

Zion Theology in the Book of Ezekiel¹

THE PROBLEM

IN ORDER TO DEAL with the issue of Zion theology in the book of Ezekiel, we need first to summarize what we mean by Zion theology. Scholars generally recognize several basic tenets of this strain of Israelite religious thought: (1) In the worship of YHWH at the national temple in Jerusalem, the deity's enthronement is a central feature. (2) Located on the "peak of Zaphon" (יֶרֶכְתִּי צָפוֹן, Ps 48:3[2]), Zion is the center of the universe. (3) The election of Zion by YHWH is closely tied to the election of David. (4) From Zion YHWH's reign of peace and justice extends to the entire world.²

For students of Zion theology, Ezekiel is problematic for several reasons. First, and most obvious, as Zimmerli has noted,³ along with the absence of many other theologically significant expressions,⁴ the name

1. A version of this paper was presented to the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia, PA, November 20, 1995.

2. See the summaries by Levenson, "Zion Traditions," 1098–99; Albrecht, *History of Israelite Religion*, 1:135–37. For fuller discussion see Ollenburger, *City of the Great King*; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*.

3. See the discussion by Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 1, 22–23.

4. The absence of words for "praise" or "petition" contributes to the somber tone of the book, but note also the absence of theological expressions like "grace" (חֵן),

“Zion” is missing in the book of Ezekiel.⁵ As is well-known, the significance of the name “Zion” grew considerably in the half-millennium from the founding of the Israelite monarchy under David to the exile of Judah in the sixth century. We can identify at least four phases in the evolution of the usage of the name. (1) Originally Zion appears to have referred to the Jebusite fortress on the ridge between the Tyropoeon Valley and the Wadi Kidron. When David captured the “stronghold of Zion” he changed its name to the City of David.⁶ (2) With the construction of the temple, the meaning of “Zion” was extended both spatially and theologically to identify the Temple Mount.⁷ (3) By a process of metonymy, the name Zion came to refer to Jerusalem itself, the city where the temple was located.⁸ (4) By further metonymy, like the name Jerusalem, in later prophecy Zion came to denote the people of Israel.⁹ Ezekiel’s avoidance of Zion in the first and last senses is understandable. On the one hand, he shows no interest in the early history of the monarchy. On the other, as a designation for the people of Israel, “Zion” is rare elsewhere, and there is no need for an alternative to the conventional “Israel.” However, given Ezekiel’s special interest in the temple,¹⁰ the Temple Mount,¹¹ and the city of Jerusalem, his avoidance of the name in these contexts is striking.

Second, the kingship of YHWH, whose enthronement features prominently in Zion theology, receives little attention in Ezekiel’s ministry. YHWH is explicitly referred to as מְלִיךְ only once, in 20:33, but the context has nothing to do with enthronement celebrations. On the contrary, the emphasis is on YHWH’s active and wrathful gathering of Israel that he may judge them in the wilderness. In the first temple vision (chs. 1–11) the כְּבוֹד יְהוָה (“glory of YHWH”) is seen abandoning its abode inside the temple, and taking its place on the portable throne carried by the cherubim. The link with traditional enthronement notions is vague at

“trust” (בטח), “to be firm” (אמן), “salvation” (ישע), “redeem” (פדה, גאל), the verb “to bless” (ברך) and “blessed” (אשרי) and “curse” (ארר); and references to “love” (אהב), “covenant faithfulness” (חסד), and “fear” (ירא) toward God by his people.

5. So are other expressions often associated with Zion theology, the most striking of which is יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת, “YHWH of hosts.” On the place of this expression in Zion theology see most recently Mettinger, “YHWH Zebaoth,” 720–24.

