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Recommended Citation

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A Symbolic or Idolatrous Reality?

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Abstract: The images and genres as well as the structure of the Book of Ezekiel aim to promote symbolic thinking in which the reader receives the word of Yhwh as an engagement with the divine Other. Such engagement fosters a priestly imaginary in which the Judean exiles are called to look beyond appearances as they wrestle with the contradictions generated by the exile and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The readers, like Ezekiel and the exiles, can become living symbols of Yhwh. Such symbolic thinking will be illustrated through a focus on chaps. 17–20 in which the tensions between individual and collective responsibility are encompassed within Yhwh's promise of an everlasting covenant with the House of Israel. Does Ezekiel's emphasis on the priestly system foster the covenant relationship or replace it? The predominantly oral communication of the prophecy of Ezekiel to the majority of Jewish and Christian audiences until the nineteenth century C.E. challenged individuals to decide for or against Yhwh.

Key Words: Ezekiel • priestly imaginary • symbolic thinking • collective responsibility • juxtaposition • plain sense • reception history

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ACCORDING TO THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER dictionary (11th edition), the adjective "imaginary" is defined as "existing only in imagination: lacking factual reality." Charles Taylor, in his *A Secular Age*, uses the term as a noun in his category, a "social imaginary."[1] He credits the concept to the political scientist Benedict Anderson, who had explained and illustrated this dimension of human perception

by the phenomenon of "nationalism."[2] Individuals or groups identify as Americans or Germans without knowing all of the individuals who are part of this group and how they would each define this reality of nationalism. In other words, the awareness of nationalism is inculcated through social practice—usually by osmosis—rather than through social theory or an intentional choice. Taylor illustrates the social imaginary by liberal capitalism in which people are enculturated into a mind-set in which prosperity and security of autonomous individuals are the criteria by which we judge sociopolitical arrangements to be legitimate or not.[3] An individual imaginary, according to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is one in which the individual dwells only on himself or on what is the same as himself.[4] By contrast, the social imaginary is a mind-set or vision for a wide-ranging group that "makes possible common practices."[5] Ezekiel and his fellow exiles had been socialized into a priestly mind-set in Jerusalem. But, as an exile, Ezekiel became a priest without a sanctuary and was called to be a prophet to deliver judgment oracles on the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

At the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel, to shore up the exiles' identity as Israelites and their hope for restoration to their homeland, Ezekiel is given a vision of the enthroned Yhwh coming from the north. Because Ezekiel is later transported to the exiles along the river Chebar (3:14-15), his exact location on receiving this vision in chap. 1 is ambiguous: he could physically be in exile in Babylonia or still in Jerusalem.[6] The vision announces the advent of Yhwh not only as an enthroned divine king but also as a divine warrior. Ezekiel's trembling in terror at visions of the destruction of Jerusalem in chaps. 7, 9, and 21 is embedded within the symbolism of this rich, complex opening vision, which later unfurls its destructive potential. Juxtaposed with the vision of the burning of Jerusalem and its temple in chaps. 9–10 is the salvation oracle in 11:14-21 in which Yhwh declares that he will be a "little sanctuary" in the midst of the exiles. These prophetic revelations for the exiles indicate that Ezekiel is intent on sustaining the priestly mind-set or imaginary as the glue that will hold the exiles together and as an internalized way of perceiving the world that will help them remain faithful to the covenant with Yhwh. Is this effort on Ezekiel's part to sustain the priestly imaginary an idolatrous one in which the priestly system is given an ultimate status? Does this system with

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; rev. ed.; London: Verso, 2006) 5-7.

[3] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 165-66.

[4] Jacques Lacan, "Sign, Symbol, Imaginary," in *On Signs* (ed. Marshall Blonsky; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 203-9, here 208.

[5] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 172.

[6] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 1:83; William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 19; Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 27-38.

its power and privileges for the priests become more important than the covenant relationship with Yhwh? In other words, do these priestly rituals, symbols, practices, and teachings cease to point beyond themselves to the divine Other? This concern for the authenticity of symbolic perception and thinking lies at the heart of Ezekiel's prophecy. Furthermore, the challenge of sustaining this symbolic perception of reality is, I contend, central to biblical studies.

A symbol is a sense-perceptible, dynamic reality that is in communication with the divine Other.[7] Michael Lieb describes Ezekiel's opening vision as "not only one that is seen but also one that sees."[8] In this act of seeing, Ezekiel becomes aware of the immensity of difference that separates him from the divine Other. Ezekiel is overwhelmed by the vision. Lieb notes that every effort to interpret the vision becomes an act of self-examination: the divine Other progressively examines the visionary and those to whom he disseminates the vision.[9] This ongoing transformation of the interpreter who engages the divine Other in visions and oracles lies at the heart of a responsible interpretation of the prophecy of Ezekiel.[10] The tools of literary and historical criticism are essential for unfolding levels of meaning not previously noticed but will be true to the plain sense of the text only if their critical edge promotes communication with the subject speaking in the text.[11] After initial hermeneutical observations regarding symbolic thinking, I wish to draw upon Ezekiel 17–20 to illustrate how an awareness of the symbolic character of these texts can appropriately channel our efforts to understand these texts not only through literary analysis and the history of composition but also through the history of reception.

