

A THEOLOGY OF EZEKIEL: GOD'S NAME AND ISRAEL'S HISTORY

Alex Luc*

To understand history is not only the concern of professional historians. As D. H. Fischer has indicated, "nobody thinks historically all the time, but everybody thinks historically much of the time. Each day, every rational being on this planet asks questions about things that actually happened."¹ The search for meaning behind the observable facts of life is itself an act of historical thinking. How a person understands history can tell us much about his world view—and, in the case of a believer, his conception of God. The prophet Ezekiel had great interest in history. This is evident in his careful dating of his prophecies and in his several outlines of Israel's history.

Ezekiel lived at a time when Babylonian power and influence had threatened the survival of the people of Israel and their faith, and he himself was exiled to Babylon in 597 B.C. Israel had been taught to believe that Yahweh alone had ultimate control of all human events,² but this tradition was now being challenged by the reality of the exile: History seemed to be under Babylonian power. We can understand this better if we seriously take into account the context of Israel, which witnessed the presence of the nations' competing religions. The victories of a people were the victories of their god(s). Thus to Ezekiel the exile was not a political but a theological problem.

A major teaching in the priestly circle where Ezekiel came from was the holiness of God, in which Yahweh's name and glory played a significant role.³ For Ezekiel, however, Yahweh's name was more important than his glory. The departure and return of God's glory marked the two crucial stages of Israel's history (chaps. 10; 43). But these two movements of God's glory were only the results of his decision to punish and to restore the people, while his decision was based on his concern for his name. Thus we see that God's name played a more important role in Ezekiel's thought. The exile had caused God's name to be despised "among the nations," and God explicitly admitted that he had concern for his name (36:20-21).

The Judahite crisis, which involved the center of Yahweh's worship (Jerusalem), had indeed put God's reputation on trial not only in the eyes of the nations

*Alex Luc is assistant professor of Old Testament at Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions in South Carolina.

¹D. H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper, 1970) 316.

²R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) 157. See also A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962), 1. 174; M. Burrows, "Ancient Israel," *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: Yale University, 1955) 128.

³W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 30; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1965), 2. 240; J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974) 40.

but also in the eyes of Israel's survivors, whose faith was Ezekiel's particular concern. The following discussion will attempt to point out that to Ezekiel the whole history of Israel was intimately tied to God's concern for his name.

I. GOD'S NAME AND ISRAEL'S PAST

Though scholars have debated the reliability of Ezekiel's historical statements in the book, it is not our purpose in this essay to evaluate their views.⁴ We are, however, concerned about Ezekiel's relevant message to his time. In this section we shall examine Ezekiel's understanding of Israel's past, which is mainly found in the three so-called historical chapters (chaps. 16; 20; 23).

1. *Israel's Repeated Apostasy.* In chap. 20, Ezekiel traces the people's past from the time they were in Egypt to their dispersion among the nations in the sixth century. We find Israel's history as a repetition of apostasy in four cycles: (a) Israel's sinful behavior in Egypt (vv 5-9); (b) their first-generation wanderings in the wilderness (vv 10-17); (c) their second-generation wanderings in the wilderness (vv 18-26); and (d) their settlement in Canaan (vv 27-31). Each cycle has a pattern containing three elements: grace shown, Israel's rebellion, wrath withheld. It first introduces God's grace in his guidance, and then Israel's rebellion. At the end of the cycle, instead of destroying them for their rebellion God withholds his wrath "for the sake of my name." Yahweh wants to keep his name from being profaned "in the eyes of the nations" (vv 9, 14, 22).

The attachment of this motif—i.e., God withholding his wrath for the sake of his name—to these earlier traditions is for the first time found in Ezekiel.⁵ At the end of the fourth cycle, however, the third element (wrath withheld) is missing. That it is omitted is important: Ezekiel is now announcing punishment on the present Israel. Israel's sinful deeds have defiled God's holiness to the extent that he can no longer tolerate them. Yahweh declares that he will bring them into the wilderness for judgment (vv 35-36) and purge the rebels among them (v 38), so that his holy name will not be profaned again by their sins (v 39). The chapter, however, ends with a promise of restoration. But this again is "for the sake of my name" (v 44). All this indicates that Israel's historical process is moved by the central consideration of God's name.⁶

The historical exposition was a response to an inquiry by the elders of the people (vv 1-3). On the basis of v 32, some have suggested that the exiles were planning to set up a sanctuary for Yahweh in Babylon. But as G.A. Cooke points out, we do not have enough evidence to warrant such a claim.⁷ In any case the occasion turned out to be a lesson about God's concern for his name.

