Notes on the Influence of Tradition on Ezekiel

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No one has been more attentive than Yochanan Muffs to the intricate connections of themes and language throughout biblical literature. His skill and originality in associating texts, his sensitivity to the theological significance of the association, and the infectious enthusiasm with which he presents his finds are proverbial. One such set of combinations involves prophetic intercession in the book of Ezekiel, which he developed in his beautiful Hebrew essay on prophetic prayer in *Torah Nidreshet*.[1] In the following pages I indicate a few other textual and thematic interconnections between passages in Ezekiel and earlier biblical and later Jewish literature—as a return for the stimulus and pleasure that Yochanan's insights have afforded me.

No one reading Ezekiel with a knowledge of biblical literature can miss Ezekiel's frequent allusions to the language, the figures and the stories found elsewhere in that literature.[2] While these allusions are, in the gross, sufficiently similar for establishing the connection, in particulars there is almost always a divergence large enough to raise the question, whether the prophet has purposely skewed the traditional material, or merely represents a version of it different from the extant records. From evidence that the prophet himself played variations on a given theme,[3] the likelihood is that such divergences arise from his own shaping of the tradition rather than from otherwise unknown varieties of it.[4]

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1. M. Greenberg, G. D. Cohen, Y. Muffs, *Torah nidreshet* (Tel-Aviv, 1984), 39–87, at 68ff.; English version in Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York, 1992), 9–48, at 31ff.

2. A good entry into the subject is Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), Scriptural Index entry "Ezekiel" (pp. 597–99). Even Fishbane's thorough survey leaves something more to be said, as I hope to have done in this essay.

3. As in his re-use of the vine image, illustrated below; see also the interweave in 33:1–20 of elements repeated from 3:17–22 and the two parts of 18.

4. The verbal similarities between Ezekiel and other parts of Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., Leviticus 18–26, and Jeremiah, are so pervasive as to almost compel the conclusion that there is a genetic relation between them. ("You will not find a prophet besides him who reproves his generation by the standard of the Torah; his idiom is for the most part that of the Torah, and he comes close to repeating the whole Torah for them"—Eliezer of Beaugency, Introduction to his commentary to Ezekiel). For the most part the abovementioned literary entities were available to the prophet in a form similar to, but not identical with, their present canonical one. Ezekiel was a priest and hence presumably schooled in the various types of traditional literature that are reflected in his oracles (narratives, prophecy, laments, law, ritual, temple plans). A. Lemaire has developed a highly suggestive and engaging hypothesis concerning school texts and the biblical canon in *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël*, Orbis

1. The figure of the lion. The first part of ch. 19 is a dirge over certain kings of Judah, depicted as lions who were raised to rule by their mother (= the dynasty or the state), but were captured and deported by hunters.[5]

What a lioness was your mother,
Couching among the lions,
Rearing her cubs
Among the young lions.
She raised up one of her cubs—
He became a young lion;
He learned to tear prey,
He ate men.
Nations heard about him—
He was caught in their snare;
They led him in shackles
To the land of Egypt.
When she saw that she waited in vain,
That hope was lost,
She took another of her cubs,
Appointed him a young lion.
He walked among lions,
He became a young lion.
He learned to tear prey,
He ate men.
He knew (Greek: he grazed on) his widows
And desolated their cities;
The land and all that was in it were appalled
At the sound of his roaring.
Nations set upon him
From provinces roundabout;
They spread their net for him,
He was caught in their snare.
They put him, shackled, in neckstocks
And led him to the king of Babylon—
Led him in toils,
So that his voice would no longer be heard
On the mountains of Israel.

Some critics regard this dirge as nationalistic,[6] an expression of the prophet's "pride in the royal house of Judah, and his pity for the misfortunes of the young

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Biblicus et Orentalis 39 (Göttingen, 1981). The sacred status of the literature at Ezekiel's disposal cannot be proven, but the density of his citation of and allusion to it indicates at least that its formulation was firmly fixed and familiar to his audience—else why should he have adhered so closely to it? S. Z. Leiman has collected the internal biblical evidence for the early reduction to writing of elements of Hebrew Scriptures in *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture*, Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 47 (Hamden, Conn., 1976), 16–24.

5. Documentation supporting the translation and interpretation of passages from Ezekiel adduced in the sequel can be found in my commentary, *Ezekiel 1–20*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y., 1983). Arguments for a conservative approach to the question of the authenticity of the oracles are set out in my methodological introduction, pp. 18ff., and at greater length in my article "What Are Valid Criteria for Determining Inauthentic Matter in Ezekiel?" in J. Lust, ed., *Ezekiel and His Book*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 74 (Leuven, 1986), 123–35.

