in speech is valued, while in another, the emphasis is on justice uncontaminated by bribes or special interests. In contrast with these other virtue lists, Ezekiel 18:5-18 is primarily concerned with economic justice. Cultic and sexual matters do introduce the lists, but economic relations within the community quickly take center stage. Given the patriarchal assumptions of the time, one may explain the apparent preoccupation with sexual morality as a matter of property rights. But Ezekiel’s primary concern is economic; more specifically, his concern is with the distribution of the land. The misappropriation of property is intolerable and deserving of the highest penalty, death.



***The Righteous Man and His Wicked Son, 18:5-13***

The first case is that of a “man who is righteous and does what is just and right” (18:5-9). The enumeration of this man’s righteous deeds represents an ideal that, for Ezekiel, has probably never been realized. The second generation, however, closely resembles Ezekiel’s own generation of both exiles and Judeans. The son born to the righteous man is not simply wicked, but rapacious and predatory (*pārîš*), and his actions are antithetical to those of the righteous man (18:10-13). The wicked man takes what is not his. He robs and extorts; these two verbs (*gʒl* and *šq*) appear frequently as word pairs in cultic and prophetic prohibitions against the unjust economic oppression of the weak by the stronger members of the community. Elsewhere, Ezekiel condemns the “people of the land,” that is, Judean landowners, for such oppression (Ezek 22:23-29).<sup>8</sup> In demanding interest for a loan, the wicked man further jeopardizes his neighbor, who may eventually be forced to sell everything he owns to pay off his debt. Having made similar accusations elsewhere, Ezekiel now summarizes his concerns in this concise list of vices.

***The Discerning and Repenting Grandson, 18:14-18***

The son of this wicked man sees and takes note of his father’s actions (literally, “sees and sees,” that is, “sees and comprehends”) and chooses not to follow in his father’s footsteps. His actions are identical to that of the first man, and we may therefore assume that the grandson also represents an ideal that has not yet been realized. It is worth noting that the righteousness of the grandson exceeds that of the grandfather, in that the righteous man had followed the law in returning the debtor’s pledge, while the grandson exacts no pledge at all. Even so, what is emphasized in the case of the third man is not his righteousness so much as his ability to comprehend the consequences of his father’s actions and change his behavior.

Because the grandson is the kind of person who heeds the warning of the sentinel (Ezek 3:16-21), he represents Ezekiel’s ideal audience. In his capacity to observe and also comprehend, he serves as a model for the community of exiles, who “have eyes to see but do not see” (Ezek 12:2). For such a person, the father’s actions become an occasion for learning and change. To underscore the assertion that the son will not die for his father’s sin, the verdict returns to the fate of the wicked father. Because of his sins of commission (extortion and robbery) and omission (failure to do good), he will surely die. But since the son does not die for these sins, the

Three Test Cases		
<p><b>Ω</b></p> <p><b>The Righteous Man (18:5-9)</b></p> <p>Does what is lawful and right:</p> <p>Does not eat on mountains Does not lift eyes to idols Does not defile neighbor's wife Does not approach a menstruant</p> <p>Does not oppress anyone Restores debtor's pledge Does not commit robbery Feeds the hungry Clothes the naked Does not take advance/accrued interest Withholds hand from iniquity Executes true justice</p> <p>Follows my statutes and observes my ordinances</p> <p><i>He is righteous.</i></p> <p><i>He shall surely live.</i></p> <p>———— omission &gt; change in sequence + intensification</p>	<p><b>The Violent Son (18:10-13)</b></p> <p>Sheds blood, does these things that his father has not done:</p> <p>Eats on mountains. ———— Defiles neighbor's wife ————</p> <p>Oppresses poor and needy &gt; Commits robbery &gt; Does not restore debtor's pledge ———— ————</p> <p>&gt; Lifts eyes to idols + Commits abominations &gt; Takes advance/accrued interest</p> <p><i>Shall he live. He shall not. He has done these abominable things.</i></p> <p><i>He shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.</i></p>	<p><b>The Comprehending Son (18:14-18)</b></p> <p>Sees father's sins, comprehends their consequences, does not do likewise:</p> <p>Does not eat on mountains Does not lift eyes to idols Does not defile neighbor's wife ————</p> <p>Does not wrong anyone + Exacts no pledge Commits no robbery Feeds the hungry Clothes the naked</p> <p>Withholds hand from iniquity &gt; Takes no advance or accrued interest</p> <p>Observes my statutes, follows my ordinances</p> <p><i>He shall not die for his father's iniquity.</i></p> <p><i>He shall surely live.</i></p> <p><i>But the father, because of his extortion, robbery, and failure to do good among his people, he shall die for his iniquity.</i></p>

cycle of punishment *may* come to an end with the exilic generation. It need not go any further.

### Objection and Rebuttal, 18:19-24

Refusing to accept Ezekiel's arguments, the people return the debate to where it had begun and ask, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" (18:19). This question confirms the suspicion that they have interpreted the proverb as a prescriptive norm for justice that is owed to them. That is, they believe that children not only do suffer the consequences of their

parents' actions, but that they ought to. As argued above, this perspective is intelligible only if the children's suffering benefits themselves in some way. Verses 19b-20 reiterate what has been worked out in the disputation.

The use of familiar Ezekielian terminology, particularly in the description of the wicked second generation, should lead the exiles to be concerned about their own fate, not that of the succeeding generation. But their question suggests that they fail to identify their place in the sequence of generations. Verses 21-24 now turn to address this concern. The open future that is offered to the third generation is now also offered to the second. Even the wicked may turn from their sins, do what is just and right, and live. By the same token, the righteous do not have a lock on the future: if they turn away from their righteousness and do the abominable things that the wicked have done, they shall die.

### **"The Way of the Lord Is Inscrutable!" 18:25-29**

Though Yahweh has offered the possibility of life to all, the people make yet one more objection. NRSV translates the people's objection as a question concerning divine justice: "the way of the Lord is unfair" (18:25). Because the entire disputation challenges the principle of transgenerational retribution, the emphasis on fairness is plausible. However, among the relatively small number of occurrences of this verb in the Old Testament, it is assumed to connote justice only in Ezekiel.<sup>9</sup> The root meaning of the term (*tkn*) is "to weigh or measure" (Job 28:25; Isa 40:12; 2 Kgs 12:11); elsewhere, it connotes steadiness and stability in the cosmos (Ps 75:3).<sup>10</sup> In references where Yahweh "weighs" human thoughts and evaluates them (Prov 16:2; 21:2; 24:12), the term implies that Yahweh can know and understand human motivations. One cannot, however, "weigh" or understand the spirit of Yahweh (Isa 40:13). Given this usage, it is more likely that the saying of Ezekiel 18:25 emphasizes the impossibility of discerning the ways of Yahweh. Yahweh's way is indeterminate, open to change, and therefore unknowable. Yahweh's retort, "It is your ways that are inscrutable," ascribes a similar indeterminacy to human behavior. In its rebelliousness, Israel has been irrational, erratic, and therefore subject to judgment. The unit thus moves toward its conclusion with the declaration that Yahweh will indeed judge them for their transgressions. But Israel's erratic nature also means that its destiny is not necessarily fixed. They can repent and get new hearts and a new spirit. In a striking departure from much of the rest of Ezekiel, this

unit asserts that Israel has the capacity to change, to seek life and avoid the certain death of divine judgment.

### **Coda, 18:30-32**

On the basis of this elaborate rebuttal of the exiles' proverb, Yahweh announces judgment over the entire house of Israel and urges all of them to repent. The proverb, used by the exiles to shift blame and responsibility to others, is set aside. All are guilty, and all face the prospect of death. As the one to whom judgment belongs, however, Yahweh offers life instead.

In this concluding challenge to the exiles, Yahweh declares, "Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!" Similar language is employed in 11:19, where Yahweh's promise of transformation includes the gift of "one" heart. In the commentary on that verse, it was suggested that the gift of "one" heart was intended to heal the divisions within the community; a similar meaning is implicit here.

The use of the ambiguous verb *tkn* in these final verses suggests that at the heart of Ezekiel 18 is a divine mystery. Yahweh declares his preferential option of life for all. This is not simply a wish or a desire; it is rooted in Yahweh's self-understanding as the sovereign of all living things. Justice and judgment remain certain, but Yahweh now issues a call to repentance. This call for repentance was anticipated in 14:6 but is now fully situated within the context of Yahweh's desire that all should live. If repentance is possible, the future remains open.

## CONNECTIONS

Whether the exiles identified with the children in the proverb, as is generally maintained, or whether they applied the proverb in the way that I have suggested, in either case they used it to exonerate themselves by blaming others. The insidiousness of the exiles' position is that it is grounded in conventional piety, expressing the widely held conviction that the cosmic order is inherently just because it is ruled by a just God. But even if it expresses a valid conviction regarding the justice of God, it keeps them rooted in the past and allows old hurts and injustices to haunt their present. Not only does it lead to rifts between the exiles and Judeans, it also contributes to the estrangement of the current generation from the

next. As long as the calculus of reward and revenge is employed, there can be no future, only an endless recycling of hurt, recrimination, revenge, and retaliation.

In the disputation, Yahweh does not uphold the rights of the exiles but rather calls them to reevaluate their assumptions about the workings of justice. By insisting that all lives belong to him, Yahweh urges an inclusive vision of community. The ethical dimensions of this new vision include the following convictions:

(1) All life is holy. Since all lives belong to Yahweh, then one's regard for the life and well-being of others becomes rooted in one's reverence for Yahweh.

(2) Possibility is the basis of communal life. In contrast to the exiles, who use the "sour grapes" proverb prescriptively to exact punishment for others and ensure restitution for themselves, Yahweh's goal of reclaiming the lives of all who belong to him requires the full exercise of mercy, not only on the part of Yahweh, but also on the part of Israel. This precludes any claims to entitlement based on past injustices.

(3) Conscience invokes communal norms. The righteous, wicked, and self-reflective persons are each evaluated in terms of established communal norms. Such norms are outlined in Yahweh's statutes and ordinances and can be summarized as "justice and righteousness." The effect of conscience is most clearly seen in the third case, that of the grandson who "sees and sees." Evaluating his father's actions and their consequences, he consciously adopts a way of life that reflects Yahweh's norms.

(4) Communal norms undergird economic well-being. The predominant emphasis on economic well-being in this chapter is surprising, especially since Ezekiel elsewhere appears to be exclusively concerned with cultic matters. But if Ezekiel's focus is on the restoration of the whole house of Israel, then attention to economic and physical well-being is essential. This is not simply a matter of acting charitably toward the poor, though such actions are included in the ideal. Rather, the norms establish a social structure that fosters the economic well-being of all and sets important restrictions on exploitation.

Ezekiel 18 breaks the cycle of recrimination, revenge, and retaliation by insisting that what is past is past. Dwelling on past hurts and injustices leads to death—a death of the community, as each side hardens into factions, and a death of the spirit, as possibility withers and leaves behind predictable patterns of reaction, and retaliation. In place of the proverb, which allows the exiles to marinate themselves in their hurt, God commands, "Get yourselves a

### “The Owl’s Night”



There is, here, a present not embraced  
by the past.

When we reached the last of the trees, we knew  
we were unable to pay attention.

And when we returned to the ships, we saw  
absence piling up its chosen objects  
and pitching its eternal tent around us.

There is, here, a present not embraced by the  
past.

A silken thread is drawn out of mulberry trees  
forming letters on the page of night.

Only the butterflies cast light upon our boldness  
in plunging into the pit of strange words.

*Was that condemned man my father?*

Perhaps I can handle my life here.

Perhaps I can now give birth to myself  
and choose different letters for my name.

There is, here, a present, sitting in an empty  
kitchen

gazing at the tracks of those crossing the river on  
reeds.

A present polishing the flutes with its wind.

Mahmond Darwish, “The Owl’s Night,” in *Unfortunately, It was Paradise*, trans. and ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Furché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 63.

new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek 18:31).

Unfortunately, we are likely to be more sympathetic to the exiles’ deeply felt need for justice than to Ezekiel’s call to get ourselves new hearts. We can readily count up the world’s hot spots, where disputes over boundaries not only provoke but also require a careful reconstruction of historical events contributing to present impasses. And in the realm of interpersonal relations, we can think of similarly debilitating abuses. In neither the realm of global politics nor in interpersonal relations would any reasonable person think that justice would be served if we just wiped the slate clean. To the extent that the sour grapes proverb reflects an abiding concern to satisfy the requirements of justice, even if it is justice delayed, it remains a truthful maxim for human existence. At the same time, we also know well the liberating power of forgiveness—of letting go of our demands for satisfaction even as we recognize how deeply we have been injured. To choose to forgive in the absence of justice is not to choose to be a victim; rather, it is a determination not to allow past hurts to dominate our hopes and dreams, not to

allow the heart to become hardened by old patterns, but to be open to other ways of understanding ourselves and our relationships to one another. [“The Owl’s Night”]

Ultimately, the ability to move out of our painful, sometimes crippling, past experiences into the future rests on the character of God. If Yahweh is a God who desires both justice and life instead of punishment, then the future is wide open. Given our injuries, our patterns of justice are perfectly predictable; but the inscrutability of God’s ways means that everything is possible.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:334.

<sup>2</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:328.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Tur-Sinai, cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:328.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:328.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 27:1; Deut 34:7; Isa 42:4; Zech 11:17; Job 17:7.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:328.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Pss 15; 24:3-4; Isa 33:14b-16; Amos 5:13, 15; Isa 1:16-17; Mic 6:8.

<sup>8</sup> Erhard Gerstenberger, "פֶּשַׁע *āšaḳ*" *TDOT*, 11:412-17.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek 18:25, 29; 33:17, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel employs a related noun, *taknîṭ*, to refer to the fixed foundations of the new sanctuary (Ezek 43:10).





# A LAMENTATION

## Ezekiel 19:1-14

Ezekiel 19 contains a two-part poem that focuses on the fate of a mother and her royal progeny. [An Outline of Chapter 19] Part one (19:2-9) introduces the metaphor of the mother as a lioness who promotes two of her cubs to positions of leadership. When they become man-eating, city-destroying predators, the alarmed nations capture each in turn and carry them off, the first cub to Egypt, the second to Babylon. Part two (19:10-14) compares the mother and her sons to a fruitful vine whose strong branches reach into the clouds and become rulers' scepters. Suddenly, she is dried by the east wind, plucked up and transplanted to a dry land, and consumed by a fire that breaks forth from one of her own branches (19:10-14). Whereas the metaphor of the lion and her cubs asserts that the mother unleashes unspeakable violence on the world, the simile of the vine concludes that the mother has engendered her own destruction.

The poem is called a *qînâ*, or dirge for a deceased individual, in both the opening and closing verses of the chapter. [Dirges] But the closing verse observes that the poem "became" a *qînâ*, as if it were not one to start with. Moreover, the poem does not sustain the direct address typical of dirges in Ezekiel. Finally, although NRSV renders v. 2 as an exclamation in keeping with the assumption that the poem is a dirge, the poem actually begins with a question. The verse is more properly translated "What was (is) your mother?" Block therefore concluded that the chapter combines features of a riddle with that of a dirge.<sup>1</sup> As with other units in chapters 14–19, the chapter thus demands readers' active involvement in interpreting its metaphors.

Because the normally ubiquitous concluding recognition formula is absent from chapter 18, and chapter 19 contains no introductory formula to indicate that it constitutes a separate revelation, chapter 19 may be interpreted as the culmination of the argument begun in chapter 18. Taken together, the two chapters establish a series of con-

### An Outline of Chapter 19



1 Instruction to the prophet to raise a lamentation over princes of Israel

2a A riddle: What was your mother?

2b-9 A lioness, her cubs, and their destinies

3-4 Mother's aims, aggression and downfall of first cub

5-9 Mother's aims, aggression and downfall of second cub

10-14 A self-destructive vine

**Dirges**

**ΑΩ** Dirges are well attested in Ezekiel; in fact, ten of the eighteen occurrences of the noun *qînâ*, “dirge,” occur in Ezekiel (in Ezekiel: 2:10; 19:1, 14; 26:17; 27:2, 32; 28:12; 32:2; elsewhere: Amos 5:1; 8:10; 2 Sam 1:17; Jer 7:29; 9:10, 20; 2 Chr 35:25). All but two of the poems labeled dirges in the Old Testament are found in this book (Ezek 19:1ff; 26:17; 27:2; 27:32; 28:12; 32:2; for the others, see Amos 5:1-2; 2 Sam 1:17; cf. 2 Sam 3:33). Block pointed out that dirges normally

- (1) are addressed directly to the deceased,
- (2) open with an exclamation of grief,
- (3) compare the present loss with the past greatness or ambition of the deceased,
- (4) employ paired lines that generally exhibit a 3/2 metrical pattern.

Although these characteristics are consistently represented in the dirges in Ezekiel, they do not appear in all dirges in the Old Testament. For example, David’s lament for Jonathan and Saul is addressed to Israel (2 Sam 1:17), and their downfall is, for the most part, described in the third person.

Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:592.

trasts. The final verse of chapter 18 is a summons to live, while chapter 19 pronounces a funeral song for the princes of Israel. The legal language of chapter 18 maps out the hypothetical possibility of securing life through repentance, while the metaphorical language of chapter 19 contrasts that with certain death. Chapter 19 thus situates the open-ended invitation to repentance and life within the context of the current destruction of Jerusalem.

In posing this contrast between life for Israel and death to its princes and their mother, chapters 18 and 19 recapitulate the themes of chapter 14.<sup>2</sup> Two parallels are worth noting. First, the audience is urged to repent in the context of a decisive verdict against the land. Chapter 14 announced that the verdict would not be revoked even if the three legendary paragons of righteousness, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were to intercede; the dirge of chapter 19 underscores that irrevocability. Second, despite the inevitability of wholesale judgment, both chapters envision the deliverance of righteous individuals. Noah, Daniel, and Job cannot spare their own children, but they can and do save their lives through their righteousness; similarly, in chapter 18, Yahweh offers life to those who remain righteous. The future envisioned for those escaping judgment was intimated in 11:14-21 and will be further explored at the conclusion of chapter 20.

## COMMENTARY

**What Is Your Mother? 19:1-2**

Verse 1 instructs Ezekiel to utter a dirge over the “princes of Israel,” but v. 2 turns the audience’s attention to the mother. One must therefore consider whether the topic of the chapter is the princes or their mother. The chapter does not easily resolve that ambiguity, since it alternates between the agency of the mother and that of her cubs in vv. 2-9 and then conjoins their fates in the simile of the vine and branches in vv. 10-14. The question introduces a further ambiguity, since it directs readers to consider *what* the mother is, and not *who* she is. Attempts to identify the mother as a particular person are thus misguided. [Princes and Queen Mothers]

Both sections of the chapter supply answers to the question of v. 2 (19:2b-9, 10-14). The first section identifies the mother as a lioness among lions, who places her cubs in positions of terrifying authority and world-destroying power. The second section employs the simile of a vine and its branches to suggest that there is an organic relationship between the fates of the mother and her offspring. Because the careers of Jehoahaz and Zedekiah so closely resemble the careers of the young lions, scholars have been tempted to interpret Ezekiel 19 as a political allegory. [Is Ezekiel 19 a Political Allegory?] But these interpretations have failed to generate any agreement among commentators; nor do they adequately deal with the poem as a whole, which addresses the question of the character and destiny of the mother.

The unusual juxtaposition of lion and vine imagery is a clue to her identity. Block pointed out that vine and lion imagery is also combined in Jacob’s blessing of Judah (Gen 49:9-11). Three of the four terms for lion employed in Ezekiel 19 (*gôr*, *ʾaryēh*, *lābîʾ*) are used in Genesis 49:10; the fourth (*kēpîr*, “young lion”) may have a specialized political connotation for Ezekiel (cf. Ezek 32:1; 38:13). In Genesis 49:9, Judah is depicted as a lion’s whelp (*gôr*), and his actions are described as those of a crouching lion (*ʾaryēh*) and lioness (*lābîʾ*). In addition, the scepter of Judah signifies his everlasting dominion

**Princes and Queen Mothers**

One attractive interpretation of Ezek 19:2-9 identifies the first cub as Jehoahaz and the second as Zedekiah. What is known of these kings partially supports the interpretation, since the former was detained in Egypt and the latter was carried off in chains to Babylon. Moreover, since both kings were the sons of the same woman, it becomes possible to suggest that the lioness of 19:2 represented Hamutal (2 Kgs 23:30-35; 24:17-25:7). If this interpretation could be sustained, then it might be possible to construct a relatively powerful role for queen mothers in Judean court politics. Unfortunately, Hamutal’s name is listed only in the kings’ genealogies, not in the accounts of their rise to power. Apart from Bathsheba’s role in bringing her son Solomon to the throne (2 Kgs 1-2), there is no evidence that queen mothers exercised this kind of political influence in Judah.

**Is Ezekiel 19 a Political Allegory?**

Although it is tempting to interpret 19:2-9 as a historical allegory, our fragmentary information of the events to which it alludes renders such an interpretation tenuous. Scholars agree that the first cub represents Josiah's son Jehoahaz, whose rebellion against Egypt in 609 led to his imprisonment in Egypt, but there is no agreement regarding the identity of the second cub. Both Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were deported to Babylon, so the second cub may represent either one. Nor are other details easily parsed. Not only did queen mothers not play a role in the succession of Judean kings, each of these kings came to power through different means: Jehoahaz by the appointment of the "people of the land," Zedekiah by covenant with King Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Ezek 17), and Jehoiachin evidently through a normal process of succession. Finally, the historical record does not corroborate the implication of Ezek 19 that the surrounding nations took the initiative in handing Judean kings over to Egypt and Babylon. Thus, even though it is possible to detect historical allusions in the poem, it seems preferable to interpret it as a parody of the blessing of Judah (Gen 49:9-11). The poem thus attempts to capture the dynamics of Judean history, not its details.

over the peoples,<sup>3</sup> and he celebrates his victories by washing himself in the "blood" of the vine—an ambiguous image connoting both luxury and violence.<sup>4</sup> In the context of Ezekiel's rhetoric, the lioness represents a corporate entity, which can only be Jerusalem.

**A Lioness Among Lions, 19:2b-9**

The answer to the question "What was your mother?" is immediately supplied: a lioness among lions!<sup>5</sup> Even though the remaining verses focus on the cubs' predatory behavior, the lioness remains an active agent throughout, as she promotes first one and then the other cub. The description of the first cub establishes the basic pattern of predatory behavior, which is then elaborated in the description of the second cub. In each case, the surrounding nations become so alarmed that they mobilize forces to trap and imprison the young lions. The imagery resembles Assyrian depictions of actual hunts as well as the application of that imagery to the capture of human kings. [*Lions and Assyrian Iconography*] In terms of the blessing of Genesis 49:9-11, Judah's domination has obviously come to an end. The first cub is carried off to Egypt, while the second is carried to the king of Babylon.

Greenberg drew attention to the ambivalence of lion imagery in the Old Testament. On one hand, the lion symbolizes strength and victory and therefore figures prominently in several of the ancient blessings of the tribes of Israel.<sup>6</sup> The lion of Judah appears on royal seals as a symbol of the Davidic dynasty; and lions are said to have decorated the throne of King Solomon (1 Kgs 10:19). On the other hand, as wild animals, lions also represented the chaotic



### The Lion in the Vineyard

This 7th C. Assyrian wall relief is further evidence of the combination of lion and vineyard imagery in the ancient world. But it also raises a question about such a combination: Do lions belong in vineyards? As enemies of human cultivation, does their presence here not suggest a threat?

[Credit: British Museum. Stone panel from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal. Nineveh, northern Iraq Neo-Assyrian, 645 bc.]

forces lurking on the periphery of the civilized world and requiring continual vigilance (cf. 1 Sam 17:34-37). Because of this latter connotation, lions also figure prominently in the prophetic literature as agents of destruction.<sup>7</sup>

Ezekiel exploits this ambivalence to declare that Judah has given birth to the evil that is now unleashed upon the world. The poem employs a variety of nouns for lions; but one term, *kēpîr*, stands out. The lioness crouches among other *kēpîrîm*; when she promotes her cubs to prominence, they too become *kēpîrîm* and learn to catch prey, devour human flesh, and destroy cities (19:2, 3, 5, 6). Elsewhere in Ezekiel, but nowhere else in the Old Testament, the term is used of warrior-princes—lords of enemy nations who consider themselves contenders in international politics and in both cases, this self-regard is condemned in the case of Egypt (Ezek 38:13; 32:2). To call the princes of Israel *kēpîrîm* is to suggest that they have arrogantly ascribed roles to themselves that they cannot play.

Who is the “mother” of these princes? Does the poem allude to Judah, or the people of Israel, as it has been argued?<sup>8</sup> The antecedent use of the lion and vine imagery in the blessing of Judah would point in this direction. However, in Ezekiel, feminine imagery is applied exclusively to Jerusalem. That is especially clear


in chapters 16 and 23, where Jerusalem is denounced as Yahweh's adulterous daughter-bride. It is also evident in such oracles as 5:5-17, where feminine pronouns reflect the conceptualization of Jerusalem as female. Finally, when Jerusalem is destroyed, the death



Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh. Late Assyrian, c. 645 BC.

[Photo Credit: Werner Forman. British Museum, London, Great Britain / Art Resource]

### Lions and Assyrian Iconography

 The motif of the lion hunt was a favorite theme in Assyrian palace reliefs. In addition to displaying the king defeating his human enemies, wall reliefs also depicted the king's prowess in the hunt (see above). Lurking behind these portrayals is the conviction that wild animals and rebellious kings posed analogous threats to cosmic order. It was the duty of the Assyrian king as the viceroy of his god Ashur to bring all such rebels under his control (ARAB, 2:935).

Ezekiel's development of the motif is distinctive in that the smaller nations initiate the hunt. This adaptation of the motif underscores Jerusalem's uniqueness in its rebellion against the empires of Egypt and Babylon. While Jerusalem may have viewed its politics as reasonable resistance against a commonly despised overlord, the dirge paints a different picture—of Judah as a rogue nation disturbing a universally accepted political order.

of Ezekiel's wife becomes the occasion for reflecting on the *city's* demise (Ezek 24:15-27).

Given the pervasiveness of the feminine personification of Jerusalem, the mother/lioness most likely represents Jerusalem. To say that the "mother" is a lioness who gives birth to and advances the careers of ruthless, predatory warrior-princes, is to overturn the conception of the city as the center of Yahweh's creating and sustaining activity. Ezekiel is not the first to equate the city of Jerusalem and its leaders with the ruthlessness of wild beasts; that honor belongs to Zephaniah:

Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city!  
 It has listened to no voice;  
 it has accepted no correction.  
 It has not trusted in the Lord;  
 it has not drawn near to its God  
 The officials within it are roaring lions;  
 its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.  
 (Zeph 3:1-3; cf. Jer 12:8)

But Ezekiel may be the first to accuse Jerusalem of being a terror not only to herself but to the other nations. Jerusalem's evil is not local, but cosmic, and the surrounding nations react to her with alarm.

The dirge bears comparison with Ezekiel 5:5-17, Yahweh's first indictment of Jerusalem. Set in the midst of the nations, Jerusalem was to have been the center of order and obedience to Yahweh's laws and statutes. But in her defiance of these statutes, Jerusalem proved to be worse than the surrounding nations. The term used for the inversion of order and chaos was *hāmôn*, "turbulence." One normally expected turbulence to break in on the city at its borders, but in the case of Jerusalem, the turbulence came from within. The metaphor of the ambitious, predatory lioness conveys that chaos well.

### The Vine, 19:10-14

Next invoking the simile of a vine, the poem considers the intertwined fate of the mother and her princes. Because the vine is nourished by "many waters" (NRSV "abundant water"), it puts forth abundant, strong shoots that become rulers' scepters. [Many Waters] Their strength turns into arrogance, however, when the branches tower among the clouds (NRSV "thick boughs," but see Ezek 31:3, 10, 14). Suddenly, an east wind strikes, and the entire



### Many Waters

**ΑΩ** In both Ezek 17 and 19, a vine is planted by many waters (Heb. *mayîm rabbîm*; NRSV “abundant water;” 17:5, 8; 19:10). Although the phrase appears to be innocuous, especially in these contexts, its use elsewhere suggests that it has a more sinister connotation. The phrase appears regularly in the psalms, where the context always requires the translation “mighty waters.” The phrase reflects traces of an old chaos myth, in which seas and rivers are not simply bodies of water found on the earth’s surface, but are archetypal enemies of Yahweh—subterranean waters that can defy Yahweh’s imposed order, and which threaten to break out and destroy the cosmos at any time (Pss 18:16; 29:3; 32:6; 77:19; 93:4; 144:7). Even in the one psalm where the phrase appears to have been demythologized, the connotation of danger remains (Ps 107:23). The pairing of “many waters” with waters of the flood in Song of Solomon again attests to the destructive nature of these waters: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it” (8:7). Ezekiel may have been acquainted with the phrase’s connotation of overwhelming destructive power. He uses it to describe the sound of the thundering wings of the creatures accompanying the Almighty (1:24; 43:2). Elsewhere, the phrase appears in oracles against Tyre and Egypt. In 32:12, the phrase is contrasted with “clear waters” and seems to mean surging, muddy water. Another text describes a shipwreck on the high seas (27:26). Both of these references can be understood naturalistically and may not reflect the mythological background found in the psalms; even so, all four of these references imply turbulent, surging waters, and not quietly flowing, nourishing streams, as the phrase is normally understood in chs. 17 and 19.

The two remaining references to *mayîm rabbîm* occur in Ezek 31, and these suggest that Ezekiel was acquainted with the mythological connotations of the

phrase. In ch. 31, Egypt is compared to Assyria, which is then described as a cosmic tree whose roots had been nourished by many waters (31:5, 7). That this is not simply a naturalistic image is suggested by its pairing with “the deep” (*têhôm*), which elsewhere is associated with the primordial waters of chaos (cf. Gen 1:2). As the tree takes nourishment from these waters of the deep, it becomes both good and beautiful, and none of the trees in the garden of Eden can compare. However, when the tree becomes arrogant and stretches its top into the heavens (31:10), Yahweh hands it over to be destroyed. In the process of destroying the world tree, Yahweh also reestablishes his control over the waters. No other “trees of the waters” will be allowed to feed from the waters as Assyria has done (31:14-15).

In Ezek 17, 19, and 31, the motif of “many waters” may be remotely connected with that of the raging waters of the psalms. Both are associated with creation traditions as well as with the theme of rebellion against divine rule. That rebellion does occur in different ways, however. In the psalms, the waters themselves burst out of the order imposed on them and are almost never depicted in peaceful repose. In Ezek 17, 19, and 31, by contrast, the waters provide nourishment *because* they are properly contained within the created order. Nevertheless, even in this apparently peaceful context, the ambivalent waters nurture power that can be used for good or evil. When the tree or vine remains subject to divine rule, the waters nourish it for a life of bearing fruit and giving blessing to others; for example, the world tree Assyria gives shade to all the birds and beasts of the earth. Yet when the tree moves beyond its intended purpose and vaunts its own will, the chaos latent in the “many waters” erupts. The tree must be cut down, and at least in the case of Ezek 31, the waters must be brought back within their proper boundaries.

vine is plucked up and transplanted to a dry land. Fire comes out of one of the branches and completely destroys the vine.

The vine imagery has strong connections to chapters 15 and 17. Chapter 15 applies vine imagery to the city of Jerusalem, while chapter 17 develops it as a metaphor of Zedekiah’s rule. Chapter 19 incorporates the connotations of both of these earlier applications of vine imagery. The vine is again a figure of Jerusalem (i.e., “your mother”), and her rulers are represented by strong branches, not



the vine itself. Whereas chapter 15 depicted judgment as a process of pruning individual branches from the vine and consigning them to the fire, chapter 19 declares that fire from a single branch will consume the entire vine.

Although it is possible to suggest that the branch that destroys the vine is Zedekiah, in line with the allegory of chapter 17, the features of the poem argue against an allegorical interpretation. Throughout, the focus remains on the arrogance of the vine, not on any particular branch. NRSV's translation obscures this by following the Septuagint in reading v. 11a to refer to a single scion of the Davidic dynasty. By contrast, MT reads, "Its strongest stems became rulers' scepters," implying that the image represents the whole of the Davidic dynasty. The accusation is that the entire dynasty has pretended to greatness.

The sudden destruction that comes upon the vine is the predictable outcome of this arrogance. In Ezekiel's image, the destruction of the vine comes not from external forces alone but out of its strong stem. If the strong stem represents a scion of the Davidic dynasty, then the poem envisions Jerusalem's downfall at the hand of her rulers. But since she is the one who produced her rulers, her destruction is not entirely undeserved.

## CONNECTIONS

The imagery of the mother as a lioness and self-destructive vine asserts that the entire community of Israel is morally responsible for the downfall of the Davidic dynasty. If Ezekiel 17 blamed Zedekiah for his rebellion against the covenant, chapter 19 extends blame to the entire community. The roots of the princes' predatory behavior go back to the city itself. If the exiles heed Ezekiel's call to repentance, they must do so knowing that nothing of their rich heritage can be saved, because all of it has nurtured violence.

The final observation of the chapter, "This is a lamentation, and it has become a lamentation," suggests that the riddle of the mother's existence need not have ended in death. It became a lamentation, but it started out as a riddle. Seeking to participate in the power politics of the other lions, she raised her cubs to be contenders in a vicious world. Why, then, does her power not lead to greatness? Similarly, the vine, nourished by the abundant waters of Yahweh's ordered creation, grows naturally to prominence, as its

strong branches reach into the clouds. Why, then, does a branch become the source of the fire that destroys her?

The great irony of the chapter is that the mother has engendered her own demise. What Ezekiel 19 mourns is not the death of princes so much as a way of life—of seeking security through power and domination. This is the way of the world; but for Jerusalem, this way has sealed her doom.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:591-95.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 72-81.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 49:10, cf. Ezek 19:11.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 49:11; cf. Ezek 19:10, “your mother is like a vine *in your blood*.” The latter phrase remains a crux, but it may have originally derived from the imagery of Gen 49:11.

<sup>5</sup> Contrast the translation of Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:595-96.

<sup>6</sup> Judah: Gen 49:9-11 (see above); for the people of Israel as a whole: Num 23:24–24:9; for Gad and Dan: Deut 33:20, 22; see further Moshe Greenberg, “Notes on the Influence of Tradition on Ezekiel,” *JANES* 22 (1993): 31.

<sup>7</sup> Amos 5:19; Isa 15:9; 35:9; Jer 2:30; 4:7; 5:6; 50:17; 51:38; Pss 7:2; 10:9; 17:12; 22:13; Job 4:10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:356-57; Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:604.

# THE CONTENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF YAHWEH'S OATH TO THE ANCESTORS

## Ezekiel 20:1-44

Earlier units have progressively developed Yahweh's case against Jerusalem, first by commissioning the prophet Ezekiel (chs. 1–7), next by making him an eyewitness of the abominations in the Jerusalem temple (chs. 8–13), and finally, by presenting him as the prophet and sentinel who announces judgment and calls for repentance (chs. 14–18). In chapter 19, Ezekiel utters a dirge over the princes of Judah, in effect announcing an end to the political status quo. By way of a scathing reinterpretation of Israel's traditions of election, salvation, and monarchy, chapter 20 abolishes the past. [Critical Issues in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 20] Because Israel has rebelled against Yahweh from the very beginning, there has never been a covenant or, for that matter, a legitimate possession of the land. Yahweh now intends to complete what he had sworn to do: to be king over the people he has chosen, to bring them into the bond of the covenant, and, finally, to plant them in his land, where they will

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### Critical Issues in the Interpretation of Ezekiel 20



A common strategy in the interpretation of this chapter is to divide the oracle into a pre-exilic, original oracle of judgment (20:5-32) and a post-exilic promise of restoration (20:33-44). This critical dissection has always been problematic. First, it remains unclear whether v. 32 belongs to the first or second part of the oracle. Second, the numerous attempts to explain the structure of the historical survey in vv. 5-26 falters because of a failure to deal with the chapter as a whole. Whether there are three, four, or even five periods in the history of Israel is a moot point, as long as the place of this historical recital within the larger argument remains uncertain. Finally, the assessment of vv. 32-44 as a promise of restoration is a misreading of this final section of the chapter. Indeed, Baruch Schwartz has argued that the renewal of the covenant is hardly an act of grace, but instead is an assertion of Yahweh's will once and for all over a chronically rebellious people.

For a survey of interpretations of Ezek 20, see Leslie C. Allen, "The Structuring of Ezekiel's Revisionist History Lesson (Ezekiel 20:3-31)," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 448–462. For a rejection of the view that covenant renewal is an act of divine grace, see Baruch Schwartz, "Ezekiel's Dim View of Israel's Restoration," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (SBLSS 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 43–67.

### Not Just One Finger



Not just one finger of God but all ten of them strangle me. "I won't let you let me leave you."

Yehuda Amichai, "Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela," in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, newly rev. and expanded ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 67.

serve Yahweh alone (20:33-40). [ **Not Just One Finger** ]

One may infer from the frequent references to oaths, to Yahweh's acting for the sake of his name, and from other adaptations of the historical traditions, that the elders have appealed to Yahweh to act, if

not for their sake, then for the sake of the oath that he had sworn to their ancestor Jacob. [ **Appeals to Yahweh's Oath** ] In the present context, Yahweh will have none of it. Whether the elders were appealing to Yahweh to act or inquiring about their eventual possession of the land remains unclear; what is obvious is that this inquiry has been construed as an assault on Yahweh's integrity. Yahweh refuses to be consulted and instead instructs Ezekiel to file charges against the house of Israel.

As he states Yahweh's case against Israel, Ezekiel argues that

### Appeals to Yahweh's Oath



One may infer from the frequent references to oaths, to Yahweh's acting for the sake of his name, and from other adaptations of the historical traditions that the elders appeal to Yahweh to act, if not for their sake, then for the sake of the oath sworn to their ancestor Jacob. Such an appeal is well attested within the complaint traditions of the psalms, where the petitioner expresses confidence in the relationship and in the Divine Other to honor the relationship. The one who was so petitioned was spurred to action (cf. Ps 22:3-5) (see [ **Why?** ]). The appeal to Yahweh's love for the ancestors is also deeply embedded in the tradition of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness (see [ **Exodus Traditions in Ezekiel 20** ]). On two important occasions, Moses averts Yahweh's wrath by reminding him of his oath sworn to the ancestors of Israel (Exod 32:13; Num 14:16).

Israel's rebellions have so compromised Yahweh's intentions that the oath to the ancestors to give them the land remains essentially unfulfilled. Yet Yahweh does not intend to allow Israel's rebellion to overrule his original intention. Speaking to the present generation, Yahweh swears that he will indeed fulfill his ancient promise (20:33). Since it is only at this point that Yahweh will be able to fulfill his oath without qualification, the return from exile becomes the only legitimate entry into the land; indeed, Greenberg noted, "even the exile is at bottom a pre-settlement event!"<sup>1</sup> Although there is no prospect of survival for the first generation of exiles, Yahweh does offer life to the second generation, those born in the "wilderness of the peoples." The prospect of heeding the lesson of Israel's history thus falls to the second exilic generation, who, like the ancient wilderness generation, must choose

generation, who, like the ancient wilderness generation, must choose

### Why?



"My God, my God, why? Hast thou forsaken me. My God, my God. Even then he had to be called twice. The second call was already like a question, out of a first doubt: my God?"

Yehuda Amichai, "Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela," in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, newly rev. and expanded ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 63.

### The Exodus and Wilderness Generations



The contrasting fortunes of the first and second generation of exiles provide a key to unlocking the complex structure of this chapter, the rhetorical impact of which depends on the correspondence between the two generations of exiles and the two generations of the archetypal ancestors. The rhetoric of the chapter works on two levels: it is addressed to the characters in the book, the elders who come to inquire of Ezekiel in 591, but also to the readers, the children of those elders, for whom the destruction of Jerusalem lies in the past. Like the generation that had been brought out of Egypt, the elders can expect to die in the wilderness (20:38). The second exilic generation, meanwhile, is exhorted to see itself as the generation born in the wilderness. Like that earlier generation, they are not excused from the divine requirement of obedience to the statutes and requirements of Yahweh. Whereas the ancient wilderness generation failed to turn from the ways of their parents, the current generation is yet again offered the possibility of entering the land—but only as a holy and cleansed people.

Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, VTSup 76 (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 83–84.

between the idolatrous ways of their parents and the statutes and ordinances of Yahweh. [The Exodus and Wilderness Generations]

In response to the elders' appeal to the ancestors, Ezekiel marshals the exodus traditions to explore the meaning and significance of this oath. [Exodus Traditions in Ezekiel 20] In order to defend Yahweh's integrity on one hand, and, on the other, to assert there is no reason to expect that Yahweh should act for the sake of the ancestors, Ezekiel shows that Yahweh has always acted in accordance with his oaths. The argument hinges on Ezekiel's premise that there is no single oath guiding the work of Yahweh with Israel, but rather, a series of oaths. The elders learn that their current situation cannot be construed as Yahweh's failure to honor an ancient oath, as they seem to believe. Instead, the exile is the fulfillment of an oath that Yahweh was forced to swear in response to Israel's rebellion in the wilderness (20:23-24).

That wilderness oath was one of a series of oaths. According to Ezekiel, the first oath was made to the descendents of Jacob in Egypt (20:5); this in itself is a startling revision of the patriarchal traditions of the divine promise of land (see esp. Gen 12:1-3). The patriarchal tradition was not unknown to Ezekiel; elsewhere he quotes, if only to reject, the Jerusalemites' self-serving allusion to Yahweh's promise of land to Abraham (Ezek 33:24). By having Yahweh promise land to Jacob's descendents in Egypt, and not to Jacob himself, Ezekiel more closely connects the gift of the land with the Sinai covenant and the demand for obedience to the statutes and ordinances. When Israel rebels, Yahweh is forced to swear two additional oaths, each of which limits and constrains the original one. One oath condemns the exodus generation to die in the wilderness (20:16-17), while another turns the time in the land

### Exodus Traditions in Ezekiel 20



Ezek 20 is a retelling of the exodus story, and it is clear from Ezekiel's many allusions that he was familiar with the pentateuchal narratives of the exodus. He refers, for example, to the sojourn in and deliverance from Egypt, to the two generations in the wilderness, the giving of the law, and the entry into the land. But if Ezekiel demonstrates a deep familiarity with these traditions, it is also worth noting what he has left out. There is no reference to Yahweh's promise to the patriarchs to give their descendants the land of Canaan. Nor is there any reference to the slavery and oppression of Israel in Egypt, or to Yahweh's gracious response to this suffering (cf. Exod 2:24-25). Ezekiel also omits the account of the crossing of the Red Sea. Finally, even though the statutes and ordinances are of fundamental importance to Ezekiel's account of Israel's time in the wilderness, he refers neither to Mount Sinai nor to Moses. Given the very creativity of Ezekiel's appropriation of the exodus and wilderness traditions, it may be futile to seek any single motivation for these omissions. But such a motivation, if it may be discerned, may provide important clues to the interpretation of this chapter.

It has been argued that Ezekiel's work as a writer makes it possible for him to reconceptualize the history of Israel in such a radical fashion. Most helpful in this regard has been the work of Ellen Davis, who pointed out how the two parts of Ezek 20 belong together as a narrative whole. Citing the literary critic W. B. Gallie, she argued that a conclusion need not be predictable but only acceptable given the logic of the narrative. As she notes, "narrative is directed toward eliciting emotional and cognitive involvement in the discovery that a given sequence of occurrences, however, difficult, has a coherence and an outcome which may be deemed 'acceptable after all.'" Davis then demonstrated that the entire chapter leads to the conclusion found in

20:32-41. Ezekiel ends not in a declaration of salvation, as one might expect in a retelling of the paradigmatic story of Israel's salvation, but in a declaration of judgment against Israel. Davis rightly emphasized the moral necessity of insisting that the exiles reconsider their future in light of such a reconstructed past.

But it is equally important to point out where Ezekiel begins his narrative. Ezekiel chooses to begin the exodus without a "back-story," without the prior motivations or history between Yahweh and the ancestors. In the pentateuchal narratives, that "back-story" is crucial to understanding the motivations of Yahweh, especially since his decision to bring the Israelite slaves out of Egypt is motivated by his remembering the covenant he had sworn to Abraham (Exod 3). In Ezekiel's version of the exodus, there is no such prior history between Yahweh and the ancestors of Israel.

Removing this prior history is possibly also the reason why Moses is left out of the narrative. Moses figures prominently in the exodus and wilderness traditions as a lawgiver, but he also plays a prominent role as an intercessor, and paradigmatically so in the two accounts of rebellion to which Ezekiel alludes (Exod 32-34; Num 14). In both of these narratives, Moses reminds Yahweh of the oath he swore to the ancestors, and Yahweh relents from his decision to destroy the people. In Ezekiel, however, no intercession is permitted (Ezek 20:1-4; cf. Ezek 13); consequently neither the oath to the ancestors, the central warrant for any such intercession, nor Moses, the intercessor par excellence, plays a significant role.

For Ezekiel's adaptation of the Exodus traditions, see Corrine Patton, "I Myself Gave Them Laws that Were Not Good," *Ezekiel 20 and the Exodus Traditions*, *JSOT* 69 (1996), 73. For the treatment of Ezek 20 as a coherent literary composition, see Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, *JSOTS* 78; Bible and Literature Series 21 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 109.

into a time of death, further rebellion, and inevitable expulsion from the land (20:23, 27-32).

The entire story of salvation thus becomes a story of divine oaths necessitated by Israelite rebellion. The significance for the exiles is that the ancestral oath has gone through so many adaptations and permutations—all because of the ancestors' disobedience—that it is absurd for the exiles to remind Yahweh of it now. But there is another consequence of Ezekiel's adaptation of the tradition of the oath to the ancestors: if Yahweh is not forced to abide by ancient commitments, he can enter into new ones. As the oracle turns to

examine the exiles' present situation, this new era is marked by yet another divine oath: "As I live, says the LORD God, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, I will be king over you" (20:33). This final part of the chapter describes the manner in which Yahweh will, finally, fulfill the original oath to the descendents of Jacob. The current generation will endure yet another exodus and purging in the wilderness, and those who survive will be planted on Yahweh's holy mountain (20:34-44). Just as the children born in the wilderness were ordered to turn from the ways of their parents, so also are the children of the exile ordered to abide by Yahweh's commandments.<sup>2</sup> Yahweh will rule as their king, whether they like it or not. They can, however, choose to perish under this rule, in the wilderness, or to be planted on Yahweh's holy mountain, as a holy and cleansed people.

Such a presentation of Israel's past gives the exiles an entirely new perspective on their present exile and estrangement from Jerusalem. Against the Jerusalemite claim that the exiles have "gone far from" Yahweh, their expulsion from the land becomes the fulfillment of one of several oaths that Yahweh had sworn to the ancestors. Their exile does not indicate that the promise to the ancestors was broken; rather, it marks the beginning of Yahweh's attempt to fulfill that promise once and for all. Nor does their exile mean that they alone have been singled out for punishment, since those who remain in the land will also be brought out into the wilderness of the peoples. All will be forced into the bond of the covenant, and all will go through Yahweh's wrathful purging of rebels. To the extent that anyone survives the judgment in the wilderness, they will constitute the new—and historically the only legitimate—polity of Yahweh's kingdom.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Inquiry, 20:1-4**

The elders come to inquire of Ezekiel in the fifth month of the seventh year of their exile, or 14 August 591. The late 590s were significant for international relations. Exactly two years earlier, the prophet Hananiah had declared in Jerusalem that the exile would come to an end in two years (Jer 28).<sup>3</sup> Hananiah's prophecy evi-

dently supported plans for a rebellion of the Syro-Palestinian states led by the Judean king Zedekiah, which is alluded to in Jeremiah 27. In late 592 or early 591, the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus II had toured Syria-Palestine, quite possibly engendering hopes that Egypt would lend aid to Judah in this rebellion. Although neither Hananiah's prophecy nor Psammetichus II's tour of Palestine is directly alluded to in Ezekiel 20, the date of the inquiry links the conspiracies of that decade with the subsequent invasion and destruction of Jerusalem. Greenberg observed that the date eerily anticipates the fall of Jerusalem exactly five years later (cf. Jer 52:12).<sup>4</sup> The correspondence between this date and the later destruction of Jerusalem would have been intelligible and significant for the readers of the second generation of exiles, who see in retrospect that the rebellion of Zedekiah eventuated in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Yahweh rejects the elders' inquiry but uses the occasion to announce judgment. Greenberg persuasively argued that the connotation of the verb that NRSV translates as "judge" is to arraign, or file charges. Because the basis of this arraignment is the "abominations of the ancestors," it is possible that the oracle was precipitated by the elders' appeal to Yahweh on the basis of his past commitments to the ancestors. The exiles may have invoked the tradition of Yahweh's promises to the ancestors in order to seek reassurance that there would be a second exodus.

### **The Arraignment, 20:5-31**

Countering the elders' appeal with his own version of the ancestral history, Ezekiel argues that the present situation does not constitute Yahweh's reneging on his oath to the ancestors. Israel's history devolves not from Yahweh's oath to Abraham, but from a series of oaths provoked by Israel's many rebellions. Concluding that the present generation is no better than the ancestors, Yahweh therefore rejects their pleas for mercy.

### ***The First Generation, 20:5-17***

The account of the exodus generation spans three episodes, including the day when Yahweh chose Israel and swore to give it the land [[The Election of Israel](#)], Israel's initial rebellion in Egypt, and its subsequent rebellion in the wilderness.

When the theme of the promise of land occurs elsewhere in the context of the exodus, it serves as a rationale for Yahweh's mighty acts on behalf of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The promise, which is always confirmed



### The Election of Israel

**Ω** The verb *bhr*, “choose,” is a key Deuteronomic term for Yahweh’s election of Israel. Ezekiel’s use of the term is consistent with Deuteronomistic usage, wherein election is closely associated with the gift of the land, as well as with the dialectic of divine obligation and human response (Deut 4:37; 7:6f; 10:15; 14:2). Yahweh swears a two-part oath: to bring Israel out of Egypt and to bring it into the land that he has spied out for his people. Yahweh also makes a two-part command to the people: to cast away the “detestable things” of Egypt, by which Ezekiel means their idols, and to avoid defiling themselves through the worship of these idols.

For further discussions of the verb *bhr*, “choose,” see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1987), 1:363; and Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:407.

by an oath, is prior to Yahweh’s deliverance, and it provides the motivation for bringing the slaves out of Egypt. The Priestly tradition illustrates this sequence of remembering and acting:

I have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites: I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You will know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burden of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD. (Exod 6:6-8; cf. Ps 105:9-11, 37, 42)

The language in Ezekiel 20 suggests that Ezekiel was acquainted with this logic of grounding the deliverance from Egypt in Yahweh’s promise of land to the ancestors.<sup>6</sup> However, Ezekiel omits any reference to an oath to Jacob and instead unites the two moments of promise and deliverance into a single act of salvation. This is underscored by the repetition of the phrase, “on the/that day”:

On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the House of Jacob—making myself known to them in the land of Egypt—I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. (20:5-6)

Ezekiel underscores the Priestly nuances of the oath by repeating the formula of divine self-revelation (“I am Yahweh, your God”) at

the beginning and end of the speech. In this way, the tradition of divine promise becomes primarily a declaration of Yahweh's claim to be the god of Israel. Because this formula is also associated with the laws that define Israel's identity and character as the people of Yahweh (cf. Lev 18:1-5), divine promise also becomes a divine command. Because Yahweh is their god, the Israelites are commanded to abandon their "detestable things" and to cease worshiping the idols of Egypt (20:7). Ezekiel thus binds human and divine obligation into a single oath. **[The First Two Commandments]** Never simply a promise of land, the oath to the ancestors had always asserted Yahweh's claim to be the God of Israel, and it was always connected to the demand that Jacob demonstrate his allegiance to Yahweh by giving up his idols.<sup>7</sup>

The Israelites rebel against this divine command, and their failure to give up the idols signifies a rejection of their holy identity as the people of Yahweh. This puts Yahweh in an impossible position. Jacob deserves to be punished, and accordingly Yahweh contemplates pouring out his anger in judgment. Some have noted that Ezekiel's account of this rebellion is reminiscent of the golden calf incident (Exod 32–34); if so, what is noticeably absent is any reference to Moses' intercession, in which he reminds Yahweh of the oath that he had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and urges him to spare the rebels out of love for the ancestors (Exod 32:13). By removing references to intercession and to the archetypal intercessor Moses, Ezekiel also effectively removes the warrant for the intercession, Yahweh's love for the ancestors.

Yahweh does relent, but only for the sake of his reputation in the eyes of the nations. Bringing the descendants of Jacob out of Egypt, he only partially fulfills the oath, since he does not take them directly to the promised land. In the wilderness, Yahweh gives Israel a second chance by giving them statutes and ordinances by which they might live. Yahweh also gives them sabbaths as a sign that he sanctifies Israel. While there is a general consensus that Ezekiel alludes here to the covenant at Mount Sinai,<sup>8</sup> he may be referring

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### The First Two Commandments



The demand for absolute loyalty in Ezek 20 reflects the first two commandments of the Decalogue:

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . . (Exod 20:1-5a)

more specifically to the Priestly lawgiving tradition. By this account, Moses goes up on the mountain as soon as the Israelites come to Sinai (Exod 19:1-2).<sup>9</sup> There he enters the cloud and receives instructions for building the tabernacle (Exod 24:15–31:18).<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel's reference first to statutes and ordinances and then to the sabbaths follows this legislation in general outline (Exod 31:12-17). Moreover, Ezekiel's description of the sabbaths as signs depends heavily on Priestly theology. For both P and Ezekiel, the sanctification of Israel (Heb. *qādôš*) involves a process of being separated from the rest of the nations and set aside for exclusive service to Yahweh (cf. Exod 31:12-17). [Sabbaths] Finally, the entire section reflects the Priestly understanding of divine presence as the source of life.

When these verses are read in light of Yahweh's initial oath and Jacob's rebellion, it becomes clear that Yahweh now does for himself and for Israel what Israel has so far failed to do. If Israel had forsaken its idols, it would have honored Yahweh among the nations. Now Yahweh must defend his honor despite Israel's rebel-

### Sabbaths



Ezekiel's references to the sabbath are concentrated in chs. 20–23. The term is repeated six times in ch. 20 in a precisely patterned account of the abominations of the exodus generation and the generation born in the wilderness. It occurs again in the denunciation of the princes and priests of Jerusalem (22:8, 26) as well as of Jerusalem itself (23:38). Such a clustering appears again only in Ezekiel's vision of restoration, when these abuses will be set right (44:24; 45:17; 46:1, 3, 4, 12).

Efforts to trace the origin of the sabbath to non-biblical sources and contexts in the past century have been inconclusive. Within the Old Testament, the sabbath is the seventh day of the week, which is set aside as a day of rest. Although some have argued that sabbath observance did not come into widespread practice until the exile, there is evidence that it was a very old and well-established part of Israelite worship (Amos 8:5). The Old Testament gives two separate motivations for the observance of the Sabbath. In Exodus, the sabbath is grounded in Yahweh's resting on the seventh day of creation (Exod 20:8-11; cf. Gen 2:1-3); in Deuteronomy, it is grounded in Yahweh's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery (Deut 5:12-15). Ezekiel appears to have combined these two traditions: on one hand, he follows the priestly traditions in his description of the sabbath as a sign of divine sanctification; on the other, he grounds the establishment of sabbath observance in the exodus, and not in creation.

Though Ezekiel demonstrates a familiarity with both traditions of the sabbath, he does not emphasize its humane benefits. In the ancient world, human beings were made to work and serve the gods, while only the gods rested. In those traditions of the sabbath that are based on the creation of the world in seven days, human participation in the sabbath signifies a daring claim that human beings share in the divine image. Just as God rests on the sabbath, human beings also rest. In the traditions that ground the observance of the sabbath in the exodus from Egypt, the sabbath is a reminder of liberation, that burdensome and alienating labor have no place in a world ruled by God. Ezekiel, by contrast, emphasizes the radical theological claim that the sabbath makes on those chosen by Yahweh. The sabbath is a sign that sets Israel apart, not for Israel's benefit, but for Yahweh's (see further [A Sabbath Poem]).

**"A Sabbath Poem"**

To sit and look at light-filled leaves

May let us see, or seem to see,

Far backward as through clearer eyes

To what unsighted hope believes:

The blessed conviviality

That sang Creation's seventh sunrise,

Time when the Maker's radiant sight

Made radiant every thing He saw,

And every thing He saw was filled

With perfect joy and life and light.

His perfect pleasure was sole law;

No pleasure had become self-willed.

For all His creatures were His pleasures

And their whole pleasure was to be

What He made them; they sought no gain

Or growth beyond their proper measures,

Nor longed for change or novelty.

The only new thing could be pain.

Wendell Berry, "A Sabbath Poem," *Sabbaths* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 9.

lion. Again, if Israel had forsaken the worship of its idols, it would have testified to Yahweh's exclusive claim on them; sabbaths might not have been needed. By giving them sabbaths, Yahweh intends to sanctify Israel in spite of themselves. They will be his holy people one way or another.

Once again, the Israelites rebel, going after their idols, profaning the sabbaths and rejecting the statutes and ordinances that would have granted them life. The rebellion is reminiscent of both the golden calf incident (Exod 32–34) and the subsequent rebellion in Numbers 14. Again Ezekiel has omitted any reference to Moses' intercession, and Yahweh's only concern is to protect his reputation in the eyes of the nations. Here, as in Numbers 14, Yahweh does not renege on his oath to the ancestors but swears an additional one. In Numbers, the people fear death if they should attempt to take the land of Canaan. Yahweh's oath ironically

turns that fear into their fate, as Yahweh decrees that only their little ones will survive to enter the land (Num 14:26-35, cf. 14:2-3). In Ezekiel's version of the wilderness rebellion, the divine oath is a response, not to Israelite fear, but to their habitual refusal to give up their idols.<sup>11</sup> They will die in the wilderness because they refuse to accept what has plainly been revealed to them, that they owe their lives to Yahweh, his ordinances, and his sabbaths.

***The Second Generation, 20:18-26***

Yahweh immediately warns the children of the next generation not to follow in the ways of their parents, and commands them to obey his statutes and ordinances and to hallow his sabbaths. When the children prove to be as rebellious as their parents (cf. 16:44), Yahweh again considers pouring out his wrath but refrains for the sake of his name. Yet again, Yahweh does not revoke the original oath, but he does drastically compromise its fulfillment as he vows to disperse Israel among the nations. The oath is unique in the biblical traditions. Life in the land can now only be a temporary sojourn, since the generation born in the wilderness has already provoked the divine decree of expulsion.

Yahweh further obviates the intended blessing of the land by giving the people laws that "were not good." The Israelite obser-

vance of these laws is not intended to cause the expulsion from the land; that expulsion has already been determined by the rebelliousness of the wilderness generation. Rather, the intention of these not-good laws is to “horrify” (Heb. *šmm*, hiphil.) Israel. The word is associated with manifestations of divine power and wrath, and it has the connotation in all of its forms of both wholesale destruction and of emotional devastation and dismay. Because this dismay is a reaction to the manifestation of divine power, it is a religious response—the deepest expression of the fear of Yahweh. Horror is a means to an end, leading Israel to a recognition of the power of Yahweh to control every aspect of its life. Ezekiel reinforces that idea with the concluding result clause, “so that they might know that I am the Lord.” Israel has not yet acknowledged the sovereignty of Yahweh, either by casting away its idols or by observing the sabbaths; perhaps these not-good laws will do the trick.

The epitome of these not-good laws is the command that Israel donate its firstborn. The verb used here (*‘br* hiphil; NRSV “offer up”) is ambiguous, and it is difficult to determine whether it refers to child sacrifice or a substitutionary sacrifice. The pentateuchal legislation concerning the donation of the firstborn does not help to resolve the ambiguity, since it implies child sacrifice in some contexts but specifies alternative modes of redemption in others. [Did Yahweh Require Child Sacrifice?] Deuteronomy, however, explicitly forbids child sacrifice as a Canaanite abomination (18:9-14), and the Deuteronomistic historians cite it as an egregious example of a king’s disobedience of the covenant (2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6).

Critics often debate whether Ezekiel’s “not-good” law was deadly because it was misinterpreted as a demand for child sacrifice, or whether the divine law itself required the sacrifice of human firstborn. Although the horror of 20:25-26 would suggest that Ezekiel understood the law to require child sacrifice, elsewhere Ezekiel condemns the practice not only because it became a part of Israel’s idolatry, but also because it resulted in the shedding of innocent blood (23:27). It would therefore appear that Ezekiel thought the law was deadly because it was misinterpreted.

The logic of Ezekiel 20 makes it a “no-good” law for yet another reason. Like earlier wilderness decrees, the law is a divine concession to Israel’s rebelliousness, on one hand, and an assertion of absolute divine demand, on the other. While Yahweh had initially expected to sanctify the entire congregation, he now demands only the firstborn. The demand creates an impossible contradiction. It appears to signify absolute devotion and love; in this regard one recalls the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22)

### Did Yahweh Require Child Sacrifice?



Perhaps the most troubling text in Ezekiel is 20:25, which states that Yahweh gave Israel “not-good” laws requiring them to sacrifice their children. Biblical law did include the categorical statement that all first-born, whether human or animal, belonged to Yahweh: “Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine” (Exod 13:2). The more difficult question is whether the law required the sacrifice of both human and animal firstborn, or whether human firstborn could be redeemed with substitute offerings. Some pentateuchal laws allowed for the redemption of human children (Exod 13:12-13; 34:19-20), while others did not (22:28-29 [29b-30]).

Although it is beyond the scope of this commentary to resolve the complex issues for the history of Israelite religion, the following discussion seeks to address the difficulties in Ezekiel. The problem of child sacrifice was anticipated in this commentary in ch. 8, where it was argued that the “image of zeal” (NRSV “image of jealousy”) was a representation of human devotion, possibly a monument that substituted for the sacrifice of a child (see **[The Image of Jealousy]**, **[Was the Image of Jealousy an Image of Asherah?]**, **[If the Image of Jealousy Was Not an Idol, What Was It?]**, and **[The Image of Zeal that Ensures Blessings]**). What remains problematic is the apparent contradiction between Ezekiel’s articulation of the law and his condemnation of the practice (16:17-21; 20:30-31; 23:37-39). Because Ezekiel condemned the house of Israel for sacrificing its children to its idols and worthless things, it would appear that the difficulty lay in the object of Israel’s worship. Rather than offering their children to Yahweh as they had been commanded to do, they sacrificed their children to the idols.

Although Ezekiel’s polemic against cult objects obscures their nature and function, nevertheless one may suggest that the real difficulty was that Israel made monuments as substitute offerings. The clearest evidence is in Ezekiel’s vision of the newly built temple, in which Yahweh expressly forbids *pigrê malkêhem*, which NRSV renders as “kings’ corpses” (Ezek 43:7, 9). Recent commentators take the phrase to refer to funerary monuments, and the present commentary builds on that conclusion by suggesting that they were monuments set up as substitute offerings in place of the sacrifice of a child (see **[The Logic of Child Sacrifice]**).

Ezek 20:30-32 supports the suggestion that the monuments had become the focal point of the requirement to sacrifice children. No sooner did the people enter the land

than they built high places and defied Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances. This is not depicted as a straight-out rebellion, but rather as a perversion of the divine decree. The declaration in v. 26, “I defiled them through their very gifts, in the offering all that opens the womb,” is chiasmatically echoed in v. 31: “in your lifting up of your gifts, in your passing your sons through the fire, you defiled yourselves with all your idols [Heb. *gillûlîm*] to this very day.” The close correspondence of these two verses suggests that the problem is not that Israel broke the commandment; indeed, v. 31 exactly mirrors the requirement described in v. 26. Rather, Israel’s gifts were compromised by its *gillûlîm*. Since the term *gillûlîm* is a pun on sculpted, rounded stones, it can as easily refer to votive monuments as to idols. Israel is condemned not because it offers sacrifices to “all your idols” but because it believes that it can satisfy Yahweh’s requirement of the firstborn *with* these *gillûlîm*, or substitutionary monuments. Israel is not condemned because it sacrifices its children to its idols but rather because its offerings *are* its idols.

Ezek 16:17-22 more fully describes the service of cult statues (cf. 20:32). Jerusalem is accused of melting down Yahweh’s gifts of gold and silver in order to fashion for herself *šalmê zākār*, which are usually interpreted as “male images,” or idols. That this was a statue of a human being and not a god in human form is suggested by the fact that the one other use of the term *šelem*, “image,” in Ezekiel explicitly refers to representations of human beings (23:14). What angers Yahweh is that Jerusalem devotes herself to these statues but fails to remember (*zkr*, 16:21) what Yahweh did for her in the wilderness. The condemnation of the care and feeding of these statues implies that they had become deified. The profusion of sacrificial language, as well as the explicit description of Jerusalem giving her children over to these images to eat, portrays the images as the recipients of the gifts, and not simply commemorations of them or substitutions for them. While these details seem to lead to the conclusion that the images were idols, another explanation is that this language represents the culmination of theological reflection on the nature of cult images. Any image that becomes the focus of ritual activity is by definition a rival of Yahweh. This polemic reaches its fullest development in Ezek 23:38-39, which incorporates many of the themes and motifs found in 16:17-21.

and even the Christian belief that Jesus' death is an act of divine love and sacrifice for the world (cf. John 3:16). However, for Ezekiel, the sacrifice of the firstborn only serves to sacralize and legitimate the communal death wish. The horror of the not-good laws is that they quite literally do no good. They are set forth as a statute for Israel to observe, but they do nothing other than remind Israel that it is Yahweh who makes their laws for them. Since they choose death, Yahweh will give them death in their statutes and ordinances. Thus rituals intended for sanctification result in defilement, and offerings thanking Yahweh for life bring only death.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Announcement of Judgment, 20:27-31***

Although vv. 27-29 continue to recount the abominations of the ancestors, they provide the basis for pronouncing judgment on the current generation. These verses, directly addressed to Ezekiel's audience, accuse them of defiling themselves through idolatry just as their ancestors had done. The unit concludes with the declaration, emphatically sealed by an oath, that Yahweh will not allow himself to be consulted by these people.

No sooner has Yahweh brought the wilderness generation into the land that he had sworn to give to them, than Israel begins to offer its sacrifices at the high places. The fourfold repetition of the adverb "there" draws attention to Israel's mistake of using Yahweh's gift of land to continue in its rebellion (28-29). The pun in v. 29 hammers home the nature of Israel's faithlessness. Moffatt renders the pun, "What is the *high place* [Heb. *bāmā*] to which you *hie to* [Heb. *habbā'im*]."<sup>13</sup> Rather than offering its sacrifices to Yahweh, who has brought Israel into the land (*bô' hiphil*, v. 28), Israel cannot wait to go (*bô' qal*, v. 29) on its own to the high places (*bāmā*) to worship the idols there (cf. 6:13).



**The Tophet of Carthage**

A Phoenician incinerator where the bodies of sacrificed children were burned.

Carthage, Tunisia. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

Israel's refusal to obey the not-good laws foils Yahweh's plans once again. Yahweh had given them these laws in order to devastate them and lead them to a recognition of Yahweh's claim over their lives. Verse 27 underscores the nature of the betrayal: the Israelites have mocked their god (*gd̄p* piel, NRSV "blaspheme," cf. Ps 44:17) by refusing to give him his due (*m'ʿl*, NRSV "dealing treacherously"). Greenberg suggests that the latter verb refers to the violation of the provision for worshiping in a single sanctuary;<sup>14</sup> however, in the present context, it is more directly connected to the violation of the command that Israel offer up its firstborn. The references to every green tree and the high places imply that Israel has indeed been making its sacrifices; the only problem is that Israel is sacrificing its children to its idols. They have dealt treacherously with Yahweh because they have made these sacrifices to their idols, and not to Yahweh (cf. Ezek 16:20-21).

Ezekiel applies this appalling history to the present situation of the exiles in vv. 30-31. Circling back to the occasion that prompted the oracle, Yahweh rejects the exiles' inquiry and charges them with continuing to walk in the ways of their ancestors, who had never acknowledged Yahweh's exclusive claim on their lives. Despite Israel's numerous betrayals, there is no question that Yahweh has been loyal to his oath; the only remaining question is whether Israel's habitual rebellions can overrule Yahweh's intention to claim them as his people. If Israel can succeed in its rebellion, then Yahweh is no god.

### **The Final Oath, 20:32-44**

Yahweh categorically rejects the thoughts that come into their minds: "Let us be like the nations, who worship wood and stone." As an allusion both to 1 Samuel 8, in which the request for a king was construed as a rejection of Yahweh's kingship, and to Deuteronomistic prohibitions of idolatry (e.g., Deut 4:15-40), the quotation epitomizes Israel's refusal to abide by Yahweh's commandments and statutes. Although the verse reads like a non sequitur in the context, it is consistent with the logic of the chapter. Yahweh gave Israel statutes and ordinances that were to set it apart from the nations. When they rebelled against the ordinances, Yahweh imposed the sabbaths, again, in an effort to set Israel apart from the nations. Once they were settled in the land, he required child sacrifice as a demonstration of their fearful allegiance to Yahweh alone. The final act of Yahweh will establish Israel's distinctiveness. Paradoxically, it will do so by expelling them from the



land, the possession of which would have distinguished Israel from the other nations.

### **The Fulfillment of Yahweh's Oath, 20:32-44**

In the first part of the chapter, vv. 5-26 introduced successive eras in Yahweh's dealings with the people by referring to new oaths that had been sworn in the wilderness. In each case, the new oath modified an older one, even while reasserting Yahweh's power to determine Israel's history. Verse 32 bears no structural or grammatical resemblance to these earlier oaths, since the earlier ones were described in historical narrative, while the present oath takes the form of a direct address. Also, v. 32 does not use the characteristic expression for swearing an oath (Heb. "raise the hand," obscured by NRSV's contextual translation "I swore"). Nevertheless, the verse is the fourth and final oath of the series.<sup>15</sup> Despite all of Israel's attempts to go its own way and worship its idols, Yahweh will be king. He will claim them as his people, purge the rebels, and plant them on his holy mountain. This final act of Yahweh recapitulates the earlier history and includes a wholesale expulsion from the land, a time of judgment in the wilderness, and, finally, settlement on Yahweh's mountain. Only after all of these things have been accomplished will Yahweh's oath to Jacob finally be fulfilled.

Ezekiel may have regarded the rebellion of Zedekiah in the 590s (cf. 20:1-4) as an effort to thwart Yahweh's intention to expel Israel from the land, and therefore as a direct rebellion against the oath that Yahweh had sworn in the wilderness (v. 23). Just as that oath had reflected an adaptation of an earlier divine intention (cf. v. 23), the oath in v. 33 reiterates Yahweh's intention to rule Israel, even while it accommodates this most recent rebellion. Throughout this section, Ezekiel subverts expressions that have always been associated with the exodus and settlement. In terms normally associated with the mighty, salvific acts of Yahweh, Ezekiel now declares that Yahweh will drag the people out of the land "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." As in the first exodus generation, those who are "brought out" will not return.

Verses 34-38 describe several distinct acts. First, those who have already been scattered will be brought together for judgment in the "wilderness of the peoples." Elsewhere in the biblical tradition, the time in the wilderness is often depicted as a time of idyllic intimacy between Yahweh and his new people (cf. Hos 2:14-15). In keeping with his emphasis on Israel's rebellions in the wilderness, however,

Ezekiel describes this time as a period of judgment. Even so, by describing the land of exile as the “wilderness of the peoples,” Ezekiel turns the place of exile into a place of divine activity.

Second, those who remain in the land of Judah will not escape this judgment. Elsewhere, Ezekiel has directly addressed the status of those who remained in Jerusalem as compared with those who have been taken into exile. Contrary to the assumptions of those who remained in the land, Ezekiel declared that Yahweh would begin the work of restoration among the exiles, not among those who remained in the land. Although the reference to the groups of exiles and Jerusalemites here is enigmatic, it is possible that Ezekiel is describing two distinct methods for dealing with each group. Verse 37 describes the counting and preserving of all those who have been scattered. As a shepherd-king reclaiming what belongs to him, Yahweh makes the scattered ones pass under the staff and forces them into the “bond” of the covenant. Although this process is explicitly described as an act of judgment and is much more a demonstration of Yahweh’s ownership than it is an act of grace, those who are pressed into the bond of the covenant survive the judgment, while those in v. 38 do not.

Verse 38 describes a wholesale purging of the rebels from among the people of Israel. While it is conceivable that some of these rebels come from the groups that have been scattered among the peoples, v. 38 refers to their residence as aliens in an unspecified land (NRSV; cf. Heb. “land of their sojournings”). The reference to the “land of their sojournings” is an allusion to the land of Canaan, where the ancestors resided as aliens long before it was given to them as a possession. Ezekiel probably intends the phrase as a veiled reference to the land of Judah. The implication is that the current inhabitants of Judah still have not been granted the right to possess the land. They will be brought out of that land, purged from Israel as rebels, and, significantly for Ezekiel’s audience, barred from reentry into the land.

Verses 39-44 describe the way in which Yahweh’s oath will finally be honored. First, all of Israel will serve Yahweh in the land. The primary purpose of the oath, to establish Yahweh as the God of Israel, is finally acknowledged, as evidenced by the establishment of the proper relationship between king, people, and land. Yahweh no longer “serves” Israel by giving it the land; rather, Israel uses the land properly, as the place where it “serves” Yahweh. Second, Israel is “sanctified,” and Yahweh accepts their offerings, and even themselves, as a pleasing odor. Finally, there will be no question about

the basis of Yahweh's honor. Despite Israel's continual rebellion, Yahweh has always acted to uphold his name.

## CONNECTIONS

In an intriguing exploration of the exodus narrative and its modern reinterpretations, Michael Walzer argued that the exodus story has been fundamentally important in Western culture in the conceptualization of and mobilization for revolutionary movements seeking to establish a new way of life in the world.<sup>16</sup> The exodus narrative played a key role in the American Puritan defense of its “errand in the wilderness,” and appeared again in sermons during the American Revolution. In more recent times it has been significant not only for Christian liberation movements, but also for secular political movements, including Marxism and Leninism. Unlike other classic journey stories, which almost always include a homecoming, the exodus is a journey from one way of life to another, from Egypt to Canaan, from life under Pharaoh to life under God.

The wilderness is the place where the people are equipped to make that transition. It is not an easy transition to make; Walzer notes that, both literally and figuratively, the people who arrive in Canaan are not the same as they were when they left Egypt. The wilderness rebellions show just how difficult it is to leave the old



### Early Morning in the Wilderness of Shur

Scene set at the “Well of Moses” on the western shore of the Red Sea. A family group is sitting outside a tent on the far left, a group of men is sitting in the center of the picture, some on the back of camels. All are focusing on a man with an outstretched arm on the far right. This picture depicts an event from the Old Testament. Moses led the people of Israel from the Red Sea and into the Shur desert, where they traveled for three days without water. The story can be found in the book of Exodus.

Frederick Goodall (1822–1904). *Early Morning in the Wilderness of Shur*. Guildhall Art Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: HIP / Art Resource]

way of life behind. Even the holy gift of manna becomes monotonous after a while, and the Israelites yearn once more for the fleshpots of Egypt. In nearly all of the murmuring stories, the people are rebellious because they are vulnerable and dependent on the care of someone else, usually Moses or Yahweh. Someone must feed them; someone must season their food and provide some variety; someone must protect them from their enemies. In the earlier murmuring stories, this vulnerability is tolerated, if barely. But Israel's chronic dependence and crankiness soon becomes wearing, both for Yahweh and for readers of the narrative.<sup>17</sup> If they are to possess the land, this dependency and vulnerability must be rooted out. The purging of the murmurers is painful and difficult; however, the goal is not to whittle Israel down to a righteous remnant but to create a new identity for the entire group. Even though it takes an entire generation to school Israel in its new identity as the people of Yahweh, and though many die in the process, it is the whole people who enter the land, not just a loyal remnant.

Walzer detected this theme of forging an identity for the people of Israel in the narratives of Exodus and Numbers, but it is present in Ezekiel 20 as well. Although Ezekiel has discarded many elements of the exodus tradition, he has fiercely held on to the idea that *all* of Israel will worship Yahweh on his holy mountain. There are traces of the old wilderness vulnerability in the elders' initial inquiry. One suspects that the elders have appealed to the ancestors' trust in Yahweh, a motif attested in the complaint psalms. Ezekiel's repetitive recital of the ancestral rebellions belies any such claim that the ancestors ever trusted Yahweh. They may have depended on Yahweh, but they never trusted him. Worse, they never accepted Yahweh's radical claim on their lives. Failing to accept the terms of Yahweh's covenant in the wilderness or in the land in which they had been settled, the exiles will be forced to accept it in the wilderness of the peoples. As in the wilderness narratives, so also in Ezekiel 20: all Israel is brought into the bond of the covenant to endure divine judgment and purging. Even though traces of contentiousness between the exiles and the Jerusalemites are evident in the account of the judgment (cf. vv. 37-38), all will come under the bond of the covenant, all will be judged, and all Israel will serve Yahweh in the land.

As a political historian interested in the roots of liberty in the Western tradition, Walzer pointed out that the rabbis always understood that true freedom is rooted in the service of God.<sup>18</sup> If theologians wish to explore the biblical connections between freedom and service, Ezekiel 20 will be of little help, and they

would be advised to turn, with Walzer, to the pentateuchal narratives. Even so, Ezekiel 20 is useful for exploring the notion of divine service and civic responsibility. Ezekiel is concerned with establishing the proper foundation for a new society. He finds this foundation in the reconceptualization of the meaning of the covenant—or, rather, in a reiteration of the Priestly conviction that the covenant establishes Yahweh as the God of Israel. Never an unconditional promise guaranteeing benefits, rights, or privileges, the covenant always required that Israel honor Yahweh's oath with a corresponding attitude of allegiance and responsibility. In Ezekiel 20, Israel must demonstrate that allegiance by abandoning its habits of dependence, exemplified in its worship of the idols from Egypt, and it must demonstrate its responsibility by acknowledging its own culpability in its unfortunate history and owning up to its profound sense of shame.

Ezekiel's lesson is a harsh one, as are all of the lessons of the wilderness. But it is a necessary one. The temptation to mistake dependence for trust has not been entirely avoided in the Christian tradition. One of the well-known sayings of Jesus, for example, seeks to establish such a reorientation, but it may not, finally, succeed, if only because we cling so desperately to our vulnerabilities. The following teaching in Luke appeals directly to those vulnerabilities as it advises:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! (Luke 12:22-24)

Just as Ezekiel equates idolatry with the ways of the nations, Jesus equates striving for these things with the ways of the world: "And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things . . ." (Luke 12:30). The teaching concludes with the instruction "strive for [God's] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well" (Luke 12:31). In this teaching, striving correlates nicely with worship and service in Ezekiel. One strives for the things of the world, or one strives after the things of God. Like Ezekiel, Jesus seeks to reorient the attitudes and dependences of his hearers. Although we often read this text as one that encourages complete dependence on God, Jesus does not tell his audience that human beings are to depend on God as the ravens do, nor does he tell them to transfer their feelings of anxiety

from the world to God. Rather, Jesus instructs his hearers to demonstrate that their lives have been changed by God's transforming power. Trust in God's provision gives us the energy to strive, not for our own wants or needs, but for the kingdom of God, and to forget our fears in the service of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:382.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:382-83.

<sup>3</sup> A. Malamat, "The Twilight of Judah: In the Egyptian-Babylonian Maelstrom," in *Congress Volume, Edinburgh 1974* (VTSup 28; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 123-45.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:363.

<sup>5</sup> See Deut 4:37; 6:23; 9:25-29; 26:8.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:627.

<sup>7</sup> The connection between exodus and law is found in all of the major pentateuchal traditions and is by far the most prominent feature of the exodus traditions, see E: Exod 18:1; 20:2; Josh 24:8; JE: Exod 13:3, 9, 14, 16; 32:11; Num 20:16; D: Deut 1:27; 4:20; 5:6, 16; 6:12, 21; 8:14; 9:12; 13:6, 11; 16:1; H: Lev 19:36; 22:35; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13; P: Exod 12:17, 42, 51; 16:6, 32; 29:46; Num 15:41. Citations from BDB 424c. A similar dynamic is evident in the Deuteronomistic formulation, although the ancestral promise and the obligation to obey the covenant remain separate historical events (see Judg 6:8; 1 Sam 12:8; Jer 11:4; 31:32; 32:21).

<sup>8</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:410; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:366.

<sup>9</sup> Corrine Patton, "'I Myself Gave Them Laws that Were Not Good': Ezekiel 20 and the Exodus Traditions," *JSOT* 69 (1996), 75-76.

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 185-86.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:383.

<sup>12</sup> For an alternative interpretation that takes into account recent considerations of the influence of Deuteronomy on Ezek 20, see Scott Walker Hahn and John Seitze Bergsma, "What Laws Were 'Not Good?' A Canonical Approach to the Theological Problem of Ezekiel 20:25-26," *JBL* 123 (2004): 201-18.

<sup>13</sup> As cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:370.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:370.

<sup>15</sup> There is a possibility that Ezekiel has adapted the fourfold pattern of judgment from Lev 26, though that remains uncertain.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller exploration of the development of the murmuring traditions, see George Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness*, 53.

# THE WEAPON OF YAHWEH

Ezekiel 20:45–21:32 (Heb. 21:1-37)

This chapter contains three different types of oracles. The first oracle contains a riddle (cf. 20:49) and its solution (20:45-59 [Heb. 21:1-5]). The second oracle describes the manufacture and delivery of Yahweh's sword into the hand of the slayer (21:8-17 [Heb. 21:13-22]). This second oracle is filled with difficulties, as the oracle abruptly shifts from addressing first the sword, then the prophet, and the victims. A third oracle depicts Nebuchadnezzar standing at the parting of the ways and using divination to determine whether to attack Jerusalem or Rabbah, the capital city of Ammon (21:18-32 [Heb. 21:22-37]). Although this last oracle begins with narrative clarity, its ensuing announcement of judgment has been difficult to interpret.<sup>1</sup>

There is general scholarly agreement that these oracles were uttered on separate occasions before the destruction of Jerusalem, possibly around 589. The transition from one oracle to the next is significantly rougher than many of the other chapters in Ezekiel, where the hand of a writer is evident in shaping and expanding long, extended units. Thus in these chapters, as in perhaps very little else in the book, the ministry of Ezekiel is presented along the lines of many other prophets: as a preacher making short, dramatic speeches, receiving instructions to perform specific actions, and reporting the response of the audience to his words.

Despite the sense that chapter 21 is simply a loose collection of oracles brought together around a single catchword, the chapter is more coherent than is usually assumed. [Catchword Collections and Written Compositions] The three oracles may have been brought together to address a single theme: the destruction of Jerusalem. While the entire chapter focuses on the motif of the sword, it begins and ends with the declaration that fire will utterly consume the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding land.<sup>2</sup> Enigmatic references to the "south" in the initial oracle lead the reader in the direction of Jerusalem, while the second and third oracles confirm the city's certain destruction. Moreover, the final verses (30-32) bring together a number of motifs used in earlier indictments of Jerusalem. The city will be judged in the "land of her origin" (21:35; cf. 16:3); Yahweh will pour out his wrath on her as she becomes fuel for the fire (cf. ch. 15) and her

blood is poured out on the open ground. Finally, where chapter 20 only hinted at the rebellion of Zedekiah, chapter 21 brings that rebellion to light. Even the king of Babylon is astonished when his divination reveals that Jerusalem, not Rabbah of the Ammonites, must be punished.

### Fire in the Negev, 20:45–21:6 [Hebrew 21:1–12]

The first subunit in the chapter consists of two smaller oracles, each set off from the other by instructions to prophesy (20:45–49; 21:1–6). The typical verb for prophesying is paired in 20:45 with the more rare verb *hattêp*, the precise meaning of which is uncertain. In other contexts, it connotes “dripping down,” as rain from clouds (Judg 5:4; Job 29:22; Prov 5:3; Cant 4:1). Although it can characterize human speech that should be welcomed for its wise counsel (Job 29:22), it has a darker connotation in prophetic contexts (Amos 7:16; Mic 2:6, 11). Micah uses the verb to connote the prophetic practice of exposing the true meaning of human affairs (Mic 2:6, 11); his hearers roundly reject his preaching in favor of their delusions. The verb may have a similar connotation in Ezekiel 21.

The two oracles mirror one another in a nearly exact set of correspondences. [Parallelism in Ezekiel 20:45–21:6] Employing three synonyms for the south (*têmān*, *dārôm*, *negev*) the first oracle is addressed to the Negev, [The Negev] while the second recapitulates this structure but is addressed to Jerusalem, its sanctuaries, and the land. In the first oracle, fire breaks out in the “forest” of the Negev and spreads throughout the land; in the second, the sword of Yahweh cuts off all, both righteous and wicked, from south to north. In the first oracle, the fire will not be quenched; in the second, the sword will not be put back into its sheath. Because of these correspondences, there is general agreement that the second oracle interprets the first.

At the end of the first oracle, Ezekiel reports that the people call him a “maker of allegories.” The underlying Hebrew term is *māšāl* (NRSV “allegory”), a figurative form of speech based on a comparison of two dissimilar objects. One important type of *māšāl*, the proverb, explains human behavior by likening it to a well-known natural phenomenon (e.g., “Like a door on its hinge is the sluggard in his bed”).

