Kutsko, John F.

*Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*

Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 7


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This revised doctoral dissertation, prepared under the supervision of Peter Machinist, addresses the complex and often surprising interactions between themes of God's presence and absence in the book of Ezekiel. A sensitive and learned reader, Kutsko shows that Ezekiel draws on both Israelite and Mesopotamian traditions to critique idolatry (often using language and motifs borrowed from the pagans against whom he argues), to explain the exiles' plight, and to assure them of restoration.

The monograph is full of interesting and original insights. Kutsko points out that, unlike other biblical authors, Ezekiel refuses to use the word *'êlôhim* to describe pagan deities. The prophet avoids any rhetorical move that might give the appearance of legitimizing a god other than YHWH. While many scholars cite Deutero-Isaiah as the most thoroughgoing (and perhaps the first) monotheistic voice in the Hebrew Bible, Kutsko shows that a generation earlier Ezekiel already earned this distinction. Kutsko is especially effective at uncovering the paradoxes at the heart of Ezekiel's project. This prophet sharply attacks the notion that divinity can be present in a physical and visible form, that is, in an idol. Yet his prophecies "contain the most graphic portrayals of the divine presence in the Hebrew Bible" (88). Ezekiel mediates this tension, or does not regard this paradox as a tension at all, because he seems to distinguish between physical and verbal portrayals of the divine; the former are abhorrent, but the latter can be surprisingly explicit (90). Divine absence involves another multilayered set of paradoxes. Ezekiel stresses that divinity is completely absent where it seems most clearly present: in a physical object. At the same time, YHWH's exit from the temple (so clearly described
indicates more than divine absence and anger. In a subtle way it also hints at God's presence and concern, for when God exits the temple God heads east, toward the exiles in Babylon. Divine absence (from Jerusalem) thus becomes a token of both punishment and presence (in exile). Kutsko shows us how a single motif signifies in two very different ways: the cloud surrounding the kāḇōd as it leaves in fury has an important silver lining that most readers have missed. Kutsko shows that motifs associated with cult statues in Mesopotamia are transferred to humanity and especially to Israel in Ezekiel; divine presence animates humans, not wood and stones.

Unfortunately, many of Kutsko's fine insights tend to get lost amidst the unmistakable elements of the dissertation genre. Much of the book consists of reviews of secondary literature and discussions of philological matters that do nothing to move the argument forward--and often obscure it. A typical, if small example is the discussion of the broken ēṣ that is put back together in Ezek 37:16-20. Kutsko notes (140) that the Hebrew term might can mean "rod, staff," "wooden tablet," or "tree," adducing an impressive range of evidence from the Septuagint, Targum, and modern secondary literature. But the exact translation, he goes on to note, is not important, since the point of the verses is "clear enough. What was once whole will become one again." In that case, why bother debating whether ēṣ is rod, tablet, or tree? One senses that the point being made on page 140 is about Kutsko's skills, not Ezekiel's theology. Writing of this sort is understandably common in a dissertation (which a committee reads to find out something about its author), but it is unfortunate in a book (which people read to find out something about its subject). The interesting point Kutsko makes in the discussion of Ezek 37:16-20—that Israel as ēṣ is implicitly compared to an idol--gets lost amidst the irrelevant material. Similarly, Kutsko shows that after Assyrians took cult statues as plunder, they often repaired them and returned them to the conquered city. The repairs they made have not been emphasized in most discussions of Assyrian policies toward plundered idols, and these repairs provide relevant background for Ezekiel's predictions that God will purify Israel and then restore her. This is an original and important insight. However, it appears (on 118-20) only after seventeen pages of literature review that do not make any new points. Unlike a scholar assigned a book review for a journal, most readers are not morally obligated to plow through the whole, and I wonder how many will make it to the pages in which Kutsko arrives at his own contribution.

At times, the need to impress the graduate committee trips up not only the reader but, I suspect, the author himself. Kutsko discusses the setting of P's term selem ʾēlōhīm in Gen 1 and 9 at length, arguing that its similarity to the Akkadian term salam ilāni points to its exilic date: the Priestly writers encountered this motif of Mesopotamian theology while exiled in Babylon. But in the course of his own discussion Kutsko notes that the term appears not only in Neo-Babylonian but also Neo-Assyrian royal texts. As Kutsko's own adviser conclusively demonstrated in JAOS 103 (1983): 719-37, Judean writers were quite familiar with Neo-Assyrian royal propaganda as early as the eighth century. Thus the evidence that Kutsko himself adduces undermines his thesis: the term selem ʾēlōhīm
could have been known to Priestly writers well before the exile. Moreover, it turns out that the dating of Gen 1 and 9 is entirely moot to the larger point Kutsko intends to make, namely, that in using this term P reacts to Mesopotamian theology and that in avoiding it Ezekiel reacts to both Mesopotamian theology and P. The lengthy discussion of dating adds nothing, since P's borrowing could have occurred before or during the exile. Indeed, at a rhetorical level this discussion weakens the argument, for Kutsko may lose readers who disagree with the reasoning he provides for dating Gen 1 and 9 but do not pause to realize that this reasoning is merely a distraction. One senses that the genuinely impressive amount of material the dissertation gathers has not been fully digested.

Valuable insights and excellent questions await scholars of Ezekiel in Kutsko's work. Alas, they will have to mine the dissertation to find them.