⁴Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University Press, 1960) 431; M. Greenberg, "Prolegomenon," in C. C. Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy* (New York: KTAV, 1970) xi-xxxv; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* 275.

⁵G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) 216.

⁶Y. Hoffman, "Ezekiel 20—Its Structure and Meaning," *Beth Mikra* 63/4 (1975) 587.

⁷Cooke, *Ezekiel* 220.

2. *Israel's Increasing Apostasy.* While chap. 20 describes Israel's past in literal terms, chaps. 16 and 23 narrate it in metaphorical language. While chap. 20 views Israel's history as simply a repeated apostasy in a cyclical fashion, chaps. 16 and 23 present it as a record of increasing apostasy. Jerusalem (which stands for Judah) is portrayed as an unfaithful wife who has dishonored her husband (Yahweh). Here Ezekiel takes up a motif from Hosea and Jeremiah but formulates it in his own way.

In the introduction of chap. 16 God says to Jerusalem, "Your origin and birth were of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite" (v 3). This remark implies that Jerusalem's sinful tendency has originated with the Canaanites: Like mother, like daughter. In this chapter, Jerusalem is described as a foundling who was rescued by a passerby (Yahweh) and was eventually married to the latter. Despite all the riches he gave her, she has turned away and lived an adulterous life. For this reason God now has to punish her. But like chap. 20, the end of this chapter contains a message of restoration (vv 53-63).

The metaphorical presentation of Israel's history in chap. 16 reappears in chap. 23 with some modifications. Here Israel's history is described through a story of two sisters: Oholah and Oholibah. Though they are not explicitly identified as Yahweh's brides, the relationship is implied⁸ in statements like "they became mine" (v 4) and "Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine" (v 5). God traces their adulterous acts to the time when they were still in Egypt (v 2). Oholibah (Jerusalem, representing Judah) is described in both chapters as more depraved than her sister Oholah (Samaria, representing northern Israel). Israel's history in these two chapters, however, has a similar pattern of increasing apostasy.

In chap. 16, God condemns Jerusalem for her continuous betrayal: "Was your prostitution not enough?" (v 20); "in addition to all your other wickedness" (v 23); "you increased your harlotry" (v 19). She is "more detestable" than Samaria (v 51) and even "more depraved" than Sodom (v 47). Thus Judah must be punished (v 38).

Oholibah (Jerusalem) in chap. 23 is similarly portrayed as worse than her sister: "She carried her prostitution even further" (v 14), she "increased her harlotry" (v 19). She has forgotten Yahweh and marred his reputation by her sinful deeds to such an extent that punishment is no longer avoidable (vv 35, 38, 49). Yahweh has to "put a stop" to this increasing trend (vv 27, 48).

II. GOD'S NAME AND THE PRESENT CRISIS

Ezekiel's gloomy picture of Israel's history in the three historical chapters had an important function in his time. They served not only to call the exiles to repentance but also to discourage them from looking back to their "good old days." Ezekiel was aware that so long as they lived in the past they would close their minds to his message and refuse to face the present reality. Israel had to forget what they should not have remembered.⁹ They had to face their reality and act

⁸Perhaps Ezekiel deliberately avoids explicit marital terminology in this chapter so that his serious audience may not think that he is suggesting that God practices polygamy.

⁹S. J. de Vries, "Remembrance in Ezekiel," *Int* 16 (1962) 64.

accordingly in light of God's contemporary word. Ezekiel was concerned about the faith of the exiles. To him the hope of a future Israel lay in these survivors.¹⁰

As we mentioned in the first section of this study, Ezekiel regarded the Judahite crisis as God's design to put a stop to Israel's repeated and increasing apostasy. Ezekiel did not consider the Babylonians as the real cause of the crisis. Rather, it was God who destroyed his own people for the sake of his name: "They defiled my holy name by their detestable practices, so I destroyed them in my anger" (43:8). That the city of Jerusalem could be destroyed was not because the Babylonians were more powerful than Israel but because God's glory had departed from there (10:23). It was Yahweh who destroyed the city and desecrated his own temple (24:21).