The *māšāl* in Ezekiel 21 is considerably more elaborate. Ezekiel uses the figure of a forest fire in the Negev to describe the collapse of civic and political life in Jerusalem and Judah. Because the Negev was long associated with the Israelite traditions of the con-



**Parallelism in Ezekiel 20:45–21:6**

Set your face toward *tēmān*  
preach to *dārôm*

prophesy to the forest land of the Negev (20:45)

Set your face toward Jerusalem,  
preach to the sanctuaries,  
Prophesy to the land of Israel (21:1)

I will kindle a fire in you (20:47)

I will draw my sword out of its sheath (21:3)

All faces scorched from south to north (20:48)

All flesh, righteous and wicked, cut off, from south to north  
(21:4)

Fire shall not be quenched (20:48)

sword will not be sheathed (21:5)

allegories (*mēšālīm*) (20:49)

news (*šēmû'ā*) (21:6)

quest and settlement of Canaan, Ezekiel's use of *negev* as a *māšāl* or likeness for Jerusalem suggests a host of comparisons as yet undiscernible to his audience. The metaphor suggests that Israel's end will be like its beginning, only in horrifying reverse. In the conquest traditions, the former inhabitants of the land were expelled from the land; in the coming judgment, the land will be cleared of its inhabitants once again. More horrifying still, the fire will come from within, from the royal palaces. [The Forest and Royal Imagery]

The remark of Ezekiel's audience does not constitute the wholesale rejection of prophetic speech, nor does it break off communication between prophet and people. Even so, the audience remains focused on the beauty of Ezekiel's speech and does not ask about its underlying meaning (cf. Ezek 33:32). In the second oracle, therefore, Ezekiel must sigh and moan over the

**Catchword Collections and Written Compositions**

After nearly a century of attempts to interpret Ezekiel in terms of oral prophetic performances, Ellen Davis has revived an older notion of Ezekiel as a "writing prophet" and argued that the unique coherence of Ezekiel was possible only through the processes of writing. Ezek 21 appears to be the exception to Davis's theory, since it would appear that an editor has brought three originally discrete oracles without seeking to bring any further coherence to the unit. But ch. 21 may reflect considerably more literary activity than the process of compiling or collecting would imply. In the first oracle of the unit, Ezekiel's audience calls him a maker of allegories. However, the use of figurative language pervades the entire unit, to such an extent that scholars remain deeply puzzled by the final verses. Do they refer to the destruction of Babylon, as some have suggested, or to Rabbah, which others think more likely, or to Jerusalem, a plausible but as yet unconsidered interpretation? If these oracles are treated simply as a collection of shorter units, then it becomes impossible to solve Ezekiel's riddle. When, on the other hand, the chapter is read as a literary composition, as opposed to a loosely organized collection of oral poetry, it becomes evident that nearly every line in 21:30–32 is an allusion to earlier references to Jerusalem. Only this latter suggestion adequately fits the context of the chapter, which from beginning to end shocks its readers with the prospect of Jerusalem's destruction.

For the discussion of Ezekiel as a writer, see Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, JSOTS 78, Bible and Literature Series 21 (Sheffield: Almond, 1982). For the intellectual processes inherent in collecting oracles, see Ronald F. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

### The Negev

Ω One of the cruxes in the interpretation of Ezek 20:44–49 [Heb. 21:1–5] is the meaning of the term *negev*, which NRSV renders as the geographical region of the “Negev,” the desert to the south of Judah, but which others regard simply as a geographical direction, “south.” The former rendering is preferred, with some qualifications, since Ezekiel uses *negev* as a designation for the land of Judah. However, equating the Negev with the territory of Judah does not exhaust its metaphorical significance. Like the other terms used in this oracle to indicate the south (*dārôm* and *têmân*), *dārôm* is a highly specialized term and appears again in Ezekiel only in chs. 40–48 (cf. 40:24 [twice], 27, 28 [twice], 44, 45; 41:11; 42:12, 13, 18); outside of Ezekiel it is used only four times, three times to refer to the south wind (Job 37:17; Eccl 1:6; 11:3), and once to refer to the inheritance of Naphtali (Deut 33:23). Ezekiel uses *têmân* to designate boundaries (21:2; 47:19 [twice]; 28:28); like *dārôm*, it is a relatively rare term, occurring only twenty times elsewhere. Ezekiel uses *negev* to designate both boundaries (e.g., 47:19 [twice] 48:10, 16, 17, 28, 33) and the extreme southern point of a south-north axis (46:9; cf. 21:9). The more general term for “south” is *yâmîn*. This noun occurs 137 times in the Old Testament. Even though *yâmîn* occurs in chs. 1–39 (Ezek 1:10; 10:3; 16:46; 21:27; 39:3), it does not occur in this oracle against the “south,” nor is it used in chs. 40–48. Although their precise nuances remain unrecoverable to modern exegetes, their distribution suggests that Ezekiel uses these terms to evoke more than geographical connotations. Ezekiel’s audience knows he makes metaphors; like them, we should assume that he means more than he says.

Because Ezekiel uses *negev* exclusively in connection with the apportionment of the land in chs. 40–48, its significance is probably to be found in the settlement traditions.

*Negev* is used 109 times in the Old Testament; more than half of these assert Israel’s claim to the land. The Negev is the land of Abraham’s sojournings (Gen 12:9; 13:1, 3, 14; 20:1; 24:62; 28:14) that Yahweh promises to give to him (Gen 13:14; 28:14). The Israelites’ first successful attack was in the Negev (Num 13:17, 22, 29; 21:1; Deut 1:7). It appears frequently in territorial lists: of lands taken in the initial conquest (12:8; 15:19), lands allocated for the tribes of Judah (Josh 15; cf. Judg 1:9, 15, 16) and Benjamin (Josh 18), or as the southern boundary of the land of Israel (Num 34:3–5). The summary statement of Joshua’s victories over the entire land specifically mentions the Negev (Josh 10:40).

When read in light of these traditions, prophetic declarations concerning the dispossession of and resettlement of the Negev become highly charged. While such oracles are exceedingly rare in the prophetic tradition, their emotional fervor suggests that the traditions concerning the possession of the Negev tapped the deepest roots of Israelite identity and divine promise (Jer 13:19; Jer 32:44; 33:13; Obad 19, 20; Zech 7:7). Ezekiel’s oracle of the attack on the Negev is no different. Just as the Canaanites and their kings were expelled so long ago, the time has come for Judah and its princes to be expelled from the land. Joshua had totally and completely cleared the land of its inhabitants; the fire of Yahweh will do the same (20:47).

Contrary to the usual assessment of this chapter as a very loose collection of disparate oracles, this use of *negev* suggests that Ezek 21 was crafted to fit its literary context. Ch. 20 announces that the exile marks the beginning of the fulfillment of Yahweh’s ancient promise to Jacob. As the only true settlement of the land, the current judgment of Jerusalem and Judah recapitulates the ancient traditions of conquest and settlement. As in the ancient traditions, Yahweh begins with the Negev.

coming disaster. When the people now ask why he moans, Ezekiel must tell them it is because of the news he has received. Unlike their word *māšāl*, Ezekiel’s word (Heb. *šēmûʾâ*, literally “hearing”) underscores the certainty of the coming event. Because Ezekiel “hears” that it has come, it is as good as done. The second and third oracles are not merely words or allegories but the full disclosure of Yahweh’s intervention into Judean affairs.

### The Forest and Royal Imagery

**ΑΩ** The identification of Ezek 20:45–49 as an allegory suggests that each element of the oracle has symbolic meaning. Such is the case with the image of the fire in the “forest” of the Negev, especially since such an image is literally nonsensical. As an exceedingly dry region, the Negev cannot support a forest. Consequently, some scholars attempt to make the image more intelligible by interpreting the term *ya’ar*, forest, as scrub growth. Even though there is exegetical support for such an interpretation, it obscures the metaphor. It is far simpler to assume that the “forest” signifies the royal palace, whose formal name was the House of the Forest of Lebanon (1 Kgs 7:2–12; 10:17, 21; cf. Isa 22:8) but which was called “the forest” (Jer 21:14).

Ezekiel’s metaphorical point is precisely his literal point: the land of the Negev cannot support a forest; it can hardly support the royal vine (19:12–14). Thus, the forest—all of the trappings of royal privilege and power, precisely those things that made the House of Israel so abominably like the nations—must be consumed by the fire of Yahweh. One notes, furthermore, that in the magnificent reconstruction of the city in chs. 40–48, the *nāsi*,<sup>9</sup> hardly a king and probably not even a prince, is allotted a portion but not given a palace.

See Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40–48* (SBLDS 154; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 119–23.



### The Negev Desert

View from Sole Boker. Israel

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

## The Sword in the Slayer’s Hand, 21:8–17 [Hebrew 21:13–22]

The second oracle focuses on the weapon of Yahweh, a sword polished for destruction and placed into the hand of the slayer. **[Yahweh’s Weapon]** The oracle contains some of the most thrilling poetry in the book of Ezekiel, as well as a number of complex critical problems. Some lines remain unintelligible (e.g., vv. 10b, 13a), while some of the shifts in address and mood remain difficult to interpret. For example, in v. 12, Yahweh speaks with evident pain that his people will fall on the sword, while in v. 17 Yahweh claps with glee at the destruction. Despite these difficulties, the general sense of the oracle is clear: a sword is prepared for battle, placed in

**Yahweh's Weapon**

The metaphor of the sword of Yahweh is a common one in the Bible, and the vivid imagery of Ezek 21 is anticipated elsewhere. The sword signifies the power of Yahweh (Amos 4:10; 7:9; 9:1); it has an autonomous existence as an instrument that carries out Yahweh's commands (Amos 9:4; Jer 47:7).

Metaphors describing the effects of Yahweh's sword inhabit two entirely different semantic fields. First, the sword is equated with fire, the latter being understood as the flash of lightning.

For the Lord will come in fire,  
and his chariots like the whirlwind,  
to pay back his anger in fury,  
and his rebuke in flames of fire.  
For by fire will the Lord execute judgment,  
and by his sword, on all flesh;  
and those slain by the Lord shall be many (Isa 66:16; cf. Nah 2:14; 3:15).

The correspondence between fire and sword is, of course, suggested by the flashing brilliance of lightning and the blade. This correspondence is well known in the ancient Near East and is reflected in early personifications of the deity *Istum*, whose name is derived from the Akkadian word for fire (Bodi, 250-54).

Because it consumes flesh (Isa 1:20; Jer 12:12; 46:10; Nah 2:14) and gets drunk on human blood (Isa 34:5; Jer 46:10), the sword is also metaphorized as a devouring animal. (For these citations, see Zimmerli, 1:432-33.) Again, this is a commonplace in the ancient Near East; there is widespread archaeological evidence of sword hilts crafted to resemble the gaping mouth of a wild animal, usually a lion (Bodi, 243).

Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, *Orbis biblicus et orientalis* (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1991); Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983).

the hand of the slayer, and is ready to attack. As in the first oracle, hearts will melt at the sight of the great slaughter (21:7, 15).

**The Parting of the Ways, 21:18-32 [Hebrew 21:23-37]**

This subunit consists of instructions to the prophet to perform a symbolic act (21:18-19), a narrative explanation of the act (21:21-23), and an ensuing oracle of judgment (21:24-32). The symbolic act is relatively straightforward: at a point where two roads diverge, Ezekiel sets up a signpost marking the separate ways to the city of Rabbah of the Ammonites and Jerusalem. Possibly the reference is to Nebuchadnezzar's base of operations in Riblah near Hamath (cf. Jer 40:1); in any case, taking the road to one city precludes any possibility of attacking the other.

NRSV obscures MT's placement of the inhabitants of Judah "in Jerusalem." What is intended by MT's phrasing is not entirely clear, though at the very least the oracle identifies both the cities

and their inhabitants as the subjects of Nebuchadnezzar's inquiry. Jerusalem, and not Rabbah, is identified as the fortified city.

Standing at the parting of the ways, Nebuchadnezzar performs rites of divination in order to determine whether to attack Rabbah or Jerusalem. The scene realistically portrays the practice of ancient Near Eastern kings in the conduct of war. As pious vice-regents acting in behalf of their gods, they did nothing without first determining whether it was the will of the gods that they should go into battle. Nebuchadnezzar's piety poses a damning contrast to Zedekiah, whose rebellion against Babylon was also a rebellion against Yahweh. Nebuchadnezzar employs three different strategies of divination, only one of which, haruspicy, or the inspection of livers, is clearly attested as a Babylonian divinatory practice. All three of the divinations confirm one another: the lot has fallen on Jerusalem.

Verse 23 is a crux in the interpretation of the narrative. Up until this point, Nebuchadnezzar has been the subject of the narration. He has come to the fork in the road, he has performed the divination, and the lot for Jerusalem has fallen into his hand. Verse 23 records the incredulous response of a group of people to this divination, which seems false to them. The use of the masculine plural continues in the next phrase, "they have sworn solemn oaths." The final clause alternates between "he" and "they": "But *he* brings their guilt to remembrance, bringing about *their* capture."

The question for interpretation is who is "he," and who are "they"? Among recent commentators, the preferred interpretation has been to assume that "they" refers to the Judeans, and it is occasionally suggested that the Judeans refuse to believe that Nebuchadnezzar's pagan divinations can yield any truthful word of Yahweh. But this is implausible for both narrative and religio-historical reasons. The Judeans might well have rejected the divination of Nebuchadnezzar, but their reasons for doing so would not have been that the divinations were pagan. Such an explanation for the Judeans' disbelief is both anachronistic and contrary to message of the book of Ezekiel, which condemns the house of Israel for wanting to be pagan and refusing to set themselves apart from the nations (cf. 20:32).

But a more important reason for rejecting this interpretation is the narrative structure of the unit, which focuses on the actions of Nebuchadnezzar. It is inconceivable that Judeans would be present in the camp of Nebuchadnezzar or that they would be in any position to respond to such a divination. The structure of the narrative requires a Babylonian, not a Judean, response. Nebuchadnezzar

stands at the parting of the ways; he correctly performs a series of divinations, each one of which confirms the findings of the last. It astonishes the Babylonians accompanying Nebuchadnezzar that Jerusalem, not Rabbah, is disclosed as the rebel deserving punishment. The ambiguous “they” of v. 23 must refer to the Judeans. Nebuchadnezzar’s surprise consists in the fact that he had entered into a treaty with Judah, and therefore expected their loyalty (cf. Ezek 17). After all, the Judeans had sworn solemn oaths; surely, they were to have been trusted! The narrative closes with the reiteration that the divination was correct: Nebuchadnezzar has brought the guilt of the Judeans to remembrance. Jerusalem is the city to be captured.

The phrase “bring guilt to remembrance” is found in legal and prophetic traditions (Num 11:1; 1 Kgs 17:18). Secret misdeeds may remain hidden from view, but once they become known, they must be punished. The transgressions of v. 24 are political in nature and refer to the Judean act of reneging on its oaths to Babylon. As the subsequent verses will indicate, Judah has also transgressed against Ammon. Accordingly, the oracle addresses the respective fates of both the Judeans and the Ammonites.

Verse 24 is addressed to a masculine plural audience and evidently has the Judean inhabitants of Jerusalem in mind. Structured as a two-part oracle of judgment, this verse repeats the language of v. 23 and makes it the basis for the judgment. Because they have brought their guilt to remembrance, they will be captured. The Hebrew word translated by NRSV as “taken in hand” is used elsewhere in Ezekiel of the capture of rebels (Ezek 12:13; 17:20; 19:4, 8; cf. 14:5).

The twin fates of Zedekiah and Jerusalem are linked by the two exclamations “this shall not be” in v. 26 and “this also shall not be!” in v. 27 (NRSV “such has never occurred”).<sup>3</sup> The condemnation of Zedekiah is reminiscent of language used in chapter 7. Here, as in chapter 7, the term for punishment (*ʿāwôn*) can also refer to guilt. The sense of v. 26 is that Zedekiah can do no further damage because his wrongdoing has become his punishment. Both Zedekiah and Jerusalem are brought down from their positions of prominence: the prince must remove his turban, thus signifying his removal from royal office, while Jerusalem, identified at the outset as a fortified city, is made into a ruin.

In its translation of the second half of v. 27, NRSV has followed a generally well-accepted tradition that sees a messianic allusion to a future king (“until he comes whose right [Heb. *mišpāt*] it is; to him I will give it”). Others have noted that Ezekiel does not use

*mišpāt* in the sense of “right” but always in the sense of judgment. They have therefore proposed that the line alludes to Nebuchadnezzar, to whom Yahweh gives the judgment.<sup>4</sup> The same idiom in Jeremiah 27:7 is concerned with the duration of judgment, and that may be the meaning here. Jerusalem will remain a ruin until its judgment is complete.

The next verses, 28–30a, interrupt the address to Jerusalem and Zedekiah. Ezekiel receives new instructions, this time to prophesy to the Ammonites with respect to their reproach. Although these verses appear to interrupt a coherent oracle of judgment against Jerusalem and its prince, they provide part of the rationale for the judgment. Splicing in poetic imagery from both the first and second oracles, v. 28 reminds readers that the sword that has been polished for slaughter (cf. v. 10) has also been unsheathed and hangs over the entire region, from south to north (cf. vv. 3–5). Although these verses are typically interpreted as an oracle of judgment against Ammon, the first line of v. 30 lets Ammon off the hook, if only for the time being. [Ammon] Remarkably, Yahweh commands the wielder of the sword to return it to its sheath.<sup>5</sup> What is the reason for this abrupt decision to leave Ammon alone?

Greenberg and others have argued that this section is not directly addressed *to* Ammon, but is, rather, an announcement *concerning* Ammon and its reproach, the latter being understood as Ammon’s insulting taunts on the occasion of Jerusalem’s downfall. The oracle is then interpreted as an address to Jerusalem concerning Ammon, and v. 29 is read as a consolation to Jerusalem, as Yahweh defends it against Ammon’s false divinations. The reasons for rejecting this interpretation are many. First, as Greenberg himself notes, the reading of the preposition *ʿl* as “concerning” and not as “to” is contrary to Ezekiel’s normal usage.<sup>6</sup> It is more reasonable to read v. 28 as Yahweh’s address *to* the Ammonites. Second, contrary to most interpretations, the “reproach” of the Ammonites refers to their subjective experience of humiliation, not to their taunting ridicule of Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Jerusalem’s behavior has humiliated Ammon, not the other way around. Third, the reading of v. 29 as Ammonite actions leaves the rest of the oracle unintelligible. If these are the actions of the Ammonites, then there is no good reason why Rabbah should be rescued from the sword of Yahweh. Furthermore, within the context of the entire oracle, there is no good reason why Yahweh should be concerned that the “vile wicked ones” (cf. v. 25) should find themselves subjugated to Ammon.

Finally, even though most commentators explain NRSV’s “they place you over the necks of the vile wicked ones” as the Ammonite



### Ammon



Situated along major trade routes between Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, the city of Ammon, now the capital of the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, has been a strategically important city since ancient times. It is often assumed that Ammon was a full partner in Jerusalem's rebellion and suffered the same consequences. Most interpretations of Ezek 21:28–30 present Ammon as the aggressor, duping Judah with its false divinations. But is there another way to construe the evidence?

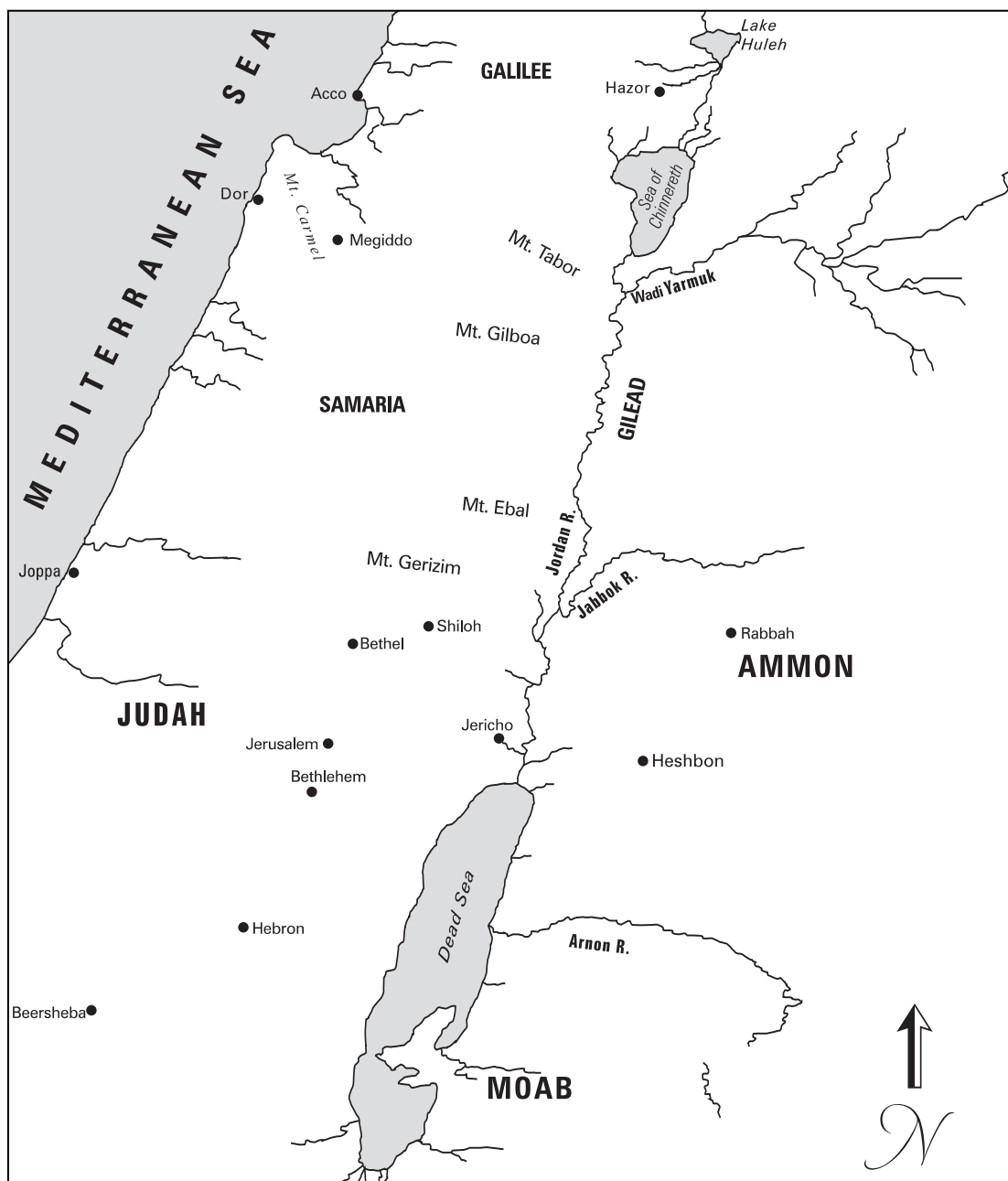
What little is known of Ammon during this period comes from Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and texts that are dependent on these prophetic books but occasionally contain information not available elsewhere. In Jer 27–28, Ammon, along with Tyre, Sidon, and Edom sent envoys to King Zedekiah, who was plotting rebellion against Babylon. Whether these kingdoms actually joined the rebellion is unclear. Ammon was hardly an instigator of rebellion and may have lacked the inclination to follow Judah's lead. Repeatedly a target of Judean military subjugation and in the tenth and ninth centuries, it flourished in the 8th and 7th centuries once it became a loyal vassal of Assyria. Ammon was not inclined to rebellion; when it is mentioned in Assyrian historical documents, it always appears as a loyal vassal, rendering tribute (*ANET*, 282, 287), labor (*ANET*, 291), or troops (*ANET*, 298). This loyalty did not go unrewarded. Archaeological evidence of the new construction of traditional Ammonite buildings during the 7th–6th centuries BCE suggests that it benefited greatly from its alliance with Assyria.

While the archaeological and epigraphic evidence is relatively straightforward for the Assyrian period, the epigraphic evidence for the Neo-Babylonian period is slim, and archaeological evidence is only beginning to be understood. Although Josephus reports that Nebuchadnezzar invaded Ammon and Moab in 582–81 (*Antiquities* 10.9.7), there is no evidence that Ammon suffered the deportation and destruction encountered by such cities as Jerusalem. Jeremiah reports that some Judeans sought refuge in Ammon after the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 40:11). There are signs of significant economic expansion in the mid- to late 6th century in at least one urban center and signs of political continuity in another. Ammon may have learned that its quiet, steady tribute—first to Assyria and then to Babylon—was the way to survive. In fact, its survival confirms Jeremiah's advice to the Judeans: "any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, says the LORD, to till it and live there" (Jer 27:11).

Although it is more likely that the accusations against Ammon in 25:1–7 are theologically motivated (see commentary on Ezek 25), the different attitudes toward Ammon in Ezek 21:28–30 and 25:1–7 may reflect historical changes. The extant Babylonian chronicle for the first eleven years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign speaks in general terms about loyal vassals and names only the rebels, whose cities are targeted for destruction (e.g., Ashkelon, Jerusalem, B.M. 21946). Because Ammon is not named in this text, its political leanings toward Babylon remain unclear. Ammon's position east of the Jordan probably kept it in the background of Nebuchadnezzar's operations to secure the coast in order to defend against Egyptian incursions. Nebuchadnezzar did not invade the Transjordan until his sixth year, when he collected tribute from the Arab tribes. At least for this early period, then, Ammon was left alone. After the fall of Jerusalem, however, Nebuchadnezzar continued to exert pressure in Syria-Palestine, and Ezekiel's second oracle concerning Ammon (25:1–7) may be associated with these later events. Josephus reports a three-pronged objective for Nebuchadnezzar's twenty-third year, five years after the destruction of Jerusalem (582): to exert control over Syria-Palestine, to conquer Moab and Ammon, and, finally, to invade Egypt (*Antiquities* 10.9.7). Ezek 25:1–7 condemns Ammon for its response to the destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary and most likely reflects this later phase of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Syria-Palestine.

For the Babylonian account of Nebuchadnezzar's campaigns in Syria-Palestine, see Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings* (626–556 B.C.) in the British Museum (London: British Museum, 1956). See further Larry G. Herr, "What Ever Happened to the Ammonites?" *BAR* 19/6 (Nov-Dec 1993): 26–35, 68; Raz Kletter, "The Rujm El-Malfuf Buildings and the Assyrian Vassal State of Ammon," *BASOR* 284 (1991): 33–50, esp. 42–45; Burton MacDonald and Randall Younker, eds., *Ancient Ammon, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East* 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1999); and Burton MacDonald, *Ammon, Moab and Edom: Early States/Nations of Jordan in the Biblical Period (End of the 2nd and During the 1st Millennium BC)* (Amman: Al Kutba, 1994).





### Ammon

subjugation of the Judeans, this interpretation does not have solid grammatical support.<sup>8</sup> The line may employ a common motif of subjugation, of putting someone's neck under a yoke. This motif figures prominently in the famous dispute between Jeremiah and Hananiah over Jeremiah's wearing a yoke to symbolize that Yahweh had handed all the nations over to the king of Babylon (cf. Jer

27–28), and it is not a coincidence that Ammon had an envoy present in Jerusalem at that time (Jer 27:2). But the preposition used here is not the one typically found in descriptions of subjugation (Heb. *ʾal*), but rather of bringing two necks together (Heb. *ʾel*, literally, “to bring you *to* the necks of the vile wicked ones”). If the allusion is to the yoke of Babylon, then the line suggests that Judah has sought to yoke Ammon to it in a common plot of rebellion. The verse underscores the disastrous consequences of such a strategy for Ammon. Not only was it foolish for the Judeans to think Ammon could protect them from their day of judgment, it was rooted in deceptive divination and misleading oracles. In its desperate attempt to save its own neck, Jerusalem has put Ammon in the humiliating position of certain defeat.

Thus, even though these verses are addressed to the Ammonites, they give the reason for the condemnation of Zedekiah and Jerusalem. Verse 29 should therefore be interpreted as a continuing condemnation of the “vile wicked ones” first mentioned in v. 25. Not only have Zedekiah and the Judeans deceived the king of Babylon, they have also deceived their comrades in rebellion. The Judeans are the ones who have dreamed false dreams and given lying divinations for Ammon, and these false divinations have rendered Ammon vulnerable to Babylonian attack.

Because Nebuchadnezzar’s divination has brought this deception to light, Yahweh protects the Ammonites from Babylonian attack by commanding the sword to return to its sheath. This does not mean that Ammon is permanently spared from judgment. It will be condemned later, albeit for a different offense than the one described here (cf. 25:1–7). Even so, within the context of the chapter, which has asserted that all flesh will be subject to the sword, Yahweh has made an astonishing exception in the case of Ammon. The guilt of Jerusalem must be very great indeed.

In vv. 30b–32, the oracle proceeds to announce irrevocable judgment against Jerusalem (vv. 30b–32). The lack of any explicit reference to Jerusalem makes it very difficult to determine just who is being targeted for judgment in these verses. Among recent commentators, there is general agreement that the verses announce judgment on the sword, which is to say Babylon.<sup>9</sup> The strongest argument in favor of this interpretation is that the sword has already been sheathed in 30a; supporting arguments include comparable oracles in Isaiah, where Assyria, the instrument of Yahweh’s wrath, is destroyed once it has completed its work of judgment (Isa 10:5–32).

But such an interpretation of these verses is problematic for several reasons. First, any such announcement of judgment against Babylon would be unusual in Ezekiel, which explicitly asserts that Yahweh has given his sword to the king of Babylon (Ezek 30:25, but see commentary on Ezek 38–39). Second, Babylon is not the weapon of Yahweh, but the agent who wields the sword. Even though the prophets do speak of the changing fortunes of those to whom Yahweh gives his weapons (cf. esp. Isa 10:5–19), these agents are never equated with the weapon itself. Since the sword signifies Yahweh's power, it would be incongruous to imagine that the sword of Yahweh should be destroyed. Finally, and most importantly, even though the feminine pronouns of vv. 30b–32 would technically allow the sword to be the subject of this address, the types of judgments that are described here are those that are leveled against populations, not swords. Swords are beaten into plowshares, but they do not spill their blood upon the ground.

A more likely possibility is that the oracle returns to its wholesale announcement of judgment against Jerusalem. Indeed, all of the imagery in these last two verses points to Jerusalem, as motifs that had been used earlier are now brought together here. The city will be judged in the “land of her origin” (cf. Ezek 16:2); Yahweh will finally pour out his wrath (20:33); she, along with her inhabitants, will be fuel for the fire (15:7). By spilling her blood on the open ground, Yahweh will avenge her bloody crimes (5:23). The chapter thus ends as it began: with the announcement of the judgment of fire, a judgment that is devastatingly comprehensive, but which is reserved for Jerusalem alone.

## CONNECTIONS

The oracles in 20:45–21:32 [Eng.] draw us in, first to contemplate the meaning of Ezekiel's words, but ultimately to consider the structure of reality. Ezekiel's audience hears an allegory, Nebuchadnezzar's company witnesses a series of divinations, and neither can believe what they have heard or seen. A simple allegory proves to be not so simple, as its first layer of meaning yields to ever deeper levels of significance. A divination brings to light a hidden fact, which completely changes the political landscape. Nebuchadnezzar had thought his enemy was Ammon, but learned that it was Judah; perhaps this narrative preserves a memory of which nations had sworn loyalty to Babylon and which remained

**Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah**

The Babylonian Chronicle describes Nebuchadnezzar's appointment of Zedekiah to the Judean throne as one of the consequences of his successful siege of the city of Jerusalem.

In the seventh year, the month of Kislev, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land, and encamped against (i.e., besieged) the city of Judah and on the second day of the month of Adar he seized the city and captured the king. He appointed there a king of his own choice (lit. heart), received its heavy tribute and sent (them) to Babylon.

B.M. 21946, ll. 11–13, rev., in Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (626–556 bc) in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1956), 73.

just outside of Nebuchadnezzar's control in the years immediately preceding Jerusalem's destruction. Nebuchadnezzar remembers swearing oaths with Jerusalem: surely Zedekiah, a man of his own heart, would be loyal. [Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah] Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar had no reason to expect the same from the Ammonite king, since he had not yet submitted to Babylonian rule.

One can scarcely decide which is more horrifying: the glittering power of Yahweh's sword, or the frank portrayal of human responses to revelation, which range from egoistic cynicism to blasé indifference. At the center of the chapter stands Yahweh's sword, the manifestation of divine power in the world. All around the periphery are intellectual conversations and deceptive manipulations. Only the pagan Nebuchadnezzar attends carefully to the signs.

In the opening oracle, divine revelation comes in the form of figures of speech. From our own great distance in time and culture, we can at least discern that Ezekiel speaks of a forest burning out of control in a dry, desert land. There are plenty of clues to Ezekiel's meaning, but as far as we can tell, the audience takes the detached position that Ezekiel is a "maker of allegories." They recognize the game that is to be played, but they choose not to play. They take Ezekiel's point, that there is something to be pondered in his words, but they do not go on to ask what he means. They may not be hostile to the message, as so many commentators infer. They may find Ezekiel's words entertaining, as they do in chapter 33, or they may simply be bored: there he goes again. The narrative is less concerned with their emotional motivation than with the fact that they do not care to seek out the meaning of Ezekiel's words. It will take Ezekiel's own suffering to get them to ask what he means. Only then will Ezekiel be able to tell them that his revelation is not mere wordplay but a status report, not allegory but front page

news: their world is disappearing as fast as desiccated wood in a forest fire.

At the edge of their world, as it were, Nebuchadnezzar takes the time to make the proper inquiries. By means of various techniques, he asks for divine guidance not once but three times. And he asks again: surely I was to trust people who have sworn oaths? But no, the guilt of the Judeans has been brought to remembrance, and it turns out that their guilt consists, in part, in not making proper inquiries. Using false divination, they have roped the Ammonites into their scheme of rebellion. The contrast could not be more glaring. Even if both Jerusalem and Rabbah of the Ammonites are his enemies, Nebuchadnezzar hesitates to move forward until he is certain of the divine will. And while the Ammonites and Judeans share common lineage going back to Abraham and Lot, the “vile, wicked prince” of Judah will use false divination to manipulate Ammon into his camp. The Babylonian is concerned to know the divine will, the Judean to exert his own will—even if it means abandoning his ally to the sword. Meanwhile, Ezekiel’s audience would just rather not know what is happening.

Although the chapter does not establish a causal connection between the indifference of Ezekiel’s audience and the intentional use of false divination by the Judean prince, the juxtaposition of these two vignettes suggests that spiritual ignorance has ethical consequences. In the first oracle, the people refuse to inquire about the nature and character of their own destiny. It is as if the people are willing to acknowledge the presence of meaning without wanting to know its implications. That makes as little sense, of course, as not caring to ask what a lover means when he says, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” or noting the presence of the holy without bothering to worship it.

Even if this first vignette is not causally connected to the third, nevertheless one may suggest that habitual indifference to revelation, even if it comes in ordinary human figures of speech, renders a people vulnerable to falsehood. How would they know what a vision means, if they do not actively engage in inquiry? How would they know to trust a vision if they do not, like Nebuchadnezzar, doubt what is revealed to them, and ask again?

In any case, the consequence of Judean ignorance is far-reaching. Not knowing themselves, they deceive others. The treachery with Babylon was intentional, and reckless; and one is not surprised that they would be punished for that crime. But Judah’s dealings with Ammon were, on the surface at least, a straightforward attempt to forge an alliance. If it had received oracles to support that attempt,

how was Judah to know that the oracles were false? Of course, there is an answer to that question. The “vile wicked ones” are not let off the hook because the divination was false; rather, it is assumed that their own wickedness perverted the divination and led to the deception.

One may detect an emergent monotheism in this chapter—a radical belief that God is at work in all of human history, and the corresponding belief that human existence is ethical only to the extent that it is a response to divine action in the world.<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 21 moves toward monotheism by examining the complex relationships between three actors, all of whom stand under the transcendent power of Yahweh as it is made manifest in his sword [The Freedom of Yahweh’s Sword] In the end, the sword is called out, not to avenge Judah’s broken faith with Babylon, but to punish Judah for putting Ammon in harm’s way. Thus the sword stands over even Nebuchadnezzar who, presumably, had thought that he would be attacking Ammon but found that he was defending it instead. The sword of Yahweh shows no partiality: it goes into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, and it defends a people that Yahweh does not call his own.

Half a century ago, as the United States was belatedly entering the Second World War, H. Richard Niebuhr urged American Christians to view the war through the lens of this kind of radical monotheism. In his view, “It is a sign of returning health, when God rather than the self or the enemy is seen to be the central figure in the great tragedy of war and when the question ‘what must I do?’ is preceded by the question, ‘what is God doing?’”<sup>11</sup> As he developed his argument, he demonstrated a host of ways in which such questions might contribute not only to our conceptualization of war but also to our working toward what he called a “just and durable if not a just endurable peace.” One of the most impor-

### The Freedom of Yahweh’s Sword



The freedom of the sword of Yahweh is reflected in a vignette in the book of Joshua:

Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?” He replied, “Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” (Josh 5:13-14)

As in other biblical narratives (cf. Gen 28), Joshua sees a “man,” who appears to be an ordinary human being. Joshua’s question would be that of any sentry guarding a camp: “Halt. Who goes there? Friend or foe?” The man declares that he is no ordinary human warrior, and it remains an open question whether this warrior is Yahweh Sabaoth. But the man does not answer the more important question, “Are you one of us, or are you one of our enemies?” Rather than choosing sides, the warrior forces Joshua to acknowledge his transcendent holiness and continues to elude human control throughout the book of Joshua.

tant implications of his proposal was the relativization of all human claims to rightness or wrongness: “God does not act save through finite instruments but none of the instruments can take the place of God even for a moment, either in their own view or in the view of the one who is being punished.”<sup>12</sup> It was also important to Niebuhr to emphasize God’s sovereignty over all aspects of human life. He found it inadequate to speak of a division of human life into spheres of political and civic action, on the one hand, and religious and spiritual life, on the other. Rather, if war was the judgment of God, then “it is the judgment of the one and universal God and not the judgment of a Lord of the spiritual life, or of a Lord of religious life, or of a Christian Lord over Christian life.”<sup>13</sup> The alternative, to Niebuhr, was intolerable. Not only did it make human beings “double-minded, unstable in all our ways,” it also implied that God was God of only a portion of the created order. And if something else ruled the other parts of the created order, then God was not really God.

Just sixty years later, Niebuhr’s questions need to be asked again, and with as much fear and trembling. In his own time, he could describe his thinking as that of someone who sought God in objective reality, while others sought God in the subjective experience of their feelings. In our own time, much of our religious language tends toward the subjective realm of feeling, because we hesitate to make any objective claim that God is at work in history. There are a number of excellent reasons for avoiding such claims, not least of which is the tendency to assume that our aims are God’s aims. When we fall prey to that temptation, we are like the Judeans, whose divinations are false because they cannot attend to anything beyond their own immediate interests. But Niebuhr’s questions help us to avoid just that. He approached the question “What is God doing in the war?” with very few concrete answers—indeed, with as many questions and doubts as Nebuchadnezzar exhibits in this story. One senses that the question poses its own judgment on narrow self-interest. The question itself is the weapon of Yahweh, which glitters with danger but also with the real possibility of deliverance from human falsehood and sin.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter the citations will refer only to the versification in NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Guthrie, "Ezekiel 21," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 74 (1962): 268-81, esp. 271. Cited by Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra* (OBO; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1991), 233 n. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:439; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:433-34.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:434; cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:692-93.

<sup>5</sup> The imperative verb is masculine plural and thus cannot be addressed directly to the sword, which is a feminine noun. Cf. v. 21, where the sword is addressed directly and feminine forms of the imperative verbs are used.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., the instructions to prophesy in 20:46-47 and 21:2-3, all of which employ the preposition 'el to indicate a direct address (i.e., "prophesy to the Negev"), and not a speech concerning someone or something (i.e., "prophesy concerning the Negev").

<sup>7</sup> Although most commentators interpret "their reproach" in v. 28 to refer to Ammonite insults and taunts leveled at Jerusalem, that is not likely. When "reproach" is modified by a possessive pronoun, it usually refers to the subjective experience of humiliation (Gen 30:23; 1 Sam 25:39; 2 Sam 13:13; Isa 4:1; 25:8; 47:3; 54:4; Jer 31:19; Hos 12:15; Mic 6:16; Pss 69:20; 74:22; 89:51; 119:39; Job 19:5; Lam 5:1; Prov 6:33). The Ammonites have been humiliated, and this oracle addresses that problem.

<sup>8</sup> The preposition that would be required for this idiom would be 'al, "upon, against," cf. Deut 28:48; Josh 10:24; Isa 10:27; 52:2; Jer 27:2, 8, 11, 12; 28:10, 11, 14; 30:8.

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:437-38; Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:697-98; Allen, *Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1990, 1994), 2:28; Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 153.

<sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *ChrCet* 59/19 (13 May 1942): 630.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 631.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



# THE BLOODY CITY

## Ezekiel 22:1-31

Chapter 22 is a loosely structured collection of three discrete but interlocking oracles. The first oracle announces judgment against the “bloody city” by enumerating a series of laws that have been violated (22:1-16). In the second oracle, Yahweh announces to Ezekiel that because the house of Israel has become “dross” to him, he will gather all of them into the city, the crucible in which he will melt them down with the fierce heat of his anger (22:17-22). The final oracle, which is again addressed to Ezekiel, expands on the previous oracles by enumerating the charges against five classes of people in Jerusalem: the rulers, priests, officials, prophets, and people of the land (22:23-31).

Although both chapters 21 and 22 contain apparently unrelated oracles, they may nevertheless be part of a continuous argument. Specific motifs tie the two chapters together. For example, the catchword “blood” ties 22:1-16 to 21:32, while *za‘am*, “indignation,” which appears in Ezekiel only in these two chapters (e.g., 21:31 [MT 21:36], 22:24, 31), frames the oracles of accusation and judgment in 22:1-22. Although it remains an open question how these oracles were brought together, it is possible to suggest that chapter 22 presses the conclusions of chapter 21 by exposing the underlying cause of Jerusalem’s inability to honor its international commitments. If Jerusalem has failed to honor its allies, it has treated its own flesh and blood no better.

## COMMENTARY

### **Family Values in the Bloody City, 22:1-16**

This oracle evokes the beginning of chapters 16 and 20 with its question “Will you judge, will you judge the bloody city?” and with its ensuing instruction that Ezekiel make known its abominations.

Unlike chapter 16, which developed the accusation by way of an extended metaphor of Jerusalem as Yahweh's adopted child-bride, or chapter 20, which developed its case by invoking the salvation history of Israel, the present chapter presents its case by way of an extended legal argument that invokes both international and Israelite law. As in 5:5-17, Jerusalem has not only failed to abide by its own laws, it has also failed to abide by the laws of any of the other nations.

The word "blood" is repeated with sickening regularity. Ezekiel may have borrowed his epithet for Jerusalem, "the bloody city" (*ʿir haddāmîm*), from Nahum 3:1, where it had been used of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Where Nahum condemns Nineveh for its shedding the blood of its enemies, Ezekiel accuses Jerusalem of shedding the blood of its own people. No one commits outright murder in Jerusalem; as Greenberg has noted, Jerusalem is guilty of "judicial murder," or legally protected abuses of power that harm the weaker members of society.<sup>1</sup> The oracle contends that these practices harm not only those on the margins of society, such as the widows, orphans, and aliens, but also those nestled within families, the most basic unit of social life. If widows and orphans do not receive the customary protections due them, neither do the mothers, daughters, and sisters. Meanwhile, Jerusalem's neighbors must pay bribes to secure its friendship. It is no wonder that Jerusalem should prove to be an unreliable ally, if its allegiances can be bought and sold.

The oracle develops its case in two parts. Verses 3-5 make a general indictment: because of Jerusalem's bloodshed and idols, she has hastened her day of judgment. Yahweh therefore disgraces her in the eyes of all the nations, both near and far. This general indictment ends with two epithets: "O Defiled Name" (NRSV "infamous one"), "O Great Tumult" (NRSV "full of tumult"; Heb. *rabbāt hammēhûmâ*).<sup>2</sup> Both epithets play on the greatness of Jerusalem. But in both cases, her lawlessness is the source of her renown (cf. 5:5-17).

The second part of the indictment, vv. 6-12, catalogues Jerusalem's crimes in a series of intertwined cultic, sexual, and social abuses (cf. ch. 18). Unique to this list of crimes is the sense of escalating lawlessness, which is developed in three roughly parallel sections (vv. 6-8, 9-11, 12). Each section is introduced by a noun clause that identifies the crime and ends with a result clause, "so that blood is shed" (vv. 6, 9, 12). The crime is further elaborated with a series of declarative sentences describing the actions of Jerusalem's inhabitants and culminating in a direct accusation

against Jerusalem. [The Structure of Ezekiel 22:6-12] The indictment describes a progressive deterioration in the fabric of community life. The weakening of the community begins with the royal abuse of power, which not only undermines the most basic social unit, the family, but also jeopardizes those on the margins of society (22:6-8). It continues in the violation of incest taboos in 22:9-11, as no woman in Jerusalem is safe from the aggressions of even close members of her family. Finally, the violence cannot be contained, as Jerusalem's lust for power makes it an unreliable neighbor in the international community.

Although these crimes may be understood as violations of Israelite law, it is important to the present argument that laws regulating these spheres of social life are not unique to Israel. Greenberg points out that ancient Near Eastern law codes cite the restoration of the proper relationship between fathers and sons as a fundamental requirement of social order. In the second millennium BCE, for example, King Lipit Ishtar of Isin corrected the wrongs in his city, in part, by reinforcing parental and filial relationships.<sup>3</sup> The requirement to honor parents is thus not an isolated filial duty but a cornerstone of social order. As the son assumes the responsibilities for the family from his increasingly aged and infirm father, something beyond the mere assertion of power must regulate this transition. Otherwise parents are as vulnerable to mistreatment as are the most marginalized widows and orphans, as is indicated by the placement of one such command within the context of laws regulating the protection of the weaker members of society (Deut 27:16). That Israel shared this understanding with its neighbors is reflected in the placement of the command to honor parents at the head of laws regulating social life in the Decalogue (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16).

Israel shared with its Near Eastern neighbors the conviction that the health of a society could be gauged by the availability of justice and fairness to the weaker and marginalized members of society. Kings were therefore responsible for protecting the rights of widows and orphans; aliens, resident non-citizens, were also to be treated fairly. Because the princes in Jerusalem have been concerned with their own power, Ezekiel claims that these universal norms of

### The Structure of Ezekiel 22:6-12



22:6-8 Look: the princes of Israel cause bloodshed

Father and mother are dishonored

The alien suffers extortion

The orphan and widow are wronged

22:9-11 Slanderers cause bloodshed

They eat on the mountains and commit lewdness:

A father's nakedness is uncovered

A woman is forced during her time of uncleanness

A man commits abomination with his neighbor's wife

Another defiles his daughter-in-law

A man forces himself on his sister

22:12 Bribe-takers cause bloodshed

They take advance and accrued interest

They make gain against neighbors by extortion

and me you have forgotten.

justice have been violated, with the result that aliens suffer extortion and widows and orphans are abused of their rights.

By pairing the welfare of parents with those on the margins of society, Ezekiel 22:6-7 makes the case that the princes' preoccupation with their own power has resulted in the weakening of all of Jerusalemite society. Ezekiel closes this section with a charge against Jerusalem: "You have despised my holy things and profaned my sabbaths." While it would be technically accurate to see this charge as an accusation that Jerusalem has failed to uphold other, cultic norms, one may also interpret this line to refer to the previous abuses: the princes have failed to acknowledge the sacrality of civic life. In this regard Ezekiel follows the Holiness Code, which brings together the observance of sabbaths and the honoring of parents as the essence of holiness (Lev 19:2-3).

The second section turns to more specifically Judean requirements for the proper ordering of family and social life, as Ezekiel catalogues the "slanderers" (Heb. *'ansê rākîl*, "men of slander") violation of the sexual norms outlined in the Holiness Code (22:9-11). Elsewhere, Ezekiel uses *rākîl* to refer to traders and merchants (cf. Ezek 27:3, 13, 15, 17, 22, 23, 24), but NRSV's "slanderers" in 22:9 is an accurate reading, since Ezekiel does not appear to single out one class of people here, but rather denigrates the entire population with this epithet. Jeremiah uses the term in connection with rebellion against Yahweh, which leads the people into ever greater evil (Jer 6:28; 9:3). Because Ezekiel's slanderers "eat on the mountains" and "commit lewdness," a similar connection between rebellion against the covenant and social wrongdoing may be implied here. Eating on the mountains probably refers to idolatry and is not further explained (cf. 18:8); however, the full range of lewdness is laid out in an enumeration of sexual offenses against the father (which is also an offense against the mother or stepmother, cf. Lev 18:8), the menstruant, the neighbor's wife, the daughter-in-law, and the sister. All of these actions violate the requirements for purity set forth in the Holiness Code (Lev 18:6-19), and three of the five involve incestuous relationships. In the Holiness Code, the violation of these prohibitions defiles the land. That consequence is not described in 22:1-16; however, the defilement of the land is taken up in 22:23-32.

Although NRSV's translation accurately conveys the meaning of the Hebrew verbs (e.g., "uncover nakedness," "violate," "defile," "commit abomination"), it does not quite capture the sting of the accusation for modern readers, who might better understand what is at stake if the action was simply called what it is—rape and

incest. In all cases, the “slanderers” engage in unwanted sexual aggression against women, in several cases against women in their own families. It does not take a specialized knowledge of incest taboos to see that these sexual offenses amount to utter lawlessness. When men sexually force themselves on women with whom they have the closest of family ties and the greatest of obligations, nothing is left of the social fabric. In one well-known story about the children of King David, such a crime is referred to as an “outrage in Israel,” and it eventually resulted in a civil war that nearly destroyed David’s kingdom. [The Rape of Tamar] Ezekiel’s accusation is that every woman in Jerusalem has been so abused.

With this enumeration of wholesale sexual abuse, Ezekiel exposes the consequences of the royal abuse of power described in vv. 6-8. Because of their preoccupation with power, the obligations of children to their parents are ignored, as are the protections for the marginalized members of the society, the widows and orphans. But if widows and orphans are not safe, then neither are mothers, daughters, or sisters.

The final subsection of this indictment charges the inhabitants of Jerusalem with taking bribes (v. 12). Because this section of the unit is addressed directly to Jerusalem, it is likely that the “neighbors” in question are not individuals within the city, but Jerusalem’s political allies, and one is reminded of the princes’ bad treatment of the Ammonites in 21:18-20. While such a charge may seem anticlimactic after the significantly more dramatic charge of incest and rape, the logic of the indictment is perfectly clear. If the inhabitants of Jerusalem cannot be trusted to maintain close family ties, then

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### The Rape of Tamar



Like Ezek 22:1-16, the story of the rape of Tamar in 2 Sam 13 construes the nation’s disintegration as a direct consequence of King David’s failure to uphold taboos against incest.

Because Ezek 22:1-16 quite likely played off the revulsion that an ancient audience would have felt in response to such tales of incest and rape, the story is retold here.

Sick with desire for his half-sister Tamar, prince Amnon manages to get her alone with him in his bedchamber. The narrative emphasizes the horror of the episode by repeating the terms “sister” and “brother.” Tamar voices the norms of Israel as she seeks to dissuade him: “No, my brother, do not force me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel” (2 Sam 13:12-13). Tamar urges Amnon to speak to the king, their father, who will give her in marriage to Amnon. But Amnon, “being stronger than she, forced her and lay with her” (2 Sam 13:14). That is not the end of Tamar’s horror. No longer calling her his “sister,” he now refers to her as “this thing” and commands the servant to put her out and bolt the door after her. Even though David is angered by Amnon’s act, he does nothing, since Amnon was his firstborn. Reacting to David’s own inaction, Tamar’s brother Absalom arranges to assassinate Amnon and eventually stages a rebellion against his father David. Before it is all over, David will have fled from Jerusalem, the entire kingdom will be forced to side with father or son, and Absalom will die a horrible death.

neither can they be trusted to honor their political alliances. If they will extort aliens, then they will also extort neighbors. And even if the neighbors bribe Jerusalem with gifts, there is no reason to expect Jerusalem to honor her word.

The oracle concludes with an announcement of judgment against Jerusalem. Her princes rely on their own strength; now Yahweh asks whether that strength will endure in the coming days of judgment. Because Jerusalem has wantonly defied every legal canon, both her own and that of the nations, Yahweh will profane her<sup>4</sup> in the sight of the nations.

### **Meltdown, 22:17-22**

Although introductory and concluding formulas set this section apart as an independent oracle, Yahweh's declaration that he will "melt" the house of Israel just as metals are melted down is integrally connected to the preceding catalogue of the bloody city's crimes. The association between the refining of silver and the just rule of a city may have been a widespread wisdom motif, as reflected in the following proverb:

Take away the dross from the silver,  
and the smith has material for a vessel;  
take away the wicked from the presence of the king,  
and his throne will be established in righteousness. (Prov 25:4-5)

The connection between just rule and refining is first appropriated by Isaiah (1:21-26), who announces that the harlotrous city of Jerusalem can regain its original state of righteousness only if its corrupt leaders are purged from her midst, as alloy and dross is removed from silver. Although the simile of refining silver is also used in the more general sense of purging rebels from the covenant community (Jer 6:6-8; Isa 48:10; Zech 13:9), Ezekiel's usage is more squarely in line with the wisdom proverb—and with Isaiah's appropriation of it—in connection with Jerusalem.

The association between rebellion and dross is derived from a pun on the verb root *sûg*, which can refer both to the act of disloyalty (i.e., "to deviate") and to the smelting process, which involves inducing a chemical reaction that allows impurities in the ore to bond with a lighter substance and float to the surface, leaving the heavier, purified metal to sink to the bottom of the furnace. This lighter, foamy material, which is then poured away (*sûg*), is called *sîg*. The Masoretic text of Ezekiel accentuates the connection

between rebellion and refining in 22:18 by preserving the spelling of the term for disloyalty (*sûg*) while specifying that it be pronounced as dross (*sîg*). Yahweh's punning statement to Ezekiel, "The House of Israel have all become as dross/disloyal to me," thus establishes a connection between their disloyalty and their essential worthlessness.

The announcement of judgment follows from this observation. Ezekiel then develops the metaphor of Israel as dross by alluding to aspects of metalworking. Ezekiel's use of the metaphor requires knowledge of ancient metallurgy; however, it must be remembered that Ezekiel is a "maker of metaphors" and not a metallurgist. His metaphor thus may not accurately reflect all of the stages of refining metals. [Metallurgy]

As "dross," the house of Israel is utterly worthless. They are already garbage, and there is nothing of value to extract from them. Ezekiel intensifies the image by saying, not only are they worthless, they have become worthless through an inexplicable, perverse alchemy. In v. 18, Ezekiel declares, "all of them are copper,<sup>5</sup> tin, iron and lead in the midst of the furnace; they have become dross of silver."<sup>6</sup> If Ezekiel had intended to allude to the process of smelting—that is, of extracting the metal from the ore and refining it—it is likely that the term for ore, "stone" would have been used (*eben*, cf. Job 28:2, 3).<sup>7</sup> Instead, Ezekiel refers to the finished metals—copper, tin, iron, and lead—which are ready to be worked into useful objects.<sup>8</sup> Israel goes into the furnace as a pure metal but comes out as "dross of silver," or slag. This is not simply a failure of the smelting process, which can occasionally go wrong, but an anomalous perversion of metals that should have been stable enough to withstand the heat of the furnace (cf. Num 31:22).

In turn, Yahweh takes an anomalous course of action. Slag cannot be purified, cleansed, reduced, or otherwise gotten rid of.<sup>9</sup> Nor would any metalworker return it to the furnace, since the whole point of smelting is to drain off the slag from the purified, molten metal. Even so, Yahweh gathers Israel, dross as it is, into the furnace, just as one would gather ores into the furnace. Just as silver is melted in the furnace, so Yahweh will melt this irreducible lump (22:20-22). What is important to the metaphor is that Yahweh does what no metalworker in his right mind would do. As dross, Israel is not the malleable, workable metal that it ought to be. Even so, Yahweh does not cast it on the slag heap of history, but continues to apply the heat. The logic of Israel's perversion and Yahweh's reversion does not yet, however, constitute a conversion; thus the oracle ends only with the stoking of Yahweh's wrath and

### Metallurgy



Although the understanding of Ezek 22:17-22 depends in part upon knowledge of the process of refining metals, it must be remembered that Ezekiel is a “maker of metaphors.” His use of images from metallurgy is thus highly figurative, and we should not expect an exact correspondence between his figures of speech and the practice of metallurgy. A brief explanation of the process of extracting metals from their natural state will show just how far Ezekiel’s metaphorical usage is from actual practice, and also serve to elucidate the meaning of yet one more of Ezekiel’s strange turns of speech.

The metals mentioned in Ezek 28:17-22 do not occur naturally in their pure state, but rather must be extracted from their ores through the process of smelting. Smelting involves the application of heat and the inducement of a chemical reaction that allows the impurities to be released from the ore. The heat must be very high, particularly for metals like iron, and usually the heat is intensified by forcing air into the furnace by means of a bellows. Once the chemical reaction occurs, the purified, molten metal sinks to the bottom of the furnace, while the slag floats to the top and is then poured off.

As a general rule, the smelting process yields only a very small amount of pure metal and a significantly larger quantity of waste, or slag. This waste does not consist simply of the impurity that has been removed from the metal; rather, it is the product of the chemical reaction in the smelting process. Some ores can yield several useful metals; for example, silver is found in a lead oxide known as galena, and the extraction process may yield both silver and lead. Tin may also be a byproduct of silver production. But the melting temperature of each of these metals suggests that each would have required its own smelting process: tin melts at 231°C and boils at 2,270°C; lead melts at 327°C and boils at 1,744°C; silver melts at 960° and boils at 2,212°; copper melts at 1,083°C and boils at 2,595°C; iron melts at 1,535°C and boils at 2,750°C.

Once a metal has been purified, it is reheated and worked into its desired shape. Biblical writers were especially acquainted with this latter process; in fact, the term for metal is derived from the verb root *nsk*, “to pour.” Because Palestine depended on trade for its metals (cf. Ezek 27:12, 13, 19), its peoples were probably better acquainted with this final stage of metalworking than with the process of smelting. Metal would have been traded in the form of ingots, which would be relatively easy to weigh and store (cf. 1 Chr 22:3), and also ready for this third and final stage of metalworking.

See entries under “metal,” “refine,” “silver,” “brass,” “copper,” “iron,” and “lead” in *JSBE*, 4 vols., fully revised, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–1988).

the declaration that Israel will indeed melt in the heat of that fury. Even if it chooses to be dross, even if it chooses to deviate and be poured away, Israel’s fate is ever to be subject to the indomitable divine will, to be gathered into the furnace and to burn and burn again.

### Retrospect, 22:23-31

This final oracle in the chapter is an extended address to the prophet Ezekiel. Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to announce to the land that it is a “land not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation.” The rest of the oracle recounts Yahweh’s assessment of Israel’s leaders to Ezekiel and concludes with the observation that



there was nothing else for Yahweh to do but pour out his wrath upon them (cf. 22:31). The oracle therefore functions as an elaborate justification of Yahweh's ways to Ezekiel.

Greenberg has suggested that the entire oracle was composed for its present context. Pointing out that such motifs as the "land not cleansed" evoke not only the epithet for the city ("O Unclean One," 22:5) but also the metaphor of vv. 17-22,<sup>10</sup> Greenberg detected in this oracle an elaborate reprise of the themes of the chapter. One might, in fact, suggest that this oracle represents a recapitulation of themes from the entire book, as Ezekiel incorporates metaphors and motifs used earlier to consolidate this wholesale condemnation of the city of Jerusalem. Having recounted earlier decisions to hold back his anger, Yahweh now concludes that there was no other option than to pour out his wrath on Jerusalem.

Ezekiel begins the oracle with an address to the land: you are a land not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation. Block has argued that this statement must be understood in light of the Genesis flood tradition.<sup>11</sup> Especially in the Priestly account of creation, human violence corrupts the earth. The flood is therefore both a judgment against "all flesh" that wreaks violence in the earth, and a renewal that cleanses the earth of its corruption (cf. Gen 6:11). Block's suggestion, then, is that the land of Israel richly deserved such a flood because of the corruption of its inhabitants. The oracle then speaks about the land's leaders in the third person, as if Yahweh were looking back in retrospect on the action that he has taken.<sup>12</sup> Yahweh turns to address the land because nothing else is left.

Taking up each class of leaders separately, Ezekiel makes the comprehensive claim that Jerusalem's leaders were the source of the violence that finally destroyed the city. Ezekiel may be drawing on Zephaniah 3:1-4, which enumerates the sins of Jerusalem by detailing the crimes of its officials. Whether the oracle in Zephaniah is the source of Ezekiel's argument or not, 22:25-28 nevertheless bears Ezekiel's own creative stamp. In v. 25, Ezekiel depicts the rulers of Judah as anti-rulers, as wild beasts devouring prey. The symbol of the Judean kings, the "lion of Judah," is well suited for this kind of symbolic development. Normally, the symbol signifies the proud strength of the Judean king (cf. Ezek 17); here Ezekiel inverts it and interprets it in light of another range of meanings. In the ancient Near Eastern iconography, lions symbolized that part of the chaotic world that kings were charged to control. By equating the rulers of Judah with ravaging wild



### The Seal of Jeroboam, King of Israel

Copy of lost original. Israelite, 1000 BC.

Reuben & Edith Hecht Collection, Haifa University, Haifa, Israel.  
[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

beasts, Ezekiel depicts their power as a destructive force unleashed upon the world. The significance of this charge is underlined in the accusation that these kings “make many widows”: although it was the duty of kings to protect widows, the kings of Judah were busy making more of them. They are not simply bad rulers, failing to uphold the cosmic order; rather, they are the source of the chaos and disorder that has generated so much bloodshed within the city.

The very generality of this denunciation is staggering. Elsewhere, Ezekiel condemns the kings of Judah for devouring their own people (ch. 34); here, Ezekiel may describe a destructiveness that extends well beyond the borders of Judah. For example, the phrase “taking treasure and precious things” is used elsewhere of Nebuchadnezzar’s looting of Jerusalem (Jer 20:5);<sup>13</sup> its use may here allude to the princes’ attempt to force Jerusalem’s neighbors into making payments for protection (cf. 22:12).

In v. 26, in the only denunciation of priests in the book, Ezekiel charges that the priests have perverted every aspect of their calling, with the result that Yahweh is profaned. In v. 27, officials (NRSV “princes”) shed blood for dishonest gain (cf. 11:1-14). In v. 28, prophets allow all this to happen through their false divinations. Finally, even the people of the land, its free citizens, extort the weaker ones for financial gain (v. 29; cf. 11:14-21). The oracle concludes with Yahweh’s sense of defeat. Having looked in vain for a single person who would stand in the breach on behalf of the land (not the people!), Yahweh resolves to pour out his indignation on the people. The image evokes Jeremiah’s search for a single righteous person in Jerusalem (Jer 5:1); it also reinforces the conclusion of the previous oracle: the inhabitants of Jerusalem are all worthless slag.

## CONNECTIONS

The opening oracle in this chapter enumerates egregious crimes against all members of society, and at its heart is an appalling array of sex crimes. These crimes would have shocked Ezekiel's audience with their wanton disregard of the canons of holiness; indeed, the story of the rape of Tamar depends on this sense of outrage. Although we do not order our lives according to the same conventions of holiness, nevertheless these crimes should shock us also. Ezekiel is not simply delineating an arcane set of sexual taboos or being excessively priggish about sexual morality. Rather, he is describing a society in which rape and incest have become the norm.

Strangely enough, commentators have not made much of this fact, and it is worth asking why. In his observation that 22:1-16 is a speech constructed to evaluate Jerusalem against the norms of the Holiness Code, Walther Zimmerli cautions against reading this oracle as an enumeration of specific facts or historical charges against the men of Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Zimmerli wants his readers to understand that these things did not really happen. While one is likely to agree with Zimmerli's assessment of the rhetorical dynamics of this oracle, one is also reminded that Sigmund Freud labeled his female patients' memories of childhood incest and abuse as hysteria. In both cases, lurid charges strain credulity and thus must be explained away. In the case of Freud's women, they were just fantasizing; in the case of Ezekiel, he is speechifying, making "doctrinaire"<sup>15</sup> claims about what is wrong with Jerusalem.

Another strategy for interpreting this chapter is to point out that the enumeration of all of these crimes supports Ezekiel's central claim, that Jerusalem has forgotten Yahweh (22:12). Interpretation thus emphasizes the theological point that all of social, cultic, and sexual life is to be rooted in one's obedience to Yahweh. There is much to appreciate in this strategy, since the book of Ezekiel is so radically theocentric. But Ezekiel is nothing if not obsessively preoccupied by details; if one overlooks the precise clustering of social, familial, and economic norms, then one runs the risk of losing Ezekiel's point, not clarifying it.

Finally, other commentators draw attention to the oracle's emphasis on social concerns at the expense of its emphasis on sexual norms. Greenberg, for example, concedes that sexual abominations do "threaten national well-being" as they do in Leviticus 18 and 20; however, he hastens to point out that "social offenses predominate" in Ezekiel 22:1-16, as if those were the ones that

mattered.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, even though feminist scholarship has made something of a cottage industry of the interpretation of chapters 16 and 23, it has not addressed the unique issues presented by this oracle.

Even if one agrees, with Zimmerli, that this oracle is structured to reflect legal canons and not historical fact, Ezekiel has described a shocking state of affairs. The princes fail to rule, women are abused, and alliances cannot be trusted. In Ezekiel's world, there is no division between the sacred things, economic and political affairs, and private morality. All of human life is woven from the same thread: pull at one, and the whole fabric falls apart. One may as easily start with the treatment of the neighbors and end up with guesses about what goes on behind closed doors. But Ezekiel has chosen the safety of women, more particularly their sexual safety, as the defining criterion of the social well-being of Jerusalem. One should not have to ask whether women may be safely left at home alone with their sons, husbands, brothers, fathers, or uncles. But if this very basic level of trust has eroded, it should come as no surprise that no one is safe.

It is important to note, however, that Ezekiel does not begin with the safety of Jerusalem's women; rather, he begins with much more conventional concerns. Parents are to be honored, and the rights of widows, orphans, and aliens are to be upheld. If fathers and mothers are honored, then the basic fabric of society is strong. And if widows and orphans are treated fairly, then no one else falls through any gaping holes or broken seams. It had long been a commonplace of prophetic critique that the widows and orphans were neglected in Israelite and Judean society; Ezekiel does not stop there, but presses on to explore the consequences of their neglect. If these marginal ones are not cared for, who is?

One wonders whether there is a comparable litmus test for society today. Is there any single criterion that we might use as a gauge of our social well-being? Many factors complicate such a question in the modern world. Ever since the Enlightenment and the rise of constitutional democracies, it is a given that government rests on the consent of the governed. Neither a government nor its laws is divinely ordained; rather, both reflect the arduous and often fragile process of safeguarding human rights and delineating human duties through the forging of human agreements. If one were to arrive at a single criterion of the well-being of society, it would have to gain common consent. Given the philosophical, religious, and moral diversity that characterizes the modern world, one

is at a loss to imagine whether any such criterion could be articulated.

For the political philosopher John Rawls, one possible criterion is “justice as fairness.” Contending that it is unlikely that any community can arrive at a commonly held philosophical, religious, or moral conception of justice, Rawls charts a more pragmatic course of ensuring just political systems while also honoring the diverse philosophical, moral, and religious commitments that coexist in any modern society.

Two elements of his theory of political justice have interesting implications for our thinking about Ezekiel. First, Rawls offers a litmus test comparable to Ezekiel’s criterion of the treatment of widows and orphans. If justice as fairness is properly at work in any given political system, its citizens experience a degree of stability that allows for the perpetuation of society and its institutions:

those who grow up under just basic institutions acquire a sense of justice and a reasoned allegiance to those institutions sufficient to render them stable. Expressed another way, citizens’ sense of justice, given their traits of character and interests as formed by living under a just basic structure, is strong enough to resist the normal tendencies to injustice. Citizens act willingly so as to give one another justice over time.<sup>17</sup>

Rawls believes that justice as fairness ensures the health of the society because it creates a high degree of stability. In such a society, institutions not only enforce justice, they also teach it. Citizens’ behavior is thus not simply regulated, as in a police state, it is also shaped to reflect the inherent values of the society. Justice becomes a self-generating phenomenon, as citizens who live under just institutions learn that it is to their advantage to treat others justly as well.

Ezekiel 22:1-16 is the inverse of such an understanding of society. Instead of creating just institutions that would further generate just behavior, the princes have acted only to protect their own power. What is learned in Jerusalem is not justice but an avaricious self-assertion that not only destroys family relationships, those at the core of society, but undermines all spheres of economic and political life. Jerusalem is not simply unstable, it is a city that teaches chaos (cf. 22:5).

Second, Rawls’s theory offers a way in which such a single criterion of justice as fairness might come to be accepted by widely differing groups of people that make up any given modern society.

Rawls's term for this common agreement is "overlapping consensus." Those holding diverse moral, religious and philosophical beliefs ground their support of justice as fairness by appealing to deeply held values. Although each group may support the concept of justice as fairness by way of different—and even perhaps conflicting—principles, nevertheless the groups arrive at an "overlapping consensus" that upholds the concept of justice as fairness quite apart from any other consideration, such as shifts in the balance of power among these different groups.<sup>18</sup> Rawls further contends that broad-based theoretical agreement is not necessary to come to a deep and lasting consensus. Nor is it necessary, or even helpful, to sharply delineate between political justice and the fundamental moral and religious commitments of its constituents, as if religious concerns had nothing to do with public life. What is necessary is that citizens base their support of political justice on deep and significant elements of their philosophical, moral, or religious positions.

Ezekiel's twin criteria of respect for parents and protection for widows and orphans can and should be interpreted as the ancient world's "overlapping consensus." In the commentary, it was noted that Israel shared these concerns with its ancient Near Eastern neighbors. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah grounded these commandments in their understanding of their covenant with Yahweh, while its polytheistic neighbors found religious warrant elsewhere. Despite very different moral and religious underpinnings, Israel and its neighbors came to some basic agreements about what constituted a just and fair society. At both the core of a society and at its margins, there should be a certain degree of reliability in the conduct of human affairs. The litmus test then, as now, is justice as it is meted out fairly to all; and the evidence of its fairness is the treatment of those at the margins of society. If justice does not extend to those at the edges, then there is a good chance that society is also rotten at its core.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See commentary at 7:23; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 1:154.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:454.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Contrast NRSV, which asserts that Yahweh will be profaned in the sight of the nations ("I"). The present reading follows the Masoretic text, in which it is Jerusalem ("you") who is profaned.

<sup>5</sup> Contrast NRSV, which translates *nēḥōšet* as bronze. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin; as a pure metal copper is the preferred reading here. Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:459.

<sup>6</sup> Contrast NRSV, which inserts "silver" at the head of the list from its position toward the end of the sentence. There is no manuscript support for this change, though it must be admitted that the sentence as it stands is difficult. For the rendering of the phrase as "dross of silver," see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:458.

<sup>7</sup> For an interpretation based on the assumption that Ezekiel accurately describes the smelting process, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:716-18; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 1:463-64, though the latter concedes that a "slight logical inconsistency is not to be denied in the whole address" (464).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:458: "since silver-bearing ores are not found in the land of Israel, knowledge of their processing was presumably restricted to secondary stages . . ."

<sup>9</sup> Contrast Greenberg who, in line with the metaphor of the vine in ch. 15, sees the melting process here as a process of "obliteration" (*Ezekiel*, 2:459).

<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1:460.

<sup>11</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:722-24.

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:467.

<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:462.

<sup>14</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:456.

<sup>15</sup> The word is Zimmerli's.

<sup>16</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:467.

<sup>17</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, John Dewey Essays in Philosophy 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), IV.2.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.4.2.





# TWO SISTERS AND THEIR DANGEROUS LIAISONS

## Ezekiel 23:1-49

Ezekiel 23 contains three parts: Yahweh's first-person account of his marriages to Oholah and Oholibah (23:1-21), his announcement of judgment against Oholibah (23:22-35), and his instruction to Ezekiel to judge the two sisters and make known their abominations (23:36-49). As the counterpart of chapter 16, the present chapter reprises the metaphor of Jerusalem as Yahweh's wife and brings this section of the book to a close.<sup>1</sup> In addition, vocabulary not used elsewhere in Ezekiel links the present chapter to chapters 20–22,<sup>2</sup> thus suggesting that chapter 23 was crafted to incorporate accusations lodged in those chapters as well.

Where Ezekiel 16 speaks only in passing of Jerusalem's sisters Samaria and Sodom, chapter 23 more fully explores the similarities of Jerusalem and Samaria, called Oholibah and Oholah. This treatment of the two sisters is reminiscent of Jeremiah's pairing of "faithless Israel" and "false Judah" (Jer 3:6-10). Although Oholah's destruction should have been an object lesson that would lead Jerusalem to repentance, Oholibah's adulteries outstrip those of her older sister, and she can expect the same disastrous result.

Ezekiel's use of the harlotry metaphor is associated primarily with the forging of multiple political alliances, [Covenant Love and Harlotry] which date back to the eighth century. Ezekiel asserts that these alliances were undertaken at the sisters' initiative; a few biblical narratives partially corroborate this scenario. [The Political Alliances of Israel and Judah]

At least some of Ezekiel's readers would have readily identified with those involved in diplomatic negotiations with the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylonia. As these readers identify with the female characters Oholah and Oholibah, they see their attempts to secure power through the lens of Ezekiel's sexual metaphor. Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes notes that the narrative establishes a fundamental ambiguity in the account of the sisters' involvement with their lovers. On the one hand, by characterizing their activity as "whoredom," the narrative suggests that they initiate the alliances. On the other hand, they become passive victims of their lovers' brutal advances (23:3, 8). Van Dijk-Hemmes sees this as a classic, patriarchal "misnaming" of

### Covenant Love and Harlotry



Although modern readers tend to differentiate between religious apostasy and political rebellion, the two went hand in hand in the ancient world. In fact, the metaphor of “going after lovers,” which became associated with the worship of other gods, was probably first used as a political metaphor, not a religious one (cf. Hos 8:9). In the commonplaces of ancient Near Eastern treaty-making, loyalty to a treaty partner was often couched in terms of endearment; thus when Solomon succeeds David as king of Israel, the Tyrian king Hiram affirms his loyalty to Solomon as one who had been a “lover” of David (*’ōhēb*, NRSV “friend”). That the metaphor became associated with religious apostasy may be due to the treaty requirement that Israel acknowledge the deities of these other nations. But even in instances where other gods are not mentioned, the prophetic texts construe political alliances with other nations as a rejection of Yahweh. The 8th-century prophets viewed the alliances with Assyria and Babylonia as religious apostasy. Isaiah depicts these alliances as a refusal to trust in Yahweh (cf. Isa 7), while Hosea depicts Yahweh as being “forgotten” and kept out of the political loop (Hos 8:4). The political emphasis in Ezek 23 thus reflects a longstanding conception of harlotry as political apostasy. In forging these political alliances, Oholibah has “forgotten” Yahweh (23:35).

For an early study of covenant terminology, see W. L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBO* 25 (1963): 77–87. For an interpretation of the metaphor of harlotry in light of the international political dynamics of the ancient Near East, particularly as it is used in the book of Hosea, see Alice A. Keefe, *Woman’s Body and the Social Body in Hosea*, JSOTS 338, Gender, Culture, Theory 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

women’s experience. By calling the sisters’ experience prostitution and not rape, the narrative blames the victim.<sup>3</sup>

Though van Dijk-Hemmes views this as a fundamental problem of the chapter, the metaphor depends on this ambiguity. As a prostitute, Oholibah takes the initiative in establishing these dangerous liaisons, and believes that she can dictate the terms of the transaction. Eventually, however, she finds herself subject to advances that she cannot control. Dalliance turns into rape, trade into plunder.

### The Political Alliances of Israel and Judah



The earliest biblical reference to an alliance with Assyria is 1 Kgs 15:9, where it is said that Menahem sought such an alliance to confirm his position as king of Israel (c. 745 BC; cf. 2 Kgs 15:9). A decade later, Hoshea first allied his kingdom with Assyria and then sought to rebel by allying with Egypt (2 Kgs 17:3-5). References to both Assyria and Egypt in Hosea (7:11; 8:9; 12:2 [ET 12:1]) probably refer to these shifts in allegiance. Assyrian records suggest that alliances were forged much earlier. The famous Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser depicts the Israelite king Jehu (c. 843/2–815 BC) bowing down and paying tribute to the Assyrians well before the reigns of Menahem and Hoshea, when fevered negotiations could not avert (and probably hastened) the Assyrian destruction of Israel.

If Israel’s treaties with Assyria remain obscure, Judah’s are better known. Ahaz sought an alliance with Assyria in order to protect against the incursions of Northern Israel and Aram (c. 735–732 BC). Isaiah condemned this initiative and declared that Judah would be destroyed by the very kingdom from which it sought protection. From that point on, Judah could not escape Assyrian control, even though it continued to explore other alliances. The account of Hezekiah’s visit with Babylonian envoys may reflect one such attempt, which the prophet Isaiah predicted would end in disaster (Isa 39:1-5).

By the end of the narrative, it is clear that she cannot play their game.

Feminist interpreters note that a key element of this chapter is Jerusalem's otherness. [Otherness, Reciprocity, and Back Again] Once the conception of otherness is invoked, however, questions remain. In relation to whom is Jerusalem the Other? Is her otherness posited in relation to Yahweh, who seeks to control her, or in relation to Ezekiel's male readers? Feminist interpretation explores both options. Yet a third option is that female otherness is employed in this chapter to assert the claim that Jerusalem will never be like the nations. Although she may engage in the diplomatic activities of the nations, she will never, ever be like them. With Oholibah's tragic destruction at the hands of those whom she sought to be like, Ezekiel thus sets the stage for the reconstruction of a nation that must accept its uniqueness as Yahweh's covenantal possession.

## COMMENTARY

### The Twin Careers of Oholah and Oholibah, 23:1-34

The first part of the unit consists of an extended narrative in which Yahweh tells Ezekiel the story of the two sisters' infidelities (23:1-21). They are identified in vv. 1-4 as two sisters of the same

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#### Otherness, Reciprocity, and Back Again



The feminist concept of woman as Other can be traced to Simone de Beauvoir: "She is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other" (11 n. 1). The female acceptance of this status was, in de Beauvoir's opinion, contrary to ordinary processes of human interaction, which de Beauvoir characterizes as the eventual discovery of reciprocity: "As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept Other of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity; willy-nilly, individuals and groups are forced to realize the reciprocity of their relations" (xvii). Contrary to the more complex dynamic of reciprocity that emerges from such interactions, however, the male-female dynamic remains locked in the dynamic of Self and Other.

De Beauvoir's dialectic between otherness and reciprocity is useful for understanding the personification of Oholibah in ch. 23. For Ezekiel, the problem is not otherness but Jerusalem's conviction that reciprocity with the nations is both possible and desirable. Ezekiel's allegory suggests that Oholibah can never benefit from her congress with the nations. As the lesser partner in these alliances, she will never be accorded full dignity as a subject in her own right, but will always be acted upon as the object of the male assertion of dominance and control.

See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), xvi; cited by Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea*, JSOTS 338, Gender, Culture, Theory 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

mother. Since no father is mentioned, one may assume that these are illegitimate children or, as Hosea would put it, “children of harlotry” (cf. Hos 1:2). Their story begins in Egypt, where both girls prostitute themselves to the Egyptians. The two names may have symbolic significance, the former referring to Samaria’s independent cult (“she has a tent”), the latter to Yahweh’s residence in Jerusalem (“my tent is in her”). Alternatively, the significance of the names may simply reside in their similarity: These sisters are two peas in a pod, with not an iota’s worth of difference between them.<sup>4</sup>

Their sexual activity is described as *zānâ*, sexual activity outside of the control of a male, and it is best interpreted in light of narratives about prostitutes, which revolve around their social location. [Laws Regulating Prostitution] The few narratives that speak explicitly of prostitutes confirm this marginal social location. Jephthah, the child of a prostitute and scorned by his legitimate half-brothers, is forced out of his father’s house and takes up with a band of outlaws

(Judg 11:1-3). Solomon’s wisdom in the case of the two prostitutes demonstrates that his justice extends even to this unruly corner of his kingdom (1 Kgs 3:16-28). The prostitute Rahab provides the crucial opening in the defended boundaries of the city of Jericho. Her status is then reversed as she finds a home in the “midst” of Israel (Josh 2:1; 6:17, 22, 25).

The *zānâ* of Oholah and Oholibah indicates their independent, and therefore marginalized, status. Yahweh could have made honest women of them; but that does not happen, and the

sisters revert to the life that they had known in Egypt. As the metaphor develops into a tale of repeated, habitual, and obsessive promiscuity, the sisters’ original marginality hardens into an archetypal quality, a permanent aspect of their moral character. [Harlots and Hebrews]

### Laws Regulating Prostitution



Biblical laws related to prostitution are primarily concerned with the legal obligations of fathers and daughters to one another. The father’s sale of a daughter into prostitution defiles the land (Lev 19:29), while a daughter’s *zēnūt* against her father’s household is punishable by death (Deut 22:21; Lev 21:9). Once the father-daughter relationship is broken, the woman appears to be isolated from the centers of cult and culture. No laws forbid the prostitute from plying her trade; however, several reinforce her marginal status (Lev 21:7, 14; Deut 23:19).

### Oholah, 23:5-10

Oholah lusts after the handsome, powerful Assyrians, who are lavishly depicted as men of great beauty and power. By designating the Assyrians as Oholah’s “lovers,” the narrative invokes a commonplace from ancient Near Eastern treaties, wherein vassals were commanded to demonstrate loyalty through their “love” of the suzerain. The trope of female otherness revalorizes the normal political activity of forging alliances and posits the essential asymmetry of Israel’s alliances. Although ancient Near Eastern treaties

### Harlots and Hebrews

**AO** The social location of the prostitute, *zōnâ*, is analogous to that of the Hebrew slaves in the Exodus traditions, since the term “Hebrew” may be etymologically related to the Akkadian *Habiru/apiru*, which had the connotation “foreigner” in some contexts and “outlaw” in others. Although the etymology remains a matter of debate, there is general agreement that the term was a social designation for those marginalized outsiders that swept through the region during the late Bronze Age. It has also been noted that the term could be used pejoratively of those who were not *Habiru*.

The term “Hebrew” expresses a comparable range of meanings in biblical narrative. In Exodus, the term is used by the Egyptians but not by the Israelites; hence it carries the connotation of “foreigners.” Furthermore, as foreigners, the Israelites lack the rights of Egyptian citizenship and can therefore be pressed into slavery. The key difference between a Hebrew slave and a *zōnâ*, at least in the cultural assumptions of Ezekiel’s time, is that the status of a slave can change, while a harlot’s cannot.

Cf. Niels Peter Lemche, “*Habiru/apiru*,” *ABD*, 3:6-11.



### The Harlot of Jericho and the Two Spies

James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836–1902). *The Harlot and the Two Spies*. c.1896–1902. Gift of the heirs of Jacob Schiff. The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, U.S.A. Photo: John Parnell. [Credit: The Jewish Museum, NY / Art Resource]

maintain a fiction of balance between partners, Oholah’s otherness exposes their inherent lie. She wants to possess her lovers’ power, and she offers sexual favors in exchange for it. But in the end she can never claim this power as an essential attribute. Nor, for that matter, can she control or use it to her own advantage. Thus, although she initiates the liaison as a fair exchange, she will experience it as invasion.

The account further characterizes Oholah’s behavior by equating it with her harlotry in Egypt (v. 8). Ezek 23:8 may contain an allusion to a subsequent treaty with Egypt, which would have been a violation of her treaty with Assyria.<sup>5</sup> Although evidence for such a treaty violation can be adduced from the historical record (2 Kgs 17:4 and possibly also Hos 7:11; 12:2), Ezekiel 23:8 does not develop the metaphor in that direction. Rather, the reference to Oholah’s harlotry in Egypt establishes a correlation between her present involvement with Assyria and her beginnings in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> In

so doing, Ezekiel adapts a motif known elsewhere in prophetic literature, which views Israel's alliance with Assyria as essentially a return to Egypt. Though she could have known freedom under the rule of Yahweh, she prefers her former life of slavery. Because she has rejected him and the life he offered her, Yahweh hands her over to her lovers the Assyrians, who strip her of her gifts.

***Oholibah, 23:11-21***

Oholibah gets her start by following in her sister's footsteps, as vv. 11-13 reinforce the essential likeness of the two sisters by repeating Oholah's story virtually word for word. However, Oholibah very quickly goes her own way, turning first to the Babylonians (23:14-18) and then back to her first lovers, the Egyptians (23:19-21). In vv. 14-18, Oholibah sees carvings of Chaldeans on walls. In these carvings, the Chaldeans, like the Assyrians, are gorgeously clothed in brilliantly hued fabrics and flowing turbans. Block notes that these Chaldeans are of the "third rank," which is to say, the nobility.<sup>7</sup> While her sister was smitten with the warrior class, Oholibah has higher aspirations. More astonishing still is that Oholibah does not fall in love with actual lovers, as Oholah did, but with their pictures.

Although it remains a matter of conjecture where she would have seen these wall carvings, one possibility makes Oholibah's behavior even more damning. The Assyrian practice of building palaces in commemoration of their worldwide domination and military exploits is well known. Given Hezekiah's dalliance with the Chaldeans (cf. Isa 39), one can imagine that Assyrians would make a point of showing the reliefs of defeated Chaldeans to Judean emissaries. Ironically, what was to have instilled loyalty to Assyria only stokes Oholibah's wanderlust. Worse, she infers that these Chaldeans are powerful men, even though the point of Assyrian iconography is to assert their powerlessness against Assyria.

At a metaphorical level, however, Oholibah's dalliance suggests her basic instability, as she turns from one lover to another, only to turn away in disgust. Yahweh is also disgusted with her, and turns away from her as he turned away from Oholah (v. 18). The reference to Yahweh's disgust may allude to Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in 597, when Judah came fully under Babylonian control.

Possibly referring to Judah's shifting political allegiances in the 590s, Oholibah returns to her first lovers, the Egyptians. As the archetypal enemy of Yahweh, Egypt is portrayed in mythically bestial terms in 29:2 and 32:2; here Ezekiel employs imagery that is

more in keeping with the sexual imagery of the chapter. Returning to the days of her youth, Oholibah makes a reckless descent into chaos, as Ezekiel couples the imagery of human fondling with the sights and sounds of a stable.