I. Symbolic Thinking in the Book of Ezekiel

Sandra Schneiders, in her *The Revelatory Text*, has carefully explained how symbols exist in the linguistic medium and are most fully realized when the speaking subject of the text engages with the hearer.[12] This engagement of the interpreter

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[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed.; London: Continuum, 2004) 64-66; Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) 30-36; Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001) 69-73.

[8] Michael Lieb, *The Visionary Mode: Biblical Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Cultural Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 39.

[9] Ibid., 40.

[10] On Ricoeur's understanding of the mediated self through the reading process, see Eftichis Pirovolakis, *Reading Derrida and Ricoeur: Improbable Encounters between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics* (SUNT Series, Insinuations; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) 96.

[11] Renz, *Rhetorical Function*, 15-16, 39-41.

[12] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) 34-40.

with the prophetic text recreates or continues the dialogue of the speaker with the audience, which constitutes the reason the text is preserved in written form.[13] Even narratives such as the metaphorical ones in Ezekiel 17 and 19 or the disputations in Ezekiel 18 and 20, which seem to have been written out prior to delivery, were composed with the idea that oral delivery was the primary communication situation.[14] Martin Jaffee, in his book *Torah in the Mouth*, argues that the oral communication of the Torah was essential to the reality of the Torah; the written five books of Moses in their material reality of ink and papyrus were not authentic Torah unless they were communicated by a reader to an audience or by a sage to a disciple.[15] The performative contexts of this communication, although taking many forms from the late Second Temple through the Amoraic period in the fifth century C.E., were essential for the engagement of the hearer with the divine Other.[16] With reference to the rise of universal literacy in the nineteenth century, William Graham notes that "the dominance of oral/aural interaction with sacred texts has been the rule rather than the exception for the vast majority of persons and communities throughout history."[17]

If the biblical interpreter's effort is focused on stabilizing the written text at a particular point in time with the goal ideally of providing a definitive interpretation of the text, then this particular static text, it seems, has become an end in itself rather than a dialogue partner whose message the interpreter is trying to understand better so as to communicate such understanding to others who are also trying to engage the text. The rather frequent critique of historical critics is that we treat the biblical text like a cadaver to be dissected. These efforts to discover the best text and to recover the historical contexts in which the text was composed are indispensable to a responsible interpretation of the text.[18] The objectivity of these historical-critical interpretations rests on their potential to be duplicated by other investigators. How, then, can we draw forth new or hidden levels of meaning of symbolic texts without straying into esoteric, fanciful interpretations? How can

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[13] William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 155-60; cf. Joachim Schaper, "Hebrew Culture at the 'Interface between the Written and the Oral,'" in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings: Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production* (ed. Brian B. Schmidt; AIL 22; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015) 323-40, here 337-38; Schaper, "Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophecy and the Orality/ Literacy Problem," *VT* 55 (2005) 324-42, here 327-29.

[14] Renz, *Rhetorical Function*, 18.

[15] Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 155.

[16] Ibid., 154.

[17] Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 159.

[18] Hermann Spieckermann, "From Biblical Exegesis to Reception History," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1 (2012) 327-50, here 349; Paul Joyce, "Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives on Ezekiel," in *Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis* (OtSt 34; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 115-28, here 126-27.

critical reason and symbolic thinking work together to promote as full an engagement as possible with the divine Other speaking through the text?

John Barton claims that biblical critics who may self-describe as historians are theologians in disguise.[19] He goes on to explain that biblical studies is primarily an exercise in literary interpretation rather than the historical reconstruction of texts. He identifies the goal of biblical criticism as the discovery of the plain sense of the text. An important first step in this discovery of the plain sense, he argues, is the identification of the genre.[20] In other words, more objective literary categories exist or can be reconstructed from the texts that can guide our subjective engagement with the text and make our interpretations serviceable to other interpreters. Another indispensable literary analysis is how a passage fits into the larger context of the literary work. Satisfying these criteria of genre and literary context provides more publicly shared, factual knowledge. This effort at contextualizing traditional texts as a guide to their interpretation is especially challenged in Ezekiel's visions of encounter with the divine Other: the more one sees, the more one is aware of what is not perceivable. Even if the text is plurivocal, it cannot mean everything and anything.[21] This issue becomes more important in our time with the increasing attention to intertextuality and reception history.[22] These interpretive approaches attend to the ways the biblical text has been shaped by culture, but in turn the biblical text has had an impact on culture. How does one discern if an impact is fanciful or true? If an impact involves the use of imagination, does such an interpretation emerge from the plain sense of the text or was it read into it? How do we do exegesis in which the resources of literary criticism, the history of composition, and the history of reception are all drawn upon in order to the allow the depth of meaning of the text—its symbolic truth—to emerge?[23]

II. The Symbols of the Covenant in the Face of the Fall of Jerusalem in 586

The Zadokite priest Ezekiel, called to be a prophet at age thirty—if the "thirtieth year" in the opening verse of the book refers to his age, as Origen understood

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[19] John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 38.

