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„For a while I have been a sanctuary for them”

Dynamic of presence and idolatry in the Book of Ezekiel

Thesis booklet

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In the research of the book of Ezekiel, two trends have manifested in recent years, often complementing each other. The first is the prominence of the synchronic examination as opposed to the meticulous examination of the diachronic redactional layers. The other is placing the book of Ezekiel and the prophet himself in a broader cultural context, usually through an examination of Mesopotamian parallels.

Our thesis was the following: the book of Ezekiel in its current canonical form appears to us as a theological summary, which tries to provide relevant answers to the challenges of the period for the conditions of the Babylonian captivity. It does this by making God's effective presence relevant both in his own time and in the history of Israel, while synthesizing earlier Israelite theological approaches in his language and presentation. An important part of this positive theological work is the presentation as a kind of negative theology of what is not God, that is, idolatry as a fundamental sin in the book of Ezekiel.

In the course of our work, we primarily wanted to continue the relevant work of J. F. KUTSKO¹, supplementing it with more recent research and deepening it at some points. In contrast to relevant research, we did not focus on extra-biblical sources, but on the theological antecedents within the Old Testament, for which we found only few examples in the literature in systematic detail.

Because of the above, our work is both historical: it follows the theology of God's effective presence all the way to the book of Ezekiel; and ahistorical: it examines the work of the prophet as a finished, canonical book in a synchronic way. Our discussion is further complicated by the insight that the spiritual background of the prophetic book was not built according to today's – linearly progressive – logic. Therefore, at the beginning of our work, we were faced with the fact that the discussed topics cannot be explained linearly from each other, but can only be understood in their continuous operation. For this reason, we were forced to - in an unusual way - divide our work into circles, during which we deepened the individual topics, along an internal coherence.

Due to the wide-ranging nature and complexity of our topic, we tried to formulate a detailed methodology and stick to it. In the absence of uniform Hungarian – and sometimes foreign – terminology, we also tried to develop a consistent use of words and present the key concepts in detail. In addition, we tried to

¹ KUTSKO, J. F., *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, (BJS 7.), Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake 2000.

process both the latest publications and works considered fundamental in the field of technical literature.

The following questions arose from the topic and were discussed:

1. *What were the factors that directly influenced the holy author – or authors – in the completion of the book, and in what form did it finally happen (Circle I)?* For this question, we tried to take into account the mentality of the period (chapter 1), the possible personal and social effects (chapter 2), and the historical background (chapter 3). After outlining these, we used our previous work to outline the current, canonical structure of the book of Ezekiel in more detail than usual, showing the very complex editing of the book, which is not independent of what it says.
2. *Within the framework outlined above, how did contemporary people think about God's effective presence (circle II)?* This part of our work can actually be described as an Old Testament theological history. After briefly reviewing the theologies outside of Israel – how the "foreign peoples" themselves saw the question of the presence of their gods – (chapter 1), we also reviewed the Old Testament manifestations of the theme (chapter 2). Then we presented the negative side of the topic, the Israelite but illegitimate forms of God's presence (chapter 3) and through this, idolatry itself (chapter 4).
3. *How does the idea of God's presence and its opposition to idolatry – which is a kind of negative presence – specifically appear in the book of Ezekiel (Circle III)?* In discussing this question, we highlighted three texts from the book of Ezekiel (chapters 16, 20 and 23) that present the history of Israel, specifically from the point of view of idolatry and God's effective historical presence, and analyzed them in more detail (chapter 1). After that, we examined the historical perspective of the entire book itself (Chapter 2).

Our third subtopic is actually the connection between the topic of Presence (God's effective presence) and idolatry, which in the eyes of the holy author took place in the history of Israel. What is the relationship between them? If someone – even superficially – reads the book, he can apparently answer the question simply:

God rejects and punishes Israel because of idolatry; the Glory leaves the Temple in Jerusalem, which is then destroyed; then, during the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites are cleansed of the sin of idolatry, so the Lord gathers them and then restores the country and the official cult. This is true, in short, but is that really all there is to it? Problems arise that show that the situation is somewhat more complicated.

Ezekiel – like other prophets – presents idolatry with very harsh words. At the same time, it presents such an incredible world of images, which in the Israelite traditions – that forbid pictorial representations – are rare even among the texts (e.g. the harlot in Ez 16; the pharaoh's descent into the underworld [Ez 32:17-32]; Tyre as a ship in Ez 27; etc.). Moreover, Ezekiel repeatedly and demonstrably uses the imagery of foreign cults (certain elements of the throne-chariot vision; the representation of Egypt as a "world tree" in Ez 31; etc.). In addition, recent research has also discovered "pagan" prefiguring in the literary and theological design of the work itself.² This trend also raises the question of inculturation, which is so important nowadays.

The book of Ezekiel asks about the road to the Babylonian captivity crisis: "How did we get here?" When looking for the reasons for this, it found the answer in idolatry. We have shown that the work interprets idolatry on a very broad scale. It lists popular superstitions (Ez 20:28), divination (Ez 13:17-23), foreign cults (Ez 8:10-17); but it also lists here the elements of illegitimate cults, false prophets (Ez 13:2-16), improperly performed cults, political idolatry – when the hope of liberating deeds is tied to a foreign earthly power – and in this connection we saw the maximum of idolatry when someone considers himself a god (Ez 28, 29).

