The Nations in the Book of Ezekiel

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The question posed to our panel was left undefined intentionally so that there would be a variety of possibilities for development. Without attempting to be exhaustive I offer a list of some of those possibilities: the relationship between Ezekiel's oracles against foreign nations and similar collections in Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; the Gog of Magog pericope; the conspiracy of the nations mentioned in Jer 27:3 and its relationship to the date and purpose of Ezekiel's call; the use of the word goyim in the book of Ezekiel; and the oracles against foreign nations in Ezekiel itself, particularly chaps. 25-32 and chap. 35. It is these oracles to which I will address my attention, with short reference first to the use of the word goyim in the book of Ezekiel.

The Word Goyim

The word Goyim is used some 86 times in the first 39 chapters of Ezekiel--never in 40-48--with the following distribution of meanings:

--A neutral designation for other countries in the world (Jerusalem in the center of the nations 5:5; cf. 16:14)
--A term that designates Israel either positively (25:8; Because you [Edom] said, These two nations... shall be mine 35:10; 37:22) or negatively (the people of Israel, a nation of rebels 2:3)
--The place where the punishment of Israel is carried out (that is, exile) (Israel shall eat bread unclean among the nations 4:13; 6:8; 39:28)
--The agents who defeat Israel or other countries (The nations sounded an alarm against him 19:4 [Jehoahaz], 8 [Zedekiah])
--The nations represent an unfavorable standard of behavior with which Israel is compared
(You have acted according to the ordinances of the nations 11:12; 20:32)
--Peoples among whom Yahweh's holiness or reputation has been damaged or was in danger of
being damaged (I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the
nations 20:9, 14, 22; 22:16; 36:21-23)
--Witnesses of God's judgment on Israel (I will execute judgments in the sight of nations 5:8;
39:23)
--Peoples who will finally be defeated by Yahweh (day of Yahweh...time of doom for the
nations 30:3; 36:7, 15; 39:21)
--Peoples who will be able to testify to Israel's redemption (I will manifest my holiness among you
in the sight of the nations 20:41; 28:25; or: Then the nations that are left all around you shall know
that I Yahweh have rebuilt the ruined places 36:36; 37:28; 38:16, 23; 39:7, 27) This statistical,
superficial summary could be greatly expanded in any full scale study of the nations in the book of
Ezekiel, but it highlights the breadth of the question we are discussing.

The Oracles Themselves

Even a restriction of the discussion to the oracles against foreign nations permits a variety of
approaches: the arrangement and order of the oracles; the forms employed in these oracles
(although I believe little needs to be added to the 1989 commentary by Ronald M. Hats in the
FOTL series); the abundant use of specific dates in these oracles, especially in the oracles against
Egypt (Cf. Kutsch); philological treatments of the prose-poetry in the Dahood tradition (Boadt;
Van Dijk); or theological understandings of the oracles against foreign nations. Since I have
argued in my book on Ezekiel that Ezekiel is one of the most God-
centered of the prophets, couching almost all of his own words as words of Yahweh, no one will be surprised that I will devote my primary attention to the theological purpose of the oracles against the foreign nations in the present book of Ezekiel.

The allusion to the present book of Ezekiel is important since various of these oracles are often identified as secondary though I have the impression that the issues in Ezekiel about primary and secondary materials within the oracles against foreign nations are not as severe as in Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Still the Sidon oracle is usually identified as secondary as is the third prophecy against Egypt in 29:1-16. The latter oracle seems to presuppose the existence of a restored Israel. It is usually proposed that Sidon was added to the other six nations--Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, and Egypt--in order to make a total of seven. Note that no reason is given for Sidon's judgment. There is probably little new to add about the surprising yet explainable absence of Babylon from this collection. Hals has shown that Egypt is now the 7th nation in the collection and that there are seven prophecies against Egypt in Ezekiel. In the seventh of these prophecies there are seven other nations named in the underworld (Assyria, Elam, Meshech, Tubal, Edom, the princes of the North, and the Sidonians). The use of the number seven may be an allusion to Deut 7:1, which reports that seven nations were to be destroyed before Israel's entry into the land. There are also seven oracles against Tyre.