[20] Ibid., 5-6.

[21] John F. A. Sawyer, "A Critical Review of Recent Projects and Publications," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 3 (2012) 298-326, here 324.

[22] David M. Carr, "The Many Uses of Intertextuality in Biblical Studies: Actual and Potential," in *Congress Volume: Helsinki 2010* (VTSup 148; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 505-35, esp. 515-23; James E. Harding, "What Is Reception History, and What Happens to You If You Do It?," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice* (ed. Emma England and William John Lyons; LHBOTS 615; London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 31-44.

[23] Brennan Breed, "What Can a Text Do? Reception History as an Ethology of the Biblical Text," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (ed. England and Lyons), 95-109.

it—had lived in Jerusalem for more than two decades.[24] He would have been aware of the reform movement under Josiah spurred on by refugees from the north with the "Yhwh-alone" message of Deuteronomy in hand and then of possible idolatrous cults returning to the temple under the rule of Jehoiakim.[25] Ezekiel's inaugural vision emphasizes the transcendent, ineffable character of Yhwh enthroned on the celestial throne chariot by focusing initially on the cherubim as part of the storm cloud in its dynamism and mobility. Their statuelike character in 1:5-11 recalls their appearance in the holy of holies in Solomon's temple, but in vv. 12-14 their coordinated movement and their darting about like lightning bolts attests that they are controlled by the divine *rûaḥ* (wind, breath, spirit) of the storm cloud. Yhwh, enthroned above the cherubim, is portrayed as human in form from the waist up but downward from there and encompassing the whole figure is fire (1:26-28). This tension between an anthropomorphic and aniconic portrayal of Yhwh indicates Yhwh's transcendence.[26] These sanctuary symbols, which the priests have a special responsibility to guard from defilement, are real symbols, as defined by Karl Rahner: they participate in the reality to which they point.[27] Such real symbols in Ezekiel's prophecy extend beyond the sanctuary. Most notably, the Israelites who are in covenant with Yhwh are living symbols of Yhwh if they participate in and reflect Yhwh's reality (see Ezek 36:20-28). To reflect Yhwh's reality and to avoid becoming idolaters means that the Israelites must repeatedly undergo transformation: a consequence of engagement with the divine Other.[28]

This priestly, symbolic way of thinking pervades the Book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is lifted to his feet by the divine *rûaḥ* after the inaugural vision (2:2). This divine presence will be symbolized further by his reception of the message of "woe, lamentation, and mourning" that he is to deliver to the rebellious Israelites by consuming a scroll and thus ingesting this difficult message (2:8–3:2). When he subsequently returns from the visionary plane of reality to the earthly setting near the river Chebar, he is filled with a bitterness of spirit that reflects Yhwh's wrath

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[24] *Origen of Alexandria: Exegetical Works on Ezekiel. The Fourteen Homilies and the Greek Fragments of the Homilies, Commentaries and Scholia. Text and Translation* (ed. Roger Pearse; trans. Mischa Hooker; Ancient Texts in Translation 2; Ipswich: Chieftain, 2014) 416-17.

[25] Lester L. Grabbe, "The Last Days of Judah and the Roots of the Pentateuch," in *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Rise of the Torah* (ed. Peter Dubovský, Dominik Markl, and Jean-Pierre Sonnet (FAT 107; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 19-25, here 20-24; Christoph Uehlinger, "Was There a Cult Reform under King Josiah? The Case for a Well-Grounded Minimum," in *Good Kings and Bad Kings* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; LHBOTS 393; European Seminar in Historical Methodology 5; London: T&T Clark, 2005) 279-316, esp. 286, 291, 295-97.

[26] Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (ConBOT 18; Lund: Gleerup, 1982) 25.

[27] Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Symbol," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings* (trans. Kevin Smyth; Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221–52, here 224.

[28] Lieb, *Visionary Mode*, 41.

and sits "stonelike" (*mašmîm*) for seven days (3:14-15). What he has been through in his prophetic commissioning has been an embodied experience. How his bodily behavior and demeanor communicate the prophetic message given him continues in the symbolic acts in chaps. 3–5: he is bound with cords and is muted (3:22-26); in pantomine he acts out the impending siege of Jerusalem to communicate the fact that Yhwh is orchestrating this siege (4:1–5:4).