While commentators often remark on Oholibah's conduct, they overlook the narrator's depiction of the lovers, which is meant to highlight the extent to which Oholibah brings chaos on herself through her behavior. Ezekiel conceptualizes the cosmos in terms of a sacred center that is upheld by the creating and sustaining rule of Yahweh, and the faithful obedience to his statutes and ordinances. The stability of the cosmos is never taken for granted, since the chaotic elements lurking at the boundaries of the created order always threaten to invade and erode the stability of the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> For Ezekiel, the great irony is that Jerusalem, which was to have been the center of Yahweh's creative and sustaining activity, has become the model of chaos itself:

This is Jerusalem: I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. But she has rebelled against my ordinances and my statutes, becoming more wicked than the nations and the countries all around her, rejecting my ordinances and not following my statutes. (Ezek 5:5-6)

In chapter 23, Ezekiel uses the portrayal of Jerusalem's lovers as markers for the extent of her transgressions against the boundaries of order. Her first lovers, the Assyrians, are worthy opponents of Yahweh, and in fact Assyria will be praised as the upholder of cosmic order in Ezekiel 31. Oholibah's next lovers, the Chaldeans, are by no means the equals of Assyria. They may look as good as Assyria to Oholibah, but she has, quite literally, failed to read the writing on the wall. In the Assyrian order of things, the Chaldeans were rebels, and as such they were agents of chaos. Thus, when Oholibah consorts with them, she does not simply forsake one lover for another, she crosses the boundary from order into chaos. She presses against the boundaries yet again when she takes animals for her lovers in the form of Egyptians. Not only does this final step constitute a return to Egypt, it signifies the reversal of creation. Oholibah has destroyed what Yahweh had attempted to create.

#### ***Announcement of Judgment, 23:22-34***

The ensuing announcement of judgment is depicted as Yahweh's direct, unmediated speech to Jerusalem. Messenger formulas (i.e., "thus says the Lord") divide the announcement into four themati-

cally connected sections (vv. 22-27, 28-31, 32-34, 35). In the first section (vv. 22-27), Yahweh announces that he is rousing Oholibah's lovers against her. In the second section (vv. 28-31), Oholibah's punishment is explained as a consequence of her "whoring" with the nations and going the way of her sister Oholah. The twin themes of being like the nations and like Oholah are brought together in the third section, vv. 32-34, in which Oholibah drinks the cup of her sister's judgment. The fourth and final section underscores the reason for Oholibah's judgment: she has forgotten Yahweh (v. 35).

The motif of treaty partners as lovers is invoked in the first section, as Yahweh announces that he will hand Jerusalem over to those from whom she has turned in disgust. In contrast with chapter 16, which speaks in general terms about the attack of Jerusalem's lovers, 23:22-23 enumerates the allies of the Chaldeans in demonstrably accurate historical detail.<sup>9</sup> Other motifs in these verses reflect the siege of a city: chariots and wagons, bucklers, shields, and helmets. Returning her covenant infidelity measure for measure, those whom she hated will now deal with her in hatred and repudiate their oaths of protection (23:22, 28) while holding Oholibah accountable to their ordinances.

Commentators often treat the stripping and public exposure in these verses as punishments for adultery. However, Peggy Day argues that these are better understood as punishments for treaty violations.<sup>10</sup> Other elements of Jerusalem's punishment, in particular her disfigurement and the seizure of her sons and daughters, are attested in Assyrian military records as penalties for treaty violation.<sup>11</sup> Within the framework of the metaphor of Jerusalem as a woman, the "sons and daughters" can be understood either as satellite villages (cf. Ezek 16:46-48) or as the general population. Sennacherib's account of the siege of Jerusalem speaks both of the deportation of peoples and of the confiscation of villages as a consequence of rebellion (*ANET*, 287-88). Ezekiel's account may be lurid, but it is neither fanciful nor unrealistic.

The aim of the judgment is not simply that Jerusalem's habitual *zanâ* be eradicated, but that she cease her longing for Egypt. To that end, the second section (vv. 28-31) reiterates that she is to be stripped of everything and left naked. Because she followed in the way of her sister, she will share her sister's cup of judgment, which is "deep and wide." Driven mad with torment, she will tear out her breasts, which she had so willingly offered to her lovers.

The cup of reeling is not used elsewhere in Ezekiel, though it is known from other biblical contexts. Although some psalms speak



in general terms of a cup of blessings for the righteous (Pss 16:5; 23:5) and a cup of punishment for the wicked (Ps 75:8),<sup>12</sup> the motif is more frequently associated with the judgment of the nations (Obad 16; Hab 2:15-16; Lam 4:21). Even when Babylon is identified as the cup of Yahweh's wrath in Jeremiah 51:7, the image of judgment is a universal one: *all* the nations drink from the cup and go mad. When the cup of wrath is used as a metaphor for the judgment of Jerusalem and Judah in sixth-century prophetic literature, it is usually in the context of this portrayal of universal judgment (cf. Jer 25:15-29).

Within this larger context, Ezekiel's use of the cup of divine wrath becomes intelligible. Samaria and Jerusalem drink from the cup because they have consorted with the nations and tried to be like them. The oracle then comes to a fitting close: all of this has come upon Jerusalem because she has forgotten Yahweh.

### Reprise, 23:36-49

In the third section of the unit, Ezekiel is commanded to judge the two sisters. The unit appears to be a secondary reworking of earlier themes. What had been called *zānā* is now called adultery (vv. 37, 43), and the lovers are identified as idols, not allies (v. 37). Child sacrifice, which was mentioned in chapter 16, is combined with the violation of the sabbaths, as first mentioned in chapter 20 (vv. 38-39). Verses 36-45 consist of Yahweh's rationale for the judgment, and one detects in these verses a resumption of the narrative that ended in v. 21.

Somewhat surprisingly, Oholah is included. These verses are confusing, since it is not clear that Oholah's presence adds anything to the plot. But the reason for including Oholah is given in v. 48: in this way, Yahweh will put an end to lewdness "in the land." The comprehensive judgment of both sisters thus resembles the categorical declaration in chapter 20, that all would be brought under the bond of the covenant.

Oholibah and Oholah "marry chaos" in Yahweh's sanctuary (vv. 40-42). Oholibah sends for her lovers and lavishly entertains them, setting a table on which she places oil and incense intended for Yahweh. Galambush is probably correct to interpret this scene as the ratification of a treaty in the sanctuary in the presence of the gods of the nations.<sup>13</sup> Chaos descends upon the sacred precincts, as a noisy multitude<sup>14</sup> "takes its ease in her" (*qôl hāmôn šālēw bāh*). The construction, evidently a pun on the name of Oholibah (*ʔohālîbāh*, "My tent is in her"), suggests that Israel's lovers have dis-

placed Yahweh. To underscore the chaos, a drunken rabble from the wilderness is also brought in (v. 42). In a mockery of marriage, these men place bracelets and crowns on Oholah and Oholibah (cf. 16:11),<sup>15</sup> thus formalizing the lovers' primacy in the sisters' fractured loyalties.

Looking on in amazement, Yahweh exclaims that Oholibah is worn out from her adulteries. Nevertheless, the lovers keep pressing in on the two sisters. Although Yahweh seems to recognize their powerlessness, he declares that they will be judged by "righteous men" as wanton women. Whether they are helpless victims or not, they will bear the penalty for their adulteries. A messenger formula in v. 46 introduces the announcement of judgment, as Yahweh summons the "assembly." In a mixture of military and judicial metaphors, the two sisters are plundered, stoned, cut down, their houses burned, and their children killed, in order to bring an end to their ways. [Jerusalem, 1967]

The unit ends with the declaration that these two sisters will become an object lesson for ordinary women. Although the verse is intended to emphasize the thoroughness of the judgment, feminist critics are correct to point out that the transition from metaphor to literalism only reinscribes and reinforces patriarchal values. Thus, a metaphor that exposes the false assumptions of patriarchal power becomes misread as a tool to control women. One can think of no other remedy than to ignore this verse.

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### "Jerusalem, 1967"



Jerusalem stone is the only stone that can feel pain. It has a network of nerves.

From time to time Jerusalem crowds into  
mass protests like the tower of Babel.  
But with huge clubs God-the-Police beats her  
down: houses are razed, walls flattened,  
and afterward the city disperses, muttering  
prayers of complaint and sporadic screams from churches  
and synagogues and loud-moaning mosques.  
Each to his own place.

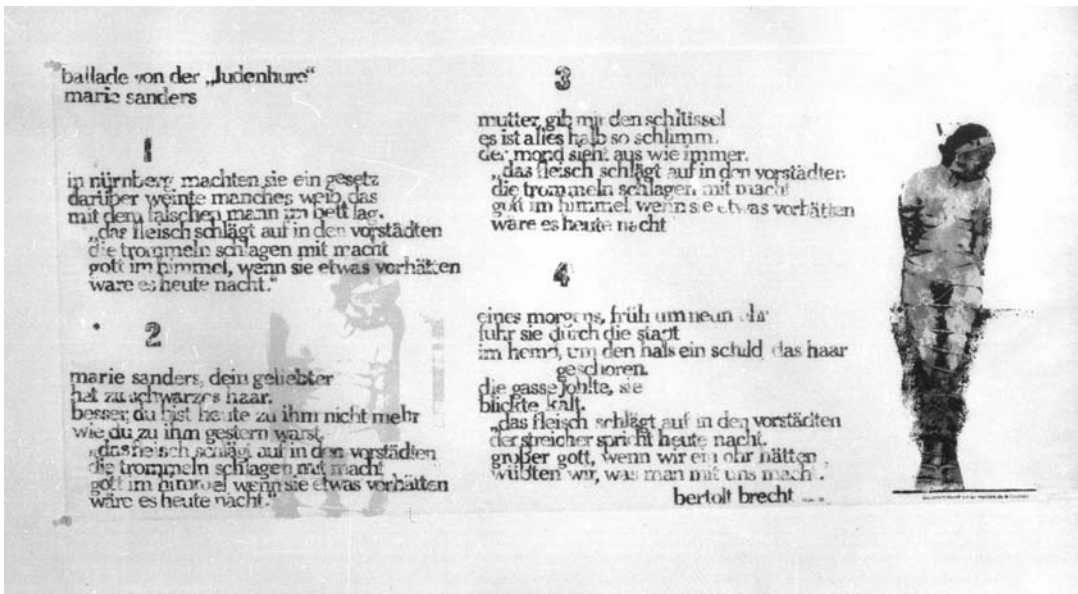
Yehuda Amichai, "Jerusalem, 1967," stanza 12; in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, newly rev. and expanded ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 51.

## CONNECTIONS

If Oholibah is weary of her adulteries, this commentator is weary of Ezekiel's metaphor. One would like to be done with this business and move on to other things. The author of Ezekiel will kill off the metaphor soon enough: Jerusalem will die in chapter 24 and, as Julie Galambush has noted, the female voice of the city will never be heard again. But the images linger—of spread legs, enlarged penises, drunken orgies, repeated and relentless rape. Although we would prefer to relegate these images to a brutal past, we cannot escape the haunting resemblance between Jerusalem's shame and the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners of war at the hands of American soldiers at Abu Ghraib in late 2003. In this most recent episode, the abuse, not to mention the care taken to preserve a photographic record, defies basic canons of human decency. Many of us wanted to minimize the horror by isolating the event as a random act by a few rogue soldiers. Yet only careful reflection on the circumstances that allowed it to happen in the first place can prevent it from happening again.

What can memory teach us? In this instance, it can teach us that none of us is very far from the abuse of power. The artist Nancy Spero employed such images as a newspaper photograph of a German woman executed for having sexual intercourse with a Jew found to emphasize the victimization of women in war. The repetition of the identical image throughout her work underscores its brutality. While it is not difficult to imagine this abuse as yet another instance of the evils of the Nazi regime, these were not the only photographic images of such abuse during that time, or in the years after World War II. Spero could have chosen from any number of news photographs from any country that suffered German occupation. And she need not have focused on abuses by German armies: when the Germans were forced to retreat, local peoples vigorously shamed women who had consorted with German soldiers. The difficult task of memory is to see that all of us are culpable and to ask what it is in our human condition that allows us to be so cruel.

While it is easy for us to see the evil in others or to imagine that Assyrian military practices were a particularly brutal show of force, honesty forces us to acknowledge that we are not so different from them after all. No one will soon forget the photograph of the American female soldier holding an Iraqi prisoner on a leash, or indeed the other acts of brutality perpetuated by an army claiming to liberate Iraq from human rights abuses. Corrine Patton has drawn attention to the Assyrian strategy of emasculating the



### The Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore

In this collage, the American feminist artist Nancy Spero brings together two images: a newspaper photograph from Nazi-era Germany of a woman who was publicly stripped before being hanged for the “crime” of having sex with a Jew, and the lyrics of Bertolt Brecht’s song denouncing the woman’s treatment. The horror of the image consists not

only in the fact of the brutality to which it attests, but also in its publication as a warning not to consort with Jews (cf. Ezek 23:48). Spero’s work memorializes the woman’s suffering as yet one more instance of the centuries-long abuse of women.

Nancy Spero. b.1926. *The Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore*. © 1991. Color lithograph on Japanese paper, 21 x 48 inches. Purchased with funds provided by the Herkauf Fund, 1992–8. [Photo Credit: David Reynolds. The Jewish Museum, New York / Art Resource]

enemy, and the notion of treating prisoners like dogs is also attested in the Assyrian literary traditions (see [\[Kings on a Leash\]](#)). The notion of progress may allow us to believe that we are more humane and go to war for more justifiable reasons, but the accumulated evidence of the last century suggests otherwise.

Memory can allow us to identify with every aspect of Ezekiel 23. As we listen to Oholibah’s story, we may wish to put ourselves in Oholibah’s place: to remember lessons taught but not learned, alliances forged and betrayed, and, finally, the weary and useless attempts to escape the consequences of our actions. We may wish to put ourselves in the place of Yahweh, her cuckolded husband, and remember the times when others’ betrayals leave us burning mad—and humiliated. Finally, we may imagine ourselves as the invading armies, if only because that is the way that others see us. Memory brings its own shame; fortunately for Oholibah and for us, that shame does not endure forever.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ezek 16:2; 20:4, 11; 22:2, 26.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, lewdness (*zimmâ*, 22:9, 11; 23:21, 27, 29, 35, 44, 48, 49; cf. 16:27); sabbaths (20:12, 13, 16, 20, 21, 24; 22:8, 26; 23:38); forget Yahweh (22:12; 23:35).

<sup>3</sup> Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23," in *Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, Feminist Companion to the Bible 8, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 244-55.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the spelling of the two names: *ʾhlh* and *ʾhlybh*.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS 130 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 113-15.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:738.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:745.

<sup>8</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:750; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:481.

<sup>10</sup> Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *VT* 50/3 (2000): 285-309.

<sup>11</sup> Shalom Paul, "Biblical Analogues to Middle Assyrian Law," in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin B. Firmage et al. (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 344 n. 48. Although Paul cites numerous instances of disfigurement in the context of punishment for political rebellion, he follows most commentators in interpreting this punishment solely in terms of laws concerning adultery (344-46).

<sup>12</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 1:755.

<sup>13</sup> Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 120-22.

<sup>14</sup> For the association of *hāmôn* with chaos, see commentary on 5:5-17.

<sup>15</sup> NRSV's translation, which implies that ordinary human women receive this jewelry, disrupts the sense of the metaphor, which speaks only of Oholah and Oholibah. The jewelry can be interpreted as the wages of a prostitute (Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:486). Zimmerli, however, notes that the reference to jewelry here is a "distortion" of Yahweh's gifts in 16:11 (*Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983], 1:492).



# THE BEGINNING OF THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

## Ezekiel 24:1-27

A date notice in the first two verses of the chapter indicates that the siege of Jerusalem has begun. Ezekiel receives word from Yahweh to record the day (15 January 588 BC), the importance of which is underscored by way of a threefold repetition of the word “day”: “Write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.” The final verses of the chapter anticipate the end of the siege. On the day that Jerusalem falls, a fugitive will arrive to report that the city has fallen (24:25-27). Ezekiel 33:21-23 contains the report of that event.

Chapter 24 commemorates the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem with two enigmatic oracles, a parable of a cooking pot filled with choice pieces of meat (24:1-14), and a symbolic act on the occasion of the death of Ezekiel’s wife (24:15-27). The former alludes to a proverb used by the Jerusalemites in 11:3 to establish their claim to the land of Jerusalem over against the exiles: “this city is the pot, and we are the meat.” Ezekiel has already repudiated this claim in chapter 11. In 24:1-14, Ezekiel recasts the proverb into a *māšāl*, “riddle,” in order to comment once again on the guilt of Jerusalem and the question of the election of those who remained in the city. Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to set a pot on a fire and fill it with water and choice pieces of meat and bones. When impurities are found in the pot, the meat that had been so carefully selected is indiscriminately thrown out, and the empty pot is kept on the fire in order to burn out its impurities. The parable thus anticipates the complete rejection of Jerusalem and those who remain within its walls. Having tried in vain to cleanse it of its impurities, Yahweh now consigns the pot to utter destruction.

The second unit recounts a symbolic act that Ezekiel performs when his wife dies (24:15-27). Yahweh informs Ezekiel that he is about to take away his wife, the “delight of his eyes,” in a single blow. When this occurs, Ezekiel is not to engage in any of the acts of mourning but must instead put on his turban and sandals. His wife dies that evening, and the next day, Ezekiel does as he was told. When the people ask him what his actions mean, Ezekiel tells them

that they too will lose the delight of their eyes, Jerusalem, and that they will do as he has done.

Both units revolve around the destruction of Jerusalem. The significance of the copper pot for the Jerusalemites is clear: they would be cast out of the pot and utterly rejected. The meaning of Ezekiel's actions for the exiles is more ambiguous, and the exiles ask Ezekiel what his actions mean. The present commentary contends that the prohibition against mourning corresponds with the symbols of election and rejection in vv. 1-14. The motifs of putting on sandals and donning turbans are nowhere connected with rituals of mourning, but occur instead in contexts of election and changes in status (for the better). If the Jerusalemites are rejected, the exiles are accepted: when Jerusalem, the bejeweled, sandaled, turbaned wife of Yahweh dies, Ezekiel and his fellow exiles take on the garments of the dead wife as they bind on turbans and put on sandals. These actions do not signify the absence of mourning but rather a new beginning. Even though Jerusalem is dead, a new polity will be forged among the exiles. The donning of turbans is therefore an expression of hope in the midst of death and despair.

Thus on the day that Nebuchadnezzar begins his siege of Jerusalem, the book of Ezekiel poses a contrast, yet again, between those who remained in Jerusalem and those living in exile. That contrast will be posited yet again in chapter 33, the closing frame of this larger unit. The inhabitants of Jerusalem will be definitively rejected because of their claims to election (33:24), while the hope of a new beginning will be offered to the exiles even in the midst of their great loss.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Parable of the Cooking Pot, 24:1-14**

The contours of the unit are delineated by the date formula and instructions to utter an allegory in 24:1-3 and a prophetic signatory oath at the end of v. 14. Messenger formulas further divide the unit into three subunits: the parable itself (vv. 3-5) and two subsequent announcements of judgment (vv. 6-8, 9-13). The prophet concretizes a proverb about a cooking pot in order to subvert its meaning.



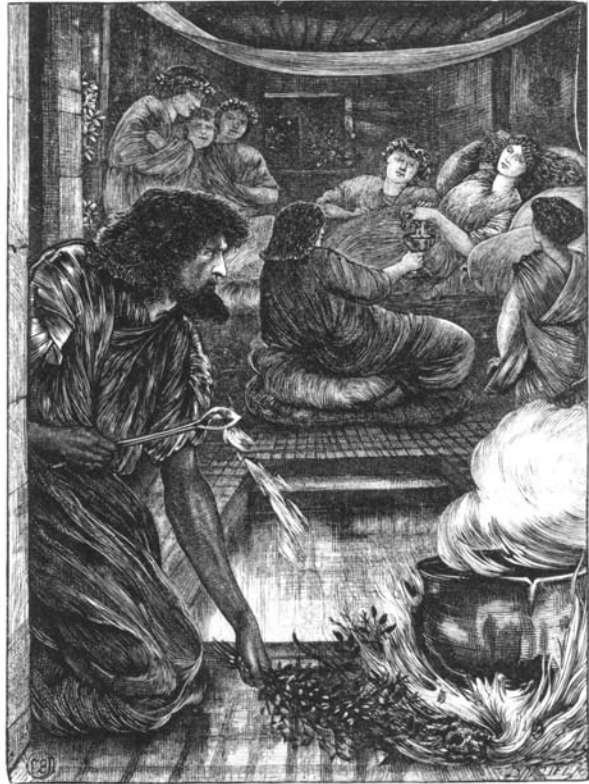
Earlier in the book, the proverb was attributed to the Jerusalemites, who used it to describe their sense of security within the walls of Jerusalem: “this city is the pot, and we are its meat” (11:3). In the present oracle, Ezekiel embellishes the metaphor by bringing together a number of motifs that had been introduced earlier in the book, among them the bloody city (22:2), bloodshed (7:23), the inability to cleanse Jerusalem of its filth (22:17-22), and the divine resolve not to relent (7:9).

### ***The Parable, 24:3-5***

In 24:2, Ezekiel is instructed to speak a *māšāl*. NRSV’s “allegory” implies to modern readers that the details of the poem will correspond point for point with aspects of historical reality. It is more accurate to consider this poem a parable whose likeness to reality is intended to shock the hearers into a new understanding of themselves.

The parable begins innocuously, even joyfully,<sup>1</sup> with the preparation of a choice stew filled with rich cuts of meat. It is occasionally suggested that a common work song may lie behind the poem. While such a possibility cannot be denied, cooking stories occur so rarely in the Bible that it is unwise to infer custom from this single instance. There is a nearly verbatim echo of the first line in 2 Kings 4:38, when the prophet Elisha instructs his disciples to “put the large pot on” to prepare a stew. If there is any conventional language in the poem, this line is the only certain evidence of it.

The last time that Ezekiel cooked anything, he was performing a sign (4:9-17). On that occasion, he prepared a porridge of mixed grains and beans that signified famine in Jerusalem and unclean-



### **The Parable of the Boiling Pot**

This painting by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones imagines a setting for Ezekiel’s parable of the cooking pot. Although such a setting is not described in Ezek 24:1-14, it is an effective interpretation of the impact of Ezekiel’s message on his audience. Despite abundant warnings, Ezekiel’s fellow exiles recline in enjoyment over a meal, evidently in oblivion concerning their impending doom. All of the energy of the painting is concentrated in the foreground—in the prophet’s eyes and in the fire flaming out of control from under the copper pot.

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898). *The Parable of the Boiling Pot*. Engraved by the Dalziel Brothers. Published in 1881. Tate Museum, London. [Credit: Tate Museum]

ness for those who were deported. The present stew, by contrast, is filled with choice meat (NRSV “good pieces”) cut from the best of the flock. This is hardly an ordinary stew: comparable richness is set out for honored visitors (Gen 18:1-8; 1 Sam 9:23-24) or enjoyed during festivals when sacrifices were offered to Yahweh (cf. 1 Sam 2:12-17). That this is a ritual meal is further indicated, first, by the text’s use of vocabulary that occurs only rarely outside of the priestly legislation for handling sacrificial meat,<sup>2</sup> and second, by the fact that it is a copper pot, while ordinary cooking pots were typically made of clay.<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel may be describing a sacrificial meal that joins its participants in communion with Yahweh (see, e.g., Exod 24:9-11). Such a meal would be consistent with the connotations of election that are inherent in the proverb.<sup>4</sup>

### ***First Announcement of Woe, 24:6-8***

The announcement of judgment equates the pot with the “bloody city,” or Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 22:2). NRSV’s translation of the second line suggests that the pot itself is unclean, and that sense is also reflected in the second announcement of judgment (vv. 9-13), in which the pot itself is heated in order to cleanse it of its filth. The question is, what has made the pot unclean?

What was thought to have been properly prepared meat is discovered to be contaminated by blood. The laws concerning the slaughter of animals lie behind the development of this motif in the poem. Human beings were permitted to eat flesh as long as it was drained of blood (Gen 9:4). That such laws have not been followed is suggested by v. 7: the city has poured out blood on a bare rock and has not attempted to cover it with earth. Although the metaphor revolves around matters of ritual purity, Ezekiel’s primary concern is with the judicial murders that have filled the city with the blood of innocent men, women, and children (ch. 22; Ezek 7:23). Yahweh resolves to leave the blood exposed, thereby hastening the punishment (cf. Gen 4:10).

Careful readers will have noticed that 24:6-8 is a poetic restatement of the declaration of judgment in 11:5-12. According to that earlier announcement of judgment, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had indeed been selected to fill the pot, but they would be expelled not only from the city but also from the land itself. Using the metaphor of the pot, Ezekiel 24:6-8 extends that judgment by declaring that their bloodshed defiles the pot as well as themselves. Even after the meat is cast out, the pot remains so thoroughly contaminated that it cannot come clean.

### ***Second Announcement of Judgment, 24:9-14***

This second announcement of judgment pulls together motifs from vv. 3-5 and 6-8, as Yahweh takes charge of the cooking (vv. 3-5) and cleansing (vv. 6-8) of the pot. Yahweh commands that the meat be emptied out of the pot in v. 6, while vv. 10-13 depict both the disposal of the meat and the repeated futile attempts to cleanse the pot. Yahweh stokes the fire by adding more logs to the pyre (Heb. *mēdûrâ*; NRSV “pile”; v. 9, cf. v. 5) and gets the stew boiling so hot that even the bones become charred. All of the liquid is boiled out of the stew, and the solid matter is burned to a crisp. Two features of these verses lead Block to conclude that the meat in the pot is now disclosed to be human flesh. First, the one other use of the noun “pyre” has associations with human sacrifice. Second, Ezekiel uses the term “bones” (Heb. *‘ēṣāmôt*) only of human bones.<sup>5</sup> The gruesome disclosure that the people *are* the sacrifice is reminiscent of Zephaniah 1:7, where the consecrated guests that have gathered for the Lord’s sacrifice turn out to be the sacrifice themselves.

The pot is then set empty upon the coals in order to burn out the remaining corrosion. In addition to rust, which had been the only description of impurity in v. 6, vv. 11-13 employ cultic terms for impurity that recall earlier announcements of judgment against the city. Commentators have long noted that oxidized copper produces not rust but verdigris, a green-black tinge, and it may be germane to the metaphor that such verdigris cannot be removed by heat. Readers will be reminded of the metaphor of the house of Israel as worthless dross (22:18-22); here, it is the city that cannot come clean. The oracle closes with declarations of divine resolve not to spare the city from destruction (cf. 7:8-9).

### **The Death of Ezekiel’s Wife, 24:15-27**

In the second major unit in the chapter, Ezekiel performs a symbolic act that portends the destruction of Jerusalem and its significance for the exiles. Accounts of symbolic acts appear elsewhere in Ezekiel (4:1-5:5; 12:1-16; 37:15-28); the present unit is one of only two that consistently conforms to the genre (the other is 12:1-16). Yahweh informs Ezekiel that his wife is about to die, and instructs him not to mourn. Ezekiel’s wife dies that evening, and Ezekiel does as he is commanded the next day. When the people ask him what his actions mean, he utters an oracle that reveals Yahweh’s plan to destroy the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Unlike other symbolic acts, this one becomes a model for the exiles’ own

behavior. When Jerusalem falls, they are to do as Ezekiel has done. The emphasis from the beginning on the prophet's obedience thus begins to bear fruit, as the people pattern their behavior after his.

For modern readers who are interested in the lives of the prophets, this account is troubling. The episode raises questions about divine justice and compassion: could Yahweh be so cruel as to cause a woman's death in order to make a point about the destruction of Jerusalem?<sup>6</sup> Some commentators resolve this difficulty by suggesting that the connection between experience and theological insight was the other way around. That is, Ezekiel's struggle to come to terms with his grief led him to understand the nation's grief when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The prohibition against mourning raises similar questions: Is Yahweh's prohibition of mourning cruel? After all, isn't it healthy and normal to express grief? Some commentators resolve the difficulty by suggesting that Ezekiel's inability to mourn the death of his wife was the result of a grave emotional paralysis. Others avoid the difficulty by cautioning against taking this story as a direct historical report. Ezekiel's symbolic act is preaching, not biography, and thus it simply does not answer the kinds of questions we ask about Ezekiel's personal experience.

One further approach to the problems revolving around the prohibition of mourning is to examine it in connection with other stories of mourning in the Old Testament. [*Mourning Narratives in the Old Testament*] These stories suggest an alternative possibility of interpretation. Far from expressing divine cruelty or human paralysis, Ezekiel's symbolic action anticipates the exiles' future as Yahweh's elect.

### ***Instructions to the Prophet, 24:15-18***

Informing the prophet that he is about to take away the delight of his eyes in a single blow, Yahweh tells Ezekiel that he is not to mourn publicly, but must instead don a turban and sandals. Because the loss is described somewhat enigmatically as the "delight of your eyes," one may rightly ask whether the prophet knew that Yahweh was speaking of his wife. In any case, when his wife dies that evening, the prophet does as he was commanded.

The instructions for performing the symbolic act contain a mixture of prohibitions of customary rites of mourning and positive instructions to perform actions that are totally unrelated to mourning. It is assumed that the prophet will experience the loss on an emotional level, since he is told to "sigh, but not aloud." What Ezekiel cannot do is engage in formal rituals of mourning.

The positive instructions to put on sandals and turban come from rituals marking status transformation, not from acts of mourning. Priests and kings don turbans when they are installed in office, and marriage rituals may involve both sandals and turbans. [Turbans]

While there is a range of meanings associated with mourning in the Old Testament, Leviticus 10 bears the closest parallel to Ezekiel 24:15-24, and indeed to the chapter as a whole. Occurring within the context of the ritual of the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, Leviticus 10 depicts the punishments of Nadab and Abihu while forbidding the chosen priests Aaron and his sons from mourning their deaths. The prohibition against mourning is explicitly defended as a strategy for containing divine wrath, lest the mourning of the priests cause divine fire to break out against the rest of the camp. The divine prohibition against mourning thus protects the life of the community from further destruction. Ezekiel 24 contains a similar sequence of rejection and election: a communal meal is consumed by divine wrath, while Ezekiel dons tokens of election.

### Mourning Narratives in the Old Testament



By publicly mourning Saul's death (1 Sam 25:1; 2 Sam 1:12), David continues to honor Saul's role as the anointed of Yahweh even while he consolidates political support to succeed him. Joab's assassination of Abner removes a serious threat to David's control over the kingdom, but David publicly denies any part in the assassination by assuming the role of chief mourner (2 Sam 3:31; cf. 3:28). Similarly, even though Bathsheba's involvement with David has contributed to Uriah's untimely death, her rites of mourning publicly declare her innocence (2 Sam 11:26-27).

Given the complicated circumstances leading to the deaths of these individuals, one cannot regard these acts of mourning simply as expressions of grief. Rather, in each instance, public rituals of mourning communicate important information about the relationships between the living and the dead. That David and Bathsheba mourn implies their integrity with respect to Uriah and thereby publicly confirms their innocence. Emotion can get in the way of these dynamics. When David expresses his grief over the death of his son Absalom, he insults those warriors who defended him against Absalom's treason (2 Sam 19:1, 5-6). David's grief binds him to the wrong person—to Absalom the traitor and not to his own supporters.

The account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Lev 10 presents a closer parallel to the mourning in Ezek 24, in part because there are general correspondences between this

narrative and Ezekiel as a whole. The episode occurs within the larger context of the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood (Lev 8–10). Even though Moses allows the people of the camp to mourn the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, he prohibits Aaron and his sons from mourning, since they are still anointed with the oil of the Lord. If they were to engage in mourning, they would die, and further wrath and destruction would break out against the people (Lev 10:6). In this context, the prohibition of mourning has life-sustaining significance: it dissociates the surviving priests from the dead ones and thus preserves the entire camp from destruction.

Finally, commands to mourn and prohibitions against mourning are scattered throughout the historical books and prophetic literature. Commands to mourn signify the totality and certainty of destruction (Isa 32:12; Jer 4:8; 49:3; Mic 1:8; Zech 12:10-12). Prohibitions against mourning function as further expressions of judgment against the deceased. A righteous person is mourned and buried (1 Kgs 13:29, 30; 14:13, 18; Jer 34:4-5), but a wicked king is not (Jer 22:8-9; 25:33; cf. Jer 16).



### The Death of Ezekiel's Wife

William Blake's Ezekiel looks upward in sorrow as others are overcome with grief at the death of his wife (c. 1785). Bearing a close resemblance to Blake's portrayals of the suffering of Job, this portrait of Ezekiel reflects his own struggle to interpret the prophet's response to this command. In an earlier sketch of this scene, Blake included furrows in the prophet's brow, thus giving the prophet a more sorrowful and troubled appearance. Those lines are smoothed out in the drawing reproduced here. Note also the contrast between Ezekiel and the mourners, as indicated by the placement of their hands.

William Blake, *The Death of Ezekiel's Wife*, c. 1785. [Credit: Philadelphia Museum of Art]

### *You Shall Do as He Has Done, 24:19-24*

The exiles respond by asking what Ezekiel's symbolic act means for them. For the most part, Ezekiel's answer is framed as a divine oracle. Yahweh discloses that he is about to destroy the sanctuary (v. 21). When this happens, Ezekiel will be a sign for them, and they will know that "I am the LORD God" (v. 24). However, Ezekiel's own voice intrudes in v. 22: "And you shall do as I have done." The instructions to the exiles are elaborated in two ways. First, the nature of their grief and perhaps their complicity in the destruction of Jerusalem is indicated in v. 21: "the sons and daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword." Not only is a city destroyed, but the exiles' own future, in the form of the next generation, is wiped out. Second, the exiles must imitate Ezekiel's actions. This is the only instance in Ezekiel in which a sign becomes a model for others. The addition of this element to the

## Turbans



Although it is generally asserted that Ezekiel's act of donning his turban reverses the usual ritual of mourning, there is little evidence to support that claim. The only other text in which a turban is associated with mourning is Isa 61:3. But the difficulty of using Isa 61:3 and Ezek 24:17 to reconstruct ancient mourning customs is well known. Apart from these two texts, accounts of mourning begin with a bare head, which is then shaved, disheveled, or covered with ashes or dirt. Mourning rituals described elsewhere in Ezekiel do involve shaving and putting ashes on the head, but not the removal of a turban (7:18; 27:30-31).



### Turban

(Illustration: Barclay Burns)

The motif of donning the turban does appear in other social and literary contexts, for example, in the description of the clothing worn by priests (Ezek 44:18; Exod 39:28), in accounts of election or restoration to high office (Zech 3:5), or in wedding imagery (Isa 61:10). All of these references suggest that turbans signify the acquisition of a new status. If a turban is associated with mourning, it is due to this more general association with status transformation. Kings take off their turbans when they are deposed (Ezek 21:25-26; Isa 3:20) and put them on when they assume power (2 Sam 12:30). Similarly, priests don special clothing and headgear when they are initiated into the priesthood (Lev 8:6-9; Zech 3:5).

The reference to the turban in Isa 61:3 is best understood within such contexts of status transformation. Not simply a token signifying the end of mourning, the turban prefigures the transformation of Jerusalem. Speaking as Zion, the prophet imagines this transformation in terms of the attire of the wedding couple:

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland [Heb. *pe'er*, turban],  
and as a bride adorns herself with jewels. (Isa 61:10).

The turban that replaces the ashes of mourning in 61:3 anticipates this transformation. Donning the turban signifies not merely the end of mourning, but the transition to a wholly new identity as the beloved of Yahweh.

For clothing and headgear as symbols of status transformation, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 170–71. For mourning customs in the Old Testament, see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1:59; Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). For the survival of the turban motif into the 1st c. AD, see Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.273, 280.

**The Sign of Ezekiel**

**ΑΩ** Not only does Ezekiel perform signs, he is a sign (Heb. *môpêṭ*). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the term signifies supernatural signs and portents, as in the signs and wonders in Egypt. Signs are thus evidence of divine power at work in history. Human beings only rarely appear as signs (Ps 71:7; Isa 8:18; 20:3; Zech 3:8; 1 QH 11:21). When they do, they also are testimonies to the work of God in history. Since human beings are often called signs in the absence of confirming evidence, they become testimonies of faith to the hidden reality of God.

Ezekiel functions as such a sign. In all of his symbolic acts, he makes manifest that which remains hidden in the working of history. When he swallows the scroll in 3:3, he ingests the future that is decreed for Jerusalem, and his subsequent actions become a sign of the coming disaster. Similarly, when he dons the turban in 24:15-24, he manifests a future restoration that is as hidden at that moment of despair as judgment was at the beginning of his ministry.

S. Wagner, "בויפֿט, *môpêṭ*" *TDOT*, 8:174-81.

report of the symbolic act provides a direct answer to the exiles' question by linking their own status to the destruction of Jerusalem. [\[The Sign of Ezekiel\]](#)

***Your Mouth Shall Be Opened, 24:25-27***

The unit closes with a private communication from Yahweh to the prophet that portends the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction. This report anticipates the arrival of the fugitive in 33:21-22 and suggests that chapters 24 and 33 frame the larger rhetorical unit of the oracles against the nations. The report also ends on a note of hope, as the destruction of Jerusalem will result in a new phase of Ezekiel's ministry.

**CONNECTIONS**

When Phyllis Trible delivered her Beecher lectures at Yale Divinity School in the early 1980s, her theme was "texts of terror."<sup>7</sup> In the course of four days, Trible presented chilling and unsparing interpretations of biblical narratives about women who suffered violence at the hands of husbands, fathers, brothers. Accustomed to ending hard sermons with resurrection hope, the audience that had gathered to hear Professor Trible's lectures kept pressing her to talk about signs of redemption in these stories. She refused, insisting that we stay with the pain that so many centuries of Jewish and Christian communities had ignored.

Ezekiel 24 seems to expect the opposite of the exiles; that is, it seems to forbid mourning. Yahweh's well-shod, bejeweled and tur-



baned wife is dead, but the exiles put on their festal garments anyway. But even if this seems like a denial of their grief, the exiles escape neither their pain nor their responsibility. Ezekiel must sigh, and the exiles must groan in their iniquities as they remember the sons and daughters that they had left behind. In Ezekiel 37:10, we will hear the full expression of that groaning: "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are clean cut off." The exiles come to recognize that their iniquities have closed off their future, a future that is very concretely depicted as sons and daughters who were left behind in Jerusalem, presumably to be "cooked" in the copper pot.

One may ask whether grief can contribute to the shaping of moral sensibilities. Does it heighten a sense of moral responsibility, as Phyllis Tribble apparently hoped it would? By insisting that we stay with the pain of the biblical narratives, Professor Tribble forced those of us in the audience to contemplate our own tendency to deny the very real existence of systematic abuse and oppression of women within our own communities. Grieving can also teach us to use our time well, to love fully, and to pay attention to others' pain. But grief is not always a good teacher. We can wrap ourselves in grief like a cocoon of self-pity, and we can worry our woundedness into a festering sore. Ezekiel 24 is attuned to this latter understanding of the seductiveness of mourning. It demands that the exiles move on. It recognizes the depth of their loss, yet also demands that they prepare for the future. The hard work of rebuilding the community must begin even before the fire of divine wrath is cooled.

Ezekiel's message is obviously inappropriate in personal situations of grief and loss; indeed, the radical challenge of this message can be understood only in the light of normal and spontaneous expressions of grief and consolation. But it deserves reflection on those occasions when grief does not heal. In such settings, our grief may not prepare us for new possibilities. Instead, it may keep us locked in the past. In the guise of nursing our injuries, we only pick away at them and make our wounds even worse. Choosing not to dwell on the injury may seem heartless, but it may also be the only way to heal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 172.

<sup>2</sup> For the ritual instances of cutting meat (verb *nth*) into its parts (noun *nth*): Exod 29: 17; Lev 1:6, 8, 12; 8:20; 9:13; 1 Kgs 18:23, 33. The three non-ritual occurrences of these terms have ritual overtones: Judg 19:29; 20:6; 1 Sam 11:7. For cultic instances of boiling (*bšl*), see the following: prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk, Exod 23:19//34:26//Deut 14:21; provisions for preparing the ram of ordination, Exod 29:31//Lev 8:31; the Passover offering, Deut 16:7; and offerings in connection with the consecration of the Nazirites, Num 6:19; provisions for the restored temple, Ezek 46:20, 24; eschatological kitchen purity, Zech 14:20-21; cooking as a Levitical responsibility (2 Chr 35:13). The accounts of the preparation of manna probably also reflect cultic assumptions (Exod 16:23; Num 11:8). In the remaining narratives, cooking is associated with danger (2 Sam 13:8; 2 Kgs 4:38; 6:29, cf. Lam 4:10).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 1:775-76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:776-77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:780.

<sup>6</sup> So Hals, *Ezekiel*, 175-76.

<sup>7</sup> The lectures were published under the title *Texts of Terror* (OBT 13; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

# THE ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS

## Ezekiel 25:1-17

As if to demonstrate that Yahweh's war is against "nations of rebels" (cf. 2:3), the book turns to address other enemies of Yahweh in a series of oracles against the nations (Ezek 25–32). As Hals notes, these chapters are a "collection of collections."<sup>1</sup> The unit includes a series of short oracles against the statelets Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia (ch. 25), and two extended collections of oracles against the more powerful kingdoms of Tyre (26:1–28:19) and Egypt (29:1–32:32). Inserted between the oracles against Tyre and Egypt are an oracle against Sidon (28:20–24), which rounds out the total number of nations to seven, and an announcement of future blessing for the house of Israel once Yahweh has executed judgments on Israel's neighbors (28:25–26). Similar oracles figure prominently in several other prophetic books (e.g., Amos 1–2, Nahum, Isa 13–23, Jer 46–51), as well as in some prophetic narratives. As is the case with so much of the book, however, Ezekiel goes his own way in appropriating and developing this prophetic tradition.

While it is generally assumed that Ezekiel 25–32 mark a transition from the oracles of judgment in chapters 1–24 to the oracles of restoration in chapters 33–48, the nature of that transition is not always clearly defined. It is occasionally suggested that Yahweh has now turned from judging Jerusalem to avenging it for its mistreatment at the hands of its neighbors.<sup>2</sup> [The Nations in Ezekiel 25] Such an assessment of the role of the oracles against the nations is based on the form-critical work of Claus Westermann, who argued that oracles against the nations were essentially oracles of salvation for Israel.<sup>3</sup> However, Westermann's classification has come under scrutiny as critics have increasingly asked how these oracles function in their literary contexts.<sup>4</sup>

The clash between the formal characteristics of oracles against the nations and their literary contexts is especially evident in Ezekiel 25, which is often construed as a straightforward announcement of judgment against the neighbors of Judah for their treatment of Jerusalem after its destruction. But this traditional interpretation falters on both formal and historical grounds. As far as formal considerations are concerned, the reading of Ezekiel 25 as a vindication of Israel against

the taunts of its neighbors depends more upon the typical features of ancient war oracles than upon Ezekiel's unique adaptation of them. The three-part proof oracle that dominates Ezekiel 25 has its roots in the old holy war traditions, which often depict Yahweh coming to the aid of his beleaguered people.<sup>5</sup> In an account of the foreign wars of King Ahab (1 Kgs 21:28, cf. v. 13), one such oracle promises divine assistance against a much larger, apparently indomitable foe, whose assault on Israel is considered a direct attack against Yahweh. Victory over this enemy is not only a vindication of Yahweh's sovereignty, but also a victory for Israel: "Thus says the LORD: Because the Arameans have said, 'The Lord is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys,' therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD" (1 Kgs 20:28). The oracles in Ezekiel 25 follow this pattern, in each case justifying Yahweh's attack by citing the offense of the foreign nation (25:3, 8, 12, 15) as the reason for the announcement of judgment (25:4-5, 10, 13-14, 16-17). Both the older oracle and Ezekiel's adaptation of it underscore the sovereignty of Yahweh ("they will know that I am the Lord," 25:5b, 7b, 11, 14, 17). However, Ezekiel does not claim that Yahweh acts for the sake of the house of Judah, which in no way benefits from Yahweh's assault on the nations.<sup>6</sup>

The reading of these oracles as a defense of Israel also depends on the premise that the neighboring kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Philistia profited from or assisted in the destruction of Jerusalem and, moreover, that Ezekiel would have viewed this as a betrayal of a political alliance, presumably the one forged with Zedekiah in the 590s (Jer 27).<sup>7</sup> Such an interpretation is untenable given Ezekiel's attitude toward Jerusalem's "harlotrous" alliances. If these kingdoms had reneged on an alliance, Ezekiel would have seen any such perfidy as the fulfillment of Yahweh's threat to send Jerusalem's "lovers" against her (Ezek 23:22-26).

Moreover, the evidence that Zedekiah succeeded in forging an alliance with these nations is slim. Moab and Ammon participated in Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem in 597, probably as loyal vassals to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:1-2). Several years later, all four of these nations, including Moab and Ammon, sent envoys to Zedekiah's conference in the late 590s (Jer 27). The evidence that any anti-Babylonian alliance came of the meeting is ambiguous in the case of Moab and Ammon and absent for Philistia, though it is hinted at for Edom and Sidon (Ezek 30:5; 32:29-30; for Edom, see also Obad 11-14). On the other hand, evidence of a pro-Judean stance may be found in Jeremiah 40, in an account of the gover-

norship of the Babylonian-appointed Gedaliah. When a member of the Judean royal family, Ishmael, assassinated Gedaliah, King Baalis of Ammon was rumored to have been behind the assassination (Jer 40:13; 41:1). This same narrative also mentions that Ammon, Moab, and Edom provided refuge for Judeans who escaped Jerusalem during the second Babylonian invasion of 589–586. These accounts suggest that, while Moab, Ammon, and Edom did not overtly support Judean efforts to resist Babylon, neither did they rejoice or seek to profit from Judah's defeat.

Given the sparse and ambiguous nature of the evidence, restraint should be exercised in positing any historical background for these oracles. A more reliable basis for interpretation is Ezekiel's assessment of Judean alliances. Ezekiel condemns Judah for its refusal to set itself apart from the nations. Participating in the international politics of the day through the forging of alliances constitutes "harlotry," a refusal to trust in Yahweh while seeking security through other means. [Alliances and Chaos] If the house of Israel is ever to be established as a distinctive polity ruled by Yahweh alone, these allies must be eradicated.<sup>8</sup> The oracles against the nations are thus concerned, not with avenging Israel of attacks by the nations, but with the definitive separation of Israel from its past ways.

Noting the parallel between the seven nations in Ezekiel's oracles and the promise in Deuteronomy 7:1 that Yahweh would eradicate the seven nations that had inhabited Canaan, some have suggested that Ezekiel 25–32 is a recapitulation of that ancient conquest tradition.<sup>9</sup> One problem with this theory is that the Deuteronomistic tradition asserts that Israel will inherit the land of these dispossessed peoples, while Ezekiel 25 obviates that possibility by giving the land of these kingdoms to others. One suspects that the destruction of these kingdoms is a repudiation of the Judean monarchy. Displacing Yahweh in his right to rule (cf. 1 Sam 8:8), the Judean kings followed expansionist policies in their efforts to be like the nations (20:32; 25:8). In Ezekiel 25, then, Yahweh shears away territories that Israelite and Judean kings had laid claim to time and again,<sup>10</sup> often in opposition to their own conquest traditions. As Yahweh prepares to settle Israel in the land that had been promised to Jacob (cf. 28:25-26), the boundaries will, once and for all, be clearly established, with no possibility of contamination by any foreign alliances.

**Alliances and Chaos**

In a reference to Jerusalem's treaty-making in Ezek 23, Ezekiel charged Jerusalem with bringing all manner of noisy lovers into the midst of the city. Embedded in this charge of harlotry was a mythological allusion: a "noisy multitude took its ease in her" (*hāmôn*, Ezek 23:42). The expression evokes the Mesopotamian myth of Tiamat, the primordial waters of chaos whose noisy offspring "in her" disturbed the sleep of the older gods. With this noisy multitude "in her," Jerusalem comes to resemble Mother Chaos, and is destroyed along with the alliances that she has made.

Although Jerusalem's allies are not, properly speaking, the "offspring of Tiamat," as rebels are called elsewhere, they are closely associated with chaos and the chaos traditions. The term used in Ezek 23:42, *hāmôn*, is associated in the mythological traditions with the turbulence and disorder of chaos. In Ezekiel the term is closely associated with political alliances, and occurs an unprecedented number of times in the oracles against the nations, specifically in the oracles against Egypt (see Ezek 26:13; 29:19; 30:4, 10, 15; 31:2, 18; 32:12, 16, 18, 20, 25, 31, 32). Outside of the oracles against the nations, it appears in 5:5-17, where it is said that Jerusalem's tumultuousness (*hāmôn*) exceeds that of the nations round about; in 23:42, where Jerusalem brings this noisy multitude into her midst; and, finally in 39:11-16, when the resettled people assiduously cleanse the land of Gog's hordes. *Hāmôn* is a quality associated with the sinfulness of Jerusalem, and must be eradicated. In ridding Jerusalem of its *hāmôn* (cf. 5:7), it is imperative that Yahweh also bring the *hāmôn* of her foreign alliances to an end.

## COMMENTARY

**Oracles against the Disputed Territories, 25:1-17**

The oracles against the nations are introduced with the formula for the reception of the divine word and instructions for the prophet to set his face toward the Ammonites (25:1). The absence of such formulas elsewhere in the chapter indicates that it constitutes a single literary unit. Of the four oracles, only the oracle against Ammon (25:1-7) is delivered in the form of a direct address, while the others employ the third person to describe the judgments and offenses of the other nations (e.g., Moab, vv. 8-11; Edom, vv. 12-14; and Philistia, vv. 15-17). There are other signs of internal coherence. The announcement of judgment against Moab completes the judgment of Ammon, while internal parallelism in the oracles against Edom and Philistia suggest that they were composed as a pair.<sup>11</sup> The charges are theologically motivated. The insults of Ammon and Moab contradict Yahweh's idea of Israel's distinctiveness, while Philistia and Edom have arrogated divine power for themselves.

***Ammon and Moab, 25:1-11***

The oracle against Ammon not only takes pride of place, it is also accentuated through a doubling of the accusation (25:3, 6), announcement of punishment (vv. 4, 7), and concluding recognition formula (vv. 5, 7). The first charge focuses on three aspects of the divine judgment of Judah: the profanation of the sanctuary, the desolation of the land, and the deportation of the people (v. 3), while the second accentuates the Ammonite malice in a three-part description of their clapping hands, stamping feet, and malicious rejoicing. In response, Yahweh will hand over the land of the Ammonites to the peoples of the east and cut them off from the face of the earth.

Contrary to the claims of this oracle, the Ammonites may have continued to support the attempt of one member of the royal family, Ishmael, to hold on to the Judean throne (Jer 40). The account of Ammonite hostility in Ezekiel 25 is therefore probably a development of an older Israelite tradition. Despite a prohibition against possessing Ammonite lands (Deut 2:19), Israelite and Judean kings had controlled Ammonite territory off and on from the time of David (2 Sam 8:12, 10–12; cf. 2 Chr 26:8; 27:5).<sup>12</sup> Ammon took advantage of periods of Israelite and Judean weakness to reassert control over its territories (Amos 1:13-15; Isa 11:14; Jer 49:1-6), and the taunting that is described in 25:1-7 may rest on a traditional Judean denunciation of this longstanding Ammonite resentment (cf. Zeph 2:8-9).

From the Deuteronomistic perspective, the Judean conquest of the neighboring kingdoms like Ammon led directly to the violation of Moses' command of strict separation from the nations (1 Kgs 11:1; cf. Deut. 7:1-6). Ezekiel's denunciation of Ammon has more in common with this principle of separation than with prophetic conceptions of retribution. Although it would be perfectly reasonable to punish Ammon by handing it over in perpetual servitude to those whom it scorns (cf. Zeph 2:8-9), Ammon is instead handed over to the peoples of the east. Yahweh thus ensures that the Israelite break with the Ammonites will be complete. There will be no more mixing with the nations, because these nations will be completely cut off. *[Were the Prophecies Against Ammon, Moab, and Edom Fulfilled?]*

The theme of cutting off the nations continues in the oracle against Moab (25:8-11). The oracle follows the three-part proof pattern, although the announcement of judgment surprisingly refers to the consequences of the judgment of Moab for Ammon, which will no longer be remembered among the nations once

**Were the Prophecies Against Ammon, Moab, and Edom Fulfilled?**

That Ezekiel's oracle against Ammon reflects a theological agenda, not historical fact, may be corroborated by archaeological evidence. Josephus reports that Nebuchadnezzar did invade Ammon and Moab in 582 BCE (*Antiquities* 10.9.7), and Nabonidus (555–539 BCE) may have laid siege to the city of Bosrah in Edom (*ANET*, 305); however, these kingdoms do not appear to have suffered the kind of destruction and disruption that was experienced west of the Jordan. Instead, archaeological evidence in the form of public buildings, inscriptions, and pottery, suggests that Ammonite cultures remained largely intact throughout the Neo-Babylonian period and well into the Persian era. Edom's disintegration is more complex; the reader is referred to the discussion of Edom in ch. 35.

See Larry G. Herr, "What Ever Happened to the Ammonites?" *BAR* 19/6 (Nov–Dec 1993), 26–35, 68; Burton MacDonald, *Ammon, Moab, and Edom: Early States/Nations of Jordan in the Biblical Period* (Amman: Al Kutba, 1994), 51–72.

Moab is destroyed. This preoccupation with Ammon may rest on Ammon's claim to preeminence among the Transjordanian states.<sup>13</sup>

The basis for the judgment against Moab is outlined in the quotation attributed to Moab: "The House of Judah is like all the other nations" (cf. 20:32; 1 Sam 8:8). This is usually construed as a ridiculing taunt of Moab on the occasion of Judah's downfall; however, it can also be read as a complaint against Judah's territorial aggression. The cities named in the announcement of judgment (Beth-jeshimoth, Baal-Meon, and Kiriathaim) lay within the region that had traditionally been allocated to the Reubenite tribes, and which had changed hands many times during the Israelite and Judean monarchy.<sup>14</sup> As Yahweh lays open the western frontier of Moab, the cities in contention are handed over to the peoples of the east, never again to give rise to such territorial disputes.

***Edom and Philistia, 25:12-17***

In each of the oracles against Edom and Philistia, a twofold reference to human vengeance is countered with a threefold declaration of divine vengeance. As in the above oracles, it is uncertain whether these oracles refer to any specific historical occasion.<sup>15</sup> But it is clear that in both cases Edom and Philistia are condemned for acting with vengeance (*nqm*) against the house of Judah. The conception of vengeance is, as George Mendenhall argued, primarily associated with the divine prerogative to exercise legitimate power. Such power is delegated by the gods to kings, and is exercised by suzerains in international contexts and by the gods in mythical contexts.<sup>16</sup> To condemn Philistia and Edom for acting with vengeance is to condemn them for the illegitimate exercise of power. Yahweh's response is to demonstrate his vengeance against them. Although Israel is the instrument of this vengeance, the



purpose of this exercise of power is not to rescue the house of Judah but to assert Yahweh's right to rule.

## CONNECTIONS

Among Ezekiel's oracles against the nations, these are among the most difficult to appreciate. Not only do they lack the brilliant metaphors that make the oracles against Tyre and Egypt so compelling, they also seem to lack the poetic twists that we have come to expect from our maker of metaphors. On closer examination, however, we see that these oracles continue to subvert conventional expressions of Israelite complacency. These oracles overturn nationalistic expectations that Yahweh would side with Judah against its enemies. According to these ancient expectations, if a kingdom profited at Israel's expense, the tables would be turned when Yahweh came to Israel's aid. Those whose ears were attuned to the traditional motifs of vengeance and retribution would have been startled to hear Ezekiel's new take on Yahweh's judgment of the nations. The basis for judgment remains the same as it ever was: these kingdoms have grievously injured our pride and profited from our misfortune. The divine prerogative to execute vengeance against such injuries remains intact. But these oracles deprive Israel of that most valued of commodities, the award of compensatory damages.

It is in this subtle change of the holy war traditions that one discerns possibilities for further theological reflection. Even if divine judgment is a response to human injustice, the fact that it is divine justice sets it above any human claims. At the same time, human history becomes a much more complex matter of cause and effect. In the older holy war traditions, the accusations against enemy nations were often presented as unprovoked attacks on Yahweh's innocent, unsuspecting people. Though the accusations against the nations in Ezekiel 25 similarly appear to have come out of nowhere, the commentary to this chapter has pointed out that Judah's dealings with these kingdoms were considerably more complex. By subverting the usual expectations of retribution and revenge, these oracles imply that the question of assigning guilt to one party and rewarding damages to the other does not accurately reflect the complex processes of historical causation and moral responsibility. Because of its long history of rebelliousness, the house of Israel can no longer expect to make simplistic claims on

divine justice. Even as its enemies are held accountable for their crimes, the house of Israel must acknowledge its complicity in its own destruction.

On closer analysis, then, these apparently simplistic oracles contain a profound moral insight into the dynamics of blame and revenge-seeking. Ezekiel repudiates a common human tendency to claim victimization, to harbor a belief in one's own innocence while projecting guilt onto others. Ezekiel's success in separating the principle of divine justice from human claims of victimization can be demonstrated by way of a comparison with Paul's writing on the subject of revenge. On one hand, Paul and Ezekiel share the conviction that vengeance belongs to God alone:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom 12:18-19)

Paul's instruction adequately expresses the reason for leaving justice to God: when human beings seek recompense for injuries, whether real or perceived, they are likely to create further evil. However, Paul does not escape the all too common tendency to see evil in others but not in oneself:

No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:20-21)

This strategy of returning good for evil is problematic, however, since the goodness that Paul advocates seems more like passive-aggressive retaliation. After all, he seems to revel in the enemy's discomfort. But a more serious problem is that Paul retains the distinction between innocence and injury, and thus encourages his readers to continue to perceive themselves as victims even while they take the high moral ground of repaying evil with good. One wishes that Paul had taken his teaching one step further: can any act be considered morally good when the intention behind it is to make its recipient squirm?

In the book of Ezekiel, by contrast, there are no victims, no high moral ground, and no spoils of victory. If ever Jerusalem deserved to be considered a victim, it is here in Ezekiel 25, where her neighbors have taken to kicking her while she is down. But to deny

Judah the status and compensation of the victim is to bring an end to its old ways and to urge it toward moral regeneration. Blame ends, responsibility begins.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 179.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 111; Block regards these oracles as implicitly oracles of hope (Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. [NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998], 2:3); Greenberg attributes the oracles' animosity to territorial disputes with these nations (Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes*, 2 vols. [AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997], 2:523).

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. H. C. White (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 204-205.

<sup>4</sup> See Ellen F. Davis, "And Pharaoh will Change His Mind . . ." (Ezekiel 32:31): Dismantling Mythical Discourse," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 224-39; and G. R. Hamborg, "Reasons for Judgement in the Oracles Against the Nations of the Prophet Isaiah," *VT* 31 (1981): 145-59.

<sup>5</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:11.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:525.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> John B. Geyer, "Mythology and Culture in the Oracles Against the Nations," *VT* 36 (1986), 136; and Graham R. Hamborg, "Reasons for Judgement in the Oracles against the Nations in the Prophet Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 145-59.

<sup>9</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:3; Hals, *Ezekiel*, 180.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:12; Isa 11:14. For the negative consequences of this territorial expansion, cf. 1 Kgs 11:1 and Deut 7:1-6.

<sup>11</sup> William T. Koopmans, "Poetic Reciprocation: The Oracles against Edom and Philistia in Ezekiel 25:12-17," in *Verses in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, ed. J. C. de Moor and W. G. E. Watson, AOAT 42 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 113-22.

<sup>12</sup> Saul's wars against the Ammonites were probably defensive in nature (1 Sam 11:1-11; 14:47).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Burton MacDonald, *Ammon, Moab, and Edom: Early States/Nations of Jordan in the Biblical Period* (Amman: Al Kutba, 1994), 69-72.

<sup>14</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:21.

<sup>15</sup> See John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOTS 77; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 153.

<sup>16</sup> George E. Mendenhall, "The Vengeance of Yahweh," in *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 69-105.



# THE CITY OF TYRE

## Ezekiel 26:1-21

The first of three chapters devoted to oracles against the island kingdom of Tyre (chs. 26–28), chapter 26 consists of four oracles (26:1-6, 7-14, 15-18, 19-21). As a three-part proof oracle, 26:1-6 closely resembles the oracles in chapter 25 in both content and structure. The reason for judgment more closely resembles those in the oracles against Ammon and Moab (26:2; cf. 25:2, 8), while the announcement of judgment more closely resembles the oracles against Edom and Philistia in its use of wordplay. The second and fourth oracles are linked to the first and third by the causal particle *kî*, “for,” and certain expressions and themes that are introduced in the first oracle are taken up and further developed. Of particular importance is the water motif, which is first used as a simile for the invading armies in v. 3 and becomes a full-blown metaphor with cosmogonic overtones by the end of the chapter.<sup>1</sup>

The setting of the oracle against Tyre is not certain. Some commentators argue that the oracle anticipates Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Tyre that began in 585, shortly after the fall of Jerusalem. Others, however, observe that the date and nature of Nebuchadnezzar’s action against Tyre remains uncertain. The only reference to a Babylonian siege of Tyre is found in the report of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, who cites Menander Ephesius: “Nebuchadnezzar besieged Tyre for thirteen years in the time of Ithobal the king; after him reigned Baal, ten years.”<sup>2</sup> Since the date of Ithobal’s reign remains uncertain, it is difficult to correlate Menander’s statement with specific events. Neo-Babylonian texts do suggest that Tyre was under the control of Babylon by 570, which would correlate nicely with a siege begun in 585 and lasting thirteen years. On the other hand, Donald Wiseman suggests that the Babylonian siege of Tyre, more likely a blockade, may have been initiated earlier. Josephus himself dates the beginning of the siege to the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>3</sup> the same year that Nebuchadnezzar first laid siege to Jerusalem (597). Wiseman thinks a more plausible time frame for the beginning of a blockade would have been at the outset of Nebuchadnezzar’s incursions against Egypt, when a strategic goal would have been to cut off supplies from Egypt’s allies. Wiseman

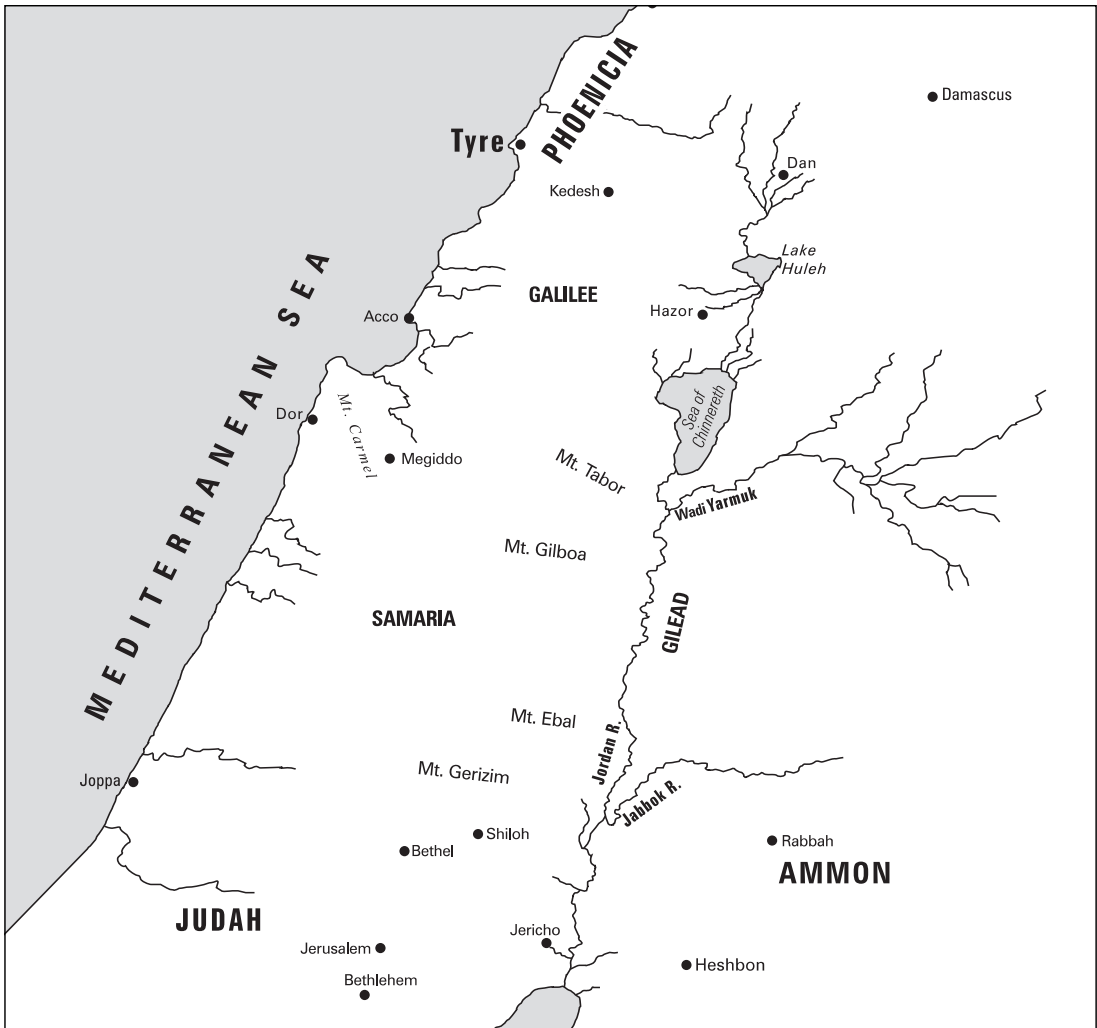
thus suggests that the blockade of Tyre could have begun as early as 603.<sup>4</sup>

These alternative reconstructions of Tyrian military affairs serve as a useful reminder of the limits of historical reconstruction. Even if the date of Ezekiel's oracle against Tyre is historically reliable, it is more relevant to an understanding of Judean and exilic affairs than to a reconstruction of Tyre's military history. For Ezekiel and the exiles, the most pressing concern is not the fate of Tyre but the siege of Jerusalem, whose outcome would have been a foregone conclusion by this time.<sup>5</sup> Given Ezekiel's concern to shear away all of Jerusalem's potential allies, the more likely motivation for the oracle is not Tyre's *Schadenfreude* but its perceived potential as an ally. Tyre is included in these oracles because it was one of the neighbors to whom Zedekiah turned for support as he plotted his rebellion (Jer 27). By citing Tyre's expectation of profiting from Jerusalem's downfall, the oracle asserts that Tyre is not the friend that Jerusalem thought it was (cf. Ezek 23). More importantly, the oracle ends with the declaration that Tyre is no match for the overwhelming sovereignty of Yahweh's judgment. As attractive and powerful as Tyre may seem, it will be consigned to the underworld, never to be found again (26:21).

## COMMENTARY

### **The Accusation against Tyre, 26:1-6**

A date formula and a word-event formula indicate the beginning of a new unit in v. 1. The date formula mentions the year and day, but not the month. According to Ezekiel's chronology, which reckons years in terms of the deportation of Jehoiachin, the oracle would have been delivered sometime during the eleventh year (March 586–March 585). Some have suggested that the month is the eleventh or twelfth, thus bringing the oracle closer to the time of Nebuchadnezzar's supposed siege of Tyre; however, there is little to support either the emendation or the claim that Nebuchadnezzar's siege began in 585 (see above). Since none of the other dates in the oracles against the nations can be securely tied to historical events, there is little reason to suppose that the occasion on which this oracle was delivered can be identified.



### Tyre

Verse 2 quotes Tyre's mocking taunt against Jerusalem: now that Jerusalem, the "gateway of the peoples" has broken, Tyre will be replenished. The reference to Jerusalem as a "gateway of the peoples" may indicate either the growth of Jerusalem's involvement in trade during the time of Manasseh<sup>6</sup> or the city's role in organizing the rebellion against Babylon.<sup>7</sup> In either case, Tyre expects to benefit from Jerusalem's misfortune.

Greenberg has raised the question whether this citation authentically represents Tyre's political stance or whether it is rhetorical invective.<sup>8</sup> Within the context of Ezekiel's repudiation of Jerusalem's "lovers," the latter possibility deserves more consideration than it has received. Whether or not Tyre actually expected to benefit from the destruction of Jerusalem, attributing these words

to Tyre serves a rhetorical goal of exposing the folly of human pretensions to power.

The judgment announced in vv. 3-6 reflects Tyre's location as an island city. Located about twenty-five miles south of Sidon, the city was situated about six hundred yards from the coastline. This made the city relatively invulnerable to attack, and in fact it was not destroyed until about 333 BCE, when Alexander built a mole out to the city in order to launch a siege.<sup>9</sup>

Not only is Ezekiel's oracle of judgment appropriate for an island city, it also plays on a widespread ancient perception of the city's invulnerability, which is reflected in the widespread use of the expression "in the midst of the sea" to characterize Tyre.<sup>10</sup> Tyre's own perception of its invulnerability is expressed in its name, *ṣōr*, which is a play on *ṣōr*, "rock." Noting that such a name is implicitly a metaphor, Carol Newsom has suggested that the name of the city invokes a number of commonplaces that connote stability and invincibility. As a "rock," the city trusts in its own security, even more so because it is nestled "in the midst of the sea." Ezekiel's announcement of judgment overturns this sense of security by invoking other connotations of the metaphor. While Tyre believes that it benefits from its insular position in the midst of the sea, Yahweh now declares that he will wear it down when he hurls many nations against it, just as the successive waves of the sea eventually wear down even rock.<sup>11</sup> [A Literary Model for Ezekiel's Oracle?]

### Further Judgment of Tyre, 26:7-14

The judgment is more fully elaborated in this second oracle in the chapter. Zimmerli has suggested that these verses are an "expository amplification" of the original oracle,<sup>12</sup> and there is little reason to question that assessment. The agent of judgment is identified as the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the assault on Tyre is depicted as a full-blown siege. Although much of the oracle depends on stock descriptions of siege warfare ill-suited to the capture of an island city, nevertheless the oracle retains its emphasis on Tyre's ultimate fate to become what it really is—nothing but bare rock.

Nebuchadnezzar is named for the first time in the book, though he has earlier been alluded to as the "king of Babylon" (17:12; 19:9; 21:24, 26; 24:2). The spelling in 26:7 is a more adequate reflection of the Babylonian pronunciation of the name "Nabu kudurru-usur," "O Nabu, protect my offspring"; elsewhere in the Bible, the name is spelled Nebuchadnezzar.



### A Literary Model for Ezekiel's Oracle?



One of the working premises of this commentary is that the structure of the book of Ezekiel is deeply influenced by the genres and literary traditions of Assyria. That influence can be detected in myriad contexts; for example, Ezekiel's designation of Nebuchadnezzar as "King of Kings" depends on Assyrian convention, since Neo-Babylonian kings did not apply that title to themselves (see commentary on 26:7). The literary influence of the Assyrian traditions is also evident in Ezekiel's oracles against the nations, and elements of that influence will be identified in the course of the next several chapters. Of particular interest for the present chapter is the following account from one of Esarhaddon's historical prisms:

Abdimilkutte, king of Sidon . . . threw off the yoke of the god Ashur, trusting the heaving sea (to protect him). As to Sidon, his fortress town, which lies in the midst of the sea, I leveled it as if an *abûbu*-storm (had passed over it), its walls and foundations I tore out and threw (them) into the sea destroying thus its emplacement completely. (*ANET*, 291, trans. R. Campbell Thompson, *The Prisms of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal* [London, 1931])

Noting the unusual number of parallels between this brief text and Ezekiel's oracle, Greenberg asks whether the prophet was working from a literary model, or whether there was a common store of idioms from which he drew (Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997], 2:535). Although Greenberg's question is central in any discussion of literary dependence, it may be difficult to resolve the question one way or another given the state of the evidence and the sources now available to us.

How one resolves the question of literary dependence may rest on the nature and extent of the resemblances. On the one hand, one expects a common stock of idioms to appear in isolated references. For example, the description of Tyre's location "in the midst of the sea" need not reflect literary dependence; on the contrary, such an idiom could easily be applied to any number of island or coastal cities, and the wide applicability of this idiom is well attested in the Assyrian inscriptions (cf. *ARAB*, 2:547, 779, 847, 970, et *passim*). On the other hand, a more concentrated clustering of idioms may well suggest a greater degree of literary dependence. The close connections between the Ashurbanipal text cited above and Ezek 26 suggest that a more complex constellation of themes may lie behind Ezekiel's oracle. When similarities move beyond the appropriation of single motifs to the appropriation of an entire sequence of associated ideas, then one may well suspect that the relationship between the two traditions is due to a more direct form of borrowing and dependence.

Ezekiel's familiarity with Assyrian culture is reflected in the designation of Nebuchadnezzar as "King of Kings," an epithet that had been used of Assyrian kings since the thirteenth century BCE and was frequently used of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal in the seventh century. Although the epithet was used in Babylon to refer to the god Marduk, it is not yet attested in Neo-Babylonian literature as an epithet for human kings.<sup>13</sup> As the agent of Yahweh's judgment, Nebuchadnezzar thus exercised sovereignty not only over the kingdom of Judah, but also over all the nations.

The attack begins against the "daughter-towns," a reference to satellite cities on the mainland (v. 8, cf. v. 6), and the focus quickly shifts to the city of Tyre itself. Verse 3 likened the invasion of Tyre

to the successive hurling of waves against rock; the present oracle more concretely depicts the devastating effects of military invasion. The oracle accurately illustrates the successive stages of a siege: the building of ramps and positioning of battering rams to knock down city walls, sending the cavalry through the resulting breach in the walls, plundering the city of its wealth, and, finally, the descending pall of silence, as all music ceases. A recurring motif is the wearing down of the city, as trampling horses kick up dust, the rumbling wheels of the chariots cause the city walls to shake, and all of the rubble from the destroyed buildings is cast into the sea (vv. 10, 12; cf. 23:23-24). Picking up the pun on Tyre's name in v. 4, the oracle closes with Yahweh's declaration that Tyre will be made a bare rock, a place only for spreading nets, and will never be rebuilt.

### **Lamentation of the Coastland Princes, 26:15-18**

This third oracle is set off from the preceding by a messenger formula and by a distinct change in tone. Now that the judgment is complete, Yahweh describes the universal mourning that will accompany Tyre's fall. The coastlands themselves will tremble, and all the princes of the coastlands mourn as they descend from their thrones, strip themselves of their rich clothing, and put on terror as garments of mourning (cf. 7:27). The princes raise a lamentation that reflects the traditional conventions of the funeral lament, as the former greatness of the city is contrasted with its present demise.<sup>14</sup> The city that had once been renowned as a great and strong city has now completely vanished from the sea. In contrast with the oracles of judgment in 26:1-14, where Tyre was beaten down to bare rock, in the dirge, not even the rock remains.

The unit is not without difficulties. The expression "they set terror" (NRSV "who imposed your terror on all the mainland," cf. MT *nāṭēnū ḥittītām lē kol-yôšēbēhâ*, "they set their terror on all her inhabitants") is attested elsewhere only in Ezekiel 32:23-27, 32, where it appears as one of the epithets of the fallen mighty hordes in the underworld. The situation is considerably more confusing in 26:17-18. A plain reading of the line is reflexive, as Tyre terrifies itself: "Tyre and her inhabitants set their terror on her inhabitants." Because this reading makes little sense, many suggest instead that Tyre and its inhabitants terrorized the neighboring peoples.<sup>15</sup> NRSV reflects the commentators' consensus in its paraphrase of the line.

The difficulty with this accepted reading, however, is that it assumes that the unique formulation in 26:17-18 should be clarified by the more intelligible expressions in chapter 32. Speaking against this strategy is the clear adaptation of the idiom to speak of terror among *Tyre's* inhabitants. Moreover, the neighboring kingdoms do not rejoice at Tyre's downfall, as one might expect if Tyre had terrorized them.<sup>16</sup> Rather, they shudder and are dismayed at her passing, as if the terror that overwhelms her is something they, too, should fear. As an alternative reading, one may suggest that the agents of terror are the seas in v. 17. That which gave Tyre its greatest security now terrifies her and brings her destruction. Such a reading will be confirmed by Yahweh's final declaration of his intention in 26:19-21.

### Descent into the Underworld, 26:19-21

The fourth unit of the chapter is linked to the preceding by the causal particle, *kî*. Recapitulating the vocabulary of the dirge, Yahweh declares that he will make Tyre like the cities that are no longer inhabited (niph'al *yšb*; cf. *nôšebet*, v. 17) when he brings the waters of the deep (*těhôm*) and the great waters (*hammayîm hārabbîm*) against her. The noun *těhôm*, here used as a proper noun, refers to the primeval waters that Yahweh separated as the first act of creation (Gen 1:2). As *těhôm* once again engulfs dry land, Tyre sinks into the depths of the earth. Others have noted that the sea was introduced in v. 3 as a simile for the armies that would be sent against Tyre.<sup>17</sup> With the incorporation of mythic language in v. 19, the simile is transformed into a metaphor of cosmic significance. There is no longer any reference to human agents of destruction, as in vv. 1-14; rather, it is now Yahweh who causes the sea to engulf Tyre. [Creation Imagery and History]

The death of Tyre is definitive, and is underscored through the repeated use of the language of death and entombment. Now personified, Tyre descends into the underworld, which is depicted as a place of primeval ruins inhabited by ancient peoples. Ezekiel will return to the underworld motif in chapters 28 and 32; for now it may suffice to point out that the oracle ends with the declaration that Tyre will disappear completely from the "land of the living." The city will be sought but never found.

### Creation Imagery and History



Although it is widely recognized that the oracles against Tyre in chs. 27 and 28 contain full-blown mythological motifs, the degree to which mythological imagery is employed in ch. 26 remains a matter of considerable debate. On the one hand, commentators readily admit that Ezekiel has employed imagery and motifs associated with the chaos traditions; for example, the use of the term *tēhôm* without a definite article suggests that Ezekiel was referring to the primeval waters of the deep. On the other hand, commentators seem less comfortable in interpreting the oracle as a full-blown myth, on the assumption that these mythological terms have been thoroughly demythologized.

Ezekiel's artistry may have contributed to this ambivalent assessment. Certainly his invocation of a simile in v. 3 need not be construed as a mythological allusion; he simply compares the invading armies with the wearing effects of waves being hurled against a rock. But the artistry consists in Ezekiel's ability to begin with appearances and delve more deeply into the powers that propel and undergird reality. As the oracle proceeds, the waves of the sea become fully revealed as the powers of chaos and even named as such. The more mythological connotations are better conveyed by treating *tēhôm* as a proper name, *Tēhôm*, a cognate of the Mesopotamian *Tiamat*. And it is not Nebuchadnezzar who casts the mighty waters over Tyre, as one might expect if this were a "demythologized" oracle; rather, it is Yahweh himself who commands the sea as the coastlands quake. If anything, the oracle is not an example of demythologization, but remythologization.

## CONNECTIONS

Recent treatments of the use of metaphor in Ezekiel have drawn attention to the way in which ordinary, everyday language is saturated with cultural meanings and metaphors. For example, we may speak about nursing a project along without ever considering what it means to use such a predominantly feminine image of care. It is in the context of such common metaphors that our lives and experiences are shaped and defined. Those who leave faculty or church meetings weary and defeated may well appreciate Julie Galambush's observation that martial imagery defines our approach to resolving disagreements. As she notes, we defend and win or lose arguments, but do not dance them. Such language prepares us for our encounters; indeed, if we expect a fight at that faculty meeting, we come "armed" with all our best arguments. No wonder we now feel so drained.

What, indeed, if argument were dance? What if the interplay of words and ideas became a concert and not a clash of competing, contesting wills? How then might we approach that meeting? If we were preparing to meet a dance partner and not an opponent, how would the meeting proceed? If we danced the argument, surely we would be tired; but would our exhaustion hold quite the same sense of despair? One longs for the possibility of transforming our lives by changing our metaphors. That this is no easy task is suggested by the very absurdity of putting the words "dance" and

“argument” together. We glimpse the possibility and radicality of such a way of engaging in disagreement; but, when the vision cannot be sustained, we go back to the way we have always done things.

For Carol Newsom, the need to examine the metaphorically and culturally defined limits of our language is a prophetic activity. Speaking specifically of the politically comforting but false perception of Tyre as an invincible “rock,” Newsom observes that modern peoples are no different when it comes to their perception and naming of political power:

No less than the Tyrians and the Israelites, modern peoples perceive the realities of national power through metaphors, explicit or implicit. Ezekiel reminds one that it is a prophetic activity to define what these metaphors are, to subject them to critique and to make new ones which can redescribe reality in a liberating manner.<sup>18</sup>

In the Western world, our metaphors are often sharply dualistic, defining the different sides of a conflict exclusively in terms of good and evil. The death of women and children in a protracted civil conflict is judged to have different moral consequences if it is the result of a “terrorist” attack than if it is the unintended result of a “military operation.” Although the loss of innocent human life is grievous in either case, the description of the former as a “terrorist” attack immediately triggers moral condemnation, while the description of the latter as a military operation, presumably by government-authorized agents, at least allows for the suspension of judgment until other facts can be weighed and evaluated.

Newsom suggests that prophetic activity includes the identification and critique of such language. Yet another prophetic activity is to expose all such human entities as ultimately under the sovereignty and judgment of God. Perhaps it is small comfort to recognize that Ezekiel 26 claims that Yahweh is ultimately in control of the waters that terrorize Tyre and cause dismay among the coastlands; on the other hand, this vision of divine sovereignty also serves to remind readers of the limits of human evil. If something as enduring as rock can be worn down, it is small wonder that monuments to human power also crumble. It is in this vein that the prophet Isaiah admonished: “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread” (Isa 8:12-13 NRSV). Behind Isaiah’s message is the recognition that human labels, metaphors, and concerns ultimately fail to come to grips with that

which undergirds all of human existence. Radical prophecy points beyond all attempts at metaphor to the source of liberation itself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:538; Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:39.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apionem* I 21; *Antiquities* XI I; X 228.8; cited by Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, Schweich Lectures, 1983 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Contra Apionem*, I.21; cited by Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 27 n. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 27-29.

<sup>5</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:530.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:530.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:34.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:530.

<sup>9</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:29.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Luckenbill, *ARAB*, 2:547, 779, 847, 970; Katzenstein, *A History of Tyre*, 9, as quoted by Carol Newsom, "A Maker of Metaphors: Ezekiel's Oracles Against Tyre," *Int* 38 (1984): 155.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-56.

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:33.

<sup>13</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:38.

<sup>15</sup> See Greenberg's helpful discussion of the difficulties: *Ezekiel*, 2:537-38. Although Greenberg follows the general consensus, he does observe that the line does not accord with what is known of Tyre historically: "The stereotypical ascription of terrorization to Tyre must not be pressed; unlike the imperial dread of ch. 32, Tyre did not in fact wield political-military control over her trading partners" (538).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:45.

<sup>17</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:538; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:39; contra Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:48, who asserts that the figure of the sea has been demythologized.

<sup>18</sup> Newsom, "Ezekiel: A Maker of Metaphors," 164.

# A LAMENT OVER THE SINKING OF THE SHIP TYRE

## Ezekiel 27:1-36

This chapter continues Ezekiel's announcement of judgment against Tyre. Structured in the form of a dirge or funeral lament, the oracle accentuates Tyre's sudden demise by describing its former greatness. Like other dirges in Ezekiel (see, e.g., Ezek 19), this one revolves around an extended metaphor, in this case, of Tyre as a skillfully built and splendidly defended ship that engages in far-flung trade. While the metaphor is a natural one given the city's island location and extensive trade networks, it may also have been based on the convention of speaking of port cities as ships as attested in the Hellenistic epithet *nauarchis*, which was applied to Phoenician and other Mediterranean ports.<sup>1</sup> If the designation of Tyre as a ship was a well-known convention, Ezekiel has fully exploited it for what Carol Newsom calls its "lurking connotations."<sup>2</sup>

The poem alternates between describing Tyre as a port city and a ship. The former is reflected in the depiction of ships "in her" and mercenaries hanging their shields on the city's towers and walls (vv. 9b-11), while the latter is reflected in the explicit description of the city as a ship whose wise men and elders serve as Tyre's oarsmen and sailors (vv. 5-9). The poem thus keeps both the tenor ("city") and vehicle ("ship") of the metaphor fully in view, and it is important to recognize that this conjunction of tenor and vehicle creates new meanings and associations. So for example, when the poem describes Tyre's leaders as sailors, oarsmen, and caulkers, their roles in maintaining the security and stability of the city is accentuated by means of the vehicle. Just as any ship must constantly be defended against rot and decay and buttressed against the buffeting winds and seas, so also does a city's security depend on the constant attention of its leaders.

