

The vox populi and structural elements of the book of Ezekiel

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ABSTRACT

The authors study the influence of the vox populi, as expressed by two proverbs (Ez 12:22 and 27;18:2), on the structure of chapters 12 to 33. They conclude that Ezekiel 33 serves as a conclusion to this section, and forms a bridge to Ezekiel 34 onwards.

A INTRODUCTION

Studying the interaction between Ezekiel and the exiles gives one a clearer understanding of the structure of the prophet's sayings to the exiles in Babylonia, as collected in chapters 12 to 33 of Ezekiel. This structure can be determined from Ezekiel's reaction to the expectations of salvation and restoration, as reflected in utterances of the people about the prophecies and their religious situation, as expressed in the proverbs in Ezekiel 12:22, 27, and 18:2.

From these sayings of the people, this record of the *vox populi*, as a starting point, one can distinguish two main sections in the words of the prophet to the exiles in Babylonia, namely Ezekiel 12-17 and Ezekiel 18-33 (with the prophecies against the nations having been inserted during the editorial process). These two main parts of Ezekiel's prophecies to the exiles are at odds with the exiles' misconceptions about their hopes for the future (based upon a false idea of Yahweh's natural attachment to the land and Jerusalem, and their own expectation of escaping the judgment of Yahweh) and a speedy return to their land. The message about the fall of Jerusalem (Ez 21) is the sign to the people that 'there has been a prophet among them' (Ez 33:33), confirming Ezekiel's prophecies. From then on, in chapters 34 to 48, the tenor of Ezekiel's prophecies is that of hope and restoration.

B RECENT TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF EZEKIEL

Two trends in recent investigations into the prophetic literature have given a stimulus to this study on Ezekiel. The first is the study of the process of editorial completion of the prophetic books – that is, the book of Ezekiel.

Clements (1982) has pointed out the role of the tradents, from a specific movement in the shaping of the book. In the case of Ezekiel these tradents must be seen as part of the 'circle of the Holiness Code and the nascent Priestly School' (Clements 1982:132). This does not however mean, as Garscha (1974) has concluded, that only a relatively small part of the book comes from Ezekiel himself; Clements holds with Zimmerli (1979) that 'a remarkable part of the homogeneity and uniformity of the book stems from the contribution of Ezekiel himself' (Clements 1982:128). On the other hand Clements points out that there must have been 'a remarkable element of planned structure' in the book, and that there must also have been a considerable reworking of Ezekiel's prophecies to attain the impressive theological homogeneity and literary structure that are found in the book.

This viewpoint also leads to a more precise dating of the editorial completion of the books, and Clements concludes that the book of Ezekiel must have been finally completed by 516 BC. It is also very possible, as Zimmerli has pointed out, that the prophet himself had a hand in this completion (1979:71). This implies a great deal of redactional work around 571 BC.

The second trend is the influence of direct interaction between the prophet and his audience in the prophetic process. The importance of the prophet's audience in the prophetic process has been pointed out by Overholt in quite a few publications (Overholt 1977, 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 1982). Two aspects of the reaction of the audience to the prophetic message are of importance for the study of the prophecy. The first is the interaction between the prophet and his audience, an aspect elaborated on quite fully by Overholt. The second is the fact, indicated by Overholt in the prophecies of Jeremiah, that the disposition of the audience is at times reflected in the prophetic utterances, by means of quotations. Jeremiah more than once quotes the words of his audience (Overholt 1979b:262ff). This may be nothing more than a rhetorical device in some instances, but even then these quotations indicate how the prophet understood the reaction of his audience - that is, his reading of the *vox populi*.

Crenshaw distinguishes four stages in the prophetic process - namely the prophet's secret experience with God, his interpretation of it in the light of his faith, the process of intellectual revision, and the artistic development of his message (Crenshaw 1971:3). Overholt (1977), however, while proceeding along these lines, puts more emphasis on the interaction between prophet and audience. It seems that the authority of the prophet depended on two things: on the one hand he would have had to receive a revelation from Yahweh and, on the other, there would have to be an acknowledgement within a particular social context by some segment of his

audience (Overholt 1977:132f). Thus, there are three elements playing a role in the prophetic process - namely the supernatural from whom the message comes, the prophet delivering the message, and the audience receiving the message. Of importance is the interaction between these elements (Overholt 1977:132f.). There are also two standards by which the community can verify the prophet's message. The message must be a continuation of the socio-religious traditions of the community, and it must be relevant to the prevailing socio-political situation (Overholt 1977:132).

With regard to the prophecies of Ezekiel, it seems that this whole process, especially the interaction between the prophet and his audience, has some relevance to the structure of at least a part of the book of Ezekiel.

C THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK EXEKIEL

The structure of the book of Ezekiel is described in many Introductions and commentaries. The parts of the book are generally defined in terms of their inner coherency, resulting in the following scheme:

- 1 - 3: the coherent parts of the book in terms of the prophet's call;
- 4 - 24: the prophecies about Jerusalem and those people living in Judah;
- 25 - 32: the prophecies against the nations; and
- 33 - 48: the prophecies about the restoration after the destruction of Jerusalem.

The so-called temple vision (8 - 10) is also identified by some as a coherent part. This more or less gives the following structure of the book:

- 1 1 - 24: Prophecies against Jerusalem and Judah
 - a 1 - 3: The prophet's call
 - b 4 - 7: Prophecies against Jerusalem
 - c 8 - 11: The temple vision
 - d 12 - 24: Other prophecies against Jerusalem
- 2 25 - 32: Prophecies against the nations
- 3 33 - 48: Prophecies of restoration
 - a 33 - 39: Spiritual restoration of the people
 - b 40 - 48: Restoration of the land, the city and the temple

In the scheme given above, the position of Ezekiel 33, the first chapter after the prophecies against the nations, which is thus seen as part of the restoration utterances, gives rise to two pronounced difficulties.

Firstly, chapter 33 does not really speak of restoration, although it may be seen as the introduction to (and the basis of) future restoration.

Secondly, verses 1-20 of chapter 33 are clearly so related to chapter 18 (cf e.g. the discussion of Zimmerli 1979:374-375) that one may well ask whether both sections do not belong to the same cluster of utterances. This same argument would hold true with regard to the agreement of both chapters 18 and 33 with chapter 3:16b-21. (It is possible that 3:16b-21 is a redactional expansion of the call narrative, with material of the watchman oracle of chapter 33 and material from chapter 18; cf Zimmerli 1979:144.)

D THE VOX POPULI AND THE STRUCTURE

This very problem of the close relation between chapters 18 and 33 compels one to look at the coherence of these utterances from another viewpoint, namely that of the interaction between the prophet and his listeners. It is clear that the focal issue of Ezekiel's prophecies is the fall and destruction of Jerusalem, the reasons for this event, and how God uses such events to elaborate on the restoration of his people in history. It must be remembered, however, that this message was directed at the Babylonian exiles.

At first, before Jerusalem was taken, Ezekiel had to convince the exiles that there was no reason for them to expect to return to Jerusalem, a conviction which had also prevailed in Judah shortly after the first exile in 597 BC. When the fall of Jerusalem became evident (probably also when the final siege of Jerusalem took place) Ezekiel had to explain to the exiles the religious background to the predicament in which they found themselves. Afterwards, when they came to accept this, he had to sketch the programme of restoration.

In the first group of utterances (chs 1 - 11) and especially in chapter 11, the prophet is struggling with the misconceptions of the leaders in Jerusalem about God's promise concerning the land of Israel. This misconception is profoundly expressed in their words in 11:15: 'This land was given to us as our possession.' Although this is a quotation of what the leaders in Jerusalem had said, its root - a misconception about the covenant and God's supposed obligation to the land of the covenant - must also have prevailed among the exiles and, while it was put here in the form of an utterance directed at the leaders in Jerusalem, it was spoken to be heard by the exiles. They, at least, were his audience, if one accepts the Babylonian ministry of Ezekiel (as Zimmerli 1979:16 does). As these chapters were not part of our study, this question is not pursued any further here.

From chapter 12 onwards, interaction is found between the prophet and

his Babylonian audience by discussing the sayings of the people. In the cluster of prophecies from 12 to 33 Ezekiel had to continue struggling with the misconceptions of the exiles regarding the Lord's obligation to protect Jerusalem and return the exiles to the land of the covenant. They did not come to understand that even their own exile was a result of God's judgment on their breaking the covenant by their sins.

To bring this message home, the whole of 12 to 33 seems to be governed by Ezekiel's response to two proverbs uttered by the people, through which he brings the Word of the Lord in answer to the false accusations implied by the proverbs. Interestingly enough, these two proverbs are also the only instances in Ezekiel where **הַמַּשָּׁל** is used (Ez 12:22,23 and 18:2,3), whereas **מַשָּׁל** is used elsewhere in Ezekiel in different forms.

1 The first proverb, 12:22,27

The first of these proverbs occurs in chapter 12. The first part of this chapter, containing a prophecy about the exile and the destruction of the city, becomes the reason for the people's use of the first of these two proverbs:

The days go by and every vision comes to nothing (NIV).

