



## The Book of Ezekiel Ezekiel, Part 2

### Ezekiel Chapter 8 and the Vision of Jerusalem

In Chapter 8 Ezekiel has a vision in which he is transported back to the temple in Jerusalem. This is still in the intermediate period between 597 and 587, when the first wave of deportations had happened, but the temple had not yet been destroyed. In this vision Ezekiel bears witness to all sorts of unauthorized practices happening within the temple: there are images of foreign deities, unclean animals, and the elders of the land do as they please because they think that YHWH can no longer see them.

This in-between time is akin to teenagers left alone without their parents for the weekend - they throw a party and do everything they are otherwise not allowed to do. This litany of unauthorized practices are all the kinds of things Israel would like to do if YHWH wasn't watching. This forms a key part of the backbone of Ezekiel's argument throughout this text: these people are irredeemable, because they will constantly be in breach of the covenant. For Ezekiel, crucially, restoration is promised not because the people are worth saving, but because restoration will glorify the divine name.

### Transgenerational Punishment

Chapter 18 opens with an apparently classic proverb that when parents eat sour grapes, their children's teeth are set on edge, an adage that relates to the highly contested and complex idea of transgenerational punishment. Some scholars take Ezekiel's words here to be advocating for individual accountability, and others see a sarcastic remark about the futility of being able to mete out specific punishments to the specific people who caused specific wrongdoings, that in some sense the nation as a whole will always hold a degree of responsibility.

The list of wrongdoings that follows also goes to show us what Ezekiel considers to be "sins": eating upon the mountains, defiling one's neighbor's wife, oppressing the poor and needy, committing robbery, not restoring the pledge of a debtor, lifting up one's eyes to idols and committing abominations, taking an advance or accruing interest, and so on. We see each of these "sins" as Ezekiel makes his argument about individual responsibility.

Ultimately, the question here is as follows: is this generation responsible for what previous generations did? Specifically, are the people who are suffering in exile, who maybe weren't the ones that actually committed all the crimes that lead to their destruction and deportation, responsible for

those sins nonetheless? It seems to be the case that Ezekiel does consider them to be guilty of the same crimes, and so are worthy of condemnation; but this guilt is theirs, it is not the result of some previous generation. Ezekiel even leaves room for the fact that if the people were to do well enough, they could be saved on that account. Unfortunately, Ezekiel also thinks the people are incapable of doing so. They just need to “get a new heart and a new spirit” - as if it were that easy! Ezekiel’s reproof of the people is not about behavior - as in “stop doing this and you will be fine” - but rather about the people needing to change who they are in their innermost being.

#### Ezekiel Chapter 36 and Israel’s Heart Transplant

Towards the end of the book, in Chapter 36, Ezekiel expounds on what needs to happen in order for Israel to be restored - and it requires a lot of action on God’s part, with very little the people can actually do to help themselves. In verse 26 onward, we find the language of a heart transplant. An important piece of historical context here is that, for people in Ezekiel’s time, the heart is not the location and organ of feelings; rather, it is the organ of cognition, and the location of all speech and knowledge. When YHWH tells the people they need a new heart, he is literally saying that they need to get rid of everything they have learned before, to get rid of this old and inflexible heart of stone. What is needed now is a new heart, a heart of flesh, one that is dynamic, can change with the times, and is capable of learning new things. The language of spirit from these same verses also calls to mind the priestly language from the “P” creation story in Genesis, and once again goes to show how deeply steeped Ezekiel is in this imagery and theology, and how he is able to use that familiar language to great effect with his immediate audience. Remember, Ezekiel went into exile in 597 during the first wave of deportations, which indicates his audience is likely other priestly elites, who are equipped to understand exactly what his message is here.

These motifs also recall another event from the Pentateuchal priestly material, namely the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus. In that narrative, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart in order to make him worse, so that he won’t do that right thing. Here in Ezekiel, this heart transplant is necessary because Israel’s hearts aren’t just hardening, as an ongoing action, they’re already hardened, a completed process that makes them completely irredeemable. The admission here is that it is impossible for mortals to undo this damage, and the only way to rectify the situation is for God to perform surgery on them. Even after such a surgery, the simple change is not enough - God needs to actually make the people follow his statutes, forcing them to obey, because we have seen now in the disasters of history what happens when they are left to their own devices.