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_Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality_  

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This collection of essays is a result of the continuing work of the Seminar on Theological Perspectives on the book of Ezekiel, which meets at each SBL Annual Meeting. The volume focuses on Ezekiel’s hierarchical thinking. No other book of the Old Testament reflects themes such as creation, land, or priesthood in terms of hierarchy as Ezekiel does. While in antiquity hierarchy reflected order not only of society but of the whole cosmos, in postmodern and postcolonial times “hierarchy” as an instrument of control and suppression has become subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion. Under these circumstances, the book of Ezekiel has become the target of continued fierce criticism. Sometimes even the place of the book within the canon is questioned. In this context the editors want to take up the hermeneutical challenge of how to appropriate the theology of Ezekiel “within the contemporary debates over the meaning and function of hierarchy within church and synagogue” (2).

The editors provide a comprehensive introduction (“Hierarchical Thinking and Theology in Ezekiel’s Book” [1–23]) to the subsequent twelve essays. Two responses by Daniel I. Block (“In Search of Theological Meaning: Ezekiel Scholarship at the Turn of the Millennium” [227–39]) and Stephen S. Tuell (“Contemporary Studies of Ezekiel: A New
The first four essays deal with the subject of priesthood in Ezekiel. Friedrich Fechter (“Priesthood in Exile according to the Book of Ezekiel” [27–41]) points out “that priests play hardly any role in the prophet’s announcement of disaster while they play a central role” in the concluding vision of Ezek 40–48 (27). The differences in terminology between Ezek 40:45–46 and texts like Ezek 44 show that the distinction between higher and lower clergy is the result of a redactional process. Particularly Ezek 44 does not fit into an exilic setting but seems to be of postexilic origin and stems from Zadokite circles.

Ian M. Duguid’s study (“Putting Priests in Their Place: Ezekiel’s Contribution to the History of the Old Testament Priesthood” [43–59]) opposes Fechter’s approach. Arguing from a holistic approach, Duguid reads Ezek 40–48 as an exilic vision of the future. According to him, the distinction between Levites and Zadokite priests does not mark a watershed in the history of Israel’s priesthood, as commonly accepted, but only corresponds to the priestly task of making distinctions and putting things in their place: “The picture that emerges from a study of Ezekiel’s ministry as a priest in exile is that he fits comfortably within the profile one would expect” (58). It is questionable whether this approach is satisfactory (cf. the response of Tuell on 242–43). The tension between Ezek 40:45–46 and Ezek 44 is not explained.

The generally accepted view that Ezekiel was both a priest and a prophet is challenged by Baruch J. Schwartz (“A Priest Out of Place: Reconsidering Ezekiel’s Role in the History of the Israelite Priesthood” [61–71]): not denying a priestly background for Ezekiel, he maintains that the prophet never acted as a priest. The argument is as provocative as the book of the prophet itself. However, it is based on a very narrow definition of the priestly role.

In contrast to this, Corrine L. Patton (“Priest, Prophet, and Exile: Ezekiel as a Literary Construct” [73–89]) stresses that “the categories of priest and prophet are more interdependent than once thought” (75). She analyzes how and for which purpose Ezekiel is constructed as a priest in the text:

The characterization of Ezekiel as priest achieves several ideological ends. First, the status of Ezekiel asserts the importance of Zadokite priesthood over any other social group. Second, Ezekiel’s moral rectitude maintains the possibility of a righteous remnant among the old Jerusalem priesthood, without which the restoration to their prior social status is impossible. The portrait also asserts the priesthood over prophecy. Ezekiel is a better mediator of God’s presence to Israel.
than prophets are, representing a permanent social vehicle for this mediation, in contrast to the obliteration of prophecy. As mediator, Ezekiel has no false vision, and the message he delivers is always clear. (89)

The following three essays examine the topics of land and creation in the book of Ezekiel. Julie Galambush (“God’s Land and Mine: Creation as Property in the Book of Ezekiel” [91–108]) offers an impressive survey of the way animals, plants and the land are described in Ezekiel: “Wilderness, whether the wildness of plant, animal, or human, signifies opposition to YHWH. As such it will cease to exist altogether” (104). Nature is only seen positively when it is cultivated. Compared with Jeremiah and Leviticus, particularly the land has a different function. It is metonymic for its inhabitants: “The land is not a victim, but a party to its inhabitants’ actions; it is guilty and suffers for its own sins” (100). Creation in Ezekiel is always seen as property within an ordered cosmos. “Ezekiel’s extreme preference for the ordered world—to the point of wild nature’s exclusion—seems, in context, to reflect the sociopolitical tensions of the exile” (106).

