

THE SILENCE OF THE LANDS

The Ecojustice Implications of Ezekiel's Judgement Oracles

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Introduction

My aim in this paper is to illustrate how the hermeneutic espoused by the Earth Bible Project helps us gain a fresh understanding of Ezekiel's fundamental orientation to Earth as God's creation and more particularly to the 'lands' of Earth which are threatened with desolation in his judgement oracles.

The six basic ecojustice principles that inform the Earth Bible approach are outlined in the initial volume of the series, *Reading the Bible from the Perspective of Earth* (Habel 2000). At the risk of oversimplifying this approach, let me emphasise a number of considerations that are significant in tackling a complex literary work like the book of Ezekiel.

The first relates to the assumed posture of the reader. In the Earth Bible Project we seek to read from the perspective of Earth. We are not simply exploring Earth as a theme or topos, an object of detached scholarly investigation, another odd image in Ezekiel's gallery of the bizarre. As Earth beings we are concerned about our Earth and how Ezekiel, a fellow Earth being, treats Earth.

We also seek to see things from Earth's perspective: is Earth honoured, ignored, treated unjustly, or viewed in some other way. Admittedly, such a reading remains an approximation. We would argue, however, that this reading remains a necessary—if precarious—task in the current ecological context. The critical state of the planet is an existential condition which affects all of us. We are, moreover, an integral part of Earth. When we seek to detach ourselves from Earth as the space and substance of our being, we establish a false dualism that tends to view reality from a strictly anthropocentric perspective and silences Earth as an active participant in the interpreting process.

Our application of ecojustice principles to any given text involves a basic hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. Because biblical texts have been written by historical human beings, there is every likelihood that they will be biased in favour of human interests at the expense of Earth's interests. Similarly, because most influential interpreters of the biblical text—until recent times—have been embedded in a Western culture intent on human progress at the expense of the environment, such readings of the text are also likely to ignore rather than honour Earth as a participant in the interpreting process.

We also recognise that, precisely because of the anthropocentric bias of most past interpreters, there may well be texts in the book of Ezekiel where Earth is not dismissed or silenced within the text itself, but which these interpreters have overlooked. The retrieval of these texts is an exciting and significant part of the Earth Bible Project. We are, however, wary of theological 'cherry picking', selecting a collection of these texts and subsequently declaring that the Bible is 'eco-friendly'. Our task is to identify where Earth has experienced justice or injustice, whether at the hands of writers or readers, and where Earth is a subject within the text, whether honoured or suppressed.

In any given reading of a text, we focus on those ecojustice principles which tend to be pertinent rather than discuss how all six of the principles may apply to the text. In this analysis of the book of Ezekiel, I shall consider especially the principle of intrinsic worth which states that *the universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value*, and the principle of voice which states that *Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice*.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that these are ecological principles developed in dialogue with ecologists. They are not cryptic theological principles designed to uncover an ecotheology latent in the biblical text. So, from the outset, the fact that a given text may appear to be theocentric rather than anthropocentric does not necessarily imply it is eco-

friendly. In a given text, Earth may experience injustice at the hands of God just as readily as at the hands of humans.

Ezekiel's Cosmos

How does Ezekiel construct the world? What parts of his cosmos are valued or devalued in that construct? What roles do Earth and members of the Earth community play?

Ezekiel preserves no creation narrative similar to Genesis 1 and no portrait of creation's designs as in Job 38–39. And, as David Peterson demonstrated in an earlier paper for the Ezekiel Seminar, 'we have found no evidence that Ezekiel has used biblical creation traditions in his rhetoric' (Peterson 2000: 9). This absence of creation traditions may suggest that Ezekiel is less interested in the events of a creation narrative than in the events of history—whether recent or past. Does this lack of focus on the creation events imply, however, that Ezekiel has a negative attitude toward the natural world? Not necessarily! One possible way of discerning Ezekiel's attitude to creation/nature is to identify where creation's/nature's components are located in the construct of his world.

a. The City

A key image in Ezekiel's cosmology is revealed when God announces to the prophet that 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the centre of the nations, with lands all around her' (Ezek. 5.5). Jerusalem is the centre of the Ezekiel's world because YHWH has chosen this city to be locus of the divine presence, the mountain sanctuary where the *kabod YHWH* dwells (cf. Ezek. 20.40). In anticipation of the omphalos image of Jewish Midrashim, Jerusalem is tantamount to the *umbilicus terrae* (Alexander 1999).

