
EZEKIEL AND THE COVENANT OF FRIENDSHIP

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Abstract

The slippery idea of “spirituality” might, with care, be put to use by biblical exegetes. Spirituality is defined in this paper as the social enactment of religious ideas. Four categories are offered to analyze the biblical witness as a record of spirituality. These categories are, first, an ultimate end; second, an ideal self-image by which this end might be achieved; third, an encoding of teachings in Scripture by which the self-image can be realized or understood; and fourth, a proposal for a way of life that makes achievement of the ultimate end a practical possibility. Accordingly, Ezekiel’s “spirituality” may be understood to have, on one hand, an ultimate end of a return of the people to the land with the presence of God; and on the other, an ideal self-image of conversion of the community toward this ultimate end. Then it encodes, in oracles of judgment and deliverance, teachings that enable adherents to form the ideal self-image, and finally, as a way of life that puts these teachings into practice, it proposes a “covenant of friendship” (Ezek 34:25 and 37:36) among the exiled people and between them and their captors.

SCHOLARS attempting to define “spiritual” practice in Israelite religion have so far explored the Deuteronomic and Priestly *community* traditions (Becker, Derousseaux), the wisdom traditions emphasizing *individual* spiritualities (Derousseaux), and the so-called spiritualities of the poor, or *anawim* (Gelin). The “spirituality” of the prophetic tradition as such has yet to be considered in any comprehensive way. I do not propose in this article to present such a comprehensive treatment, but I do intend to open up some ground regarding method of investigation by attempting to describe a spirituality represented by the writings that form the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel’s book comes to us as the redacted experience of a community-in-exile. This community is composed of the ruling class forced from Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. and detained in Babylon, and the classes exiled to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 (Childs: 359). Apart from the trauma of what we can only euphemistically call “relocation,” perhaps the most daunting fact that all these exiles faced was that the wars of conquest that they and their forebears had experienced over the period of more than a century had wrested their land from them. The collective memory was not only one of a land lost by relocation, but also one of a land lost by violence. The people endured a severe dislocation—both literally and spiritually.

This *dislocation* of people and land may be posed as a theological problem, though it is not my intention to dwell on theological problems at any length in this paper—

rather to wonder how the people’s coping with these theological problems is reflected in spiritual practice. As Walter Brueggemann points out, in the pre-exilic religion, just as the people were intended for the land, so also Yahweh was “intended for the land” (138). When Israel is exiled, God forsakes the land (9:9, 7:22 and especially 8:6). God’s exile is completely inexplicable, and the fact that it has happened, terrifying. The people completely lose their moorings. The frantic, brutal and devastating quality of the writings that comprise Ezekiel reflect, I think, its audience’s terror at this loss.

The sense of a land, a city, and a sanctuary, and almost a people, lost, and lost by violence, and God himself in exile, is set harshly into the structure of Ezekiel. For one thing, the people are implicated in the sorry business of the loss. In Ezekiel 17 (verse 15 and following) the book records that King Zedekiah set himself in opposition to the Word of God because he rebelled against Babylonian overlordship, aligning himself with Egypt. He “took sides” in wars of conquest over a land to which neither power had any right. For another thing, the text is full of images of brutality. The Temple is destroyed, and most of those who survive the quelling of rebellion are forced into exile. Pain and responsibility are dominant realities of God’s exile. Nonetheless, the reader interested

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in spirituality does not, I believe, experience the writings in the first place as a statement of these historical themes, but experiences them first as the residue of an enactment of Israel's old religious ideas in the completely unfamiliar social setting of exile. This body of writings can be argued to have arisen as an aid to a new social practice emerging from the complete break-down of social and religious order to which both the historical facts, and the disjointedness of the writings are witnesses. Though the writings are disjointed, they are by no means disorganized. Indeed, they are carefully worked upon and extremely powerful writing—more evidence for their role as aid-to-practice, or, as the final product of their being refined as aid-to-practice.