6. The change in designation is referred to in 2 Sam 5:7, 9.

7. E.g., Ps 48:1–3[1–2]; 78:68–69; 87:2; 132:13–16.

8. Cf. the interchanging of “Jerusalem” and “[Fair] Zion” in Lam 2:6–8.

9. Isa 51:16; Zech 2:7[11].

10. See especially chapters 8–11 and 40–48.

11. Note the reference to the “high mountain” in 40:2.

best. Ezekiel 43:6–9 is more suggestive. After observing in visionary form the *יהוה כבוד* entering the temple, here Ezekiel hears YHWH declare the temple to be the place of his throne and the place of the soles of his feet, where he will dwell among the descendants of Israel forever. However, in context, his occupation of the throne is not the occasion for celebration, but of warning. Never will the house of Israel, inclusive of its kings, defile his holy name again.

Third, while Ezekiel perceives Jerusalem as the center of the international universe, her position here has little resemblance to the role of Zion in Zion theology. In 5:5 YHWH affirms that he has set Jerusalem in the midst of the nations (*בְּתוֹךְ הַגּוֹיִם*). To YHWH Jerusalem was not just another city among many; rather with him in the past she had enjoyed “most favored nation” status. Minimally this must mean that the world is invited to watch how YHWH cares for his people. However, instead of serving as a paradigm of divine grace she had publicly set a new standard of evil. If Ezekiel hereby intends an allusion to Zion theology, his intention is well-veiled.

In 38:12 he describes the regathered nation of Israel living securely “on top of the world.” The meaning of *טֹבַר הָאָרֶץ* in 38:12 continues to engage scholars. The common rendering “navel of the earth,” which derives from LXX’s *ὀμφαλόν*, is perpetuated in the Vulgate’s *umbilici terrae*, as well as in pseudepigraphic,¹² and rabbinic writings,¹³ and is reflected in several renowned medieval maps.¹⁴ But many modern interpreters have abandoned the literal “navel” explanation, preferring to see here a figure of speech for “the center of the earth.” By this understanding the land of Israel/Zion is viewed as a sort of cosmic midpoint.¹⁵ This accords better with later Hebrew;¹⁶ and with our prophet, who had earlier declared that YHWH had placed Jerusalem in the middle of the nations (5:5). The expression *טֹבַר הָאָרֶץ* occurs elsewhere only in Judg 9:37. There it describes

12. Jubilees 8:19 reads, “Mount Sinai [was] in the midst of the desert and Mount Zion [was] in the midst of the navel of the earth.” Cf. also 1 Enoch 26:1. Josephus (*Wars* 3.3.5) notes that some called Jerusalem the navel of the country.

13. *B. Yoma* 54b, “The world was created from Zion”; *Midrash Tanhûma Qedoshim*, 10, “As the navel is situated in the center of a person, so is the land of Israel—in the center of the world.” See also *Sanhedrin* 37a.

14. See particularly the map from the thirteenth-century Latin manuscript of the book of Psalms and the sixteenth-century “clover leaf” map, reproduced and discussed by Beitzel, *Moody Atlas*, 201–3.

15. Cf. NRSV, NJPS, REB, NASB, NIV, JB.

16. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 529.

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Mount Gerizim overlooking Shechem, which some contend was considered by the Canaanites as the navel, viz., center of the land of Canaan.¹⁷ Some also draw support for this understanding from extra Israelite attestation to the notion of a navel or center of the earth.¹⁸

However this interpretation suffers from several major weaknesses, and should probably be abandoned.¹⁹ (a) The etymology of טִבּוֹר is uncertain. Admittedly, it is used of the umbilical cord in Mishnaic Hebrew and later Aramaic, but the Old Testament itself provides no support for this interpretation.²⁰ Furthermore, Biblical Hebrew possesses a word for “navel” or “umbilical cord,” that Ezekiel himself has used שֵׁר in 16:4.²¹ (b) Ezekiel 5:5 refers, not to a cosmic center, but to Jerusalem’s position in the context of her neighbors. (c) The context of Judg 9:37, specifically the previous verse, suggests a more mundane denotation, “elevated ground.”²² (d) There is no obvious need for a reference to either the navel or the center of the earth in the present context. In fact, its juxtaposition with “unwalled villages” points to some safe and secure location. This requirement is fully met if טִבּוֹר הָאֶרֶץ is interpreted as an elevated plateau without external fortifications, as in Judg 9:37. Fifth, this interpretation finds early support in the Targum, which translates the word as חֲקִיפָא, “stronghold.”²³ In any case, Ezekiel here speaks of Israel as a nation regathered in the land, not the city of Jerusalem where the worship of YHWH is centered. Any allusion to Zion theology in this text is more in the mind of the reader than in the text itself.