The immediate reaction of Ezekiel to this is in verse 23: the assurance of the Lord, introduced with **לֵכִי**, that this *mashal* will soon change into

The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled,

and that

*... I, the Lord, will speak what I will (root: **דָּבַר**), and it shall be fulfilled (root: **עָשָׂה**). For in your days, you rebellious house, I will fulfil (root: **עָשָׂה**) whatever I say (root: **דָּבַר**).*

Thus it seems that the listeners denied that Ezekiel spoke God's word. Overholt (1977:132-133) also discusses such a situation, and poses two possibilities as a result - namely that the false prophet will adapt his message, and that the true prophet will confirm it. Greenberg (1983:230) points out that the unfulfilled prophecies had been dismissed by the people.

In verses 26-28, which are seen by Zimmerli (1979:283) not as a redactional repetition beside verses 21-25, but as 'an independent disputation

oracle', we have the sequence of this disputation. Then the people (the House of Israel) say:

The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.

They indicate that there may be something true in Ezekiel's words, but that it is only relevant for the distant future (cf Greenberg 1983:230-231). Ezekiel again rejects this reaction and confirms his message by saying that the Lord answers that what he has said will be fulfilled; he again uses the verbs **אָמַר** and **עָשָׂה** in the expression 'whatever I say, will be fulfilled'.

Just before the quotation of the second proverb in chapter 18, the group of utterances in chapters 12 to 17 is concluded with 'I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it' (17:24), again using the verbs **אָמַר** and **עָשָׂה**. This formally binds the group of utterances in chapters 12 to 17 together by the expression Zimmerli calls 'the expanded proof-saying' (1979:367; cf also 1979:38-40). Clearly, Ezekiel's disputation points in general to the reaction of the people of Israel, echoed by the exiles, to the prophecies of doom uttered by the prophet in chapters 7 and 9, among others. The proverb then tends to say that while none of the prophecy has yet been fulfilled, there need be no fear. This disputation, directly follows the people's reaction to the prophecy in chapter 12 about the laying waste of the land and the exile of the remnant. Ezekiel asserts that any expectation of a speedy return to the land is futile. It is therefore clear that this prophecy is to be dated before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC (Zimmerli 1979:282).

It seems that chapters 13-17, with chapter 12 as introduction, lay emphasis on prophesying just this – the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and Ezekiel's struggle to bring the people to the insight that any expectation to return to the land soon is futile. This struggle is, for example, clearly illustrated in chapter 13's utterances against those who say 'Peace' when there is no peace. Ezekiel's struggle, of course, does not centre on the formal forecasting of a return to the land, but on the false religion behind it. Although the emphasis in these chapters lies on the issue of returning to the land or not, and their general scope does not exceed Jerusalem's fall, this is not a watertight distinction regarding the contents of this part of the book. In chapter 11, for example, there is in the last verses (from verse 59 onwards) a prophecy of the re-establishment of the covenant and atonement for the people's wrongdoings.

2 The second proverb, 18:2

The second proverb appears in 18:2:

*The fathers eat sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.*

Whatever the real scope of this saying, the people are clearly convinced that they are being punished for the sins of others (cf Greenberg 1983:327-328). This state of mind follows the previous group of utterances by Ezekiel, and it seems that the exiles have come to accept Ezekiel's assurance that Jerusalem will be destroyed and that there will not be the expected return to the city in the immediate future. It seems feasible, therefore, to claim with Zimmerli (1979:377), inter alios, that this prophecy was uttered after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Clinging to their claims of innocence, probably partly because they had been exiled with king Jehoiachin, who did not dare to resist Nebuchadnezzar, but willingly gave himself up in order to spare the city, the people now complain that they have become the victims of the transgressions of others, and in the last instance of the Lord's judgment over the sins of others. Thus we may see in this proverb 'a mocking at the divine righteousness which lays the guilt of the fathers upon the children' (Zimmerli 1979:378).

The people's interpretation of the cause of their predicament is therefore: 'The way of the Lord is not just' (v 25). Ezekiel's response to this boils down to a theodicy – a justification of God's acting against his people. Against this background Ezekiel brings the message of personal responsibility in chapter 18: 'The soul who sins is the one who will die' (v 4). This again is the governing trend of Ezekiel's utterances from chapter 18 to chapter 33:21.

3 The proverbs' assistance in determining the structure

Among this cluster of prophecies the prophecies against the nations appear in chapters 25-32. Since we must assume a deal of redactional work in the grouping together of these utterances, it is at least understandable that they are grouped together, and also that, for example, the prophecies against Egypt are placed together in spite of chronological diversity.