6. J. W. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, Century Bible, New Series (London, 1969), 146.

princes."[7] The figure was chosen, Luzzatto asserts, for its expression of "the lion's sovereign freedom."[8] If this evaluation is correct, the dirge would be a notable departure from the attitude taken elsewhere in Ezekiel's prophecies toward the monarchs of Judah, whom he consistently denounces (chs. 17, 22, 34, 45). But a review of the uses of the figure, particularly with respect to its metamorphosis in prophecy casts doubt on this judgment.

In the ancient poem of Jacob's Blessing of his sons (Genesis 49), the lion is a heroic emblem in the blessing of Judah:

> Judah is a lion's cub;
> On prey, my son, you have grown.
> He couches, lies down like a lion,
> Like a lion—who dares rouse him?

So too in Balaam's depiction of Israel (Num. 23:24; 24:9):

> Lo, a people that rises like a lion,
> Leaps up like a lion
> Rests not till it has feasted on prey
> And drunk the blood of slain.

And again in Moses' "blessing" of Gad and Dan (Deut. 33:20, 22):

> Poised is he [Gad] like a lion;
> He tears off arm and scalp.
> Dan is a lion's cub
> That leaps forth from Bashan.

The terms of the blessing of Judah in particular are so similar to those of our dirge as to suggest a genetic relation: in common are *gwr*, "cub," *ʾarye*, "lion," *ṭrp*, "prey" (noun & verb), *ʿala*, "rise/grow up," *rabaṣ*, "couch," *lbyʾ*, "lion(ess)."

In Psalms, however, lions appear as an emblem of the wicked enemy:

> . . . lest, like a lion, they tear me apart,
> Rending in pieces, and no one save me (7:3).
> He is like a lion eager for prey,
> A lion lying in wait (17:12).

While in Prov. 28:15, "A roaring lion, a ravenous bear is the wicked ruler of a poor people."

Prophets, too, employ the lion as a figure of fierce cruelty. Nahum characterizes the Assyrian conqueror in his treatment of defeated peoples as follows:

> [Where is] the lion that tore victims for his cubs
> And strangled for his lionesses,
> And filled his lairs with prey
> And his dens with mangled flesh?

7. G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel*, *ICC* (New York, 1937), 204.

8. S. D. Luzzatto, *Peruše Šadal ʿal Yirmiya, Yeḥezqel, Mišle veʾIyyov* (Lemberg, 1876; reprint: Maqor, 1969), 158.

I will stamp out your killings from the earth;
And the sound of your messengers
Shall be heard no more.

We note the terms held in common by Nahum 2 and our oracle: *ʾarye*, *lbyʾ*, *gwr*, *ṭrp*, and the phrase *lo yiššamaᶜ ᶜod qol*, "the voice/sound of . . . shall no longer be heard." In Zeph 3:3 we find the first application of the figure to Israel's rulers:

Her officers in her midst are roaring lions;
Her rulers, wolves of the steppe;
They leave no bone until the morning (?).

Jacob's endowment of Judah with royalty evidently hovered in Ezekiel's consciousness as he composed this dirge over Judah's rulers; however, he subverted the terms of the patriarchal blessing, inspired perhaps, by the language of Nahum and Zephaniah. Though the horrible acts of the lions are described as similar to those of the heroic lions, that Ezekiel intended the lion here to be a perjorative figure is suggested by his similar language when, in 22:25, he describes the kings of the "bloody city" Jerusalem (the epithet belongs to Nineveh in Nah. 3:1):

Her chiefs [reading *neśiʾeha*, with the Greek] are in her midst like a roaring lion, tearing prey; they eat people, they take wealth and precious things; they multiply widows within her.

Ezekiel's language in the dirge, rather than expressing sympathy with the unfortunate lions, describes them in accord with his previous denunciations of Jerusalem's lawlessness and her murderous aristocracy (9:9; 11:6f.). By depicting the enemies of the lions as human hunters he may be suggesting that they, like the human victims of the lions, were morally superior (cf. 5:7; 11:6).

2. The figure of the vine. In ch. 15, Ezekiel compares Jerusalem to a charred vinestock, good only for fuelling a fire; by this comparison he points to the fires of destruction as Jerusalem's ineluctable destiny.