17. Anderson, “Place of Shechem,” 10–11.

18. (1) A circular sixth-century-BCE map of the world from Babylon locates this city in the center surrounded by neighbors, some positioned irrespective of their actual location (cf. Beitzel, *Moody Atlas*, 197–98; Unger, *Babylon*, 20–24). (2) In Greece, Homer saw the navel in the geographic midpoint of the sea (*Odyssey* 1.50). (3) Major Greek oracle sanctuaries such as those at Didyma, Miletus, and Delphi were viewed as the navel of the earth. (4) According to Aristides the Eleusinian mystery cults reserved this honor for Athens. (5) Islam ascribes this status to Mecca. For discussion and bibliography see Terrien, “Omphalos Myth,” 315–38; cf. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 311.

19. So also Talmon, “הַר har,” 437–38.

20. Ahroni (“Gog Prophecy,” 12–13) accepts the omphalic interpretation here, but sees the presence of the phrase as an argument for the late date of the Gog prophecy.

21. See also Song 7:3[2]; Prov 3:8.

22. So also Thomas, “Mount Tabor,” 230.

23. Kimchi explains this translation geographically, as a reference to the territory of Israel being elevated higher than the rest of the countries. See Levey, *Ezekiel*, 107.

Fourth, while Zion theology ties the election of Zion as the seat of YHWH's throne closely with the election of David,²⁴ Ezekiel never links these motifs. In the judgment oracles of chapters 4–24 both temple and dynasty come under the fury of divine wrath, but always in different contexts. The Davidic house is entirely out of the picture in the vision of the departure of the *כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה*, “glory of YHWH” from the temple (chs. 8–11). Correspondingly, in judgment pronouncements directed against the Davidic house, the temple is out of the picture.²⁵ Similarly, while Ezekiel's salvation oracles do indeed envision the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and YHWH's re-occupation of the throne (43:6–9), election terminology is avoided in both instances. In 34:23–24 the prophet conjoins notions of Davidic shepherdship (= kingship) with peace, security, and prosperity, but without any reference to the temple. Ezekiel 37:21–28 looks more promising, inasmuch as references to the establishment of David as shepherd king over Israel and YHWH's dwelling among his people in his sanctuary (*מִקְדָּשׁ*) occur in the same context.

However, the language of this passage is scarcely typical of Zion theology. Furthermore, references to the Israelites living on the land that YHWH gave to Jacob, and the promise of YHWH's residence among his people as an extension of the covenant formula, also link this passage with the Abrahamic and Israelite (Mosaic) covenants respectively. While the references to the *נְשִׂיא* provide a link with the David of 34:23–24 and 37:25 in the final temple vision, he is not presented as a royal figure after the order of the Davidic dynasty, but as the hands on patron of the cult.

Fifth, although Ezekiel's restoration oracles include visions of final peace,²⁶ this peace bears no direct links with Zion theology. To be sure, Ezekiel knows of YHWH's victory over the nations (34:27–28; cf. 38–39), of his “covenant of peace” (*בְּרִית שְׁלוֹם*),²⁷ even of the destruction of the enemies' weapons,²⁸ but in each case the style and tone of the description bear little resemblance to other Zion theology texts. Specifically, as Kathie Darr has observed,²⁹ Ezekiel's vision of the future is narrowly parochial. He does indeed recognize the universal implications of YHWH's future actions. YHWH will magnify himself, sanctify himself (38:23), and set his