The divine punishment envisioned in the Second Temple vision in chap. 9 portrays Yhwh as a wrathful God determined to punish and not have mercy. The divine directive to the angelic executioners who will stand behind the Babylonian conquerors is for them to go through the streets of Jerusalem and slaughter everyone: young and old, male and female, women and children (9:1-2, 5-6). The muted Ezekiel is allowed an outcry at the excess of this divinely ordered genocide (9:8). The only ones to be spared are those who deeply repent—that is, those who are "moaning and grieving" (*hanneʾĕnāḥîm wĕhanneʾĕnāqîm*) over the defilement of the Jerusalem temple (9:3-4). Ezekiel's outcry at the extreme character of this destruction is echoed by another strong reaction by him later in chap. 21. In the judgment oracle in 21:8-10 (Eng. 21:3), Yhwh says, "I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you the righteous and the wicked." In response, Yhwh orders Ezekiel to act out symbolically what he has been feeling in his reception of this oracle of divine genocide. He is to groan before the people as if with a broken back so that they ask why he is in such pain and grief (21:11-12).

The extreme character of the divine punishment is a way of claiming that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 was not simply a result of Babylonian military might, or alternatively something that just happened, but rather an event under the control of Yhwh as sovereign ruler of the cosmos. The protest against the merciless character of the divine wrath that Ezekiel is allowed to express momentarily in 9:8 is held in check but not eliminated (cf. 11:13). The literary arrangement of the narratives in chaps. 17–20 wrestles with the ethical character of such merciless divine punishment. The genres of these narratives and the fact that they are simply juxtaposed provoke ongoing reflection on the dual claim that Yhwh has power over the course of historical events and that he cares for the people in covenant with him. This wrestling with unresolvable contradictions in human experience—with the riddles of human existence— as communicated in the plain sense of chaps. 17–20 demands engagement with the divine Other and thus constitutes an important example of symbolic thinking in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 17 and 19 address the issue of collective responsibility in light of the symbolic role of the king. Metaphorically, the king is the people: what goes well for the king goes well for the people. Literally, the king is a distinct individual identified as the ruler over against the ruled. But the claim that the king's body is the polity is true in more than a figurative sense. The king is a symbol of the community. His decisions and actions have implications for the people as if they had

each individually made these decisions.[29] In Ezek 17:1-2, Yhwh commands Ezekiel to "pose a riddle and craft a comparison for the house of Israel." A riddle poses a question in an engaging, ambiguous way in which the answer is obscure and presupposes an experience that is unique or beyond that accessible to most humans (Judg 14:12-14; Num 12:8).[30] In the ensuing metaphorical narrative, vv. 3-8 form a fable whose personified characters are two eagles, a vine, and a cedar. A great eagle takes the crest of a cedar to another land but, in the native land, plants a seed that grows into a low-lying, well-cared-for vine. A second eagle comes along to which this vine turns. This fable could tell a story about any number of kings and their polities. In its present context, it forms the accusation of a judgment oracle with its corresponding punishment articulated in vv. 9-11. If these personified characters of the eagles, the vine, and the cedar are to function in a riddle, they need to be set within a more specific historical context. So vv. 12-21 provide an allegorical explanation of the fable by identifying the first eagle as the king of Babylon (vv. 3-5), the vine as the Jerusalemites (vv. 5-6), the second eagle as the king of Egypt (vv. 7-8), and the cedar sprig as the exiles deported to Babylonia along with King Jehoiachin (vv. 3-4). When Zedekiah as king of Jerusalem rebels, this action will bring trouble not only to the people of Jerusalem but also to the exiles who are being held hostage by the king of Babylon. The judgment decreed in this allegorical explanation is a punishment for treating lightly the divine name that Zedekiah had invoked in initially making the treaty. The upshot of this riddling allegory is a theopolitical reflection on how the oath taking or performative speech of the Judean king had created space for Yhwh to play a public, international role in the Judean king's affairs, but in effect Zedekiah did not take Yhwh seriously as a historical agent but treated him as fictional in this contractual relationship. He denied the symbolic reality of Yhwh in the pragmatics of his treaty making.

Moving to the metaphorical narrative in chap. 19, the lamentation in vv. 2-9 has a riddling character to it insofar as it does not explicitly identify the lioness and her cubs but calls upon the reader to see how the lioness and her cubs participate in the events that bring about their demise.[31] The lioness and her cubs are aggressive and not simply the victims of unforeseen circumstances. They violate

[29] Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Bible in Its World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 48-50.

[30] Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, "The Words of the Wise and Their Riddles," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 127-51, esp. 148; Mark W. Hamilton, "Riddles and Parables, Traditions and Texts: Ezekielian Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom Traditions," in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies* (ed. Mark R. Sneed; AIL 23; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015) 241-62, here 255-56.