Man, what of all trees becomes of the vinestock,
The vine branch that belongs among the trees of the forest?
Can wood be taken from it to make something useful?
Can one take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel?
See, it has been consigned to the fire as fuel;
When fire devours its two ends, and its inside is charred,
Is it fit for anything useful?
If when it was whole it could not be made into something useful,
How much less when fire devours it and it is charred
Can it be made into some useful thing!

What we have here is a grotesque distortion of the traditional use of the vine as a figure for Israel. The vine aptly represented several aspects of Israel's relation to its God. In the psalm of petition, Psalm 80, it serves for eulogistic self-description:

You [God] plucked up a vine from Egypt;
You expelled nations and planted it.
You cleared a place for it;
It took deep root and filled the land.

> The mountains were covered by its shade,
> Mighty cedars by its boughs.
> Its branches reached the sea,
> Its shoots, the river.
>
> O God of hosts . . .
> Take note of that vine,
> The stock planted by Your right hand,
> The stem You have taken as Your own.

In the parable of Isa. 5:1–7, Israel is God's "beloved planting"; as the vinedresser lovingly cultivates his vineyard, expecting a good reward, so God cultivated and tended Israel, expecting faithful obedience. Here we have the figure given a polemical turn. Jeremiah continued in this vein, speaking of the disappointment of the divine vinedresser, whose labors yielded only bad grapes (Jer. 2:21). But Ezekiel's imagination seized upon an as yet unexploited aspect of the figure. Why speak of the fruit at all, when the only appropriate element of comparison was the base wood of vine, whose destiny was destruction? So Ezekiel speaks not of grapes gone bad, but of wood of vinestock that from the start was never good for anything but to fuel a fire; this accords with his favorite idea that Israel's sinfulness is congenital (ch. 16).

Twice again the prophet calls on the vine image, and each time for disparaging purposes. In chapter 19, in a second image, Israel's monarchy is compared to a vine, with one arrogant bough soaring high; that bough will catch fire, and from it, fire will spread through the entire vine. In chapter 17, the vine is employed as a figure of vassaldom: its lowly, trailing nature, as opposed to the towering cedar is played upon. The cedar represents the independent Davidic kings before Zedekiah; the vine, Zedekiah, who was bound by a vassal oath to subjection to Nebuchadnezzar.

In its repeated uses, the traditional figure is distorted and transvalued; it is viewed from aspects hitherto unconsidered (vine replaced by vinestock), because uncongenial to its original purpose (eulogistic), but eminently needful and useful for the prophetic invective.

3. The image of Israel as a faithless wife. Forshadowed in the divine epithet *qanna*ʾ, "jealous" (better, "impassioned")[9] —as in Exod. 20:5—the metaphor of husband-wife for the relation of exclusive loyalty demanded of Israel by God was fully worked out for the first time in the extant literature by Hosea. Hos. 2:4–14 denounces the northern kingdom of Israel for apostasy and threatens it with punishment in terms of this metaphor:

> Let her remove her harlotry from her face and her adultery from between her breasts, lest I strip her naked and exposed her as on the day of her birth. . . . Their mother has fornicated . . . for she said, Let me go after my lovers who give me my bread, my water and my wool, my flax, my oil and my drink. . . . She did not realize that it was I who gave her her grain, new wine and oil; the silver I gave her so much of, and the gold, they made over to Baal. So I shall take back my grain in its season and my new wine in its time, and pluck off

9. See G. D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures, 1960–1966* (New York, 1966), 1–22, at 4–8 (reprinted in the author's *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* [Philadelphia, 1991], at 5–8).

> my wool and flax so that it does not cover her nakedness. Now will I uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and no one will save from my hand. . . .

Israel is depicted as an unfaithful wife; having received bounty from her God, she attributed it to others, on whom she spent it (cf. the motif of the Golden Calf, made out of the gold objects God disposed the Egyptians to bestow on the departing Israelites). God will punish her by withdrawing his gifts, stripping her naked and exposing her to her lovers.

Jeremiah took up the image. In 2:20–25 he brands Israel's illicit cults as harlotry, a pursuit of "strangers." In chapter 3 he aggravates the sin by depicting it as a veritable addiction:

> You have fornicated with many "friends." . . . Look around at the hills and see, where you have not been laid? You waited on the roads for them . . . and polluted the land with your fornication. . . . You have the forehead of a harlot; you refuse to be shamed. . . . She fornicated with wood and stone. . . . Know your iniquity, for you have rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favors among strangers under every green tree (3:1–3).

New here are ubiquitous promiscuity (many shrines to foreign gods), brazen shamelessness, relations with wood and stone.