24. Pss 78:70–72; 132:11–12, 17–18.

25. Ezek 12:1–16; 17:1–24; 19:1–14.

26. Ezek 34:25–32; 37:26; 38:8.

27. Ezek 37:26; cf. Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–4.

28. Ezek 38:9–10; cf. Pss 46:10–11[9–10]; 76:4[3]; Isa 2:4; Mic 4:4.

29. Darr, “Wall around Paradise,” 271–78.

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glory among the nations as they experience his acts of judgment (39:21)—and they will know that he is YHWH (38:23). But this is a far cry from the extension of his reign of peace and justice to the ends of the earth. He comes the closest in the coda to his riddle on the Davidic dynasty in 17:22–24, where YHWH plucks a קֶרֶן, “sprig, shoot,” from the topmost crown of the cedar and plants it on “a high and lofty mountain,” and “the high mountain of Israel,” where it takes root and grows into a gigantic tree that offers shade and a place for nests for birds of every kind. Then all the trees of the field (foreign nations?) will recognize him as YHWH. One may recognize here resemblances to other passages celebrating the exaltation of Zion, but the motif is veiled almost beyond recognition.

Sixth, while Ezekiel’s vision of the reconstituted nation focuses on a city to the south of a very high mountain (40:2), the heart of the city is taken up with the temple. However, Ezekiel avoids naming this city either by its historical designation (Jerusalem) or by its theological name (Zion). On the contrary, he separates the residence of YHWH, the temple, from the city, which he names יְהוָה שָׁמָּה, “YHWH *Shammah* (YHWH is There)” (48:35). This city bears no resemblance whatsoever to the Jerusalem of Zion theology. It is not located in Judah, the tribe of David. In fact, it is not associated with David at all. Special lands are indeed set aside for the לְנֶחֱדָה, presumably a Davidide, though this identity is withheld, but the city is in the midst of Levitical and priestly property; it is not a royal estate. On the contrary, the city belongs to the people; all the gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel. In this allocation not only is the king out of the picture; in treating “each [tribe] like his brother,” the allotments of land demonstrate a new egalitarian ideal designed to prevent the social injustices of the past. Even the design and function of the city reflects Ezekiel’s fundamental social premise that all citizens have equal rights to the worship of YHWH. And despite the prophet’s exclusivist vision, aliens are welcome here. But they must come on YHWH’s terms. If they identify with the faith of his people they are entitled to all the rights and privileges extended to the physical heirs of the traditions. However important Zion theology may have been for the prophet, again the paradigmatic features have been totally suppressed.

THE EXPLANATION

This cumulative set of problems raises the question, “What has happened to traditional Zion theology in the preaching of Ezekiel?” It is

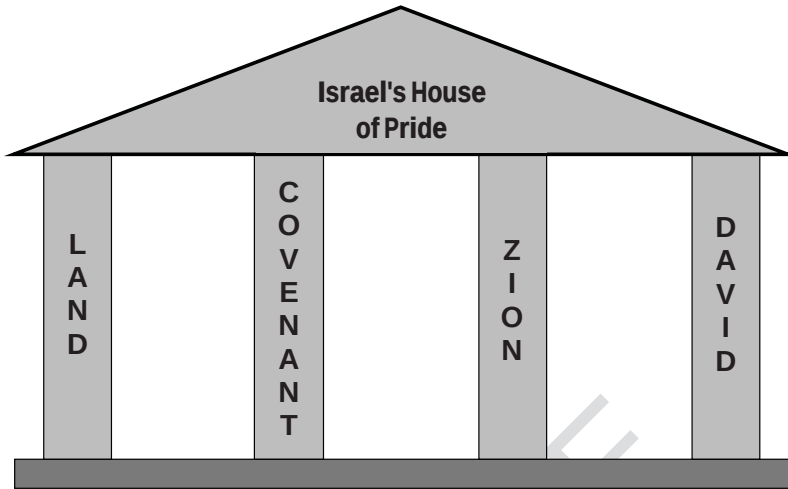
inconceivable that he was ignorant of the Zion traditions. Contra Rainer Albertz, it is equally unlikely that Ezekiel is hereby starting a branch of the reform priesthood fundamentally opposed either to traditional Zion theology, or later Deuteronomist images of the royal state cult.³⁰ One misunderstands Ezekiel if one finds in this book a sweeping repudiation of the Davidic monarchy and/or a total repudiation of royal involvement in the cult. To be sure, the cult of deceased kings is denounced, and future royal encroachments into the sacred sphere of the temple are precluded (43:7–9). However, the נִשְׁבַּע of chapters 40–48, undoubtedly a royal figure, retains an important cultic function: as patron of the cult he supervises the temple activities and provides the offerings for the sacrifices.

