

Ezekiel and the Foreign Nations

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Ezekiel

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Abstract and Keywords

Foreign nations serve several, interrelated functions within the book of Ezekiel. First, the nations are identified as a cause of Israel's downfall, insofar as Israel has imitated foreign behavior rather than maintained its distinctively Yahwistic practices. The nations are also called into service as agents of divine punishment. As unwitting agents, however, the nations threaten Yhwh's authority; the oracles against the nations in particular are accordingly devoted to the nations' proper subordination to Yhwh. They witness to Yhwh's nature as a powerful, holy, and just God. Having served as a temptation to Israel and a danger to Yhwh's authority, they are absent from Ezekiel's visions of Israel's future.

Keywords: oracles against the nations, idolatry, political alliances, agency, knowledge of Yhwh

Ezekiel is theology on the world stage. For all that Israel is the center of its attention, the book is acutely conscious of its international audience. Israel's fate and thus Yhwh's actions are under constant scrutiny from the nations, whose watchful eye and implicit judgment drive the action. The book's characteristic refrain encapsulates its concern with these international observers of Israel and Yhwh's relationship: "then they will know that I am Yhwh." The nations serve primarily as witnesses to Yhwh's true nature. For all to be well, therefore, the nations must know Yhwh.

This is, however, not the only function of the foreign nations in the book of Ezekiel. They are put forward as the cause of Israel's downfall, as their wayward behavior is adopted and enhanced by the Israelites in defiance of Yhwh's commands. They serve as the agents of Yhwh's punishment of Israel—Babylon and its king, above all—and therefore they appear as the destination of Israel's punishment, as Israel is scattered among the nations in exile. As Yhwh's agents—indeed, by their very existence—however, the nations threaten to undermine Yhwh's authority. Substantial parts of the book are therefore devoted to emphasizing the nations' proper subordination to Yhwh; especially the section known as the oracles against the nations (Ezekiel 25–32) seeks to put them in their rightful place. It is perhaps little surprise that, in Ezekiel's visions of the future, the foreign nations are almost entirely hidden from view.

In what follows we will examine the various roles played by the foreign nations in Ezekiel, with particular attention to the relationship among them. We will take a largely synchronic approach; although certain aspects of the foreign nations' presentation are more, or less, prominent in different parts of the book, the picture overall is quite consistent. The minor variations in their presentation, though they will be noted, are not sufficient to warrant an extensively diachronic analysis in an investigation of the present scope.

1. The Foreign Nations as Cause of Israel's Downfall

The foreign nations' involvement in Israel's sin and consequent destruction is of two types. First, Israel is accused of imitating the religious abominations of the foreign nations, defiling the temple through the adoption of foreign practices, and offending Yhwh to the point of his departure from the sanctuary. This role for the nations—as the source of Israel's inspiration in its pursuit of non-Yahwistic cultic activities—is most prominent in Ezekiel's vision of the abominations occurring in the temple precincts, in chapter 8. Although exactly what is happening in each of the parts of this vision is not wholly clear, it is widely agreed that there is a foreign component to some, if not all, of the activities that Ezekiel sees.¹ The significance of these activities for Yhwh's judgment on the inhabitants of Jerusalem in chapters 9–11—and the specifically problematic nature of their association with non-Israelite nations—is clear in Yhwh's explanation of the devastation he has wrought: “Then you shall know that I am Yhwh, whose statutes you have not followed, and whose ordinances you have not kept, but you have acted according to the ordinances of the nations that are around you” (11:12).²

Although the foreign nations as the source of Israel's bad habits is less prominent in most other parts of the book, a similar association between Israel's downfall and its adoption of foreign habits occurs also in the litany of disasters which constitute Israel's history with Yhwh (chapter 20), and in the provisions for the restored temple (chapters 40–48).³ In the first case, immediately upon Yhwh's choice of Israel in Egypt we hear of Israel's refusal to abandon Egyptian practices:

They rebelled against me and would not listen to me; not one of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. (20:8; cf. 20:16, 32)

Yhwh is a jealous God, unwilling to share the adulation of the Israelites with other nations' gods; the Israelites' worship of such deities defiles them and makes them unfit for relationship with Yhwh.⁴ The idea that there is a fundamental incompatibility between Israel's worship of its particular god, Yhwh, and the Israelites' worship of the gods of other nations lies beneath both this condemnation and the defilement depicted at greater length in the vision of the temple (chapters 8–11).