When we turn to Ezekiel 16, we find all these details woven into a lurid extended metaphor. Jerusalem is portrayed as a child of callous pagan parents who abandoned her in the field, naked and bloody, on the day of her birth. God is figured as a kindly passerby who proclaimed that she would live. He waited till she grew up, wild, and then married her. He washed her, still naked and bloody, and decked her with gorgeous clothes and ornaments till she was fit to be a queen. But she, banking on her beauty, began to scatter her favors on every passerby, lavishing on them the costly gifts her savior-husband had given to her. She went from bad to worse: she murdered her children for food for the wood and stone images with which she fornicated; then she wandered far and wide—to Babylonia and to Egypt—for new lovers to slake her insatiable lust. In the end, God will strip her naked and submit her to the judgment of her lovers, who will put her to death for adultery and murder.

The major new feature in Ezekiel's use of the metaphor is the extension in time: from the woman's birth, through her maturity, to her death. Apparently he took his cue from Hosea's phrase, "lest I strip her as on the day of her birth," whence he developed by antithesis the theme of the utterly destitute infant, who, when she became nubile, was munificently endowed by her savior-husband, to whom she then played false. By extending the metaphor in time, Ezekiel provided the adulterous wife of Hosea and Jeremiah with a biography—making room not only for a descent into vice, but for the repeated, even-more-depraved actions of a woman, portrayed as a nymphomaniac.

One impulse to this development came from theodicy. The imminent destruction of "the last remnant of Israel" that Ezekiel incessantly announced was a catastrophe that demanded an enormous sin to justify. The doom-prophets of the age supplied it by summoning up the accumulated offenses of Israel's entire history. Jerusalem and Judah would be eradicated "because they have done what is evil in

my sight and have been vexing me from the day that their fathers came out of Egypt to his day" (2 Kgs. 21:15—a comment on wicked king Manasseh's reign). During King Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah denounced the people for having "gone backward, nor forward, from the day your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until today" (7:24f.). In Ezek. 20:8ff. and 23:3, 19, our prophet carries back Israel's rebellion against its God to the Egyptian bondage. But in chapter 16, with the metaphor of the faithless wife he takes a different tack: by starting from the very origins of the woman (= the people)—evidently suggested by Hosea's "the day of your birth" as we have indicated—the record of sin is augmented and the calamity is better justified.

Here a word is in order on the above-mentioned passages placing the start of Israel's rebellion against God during the Egyptian bondage. The passages cited from Kings and Jeremiah assert that Israel's apostasy started after the Exodus ("from the day your fathers came out of the land of Egypt"); support for this view may be found in the Pentateuchal stories about the murmurings of Israel in the wilderness and their making the Golden Calf. But Ezekiel goes further: in chapters 20 and 23 he portrays Israel as apostatizing even while it sojourned in Egypt. While chapter 23 re-uses the figure of sexual promiscuity, chapter 20 employs straight narration: in Egypt, God addressed a call to the enslaved Israelites to forsake the "abominations of Egypt" to which they were attached; but the Israelites refused to comply, so God came near to destroying them then and there. This portrayal of the Israelite slaves as addicted to Egypt's idols is unknown from the earlier traditions embodied mainly in the Pentateuchal stories. But it suited Ezekiel's purposes of drawing a parallel between the Egyptian sojourn and the Babylonian exile: as the exiles in Babylonia tended to accommodate themselves to their surroundings—a tendency that Ezekiel decries in chapter 20—so must the slaves in Egypt have been marked by a tendency to assimilate to the Egyptian's culture. Ezekiel draws the past in lines corresponding to those of the present, and gives the issues of the present a hoary antiquity.

We conclude this section with some later retrojections of Ezekiel's elaboration of the tradition onto earlier biblical texts. Readers of the Books of Exodus and Hosea who knew Ezekiel could not but find his themes in the earlier literature. Thus the Aramaic Targum to Hos. 2:5 reads as follows:

> *Biblical original*: Lest I strip her naked and present her as on the the day of her birth. And I will make her like a wilderness; render her like desert land.
>
> *Aramaic Targum*: Lest I remove my presence from her and strip her of her glory, and make her abandoned as in days of yore, before she was brought near to my worship. And my anger will fall on her as it fell on the generation that violated my Torah in the wilderness. . . .