Ezekiel records no cosmogony in which Earth emerges pristine and latent with potential from the deep primal waters, as appears in Genesis 1. Nor is there any suggestion of primordial rejoicing with wisdom, any celebration of the celestial host or any divine play with creatures of the deep. Instead we are confronted with what might be designated an urban cosmogony—one centred on the city—whose rhetoric tends to subvert the very symbolism of a creation cosmogony (Ezek. 16).

The location for the birth of the sacred centre is in the land of the Canaanites—hardly an auspicious place of origin. The parents are portrayed as possessing much less than pure primal stock. The child, unwanted and abandoned in an open field, is a bloody and miserable sight. Yet YHWH loves this rejected orphan, enters into a covenant with her and transforms her into a beautiful city, adorned with magnificent finery. She becomes a wealthy queen, and the rumour of her beauty spreads to all the surrounding nations.

With a city at the centre of his cosmos, Ezekiel seems to be essentially an urbanite. He apparently has a *polis* perspective on the world: an urban orientation that influences the way he views land and the lands which surround his sacred city centre. His perspective, then, is quite distinct from the rural orientation of texts like Leviticus 25–26 where YHWH quite explicitly says, ‘The land is mine’ rather than ‘The city is mine’. In this Leviticus passage the writer is concerned about the long-term welfare of the ancient land holdings. The locus of YHWH’s presence is not primarily in the city, but in the countryside where YHWH ‘walks’ as YHWH once walked through the garden of Eden (Habel 1995: 97–114).

For Ezekiel, the urbanite, Jerusalem is the centre, the locus of YHWH’s presence and the focus of his cosmological construct. The *kabod YHWH* may reside temporarily among the exiles, but it belongs in the holy city and must ultimately return there. The transformed cosmos in the final chapters of the book of Ezekiel also has the holy city as the source and centre. A stream flows from the threshold of the temple and creates a romantic landscape with unnatural patterns—including trees that produce fruit every month (Ezek. 47.1–12). This cosmos, it seems to me as a youth from the country, suits the lifestyle of a city dweller. Ezekiel’s world apparently begins and ends with the city.

b. Land and Lands

In the Ezekiel cosmos, the city of Jerusalem is located in the land of Israel which is surrounded by other lands. The image appears to be one of a

city located within one land—the land of Israel—which is encircled by many other lands. How does Ezekiel view these lands?

The land of Israel is not just another land, but the ‘most glorious (*tsebi*) of all lands’, the promised land, the land in which God and God’s people dwell (Ezek. 20.6). This land is also differentiated from other lands by the frequent use of the designation *‘adamah* (e.g. Ezek. 7.1), rather than *‘erets*, which is the standard term for land in Ezekiel. The ‘land of Israel’, it seems, is supposed to be the ideal settled and cultivated land (*‘adamah*) under the supervision of the sacred city centre. The *‘adamah yisrael* is ‘the land belonging to Israel’, the ‘homeland’ of God’s people as distinct from any other ‘land’ (*‘erets*) surrounding Israel (cf. Galambush 2000: 13).

At several points in the text of Ezekiel the term ‘lands’ (*‘erets*) is paired with ‘nations’ (Ezek. 5.5-6; 20.32; 22.4, 5). This pairing suggests an overlap in semantic content between peoples and places. Elsewhere ‘land’ (*‘erets*) is paired with ‘city’, which suggests a similar overlap in meaning between *polis* and place (Ezek. 7.23; 12.20). Land and lands are not simply geographical locations that bear a given name, but settled environments structured and ordered by human beings.