As the worship of foreign gods defiled the temple, so too did the presence of foreigners. The prescriptions for the renewed worship of Yhwh at the end of the book make absolutely clear that such persons are never again to be permitted into the sanctuary:

Say to the rebellious house, to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord Yhwh: ‘O house of Israel, let there be an end to all your abominations in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple when you offer to me my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant with all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of my sacred offerings; but you have appointed foreigners to act for you in keeping my charge in my sanctuary.’ Thus says the Lord Yhwh: ‘No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.’” (44:6–9)⁵

The recurrent references to “abominations,” here as in chapter 11, signal that the presence of foreigners in the most sacred of Yahwistic spaces is conceived as a boundary violation: this is Israelite, Yahwistic space—and non-Israelite, non-Yahwistic people are not permitted to enter it.⁶ By their presence and by their practices, the foreigners have diminished Israel’s uniqueness as a Yahwistic people. Taken to its inexorable conclusion, Israel’s adoption of these foreigners’ practices led to its dissolution as Israel and its dispersal among those very nations—from which it was now indistinguishable.

When the book links the sins of Israel with the activities of foreigners, it tends also to emphasize Israel’s propensity to *surpass* the deeds of these foreign nations; by this exaggeration of the nations’ sins, Israel condemns itself all the more. Thus in chapter 5, Jerusalem’s punishment is linked to the greatness of her offense when compared to her neighbors:

Thus says the Lord Yhwh: “This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. But she has rebelled against my ordinances and my statutes, becoming more wicked than the nations and the countries all around her, rejecting my ordinances and not following my statutes.” Therefore thus says Yhwh God: “Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not followed my statutes or kept my ordinances, but have acted according to the ordinances of the nations that are all around you.” Therefore thus says Yhwh God: “I, myself, am coming against you; I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations, I will do to you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.” (5:5–9)

Margaret Odell observes of this passage that “Jerusalem’s turbulence is scandalous not simply because it is worse than that of the nations but because it erupts in Jerusalem, at the center of God’s creating and sustaining activity.”⁷ The same note is struck in chapter 16. As the diatribe of the allegory reaches its height, Jerusalem is negatively compared to her foreign sisters, Sodom and Samaria:

You not only followed their ways, and acted according to their abominations; with-
in a very little time you were more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live,
says Yhwh God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and
your daughters have done.... Samaria has not committed half your sins; you have
committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear right-
eous by all the abominations that you have committed. (16:47–48, 51)

The same point is made in chapter 23's allegory of the sisters Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem). Jerusalem's offenses would be bad enough on their own, but they have been made worse by their excess and their foreignness (23:11, 40–42). As Odell explains, "Oholibah has imported the *hāmôn* [tumult] of the nations into her precincts and has thereby increased the scandal of her own chaotic behavior."⁸

Second, Israel is accused of having pursued various foreign nations as political allies. This is the focus of the interminable diatribes of chapters 16 and 23, in which Jerusalem is cast as the unfaithful spouse of Yhwh. Political alliances with other nations are depicted as dalliances with other lovers: "You played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger," declares Yhwh; "You played the whore with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied. You multiplied your whoring with Chaldea, the land of merchants; and even with this you were not satisfied" (16:26, 28–29). Political alliances with other nations are cast as betrayals of Yhwh; political and religious exclusivity are overlaid one upon the other.⁹ Israel's political loyalty, like its worship, should be to Yhwh alone.

This logic is familiar from the oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem: the reliance on alliances with foreign nations to shore up Jerusalem's political security constitutes a failure to trust in Yhwh's power to defend and protect the city and its inhabitants. Reliance on mere mortal powers to rescue Israel from its enemies is doomed to fail; none can match Yhwh.

About Egypt, Ezekiel warns that it was "a staff of reed to the house of Israel; when they grasped you with the hand, you broke, and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke, and made all their legs unsteady" (29:6b–7; cf. Isa 30:1–7; 31:1–3).¹⁰ In chapter 23, the futility of Jerusalem's pursuit of such alliances is underlined by comparison: Samaria pursued the Assyrians, only in the end to be given up to them (23:5–10). Jerusalem witnessed the consequences of Samaria's reliance on foreign nations but failed to heed the lesson. It, too, pursued the Assyrians, then the Babylonians and the Egyptians in turn. Again, Jerusalem's crimes are compared to those of the nations, emphasizing their depravity: "she was more corrupt than her sister in her lustings and her whorings" (23:11). Jerusalem's judgment is explicitly linked to these political-religious infidelities, namely, the betrayal of its promises to Yhwh, in the form of political dalliances with foreign powers.

The conflation of the political and the religious in these extended allegories is unlikely to be random imagery. Political alliances invoked the gods as witnesses, and also as guarantors of punishment—should either party fail to live up to their commitments. When these

chapters refer to the “idols of everyone for whom she lusted” (23:7, concerning Samaria; cf. 23:30, concerning Jerusalem), therefore, they may have in mind these specific acts of religious apostasy, in addition to condemning failure to trust in Yhwh in political terms: the idols of the foreign nations become the idols of Jerusalem (16:36; 23:37, 39, 49).¹¹

Although grotesque, there is a kind of poetic justice in the consequences that loom as Jerusalem’s punishment: because it betrayed the Babylonians in favor of alliances with Egypt, it will be given into the Babylonians’ hands (23:17, 28). Even more notable is that the choice of this fate as Jerusalem’s punishment effectively allies Yhwh with Babylonia. Both have been betrayed by Jerusalem’s relentless pursuit of other saviors; both will be vindicated when Yhwh delivers Jerusalem into the Babylonians’ hands.