The Theological Key

In 1988 I proposed, and would like to repeat today, that the theological theme of the oracles against foreign nations is best expressed in the Sidon pericope, secondary though it may be (28:20-26). "See, I am against you, 0 Sidon, and I will glorify myself in the midst of
you and they shall know that I am Yahweh when I sit in judgment over Sidon and so reveal myself as holy in her." Three verses later Yahweh manifests his holiness in Israel by restoring them to the land. An attempt to vindicate Yahweh—that is, to defend his glory and his holiness—is the theological theme that unites Ezekiel's treatment of the nations in his oracles against the nations.

Yahweh's glory and holiness can be maintained to the extent that the nations in these oracles are shown to be sinful. Although five of the seven nations were participants in the rebellious convocation in Jerusalem in 594/593, Ezekiel does not discuss this conspiracy in so many words. But it was about the time of this conspiracy that he began his ministry in Babylon and from then until the destruction of Jerusalem he opposed any effort to resist the Babylonian power. The oracles against Egypt do refer to its efforts to aid Judah in its resistance to the Babylonian invasion. Three of the oracles--29:1-16, 30:20-26, and 31:1-18 [cf. 32:1-16; 32:17-32]--are dated to the last years of Jerusalem when the city looked to Egypt for help in its efforts to withstand Nebuchadnezzar. Pharaoh Hophra's efforts to relieve Jerusalem, for instance, provide the context for 30:22-26. Yahweh announces that he has broken the Pharaoh's arm and will soon shatter both of Pharaoh's arms and cause his sword to fall from his hand. The broken arm of Pharaoh would seem to represent the defeat of the Egyptian relief force. The worst thing about relying on Egypt, however, was not its weakness or unreliability, but that Israel thereby negated any claim they might make about trusting in Yahweh. Although Yahweh promised to restore Egypt one day, he said that Egypt would only be a lowly country, unable again to entice Israel into false trust (29:16).

The pride of the nations is the second factor that demonstrates Yahweh's glory and holiness. Tyre and Egypt are scored respectively for their pride about their perfect beauty and their incomparable beauty. The prince of Tyre claimed El-like rights: I am a god, I sit in the
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seat of the gods (28:2). In 28:11-19 Ezekiel portrays the fall of the king of Tyre as a repetition of the fall of a primeval human being. Pharaoh even arrogantly disowned the creator: My Nile is my own, since I made it for myself (29:3).

Proud rebellion of the nations led them thirdly to contempt for Israel and a concomitant questioning of Yahweh's honor. Edom's reviling of Israel is explicitly related to its arrogance: You [thereby] magnified yourselves against me with your mouth, and multiplied your words against me (35:1-13). Tyre and Ammon used the word "Aha" over Israel while the Ammonites, Philistines, Edomites and other surrounding nations showed contempt at the land's misery. But God did not pronounce judgment on Judah so that the scornful nations of this world would have the last word. His honor and his holiness had to be defended.

Moab believed that the judgment imposed by God was a refutation of God's special relationship with his people (25:8). The prophet charges Edom with hatred and abuse of Israel (35:11-12). Yahweh's mercy extended to Israel precisely because she had been reproached by the nations and had suffered disgrace from the peoples. Challenges to Yahweh's honor would not be permitted in the future (28:24-26; 36:15), and the nations who had uttered these challenges would suffer the consequences of their hostile attitude.

The fourth and final indictment against the nations deals with their violence. Tyre's investment in trade led to violence (28:16, 18) and to the profanation of its sanctuaries by goods seized from other people. Ezekiel accused Edom of acting revengefully (25:12), a charge he also made against the Philistines (25:15). The Philistines at Ezekiel's time may have profited from the Babylonian hegemony by taking over some of the territory of Judah, just as an earlier generation of Philistines seems to have done after the defeat of Hezekiah by Sennacherib. Edom and Philistia are accused of eternal hatred. The Edomites in Ezekiel's telling tried to take possession of the land belonging to both kingdoms (35:10) and were ready
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to eat them up (35:12).

**The Punishment of the Nations**

Yahweh's defense of his glory and the revelation of his holiness required him to implement punishment against the nations. This theological understanding of the harsh words against the nations sets them off from any desire for personal or national vindication despite Hals' claim that "The desire for revenge is unmistakably a part of the mood which characterizes this entire collection of prophecies" (p. 183, referring to chap. 25).