[31] Corrine Carvalho, "Putting the Mother Back in the Center: Metaphor and Multivalence in Ezekiel 19," in *Thus Says the Lord: Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R.*

the ethical world order. The lamentation in vv. 10-14 identifies the mother with a vine that oversteps its limits and produces cedar shoots that symbolize royal rulers who have tried to usurp divine prerogatives and so are brought down. Similar to the metaphorical narrative in chap. 17, the narrative of chap. 19 claims that the royal household of Jerusalem brought about the destruction of the Davidic dynasty and the deportation of the people. Therefore, the Israelites are collectively responsible and have no basis for a legitimate complaint against the fairness of Yhwh in his rule over history.

Chapter 18, a disputation sandwiched between the metaphorical narratives of chaps. 17 and 19 dealing with the Davidic dynasty, addresses the widespread opinion of the people of Jerusalem that they were victims of events beyond their control. The proverb in 18:2 about the parents' eating sour grapes that set their children's teeth on edge was circulating widely. Those who gave voice to it were claiming to be victims of circumstances beyond their control and to be robbed of their agency as individuals. In 18:4, Yhwh counters this claim with the statement, "Only the one who sins shall die," which echoes the law in Deut 24:16 that for capital crimes there is no intergenerational transfer of guilt. This leaves open the possibility that, for lesser faults, the ill effects can strike up to the third and fourth generation. Yhwh emphasizes the fact that the individual agent is responsible for his fate: if the sinner repents, he finds life; if the upright person turns away from Yhwh and sins grievously, he will die, regardless of a previous life filled with upright actions. The disputation records the people's protest against this emphasis on the immediate state of one's relationship with Yhwh as "unfair" (18:25). But Yhwh counters them by exhorting them to repent.

As a counterpoint to chap. 18, the first half of chap. 20 describes Israel's foundational history in Egypt through the first two generations in the wilderness as a story of rebellion that has given rise to a cycle of sin that has continued through Israel's time in the land and into the exile. The idolatrous behavior of the ancestors has been repeated by the succeeding generations. This description of pervasive sin leaves no room for an innocent individual. Yhwh is patient with their waywardness in Egypt, but in the wilderness after the second generation sins, he decrees that in the future they will be exiled from the land. This point seems to confirm the earlier protest of the people in chap. 18 that their ill fate was determined by what previous generations had done. Thus, there is a tension between the views of these two chapters on the issue of intergenerational transfer of guilt.[32] Chapter 18 is emphatic that there is no capital punishment visited on one generation for the sins of another, but chap. 20 seems to say that those Israelites who would go into exile in the sixth

Wilson (ed. John J. Ahn and Stephen L. Cook; LHBOTS 502; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 208-21, here 217.

[32] Jurrien Mol, *Collective and Individual Responsibility: A Description of Corporate Personality in Ezekiel 18 and 20* (SSN 53; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 257.

century B.C.E. had their fate determined even before the second generation of Israelites in the wilderness had entered the land. One can avoid the apparent contradiction by claiming that not one of the exiles in the sixth century was innocent, but this point would call into the question the efficacy of the act of repentance emphasized in chap. 18. The juxtaposition of these chapters provokes ongoing reflection by the Israelites on how they stand collectively and individually in their covenant relationship with Yhwh.[33] It is for the sake of this covenant relationship to which Yhwh had promised to remain faithful forever that Yhwh held back his anger in punishing the earlier generation. It was for the sake of his Name that Yhwh was being patient with the Israelites (20:9, 14, 22). The upside of this patient forbearance by Yhwh is the fact that the character and well-being of the Israelites reflected Yhwh's reality on the stage of history. They were living symbols of Yhwh's presence in history. Just as Yhwh expected Zedekiah to keep his treaty with Nebuchadnezzar sworn in Yhwh's name, so also would Yhwh honor his reputation by keeping his word (16:59-60; 20:33, 44; 36:21-23).

One further twist on the culpability of the Israelites seems to have been added after the predicted punishment of future exile. In 20:25-26, Yhwh states, "I myself even gave them not-good statutes and stipulations in which they could not find life. I defiled them through their gifts when they made every firstborn cross over that I might devastate them that they might know that I am Yhwh." The obvious meaning of this text is that Yhwh gave them commands that led them to practice child sacrifice. This decree of not-good laws portrays Yhwh as deceitful—a deity who tricks the Israelites into punishing themselves.