One of the striking features of this oracle is the presence of a trade list in vv. 12-25. In contrast with the surrounding poem of vv. 3-11, 25b-36, which focuses on Tyre itself, the list delineates Tyre's external relationships with trading partners. Its insertion into the poem augments Tyre's greatness by depicting the luxury goods that flow into Tyre. Both the literary character of the list and its historicity remain a matter of ongoing debate. Some critics regard it as a secondary inser-

tion into an original poem, while others view it as integral to the poem and essential to its meaning. Although there is a wide range of opinions regarding the historical period reflected in the list,<sup>3</sup> it is probably to be dated to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, when, due to Assyria's demand for prestige goods, Tyre was at the height of its trading influence.<sup>4</sup> Such a time frame would explain the reference to the land of Israel, which no longer existed in Ezekiel's time (27:17), and it would also explain the absence of references to Egypt, since Assyria prohibited Tyre from trading with Egypt in exchange for liberal concessions to conduct trade elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

The mythological dimensions of the oracle are a clue to its theological implications.<sup>6</sup> Employing language associated with the older *Chaoskampf* traditions, the poem depicts Tyre as seated or enthroned upon the sea. Although this can be read either as a description of Tyre's island location or as an indication of Tyre's mastery of the natural forces of the sea, it is more likely that the sea evokes mythological notions of the powers of chaos, with which the sea is associated.<sup>7</sup> The assertion of dominion over the sea is a claim normally reserved for supernatural beings (cf. Ps 29:10). Tyre cannot, of course, sustain such a position; hence the oracle depicts the human projects of building, trade, and military defense as ultimately subject to powers beyond human control. Whether Tyre's demise is a result of its hubris or an inevitable consequence of its being a human endeavor is difficult to determine. On one hand, the chapter seems to suggest that Tyre falls not because her activities are evil, but because they cannot be sustained. On the other hand, in the ensuing denunciation of the king of Tyre in chapter 28, Tyre is denounced for its unrighteous trade (28:16, 18). If chapter 27 is read in light of this final condemnation of Tyre, then these human activities assume a much darker dimension. Tyre's trade can therefore be understood to depend not on mastering chaos but on being in league with it.



## COMMENTARY

**The Beauty of Tyre, 27:1-11**

The opening three verses present the ensuing dirge as a divine speech that Yahweh has commanded Ezekiel to speak to Tyre. Tyre is characterized as “one who sits” at the entrance of the sea and is a merchant of the peoples. The reference to the entrance to the sea is plural in the Hebrew text and may refer to Tyre’s northern and southern harbors. Whether Tyre’s position is to be viewed as a mythological enthronement (see above) or a geographical description of its island location, the statement nevertheless suggests the city’s dominance of the maritime trades. Given Tyre’s location at the “entrance” to the seas, one may also construe the verse to refer to Tyre’s role in bringing together the trade of land and sea. Tyre’s dominance is further suggested in the city’s description as a “merchant of the peoples.” Indeed, as vv. 12-24 will demonstrate, all the riches of the earth flow into the city.

The dirge proper begins with a quotation of Tyre’s boast: “You have said, ‘I am perfect in beauty.’” Elsewhere in Ezekiel, such quotations are the occasion for disputation (see, e.g., 11:15).<sup>8</sup> Following Rashi, Greenberg suggests that Tyre is condemned because it has misappropriated an epithet that more properly belongs to Jerusalem (cf. Ps 50:2; Lam 2:15; Ezek 16:14, 15). Because the ensuing verses do not condemn Tyre for this self-assessment but rather agree with it, the error of Tyre’s claim probably lies elsewhere. Tyre is indeed “perfect in beauty,” the result of the attentions lavished on her by her builders and warriors. Furthermore, although beauty is attributed to Jerusalem in Ezekiel, it is also attributed to Assyria (31:8), as well as to the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:7, 12, 17). As Ezekiel employs the term, beauty is a cosmic attribute, a gift of divine splendor within the created order (Ezek 16:14) and closely associated with primeval goodness (Ezek 28:12, 17; 31:8). In none of these cases, however, is beauty an enduring attribute; thus the praise of Tyre’s beauty is especially fitting for a dirge, which contrasts the past glory and present ignominy of the deceased.

Verse 4 affirms Tyre’s opinion of itself by describing the achievement of Tyre’s builders, who “made perfect” her beauty. The same statement is made in v. 11 of the warriors who hang their shields on Tyre’s towers and walls. The inclusion thus suggests that vv. 5-11 recount the means whereby Tyre acquired its beauty. Although

some interpreters construe the reference to Tyre's builders as a simple reference to human skill,<sup>9</sup> the widespread ancient Near Eastern custom of attributing the securing of boundaries<sup>10</sup> and the building of cities to the gods or their royal representatives makes it more likely that this reference to Tyre's builders has mythological connotations. Tyre's boundaries, which are in the "heart of the seas," make Tyre into an outpost against chaos.

Rather than emphasizing the unique role of the king in the establishment and construction of the city, Ezekiel praises a plurality of builders in v. 4, and the emphasis on the corporate nature of the project of building and maintaining a city is developed in the ensuing metaphor of the ship. Her sailors (literally, "those who handle the ropes") and caulkers make up the ruling classes. The "inhabitants" of Sidon and Arvad (Heb. *yôšēbîm*, v. 8) are those who sit in the city gates in order to execute justice (cf. Jer 39:3; Ruth 4:1-2), while the elders of Gebal (v. 9) are also drawn from the elite strata of society.<sup>11</sup> Wise men (*ḥākāmîm*, contra NRSV's "skilled men," v. 8b, "artisans," v. 9a) join the elders of Gebal and inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad. While it is possible to interpret these verses to signify Tyre's power in its ability to impose menial chores on even the elite of her neighbors,<sup>12</sup> such a reading confuses the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor. It is more likely that the portrayal of the elders and wise men engaged in these activities is intended to evoke the never-ending task of maintaining order. On a boat, ropes hold the riggings taut; without them, the entire project collapses (cf. Isa 33:23). And, since it falls to the rulers to make the necessary repairs to a city (cf. 2 Kgs 12:6-9, 13; 22:5; 2 Chr 34:10), it should not be surprising that Tyre's caulkers were its elders and wise men. Tyre's wise leaders have made strong repairs; by contrast, the foolish prophets of Judah have failed to repair the breach, and have only smeared whitewash on the crumbling walls of Jerusalem (Ezek 13).

Tyre's builders have employed the finest raw materials gathered from near and far. In vv. 5-6, four different types of wood are used in the building of the ship, each from a different region, and each suited for its purpose: cedar from Lebanon for the mast; fir from Senir, or Mount Hermon near Damascus, for the planks; oak from Bashan, east of the Jordan near the Sea of Galilee, for the oars; and pine inlaid with ivory from Cyprus, for the deck. Her sail is of fine embroidered linen, while her awning is made of costly purple cloth. Although some commentators have noted that all of these materials were used in the building of the tabernacle,<sup>13</sup> not too much should be made of the sacral connections. All of these prod-

ucts were highly prized as building materials and were often described in imperial accounts of conquest. What is important is that Tyre was built to last.

Tyre's warriors complete her beauty and splendor by hanging their shields, helmets, and quivers along her walls (vv. 10-11). Although some have detected in this reference to military presence an allusion to Tyre's military engagement with Babylon, it is more likely that the portrayal of military defense accurately reflects the need to defend a cargo ship as it moves into foreign lands.<sup>14</sup> The poem itself is more concerned with the manner in which these armaments complete Tyre's beauty. The weaponry adds *hādār*, "splendor" (v. 10), a glittering brilliance to the city walls, as if the city has been adorned with jewelry.

The triads of names in vv. 10 and 11 delineate the southern and northern reaches of Tyre's influence. The first triad, Paras, Lud, and Put, name traditional Egyptian allies (v. 10). Although the spelling of Paras is identical to the Hebrew spelling of Persia, this reference more likely reflects a variant spelling of the Egyptian term *pathros*, "the southland." Lud and Put are references to Lydia and Libya, respectively, both allies of Egypt since the mid-seventh century BCE. The triad in v. 11 is less certain, though the reference to Arvad suggests that this triad delineates northern allies. Helek may refer to Hilakku in Cilicia, Gamad to a Syrian town Qumidi.<sup>15</sup>

As in Ezekiel 16:14-15, where Jerusalem's splendor comes from gifts that Yahweh lavishes upon her, Tyre's beauty is not intrinsic but rather belongs to her as a gift. Herein, perhaps, lies the basis of Ezekiel's critique of Tyre's boast: although she claims that she herself is perfect in beauty, her builders know otherwise. She stays afloat only because an ever-enlarging sphere of allies and partners has outfitted, piloted, repaired, defended, and adorned her. If her beauty must be so arduously maintained, it is nothing more than an elaborate façade.

### The Trade Networks of Tyre, 27:12-24

Verses 12-25 more prosaically describe the network of trading relationships that sustain Tyre, and develop the theme of Tyre's aggrandizement by way of its interaction with other nations. Called the "trader of the peoples" in v. 3, Tyre is now described as the one for whom others engage in trade. Although there is some minor variation in the list, each reference typically (1) names the nation or nations, (2) defines the nature of the trading relationship to Tyre, (3) enumerates the products in which it deals, and (4) more gener-

### Cargoes



Less than a century ago, John Masefield drew the comparison between the exotic sea trade of antiquity and the considerably more fatigued world of British imperialism. No doubt influenced by the waning days of the British empire, “Cargoes” employs ships as emblems of empires. In the final stanza, the British empire sputters along in its decrepitude, no longer bringing home the riches of the earth, as in the days of Nineveh and the Spanish conquests. Like his contemporary T. S. Eliot, Masefield intimates that the world will end, not with a bang but a whimper. It is left to the reader to decide which is depleted, the empire and its imagination, or the earth and its resources.

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir  
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,  
With a cargo of ivory,  
And apes and peacocks,  
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,  
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,  
With a cargo of diamonds,  
Emeralds, amethysts,  
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack  
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,  
With a cargo of Tyne coal,  
Road-rail, pig-lead,  
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

John Masefield, *Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1946), 906.

ally states that these products are exchanged for certain goods from Tyre. The service that these nations perform for Tyre is conveyed by one of two terms. *Sōḥar* and *rōkel*, both derived from Hebrew verbs for free movement, eventually acquired the meaning of travel for the sake of trade. Mario Liverani has suggested that the verbs indicate a transition from stationary, state-sponsored trade to a form of trade that required the development of a merchant class.<sup>16</sup> In vv. 12-24, these nouns are modified by the possessive pronoun “your,” indicating that the nations are Tyre’s agents and do not act on their own behalf. Block therefore renders these terms as “broker” (vv. 12, 16, 18, 21) and “agent” (vv. 13, 15, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24), respectively.<sup>17</sup> Because these agents ply the overland caravan routes, Tyre’s reach as the “trader of the peoples” extends well beyond the seas to the farthest known reaches of the earth. [Cargoes]

Tyre’s agents bring in all manner of valuable materials, including silver and iron, ivory and ebony, colored and precious stones, rare foodstuffs, choice livestock, finely dyed and embroidered clothing,

skillfully bred horses, and riding cloths. In certain cases, the agents trade goods from their own lands. For example, traders of Tarshish, presumably Spain, and Beth Togarmah, a region in central Anatolia, trade in products for which they were famous: precious metals and horses, respectively. In other cases, the agents procure goods from more distant lands. Damascus, a major center of caravan trade, secures wine and fine wool from nearby regions<sup>18</sup> and the rarer cassia and sweet cane, both used in perfumes, from India and eastern Asia.<sup>19</sup> Rhodes, an island in the Aegean, pays its fees to Tyre in ebony and ivory, precious raw materials imported from Africa or India. Even Judah may have acted as a broker for other regions: of the five products listed for Judah, one, “wheat from Minnith,” may have been acquired from the Transjordan (for the place name, see Judg 11:33).

Liverani has suggested that the imbalance of trade is indicated by the fact that raw materials flow into Tyre, while finished products flow out: “In general terms, therefore, the trade brings raw materials and exotic goods, very seldom manufactured items, from the periphery to Tyre, in exchange for manufactured goods and for general ‘wealth.’” To call these products raw materials, however, is to distort the economic and ecological investments that local peoples would have already made to produce goods for trade. Before Tarshish exported its silver, iron, tin, and lead, miners extracted the ores from the earth and laborers smelted them into a usable form. The ability to produce such “raw” materials was in itself an indication of high social and economic organization, as well as metallurgical skill. The production of agricultural products for trade requires a comparable concentration of resources and labor for the production of materials for export. If, as is commonly suggested, “wheat from Minnith” (v. 17) and “wine of Helbon” (v. 18) are specialty agricultural products, then it is possible to infer from their presence on this trade list that they were grown on lands that had been set aside explicitly for the production of cash crops. Beth Togarmah’s production of “horses, war horses, and mules” and Arabia’s trade in “lambs, rams, and goats” may signify similar concentrations of expertise in animal husbandry to produce goods for export. In none of these instances is it necessarily the case that the products represented a surplus, in the sense that the inhabitants traded only what they did not need. More likely, these goods were explicitly produced for the international market. Whether this production resulted in a corresponding reduction in goods for local consumption and sustenance cannot be determined from this list, but that is likely to have occurred. The prophets of Israel and Judah

had inveighed against such involvement in foreign affairs, which had brought devastating effects upon Israelite and Judean local economies.

Tyre's own dealing in purple suggests a complex set of interactions. [Dy(e)ing for Purple] The trade list cites two sources of purple cloth: Aram (contra NRSV "Edom," v. 16) provides cloth tinted in a reddish purple (*ʾargāmān*), while trading centers farther east (v. 23) supply Tyre with a more bluish, hyacinthine purple (*tēkēlet*, v. 24). Although this trade seems to some modern readers to resemble "carrying coals to Newcastle," another possibility is that Tyre supplied these regions with its own precious dye and received finished goods in return. If that is the case, then the network of trading relationships implies very close and longstanding collaborative networks.

In contrast with the colorful array of the traders' merchandise, Tyre's products are more blandly described as *ʾizbôn*, "exports" (vv. 12, 14, 16, 19, 22), and *ma'ārāb*, "merchandise" (vv. 13, 17, 17, 25). [Exploitative Trade] Tyre receives tribute of ivory and ebony from Rhodes (v. 15; cf. Ps 72:10),<sup>20</sup> but there is no mention in the list of the exquisitely carved ivories for which Tyre was justly famous. Only twice is Tyre's merchandise described as the product of labor (*ma'āśeh*, vv. 16, 18). When Tyre's wares are so generically described, one gets the impression that the list highlights a different kind of imbalance than that between raw materials and finished goods. While the traders procure for Tyre a rich profusion of color, scent, texture, and luxury; what Tyre manufactures seems cheap by comparison. As in vv. 3-11, where Tyre's beauty was the work of her builders and defenders, so also in vv. 12-24: Tyre's adornment comes from the intensive labor of her brokers and agents, who scour the earth on her behalf.

### Shipwreck and Mourning, 27:25-36

With an astonishing economy of words, vv. 26-27 describe the ship's demise. Heavily laden with her wares, the ship is rowed into the midst of the sea, where it suddenly sinks with the blast of the east wind. If the sinking of the ship is to be attributed to the hubris of its sailors, as some commentators have suggested, then it is depicted more along the lines of Greek tragedy than of prophetic judgment. The sense of awe surrounding the event exhibits none of the judgment so often associated with biblical condemnations of human pride. The dirge does not suggest that Tyre should not have embarked upon its great project of trade with the nations of the

### Dy(e)ing for Purple



Tyre was well known in the ancient world for its production of purple dyes from several species of shellfish gathered from shallow coastal areas in the Mediterranean. In fact, the Greek term for the eastern Mediterranean coastline, Phoenicia, is derived from the Greek *phoinike*, or of pertaining to the color red-purple. To Greek-speaking peoples, then, Phoenicia was the “country of purple cloth.”

Thus it comes as something of a surprise when, in Ezekiel 27, Tyre’s awning of blue and purple cloth comes from Elishah (an ancient name for the island of Cyprus), and its foreign agents secure purple and blue cloth for Tyre from other regions (27:16, 24). Walther Zimmerli has remarked, “That Tyre, the center of the purple-dye industry . . . should have imported purple cloth is the most remarkable statement of this whole complex” (*A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., Hermeneia, trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983], 2:58).

The statement is remarkable in that it suggests that Tyre’s demand for purple exceeded its local supply. Pliny notes that it was Tyre’s search for new sources of murex beds that propelled its establishment of settlements as far away as Spain and the Atlantic coastline of North Africa. Even if Tyre’s wealth was primarily based on its monopoly of the silver trade, as many scholars now suggest, Tyre’s settlements were nevertheless in coastal areas, and not closer to the silver mines. At many of these ancient Phoenician settlements, huge heaps of murex shells, as well as stone vats for distilling the dye, can still be found.

The human cost of this vast industry remains unknown. Only recently have anthropologists begun to ask questions about the socioeconomic dynamics of the pre-industrial production of textiles and dyes, while more specific questions about Phoenician social and economic organization remain unanswered. The dye production may have been a seasonal activity: the murex were harvested before the eggs were laid, and summer sunlight was essential for achieving the highly prized bright red hue. For all the labor that went into the harvesting, seasoning, and cooking of the dye, the yield was small; it has been estimated that twelve hundred murex were required to produce one and a half grams of dye.

It is widely acknowledged that the production of the dye remained a closely guarded secret, but whose secret was it? Was it a state secret, the purple being closely guarded as a source of royal income? Or was it the product of private enterprise, the secret being guarded by mercantile families? If it was a state sponsored industry, how was the

labor allocated? One reference to population density in dye production does not come from this period or from Phoenician settlements; nevertheless, it raises important questions about the sheer work involved in producing the dye. In describing a village in the Greek region of Phocis, the geographer Pausanias (2d century CE) noted that more than half of the population was occupied in fishing for murex (*Description of Greece* 10.37.1). One wonders whether the labor was conscripted: if the purple dye lent Phoenicia its identity, was it also part of a Phoenician’s contribution to the state? Unlike other luxury goods, such as carved ivories, for which Phoenicia was famous in antiquity, the production of purple dye did not require great skill or expertise but sheer endurance and many hands.

Maria Eugenia Aubet has suggested that Tyre’s westward expansion was partly due to its overpopulation and corresponding shortage of foodstuffs. Kition, its oldest colony on Cyprus; Carthage, its best known; and recently discovered smaller settlements in eastern Andalusia—all have in common secure harbors, agricultural lands, and murex beds. One may plausibly suggest that Tyre solved its population problem by expending the labor of its surplus population for the harder to come by treasure of the murex. In that sense, the value of the dye should be reckoned in terms of the hours of human toil that went into its production. The deep color of the dye, which even in antiquity was associated with the color of blood, is a revealing commentary on its real costs.

Pliny’s description of dye production (*Natural History*, IX.133–134) is quoted by I. Irving Ziderman, “Seashells and Ancient Purple Dyeing,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 53/2 (June 1990), 98–99. For discussions of the production of purple dye and its association with Phoenix, see Michael C. Astour, “The Origin of the Terms ‘Canaan,’ ‘Phoenician,’ and ‘Purple,’” *JNES* 24/4 (1965): 346–350; and Lloyd B. Jensen, “Royal Purple of Tyre,” *JNES* 22/2 (April 1963): 105–109. For the emerging interest in the ethnology of textiles, see *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Industry (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). For questions about Phoenician social organization, see Glenn E. Markoe, *The Phoenicians, Peoples of the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 90–92. For the westward expansion of the Phoenicians, see Maria Eugenia Aubet, *Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade*, trans. Mary Turton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56–59, 42–45 (Kition), 187–99 (Carthage), and 249–72 (eastern Andalusia).

### Exploitative Trade



Noting that the terms employed for Tyre's merchandise may reflect archaic patterns of an economy based on the exchange of gifts, Mario Liverani nevertheless suspected that the older connotation of reciprocal exchange had been lost. Archaeological evidence supports Liverani's contention while suggesting a further refinement. Rather than seeing a change in the meaning of the term, one might rather detect a change in the function of the gift. Tyre's gifts no longer functioned in a system of reciprocity but rather to secure access to goods of far greater value. Evidence for the use of such prestige gifts is to be found in the tombs of chieftains who would have controlled access to the silver mines in Spain. In the 7th century BCE, small amphorae, which would have contained luxury items like oils, perfumes, and cosmetics, as well as other objects like carved ivories and jewelry, began to appear with increasing regularity in areas that controlled the access to silver ore. Even in ancient times, the exploitative nature of this trade was obvious: Diodorus observed that the Phoenicians took advantage by trading trinkets for the much more valuable ores. Commenting on Diodorus's critique from a more modern perspective, Aubet has characterized the exchange as a "typically colonial situation," in which genuinely valuable resources are exchanged for items of little more than prestige value. Rather than signifying true trade, Aubet concluded, the Tyrian gifts reflect an imbalance of power, with two consequences: "a social change within the indigenous society from the moment when certain sectors of the population are incorporated into the Phoenician trading circuit and take advantage of the situation, and a long-term frittering away of the resources of the territory."

Mario Liverani, "The Trade Network of Tyre According to Ezek. 27," in *Ah, Assyria . . . Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor*, ed. Mordechai Cogan and Israel Eph'al, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 33 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 78–79; Maria Eugenia Aubet, *Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade*, trans. Mary Turton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 241, 246–47.

earth, but rather that all such human achievements are subject to forces beyond human control. In an interesting development of the lament genre, the poem contains a lament within a lament, as all the sailors and princes of the coastlands mourn Tyre's sinking in the midst of the sea. To continue the analogy with Greek drama, the sailors' lament is analogous to the response of a Greek chorus to the tragedy, and it expresses their pity and awe. NRSV's "hissing" in v. 36 is an expression of dismay and horror, not scorn.

## CONNECTIONS

This remarkable poem is a lamentation for the lost beauty, wisdom, and skill of the great city of Tyre. Unlike Jerusalem, which had squandered her beauty on her lovers, Tyre was perfect. The poem attributes this achievement to Tyre's elders and wise men who, unlike Jerusalem's leaders, carefully attended to the care and repair of their great city. Tyre was justly proud of her perfection, and the princes of the coastlands agreed with her assessment. When she sank into the depths of the sea, they proclaimed, "Who was ever



like Tyre?” Their question requires a negative answer: no one.

Commentators have often noted a traditio-historical connection between the trade list of Tyre and the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. That connection is no accident, since Tyre’s achievement is arguably on par with the building of the tower of Babel in bringing all the kingdoms of the earth together in a common project for human enrichment. The wealth of Tyre may have other primeval connotations as well: an ancient Sumerian poem invokes blessings on the paradisaic city Dilmun that its warehouses be filled with all the riches of the earth. [A Primeval Blessing for Trade] To invoke a comparison with a primeval human project, however, is to predict its failure. Like Babel, Tyre will fall.

In certain respects, the chapter bears fruitful comparisons with the medieval custom of carrying an emblem of death, a *memento mori*, as a reminder of one’s mortality. Rather than being concerned with individual mortality, however, Ezekiel 27 is more deeply concerned with the fragility of human culture. The message is universalistic in its implications, since those who witness Tyre’s demise include all those who had traded with Tyre and contributed their expertise to the building and maintenance of this splendidly built ship. Within the context of the book of Ezekiel, the message is aimed at a narrower audience: the remnant of Israel and Judah. Buried as they are in the middle of the trade list, the industry of Judah and Israel has been so seamlessly integrated into Tyre’s enterprise that they have become nearly invisible (27:17). The message is clear: this is what comes of trying to be like the nations.

Although Tyre’s relations with its trading partners appear, on first glance, to be reciprocal, on closer analysis the poem exposes the centripetal forces at work in Tyrian trade. Tyre may look as if she is enriching the peoples of the earth with her gifts, and the princes of the earth who mourn her passing may yet believe they have profited from trading with her. But the rhetorical power of the poem depends on the false consciousness of both Tyre and the princes.

### A Primeval Blessing for Trade



May Dilmun become (an emporium,)

a storehouse on the quay

for the country’s produce!

May the land Tukrish

[offer you for exchange]

gold of the river-bends,

may it exchange lapis-lazuli

and clear [lapis lazuli!]

May the land Meluhha

load precious desirable sard,

mesu wood of the plains

the best *abba* wood

up into large ships!

May the land Marhashi me[et] you

with precious stones,

topa[zes],

May the land Magan

offer you [for exchange]

strong copper gongs, . . .

May the Sealand

offer you [for exchange]

ebony wood

fit for a king’s chest!

May the “Tent” lands

offer you [for exchange]

fine multicolored wools!

May the land Elam

offer you for exchange

choice wools, its produce!

May the manor Ur,

the royal throne dais,

city of hear[rt’s delight,]

[load up into] large ships for you

sesame, august raiment,

and fine cloth!

May the wide sea

[yield you] its wealth!

Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once . . .* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 188–89.

### “Victory”



Something spreading underground won't  
speak to us

under skin won't declare itself  
not all life-forms want dialogue with the  
machine-gods in their drama hogging down  
the deep bush clear-cutting refugees  
from ancient or transient villages into  
our opportunistic fervor to search  
crazily for host a lifeboat

Suddenly instead of art we're eyeing  
organisms traced and stained on cathedral  
transparencies  
cruel blues embroidered purples succinct yellow  
*a beautiful tumor*

Adrienne Rich, “Victory,” *Fox: Poems 1998–2000* (New York: Norton, 2001), 3.

When Tyre sinks, the folly of their alliance becomes obvious. Rather than a rising tide that lifts all boats, Tyre is a dead weight of accumulated stuff. Nothing can be salvaged; thus the princes of the earth not only mourn Tyre's fall, they also mourn the loss of all that they had willingly given to Tyre.

In its accumulation of wealth, Tyre bears a disturbing resemblance to contemporary American consumerism and our dependence on global economic markets to supply our demand for cheap and plentiful goods. The labor-intensive production of purple dye, which only the wealthy could afford; the production of cash crops to feed appetites grown accustomed to novelty and luxury; and the promise of full partnership in a world of increasing wealth all have their counterparts in the modern world of sweatshops, agribusiness, and multinational corporations. [Victory] Whether we are yet ready to

call our way of life idolatrous is another question: we accept our economic myths as fact, and we are inclined to believe our leaders when they say that spending is patriotic.<sup>21</sup> But to the extent that these beliefs hide the long-term consequences of our economic actions, they are, if not idolatrous, then at least disingenuous. Tyre's beauty was a façade, and our wealth is not our own. We now have another answer to the princes' question, “Who was ever like Tyre?” Sadly, we answer, we are.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 569; citing A. Fitzgerald, “The Mythological Background for the Representation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the O.T.,” *CBQ* 34 (1972): 403-16, esp. p. 406 n. 16.

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Newsom, “A Maker of Metaphors—Ezekiel's Oracles Against Tyre,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 151-64, esp. 157-58.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the options, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:568-69.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Eugenia Aubet, *Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade*, trans. Mary Turton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68-74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. Cf. Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:70-71.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John B. Geyer, "Ezekiel 27 and the Cosmic Ship," in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 144 (JSOTSup 144; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 105-26, esp. 105-107; idem, "Mythology and Culture in the Oracles against the Nations," *VT* 36 (1986): 129-45. Geyer's contention that the ship of Tyre resembles the Egyptian myth of the *Amduat* is less convincing.

<sup>7</sup> Geyer, "Ezekiel 27 and the Cosmic Ship," 106-107; see also Herbert Gordon May, "Some Cosmic Connotations of *Mayim Rabbîm*, 'Many Waters,'" *JBL* 74 (1955): 18.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:548.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:58; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:549; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:56.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Magnus Ottoson, "*gebûl*," *TDOT*, 2:361-66.

<sup>11</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:62.

<sup>12</sup> So Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:58.

<sup>13</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:157; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:549-50.

<sup>14</sup> See George Dalton, "Karl Polanyi's Analysis of Long-Distance Trade and His Wider Paradigm," in *Ancient Civilization and Trade*, ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff and C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 102.

<sup>15</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:64-65.

<sup>16</sup> Mario Liverani, "The Trade Network of Tyre According to Ezek. 27," in *Ah, Assyria . . . Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor*, ed. Mordechai Cogan and Israel Eph'al, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 33 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 75-76.

<sup>17</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:68, and chart, p. 69; cf. Liverani, "Trade Network of Tyre," 76.

<sup>18</sup> See Block's "casks of wine from Uzal"; contra NRSV's "Vedan and Javan from Uzal," 27:19; Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:76-77.

<sup>19</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:76-77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:70.

<sup>21</sup> For a critique of contemporary economic myths, see Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 46-69.



# THE KING OF TYRE

## Ezekiel 28:1-26

This chapter completes Ezekiel's announcement of judgment against Tyre. The chapter consists primarily of two oracles addressed to the king of Tyre, one in the form of a two-part oracle of judgment, the other in a modified lament form (28:1-10, 11-19). The chapter also contains an oracle against Sidon, a Phoenician city often linked with the city of Tyre (28:20-24), and a statement that anticipates the restoration of Israel to land Yahweh had promised to Jacob (28:25-26).

Characteristic of Ezekiel's oracles against Tyre is the tendency to probe beneath the surface meanings of Tyre's historical existence by exploiting what Carol Newsom has called the "lurking connotations" of conventional metaphors. An important example of Ezekiel's strategy is his exploration of the symbolic connotations of Tyre's location in the midst of the sea (26:5, 17, 19; 27:4, 25, 26, 32, 34). Although Tyre derives its power, wealth, and security from the sea, Ezekiel declares that these very waters will bring the city down. Through his use of certain key terms, Ezekiel suggests that these waters on which Tyre depends are not simply maritime channels, but the waters of chaos, which had engulfed the world before creation and which posed a continual threat to the cosmic order. Tyre's folly was to believe that human wisdom and industry could create a bulwark against such forces (cf. ch. 27).

In 28:2, Tyre's location in the "heart of the seas" becomes associated with another mythological concept, the mountain of divine assembly, where Ezekiel presents the king of Tyre in all his splendor as the Primal Human. Invoking royal ideologies, Ezekiel depicts the king of Tyre as a divinely legitimated king. He is endowed with the gifts of wisdom, power, and beauty, and his dwelling on the mountain of divine assembly in the Garden of Eden makes him the channel of blessings in the earthly realm. [\[The Primal Human\]](#)

While his blessings are not disputed, his use of them is. The king is condemned in 28:1-10, not for the great power he acquires as a result of his wisdom, but for claiming divine status. In the dirge of 28:11-19, the sin is variously described as unrighteousness in trade, the corrupt use of his wisdom for self-aggrandizement, and the profanation of his sanctuaries. Ezekiel thus exposes the implications of the



### **Satan in His Original Glory**

William Blake's painting reflects the traditional Christian interpretation, which equated the fall of the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28 with the legend of Satan's fall from glory.

William Blake. *Satan in his Original Glory*: "Thou wast Perfect till Iniquity was found in Thee." c.1805. Presented by the executors of W. Graham Robertson through the National Art Collections Fund, 1949. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource]

divine legitimation of sovereignty: if Yahweh appoints kings, then Yahweh can also remove them from power.

The fact that Ezekiel addresses a mythical king, rather than a historical one, should not be overlooked. As the Primal Human, the king functions as an archetype of power, and embodies the perennial contrast between the mythic ideal and reality. Readers of the Bible are familiar with this juxtaposition of the intended and actual conditions of human beings in the narratives of Genesis 2 and 3. In these early chapters of Genesis, the fall of the first human being has been so universalized that we think of Adam as an "everyman," not

### The Primal Human



The two oracles against the king of Tyre present a number of critical difficulties that are not easily resolved. Each addresses the king by a different title, the former as *nāgīd* ("prince"), the latter as *melek* ("king"). The former presents the sin as the king's arrogant claim to divinity, while the latter oracle frankly concedes that the king dwells on the holy mountain of God but condemns him for more mundane sins, like unrighteousness in trade. Moreover, if one follows the MT in v. 14, the second oracle does not simply place the king *among* the cherubim, it claims that he *is* a cherub (contra NRSV "with an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you"). In both oracles, the judgment is death; however, in the former oracle, death is defined as being cast down to the underworld, while in the latter, the king is cast down to earth and burned to ashes in the sight of the nations. The former judgment results in a human being's increased awareness of his humanness, while the latter has often been compared to the myth of the fallen angels, which has important precursors in Ps 82 and Isa 14:21-23 but which is more fully developed in Second Temple Jewish literature.

While some interpreters have concluded that the differences are so great that each oracle must be interpreted on its own terms, others have highlighted the thematic connections between the two. For example, Dexter Callender argues that both oracles bear important resemblances to ancient Near Eastern treatments of the Primal Human Being, who represented an important mediating link between the heavens and the earth. The conception was an important element of ancient Near Eastern royal ideologies, which posited that kings fulfilled this intermediary function. Although the Old Testament creation narratives obscure the royal role of the first human beings, traces of the royalty can still be discerned, especially in Gen 1:26-28, in which human beings are made in the image or likeness of God and are given dominion over the earth. It is the burden of Callender's thesis to draw attention to these elements in Genesis.

Central to Callender's argument is the recurrence of three *topoi*: place, wisdom, and conflict. The two oracles against the king of Tyre contain all three *topoi*. In both oracles, the Primal Human dwells in the divine abode: in vv.

1-11, the prince claims to have taken his seat among the gods "in the heart of the seas," while in vv. 11-19, the king lives in Eden, the garden of God and walks among the "stones of fire" on the mountain of God. Behind these various designations of the divine abode is the conception of an intersection between heaven and earth, which is simultaneously the source of the fructifying rivers of the earth and the entrance to the underworld. How the Primal Human loses this place of privilege is developed in the remaining two *topoi*, wisdom and conflict.

That the possession of wisdom is associated not only with the dwelling place of God but also with the Primal Human is hinted at in Gen 3, where eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil makes the man and woman "like gods, knowing good and evil." In Ezek 28, by contrast, the possession of wisdom is praiseworthy. In 28:3-5, the wisdom of the prince exceeds that of the legendary Daniel, while in 28:12-13 the king appears to have been endowed not only with wisdom, but with a breastplate that Callendar argues, signifies the power of royal-priestly divination. However, wisdom becomes the focus of conflict in the third *topos* that Callendar associates with the Primal Human. In Ezek 28:1-10, 11-19, wisdom is granted to the Primal Human as a gift and it becomes the source of great wealth. However, when this wisdom becomes the occasion for pride (28:5; 17) or self-exaltation, the Primal Human is expelled from the garden.

Dexter E. Callender, Jr., *Adam in Myth and History: Ancient Israelite Perspectives on the Primal Human* (HSS 48; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000). Callender's argument builds on the work of Aage Bentzen, who first traced the connections between the First Man and royal ideology (*King and Messiah*, ed. G. W. Anderson [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970, first published 1955]). For summaries of Bentzen's argument, see Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hubris in the Old Testament* (PTMS 6; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), 85-87; and Herbert G. May, "The King in the Garden of Eden: A Study of Ezekiel 28:12-19," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 166-76.

as a king. Especially within the Christian tradition, these narratives become an important meditation on the situation of all human beings before God. In Ezekiel's version, in which the central figure is a king, the more fundamental problem is the royal abuse of

divinely-bestowed power. Ezekiel's myth thus considers the perennial problem of human government, which is ever a mixture of benevolence and tyranny, beauty and ugliness, and good and evil.

## COMMENTARY

### “You Are Human, Not a God!” 28:1-10

Opening with the familiar formulas instructing Ezekiel to utter an oracle, vv. 1-10 follow the typical pattern of a two-part oracle of judgment by citing the reason for judgment (vv. 2-5) before the actual announcement of judgment (vv. 6-10). Some interpreters discern the insertion of secondary material in vv. 3-5, which appear to disrupt the transition from the accusation in 2b, to the announcement of judgment in v. 6. However, since these so-called secondary verses shed significant light on the nature of the prince's wisdom and arrogance, they will be taken as an integral part of the oracle.

The oracle begins with an accusation that the prince's heart is proud. The accusation is supported by the prince's own assertion of divinity: “You have said, ‘I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas’” (28:2). Yahweh negates the self-assertion with the obvious declaration that he is only a human being, and not a god. [Tyre's Claim to Be God]

The accusation does not dispute the prince's assessment of his wisdom; indeed, it exceeds even that of the legendary Daniel [Wiser than Daniel], and it has brought great wealth to Tyre. What is under dispute, however, is the prince's inner disposition. NRSV locates

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#### Tyre's Claim to Be God



In his assertion of divinity, the prince of Tyre employs the noun *'ēl*, which can be interpreted either as a common noun referring to a god (i.e., el), or as a proper name of the god El, who was worshiped throughout the Canaanite world as the high god who created the heavens and the earth and who legitimized the rule of other deities over their respective spheres. Critical discussions have focused on whether the Tyrian prince merely claimed divinity or whether he intended to usurp the throne of the high god El. Those who opt for the former interpretation note that the prince's boast may signify more of an arrogation of authority denied to human beings than outright rebellion against the high god. In Ezekiel's world, however, any unwarranted claim to authority would be construed as rebellion.

For a discussion of El in the Canaanite sources and the Old Testament, see E. Theodore Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods* (HSM 4; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 9–45.



this inner disposition in the heart with expressions that imply pride (e.g., “lift the heart,” vv. 2, 5), and in the mind when the prince claims divinity (e.g., “you compare your mind with the mind of a god,” vv. 2b, 6). The claims are as delusional as they are rebellious, and are reminiscent of the prophets’ “prophesying out of their own hearts” (Ezek 13).

The announcement of judgment condemns the prince for the error of his thinking. Because he claims to be a god, he will be defiled in much the same way that idols are defiled in warfare (28:7). As the intersection between the heavens, the earth, and the deep, the sea is the focal point of the poem. Though the prince claims to divide—that is, rule in the heart of—the sea, that is where he will die. The prince descends, once and for all, to his real eternal home: not the dwelling of the gods, but the abode of the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many of the oracles of judgment in Ezekiel, which end with the declaration that judgment will lead to the knowledge of Yahweh, the judgment of the prince of Tyre will lead to truer *self*knowledge:

Will you still say, “I am a god,”  
 in the presence of those who kill you,  
 though you are but a mortal and not god,  
 in the hands of those who wound you? (28:9)

No longer able to claim that he is a god, the prince’s death becomes the moment of existential clarity. [Ignorance of Self]

### “You Were a Seal of Perfection,” 28:11-19

A new word-event formula and instructions for Ezekiel to raise a dirge over the king of Tyre set this oracle apart from the previous one. Called a “prince” in vv. 1-10, the figure is now addressed as a “king.” These terms are interchangeable elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel, though occasionally the term “prince” designates a subordinate status. Although the present oracle lacks many of the metrical features of a typical lament, it follows the familiar dichotomy between the king’s glorious past and his impending,

#### Wiser than Daniel



In 28:11-19 the prince of Tyre surpasses even the legendary Daniel in his wisdom:

You are indeed wiser than Daniel;  
 no secret is hidden from you;  
 by your wisdom and your understanding  
 you have amassed wealth for yourself,  
 and have gathered gold and silver into your  
 treasuries. (28:3-4)


Although the allusion to Daniel is probably to the legendary Canaanite king Dan’el, comparisons with the biblical Daniel are also relevant, since the nature of the prince’s wisdom is that “no secret” is hidden from him. This kind of wisdom has less to do with the practical wisdom derived from common-sense observation of the world, and more closely resembles “mantic wisdom,” which is associated with the disclosure of heavenly mysteries (cf. Dan 2:10-11, 27-28, 47).



### Nebuchadnezzar

William Blake (1757-1827). Nebuchadnezzar c. 1805. Colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 44.6 x 62.0 cm. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource]

### Ignorance of Self

 Lurking behind the theme of arrogance in 28:1-10 is the theme of estrangement from one's own essential human identity. This theme is developed in Ezekiel in connection with a royal figure, someone whose wisdom has given him great wealth and power. Given this text's allusion to Daniel, it is interesting to note that the theme of self-alienation is further developed in that book's depiction of the Babylonian and Persian kings. King Nebuchadnezzar has dreams that he cannot understand (Dan 2, 4), and even when they are interpreted for him, he remains blind to the consequences of his arrogance (Dan 4). Especially in Dan 4, Nebuchadnezzar's refusal to understand that his power comes from Yahweh results in the loss of all human understanding. He literally loses his mind and roams the earth eating grass like a beast of the field. (I am grateful to a former student at Converse College, Frances Taylor, for this insight.)

humiliating end. The unit is filled with text-critical and lexical difficulties, many of which remain unresolved.

In vv. 12-15, the presentation of the king in his former glory revolves around his state of perfection and his location in the garden of Eden. Addressing him directly, Yahweh declares that he was to have been a “seal of perfection.” Both words of this phrase are difficult. The first, *hôtēm*, is a participle, “sealer,” and is often emended to a noun form, *hôtām*, “seal,” and interpreted in light of two references to Judean kings who serve as Yahweh's “signet ring”

(Jer 22:24; Hag 2:23). As a “seal” or signet, the king bears the likeness of Yahweh and represents divine authority in the world. The second term, *toknît*, appears also in 43:10, where it refers to the perfectly established temple. The etymology and exact meaning of the term remain unclear; in 28:12, it appears to connote a perfectly executed pattern, hence the translation “seal of perfection.”

The nature of this perfection is further developed by the parallel descriptions “full of wisdom” and “perfect in beauty.” The latter is more fully developed in v. 13, which describes the workmanship of the king’s garment (NRSV “covering”), which is set with precious stones from the garden of Eden. Because these stones roughly correspond to the stones in the priestly breastplate described in Exodus 28:15-28, it is often suggested that the king’s “covering” is a kind of priestly-royal pectoral. Citing Phoenician examples of such workmanship, Block has made an alternative suggestion: that the king is being described as a perfectly-crafted statue, encrusted with jewels from head to toe.<sup>2</sup> Taken on their own, however, the oracles in chapter 28 suggest another, more complex assessment of human power and frailty.

This king is clearly a creature, since the text twice refers to his having been “created” (28:13, 15). Nevertheless he enjoys divine privilege, since he is set on Yahweh’s holy mountain with a cherub as his guardian, and he walks among the “stones of fire.” All of these references are obscure and continue to be debated. For example, there is considerable disagreement whether one should follow MT, which suggests that the cherub was the king himself<sup>3</sup> or his guardian, as in NRSV. Despite these critical difficulties, what emerges is a picture of sublime perfection and access to divinity.

Verse 15 abruptly introduces the occasion for expulsion from the garden. Inexplicably, iniquity (*‘awlah*) is found in this blameless, perfect being. This conception of iniquity or unrighteousness is a generalized disposition, an inclination to deviate against the divine will. Used in connection with Tyre, whose name itself is a play on the word *šûr*, “rock,” the conception of *‘awlah* may be associated with fault lines or cracks that make rocks internally unstable. The use of these two terms in an antithetical parallel in Psalm 92:15 may indicate that the two terms were bound together in conventional expressions before Ezekiel put them together: “The Lord is upright; he is my rock (*šûrî*), and there is no unrighteousness (*‘awlah*) in him.” To say that deviation or instability has been found in Tyre, the rock, is to say that Tyre has fundamentally corrupted its own nature.

This iniquity is more fully disclosed in vv. 16-18. Each verse announces the discovery of guilt and the corresponding punishment in a threefold cycle that seems excessively repetitive. On closer examination, however, the three verses highlight the king's guilt and his punishment with increasing intensity. In v. 16, the iniquity is traced to the abundance of Tyre's trade, which has filled him with violence and led him to sin. Although no specific details are provided here, the very reference to trade breaks the mythological spell, as we are led to consider the king's actions on the earthly plane. In reprises of v. 16, vv. 17-18 describe the king's sin as pride and the corruption of his wisdom. The iniquity is again associated with Tyre's great trade, which profanes his sanctuaries. This particular term for iniquity (*āwel*) is a cognate of the term employed in v. 15. It is associated with social and economic injustice (cf. Lev 19:15, 35; cf. Deut 25:13-16), and it also appears, in limited contexts, to be associated with unjust human rulers (Mic 3:9-10; Hab 2:12; contrast Zeph 3:5; Deut 32:4). These latter verses more clearly suggest that the nature of the king's iniquity is the corruption of his divinely given role through the misuse of power.

While it has often been observed that Ezekiel's story of the First Man resembles the story of the expulsion of the first couple from the garden in Genesis 3, a significant difference is often overlooked. In Genesis 3, the man and woman are expelled for defying a divine command: the prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Their act is a crime against Yahweh; by contrast, the king of Tyre commits crimes against the human community. In this respect, his iniquity more closely resembles the spread of violence described in Genesis 4-6. In the primeval narratives of Genesis 1-11, sin (*ḥt*) first appears as an offense against human beings (Gen 4:7), while violence (*ḥamas*) and corruption (*šḥt*) are perversions of the created order (Gen 6:9-12). This is not to say that Tyre's iniquity is not an offense against Yahweh; rather, that the offense consists of the violation of his divine charge to rule the earth with wisdom and justice (cf. Ps 82). Accordingly, Yahweh casts him like a profane thing from the mountain of God. Now a "corrupt" rock, the cherub drives him away from the holy stones of fire. Curiously, the king self-immolates at Yahweh's command (v. 28:18b), as if the king were made of fire as other heavenly beings were (cf. Ezek 1). There is nothing left of this magnificent First Human, and all who knew Tyre are appalled.

### **Against Sidon, 28:20-24**

After three chapters of extended oracles against Tyre, it is somewhat surprising to come across this brief oracle against Sidon. It may have been included because the king of Sidon had been named in Jehoiakim's coalition of rebels against Babylon (Jer 27:3). Ezekiel may have been aware of Sidon's role in the rebellion (cf. Ezek 32:29). Further confirmation of Sidon's role in the rebellion may be indicated by the inclusion of the Sidonian king in a list of kings that had been captured by Nebuchadnezzar (*ANET*, 308). However, since the oracle itself does not give a reason for Yahweh's judgment of Sidon, any explanation for its inclusion remains conjectural.

The oracle against Sidon brings the oracles against Israel's neighbors to a close with a summary declaration that Yahweh will be vindicated in the sight of the nations. Yahweh's primary goal in the oracle against Sidon is to "get glory" and to "manifest holiness." Both expressions are unusual; the former appears only in the conclusion to the oracle against Gog in 39:13, and the latter always appears in the context of Israel's restoration in the sight of the nations (20:41; 36:23; 38:16; 39:27).<sup>4</sup> Yahweh demonstrates this glory when he "executes judgments" in Sidon. As Block argues, this phrase implies that the judgment against Sidon was not simply a random attack, but a judgment of Sidonian guilt.<sup>5</sup> Yet given the immediate context, in which the king of Tyre has proven to be an unrighteous ruler, Yahweh's execution of judgments is more likely intended as compelling contrast to the vagaries of human rule. Unlike the First Man, whose iniquity brought about violence and sin on the earth, Yahweh's judgments are just. That justice is also reflected as Yahweh champions the concerns of Israel, which suffered contempt from its neighbors. The clear demonstration of Yahweh's holiness is underscored with the threefold repetition of the recognition formula.

### **A New Beginning for the House of Israel, 28:25-26**

Introduced by a messenger formula, these verses suggest that the oracles against Israel's neighbors can be interpreted as the beginning of Yahweh's work of restoring the nation. For the first time in the book, there is an explicit allusion to Yahweh's oath to give Jacob the land. In the revisionist history of chapter 20, no such promise was made to Jacob; rather, Yahweh's first oath was sworn with Jacob's children, in Egypt (20:5). The reference here to the ancient tradition of the promise of land to Jacob reinforces the sense that

Ezekiel imagines the restoration along the lines of the first conquest. The promise of safety underscores this sense of a fresh start. In the historical traditions, safety and rest from the enemies was associated with the establishment of David's throne (2 Sam 7:1). In Ezekiel's vision of restoration, it will be the execution of Yahweh's just judgments against the nations (28:26) that will give Israel the perfect justice of a perfect king.

## CONNECTIONS

One connection between these oracles and contemporary theological reflection is the theme of hubris, or pride, as a universal human failing. Daniel Block sums up the oracles as an exposition on the very basic observation that "pride goes before a fall."<sup>6</sup> Delving into Christian insights about the human condition, Walther Zimmerli suggests that the primeval setting of these oracles makes them into a story about everyman. Zimmerli further invokes Martin Luther's expression *homo incurvatus in se*, human self turned in upon the self, in order to suggest that these oracles are concerned with that form of self-regard that becomes the root of all sin.<sup>7</sup> For both commentators, the clue to interpreting these oracles is the divine decree in 28:2: "You are *adam*, not God!" In their view, these oracles are concerned with defining the human condition, and with defining the proper limits to human activity. Just as Ezekiel urged the house of Israel to get themselves a new heart, so also would he expect his readers to reflect upon the heart of the king of Tyre. When he compared his heart to God's, he made a fundamental human error in what it means to be human. Just as the king came to understand his humanity by contemplating his death, so also we are urged to remember our mortality. Through this, we learn that whatever sense of power or invincibility we might have is only an illusion. As great as our wisdom and accomplishments may be, they cannot make us into gods.

As compelling as this approach to the oracles may be, I suspect we lose something significant by so universalizing them. To be sure, the rhetoric makes us the audience, as we hear the deity declare: *you* were a seal of perfection; *you* were perfect in your ways; and possibly even, *you* were a cherub. The sense of loss sounds as a death knell through throughout the oracles: such perfection has never since been enjoyed in human experience. On the other hand, since Ezekiel makes it clear that in the restoration there will be only

one king, and not a human one, it seems questionable that he would have made the king of Tyre into a model of humankind. The prince of Judah was forced to come down from his throne and remove his crown, and now the king of Tyre has been cast down into the pit, never to be seen again. If kings had ever functioned as models for humankind—and there is evidence that they did—they lost that honor in the book of Ezekiel. If there is an everyman in the book of Ezekiel, it is Ezekiel, the *ben adam* who perfectly submits to the divine will and is offered as the model for the exiles in 24:15-27.

Within this larger context of Yahweh's claim to kingship, these oracles are better understood, not as a condemnation of the universal human sin of pride, but as a rejection of any claim that human government is divinely legitimated. In the first oracle, the declaration "you are *adam*, not a god," is an explicit demotion of kingship. In the ancient hierarchical order, there were gods, kings, and *adam*. John Van Seters has drawn attention to this distinction, noting that ordinary human beings were created as servants of the gods, while kings were created to rule over human beings. To say that the king of Tyre was *adam* was not only to remove him from the place of divinity that he had so arrogantly claimed, but also to demote him from his place in the hierarchy into the ranks of *adam*. The second oracle, 28:12-19, more explicitly addresses the myths of divine legitimation of human rule. The king was the perfectly executed model of a heavenly likeness: perfect in beauty and wisdom, placed in the holy mountain of God with a cherub, and walking among the heavenly beings. In all of these claims, Ezekiel is most likely invoking a common royal ideology that claimed that government was created and established at creation. If Israel and Judah ever shared this royal ideology, it is all but erased from the narratives of Genesis 1-3, as well as from the more historically oriented accounts of the rise of the monarchy in Israel. Even so, Ezekiel appears to have been well acquainted with the ideology, and he has ably captured its praise of the human king. One can detect within this exposition of the king's beauty the intended rhetorical inference: if he is so perfectly formed, then his government must be a perfect execution of the divine will.

Ezekiel, of course, does not let matters rest there. Iniquity is mysteriously, and without provocation or cause, found in the king of Tyre. In an odd collapsing of the heavenly and earthly planes, the king's iniquity is described not as a rebellion against God, but as corrupting his wisdom for the sake of his power and wealth through unjust trade (28:18). Because his sin was a corruption of

the divine perfection that had enabled him to serve as mediator between the divine and human realms, he is cast down upon the earth. Reminiscent of the destruction of the Jerusalem sanctuary, which was burned by coals from its own altar, fire comes forth from the king of Tyre, and his own power consumes him until nothing is left. If we get hung up on how this was imagined, we miss the significance of Ezekiel's adaptation of the myth: when power is corrupt, it destroys itself.

In neither oracle, then, is the subject ordinary human hubris, but rather, government gone wrong. Donald Gowan has noted that in the Old Testament, the theme of hubris is always explored in the context of foreign rulers and governments and is, accordingly, a judgment "as to the real effect and spiritual implications of an empire builder's acts and words."<sup>8</sup> If that is the case, then it is worth noting that the hubris of Tyre is closely linked to power and economics. Tyre's great wisdom has enabled it to gather gold and silver into its treasuries and to amass *hayil*, a term which can be rendered either as "power" or "wealth." It is not the accumulation of power being condemned, but its consequence: "your heart has become proud in your power/wealth." When the king of Tyre considers this power equivalent to divine power, he crosses the line between the human and divine realms.

Just what it means for a ruler to claim divinity is more directly explored in 28:11-19. The king's acquisition of splendor constitutes a form of self-aggrandizement, which is unnecessary given the perfection with which he is already so generously endowed. Embedded in Ezekiel's critique is the common prophetic concern for the human community: this self-aggrandizement, like the unrighteous trade it encourages, comes at the expense of others. Although the term that NRSV translates as "unrighteous" (*'awel*) does not appear frequently in the Old Testament, it carries a great deal of freight in Ezekiel as the single characteristic that can lead to the condemnation and death of even righteous individuals (Ezek 3:20; 18:24, 26; 33:13, 18; cf. 33:15; Lev 19:15, 35; Pss 7:3; 82:2). In both of these oracles, then, the problem with the king of Tyre is that he has corrupted his divinely given wisdom in order to magnify his power and wealth—at the expense of the earth and its inhabitants. When seen as a trait of governments, the sin against God is seen to have human and earthly consequences. It is not so much *homo incurvatus in se*, as Luther would have it, but *homo curvatus in orbem*, or "self turned against the world" in its anxious quest for more power and wealth.<sup>9</sup> Against Block, then, the oracles do not illustrate the maxim "pride goes before a fall," but Lord



### The Human Paradox



Paradise is not utterly lost, for in the great kingdoms of the earth may be seen the magnificence which the brains and hands of these almost divine beings have created. But the same kingdoms are also evidence of the Fall, for in them are to be found violence and iniquity (28:15f.), and they die in flames (28:18). And why is that? It is because men are not gods ultimately, not fully able to be masters of their futures nor even always to act in their own best interests.

Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hubris in the Old Testament* (PTMS 6; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), 91.

Acton's observation, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Taken as a whole, the book of Ezekiel envisions the restriction of all human power in order to prevent such corruption. There is greatness, yes, even intimations of divinity and morality in the human project. Yet, as Donald Gowan notes, even egotists do not always know what is in their best interests. As noble as human achievement can be, it is nevertheless subject to human limitation. [The Human Paradox]

Ezekiel's solution to the paradox of human divinity and corruption is to claim that only Yahweh can create a polity able to secure humanity from danger. In a modern world that credits human beings with the creation of government, we do not have that option. We can, however, remain suspicious, as Ezekiel was, of any human government that claims to act in God's name, or any government that legitimates injustice with claims of sovereign or executive privilege. To recognize that we are *adam* and not God is to move with humility into the public deliberation about what constitutes just government for ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the rivers as the intersection between the mount of divine assembly and the realm of the dead, see E. Theodore Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods* (HSM 4; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 150-54.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:112.

<sup>3</sup> James Barr argues convincingly for retaining the Masoretic text in "'Thou Art the Cherub': Ezekiel 28:14 and the Post-Ezekiel Understanding of Genesis 2-3," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp*, ed. E. Ulrich, J. Wright et al. (JSOTS 149; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 213-23; cf. Knud Jeppesen, "You Are a Cherub, but no God!" *SJOT* 1 (1991): 83-94.

<sup>4</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:98.

<sup>5</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:120.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:95.4.

<sup>8</sup> Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hubris in the Old Testament* (PTMS 6; Pittsburgh PA: Pickwick Press), 69.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Katharine Monson for suggesting this felicitous Latin expression as the counterpart to Luther's.

# THE GREAT CROCODILE

## Ezekiel 29:1-21

Egypt, the last of the seven nations to be addressed in Ezekiel's oracles against the nations, is by no means the least important. Readers have been prepared for Ezekiel's denunciation of Egypt in several oracles of judgment against Judah. Zedekiah is condemned for violating his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar by turning to Egypt (17:15, 17); Egypt's seductive promise of aid is lasciviously depicted in the allegory of the affairs of Oholibah (23:19-21); and its ancient attractions are condemned in Ezekiel's revisionist salvation history (ch. 20). Even if Judah takes the initiative in turning to Egypt, treaty terminology and covenant curses in chapter 29 suggest that Egypt is also held accountable.<sup>1</sup> Though the judgment is severe, Egypt will not be totally destroyed. After a period of desolation, it will be restored to its original boundaries, where, as a "small kingdom," it will never again entice Israel away from its covenant with Yahweh. A second oracle, in 29:17-21 spells out the implications of Egypt's judgment for Israel's restoration.

Ezekiel 29:1-16 demonstrates that Egypt has neither the moral nor the political credibility to warrant Judah's allegiance. Egypt had long claimed dominance in the affairs of Syria-Palestine, and events leading up to the Babylonian deportation had seen a resurgence of Egyptian interests in exercising its influence in that area.<sup>2</sup> But Egypt had also proven to be an unreliable ally for more than a century, and wavering foreign policy continued to characterize its dealings with Judah during Ezekiel's time. [\[Egypt and Judean Politics\]](#) Against the background of this dismal diplomatic track record, Ezekiel takes a conventional epithet for Pharaoh—the crocodile—to satirically denounce him as a monster that destroys everything it touches.

### Egypt and Judean Politics



When Josiah was killed in his attempt to prevent Egypt from coming to the aid of the Assyrians against the Babylonians in 609, Judah became a vassal of Egypt. Pharaoh Necho imprisoned Josiah's son Jehoahaz, appointed Jehoiakim to the Judean throne, and imposed heavy tribute (2 Kgs 23:28-35). Affairs became more complicated in 605, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish and claimed control of the entire Syro-Palestinian region, including Judah. Egypt and Babylonia both asserted claims to Syria-Palestine during the next decade, and Judean kings took advantage of the instability in the region to rebel against Babylonian rule on at least two occasions. When, in 601, a Babylonian incursion into Egypt ended in a draw, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon (2 Kgs 24:8-17). When Nebuchadnezzar suppressed this rebellion in 597, he deposed the Judean king (now Jehoiachin), installed Zedekiah as his vassal, and deported several thousand Judean leaders to Babylonia, including Ezekiel.

Despite the loyalty he owed to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Ezek 17), the new king Zedekiah continued to seek Egyptian support for further rebellion against Babylon. Egypt, meanwhile, may have led him to believe that aid would be forthcoming. When two new pharaohs came to the throne in Egypt, Psammetichus II in 594 and Apries (Hophra) in 589, each made token exertions of influence in the region of Syria-Palestine. In 591, for example, Psammetichus II conducted a ceremonial procession into Syria-Palestine; his display of power appears to have strengthened Zedekiah's resolve to rebel against Babylon (cf. Jer 27-28). When

Nebuchadnezzar moved to crush Zedekiah's rebellion by besieging Jerusalem in 589, Egypt again gave the appearance of supporting Zedekiah. Apries, who had succeeded Psammetichus as pharaoh, provided limited support and caused a temporary retreat of the Babylonians (Jer 37:5); however, Apries' intervention appears to have been at best only a token sign of support.

Karl Freedy and Donald Redford have demonstrated that the dates in Ezekiel's oracles against Egypt correspond well with what is known about Egypt during these years (see **[Date Formulas in Ezekiel's Oracles Against Egypt]**). According to their reconstruction of the events, Ezekiel's preoccupation with Egyptian intervention began in 591. In the same year that Psammetichus II toured Palestine, elders came to inquire of Ezekiel (20:1). Freedy and Redford conjectured that Ezekiel's response, which traces Israel's rebellion back to its days in Egypt, is implicitly concerned with the fascination that Egypt held for Ezekiel's contemporaries. Then, during the years of the siege of Jerusalem, the progress of Nebuchadnezzar's war against Jerusalem is traced by way of the progress of Yahweh's war against Egypt. If a lag time of about four to five months is allowed for news of events in Jerusalem to reach Babylonia, the dates of the oracles against Egypt correspond well with news of Apries's intervention and retreat. The oracle dated to the twenty-seventh year (571), 29:17-21, also is consistent with what is known of a late attempt on the part of Nebuchadnezzar to invade Egypt in 568.

Karl S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford, "The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970) 462-85.

## COMMENTARY

### The Judgment of Egypt, 29:1-16

Dated to the twelfth day of the tenth month of the tenth year of Jehoiachin's deportation, five months after Hophra's intervention in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (Jer 37:5) and six months before the city's fall, the oracle is introduced by the instruction to the prophet to "set his face" against Egypt. The first section of the oracle, vv. 2-9a, declares Yahweh's opposition to Egypt, while the second section, vv. 9b-16, describes the eventual goal of the judgment. Once its ancient boundaries are restored, Egypt will no longer dominate other kingdoms. The intention of Yahweh's judg-

### Date Formulas in Ezekiel's Oracles Against Egypt



The oracles against Egypt contain several features found in Ezekiel's other oracles against the nations, among them the concentration of mythological themes and the alternation of oracles of judgment with dirges or funeral laments. What is distinctive, however, is their use of date formulas: six of the seven oracles against Egypt are introduced by a formula giving the precise date on which Ezekiel received the oracle, and all but one of these are situated during the years of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem. The one exception, 29:17-21, is dated to the twenty-seventh year (c. 571) and is the last dated oracle in the book (cf. 1:1; 40:1).

ment of Egypt, therefore, is to redraw political boundaries such that Egypt, now subject to Yahweh, will never again claim sovereignty over the other nations.

### ***"I act for myself," 29:3-9a***

This section of the oracle condemns Pharaoh not only for his arrogance but also for his political impotence. Beginning with a challenge formula and concluding with a doubled and expanded recognition formula, the oracle contrasts Pharaoh's extravagant claims with the deleterious consequences of his actions. Verse 4 emphasizes Pharaoh's perceived self-importance by way of a doubled title (i.e., "Pharaoh, king of Egypt"), describing him as a dragon sprawling in its rivers, and by quoting his boast.

NRSV's translation of the boast accurately renders the Hebrew use of first person pronouns, which may seem somewhat redundant but which emphasize Pharaoh's inflated ego: "*My Nile is my own; I made it for myself*" (NRSV, emphasis added). Although NRSV implies that Pharaoh made, or created, the Nile, the verb and its object pronoun are more properly translated, "I act for myself."<sup>3</sup> In Ezekiel's world of covenant-making, such a self-serving political stance could not be more damning. Greenberg cites an Akkadian proverb to this effect: "To create trust and then to abandon / To [promise] and not give / Is an abomination to Marduk."<sup>4</sup> Despite its gestures to the contrary, Egypt's only agenda is Egypt.

Given Pharaoh's record of promising aid yet rarely venturing out of Egypt, the depiction of him as a crocodile inhabiting the Nile ironically expresses his narrower parochial interests. In Egyptian thought, the Pharaoh was often compared and even identified with the crocodile-god Sobek. The blessing of a victorious Pharaoh by the god Amon-Re captures the power suggested by this comparison: "I cause them [the enemy] to see thy majesty as a crocodile, the lord of fear in the water, who cannot be approached."<sup>5</sup> In Ezekiel's appropriation of the epithet, however, the crocodile hardly



### The Crocodile-God Sobek

Crocodile-God Sobek wearing the crown of Amun.

Relief. 2nd C. BC (Ptolemaic period). Temple of Sobek and Horus, Kom Ombo, Egypt.  
[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

inspires fear but rather ridicule: it sprawls in its own river channels but flounders helplessly when Yahweh draws him up with a hook and casts him onto dry ground. Like the proverbial fish out of water, the great crocodile is helpless outside of his native habitat.

Covenant curses in vv. 4-5 indicate the severity of Yahweh's judgment against Pharaoh: thrown out into the wilderness, he will not be gathered or buried but left to be devoured by the animals of the field and the birds of the air. The application of these curses to Pharaoh suggests that Egypt has failed to abide by oaths it swore to Judah.<sup>6</sup> One peculiar feature of the crocodile's demise is the emphasis on fish sticking to his scales (vv. 4b, 5a), an apparent reference to Pharaoh's dependents. Whether these are the inhabitants of Egypt or vassal kingdoms is not made clear.

Verses 6-9 bring this section of the oracle to a close with an expanded recognition formula that sharply contrasts Pharaoh's claim of power with Yahweh's real power. When Yahweh defeats Pharaoh in his own land, then the Egyptians must come to grips with their ruler's weakness. Even though it is the Egyptians who must acknowledge Pharaoh's impotence, the oracle is primarily concerned with the question of Egypt's ability to come to the aid of Judah. Employing a well-known image of Egypt as a "staff of reed" (cf. 2 Kgs 18:21), Ezekiel emphasizes the danger of relying on such support: the broken reed cuts the hands of those who attempt to hold onto it, and causes those who lean on it to stumble. As a rival to Yahweh, Pharaoh has utterly failed.

### *A Small Kingdom, 29:9b-16*

The second part of the oracle reiterates Pharaoh's boast as the reason for judgment, and then describes Yahweh's plan for Egypt:

first, to subject it to wholesale devastation for an entire generation (vv. 9b-12), and then to restore it to its ancient boundaries (vv. 13-16). After forty years, Yahweh will gather the dispersed peoples and bring them back to Pathros, the land of their origins. Pathros, a region farther south along the Nile, is a more limited territory than that under Egyptian control in Ezekiel's time. The confinement of Egypt to this region makes it into a "small kingdom"; the same phrase is used of Judah in 17:14 to signify a kingdom's vassal status.<sup>7</sup>

Yahweh's restoration of Egypt is perplexing. References to Egypt's restoration do not occur again in Ezekiel, and the promise of restoration seems contradicted by the subsequent depiction of Pharaoh and his armies descending into the land of the dead in chapter 32. However, since the purpose of restoring Egypt is to prevent it from becoming a temptation to Israel, one may suggest that what comes to an end is not Egypt, but its claim to rule the kingdoms of the earth.

### The Salvation of Israel, 29:17-21

The second oracle in the chapter is the shortest but arguably most important of the oracles against Egypt, since it intimates that the end of Pharaoh's hegemony will be the beginning of Israel's salvation. Dated to the twenty-seventh year of the deportation, or 571, the oracle disrupts the chronological sequence of the other oracles against Egypt. The date gives evidence of the long duration of prophecy associated with Ezekiel, and also hints at the long gestation period of the book. Especially since the oracle refers to Nebuchadnezzar's negligible reward for his labor against Tyre, some commentators interpret 29:17-21 as an answer to the problem of unfulfilled prophecy. [Unfulfilled Prophecy?] However, since doubts about the reliability of prophecy are not explicitly expressed, it is more likely that 29:17-21 addresses other concerns.

Those concerns may more reasonably be interpreted in light of imperial political strategies. Assyrian inscriptions report that Assyrian

#### Unfulfilled Prophecy?



Since Ezek 29:17-21 was delivered at a much later date than the other oracles against Egypt, it is often construed as a revision of prophecies that have gone unfulfilled. The prophecies in question are those against Tyre, particularly 26:7-12, which declares that Nebuchadnezzar will plunder Tyre of its wealth. The present oracle acknowledges that Nebuchadnezzar and his armies have labored long and hard against Tyre without gaining any booty or plunder as remuneration. Yahweh will therefore send Nebuchadnezzar and his troops against Egypt, where they will be richly rewarded for their efforts against Tyre.

That this oracle constitutes a revision unfulfilled prophecy may be reflected in NJPS, which is more of a dynamic interpretation than a literal translation of 29:21b. According to this translation, Ezekiel will be "vindicated" (cf. Heb. "I will grant you an opening of the mouth") among the exiles—apparently because his prophecy has finally been fulfilled.

But is the oracle concerned with the problem of unfulfilled prophecy? If it were, one might expect a quotation of the elders, as we find elsewhere in more disputatious contexts: "Mortal, what is this proverb of yours about the land of Israel, which says, 'The days are prolonged, and every vision comes to nothing?'" (12:22). Or we might expect something along the lines of a proof-saying, as in 33:33: "When this comes—and come it will!—then they shall know that a prophet has been among them." If 29:17-21 is concerned with the validity of the prophet's message, that concern must be inferred; indeed, it has been argued in the commentary that 29:21 is not concerned with Ezekiel's role as a prophet but with Yahweh's reliability as a covenant partner.

kings occasionally sent compliant vassals to subdue rebel kingdoms (see, e.g., *ARAB*, 2.509). When 29:17-21 is interpreted in light of such a strategy, Nebuchadnezzar appears as a loyal vassal of Yahweh, who is sent first against Tyre and then against Egypt. Recognizing that Nebuchadnezzar deserves compensation for his service, [Nebuchadnezzar in Yahweh's Service] Yahweh gives him Egypt (29:19, 20; cf. 28:25). [Yahweh the Suzerain] The gift of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar is reminiscent of Sennacherib's gift of Judean cities to the Philistine kings who had remained loyal to Assyria during that particular rebellion: "His [Hezekiah's] towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country . . ." (*ANET*, 288). Not only does such a gift reward Nebuchadnezzar for his loyal service, it confirms Egypt's status as "small kingdom" subjected to Yahweh's vassal Babylon.

### Nebuchadnezzar in Yahweh's Service



Ezek 29:17-21 refers to a long campaign against Tyre that yielded no great booty or plunder for

either Nebuchadnezzar or his warriors. The account accords well with what little is known of Nebuchadnezzar's actions against Tyre, which may have involved a blockade but not an all-out siege. Babylonian records do suggest that Tyre was under the control of Babylon by 570, a date that roughly corresponds with that given in 29:17 (571).

Although the failure to acquire booty does contradict the oracle against Tyre in 26:7-12, the issue at stake in this short oracle does not appear to be the failure of the prophetic word (see [Unfulfilled Prophecy?]). Rather, the text is at pains to depict Nebuchadnezzar dutifully performing this labor for Yahweh. Within these three verses the verb "serve" (NRSV "to labor") is used five times—four times in v. 18 alone—to underscore the great toil expended in Nebuchadnezzar's efforts to subjugate Tyre. Here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, the verb connotes submission to a dominant power; in the present instance, it may also define the relationship of a vassal state to its suzerain.

The notion of submission is obvious in the extent to which Nebuchadnezzar forces his troops to engage in this unrewarding and relentless attack on Tyre. It is worth noting that Nebuchadnezzar also "serves," or "submits," to Yahweh: "I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he labored [Heb. *'bd*, "to serve"], because they worked for me, says the Lord God" (29:20). The oracle discloses that Nebuchadnezzar has been in Yahweh's service for many long years of unrewarding work.

The motif of bald heads and bare shoulders in v. 18 lends further support to this interpretation. Some commentators construe the bald heads and bare shoulders as a reference to the hard labor in building siegeworks. While such a reading cannot be disputed on a literal level, the reference may also refer to growing old, and therefore bald, and shoulders rubbed raw in the yoke of service to Yahweh. Ezekiel was familiar with the ancient Near Eastern motif of the yoke as a symbol of submitting to the power of a suzerain. In his declaration that he will free the house of Israel from bondage and rule them in justice, Yahweh declares that he will break the bars off their necks and deliver them from those who had forced them into service (34:27). Like his contemporary, Jeremiah, Ezekiel associates the yoke with vassalage (cf. Jer 27:2, 8, 12; 28:2, etc.), and the usage of both prophets reflects a well-worn idiom of imperial domination (cf. *ARAB*, 2:238, 239, 240, et *passim*).

The claim that Nebuchadnezzar serves Yahweh is doubly ironic, first, because the same cannot yet be said of the house of Israel, which has rebelled against Yahweh's rule from the beginning of their covenant; and secondly, because the Babylonians had once figured prominently in Jerusalem's rebellions (Ezek 23:14-18; see [The Political Alliances of Israel and Judah]). In the present context, then, Israel learns how to serve Yahweh by observing the obedient service of a former rebel.

Helmer Ringgren et al., עִבָּר, *TDOT*, 10:376-405; Z. Zevit, "The Use of *'bd* as a Diplomatic Term in Jeremiah," *JBL* 88 (1969): 74-77.



### Yahweh the Suzerain



If Nebuchadnezzar is a dutiful vassal, then Yahweh is a beneficent suzerain, richly rewarding those in his service. Here again Ezekiel demonstrates his familiarity with ancient Near Eastern political strategies. In his well-known account of the siege of Jerusalem in 701, Sennacherib reports handing over dozens of Judean cities to Philistine kings in reward for their faithful service—and as reparation for Hezekiah's perfidy (*ARAB*, 2:240). A similar logic is discernible throughout Ezek 29: once Yahweh defeats Egypt, restores its original boundaries, and reduces it to vassal status (cf. 19:15), Yahweh gives it to Babylon to reward its faithfulness.

Verse 21 links Israel's salvation with Babylon's victory over Egypt. On the "day" when Yahweh gives Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar, two things will happen for Israel: a horn will "sprout," and Ezekiel's mouth will be opened for the exiles. The motifs of the sprouting horn and Ezekiel's opening mouth both symbolize salvation for Israel. In traditional Jewish interpretation, the sprouting horn is associated with the reference in Psalm 132:17 to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy;<sup>8</sup> consequently, NJPS translates the line "I will endow the House of Israel with strength." As far as Ezekiel's mouth opening is concerned, it is often associated with Ezekiel's dumbness (3:16-22), which ends once Jerusalem has fallen (24:27; 33:22). Because Ezekiel begins to speak once his prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem have been confirmed, NJPS construes this second motif as a vindication of the prophet's message.<sup>9</sup>

While the evidence that the motif is concerned with the prophet's ministry is strong, it does not adequately deal with the unusual expression employed here for Ezekiel's mouth opening. In the one other occurrence of this expression in 16:63, the expression, *pithôn peh* (NRSV "open your lips"), is not used of prophetic activity at all. Rather, it characterizes the cessation of a certain form of ritual activity once Jerusalem's covenant with Yahweh is restored. Ezekiel 16:63 appeared at the end of a long disputation that demonstrated that Yahweh had always remained faithful to his covenant with Jerusalem. In that context, Yahweh prohibits mouth openings stemming from Jerusalem's conviction that Yahweh had abandoned her (see [Shame]). Jerusalem would no longer be permitted mouth openings motivated by shame—that is, she would no longer be permitted to accuse her covenant partner Yahweh of abandoning her.

The use of the phrase in 16:63 suggests that 29:21 is associated with the question of Yahweh's reliability as a covenant partner. In 29:17-20, Yahweh demonstrates his suitability as a sovereign by paying his vassal Nebuchadnezzar what is owed him. Mouth open-

ings are therefore permitted to Ezekiel because the house of Israel may now trust that Yahweh will make good on his word. In both 16:63 and 29:21, then, the occasions for mouth openings are related to covenant loyalty, and to the proper relationship between a suzerain and his vassals.

## CONNECTIONS

The restoration of Egypt after a season of judgment has struck at least one interpreter as an intimation of the beginnings of universalism in Israelite religion.<sup>10</sup> But this restoration is not universalism in the sense of universal salvation, since Ezekiel 29 presents Egypt's restoration in terms of Israel's future. If Egypt's restoration is salvation, it is salvation for Israel; at any rate, it would not be the salvation that Egypt would imagine for itself.

If there is universalism in Ezekiel 29, it consists of Yahweh's dominion over the nations, not their salvation. Such an understanding of universal sovereignty is consistently maintained throughout the book of Ezekiel. [Critiquing the Metaphor of God as King] In chapter 1, for example, Ezekiel sees four living beings holding up

### Critiquing the Metaphor of God as King



Sallie McFague's critique of the metaphor of God as king reflects a widely held assessment:

If metaphors matter, then one must take them seriously at the level at which they function, that is, at the level of the imaginative picture of God and the world they project. If one uses triumphalist, royal metaphors for God, certain things follow, and one of the most important is a view of God as distant from and basically uninvolved with the world. God's distance from and lack of intrinsic involvement with the world are emphasized when God's real kingdom is an otherworldly one: Christ is raised from the dead to join the sovereign Father—as we shall be also—in the true kingdom. The world is not self-expressive of God: God's being, satisfaction, and future are not connected with our world. Not only, then, is the world Godless, but God as king and lord is worldless, in all but an external sense. To be sure, kings want their subjects to be loyal and their realms peaceful, but that does not mean internal, intrinsic involvement. Kings do not have to, and usually do not, love their subjects or realms; at most, one hopes they will be benevolent.

Even if McFague's assessment of the kingship metaphor is widely shared, one may question whether it is accurate. First, one may ask whether McFague's critique of kings is not overblown, reflecting an American democratic tradition and suspicion stretching back to the Revolutionary period. Second, one may question whether the biblical portrayal of God's kingship was ever otherworldly in the way that McFague implies (cf. Ezek 48:35; Luke 17:20-21).

Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 65–66.

the firmament on which the appearance of the likeness of the divine glory is enthroned. In the commentary on that chapter, it was argued that the vision depicts the universe as it ought to be, with Yahweh ruling over formerly rebellious creatures. The present chapter imagines the historical world conforming to that vision. Babylon, once a rebel and a temptation to Judah, now serves Yahweh, and is rewarded for that service with booty from the kingdom of yet another of Yahweh's rivals, Egypt. Having won over one of Jerusalem's lovers (Babylon) and put the other one in its place (Egypt), Yahweh is then able to restore Israel. One may contrast this pattern with that of

Genesis, where, after a series of disappointing attempts at universal rule, Yahweh begins again with just one man Abraham, whose blessing should ripple outward to the nations (Gen 12:1-3). In both Ezekiel and Genesis, what happens to and for Israel is visible to the world at large; thus even if salvation is only for Israel's sake, it does not occur in a corner. The paradox for Ezekiel is that, while Israel cannot be like the nations, it cannot live in isolation. What happens in Babylon or Egypt does have consequences for Israel, and vice versa.

This conception of God's universal dominion can be considered problematic. The feminist theologian Sallie McFague has observed that the so-called "monarchical model" of God, so deeply embedded in Western culture, is damaging for at least three reasons: "in the monarchical model, God is distant from the world, relates only to the human world, and controls that world through domination and benevolence."<sup>11</sup> If McFague's critique is correct, then Ezekiel's portrayal of Yahweh should be rejected as one of the sources of this powerful yet damaging metaphor. Especially in Yahweh's dealings with Babylon and Egypt, we see not only divine control through domination, which McFague condemns, but also the perpetuation of hierarchies: Babylon can and should profit from Egypt's downfall; Egypt must never seek to be Babylon's



**The Prophet Ezekiel**

Simone Martini (1284–1344). *The Prophet Ezekiel*. 1320. Oil on wood. Tondo. Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon, France [Photo Credit: R.G. Ojeda. / Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource]

equal; and somehow Egypt's belittling enhances Israel's prestige. The win-lose aspect inherent in the kingship metaphor must be frankly acknowledged. On the other hand, Ezekiel's use of the kingship metaphor allows him to maintain that no rebel is beyond the reach of God. Neither of Israel's "lovers" is an evil that must be eradicated; rather, both can and should be rehabilitated, brought back into a cosmos ordered and ruled by God.

Part of the difficulty we moderns have with the kingship metaphor may be due to our tendency to divorce it from the sphere of political and historical reality for which it was intended. Ezekiel 29 is, primarily, a vision of a new world order, a redrawing of boundaries and a redistribution of power so that Israel can take its place among the nations. Contrary to McFague's contention that the monarchical model implies that "God can be God only if we are nothing,"<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel maintains that each nation *is* something in God's eyes. The world cannot exist without Egypt; Babylon has a divinely ordained vocation; and Israel is not restored until it regains its strength. While we cannot directly apply Ezekiel's metaphor to our own world of secular nation-states and constitutional democracies, we would do well to recall that Yahweh's universal dominion in Ezekiel 29 is for the sake of establishing a workable balance of power.

Rather than eschewing Ezekiel's political metaphor of God as king, we might examine its consequences for political ethics, and consider how it might be brought to bear on the problems we create through our own self-assertion. In this respect, the metaphor of Pharaoh as a crocodile remains a powerful critique of any nation who claims to know what is right and good for the rest of the world. Ezekiel's critique of Pharaoh's boast, "I act for myself," may usefully applied to any foreign policy based on national interests, while the image of the crocodile out of water brings to mind the inevitable danger of throwing our weight around. We might consider asking ourselves, what fish stick to our scales? Who have we destroyed in our wake?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walter Vogels, "Restauration de l'Égypte et universalisme en Ez 29, 13-16," *Biblica* 53 (1972): 473-94, esp. 476-77.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:129.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:138.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:611; citation from W. W. Hallo, "Biblical Abominations and Sumerian Taboos," *JQR* 76 (1985): 30.

<sup>5</sup> *ANET*, 374. For further references, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:612.

<sup>6</sup> For the use of covenant curses, see Vogels, "Restauration de l'Égypte," 476-80. For a historical account of Egypt's treaty with Judah, see Karl S. Freedman and Donald B. Redford, "The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian Sources," *Journal for the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 462-85.

<sup>7</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:143-44.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, "Introduction and Annotations to Ezekiel," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. Ezek 29:21.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:152-53.

<sup>10</sup> Vogels, "Restauration de l'Égypte."

<sup>11</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



# THE SUPPORT OF EGYPT

## Ezekiel 30:1-26

Chapter 29 laid out the entire sweep of Yahweh's plan for Egypt: because Pharaoh had claimed to be god to the detriment of those to whom he had pledged support, he would be destroyed and his kingdom desolated. After forty years, the kingdom would be restored to its original boundaries, but it would never again dominate other nations. A second oracle, 29:17-21, describes the reordering of the cosmos, as Yahweh, Egypt's new liege lord, hands the vastly reduced kingdom over to his loyal servant Nebuchadnezzar.

The present chapter focuses on the moment of destruction and devastation. In the first oracle, vv. 3-19, the prophet instructs an unidentified audience to wail and mourn over the devastation of Egypt. A second oracle, vv. 20-26, declares that Yahweh, who has already broken one of Pharaoh's arms, is about to break the other one while strengthening the arms of the Babylonian king. The chapter also envisions the judgment of Egypt's allies. As in the sinking of the ship Tyre, Egypt's destruction is not an isolated event.

Sandwiched between 29:17-21, which is dated to the twenty-seventh year, and 30:20-26, which is dated to the eleventh, the undated oracle in vv. 1-19 cannot with certainty be tied to a specific historical setting or occasion. The oracle itself is complex, suggesting either that several originally independent oracles have been fused into a single composition, or that prophetic formulas were employed as transitional elements in a composition that began as a literary work. The theme of breaking Egypt's dominion (30:18) is disclosed only at the end of the oracle, but it is developed throughout with reference to Egypt's allies, who are described as Egypt's "hordes" (*hāmôn*, vv. 4 [NRSV "wealth"], 10, 15) and "supporters" (*sōmēkîm*, v. 6; *ōzērîm*, v. 8) and explicitly named in v. 6. Although chapter 30 has occasionally struck commentators as an inferior imitation of the "taut strength"<sup>1</sup> of chapter 7, the reuse here of the day of Yahweh motif further underscores the theme of Yahweh's universal dominion. [Egypt's Supporters]

## COMMENTARY

**A Time of Doom for the Nations, 30:1-19**

The contours of this oracle are delineated by introductory formulas in vv. 1 and 20. Within the oracle itself, messenger formulas and recognition formulas define four subunits: vv. 3-5, 6-9, 10-12, 13-19. The first subunit, a summons to mourn, announces a day of doom for the nations. Doom falls upon Egypt in v. 4, and the second and third subunits announce judgment against Egypt's supporters (vv. 6-9) and its hordes (vv. 10-12). Only the fourth and final subunit is devoted to the destruction of Egypt itself. Describing the devastation of prominent Egyptian cities, the oracle declares that the authority of Egypt will be broken. The oracle thus emphasizes the consequences for Egypt of the fall of these nations. Like Tyre, whose beauty is not intrinsic but dependent on the goods secured from trade, Egypt owes its strength to its extended political alliances. The judgment of Egypt thus begins with the judgment of Egypt's allies. Once they are destroyed, Yahweh moves against Egypt itself.

***Summons to Mourn, 30:2b-5***

This summons to mourn is addressed to an unidentified audience, who are instructed to wail the coming day of "doom for the nations." Within the first two verses, the word "day" is repeated four times, creating a hammering effect. Motifs of the nearness of the day in v. 3 echo the announcement in 7:8, 10.<sup>2</sup> The verse also describes the universal scope of the destruction by declaring that what happens in Egypt will create anguish as far away as Ethiopia. The slain—that is, those pierced by the sword—will fall, Egypt's wealth (Heb. *hāmôn*) will be carried away, and its foundations will

**Egypt's Supporters**

**ΑΩ** That Egypt's troops are allies is indicated by their designation as *sōmēkîm* and *ʿōzērîm* ("supporters" and "helpers"). Only occasionally does the latter term refer to individual warriors (2 Sam 18:3; 21:17; Ezra 8:22); more frequently, it refers to political support (1 Kgs 1:7; Ezra 10:15; 1 Chr 12:1, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23; 1 Chr 22:17). In military contexts, it denotes equal partners (Josh 1:14; Judg 5:23), subordinates (2 Sam 8:5; 1 Kgs 20:16; Jer 47:4), and superiors (2 Chr 28:16). Most notably, Egypt is called a helper who cannot save (Isa 30:7; 31:3; cf. 2 Chr 28:16). The use of the term to describe Yahweh's aid probably depends as much on the connotation of reliability as of strength (see esp. 1 Sam 7:12; Pss 54:4; 115:9, 10, 11; contrast Pss 22:11; 72:12; 107:12; 2 Kgs 14:26).

Cf. E. Lipinski, "אָזָרִי ʾāzar," *TDOT*, 11:12-18; J. Milgrom and D. Wright, "סֹמְכִים *sāmak*," *TDOT*, 10:280.

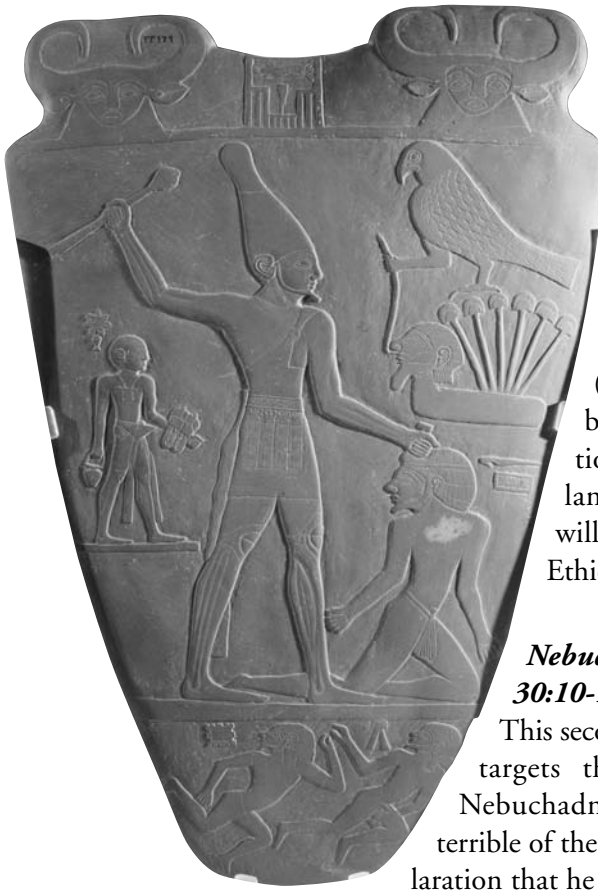


be torn down. The motif of tearing down foundations is well known in prophetic literature (Mic 1:6; Hab 3:13; Ps 137:7);<sup>3</sup> given Ezekiel's emphasis on building in connection with the establishment of Yahweh's rule, the motif is further significant as a declaration that Egypt will never again be a center of dominion.