It used everything at his disposal for its prophetic answer. It visibly applied the theology of the Priestly writings of the Pentateuch, most spectacularly in its so-called theology of glory, as well as abundant references – for example in chapter 16 – to the Tabernacle as depicted in the P source. In the same way, it used the older traditions inserted in P: the image of the Lord as a king enthroned on cherubim, and of the Tabernacle as an encounter with God. Most strikingly, however, it used the theology of the law of holiness (H) in his preaching, especially the part containing the curses (Lev 26.), which is for breaking the covenant.

² Primarily: BODI, D., *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, (OBO 104.), Academic Press – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Fribourg – Göttingen 1991; and PETTER, D. L., *The Book of Ezekiel and Mesopotamian City Laments*, (OBO 246.), Academic Press – Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Fribourg – Göttingen 2011.

It's harder to show, but it also used Deuteronomist (D) theology – the so-called Name theology. The Presence of the Lord is no longer necessarily connected to the Temple, despite its prominent role, and the necessity of the cult also becomes relative for those in captivity. In this context, individual devotion (prayer) takes on a greater role through personal responsibility and the possibility of conversion. It is also characteristic of the Deuteronomistic Temple interpretation that in the book of Ezekiel, Jerusalem remains as a point of orientation for the captivity. It provides the direction to return through remembrance.

The purpose of everything was to create a huge theological summary, a kind of "Summa Theologiae", primarily for the victims of the Babylonian captivity. It wished to be a synthesis – a "new law" (Ez 43:10-12) – that would help the Israelites interpret the present and, in light of it, the past and the future. To do this, he used the correct knowledge of God – the operation of the Presence in the history of Israel – as a basis to show the unsustainability of idolatry, the root of which is the pride that you can allow yourself to defy God, despite the fact that He wants the best for you.

The results of our investigations can be summarized below:

1. The structure of the book of Ezekiel is the result of a thoughtful, complex editing that is completely subordinated to the theological message: The captivity is a punishment for cultic and political idolatry, which entails the departure of the Glory from Jerusalem. This will be followed by a restoration in the future, by God's sovereign decision.
2. Idolatry, as it is traditionally presented by the prophets, including Ezekiel, does not fully correspond to the ideas of the foreign peoples of the time, but even among themselves, as a result of a possible degeneration, it was a real danger. Ezekiel was apparently aware of this, but of course the prophet had to reject the cults of foreign peoples, as it was a violation of the covenant with the Lord.
3. Ezekiel knows and uses the Israelite traditions of that time about the Presence. He attempts to harmonize the temporary "theologies of appearance" and the "theologies of presence" which assume a permanent Presence, and for this he uses the symbolism of all known major sacral-cult paraphernalia (the Ark, Tabernacle, Temple, etc.).

4. There were elements of the legitimate YHWH cult that became illegitimate over time, as a result of a kind of modernization. This is not to be explained by the change of God, but rather the consequence of changing human circumstances, which are constitutive elements of the cult, which was meant to ensure the relationship between God and man.
5. These illegitimate-turned cultic elements eventually fell into the category of idolatry due to their illegality, despite the fact that they may once have been an integral part of the Lord's cult. The cult forms the orderly relationship between man and God, that is, it mediates the Presence. If it is unable to fulfill this, but still makes such a request, then it falls under the category of idolatry.
6. Even though it is not overtly stated, the book of Ezekiel is consistently monotheistic. He does not call the idols gods, and the idols never appear as active actors, nor even passive shapers of history.
7. In the book of Ezekiel, idolatry is not reduced to cultic components. Political idolatry, when the laws of the Lord are broken for the sake of a political power, and pride also appear in him, just like the idolatry of self-deification.
8. In Ezekiel's prophecies, history gives place simultaneously to judgment and salvation, as well as God's will and human freedom. These may appear as seemingly cyclical recurring events, but these are merely different constellations of constant elements (God's immutability, man's tendency to sin) emerging from time to time.
9. In the book of Ezekiel, the first and last word is of grace. Most of the book is about judgment, but it begins with an act of grace (the Lord comes to the Babylonian captivity to the prophet Ezekiel) and ends with it (the establishment of a new, even more perfect cult than the previous one). What the book says is fundamentally positive.

Nevertheless, although the holy author reconciled the various traditions that related to the Presence as best as possible at the theological level of the time, his

synthesis remained fragmentary. In his vision of the chariot, he always uses only similes; it remains in the dark in his theology how the otherwise transcendent God, whose Glory is at the same time quite tangible, is immanently present among his people. Similarly, the essence of the true knowledge of God awaiting foreign peoples is not clarified.

These answers are resolved within the framework of Christian theology, only in the mystery of the Incarnation. The book of Ezekiel shows that in the Old Testament, a lot of theologically interpreted experiences were collected, traditions (theologies) were formed, and these began to converge as a result of an increasingly refined knowledge of God. The book of Ezekiel during the captivity can be seen as an important religious historical milestone of this convergence, but not as its final destination. The prohibition of idolatry is a kind of negative way to separate from our image of God everything that does not belong to God. The theologies of Presence, on the other hand, try to articulate in a positive way who and what God appears to us as an effective historical force. The two paths, like the theological traditions, converge for Christians in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, "*For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things*" (Romans 11:36).

The book of Ezekiel can help today's theologians to understand how people think about God and how it affects our lives. The prophet strikes a very strong tone against his contemporaries and foreign peoples, but he is not ashamed to use the rich cultural treasures of these foreign peoples (motifs, use of words), just as the Lord used Nebuchadnezzar for his purposes.