The disputation in the second half of chap. 20 counterbalances the harshness of the image of Yhwh presented in vv. 23-26. Here Yhwh states his determination to remain in covenant with the Israelites even if he must force them to be obedient (v. 32). But as this dispute takes shape, Yhwh plans to take those in exile into the wilderness and sort them. This appears to mean that the exiles have the capacity to repent. He commands the exiles in v. 39, "Each of you, go, serve your idols." But then immediately states that, if they do not obey him, he will not let them desecrate his holy name with their idols and gifts. Therefore, he must intend to separate out these idolaters and leave them in the wilderness. But then in v. 40, Yhwh states that the "whole house of Israel, all of it, will serve him on his mountain in Israel." The tensions between these verses rest on the fact that Yhwh is committed to be in covenant with Israel in an everlasting way, but the potential for disobedient, defiling actions by the Israelites must be addressed. There appears to be a sorting in the wilderness such that individual Israelites have a choice before

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[33] On juxtaposition as a literary technique in Exodus 14–15, see Joshua Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 33, 58-60.

them whether to be obedient to Yhwh or to serve idols. Then vv. 40-42 announce the return of the exiles to the mountain of God in Jerusalem, where they will be an acceptable offering to Yhwh, and Yhwh will manifest his holiness through them in the sight of the nations. This juxtaposition of point–counterpoint in chaps. 17–20 manifests the riddling character of the covenant relationship, which is exemplified poignantly in the claim that Yhwh is present in punishment as well as in blessing.

III. Reception of Ezekiel 17–20 in the Jewish and Christian Traditions

The juxtaposition of passages in chaps. 17–20 serves to keep the riddle alive about how Yhwh is present in the lives of the Israelites and governs the course of events. The final goal of these chapters is to claim that Yhwh will manifest his holiness through the Israelites in the sight of the nations (20:41). An important way that such holiness will transform the Israelites from generation to generation is by engagement with the message of Ezekiel through interpretation of the Book of Ezekiel. How has the Book of Ezekiel been received in the Jewish and Christian traditions? What impacts has this biblical book had on the history of human culture? In assessing this impact, it is necessary first to clarify what we mean by the Book of Ezekiel and when it assumed its final form.

The historical prophet Ezekiel delivered his message in the early sixth century B.C.E. The chronology of the book claims that he communicated this message between 593 and 573 (1:2; 40:1). He may well have written out his longer narratives and disputations prior to delivering them, but he did so with the goal of delivering them in speech. Oral communication is the dominant register in the rhetoric of the book.[34] Even when this message is written down, it is most properly communicated when it is read aloud and interpreted by a community. The memory of what the prophet Ezekiel said in the sixth century is kept alive by his disciples in a performative context until 100 C.E., when the Hebrew consonantal text was standardized.[35] Werner Kelber contends that "textual pluriformity was an acceptable way of life at the turn of the era."[36] Eugene Ulrich and Ingrid Lilly have

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[34] Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 23, 38, 82-84.

[35] Emanuel Tov, "The Status of the Masoretic Text in Modern Text Editions of the Hebrew Bible: The Relevance of Canon," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 234-51, here 239, 243; On the role of memory in the formation of literary texts, see David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 5.

[36] Werner H. Kelber, "The History of the Closure of Biblical Texts," in *Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres* (ed. Annette Weissenrieder and Robert B. Coote; WUNT 260; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 71-99, here 77.

established that two literary recensions of the Book of Ezekiel were circulating in the first two centuries B.C.E.[37] Emanuel Tov recommends that these two recensions be set in parallel columns for interpreters to examine rather than being merged into an eclectic text.[38] As an alternative approach to this pluriformity, Shemaryahu Talmon hypothesizes that there were multiple pristine texts prior to standardization and claims that these texts went through a sorting out and trying out process from which the proto-MT emerged, which was then adopted by Pharisaic Judaism.[39] The standardization of the consonantal Hebrew text highlights the importance of the written text but still does not overshadow the oral performative context for the interpretation of the text. The standardization of scriptural texts sets a boundary around them and then allows diverse texts in the corpus of biblical texts to be intertexts. Michael Fishbane has called intertextuality "the core of the canonical imagination" and fundamental to the creativity of the rabbinic interpreters.[40] As Martin Jaffee has argued, it is the Torah in the mouth or the proclaimed and interpreted Torah that is authoritative rather than the Torah in the script.[41] Therefore, even after the Book of Ezekiel has been given a standardized form, the way the message of Ezekiel is received is still an integral component in the revelation of its truth. In contrast to the rabbis, literary and rhetorical critics regard the final form of the biblical book as the boundary that shapes intertextual relationships rather than the corpus of biblical books. Such critics, in contrast to the rabbis in their oral register, will typically analyze a single biblical book holistically.[42]

How can we know then whether an interpretation of a passage from Ezekiel is true to the text? On what basis can we distinguish exegesis from eisegesis? If we follow Barton's lead and aim to discover the "plain text" in interpreting passages in the Book of Ezekiel, we will first identify the genre and then describe the

[37] Eugene Ulrich, "The Old Testament Text and Its Transmission," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to 600* (ed. J. C. Paget and J. Schaper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 83-104, here 99; Ingrid Lilly, *Two Books of Ezekiel: Papyrus 967 and the Masoretic Text as Variant Literary Editions* (VTSup 150; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 306.