The book draws on Priestly concepts (Hurvitz). It can be argued that it refashions Priestly ideas to adjust social practice of the community's religious ideas to the facts of exile. For the Priestly tradition, Temple, prince, and ritual are elements that attach the people to the land as much as to God. Thus, the book of Ezekiel would require at the least that the social practice of religious ideas have some way of naming the desire to return to the land in terms like the Priestly ones, some way of imagining a definitive end to the wars of conquest over that land in much the same vein, and would require that Israel be named in such a way as would promote the self-removal of the interlopers occupying the land which Priestly spirituality needs uncontested. For convenience, I will discuss these basic needs the text might be expected to meet as those of ultimate end, ideal self-image, encoding in the text of teachings toward this end, and proposed way of life. I use these categories as a heuristic toward making the case that the book of Ezekiel offers a spirituality, with a deep sense of gratitude to Professor William Irwin of the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, whose unpublished ideas on other First Testament spiritualities I put to use here.

While the book of Ezekiel depends by and large on the priestly tradition for religious ideas, it undertakes a fairly complete renovation of the relationship of these ideas to the practical life of the people in exile it addresses. The ultimate end of Ezekiel's spirituality, for example, is not, as it is in the Priestly tradition, life purified by the presence of God, but *the return* of the people to the land. The return of the people to the land implies the rest of the Priestly spirituality—purification, presence of God, Temple and rituals. To put it the other way, the rest of Priestly spirituality implies the return of the people to the land. As Walter Brueggemann writes, biblical faith consistently refuses to choose between land and people (139). For the book of Ezekiel, the presence of God must be in the land for the land to be truly the people's, and just as important, the presence of God must be with the people

for the people to be truly the land's. Ezekiel makes this point frequently.

I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place my Sanctuary among them forever. My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God and they shall be my people. And when my Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the Lord do sanctify Israel (37:26b-28).

The Lord sanctifies both the people and the land: land and people together make up Israel. The land itself, for example, is seen as an entity capable of purification: "No more will I allow the jibes of the nations to be heard against you, no longer shall you suffer the taunting of the peoples; and never again shall you cause your nations to stumble" (36:15). The symbiotic relationship between people and land highlights how crucial the return of the people to the land or joining together of them is for the exiles, and how painful the separation.

The return of the land, the presence of God, and the people are all part of the goal of Ezekiel's spirituality. The book also sets forth a prince as a necessary element. In chapter 34, God likens both himself and David to a shepherd: "I will appoint a single shepherd over them to tend them—my servant David" (34:23). The spirituality thus includes the political realm in its ultimate end. The reunion of God, land and people can only occur at the same time as a new political order does. Nonetheless, the book does not offer a new political order as the means by which the people will return to the land; nor does it offer the return to the land as the means by which a new political order is established. Rather, it sees both political order and return to the land as simultaneous ends toward which spiritual practice is aimed.

The ultimate end of Ezekiel's spirituality, then, the reunion of nation, land and prince with the presence of God, is a highly cohesive and comprehensive end. The vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezek 37) conveys the spiritually integrative energy this ultimate fulfillment affords the exilic community. Like dry bones into which new life is breathed, the people will, as ultimate end, once again live in the land with the presence of God and under just government.

Without a prevailing idea of a self-image useful to this end, however, the reunion, either projected or anticipated, remains merely a fantasy. The book sets forth such a useful ideal self-image in language sure to guarantee it prevails: that of both a people and individuals among that people experiencing conversion to God's holiness. The following well-known passage attests that the primary experience of self in this spirituality (again, acknowledging Ezekiel's debt to the priestly tradition, while being careful to distinguish his departures) is not the experience of

God's holiness, but rather, the experience of *conversion* to such holiness:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put my spirit into you Thus I will cause you to follow my laws and faithfully observe my rules. Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people and I will be your God (36:26-28).