That the crisis was not to be considered a sign of God's weakness is also seen in Ezekiel's use of the recognition formula: "Then you (they) will know that I am Yahweh." It is characteristic of Ezekiel's prophecy to resume his speeches after this formula. The expression is often followed by the preposition *b^e* with an infinitive construct and a suffix—e.g., "Then they will know that I am Yahweh, when I disperse them among the nations" (12:15). If we include those occurrences that have slight variations, the formula is used in Ezekiel seventy-eight times.¹¹ W. Zimmerli suggests that the formula is part of a prophetic form and that Ezekiel did not use it for the first time. He argues that it originates with prophecies against Israel's enemies as found in 1 Kgs 20:13, 28.

Zimmerli holds that the verbal element "then you (they) will know" derives from legal language in the context of a process of proving (e.g. Gen 42:34), while the second element ("I am Yahweh") is a form of self-presentation by which, in an encounter, an unknown person introduces himself (e.g., Exod 20:2). He defines this self-introduction as "the form of self-revelation of a person in his name."¹² Though the formula was not invented by Ezekiel, its extremely frequent use in the book deserves our special attention. A close examination of the formula, which always comes after a statement of Yahweh's action, indicates that through everything that Ezekiel proclaims Yahweh is going to reveal himself to the people and the nations.

In Ezekiel the formula is only connected with two kinds of divine action: punishment of Israel (or the nations) or restoration of Israel.¹³ An example of punishment is 5:13: "When I have spent my wrath upon them, then they will know that I am Yahweh." An example of restoration is 28:26: "They will live in safety. . . then they will know that I am Yahweh." The formula functions as a prediction of vindication of Yahweh's reputation as well as of the prophet's credibility. Ezekiel was concerned about the faith of his audience, and this was probably the main

¹⁰Kaufmann, *Religion* 427; R. de Vaux, "The Remnant According to the Prophets," *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) 19.

¹¹W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 1. 38.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 37. See also "The Message of the Prophet Ezekiel," *Int* 23 (1969) 147-148.

¹³On punishment: 5:13; 6:7, 10, 13, 14; 7:4, 9, 27; 11:10, 12; 12:15, 16, 20; 13:9, 14, 21, 23; 14:8, 23; 15:7; 17:21; 20:38; 22:16, 22; 23:49; 24:24, 27; 25:5, 7, 11, 17; 26:6; 28:22-24; 29:6, 9, 16; 30:8, 19, 25, 26; 32:15; 33:29; 35:15; 36:23; 38:23; 39:22. On restoration: 16:62; 20:41, 42, 44; 28:26; 29:21; 34:27; 36:11, 36, 38; 37:6, 13, 14, 28; 39:7, 28.

reason that he took special care to date his prophecies.¹⁴ According to Deut 18:22 and Jer 28:9, fulfillment is the ultimate criterion for ascertaining true prophecy.

Cooke has considered that the formula has its counterpart in the expression, "They shall know that a prophet has been among them."¹⁵ Israel's faith would endure only when they could see that God was in complete control, even if his control meant disaster for them. The formula reminded them that whatever happened God was there, and his name would be ultimately recognized and honored.

III. GOD'S NAME AND FUTURE RESTORATION

Though Ezekiel had proclaimed that the Judahite crisis was God's design, he could not avoid another crucial question: How could God's name not be despised in the eyes of the nations when they would inevitably interpret the event as a weakness on the part of Israel's God? That this was a major concern of Ezekiel can be seen in the following saying of God: "I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone." The reason was that "wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the people of Yahweh, and yet they had to leave his land!'" (36:20-21). God was concerned about his reputation among the people of Israel as well as the nations.

Since his audience was primarily the exiles, Ezekiel's oracles against the nations, which occupy one-sixth of his book (chaps. 25-32; 38-39), must have had a particular purpose. The special phenomenon of this type of oracle in prophetic literature has generally been interpreted as indirect assurances of salvation to Israel.¹⁶ In his literary and philological study of the oracles against Egypt (chaps. 29-32) L. Boadt has indicated that Ezekiel was conscious of the conflict between Yahweh's exclusive claims and the attraction of the other nations' idols. He concludes that the function of these oracles and the use of the recognition formula were to call for "acknowledgment of Yahweh's pre-eminence as God."¹⁷