Keith Carley (“From Harshness to Hope: The Implications for Earth of Hierarchy in Ezekiel” [109–26]), a contributor to the Earth Bible project, reads Ezekiel from the perspective of Earth. According to him, Earth in Ezekiel “is largely a passive instrument by means of which God’s absolute power to eradicate or renew may be demonstrated” (116). His article essay a kind of reading that implicitly questions Ezekiel’s place in the canon: “Because of its place in the canon, the prophecies of Ezekiel have—understandably—had greater impact than the caveats of their critics…. Ezekiel should not have the last word” (124–25).

Norman Habel (“The Silence of the Lands: The Ecojustice Implications of Ezekiel’s Judgment Oracles” [127–40]) takes the same direction as Carley does: “Reading the judgment oracles of Ezekiel from the perspective of Earth exposes a decidedly negative bias toward creation…. The lands and life on the lands suffer unjustly. They have done nothing to deserve the desolation they experience. They are victims of a divine rage against any nation who has offended YHWH. Publicizing the divine name is more important than compassion for creation” (139). Carley as well as Habel do not take into account that the “dominator hierarchy” (110) of Ezekiel is the literary attempt to come to terms with suffering the violence of exile.

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher (“Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib: Rereading Ezekiel 16:37–39 in the Context of Imperial Conquest” [141–57]) goes one step beyond this one-sided approach. He analyzes the metaphor of public stripping and nakedness in Ezek 16:37–39 from a postcolonial perspective. In recent years, Ezek 16 and 23 have sometimes been qualified
as prophetic “pornography” that reflects the fantasies of Ezekiel’s male audience. In contrast to this, Smith-Christopher tries to read these texts from the perspective of a victim that suffers the violence of the Neo-Babylonian conquest of Palestine. He rejects the commonly accepted view that public stripping was a penalty for adultery. Instead, he draws attention to the practice of stripping prisoners of war in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian military practice. From this perspective, the intended readers of Ezek 16 and 23 “would have identified with the female Jerusalem, rather than the ‘male’ God” (155–56).

Risa Levitt Kohn (“‘With a Mighty Hand and an Outstretched Arm’: The Prophet and the Torah in Ezekiel 20” [159–68]) analyzes the language of Ezek 20. According to her, “Ezekiel fuses images and expressions drawn from the independent traditions of the Priestly and Deuteronomistic sources” (160). She offers her own translation of the biblical text in which Deuteronomistic and Priestly phrases are highlighted in detail. However, she neither offers any criteria by which an expression can be identified as Deuteronomistic or Priestly (see the response by Tuell, 251–52), nor does she provide any reason for arguing that Ezek 20 is dependent on two separate sources (see the response by Block, 237). Ezekiel 20 is one of the key references for the fusion of Priestly and Deuteronomistic traditions. A much more sophisticated and careful approach is necessary to understand how this fusion has taken place.

In contrast to this, David L. Petersen (“Creation and Hierarchy in Ezekiel: Methodological Perspectives and Theological Prospects” [169–78]) calls for methodological reflections when talking about “traditions,” “themes,” “motifs,” and the like. He observes that creation traditions are not important for Ezekiel’s theological argument. He concludes that the reason for this absence lies in Ezekiel’s view of human nature: “Ezekiel’s conviction is clear. Humans as originally created are defective. They have a heart of stone and breath that is insufficient to engender proper life” (175). I think the problem is more complicated. Ezekiel’s pessimism about Israel’s ability to choose life contrasts to his tireless call for repentance and his insistence on the responsibility of every individual for his or her own deeds. How do these two elements go together? Ezekiel’s position within biblical anthropology is still a question that has to be settled.