2. The Foreign Nations as Agents of Yhwh’s Punishment

This alignment of Yhwh with Babylonia as the agent of Yhwh’s wrath is a particularly prominent aspect of Ezekiel’s attitude to the foreign nations.¹² The role of a foreign nation in the exaction of Yhwh’s judgment is hinted already in the book’s first sustained oracle of disaster against the land and its inhabitants, as Yhwh declares that “I will hand it over to strangers as booty, to the wicked of the earth as plunder; they shall profane it. ... I will bring in the worst of the nations to take possession of their houses” (7:21, 24). A similar warning is decreed for the house of Israel that remains yet in Jerusalem, as Ezekiel’s vision of the abominations in the temple—and the judgment to be wrought upon the city as a result—reaches its climax: “I will take you out of it and give you over to the hands of foreigners, and execute judgments upon you” (11:9). That Yhwh will banish the prince of Jerusalem to Babylon is noted in 12:13, but as late as chapter 16 the human agent of this disaster is still identified only obliquely:

I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated; I will gather them against you from all around, and will uncover your nakedness to them, so that they may see all your nakedness. ... I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments. (16:37, 39–41)

That the agent of this devastation is Babylon is explicit only from chapter 17—a sustained allegory involving two eagles, a cedar tree, and a low-growing vine. The eagles are Babylon and Egypt, the cedar tree is Jehoiachin, and the vine is Zedekiah. Like chapter 16, the root of the problem is disloyalty. Here, however, disloyalty to Yhwh is overlaid onto disloyalty to the king of Babylon. Zedekiah is condemned for his betrayal of his loyalty oath to

("covenant with") Babylonia, in language identical to that used to describe Israel's oath of loyalty to Yhwh (and its betrayal) (17:13–19).

The strength of this parallel, between Israel's oath of loyalty to Yhwh and the king's oath of loyalty to the king of Babylon, resides in part in the aforementioned invocation of the gods in the enforcement of such international treaties. The kings of the house of Israel swore by Yhwh that they would uphold this covenant with Babylon; their betrayal of that oath demands Yhwh's intervention. Yhwh and Babylon are thus arrayed together against the king in Jerusalem. Indeed, the conflation of Babylon's actions on behalf of *its* claim to loyalty and Yhwh's actions on behalf of *his* claim to loyalty is remarkable, with references to one and then to the other in rapid succession in the explication of the allegory:

As I live, says the Lord, Yhwh, surely in the place where the king resides who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke—in Babylon he shall die. ... Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, because he gave his hand and yet did all these things, he shall not escape. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Yhwh: As I live, I will surely return upon his head my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will spread my net over him, and he shall be caught in my snare; I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treason he has committed against me. (17:16, 18–20)

From this point onward, it is clear that the actions of the king of Babylon are undertaken not only on his own behalf but also on that of Yhwh: the king of Babylon has been chosen to be the agent of Yhwh's destruction. The sword that Yhwh prepares (21:8–17) is wielded by the king of Babylon, whom Yhwh directs toward Jerusalem (21:18–23).¹³ When Ezekiel revisits the allegory of Yhwh's unfaithful wife, he dissembles no longer:

Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord, Yhwh: I will arouse against you your lovers from whom you turned in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side: the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, governors and commanders all of them, officers and warriors, all of them riding on horses. They shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples; they shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet, and I will commit the judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their ordinances. (23:22–24)

Babylonia, accompanied by its allies, is the agent of Jerusalem's destruction; and it is Yhwh's judgment that the Babylonians will mete out. That the king of Babylon has at last begun the deed is conveyed to Ezekiel through a divine word (24:2). In recompense for his efforts on Yhwh's behalf—however unwitting—that king will be rewarded handsomely; the implied reward seems to have been Tyre but was later decreed to be Egypt (29:17–20). Indeed, the claim that the actions of the king of Babylon against Yhwh's own people are at the instigation and direction of Yhwh could hardly be clearer:

Therefore, thus says the Lord Yhwh: I will give the land of Egypt to King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon; and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it; and it shall be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt *as his payment for which he labored, because they worked for me*, says the Lord Yhwh. (29:19–20, emphasis added)

Thereupon follow the oracles against Egypt, with their own reiterations of the same principle: Nebuchadrezzar acts against Egypt at the behest of Yhwh (30:10, 24–25; 32:11–12).

Yet in Ezekiel, Babylon is not the only foreign power through whom Yhwh acts. The Assyrians serve a similar function against Samaria (23:9–10), while Gog of Magog moves according to Yhwh's stage directions (chs. 38–39). Even Egypt seems briefly to be allowed in on the action, as the first of chapter 19's two lion cubs is dragged off to Egypt (19:4), before the second is taken to the king of Babylon (19:9).