Commentators on Ezekiel have generally acknowledged the difficulty of interpreting the oracles against Gog (chaps. 38-39). But the purpose of the oracles is clear: "I will make known my holy name among the people of Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I, Yahweh, am the Holy One in Israel" (39:7). It was because of his name that God showed mercy to Israel in the past, it is now because of his name—which has been defiled by Israel to an intolerable extent—that God punishes them, and it is also because of his name that Israel (the people that bears his name) will be restored: "I will now bring back Jacob from captivity . . . I will be zealous for my holy name When I have brought them back from the nations . . . I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations" (39:25, 27). The emphasis of God's

¹⁴K. W. Carley, *Ezekiel Among the Prophets* (London: SCM, 1974) 68.

¹⁵Cooke, *Ezekiel* 34.

¹⁶W. McKane, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," *Tradition and Interpretation* (ed. G. W. Anderson; Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 173.

¹⁷L. Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles Against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29-32* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980) 169170.

concern for his name is even more explicit in 36:22: "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things [i.e., restoration], but for the sake of my holy name!"

In examining Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's shift from judgment preaching to salvation preaching, T. M. Raitt has argued that the two prophets attach no reason to the announcement of God's coming salvation and that no logical transition exists between the two phases of preaching.¹⁸ While trying to make the structure of the two prophets' salvation oracles conform to a uniform pattern, Raitt has ignored an important difference between the two prophets. We cannot deny that Jeremiah gives no reason for God's announcement of intervention to save Israel: He simply starts his oracles with "Days are coming" (15 of 19 OT occurrences are in Jeremiah) and with God's "I will."¹⁹ But Ezekiel goes beyond Jeremiah: He has explicitly given a reason for which God has declared that he will intervene.

The motif of God's concern for his name, as we have shown, has served as the logical link between Israel's past survival, present judgment and future salvation. The exiles had to be convinced of God's continuing guidance of Israel's future, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem. A nation that doubts its future will do little to ensure its continuation. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the bones (chap. 37) was one of his important messages of hope to the exiles. In his excellent essay on the rhetoric of the vision M. V. Fox has concluded that its message not only aimed at preserving the nation's hope and thus its will to survive but also implanted in the exiles the understanding that their future would be a transformation of the nation's character by the power of God's Spirit.²⁰ God is concerned that when the nation comes to life again they "will know that I am Yahweh" (vv 6, 13, 14).

Another important message of hope in Ezekiel is his elaborate visions of the restored temple and land (chaps. 40-48). M. Haran has convincingly argued for the authenticity of these visions and has classified them into two types of material: descriptions of visions, and prescriptions of laws.²¹ The grandeur of this series of visions must have greatly impressed Ezekiel's audience. They are an effectual reminder to the despairing exiles: If God has worked out such a detailed plan, the restoration is definitely going to take place. The promise that accompanies this series of visions is this: That which has caused the chosen people to go into exile will not happen again, because "the house of Israel will never again defile my holy name" (43:7).

IV. CONCLUSION

In the previous sections we have suggested that, in Ezekiel, Israel's entire history is intimately tied to God's concern for his name. The three historical

¹⁸T. M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 145, 255.

¹⁹M. Weinfeld, "Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel," *ZAW* 88/1 (1976) 18.

²⁰M. V. Fox, "The Rhetoric of Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of the Bones," *HUCA* 51 (1980) 6, 15.

²¹M. Haran, "The Law-Code of Ezekiel XL-XLVIII and its Relation to the Priestly School," *HUCA* 50 (1979) 47.

chapters indicate how, in Israel's past, God has withheld his wrath for the sake of his name, and how Israel's repeated and increasing apostasy has defiled God's name to such an extent that it is now no longer tolerable and needs to be stopped. The punishment of the people, however, has brought about a test of God's reputation because they are the people who bear his name. For this reason God will restore Israel, revealing himself as the Lord of history. Thus in Ezekiel Israel's history is regarded as the arena where God's name is to be recognized and honored because he is actively involved with the people of Israel. Though many of his prophecies deal with the gloomy picture of punishment and destruction, Ezekiel has a positive view of his people's destiny. Since its historical process is primarily moved by God's concern for his name, Israel is protected. Because the people's destiny does not rest on human deeds but on God's name, their restoration from exile is guaranteed. By closely examining the conception of Israel's history in the book, we have entered into a distinctive domain of Ezekiel's thought.