The term *hāmôn*, which NRSV renders as "wealth," is a key term in the oracles against Egypt. Occurring about eighty times in the Hebrew Bible, it is used twenty-six times Ezekiel, sixteen times in the oracles against Egypt. The basic meanings of the term is "din" or "multitude," and its use in a wide variety of contexts suggest that it can connote wealth, military troops, arrogance, noisiness, or chaos. Given the denunciation of Egypt's arrogance in chapter 29, some commentators have chosen to render the term in v. 4 as "pomp."<sup>4</sup> That it should instead be translated "multitudes" or even "troops" in v. 4 is suggested by the enumeration of Egypt's allies in v. 5.<sup>5</sup>

These nations are cited elsewhere in the Bible as allies of Pharaoh during this period (Jer 46:9),<sup>6</sup> and extra-biblical sources provide further confirmation of these political relationships. In the fragmentary text that refers to Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Egypt in 568, Putu-yaman is cited as one of Egypt's allies.<sup>7</sup> Lud, or Lydia, a region in Anatolia, is known from the Assyrian annals to have been an ally of Egypt in the seventh century.<sup>8</sup> The term that NRSV translates as "Arabia" more likely refers to a mixed company of non-Egyptian warriors (cf. Jer 25:20; 50:37).<sup>9</sup> The land of Cub remains unknown; NRSV follows a widespread suggestion that the reference is to the north African country of Libya.

The obscure phrase "sons of the land of the covenant" (NRSV "people of the allied land") is occasionally interpreted as a cryptic reference to Judean mercenaries who served in Egypt's armies. The interpretation depends on the Letter of Aristeas (c. second century BCE), which attests to the presence of Jews and Syrians in the Egyptian army since Psammetichus's war against Ethiopia around 593 BCE.<sup>10</sup> While this reference may support the inference that Judeans served in Psammetichus's army, it does not indicate that they were mercenaries. Indeed, Aristeas 13 speaks of the "dispatching" of troops to Egypt, in what may be construed as the fulfillment of a treaty obligation. Citing evidence that Syro-Phoenician states were vassals of Egypt since at least 612, Freedy and Redford argued that Judah came into the Egyptian orbit in 609. The presence of Jewish troops in Psammetichus's army is evidence of such a relationship: "It is quite possible, in fact, that Zedekiah and his colleagues had no choice but to send troops."<sup>11</sup>



#### **Palette of Narmer**

Narmer Palette commemorating the victories of King Narmer. Horus, depicted as a falcon, delivers captives to the king. 1st dynasty (c. 3100-2890 BC).

Nekhen. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Egypt. (Credit: Werner Forman / Art Resource)

#### ***The Fall of Egypt's Supporters, 30:6-9***

The oracle continues with the proclamation of the downfall of these supporters in the land of Egypt. The extent of their destruction is described geographically: from Migdol (literally “Tower”), any one of a number of so-named fortresses on the northeast border, to Syene (modern Aswan), the ancient southern boundary of Egypt.<sup>12</sup> But the destruction is not contained within Egypt: the lands and the cities of these supporters will also be left desolate, and even far off Ethiopia will be terrified by Egypt’s doom.

#### ***Nebuchadnezzar, the Agent of Judgment, 30:10-12***

This second announcement of judgment again targets the hordes of Egypt by bringing Nebuchadnezzar and his vast armies, “the most terrible of the nations,” against them. Yahweh’s declaration that he will dry up Egypt’s streams resembles Assyria’s boast, “I dried up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt” (Isa 37:25),<sup>13</sup> and demonstrates Yahweh’s mastery over Egypt. This mastery is further indicated by his declaration that he will “sell” Egypt into the hand of evil-

doers. The expression appears only here in Ezekiel, but appears frequently in Judges, where Yahweh sells his own people into the hand of their enemies.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***Disaster on the Cities of Egypt, 30:13-19***

In the third and final announcement of judgment, Yahweh declares that he will put an end to Egypt’s authority as conveyed by its princes, idols, and cities. Conventional expressions for the day of Yahweh are employed to describe Yahweh’s assault on Egyptian cities. There is no apparent geographic order in the enumeration of the cities. Some were important in Ezekiel’s time, while others had been significant in earlier periods of Egypt’s history.<sup>15</sup> Although

some of the cities were known as places of Jewish refuge during Ezekiel's time (Jer 44:1), that is not the focus of the oracle. Rather, the intention is to convey the all-encompassing, inescapable doom that comes over Egypt.

The climactic announcement of the end of Egypt's hegemony is in v. 18, where Yahweh declares that he will break the staff or yoke-pole (Heb. *matteh*, NRSV "dominion") of Egypt. A yoke-pole was a bar that held two or more yokes together. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, breaking the yoke or yoke-pole is an image of liberation (Lev 26:13; Ezek 34:27); Jeremiah uses it explicitly for breaking the bonds of political subservience to Babylon (Jer 27:10). In the present context, the conception of Egypt's yoke-pole exposes the ironic status of Egypt's helpers, who were not free to withhold their assistance, but instead were obligated to come to Egypt's aid. Breaking the yoke-pole disperses the helpers and leaves Egypt defenseless.

### **The Broken Arm of Pharaoh, 30:20-26**

The date formula in v. 20 sets vv. 20-26 off from the preceding as a separate oracle. The date falls some three months after the date given in 29:1 and roughly corresponds with Pharaoh Hophra's intervention in Judah. As in 29:17-21, Yahweh communicates privately with the prophet. Ezekiel 29:17-21 declared that Nebuchadnezzar had served Yahweh well in his long labor against Tyre. In these verses, Yahweh declares that he will put his sword into the hand of the king of Babylon, even as he knocks the sword from Pharaoh's.

Depending on one's literary sensibilities, the repetitive style of the unit will seem either redundant or extraordinarily focused. Dominating the oracle is the motif of the bared arm, which is used of both Pharaoh and the king of Babylon. Yahweh breaks the arms of Pharaoh, but strengthens the arm of the king of Babylon. Once the sword falls from Pharaoh's hand, Yahweh puts his own sword into the hand of the Babylonian king. The oracle thus conveys the transfer of dominion from one kingdom to the other.

The notion of the bared arm of Pharaoh had long been employed in Egyptian iconography, and Pharaoh Hophra had adopted the epithet "possessed of a muscular arm" as part of his royal titulary.<sup>16</sup> In the biblical tradition, the bared arm is more typically employed as a metaphor of Yahweh's strength (cf. Isa 51:9-11). This metaphor of strength is no match for Ezekiel, however, as he easily subverts it,

breaking first one, then the other of Pharaoh's arms, which signifies the successive stages of Yahweh's defeat of Pharaoh.<sup>17</sup>

The date of the oracle has led modern commentators to regard the reference to Pharaoh's broken arm as an allusion to Hophra's aborted incursion into Judah in 588. Greenberg, however, noted that medieval commentators associated the motif with Pharaoh's defeat at Carchemish in 605, and he conjectured that the motif may also refer to Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Egypt in 601.<sup>18</sup> Greenberg's suggestions are attractive not only because these battles were known to have weakened Egypt's involvement in Syria-Palestine but also because they provide a useful complement to the oracle of 29:17-21. Just as it has taken a long time for Nebuchadnezzar to complete his work against Tyre, neither should it be a surprise that Yahweh's war against Egypt is a protracted one.

Verses 24-26 develop the motif further by contrasting Pharaoh's broken arms with the strengthened arm of the king of Babylon. Yahweh's declaration that he has put his sword into the hand of the king of Babylon is reminiscent of the song of the sword in chapter 21. Here, the motif signifies a transfer of dominion from one world power to another, which will result in all coming to acknowledge the power of Yahweh.

## CONNECTIONS

Egypt had long been known as one whose help was no help. Isaiah had condemned those who sought aid from Egypt, declaring,

The Egyptians are human, and not God;  
 their horses are flesh, and not spirit.  
 When the Lord stretches out his hand,  
 the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall,  
 and they will all perish together. (Isa 31:3 NRSV)

Ezekiel intensifies this well-known accusation against Egypt. Not only is Egypt a broken reed that cannot support others, it is so feeble that it needs its own propping up. Worse, the nations' assistance is not voluntary, but reflects an obligation that will prove to be their own undoing.

For Ezekiel's audience, the message exposes both the fundamental weakness of Egypt and the folly of entering into alliances with it. If an alliance with Egypt promises protection, then it also

carries considerable risk. When Zedekiah broke his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar to secure aid from Egypt, he did so in order to strengthen his own position against Babylon. But Egypt's promise of assistance was bought with the agreement that Zedekiah would come to Egypt's aid should Egypt be attacked. The Letter of Aristeas provides partial support for the impact of such an alliance on Judah. Even while it was seeking to defend itself against Babylon, it was forced to hand over its scarce resources to Egypt. It is not an exaggeration to say that the cost of Egypt's promise—and it was only a promise—was the life and livelihood of statelets like Judah.

Ezekiel's announcement of Yahweh's "day" against such alliances leads to a sober realization of the fragility of any human project undertaken apart from God. Ezekiel's oracle against Egypt's helpers suggests several possible areas for contemporary theological reflection. First, while looking out for one's own interests is not intrinsically wrong, self-motivated alliances seem, inevitably, to involve some degree of deception. Promises based on less-than-full disclosures about resources, intentions, or liabilities are promises that are waiting to be broken or left unfulfilled. Such deception is ultimately rooted in the inability to know or control the outcome of future events. We all well know the painful experience of hindsight, when we look back on our broken promises and excuse our actions with such claims as, "I did not know," "I did not intend," "I never meant." But it is probably also wise to suspect some degree of deception in such casual promises, and it may well reside on both sides of the agreement.

There are warnings here for both the strong and the weak, perhaps the most obvious being that the strong are never as strong as they claim and the weak never so vulnerable that they must sign away their power in desperation. Such a sober recognition of human limitations need not lead to isolationism or isolating illusions of self-sufficiency. Indeed, the Bible begins with the premise that it is not good for human beings to be alone, and the Lord God searches long and hard to find a suitable "helper" for human beings—the word used in Genesis is the same one used in this chapter in reference to Egypt's helpers (Gen 2:18, 20). True companionship and genuine help is deeply needed, and the absence of help is unbearable for individuals and kingdoms alike (cf. Job 29:12; Pss 22:11; 72:12; Lam 1:7; Ps 107:12; 2 Kgs 14:26).

The genius of prophetic thought is to see in the breakdown of all such alliances the disclosure of Yahweh's "day." Yahweh, who remains utterly loyal to his promise despite all human betrayals (cf.

Ezek 16), stands opposed to “the yoke-pole of Egypt,” a fitting metaphor for any alliance that purports to strengthen human communities while actually enslaving them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The expression is Zimmerli's; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:128.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32* (BibOr 37; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:128.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:158. For a full discussion of the use of *hāmôn* in Ezekiel, see Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 104 (Freibourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 117-29.

<sup>5</sup> The interpretation offered here is consistent with the Targum's rendering of the term; see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:615. For the use of *hāmôn* as “troops,” see Judg 4:7.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:621.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:621-22.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Aristeas 13.

<sup>11</sup> Karl S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford, “The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian Sources,” *Journal for the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 478.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:606.

<sup>13</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:163.

<sup>14</sup> Judg 2:14; 3:8; 4:2, 9; 10:7; 1 Sam 12:9; cited by Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:163 n. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:165.

<sup>16</sup> Freedy and Redford, “The Dates of Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian Sources,” 482-83.

<sup>17</sup> For the motif of breaking the arm of the enemy, see Jer 48:25; Ps 10:15; Job 38:15.

<sup>18</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:634.

# THE LESSON OF ASSYRIA

## Ezekiel 31:1-18

This, the fifth oracle against Egypt, begins in 31:1-2 with a date formula and instructions to Ezekiel to prophesy, and ends in v. 18 with a concluding formula for a divine utterance. Although the chapter revolves around a relatively concise metaphor, it is not without its complexities. The oracle begins and ends with an address to Pharaoh and his hordes, yet it is primarily devoted to the greatness and fall of Assyria. Three subunits share a handful of motifs, including trees, shade, waters, and Eden, though each subunit takes the motifs in unexpected directions. In addition, the chapter picks up several themes and motifs that appeared earlier in the book, most notably the portrayal of the king of Judah as a cedar growing by abundant water (17:5). Although some commentators have argued that the chapter is a composite oracle, all of these disparate elements suggest that it was very carefully crafted to reflect on the end of the great empires. Assyria had fallen, and Egypt, a much smaller “tree” in the garden of God, cannot hope to stand.

The oracle begins with a question posed to Pharaoh: “Whom are you like in your greatness?” (31:2b). A meditation on Assyria and its fate is provided as an answer to the question. The description of Assyria in vv. 3b-9 is so positive that at least one critic has suggested that it was originally a hymn of praise to Assyria.<sup>1</sup> Breaks in the person and number of the pronouns, from a second-person address to Egypt in v. 2b to a third-person narrative description of the tree in vv. 4-9, are cited as evidence that this older hymn is now applied to Egypt. The second section, vv. 10-14, recounts the judgment of Assyria for its pride, and applies this cautionary tale to all the nations. The third section, vv. 15-18, seals Assyria’s fate and applies the lesson directly to Pharaoh. Once the cedar descends into Sheol, Yahweh causes the waters of the deep to cover it. The unit ends with a second question to Pharaoh, which asks him to consider which of the trees of Eden was like him. Not only is Pharaoh not as great as he thought he was, his fate is sealed.

## COMMENTARY

**The Cosmic Tree, 31:2-9**

Ezekiel is instructed to address Pharaoh and “his horde” (*hāmônô*). Although the term may refer to Pharaoh’s “pomp” or arrogance, personality traits are not usually addressed as subjects in oracles. Because the entire chapter develops the metaphor of the greatness of the tree with reference to its allies (cf. vv. 6b, 12, 17), NRSV’s translation “his horde” is preferred.

“Assyria” is rather abruptly proposed as the answer to the question, though it is not certain whether this is Pharaoh’s answer or the prophet’s. Despite the widespread support of the ancient textual witnesses, many commentators emend “Assyria” (Heb. *ʾaššûr*) to “cypress” (Heb. *tēʾaššûr*). But there is no text-critical reason to emend the text. Second, the question “who” (Heb. *mî*) invites a comparison with a human being, not an object. Third, the reference to Assyria fits the context of Ezekiel’s oracles against Egypt and anticipates the reference to Assyria in 32:20. Finally, the reference fits the worldview reflected throughout the book of Ezekiel: Assyria is no longer a power to be reckoned with, but its cultural and political influence continues to be felt in nearly every chapter of the book. [\[The Glory That Was Assyria\]](#)

Assyria is portrayed as a mighty cedar of Lebanon whose branches provide dense shade and protection for birds, beasts, and nations. While NRSV’s translation emphasizes its great height by saying that its top was in the clouds, MT emphasizes the denseness of the thick boughs (31:3b, 10, 14) and is more consistent with the emphasis placed on the tree’s shade throughout the oracle.

Although the precise origin of the metaphor remains unknown, it is likely that it was developed in association with ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the cosmic tree. In Assyrian iconography, the king is depicted as the gardener or caretaker of the sacred tree, which is a symbol of the entire cosmos (see [\[The Cosmic Tree and the Assyrian Throne Room\]](#)). In chapter 31, the cosmic significance of the tree is evident in the description of its nourishment by subterranean waters (v. 4), as well as in its provision of a home for birds, animals, and nations (v. 6). From the underworld, it is nourished by the waters of the deep (Heb. *tēhôm*). Although these waters are associated elsewhere with the teeming waters of chaos (cf. Gen 1:2), here they are subdued and thus become the life force not only of Assyria, but of the whole earth (see [\[Many Waters\]](#)). Birds build



their nests and animals give birth in the shade of this great tree, which is also a place of refuge for the nations (v. 6). Indeed, what Assyria has become is better than the garden of Eden, since none of the trees in the garden of Eden can rival its beauty and greatness.

The closing verse emphasizes that it was Yahweh who made the tree so beautiful. If, as some commentators have suggested, this verse is a later addition to an original hymn celebrating the greatness of Assyria, then it is evidence of reflection on the nature of the work of Yahweh in history. But even here, close parallels with Assyrian conceptions may be detected. In Assyrian iconography, the human king tends the tree and is aided in this work by protective deities, while the god Ashur, depicted in a winged sun disk, hovers over the tree. What is distinctive about Ezekiel 31:9 is that it is Yahweh, not the Assyrian god, who allows the tree to flourish. If the cosmos has been so ordered that one kingdom, Assyria, has come to provide health and prosperity to the entire created order, then that order is ultimately Yahweh's doing. The unity, coherence, and security of the cosmos is entirely the work of the God of Israel.

### **No More Lofty Trees, 31:10-14**

A messenger formula introduces the second major section of the unit, which is structured as an oracle of judgment. Although the motivation for the judgment implies that Assyria has been judged because it has grown high, the account of Assyria's growth in v. 10 simply recapitulates that for which Assyria has already been praised: it grew tall and thick. Rather than condemning it for its growth which, after all, was not its own doing but Yahweh's, the oracle condemns Assyria for taking pride in what it has become.

The judgment for such pride is to chop down the tree. In v. 11, Yahweh declares that he has given the tree into the hands of the "ram" (NRSV "prince") of the nations, who has dealt with it as its wickedness deserves. Foreigners from the most terrible of the nations will chop it down and leave its boughs strewn among the mountains. The peoples who have enjoyed its shade will abandon it, and the birds and wild animals will settle on it, not, this time, in the sense of peaceful nesting, but rather in the sense of restless displacement.

While it is fairly certain that the ram of the nations is an allusion to Nebuchadnezzar, it is worth noting that Assyria's role as the agent of cosmic order is not conferred upon him. Rather, the text depicts Nebuchadnezzar as a prince of misrule. Used of chiefs and leaders elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the epithet "ram" may connect such leaders with

threats to order (cf. esp. 2 Kgs 24:15; Ezek 34:17-19; Dan 8:2-4). Certainly the ram is paired here with the “most terrible of the nations,” and once the tree is cut down, there is no more protection for any of the vulnerable nations who had sought shelter in the shade of Assyria. Indeed, the purpose of Nebuchadnezzar’s attack on Assyria is stated in v. 14: it is not to establish a new world order, but to ensure that no other tree should grow to such greatness. What the text envisions is, in short, the end of empire.

### Confined to Sheol, 31:15-18

The third subunit underscores the finality of Assyria’s end. On the day the cosmic tree went down to Sheol, Yahweh closed up the deep and dammed up the rivers and streams. What was once a source of nourishment now becomes Assyria’s prison. Assyria’s demise is felt in the lands of both the living and the dead: Yahweh clothes the trees of Lebanon in darkness, while all the trees of Eden, which had been well watered but are now in Sheol, are comforted at Assyria’s demise. The nations quake, and Assyria’s allies, those who had sought shelter in its shade, are condemned to Sheol as well.

The unit closes with a resumption of the address to Pharaoh that echoes the initial question. Pharaoh has not measured up to the comparison with Assyria, so he is asked to consider which of the trees in Eden is like him. The comparison is ominous, however, since all of the trees in Eden are now in Sheol.

#### The Glory That Was Assyria



The image of Assyria as a cosmic tree drawing nourishment from the subterranean depths and providing protection and security for all living things is among the more positive portrayals of Assyria among the prophetic writings. More typical are Isaiah’s portrayals of Assyria as a brash tyrant boasting of his own strength (Isa 10:5-15; 36–37), Jonah’s distaste at having to take the word of God to the city of Nineveh, and Nahum’s rejoicing over Assyria’s destruction.

In contrast to the above texts, which indicate that Judeans consistently resisted Assyrian domination, the book of Ezekiel supplies indirect evidence of the embrace,

at least in some Judean circles, of Assyria’s pervasive cultural and political influence. Specific aspects of this influence have been discussed elsewhere in this commentary, and the reader is encouraged to read Ezek 31 in light of these earlier discussions. To suggest that Ezekiel has been influenced by Assyrian cultural idioms is not, of course, to say that Ezekiel longed for the good old days. Even so, Ezekiel stands in Assyria’s long shadow, and the influence of that great empire on the prophet’s thought cannot be ignored.

## CONNECTIONS

The oracles against the nations shed significant light on prophetic views of history as the arena of divine activity. That is certainly the case in Ezekiel 31, which declares that all political and cultural greatness comes from Yahweh. Yahweh caused the great cedar Assyria to grow into a refuge for the entire cosmos. But Yahweh also stood sovereign over that tree, and commanded barbarous nations to cut it down.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the entire book is the extent to which it reflects older Assyrian iconography and literary conventions. The influences are so great, in fact, that a scholar writing early in the twentieth century argued that the book must have been written by a northern Israelite during the height of Assyrian hegemony in the late eighth century BC.<sup>3</sup> But there is another way to understand this pervasive Assyrian influence: it is an indication of the lasting effects of Assyrian culture even after its demise in the late seventh century BC.

If Ezekiel was thirty years old in 592 BC, he would have been a child when the empire began to fall to the Babylonians. We do not have a report of Ezekiel's education, but we can trace its effects in his writings. As learned as he was in the laws and traditions of Judah and Israel, he was also well versed in Assyrian literary and iconographic traditions. It is no exaggeration to say that Ezekiel was schooled for empire: he was immersed in two worlds, the larger cosmopolitan world of the now defunct Assyrian empire, and the more locally defined world of the house of Israel.

Tragically for Ezekiel and his people, both worlds had collapsed, leaving them to build a new world out of the ruins of the old. In this kind of situation, Ezekiel's appropriation of Assyrian literary traditions can fruitfully be interpreted in light of postcolonial literature and criticism. [Postcolonial Criticism] A possible analogy to the book of Ezekiel is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a story told from the perspective of the first child born on the day that India gained its independence from Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> Structured as an autobiography, the narrative recounts the struggles to define Indian identity and to forge a functioning government out of the diverse segments of the Indian population during the first decades of independence. Independence does not, of course, lead to a clean break with either the centuries of British rule or the local appropriations and emulations of British commerce, education, and government. Rushdie's writing is itself a testament to the enduring impact of British culture on Indian letters. Postcolonial criticism addresses the manner in which nations that have gained their independence

**Pride and Power**

No man or nation is wise or good enough to hold the power which the great nations in the victorious alliance hold without being tempted to both pride and injustice. Pride is the religious dimension of the sin which flows from absolute power; and injustice is its social dimension. The great nations speak so glibly of their passion for justice and peace; and so obviously betray interests which contradict justice and peace. This is precisely the kind of spiritual pride which the prophets had in mind when they pronounced divine judgment upon the nations which said, "I am god, I sit in the seat of God." Consider how blandly the victorious nations draw plans for destroying the economic and political life of defeated nations in the hope of rebuilding them as democracies "from the ground up." This lack of consideration for the organic aspects of the social existence of other nations, this confidence in our ability to create something better by our fiat, is a perfect illustration of the pride of power. It is not made any more sufferable by the idea that we are doing all this for the sake of "purging" the defeated nations of their evil and bestowing our "democracy" upon them. The very absurdity of restoring democracy by the will of the conqueror contains the pretension against which the prophets inveighed.

Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Nemesis of Nations: Ezekiel 31:1-14," in *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), 59-72.

since World War II come to terms with such conflicted and complex pasts and come into their own identities.

The analogy allows us to consider the manner in which the book of Ezekiel is related to the dominant culture of his time. If Judah is to Assyria as India is to Great Britain, then Ezekiel was heir to the Assyrian cultural heritage in a way that is comparable to Rushdie's schooling in Western philosophical and literary traditions. In Ezekiel's time, the "master narrative" posited that the order of the cosmos was derived from the Assyrian king's dutiful care of the "cosmic tree." This narrative was spelled out in numerous ways throughout the Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian world, particularly in victory steles and treaties which were the common coin of empire. There is abundant evidence in the biblical literature to indicate the pervasive impact of Assyrian culture and ideology: even the book of Deuteronomy, arguably the most influential book in the Old Testament, is deeply indebted to the Assyrian convention of forging treaties with its vassals.

Ezekiel's relationship to Assyrian traditions exhibits traits characteristic of postcolonial writing. Though steeped in the traditions of Assyrian culture and politics, he remains deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, he can speak of Assyria in glowing terms as a tree that provides abundant shade for all the living creatures of the earth. There is no satire in this metaphor; if anything, he invokes it to declare that Assyria was without equal. When the nations of the world sought refuge in Assyria, they found it. What activity there is—birds nesting, animals giving birth, and nations seeking

### Postcolonial Criticism



While literary studies often address patterns of syncretism and enculturation, two issues set postcolonial theory apart from this more familiar enterprise. First, postcolonial criticism is explicitly concerned with the problems facing developing nations that have gained independence from European colonizers since World War II, as well as with the continuing cultural pressures of the phenomenon of globalization. One important aim of postcolonial theory is to aid local peoples in the creation of genuinely sustainable cultures and communities. In certain respects, this aim echoes Reinhold Niebuhr's prescient critique after World War II of American attempts to import democratic forms of government to defeated nations. What Niebuhr observed then remains true today: such attempts to impose Western liberal traditions fail to acknowledge the "organic aspects" of social existence (see **[Pride and Power]**). Sustainable forms of community and government cannot be imposed from the outside and must always accommodate local traditions and values. Acknowledging the complex interrelationship of inherited Western values and local traditions, postcolonial theorists seek to articulate ways in which local productions of cultural symbols facilitate genuine social stability.

The second issue stems from this political concern. The issues are succinctly summarized by Homi K. Bhabha in an essay that provides a general introduction to postcolonial criticism:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of "minorities" within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity.

Bhabha points out that the questions addressed in postcolonial discourse involve transnational and translational considerations. They are transnational in the sense that the

primary experience of subjugated peoples has been displacement:

Contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the "middle passage" of slavery and indenture, the "voyage out" of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World.

Bhabha situates the translational enterprise within this context, and adds to it the explosion of information and media technologies, all of which, he notes,

make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences—literature, art, music, ritual, life, death and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value

Within this context of displacement and loss of meaning, every cultural symbol can be contested: a single event may have radically different meaning depending on one's social and political location. In such a situation, the postcolonial theorist asserts the right of each culture to define its own identity by assigning its own meaning to such contested symbols, as well as by creating new symbols of its own. Given the pervasive power of Western culture in nearly every aspect of economic, cultural, and political life, the very work of producing culture is a matter of survival for minority peoples.

Homi K. Bhabha, "Postcolonial Criticism," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Library Association, 1992), 437–65, esp. 437, 438.

shelter—reflects the harmonious interaction of a world at rest (cf. [Ammon]). Ezekiel also construes Israelite identity in terms that resonate with the Assyrian view of Israel and Judah. Throughout the

Assyrian historical inscriptions, both kingdoms are presented as intractable rebels. The subjugation of Judah was so important that Sennacherib devoted one entire room of his “Palace Without Rival” to the depiction of his victory over the city of Lachish.

On the other hand, Ezekiel condemns the Israelite and Judean alliances with Assyria as “whoring” (chs. 16, 23), a metaphor whose associations with illicit sexuality, transgression of boundaries, and loss of control, aptly expresses the ambivalence of a compromised national identity. If Ezekiel accepts the Assyrian definition of Israel’s identity, he nevertheless traces it back to a more fundamental rebellion against its first covenant, which was to have conferred on it the unique identity as the kingdom of Yahweh.

A second way in which Ezekiel 31 reflects the postcolonial experience is its sense of the passing away of an old order. The felling of Assyria is not simply the passing of one

empire among a great succession of empires but the hoped-for end of the ways of the nations. As Egypt seeks to take Assyria’s place, Yahweh declares that Assyria has been brought low *so that* no other kingdom would ever vaunt itself over the other kingdoms. What is destroyed, therefore, is not simply a single instance of domination, but the universal tendency of one nation to achieve ascendancy over another. The demise of a familiar world order brings its own anxieties, however: the motif of birds settling on the fallen trunk is a haunting image of restlessness at the end of an era. The birds return to what they had known, but find it forever changed.



### The Siege of Lachish

In a wall relief which occupies an entire room of Sennacherib’s palace, the siege of the Judean fortress Lachish (c. 701 BCE) is recounted. Assyrian archers advance on the city; battering rams scale the city walls; Judean men, women, and children are led out of the city and presented to Sennacherib. The inscription over Sennacherib identifies the scene: “Sennacherib king of the world king of Assyria. On a seat he sat and the booty of Lachish before him it passed.”

T. C. Mitchell, *Biblical Archaeology: Documents from the British Museum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 60–64.

British Museum, London, Great Britain. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

If one were to seek contemporary parallels, one might find it in the legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western imperialism. The postcolonial literary critic Homi K. Bhabha has observed that the European nations, and particularly Great Britain, incorporated a civilizing mission into their more commercial ventures. Associated with the Christian evangelical mission, English language and culture were offered as a promise of peace and salvation to peoples who were perceived as benighted heathens. Now that the sun has set on the European age of empire, the lasting effects of colonization and the ambiguous results of the civilizing mission can be discerned in the continuing struggles in many regions of the world to create sustainable, functioning governments. As in Ezekiel's motif of the birds settling on the fallen tree, ours is a time of profound restlessness, characterized by a succession of failed governments, civil wars, and local genocide. Ezekiel's metaphor reminds us that there is no going back to a simpler time of apparent peace. As an alternative to the hegemonic shade of Assyria, Ezekiel offers what in current parlance may be called a pluralistic vision. Never again will a single tree tower over the others, but there will be many trees, all achieving parity in the garden of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Harald Schweizer, "Der Sturz des Weltenbaumes (Ez 31)—literarkritisch betrachtet," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 165 (1981): 197-213, esp. 212.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Exod 15:15; 2 Kgs 24:15; Ezek 17:13; Lawrence Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32* (BibOr 37; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 113-14.

<sup>3</sup> James Smith, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: A New Interpretation* (London: S.P.C.K., 1931).

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin, 1980).





# THE END OF EGYPT AND ITS HORDES

## Ezekiel 32:1-32

This chapter, which contains the sixth and seventh oracles against Egypt, brings the oracles against the nations to a close by announcing the definitive end of Egypt and its allies. As the book sets the stage for a restoration of Israel under the just rule of Yahweh, these oracles declare an end to the political powers that had seduced Israel to be like them. It is too late for Pharaoh, who takes his place among the dishonored dead. But for the house of Israel, the end of the nations marks a new beginning.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Lamentation over the Dragon, 32:2-16**

Date formulas in 32:1 and 17 divide the chapter into two oracles delivered on two separate occasions. According to the date in 32:1, the oracle in vv. 2-16 was delivered two months after the fall of Jerusalem. However, since themes and motifs that were introduced in earlier oracles are more fully developed and expanded here, it is more likely that this oracle was reshaped to fit its present literary context.

An *inclusio* identifies the oracle as a dirge, or lament. Ezekiel is instructed to pronounce this dirge over Egypt in v. 1, and in v. 16, it is labeled as a song that will be sung by the women of the nations. If any dirge is present, it is to be found only in v. 2, and only in a highly adapted form. Dirges usually revolve around a temporal contrast between the past glory and present demise of the deceased. In the hands of the prophets, the dirge became a highly effective meditation on the follies of self-deception, since death negates all human claims of invincibility. In 32:2, the contrast between past and present is lost, although the contrast between perception and reality remains: “You seemed<sup>1</sup> to be a lion, but you were only a dragon fouling the seas.”

What remains of the dirge form becomes the basis for the ensuing oracle of judgment.

A second characteristic feature of this oracle is its resumption and elaboration of motifs that appeared in earlier oracles against Egypt. Pharaoh was called a dragon in the seas in 29:1, and that characterization is parodied in 32:1. Motifs from chapter 29 are more fully developed to emphasize Yahweh's decisive victory over Pharaoh (cf. 29:5, 32:4-6; 29:11, 32:13-15).

### ***The Lamentation, 32:2***

This lamentation over Pharaoh revolves around the contrast between the universal perception of Pharaoh as a lion and his reality as a sea-dragon. NRSV renders the first line to suggest that Pharaoh's own self-perception is at issue: "You consider yourself a lion." One argument in favor of this translation is the tendency throughout the oracles against the nations to cite the addressee's self-regard as the basis for judgment (27:1; 28:2; 29:3; cf. 26:1). However, since the verb form can imply that this perception was more widely shared, Greenberg proposes the translation "You seemed to be a lion."<sup>2</sup> Greenberg's translation not only fits the



### **The Dying Lion**

Small alabaster wall panel showing a lion struck by one of the king's arrows; blood gushes from the lion's mouth, veins stand out on his face. Lions symbolized everything that was hostile to urban civilization and there was a long tradition of royal lion hunts in Mesopotamia.

Stone panel from Ninveh, northern Iraq, Neo-Assyrian, 645 bc. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

political situation—since Judah and other Palestinian states regarded Egypt as a worthy political power—it also is consistent with the oracle’s emphasis on the nations’ response to Egypt’s fall. At issue is not simply Pharaoh’s self-regard, but world opinion.

Elsewhere, Ezekiel invokes metaphors in order to subvert them by exploiting hidden connotations. Here, Ezekiel exchanges one metaphor for another. Pharaoh was thought to be a lion of the nations, but he is really only a dragon of the seas. What is the significance of the exchange? One clue to Ezekiel’s meaning may be in his use elsewhere of the term *kēpîr*, “young lion.” In chapter 19, the term is used of the princes of Judah, whose mother teaches them to catch prey and devour humans. Their actions rouse the concern of the surrounding nations, who catch them with hooks and nets and hand them over to their overlords for punishment (Ezek 19:2-9). In chapter 19, the lion is a metaphor for a rebellious ruler. Yet even if he seems dangerous, he can be controlled [*Lion Imagery in Egypt and Mesopotamia*]).

By contrast, the dragon metaphor invokes the arena of divine combat. Unlike 29:3, which locates the dragon in the Nile, the cosmic connotations of the dragon are highlighted in 32:2. The term used in 32:2 and 29:3 for the dragon appears as a parallel term elsewhere in the Bible for Leviathan (Ps 74:12-15, “twisting one”) and Rahab (Ps 89:9-10), and is also associated with the raging rivers and seas that threaten cosmic order.<sup>3</sup> The writhing,

### Lion Imagery in Egypt and Mesopotamia



Discussing the metaphor of the lion, commentators frequently refer to Egyptian iconography, in which lion imagery depicts both royal and divine power. One portrait of Ramses III depicts him with the head of a lion and describes him as “The lion, the lord of victory, concealed, going forward, and making a conquest—his heart is full of might,” while another depicts a lion running alongside his chariot. The political connotations of the metaphor are evident in these illustrations: no enemy can stand against the fierce power of the lion. If one interprets 32:2 as a reference to Pharaoh’s own self-perception, these examples provide ample visual evidence of Ezekiel’s appropriation of Egyptian symbolism.

If the Egyptian imagery conveys the power of the king to vanquish his enemies, Ezekiel’s usage leads us to suspect that the imagery can also connote the sense of Pharaoh as the enemy, not the sustainer, of royal order. In ch. 19, the same term *kēpîr* is employed in an allegory of the violation of political treaties. The Judean princes are depicted as young lions who prowl among other lions, catch prey, devour

humans, and demolish strongholds (19:2, 3, 6-7, see [*Lions and Assyrian Iconography*]). Given Ezekiel’s full development of lion imagery in the context of political rebellion, it is more likely that the portrayal of Pharaoh as a “*kēpîr* of the nations” calls attention to his propensity to violate treaties and encourage others to do likewise.

This latter connotation of lions as threats to political order is more fully developed in Mesopotamian art and iconography. In addition to portraying their prowess in war, Assyrian kings also displayed their victory in the hunt. Indeed, some of the more exquisite sculptures to have survived portray a lioness in the agony of defeat.

Iconography description cited by Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., NICOT (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:200 n. 18. For other epithets, see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols., (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 2:657; Lawrence Boadt, *Ezekiel’s Oracles against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32* (BibOr 37; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 132. All of these discussions are indebted to the masterful collection of citations and accompanying illustrations by E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vol. 7, *Pagan Symbols in Judaism*, Bollingen Series 37 (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 46–50.

twisting character of the dragon is aptly captured in 29:3, as he thrashes about and muddies the waters.

The closest analogies to the defeat of the dragon are in the biblical *Chaoskampf* traditions, in which Yahweh alone subdues the raging powers of the seas and crushes the head(s) of Leviathan (Ps 74:12-15; see also Pss 89:9-10; 87:4; Isa 51:9; Job 26:12), thereby establishing his kingship over the heavens and the earth (Pss 65:7; 93:3-4; 104:6-7). One may therefore suggest that the exchange of metaphors is intended to heighten the mythic and cosmic dimensions of Pharaoh's political actions. He has not simply opposed Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, he has challenged the sovereignty of Yahweh, the God of the heavens and the earth.

### ***Divine Combat, 32:3-15***

Exposed as a threat to cosmic order, Pharaoh is fully and publicly defeated. In an assembly of many peoples, Yahweh captures Pharaoh in his dragnet and throws him out on the open field to be devoured by the birds and beasts. The dragnet is reminiscent of Marduk's victory over the goddess Tiamat (*Enuma elish* IV 95). The motif of leaving the defeated enemy unburied in the open field was employed in the first oracle against Egypt (29:5); in the present oracle the cosmic dimensions of the victory are intensified, since Pharaoh's bulk is so vast that it fills the valleys and his blood and guts fill the watercourses. Assyrian parallels underscore the cosmic dimensions in their likening of royal battles to the actions of the storm-god: "The corpses of their warriors I hurled down in the destructive battle like the storm-(god). Their blood I caused to flow in the valleys and on the high places of the mountains" (Ashurnasirpal I, *ARAB*, I.221).<sup>4</sup> Further indications of the cosmic dimensions of this victory include the darkening of the skies (cf. Isa 50:2-3; Ps 18:9)<sup>5</sup> and Yahweh's control of the waters (vv. 13-15, cf. Pss 65:7; 93:3-4; 104:6-7; Job 26:12). Moderns are likely to construe v. 14 as an image of peace: "Then I will make their waters clear, and cause their streams to run like oil, says the LORD God." Yet this is more likely intended as an image of the completeness of Yahweh's victory over Egypt's turbulence. All human and animal life is destroyed, so there are no feet or hooves to disturb the waters. The image more closely resembles the birds settling on the branches of the fallen cedar in 31:13 and suggests the absence of life rather than its renewal. Far from a promise of new life, the image quite simply demonstrates Yahweh's power over that which Pharaoh thought he could control.

***Colophon, 32:16***

The unit ends with the declaration that this is a lamentation to be chanted by the daughters (NRSV “women”) of the nations. Whether the women are to be regarded as individual women or as “daughter-towns,” as elsewhere in Ezekiel, the lamentation signals the end of Pharaoh’s pretension to be a lion among the nations. Exposed as a threat to cosmic order, Pharaoh has been decisively defeated, never again to trouble the land of the living.

**The Death of Egypt’s Hordes, 32:17-32**

The seventh and final oracle sends Egypt and its hordes down to Sheol, the land of the dead, where they will join other kingdoms that once terrorized the land of the living. The oracle contains a number of difficulties, and there is as yet little agreement regarding its genre, text, or, for that matter, meaning. Although the unit employs grief language and is associated with burial, it lacks the characteristics of a dirge. Some have argued that it may be related to lamentations for the dead, and such observations do help to make sense of the consolation of Pharaoh in 32:31.<sup>6</sup>

Genres typically associated with prophecy do not contribute significantly to the present form of the oracle. Although Ezekiel’s act of “sending” Pharaoh to the land of the dead may indicate the power and vitality of the prophetic word, formulas typical of prophetic judgment oracles are absent. Even the phrase, “they spread terror in the land of the living” (32:22, 25, 26, 27, 30), which describes the acts of these mighty nations when they were alive, is not given as a reason for judgment. While modern readers might desire a condemnation of terrorism on moral grounds, the phrase is used in a neutral sense to indicate the exercise of sovereignty. Once these mighty powers are consigned to the underworld, Yahweh becomes the one who spreads terror (32:32; Heb. “I,” contra NRSV “he” [Pharaoh]). Although these nations may be guilty of attempting to supplant Yahweh in their claim to sovereignty, the poem does not argue that point but simply declares that their exercise of power has come to a shameful end.

A number of text-critical problems further complicate the assessment of the nature and purpose of the oracle. For example, some commentators emend v. 18 so that the daughters of the nations join Ezekiel in wailing over the hordes of Egypt: “Mortal, wail over the hordes of Egypt, and send them down, you (NRSV “Egypt”; Heb. “it”) and the daughters of the majestic nations.” While such an emendation has the advantage of linking vv. 17-32 to the

mourning women in 32:16, it strains credulity to imagine mourning women participating in the act of sending Egypt down to the underworld. In order to avoid possible misreadings such as these, the present commentary seeks to interpret the Masoretic text as it stands.

Finally, it remains an open question why these particular nations—Assyria, Elam, Meshech and Tubal, Edom, and the princes of Sidon (i.e., Phoenicia)—should be the ones to greet Egypt on its entry into Sheol. Commentators have not yet identified a pattern linking these nations; not surprisingly, the failure to identify a pattern has led to suggestions that an original poem has been secondarily expanded.

Assyrian historiographical traditions provide useful clues for interpreting the motif of sending the armies down to the underworld, as well as to the inclusion of these particular nations. The Assyrian inscriptions typically portray rebel kings yoked to the chariot of the Assyrian king (*ARAB*, 2:793, 992, 996), paying tribute, or working on building projects. But when rebels continually disrupt Assyrian rule, they are, finally, consigned to the land of the dead. This motif is clearly associated with Elam, a nation that figures prominently in Ezekiel's roster of the dead in chapter 32. In a recital that resembles the repetitiveness of Ezekiel 32:17-32, Ashurbanipal describes the fates of kings who allied with Elam against him. He tore up the graves of dead kings and "laid restlessness among their shades" (*ARAB*, 2:810), sent living kings to their "mournful abode in that place of desolation," and made other rebel kings "more dead than [they were] before" (*ARAB*, 2:815). Elsewhere, Ashurbanipal attributes this decisive, final victory to the gods. Hearing Ashurbanipal's prayer and deciding in his favor against the Elamite king, Ishtar and Nergal defeat the latter in battle and later "destroyed his life through a miserable death, and gave him over to the 'Land of No Return' from which none [comes back]" (*ARAB*, 2:934).

Assyrian historiographical conventions also shed light on the inclusion of these particular nations in 32:17-32. In their summary inscriptions, Assyrian kings would describe the extent of their kingdoms by enumerating the distant lands that they had conquered. Elam typically defined the eastern boundary, while the western boundary was often defined as extending from Egypt into the region of the Sidonians (often identified as the island of Cyprus), Israel and Edom (*ARAB*, 1:739) and as far north as Meshech and Tubal (*ARAB*, II.16, 71). These nations do not precisely conform to the four points of the compass, but they do represent the axes of

Assyrian power. None of these kingdoms could be called docile vassals, however, and the Assyrian annals frequently refer to rebellions that required suppression in these border states.

When Ezekiel's description of the underworld is interpreted in light of these Assyrian historiographical traditions, the structure governing the oracle can be construed as a final comment on Egypt's attempt to replace Assyria as the center of world power. Egypt's pretension to world dominance was already suggested in the comparison with Assyria in chapter 31, and that comparison is brought back to mind with the question in 32:17: "Whom do you surpass in loveliness?" [An Outline of Ezekiel 32:17-32] Whatever Egypt's claims to loveliness, it will not take its place beside Assyria in the land of the dead, but will instead join the uncircumcised, dishonored ones. In essence, the oracle buries the world of power politics as it was known in Ezekiel's time, and sets the stage for a new polity under the rule of Yahweh.

### *The Address to Egypt, 32:17-19*

A date formula and a report of the reception of the divine word introduce the oracle. Although the Hebrew text lacks a reference to the month, commentators assume it was delivered in the same month as the oracle in 32:1-16. The oracle is thus dated two weeks later.

In v. 18, Ezekiel is instructed to wail over the hordes of Egypt and send them down. The question in v. 19, "Whom do you surpass in beauty?" echoes that of 31:1, where a comparison with

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#### **An Outline of Ezekiel 32:17-32**



32:17 Date formula; reception of divine word

32:18 Instructions to Ezekiel to wail and send Egypt and its hordes down to the Pit

32:19-28 Egypt joins the fallen warriors

32:19 Direct address to Egypt, who is sent down to Sheol

32:20-21 Report of Egypt's demise and the response of the fallen warriors

32:22-26 Fallen warriors in Sheol

32:22-23 Assyria

32:24-25 Elam

32:26 Meshech and Tubal

32:27 Honorable and dishonorable burials of slain warriors

32:28 Direct address to Egypt, who will join the dishonored dead

32:29-32 The consolation of Egypt

32:29-30 Other dishonored dead: Allies of Egypt (?)

32:29 Edom

32:30 Phoenicia

32:31 Pharaoh sees and understands

32:32 Yahweh is the source of Pharaoh's power

Assyria found Egypt wanting. The present oracle again establishes a contrast between Assyria, who is buried honorably with its assembled warriors, and Egypt, who will join the dishonored dead.

Whether the warriors are consigned to lie among the uncircumcised appears not to reflect actual cultural and historical practices of the time, but rather to indicate one's shamed, dishonored status in the land of the dead. Thus, even though Assyria did not practice circumcision, this text does not condemn it to lie among the uncircumcised in Sheol. By contrast, even though the Egyptians, Edomites, and Phoenicians did practice circumcision, they are consigned to lie among the uncircumcised dead. Given the military context of the oracle, one suspects the connection between shame and uncircumcision is best understood in light of military practices. Greenberg notes that the Egyptians kept track of slain enemies by cutting off the penises of uncircumcised troops, while severed hands sufficed for counting the circumcised dead.<sup>7</sup> Such mutilation, along with the practice of stripping the enemy dead of all of its booty, would surely have left slain warriors in a perpetual state of shame. Readers may see in this fate an ironic end to the object of Oholibah's lust (23:20), as the slain warriors find themselves forever deprived of the synecdochal symbol of their power and prowess.

### ***The Mighty Warriors in Sheol, 32:20-28***

The oracle abruptly shifts from a second person, direct address to Egypt to a narrative description of the mighty chiefs and their helpers announcing Egypt's demise. The reference to helpers (Heb. *ʕr*) evokes an earlier reference to Egypt's allies, who were condemned along with Egypt in an earlier oracle (30:8; cf. 30:6). One therefore suspects that the kingdoms listed here—Assyria, Elam, and Meshech and Tubal—may correspond to this differentiation between “mighty chiefs” and “helpers.” The variations in the description of these three kingdoms bear out this theory: Assyria is surrounded by its “assembly” (Heb. *qāhāl*), while Elam and Meshech and Tubal are surrounded by their “hordes” (Heb. *hāmôn*). As vassals on the borders of the Assyrian empire, Elam, Meshech, and Tubal should have been counted on to be Assyria's “helpers” (cf. *ARAB*, 2:16, 41-43, 73). However, they often rebelled against the Assyrian yoke and formed alliances that posed threats to Assyrian order.<sup>8</sup> Their turbulent, rebellious nature is reflected in the description of their accompanying armies as hordes. The honorable burial of Assyria, on the one hand, and the dishonorable burial of Elam, Meshech and Tubal on the other, further reflects this differ-



entiation. Following the conventions of royal burials, Assyria lies in the center with its company surrounded about it. Elam, Meshech, and Tubal, however, lie among the dishonored dead. Even though these latter kingdoms attempted to be mighty chiefs in their own right, their burial among the uncircumcised consigns them to everlasting shame and impotence.

Underscoring the difference between honorable and dishonorable burial in v. 27, the oracle returns to a direct address to Egypt and its hordes. Even if Egypt thinks that it surpasses Assyria in greatness, it will not join those who have died with honor. Instead, it will be apportioned a place in Sheol among the other rebels.

### ***Other Dishonored Dead: Edom and Phoenicia, 32:29-32***

Shifting back to the narrative voice, the poem identifies two further inhabitants of the land of the dead, Edom and the princes of the north, the Sidonians. Not only do these kingdoms not seem to fit with the more powerful kingdoms listed above, they are also not accompanied by hordes, though in each case they represent an alliance of many kings and princes. Even so, they share the fates of Elam, Meshech and Tubal, since they lie among the uncircumcised and bear their shame. One possible explanation is that these two kingdoms constitute Egypt's hordes, which have already been sent down to the underworld (cf. 30:6, 10; 32:12, 16, 17). If that is the case, then these two kingdoms constitute a southern axis of power that pales in comparison to Assyria's former domination of the known world.

Pharaoh's response to this sight is not without difficulties (v. 31). The Hebrew text emphatically draws attention to what Pharaoh sees: when he sees *them*, he is consoled. One may reasonably ask what the pronoun "them" refers to: Edom and the Sidonians? All of the dishonored dead? The distinctions that are made between the honored and dishonored ones? Or the implied distinction between Assyria and Egypt and their respective allies? A further difficulty is that it is not at all certain what is meant by the declaration that Pharaoh will be "consoled for all his hordes" (*niḥam 'al kol-hāmōnō*). Elsewhere in Ezekiel, cities are consoled when they see their status in relation to other nations in a new light (16:54), and this consolation occurs in connection with the experience of bearing shame or humiliation. What Pharaoh witnesses in the land of the dead is a matter of seeing relationships between kingdoms in a new way and coming to a new understanding of himself in light of these relationships. But "consolation" does not quite capture the nuance of what happens to Pharaoh. It is more likely that the verb

indicates a fundamental change in Pharaoh's understanding of the nature of his power.<sup>9</sup> That changed understanding may include an acceptance of the consequences of his rebellion; it certainly requires a different answer to the question posed in 32:17. If Pharaoh thought he surpassed Assyria in loveliness, he now knows he was wrong. Finally, v. 32 provides Yahweh's answer to the question: "For I [contra NRSV "he"] have set his terror in the land of the living." Whatever power Pharaoh had exercised, it had been granted to him by Yahweh. Far from being his own agent gathering his own allies, Pharaoh was really a servant of Yahweh.

## CONNECTIONS

For contemporary Christian readers, the oracles against the nations pose serious challenges to theological interpretation because they exemplify what is "old" about the Old Testament. Although these oracles are among the most stirring poetry in the entire Old Testament, they are also theologically and historically inaccessible to many moderns. They are theologically inaccessible because we would prefer not to think of God as warrior and judge. They are historically inaccessible because their metaphors, as beautiful as they are, do not readily speak to modern concerns.

But perhaps inaccessibility is Ezekiel's point. Other oracles in 25–32 recount, with some awe, the magnificent achievements of the great nations. Among these portrayals, the depictions of Tyre and Assyria are beguilingly sensuous. One can almost touch the luxurious cargoes in the ship of Tyre or feel the breeze in the branches of the cedar that was Assyria. But just as suddenly, the ship sinks and the cedar topples. And now, in 32:17-32, the final oracle in the collection, we get one final glimpse of human achievement. If one searches for Assyria, Tyre, Egypt, or any of the great civilizations of Ezekiel's time, one will find them in Sheol, in varying degrees of honor and shame, but all dead. This is the end of history. If one longs to go back to the good old days, they are gone. Although this survey of the fallen mighty nations in the land of the dead signals the end of the old order, it is not the end for the house of Israel. In 37:10-14, Yahweh will bring the people of Israel out of their graves, give them his spirit, and plant them on their own soil. There will be grace for Israel, and a new life beyond imagining. At this stage in Ezekiel's great drama, however, the readers

### From a Monk's Diary



As he was struggling to make sense of the mounting protests and demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton came to Ezek 32 in his daily reading on 12 November 1965:

This morning in my *lectio* I came to Chapter 32 of Ezekiel—again the wonderful and awful solemnity of those scenes as all the kings go down into the abyss uncircumcised and killed by the sword. Is there some key to the mentality of our country and of our time? If there is I wish I had it and could open up something of a new understanding. It is badly needed, because the first thing we lack is insight. The most obvious and terrible thing about us is that we have almost infinite power and we are completely blind. The judgment of God hangs over us and we cannot understand.

Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, *Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 315.

are called to mourn what is lost and to recognize that death defines and delimits all human achievements.

As it turns out, such a message is not so much inaccessible to contemporary readers as it is unpalatable: we would much prefer to think that we can live forever, that we can use sheer force to eliminate all threats to our safety, and that we can have it all. In that regard, we are not so different from the fallen warriors mourned in Ezekiel 32. [From a Monk's Diary] The challenge for us, as it was for Pharaoh, is to see that any loveliness we may possess, be it the beauty of wisdom or power or craft, comes to us from God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The translation is from Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983); s.v. 32:2.

<sup>2</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, citing Talmudic usage as grammatical support.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the biblical and extra-biblical occurrence of these terms, see John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ARAB*, 1:78, 142, 222, 227, 229, 231 and elsewhere. The motif is not frequent in the later annals, but see *ARAB*, II.521, 787, 794-96. D. H. Muller noted the connection (*Ezechiel-Studien* [1894]: 56-58), and has been cited by Walther Zimmerli in *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:160, and further elaborated by Greenberg (*Ezekiel*, 2:656).

<sup>5</sup> Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon*, 93-95.

<sup>6</sup> So Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:170.

<sup>7</sup> James H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents*, vol. 3, *The Nineteenth Dynasty* (1906; repr. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 248-49; see the discussion by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:661-62.

<sup>8</sup> For Elam, see *ARAB*, 1:726; 2:31, 35, 234//242//257; 252. For Meshech and Tubal, see *ARAB*, 2:55; for Meshech alone, see *ARAB*, 2:8, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen F. Davis, "And Pharaoh will change his mind . . ." (Ezekiel 32:21): Dismantling Mythical Discourse," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathrynne Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids MI: 1999), 234. For the more traditional interpretation of 32:31, see Simian-Yofre, "חִימִי," *TDOT*, 9:340-55.

# THE EXILES' COMPLAINT

## Ezekiel 33:1-33

The present chapter contains five subunits, which are delineated by prophetic formulas and thematic emphases (33:1-9, 10-20, 21-22, 23-29, 30-33). Each subunit picks up and develops themes that appear earlier in the book, sometimes with almost verbatim quotations. The metaphor of the sentinel in vv. 2-9 alludes to 3:16-21; vv. 10-18 summarize the disputation of chapter 18; vv. 21-22 fulfill the prophecy of 24:25-27; and vv. 23-29 recapitulate the judgment of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Verses 31-33 may also allude to the theme of Israel's refusal to listen, which was first introduced in Ezekiel's commissioning (2:7). However, while it is clear that the exiles have not yet taken the prophetic message to heart, they are not called the "house of rebelliousness" in these verses, and they do listen to the prophet, even if they regard him only as an entertainer. Even though it is evident that their transformation is not yet complete, their willingness to listen to the prophet suggests that transformation is at least possible.

As the chapter pulls together earlier themes of the book, it also balances the issues of prophetic and communal response in a literary structure that can be outlined as follows:

- A Sentinel: responsibilities of prophet and people
- B Exiles' acceptance of guilt and resulting despair
- C Report of the fall of Jerusalem
- B' Jerusalemites' confession of faith and resulting complacency
- A' The singer of love songs: responsibilities of prophet and people  
(vv. 31-33)

Metaphors characterizing the role of the prophet and the community's response open and close the chapter. In vv. 1-9, the prophet is depicted as continuing to fulfill the role of sentinel even if the people should fail to heed his message (A). Then, in vv. 31-33, the people come and listen to the prophet as if he were a singer of love songs, not a sentinel announcing disaster (A'). The fugitive's report that Jerusalem has fallen stands at the center of the chapter, in effect vindicating the work of the sentinel while also posing the question whether the community yet understands the significance of his work

(C). The responses of the exiles and the survivors who remain in Jerusalem surround this report (B, B'). The Jerusalemites remain impervious to Jerusalem's destruction. Invoking the traditions of Abraham, they continue to lay claim to the land and to express hope in their future (B'). Failing to acknowledge their guilt, their expression of faith rings hollow. By contrast, the exiles are so burdened by guilt that they despair of ever living again (B).

The chapter thus confirms the message of judgment by reporting that Jerusalem has in fact been destroyed. But even so definitive a judgment as the destruction of Jerusalem does not mark an objective or definitive end to the house of Israel. Whether the community will heed the warnings of the sentinel remains an open question. The prophet has sounded the alarm, and even though the disaster has come, the house of Israel may yet repent and live.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Sentinel, 33:1-10**

The chapter opens with instructions to the prophet to deliver an oracle consisting of a parable (vv. 2-6) and its interpretation (vv. 7-9). Using a formulation from case law, the parable describes a typical wartime practice, when villagers charge a sentinel with the responsibility of warning them of impending attack. Hypothetical situations in vv. 3-4 and 6 clarify the respective responsibilities of sentinel and people. The sentinel is held accountable if he does not sound the alarm, but if he does sound the alarm and the people do not heed it, then their blood is on their heads, and he is innocent.

Readers have been prepared to make the connection between this parable and the prophet by the use of the sentinel metaphor in 3:16-21. For the imagined audience in the book, however, the connection is made only in 33:6, when it becomes clear that the sentinel's warning should rescue the people from their iniquity. The connection with Ezekiel's role is further strengthened in vv. 7-9, which restate the prophet's responsibilities as outlined in 3:16-21. Not only is he called to announce judgment on Jerusalem and the rebellious house of Israel, he must also rescue them from their guilt so that they may live. Thus even though the warning is formulated as a death sentence, "you shall surely die,"<sup>1</sup> it functions more as a

call to repentance than as the announcement of an irreversible decree.

As in 3:16-21, 33:1-10 emphasizes the accountability of Ezekiel to sound the warning. But this subunit also emphasizes the need for the house of Israel to respond to the warnings. According to the logic of the parable, the normal response would be to heed the sentinel, since it would be absurd to ignore an alarm in a time of crisis.

### **How Can We Live? 33:10-20**

This subunit, which is structured as a disputation, quotes a complaint of the people who, for the first time in the book, appear to have taken Ezekiel's warnings to heart. Echoing the language of 24:23, they express the agony of accepting responsibility for their guilt: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how can we live?" They have heeded the sentinel's warnings, but the intended result is not yet obtained. Rather than embracing life now that they have repented, they do not see how the death penalty can be averted.

The refutation of the complaint begins with a divine oath sworn on the deity's own life and the articulation of a general principle. Yahweh does not desire the death of the wicked, but their repentance. Yahweh then appeals directly to the house of Israel, first with a series of commands urging them to repent (NRSV "turn back") and a question: "Why should you die?" Although NRSV's rendering of the question in v. 11 implies some degree of certainty about their fate ("why *will* you die?"), the imperfect verb suggests that it is more open-ended. The question whether they will live or die is not Yahweh's decision, but theirs.

Commentators frequently draw attention to the parallels between this unit and chapter 18, which sought to persuade the present generation that they were being punished for their own sins, not the sins of their ancestors. In chapter 33, the house of Israel no longer needs to be convinced of that fact. Now, they despair of the future. Somewhat ironically, the same type of argument used in chapter 18 to convict them is employed in the present argument to console them. At stake is not the guilt or righteousness of the generations, but the degree to which one's past state of wickedness or righteousness determines the future.

Verses 12-14 indicate that the death penalty is not an irrevocable judgment. The argument in these verses depends on the general principle that a righteous person cannot count on past righteousness once he transgresses. That being the case, any divine

pronouncement of life or death can be changed, depending on human willingness or unwillingness to live in obedience to Yahweh. These verses therefore pose a hypothetical situation along the lines of case law: Suppose Yahweh pronounces a death sentence against a wicked person; what should happen if that person repents? In such a case, none of his prior acts will be held against him, and the death sentence will be reversed: “He shall surely live.”

Yahweh addresses yet another popular quotation: “Yet your people say, ‘the way of the Lord is inscrutable.’” NRSV’s translation suggests that the people complain that Yahweh’s ways are unjust. However, as in 18:25, the saying concerns the unfathomability of divine justice. The saying is refuted in 33:18-19 with the reaffirmation of the absolute consistency of the divine principles of judgment. What is inscrutable is that the people should choose the way of death, not life.

### **The Report of the Fugitive, 33:21-22**

A date formula situates this report about five months after the destruction of Jerusalem (January 19, 585), sufficient time for someone to have made the journey from Jerusalem to Babylonia on foot. The fugitive was probably among the group of exiles brought to Babylonia after the fall of Jerusalem. The event is anticipated in 24:25-27: when Jerusalem falls, a fugitive will bring word to Ezekiel, whose mouth will be opened and he will be able to speak once again to the exiles. The fugitive arrives and reports the news in two words, and the prophet’s report of the experience is not much more developed. The hand of the Lord had been upon him the night before, and by the time the fugitive arrived in the morning, his mouth was opened, and he was no longer unable to speak.

Readers are left to piece together the significance of this episode from earlier references to Ezekiel’s silence. One line of interpretation sees this episode as the reversal of the dumbness that was imposed upon Ezekiel during his call (3:22-27) and thus the restoration of the prophet to “normal intercourse in his society.”<sup>2</sup> In light of this renewal of speech, it is worth noting that instructions to prophesy are more concentrated in chapters 34–39 than in the previous thirty-two chapters combined. [Prophesy!] But the reference to Ezekiel’s speech probably does not imply a renewal of prophetic activity. If the reference is interpreted strictly in terms of 24:25-27, to which it immediately alludes, its significance is that a sign has



been confirmed, and with it, the validity of the prophet's message of judgment. It is now up to the audience to respond.

### **"The Land Is Given to Us to Possess," 33:23-29**

In the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem, survivors who remain in the waste places of Judah invoke the patriarchal traditions as an expression of confidence. Abraham possessed the land even though he was but one man; they also have been given the land to possess even though they are few in number. The saying reflects continuing tension between the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the exiles over inheritance rights (11:15). Yahweh rejects the Jerusalemites' claim by reiterating accusations that were the basis of judgment earlier in the book (chs. 18, 22), by sending the four weapons of divine judgment against the survivors (see 5:12; 7:15; 14:21), and by declaring that the land they seek to possess will be made into an uninhabitable wasteland.

#### **Prophesy!**



Apart from the two references to Ezekiel as a prophet in 2:25 and 3:33, Ezekiel is not elsewhere called a prophet, while those who are called prophets are rejected (chs. 13, 14). Ezekiel is not alone in this ambivalent attitude toward the prophets. A. Graeme Auld has argued that the term *nābi*, "prophet," only acquired its high status in the exile. In pre-exilic literature, prophets were portrayed as unstable ecstasies whose messages did more harm than good. That portrayal is certainly consistent with Ezekiel's condemnation of the prophets in chs. 13 and 14, but it begs the question: if prophets were so poorly regarded in Israel and Judah, how did the role come to be so highly valued during the exile?

While it is outside the scope of this commentary to address this question in detail, an examination of the uses of the verb "prophesy" in Ezekiel can at least clarify the role that Ezekiel played as a prophet. Instructions to Ezekiel to prophesy are frequently found coupled with the expression, "set your face toward (against) X," and most of these are addressed to foreign nations (Ammon, 21:33 [28]; 25:2; Sidon, 28:21; Pharaoh, 29:2; shepherds of Israel, 34:2; Mount Seir, 35:2; Gog, 38:2, 14; 39:1). The expression "set your face against X and prophesy" is also used in oracles against Jerusalem (4:7; 21:7, 14, 19 [2, 9, 14]), the moun-

tains of Israel (6:2), the elders of the house of Israel (11:4, 13), and the prophets of Israel (13:2, 16, 17).

Since the expression "set your face against X" is found elsewhere only in the oracles of Balaam, a seer hired by the Moabite king to curse the Israelite tribes (Num 22–24), it is likely that this act of prophesying was originally associated with the deliverance of Yahweh's people from their enemies. In Ezekiel, Yahweh's people have become the enemy, and thus the command to prophesy introduces many of his messages of judgment.

Although the use of the verb in connection with judgment has led to the assumption that prophecy is primarily the communication of divine judgment to God's people, chs. 34–39 preserve the older association of prophecy with deliverance from enemies. In these chapters, prophecy is associated with deliverance from the insults of the nations (36:1, 3, 6), as well as with the divine answer to lament (37:12), which can bring a dead nation back to life (37:4, 7, 9). In all of these references, prophecy is closely associated with divine power to save. To know that a prophet has been in their midst therefore means that the people have come to see the power of Yahweh at work in Ezekiel.

For the social location of the prophetic expressions discussed here, see Keith W. Carley, *Ezekiel Among the Prophets* (Studies in Biblical Theology, second series, 31; London: SCM, 1975), 40–42.

### An Audience of Insincere Lovers, 33:30-33

In a final communication with the prophet, Yahweh characterizes Ezekiel's audience as people who have made only outward changes in their behavior. As in 33:10 and 23, the unit begins with a popular saying. Unlike the first, which expressed despair, and the second, which exuded false confidence, this third saying appears to demonstrate an appropriate eagerness to seek out the prophet and listen to his words. Yahweh exposes this eagerness as insincerity. Even though they come to the prophet as "my people," that is, as people who accept their covenantal identity as the people of Yahweh, and listen to the prophet's words, they do not take them to heart.

Verse 32 employs erotic metaphors to express the nature of the problem: passionate words are on their lips, but their hearts continue to pursue their own interests. NRSV's translation, which rests on a preference for the Septuagint's translation of the rare *'ăgābîm*, erotic words, as *pseudos*, false, implies that the behavior is rooted in flattery and deception. The erotic connotation of the Hebrew term is more in keeping with their perception of Ezekiel as a singer of love songs, as well as with Ezekiel's indictment of Jerusalem for going after her "lovers" in chapters 16 and 23. At the heart of these metaphors is the question of fidelity and constancy. Yahweh knows the signs of insincerity and warns the prophet not to be taken in by actions that come from as yet untransformed hearts. Yahweh also promises the prophet that he will be vindicated. [A Prophet in Their Midst]

## CONNECTIONS

Even though Ezekiel 33 more closely resembles the oracles of judgment in chapters 1–24, the chapter poses an utterly new question. Like chapter 18, which held the exiles accountable for their sins and called for repentance, chapter 33 holds forth the possibility that the house of Israel can repent and turn from their wicked ways. Though even something as final as the divine death penalty should lead to repentance and life, the saying in v. 10 suggests that it has left the house of Israel paralyzed by despair: "Our sins and our transgressions weigh heavy against us, and we waste away because of them; how *can* we live?" The ensuing disputation seeks to persuade Ezekiel's audience that the death penalty does not

### A Prophet in Their Midst



The statement “they will know that a prophet has been in their midst” occurs at two key points in the book of Ezekiel. In 2:5, it is associated with Ezekiel’s proclamation of the word whether or not the people hear him. By contrast, in 33:33, it is associated with the word’s fulfillment. Countering the perception of Ezekiel as a singer of love songs, someone whose words make for easy listening, Yahweh declares that the things of which Ezekiel speaks will indeed come to pass: “When this comes—and come it will!—then they shall know that a prophet has been among them” (33:33).

What does this declaration mean? One possibility is that the statement alludes to the words of judgment in chs. 1–32. But these words have been confirmed by the arrival of the fugitive in 33:21-22, who reports that Jerusalem has been destroyed. Despite the confirmation of these oracles of judgment, Ezekiel is not yet acknowledged as a prophet. Another possibility is that the statement alludes to oracles that remain unfulfilled, which speak of the election of the exiles, Yahweh’s intention to gather and cleanse them, to bring them into the bond of the covenant, and to resettle them on land promised to their ancestors (11:14-21; 20:33-38). But the issue is no longer that the people might refuse to hear, as in 2:5; rather it is that they fail to *do* the words. The terminology suggests that words at issue here have more to do with priestly torah instruction, such as that found 33:10-20, than with Ezekiel’s prophetic activity.

The solution to the failure of priestly instruction is further prophecy. Commands to prophesy are more concentrated in these chapters than anywhere else in the book (see **[Prophecy!]**). Like the earlier prophecies, these are performative, bringing new things into existence. Ezekiel will proclaim that Yahweh is shepherd of the flock; and at



### A Prophet (Ezekiel?)

Piero della Francesca. (c.1420–1492). Fresco. Pre-restoration. S. Francesco, Arezzo, Italy. [Credit: Scala / Art Resource]

Yahweh’s instruction he will set his face against the enemies of Israel, breathe new life into a long dead people, reunite the divided kingdom, and preside over their final vindication. At the end of it all, they will be a new people—restored, cleansed, with responsive hearts—not because of anything that they have done but because there has been a prophet in their midst. Such a one is not merely a conveyor of divine words, but the medium of divine presence and power.

mean either that the decree is irrevocable or that God enjoys seeing the wicked suffer. Rather, God longs to reverse the decree and allow them to live.

To their despair, God offers the reasonable rejoinder, why should you die? Ezekiel’s audience should not take the death penalty as the last word but see it as enclosing within it an inconceivable promise of new life. That promise is grounded in the absolute assertion of the divine will in all matters of justice and righteousness. If no

**"I Read It Here In Your Very Word"**

I read it here in your very word,  
in the story of the gestures

with which your hands cupped themselves  
around our becoming—limiting, warm.

You said *live* out loud, and *die* you said lightly,  
and over and over again you said *be*.

But before the first death came murder.  
A fracture broke across the rings you'd ripened.  
A screaming shattered the voices

that had just come together to speak you,  
to make of you a bridge  
over the chasm of everything.

And what they have stammered ever since  
are fragments  
of your ancient name.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Ich lese es heraus aus deinem Wort," trans.  
Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love  
Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 55.

human being can trust in her own righteousness to deliver her from her transgressions, then neither can any wicked one despair of his wickedness. Because God stands as judge over each and every moment, the future remains open.

Modern readers may find it useful to consider the implications of this disputation in light of previous announcements of judgment. Did God not mean it when God declared that there would be no pity? The second disputation (33:23-29), as well as the destruction of Jerusalem, makes it clear that God stands by the word of judgment. Even so, if judgment is not an end but a process that leads from death to life, then it does mean something more than human beings can conceive of. Modern readers might also ask whether the character of God is revealed to be something other than the determined deity who that is found on nearly every

page (see esp. 20:33). But again, it is this divine willfulness that makes the reversal of the death penalty possible. Finally, we might ask whether there was any way to avert the destruction of Jerusalem. Probably not; but for Ezekiel, the mystery is that there is a future even after this end.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel's contemporary, describes the moment when the battered, defeated people recognize that divine grace has been with them all along: "The people who have survived the sword found grace in the wilderness" (Jer 31:2). Jeremiah's words of discovery are more appealing to us, and far more comforting. But it is Ezekiel's special gift to capture the existential paralysis that precedes the experience of grace. In a despair brought on by recognition of their own transgressions, the exiles ask, how can we live? God's plan to preserve them from calamity and deliver them from their own despair will be recounted in the next few chapters; for now, readers must stay with the question. Are there times when we cannot see the grace that stands right in front of us? Are there times when we ask, how can we live? Knowing what we do about our crippling failings, regressions, and willful impulses, we can hear the question as an honest expression of human limitation. We cannot save ourselves. ["I Read It Here in Your Very Word"]

Consider the healing of the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1-8). Jesus comes upon a man who for thirty-eight years has been lying beside the pool, unable to step into its healing waters. Before Jesus commands the paralytic to take up his pallet and walk, he asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). The question is astonishing; who would not want to be healed? But the fact is, the man does not exactly answer Jesus' question, which requires a simple yes or no. Instead, the paralytic makes excuses. He explains that there are reasons why he is not well: others are stronger and faster, or have friends to help them get into the pool. Even more astonishing is the fact that the man's inability to answer the question does not prevent Jesus from healing him. Jesus' command overrides his excuses, and the man must get up and walk. We still do not know whether he wanted to be made well, and in fact, the healing puts him in a terrible bind since he must now carry his mat on the sabbath (John 5:9-13). Whether he wanted it or not, his life is forever, noticeably changed, and in ways that make him a misfit in the world that he had known.

In a similar way, the exiles do not have the last word. To their question "How can we live?" God replies, "Why should you die?" and calls them to turn from their debilitating ways. This is one of the few instances in which Ezekiel speaks of repentance (Heb. *šûb*, cf. 18:21-30); and yet, the exiles remain ambivalent. They complain that God is inscrutable; yet like moths to a flame they are drawn to the prophet's words as to a singer of love songs. What do they want? Even they seem not to know. Fortunately, the transformation is not up to them. Change will come, proving that God's grace is, in the end, irresistible. [Irresistible Grace]

### Irresistible Grace



In the first century of the Protestant Reformation, one of the most pressing doctrinal debates revolved around the nature of God's grace. Could human beings cooperate with God's grace in any way? That is, could human beings take the initiative in seeking salvation? The resounding answer within the Calvinist tradition was that human salvation was entirely the work of God. Human beings did not deserve salvation at all, but it was God's good pleasure to elect those who were saved. And, because God is God, God's grace would not only be effective, it would be irresistible. The doctrine is worked out in the Canons of the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619 and is rooted in an understanding of the nature of God and God's "unchangeable purpose": "Just as God himself is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; nor can his chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced (1.11)." Conversion is effected both outwardly and inwardly, through the hearing of the word but more importantly through the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate human hearts. It is this work of the Holy Spirit that is irresistible:

he not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly discern the things of the Spirit of God, but by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds. (4.11)

Although much of this discussion of the relationship between divine grace and human will is rooted in the Augustinian tradition, the description of the work of the Holy Spirit appears to draw on Ezekiel's account of the transformation of human beings in 36:26-28. One can speculate that the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, including the book of Ezekiel, gave these early Protestant theologians the metaphors for conceptualizing the overwhelming power of God's will to save.

For the text of Canons of the Synod of Dort, see Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, pt. 4, *Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation Era* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 586. For a concise explanation of the terms discussed here, see "Grace" and "Synod of Dort," in Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1984).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the juridical background of this death penalty, see 1 Sam 14:44; 22:16; 2 Kgs 1:4, 6, 16. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols. trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:186.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:682.

# THE SHEPHERD

## Ezekiel 34:1-31

The present chapter revolves around the metaphor of Yahweh as the shepherd of the flock Israel. Indicting the abusive shepherds (34:1-10), Yahweh declares that he alone will shepherd the flock. Once the flock is gathered from the lands to which it has been scattered, Yahweh will punish those who abused it, and unite it under one shepherd, the servant David (34:11-24). The chapter ends with the establishment of Yahweh's covenant of peace, which restores fecundity to the land and provides security from the attacks of the nations (34:25-32). In this last section of the chapter, the shepherd-sheep metaphor remains implicit in the natural imagery and is explicitly fused with covenant language in the closing recognition formula (vv. 30-31).<sup>1</sup>

The chapter is organized in a stair-step progression of ideas. For example: Yahweh declares in v. 10 that he will rescue his flock from the shepherds; that declaration is then expanded in vv. 11-16. At the end of that subunit, Yahweh declares that he will rule (NRSV "feed") the flock in justice; vv. 17-24 develop that theme by describing Yahweh's defense of the weak members of the flock against the strong. This ruling in justice culminates in the establishment of the covenant, which is introduced in v. 24 and more fully elaborated in vv. 25-31.

A longstanding critical consensus takes the "shepherds of Israel" in v. 2 to refer to the Israelite and Judean nobility, whose political policies have resulted in the scattering and exile of the people. In keeping with this identification of the shepherds, the judgment between sheep, rams, and goats in v. 17 targets individuals within the community. Thus chapter 34 launches Ezekiel's program of restoration by focusing on the crisis of local leadership.

There are good reasons to reject this consensus. Yahweh's actions on behalf of the flock take place in the international arena (34:11-15), and the reasons for rescuing the sheep are international in scope: to break the yoke of the foreign oppressor (34:27), bring an end to the nations' plundering of Israel (34:28), and demonstrate that the flock belongs to Yahweh alone (34:30-31). This commentary will therefore suggest that the chapter is more specifically concerned with the political domination of Israel by foreign overlords and its plundering by

neighboring nations, which are depicted in the oracle as fat sheep, rams, and goats (34:17-22).

This identification of the “shepherds of Israel” as foreign rulers has significant consequences for interpreting the oracles of restoration in chapters 34–48. Because these chapters have usually been regarded as oracles addressing the internal conditions of the house of Israel, it has remained difficult to understand the function of the oracles against Edom (ch. 35) and Gog (chs. 38–39). If, however, chapter 34 is concerned with the vindication of Yahweh’s sovereignty in the eyes of the nations, then these problematic oracles are central to the development of this larger section of the book. Once the scattered flock is gathered together (ch. 34), it is settled on land rescued from Israel’s ancient rival Edom (35:1–36:15), cleansed of its impurities (36:16-38), brought back to life as a single nation united under David (37:1-27), defended against all attack (chs. 38–39), and governed in justice and peace (chs. 40–48).

## COMMENTARY

### **Against the Shepherds of Israel, 34:1-16**

The oracle against the shepherds begins with a woe oracle that indicts the shepherds for their treatment of the sheep (vv. 1-6). Themes introduced in vv. 1-6 are then developed in vv. 7-10 and 11-16. Verses 7-10 describe Yahweh’s response to the mistreatment of the sheep (vv. 3-4), while vv. 11-16 describe Yahweh’s gathering of the scattered sheep (vv. 5-6.)

#### ***Indictment of the Shepherds, 34:1-6***

The prophet receives commands to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Although the commonly accepted interpretation of this reference is to the leadership class of Judah [*Who Were the Shepherds of Israel?*], there is good reason to reject this reading. In ancient Near Eastern usage, the noun “shepherd” was used as an epithet for kings, and the verb was a technical term for ruling.<sup>2</sup> Some commentators, like Block, have therefore narrowed their interpretation of v. 2 to refer strictly to the recent kings of Judah. But Ezekiel’s use of the verb *rdh* in v. 4 to characterize the rule of the shepherds speaks against that interpretation. [*Dominion*] The verb connotes the



### Who Were the Shepherds of Israel?



A straightforward reading of Ezek 34 leads to the commonly held consensus that the shepherds of Israel are local, Israelite leaders. Ezekiel condemns these leaders in chs. 13 and 22, and thus it does not seem surprising that these oracles of restoration should begin with an assertion of Yahweh's claim to rule over those who have left the flock so badly injured and scattered.

This consensus can be challenged, however. Apart from David and Joshua, no other named ruler is explicitly called a shepherd, and with the exception of one reference to David (Ps 78:71-72), the title does not appear in royal psalms that celebrate the attributes of wise and righteous kings. In the earliest traditions, the title is associated with the shepherd's duty of leading sheep out of and into the sheepfold. When it is applied to David and Joshua, it is therefore associated with their roles in battle and not with their care of the nation as a whole (2 Sam 5:2; Num 24:17; cf. 1 Kgs 22:17). Possibly Doeg the Edomite, one of Saul's shepherds (1 Sam 21:7), and Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa (Amos 7:14-15), should be included in these early traditions. When the epithet is employed in the prophetic traditions, the shepherd's worthlessness or absence is stressed (Isa 56:11; Jer 2:8; 10:21; 50:6; Zech 11:4, 7, 9, 15-17; 13:7), and it is only in eschatological texts that Yahweh will send good shepherds, shepherds after Yahweh's heart (Jer 3:15; cf. Mic 5:3; 7:14).

From Ezekiel's 6th-century context, more solid evidence exists for the use of this epithet in connection with *foreign* rulers. Jeremiah is frequently cited as evidence that the shepherds are Judean kings; however, a significant number of Jeremianic references portray foreign rulers as shepherds who destroy Judah. Particularly noteworthy in connection with Ezekiel's contention that the shepherds consume the sheep is Jer 6:3, which depicts the siege of Zion as a pasture being overrun with invaders:

Shepherds with their flocks shall come against her;  
They shall pitch their tents around her;  
they shall pasture, all in their places.

Even though Yahweh has handed his beloved over to her enemies, Yahweh laments her destruction.

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard,  
they have trampled down my portion,  
they have made my pleasant portion a desolate  
wilderness. (Jer 12:10)

In 22:22, these shepherds are more explicitly identified as Judah's "lovers," a polemically-tinged epithet for nations with whom Judah has entered into alliances:

The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds,  
and your lovers shall go into captivity . . .

The judgment against these shepherds is announced in 25:34, where the context implies that the shepherds are

the rulers of the nations (cf. 25:32). Given these references, it is likely that Jer 23:1-4, which is often compared with Ezek 34, can also be construed as an oracle against foreign rulers.

Although the use of the shepherd metaphor becomes more complicated after the exile, it is possible that it continues to refer to the great suzerains. Such a possibility is clearest in Zech 11:1-3, in which the prophet announces the destruction of the great cedars. Eric and Carol Meyers have suggested, on the basis of the parallel in Ezek 31, that the cedars be interpreted as a reference to the great superpowers that had dominated Israel's history. Among those who bewail the destruction of the cedars are the shepherds, whose glory is thereby destroyed (Zech 11:3). The identification of shepherds as foreign rulers also makes good sense in Zech 10:3, which contains another allusion to Ezekiel, in its reference to "shepherds" and "goats" (Heb. *'attûdîm*; NRSV leaders; cf. Ezek 34:17). In both Ezek and Zech, the goats are subordinate in power to the shepherds, and they may have been understood as commanders of the flock (cf. Zech 10:4; Jer 50:8). But the context clearly suggests that they are foreign rulers who have taken charge of Yahweh's flock (see Isa 14:9). With his wrath burning hot against the shepherds and goats, Yahweh takes charge of the flock and brings forth leaders from the house of Judah. As the metaphor is developed, the emphasis is on Yahweh's supplanting the shepherds and replacing the "goats" with leaders from within the flock. The concern is thus not to purge Judah of corrupt leadership, but to restore self-rule.

The above discussion of Zechariah parts company with recent commentators, who construe the shepherd and goat imagery in ch. 10 to refer to Israelite and Judean leadership (see, e.g., Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 25C; Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1993], 194-97; and David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi* [OTL; Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995], 72-73, 91-92). Although an evaluation of the respective arguments would take us too far from our study of Ezekiel, one may posit that the critics' interest in interpreting Zechariah in light of internal political issues leads them to overlook multinational dynamics reflected in the text. The litmus test for the meaning of the shepherd imagery remains Zech 11:4-17, a highly complex prophetic symbolic act which, like the other shepherd passages in Zechariah, focuses on the abuse of Yahweh's flock at the hands of foreign rulers.

For a discussion of shepherd imagery in prophetic and eschatological texts, see G. Wallis, "רעה, *rā'ā*," TDOT, 13:550. For Doeg's title and function, see Shawn Zelig Aster, "What Was Doeg the Edomite's Title? Textual Emendation versus a Comparative Approach to 1 Samuel 21:8," JBL 122 (2003): 353-61.

### Dominion

**Ω** That the shepherds in Ezek 34 are foreign rulers is further suggested by the use of the verb *rdh* in 34:4 to characterize their rule. The term is associated with the exercise of suzerainty, the rule or dominion of one kingdom over other kingdoms. Jacob will rule over Edom (Num 24:19); Solomon rules over other nations (1 Kgs 5:4); Babylon rules the nations (Isa 14:6); and Cyrus rules kings (Isa 41:2). Even the dominion of human beings over the created order can be understood as this type of suzerainty, since human dominion extends over other classes of living beings (Gen 1:28). In the covenant curses of Lev 26, Yahweh threatens that Israel's foes will rule over it (Lev 26:17), and Neh 9:28 refers to the fulfillment of that curse. Israelites are forbidden from ruling over one another in this way (Lev 25:43, 46, 53) because it is a form of domination that they had known in Egypt (Exod 1:13). Solomon's dominion over conscripted Israelites is the only reference to any such mistreatment of fellow Israelites (1 Kgs 5:30; 9:23//2 Chr 8:10) and is the exception that proves the rule.

exercise of suzerainty, that is, the establishment of the dominion of one kingdom over others. The verb is used elsewhere in Ezekiel only in 29:15, where it connotes the dominion of Egypt; it is not used elsewhere in the book in connection with Judean kings, princes, or leaders. Yahweh does refer to the shepherds as “my” shepherds in v. 8, and some readers may therefore point out that such a reference must surely refer to a native ruler of Israel or Judah. However, the expression can be used of a foreign ruler; for example, in Isaiah 44:28, the Persian king Cyrus is called “my [i.e., Yahweh’s] shepherd.” For Ezekiel and for

Deutero-Isaiah, then, the personal pronoun can be used to denote foreign rulers who are appointed as agents of Yahweh (cf. Isa 10:5-15).<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the shepherd metaphor, the ancient Near Eastern ideology of kingship stressed the nurturing and sustaining role of kings. They ruled with justice, provided for their people, and ensured abundance and prosperity. [Shepherd Kings] Other aspects of royal ideology indicate that kings performed these functions as servants of the gods, to whom they gave an accounting of the lands and peoples over which they exercised stewardship.

Ezekiel condemns the shepherds for feeding themselves, not the flock. They eat the fat, clothe themselves with the wool, and slaughter the fatlings; nothing is left but the bleat. Some commentators emend the accusation in the first clause to suggest that the shepherds eat the “milk” of the sheep, not the fat. If, however, the

### Shepherd Kings



In the ancient Near Eastern development of the metaphor of shepherd kings, a primary responsibility was to care for the human flock. The range of nurturing activities is reflected in the autobiographical introduction to the law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi (18th century BCE). When the gods Anum and Enlil established kingship in Babylon, they appointed Hammurabi to “make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god Shamash over all humankind, to illuminate the land.” When Hammurabi invokes the epithet of shepherd, it is closely associated with the well-being of his people: “I am Hammurabi, the shepherd, selected by the god Enlil, he who heaps high abundance and plenty, who perfects every possible thing for the city Nippur. . . .”