These findings are consistent with those of Julie Galambush in a previous paper for the Ezekiel Seminar; Galambush points to the pairing of waste land and ruined town, both of which are restored in the transformed cosmos. Galambush claims, quite correctly I believe, that in these contexts ‘land’ is

coterminous with sown and settled land. This privileging of the settled over the wild is emphasised to the point that the land is ‘promised’ not only fertility but urban development (2000: 17).

c. Beyond the Lands

Beyond the wider circle of settled lands, Ezekiel refers to a range of places and forces which may be designated the untamed or wild domains of the cosmos. Galambush refers to these domains as ‘chaos’, a realm of forces hostile to ordered human habitation (2000: 3). A significant designation of

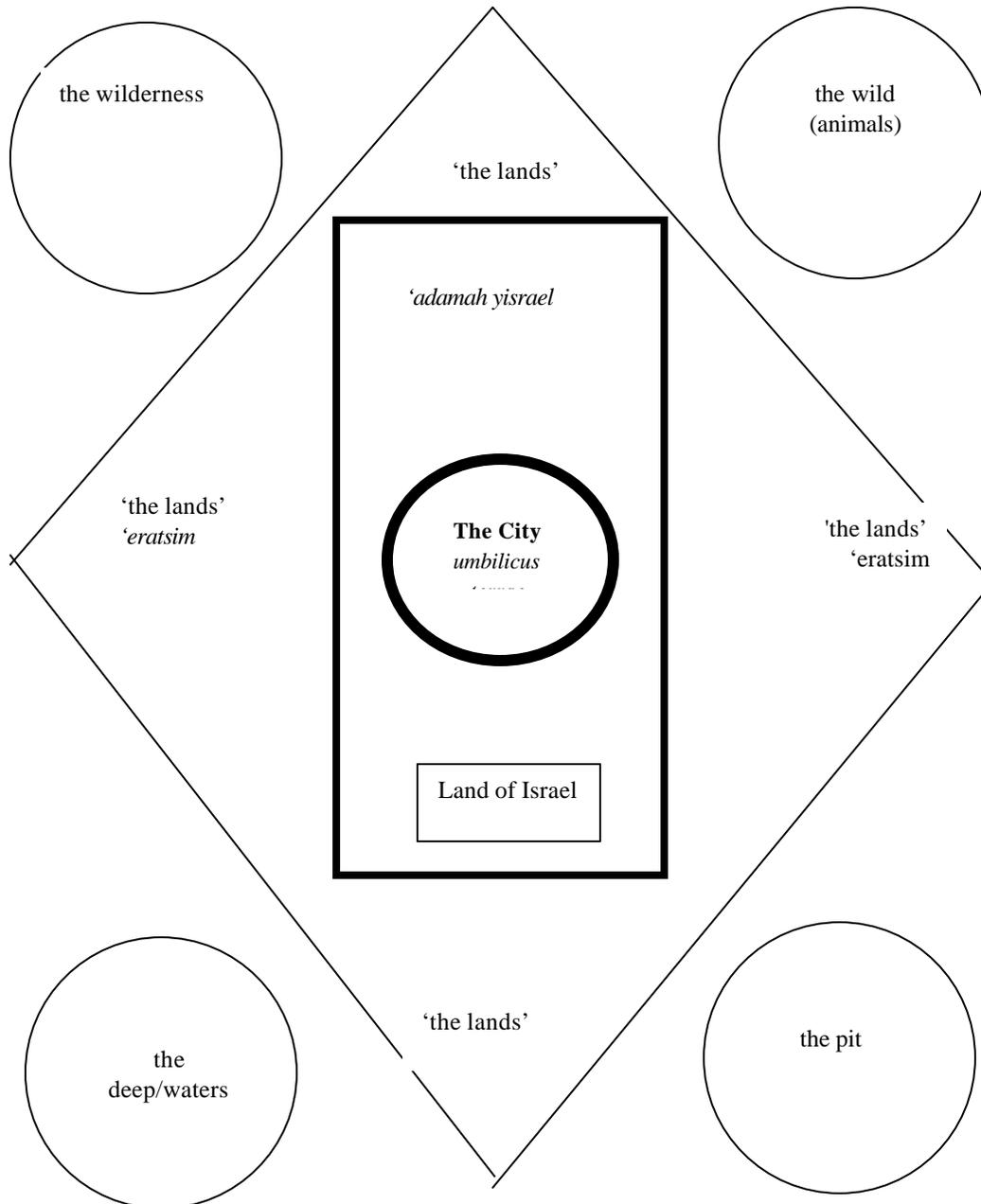
part of this outer domain is the *midbar*, often rendered ‘wilderness’ (Ezek. 19.13; 29.5). This wilderness is beyond the surrounding lands and the peoples among whom Israel may be scattered in exile.