As each of these passages anticipate, the role of the foreign nations—especially Babylon—as agents of Yhwh's punishment against Israel means that they are also and often the resulting exiles' destination. Only occasionally is a specific location named; usually the warnings are generic declarations to the effect that Yhwh will “disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries” (12:13–19; cf. 6:8–9; 11:16–17; 14–16; 17:21; 20:23; 22:15; 36:19).¹⁴ When the destination is more specific, it is usually Babylonia (12:13; 14:22). Wherever they go, it is among the nations that Israel will finally be forced to consider and confess to its sins against Yhwh: “Those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I was crushed by their wanton heart that turned away from me, and their wanton eyes that turned after their idols” (6:9; cf. 12:16). As the book turns toward the future, it affirms that Yhwh “will take you [the house of Israel] from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land” (36:24; cf. 20:34, 38, 41; 28:25; 34:13, 27–28; 37:21; 39:27).

3. The Foreign Nations as Witnesses to Yhwh's Holiness

The foremost role of the foreign nations in the book of Ezekiel is that of witnesses. This is, ultimately, about recognizing the true nature of Yhwh: not only Israel but also the nations must rightly comprehend the power, the holiness, and the justice of Yhwh.¹⁵ There is a strong contextual component to the shifting manifestations of this part of the foreign nations' role in Ezekiel; what and how the nations witness to Yhwh's nature varies depending on the particular historical circumstances at hand.

First and foundational is that the foreign nations serve as witnesses to Yhwh's punishment of Israel. Again and again, the judgment pronounced on Israel is described as taking place “in the sight of the nations.” The reason that Israel will be publicly punished is expressed clearly the first time that Yhwh declares his intention to do so:

Thus says the Lord, Yhwh: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. But she has rebelled against my ordinances and my statutes, becoming more wicked than the nations and the countries all around her, rejecting my ordinances and not following my statutes. Therefore thus says the Lord, Yhwh: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not followed my statutes or kept my ordinances, but have acted according to the ordinances of the nations that are all around you; therefore thus says the Lord, Yhwh: I, I myself, am coming against you; I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations. (5:5–8, cf. 16:37)

Israel's special status as Yhwh's particular people has put Israel under exceptional scrutiny, for it is Israel which is meant to represent Yhwh to the world. Israel has failed, catastrophically, to witness to the nature of Yhwh. Indeed, even the Philistines are embarrassed on Israel's behalf (16:27)! Yhwh's holiness and Yhwh's power—over both Israel and the nations—are undermined by Israel's behavior. Indeed, Israel's bad behavior not only ignores Yhwh's true nature, but witnesses *against* it. It offends Yhwh's holiness, by defiling the people and the sanctuary with impure praxis and paraphernalia.

Equally severe is Israel's failure to acknowledge the loyalty that it owes to Yhwh, as the God that brought it out of Egypt; its pursuit of other gods and other powers constitutes a denial of Yhwh's status as Israel's one God and an expression of doubt in Yhwh's power to act on Israel's behalf. Through its infidelities, Israel has maligned Yhwh's reputation, giving to others the honor due to Yhwh alone. As the consequence for having dishonored Yhwh, Israel is to be deprived of its own honor (see esp. 22:8, 16, 26). It is to be made "a desolation and an object of mocking among the nations around you, in the sight of all that pass by" (5:14, cf. 5:15; 16:57; 22:4). Israel must be punished in the sight of the nations in order that the nations know that Israel's behavior does not reflect the nature of Yhwh; rather, it is abhorrent to and incompatible with Yhwh.

Putting this principle into practice, however, proved problematic. The intention was that Israel, once sent among the nations, would themselves witness to the justice of Yhwh in exacting this terrible punishment upon them (12:16). This either did not happen or did not succeed. Indeed, that the destruction of Israel might fail in its goal of demonstrating Yhwh's true character is anticipated already in the historical litany of chapter 20. Several times, Yhwh draws back from punishment: "I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of Egypt" (20:9, cf. 20:14, 22).

It is perhaps, then, little surprise that the foreign nations did not understand Israel's eventual punishment as a reflection of Yhwh's true nature as a holy, just, and absolute power. Rather, they misconstrued it, thinking that Israel's humiliation reflected the humiliation of its god, rather than Israel's humiliation at the hands of its god. The nations saw Israel's devastation at the hands of the Babylonians and concluded that Yhwh had been incapable of protecting them. Not only Israel (22:16) but also Yhwh is thus dishonored by Israel's sojourn among the nations (36:22–23). Indeed, even Israel's humiliation has been

taken too far: “they made you desolate indeed, and crushed you from all sides, so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations, and you became an object of gossip and slander among the people” (36:3; cf. 35:10–12). The nations mistook Israel’s devastation in Yhwh’s hands as a sign of their own triumph; they believed that Israel could belong to them, rather than recognizing that Israel belongs only to Yhwh. The nations’ recognition of Yhwh’s power, first demonstrated by Israel’s ethnogenesis in Egypt, has now been undone by Israel’s dispersal among the nations. Yhwh’s fury is duly ignited (36:5–6).