Law Code of Hammurabi II. i.27–49, 50–52, trans. Marth Roth, in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, 3 vols., ed. William VV. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2.131.

conceptual background of this metaphor is that the king-shepherds are caretakers of people who properly belong to the god, then the point of v. 3 is that the shepherds not only abuse the sheep, but steal from the god who owns the flock. Eating the fat signifies this theft, since all fat belonged to Yahweh.<sup>4</sup> At this point, the tenor of the metaphor intrudes, as Ezekiel sums up their behavior: they have ruled with force and harshness. As it has been noted above, the verb employed in v. 4 for ruling is *rdh*, which has a stronger connotation of exercising dominion than other verbs for ruling, like *mlk*. Israelites are forbidden to rule over one another with violence (*běpārek*, v. 4) because that is the form that domination takes over subjugated peoples. Israel had known such subjugation when it was in slavery in Egypt (Exod 1:13).

The harsh dominion of the shepherds has left Israel without a shepherd (34:5, 6, 7). In the ancient world, which relied heavily on autocratic rule, to be left “like sheep without a shepherd” was to be left in a state of defeat (cf. 1 Kgs 22:17). The charge may allude to the Babylonian imprisonment of Jehoiachin, whom Ezekiel regarded as the legitimate king of Judah.

### ***The Judgment of the Shepherds, 34:7-10***

In this two-part oracle of judgment, the accusation focuses on the vulnerability of Yahweh’s flock and the failure of the shepherds to protect them. The frequent repetition of first-person pronouns stresses Yahweh’s ownership of the flock (“my flock,” vv. 8, 10) and the shepherds’ corresponding obligation to Yahweh (“my shepherds,” v. 8). Even though the shepherds are directly addressed (vv. 7, 9), the judgment proper is described in the third person, as if the information were being conveyed to a third party, most likely Ezekiel’s exilic audience (v. 10). In an adaptation of the traditional challenge formula (“I am against the shepherds,” cf. Ezek 5:8; 26:3; 29:3; 38:3; 39:1), Yahweh declares that he will demand his sheep from their hand. Rather than promising a definitive defeat over the current shepherd Nebuchadnezzar, Yahweh simply pulls his sheep out of the flock.

### ***The Gathering of the Flock, 34:11-16***

The gathering of the flock is described through an analogy. Just as shepherds seek out their own among a scattered flock, so also will Yahweh gather his dispersed and scattered sheep. These verses are reminiscent of Yahweh’s gathering of the exiles in 20:34. There, the ingathering was an act of judgment; in this chapter, the emphasis is on the saving and nourishing character of Yahweh’s action. Yahweh

will return the sheep to good pastures on the mountains of Israel, where they will feed in the settlements and along all the water-courses. NRSV's rendering of *r'h*, "to shepherd," as "feeding" captures the generous care and concern that Yahweh lavishes on the flock. In the last line, "I will feed [*r'h*] them with justice," the referent again intrudes on the metaphor and reminds readers that the verb also connotes the establishment of Yahweh's just and proper rule.

### **Yahweh's Rule for the Sake of the Flock, 34:17-24**

Whereas vv. 1-16 are addressed to the shepherds, vv. 17-24 address the flock of Yahweh and the other sheep, rams, and goats that encroach on it. NRSV implies that the judgment will be between two different classes of animals within the flock: between sheep and sheep and between rams and goats. In addition, the English pronoun "you" obscures the alternation of address between the different entities. Readers of NRSV may therefore assume that the "you" addressed in v. 18 is the same as the flock that is addressed in v. 17. However, since grammar and context suggest that the sheep in Yahweh's flock are being defended against other sheep, rams, and goats, one should imagine two audiences for this oracle, the flock itself, and other sheep, rams, and goats (cf. the two audiences in vv. 7-10). Yahweh first addresses the flock in v. 17, informing them of the impending judgment of the sheep, rams, and goats. The sheep, rams, and goats are then directly addressed in v. 18. A similar distinction between fat sheep and the flock is maintained in vv. 20-22. Yahweh thus judges other sheep, rams, and goats on behalf of the flock.

The rams and goats signify leaders. In Exodus 15:15, the term "ram" is used in parallel with *ʾalûpîm*, "tribal chiefs" (literally, "head of a thousand") and may refer to heads of tribes. Whether these rams and goats are leaders of the Israelites or another people is another question. In 17:13, Judean "rams" were deported in order to ensure Judean compliance with its covenant with Babylon (17:14). For those who interpret chapter 34 as a judgment of local leaders, 34:18 is therefore taken to refer to Judean princes who have disrupted the security and prosperity of the flock. However it is more likely that these rams, who trample the pastures and muddy the streams that belong to Yahweh's flock, are being condemned for transgressing boundaries. The rams and goats of v. 18 are thus more likely foreign princes who plundered the land once the sheep were scattered (cf. 32:21; 34:28; 39:18).

The culmination of Yahweh's just exercise of rule is the establishment of one shepherd, David, over the flock (vv. 23-24). The use of the shepherd epithet in connection with Judean kings is rare; in fact, the only Israelite king to whom it is applied is David (1 Sam 16:11; 17:15; 2 Sam 5:2; 7:7; cf. Mic 5:3; Ps 78:71, 72). In this subunit, David is called "my servant," "one shepherd," and "prince." All of these titles contrast his just rule to that of the other shepherds.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the shepherds of vv. 1-10, who fail to honor their roles as stewards of the sheep, David will act as Yahweh's servant. The emphasis on his singularity ("one shepherd") may be intended as a solution to the conflicting claims over the flock in vv. 17-22. As in vv. 11-16, NRSV's translation in v. 23 of the verb *rʾb* to emphasize David's "feeding" the flock (v. 23) calls attention to the fulfillment of his royal responsibility to care for the sheep. Yahweh's claim to the sheep is emphasized in v. 24: David will be prince, but Yahweh will be their God. This declaration, the first half of the covenant formulary, is more fully developed in the next section of the chapter, as Yahweh establishes his covenant of peace with his flock.

### **The Covenant of Peace, 34:25-31**

This section adapts material from Leviticus 26:3-14 to describe the full blessings that will accrue from the covenant that Yahweh establishes with Israel. As a result of the covenant of peace, the land will be abundantly fruitful, and the flock will dwell in security on the mountains of Israel. The phrase, "covenant of peace," appears elsewhere in Ezekiel in 37:26, where the covenant is also called an everlasting covenant (cf. 16:60). The phrase may be associated with the mythical motif of the cessation of hostility between the gods and humankind, such as that which is promised to Noah after the flood (cf. Isa 54:9-10).<sup>6</sup> ["Wildpeace"]

While motifs of the earth's fecundity may have connotations of primeval goodness, Ezekiel's appropriation of the motif is more narrowly concerned with the fate of Israel. Yahweh will break the bars of their yoke, and they will no longer be a prey to the nations or suffer their reproach. The details of this covenant thus more closely resemble the promised blessings in Leviticus 26:3-14. Unlike Leviticus 26, which makes the blessings contingent on Israel's obedience to Yahweh's laws and statutes, the blessings of the covenant of peace are showered upon the flock without any reference to obedience. This emphasis on divine mercy is in keeping

**"Wildpeace"**

Not the peace of a cease-fire,  
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,

but rather

as in the heart when the excitement is over  
and you can talk only about a great weariness.

I know that I know how to kill,  
that makes me an adult.

And my son plays with a toy gun that knows  
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.

A peace

without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,  
without words, without

the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be  
light, floating, like lazy white foam.

A little rest for the wounds—  
who speaks of healing?

(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation  
to the next, as in a relay race:  
the baton never falls.)

Let it come

like wildflowers,  
suddenly, because the field  
must have it: wildpeace.

Yehuda Amichai, "Wildpeace," in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*,  
newly rev. and expanded ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell  
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 88.

with the presentation of Yahweh throughout the chapter as the shepherd who protects his flock from all harm.

## CONNECTIONS

Of all the metaphors in the Old Testament, the metaphor of God as the shepherd of the flock is perhaps the best known and most loved. Even if modern Christian readers are largely unacquainted with the Old Testament, they probably know the Shepherd's Psalm (Ps 23), and they are even more likely to be familiar with its appropriation as a metaphor for Jesus' care and concern for the flock. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus uses the metaphor to express the fullness of divine love and concern for all. Just as a shepherd will leave the ninety-nine to rescue one lost sheep, so also will God rejoice at the repentance of a single sinner (Luke 15:3-7) and hold the

church accountable for each and every "little one" (Matt 18:10-14). In John's Gospel, Jesus *is* the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10).

The metaphor may be so familiar, in fact, that it has lost its power to illumine the raw power and ultimate resolve with which God seeks out and claims the scattered sheep. Iconic representations of the good shepherd that most quickly come to mind depict the shepherd and sheep at rest in an idyllic pastoral setting. [Artistic Portrayals of the Good Shepherd] To be sure, serenity is part of the metaphor, as Ezekiel's covenant of peace suggests. But such representations obscure important dimensions of the metaphor. How did the sheep come to such safety? What was risked for their sake? Because it has become such a commonplace in Christian iconography, we may have lost sight of its radical implications even for Jesus' audience. In the gospel of John, Jesus' use of the metaphor to describe his relationship to God nearly results in his being stoned for blasphemy, and it does in fact lead to his death (John 10:31-33).

### Artistic Portrayals of the Good Shepherd



The figure of the Good Shepherd appears in Christian funerary art as early as the 3rd century CE. Figure 1 is an epitaph found in the Basilica of Damous el-Karita at Carthage (National Museum of Carthage, Carthage). Figure 2, an oval sarcophagus, depicts the Good Shepherd at the center, with another sheep grazing at his feet and rams at the corners of the sarcophagus (Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums).

Figure 3 is a pen and ink drawing from the Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, depicting the Good Shepherd as the Christ child (c. 1675–1680).

Figure 4 is a 1926 woodcut by Eric Gill (1882–1940). Through its use of the halo and the stylized facial features reminiscent of Greek Orthodox icons, this woodcut captures the iconic qualities of the motif of the Good Shepherd.

Ezekiel's use of the metaphor is no less daring. Against the imperialist claims of the superpowers of his day, Ezekiel asserts that Israel belongs to no other shepherd than Yahweh. Other prophets were more accommodating to foreign rule. Isaiah portrayed such empires as Yahweh's instruments of judgment (Isa 10:5-15); Ezekiel's contemporary Jeremiah urged Judeans to submit to the yoke of Babylon, and Ezekiel's younger contemporary, the anonymous Second Isaiah, envisioned a more hopeful future under Yahweh's shepherd Cyrus. The tradition of accommodating to the great powers continues in the New Testament, with Paul's counsel to submit to the governing authorities (Rom 13). Ezekiel, by contrast, never fully legitimates Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Nebuchadnezzar acts with integrity when he consults the oracles (Ezek 21:18), and Yahweh rewards him for his labor against Tyre (Ezek 29:17-21); nevertheless, Ezekiel never says that Yahweh gives him authority to rule Israel. Rather, Babylon wreaks havoc on Jerusalem because Yahweh has abandoned the city to its lovers, other rebels and lords of misrule (Ezek 23:22-35). As



**[Figure 1]** Christian epitaph with engraving of the Good Shepherd, found in the Basilica of Damous el-Karita at Carthage. White marble, late 3rd/early 4th.

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing. C. National Museum of Carthage, Carthage, Tunisia / Art Resource]



**[Figure 2]** Oval sarcophagus depicting the Good Shepherd at the center, with another sheep grazing at his feet and rams at the corners.

[Photo Credit: Scala. Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums / Art Resource, NY]



the restoration begins, Nebuchadnezzar is roundly repudiated for the harm that has been done to the flock.

The chapter is an astute deconstruction of political ideology. The shepherd metaphor has ancient roots in the Assyro-Babylonian royal ideology and was current in Ezekiel's time, since Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar both claimed the epithet for themselves.<sup>7</sup> Other epithets epitomized other royal responsibilities, but the shepherd metaphor was closely associated with the king's responsibility for the welfare of his people. Echoing Ezekiel's indictment that the king failed to heal the sick or bind up the injured, one inscription likens a king's shepherdship to a "healing drug."<sup>8</sup> Hammurabi's shepherdship ensured an abundance of water and pasturage:

I dug the canal Hammu-rapi-nuhush-nishi ("Hammur-rapi is the abundance of the people"), which brings abundant water to the land of Sumer and Akkad.

I turned both its banks into cultivated areas. I kept heaping up piles of grain. I provided perpetual water for the land of Sumer and Akkad and gathered the scattered peoples of the land of Sumer and Akkad (and) provided for them pastures and watering places. In abundance and plenty I shepherded them. I settled them in peaceful abodes.<sup>9</sup>

Finding water, gathering, feeding, settling in peaceful abodes: Hammurabi's explication of the shepherd metaphor clearly illustrates its connotations of care and nurturing.

Ezekiel exposes the hypocrisy inherent in the metaphor by dwelling on the manner in which the shepherds enrich themselves at the expense of the flock. Ezekiel asserts that the cause of the shepherds' failure is their determination to dominate with violence and harshness (v. 4), not



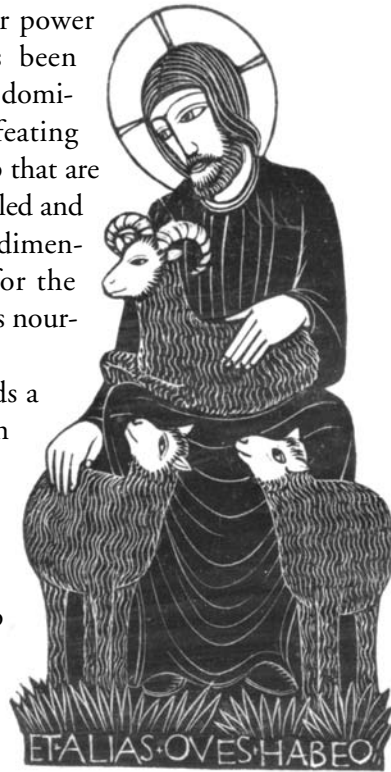
**[Figure 3]** Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. *The Christ Child as the Good Shepherd*. Spanish, Seville, 1675–1680 Pen and brown ink over black chalk.

[Credit: The J. Paul Getty Museum]



to lead with care and concern. The quest for power drives the shepherds to destroy what has been entrusted to them. Associated with this will to dominate is the worrisome and ultimately self-defeating consumption of resources. If it is not the sheep that are being eaten, it is the pasture that is being trampled and the waters that are being fouled. One further dimension of good shepherding, then, is to care for the environment on which the flock depends for its nourishment.

Ezekiel's use of the shepherd metaphor adds a further dimension to a familiar Christian icon by reminding us that the world is overrun with bad shepherds and greedy goats and rams, whose claims to govern in behalf of their constituents often mask other, less altruistic interests. God's resolve to rescue the sheep from such as these constitutes a repudiation of those powerful entities that consume the resources of the earth only to enhance their own strength, while cloaking their aims in the rhetoric of stewardship and service.



[Figure 4] Eric Gill. 1822–1940. *The Good Shepherd* 1926. Relief print on paper image.

[Credit: The Tate Museum, London, The Bridgeman Art Library]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Contra Zimmerli: “the main theme of Ezekiel 34 has disappeared completely in vv 25-30. There is no longer any reference here to good and bad shepherds, but to the salvation which Yahweh has established in his covenant of salvation” (Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983], 2:221).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:281 n. 54; Sabina Franke, “Kings of Akkad: Sargon and Naram-Sin,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 vols., ed. Jack Sasson et al. (New York: Scribner’s, 1995), 2:833.

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg recognizes that the epithet can be used of foreign rulers; however, he follows the consensus in interpreting the shepherds in 34:2 as Judean leaders (Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. [AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997], 2:699).

<sup>4</sup> Lev 3:16b-17; 7:23; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:696.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, VTSup 56 (VTSup 56; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Batto, "The Covenant of Peace: A Neglected Ancient Near Eastern Motif," *CBO* 49 (1987): 187-211.

<sup>7</sup> *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, 3 vols., ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2:121, 122, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Saba'a Stele (2.114E), trans. K. Lawson Younger Jr., in *Context of Scripture*, 2.114E.

<sup>9</sup> *Context of Scripture*, 2.107B, ll. 17-37.

# RECLAIMING THE LAND: THE MOUNTAINS OF EDOM AND ISRAEL

Ezekiel 35:1–36:38

In chapter 34, Yahweh asserts his claim to the flock of Israel and declares that he will shepherd it with justice (34:16). This promise of justice is international in scope and is concerned with protecting Yahweh's flock from other sheep and goats that have encroached on its territory (34:16-22). In chapters 35–36, this declaration of divine intent is further developed in the oracles addressed to Mount Seir (35:1-15) and the mountains of Israel (chapter 36). Addressed to Mt. Seir, 35:1-15 indicts the Edomites for cherishing an "ancient enmity," handing Israel over to the sword on the day of its calamity, and plundering and possessing the land. The corresponding oracle in 36:1-15, which is addressed to the mountains of Israel, completes the judgment of Edom in vv. 1-7 before continuing with a promise of salvation for Yahweh's land.

The connections between chapters 34 and 35–36 in structure, theme, and motif should be noted. The structural pattern of announcing the penalty for the criminal and salvation for the victim in 35:1–36:15 closely follows that of chapter 34.<sup>1</sup> The theme of divine justice (*šp̄t*, 34:16, 17, 20, 34; 35:11; 36:19) is explicitly worked out in the adjudication of the claims of Edom, which has arrogated Yahweh's land to itself, and those who are injured by Edom's actions—the land, Yahweh, and the mountains of Israel.<sup>2</sup> The recurrence of the shepherd metaphor also suggests a connection with chapter 34: Edom is condemned for taking possession of Israel's "pasture" (36:5), and the restored house of Israel is likened to a "flock for sacrifices" (36:37-38). Finally, like chapter 34, chapters 35–36 contain numerous allusions to the covenant blessings of Leviticus 26. The invocation of covenant blessings, in turn, creates thematic associations with chapter 6, in which covenant curses were unleashed against the mountains of Israel.

Even though these chapters employ a profusion of prophetic formulas that tempt commentators to identify originally smaller units of prophetic speech, it is more useful to regard these chapters as originating in the processes of writing. As Ellen Davis has noted, writing

makes possible a fuller elaboration and critique of traditions than is normally associated with compositions prepared for oral delivery.<sup>3</sup> This literary shaping contributes to several unique features of these chapters. For example, the shifts from direct address to third-person description encourage the reader to imagine that the implied audience consists of participants in a juridical proceeding:<sup>4</sup> Edomite statements describe their attempts to take possession of the land of Israel (35:10, 12; 36:2), while Yahweh's response is significant for the mountains of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Given the literary complexity of the chapters, the usual practice of using prophetic formulas to isolate individual oracles may result in a misreading of the text. This misreading is especially acute in the case of 36:16-32, which is usually treated independently of 35:1–36:15. Because these verses emphasize the transformation of Israel, nearly all commentators highlight their anthropological elements. It can, however, be argued that the regeneration of the house of Israel is subordinated to the transformation of the land. The primary basis for separating 36:16-32 from the preceding announcement of salvation for the mountains of Israel is the presence of a word-event formula (“the word of the Lord came to me”) in 36:16. Elsewhere in this commentary, it has been argued that this formula on its own does not constitute a sufficient indication of a new unit. Other elements must be present as well, such as a transition from poetry to prose, the description of a new scene, or the introduction of a new metaphor (see [6.1 *Uses of the Word-Event Formula in Ezekiel*]). In the present instance, the word-event formula links two discrete oracles on the same subject: the restoration of the land.<sup>6</sup> The house of Israel is purified and made responsive to the covenant not for its own sake, but for the sake of Yahweh's honor and in order to restore the land. This latter motivation is clearly indicated in 36:33-36: once the house of Israel is cleansed, Yahweh will repopulate the land and rebuild the waste places. Throughout the unit, then, the primary concern is to restore the land.

## COMMENTARY

**Against Edom, 35:1-15**

Chapter 35 is comprised of three oracles, all directed against Mount Seir (35:1-4, 5-9, 10-15). The first, a challenge oracle ending in a recognition formula, employs stereotypical language to announce Yahweh's judgment. The territory identified as Mt. Seir, located east of the Wadi Arabah and south of the Dead Sea, is the traditional home of the Edomites. [Who Were the Edomites?] The reference to Edomite territory as a mountain draws an explicit parallel with the mountains of Israel (36:1).

**Who Were the Edomites?**

Until the 1960s, most reconstructions of the history of Edom depended on the archaeological investigations of Nelson Glueck, which were, in turn, heavily influenced by the biblical accounts. According to Glueck's reconstruction, Edom was a solidly established kingdom as early as the 13th century BCE. Archaeological investigations of Edom since the 1960s have effectively challenged that reconstruction. The current state of research is conveniently outlined in a series of essays published in a volume edited by Diana V. Edelman, *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition*. Against Glueck's claim that Edom had achieved statehood well before Israel, physical evidence of statehood is certain only for the 7th century BCE. Palace structures built in imitation of Assyrian architecture appear in the city of Bosrah at this time, along with evidence of bureaucratic administration. Also at this time, settlements began to increase both in Edom proper and in the Judean territory west of the Wadi Arabah.

Coinciding with minimal evidence of statehood is a fairly narrow range of material culture. The artifacts are domestic in nature: loom weights and millstones suggest the fairly basic activities of weaving and milling grain. There is even less evidence of military fortifications, and no monumental architecture. One particularly unusual find is a small collection of gold rings, earrings, and carnelian beads found in Tawilan. Although they were found in a level of the tell that dated to the 5th century BCE, they appear to have been made five centuries earlier, in approximately the 10th century BCE. The careful preservation of the jewelry through half a millennium suggests that it was probably a family heirloom. One can only speculate on the history and fortunes of the family or families that owned the jewelry: was

it passed on in a single family? Or was it sold or stolen? Was the quantity and quality of the jewelry typical of the wealth of a single family? Or had pieces of the hoard been sold or bartered away through the years? Of course, such questions cannot be answered. Even so, the overall absence of wealth in Edom provides a glaring contrast to biblical prophetic charges that the Edomites profited from the downfall of Jerusalem.

Although archaeologists are quick to caution that one cannot hypothesize from the absence of evidence, the pattern of findings suggests that Edom never developed a significant or enduring material culture. A picture is emerging of the Edomite peoples as barely sedentary agropastoralists who briefly achieved statehood and the trappings of bureaucratic administration only as vassals of Assyria. Edom's century of prosperity was a consequence of its strategic importance to Assyria. But once Assyria collapsed, Edom had neither the agricultural resources nor the economic will to sustain itself as a bureaucratic state. Thus it most likely drifted back into a tribal form of organization and government.

For further information on archeological finds in Edom, see Piotr Bienkowski, "The Edomites: the Archaeological Evidence from Transjordan"; for Edomite settlement in the Negev, see Itzhaq Beit Arie, "The Edomites in Cisjordan"; and for Edomite social and economic history, see Ernst Axel Knauf-Belleri, "Edom: The Social and Economic History," all in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He Is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition*, ed. Diana V. Edelman (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

The reason for the judgment is given in two subsequent oracles, vv. 5-9 and 10-15. The first accuses the Edomites of handing the people of Israel over at the time of their calamity (*bē'ēt ʿēdām*), a phrase that is unique in Ezekiel and which has evidently been crafted as a pun on the name of Edom. Punning continues in the doubled curse in v. 6 that blood (Heb. *dām*, cf. *ʿēdām*, Edom) would pursue them. The avenging of the blood of Israel is reminiscent of the cry of Abel's blood in Genesis 4:10 and the practice of blood revenge, which allowed a close family member to avenge a kinsman's murder (Deut 19:6; Josh 20:5).<sup>7</sup> The full extent of the blood revenge is described in vv. 7-8 in a third-person account intended for the hearing of the exiles.

The second reason for judgment, in vv. 10-14, focuses more squarely on contested Israelite territory. [What Did the Edomites Do to Deserve Condemnation?] The accusation expresses the Edomite offense by way of a quotation: "These two nations and these two countries shall be mine, and we will take possession of them" (35:10). Although there is no evidence that the kingdom of Edom expressly followed a political strategy of expansion into the northern territory of Israel, there is solid archaeological evidence of Edomite settlements in southern Judean territory. [Edom and Settlements in Judean Territory] The nature of these settlements cannot be established with certainty; they may reflect Edomite control of the southern trade route to Philistia beginning in the seventh century BCE, or they may simply reflect a tendency toward Edomite and Judean intermarriage during this time. That these were permanent settlements is suggested by the discovery of the remains of an Edomite shrine,

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### What Did the Edomites Do to Deserve Condemnation?



The motivation for the prophetic condemnation of Edom remains a matter of intense scholarly debate. In the biblical tradition, the Edomites were considered to have been descended from Jacob's brother Esau, and narrative accounts reflect longstanding hostilities between the two peoples (Gen 25; 27; 2 Sam 8:13-14; 2 Kgs 8:20). In texts from the Babylonian exile, Edom comes in for particularly bitter condemnation (Lam 4:20-21; Ps 137; Jer 49:7-22; Mal 1:2-5; Isa 34; Joel 4:19 [3:19]; Obadiah). Most of these texts declare that Edom will not be able to escape the judgment that Jerusalem has endured, but only five verses in Obadiah enumerate specific crimes (Obad 10-14). Some biblical historians harmonize these exilic texts in order to suggest that Edom played an active role in the destruction of Jerusalem. Others, however, argue that no external evidence exists to corroborate such claims.

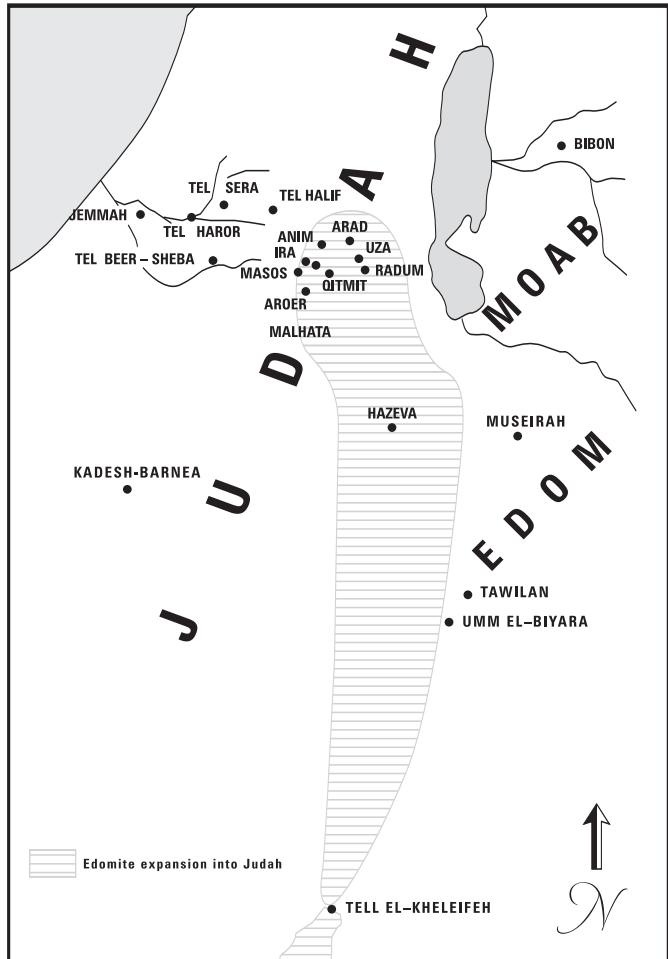
For a reappraisal of Edom in the biblical tradition, see John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, (JSOTSup 77; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989). For a lucid disentangling of the prophetic texts that stops short of a historical reconstruction, see Claire B. Mathews, *Defending Zion: Edom's Desolation and Jacob's Restoration* (Isaiah 34–35) in Context, ZAW 236 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 69–119. For a reappraisal of the biblical material in light of archaeological evidence, see the essays in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He Is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition*, ed. Diana V. Edelman, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies* 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

### Edom and Settlements in Judean Territory



Edom prospered as an Assyrian vassal during the 7th century BCE. Because its climate made agriculture precarious, development required external stimulus like that provided by Assyria, whose incorporation of Edom into its empire made it possible to circumvent the Phoenician monopolies on trade and metals. The growth in settlements coincided with this period of Assyrian control, suggesting that it was only with this external support that agricultural production became worthwhile. When Assyria collapsed, traces of Edomite statehood disappeared. The Edomite peoples retained their ethnic identity, however. Westward Edomite migrations into Judean territory, already begun in the seventh century, continued, and by the 3rd century BCE, the southern region of Judea became known as Idumea.

For more information, see Itzhag Beit Arieh, “Edomites in Cisjordan,” in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He is Your Brother*, ed. Diana V. Edelman (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).



as well as by the designation of this region as Idumea by the beginning of the Hellenistic period.<sup>8</sup>

The Edomite possession of the land is presented as a direct attack on Yahweh’s sovereignty. In v. 10, the Edomite strategy is juxtaposed with the divine assertion “although the Lord was there”—an assertion that is surprising to many commentators, given Yahweh’s departure from the sanctuary in chapters 8–11. But if this oracle is read in light of chapter 34, then the reference to divine presence may encompass the era when the “shepherds” of Assyria and Babylonia ruled Israel. Territory first began to be cut off from Judah in 701 BCE, when Sennacherib reassigned Judean cities to Philistine kings (*ANET*, 288; cf. Isa 1:21). The Edomite settlement in the Negev suggest that the Edomites were rewarded for their loyalty to Sennacherib.<sup>9</sup>

The oracle presents the Edomite claim to possess the land not only as abusive speech against the land, but also as blasphemy against Yahweh. In this respect, the condemnation closely resembles Ezekiel's oracle against Edom in 25:12-14. While commentators often draw attention to the differences between these two oracles, the central charge in both is that Edom misappropriated divine prerogatives. In 25:12-14, Edom exercised "vengeance," (*nqm*), an act of ruling that belonged to Yahweh. Similarly, in 35:10-14, Edom "magnified itself" against Yahweh when it condemned the land of Israel. The closing recognition formula, "*they* shall know that I am the Lord," suggests that the Israelites are the audience for this pronouncement against Edom.

### **The Mountains of Israel, 36:1-38**

The judicial deliberations against Edom continue, but are now explicated in terms of their salvific consequences for the mountains of Israel. Alluding to the blessings of the covenant in Leviticus 26, the chapter emphasizes the renewed fertility and fruitfulness of the land.

#### ***Judgment of the Nations Means Salvation for the Land of Israel, 36:1-15***

Ezekiel 36:1-7 creates the effect of Yahweh's mounting anger against the nations by way of a profusion of prophetic formulas and reasons for divine judgment. Unlike 35:1-15, which names Edom as the enemy, this chapter speaks more generally of "the enemy" and of the "rest of the nations." NRSV's "rest of the nations" does not quite capture the connotation of the Hebrew phrase (*šē'ērīt haggōyīm*, "remnant of the nations," v.4), which probably refers to the survivors of Babylon's Syro-Palestinian campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Edom is cited as an example of this larger group of the nations. Their offense is doubly shameful for Israel. The problem is not only that they make the land an object of gossip, predation, and plunder, but that the land falls prey even to such weakened nations as these. In his hot jealousy (vv. 5, 6), Yahweh comes to the defense of the land. Here, Yahweh's jealousy is a positive attribute, since it results in his protective care for the land. The punishment is defined as a proportional retribution, since the nations will suffer what they have done to Israel.

In 36:8-15, Yahweh addresses the mountains of Israel. Although it is commonly observed that this restoration of the land invokes creation themes, it is more appropriate to view this text primarily



through the lens of the blessings of the covenant in Leviticus 26. The land will be tilled and sown and will bear fruit for Israel; the waste places will be rebuilt and reinhabited; and the land will once again be Israel's possession. Although the restoration of Israelites is included in this series of promises (36:8, 12), Yahweh's solidarity is primarily with the land. Verses 13-15 conclude with the declaration that the land will no longer suffer the insults of the nations.

### ***The Cleansing of the House of Israel, 36:16-36***

A word-event formula signals a private communication to Ezekiel (36:16-21), which results in further instructions to address the house of Israel (36:22-31). In order to fulfill his promise to the land to repopulate it, Yahweh must address the root cause of its defilement and desolation. After describing the purification of the house of Israel, the chapter closes by reiterating the theme of restoring the land (36:33-36).

In 36:16-21, Yahweh attributes the current state of the land to the ways of the house of Israel. Israel's defilement of the land is compared to the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period. Although the simile is irredeemably offensive to modern readers, its logic is relevant for Ezekiel's argument. Menstruation was only one of many forms of bodily secretions that rendered the body ritually unclean and necessitated a strict separation from the temple and from the holy things of Yahweh (cf. Lev 15:19-24; Lev 16).<sup>11</sup> Although the uncleanness of the menstruant did not have moral overtones, such connotations emerge when the concept is applied to the house of Israel in 36:17, since it is Israel's deeds that have defiled the land.

Because uncleanness contaminates everything that comes into contact with it, a strict separation is required in order to prevent the spread of defilement. Greenberg understands the expulsion of Israel in terms of Leviticus 18:25-28, which depicts the land vomiting out its unclean inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> While much of the terminology of 36:16-22 suggests an affinity with Leviticus 18:25-28, it is worth noting that Ezekiel 36:17 emphasizes Yahweh's revulsion, and not the land's.

Yahweh is thus forced to do what he had resolved many times not to do in his past dealings with Israel. According to Ezekiel's revisionist history, Yahweh had stopped short of unleashing his wrath on Israel on numerous occasions. In each instance, Yahweh refrained from acting in order that his name not be profaned among the nations (20:9, 14, 22). Yahweh now finds himself in an impossible double bind, since his strict adherence to the terms of

the covenant has not upheld his name, but rather has resulted in further dishonor. As evidence of this dishonor, the nations are quoted: “These are the people of the Lord; and yet they had to go out of his land.” The insult can be interpreted as an assault on either Yahweh’s character or his sovereignty; that is, either Yahweh has arbitrarily rejected his people, or he is powerless to defend his land from attack. In either case, the expulsion of Israel solves one problem while creating another. In order to defend his holy name, Yahweh has no alternative but to rescue Israel and restore it to the land.

Ezekiel 36:22-32, Yahweh thus declares that Yahweh is about to act for the sake of his reputation. Yahweh will gather the Israelites from the nations to which they were scattered and settle them in their own land, cleanse them with waters of purification, give them new hearts, and endow them with his spirit so that they will be able to observe his statutes and ordinances. [Engraved Hearts] [The Heart of Stone] Only now, cleansed of their impurities and made responsive in ways they have never been before, will it be possible for Israel to inherit the land Yahweh promised long ago to their ancestors.

Israel does not deserve this mercy, but Yahweh’s dishonor in the sight of the nations leaves Yahweh no alternative. For this reason, Yahweh commands Israel to be ashamed of all that it has done. Elsewhere in this commentary, it has been noted that shame language is associated with the covenant. Its use at key points calls attention to Yahweh’s reliability and Israel’s unreliability ([Divine Brokenness]; [Sister Cities]). The same observation can be made here, since Israel’s shame is attached to the recognition that Yahweh has been forced to act in a certain way (v. 32; cf. 22). Thus, even as Yahweh fully honors the covenant by summoning the grain and making the land so fruitful that it will be compared with the garden of Eden, the house of Israel must remember its ways through shame and self-loathing.

### The Human Flock, 36:37-38

One further clue that chapters 34–36 are to be read as a continuous literary unit is the reappearance of the sheep metaphor at the close of Ezekiel 36 (36:37-38).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the rest of the chapter, which is primarily concerned with the restoration of the land, these two verses anticipate the full restora-

#### Engraved Hearts



Yet Lord restore thine image, hear my call:

And though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan,

Remember that thou once didst write in stone.

George Herbert, “The Sinner,” ll. 12–14, from *The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater, Everyman’s Library 204 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 35.

### The Heart of Stone



The image of replacing the heart of stone with the heart of flesh appears elsewhere in Ezekiel in connection with the restoration of the land. Refuting the Jerusalemite claim that the exiles had forfeited their right to the land by “going far from Yahweh,” Yahweh declares that the exiles would be the ones to inherit the land. In this earlier context, the metaphor of the heart is employed in a corporate sense: Yahweh will give them “one heart” (11:19) and thereby put an end to disputes over the land. Associated with this new unity is the gift of an obedient heart, as Yahweh replaces the hearts of stone with hearts of flesh so that the people will be able to observe Yahweh’s statutes and ordinances. This “heart transplant” suggests that obedience is a capacity well within the range of human nature, as long as it has not become habituated to resistance and rebellion. Ezekiel’s notion of a heart transplant differs significantly from the more familiar use of the heart metaphor in Jeremiah. In Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant, the torah is written on the heart so that the knowledge of Yahweh’s laws becomes innate (Jer 31:31-34). As it is, human nature is not sufficient but must be altered in some way by reconfiguring the heart.

tion of the covenantal relationship. Throughout the book, Yahweh refuses to hear the inquiries of the house of Israel; for the first time Yahweh declares that he will allow Israel to petition him (NRSV “ask”; Heb. *drš*) to increase their population. The willingness to entertain Israel’s petitions suggests that Yahweh’s action in behalf of his holy name is not the last word in this drama of restoration. In contrast with the previous simile, which likened Israel to a contaminating menstruant, this simile likens Israel to the holy things of Yahweh, the “flock for sacrifices.” Not only will Yahweh fulfill the promise to repopulate the land, Israel will be fully consecrated to Yahweh.

## CONNECTIONS

In his study of the concept of land in the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann suggested that a reconsideration of the role that land plays in the Bible could lead to a thorough revision of key categories in biblical interpretation. In particular, Brueggemann argued that the biblical theme of the land challenges modern tendencies to interpret the Bible in personal and existential categories. These categories, which focus among other things on individual piety, influence modern readers to interpret the biblical conceptions of salvation as a kind of personally liberating discovery of meaning. As opposed to this individualist method of interpretation, Brueggemann argued that the central problem in the Bible is not emancipation—a “freedom to be me,” as Brueggemann described it—but *rootage*, not meaning but *belonging*, not separation from

community but *location* within it, not isolation from others but *placement* deliberately between the generation of promise and fulfillment. The Bible is addressed to the central human problem of homelessness (*anomie*) and seeks to respond to that agenda in terms of grasp and gift. (*italics his*)<sup>14</sup>

For Brueggemann, then, the land becomes the lens through which all of the categories of biblical meaning should be reconceptualized. The category of land redefines the nature of grace by placing it within the community, rather than within solitary individuals. Moreover, if grace is associated with the inheritance and fruitfulness of the land, it is not confined to the individual's moment of decision for God. Instead, it becomes an inheritance that each generation passes on to the next. The biblical conception of land thus becomes significant for understanding divine grace as encompassing the entire community throughout its history.

Although Brueggemann's focus on the land leads him to reconfigure important theological concepts, it is worth noting that his redefinitions of such conceptions as salvation are still connected primarily to human concerns. In contrast with Brueggemann's, and perhaps also the Bible's, general tendency to speak of salvation in anthropocentric terms, Ezekiel 35–36 urges us to consider the possibility that Yahweh deals with human beings only for the sake of the land. Brueggemann points out that the Bible is preoccupied with the problem of homelessness. However, in Ezekiel 36, the problem is not homelessness but depopulation, the barrenness and desolation of the land. Thus Ezekiel does not necessarily view salvation from a human perspective. Rather, in the restoration, Israel receives the land as an inheritance so that the land may be cultivated (36:9) and consoled (36:12); the multiplication of people and animals indicates Yahweh's goodness *to the land* (36:11). Even Israel's cleansing, the replacement of its stony hearts with hearts of flesh, and the spirit-given ability to observe Yahweh's statutes and ordinances, are not for Israel's sake but for the sake of the land (36:33). And, while Israel must continue to bear its shame, the land does not.

In the restoration that Ezekiel envisions, Yahweh will demonstrate concern for his people, and there are signs of that solicitude for his people even in these chapters (cf. 36:8, 12). Nevertheless, this land-centered account of salvation suggests yet another corrective to modern categories of theological interpretation. Israel does need the land in order to be restored fully, and so Yahweh sets about to reclaim the land from those who have encroached upon it. Even so, Israel does not receive the land as a gift; instead they are

resettled on it as its servants, as the consecrated “flock” of Yahweh. Yahweh remains the owner of the land, the one who builds and replants that which has been destroyed (36:36). It is because the Israelites are instrumental to Yahweh’s plans for the land that they are cleansed, restored, and given new hearts (cf. Lev 26:3).

What are the implications of Ezekiel 36 for contemporary theological reflection? First, it can become an important resource in the emerging field of ecotheology, which seeks to bring Christian traditions to bear on our thinking about the need to care for the environment. Ezekiel 36 suggests one way to do this, by rethinking what it means to have our hearts transformed by God. In many Protestant denominations, there is a tendency to differentiate between salvation and sanctification, the former being the moment of being made right with God, the latter being the continuing growth in spiritual maturity. Often, Ezekiel’s image of new hearts is equated with the former moment of salvation. Although the notion of sanctification is closer to Ezekiel’s understanding of the restoration of human hearts, even this modern theological category falls short of what is intended by Ezekiel. Partly owing to the virtue lists of the New Testament, Christians tend to think of sanctification as growing in spiritual gifts that promote communal well-being (see, e.g., Eph 4:17–32). By contrast, Ezekiel 36 suggests that the transformation of human hearts is not an end in itself, either for the individual person’s sense of her own well-being or for that of the community. Instead, the purpose of the transformation of human hearts is to render human beings fit for service, not to one another but to the land. [The Gift of Good Land]

### The Gift of Good Land



The great study of stewardship, then, is “to know / That which before us lies in daily life” and to be practiced and prepared “in things that most concern” [*Paradise Lost*, VIII.192–93]. The angel [Raphael] is talking about good work, which is to talk about skill. In the loss of skill we lose stewardship; in losing stewardship we lose fellowship; we become outcasts from the great neighborhood of Creation. It is possible—as our experience in *this* good land shows—to exile ourselves from Creation, and to ally ourselves with the principle of destruction—which is, ultimately, the principle of nonentity. It is to be willing *in general* for things to not-be. And once we have allied ourselves with that principle, we are foolish to think that we can control the results. The “regulation” of abominations is a modern governmental exercise that never succeeds. If we are willing to pollute the air—to harm the elegant creature known as the

atmosphere—by that token we are willing to harm all creatures that breathe, ourselves and our children among them. There is no begging off or “trading off.” You cannot affirm the power plant and condemn the smokestack, or affirm the smoke and condemn the cough.

That is not to suggest that we can live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 267–81, esp. 281.

Although these chapters have more in common with the themes of the ancestral promise, covenant, and settlement (36:28), and in that respect constitute the climax of Israel's history as it was recounted Ezekiel 20, it is worth noting that a number of parallels exist between Ezekiel 36 and Genesis 2. These parallels are more broadly applicable to a contemporary audience that is less concerned with a specific territory than with the fate of the earth. When hearts are transformed, the land will be so fertile that the nations will call it the garden of Eden. Other parallels, such as the need to observe divine ordinances and the vocation to till the earth and keep it, are also reminiscent of Genesis 2. Ezekiel thus takes us back to the very beginnings of biblical anthropology: because we are made from the earth, the earth is our ground and our end.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 258.

<sup>2</sup> See H. G. Reventlow, *Wächter über Israel, Ezechiel und seine Tradition*, BZAW 82 (Berlin: A Töpelmann, 1962), 60-64; and Horacio Simian (-Yofre), *Die theologische Nachgeschichte der Prophetie Ezeziels: Form- und traditionskritische Untersuchung zu Ez 6; 35*, Forschung zur Bibel (Warberg: Echter Verlag, 1974), 354-55.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, JSOTS 78, Bible and Literature Series 21 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 33-37.

<sup>4</sup> For the rhetorical setting of juridical assemblies, see also Isa 41:1, 21; 43:8-10; 45:20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Reventlow, *Wächter über Israel, Ezechiel und seine Tradition*, 60-64, esp. 60. Although Reventlow's conclusions about a supposed covenant festival are no longer persuasive, his observations concerning the juridical setting of Ezek 36 remain sound.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ezek 24:15; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1, 11, 20; 29:1, 17; 30:1; 32:1, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1997), 2:713.

<sup>8</sup> Itzhaq Beit Arieh, "Edomites in Cisjordan," 33-40, and Diana Edelman, "Edom: A Historical Geography," 5, both in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He Is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition*, ed. Diana V. Edelman, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> An ostrakon from Arad suggests that the Edomites may have participated with the Assyrians in the war against Judah; see John Bartlett, "Edom in the Nonprophetic Corpus," in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, trans. Coslett Quin (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 490.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:727.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:727.

<sup>13</sup> Others have noted the connection between chs. 34 and 35–36; see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel*

(BZAW 301; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 159; B. Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story* (JSOTS 169; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 187.





# THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

## Ezekiel 37:1-28

We have heard nothing from the exiles since chapter 33, where neither they nor the Jerusalemites appear to have understood the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem. Those remaining in Jerusalem believed that they could, like Abraham, start from small beginnings, while the exiles listened to the prophet without taking his word to heart. In the present chapter the people seem to have grasped the implications of the judgment, but now have difficulty with the promise of restoration. Despite Yahweh's promises to gather the scattered sheep and resettle them on their land, the people sigh and groan, if not in their iniquities, then in "desiccating despair"<sup>1</sup> over their current prospects.

As in so much of the book of Ezekiel, a commonplace becomes an elaborately developed metaphor. The metaphor of bones appears frequently in the Bible as an emblem of human health or disease;<sup>2</sup> however, Ezekiel's depiction of a valley strewn with dry, disarticulated bones is unique in the biblical tradition and may reflect a familiarity with a well-known curse



### The Vision of Ezekiel

David Blomberg, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants to England, produced this painting shortly after his beloved mother's death. The painting is one of his strongest early works. By abstracting the human figure to its most essential form, Blomberg interprets Ezekiel's vision of communal resurrection as a joyful rediscovery of life. The figures are painted in shades of yellow and pink, which suggests, says art historian Richard Cork, a "blinding revelation," as well as the sense that these figures are "caught half-way between disembodied spirit and reincarnated flesh" (40). There is also a vivid sense of movement: a mother raises her infant above her head, while other figures awaken, touch, embrace, and dance.

For further interpretation of this painting, see Richard Cork, *David Blomberg* (New Haven: Yale, 1987), 38–42.

David Blomberg (1890–1957). *The Vision of Ezekiel*. © Copyright Tate Gallery. Vision of Ezekiel, 1912. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource]

### Dry Bones and Covenant Curses



F. C. Fensham suggested that we interpret Ezekiel's metaphor of dry bones in light of ancient Near Eastern treaty curses: because Judah has violated its covenant with Yahweh, its slain will be left to rot on the open field. This treatment of treaty breakers occurs with nauseating regularity in the annals of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal:

Like grain I heaped up the corpses of their warriors. (Esarhaddon, *ARAB*, 2:520)

The corpses of their warriors I forbade to be buried. (Esarhaddon, *ARAB*, 2:521)

Not a man among them escaped. Their corpses they hung on the walls, they stripped off their skins and covered the city walls with them. (Ashurbanipal, *ARAB*, 2:773)

One rebel attempted suicide, presumably in order to escape capture. The corpse was salted and delivered to Ashurbanipal, who found ways to extend the punishment even after death: "I did not allow his body to be buried. I made him more dead than he was before" (*ARAB*, 2:815).

If the field of dry bones signifies the violation of Judah's covenant with Yahweh, it also spells the end of its political aspirations. Throughout Ezekiel, rebellion against Yahweh played itself out in Judah's rebellions against political alliances, some of which the nation entered into willingly, but all of which spelled certain death. The valley of dry bones leaves no doubt about the consequences of Israel's rebellion: the nation is dead.

F. C. Fensham, "The Curse of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 Changed to a Blessing of Resurrection," *JNSL* 13 (1987): 59–60.

for treaty violation, [Dry Bones and Covenant Curses] as well as with Assyrian depictions of its slain enemies.

Like so many units in Ezekiel, this chapter neatly falls into two subunits, which may be further divided into two parts. [An Outline of Ezekiel 37] Although commentators classify the first subunit as a vision and the second as a symbolic act, both revolve around prophetic symbolic actions. In the first subunit, 37:1-14, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to prophesy over the dry bones. The symbolic action is interpreted in vv. 11-14 as a response to a community

complaint: "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are clean cut off" (37:11). This complaint is addressed by way of the metaphor of bringing the dead out of their graves, which is presented as a new exodus and resettlement in the land of Israel. The symbolic act thus envisions resurrection as a corporate event.

In the second unit (37:15-27), Yahweh commands Ezekiel to take two sticks, write the names of the northern and southern tribes on them, and join them together. In the accompanying interpretation, Yahweh declares that he is the one who will take the two sticks and

### An Outline of Ezekiel 37



37:1a Report of a divine encounter

37:1b-14 The valley of dry bones

37:3-10 Report of Symbolic Act

37:3 Divine question, prophet's response

37:4-8 Instruction to prophesy to the dry bones

37:9-10 Instruction to prophesy to the wind

37:11-14 Declaration of divine resolve

37:11 The exiles' complaint

37:12-14 Declaration of divine intent

37:15 Reception of the divine word

37:16-23 Instruction to perform symbolic act

37:16-17 The two sticks

37:17-23 The interpretation

37:24-28 Affirmation of covenant promises


join them together in his hand. The symbolic act is further explained as Yahweh's restoration of the people of Israel to their land. Themes from chapters 34–36 are underscored with the four-fold repetition of the everlasting character of the restoration.

Although the consensus among commentators is that the two subunits were originally independent, Christoph Barth argues that the chapter is, at the very least, a redactional unity. As evidence for this unity, he points to the close thematic interrelationship of 36:16-38, 37:1-14, and 37:15-28, as well as to the tendency elsewhere in the book to link interpretations to symbolic acts and vision reports (see, e.g., 3:22-5:17; 12:1-20; 8:1–11:25). What is crucial for Barth, however, is that vv. 15-28 consolidate the basic themes of vv. 1-14 by reiterating the themes of exodus, return, and reunification.<sup>3</sup>

Ezekiel 37 is skillfully worked into its literary context. As Barth notes, the thematic connections between this chapter and chapters 34–36 are widely acknowledged. The spirit of Yahweh, which was introduced in 36:26-27 and will reappear in 39:29, is instrumental in bringing the dry bones back to life. Picking up the theme of exodus from 36:24, this resuscitation is described as a new exodus and resettlement.<sup>4</sup> The oath formula in 37:14 may allude to Yahweh's renewed oath in 20:33, while the symbolic union of the two sticks of Judah and Israel may allude to the shepherd metaphor of chapters 20 and 34. As Yahweh restores the flock, the nations see that this covenant, unlike any other, is an everlasting one.

A less well-known connection is with Ezekiel's inaugural experience. Two phrases, the formula for trance experience ("the hand of the LORD was upon me," cf. 1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 40:1), and the reference to "the valley," link the chapter to the Ezekiel's first cycle of symbolic acts in 3:22–5:17 (cf. 3:22). Because the reference is to a specific valley, one may suggest that this episode is set in the same valley where Ezekiel was first commanded to perform symbolic acts (3:22-5:17). It is in this same valley, then, that the prophet sees his work come to fruition. The chapter is also reminiscent of 33:33, "When this comes—and come it will!—they will know that a prophet has been among them."

### The Resurrection of Israel

 This fresco, discovered in 1932 in the Yale excavations of the synagogue in Dura Europos (Syria, 245–256 AD), interprets the entire chapter of Ezek 37 as a single event. On the right, Ezekiel is depicted twice, possibly to indicate the two stages of bringing the dead to life (37:7, 9). At the far right, the hand of God stretches down toward the prophet (37:1). Bones appear in various stages of reconstitution throughout the panel. Rib bones appear in the center foreground (37:2). Enfleshed hands, heads, and feet are scattered throughout the panel, and six fully restored bodies lie corpselike in the center (37:7-8). A split mountain and a precariously tilted house in the background depict the quaking and loud noise of v. 7.

The prophet's second act of prophesying appears in the center right panel, where the prophet appears a second time, this time with his hand raised toward three of the four winds, which are depicted as Greek psyches (37:9). The fourth psyche cradles the head of a corpse as she breathes life into it.

The fresco also incorporates elements that are not found in vv. 1-10, but which appear in the rest of the chapter. The hand of God reaches down not only to Ezekiel but also to the three figures on the left and in the center, possibly to indicate that this resurrection is not the work of the prophet alone but also of God. In addition, the resurrection is depicted as the reunification of the tribes of Israel and Judah under one king, David (37:15-25). These different entities are all represented: the three figures on the left signify the tribes of Judah (i.e., Judah, Benjamin, and Levi), while the ten figures to the right represent the tribes of Israel. The figure of David in the center signifies the reunification of these tribes under a single king.

Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, "The Conception of the Resurrection in the Ezekiel Panel of the Dura Synagogue," *JBL* 60 (1941): 43-55.



### The Valley of Dry Bones

Fresco. c. 239 AD. Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria. [Credit: Art Resource]

## COMMENTARY

**The Valley of Dry Bones, 37:1-14**

The present unit consists of a report of a trance experience in which the prophet performs a symbolic action (vv. 1-10) and an accompanying disputation (vv. 11-14). The two subunits are held together by the complaint of the people, which is cited in v. 11: “Our bones are dried up; our hope is lost, we are clean cut off.” Zimmerli notes that the *ēnû* sounds at the end of each Hebrew verb suggest that this expression was derived from the context of complaint and lament.<sup>5</sup> In the poetic literature, the metaphor of bones represents the totality of the human person. Greenberg notes the contrast between fully alive bones, which are moist (Prov 3:8; 15:30), and despairing bones, which are dry (Prov 17:20).<sup>6</sup> The remaining expressions underscore the despair and anguish of abandonment (cf. Ps 31:23).<sup>7</sup> The complaint is the basis for what precedes and follows: vv. 1-10 focus more vividly on the metaphor of dry bones, while vv. 12-14 develop a related metaphor of bringing the dead out of their graves. [\[The Resurrection of Israel\]](#)



**The Dry Bones Restored to Life**

Fresco, c. 239 AD. Synagogue, Dura Europos, Syria. [Credit: Art Resource]

Because this unit begins with the formula that introduces each of Ezekiel's other visions, "the hand of the LORD was upon me" (cf. 1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 40:1), it is often interpreted as a vision. However, since the narrative does not employ Ezekiel's terms for a visionary experience, it is better understood as a narrative concerning a trance or seizure<sup>8</sup> during which Ezekiel performs a symbolic act.

With the hand of the Lord upon him, the prophet is carried by the spirit to "the" valley, possibly the same one where Ezekiel was instructed to perform his first symbolic acts (cf. 3:22). The noun NRSV translates as "valley" can also connote the kind of plain in which armies would engage in battle. That the valley is such a battlefield is further suggested by the reference to the corpses as the "slain" (Heb. *hārûgîm*), as well as by the reference to the resuscitated host as "a very great army."<sup>9</sup> What Ezekiel sees, then, is the end result of the rebellion of the whole house of Israel, as well as the completion of Yahweh's judgment. Block suggests that the dry bones represent not only the victims of Nebuchadnezzar's siege, but also those who fell to the Assyrians more than 130 years earlier.<sup>10</sup>

When Yahweh asks the prophet whether the bones can live, he replies, "O Lord, you know." Zimmerli observed that Ezekiel's reply encompasses an acknowledgment both of human failure and of divine possibility.<sup>11</sup> Even though the scene is a powerful vindication of the prophet's message of judgment (cf. 33:33); it is also a ruthless commentary on his efforts as a sentinel. The prophet's reply to Yahweh's question may therefore contain a tacit acknowledgment of his own failure.

Yet it is this prophet who must prophesy over the dry bones. In the ensuing scene, as Zimmerli notes, the "prophet is suddenly transformed from being a spokesman of human impotence to a spokesman of divine omnipotence."<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel's prophesying brings the dry bones to life in two stages. As he prophesies, there is a great noise and quaking (NRSV "rattling") as the bones come together and are covered with sinews and flesh.<sup>13</sup> NRSV implies that the noise comes from the sound of the bones as they are knit back together; it is more likely that the noise is that of a theophanic event, like an earthquake. At any rate, Matthew 27:51-52, which combines an earthquake with a general resurrection at Jesus' death, suggests that this was how the author of Matthew understood these verses.

Next, Ezekiel prophesies to the four winds. The term for wind, *rûah*, encompasses a wide range of meanings and can signify breath, as in v. 10, as well as the spirit of Yahweh, as in vv. 11-14. As Ezekiel prophesies, breath comes into the bodies, which stand

on their feet as a vast army (NRSV “multitude”; cf. Heb. *ḥayil*, “army”).<sup>14</sup> Although some see in this two-stage process of revivification an allusion to the creation of human beings in Genesis 2:7, the accompanying explanation more explicitly develops themes associated with exodus and resettlement. With terminology alluding to the exodus from Egypt, Yahweh brings the people up out of their graves (*ʿlh* Hif.) and brings them into the land (*bôʿ* Hif.). The concluding recognition formula ends in a formula for a divine oath. Yahweh stands behind this promise of restoration.

### The Two Sticks, 37:15-28

The form of the address in v. 15, “and you,” links the next symbolic act to Ezekiel’s act of prophesying over the dry bones. Like vv. 1-14, vv. 15-28 consist of instructions to Ezekiel to perform a symbolic act, which is accompanied by a divine speech. Unlike the episode in vv. 1-14, which appears to be intended solely for Ezekiel’s edification, this symbolic act is intended for the exiles, since Yahweh tells Ezekiel how to answer them when they ask what it means.

Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to take two sticks and write on them. The writing on the first stick identifies it as belonging to the tribe of Judah and Israelites associated with it, while the second belongs to “Joseph,” by which Ezekiel designates the tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel. Although one might expect the names of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel instead of these associations of tribes and peoples, these designations of tribes instead of kingdoms may suggest that Ezekiel intends to start from the ground up, as it were, in reconstituting the house of Israel. In addition, Ezekiel’s concern with political and military alliances may lie behind the odd phrasing of these verses (Heb. *ḥbr*, 37:16, 17, 19; cf. Gen 14:3; Judg 20:11; Hos 4:17; 2 Chr 20:35, 37; Dan 11:6, 23). This new union will in no way reflect the older political arrangements. In any case, what Ezekiel has done, Yahweh will do: he will take these two sticks and make them into one stick in his hand. This latter prepositional phrase indicates Yahweh’s agency, as the two sticks are made one by virtue of Yahweh’s power.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore better translated, “by my hand” (NRSV “in my hand”; Heb. *bēyādî*).

Both the prophet and Yahweh are said to “take” the sticks into their hands (Heb. *lqb*). [Staff or Writing Tablet?] Although this verb is very common in the Old Testament, occurring some 939 times, it is used relatively infrequently in Ezekiel. There are a few instances in which the verb has little specialized meaning for Ezekiel (e.g.,



### Staff or Writing Tablet?

**AΩ** What does Ezekiel take into his hand in 37:15? The ambiguous Hebrew *‘ēṣ*, “wood,” along with Ezekiel’s act of writing on it, has given rise to two different early translations, as well as to an ongoing debate about the meaning of this symbolic act. The Septuagint translates the term “staff” and construes it as an emblem of the tribes of Israel (cf. Num 17:17-26), while the Targum renders the term “tablet” or writing board (cf. Isa 8:1). Although commentators tend to favor the former translation, the vagueness of the term makes it difficult to unpack its symbolic meaning.

One appealing explanation may be derived from the text and iconography of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, which depicts kings of the Levant offering tribute to Shalmaneser III (c. 853 BCE). M. Elat pointed out that the obelisk records in both text and image, that two of the kings—Jehu, king of

Israel, and Sua, king of *Gilzānu*—offer the Assyrian king their staffs as part of their tribute. Since both of these kings appear to have submitted willingly to Assyrian rule, Elat suggests that the staffs symbolized “that their kingdoms had been handed over to the protection of the king of Assyria.”

Whereas these kings offer their staffs in tribute, Yahweh “takes” the staffs of Joseph and Ephraim. Even so, if such a custom lies behind Ezekiel’s symbolic act of joining the two sticks, then the symbolism portends significantly more than the simple reunification of the tribes of Judah and Israel. In the sight of the nations (37:28), Yahweh stakes his sovereign claim to these people and makes good on the promise of ch. 34 to be their shepherd. The work of restoration is nearly complete.

M. Elat, “The Campaigns of Shalmaneser III against Aram and Israel,” *IEJ* 25 (1975): 34.

3:10, 14; 8:3; 10:6, 7); however, it seems to be used primarily in situations where a king exercises his sovereign privilege by taking what belongs to him or what he has won in war. Nebuchadnezzar “takes” the sprig from the cedar and transplants it (17:3, cf. 17:13) or “takes” a seed and makes it king (17:5<sup>2</sup>, cf. 17:12; cf. 19:5); his armies “take” survivors and spoil (16:39; 23:25, 26, 29; 30:4; 38:13). In the ultimate mistake, Jerusalem “takes” gifts that belong to her and bestows them on others (16:16, 17, 18, 20). In contrast to these actions of taking, Yahweh declares that he will become the one who “takes” possession (16:61), “takes” a sprig from the cedar (17:22), and “takes” his people as his own (36:24). All of these promises come to fruition in this symbolic act, when Yahweh “takes” the scattered people and unites them by his power (37:16, 19, 21). Once the people are in his “hand,” they will no longer fall prey to these other takers. The explanation of the symbolic act concludes in vv. 22-23 with an extended promise of restoration that pulls together the themes of chapters 34–36 and ends with the covenant formula, “they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” The two “sticks” thus signify Yahweh’s sovereign prerogative to rule and protect these people.

As a coda to this declaration of restoration, vv. 24-28 pick up themes from chapter 32. With David as their shepherd, and following Yahweh’s ordinances, they will live in the land that was promised to Jacob. This reference to the ancient promise of land suggests that chapter 37 envisions the fulfillment of Yahweh’s oath in chapter 20, which intimated that the promise to Jacob had never been fulfilled. In a striking repetition of the word *‘ōlām*, forever, the





unit closes with a fourfold promise of an everlasting homeland, an everlasting king, an everlasting covenant, and the everlasting presence of Yahweh.

The concluding recognition formula indicates the goal of the restoration: The nations will know that it is Yahweh who sanctifies Israel. This emphasis on sanctifying Israel, as opposed to Yahweh's holy name (cf 36:23), occurs elsewhere only in 20:12, where it is said that sabbaths were given as a sign in the wilderness that Yahweh sanctified the people (20:12). To be sanctified means to be set apart, consecrated to Yahweh; as Zimmerli puts it, Israel is reserved for Yahweh.<sup>16</sup> Within the international context, the sanctification of Israel involves a radical separation from the nations, which had come into Israel's life as her lovers and very quickly became her destroyers. Having rescued his people from the nations and restored them to their land as a

#### **Tribute of Jehu**

This detail from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser depicts Jehu, king of Israel, bowing before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser. The accompanying inscription lists his tribute, which includes a "staff for a king."

Basalt bas-relief on the black stele of Shalmaneser III. Assyrian, 9th BC. British Museum, London, Great Britain. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

cleansed, united, and covenanted people, Yahweh thereby indicates to the nations that Israel is off limits. Yahweh gets what he has wanted all along (cf. 20:32).

## CONNECTIONS

In an essay on the impact of the book of Ezekiel on his life, the American author James Carroll reminisces on his ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood in 1969.<sup>17</sup> By tradition, the ordination was held at his parents' parish, which happened to be the chapel at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. His father, the founding director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was at that time responsible for determining where to drop bombs in Vietnam. As the war and opposition to it escalated, the younger Carroll covertly joined the protests, sometimes standing directly under his father's office window at the Pentagon, but never openly discussing his anti-war sentiments with his father.

For his ordination, Carroll chose Ezekiel 37:1-14 as his text and used his sermon to go public against the war. With a congregation filled with generals, chaplains, and other friends and associates of his father, this newly minted priest crossed the line between church and state—unheard of in military circles at the time—and equated the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision with the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and American lives that had already been lost. [*Dry Bones and Vietnam*] Although he ended his sermon with words of Christian hope in the resurrection, the damage had been done. His father's friends and colleagues pointedly stayed away from the reception afterwards, and he himself began to face the consequences of a bitter and lasting estrangement from his father.

Recollecting the event some twenty years later after a string of losses, which included leaving the priesthood and losing his infant daughter and parents to death, Carroll considered the meaning of this text afresh:

At last I realize what a misreading it was not to see that Ezekiel himself was being bitterly ironic—not uplifting—in the question he put, as well as in the answer he proposed. Ezekiel would be the last to be surprised by the way the death valleys of Vietnam have opened into those of Salvador, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Rwanda. The bone-littered valleys of *fin-de-siècle* American cities justify the defiant question as much as Khesanh ever did.<sup>18</sup>

### Dry Bones and Vietnam



I remember looking at the other bright, uplifted faces. I remember the ridged wood of the lectern edges inside my clutching fingers. I remember the blue of the carpet, the draperies, and those uniforms. And I remember the text it was my sacred calling then to proclaim:

“The hand of Yahweh was laid on me, and he carried me away and set me down in the middle of a valley, a valley full of bones. He made me walk up and down among them. There were vast quantities of these bones on the ground the whole length of the valley; and they were quite dried up.”

A mystical vision? The prophet Ezekiel in an epileptic trance? Yet news accounts not many weeks before had described exactly such a scene in the valley below a besieged hilltop called Khesanh. Ten thousand men had been killed in a matter of weeks, and that carnage was in my mind when I, violating the order of the liturgical cycle, chose that reading as the starting point of my first proclamation as a priest—which was my first mistake.

Dry bones? Even before, in subsequent verses, Ezekiel went on to make the meaning of the symbol explicit—“These bones are the whole house of Israel

. . . saying our hope has gone, we are as good as dead . . .”—the metaphor rang in the air above that blue-trimmed room, a double-edged image of rebuke, cutting both ways, toward the literal Asian valleys of the dead, and toward the realm of crushed hopes about which some of us had never dared to speak.

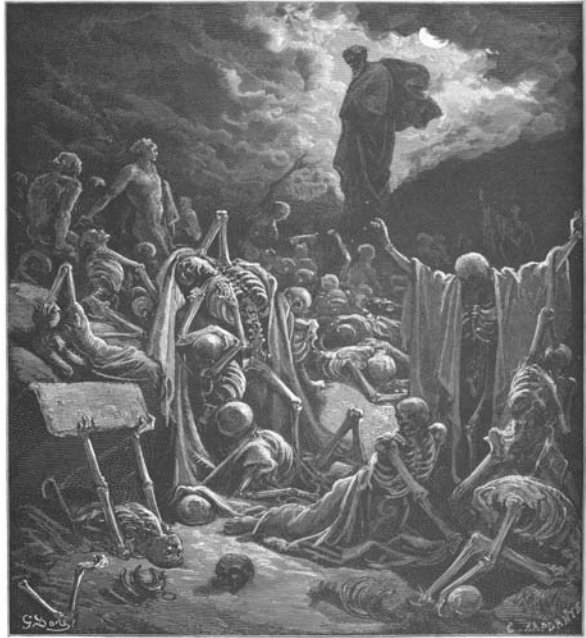
“Can these bones live?” I asked in my excursus, repeating Ezekiel’s refrain. “Dried and burned by time,” I said, “and by desert wind, by the sun and most of all”—I paused, knowing the offense it would be to use a word that tied the image to the real; the one word I must never use in this church, never use with them—“by napalm.”

It was as specific as I dared to get—or as I needed to. No one but opponents of the war referred to the indiscriminately dropped gelatinous gasoline that adheres to flesh and smolders indefinitely, turning death into torture or leaving wounds impossible to treat. Napalm embodied the perversion of the Air Force, how “Up we go into the wild blue yonder” had become the screeches of children. There was a sick silence in the chapel which only deepened when I repeated, “Can these bones live?” Only now the meaning was, “Can they live after what you have done?”

That was not a real question, of course, about the million Vietnamese whose bones the men in front of me had already scorched, or the thirty thousand Americans who had fallen by then. They were dead, dead, dead. And even a timid, metaphoric evocation of their corpses seemed, in that setting, an act of impudence. “Can these bones live?” I realized at that point in my sermon that I had unconsciously clenched my fist, and raised it. All power to the People! Hell, No: We Won’t Go! Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh! NLF Is Gonna Win! My fist upraised, as if I were Tommie Smith or John Carlos on the medal stand in Mexico City, as if I were Bobby Seale. I recall my stupefaction, and now imagine my eyes going to that uplifted arm, draped in the ample folds of my first chasuble. “Can these bones live?”

I answered with Ezekiel’s affirmation of the power of Yahweh, the great wind breathing life into the fallen multitude; an image of the resurrection hope central to the faith of Christians. I reached for the spirit of uplift with which I had been trained to end sermons, and perhaps I thought I’d found it. Yes, we can live and love each other, and be on the same side, no matter what. “Peace,” as LeMay’s SAC motto had it, “is our profession”—yours, perhaps I said, as well as mine. None of us is evil. God loves us all. Who am I to judge? Coming from one who’d just spit the word napalm at them, what crap this must have been to those generals. Amen, Alleluia, Risen indeed.

James Carroll, “Ezekiel,” in *Communion: Contemporary Writers Reveal the Bible in Their Lives*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Anchor, 1996), 49-60.



### The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones

Gustave Doré. *The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones* from the *Illustrated Bible*. 19th C. Engraving. [Credit: Dover Pictorial Archives Series]

As a writer, and not as a priest, Carroll concluded, “if God comes to us, it is in *this* state, not in the restored innocence—youthful

“The End”



After the blast of lightning from the east,  
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot  
throne;

After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,  
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
All death will he annul, all tears assuage?—  
Or fill these void veins full again with youth,  
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:  
“My head hangs heavy weighed with snow.”  
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:  
“My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.  
Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,  
Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried.

Wilfred Owen, “The End.” *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*,  
ed. C. Day Lewis (Chatto & Windus, 1963).

body—of a shallow Christian eschatology in which the tragic present is forgot.”<sup>19</sup> In reading this text as tragedy, Carroll is not alone. Looking out over the “death valleys” of the first great war of the last century, the British war poet Wilfred Owen expressed similar doubts. [The End] It is not in the nature of things to hope against hope; even the earth weeps.

Some years ago, I read Ezekiel 37:1-14 at an Easter vigil held on the campus of St. Olaf College. By chance, I had just transferred the ashes of a beloved pet from a cardboard box to another container. The opacity of the cardboard, not to mention the chintzy plaid paper in which the box had been wrapped, had allowed me to persist in the fiction that ashes were, well, ashes. But when I opened the box I saw, not ash, but bits and pieces of bone, a painful reminder of

how quickly and ineluctably life is reduced to inert matter. When I read Ezekiel 37:1-14 to the congregation later that evening, I understood for the first time just how powerful Ezekiel’s metaphor was. In our experience, the dead do not live again. Several years later, when I held the hand of a dying friend, I would see his bones just under the skin, and observe that they were already collapsing in upon themselves. His heart and lungs were failing him, and even though he was receiving oxygen, he gasped for air. I thought that perhaps I could breathe for him, and so, I as I held his hand, I breathed steadily and deeply, hoping that my breathing would at least comfort him. But of course my efforts did no good. Try as I might, I could not give him my breath.

Carroll considers God’s question and Ezekiel’s reply ironic; I consider the question cruel and the reply all too polite. Can these bones live? I can imagine Ezekiel making a different answer: why didn’t you think about that before you told me to shave my head? But of course this prophet learned long before to submit to the divine will. Ezekiel lays no bets on the prospects of these bones, and yet he must continue to prophesy.

Coming at this juncture in the book, the narrative is a metaphor for prophetic activity itself. God has commanded the prophet to speak the word whether the people hear him or not. In this valley, the ears have long since rotted away, and there are no souls left to

save, so why keep prophesying? James Carroll speaks of the tragedy of this text, but surely there is something more here. Despite the glaring evidence that he has failed to save even one person of the house of Israel, and certainly despite any empirical evidence that his work can do any good, Ezekiel continues to carry out his vocation. And because he prophesies, the house of Israel lives again.

Because this story is about the whole house of Israel, we must keep in mind that our individual experiences of death and dead ends can take us only part way in understanding Ezekiel's metaphor. We have all lost loved ones, and we can use those experiences to tap in to the grief in this vision. And we have all wanted to give up in the face of overwhelming evidence of failure. But Ezekiel's vision speaks also of things we hope never to have to know. Ezekiel witnessed the destruction of a body politic, a body so badly torn apart from within that it could not defend itself from attacks from without. People who have access to this commentary may never know firsthand the scope of such political and cultural disintegration, though such disintegration is all too painfully present in our world.

We do, however, know more than we would like about divisiveness in communities, neighborhoods, cities, faculties, even churches. For those corporate bodies that have lost all hope, Ezekiel 37 points to the gift of life from another quarter. The spirit blows where it will, choosing even to brood upon the face of the deep chaos of our lives together. If we, like Ezekiel, stick around in spite of our defeat, the spirit just might knit us back together, stand us on our feet, and give us new marching orders.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is Catherine Keller's. See her *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:262, and Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AB 22; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 2:745-46.

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Barth, "Ezechiel 37 als Einheit," in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, Festschrift Walther Zimmerli, ed. Herbert Donner et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 39-52.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 270.

<sup>5</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:262.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 2:745.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2:742.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2:744.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:379.

<sup>11</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:260.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Block observed that the description reflects a basic knowledge of anatomy available to anyone familiar with butchering (cf. Job 10:11; Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:376; cf. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:260).

<sup>14</sup> For this translation, see Ezek 1:17; 29:18f; 32:31; 38:4, 15 (cited by Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:744).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 2:755.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:277.

<sup>17</sup> James Carroll, "Ezekiel," in *Communion: Contemporary Writers Reveal the Bible in Their Lives*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Anchor, 1996), 49-60. The essay also appears as the introductory chapter in Carroll's memoir, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Carroll, "Ezekiel," 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 59.

# THE DEFEAT OF GOG AND HIS HORDES ON THE MOUNTAINS OF ISRAEL

Ezekiel 38:1–39:29

After Ezekiel's vision in chapter 37 of the coming to life of the dry bones of the house of Israel, one is somewhat taken aback by the sudden appearance of yet another foe—Gog, a mysterious chieftain at the head of a vast army comprised of warriors from the edges of the known world. Gog stands under Yahweh's command and keeps his troops in readiness for some as yet undisclosed purpose. After many days and years, Gog falls away from this divine commission and determines to attack the land of Israel, which had been restored from warfare and whose people were beginning to accumulate goods once again. Once his intentions are known, Yahweh declares his opposition even while disclosing that Gog's attack was part of the divine plan all along. Yahweh invites the birds and beasts of prey to feast on the slain hordes, while the people scrupulously cleanse the land. The defeat of Gog becomes the occasion for the full revelation of Yahweh's glory to Israel and the nations. As for Israel, its time of shame and self-loathing comes to an end. [\[An Outline of Ezekiel 38–39\]](#)

This unit contains some of the most vivid scenes in all of the book of Ezekiel, and yet it is not entirely coherent. Doublets (i.e., 38:1-6, 39:1-6), an unprecedented reference to previous prophecy (38:17), the reappearance of nations that in chapter 32 had been relegated to Sheol, and eschatologically charged imagery, have led to a variety of conjectures regarding the authorship, date, and purpose of this unit. Although questions about its relationship to later developments in apocalypticism remain unresolved, there is general agreement that as a product of the exile, it was composed either by Ezekiel or his school.<sup>1</sup> [\[Is Ezekiel 38–39 Apocalyptic?\]](#)

The unit has its origin in the tradition of the oracles against the nations;<sup>2</sup> however, the process by which it achieved its final form remains an open question. Nothing in the oracle suggests that it was composed after the exile, and in fact, the configuration of Gog's army makes good sense in light of the political dynamics of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. There is no reason to assume that Ezekiel



### God's Judgment Upon Gog

In his rendering of Ezekiel 38–39 (c. 1852), the American landscape painter Asher Brown Durand subverts a number of conventions of historical painting. For example, while the title of the painting identifies the subject as “God’s Judgement upon Gog,” Gog himself is nowhere to be seen. The art historians Andrew Wilson and Tim Barringer note further that the painting focuses on the moment of victory, when Gog’s armies fall upon each other and the birds and beasts of prey ominously move in for the feast. Although the human figures are dwarfed by the towering mountains and engulfed in darkness, the prophet Ezekiel, standing on a “stone ledge that acts as a natural pulpit,” is fully illuminated by the light bursting in on the scene.

Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820–1880*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 88.

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). *God’s Judgment Upon Gog*, c. 1851–1852. Oil on canvas, 60<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 50<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. [Credit: Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA]

38–39 does not reflect the prophet’s own writing and editorial reworking.

The more interesting question centers on the purpose of the unit. Ronald Hals noted a high degree of self-conscious theological




reflection and argued that some elements—for example, the burning of the soldiers’ weapons and the burial of the army (39:9-10, 11-16)—are misunderstood unless one takes this speculative characteristic into account.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Gerhard von Rad’s study of the wisdom traditions, he explained these features as interrelated processes of analysis which allowed the writer to systematize and project past prophecies onto future events (e.g., 38:17).<sup>4</sup> Attributing these processes to the phenomenon of writing instead of the wisdom tradition, Ellen Davis considered them a critical reworking of older traditions. Thus while Hals attributed the underlying motivation for the composition of the Gog oracle to the intellectual activity of interpreting historical experience in light of prophecy, Davis attributed it to the project of reformulating cultural and religious symbols in order to lay the foundation for a new future.

Several elements of the unit suggest that it serves as more than simply a collection of past prophetic traditions. Although it appears to combine a number of apparently disconnected elements, the structure allows for an unfolding understanding of the character of the restored people, Gog, and Yahweh. At the beginning of the oracle, the resettled people have no particular identity, at least in the eyes of the nations. A quiet people living in a land restored from war and affiliated with neither clan nor king, they appear ripe for the plundering. It is only when Yahweh tells Ezekiel to prophesy against Gog that they are claimed as Yahweh’s people (38:14, 16) and the land is defended as Yahweh’s land.

The unit also defines Yahweh’s relationship to the nations and to Israel. Juxtaposing two apparently contradictory concepts of the nations as instruments of judgment (cf. Isa 10:5-15), [The Rejection of Foreign Nations as Yahweh’s Instruments] and as enemies, [The Prophetic Proof-saying] the unit defines the proper role of the nations in a world ordered and ruled by Yahweh. Once considered rebellious nations in their own right (cf. Ezek 27:10; 32:26), the nations comprising Gog’s army are given new roles within Yahweh’s empire. Such rebels are rarely given more than one reprieve; thus when Gog conceives his own plan to attack Israel, Yahweh crushes him. More than a raw display of power, this victory over Gog is a demonstration of Yahweh’s holiness, which in this instance connotes his special,

### An Outline of Ezekiel 38–39

-  38:1-16 Rebellion against Divine Rule
- 38:1-8 Yahweh commissions Gog as guard of the earth’s armies
- 38:10-13 Gog plans to attack Israel
- 38:14–39:8 The Judgment of Gog
- 38:14-16 Yahweh’s use of Gog’s evil plan
- 38:17 A question from ancient prophecy
- 38:18-23 The manifestation of Yahweh’s holiness
- 39:1-8 The defeat of Gog
- 39:9-20 Reversal and Vindication
- 39:9-10 Israel plunders Gog’s army
- 39:11-16 Israel cleanses the land
- 39:17-20 The feast at Yahweh’s table
- 39:21-29 A Theological Coda
- 39:21-24 Vindication in the eyes of the nations
- 39:25-29 Assurance of Restoration Promises

### Is Ezekiel 38–39 Apocalyptic?



Discussions of the genre of Ezekiel 38–39 inevitably raise the question of its relationship to apocalyptic literature, a type of literature best known to readers of the Bible from the books of Daniel and Revelation. Attempts to define apocalyptic depend on two lines of investigation: the analysis of literary characteristics, and the assessment of the authors' socio-political setting (the assumption until recently being that apocalyptic was produced by powerless or marginalized groups). For much of the twentieth century, apocalyptic was defined according to a lengthy list of characteristics, such as the presence of intermediary beings, heightened eschatology, dualism, numerical symbolism, and the like. Ezek 38–39 could only ambiguously be considered apocalyptic, since it possessed some but not all of the literary characteristics associated with apocalyptic and could not be attributed to a marginalized social group.

After several decades of neglect among students of apocalyptic, Ezek 38–39 has been rehabilitated as an example of early apocalyptic. Reviving the practice of defining the genre in terms of several characteristics features, Stephen Cook argues that the Gog oracle is apocalyptic because it contains both primary and secondary characteristics of the genre. It is dualistic, seeing the "world locked in a struggle between two opposing moral forces," and it contains a heightened eschatology, envisioning the inauguration of a new era when Gog, the force of evil, is defeated. Secondary characteristics, such as its speculative and numerical symbolism, its capacity to speak of a stage in history beyond the present one (cf. 38:8, 14, 17), and its determinism, confirm this identification of the genre.

While it cannot be denied that Ezek 38–39 exercised a profound influence on the subsequent development of apocalyptic themes and motifs, the characteristics Cook cites as evidence of apocalypticism in Ezek 38–39 take on a different coloring when viewed in a different context. Cook was concerned to demonstrate the genetic similarity between Ezek 38–39 and later biblical literature; the present commentary seeks similarities with antecedent Near Eastern literary models. When Ezek 38–39 is set against this earlier literary context, such features as heightened eschatology and dualism seem less clear-cut. For example, what Cook sees as dualism can also be explained within the framework of Near Eastern political conceptions of sovereignty and rebellion that are widely attested in Assyrian inscriptions. Dualism would require that Gog be presented as Yahweh's equal or even his near equal; but Gog is introduced as a rebellious subordinate who, despite his power, is easily and definitively crushed. Moreover, the defeat of Gog does not usher in a decisively new era; that era has already begun and is evident in the idyllic security of the resettled "quiet people" (38:8-9; cf. 37:24-28).

If Ezek 38–39 is intelligible in the context of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of sovereignty and rebellion, Cook's assessment of it as apocalyptic need not be completely rejected, though one should exercise caution. Rather than thinking of the Gog oracle the first step toward apocalyptic, it is more accurate to think of it as a bridge between two entirely different conceptions of cosmic chaos and order.

Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 85–121; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:427-28; and D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

jealous concern for the house of Israel. The unit closes with an explanation of the exile and a promise for the future.

## COMMENTARY

### Commission and Rebellion, 38:1-13

A word-event formula in 38:1 and other introductory formulas in 40:1 identify chapters 38–39 as a discrete unit. The first major

### The Rejection of Foreign Nations as Yahweh's Instruments



Ezekiel's rejection of foreign nations as Yahweh's instruments of judgment is paralleled in the work of Second Isaiah, the anonymous author of Isa 40–55, who not only claims that no enemy will ever again succeed against Israel, but also denies that Yahweh will ever again cause his people to suffer: "If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me; whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you" (Isa 54:15 NRSV). Possibly alluding to the statement in Isa 10:5-15 that Yahweh wields the nations as instruments, Second Isaiah develops this claim by invoking the metaphor of weapon-making. Because Yahweh is ultimately the power behind all the weapons that are made, Israel can trust that none of them can harm Israel:

See it is I who have created the smith  
 who blows the fire of coals,  
 and produces a weapon fit for its purpose;  
 I have also created the ravager to destroy.  
 No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper,  
 and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. (Isa 54:16-17a NRSV)

section, 38:1-13, establishes Gog's relationship to Yahweh. His authority is defined in vv. 1-9, while vv. 10-13 attribute his decision to attack Israel to his own thoughts.

The challenge formula, in v. 3, "Behold, I am against you," identifies Gog as an opponent of Yahweh. Yahweh's use of hooks has parallels in the Assyrian traditions for subjugating rebellious kings. [Kings on Leashes] Biblical references to hooks outside of Ezekiel have a similar connotation of control that stops short of destruction. [Hooks] At the outset, then, Gog is presented as a hapless subordinate completely under Yahweh's control.

This subordinate position is further indicated by his designation as *nēšî' rôš*, which NRSV renders as "chief prince." As Walther

### The Prophetic Proof Saying



Ezekiel's prophetic oracles frequently follow the three-part prophetic proof saying, consisting of (1) a reason for the announced judgment, usually introduced by "because" (Heb. *ya'an*), (2) the announcement of judgment, usually introduced by "therefore" (Heb. *lakēn*), and (3) the resulting proof or vindication of Yahweh ("and you shall know that I am Yahweh"). This formula can be traced to the tradition of the wars of Yahweh, where an enemy attack is construed as a challenge to Yahweh's sovereignty:


Thus says the LORD: Because the Arameans have said, "The LORD is a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys," therefore I will give all of this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD. (1 Kgs 20:28; cf. Ezek 25:1-5, 6-7, 8-11, 15-17; 29:9b-16; 35:5-9)

Walther Zimmerli, "The Word of Divine Self-Manifestation (Proof-Saying): A Prophetic Genre," in *I Am Yahweh*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, ed. with introduction by Walter Brueggemann (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982, first published in German in 1957), 99–110.



(Illustration: Barclay Burns)

### Kings on Leashes

 The Senjirli stele, discovered in 1888 in northern Syria, graphically illustrates the subjugation of Egypt and one other kingdom, probably Tyre, to Esarhaddon. The colossally towering Assyrian king holds the much smaller kings by reins that are attached to hooks in their mouths. In the accompanying inscription, Esarhaddon describes himself as one “who holds the reins of princes.”

For the text of the inscription, see Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End* (New York: Greenwood, 1968, first published 1927), §573–81, esp. §575. For a description of the image, see James B. Pritchard, *ANEP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 300.