The idea of the community in conversion can be seen as Ezekiel's solution to a major religious problem. Priestly spirituality emphasizes a holiness code which can only be observed in God's presence and thus can only be practiced with a Temple and a caste of priests nearby. How can an exilic people be holy, if they have no access to the Temple and its rituals? The exile has knocked city and land and Temple out of daily life: holiness is at best an unachievable reality; indeed, by its absence from practical life, it might well be in a new way a terrifying concept. Conversion pulls the concept of the holy into real life again, because it makes it possible to define the holy as the at-oneness of people, land, prince and presence of God, to which experience of exile is being converted.

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Thomas M. Raitt has shown that the prophetic oracles of deliverance make their first appearance in the exile, when the institutions of Israel (prince and Temple) no longer have any force (161). He notes that fifteen of thirty-nine of them, and ten of seventeen he believes have the greatest claim to authenticity in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (133), include a "transformation" element. Transformation is one of three elements Raitt distinguishes as generic to the oracle of deliverance. He names the other two elements as deliverance and relationship. The oracle of deliverance, making its first appearance in exile, can be seen to promote the image of a conversion to holiness that Ezekiel, especially, is urging as an ideal self-image upon the exiled community. An oracle that at once states incisively that God is transforming, God is electing anew, and God is delivering God's people is an oracle that offers its audience an extremely dynamic ideal self-image of self-in-conversion.

Conversion in Ezekiel is a turning of the whole community toward the commonly valued end of return to the land. Neither conversion nor end would be necessarily granted by a people daily traumatized by the real-life

disappointments of captivity. Thus, interestingly, conversion as an ideal corporate self-image is lent to the work of building up the value of individuals within the community. In fact, conversion plays individual against community in an entirely unprecedented, and unrepeated way. Deuteronomic and Priestly spiritualities, for example, are thoroughly communal, and the later wisdom spiritualities, such as Ben Sira's, are cast as individual. But in chapter 34 God, a shepherd over Israel, dismisses the shepherds who, rather than tending the flock, have been preying on it. Dismissing these God will then gather the entire flock together (a communal image), and gathering them together, will judge between those who have been faithful, and those who have not (an individual image). Likewise, individual responsibility as a strong element in community conversion can be seen in the tale of the man in white linen who goes through the visionary city of Chapters 8 through 11 at the request of the angel of God to mark the heads of those who moan and groan for the abominations committed in it. They will be saved. Without saying how many he has found, the man returns, saying to the angel, "I have done as you have commanded me." Whoever created this passage has emphasized the importance of the individual, because two questions surface for the modern reader: first, "do the ones he has found include me, the hearer of this oracle?" and secondly, "how many *did* the man in linen find—did he find any?"—alerting the reader or hearer to value his or her place in the community, and for the community to value the place of the individual in it. Ultimately, a people who has lost its religious and political institutions must find a way to create a new leadership from within itself for its new situation. Community and individuals played off against each other in a process of conversion creates a dynamic in which leadership may develop.

The book of Ezekiel encodes means to realize the ideal self-image of community and individual in conversion within the book's oracles of judgement and deliverance. In the oracle in which God orders Ezekiel to moan softly and be heartsick at the death of his wife (24:17), God wants Ezekiel to show the exiles that what *they are to do* is to pine when Jerusalem falls and the Temple is destroyed. Permitted by the oracle to moan, Ezekiel is *prohibited* from lament. Likewise, the people "shall not lament or weep . . . but be heartsick because of [their] iniquities and . . . moan to one another" (24:23). In other words, the exiles are not to indulge their grief: they are not to be angry, are not to weep, are not to lament. Instead, they are to be heartsick; they are to pine (RSV)—and as Ezekiel is never, ever to relent from pining at the loss of his spouse, never, ever are they to relent from pining for the loss of their relationship with God and their (and God's) absence from the land.

