

Ezekiel 36: 16-38

A New People in a Renewed Land

In the Bible, the words *new heart* and *new spirit* occur only in the book of Ezekiel (18:31; 36:26; d. 11: 19). These words dominate the unique emphasis of this capstone of Ezekiel's three sayings on renewal. Following the promise of a new shepherd leadership (chap. 34) and a renewed land (35:1-36:15), this third saying pledges that there will be a renewed people. Israel's outward life will be cleansed their inward life will be re-created and activated by the divine Spirit; and their communal life will be guided by divine statutes. In this emphasis on renewal, Israel is involved as the second of three partners. The first partner is the Lord, who is the actor throughout. The Lord must act for the second partner, Israel, in order to preserve God's own integrity with the third partner, the nations, Israel's renewal is at the center of this drama and can be understood only within it.¹

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Address to Ezekiel: The Lord's Predicament, 36:17-21

The Lord tells Ezekiel a sad tale. It is the story of *Israel* and the *land* (36: 17, NIV), the subject throughout the chapter. Three partners are involved in this account (36:21; cf. Zimmerli, 1983:248). The first is *the Lord, the actor throughout*, the antecedent of all the first-person- singular pronouns as subject, *I* (36:16, 18, etc.). The second is *the house of Israel* (36:17; d. 36:21, 22, 32, 37). The third partner is *the nations*; their importance is evident since they are named nine times (36:19,20,21,22, 23bd, 24, 30, 36).²

The story has three movements. It begins with the house of Israel in *their own land* (36:17, NIV; Heb.: '*adamah*'). Then *they had to go out of his land* (36:20, RSV; Heb.: '*eres*'). Finally, *I will ... bring you into your own land* (36:24, '*adamah*'). The two Hebrew terms for land are synonyms here. This *land* is both Israel's land and the Lord's land (36:17, 20), concepts harmonized by the statement about *the land ['ere~l which I gave to your ancestors* (36:28). Israel's problem in the land is its conduct (36:17). To show how detestable this is in God's sight, Ezekiel uses a sexual simile: *like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period*. The law states that bodily emissions, such as a man's emission of semen or a woman's menstruation, renders that person unclean (Lev. 15, esp. 15:16-19, 32-33). Certain social and worship restrictions and cleansing rites were required of persons who were unclean. Ezekiel does not speak to ceremonial issues here, but uses this simile to illustrate the seriousness of Israel's ways and their deeds (36:17), more specifically, their violence (*blood ... they shed*) and idolatry (*idols*, 36: 18). These are sins against fellow human beings and God which violate both tables of the Ten Commandments. When such acts are frequent (or portrayed frequently, as on television) they may actually seem less sinful than ceremonial infractions!³

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Ezekiel's point is that they are not. Violence and idolatry are sins against covenant holiness which are incompatible with the holy land; they defiled it, made it unclean. The Lord responded to this problem by cleansing the land: *I poured out my wrath, ... scattered them, ... judged them* (36:18- 19). But these actions only result in the Lord's predicament, the point toward which this story moves and with which it deals: *They profaned my holy name* (36:20; cf. "For My Name's Sake" in TBC for 20:1-44). Israel profaned the name not by what they do in exile but just by being there. The nations know that the Lord's *people* and the Lord's *land* belong together (36:20), but they assume the reason for their separation to be divine powerlessness rather than divine holiness⁴.

Address to Israel: Response to the Predicament 36:22-32

36:22-23 God's Motivation for Action: The Name

¹ Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 288.

² Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 289.

³ Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 289.

⁴ Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 290.

The nations as the third partner in this triangle are important. They must know and acknowledge the *holy name* as the revelation of holy power which is able to achieve its goals for history (36:23; cf. 36:35-36). [Recognition Formula, p. 380.] Holy people, holy land, holy name are all defiled and polluted; and the greatest of these is the holy name. To *sanctify* God's *great name* is the motivation for God's new act before the eyes of the nations (ef. 20:9, 14,22). God's holiness will have to be displayed by means of the second partner, Israel (*through you*, 36:23). This promise of return to the land must have seemed impossible to the exiles. Contrary to Hosea and other prophets, Ezekiel does not regard love as God's motive for saving Israel: *Not for your sake* (36:22) will I *save you* (36:29). "Steadfast love," "mercy," "love," "faithfulness," and the noun "salvation" are not in Ezekiel's vocabulary (ef. Zimmerli, 1983:247 -248). Ezekiel seems far from John 3:16. But neither does God act out of self-love; instead, the Lord acts for the sake of the name, for the sake of God's revelation to the nations. The objective is the recognition by both Israel and the international community that the God of Israel alone is the holy power in history who is able to create and sustain the good community. This is not so far from the motivation of divine love as might appear superficially. But it grounds God's act in the divine self in a way, perhaps, which the concept of love cannot do.⁵

36: 24-30 *God's Five Acts for Israel*

God acts to sanctify the divine name (36:23) first by uniting the people with their own land (36:24), answering the problem posed by the nations (36:20). Note the verbs and prepositions: *take you from, ... gather you from, ... bring you into ...* (36:24). Ezekiel does not downgrade the importance of the people's environment, their *land*. God's second act speaks to the problem of the people's past, their *uncleanness* (36:25) which made them incompatible with the land (ef. 36: 17). Only a holy people can live in a holy land. Ezekiel uses language of religious ritual (*sprinkle, clean water, clean, uncleanness, cleanse*; ef. Lev. 15; Num. 8:7). Yet the cleansing is from idols and from violent conduct (36:18), actions prohibited by basic covenant law (Deut. 5:6-21). In the history of Bible interpretation by the church, this act has been understood as pointing to Christian baptism. God's third act demands of Ezekiel a breakthrough in metaphors: *ni: ?tv heart, new spirit* (36:26; PREVIEW). Jeremiah's parallel expression, "new covenant" (31:31), is often picked up by the NT church (Matt. 26:28, NRSV note; Mark 14:24, NRSV note; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24). However, the NT never uses Ezekiel's metaphors of *new heart* and *new spirit*.⁶