But why have the paradigmatic traditions of Zion theology been so overwhelmingly suppressed in this book? The most likely answer is to be found in the theological crisis to which the exilic prophet Ezekiel speaks. Ezekiel ministered in a context where Israelite confidence in YHWH was founded upon an official orthodoxy, that rested on four immutable propositions, four pillars of divine promise: the irrevocability of YHWH's covenant with Israel; YHWH's ownership of the land of Canaan, which he had granted to Israel as an eternal possession; YHWH's eternal covenant with David; and YHWH's residence in Jerusalem, the place he had chosen for his name to dwell (Fig. 1). The last two of these relate to what scholars conventionally refer to as Zion theology.

As I see it, Ezekiel's overriding rhetorical purpose is to transform his audience's perception of their relationship with YHWH, exposing delusions of innocence, and offering a divine understanding of reality. His pursuit of this goal divides into two discreet parts, separated by the announcement of the messenger from Jerusalem, "The city has fallen!" (33:21). Prior to the fall of Jerusalem Ezekiel's prophecies consist of negative pronouncements of judgment upon his people for their infidelity to the covenant. Contrary to prevailing opinion among his people, the people of Judah have no reason to hope in YHWH's rescue. This message is communicated in chapters 4–24 by systematically attacking the pillars on which official orthodoxy constructed its notions of eternal security. If Judah will be destroyed—and she will—it will not happen because YHWH has reneged on his covenant commitment or repudiated Zion theology. He will abandon his temple and send his people into exile in a foreign land because the people of Israel have been unfaithful to him. This covenantal treachery demanded the rupturing of the deity-nation-land relationships.

30. Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion*, 480–93.

Figure 1: A House of Pride: The Foundations of Israel's Security



But after 586 BCE the tone and emphasis of Ezekiel's prophesies change. Once the old illusions of spirituality have been destroyed, he can look forward to a new day when the tri-partite association is restored and all three parties experience covenant shalom. In the process Ezekiel affirms that official orthodoxy, including Zion theology, had indeed been founded on truth. YHWH's covenant promises are eternal. The earlier problem had not been the veracity of the divine word, but the illegitimate appropriation of that word by those who failed to keep the terms of the agreement. Accordingly, in his vision of the new day, Ezekiel offers hope by systematically reconstructing the pillars on which the nation's security had been based in the first place. In both, the judgment and the restoration, the word of YHWH is affirmed: not only the immediate prophetic word, whose fulfillment confirms Ezekiel's status as an authorized messenger of YHWH, but especially the ancient word, declared in the promise to the Fathers, the covenant at Sinai, the promise to David, and the election of Jerusalem as his dwelling place.

However, Ezekiel's vision of the future cannot afford simply to reverse the horrors of the divine judgment recently experienced by his people or to reconstruct the old social and theological order. Past wrongs must righted; past abuses forever resolved. To achieve this goal the political wings of the Davidic dynasty needed to be clipped and the relationship of the Davidic house to the cult totally revamped. Ezekiel is not fundamentally opposed

to Zion theology or the monarchy, but the misadministration of the past must never return. Accordingly, the revived David functions as the servant and direct under-shepherd of YHWH (34:23–24; 37:21–28). In so doing, the *shalom* that YHWH had envisioned for his people may finally be realized. But this peace will not happen until YHWH resumes his rightful place in the temple and David is reinstalled as king over all Israel.

SAMPLE