That this teaching is the book's first practical teaching can be argued from the fact that Ezekiel's response to his wife's death occurs at the center of the book as we have it. The contention can be supported from the utility of its application to other incidences recorded in the text. When Ezekiel is freed from his inability to speak (after the fugitive from Jerusalem arrives announcing the destruction of the Sanctuary [33]), he says that he expects that the exiles will come to him simply to be amused by him: they will "hear his words," but, the fools, they will not "do" them. Repentance comes to mind as something fools ought to do, but pining would be more natural here and more helpful to the community, for it would create a positive dynamic in which repentance has some use. If the exiles that come to Ezekiel are to do, rather than mock his words, then, like Ezekiel, they will moan and pine. In this case what they "ought" to do is exactly the thing they need to do if they are to preserve any sense of corporate and individual identity. On one hand, merely to ridicule Ezekiel would be to pretend nothing were wrong—that kind of denial would soon lead to losing a grip on their communal and individual identity. On the other, to lament would be to ignore that God is alive and faithful. Both of these responses, ridicule and lament, though natural enough to the exilic situation, and in other situations probably healthy, are decidedly unattractive and unhealthy alternatives here. The oracles turn the community away from both alternatives and urge that the community pine as Ezekiel pines at the loss of his wife.

A difference obtains, however, between the call for the community to pine and Ezekiel's reason for pining, and by pausing over the difference we can see something of the method employed in Ezekiel to encode the ideal self-image of community and individual in conversion. By it we see that "ideal" self-image does not mean "idealized" self-image. The book's ideal self-image is fully grounded in the actuality of loss and suffering. Ezekiel's wife is hopelessly, impossibly dead and will not live for any amount of pining. To the exiled people, the return of their land probably seemed equally impossible. The sense of futility and despair could well be imagined to be equal. By contrast, the return of land to the people is not about life and death, whereas the impossibility of the return of Ezekiel's wife is about life and death. In Ezekiel's placing his feelings of loss at the service of re-forming the community, is to be found the genuine solace he could find at his wife's death, and the chief means, if not the only means, by which the people's feelings of loss can be converted into feelings of hope. The book begins its encoding of its implicit spirituality at the point at which Ezekiel and his community are.

Literature offers several famous analogies to pining or heartsickness: Dante's longing for Beatrice; Odysseus's longing for Penelope. The consequence in the literary type

	48	37	48
Oracles of promise to Israel	↑	↑	↑
	33	36	40
	32		39
Oracles of judgment against the nations (Tyre, Egypt)		35 (Seir) (Gog and Magog)	
	25		38
	24	34	37
Oracles of judgment against Israel	↑	↑	↑
	1	33	33

of such longing is fulfillment; the consequence in the biblical one is a way of life that converts bitterness into realistic hope. An Israel that pines for its iniquities as a way of life will experience conversion of heart by which it comes to be more and more convinced that God will restore to it a land among the nations with a prince and with God's presence. This dynamic and fortifying teaching is built into the patterns of repetitions and developments in the text. For convenience's sake I have laid out some of these patterns in the chart above. The primary pattern the book uses to develop this concept arises from relationships among its great many oracles—the oracles of judgement against Israel, oracles of judgement against the nations, and oracles of restoration of the relationship between God and Israel. The oracles of judgment against Israel serve the end of converting Israel to an impossibly just awareness of God's holiness, and God's expectation that they be holy; the oracles of judgment against the nations serve the need to convert Israel to an awareness again of God's powerfully peaceful intentions for Israel and the world; and the oracles of deliverance convert Israel to the idea that the land shall be returned to it, and they shall return to the land. The dynamic of conversion encoded in these three types of oracles inheres in the structure of the book in a way that works cumulatively on the reader or hearer who attends to the whole. Since the goal to be achieved is a kind of pinnacle, or height of aspiration, I have placed the initial moment of the dynamic at the bottom of the diagram for each one of the movements I have noticed.