To correct this misunderstanding and restore his reputation, Yhwh undertakes several types of actions. First, he moves to act against the foreign nations, bringing about the demise of several named nations as well as the nations in general. This is undertaken in most sustained form in the oracles against the nations (chs. 25–32).¹⁶ Commentators frequently observe that the nations are condemned in these oracles for hubris, that is, for having confidence in their own power over and against the power and authority of Yhwh. The effect of their devastation is thus, first and foremost, to demonstrate Yhwh’s power.¹⁷ Indeed, the warnings of their coming devastation are punctuated, again and again, with the declaration that, as a result of Yhwh’s actions, the nations “shall know that I am Yhwh” (25:5, 7, 11, 17; 26:6; 28:22, 23; 29:6, 9, 16; 30:8, 19; 25, 26; 32:15).¹⁸ As Madhavi Nevader observes, by “supplanting the kings of Assyria, Egypt, and Tyre...Yhwh is engaged above all in an apologetic exercise for their jurisdiction and power.”¹⁹

The destruction of the nations as a case study in Yhwh’s power is visible also outside the oracles against the nations. Thus, the desolation of Mount Seir, too, is so that “you shall know that I am Yhwh” (35:9, cf. 35:15). Likewise, in the oracles about Gog of Magog, we hear that Yhwh’s destruction of this unprecedented enemy is to “make myself known in the eyes of many nations: then they shall know that I am Yhwh” (38:23, cf. 39:6) Yhwh’s power far exceeds that of any earthly power; he may raise them up or bring them low.

On occasion, this point is made even more specific, by explicating the devastation of the foreign nations as an object lesson in Yhwh’s exertion of his power *through the hand of Babylon*. Several times Yhwh makes explicit statements regarding his use of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, for his own particular purposes; thus, for example, “I will bring against Tyre from the north King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, king of kings, together with horses, chariots, cavalry, and a great and powerful army” (26:7). Likewise, in the description of the fate of Egypt:

I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh shall fall. And they shall know that I am Yhwh, when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall stretch it out against the land of Egypt, and I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries. Then they shall know that I am Yhwh. (30:25–26; cf. 29:18; 30:10; 32:11)

As this emphasis on Nebuchadnezzar’s subordination to Yhwh’s will suggests, these texts reflect the particular problem raised by Yhwh’s deployment of a foreign king to enact his punishment: just as the king in question is ignorant of Yhwh’s true role in his success, so too both Israel and the other nations are in danger of believing in some other source of

Babylon's power.²⁰ A similar consciousness about the danger of Yhwh's deployment of foreign kings to do his bidding undergirds Yhwh's declarations that, even as Gog of Magog comes out against Israel, in truth it is Yhwh who calls the tune: "*I will lead you out. ... I will bring you against my land*" (38:4, 16).²¹

Additionally, though less prominently, Yhwh's actions against the nations confirm Yhwh's justice. Yhwh does not exercise his power randomly, but in order to execute right judgment on the nations. This is manifest in a variety of ways. The short oracles in chapter 25, for example, speak of Yhwh as an avenging deity, recompensing the nations for their offenses (25:5–6, 14, 15–17; cf. chs. 35, 36). The execution of justice against Tyre and Egypt is likewise a key motivation for Yhwh's actions against them; though more obliquely achieved, their destruction is directly linked to their hubris in purporting to be more powerful than Yhwh and to their responsibilities in leading Israel astray.²² This emphasis on the justice of Yhwh's judgments against the nations, in turn, underscores that Yhwh's earlier actions against Israel were also justly undertaken.²³ Although the explicit expression of this point may well be among the book's latest parts, the climactic conclusion of chapter 39 gets the point across most clearly:

I will display my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am Yhwh their God, from that day forward. And the nations shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, because they dealt treacherously with me. So I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword. (39:21–23)

The second means by which Yhwh acts to restore his reputation—in the sight of Israel as well as in the sight of the nations—is by restoring Israel to security and flourishing in its own land.²⁴ As Katheryn Pfisterer Darr explains, "Israel's enemies will come to know that Yahweh is God not only when they themselves are punished for their pride and greed, but when they witness the fate of Israel. Yahweh's reputation among the nations...will be vindicated at last when God's people and their land are restored."²⁵ This, again, is primarily a demonstration of Yhwh's power, designed as an irrefutable counterargument to rumors that Israel's destruction was the result of Yhwh's impotence. This is perhaps most explicit in chapter 36, in which several times Yhwh's actions are said to respond to the negative words and deeds of those who have witnessed the preceding devastation.²⁶ Thus Yhwh will effect Israel's restoration "because the enemy said of you, 'Aha!'" and, "The ancient heights have become our possession" (36:2); "because you have suffered the insults of the nations" (36:6b, cf. 34:29); and "because they say to you, 'You devour people, and you bereave your nation of children'" (36:13). The necessity that Yhwh act in order to correct this misapprehension on the part of the nations as to the nature of his actions vis-à-vis Israel is unmistakable:

I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in

that it was said of them, “These are the people of Yhwh, and yet they had to go out of his land.” But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord Yhwh: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord Yhwh, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. (36:19–23)

The explicit object of Yhwh’s actions is the inversion of the foreign nations’ comments about Israel and their implications for Yhwh’s reputation among the nations:

And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.” Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, Yhwh, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, Yhwh, have spoken, and I will do it. (36:35–36)

As the previous declaration of Yhwh’s intentions indicates, Israel’s restoration also serves to communicate Yhwh’s supreme holiness, both to Israel and to the foreign nations who will witness this restoration. As Israel’s earlier banishment from Yhwh’s presence witnessed negatively to Yhwh’s holiness—exile having been necessitated by the dire incompatibility between Yhwh’s holiness and Israel’s impurity—the restoration of Israel witnesses to Yhwh’s holiness (28:35; 38:16, 23; 39:27) and to the sanctification of Israel that attends its renewed relationship with Yhwh (37:28). While this emphasis is peculiar to parts of the restoration material that are frequently identified as later elaborations, they are essentially continuous with the emphasis in the parts of the book devoted to judgment: namely, that Yhwh’s actions are driven by concerns about the implications of Yhwh’s holiness for Yhwh’s proximity to Israel.

4. The Foreign Nations and Ezekiel’s Vision of the Future

The culmination of Yhwh’s actions against the nations is their effective disappearance from the stage. Thus:

I will cut you [Ammon] off from the peoples and will make you perish out of the countries; I will destroy you. ... Ammon shall be remembered no more among the nations, and I will execute judgments upon Moab. (25:7, 10b–11a)

I will make you a bare rock; you shall be a place for spreading nets. You [Tyre] shall never again be rebuilt. ... I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though sought for, you will never be found again. (26:14, 21)

You [Tyre] have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more for ever. (27:36b; 28:19b)

Although the extremity of the foreign nations' devastation as described in the oracles against them may be partly rhetorical, it is noticeable that where they are allowed to survive, it is in the most limited state—and solely for the purpose of witnessing to Yhwh:

I will restore the fortunes of Egypt, and bring them back to the land of Pathros, the land of their origin; and there they shall be a lowly kingdom. It shall be the most lowly of the kingdoms, and never again exalt itself above the nations; and I will make them so small that they will never again rule over the nations. The Egyptians shall never again be the reliance of the house of Israel; they will recall their iniquity, when they turned to them for aid. Then they shall know that I am the Lord Yhwh. (29:14–16)

Having once tempted Israel with its illusory displays of strength, Egypt's punishment is to serve as an object lesson: the mighty will never pose such a temptation to Israel again. But Egypt's perpetually lowly status is the exception that proves the rule: the nations, by and large, are eliminated from the stage by the end of the book. Mount Seir—not even its people, the Edomites, but only the geography—makes a brief appearance in chapter 35, only to underscore the extent of its devastation; the mysterious Gog of Magog appears in chapters 38–39 dancing upon Yhwh's puppet strings.

The elimination of the nations as distractions on the stage of Yhwh's activities is clearest in the sustained vision of the restored temple in chapters 40–48. The only appearance of a foreigner in these nine chapters is a negative one (44:9).²⁷

5. Conclusions

The nations serve several, interrelated functions within the book of Ezekiel. First and foremost, they witness to Yhwh's true nature as a powerful, holy, and just God. Israel's punishment and restoration are directly tied to Yhwh's need for the nations to recognize these characteristics. More negatively, the nations are also identified as a cause of Israel's downfall, insofar as Israel has imitated foreign behavior rather than maintain their distinctively Yahwistic practices. Their dispersal among the nations reflects the dissolution of their Israelite identity through such activities. When Yhwh determines that Israel's punishment cannot be put off any longer, the nations are called into service as the agents of the divine punishment. Babylon and its king are of particular, though not exclusive, significance in this endeavor. As unwitting agents of Yhwh's punishment, however, the nations threaten Yhwh's authority; the oracles against the nations in particular are therefore devoted to the nations' proper subordination to Yhwh. Having served as a temptation to Israel and a danger to Yhwh's authority, they are absent from Ezekiel's visions of Israel's future. Up to these final visions, however, the foreign nations play a central role

in the book of Ezekiel's theology, key to its account of Israel's downfall, destruction, and ultimate restoration.