[38] Tov, "Status of the Masoretic Text," 249-50; cf. Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko, "Introduction: The Importance of Empirical Models to Assess the Efficacy of Source and Redaction Criticism," in *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism* (ed. Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016) 1-36, here 35.

[39] Shemaryahu Talmon, "Textual Criticism: The Ancient Versions," in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (ed. A. D. H. Mayes; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 141-70, here 152; cf. Emanuel Tov and Eugene Ulrich, "Textual History of the Hebrew Bible," in *The Hebrew Bible,* vol. 1A (ed. Armin Lange and Emanuel Tov; Textual History of the Bible; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 3-35, here 15-19.

[40] Michael Fishbane, "Types of Biblical Intertextuality," in *Congress Volume: Oslo 1998* (ed. André Lemaire and Magne Sæbø; VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 40-44, here 40.

[41] Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 155.

[42] John Barton, "Intertextuality and the 'Final Form' of the Text," in *Congress Volume: Oslo 1998* (ed. Lemaire and Sæbø), 33-37, here 36.

literary context. The plain sense of a passage is attentive to its symbolic character; the plain sense could be the spiritual rather than the literal sense.[43] When the standardized text is received later, is it interpreted in fidelity to the plain sense?

Ezekiel 17:1-21 is a riddling allegory in which Zedekiah and the Judean kingdom he symbolizes are condemned for rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar and dishonoring Yhwh's name by which he swore to be a faithful vassal. The rabbis drew on this passage to strongly oppose political revolt (*b. Ker.* 5b). In a similar way, in the eleventh century Rashi read the fable in 17:2-9 as saying there was no need for a revolt; political autonomy was not essential for the integrity of the Jewish nation. A century later, Radaq identified as idolatrous the effort to be autonomous and organized like the nations in line with Ezek 20:32.[44] In the Christian tradition, Origen interpreted the riddling allegory in Ezek 17:1-21 as condemning not simply Zedekiah's treaty breaking but also his entering into the treaty in the first place. Origen says that, if Zedekiah had properly interiorized the covenant with Yhwh, he would not have been tempted in the first place by Nebuchadnezzar's offer of a treaty.[45]

The problem of the potential demise of the Davidic dynasty at the time of Zedekiah's revolt is addressed in 17:22-24 with an eschatological oracle on the restoration of a branch of the cedar that had been taken to Babylon on the mountain heights of Israel. As the cedar grows, its royal protection spreads through the land. Even though the term "shoot" (יונק, 17:22) has royal connotations, the technical term for "messiah" (משיח) is not used until Dan 9:25 around the middle of the second century B.C.E. Joseph Fitzmyer argued that using the term "messiah" prior to 164 B.C.E. is a misuse of this label since the technical term carries meanings that emerged only at that time.[46] But if the oracle in 17:22-24 is received by Jerome and later by Calvin as "messianic," is this interpretation in accord with the plain sense of this oracle?[47]

The juxtaposition of chaps. 18 and 20 sets up a debate on individual and collective responsibility. Are we humans of the present generation inescapably weighed down by the sins of our ancestors? One proposal the rabbis offered to this issue in *b. Sanh.* 27b was to claim that everyone in the community is responsible for everyone else (cf. Lev 26:29, 37). Individuals who do not correct others are

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[43] Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 92, 116.

[44] Moshe Eisemann, *Yechezkel/The Book of Ezekiel: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (Artscroll Tanach Series; New York: Mesorah, 1988) 281, 284.

[45] Pearse (ed.), *Origen of Alexandria*, 318-19, 344-45.

[46] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 50, 62.

[47] Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; ACW 71; New York: Paulist, 2017) 197; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (trans. Thomas Myers; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 2:211-13.

also liable to punishment. Christian interpreters of Ezek 18:4, "only the person who sins shall die," have wrestled with this principle in light of the doctrine of original sin. Augustine (*Enchir.* 46) and Jerome (*Letters* 60.8) argued that this principle of individual responsibility holds true only after a person has been baptized.[48]

Can we repent and thus avert the divine punishment in store for us? Ezekiel 18:21-22 claims that repentance gives one a completely new start by emphasizing the centrality of the present state of one's relationship with God. It is the relationship itself that is fundamental. A treasury of merits will not be a bargaining chip to win God's favor. If one chooses to honor God, then all of one's past transgressions will not be held against one. The efficacy of repentance is a central doctrine in rabbinic Judaism.[49] In commenting on Ezek 18:21, Rashi goes so far as to claim that not only is the past annulled by repentance, but it can also be turned to merit (see also *b. Yoma* 86b).[50]