The peculiar and dynamic element of these structures is the way that they are not so much woven into each

other as they occur within and without each other. For example, the largest example of the dynamic is developed from one cover of the book to the other. The smallest, between chapters 33-37, occurs *within* this larger structure. These dynamics do not overlap, rather, they inhere within each other, as the wheels of the opening vision inhere within each other: wheels *within* wheels. In effect, the layers of the book correspond to the image of the wheels and wheels within wheels of the opening vision. The layers are, in fact, like wheels in *con-version*. We can see in broad outline how they work by looking at the very last phrases of the book: Ezekiel's last word is that of the oracle commanding the returned nation to rename the renewed Jerusalem with the name "The Lord is There." Everything in the text is structured in such a way as to give the people the strength to do what they practically can in the knowledge of who God is and in their real-life circumstances to live productively toward the fulfillment of this end. Wheels within wheels, turning, turning, turning, turning an exiled and violated people from bitterness of exile to hope of return, the book broaches a return both of the presence of God to the land from which he has removed himself, and simultaneously a return of his people to his presence there.

A way of life by which Ezekiel proposes to put into practice this teaching is not transparent to the reader, and this is probably so because oracles and visions do not lend themselves well to such concrete details—at least, they do not lend themselves as easily to them as holiness codes do, and instructions about ritual practice. The story told of Ezekiel's call to prophecy is about as concrete a statement of the way of life the writings propose for an exilic spirituality as anything else we get. God commands Ezekiel to eat a scroll of "lamentations, dirges and woes." It is doubtful a piece of papyrus would taste very good. As Ezekiel eats it, however, he finds that it tastes like honey. The *conversion* of the scroll (from bitterness to sweetness) is an unnatural act that anticipates Ezekiel's unnatural act of pining incessantly at the death of his wife. In eating the scroll of lamentations Ezekiel takes the bitter medicine and the taste that is left is sweet. Or, to put it graphically, he eats his bitter words.

Thus, the main outlines of Ezekiel's proposed way of life may well be that of a "covenant of friendship" (Ezek 34:25/37:36); a covenant of friendship both among the exiles and between the exiles and their captors, a covenant of friendship that grows through a conversion from bitterness, to pining, to hope, the end of which will be the return of the people to the land with a prince with the presence of God. This particular phrase, "covenant of friendship" occurs only three times in the Hebrew Scriptures: twice here in Ezekiel, and once in Deutero-Isaiah (54:10). It appears to be, then, a turn of phrase based on exilic experience. Many commentators have noted the absence

of a kind of historical specificity to the actual pronouncements by Ezekiel. Yet it is remarkable that many of his sermons and oracles have an audience—the elders of Israel who come to him for a prophetic word. Their coming together with the prophet is a sign of a covenant of friendship among them: a gathering together with each other to try to make sense of what has happened. It sets the stage for the kind of practical relationships the exiles should seek to create among themselves and with their captors. The only means a community stripped of its outward markings will possess to preserve its distinct identity would be a covenant of friendship. Walter Brueggemann notes that the oracle of deliverance at 47:21-23 includes the "stunning statement" that aliens are included in the future the book envisions for the people. He writes, "Now the alien is treated like the native born. The promise is expansive and inclusive" (143). Such it needs to be among friends.

In these few pages I have sketched out elements that would seem to argue for the idea that Ezekiel's book formulates and offers a "spirituality" to an exilic community. I have suggested that through this spirituality the exilic community grows stronger and stronger in the sense of itself as indeed destined to participate once again in a holy relationship with Yahweh in the land Yahweh has promised and with the prince Yahweh will give them. As such, the book of Ezekiel offers, from the lived experience of the exilic community, a spirituality whose lineaments differ from the Deuteronomic communal spirituality that receives its first formulation just prior to the exile, and from the later post-exilic Priestly communal spirituality; it differs from the wisdom spiritualities, such as Ben Sira, in which we see responses to the influences of Hellenism, and from the spiritualities of the *anawim*. Situated somewhere in the midst of all these, Ezekiel's spirituality offers a covenant of friendship by which an exiled people restore themselves to the land, and bring peace to all the nations.

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