The targumic word "abandoned," which has no counterpart in the Hebrew of Hosea, is precisely the word used by the same Targum at Ezek. 16:4 (Hebrew: "you were cast away on the face of the field"): "[Israel in Egypt] was like a child that was abandoned on the face of the field." As we have seen Ezekiel 16, the elaboration of the figure of the faithless wife of Hosea 2, supplies biographical details, among which is that of the woman's being abandoned at her birth by her cruel parents. The

author of the Targum, coming upon the phrase "strip her naked as on the day of her birth" could not but recall Ezekiel's vivid picture of the baby girl's exposure; hence he insinuated "abandoned" from Ezekiel into his rendering of Hos. 2:5.

More far-reaching was the reaction on the Exodus story of Ezekiel's notion that Israel in Egypt was addicted to idolatry. A midrashist combined the puzzling plague of darkness (why did it precede the final firstborn plague which caused the Egyptians to expel the Israelites?) and the obscure phrase in Exod. 13:18 "the Israelites went up *ḥamušim* (usually translated: "armed") from the land of Egypt" into the following exemplary fantasy:

> *ḥamušim*. To this the following verse alludes: "I thought to pour out my fury on them, to spend my anger on them amidst the land of Egypt, but I acted [otherwise] for the sake of my name" (Ezek. 20:9).
> R. Ishmael said: Woe to the wicked, woe to the informers, who bring destruction to "the enemies of Israel" (= Israel), were it not for the mercy of the Holy One (blessed be He). Come and see: the wicked and the informers that were in Egypt almost caused Israel's destruction . . . were it not for the mercy of the Holy One (blessed be He) who plunged Egypt into darkness and cut down those wicked and . . . destroyed them. And the Israelites buried them [forthwith]. That's what is meant by *ḥamušim*: one out of fifty (*ḥamiššim*) [left Egypt], while the rest died during the three days of pitch darkness, in order to prevent the Egyptians from saying: "They too are being afflicted like us!" (*Tanḥuma* genizah fragment, cited by Kasher[10] at Exod. 13:18).

The foregoing examples have illustrated (1) the influence of tradition on Ezekiel; (2) the freedom with which the prophet employed the stuff of tradition—shaping it for his particular purposes and inventing new features in it to suit them; (3) the later reflexive effect of Ezekiel's innovations on traditional material—how post-Ezekiel readers of earlier texts read them in his light.

Was Ezekiel conscious of his innovations and distortions? Was he capable of distinguishing the received material from his reworking of it, or did he simply consider his use a proper statement of the older stuff? In the case of substitution of vinestock for vine, he must have been aware of his deliberate skewing of the eulogistic image; so too in the perjorative use of the lion-image (for which previous prophets prepared the way) his echoing of the vocabulary of Jacob's blessing must have been deliberate. It is with regard to the use of historical allusion that we are unsure: Did Ezekiel have a version of the story of the Egyptian bondage in which the Israelites were described as inveterate idolators? Or is his version only an imaginative evocation of a possible meaning latent in the story?

My guess is that the prophet's attitude toward the traditional was wholly utilitarian: he perceived it as he needed it. He was accustomed to use tradition to justify and explain current life and behavior (the etiological meaning of the Mosaic traditions). History was, for him, a repository of lessons for the present age. We are therefore not to look to him for an interpretation of the narratives in any objective sense (= what they meant in their original context), but only in such a way that would serve his cause.

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10. M. M. Kasher, *Tora šelema*, vol. 14 (New York, 1951), 13, n. 260; taken from J. Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati, 1940), Hebrew section, 115f.

In sum, Ezekiel was ahistorical: he read the past as a mirror of the present. The tradition served him as building blocks out of which he built his own personal world view.[11]

11. On what authority did Ezekiel alter the stuff of tradition? On the authority of divine revelation, inasmuch as virtually all the oracles of the prophet are explicitly introduced by the revelation formula: "The word of YHWH came to me, saying." Strictly speaking, not Ezekiel but God (in Ezekiel's consciousness) is the alterer of tradition. As God had endowed him with a perception of present events at odds with that of his contemporaries, so his perception of past events was revised in the light of that same endowment. Yet in view of the individuality of prophetic perceptions and idioms, even premodern thinkers acknowledged an (unmeasurable) human, personal factor in prophecy; see my study, "Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy," in D. A. Knight and P. J. Paris, eds., *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of W. Harrelson* (Atlanta, 1989), 145–62. So we really cannot escape attributing to Ezekiel some degree of responsibility for these revisions. The question therefore remains, and we can hardly know how to begin to answer it: what went on in the prophet's mind when he contradicted the received version of his people's past? Fishbane struggles with such matters in *Biblical Interpretation* (note 2, above), 435–40.