According to Ezekiel, Ammonites and Moab would be handed over to the peoples of the East, while Yahweh's anger against Edom would be exercised by Israel. Yahweh promised to exercise such vengeance himself on the Philistines (25:17). Tyre would experience devastating defeat at the hand of many nations (26:3-5) and by the hand of a fierce king from the north, Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylonia (26:7). The failure of the Babylonian threat announced in 26:7-14 forced Ezekiel to update his announcement against Tyre by giving Nebuchadrezzar the land of Egypt instead of Tyre as his wages for working for Yahweh. From Ezekiel's point of view the word of Yahweh remained true if God would at some time and in some similar way exercise judgment on Tyre. A literalistic, one-to-one fulfillment was not required.

Proclamations of judgment in the oracles against the nations in Ezekiel are often followed by laments, which graphically contrast the present exalted state of a nation with its future humiliating destruction. In chap. 27 the prophet depicts Tyre as a ship laden with products from the various countries with which the island city traded. After describing the building and staffing of the ship, the poet sinks it in a single verse: "The east wind has wrecked you in the heart of the sea (v. 26)." In the lament over the Adamic king of Tyre (28:11-19), it is Yahweh himself who casts him off the divine mountain and brings out fire to consume him.
For Yahweh to manifest his true glory in the sight of the nations requires him to visit upon them their sins of rebellion, pride, unreliability, tempting Israel to false trust, contempt for Israel, and their taking vengeance on her. This is also brought out in the many recognition formulas (prophetic proof sayings) that are sprinkled throughout these chapters. In some cases the nation that experiences divine judgment will recognize Yahweh in his act of judgment; at other times Israel or the nations in general are said to be the ones who will make this recognition. In either case the recognition of Yahweh means that Yahweh has succeeded, through acts of judgment against the nations, in manifesting his glory and holiness among them or before them.

**The Punishment of Egypt**

The divine threats in Ezekiel against Egypt were not carried out, and the country was not even captured by a Mesopotamian power until after the end of the Babylonian period. Most unusual is the promise to Egypt that it will be restored after its destruction though this restored nation will be limited to Pathros in the south. Egypt would never again be a threatening power, but only a lowly kingdom. The Egyptians would never again be the reliance of the house of Israel, that is, it would never again be an occasion for false trust (29:16). It is not clear why Egypt alone is promised a life beyond judgment though Zimmerli may be correct that for Ezekiel a future world without an Egypt was inconceivable (just as it was impossible for Ezekiel to imagine a restored Israel that would lack a king, or at least a prince).

The oracles against Egypt end with a devastating lament depicting the descent of the country to the underworld, to lie with the dishonored dead. The inhabitants of the dishonorable areas in the underworld include Assyria and its whole company, who were all slain by the sword though they had once spread terror. Cf. Elam and Meshech. The fate of the
nations that lived by violence prefigures Egypt's own end. Egypt will not lie down with ancient heroes of war, but with Assyria, Elam, Meshech, Edom, and the commanders of the north, all ranked with the "uncircumcised" (cf. also 28:10 vs. Tyre) and "those slain by the sword," perhaps referring to those soldiers who had not received proper burial.

**Salvation within the Oracles against Foreign Nations**

Finally, three of the recognition formulas in these chapters come at the end of words of promise directed to Israel. In 28:24 Ezekiel promises that Israel will be delivered from the nations' violence and contempt and thereby it will come to recognize Yahweh's true identity. Yahweh will continue thereafter to manifest his holiness through Israel in the sight of the nations by gathering them from among the peoples and making them dwell securely in their own land (28:25-26). When Yahweh raises up a horn for the house of Israel--at the time when Nebuchadrezzar defeats Egypt--he will at once open the lips of the prophet and cause Israel to recognize Yahweh's true character (29:21, the latest dated oracle attributed to Ezekiel). Population increase among animals and humans in restored Israel will also lead to the recognition of God (36:11). Yahweh will do more good to Israel than ever before, and the mountains of Israel will be freed from the reproach of the nations. This positive note is not surprising since the oracles against the foreign nations are usually seen as a kind of middle stage between words of judgment against Israel and words of hope for Israel. Cf. the arrangements of the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the LXX of Jeremiah.

Summary: The proud, insulting nations were no doubt a source of grief to Israel and a grievous threat to her self-esteem, but Ezekiel argues that they were also a problem to God. The solution: Yahweh would demonstrate his glory and his holiness through Israel, in the eyes
of the nations, not least through the judgment of the nations.

Yahweh's glory and holiness could be maintained only *if the nations were judged* and if *Israel*, beyond judgment, *was finally saved.*