In these utterances the reasons given for the prophecies being directed against these nations are that the people rejoiced over the fall of the land of Israel (the Ammonites – 25:3,6); that they said that Judah had become like

all the other nations (the Moabites – 25:8); that they took revenge on the house of Judah (the Edomites – 25:12); for their vengeance and revenge and that they sought to destroy Judah (the Philistines – 25:15); for their pride and boasting (the people of Tyre – 28:2); and for their boasting and their being a reed which broke when the house of Israel leaned on them (the Egyptians – 29:3,7). In every instance these prophecies are concluded with the saying: ‘Then they will know that I am the Lord.’

With regard to Egypt, as Van Rooy’s study (1990) points out, the prophecy has as its historic background the attempt by the Egyptians to intervene in the siege of Jerusalem. Some politico-historical background can probably also be determined in the case of the other nations.

These prophecies were however uttered to be heard by the exiles in the *first place*; for the exiles the implication would be to establish God’s sovereignty over the nations as well as over his own people, and – also in this cluster of prophecies in chapters 18-33 – to warn the exiles that the nations, too, fall under the judgment of this heading: ‘The soul who sins is the one who will die’, and only in true worship of the Lord with their whole heart lies the people’s salvation.

In 33:1-20 – that is, just before the mention of the message of the fall of Jerusalem – there is a repetition of the warning of chapter 18 (33:1-9); but, as if in expectation of the turning point in the trend of Ezekiel’s utterances from chapter 34 onwards, the emphasis is then laid on the forgiveness of sins if the people repent before the Lord. When the people say ‘Our offences and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How can we live?’ (v 10), they may be assured that the Lord ‘take[s] no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live’ (v 11).

But still the exiles say: ‘The way of the Lord is not just’ (33:17,20), thus falling back on the proverb of the eating of sour grapes. But, says the Lord, ‘I will judge each of you according to his own ways’ (33:20), referring again to 18:30.

In 33:21, then, the coming of the messenger to announce the fall of the city is mentioned. The dating of the report of the opening of Ezekiel’s mouth, namely on the evening before the messenger arrived (v 22), must probably be limited only to this report (cf Zimmerli 1979:191-194).

The utterance of Ezekiel that follows in verses 23-33 brings two things to light. Firstly, there were those who, in spite of all that had happened, vainly hoped to possess the land on the basis of their view of a mechanical obligation on God’s part to fulfil his covenant, and secondly, the proof that Ezekiel was a true prophet.

With regard to the *first thing* – the hope to possess the land, the prophecy in verse 24 is directed at ‘the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel’ – that is, those who were left behind after the catastrophe of 586 BC, who maintained ‘surely the land has been given to us as our possession’ (v 24). They are assured that they will not possess the land (v 26), but that the inhabitants of the land will be killed (v 27), and that the land will be made a desolate waste (vv 28,29). Although their hope to stay on in the country may have arisen from a pious misunderstanding of their present situation (Zimmerli 1979:200), they did not understand the real reason for God’s judgment, nor did they understand Ezekiel’s call for repentance.

Ezekiel’s warning to the remnant in Judah, however, was more than a warning to the remnant and was certainly also meant to be heard by the exiles. They hoped that they could go back and live in the land. Ezekiel’s message implied that they should abandon their false hopes and claims of innocence, and change their hearts instead.

The *second thing* that is brought to light is the proof of Ezekiel being a true prophet. The description in verses 30-32 probably means that the people had not accepted Ezekiel as a true prophet, but that they came to listen to him as they would come to anyone, even someone with a directly opposing message. As long as there was no definite proof about the truth of his prophecies, they were not willing to accept his words and comply with what he was saying.

Generally speaking, there would be two standards for judging a true prophet – namely that his message should reflect the people’s socio-religious traditions, and that his predictions should be fulfilled.

With regard to the reflection of the socio-religious tradition, it is clear that Ezekiel’s denunciation of their ways was in accordance with the people’s socio-religious background. They were, however, not willing to abandon their way of life and their attachment to false hopes. They refused to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord, and this resulted in their viewing Ezekiel as nothing more than ‘one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well’, for ‘they hear your words but do not put them into practice’ (v 32).

But then the Lord says, ‘when all this comes true - and it surely will - then they will know that a prophet has been among them’ (v 33). The fall of Jerusalem, the killing of the inhabitants, and the laying waste of the city and the country would be the proof needed to establish Ezekiel as a true prophet. When this evidence was presented in the message of the fall of Jerusalem, the following utterances of Ezekiel about restoration and renewal could be accepted with more certainty and trust.

E CONCLUSION

From these arguments it becomes clear that the whole of chapter 33 should be regarded as part of and a conclusion to the utterances in chapters 12 to 33, and at the same time as a bridge and introduction to the prophecies in chapter 34 onwards. Having settled the matter of the devotion of the people to the Lord and the Torah, and having been established as a true prophet, Ezekiel could deliver his prophecies of hope and restoration from chapter 34 onwards.

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