The wilderness is apparently the haunt of wild animals; only when YHWH banishes these wild animals from this dry domain (Ezek. 19.13) is it considered safe for humans to inhabit (Ezek. 34.25). As Galambush has demonstrated, wild animals (*chayyoth*)—as distinct from domestic livestock (*behemah*)—are associated with a territory which threatens the settled realm. They are a hostile force—like pestilence, famine and fire—sent as agents of divine wrath (Ezek. 5.16–17; 14.21). YHWH uses these wild animals to ravage a land and render it totally desolate: ‘no one may pass through it because of these animals’ (Ezek. 14.15). Animals, which properly belong to the domain of the wild outside settled lands, are sent in by YHWH to reverse the social order of the cosmos.

The depth of negative feeling associated with the wild animals is evident in Ezekiel’s portrait of the great banquet of human flesh on the mountains of Israel (Ezek. 39.17-20). Here the wild animals are invited to join the birds in eating the flesh of the mighty and drinking the blood of the princes of Earth. At this ghoulish gathering, the wild animals are the epitome of the uncivilised world, ‘agents whose diametrical opposition to the realm of purity and order qualifies them to partake of the unclean sacrifice’ (Galambush 2000: 5).

That Ezekiel’s negative classification of the world of the wild is not necessarily the accepted cultural perspective of other segments of Israelite society is apparent from the descriptions of the wild kingdom in Job 39. The domains of creatures such as the hawk, the lion, the mountain goat and the wild ox reflect patterns of wisdom that exhibit a mysterious design, an alternative ordering of the cosmos that humans have yet to comprehend. For Ezekiel, however, the world of the wild is a terrifying untamed chaos beyond the control of humans but accessible to YHWH as a source for agents of destruction.

Other realms of destruction beyond the ordered lands of the nations include the great waters of the deep (*tehom*) and the pit in the realms below (Ezek. 26.19; 28.8; 31.15; 32.25). These destructive deeps of the underworld represent a watery counterpart to the barren wilderness that lies beyond the settled lands of the civilised world. Beyond the 'lands' lie the desert and the deep, the untamed and untameable world of the wild.



Relative Worth

What is Ezekiel's attitude to the various components of his cosmos? Does he value the natural world as originally created by God? If I as a reader dare to identify with Earth as distinct from the human settlements on Earth, do I feel affirmed and honoured, or negated and devalued?

Clearly the centre of Ezekiel's cosmos has supreme worth because it is the chosen locus of God's sanctuary, the abode of the *kabod YHWH*. Even

Jerusalem as such, however, has no intrinsic worth (Ezek. 16.1-5), but is endowed with value by virtue of the special transformation effected by YHWH, the loving 'husband'. The mountain at the centre of the cosmos is not valued as a cosmic mountain or a primordial peak, a primal *umbilicus terrae*; the mountain only becomes holy because YHWH has chosen this site as the sacred centre.

Similarly, the 'land of Israel', as the settled land in which this mountain is located, has no value as part of Earth. 'Lands', as ordered human habitations, can actually disappear and cease to exist (Ezek. 25.7).