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Notes:

(1.) This is indisputable in the case of the women weeping for Tammuz, and possible for the other three abominations. For proposals and discussion, see Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 46; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 37-99; William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19* (World Biblical Commentary 28; Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 131-138; Corrine L. Carvalho, "A Serpent in the Nile: Egypt in the Book of Ezekiel," in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles*

against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, ed. Andrew Mein, Else K. Holt, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 612; London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 204; Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM, 1970), 124–125; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (Anchor Bible 22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 168–172; Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Old Testament Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119–135; Margaret S. Odell, “What Was the Image of Jealousy in Ezekiel 8?,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets, and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 408; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 134–138.

(2.) In this chapter, all renderings of the Hebrew text are adapted from NRSV; “Yhwh” replaces “the LORD,” while “the Lord Yhwh” replaces “the Lord GOD.”

(3.) There is, of course, a certain irony in these condemnations, given the extent and the range of foreign traditions on which the book draws for its own rhetorical purposes. Exemplary on this topic but hardly exhaustive are Christoph Auffarth, *Der drohende Untergang: “Schöpfung” in Mythos und Ritual im Alten Orient und in Griechenland am Beispiel der Odyssee und des Ezechielbuches* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 39; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991); Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra* (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 104; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991); Carvalho, “Serpent in the Nile,” 204–209; Brian N. Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context: Ezekiel’s Message Understood in Its Historical Setting of Covenant Curses and Ancient Near Eastern Mythological Motifs* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); Donna Lee Petter, *The Book of Ezekiel and Mesopotamian City Laments* (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 246; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); C. A. Strine, “Ezekiel’s Image Problem: The Mesopotamian Cult Statue Induction Ritual and the *Imago Dei* Anthropology in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76 (2014): 251–272; Christoph Uehlinger, “Virtual Vision vs. Actual Show: Strategies of Visualization in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Die Welt des Orients* 45 (2015): 62–84. In some cases, other scholars have offered counter-arguments, contending that Ezekiel’s primary interlocutor is native rather than foreign; but the overall picture of a prophet steeped in ancient Near Eastern traditions is not in dispute.

(4.) Carvalho notes Ezekiel’s distinctiveness in apportioning blame wholly to Israel, without condemnation of Egypt (“Serpent in the Nile,” 201).

(5.) A distinction is made between foreigners, בני נכר, who are strictly forbidden, and the sojourners or aliens, גרים, who are to be treated as Israelites and apportioned an allotment in the land (47:22–23). A similar distinction is seen also in Deuteronomy; see C. L. Crouch, *The Making of Israel: Cultural Diversity in the Southern Levant and the Formation of Ethnic Identity in Deuteronomy* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 162; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 211–223. These prohibitive verses in Ezekiel 44 are frequently considered a later addition to the text; on their relationship to Isaiah 56, including a review of previous research, see Nathan MacDonald, *Priestly Rule: Polemic and Biblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 476; Berlin: de

Gruyter, 2015); on their relationship to Leviticus 22, see Mark Awabdy, "Yhwh Exegetes Torah: How Ezekiel 44:7–9 Bars Foreigners from the Sanctuary," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2012): 685–703.

(6.) See C. L. Crouch, "What Makes a Thing Abominable? Observations on the Language of Boundaries and Identity Formation from a Social Scientific Perspective," *Vetus Testamentum* 65 (2015): 516–541.

(7.) Margaret Odell, "The City of Hamonah in Ezekiel 39:11–16: The Tumultuous City of Jerusalem," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 479–489, here 483.

(8.) Odell, "The City of Hamonah," 484.

(9.) On the intertwining of religious and political offenses in the prophets' use of marriage as a metaphor for the Yhwh-Israel relationship, see Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Academia Biblica 20; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 284–285.

(10.) For a clear summary of international relations in this period, see Carvalho, "Serpent in the Nile," 196–197, with further references; Carvalho further notes that the oracles against Egypt appear specifically tied to moments at which an alliance appeared appealing (201–202).

(11.) On the likely religious component of Judah's alliances with Egypt, see, e.g., Christopher B. Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and First Isaiah* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 288–315. The range of deities invoked in Assyrian loyalty oaths may be seen in Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (State Archives of Assyria 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988).

(12.) On the identification of Babylon as Yhwh's agent as part of a larger reworking of Israel's mythological traditions in light of exile, see A. Strine and C. L. Crouch, "Yhwh's Battle against Chaos in Ezekiel: The Transformation of a Judahite Myth for a New Situation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013): 883–903.

(13.) See Petter, *Book of Ezekiel*, 112–114.

(14.) In keeping with the book's overwhelming focus on Israel's fate, these are almost invariably declarations concerning Israel. Once, however, the phrase concerns the Egyptians (30:23); their fate at the hands of the Babylonians mirrors that of Israel.

(15.) Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 51; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 127.