In the Bible, the heart is not so much the center of feeling as of thought and will. This "new mind" speaks to the condition of the unresponsive mind, th~ *heart of stone* 36:26; cf. 11 :19; 18:31). Elsewhere Ezekiel speaks o'f the *stiffhearted, hardhearted, whorish heart* (KJV: 2:4; 3:7; 6:9). Jeremiah speaks of the "stubborn and rebellious" and "evil heart" (Jer. 5:23; 7:24, KJV). The NT uses the metaphors "hardness of heart," "do not harden your hearts," "evil ...heart," "fleshly tables of the heart" (Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17; Heb. 3:8, 12; 4:7; 2 Cor. 3:3, KJV). God's fourth act is to put the divine *Spirit* within them (36:27). This is to be distinguished from the *new spirit* of 36:25. In the Bible, God's Spirit empowers and causes things to happen. Here, it will cause Israel to *walk in God's statutes, to observe God's ordinances*. The Spirit does not make law unnecessary but will empower Israel to do it. This answers Israel's problem of idolatry and violence, of defiling the land with *their own ways and doings* (36: 17 -18, KJV). In all of these acts, the Lord addresses Israel with the second-person-plural pronoun: *Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God* (36:28, KJV). The covenant structure is individuated; the individual is important but is within community rather than against community.

THE TEXT IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Inner Renewal and the Three Partners

Ezekiel's famous saying on *irm~l"re* |ewal is set within the context not of two partners, God and Israel, but of three partners, God, Israel, and the nations. The word *nation(s)*, referring to foreign peoples, occurs more often in this segment on inner renewal than in any other section of similar length in Ezekiel's book. To correct their wrong perception of God, caused by the exile, the Lord must act again on behalf of Israel (36:20b, 36; d. chap. 20). This context, God's concern for self-

⁵ Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 290.

⁶ Millard C. Lind. *Bible Commentary on Ezekiel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 291.

revelation to the third partner, the nations, is essential in order to understand the Lord's acts of renewal for Israel.

Israel, the second partner in this relationship, is the means by which God will reveal the divine self to the nations. That revelation was blocked by conduct repulsive to God. Israel's two cardinal sins were violence against human beings and idolatry, disloyalty to God. In this charge, Ezekiel is no Don Quixote, attacking meaningless windmills. Modern archaeology corroborates, for example, Ezekiel's charge of idolatry. At thousands of ancient Israelite sites, female figurines have been found, suggesting the popularity of the worship of the Canaanite goddess Asherah. Archaeological and biblical evidence indicate that the worship of this mother goddess was popular until the end of the monarchy (Dever: 148; cf. 2 Kings 18:4; 23:4). Monotheism was possible only because of persons such as Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel, and their followers.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel realized that because of the depth of Israel's sin, God must act again for Israel in a new dispensation. For Jeremiah, the law must be written upon the heart; for Ezekiel, God must create in Israel a new heart and spirit, and place the divine Spirit

Israel Shall Recognize the Lord 36:37-38

Repopulation is the subject of the second oracle (36:37-38). The *people* (36:37, NIV) will increase *like the flock at Jerusalem* (36:38). This reference to sacrificial flock hints at the people's holiness, tying the oracle to this concern within the chapter (36:20-23, 25, 31-33).

While the first oracle ends with the acknowledgment of the nations (36:36), the second oracle climaxes in Israel's acknowledgment of the Lord (36:38). Both the nations and Israel will recognize that violence and worship of the gods of violence lead to a dead end (36:18-19). The way to the future is with the holiness and worship of the God who gives a new heart and spirit.

within (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27). This work will be entirely that of the first partner in the triad, the Lord. While Israel in exile is admonished to get a new heart, Israel for this new dispensation must be given it (18:31). It will be a new creation jcf. Ps. 51:10). It is this new work of God which Jesus instituted at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:25).

For Ezekiel, however, this renewal of heart can change the mind of the nations only as it is closely connected with Israel's life, secure in the renewed land (36:28, 35). The biblical theme of land is complex ("The Land" in TBC for 35:1-36:15). But here Ezekiel's point is that only a people with a new heart and spirit is compatible with a holy and renewed land. Israel will be returned to their land not by violence nor self-help but by the Lord, who will create inner renewal. Ezekiel has yet to deal in a final way with the violence of empire which threatened Israel's relation to land throughout much of its history (chaps. 38-39).

THE TEXT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Bible Interpretation and Ezekiel 36

Several years ago, touring the naval academy building at Greenwich, England, I saw emblazoned on the wall of its chapel the words, "The meek shall inherit the earth." For both British empire and for Jesus., land and earth are very important. But whoever placed these words in the chapel did not realize that for Jesus they are a polemic *against* empire (Matt. 5:5).

Brueggemann complains that although the covenant formula in 36:28b has often been noticed ... , less frequently remarked is that this formula is accompanied by a land formula: "You shall dwell in the land ... You shall be my people, and I will be your God." Surely the combination of *land formula* and *covenant formula* is not accidental. The two ideas, in land and in covenant, belong together. (Brueggemann: 141)

In the history of interpretation these two ideas, "land" and "covenant," fell apart in the nineteenth century. Wellhausen wrote that what the prophets

were unconsciously laboring towards was that religious individualism which had its historical source in the national downfall. ... With such

men as Amos and Hosea, the moral personality based upon an inner conviction burst through the limits of mere nationality; their mistake was