The efficacy of repentance is likewise promoted within the Christian tradition. Tertullian (*Paen.* 4) notes that repentance is "a plank of salvation" that can deliver one from "a sea of sin."[51] Augustine (*Serm.* 87.10; *Vit. Christ.* 2) counsels against despair by emphasizing how God wishes for the sinner to repent or be converted, whereas the despairing sinner regards his sin as unforgivable and wishes to die by sinning.[52] Calvin also emphasizes the necessity of repentance but claims that repenting is a gift of God that one cannot initiate on one's own[53]—a point that had been emphasized by the monk Cassian in the early fifth century (*Conf.* 13.18.3).[54]

How do we come to understand the harsh, even unethical image of Yhwh presented in Ezekiel 20–21? According to Ezek 20:25, Israel's repeated refusal to obey Yhwh's statutes and stipulations led to Yhwh's giving them "not-good statutes" and "stipulations in which they could not find life." They would be deceived in obeying these statutes presumably because they believed these statutes

[48] Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion* (trans. and ed. Albert Outler; LCC 7; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 258; digitized at Infomotions, http://infomotions.com/etexts/philosophy/400-499/augustine-confessions-276.htm; Jerome, *Letters, NPNF*[2] 6:126.

[49] Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered* (New York: Ktav, 1968) 250.

[50] Eisemann, *Yechezkel/Book of Ezekiel*, 300.

[51] Tertullian, *Treatises on Penance: On Penitence and On Purity* (trans. and annotated William P. Le Saint; ACW 28; Westminster, MD: Newman, 1959) 20.

[52] J. E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of St. Augustine*, vol. 3.3 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) 413; also FC 16:14.

[53] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 2:246-48.

[54] John Cassian, *The Conferences* (trans. Boniface Ramsey; ACW 57; New York: Paulist, 1997) 490.

were commanded by Yhwh. An analogous form of punishment by divine deceit appeared previously in Ezek 14:9 in which the LORD says he himself gave a false message to a prophet who had idols in his heart. It is one thing to punish a particular prophet with a false oracle and quite another to promulgate laws for a whole people that are false if taken at face value. Thus, this troubling verse could either be ignored, as it virtually was in the Jewish tradition until the third century C.E., or be scrutinized as to its meaning and purpose—usually laying the blame on humans. The Targum claims that these laws were created by the people themselves out of "their stupid inclination." Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 6.3) does not go so far as to say that God delivers a person into the hand of his evil inclination, but he claims that sometimes justice demands that a sinner be stopped short of repentance since it is necessary that he be punished for his sins.[55] The Christian apologist Justin Martyr identified the "not-good laws" as a punishment that Yhwh gave to the Israelites because of their iniquities (*Dial.* 21:4). P. W. van der Horst claims that lurking behind Justin's critique is the view that Israel had abrogated the Sinai covenant by the transgression of the golden calf (see also *Let. Barn.* 4.8; 14.1-4).[56] Irenaeus (*Haer.* 4.15.1) would claim that the other commandments beyond the Decalogue and the Laws of the Covenant (Exodus 21–23) were given in order to enslave Israel. Christians then are regarded as set free from this additional legislation by baptism (*Didascalia apostolorum*, chap. 26).

Origen takes a different approach in his debate with Celsus, who had tried to manufacture contradictions in the Scriptures that would discredit the Jewish and Christian traditions. Origen claims that such contradictions were only apparent since a deeper meaning lies within these words (*Cels*. 7.20).[57] The life-giving laws of Ezek 20:11, 13, 21 and the not-good statutes and the stipulations of vv. 25-26 that do not bring life do not contradict one another but instead refer to the way that they are interpreted. If the laws given in vv. 25-26 are read literally, they kill. So the key to dealing with "not-good statutes" is to try to find their deeper significance. According to Origen, the plain sense of these "not-good" laws is their deeper, spiritual meaning.

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[55] Eisemann, *Yechezkel/Book of Ezekiel*, 329. For *Hilchot Teshuvah* 6.3, see https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911905/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Six.htm.

[56] P. W. van der Horst, "'I Gave Them Laws That Were Not Good': Ezekiel 20:25 in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism: A Symposium in Honour of A. S. van der Woude* (ed. J. N. Bremmer and F. García Martínez; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992) 94-118, here 107.

[57] Origen, *Contra Celsum* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 411.

IV. Conclusion

This brief history of the reception of Ezekiel 17–20 has prepared the way for a discussion between voices from the Jewish and Christian traditions on the topics of collective and individual responsibility, the effectiveness of repentance for getting a new start, and the apparent harshness of God in the brokenness of the human condition. Unresolvable contradictions on questions of theodicy could give way to despair, but if they are framed as riddles of human existence, as in the priestly imaginary of Ezekiel, then one comes to know Yhwh even in traumatic circumstances. In the symbolic medium of the covenant relationship, the apparent absence of Yhwh can reveal his presence. The engagement with the divine Other and others in this dialogue with the text creates a space for critical reason to assist in this interpretive listening. Such engagement with the Book of Ezekiel creates a priestly social imaginary that is symbolic in character in contrast to an ideology in support of a priestly caste.