Stephen L. Cook (“Cosmos, Kabod, and Cherub: Ontological and Epistemological Hierarchy in Ezekiel” [179–97]) interprets the cherubim associated with the heavenly throne vehicle by associating them with the description of the image of the quaternity by C. G. Jung. He describes the function of the cherubim within an ontological but also an epistemological hierarchy (cf. Ezek 28). Unfortunately, there is no reference to the recent article by C. Uehlinger and S. Müller Truffaut (“Ezekiel 1, Babylonian Cosmological Scholarship and Iconography: Attempts at Further Refinement,” TZ 57 [2001]: 140–71).
This would have provided a more elaborate look at the background of ancient Near Eastern iconography.

Even though the essay of Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (“Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution in Ezekiel 18” [199–223]) only implicitly contributes to the subject of hierarchy in Ezekiel, it offers a very useful analysis of Ezek 18 from the perspective of reader-response criticism. The proverb cited in Ezek 18:2 raises the question of the relationship between individual and transgenerational retribution. According to Darr, Ezekiel offers no clear perspective on this issue. While Ezek 18 vehemently refuses the idea of transgenerational retribution, it is seen as “the key” (215) of understanding Ezek 20:27–29. Even though this may miss the point (see the response of Tuell, 252–54), there is indeed a tension between individual and transgenerational retribution. The idea of transgenerational retribution is found in Ezek 21:8, where the righteous as well as the wicked are subject to YHWH’s judgment. It is not clear how this tension can be explained in a holistic reading.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a number of general observations regarding the state of contemporary Ezekiel studies as documented in this volume: (1) The holistic approach, represented by the commentaries of M. Greenberg and D. I. Block, is the dominant paradigm of North American Ezekiel scholarship. Only a single article argues on the basis of a diachronic reading, and this article is written by a German scholar (F. Fechter). Furthermore, the theory of the Kaufmann school that assumes a preexilic date of the Priestly source forms the broader conceptional background of several articles. What is surprising about this is the following: while the assumption of a far-reaching redactional process within Ezekiel is denied, at the same time such a process is conceded for the Pentateuch by assuming separate sources as J, D, and P.

(2) There is hardly any exchange between European and North American scholarship. In fact, there is an actual gap between North American and central European—especially French and German—research that corresponds to positions pro or contra a holistic approach and an early date for the Priestly source.

(3) The feminist readings—prominent in the 1980s and 1990s—retreat into the background and are supplemented by a postcolonial approach.

(4) Often neglected in the past, Ezek 40–48 has become a growing focus of scholarly attention. The discussion of the two recent studies by T. A. Rudnig, Heilig und profan: Redaktionskritische Studien zu Ez 40–48 (BZAW 287; Berlin, 2000), and M. Konkel, Architektonik des Heiligen: Studien zur zweiten Tempelvision Ezechiel’s (Ez 40–48) (BBB 129; Berlin, 2001), is still lying ahead.
For Wellhausen, Ezekiel represented the connection between the preexilic source of Deuteronomy and the exilic Priestly work. This line of argument is too simple. There are texts in Ezekiel, especially in Ezek 44–46, that are indeed dependent on the Priestly source. But the fact that some Priestly texts predate Ezekiel does not confirm the likewise too-simple reasoning of the Kaufmann school, which leads from a preexilic Priestly source to an exilic Ezekiel. One has to reckon with a much more complicated system of dependency.

Merely describing the direction of dependency between Ezekiel, P, and D is hardly enough. The fact that Ezekiel uses Deuteronomistic or Priestly expressions does not indicate that he applies the theological concepts of the Deuteronomist or the Priestly writer. For example, Ezek 40–48 sketches a Zadokite theology that draws from expressions of the Priestly source but develops a much more rigid separation of different areas of holiness. Therefore, it is important to describe the difference between the Zadokite concept of holiness represented in Ezek 40–48 and the Aaronide concept found in the Priestly source and the Holiness Code.

The same holds true for the various metaphors used in Ezekiel: they must not be analyzed in an isolated way but in connection with each other and in comparison with the remaining Old Testament literature. It is necessary to ask how and for what purpose a metaphor is used. The article of J. Galambush can be seen as pioneering in this regard: it is exciting to see how the portrayal of animals and plants in Ezekiel works hand in hand with the depiction of the land. The whole cosmos of Ezekielian metaphors is waiting to be described that way.

The volume not only offers a valuable survey of current research on Ezekiel but also sets the stage for the problems that need to be addressed in the future. Ezekiel scholarship is on the way to develop a new overall perspective of the book.