Zimmerli noted, “Gog is introduced not as the ruler of a great united empire, but as the leader of a number of national groups.”<sup>5</sup> The title indicates his derivative authority, and may also delimit it to the mustering of troops, not so much as a “chief prince” as in NRSV, but as a “head counter” (cf. *nš’ ’et rôš*, Num 1:2, 44; 4:34, 46). Gog’s authority is limited. [“Chief Prince” or “Prince of Rosh”?]

The identification of Gog and the land of Magog remains uncertain. While there is yet little consensus as to the meaning of the names Gog and Magog, the unit’s exilic context and reworking of Israelite prophetic traditions allow for the possibility that the name is a cryptic allusion to Nebuchadnezzar. [Who was Gog?] If so, then the title “prince” sets limits on Nebuchadnezzar’s authority. In contrast with Ezekiel 26:7, which speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as king of kings, and Jeremiah 27:1–11, which gives him authority over the kingdoms of the earth, Ezekiel 38:3 explicitly subordinates him to Yahweh.

Despite his subordinate status, Gog wields extraordinary power, as suggested by the enumeration of his armies and weapons. With the exception of Gomer in v. 6, the nations appear elsewhere in political or economic alliances with Tyre or Egypt (for Meshech, Tubal, and

Beth Togarmah, see Ezek 27:13–14; for variations of Paras, Cush, and Put, see 27:10; 30:5). Although commentators frequently see an allusion to the “foe from the north” tradition (cf. Jer 4–6), Gog’s army is drawn from both the northern and southern boundaries of the known political world. In fact, the enumeration delineates the ideal boundaries of the Assyrian empire. Sargon, for

example, claims to have subdued all of the Hatti-Land, “from Egypt to Meshech”:

### Hooks



The use of hooks in ch. 38 is reminiscent of the the treatment of enemy kings in the Assyrian annals, who are often depicted entrapped in nets, bound in fetters, or leashed like dogs. This treatment need not imply that the kings were slated for execution. After the Assyrians carried the Judean king Manasseh to Babylon in hooks and fetters, presumably to shock his Babylonian allies into submission (2 Chr 33:11), Manasseh was returned to Judah, where the length of his reign suggests that he became a compliant vassal. Ezekiel portrays a similar disciplinary action in 19:4, 9, when the nations carry the Judean princes to Egypt and then to Babylon. The one citation that may imply the destruction of an enemy king is 2 Kgs 19:28 (//Isa 37:29). Accusing Sennacherib of mocking Yahweh, the prophet declares that Yahweh will put hooks in the Assyrian's jaws and turn him back the way he came. But this usage only suggests that it is Yahweh who controls Sennacherib's movements.

In the might and power of the great gods, my lords, who sent forth my weapons, I cut down all of my foes from Iatnana (Cyprus), which is in the sea of the setting sun, as far as the border of Egypt and the land of the Muski (i.e., Meshech)—the wide land of Amurru, the Hittite-land in its entirety . . .<sup>6</sup>

The command in v. 7, which NRSV renders as “Be ready and keep ready,” establishes Gog as Yahweh’s agent (cf. 1 Sam 20:31; 2 Sam 7:16, 26; 1 Kgs 2:2, 45, 46). Just as his title restricts his authority to mustering troops, here his charge limits his exercise of power to maintaining order among them. Verse 7b, which NRSV inaccurately translates as a command to the entire army, is addressed solely to Gog, who is assigned as guard over these far-flung troops (literally, “you shall be for them a guard”). Gog’s initial commission thus omits any reference to Israel; thus it would be erroneous to assume that Yahweh has summoned him solely for the purpose of attacking the newly resettled land.

Many commentators, and indeed the translation of NRSV, read v. 8 to include further commands to Gog. According to this reading, Yahweh commands him to go up against the restored

### “Chief Prince” or “Prince of Rosh”?

**ΑΩ** A few contemporary English translations follow the Septuagint’s rendering of the unusual phrase *nesî rōš* and identify Gog as “Prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal” (JB, REB, NASB). For much of the past century, the Scofield Reference Bible has perpetuated the equation of Rosh with Russia, which occasionally crops up in public discourse (see **[Gog and Contemporary End-Time Speculation]**). This popular interpretation falters on both etymological and syntactical grounds and should be discarded. Even though the syntax of the phrase is difficult,

the Masoretic vowel points and grammatical structure suggest that *rōš* modifies the previous term, “prince,” and is not part of the subsequent list of place names. Moreover, even if it could be demonstrated that *rōš* was a place name, it could not have referred to Russia, since that name is of Viking derivation and did not come into use until the Middle Ages.

Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2:434-35 and notes.

### Who Was Gog?

**ΑΩ** The names Gog and Magog remain a crux in the interpretation of Ezek 38–39. Although cognates are occasionally suggested as sources for the names, they appear not to refer to any identifiable historical or geographical entity. Interpretations of the names begin either with the personal name Gog or with the geographical name Magog. Those who posit that the name Gog gives rise to the place name Magog differ over whether the name has mythological or historical significance. Among the best known of the latter is the suggestion that the name alludes to Gyges of Lydia, mentioned in the histories of Herodotus and the annals of Asshurbanipal (c. 670–630 BCE). Others posit that the name of the land of Magog, attested in Gen 10:2, gives rise to the name Gog. Although this latter reference allows for a possible equation of the territory of Lydia with Magog, the name Magog is not attested outside of the Bible.

One attractive explanation of the name is that it is a cryptic allusion to Babylon. A comparable cryptogram is used in Jer 25:26; 51:41, where Babylon is called Sheshach. The cryptogram employed in Jeremiah is an “athbash,” in which the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet is replaced by the last, the second by the next to the last, and so on (i.e., *B-B-L* = *š-š-k*). The code used in Ezekiel 38 involves a different system of substituting letters (i.e., *B-B-L* = *G-G-M*), which are then reversed (i.e., *G-G-M* = *M-G-G*, or Magog).

Since it is usually assumed that Ezekiel portrays Babylon as an agent and not an opponent of Yahweh, this explanation of the name of Magog has not gained much favor. But this assessment of Ezekiel’s attitude toward Babylon is only

partially correct. Commentators often assume that Ezekiel held Babylon in the same regard that Jeremiah did (cf. Jer 26:5-7a). However, even if Jeremiah and Ezekiel agree that Babylon is the agent of Yahweh’s judgment, they part company in their characterization of Babylon’s authority to rule. As far as Ezekiel is concerned, Babylon is one of the worst kind of rebels (ch. 23). As the leader of the “worst of the nations,” it is permitted to attack Egypt (30:10-11) and allowed to sack Egypt in payment for its service to Yahweh against Tyre (29:17-21). But it is never presented as the legitimate upholder of cosmic order, as Assyria was (cf. 31:2-9). Nor is it allowed to rule the house of Israel as its shepherd (ch. 34).

If the designation of Babylon as Gog is consistent with the characterization of Babylon elsewhere in the book, it is also an ingenious pun on the other fabricated name in Ezek 38–39, the Valley of Hamon-Gog, where Gog and his hordes (*hāmônô*) are buried (39:15, cf. Hamonah, 39:16). That such a pun is likely is suggested by the grammatically unnecessary use of the definite article in “the land of Magog” (38:2; lit., “the land of *the* Magog”). In no other instance in which the noun “land” appears in a construct chain with a proper noun (i.e., Egypt, Pathros, Israel) is a definite article used. The resulting similarity in the pronunciation of these two place names, the land of Hammagog and the Valley of Hamon-Gog, cannot have been accidental.

For surveys and bibliographies of attempts to identify Gog, see Benedikt Otzen, *gwgo gôgh gwgom... mâghôgh*,” TDOT, 2:419-25; and Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog*, WUNT, series 2, 135 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

people of Israel after many days and years. However, since a number of descriptive features in v. 8 obscure the crisp imperative voice of v. 7, it is more likely that v. 8 is a narrative description of his future acts. Rather than carrying out his commission as Yahweh’s “chief prince,” Gog brings chaos instead.

Gog’s departure from Yahweh’s command is indicated by the niphāl *pqd* (v. 8). NRSV’s translation, “you shall be mustered,” assumes that the niphāl and qal meanings of this verb are interchangeable; they are not. The more frequently used qal stem does have the connotation of mustering troops or taking a census; however, the less frequent niphāl, which is used in 38:8, connotes one’s absence from such counts.<sup>7</sup> The verse thus suggests not that Gog is mustered to go up against the land of Israel, but that he has fallen away from his duty. His attack therefore constitutes a defi-



ance of Yahweh's plan to restore the land and people of Israel (cf. 34:11-13, 25-27; 36:6-10, 24, 32; 37:13, 21-22).

### ***Gog's Evil Plan, 38:10-13***

Gog's plan is vividly presented in his own words. Verbal parallels between Gog's speech and that of the Assyrian in Isaiah 10:5-15 suggest to some commentators that Gog is patterned after the latter, well-known portrayal of the foreign king as an instrument of divine judgment. Since, in Ezekiel, such quotations often provide the occasion for further disputation and judgment,<sup>8</sup> it is more likely that Gog's speech underscores his own evil intentions. Gog declares his determination to attack a defenseless people, easy targets assuring easy success. The reference to their living in safety (NRSV "security"; Heb. *betah*, 38:8, 11, 14), alludes to the covenantal blessings of Leviticus (25:18, 19; 26:5) as well as to Ezekiel's description of the covenant of peace (34:25, 27, 28). The terminology indicates that the restoration oracles of chapters 34–37 have been fulfilled and also underscores the fact that Gog's plan is directly opposed to Yahweh's.

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### **Quiet People and the Wars of Yahweh**



Ezekiel's portrayal of people living quietly is intelligible within the framework of the traditions of the wars of Yahweh. A classic study of these traditions is that of Gerhard von Rad, whose work remains the starting point for any investigation of ancient Israelite conceptions of war.

The theme of quiet trust is a logical consequence of the central claim of this tradition, that the wars are Yahweh's wars, the enemies Yahweh's enemies. While a number of texts depict Israel fighting alongside Yahweh, an equally important theme is that the Israelites need only stand firm and witness Yahweh's work on their behalf. So, for example, in the paradigmatic confrontation between Yahweh and Pharaoh at the Red Sea, Moses counsels,

Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still. (Exod 14:13-14)

Tracing further developments in the later prophetic tradition, von Rad drew attention to this theme of quiet trust, particularly as it was developed by the 8th-century prophet Isaiah,

who advised Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimitic War (734–32 BCE) and Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE). In both of these grave periods of crisis, maintains von Rad, the prophet's advice to "be quiet" was rooted in the ancient holy war tradition. Commenting on the feverish activity of repairing breaches, collecting water, and gathering weapons depicted in Isa 20:8-11, von Rad exclaimed, "What all has happened in Jerusalem! But the one thing that was needed did not happen!" (105).

After Isaiah, the tradition of quiet trust became eschatologized. Texts like Mic 4:11-13, Ezek 38–39, Hag 2:21-22, all depict an assault of the nations on Zion, which Yahweh has brought about in order to destroy the enemies. In all instances, the enemies are overcome by a divine terror or panic. While von Rad did not comment on the "quiet people" of Ezek 38:9, he did draw attention to the development of this theme in Zech 4:6, where the maxim, "not by power, or by might, but by my Spirit," draws on the resources of the ancient holy war tradition. It is not what human beings do, but what Yahweh will do, that will bring peace and security to Jerusalem.

Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. Marva J. Dawn, introduction by Ben Ollenburger, bibliography by Judith E. Sanderson (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

Not only do the restored people enjoy security, they embody it. The Hebrew participle (Heb. *haššōmqēṭîm*), which NRSV renders as a character trait, “quiet people,” has a more active connotation. In Isaiah, the same verb appears in Isaiah’s counsel to Ahaz, “Be quiet; do not fear,” as Ahaz seeks to defend himself from attack by forging an alliance with Assyria (Isa 7:4). The concept of quiet confidence and trust in Yahweh is rooted in the ancient traditions of Yahweh wars. [Quiet People and the Wars of Yahweh] In contrast with Jerusalem’s frenetic search for “lovers,” which only brought further turmoil (cf. 5:5-17; 23:42), the restored land and people are characterized by a sense of stillness. No longer a land of tumult, the people at the “center” of the earth now enjoy the blessings of divine presence.

In contrast with the peacefulness pervading the settlements in the land of Israel, distant nations see Gog’s attack and draw attention to his evil plan. Whether they seek to share in the spoil cannot be determined (38:13); however, the reference to their leaders as young lions (NRSV “warriors”), which elsewhere connotes rebels (cf. 19:1-9), suggests that Gog’s attack is just the beginning of global mayhem.

### Yahweh’s Judgment of Gog, 38:14–39:8

If Gog has conceived a plan to attack the mountains of Israel, the next three subunits suggest that Yahweh has another, ulterior plan, to use Gog’s attack to reveal his own holiness, which is to say his power and integrity (38:14-16, 17-23, 39:1-8). [Holiness] Verses 14-16 raise the question of whether Gog acts on his own. Verses 17-23 center on the problem of Yahweh’s past practices, as reflected in the long tradition of judgment prophecy. The third subunit, 39:1-8,

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#### Holiness

**AΩ** Of the some 800 uses of the verbal root *qđš*, “to be holy,” in the Old Testament, a significant concentration may be found in Ezekiel. Many instances of the term can be found in chs. 40–48, where objects and persons are “made holy” by being consecrated for ritual use. In Ezek 38–39 and associated texts (e.g., 28:20, 25; 36:20-24), holiness connotes divine incomparability, power, and integrity. Integrity is implied when Yahweh makes good on the promise to the ancestors—not because the promise is binding or because the people can make a claim against that promise—but because it is in Yahweh’s character to live by

his word (cf. Ezek 36:20-24; 28:25). The power implied by Yahweh’s defeat of Gog is self-evident. A comparable text is Exod 15:1-18, the commemoration of Yahweh’s victory over Pharaoh. Three times Yahweh’s holiness is underscored (vv. 7, 13, 17): it is a display of power and majesty; it has the goal of planting Israel on Yahweh’s holy mountain; and the nations react in fear and awe.

H. Ringgren and W. Kornfeld, “vdq qđi,” TDOT, 12:521-45.



continues to explore the question of past prophecy by redefining the nature of its fulfillment.

Although commentators treat vv. 14-16 as a continuation of Yahweh's commissioning of Gog, the instruction to Ezekiel to prophesy, as well as the particle "therefore," indicate that these verses constitute the divine reaction to Gog's plan. Verse 16b recasts Gog's plan by subsuming it into Yahweh's demonstration of holiness. Yahweh's holiness was called into question when Israel was scattered among the nations (36:20-23), and it was vindicated when Yahweh restored the people to their land in accordance with his promise to Jacob (28:25-26; 36:23-24). Holiness cannot accommodate yet another wave of devastation, be it from Yahweh or a rogue power like Gog. Thus Gog's attack becomes an occasion for further demonstration of Yahweh's power and intention to fulfill the ancient promises.

Verse 17 associates Gog with past prophecies of judgment and asks whether he is the one foretold in former times by the prophets. The phrase "my servants the prophets" appears frequently in Jeremiah and in the Deuteronomistic history but is not used elsewhere in Ezekiel, who speaks more disparagingly of the prophets of Israel as bearers of misleading messages of hope (cf. Ezek 13). In the Deuteronomistic history, Yahweh's servants the prophets had continually warned that Yahweh would bring "evil" against the land if it did not repent (cf. 2 Kgs 21:10; 24:2; Jer 7:25; 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15); both Jeremiah and 2 Kings asserted that the ancient prophecies were fulfilled in Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem (Jer 25:4; 2 Kgs 24:2). By formulating the question of Gog's identity in Deuteronomistic terms, v. 17 takes up the question of Nebuchadnezzar's status as Yahweh's agent of judgment. If Gog had served as the agent of judgment in the past, v. 17, as well as the combat scenes in vv. 18-23 and 39:1-6, suggest that he would not do so in the future. In other words, the answer to the question of v. 17 is a resounding yes-and-no: yes, others have seen Gog as the fulfillment of prophecy; but no, Gog does not have an eternal license to wage war on Yahweh's quiet people.

So in answer to the question of v. 17, vv. 18-23 demonstrate that Yahweh's jealousy and wrath are aroused against Gog (38:18b; cf. 36:6b-7). If the cosmic earthquake in vv. 19-22 underscores Yahweh's power to face this opponent, the weapons—sword (cf. ch. 21) plague and bloodshed (cf. 5:17), and hailstones (cf. 13:11, 13)—make it clear that Gog is no agent carrying out a divine plan but is instead Yahweh's enemy. Verse 23 indicates that the purpose of this display of power is to reveal Yahweh's greatness in the eyes of

the nations. The battle against Gog reveals to the world that Gog (i.e., Babylon) is utterly under the control of Yahweh. In this context, then, Yahweh's holiness implies his control of even the earth's empires.

Whereas 38:18-23 envision the battle in terms of a cosmic earthquake, 39:1-8 portray it as hand-to-hand combat between Yahweh and Gog. Using the challenge formula associated with the old holy war traditions, Yahweh declares his absolute control over Gog. Reminiscent of David's challenge to Goliath (1 Sam 17:41-47), the scene further underscores Yahweh's holiness. The motif of hooks, first used in 38:4 to indicate Yahweh's mastery over Gog, is now adapted to suggest that Gog's appearance on the mountains of Israel is utterly under Yahweh's control, and only for the purpose of displaying Yahweh's holiness. Within the framework of chapters 38–39, the "day" of 39:8 alludes back to 38:17-18. If the "day" refers to past prophecies of judgment, as in 38:17, the declaration in 39:8 suggests that no further attack will occur. The "day" may also refer to the final vindication of Yahweh's holiness (38:18).

### **Reversal and Vindication, 39:9-20**

The interest in enlarging upon themes and motifs from the holy war traditions is evident in the next three subunits (39:9-10, 11-16, 17-20). Hals has observed that the development of these themes creates some confusion for modern readers, since, for example, a burial of all of Gog's hordes in vv. 11-16 somewhat incongruously precedes the sacrificial feasting on their flesh (vv. 17-20). From a speculative or theological point of view, however, the expansions contribute toward the definition of relationships among Yahweh, Israel, and Gog.

First, the people of Israel burn the weapons of Gog's hordes for a period of seven years (39:9-10). The notion of turning swords into plowshares is a well-known biblical motif; this text speaks of burning the weapons entirely. Rather than speaking of the eradication of the weapons as the inauguration of an era of peace, however, this text emphasizes the reversal of misfortunes, as Israel plunders those seeking to plunder them. Despite the reference to weapons forged from metal (i.e., shields, arrowheads, spears, pikes), the primary emphasis is on the use of these weapons as wood for fuel.

Second, Gog's hordes will be buried in the land of Israel (39:11-16). The subunit contains a number of cryptic terms, all of which suggest that Jerusalem has become Gog's grave. The Valley of

Hamon-Gog, or the Valley of Gog's Hordes, is probably an allusion to the Valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, which was associated with the practice of child sacrifice. Stone markers (Heb. *šîyyûn*) set up next to stray bones and possibly also an allusion to the use of monuments in child sacrifice (cf. 43:7, 9), sound too much like "Zion" (Heb. *šîyyôn*) to be accidental. Finally, Gog's burial place is identified as Hamonah in v. 16, almost as an afterthought. Hamonah is probably a symbolic name for the city of Jerusalem, whose *hamôn*, or chaos and turbulence had caused its destruction (cf. 5:5-17).<sup>9</sup> The valley is also called the Valley of the Oberim (NRSV "Travelers"). Some have sought to identify the valley east of the Dead Sea, in the plains of Moab; however, the valley's name may have a mythological connotation, as the place where the dead crossed over from the land of the living.<sup>10</sup> If this is the meaning of the name, then the burial of Gog marks a definitive end to the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem becomes a cemetery, herself a monument to the end of chaos. Meanwhile, the people and land can both cleanse and be cleansed. Thus on the day that Yahweh reveals his glory, there will also be honor for Israel, even if Jerusalem has died (cf. 24:14-24).

The final scene of Yahweh's day against Gog is an invitation to the birds and beasts of prey to feast on Gog's fallen hordes. Although the notion of feasting after the bodies have been buried is incongruous, the theological meaning is clear: with the defeat of Gog and the cleansing of the land, Yahweh has vindicated his claim to rule Israel and to control the nations. The feast celebrates the victory. As in 1 Samuel 18:41-47, the feasting of the birds and beasts of prey indicates that all the world knows what Israel knows: Yahweh is king in Israel.

### **Concluding Theological Interpretation, 39:21-29**

In a remarkable coda, we learn that the Gog unit was intended as a theodicy, an explanation of Israel's suffering in exile, and a promise that it will never happen again. When the nations learn of Yahweh's holiness through the defeat of Gog, the events of the Judean exile will be understood in a new light. Israel did not go into captivity because its god lacked the power to save. Rather, Israel's transgressions and uncleanness had given Yahweh no other alternative than to hide his face from them. Verses 25-29 build on this explanation of the captivity with a divine speech directed primarily to Israel. Although the Gog unit portrays a future act of deliverance, the divine speech in vv. 25-29 applies it to the exiles' present situation.

“Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob.” Though they have endured the pain of divine absence and continue to endure the shame of exile, the restoration is assured. Those who are in captivity will be gathered together and returned to the land. None will be left behind, and Yahweh promises never again to withdraw his protection from them.

## CONNECTIONS

When is enough enough? Exiled, scattered, gathered, purged, and finally resettled—only to be attacked and plundered yet again? Especially after the promises of chapter 37, the invasion of Gog seems redundant; yet for Ezekiel it is a necessary step in the restoration.

Because Ezekiel 38:17 explicitly refers to past prophecy, this unit is often regarded as an early example of the postexilic interest in reinterpreting ancient prophecy (cf. Dan 9). While it cannot be denied that the allusion to prophecy reflects an ongoing interest in the prophetic message, the answer to the question of 38:17 suggests that there were limits to its future applicability. If, as Nebuchadnezzar, Gog was foretold by the prophets, that does not give Gog unlimited license to attack. One suspects that the writer wanted to lock some prophecies, particularly prophecies of divine judgment, in the past.

Somewhat ironically, Ezekiel’s account of Gog’s attack continues to provoke speculation about the implications of Old Testament prophecies for our future. The development of the Gog traditions in Jewish pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic literature has been traced giving special attention to its reuse in Revelation 19:17-18 and 20:7-10. From there, the figure of Gog fuels Christian millenarian speculation about God’s final defeat of evil. One need only consult the Scofield Reference Bible to see what such speculation looks like. The 1917 edition of this widely used study Bible confidently equated Gog with Russia: “That the primary reference is to the northern European powers, headed up by Russia, all agree.” The 1967 edition removed

### Gog and Contemporary End-Time Speculation



The late Ronald Reagan made the following remarks in a dinner speech to the California legislature in 1971:

Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia. What other powerful nation is to the north of Israel? None. But it didn’t seem to make sense before the Russian Revolution, when Russia was a Christian country. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly.

Cited by Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog*, WUNT, series 2, 135 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 1.

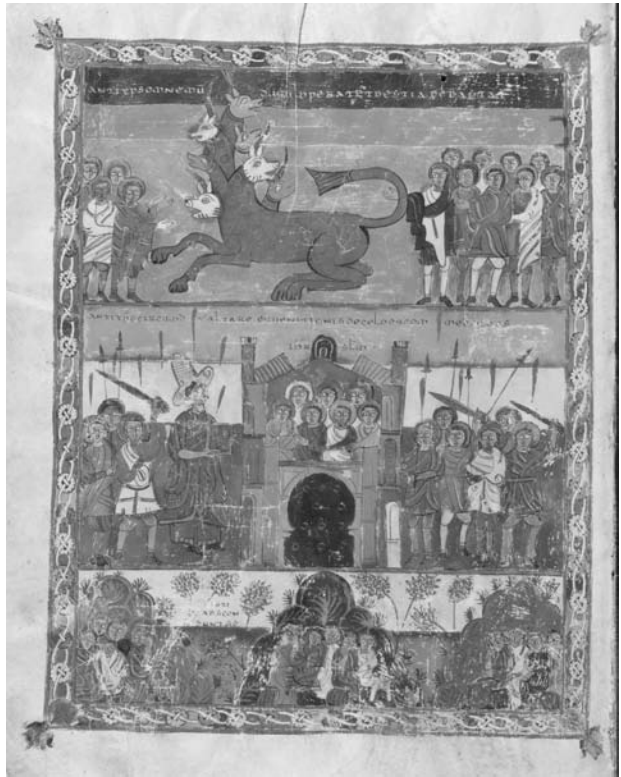
this assertion of scholarly unanimity but continued to identify Gog as Russia and the northern European nations. The interpretation continues to circulate in fundamentalist circles,<sup>11</sup> and its influence on public thought should not be underestimated.

[Gog in Contemporary End-Time Speculation]

In teaching this text, pastors and teachers must dismantle erroneous interpretations while also suggesting more theologically adequate ones. The foundation for both is historical interpretation grounded in an understanding of the liberating and life-giving character of Scripture. Lay readers need to be reminded that ancient Israelite prophecy is not a collection of obscure predictions of the future, the code of which still awaits decipherment. One of the most compelling ways to do this is to show that elements seemingly obscure to us were intelligible and coherent for ancient readers. It goes without saying that the identification of Gog as Russia fails when it becomes clear that Russia is nowhere mentioned in the text.

Not only should pastors and teachers explain what the text does not mean, they also should guide contemporary readers in the search for liberating themes in the Gog oracle. For Ezekiel, the primary concern of the text is to proclaim God's holiness, which is made manifest in God's commitment to Israel. Even though the dramatic emphasis in the narrative is on the defeat of Gog, its purpose is to demonstrate Yahweh's complete salvation of Israel: "I will leave none of them behind." To encourage speculation about who is left behind, or who is destroyed and how, is to obscure the manner in which this text emphasizes God's everlasting and all-encompassing faithfulness.

One should also be suspicious of the use of this text to demonize current day rivals and political enemies. Ronald Reagan's identifica-



**God the Creator**

God the Creator is depicted separate and apart from Creation though invested in it.

*Genesis*. Frontispiece depicting the Creation from *The Luther Bible*. 1534. Colored Woodcut. [Credit: Art Resource]

tion of Gog as Russia and his further characterization of Russia as an “atheistic and communistic” enemy of God was geared more toward perpetuating a Cold War ideology than discerning the word of God for his time. Unlike the portrayal of Gog in Revelation, Ezekiel’s Gog does not permit this demonization. Gog is a creature and, like all creatures, including Israel, he is capable of both rebellion and obedience. Gog has a place in Yahweh’s kingdom; it is only when he seeks to undo God’s work that he becomes an enemy. To put it somewhat differently: since Gog and Israel share the same creatureliness and have identical capacities for rebellion or obedience, Gog’s rebellion is not qualitatively different from that of the house of Israel.

The question is not whether God will rescue the faithful from this alien “other,” but whether their portrayal as “quiet people” provides a useful antidote to the frenetic end-time speculation described above. This “quietness” should be interpreted in light of Isaiah’s counsel to trust in God, not weapons or military alliances (see [Quiet People and the Wars of Yahweh]). Even though the people are restored to their land, they are not removed from the world. Ezekiel warned against easy messages of peace; we should not expect his message to change now. Because rebellion remains a perpetual possibility in a world of freedom, the world is not and never will be tranquil.

Even so, inner quiet is still a possibility, and it has rich implications for both our political and our private lives. Although he does not employ the themes of Ezekiel 38, Gerard Manley Hopkins’s juxtaposition of a desire for peace with the cultivation of patience provides an insightful parallel meditation on Ezekiel’s quiet people.

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### “Peace”



When will you ever, Peace, wild wooddove, shy wings shut,  
Your round me roaming end, and under be my boughs?  
When, when, Peace, will you, Peace?—I’ll not play hypocrite

To own my heart: I yield you do come sometimes; but  
That piecemeal peace is poor peace. What pure peace allows  
Alarms of wars, the daunting wars, the death of it?

O surely, reaving Peace, my Lord should leave in lieu  
Some good! And so he does leave Patience exquisite,  
That plumes to Peace thereafter. And when Peace here does house  
He comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,  
He comes to brood and sit.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Peace,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th rev. and enl. ed.; ed. W. H. Garner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 85.

Voicing frustration, if not despair, Hopkins complains to “Peace,” that “winged wooddove,” that it is always just within sight but ever elusive. [Peace] Musing that God should at least provide a proper substitute for Peace, he realizes that in fact God has given him Patience, which eventually will grow feathers, as it were (“plume”), to become Peace. Yet when Peace does come, “he comes with work to do, he does not come to coo, / He comes to brood and sit.” The closing lines of the poem thus suggest that true peace is the presence of the Holy Spirit, which brooded over the face of the deep at creation and appeared as a dove at Christ’s baptism. If, then, Patience brings Peace, Peace brings not rest but life—hard won, and forged from pain and death.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:427-28.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Lothar Hossfeld, *Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie des Ezechielbuches* (FB 20; Warzburg: Echter Verlag, 1977), 402-508; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, 1983), 2:296-302.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 282-83.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>5</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:305.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968; first published 1927), B54; cf. B882, 96, 97, 99, 183.

<sup>7</sup> G. André, “פֶּקֶד *pāgad*,” *TDOT*, 12:50-63. For uses of the niphal *pqd* with the connotation of “be missing,” see 1 Sam 20:18, 25, 27; 25:7; Job 5:24; 1 Kgs 20:39; 2 Kgs 10:19, 21; Judg 21:3; Jer 23:4. Despite André’s credible discussion of these texts, his discussion of Ezek 38:8 is problematic and should be used with caution.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ezek 8:12; 11:2-3, 15; 12:22; 18:2; 25:3, 8; 26:2; 27:3; 29:3; 33:24.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret S. Odell, “The City of Hamonah in Ezekiel 39:11-16: The Tumultuous City of Jerusalem,” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 479-489.

<sup>10</sup> Marvin H. Pope, “Notes on the Rephaim Texts from Ugarit,” in *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, ed. Maria DeJong Ellis, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 19 (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 174-76.

<sup>11</sup> Block, *Ezekiel* 2:434 n. 40.





# THE FINAL VISION

Ezekiel 40:1–48:35

## Introduction to Ezekiel 40–48

In the sixth year of the exile, Ezekiel had been transported in visions of God to the temple in Jerusalem, where he became a witness to its abominations. In the vision of chapters 40–48, dated nearly twenty years later, Ezekiel is again taken in visions of God to the land of Israel, this time to a place ambiguously identified as a “very high mountain.” There he sees a temple of palatial proportions and learns that it is the dwelling place of Yahweh, the center of a new civil and religious order. As is so typical of this book, the vision’s theme is disclosed only at the end, when Ezekiel learns that the name of the city is *yhwh šammâ*, the Lord is there (48:35). Even though it remains unclear whether the city is Jerusalem restored or an entirely new city, its name brings the book of Ezekiel to a fitting conclusion.



### Vision of Ezekiel 40 and Ezekiel 1

In this seventeenth-century woodcut, the artist has superimposed Ezekiel’s vision of the heavenly throne room in ch. 1 with his vision of the temple in chs. 40–42. In the foreground, the prophet and the bronze man, who is carrying a linen cord and a measuring rod, are shown approaching the temple compound from the east.

Christoph Weigel, *Biblia Ectypa: Bilnussen auss Heiligen Schrift Alt und Neuen Testaments* (1695)

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. [Credit: E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation]

Whatever shame or dishonor had been attached to the old city is left behind in this new city of divine presence.

The unit has always been challenging. Among traditional Jewish interpreters, it was problematic because much of its legislation conflicted with Mosaic torah.<sup>1</sup> For many Christian interpreters, the detailed measurements, legislation, and apportionment of the land have seemed a disappointing anticlimax to the more stirring restoration oracles of chapters 34–39. Finally, these chapters have not fared well under the modern practice of dissecting biblical books and assigning sections to different historical periods. The entire book suffered from this approach during a good portion of the twentieth century, but these chapters have been among the last to be rehabilitated to their exilic, Ezekielian context. Moshe Greenberg paved the way for an appreciation of the integrity of chapters 40–48 in a programmatic essay published in 1984,<sup>2</sup> and several monographs published since that time have interpreted these chapters as a product of the Babylonian exile. Even so, the temple vision continues to be interpreted in isolation from the rest of the book, and not without reason, since the unit equals some of the smaller prophetic books in length and exceeds many in complexity. Observing that chapters 40–48 are presented as a coherent “vision report,” Ronald Hals maintained that they drew from such a wide variety of genres that it remains difficult to be certain of their intent.<sup>3</sup> Recent efforts to solve the puzzle of the vision’s genre exhibit no small scholarly disagreement over how to proceed. Because the vision exhibits a number of influences from widely disparate sources, it bears fruitful comparison with biblical traditions as well as with ancient Near Eastern building accounts. [*Ezekiel 40–48 and Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Inscriptions*] [*Ezekiel 40–48 and the Sinai-Conquest Traditions*] But, as Hals noted, no single parallel provides an adequate explanation of the purpose of this vision, which begins in mythic space, extends to cultic and political reform, and ends with the promise of divine presence. Even as one discerns traces of and dependences on prior traditions, one must concede that Ezekiel’s vision is a unique literary achievement.

At the heart of the question about genre is the question of whether Ezekiel’s vision is concerned primarily to preserve Yahweh’s holiness, or to restore divine fellowship with the house of Israel. The evidence can certainly be construed either way, and readers are encouraged to consult other commentaries as they resolve this difficult issue for themselves. The premise of this commentary is that Yahweh’s holiness becomes a sanctifying presence for both the people and land of Israel. Thus despite the seemingly obsessive

### Ezekiel 40–48 and Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Inscriptions



In the present commentary, it has been argued that the book of Ezekiel owes its coherence to the author’s adaptation of an ancient Near Eastern genre, the building inscription, in which a king extols his pious acts in behalf of his god. Typically, these inscriptions follow a three-part pattern consisting of a king’s self-introduction, an account of his victories, and an account of his building projects. In a few instances, a king reports steps to rebuild the city of a formerly rebellious vassal. The king may simply report that he rebuilt the city, or he may include such features as installing a new king or governor, gathering the city’s scattered people, building fortresses, establishing its annual tribute and sacred offerings, pardoning the city’s rebels, and changing its name (*ARAB*, 2:18, 24–31, 33, 46, 54, 56, 57, 237, 580).

In Esarhaddon’s account of the rebuilding of Babylon (c. 680 BC), the motif of rebuilding a rebellious city becomes the basis for an entire inscription. In a narrative that bears striking resemblance to the entire book of Ezekiel, Esarhaddon reports that the Babylonians’ wickedness had so angered the gods that they abandoned the city, allowed its destruction, and decreed its devastation for a full seventy years. Once Esarhaddon came to the throne, however, the god Marduk reversed the decree by literally turning it upside down and allowing the numeral 70 to be read as 11. The reversal of the decree meant that the judgment had been considerably foreshortened, so Esarhaddon sought omens for rebuilding the city. Once he received the favorable signs, Esarhaddon rebuilt the sacred places, returned the divine images to their temples, reestablished the cult, and restored the Babylonians’ citizenship rights. Barbara Nevling Porter has suggested that variations among the extant versions of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscriptions illustrate the genre’s flexibility and resulting applicability to a wide variety of rhetorical aims. In versions produced for his home audience, Esarhaddon reports that he performed this unprecedented act of mercy strictly out of obedience to the gods. In versions produced for the Babylonians, however, he dwells at length on the perfection of his efforts to rebuild their city.

Not only do Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscriptions help to explain the overall coherence of the book of Ezekiel, they also provide an intriguing parallel to the clustering of materials and themes in Ezek 40–48. There are differences, of course; Ezekiel does not build, as Esarhaddon does.

### Nevertheless, the similarities are striking. [Esarhaddon’s Rebuilding of Babylon]

For the political ideology reflected in Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscriptions, see Barbara Nevling Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Policy* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993).



### Stone Prism of Esarhaddon, Neo-Assyrian, 680–660 BC.

The small stone monument records the restoration of the walls and the temples of the city of Babylon by King Esarhaddon. The cuneiform inscription is written in archaic characters to suggest antiquity and authenticity.

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource]

### Esarhaddon's Rebuilding of Babylon



The quotations given below from one exemplar of Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions illustrate the extent to which the motif of rebuilding a destroyed city could be expanded. Note also the parallels with Ezek 40–48:

#### 1. Destroyed temples are rebuilt (Ezek 40–42):

[At that time, in the place of the abode, [the dwelling] of Marduk, Sarpanit [(and) *Nabû*], I sank the terrace 16 1/2 cubits, I reached the nether waters. With bitumen and burnt brick I made it strong; a retaining wall for its foundation I built,— Nudimmu teaching me (how to do it); . . . .

#### 2. The cult is reestablished through the inauguration of the sacrificial system and the reestablishment of the priesthood (Ezek 44:13-31):

The splendid cults of Esagila I restored to their former magnificence (lit., to their place). I made them much grander than in days gone by. Their (the gods') pure sacrificial lambs, their splendid offerings, their fixed dues, which had ceased (to be paid), I set before them. *Ramku*, *passhishu*, *mahhû* (?), *hârû* (?) priests, who are "guardians" of the divine decisions (oracles), I established before them. *Ishippu*, . . . . *kalû* and *zammeru* priests, who are skilled in all the arts, I established before them.

#### 3. Measurements of the temple ziggurat and walls are given in perfect squares (Ezek 40:5–42:20):

Etemenanki, the temple tower,—1 1/2 cords on the side, 1 1/2 cords on the front, I built anew in the palaces of its former site. Imgur-Bêl, its great wall, 30 cords on the side, 30 cords on the front, by the great cubit, I made its measurement. To its former (dimensions) I restored it and made its mountain high. Nimitti-Bêl, its outer wall, I rebuilt [completely],

heaping up adornments upon it to the astonishment of all the people.

#### 4. Divine images are refurbished and returned to their temples (cf. Ezek 43:1-9):

The gods of the lands, who had been carried off, from Assur and Elam I brought them back to their places, and in every metropolis I established the customary (cults).

#### 5. The Babylonians are resettled, citizenship rights are reinstated, wrongs are righted, and provisions for farming the land are established (Ezek 47:13–48:29; also Ezek 34:25-30; 36:28):

As for the enslaved Babylonians, who had been the feudatories, the clients, of Anu and Enlil, their freedom I established anew. The "capitalists," who had been brought into slavery, who had been apportioned to the yoke and fetter, I gathered together and accounted them for Babylonians.

Their plundered possessions I restored. The naked I clothed and turned their feet into the road to Babylon. To (re)settle the city, to rebuild the temple, to set out plantations, to dig irrigation-ditches I encouraged them. Their clientship which had lapsed, which had slipped out of (their) hands, I restored. The tablet (charter) of their freedom I wrote anew.

#### 6. Opening the gates of the city (cf. Ezek 48:30-34):

Toward the four winds of heaven I opened up their ways so that, establishing their tongue (language) in every land, they might carry out their plans (lit., thoughts).

Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2, *Historical Records of Assyria From Sargon to the End* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1927; repr. New York: Greenwood, 1968), 659.

concern to guard against the encroachment of the profane into Yahweh's house, Ezekiel's vision is one of royal magnanimity. Yahweh's house is an open house: though there may be places for priests and places for laity and rules regulating passage from one to the other, there are also many rooms, which are designed to accommodate many guests (cf. John 14:2).

### Ezekiel 40–48 and the Sinai-Conquest Traditions



Although there exist similarities between Ezek 40–48 and the Sinai-Conquest traditions in Exodus–Joshua, one may argue that the differences are far greater than the similarities.

First, while Ezekiel’s vision of the “structure like a city” in chs. 40–42 can be compared with the instructions to Moses to build a tabernacle (Exod 25-31), Moses receives instructions to build a sanctuary, while Ezekiel sees a completed structure. Second, like Moses, Ezekiel receives “instructions,” which he must communicate to the people (43:13–46:24); however, these instructions are *tôrôt habbāyit*, “house rules,” indicating that they are primarily intended to regulate temple matters, while Moses’ laws more comprehensively addresses communal concerns. Third, Ezekiel’s apportionment of the land (chs. 47–48) has little to do with the social arrangements of the tribal amphictyony reflected in Joshua. Joshua’s allocation of the land presupposes differences in economic and political strength among the tribes, while Ezekiel erases these differences by apportioning the land in equal parcels. Finally, while Joshua ends with the renewal of the covenant and an exhortation to remain obedient lest the land be lost, Ezekiel ends with the affirmation of everlasting divine presence—presumably because the covenant will never again be broken.

For an evaluation of the parallels between Ezek 40–48 and the Moses traditions, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., NICOT (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:498-499.

The vision can be divided into three sections. The first, Ezekiel’s tour of the temple complex (40:1–43:12), is framed by two vision reports (40:1-3; 43:1-9) and instructions to the prophet to note carefully what he sees so that he may report it to the exiles (40:4-5; 43:10-12). The second section, 43:13–46:24, contains the “house rules,” which revolve around the establishment of cult personnel, the institution of regular offerings, and the establishment of the ritual calendar. The third section, 47:1–48:35, envisions the rejuvenation of the land and its apportionment among the tribes of Israel. Although visionary elements are most clearly evident in the first major section (40:4–43:12), they continue to be present throughout the vision and hold the entire unit together as a single, extended literary unit (cf. 43:1; 44:1, 46:19-24; 47:1-12). In the course of the vision, Ezekiel sees the restored land in ever widening circles, all of which are centered on the temple.

### The Cubit



Ezekiel’s heavenly tour guide carries two measuring instruments, a linen cord and a measuring reed (40:3). Only the reed is used, however. Ezekiel’s description of the reed reflects knowledge of two different cubit lengths. The ordinary cubit is based on the length of a man’s arm from his elbow to the tip of his fingers, about 18 inches. The “long” or “royal” cubit includes an additional handbreadth, for a total length of 21 inches. Readers may be tempted to convert the dimensions into more recognizable inches or meters. This temptation should be resisted, however, since such conversions obscure the arithmetical perfection of Ezekiel’s squares and rectangles, which are laid out in perfect multiples of 4, 5, and 10. The preoccupation with numerical perfection is unprecedented in the Bible and may indicate familiarity with Babylonian metrology, as well as with a Jerusalemite architectural tradition only hinted at in the biblical texts.

For a discussion of temple metrology, see Johann Maier, “The Architectural History of the Temple in Jerusalem in Light of the Temple Scroll,” in *Temple Scroll Studies: Papers Presented at the International Symposium on the Temple Scroll, Manchester, December 1987*, ed. George J. Brooke, JSOTP, Supp. 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1981), 23–51. For a brief introduction to Babylonian metrology, see Marvin Powell, “Metrology and Mathematics in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *CANE III*: 1941–57.

## COMMENTARY

**Ezekiel’s Tour of the Temple Complex, 40:1–43:12**

Ezekiel reports a third experience of “visions of God” in the twenty-fifth year of the deportation, twenty years after he received his first vision (1:1-2, c. 592 BCE) and nineteen years after he was carried in “visions of God” to Jerusalem, where, in a visionary state, he witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem (8:1, c. 591 BCE). In this third and final vision, Ezekiel is once again transported to the land of Israel to a “very high mountain,” where he sees a “structure like a city” to the south. He is met there by an angelic figure resembling a bronze man who carries two measuring instruments, a rod and a linen cord. The man tells Ezekiel that he has been brought out to the mountain so that he may report everything he sees to the exiles. The man takes Ezekiel on a tour of the structure, measuring as he goes. Beginning at the outer eastern gate, he takes Ezekiel to each of the three outer gates, then the gates to the inner courtyard, the house itself, a building behind the house at the western end of the compound, and chambers to the north and south of the building. The bronze man then takes the measurements of the entire complex: 500 by 500 cubits. [The Cubit] The bronze man takes Ezekiel back to the eastern gate, where he witnesses the return of the *kābôd*, or “divine Glory,” to the temple. The spirit carries Ezekiel to the inner court, where he hears Yahweh claim the structure as his dwelling place, so constructed as to preclude any further abominations of the house of Israel.

***Introduction, 40:1-4***

The introductory verses situate the vision in time and space. At the beginning of the twenty-fifth year of the deportation and exactly fourteen years after the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel is carried in visions of God to a “very high mountain” in the land of Israel, where he sees a “structure like a city” to the south. [An Outline of Ezekiel 40:1–42:20]

The date is significant both in terms of the prophet’s biography and the history of the exile. Drawing parallels with Leviticus, James Miller has interpreted the twenty-fifth year in light of regulations defining the length of service of the Levitical priests, who were ordained for service at the age of thirty and relieved of their duties twenty years later, at the age of fifty. Assuming that Ezekiel was thirty years old when he received his first vision (1:1-3), Miller



therefore suggested that the twenty-fifth year indicates the culmination of Ezekiel's career as a prophet to the exiles.<sup>4</sup>

Others reckon the twenty-fifth year as the halfway mark between the deportation and the anticipated return from exile. According to this interpretation, the restoration is anticipated to occur in the jubilee year, specified in the Holiness Code to be observed at the end of seven cycles of sabbatical years (i.e., the fiftieth year; Lev 25:8-17).<sup>5</sup> Although it is an appealing interpretation, there is little foundation for it. First, the judgment proper does not begin until the destruction of Jerusalem, in the eleventh year. From that year to the twenty-fifth, only fourteen years have elapsed. While it is possible that Ezekiel considers the deportation of the exiles the beginning of judgment, it is unlikely, since the destruction of Jerusalem figures so prominently in his book. In any case, unlike Jeremiah, who decreed seventy years for the judgment of Jerusalem (Jer 25:11-12), Ezekiel does not define the duration of Jerusalem's judgment. [Ezekiel 40–48 and the Holiness Code] While it must be conceded that the precise meaning of the date remains elusive, it is more likely that the twenty-fifth year signifies the completion of the judgment of Jerusalem. Perhaps the number indicates a “double” judgment of two sets of seven years (cf. Isa 40:2).

Not only is the vision situated in time, it is also located in space. Whereas the “very high mountain” has mythological connotations as the dwelling place of Yahweh, Ezekiel situates it in physical space. Just fourteen years after the old palace and its political systems were leveled, Ezekiel sees a new thing: Yahweh has claimed the land, built his palace, and begun to rule. Unlike the battle against Gog, which is said to occur after many days and years (Ezek 38–39), this text describes neither a future event nor an eternal, heavenly pattern; rather, it speaks *as if* Yahweh rules *in* the land of Israel, *in* the twenty-fifth year. For the exiles, of course, Ezekiel's vision remains prophetic, a promise of a future

### An Outline of Ezekiel 40:1–42:20



40:5-27 Outer Gate

40:5-6 Exterior Wall

40:6 Steps

40:6-19 East Gate

40:17-19 Outer Court

40:20-23 North Gate

40:24-27 South Gate

40:28-47 Inner Gate and Courts

40:28-31 South Gate

40:32-34 East Gate

40:35-37 North Gate

40:38 Chamber for washing the sacrifices

40:39-43 Tables for preparing the sacrifices

40:44-46 Chambers in the inner court for the priests

40:47 Measurement of the inner court; placement

of altar

40:48–41:26 The Buildings

41:1-11 The House (Heb. *habbāyit*; NRSV “temple”)

40:48-49 The vestibule

41:1-2 The nave

41:3-4 The inner room

41:5-11 Walls and chambers

41:12 The Building (Heb. *binyān*)

41:13-15a Measurements of the House and

Building

41:15b-20 Decoration of the House; Yahweh's Table

41:21-26 Doorposts, Doors, and Windows of the

House

42:1-20 Chambers and Outer Wall

42:1-14 The Chambers

42:1-10a North Chambers

42:10b-12 South Chambers

42:13-14 Function of the Chambers

42:15-20 The Outer Wall

42:15-19 Measurements

42:20 Function of the Wall

### Ezekiel 40–48 and the Holiness Code



There is a notable lack of parallels between Ezek 40–48 and the Holiness Code (Lev 18–26), which elsewhere exerts a profound influence on the moral outlook of Ezekiel. Unlike Ezek 18, none of the statutes in Ezek 44–46 reflects the Holiness Code's demand for social justice. Despite the heightened emphasis on maintaining the holiness of the temple, there are no instructions for dealing with impurities resulting from skin diseases, bodily emissions, childbirth, and the like. And given Ezekiel's preoccupation with the so-called "adulteries" of Jerusalem, laws regulating female sexual behavior of women are noticeably absent—a further reminder that the figure of adultery functions as metaphor for political intrigue, and not as a description of social reality. The absence of such laws suggests that Ezekiel's *tôrâ* served a specific function and was not intended as a comprehensive torah.

For the points of contact between Lev 18–26 and Ezekiel, see Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 vols., Hermeneia, trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 1:46-52.

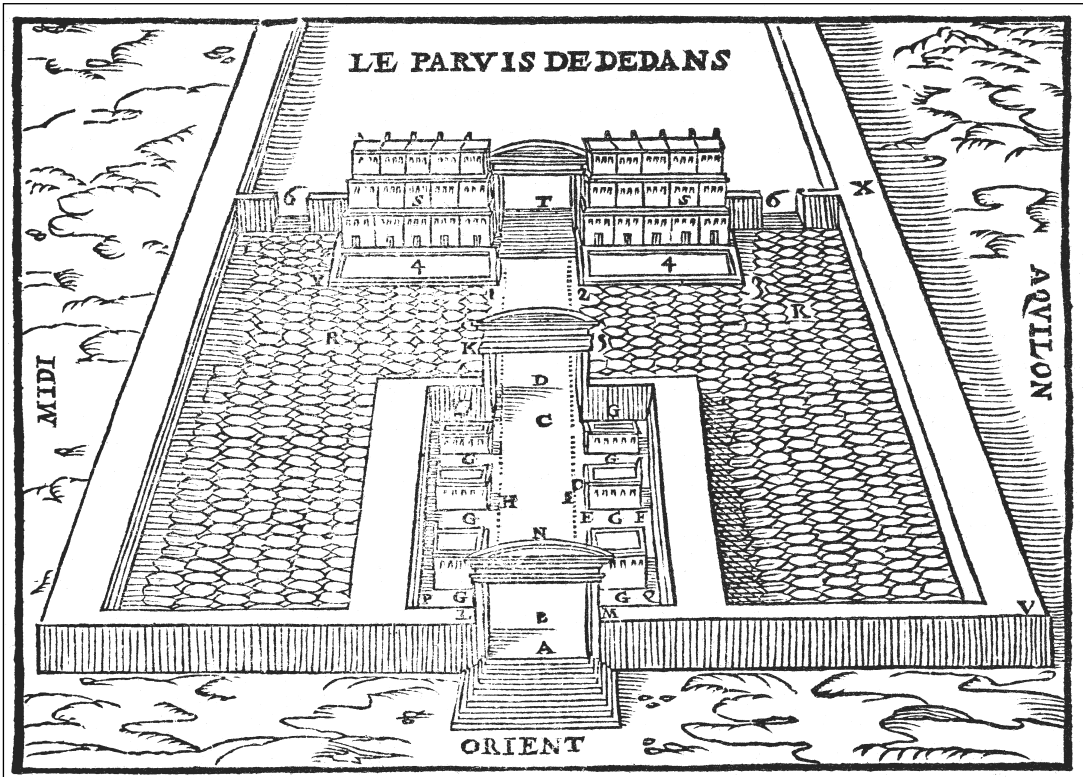
home. And the vision indicates that the structure is ready but will not be fully functioning until the altar is dedicated (43:18-27). Despite the tension between present vision and future reality, the intersection of time and space underscores the certainty of restoration: even while the exiles remain in Babylonia, Yahweh has begun to reign in the land of Israel.

### *The Structure Like a City, 40:5–42:20*

Beginning at the outer east gate and moving inward, Ezekiel accompanies the bronze man as he measures the buildings in the compound. Although these measurements are often construed as a building plan or blueprint for a future structure which remains to be built, Kalinda Rose Stevenson has persuasively argued that the bronze man measures a completed structure.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Moses, who sees a heavenly pattern which must be executed according to detailed instructions (Exod 25–31, esp. 25:9; cf. 1 Kgs 6), Ezekiel sees, not a pattern or a plan, but a complex of buildings making up Yahweh's "house."

The crux for determining the significance of what Ezekiel sees is an obscure term in 43:10, *toknît* (NRSV "pattern"). At issue is whether the noun is derived from the verb *tkn*, "regulate, measure, proportion," as indicated by MT, or whether it is derived from the more familiar root *kwn*, "establish," as suggested by the ancient versions as well as by the use of the latter term in 43:11. A further complication is that the verb is often confused with *tabnît*, "pattern," a term more typically employed in building narratives (cf. Exod 25:9; 1 Chr 28:10-12). Whatever its meaning, it is not a pattern or a blueprint. Unlike Moses and ancient Near Eastern kings, Ezekiel does not see a heavenly blueprint but a royal compound constructed in physical space. But there is enough ambiguity over the meaning of *toknît* that it remains difficult to be certain whether the emphasis is on the arrangement of space, as





### The Outer East Gate

In this sixteenth-century woodcut, the artist draws attention to the monumental size of the outer east gate, which contains six chambers and a broad passageway into the temple compound.

Antonio Brucioli, *La Bibbia, che si chiama il Vecchio Testamento* (1562).

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

Stevenson argued,<sup>7</sup> or whether it is on the stability of the structure. Because both verb roots are employed, the emphasis may be on both.

Except for the outer walls, no heights are given for any of the structures; in this respect Ezekiel's measurements closely correspond to the convention of providing measurements in ancient Near Eastern building accounts. Depending on the type of building project, measurements serve different purposes in these accounts. When dimensions of newly constructed palaces are given, measurements signify the magnificence of the king's undertaking. The situation is different for temples, where measurements indicate that the kings have successfully rebuilt on original foundations revealed through divine revelation.<sup>8</sup> [Measurements in Esarhaddon's Babylonian Inscriptions and Ezekiel 40–48]

The structure is, paradoxically, both a new city and the original one. After all, if Israel never properly possessed the land, then its temple was never properly founded. Because this temple is on a

“very high mountain,” which, mythologically speaking, is the intersection of heaven and earth, the measurements reveal that the temple is built on its “original” foundations, in the most basic sense of the term.

### **Gates, 40:5-47**

Although the narrative begins with a brief mention of a wall around the temple compound, it focuses primarily on the bronze man’s movements. The man first measures the outer east gate, then moves into the outer court, which contains thirty chambers positioned around the perimeter and adjoining the gates. The bronze man then leads Ezekiel to the other two outer gates to the north and south of the compound. The man measures each outer gate, the distance between it and the corresponding inner gate, and then proceeds to measure each of the inner gates (40:28-47). Each gate is a building in its own right, measuring 50 cubits long and 25 cubits wide; for purposes of comparison, one should note that Solomon’s temple was only 20 by 60 cubits (1 Kgs 6:2). Each gate consists of six rooms, three on either side, and passageways opening into vestibules. The vestibules of the outer gates face inward toward the outer courtyard, while those on the inner gates face outward.

#### **Measurements in Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Inscriptions and Ezekiel 40–48**



Although they are nowhere nearly so extensively detailed as in Ezek 40–42, the incorporation of measurements into building accounts is well attested in ancient Near Eastern inscriptions. When cited, they appear in accounts of the founding, restoration, or expansion of cities (cf. *ARAB*, 2:372). Measurements do not figure prominently in temple building accounts, which more often report the rediscovery of an original foundation on which the king builds a new structure.

One exception to this rule is Esarhaddon’s use of measurements in his Babylonian inscriptions. Not only are measurements given for the sacred buildings, they are given as perfect squares (*ARAB*, 2:653, 659C, 659D). The temple of Esagila, the ziggurat of Etemenanki, and the walls around the temple structures are given precise measurements in perfect squares (*ARAB*, 659D). That these measurements are attested only in the versions intended for a Babylonian readership may suggest that the square proportion was a uniquely Babylonian architectural convention. In Esarhaddon’s inscriptions, the explicit reference to the square proportion is explained as the perfect reflection of the body of Babylon’s god: “I skilfully carried

out its artistic lines and its plan being laid down according to the likeness of his (Marduk’s) members. . . . I built its structure as it was in former days” (*ARAB*, 2:659B).

In addition to being given in perfect squares, Ezekiel’s measurements conform to Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscriptions in one other respect: they are most complete for the outer walls and for the house itself. Despite the correlation between squares and sanctuaries in Ezekiel and Esarhaddon’s inscriptions, other elements of the vision suggest that the structure being described is not so much a temple but a palace. It is explicitly called a “structure like a city” in 40:2 and is more often called a “house,” not “sanctuary” (Heb. *miqdāš*). Second, the reference to the “south” in 40:2 is reminiscent of the veiled allusion to the destruction of the royal “forest of the Negev” in 21:1-5 [ET 20:45-49]. In the vision of restoration, the palace is not rebuilt but replaced by Yahweh’s compound. Third, the dimensions of this new house for Yahweh are literally palatial. Whereas the temple built by Solomon was only 20 cubits by 60 cubits (1 Kgs 6:2), Ezekiel’s is 50 cubits by 100 cubits, exactly the dimensions of Solomon’s palace (1 Kgs 7:20). Even the areas encompassed by just one of the six outer and inner gates exceeds that encompassed by Solomon’s temple.



### Measuring the Temple

The cycle of frescoes portraying Ezekiel's visions in the underchurch at Schwarzrheindorf culminate in four panels in the vault, each representing a scene from Ezekiel 40–43. Here, Ezekiel watches as the bronze man measures the circumference of the city. Note the juxtaposition of this scene with that of ch.8, where Ezekiel digs through the wall and witnesses the abominations of Jerusalem. The artist thus suggests that the measurements signify a complete reversal of the situation that had led to judgment.

Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. Photography: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.

The outer and inner gates at the north, east, and south, are thus mirror images of one another.

There is nothing to suggest that the gates block or restrict access to the courts.<sup>9</sup> [Ezekiel and *Hekhalot Rabbati*] Walther Zimmerli has observed that such gates are unprecedented in Palestinian temple architecture but widely attested in defensive city walls. However, even he notes that the gates in Ezekiel's vision do not serve a defensive function.<sup>10</sup> Only the outer east gate is closed, and even though the priests must carefully guard against communicating holiness to the people, the courtyards appear accessible to all. During the festivals, the people traverse the court, entering through one door and exiting through its opposite; on sabbaths, they bow at the inner

### Ezekiel and *Hekhalot Rabbati*



The Jewish mystical traditions known as *hekhalot rabbati* (great palaces) describe a mystical ascent through a series of closely guarded entrances into ever more sacred palaces until the mystic finds himself in the seventh palace, the throne room of God. Although this vertical ascent reflects neoplatonic developments of late antiquity, the conception of the journey through successively holy “houses” may ultimately derive from Ezekiel’s plan of the temple compound and Ezekiel’s own journey in which an angelic figure leads him through through six gates (which, it will be recalled, are free standing structures nearly equal in size to the temple) until he arrives at the seventh, the “house” of Yahweh, where he sees the glory of God.

Although the rigorously guarded gates would suggest that only a privileged few are granted access, Peter Schäfer argues the contrary: once these mystics witness God’s love for Israel, then they must report what they have seen to God’s people so that they will know that they are loved:

Bear witness to them  
of what testimony you see in me,  
of what I do unto the face of Jacob, your father,  
which is engraved [unto] me  
upon the throne of my glory.

for in the hour  
when you speak before me “holy,”  
I stoop over it [Jacob’s face],  
embrace, fondle and kiss it,  
and my hands [lie] upon his arms,  
three times, when you speak before me “holy,”

as it is said:

Holy, holy, holy [is the lord of Hosts] [Isaiah 6:3]

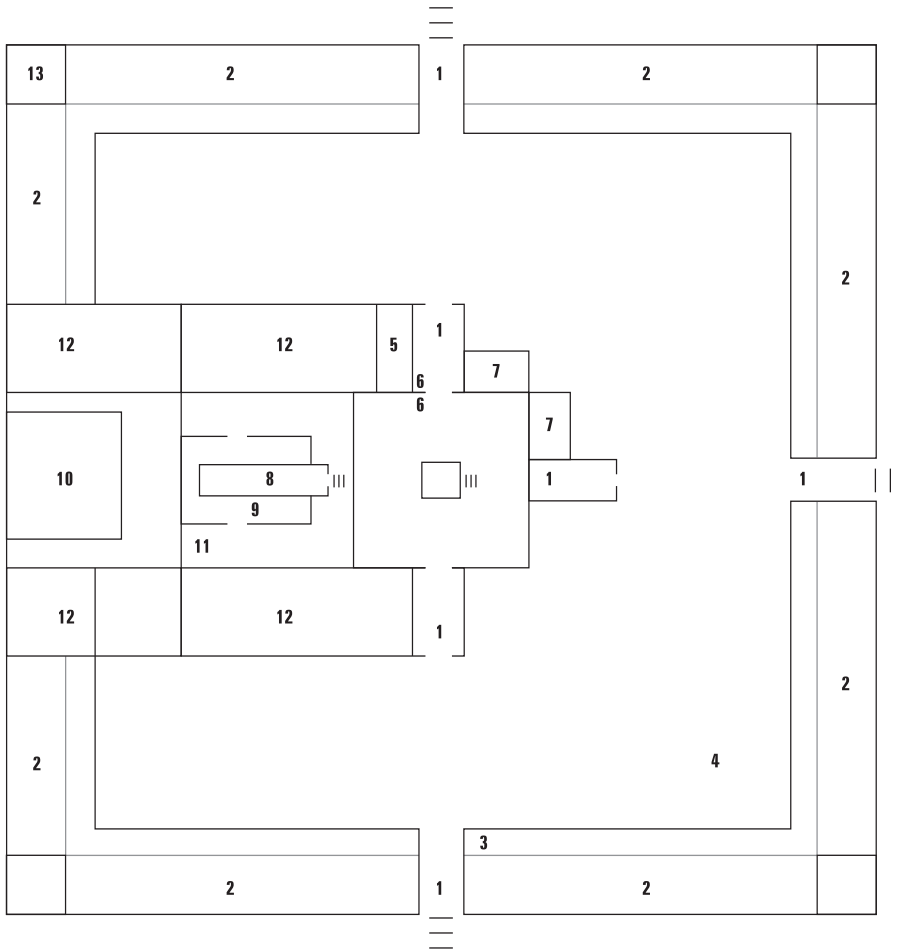
The mystic’s experience thus bears comparison with that of Ezekiel in a second respect, since Ezekiel is twice told that he has been brought to the temple so that he can bear witness of what he has seen to the house of Israel (cf. 40:4, 43:10-12).

These two points of connection between Ezekiel’s vision and *hekhalot rabbati*—the journey through a succession of gates, and the responsibility of bearing witness to God’s holiness—suggest two areas for further theological reflection. First, as it has been argued in 40:9, gates signify neither restrictions nor limits. Even though only a few pass through the gates, these few are commanded to return to fellow Jews in order to bear witness to God’s unceasing love for them. Elsewhere in this commentary I have urged that interpreters abandon the notion of graded holiness; in light of *hekhalot rabbati*, one might consider replacing it with that of radiating holiness.

Second, the vision of divine love in *hekhalot rabbati* leads one to ask whether Ezekiel sees anything comparable. The question is whether the vision revolves around rules to guard against the profanation of God’s holy name, or whether it envisions the restoration of authentic communion between the deity and the house of Israel. In the commentary on 43:1-12 and in the Connections, it will be suggested that something on the order of divine commitment to a free and authentic covenant with Israel does lie at the heart of this vision.

Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, trans. Aubrey Pomerance; SUNY Series in Judaica (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 11–54.

east gate just as the prince does. No rigid partitioning of the places is mentioned: even though there are inner gates, no wall divides the outer court from the inner court, and only the *nâsî* and priests are assigned specific places in the temple compound. Finally, subsequent interpretations regard the gates as points of access rather than restriction. In the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, arguably one of the earliest references to Ezekiel’s vision in Jewish liturgy, heavenly blessings and praise flow into the earthly realm through the gates of the heavenly temple. [*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*] Gates play a similar role in the Jewish mystical traditions.



### The Temple Complex

The above diagram provides one possible interpretation of the measurements in Ezekiel 40–42. The location of some installations cannot be established with certainty; for example, while it is possible that the altar stands in the exact center of the complex, as show here, Ezek 40:47 states only that it was “in front of” the temple.

Key: 1) Gates (40:8-16; 40:20-37); 2) Chambers for laity (dimensions not specified, 40:17-19); 3) Pavement (40:17-19); 4) Court (40:19); 5) Room for washing burnt offering (size and location not specified, 40:38); 6) Tables for offerings (40:39-43); 7) Altar (40:47); 8) Rooms for the priests (size not specified, 40:44); 9) Temple: vestibule, nave, holy of holies (40:48–41:11); 10) Side chambers (41:9b-10); 11) Building (41:11-12); 12) Boundaries of inner court, temple, and building (41:13-14); 13) Priests’ chambers (42:1-12); 13) Kitchens (46:21-24).

For diagrams on which this interpretation is partially based, see Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel* (SBLDS 154; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 29, and Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols., (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:572-73.

The chambers are also a prominent feature. Ringing the outer court are thirty chambers, apparently set aside for the laity, while chambers are placed along the gates in the inner court for the priests. Chambers adjoining the inner gate to the north are reserved for those who serve at the sacrifices, while those adjoining the inner gate to the south are set aside for the Levites. Although the cham-

### **Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice**



The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, a liturgical cycle of psalms pieced together from fragments of manuscripts discovered in Cave 4 of Qumran, describe an angelic priesthood offering its praises to God during the sabbath sacrifices in the heavenly temple. The psalms draw extensively on the imagery of Ezekiel's visions of the living beings in chs. 1 and 10 and combine it with building vocabulary from chs. 40–48. Because these songs are so fragmentary, the nature of the *Songs'* use of Ezekiel's visions remains an open question; even so, they provide early evidence of the impact of Ezekiel's vision on subsequent Jewish liturgy.

Most notable is the *Songs'* description of the vestibules and gates. Like Ezekiel's temple, the rooms in the gates feature carvings on the walls, although those of the *Songs* are explicitly described as "likenesses" of living gods, not cherubim, as in Ezek 40–42 (4Q405 frag. 14-15, col. 1, ll. 4-5). Further investigation into the nature of these wall carvings may yield striking parallels with the iconography of Ezekiel 8, where the elders of the house of Israel made their petitions to the "creeping things" on the walls. Although Ezekiel condemns these "creeping things" as idols, the designation in the *Songs* of similar figures as divine likenesses suggests that Ezekiel's polemic obscures the proper theological function of the "creeping things," and indicates that other circles regarded them as normative features of legitimate worship.

It is also worth noting that the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* regard the gates in the heavenly temple passageways between the divine and heavenly realms, not as barriers or defensive structures. Characterizing all of the movement through the gates is praise:

The godli[k]e beings praise him [ . . . ] /t their station, and all the sp[ir]its of] the shining firmam[en]ts rejoice in his glory. And (there is) a sound of blessing from all his divisions, telling of his glorious firmaments; and his gates praise with a sound of exultation. Whenever the divine beings of knowledge enter by the portals of glory, and whenever the holy angels go out to their dominion, the portals of entrance and the gates of exit make known the glory of the king, blessing and praising all the spirits of God at (their) going out and at (their) coming in through the ga[t]les of holiness. (4Q405 frag. 23 1.6-10)

Here again, the *Songs* suggest an intriguing parallel with Ezekiel's temple vision. If, as others have argued, the gates of Ezekiel's temple do not serve a defensive function, then it is possible that they functioned, like the heavenly gates of the *Songs*, as passageways allowing the worshipers to come into the divine presence while also allowing divine blessing to flow out of the temple.

James H. Charlesworth and Carol A. Newsom et al., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, volume 4B, *Angelic Liturgy: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, Princeton Theological Seminary Dead Sea Scrolls Project (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck/Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

bers do indicate heightened degrees of purity among the priesthood, there is no account of a barrier or wall dividing the inner and outer courts;<sup>11</sup> one wonders why gates would be necessary where there are no walls.

### **Temple, Side Chambers, Binyan, and Sacristies, 40:48–42:14**

The man moves from the outer gate toward the inner room, then to the chambers flanking the temple on the north and south gate, and finally to the building to the west of the temple. The overall



measurements, which are provided last, reveal three perfect squares, each one hundred cubits in length and breadth.

Ezekiel's temple is often compared with the Solomonic temple. The house itself, a three-part structure consisting of a vestibule (Heb. *ulām*), nave (Heb. *hêkal*), and inner room, resembles a Syro-Palestinian temple and corresponds to Solomon's temple in both layout and size. There the similarity ends. In 1 Kings 6, the narrator dwells extensively on the gold overlay, decoration, and utensils of Solomon's temple. By contrast, Ezekiel's temple is paneled in cedar and adorned with a pattern of alternating palm trees and cherubim. In addition, Ezekiel's attention to windows, doors, and doorposts, appears to allow for movement rather than restricting it. There is a gate across the opening to the vestibule (40:48); and double doors, each with two leaves, cover the entrances to the nave and inner room (41:24-25). But the gate nor the doors are not said to be closed (cf. 44:1-2), and Ezekiel can clearly see the bronze man measuring the inner room as he stands in the nave.

To the north and south of the temple itself are freestanding chambers in a sort of inverse pyramid three stories high. An open space separates the chambers from the temple while also connecting them to it, since a passageway opens from the chambers into this open space. Immediately to the west of the temple is a structure simply called the *binyan* (NRSV "building"). The building's function is not specified, and not even the bronze man goes inside to measure it.

Even if the temple reflects the architectural conventions of Syro-Palestinian temples, one suspects that the compound as a whole is being presented along the lines of a royal palace. It has already been noted that the gates represent one such departure from the conventions of temple architecture. Ezekiel frequently refers to the structure as a "house" (*bayit*), not sanctuary (*miqdās*); moreover, the central room, designated by NRSV as "nave," is explicitly identified as a palace (Heb. *hêkal*, lit., "big house").<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the addition of the three stories of chambers ringing the temple makes the structure equivalent in size to that of Solomon's palace. Finally, with the addition of the "building" (Heb. *binyan*) to the rear of the temple, the temple complex more closely approximates the arrangement of public and private space associated with Solomon's palace. In Solomon's complex, the House of the Palace of Lebanon was a public space, and other halls were designed for affairs of state (1 Kgs 7:2-5). But Solomon's private residence was a separate building behind the palace (1 Kgs 7:8). In this respect it is worth noting that

whereas even the bronze man does not enter the *binyan*, the rest of the “house” or temple appears to consist of relatively more accessible space; for example, while the openings into the rooms of the temple are successively smaller, there do not appear to be any barriers guarding the entrances. Thus even though Ezekiel does not go into the inner room with the bronze man, he can see into it.<sup>13</sup>

Moving back to the outer court, the bronze man shows Ezekiel chambers flanking the “building” at the western end of the compound (42:1-14). In contrast to the chambers flanking the temple, where the upper stories increase in size, these chambers become increasingly smaller. The chambers can be entered at the east, and are accessible through passageways running their length. In vv. 13-14, the chambers are identified as the most holy chambers, places set aside for the priests to eat the most holy offerings. Once they enter this holy place, priests may not go into the outer court among the people until they change garments. The number of chambers designated for the priests, triple that set aside for the laity, raises intriguing questions about the composition of the house of Israel in the restoration. Does the 3 to 1 ratio of chambers indicate a high ratio of priests to laity? Does this ratio indicate an inverted hierarchy, a nation of priests, so to speak?

### *The Measurement of the Whole, 42:15-20*

The bronze man completes the task of measuring the structure by measuring the whole. The entire compound is a perfect square: five hundred by five hundred cubits. A wall encloses the entire structure; and it is only this wall that is said to separate the holy and the common. While there may be places within the compound that are more holy than others, the entire compound is holy.

### *The Return of the Divine Glory, 43:1-12*

Once the measurements are completed, the bronze man takes Ezekiel back to the place where the tour had begun, the gate facing east, where Ezekiel sees return of the divine glory. The vision is explicitly linked to his inaugural vision at the Chebar canal (1:1) as well as to his vision of the destruction of the city (8:1). As the glory enters the temple, Ezekiel is lifted up by the spirit and carried into the inner court. Speaking from the inner room of the temple, Yahweh declares that this place will be his throne, where he will reside among the house of Israel forever. [An Outline of Ezekiel 43:1–46:24]

The divine speech in vv. 6-12 has three parts. First, Yahweh declares that this structure is the place of his throne and footstool. Other biblical texts speak of heaven as God’s throne and earth as



God's footstool (cf. Matt 5:34-35); such a conception lies behind Isaiah's vision of God sitting "high and lofty" on a throne with the hem of his garment filling the temple. By declaring that the temple is the location of both throne and footstool, Ezekiel construes the temple, not as an intersection of heaven and earth along an *axis mundi*, but a perfect merging of the two realms. A similar merging of mythic and historic space is reflected in the account of the river of life in chapter 47.

Second, Yahweh identifies the central abuse leading to the abandonment of the temple, and demands that the house of Israel put an end to these practices (43:7-9). The account, already filled with obscure technical terms, is further obfuscated by Ezekiel's polemical language. At issue is the translation and interpretation of the difficult phrase in 43:7, which NRSV renders as "corpses of their kings at their deaths" (Heb. *pigrê malkêhem bāmôtām*). Recent studies have partially resolved the difficulty by suggesting that the phrase is probably a reference to cult monuments. This commentary has built on that argument by suggesting that the monuments were substitutionary offerings, possibly devised in connection with the practice of the donation of the firstborn and intended to show devotion to Yahweh (see [Was the Image of Jealousy an Image of Asherah?], [If the Image The Image of Zeal that Ensures Blessings], [Semels as Substitute Offerings], [The Case of the Missing King's Missing Corpse]). By condemning them as *gillûlîm* and *šiqqûšîm*, dungballs and worthless things, Ezekiel associates them with idolatry. Ezekiel 43:8 may indicate how these monuments

### An Outline of Ezekiel 43:1–46:24



- 43:1-12 At the Gate Facing East
- 43:1-4 The return of the Glory
- 43:5-12 Audition and Instructions
  - 43:5-8 Private Communication to Ezekiel
  - 43:9-12 Instruction to Ezekiel to Explain Temple Design and Ordinances to Israel
  - 43:12 The Holiness of the Mountain and Its Environs
- 44:1-3 At the Outer East Gate
  - 44:2-3 Audition: The Closed Door
- 44:4-31 From the North Gate to the Front of the Temple
  - 44:5 Audition: Observe and Report Ordinances Regulating Access to the House
  - 44:6–46:18 Oracle to the Rebellious House:
    - 44:6-8 An End to the Abominations of Israel
    - 44:9-14 Reinstatement of the Levites
    - 44:15-27 Reinstatement of the Priests
    - 44:28–45:5 The Priests' Inheritance and Possession
    - 45:6 The City's Possession
    - 45:7-8 The Prince's Possession
    - 45:9 An End to the Evictions of Yahweh's People
  - 45:10–17 Establishment of the Sacrificial Offerings
    - 45:10-11 Just Weights and Measures
    - 45:12-16 Offerings from the Laity
    - 45:17 Offerings from the Prince
  - 45:18-25 Establishment of the Festivals
    - 45:18-20 Temple Purification
    - 45:21-24 Passover
    - 45:25 Booths
  - 46:1-18 Access for Prince and People
    - 46:1-8 Sabbath Offerings
    - 46:9-10 Appointed Festivals
    - 46:11-15 Offerings of the Prince
      - 46:11 Festivals
      - 46:12 Freewill Offerings
      - 46:13-15 Daily Offerings
    - 46:16-18 Limitations on Landholdings of the Prince
  - 46:19-20 At the Entrance to the Holy Chambers
    - 46:20 Audition: The Place for Preparing Divine Offerings
  - 46:21-24 In the Outer Court
    - 46:21-23 Kitchens
    - 46:24 Audition: The Place for Preparing the People's Offerings

came to be associated with idolatry, though the terminology of this verse is also obscure.

The new temple is completely cleansed of any activity associated with these practices. In this connection, one notes the relative plainness of the temple compound. There are buildings, doorways, and gates, but no monuments. The subsequent “law of the temple” will show how the design of the temple corrects the abuses of the past; for now, it is sufficient to observe that the temple is so structured as to accommodate *human* worshipers, not representations in wood and stone (cf. 20:40-41).

In the third section of the divine speech, Yahweh tells Ezekiel to declare its dimensions and ordinances to the house of Israel, and also to record them in writing. The content of Ezekiel’s message is further defined in v. 12 as instructions regulating access to the house (Heb. *tôrat habbāyit*; NRSV “law of the temple”). These instructions will be laid out in 44:13–46:24.

The sequence of clauses in vv. 11-12 is a crux. At issue is the relationship between Ezekiel’s proclamation and the people’s response: do they become ashamed when they hear about the temple, or does Ezekiel tell them about the temple because they have already adopted the appropriate attitude of shame? The former interpretation is reflected in NRSV’s translation, which has rearranged the clauses in v. 11 in order to guide the reader to a similar conclusion. If one starts afresh with the Masoretic text, the sequence of clauses suggests that the vision is an answer to the people’s shame. Each of the three clauses in v. 10 has its counterpart in v. 11 (e.g., *A, A*; etc.):

You, son of man, describe (Heb. *haggēd*) the house to the house of Israel (A)

and let them be ashamed (Heb. *wēyikkālmû*) of their abominations (B)

so that they will measure (Heb. *ûmāddēdû*) the pattern. (C)

And if they are ashamed (Heb. *wēʿim niqlēmû*) of all that they have done, (B’)

“the layout of the house, and its perfection, and its exits and its entrances, and all its layout and indeed all its statutes and all its layout and all its instructions”

you shall make known (Heb. *hōdaʿ*) to them and draw [it] (Heb. *kētōb*) in their sight. (A)

And let them observe (Heb. *wějšmērū*) all its layout and all its statutes so that they shall (Heb. *wěʿāsū*) do them. (C)

In both verses, Ezekiel declares and the people “measure” the pattern; v. 11 expands on this brief notice by saying that they will “observe” the pattern and its instructions and therefore “do” them. In v. 10, clauses A and B are both formulated as commands, the difference being that the command to the house of Israel is given in the jussive (i.e., “let them do X”). The parallel clauses in v. 11 clarify the relationship between Ezekiel’s preaching and the people’s shame, and indicate that Ezekiel’s preaching should not result in the people’s shame, but that it cannot be taken to heart until and unless the people are ashamed. It is only when the house of Israel feels shame for what it has done will it be able to hear Ezekiel’s account of the temple and respond accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

If the above interpretation is correct, then shame is not an end in itself. Elsewhere in this commentary, it has been noted that the logic of shame in Ezekiel revolves around an understanding of covenant loyalty and commitment. As Yahweh’s covenant partner, Israel has claimed that its misfortunes were the result of having been abandoned by Yahweh. With Babylonian aggression resulting in deportation for some and further subjugation for others remaining in the homeland, they complained that Yahweh’s absence had put them to shame: “The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land” (Ezek 8:12). In answer to this complaint, Yahweh enumerated all of the infidelities of the house of Israel and insisted that they accept responsibility for the impending disaster. Rather than blame their humiliation on some defect in Yahweh, they must be ashamed of what *they* have done.

Ezekiel does not say that shame is a permanent feature of the restoration. When, in Ezekiel 16:59-63, Yahweh reaffirms his loyalty by forging a new covenant with Jerusalem, he proclaims that Jerusalem will no longer engage in complaint rituals on account of her shame. Yahweh does insist that Israel bear its shame for all that it has done; but even this burdensome self-loathing will become a thing of the past. Anticipating the restoration, Ezekiel 39:26 envisions a time when the Israelites will “forget” their shame and all of their past treacheries.

Shame comes to an end in 43:10-11. When, finally, the people are ashamed of what they have done—in other words, when they have accepted responsibility for their past—then they will be ready

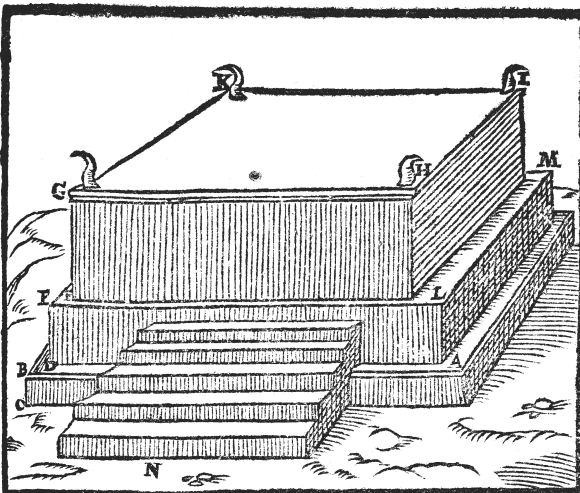
to see the pattern, conform to it, and observe the statutes. Moreover, if Yahweh enters by the east gate, shuts the door behind him and takes up permanent residence, then Ezekiel 16:63 is indeed fulfilled. There will never again be any complaint rituals on account of Israel's shame—not because Yahweh forbids them, but because they will be unnecessary in the city of Yahweh's everlasting presence.

### House Rules, 43:13–46:24

In this section, the bronze man and Ezekiel revisit places mentioned only in passing in the first tour—the altar, the outer east gate, the gate facing east, the inner court, and the outer court. At each location, the prophet receives further instructions for maintaining proper worship. Some of these auditions are framed simply as divine disclosures to the prophet. Others, introduced by the prophetic messenger formula (“thus says the Lord”), disclose rules for maintaining the cult in the form of an extended oracle to the house of Israel (cf. 44:6, 9; 45:9, 18; 46:1, 16).

At first glance, the unit appears to be primarily concerned with guarding the holiness of the temple by establishing strict rules of access. However, one can argue that that the rules of access are

intended to ensure the availability of Yahweh's holiness to all Israel. Moreover, statements throughout the unit suggest that the conception of holiness is of a piece with conceptions of justice and equity. It is therefore no accident, then, that just weights and measures and laws regulating prince's disposal of property are integrally connected to the allocation of space in the temple precincts.



#### The Altar

This sixteenth century woodcut represents an attempt to render Ezekiel's description of the altar as literally as possible. It is an open-air altar, with a broad platform for the sacrifices.

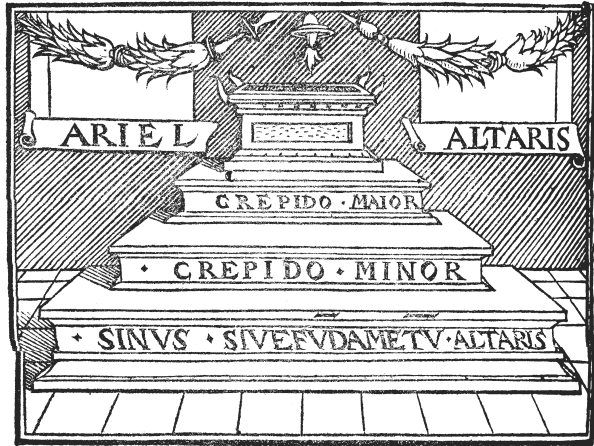
Antonio Brucioli, *La Bibbia, che si chiama il Vecchio Testamento* (1562)

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. [Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Emory University]

#### *The Altar, 43:13-27*

In the tour of the temple, the altar and its location in front of the house were mentioned in passing (40:47); the present unit focuses more fully on its dimensions as well as its use. The unit specifies the altar's proportions (vv. 13-17), and

then provides instructions for its purification and consecration (vv. 18-23). By including both measurements and provisions for human ritual, the section underscores the proleptic character of Ezekiel's vision. Like the other structures in the temple, the altar is already built; consequently, these instructions contain neither a description of building materials nor instructions for its construction. Nevertheless, the altar is not ready for use until it is purified and consecrated, and for this Yahweh needs human beings. Once the altar is consecrated, the priests will bring the people's offerings, and by accepting the gifts Yahweh will accept the people. The promise, "I will accept you" in v. 27 links this outcome to 20:40-44 and suggests that the consecration of the altar signifies the completion of restoration.



#### "Ariel Altaris"

Although the Latin terms reflect Ezekiel's description of the altar, this representation of the altar in the Zurich Bible (1536) portrays it more as a pedestal than as a place for offering sacrifices. Instead of an open-air setting, this altar appears to be situated in an interior location, as suggested by the tiled floor, wall, and ornate decoration. The Latin designation of the altar as Ariel reflects the Vulgate's transliteration of the unusual Hebrew term *har'el* in 43:15.

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the joint ATS/ATLA Cooperative Digital Resources Initiative and the Luce Foundation. [Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Emory University]

The altar measurements in 43:13-17 indicate its height as well as its width and breadth. Although the reference to height disrupts the pattern established in chapters 40–42, which apart from the outer wall speak only of the width and breadth of the structures, Assyrian building accounts provide corroborating evidence for this variation. NRSV's "base" in v. 13a should be construed as a trench around the altar (Heb. *ḥēq*, v. 13; "base on the ground," *ḥēq ḥā-āreš*, v. 14). Moving from the ground up, vv. 13-15 give the height of the altar in successive stages and also delineate a partially stepped structure decreasing in width from bottom to top; the shape of the altar is thus rather like that of a ziggurat. NRSV's "height" (Heb. *gab*) in v. 13b, better translated "platform," is the broad base on which the altar is built; this base extends one cubit around the circumference of the altar and stands two cubits high. Four cubits up from the platform is a "small ledge"; the wall upward from the ledge is set in one cubit and extends for another four cubits. At the top of this wall is another ledge. Even though it is called the "great ledge" to distinguish it from the ledge below, the two ledges are of the same dimension. From the bottom edge of the platform to the

top ledge, the altar is 10 cubits high. Moving from the hearth back down again, vv. 16-17 provide the total width: 12 by 12 cubits for the hearth, and 14 by 14 cubits for the topmost ledge. Although no other measurements are given for the first ledge, platform, or trench, the total area taken up by the altar is 20 by 20 cubits, exactly twice its height.