(16.) There is no shortage of literature on the oracles against the nations and their purpose within the book. To mention only a few recent works, see Martin Alonso Corral, *Ezekiel's Oracles against Tyre: Historical Reality and Motivations* (Biblica et orientalia 46; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2002); C. L. Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations in Light of a Royal Ideology of Warfare," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011):

473–492; John Geyer, *Mythology and Lament* (Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Lydia Lee, *Mapping Judah's Fate in Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations* (Ancient Near East Monographs 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016); Safwat Marzouk, *Egypt as A Monster in the Book of Ezekiel* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2/76; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); Madhavi Nevader, "Yhwh and the Kings of Middle Earth: Royal Polemic in Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations," in Mein, Holt, and Kim, *Concerning the Nations*, 161–178; Paul R. Raabe, "Transforming the International Status Quo: Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations," in *Transforming Visions: Transformations of Text, Tradition, and Theology in Ezekiel*, ed. William A. Tooman and Michael A. Lyons (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 187–207; Markus Saur, *Der Tyroszyklus des Ezechielbuches* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 386; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); John T. Strong, "In Defense of the Great King: Ezekiel's Oracles against Tyre," in Mein, Holt, and Kim, *Concerning the Nations*, 179–194; Ian Douglas Wilson, "Tyre, a Ship: The Metaphorical World of Ezekiel 27 in Ancient Judah," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125 (2013): 249–262.

(17.) Occasionally, the destruction of foreign nations by Yhwh's interventions is justified as necessary in order that Israel "will know that I am Yhwh," usually with an implicit connection between the nations' destruction and Israel's restoration (28:24, 26; 29:21; 39:7, 22, possibly also 29:16).

(18.) "Because they scorned Judah, Yahweh threatens them with complete extermination. ... The ego of Yahweh is clearly the focal point of the threat, expressed by the constantly repeated first person singular verbal forms. Yahweh cannot leave this contempt unpunished, because to despise Judah = despising Yahweh. The use of the recognition formula emphasizes the fact that the Ammonites will become aware of this close relationship between Yahweh and his people. The Book of Ezekiel offers an ineluctably theocentric representation of the basis of Israel's existence" (Bodi, *Book of Ezekiel*, 80). The oracles against the nations in chapter 25 are often thought to be later additions to the book, but in their emphasis on the witnessing function they are in keeping with the oracles against Phoenicia and Egypt that follow.

(19.) Nevader, "Yhwh and the Kings," 178. This is undertaken especially through allusion to traditions about Yhwh's role as divine creator and divine king (Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles").

(20.) On the theological and mythological challenge posed by Yhwh's use of Nebuchadrezzar in this way, see C. L. Crouch, "Ezekiel's Oracles," 473–492; Strine and Crouch, "Yhwh's Battle."

(21.) This may, of course, be simply the result of the Gog of Magog oracles' character as "thematic pastiche," picking up on and reiterating themes present elsewhere in the book. See William A. Tooman, "Transformation of Israel's Hope: The Reuse of Scripture in the Gog Oracles," in Tooman and Lyons, *Transforming Visions*, 50–110; William A. Tooman,

Gog of Magog: Reuse of Scripture and Compositional Technique in Ezekiel 38–39 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2/52; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

(22.) See Crouch, “Ezekiel’s Oracles,” 488–492; Ka Leung Wong, *The Idea of Retribution in the Book of Ezekiel* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 87; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 196–252.

(23.) Similarly Raabe, “Transforming,” 190, 198–200.

(24.) The tradition that the classical prophets spoke only words of doom looms long, with many interpreters still hesitant to attribute any of the book’s more hopeful parts to the prophet. Although they may in part constitute elaborations on a message initially comprised primarily of judgment, the extent to which the logic of this restoration material coheres with that of the judgment sections, together with the apparently long duration of Ezekiel’s activity, suggests that the possibility of some of this material deriving from the author of the judgment oracles ought not to be discounted out of hand.

(25.) Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “The Wall around Paradise: Ezekielian Ideas about the Future,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 275. Janina Maria Hiebel makes the intriguing observation that, at least within the visionary accounts, Israel is always an object and never a subject: “the House of Israel has no causal involvement in the accomplishment of their restoration; it remains again, and especially here, the object of Yhwh’s dealings.” *Ezekiel’s Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives* (BZAW 475; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 266–267. This overwhelming focus on divine action, over and indeed against human action, contributes to the argument for Yhwh’s power.

(26.) On Israel’s revivification in chapter 37 as an act restoring Yhwh’s honor, see John T. Strong, “Egypt’s Shameful Death and the House of Israel’s Exodus from Sheol (Ezekiel 32.17–32 and 37.1–14),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34 (2010): 475–504. On honor in Ezekiel more generally, including and especially its concentration in descriptions of Yhwh, see Daniel Y. Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt: Social-Scientific Approaches to the Book of Ezekiel* (Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 14; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

(27.) See Pfisterer Darr, “Wall around Paradise,” 271–279. On the sojourner in 47:22–23, see note 4.

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