The unusual terminology for the base and altar, which Michael Fishbane renders as “bosom of the earth” (*hēq ha’ āreš*, v. 14) and “mountain of god” (*har’el*), may indicate that the altar had at one time been regarded as an *axis mundi*, or intersection between heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, if Yahweh dwells in the temple, then it is no longer appropriate to think of Yahweh as “coming down” to the altar to accept the offerings, which “go up” to God (Heb. *ʾôlah*, “go up”). The altar remains the meeting place between deity and people; in Ezekiel’s temple, however, the intersection is worked out on a horizontal, not vertical plane, as offerings are brought in to the altar and Yahweh moves out from the temple to accept them there.

Almost as an aside, the account concludes with the description of steps ascending to the top of the altar from the east. In marked contrast with Ezekiel’s first temple vision, in which the crowning abomination consisted of worshipers bowing to the east (8:16-18), the location of these steps makes it impossible for any priest to turn his back on Yahweh. But the steps may serve another function. As the instructions for performing the ritual in chapter 46 indicate, the *nāsî* stands and the people bow at the inner east gate as they watch the sacrifices being offered on the altar. The placement of the altar steps allows the worshipers to observe every aspect of the ritual, including Yahweh’s acceptance of their offerings (cf. Lev 9:22-24).

The altar is massive but not uniquely large for that time. The Chronicler gives the same dimensions for Solomon’s altar (2 Chr 4:1), and archaeological evidence from Megiddo and Mt. Ebal corroborate these dimensions.<sup>16</sup> Even so, its monumental size strains the imaginations of modern readers accustomed to private, spiritual forms of worship. Reckoning Ezekiel’s unit of measurement, the long cubit (i.e., one cubit and one hand-width) in inches at 20.5 inches, the total area is approximately 34 feet by 34 feet, with a height of approximately 17 feet. The size of the hearth, the area on which the offerings would be burned, is approximately 400 square feet—an ample size for the continuous offering of sacrifices. The altar’s size in comparison with other elements in the temple also indicates its importance. At its base, its width is only slightly

smaller than that of the gate structures (at 25 cubits), and it is as wide as the opening to the temple. In area, it equals that of the holy of holies (41:4).

The instructions in vv. 18-23 for purifying the altar are addressed directly to the prophet (“and he said to me”), thus presenting him as the cult founder and making Ezekiel the only subject of the divine address.<sup>17</sup> In comparison with other biblical accounts of altar dedication, the required number of sacrifices for cleansing the altar is relatively modest (contrast Num 7:84-88; 2 Chr 29:20-36). On the first day, a bull is offered as a sin offering, while the second through sixth days require a male goat for the sin offering and a ram and a bull for the burnt offering, in that sequence. The procedures correspond partially to the provisions for making a sin offering as described in Leviticus (Lev 4:3-12): the blood from the sacrificial animal is smeared on the altar, while the rest of the carcass is burned in an appointed place outside the holy area. Ezekiel does not mention a third aspect of the ritual, burning the fat on the altar. Once the seven days of consecration are complete, then Israel may also offer its sacrifices of “well-being” (Heb. *šēlāmîm*).

The explicit address to Ezekiel as the agent for purifying the altar is interesting on several levels. First, his participation constitutes a reversal of his call. Not only does he return to his role as priest, he also becomes the founder of the new cult. Second, Ezekiel’s role in the new cult raises questions about how to understand the vision in relation to the exile. According to one line of interpretation, Ezekiel 40–48 envisions an eschatological restoration in the distant future: the temple will be built only after Yahweh defeats Gog after many days and years (Ezek 38–39). Ezekiel’s role in purifying the altar does not sit well with such an interpretation, since the purification of the altar is implicitly understood to take place in Ezekiel’s lifetime, not “after many days and years” (cf. Ezek 38:8).

Our usual language for explaining the nature of eschatological hope does not adequately express the immediacy implied by these verses. This is not a heavenly altar to be copied on earth, but a definitive, divinely constructed altar ready to receive the offerings of Israel and awaiting only the day of its purification. Neither eschatological hope nor realized eschatology, this vision unites future possibility and present reality in the persona of the prophet. Having embodied the consequences of judgment when he performed his initial symbolic acts and having anticipated the election of the exiles on the day that Jerusalem was besieged, the figure of

### The Closed Door



For Origen, one of the most prolific biblical commentators of all time (c. 185–254 CE), the closed door was a figure of the mystery of scripture, whose secrets could only be unlocked through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Paraphrasing 2 Cor 3:10-15, Origen equates the closed door of Ezekiel's temple with the obscurity of scriptures: Until my Lord came, the law was closed, the prophetic word was closed, the text of the Old Testament was veiled. Now that Christ has broken the seal, Christians may contemplate the mystery with unveiled faces.

In making this connection between Ezekiel's closed door and scripture, Origen reflects a common theme in early Christian exegesis. For many educated Christians of late antiquity, the Old Testament was not only obscure, it was barbaric. A century after Origen, Augustine would write that he could not even see that the scriptures contained mysteries because he thought them inferior to the Latin of Cicero (*Confessions* III.5). It was only when he learned to read the scriptures figuratively that he could understand its mysteries (*Confessions* V.14).

For Origen, even the obscurity of the scriptures was a sign of their value; for if there was not mystery, then there could not be revelation. Thus Origen regards Ezekiel's closed door as a figure, not of obscurity but of a larger mystery: "all that is mysterious is closed." The key that unlocks this mystery is Jesus Christ, and only through a Christological interpretation can scripture be properly understood.

As a Neoplatonist, Origen thought of the closed door as the boundary between the realm of the senses and the realm of the spirit; the door is necessarily closed because human beings must remain in the physical realm. Even so, the closed door becomes the means whereby the Creator is revealed through the mediating presence of Christ, whom Origen equates with the prince and high priest who "eats bread" at this closed door. Quite obviously, Origen takes liberties with the plain meaning of Ezekiel's text: he contrasts physical and spiritual realms, which Ezekiel does not do; he assumes that God, who is spiritual, is absent from the physical realm. Finally, while Ezekiel is at pains to separate the roles of the priests and the prince, Origen equates them—probably under the influence of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The resulting spiritual interpretation is worth the liberties taken with the text, as the closed door becomes the means whereby God may be fully revealed in the paschal mystery of Christ's sacrificial death:

Why closed? So that the Lord, God of Israel may enter and leave by it.

Why does he depart? to be known.

Through whom? Through the prince.

Who is the prince of the closed door? It is the Savior, who eats bread, who closes the door with the Father, who eats spiritual food, saying my food is to do the will of the one who sent me, to accomplish his work. Closed then is the door, so that no one should see the High Priest eat the bread in the Holy of Holies.

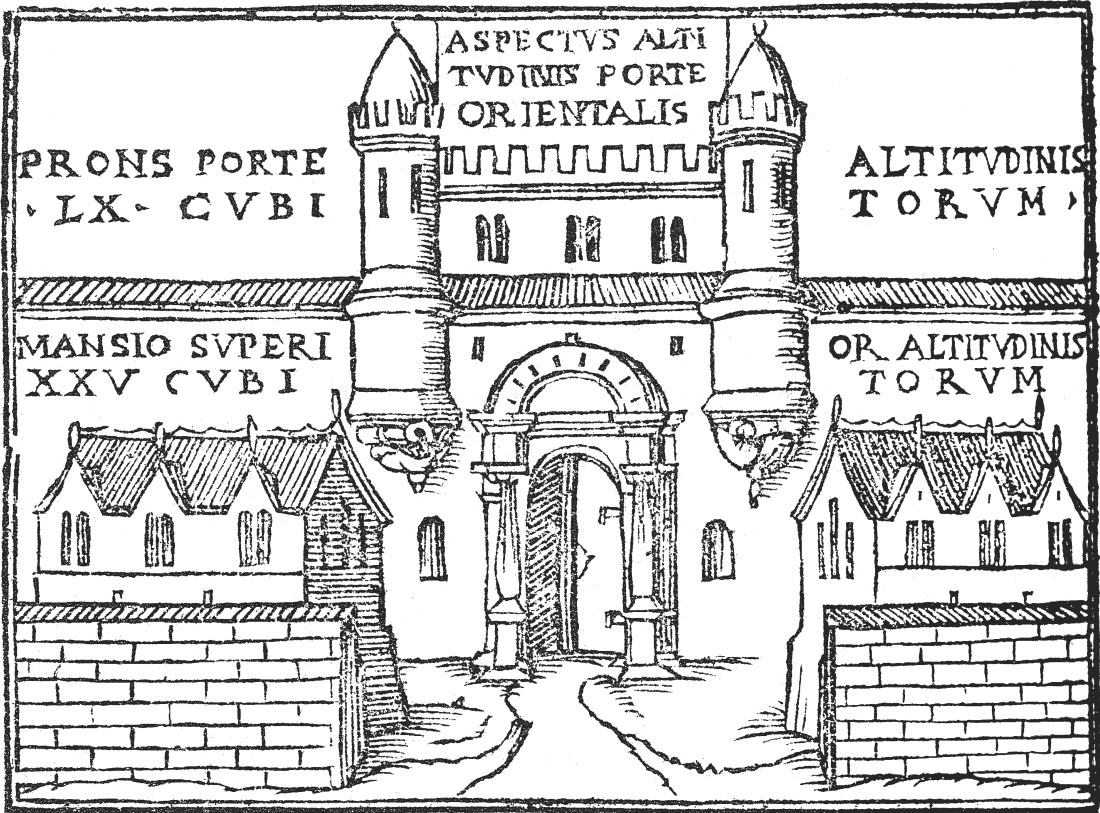
Origen, Homily 14, in Marcel Borret, S.J., *Homélie sur Ézéchiél: Texte Latin; Introduction, Traduction, et Notes, Sources Chrétiennes*, 352 (Paris: ...ditions du Cerf, 1989), 436–43. English translation (from the French) by Margaret S. Odell.

Ezekiel is yet again the locus for imagining a new phase in the exiles' history.

### *The Closed Gate, 44:1-3*

Ezekiel reports being carried back to the east gate, where the first round of his temple tour began and ended (43:1). Like the altar instructions in 43:13-27, the present unit contains both descriptive





**The Outer East Gate, or “Structure Like a City.”**

This sixteenth-century woodcut portrays the temple walls and outer east gate along the lines of a medieval city. In contrast with the declaration in 44:1-3 that the door is to remain closed, the door is partially open.

Jean Benoit, *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgat[am] quam dicunt editionem* (1552).

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation. [Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Emory University]

and instructional material. Ezekiel now sees that the gate is closed. Since Yahweh entered the temple by this route, no one will be permitted to enter in the same way.<sup>18</sup> The explanation for the closed gate in 43:2-3 revolves around anthropological concerns, not theological ones: human beings may not enter the temple by the route taken by the deity. In this respect, the closed gate may allude to abuses evident in Ezekiel’s first temple vision (chapters 8–11), where the east gate was the locus not only of abominable ritual practices (cf. 8:15-17) but also of corrupt judicial deliberations resulting in the confiscation of land belonging to the exiles. In Ezekiel’s new temple, no communal gatherings or deliberations of any kind are permitted at the east gate. Only the *nāšî?* may eat bread there; perhaps it is no accident that he eats alone. Other features corroborate the change in function of the east gate: judicial deliberations become the prerogative of the levitical priests (44:24),

and movement of the people into and out of the temple is restricted to the north-south axis (46:9-10). [The Closed Door]

***Address to the House of Israel: Reinstating the Cult, 44:4–46:19***

With the east gate closed, the bronze man brings Ezekiel into the courtyard in front of the temple by way of the north gate. There Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord again, and receives a second commission to observe what he sees and hears so as make a full report to the house of Israel. He is also given an oracle announcing a definitive end to the abominations of the house of Israel. For the first time in the oracles of restoration, Israel is called the “rebellious house,” suggesting that what follows is intended to correct past abominations.

The material included in this section reflects several literary types and does not give the impression of coherence. Some sections are addressed directly to the house of Israel, as in 44:4-8 and 45:1-8, while others contain impersonal lists of rules and responsibilities for the priests. The account of the dimensions of Yahweh’s portion in 45:1-8 appears to be out of place, as does the specification for just weights and measures. Despite the appearance of disorganization, the unit presents a comprehensive program of restoration revolving around three aspects of temple administration. First, it reinstates the priests and Levites to their proper roles within the temple and the community at large. Second, it specifies the offerings to be rendered to the temple by both the prince and people. Third, it establishes the cultic calendar.

Even though the temple becomes the domain of the priests, this section communicates its rules (*tôrat habbāyit*) directly to the whole house of Israel. If one takes the year attached to this vision at face value, this audience includes members of the old “rebellious house,” the first deportees from Jerusalem. They must apportion the land, establish just weights and measures, make the offerings, and observe the festivals. In implementing these reforms, they correct the abuses that had resulted in exile. These abuses are not immediately identified as idolatry, though idolatry will be mentioned in connection with the Levites (44:10). Rather, the oracle suggests that Israel’s chief abomination was in permitting foreigners into the sanctuary. In doing so, they profaned the temple, broke Yahweh’s covenant (“my covenant”), and failed to protect the sacred things. As the expression for breach of covenant suggests, the charge is political in nature and refers to Judah’s diplomatic misadventures. The expression is identical to the charge against Zedekiah in chapter 17, where Zedekiah’s consorting with Egypt constituted

a violation of his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>19</sup> As Matityahu Tsevat has noted, Ezekiel is unique in the biblical tradition for condemning Zedekiah's treason as a violation of *Yahweh's* oath.<sup>20</sup> That Zedekiah's treason took place in the temple is suggested by Ezek 23:40-42, in which Oholibah commits her "adulteries" with a "noisy multitude" as she offers incense in Yahweh's house (23:40-43). The notion of political treason may also lie behind the other use of the expression for breach of covenant, in 16:59.

The accusation that Israel gave foreigners charge of Yahweh's sacred offerings (44:8) may simply mean that foreigners were permitted to offer sacrifices to Yahweh in the temple. Such a situation would be entirely consistent with the scenario of 23:40-43, and probably should be assumed for Zedekiah's covenant breaking in chapter 17. Another possible explanation is that Israel's breach of covenant eventually resulted in the foreigners' confiscation of the sacred vessels (cf. 2 Kgs 25:13-18; Dan 6:2-4; cf. Isa 39:1-8). Because Israel failed to keep charge of Yahweh's sacred things, foreigners took charge in the worst possible way: in battle, and for the sake of plunder. Zedekiah's violation of Yahweh's oath had put Yahweh in a double bind: in order to uphold the oath with the foreigner Nebuchadnezzar, Yahweh was forced to violate his oath to Israel. The "house rules" (*tôrat hab-bāyit*) prevent any further compromise of Yahweh's integrity. The restoration of Israel vindicates Yahweh's holiness in the sight of the nations (Ezek 39:21-29), and the temple becomes an emblem of that holiness.

Reiterating the prohibition of foreigners, vv. 9-16 ensure the proper functioning of the temple by reinstating its rightful officials, the Levites and levitical priests. The responsibilities of each class of temple servants is delineated separately: the charge to the Levites is given in vv. 10-14, that to the priests in vv. 15-16. Although NRSV implies a sharp distinction between the infidelity of the Levites and the fidelity of the priests (cf. "but," 44:15), MT does not. Rather, the contrast is between the "rebellious house" of 44:6, who are condemned, and the priests and Levites of 44:10-16, who, even if guilty, are exonerated.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, their failures are attributed to the idolatries of the house of Israel,

#### Who Were the Levites?



The early traditions about the Levites are complex, for example, the blessing of Jacob in Gen 49:5-7 condemns Levi for his violence (cf. Gen 34), while the narrative in Exod 32 praises him for it. The term occurs more than 250 times in the Hebrew Bible and is concentrated in Numbers (66 occurrences), Chronicles (182 occurrences), and Deuteronomy (26 occurrences). As one might assume from these statistics, the more detailed descriptions of the role of the Levites in the cult are to be found in Chronicles (c. 4th century BC). When critics situate Ezek 44 in the context of historical reconstructions of the priesthood, the discussion centers on the question of whether Ezekiel "demotes" the Levites from an earlier, more privileged status, or whether he "restores" them to a traditional role as guards of the temple precincts. The critical issues involve a number of prior decisions regarding the date and interrelationships of the different texts. While significant in other contexts, these questions are bracketed in this commentary.

See Stephen L. Cook, "Innerbiblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44 and the History of Israel's Priesthood," *JBL* 114 (1995): 193-208; Rodney K. Duke, "Punishment or Restoration? Another Look at the Levites of Ezekiel 44, 6-16," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 61-81; Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1978); and D. Kellerman, "לֵוִי, לְוִי," *TDOT*, 7:483-503.



### Ezekiel's Vision of Israel

The idealized allocation of the territories to the tribes in Ezekiel 48 suggests that the rhetorical aim of Ezekiel 48 revolves around the establishment of the basic principle of unity among the tribes, and not with an actual land reform. Although boundaries and place names, which are difficult to identify, are given for the portion given to Dan, no other such boundaries are specified. For an alternative reconstruction, which assumes that Jerusalem is the restored city, see Daniel. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998), 2:711.

which have interfered with their roles as guardians of the sacred things.

The role of the Levites in Ezekiel 44:10-14 is best interpreted in light of Numbers 3 and 18, both Priestly (P) texts.

**[Who Were the Levites?]** According to these traditions, the Levites belonged exclusively to Yahweh, who accepted them as substitutes for the firstborn (Num 3:11, cf. Exod 13:2) and then “gave” them to the priests, the sons of Aaron, as servants. In their capacity as guards protecting the holiness of the tabernacle, the Levites bore primary responsibility for the welfare of Israel (Num 18:1 NRSV; Heb. *nš' awôn*, cf. Ezek 44:10, 12). As Rodney Duke has argued, the curious expression *nš' awôn*, which NRSV renders as “bear responsibility” in Numbers and “bear guilt” in Ezekiel 44:10, 12, suggests that the Levites were not being punished but rather reinstated to their traditional roles as guardians of the temple.<sup>22</sup>

What is less clear, however, is why vv. 13-14 present their

new role as a penalty. If, as Duke suggests, they had never offered sacrifices, then it seems incongruous to forbid them from making sacrifices, as v. 13 does. Nor does it make sense that this restoration to a traditional role should entail the continuing experience of humiliation (Heb. *nš' kēlimmâ*, v. 14)—quite a different thing from bearing responsibility, as in vv. 10 and 12.

A solution may lie in P's understanding of the Levites as substitutes for the firstborn. Ezekiel 44:10-14 may reflect a situation in which the Levites had been displaced from this role. As it has been

argued elsewhere in this commentary, the idols of Israel, here called *gillûlîm*, were votive statues—representations of human devotion, like the *semel* of 8:3, 5, and *pigrê molkîm* of 43:7, 9. When one recalls that these statues were regarded as substitute offerings, a correspondence between the Levites' traditional role as substitutes for the firstborn and Israel's use of monuments for similar purposes begins to emerge. It then becomes possible to suggest that the Levites became implicated in the idolatries of the house of Israel, but not in the way suggested by the translation of NRSV, which implies that the Levites led the Israelites astray. Verse 10 seems rather to imply that the Israelites took the initiative, with the result that the Levites ended up being “far from” Yahweh. In order to correct what Israel has done to the Levites, the last line of v. 10 reverses the Israelite practice by restoring the Levites to their proper role in the cult:

But the Levites, who were far from me when Israel went astray—  
they (the Israelites) went astray from me after their idols—  
but they (the Levites) will bear their (the Israelites') guilt.

The verse seems to imply that the idols, not the Levites, were used to bear the guilt of the worshipers. As a further corroboration of this interpretation, one recalls that both the *pigrê molkîm* (43:7, 9) and the *semel* (8:3, 5) were positioned in doorways, traditionally the place where the Levites discharged their duties as guardians. Verse 12 restores the Levites to their proper place, first by bringing the Levites near to Yahweh's house, and second by restoring them to their role as the proper intermediaries.

Verses 12-14 tell a somewhat different tale, however, and appear to enjoin the Levites to endure a form of punishment and lasting humiliation.<sup>23</sup> Whereas v. 10 draws only a loose connection between Israelite idolatry and the Levites' estrangement from Yahweh, vv. 12-14 more directly accuse the Levites of “ministering” to the idols. Although the precise meaning of the accusation is obscure, the Levites appear to be held culpable for tending to the statues—in effect, ministering to wood and stone (20:32). This accusation may explain the restriction placed on them in v. 13, where they are forbidden to serve Yahweh as priests. To the extent that this service to wood and stone could be construed as offensive to Yahweh, then v. 13 limits the Levites' access to Yahweh.

To sum up: the group being condemned for their abominations in vv. 10-14 is not the Levites but the house of Israel, whose use of substitutionary votive monuments constituted a violation of

Yahweh's acceptance of the Levites as proper substitutes for the firstborn. The corrective is not to expel the Levites or to demote them, but to restore them to their rightful place at the gates of the temple. The process of bringing the Levites closer to Yahweh will be completed in the next section, when they are granted territory in Yahweh's portion (45:5).

A similar logic is reflected in 44:15-16, which gives the levitical priests, descendants of Zadok, the prerogative of "approaching" Yahweh and handling the holy things. Verse 15 indicates that the priests had charge of the sacred things when Israel went astray, and many commentators construe this verse as an affirmation of their loyalty during the time of Judah's apostasy. But such a reading stands in contradiction with the statement in vv. 6-8 that Yahweh's holy things had been profaned.<sup>24</sup> In any case, Ezekiel has not been in the habit of elevating the priests as exemplars of loyalty (cf. 7:26-27; 22:26), so it would be strange to see them regarded as such now. One should therefore construe the statement in 44:15 as a traditional role comparable to that of the Levites. The levitical priests "should have guarded"<sup>25</sup> the most holy things, but they were unable to do so; indeed, on the evidence of chapters 8–11, in which priests are entirely absent from the ritual, one can argue that the elders of the house of Israel had completely displaced the priests as well as the Levites. As a corrective, Yahweh declares that the priests alone are permitted to "draw near" to Yahweh.

One should note, with Milgrom, that Ezekiel's "reinstatement" of the priests and Levites to their traditional roles is not, in fact, a reinstatement but an innovation. As Milgrom has observed, the Priestly legislation governing sacrifices (Lev 1–8) assumes that the worshiper not only brings the sacrificial victim to the temple but also slaughters it. The priest's role is limited to performing the accompanying blood rite and placing the slaughtered animal on the altar. Ezekiel's innovation is fully spelled out in the ensuing regulations, which define the degrees to which the prince and people may approach Yahweh.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Regulations for the Priests, 44:17-31***

Although vv. 17-31 depart somewhat in style and content from vv. 10-16, they are part of the continuing address to the house of Israel. Elsewhere in Ezekiel, other oracles combine direct address with third person descriptive material; the present unit employs a similar technique, this time in order to emphasize the heightened holiness of the priests over the house of Israel.

The unit contains a number of rules for maintaining priestly purity, many of which have parallels in the priestly writings. Some rules, like the requirements to don priestly garments for service in the temple and then to remove them so as not to convey holiness to the people, are stricter than laws found in P. Other laws, like the provision for restoring purity after contact with the deceased next of kin, binding on all Israel in P, apply only to the priesthood in Ezekiel. In light of what has been said above regarding the interference of the laity in priestly matters, these rules make it clear that the priests are to be elevated, not only in holiness, but also in communal authority. Thus, in addition to resuming their proper responsibility for teaching the distinctions between the holy and the common (cf. 22:26), they also assume roles previously reserved for the laity; specifically, the priests now assume the responsibility for acting as judges in legal disputes (v. 24; contrast 11:1-13). Their responsibility for maintaining the cultic calendar (v. 23) may also signify the abrogation of the king's role as the head of the cult.

***The Inheritance of the Priests and Levites, 44:28-31, 45:1-8***

Two quite different conceptions of inheritance bring this section on the reinstatement of the priests and Levites to a close. Ezekiel 44:28-31 resumes the form of direct address first employed in vv. 6-8, and elevates the priests to a status of holiness to be acknowledged by all Israel. The unit is based on an old priestly tradition assigning the offerings of Israel to the priests and Levites (Num 18:8-24). In the present context, the tradition is adapted in two ways. First, it appears to be applied only to the levitical priests, and not to all of the Levites, as in Numbers 3:13. Second, the statement about who possesses whom is inverted. In the Priestly levitical tradition, Yahweh declared that the Levites belonged to him; here, however, Yahweh declares that *he* belongs to the levitical priests as their sole possession. The unit employs two discrete terms to convey the idea of Yahweh as the priestly possession: *naḥālah* (NRSV “inheritance” or patrimony) connotes possession as a birth right, while *ʾāḥuzzah* (NRSV holding) connotes a grant or gift.<sup>27</sup> If the former reflects a priestly right by birth, the latter reflects that right as a divine decree. The use of both terms doubly legitimates the priestly privilege, the former by grounding it in an ancient warrant of inheritance, the latter by confirming it through divine decree.

Although 45:1-8 appears to contradict 44:28-31 by instructing Israel to set aside land for the priests and Levites, the underlying logic is that the divine decree in 44:28-31 must be honored by

human deed. As the plural address (“you”) suggests, the responsibility for apportioning the land is given to Israel. They may make the apportionment by lot, as suggested by the verb of 45:1, but the human act of allocating the land appears to be a necessary step in demonstrating Israel’s conformity to the divine decree. Out of the entire land, some of it is set aside as *těrûmah*, land to be transferred into Yahweh’s possession. This land is situated in the exact center of the land of Israel, and the temple is situated in the exact center of the portion, with open field around it as a buffer. The territory is massive; Block has estimated that it encompasses some 50 square miles, or 33,500 acres.<sup>28</sup> The priests’ and Levites’ newly defined relationship to Yahweh is mapped out, as it were, in this holy district. The priests’ portion, where they may build houses, is a strip of land measuring 10,000 by 25,000 cubits; the temple is situated in this area (45:3-4). A second strip equal in proportion to that of the priests is set aside for the Levites. Although some have seen in the allocation of land a further diminution of status for the Levites, the two portions are identical in size. Together, the two portions take up the entire holy district.

As if to differentiate between the things of Yahweh and the things of Israel, v. 6 establishes a “holding” adjacent to the holy portion for the city. This holding is one-quarter the size of Yahweh’s portion, or half the size of either of the sections inhabited by either the priests or Levites. In contrast to the double reference to the priestly allotments as both an inheritance and a holding, the city is called only a “holding”; it is territory set aside for the use of Israel by royal decree but not by patrimony. Similarly, vv. 7-8 provide a generous allocation of land to the prince to the west and east of the holy portion as a holding, but not as a patrimony. With the exception of the land set aside as Yahweh’s portion in the middle of the prince’s territory, this portion is equal to that of an entire tribe and thus sufficiently ample to obviate future oppression.

### ***Concluding Address to the Princes of Israel, 45:9***

If, as some commentators assume, this verse is addressed to the long line of Judah’s kings, it would constitute a new theme and a new address, and a straightforward reading of the verse would suggest that it is a conventional appeal to the kings to uphold justice and righteousness, specifically by bringing an end to the evictions of Yahweh’s people. Several considerations urge a different interpretation. First, as critics often note, the verb *hěrîm* (NRSV “cease”) recalls the catchword *těrûmah* that governs 45:1-5, and suggests that 45:9 is intended as a conclusion to the preceding



section. Second, the address is to a plurality of princes of Israel, not to the *nāšî'* (cf. 21:7 [Eng. 12]; 22:6). Moreover, since the terse imperative of this verse has much in common with the address to the “rebellious house” of 44:6, it is likely that 45:9 resumes the direct address to the rebellious house by calling them the “princes of Israel.” They are to be differentiated from “my princes” in v. 8, who, along with the priests and Levites, will assume major responsibility for the functioning of the cult. Third, the abuse is more properly attributed to the leaders of Israel, not to the royal house. Although the meaning of the noun “evictions,” which occurs only here in the Old Testament, cannot be established with certainty, its root *grš*, “to drive out,” does refer to the confiscation of land, but only in time of war, and only in terms of whole populations (cf. Exod 23:28, 29-31; 33:2; 34:11; Num 22:6, 11; Josh 24:12, 18; Judg 2:3; cf. Judg 9:41). In a few instances, it is employed in connection with a person’s status before Yahweh. In Hosea, Yahweh threatens to “drive out” the wrongdoers from his “house” (Hos 9:15). David complains that Saul has “driven” him away from his inheritance, forcing him to worship the gods of the other lands (1 Sam 26:1). Solomon “drives out” the priests of Abiathar (1 Kgs 2:27). Given these usages, it is more likely that the “evictions” entail a dual expulsion, from both the cult and one’s rightful share of the land. The verse thus seeks to correct the abuse of 11:15, when the Jerusalemites justified confiscating land belonging to the exiles by claiming that they had alienated themselves from Yahweh. As a transitional statement, the verse not only ratifies the newly defined place of the priests and levites in cult and land, it also anticipates the manner in which the vision will define the “place” of the house of Israel. Once the cultic obligations and privileges of the house of Israel are defined, the vision will conclude with the apportionment of the tribal lands.

### ***Establishment of the Offerings, 45:10-17***

Beginning with the establishment of just weights and measures, these verses describe the offerings (Heb. *těřûmah*) for the maintenance of the temple service.<sup>29</sup> *Těřûmah*, used in 45:1 to refer to Yahweh’s portion of land in Israel, here connotes a temple tax or tribute. Just weights and measures ensure that the offerings are fairly calculated (vv. 10-11). The obligations of the people are calculated in terms of their income from the fields and flocks of Israel—one-sixtieth, or 1.6 percent of the grain, 1 percent of the oil, and .05 percent of the sheep. The obligations of the prince, by contrast, are set in terms of the temple’s need; the implication is

### The Logic of Sacrifice



In his helpful overview of recent biblical scholarship on sacrifice, Gary Anderson has noted that despite significant strides in the study of sacrifice in anthropological and sociological circles, biblical scholarship has not yet benefited from these gains. Part of the difficulty for biblical scholars, of course, is that our sources do not allow us to reconstruct sacrificial practice in any meaningful way. Our task is to interpret texts, and no amount of insight into these ancient texts will allow us to reconstruct a living ritual. Yet in order to understand our texts, we must also arrive at a better understanding of the meaning and practice of the ritual reflected in the texts. This vicious circle may mean that we can never fully understand either sacrificial ritual or the texts referring to it; but that should not prevent us from trying.

Sacrifice is a form of communication, with its own system of logic and interlocking meanings. Building on theories first introduced in the late nineteenth century, some anthropologists now discuss sacrifice in terms of gift theory, in which the respective gifts on the human side and blessings on the divine side establish an elaborate network of relationships. In certain respects, the relationship between worshipers and deity remains asymmetrical, since the “gods establish their superiority by giving more than they receive” (*ABD*, 6:872). At the same time, it is also possible to imagine a sort of reciprocity between deity and worshipers. In this respect, the worshiper’s small gift is great, while the god’s great gift is small (*ABD*, 6:872). This dynamic between deity and worshipers is fully evident in the sacrificial service in Ezekiel’s temple: in the great scheme of things, the monthly, sabbath, and daily offerings do not make a significant economic dent in the livelihood of the restored people (cf. 45:13-17). Yet in exchange, the people receive abundant, overflowing divine blessings, best signified by the river of life flowing from the temple to heal the land.

As a system of communication, different sacrifices do different things. In the Priestly source, for example, sacrifices are specified not only for the national festivals but also to mark important stages in the life cycles of individual worshipers and to deal specifically with intentional and unintentional wrongdoing. Unlike the priestly legislation, Ezekiel’s ritual calendar focuses only on the national rites and on the regular daily, sabbath, and new moon offerings. Although there are references to reparation offerings, no instructions are given for making them. Other provisions for marking transitions after childbirth, cleansing from impurities, and the like are absent for all but the priests.

Sacrifices can be combined in a variety of different ways. As Anson Rainey has suggested, the normal procedure probably involved making the sin offering first, thus making it possible for the other offerings to be accepted. Ezekiel’s purification of the altar reflects this procedure. On the first day, only a sin offering is made. On the second through sixth days, sin offerings and then burnt offerings are made. Once the impurities have been dealt with, then full communion is possible, and other types of offerings may be brought. Thus, when offerings of well-being are made on the eighth day after the consecration of the altar, Yahweh clearly expresses his acceptance of the people.

Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” *ABD*, 5:870-86; Anson F. Rainey, “The Order of Sacrifices in the Old Testament Ritual Texts,” *Biblica* 51 (1970): 485–98. Major essays on the theory of sacrifice have been collected in a single volume, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Carter (New York: Continuum, 2003). For an economic analysis of one ancient sacrificial system, see Vincent J. Rosivach, *The System of Public Sacrifice in Fourth-Century Athens* (American Classical Studies 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994). Rosivach’s approach, while specifically geared toward the analysis of the political and ritual situation of Athens, suggests a host of questions about the social structures and economic arrangements implicit in Ezekiel’s calendar of sacrificial offerings.

that the prince makes up the difference between the people’s gifts and the temple’s requirements. The peoples’ offerings are described as tribute (Heb. *minḥah*), burnt offerings (Heb. *’olah*), and offerings of well-being (*šēlāmîm*). The prince makes contributions in these categories and, in addition, supplies the sin offering (Heb. *ḥaṭṭā’at*) and offerings for all of the festivals, new moons, sabbaths, and daily offerings. [The Logic of Sacrifice]

In Ezekiel’s ordinances, three types of offering are most frequently mentioned. As its name suggests, the burnt offering is

entirely consumed on the altar and thus “goes up” to God (Heb. *‘ôlah*). Among the oldest types of sacrifices mentioned in the Bible, the burnt offering may have been regarded as a “gift, with any number of goals in mind;”<sup>30</sup> in Ezekiel, it is specified for the celebration of Passover, booths, sabbaths, freewill offerings, and the daily offering. In the offering of well-being, or *šēlāmîm*, on the other hand, only the fat is offered to the deity, while a portion is given to the priests and the rest consumed by the offerer. Because the meat had to be consumed in two days, it was usually shared with other worshipers.<sup>31</sup> Offerings of well-being are prescribed for the sabbath offerings and are also permitted as freewill offerings. Like the burnt offering, the offering of well-being appears in a variety of contexts; it is offered in payment of a vow, as a freewill offering, and as a thanksgiving offering.

The sin offering (Heb. *ḥaṭṭāʾt*), more properly regarded as a purification offering, removes impurities attaching to the temple and its sacred things as result of human sin. The sacrifice accomplishes this purification through a series of rites. The offerer lays his hands on the sacrificial victim, thus symbolically transferring his identity to the animal. Once the victim is slaughtered, the priest

### Ezekiel’s Temple and the Psalms



Two of the more prominent features of Ezekiel’s temple, the gates and sacrifices, are more closely associated in the psalms with joy and thanksgiving than with any other human emotion. In the so-called entrance liturgies, the gates serve as a boundary between the sacred and profane worlds. Pss 15 and 24 ask who is worthy to enter Yahweh’s courts; and the answers underscore the need to live a life of righteousness and uprightness (cf. Ps 118:19-20). Yet these psalms do not end in disappointment, as if the entrance requirements were designed to keep worshipers out. Ps 15 raises the question of worthiness; Ps 24 suggests that the answer is a blessing. Absence from Yahweh’s temple brings pain (Ps 43), while pilgrimages are the occasion for great joy in a happy throng (cf. Ps 42:4). There is much singing in Yahweh’s courts, not to mention envy of those who take up permanent residence as singers (Pss 68:24-26, 84:4; 87:7; 95:1-2; 100:2; 134, 135, 139, 149, 150). While there is less evidence for the emotion of joy associated with the offering of sacrifices, a few psalms do speak of the fulfillment of vows with thanksgiving and sacrifices (Pss 56:12-13; 66:13-15). Even a penitential psalm anticipates the restoration of the petitioner’s joy and God’s delight in sacrifice (Ps 51:12, 18-19).

May one infer from these texts that Ezekiel’s vision set the stage for the return of festal joy in the house of God? One of the basic rules of biblical interpretation is to avoid eisegesis, or reading unwarranted meaning into a text. The suggestion offered here—to read Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple in light of the psalms—admittedly runs that risk; yet it is also offered as a warning not to restrict the meaning of Ezekiel’s vision. If one may regard the authors of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice as the first interpreters of Ezekiel, one may surmise that they accentuated the beauty of Ezekiel’s vision—not its severity—because they had experienced firsthand the close connection between sacrifice and praise.

splashes the blood of the sacrificial victim, in effect transferring the worshiper to God. In P, the carcass is burned outside the camp, possibly to transfer the impurity from the sacred to the profane realm. In Ezekiel, the disposal of the sacrificial victim outside the holy area is mentioned only in reference to the purification of the altar (43:21); whether this procedure applies for the other sin offerings is not clear (cf. 46:19-21).

Although the provisions for the offerings in 44:13-17 refer to atonement, it would be a misconception to say that these sacrifices are solely intended to atone for human sin. Even the sin offering (*ḥattā't*) does not, strictly speaking, atone; rather, it purifies the

### The Emotional Experience of Sacrificial Service



Modern Christian readers are inclined to perceive the regulations for offering sacrifice in Ezek 44–46 as punishment or at the very least, a joyless legalism. To be sure, the design reflects a hierarchical arrangement: there is a table for Yahweh, chambers in the inner courts for the priests, and outer courts and kitchens for everyone else. Even so, the explicit reference to these furnishings suggests that the primary function of the temple is to establish full fellowship between the people and the deity. The temple is a place for feasting. Though both Jewish and Christian commentators find the anthropomorphisms unsettling, even Yahweh is “fed” in the temple; indeed, he is lord of the feast.

Although Ezekiel says little about how the people should act when they bring their sacrifices, one doubts that the festivals lacked emotional content. One other text describing an eschatological temple dwells at length on the rejoicing that is to accompany the sacrifices. The Temple Scroll (11QT), found in 1956 among the Dead Sea Scrolls, draws on Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to present its own definitive vision of worship. With the exception of the Day of Atonement, which required self-mortification, all other sacrifices, even sin offerings, were occasions for rejoicing:

The sin offering: They shall rejoice because expiation has been made for them. . . This day [shall] be a holy gathering for them, [an eternal rule for all their generations] wherever they dwell. They shall rejoice. . . (11QT XVII)

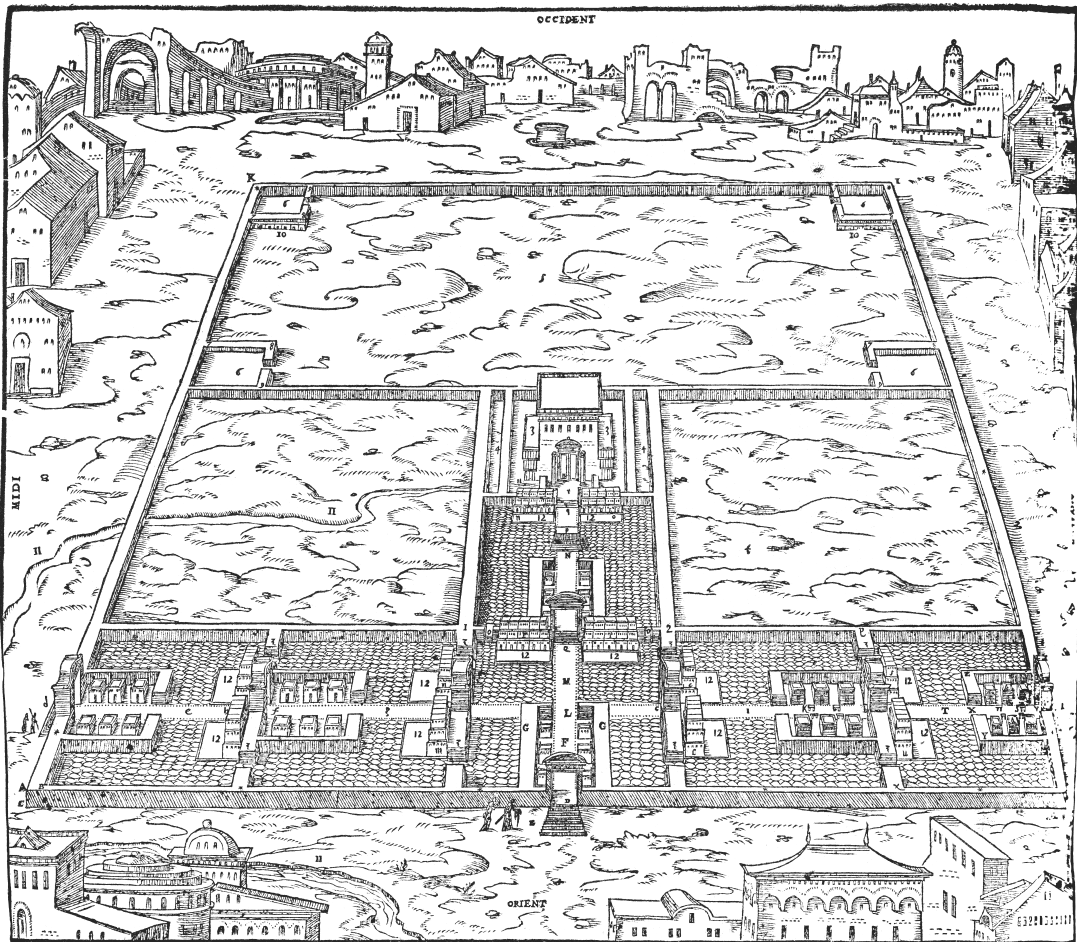
The offering of new wine: . . . [the priest]s shall drink there first and the Levites [second] . . . the princes of the standards first . . . [men of] renown. After them the whole people, from the great to the small, shall begin to drink the new wine, They [shall not e]a[t] any un[ri]pe grapes from the vines, for [on this da]y they shall expiate for the *tirosh*. The children of Israel shall rejoice before YHWH, an eternal [rule] for their generations wherever they dwell. They shall rejoice on [this] d[ay] for they have begun to pour out an intoxicating drink-offering, the new wine, on the altar of YHWH, year by year. (11QT XXI)

The offering of first fruits: They shall eat them on that day in the outer courtyard before YHWH, an eternal rule for their generations, year by year. Afterwards they shall eat from the olives and anoint themselves with the new oil, for on this day they shall expiate for [a]l[] [the o]il of the land before YHWH once yearly. They shall rejoice (11QT XXII)

New Year (seventh month, first day): You shall rejoice on this day. On it you shall do no work. A sacred rest shall this day be for you. (11QT XXV)

The Temple Scroll (11QT), in Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1987), 128–58.

temple from impurities accruing to it because of human sin. Provision is made for the annual purification of the temple, and sin offerings are specified for the festivals, sabbaths, and new moons (but not for the daily offerings); thus it is obvious that sin will continue to be a part of Israelite experience. The other offerings suggest other modes of divine and human interaction in sacrifice: the cereal and burnt offerings convey Israel's allegiance to Yahweh, while the offerings of well-being provide the occasion for rejoicing in Yahweh's presence. Altogether, these sacrifices signify the restora-



### The Temple Complex

The sixteenth century artist Antonio Brucioli places all of the gates in the forecourt of the temple, thus creating a processional route along the north-south axis that crosses the east-west axis at the inner entrance of the outer east gate. The inner east gate, accessible only to the prince, opens directly onto the inner court. This reconstruction thus preserves the sanctity of the temple while also allowing for the procession of the people from one side of the temple compound to the other (46:9-10).

Antonio Brucioli, *La Bibbia, che si chiama il Vecchio Testamento* (1562). [Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Emory University]

tion of the relationship between Yahweh and people (43:27).  
 [Ezekiel's Temple and the Psalms] [The Emotional Experience of Sacrificial Service]

***The Ritual Calendar, 45:18–46:15***

The third and final stage of the restoration of the cult involves the establishment of the festival calendar. Three annual festivals are mandated: an annual cleansing of the temple, Passover, and booths; notably absent are the day of atonement and the festival of weeks. Both the prince and the people bring offerings for these festivals: the requirements of the prince are specified in 45:18-25, those of the people in 46:11-12. The prince appears to bear the sole responsibility for making all the other offerings; these include sabbaths, new moon, and the daily offering.

The most detailed exposition of liturgical procedure is given for the prince's offering of the sabbath sacrifice (46:1-8). Although the outer east gate remains closed, the inner east gate is opened every sabbath for both the prince and the people. When the prince brings his offerings, he enters by way of the vestibule facing the court and stands at the gate while the priests perform the sacrifices. When the priests are finished, the prince prostrates himself and then exits, though the gate remains open. The people do not bring offerings themselves, but they approach the same eastern gate, where they also bow. The same procedure is followed for the celebration of the new moon each month.

Although no explanation is given for the open door, it appears to signify full and regular access to divine presence. Yahweh had given the sabbaths as a sign that he sanctified his people (Ezek 20:12); the open door becomes a further sign, possibly the means, of that sanctification. That the emphasis is on the regular opening of the door, and not on its being closed during the rest of the week, is indicated by the provision for opening the door whenever the prince wishes to bring a free will offering (46:12). This provision is embedded in the celebration of the festivals of Israel, which depending on the calendar, may fall on any day of the week. Whatever the day, the east gate will be opened for the prince while his offerings are being sacrificed.

The degrees of access to the altar vary depending on the occasion (46:11-12). During the festivals, the ritual does not revolve around the opening and closing of the east gate. Instead, with the prince accompanying them, the Israelites enter through one gate and exit through the opposite one, from south to north or vice versa. In the process, the people appear to have access to entire length of the compound. Recent construals of the temple as a place of graded

holiness, which imply that the people remain on the far edges of the court, should be discarded in light of this mandate to process through the courts. Although some areas are clearly restricted, we are not to imagine priests, levites, and people inhabiting ever-distant circles from the center. The whole territory is “most holy,” but even the laity traverse this sacred ground.

The cultic calendar closes with the ordinances for making the daily offering, or *tamid*. In comparison with the Priestly legislation, which requires a lamb for both the morning and evening sacrifices, the requirement here is modest: one lamb with the accompanying cereal offering, to be presented each morning. As Gary Anderson has maintained, the daily offering is profound testimony to the everlasting presence of God (cf. Dan 8:11).<sup>32</sup>

### ***Restrictions on the Nāšî's Disposition of Land, 46:16-18***

The provisions for the reestablishment of the cult end with stipulations regarding the prince's disposal of his property. The placement seems odd, though it serves as a reminder of the prince's role in the new polity as the patron of the cult. By virtue of his role as cult patron, he possesses land by royal decree, not by patrimonial inheritance. The restrictions prohibit him from making any royal grants of his own; thus he may give land to his sons out of his inheritance, but land given to others outside his family will revert to his sons at the jubilee.

### ***The Kitchens, 46:19-24***

The prophet's tour of the temple compound resumes, and the bronze man shows Ezekiel two areas of the temple that have not yet been described. First he sees a room near the inner north gate at the extreme western end of the priests' chambers. The man explains that it is the place where the priests prepare the sin, guilt, and grain offerings so as not to communicate holiness to the people. The man then takes the prophet on a tour of the four corners of the outer court. Each corner has a court, 40 by 30 cubits, with hearths around the perimeter. These courts, Ezekiel learns, are the kitchens where the sacrifices for the people are prepared. Kitchens like these are unprecedented in biblical temple accounts; however, annual festivals such as those imagined here would have required space for the preparation of large quantities of meat. Milgrom has suggested that sanctuaries were probably equipped with dining halls, since the offerings of well-being would have been eaten in a state of purity in the course of just one day in the case of the Passover sac-

rifices, and two days in the case of other types of *šēlāmîm* offerings.<sup>33</sup> As the last thing that Ezekiel sees before leaving the temple,

the kitchens serve as a reminder that this temple is designed with worshipers in mind.

### An Outline of Ezekiel 47–48



47:1-12 The River Flowing from the Temple

47:1-3 Following the River out of the Temple

47:3-6 Measuring the Depth of the River

47:7-12 Explanation

47:13–48:35 Divine Speech

47:13-23 Boundaries of the Land

47:13-14 Fulfillment of the Promise to Jacob

47:15-20 Boundaries

47:21-23 Provisions for Aliens to Inherit

48:1-29 Tribal Portions

48:1-7 Tribal allocations North of the Holy Portion

48:8-20 The Holy Portion

48:8-9 Size and Location

48:10-12 Allotment for Priests

48:13-14 Allotment for Levites

48:15-20 The City

48:21-22 The Prince's Portion

48:23-29 Tribal Allocations South of the Holy Portion

48:30-35 The Exits to the City

### The Fulfillment of the Ancestral Promise, 47:1–48:35

This third and final section resembles other portions of the vision in its joining of a vision report with divine speech. In the vision report, Ezekiel describes the river flowing out of the temple. Once the bronze man explains the nature and purpose of the river, the unit continues with an extended divine speech (47:13). Unlike other oracles in Ezekiel, in which the messenger (“thus says the Lord”) is frequently repeated, often apparently only for emphasis, it appears in this section of

Ezekiel only once, to introduce the speech. The speech addresses three topics: the boundaries of the land; its allocation among the tribes; and the exits to the city. [An Outline of Ezekiel 47–48]

### *The River of Life, 47:1-12*

Continuing on his tour, Ezekiel is led by the bronze man to the entrance of the temple, apparently a reference to the house itself, and not the outer east gate. While in the inner court, Ezekiel sees a stream trickling below the threshold and making its way toward the east. Following the stream's course, the bronze man leads Ezekiel out of the temple through the north gate and toward the outer east gate. From there, Ezekiel sees the stream, still a trickle. The bronze man leads Ezekiel into the water, and takes out a measuring cord, a different measuring instrument than the one used inside the temple. As the man measures the stream in four 1000-cubit segments, Ezekiel stands in the stream at each point, and reports that the stream reaches his ankles, then his knees and waist, until it is so deep that he cannot stand. At this point, the meaning of the measurements is clear: this stream is, quite literally, immeasurable. The man's question, “have you seen this?” echoes Yahweh's question in 8:17, and suggests that Yahweh has effected a complete transformation of the land that had become so polluted by the abominations



of the house of Israel. In vv. 8-12, Ezekiel sees trees “for healing” on both sides of the river, and learns that the river flows into the Dead Sea, where it so freshens the waters that it becomes good fishing grounds. In this vision of transforming the Dead Sea with the healing streams of the river of life, Ezekiel has again merged historical geography with myth. Just as the dwelling place of God has become miraculously visible in the mountains of Israel, so has the land become miraculously transformed by this powerful river of life, believed in ancient Near Eastern myth to flow from the dwelling place of the gods.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Boundaries of the Land, 47:13-23***

The oracle attached to the vision report is introduced with a messenger formula and is addressed directly to the house of Israel. NRSV follows the Septuagint reading, “These are the boundaries,” The statement is structurally parallel to the introduction to 43:13–46:24: “this is the law of the temple” (43:12). In the present unit, boundaries are defined, instructions are given for the equal apportionment of the land among the tribes, and all of it is designated an “inheritance” (*nāḥālāh*). In 45:1-9, the priestly allotments had been designated as both an “inheritance” and a “holding” by divine decree. The emphasis in this section on inheritance without reference to “holding” implies a patrimonial right and v. 14 grounds that right in the oath Yahweh swore to the ancestors. In his revisionist history of Israel (20:5, 28), Ezekiel contended that Israel’s long record of rebellions had forced Yahweh to swear other oaths superseding but not canceling out this promise. In Ezekiel’s view, then, the oath had never been fulfilled. The explicit reference to the oath here in 47:14 suggests that the restoration will be the occasion for the fulfillment of that ancient promise.

The one abuse remaining to be corrected is the dispute between the exiles and the Jerusalemites regarding the possession of the land (cf. 11:14-15; 33:24). That dispute is resolved by distributing the land in exactly equal portions to the tribes of Jacob. Defining the population in terms of tribal divisions and not along the nationalistic lines of Israel and Judah or, for that, matter, in terms of exiles and Jerusalemites, is not insignificant: by doing so, Ezekiel envisions a fresh start for the new kingdom.

The boundaries are delineated by moving clockwise, naming territories first along the northern limits, then east, then south, with the Mediterranean Sea forming the western boundary. The northern boundary extends well north of Damascus. The eastern boundary runs along the Dead Sea and thus excludes

Transjordanian lands. There are parallel boundary reports in the wilderness and conquest narratives (cf. Num 34; Josh 15), but it remains difficult to interpret the precise significance of these boundaries. To take one example: the boundary on the east does not reflect the ancient claim of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to the Transjordan (Num 34:14-15), and it is difficult to explain why the boundary should be drawn at the Jordan, and not farther east. The boundary may reflect Ezekiel's condemnation of Judah for encroaching on Ammonite territory (cf. 21:28-32).

The unit closes with a brief discussion of the inheritance rights of resident aliens. Aliens who settle down and bear children in Israel are to receive an allotment of land in whatever tribal land they have settled. This provision can be taken as further evidence of the theme of royal magnanimity running throughout Ezekiel 40–48. Not only the formerly rebellious Israelites, but also the hapless alien in the land receives a share of the divine generosity. The provision may be a poignant testimony to the exiles' own sense of alienation; one is reminded of the command in Exodus that prohibits the oppression of resident aliens: "you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9).

### *Tribal portions, 48:1-29*

The allocation of the land proceeds from north to south in thirteen equal strips running east to west, twelve for the tribes of Israel, one for Yahweh. The allotment of the lands to the tribes is interrupted in v. 8 in order to describe the holy portion, which is situated between the territory of Judah and the territory of Benjamin. Once the holy portion is fully described, the allocation of land to the tribes resumes in v. 23. Although it is tempting to regard the discussion of the holy portion in vv. 9-22 as a secondary insertion, its location in the center of the narrative corresponds with its location in Israel.

The emphasis in vv. 1-7, 23-29 is on naming the tribes, establishing the exact equality of the portions, and defining the relationships of the tribes to one another. Three formulas dominate: the title, the formula describing territorial allotments, and the granting of portions. The title of the unit, "these are the names of the tribes," draws attention to the people, not the land or inheritances, as in the conquest narratives (e.g., "This is the land you shall inherit," Num 34:13; cf. Josh 13-18). Each statement ends with the name of the tribe and the allocation of its portion (e.g., Dan: one; Asher: one; Naphtali: one, and so on), suggesting that the primary interest is in establishing exact egalitarian relationships

among the tribes. No single territory is called an inheritance, *nahālah*; that term is reserved for the whole inheritance given to Israel in 47:13-23. The individual tribes possess only territories within that inheritance. There is no evidence that these allocations were ever implemented; indeed, given the geographically unrealistic divisions, that was probably never the intention. It is more likely that the genre for allocating land has been appropriated to convey principles of membership in the community of Israel. No single tribe can claim its own inheritance, but every tribe belongs to Israel. As rhetoric for exiles, this section of Ezekiel's vision transforms a principle of inheritance into a principle for common participation within the community. The principle, "one tribe, one portion" thus asserts that no one tribe has a greater claim to being "Israel" than any other.

In the geographic center and thus in the spiritual center of Israel is the holy portion (48:9-22). The description repeats much of what was said in 45:1-9 and adds a few elements not mentioned there. The Zadokite priests are praised for not going astray when Israel and the Levites went astray. Whether 48:11 means that they successfully guarded the sacred things is debatable (see commentary on 44:15); the verse only indicates that they did not go astray and for their steadfastness they are rewarded.

For the first time, readers learn that the holy portion is situated between the territories of Judah and Benjamin. These tribes, traditionally the tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah, have been shifted slightly north so as to occupy a more central location. The holy portion is therefore also more centrally located, further evidence that this vision does not describe the restoration of Jerusalem but an entirely new city to take its place.

Ezekiel 45:6-7 specifies the size of the portion for the city and declares that it is to belong to all Israel; 48:15-19 fill out the picture by situating the city in the center of the city portion and designating the surrounding land as an open area to be cultivated by its residents, drawn from all the tribes of Israel. Just how the design of the city corrects past evils is obscure. Ezekiel 45:7 describes it as belonging to all Israel, while 48:19 describes its inhabitants as workers (Heb. *cōbadim*, servant). Whether they are to be regarded as part of a corvée or voluntary work force is unclear, though the exits of 48:30 do imply freedom of movement in and out of the city.

The description of the territory for the prince, which is consistent with that of 45:7-9, closes the section on the holy portion. More detailed measurements are given, and the restrictions on the



### The Holy City

The holy city, with gates for each of the twelve tribes opening to the four directions of the compass.

Friedrich Peypus (printer), *Biblia sacra utriusque Testamenti: iuxta veterem translationem* (1530)

This image is made available by the generous contribution of the Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation. [Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Emory University]

prince's disposal of his property are omitted. The section closes with a summary statement of the location of the holy portion.

### *City Exits, 48:30-35*

With its north-east-south-west orientation, this closing description of the four gates of the city echoes the account of the boundaries in 47:13-23. The gates are first designated as “exits” (Heb. *tōšā’ôl*), though the more typical term “gates” is employed throughout the unit. The term “exits” appears nowhere else in Ezekiel, but parallels in Esarhaddon’s Babylonians inscriptions suggest that the term may have been employed to convey the notion of freedom of egress. Esarhaddon speaks of opening ways, not gates; nevertheless, several features of Esarhaddon’s decree bear a number of interesting parallels to Ezekiel 48:30-35. First, like 48:30-35, the declaration occupies last place in the account of the restoration of Babylon. Second, like the four gates of Ezekiel, Esarhaddon opens the city in all four directions of the compass. Finally, if Ezekiel only hints at

the significance of the gates in his calling them “exits,” Esarhaddon explicitly explains the meaning of his act:

The tablet (charter) of their freedom I wrote anew. Toward the four winds of heaven I opened up their ways so that, establishing their tongue (language) in every land, they might carry out their plans (literally, thoughts). (*ARAB*, 2:659E)

In this statement, Esarhaddon equates Babylonian freedom with the right of egress, which in turn is equated with the ability to exercise autonomy; given Babylon’s history of rebellion, this declaration of freedom is extraordinary. Whether Ezekiel also imagines freedom as autonomy cannot be stated with certainty, since elsewhere freedom is more likely understood in terms of security from attack (cf. 38:11).

The book closes with the naming of the city: *yhwš šammah*, “The Lord is there.” Whether this is a new name for the city of Jerusalem is doubtful; that city, called *Hamonah* in 39:16, has become a cemetery. But what this city portends is the fulfillment of yet another ancient promise to Jacob: “I will be with you” (Gen 28:15).

## CONNECTIONS

Contemporary readers experience Ezekiel 40–48 not merely as a closed door, as Origen might have put it, but as an impenetrable wall. Not only is it difficult for us to find elements of theological relevance for our time, it is also difficult for us to comprehend how it would have been received by its ancient readers. We really do not know what it would have meant for Judean readers in exile to contemplate the temple’s measurements so as to “do” them. Nor do we know how they would have construed Ezekiel’s ritual calendar, or assessed the requirements for offerings. Some of our difficulties are due to our lack of certainty about Ezekiel’s cultural and political context. In matters of detail, such as, for example, the number of animals required for the maintenance of the cult, one wishes for a great deal more information than Ezekiel provides. The number of animals required as contributions from the people and prince seem modest; after all, one half of one per cent of the nation’s produce seems a good deal more feasible than a tithe. Given Ezekiel’s polemic against political alliances, it would also be useful to know

whether the sacrificial contributions were intended as a contrast to the heavy burdens of political tribute (cf. 2 Kgs 23:35). One suspects that this is the case, but the lack of explicit data on the burdens of tribute for pre-exilic Judah makes it difficult to be certain.

Despite these difficulties, one may suggest that these chapters envision spiritual (if not also political and moral) freedom for the exiles. As a point of entry into this meditation, consider the narratives of Jeremiah and Kings, which report, without comment, that King Jehoiachin was released from prison in the thirty-seventh year of the Babylonian captivity and from that point on dined daily at the table of King Nabonidus, who granted him a generous regular allowance (2 Kgs 25:27-30; Jer 52:31-34). The report is ambiguous, telling us neither whether the allowance lasted for Jehoiachin's lifetime or Nabonidus's, or whether this change in the Judean king's status was a good or bad thing (cf. 2 Sam 9:1-13). Given Jeremiah's insistence that peace would come only with submission to the king of Babylon, the report may serve to vindicate the word of God's servants the prophets. Peace did come, but at great cost; Jehoiachin's place in the court of the Babylonian king serves as an ironic reminder that peace could as easily have been enjoyed in the land of Israel as in the palace of Nabonidus.

Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple, dated twelve years earlier, imagines a different kind of peace. While still in exile, indeed while Jehoiachin remains in prison, Ezekiel envisions a return to the land of Israel, where the house of Israel will gather together to dine in the courts of Yahweh, its own true king. Though it remains tempting to treat the specific provisions as a concrete proposal for restoration in the land of Israel, the more immediate question is how this vision shaped the lives of exiles who, like their king Jehoiachin, remained in captivity. What difference would it make to learn that their God has already prepared a place for them? As it turns out, the answer to that question has implications for contemporary theological reflection as well.

### **The Motif of God as the Builder of the New Community**

Throughout chapters 40–48, the metaphor of God as the builder and restorer of Israel predominates. Although the metaphor was common coin throughout the ancient Near East and can be found in a number of different places in the Bible, it is not an obvious starting point for contemporary readers. Two questions need to be addressed. First, is the metaphor central to the biblical tradition? If

it is not central to the tradition, is it significant enough to warrant further attention? Second, what does the metaphor's emphasis on social and political stability suggest about the divine will and work in the world?

Although the motif of God as builder appears to be a minor emphasis in the biblical tradition, it is more significant than it appears at first glance. In the psalms, the notion of God as builder is evident in promises both of stability and radical transformation. The psalmist claims that unless God builds the house, the work is done in vain (Ps 127:1), and David gives thanks that God has "built" him a sure house (2 Sam 7:27; cf. Ps 89:4). The importance of the theme of God as builder is also implicit in Genesis 1–11. Although Christians tend to read Genesis 1–3 in isolation from its larger context, the full significance of Israel's creation traditions cannot be properly understood without examining the rest of the primeval narrative, which extends through chapter 11.<sup>35</sup> Whereas ancient Near Eastern myths such as *Enuma elish* envision the founding of cities as the culmination of the gods' work of creation, Genesis 1–11 presents them as the flawed work of human beings. The first cities are built by the descendents of the first murderer, Cain (Gen 4:17–24), while the building of Babel is construed as a work of human arrogance (Gen 11:1–9). The redactor of these chapters concurs with the Psalmist: unless it is God who builds the house, it is built in vain.

In the exilic literature, the prophet Ezekiel is joined by his younger contemporary, the anonymous author of Isaiah 40–55, in appropriating the building metaphor in order to affirm that it is God who rebuilds Jerusalem:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,  
 I am about to set your stones in antimony,  
     and lay your foundations with sapphires.  
 I will make your pinnacles of rubies,  
     your gates of jewels,  
     and all your wall of precious stones. (Isa 45:11–12)

The motif of building remains prominent in Trito-Isaiah (Isa 56–66), where, like any good potentate, God draws the corvée from subordinate kingdoms (60:10) and builds with choicest imported materials (60:13, 17–18). Though human beings do the work, God conceives it. More importantly, the work signifies God's intention to be reconciled with the devastated city:

For as a young man marries a young woman,  
 so shall your builder marry you,  
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
 so shall your God rejoice over you (Isa 62:5)

The appearance of the metaphor in both Ezekiel and Second Isaiah suggests that it became significant during the crisis of the Babylonian exile. The exilic prophets found the building motif a useful theological metaphor in a cultural setting preoccupied with the stability and order associated with royal building projects. Primarily interested in extolling God's creative and saving activity, Second Isaiah does not explicitly address the question of political powers; Ezekiel, on the other hand, is interested only in this question. While none of the great powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon can properly be said to maintain the cosmic order, God can and does, by building a new city in the midst of Israel, and by



### **The Return of the Glory of God**

The cycle of frescoes portraying Ezekiel's visions in the underchurch at Schwarzrheindorf culminate in four panels in the vault, each representing an episode from Ezekiel 40–43. In this panel, God appears in the center of the fresco adorned in royal robes and crown. In contrast with the scene of judgment in the western arch (see [\[Cleansing the Temple\]](#)), where God's left hand appeared in judgment, God is here portrayed with the right hand raised in blessing.

[Credit: Bonn-Schwarzrheindorf St. Maria & St. Klemens. Photography: Jürgen Gregori (c) Rhein. Amt f. Denkmalpflege Landschaftsverband Rheinland.]



establishing its polity on foundations of justice and equity. On the fundamentals, then, Genesis 1–11 and the exilic prophets agree: unless it is God who builds, the work will fail. Thus one distinctive element of the biblical appropriation of the building motif is its repudiation of the claim that human beings on their own can establish any political or social order of any lasting value. Both Genesis and the exilic prophets take this claim one step further by asserting that Israel must separate from the nations. In Genesis, God calls to Abraham to leave his country (Mesopotamia!) to go to an as yet unidentified land (Gen 12:1-3). Similarly, Ezekiel envisions a place set apart, where through open gates one may enter the city of God's design.

One further dimension of the building metaphor needs to be addressed. As Ezekiel's contemporary Jeremiah knew all too well, the same God who built could also tear town (Jer 1:10). Thus embedded in this extraordinary metaphor lies the possibility of razing old structures to begin again. Christian readers know this metaphor in Jesus' startling claim: tear down this temple, and in three days I will raise it up (John 2:2; Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29). In positing that it is only God who builds, Ezekiel is no less radical or threatening of the status quo than Jesus. If it is God, and only God, who has torn down, then it is God, and only God, who will build up. If the exiles are not thereby exhorted to "flee Babylon" (cf. Rev 18:4), neither are they encouraged to get used to the ways of the world. Rather, they are encouraged to contemplate the measurements of the temple, in particular its gates, entrances and exits, all of which lead directly to the contemplation, adoration, and service of the God of Israel. That at least some of Ezekiel's readers did just that is reflected in later developments in the Jewish hymnic and mystical traditions (see below, The Example of Ezekiel).

In the centuries after Ezekiel, diaspora Jews and Christians who saw themselves as a spiritual "temple" (cf. 1 Cor 3:16-17) needed to work out the nature of their allegiance to political power in relation to their allegiance to God. Other metaphors allowed for the reconciliation of competing allegiances; these are the ones that have become better known in Christian discourse. To take one example: the early Christian metaphor of the "household of God" allowed Christians to gather together as fictive kin, a single household among many in the larger *oikoumene* of the Roman Empire. There was no fundamental clash of allegiances; in fact, God had ordained the political powers to be the guardians of order (cf. Rom 13).

**“Like a Young Levite”**

Like a young Levite among the priests,  
He remained long on the morning watch.

The Judaic night thickened over him  
And somberly the ruined temple was created.

He spoke: The alarming yellow of the skies!  
Over the Euphrates it is already night, priests, take flight!  
But the elders thought: We are not to blame for this;  
The dark yellow light, the joy of Israel.

He was with us when, on the banks of the stream,  
We swathed the Sabbath in precious flax  
And with the heavy seven-branched candelabrum  
Lit up the night of Jerusalem and the smoke of nonexistence.

Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), “Like a Young Levite,” translated from the Russian by Daniel Weissbort, in *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets: An International Anthology*, ed. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf (New York: Avon, 1980), 1108.

Although other writings of the exilic and post-exilic periods illustrate similar accommodations to the realities of empire, Ezekiel appears not to have entertained such a possibility. He did not give his readers the option of rendering to Nebuchadnezzar the things that were Nebuchadnezzar’s or, for that matter, of even trying to decide whether Nebuchadnezzar was owed anything. Such an unwillingness to accommodate to the powers that be would seem to be totally irrelevant for a life in exile—or, for that matter, for any life in the messy realm of human politics—but this would be a problem only if it could be demonstrated that Ezekiel was charting a program for political restoration. More likely, Ezekiel’s vision gave exiles the opportunity to imagine and claim a spiritual freedom, and to work out the details of a united community founded on the principle of a common inheritance. One can guess that Ezekiel’s radical solution would have been all too unsettling for a community deeply mired in conflict stretching back generations. Perhaps it would have been just as well to build houses and settle down, as Jeremiah advised (Jer 29:5-7), and not go through all the upheaval of living by faith. [\[Like a Young Levite\]](#)

Although the metaphor of God as builder has passed out of use in contemporary theological reflection, its connection to the themes of creation, stability, and justice gives it continuing relevance. Buildings made of human hands do fail; no one who witnessed the collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 can dispute that fact. The question is, what do we do when our buildings do come crashing down? The prophet Isaiah ridiculed those who, in pride and arrogance, continued to

believe that somehow human strength could fashion a bulwark against disaster:

The bricks have fallen,  
 but we will build with dressed stones;  
 the sycamores have been cut down,  
 but we will put cedars in their place. (Isa 9:10)

For Ezekiel, however, the disaster threw open the heavens and revealed strength from another quarter. Fourteen years later, on the other side of the disaster, the heavens opened again and revealed yet another kind of peace than that offered by Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. The building would be of God's design and of God's own making. Here the exiles would encounter open doors and gates, open and everlasting access to the sanctifying presence of God.

### **A New Religious and Civic Order**

Integrally associated with the motif of God as builder is the work of restoring those aspects of the religious and civic order which had contributed to the nation's destruction. According to ancient Near Eastern conventions, the restoration of a destroyed city required cleansing the cult, installing legitimate priests, fixing the sacrificial offerings, and establishing the sacrificial calendar. Once these elements are fully restored, then the gods would return, and their presence would guarantee the city's stability. Ezekiel's appropriation of this archaic rhetoric is part of what makes the vision so difficult to understand. Yet at the heart of this restoration stands God's answer to Israel's complaint of having been abandoned. Almost as a non sequitur, in fact, the measurements of gates and entrances are given as an answer to the people's shame (43:10-12). Thus within the trappings of ancient Near Eastern convention lie hidden a potentially powerful metaphor of communal reconciliation and healing. The primary issue is the establishment of authenticity and integrity, not only between God and people but also among the different groups within the community.

### **Authentic Existence in Worship**

At the risk of exploring obscure details by way of inchoate emotions, contemporary readers may find it helpful to enter into Ezekiel's vision by contemplating the odd clustering of themes in 43:1-12. In the commentary on these verses, it was observed that

one of the critical issues for interpretation is whether the measurements induce further shame, or whether they are intended as an answer to the exiles' shame. An examination of the sequence of clauses in vv. 10-12 led to the conclusion that the latter is intended: the measurements are given as an answer to the exiles' newly acquired sense of shame for past actions which had resulted in exile. The question is, how do measurements heal shame?

The most notable feature of Ezekiel's temple is its size. Citing archaeological data in his commentary on the account of Solomon's building projects in 1 Kings, John Gray observed that the typical size of a palace compound was 5 acres;<sup>36</sup> at 17 acres, Ezekiel's compound was considerably larger. Such a magnificent temple could remove the exiles' sense of shame simply through its assertion of the grandeur of the God of Israel. But the close correlation of the removal of votive monuments (43:7, 9) with the command to

#### Pat Conroy and American Shame



The emotion of shame is culturally defined and therefore not easily translatable across time and space. Nevertheless, there remain segments of American culture where the language and experience of shame provide helpful parallels to that described in Ezekiel. The novels of the southern American writer Pat Conroy are a particularly rich source of stories about the lasting consequences of shame. In *The Great Santini* and *The Prince of Tides*, shame is experienced in the context of the family's encounter with the outside world. Individual family members have obligations to one another, especially to the father, to uphold the family reputation in the eyes of the community. The children inevitably fail to meet these expectations and grow up to be barely functioning adults who can never quite escape the lasting effects of childhood shame.

Conroy's novels provide a point of entry into Ezekiel's world of shame in at least two respects. First, he captures the complex dynamic of shame as a transaction involving insiders and outsiders. Even though it is an emotion experienced and reinforced within the family, it is powerful precisely because it is assumed that the actions of the family are being noticed by the outside world. Similarly for Ezekiel, the public sense of failure exacerbates the shame experienced by those within the covenantal relationship. The people accuse God of having abandoned them to their enemies, while God hurls the accusation back: it is because they have profaned his temple that his name has been dishonored among the nations.

Second, Conroy's account of the healing of shame provides clues for understanding the extensive focus on the measurements of the entrances and exits to the temple, which have been provided as a response to the people's experience of shame. In Conroy's novels, shame is healed by a painful process of self-discovery, occasionally facilitated by the kindness of a good therapist, in which the wounded individual dismantles damaging defense mechanisms that had been constructed to shield against further shame, and nurtures into existence an authentic self capable of responding to others in vulnerability and love.

In Conroy's novels, the safe place for this work of healing is the therapist's office; in Ezekiel's vision, it is the temple, at the heart of which is the encounter between deity and people in the regular offering of the sacrifices. Much can be made of the everlasting presence of the divine Glory and the implication of that presence for the people's renewed sense of trust and security in God's care. But God is not simply the ultimate therapist. Rather, God is one of the parties in a relationship characterized by shame and posturing, and it can be argued that God is transformed by the encounter as much as Israel is.



### The River of Life

William Blake's drawing of the river of life reflects his own imaginative construal of the promise of life offered by Ezekiel's vision. The drawing is filled with a dreamy romanticism: peopled with young and old, heavenly and earthly beings, it is a place of serene joy.

William Blake (1757–1827). *The River of Life*. c. 1805. Watercolor and drawing on paper. Location :Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain. [Credit: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource]

Ezekiel to describe the measurements of the gates and passageways to the people (43:10-12) suggests that shame is resolved in a more subtle way. Since the innovation in Ezekiel's temple consists primarily in the addition of courtyards, chambers, and gatehouses surrounding the temple, one may suggest that it is not the temple's size that ends brings an end to shame, but the arrangement of its space. The gates and passageways are a central element of this new design. In allowing for movement throughout the temple, these passageways signify the establishment of authentic worship and, as a consequence, authentic existence.

It is interesting to notice what is forbidden, and what takes its place. First, by forbidding the installation of votive statues, God puts an end to sham devotion, petitions by proxy. One would not want to draw too close a correlation between the “false self” of contemporary American psychotherapy [Pat Conroy and American Shame] and the ancient Near Eastern votive statue; on the other hand, one can see how exasperating it might be for God to accept worship from a block of wood. Ancient Near Eastern votive monuments exude a stodgy loyalty to the divine, but in human beings, such stoniness was never a virtue (cf. Ezek 3:7; 36:26). What God wants instead are the people themselves (cf. 20:40-41); for this reason his house must be enlarged so as to accommodate everyone.

If human worship is only commanded, one cannot properly speak of authentic worship or, for that matter, of genuine healing. Thus one needs to ask whether this restored cult allows for human initiative. Despite God’s all-encompassing claim to devotion, and despite the detailed provisions for sacrifices on prescribed occasions, the worshipers do retain some degree of autonomy. There are more than a few references to the possibility of human initiative (46:12; cf. 5, 7, 11). In the case of the prince’s free will offering, in fact, one even discerns the possibility of moving God. Although the inner east gate is normally opened only on sabbaths, it will open to receive the prince’s free will offering at any other time (46:12). The gateways indicate a measure of freedom for the people as well: if the entrances and exits allow the people to approach God in worship, they also allow them to move toward and away from the divine presence as authentic selves, worshipping in freedom and not through wooden compulsion.

How is it possible for this God to trust these people, who on Ezekiel’s evidence have been disappointing him for centuries? No one would ever say that the God of Ezekiel allows himself to be vulnerable; even so, the design of the temple suggests a transformation in the heart of God as well as in the hearts of the house of Israel. The temple is not a prison, its worshipers not creatures of wood and stone. Though its architectural logic may continue to mystify us, it is possible to suggest that it discloses an end to the shame of exile through the promise of authentic human existence freely granted and therefore grounded in freedom.

### **Authentic Existence in the Human Community**

Because restoration encompasses the civic order, the builder-king does not stop with the restoration of the cult but proceeds to

reestablish the rights and privileges of the city's inhabitants. Although no one would confuse the workings of an ancient Near Eastern city with even primitive forms of democracy, nevertheless it is worth noting that Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions resound with the language of rights, justice, and equity. Ezekiel's vision of restoration includes similar issues, among them the allocation of land to the tribes of Israel. Both the ancient building inscriptions and Ezekiel's vision correct past abuses. In the case of Ezekiel's vision, details abound: there are rules for maintaining just balances, for maintaining priestly holiness, for providing for the cult, for curbing the economic influence of the prince, for apportioning the territories and for endeavoring to keep everyone on the land. More importantly, the allocation of equal portions to all of the tribes make it clear that all lives belong to God.

Again, while it is tempting to interpret these provisions as a program for the actual restoration of Israel, certain features suggest that the vision was never so intended. For example, the allocation of territories in exactly equal strips is simply not feasible, and is certainly not attested for any historical period. Furthermore, the emphasis in 48:1-7, 23-34, on naming the tribes, suggests that what is intended is the creation of an inclusive community of Israel, founded on the principle of a strict, egalitarian share in the blessings of God. What is envisioned is a moral community, rooted in the worship of God and committed to justice and equity for one another.

Whereas in the ancient inscriptions the king carries out these reforms, in Ezekiel's vision the people themselves must respond to the divine decree and correct its own past abuses. This is evident in the enumeration of the "house rules" (Heb. *tôrât habbāyit*), which are addressed, not to a reforming prince or, for that matter, to the priestly class, but to the entire community. That there should be no doubt over who is responsible for undertaking the reforms, Ezekiel's audience is again called the rebellious house (44:6). Thus quite in contrast to the Near Eastern inscriptions, in which the inhabitants of a destroyed city remain helpless victims awaiting the rescue of a powerful king, the people themselves must make amends for their own misdeeds. For Christians who have bought into Paul's argument that the works of the law cannot save, these commands are likely to be construed as vain work under an old, futile covenant. But embedded in Ezekiel's torah is a bright hope that human beings can and do change, that old wrongs can and in fact must be righted, that even trust can be knit together from the shreds of betrayed confidence. None of this is possible, of course,

without the sanctifying grace of God; but because it is rooted in grace, it is oddly egalitarian: if all lives belong to God, then all Israel bears responsibility to God for its past actions, and all Israel has an equal share in its gracious future.

### The Prophetic Witness

If much of Ezekiel's vision bears comparison with the ancient building inscriptions, one feature, the prophet's own involvement in the vision, stands out as a striking innovation. The basis for Ezekiel's participation in the vision may be rooted in practices reflected in Psalm 48:

Walk about Zion, go all around it,  
 count its towers,  
 consider well its ramparts,  
 go through its citadels,  
 that you may tell the next generation  
 that this is God,  
 our God forever and ever.<sup>37</sup> (Ps 48:12-14a NRSV)

Ezekiel's involvement is more than that of a witness, who takes everything in simply in order to describe what he sees. Even in his designated role as reporter, he does far more than provide programmatic instructions for the people to follow. Because he sees the temple and walks through its courts, Ezekiel inhabits, if only for the duration of the vision, sacred space and time. Just as Ezekiel was the first to experience divine judgment by swallowing the scroll

and performing symbolic acts (Ezek 3:22–5:3), Ezekiel now becomes the first to enjoy the blessings of restoration. Even so, witnessing to what he has seen is a central element of the vision (cf. 40:4; 43:10).

From a purely literary perspective, it is worth noting that this vision does not "leave" Ezekiel so that Ezekiel may rejoin his community (cf. 11:24-25). Rather, it is as if the exiles must join Ezekiel. The vision ends with open gates; one is reminded of the closing verses of the Book of

Revelation, which depends in so many ways on Ezekiel's vision: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' . . . and let everyone who hears say, 'Come'" (Rev 22:17). Like John's extraordinary vision, Ezekiel's vision invites readers to inhabit mythic space and time. Whether the vision also portends that they are to prepare to pack

#### The Kingdom of God



His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" <Jesus said> "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'there it is' or 'there it is'. Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it" (Gospel of Thomas, 113).

Gospel of Thomas, translated by Helmut Koester and Thomas O. Lambdin, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 124–38.



bags and return to Jerusalem cannot be denied. The oracle in 29:17-21, dated two years after this vision, may be evidence that the promise of restoration was understood as a promise of literal return, contingent on Nebuchadnezzar's victory in Egypt. On the other hand, many features of the vision suggest that it could have transformative power as imaginary space to be inhabited while still in exile.

We moderns tend to split Ezekiel's vision along spatial and temporal lines, as if Ezekiel sees a heavenly pattern that must be replicated on earth and, for that matter, can only be replicated in some ideal future. But the vision merges mythic space with historical geography and then situates the prophet in this transformed space. We cannot quite imagine what it means for an exiled priest to claim to walk through the courts of a temple where God has already taken up residence. Or what it means for him to bathe in the river of life or see trees for healing growing in the accursed land. Because we cannot, we construe such a vision as a promise for the *future*; we cannot imagine it as sign of immediately available divine favor. But that is what this vision purports to be: it comes in the twenty-fifth year of the exile, and it discloses a fully built, divinely inhabited temple ready to receive throngs of worshipers. The vision presents a realized eschatology: no longer a promise for the distant future, Yahweh has become king in the land promised to the ancestors a long time ago. This notion of immediate availability of divine favor is a persistent biblical theme and is perhaps most familiar to Christian readers in Jesus' parables of the kingdom. [The Kingdom of God]

If the motif of God as builder has not gained prominence in the biblical tradition, the motif of the prophet as witness to a transcendent reality of grace and order continues to the present day. Early interpretations of Ezekiel's vision can be found in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, the Jewish mystical tradition, and the Book of Revelation (see [Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice]). Particularly noteworthy is the appropriation of Ezekiel's temple structure in the Jewish mystical texts known as *Hekhalot Rabbati* (Great Palaces)(see [Ezekiel and Hekhalot Rabbati]). In these texts, devotees pass through a succession of six palaces, each requiring spiritual discipline and preparation, before they achieve the full contemplation of God in the seventh and highest palace. Whether Ezekiel's exilic audience observed the measurements and "did" them in such pilgrimage fashion cannot be known; but in the case of these mystics, their pilgrimage appears to have been patterned after Ezekiel's temple vision.

*Hekhalot Rabbati* is not an isolated instance; in both the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, psalms reconstructed from fragments discovered in Cave 4 of Qumran, and the Book of Revelation, the emphasis is on the contemplation of divine presence in an imaginative construal of the place where God resides and where God's people ultimately belong. American readers are not unfamiliar with the possibilities inherent in contemplating the city of God's making. Although the American Negro spiritual "Twelve Gates to the City" is more immediately based on the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:12, it is ultimately indebted to Ezekiel's vision of a city where gates remain open, ready to receive the newly freed and cleansed people of God. In one version, the twelve gates are linked to the theme of liberation: "Who are all those children dressed in red? Must be the people that Moses led, Twelve gates to the city!" Just how the contemplation of the temple or the city related to daily life remains the question. Here again, however, the texts yield clues. For the psalmist, Ezekiel, and the mystic of *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the one blessed with this extraordinary vision must not keep it secret but proclaim what has been seen. For Ezekiel, the vision discloses present reality, not a future that remains out of reach: God is, God rules, God removes shame. If we do not know how Ezekiel's exilic readers responded to this vision, we do know that its lasting influence in the Jewish and Christian tradition was to emphasize, not barriers but access; not hierarchy but overflowing blessing; not rules but love.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of Jon D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (HSM 10; Missoula MT: Scholars, 1976), 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 181-208.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 286. For a convenient summary of the different literary units comprising Ezekiel 40–48, see his discussion, 289-347.

<sup>4</sup> James Miller, "The Thirtieth Year of Ezekiel 1:1," *Revue Biblique* 99 (1992): 499-503.

<sup>5</sup> Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration*, followed by Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 2 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: 1997, 1998), 2:512.

<sup>6</sup> Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40–48* (SBLDS 154; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 13-19.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and North-West Semitic Writings*, JSOTSup 18 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 326-27.

<sup>9</sup> Contra Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:521.

<sup>10</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2 volumes, trans. Ronald E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983), 2:360.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:543.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stevenson, *Vision of Restoration*, 109-19.

<sup>14</sup> For the occasional temporal sense of the particle *báim*, “if,” see Paul Jouon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. 2, *Part Three: Syntax, Paradigms and Indices*, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (Subsidia Biblica 14/2; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996), §166p.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 370 n. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:601-604.

<sup>17</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:606-607.

<sup>18</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:440-41.

<sup>19</sup> Although Walther Zimmerli noted that the terminology employed for breach of covenant in 16:59, 17:15-19, and 44:7, is unique to Ezekiel, he did not explore the implications of the terminology in this particular context (*Ezekiel*, 2:454).

<sup>20</sup> Matityahu Tsevat, “The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Vassal Oaths and the Prophet Ezekiel,” *JBL* 78 (1959): 199-204.

<sup>21</sup> The distinction between the house of Israel and its priests and Levites is indicated by the use of the restrictive particle *kʿbáim* in v. 10, which governs all of vv. 10-16. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 39.3.5d. For the rhetorical emphasis on the house of Israel, see Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 68-77.

<sup>22</sup> Rodney K. Duke, “Punishment or Restoration? Another Look at the Levites of Ezekiel 44:6-16,” *JSOT* 40 (1988): 61-81.

<sup>23</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:626-27.

<sup>24</sup> See Stephen L. Cook, “Innerbiblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 195.

<sup>25</sup> For the use of the perfective verb in subjunctive clauses, see Waltke and O’Connor, 30.5.4b. As Waltke and O’Connor observe, the subjunctive sense is not conveyed by the verb itself but by its context and also by conditional particles. The parallel structure of vv. 10 and 15 suggest that both are governed by the restrictive particle *báʿpnim*. On the basis of this parallel structure, the position taken here is that the perfective verb *ôaʿammeʿabr*, in v. 15 describes an irreal situation.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 451-54.

<sup>27</sup> Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 84; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:465-70.

<sup>28</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:652.

<sup>29</sup> For the notion of transfer, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 441.

<sup>30</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 220-21.

<sup>32</sup> Gary Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” *ABD*, 6:xxx.

<sup>33</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 223.

<sup>34</sup> Block, *Ezekiel*, 2:696-97, n. 64.

<sup>35</sup> See Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), chs. 1–3.

<sup>36</sup> John Gray, *I-II Kings*, 2d rev. ed., (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 177.

<sup>37</sup> For the suggestion that the contemplation of temple measurements is an act of devotion, see Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration*.

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