In several key passages, 'land' seems to be divided into at least two components: the life and the landscape. In the act of desolating a given land, all livestock are removed along with all humans (Ezek. 32.13,15). More specifically, what is removed from the landscape is its 'fullness' (*melo*), which presumably refers to all forms of life (Ezek. 12.19; 30.12; 32.15). Some translations refer to the 'contents' of the land; others use the term 'inhabitants'. These renderings, however, do not preserve the full force of the term as an expression for the life force of the land. Without the 'fullness' the land is dead; it is *terra nullius*, totally devalued.

In the famous vision of Isaiah, the seraphim make their famous cry (Isa. 6.1):

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,

His glory (*kabod*) is the fullness (*melo*) of all Earth (*erets*)

For Isaiah in this text, the *kabod* is not a mobile presence in Jerusalem, but the very 'fullness' of land/Earth. The fullness of land/Earth in Isaiah is more than a life force; it is the divine life force/presence. For Ezekiel, removing the fullness of the land may not have the significance removing the *kabod*, but neither can it be reduced to something as neutral as 'contents'. The fullness of the land, I suggest, is the very life of the land, especially ordered life in Ezekiel's terms (cf. Ps. 24.1). In a later passage (Ezek. 37.1-14), the image of a valley filled with dry bones and graves seems to reflect the reality of this lifeless landscape.

Ezekiel's message of judgement against the land is so absolute that it seems not only to proclaim doom and destruction for the peoples of a given land, including Israel, but also to devalue both the land and life on the land by reducing all to desolation. From the perspective of Earth, both land and life seem to be cheap in Ezekiel—Earth has no obvious intrinsic worth as a structural component of Ezekiel's cosmos.

Patterns of Injustice Against Nature

In the second part of this analysis I will focus on the principle of voice as a hermeneutical guide for an Earth reading of the text. This principle recognises that Earth and the Earth community as subjects in the narrative, subjects with a right to justice and a right to be heard. A discussion of voice as more than metaphor in such contexts can be found in 'The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?' (Habel & Wurst 2001).

Most of us, having been conditioned by a Western education—whether in school or society—view Earth and nature as objects to be appropriated for human benefit or as data to be analysed with scientific detachment. In spite of a handful of Gaia advocates, green poets and ecoliturgists, most of us are surrounded by a Western educational context in which Earth is an object, not a subject. To speak of Earth as subject, of course, does not mean Earth is a human subject; Earth is a subject in its own right—and a distinctive component of the cosmos.

If we grant, in accordance with this principle, that Earth—or more specifically the lands of Earth—have a right to justice, we are faced with the obvious question: do these subjects suffer injustice at the hands of other characters in the text or at the hands of the writer of Ezekiel? In my opinion, the answer is an unequivocal yes!

a. Burning the Forest

One passage which offers a clear example of this injustice is the destruction of the forest of the fields (*ya'ar hasadeh*) in the Negeb (Ezek. 20.45–49; H. 21.1–5). Ezekiel claims to have been commissioned by God to

‘preach against the South and prophesy against the forest land in the Negeb’ (Ezek. 20.46). Ezekiel addresses the forest as a living subject and announces:

Behold I am kindling a fire in you, and it shall consume every green tree in you and every dry tree; the blazing flame shall not be extinguished, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it.

And all flesh shall see that I, YHWH, have kindled it; it shall not be extinguished (Ezek. 20.47–48; H. 21.4–5).

Many interpreters (e.g. Eichrodt 1970: 287; Zimmerli 1979: 423–4) have pointed out that the Negeb of Israel has no forest as such, but only rather modest scrub. They tend to see this passage as a parallel variation of the oracle against Jerusalem and the sanctuaries of Israel in the oracle which follows (Ezek. 21.1–7; H. 21.6–13); the south, from the vantage point of the Babylon, is Judah and Jerusalem. But why the forest should be a metaphor for Jerusalem remains unclear and no such connection is made in the text. When the wood metaphor is used of Jerusalem in Ezek. 15.6–8, the inhabitants are vines, not forest trees. While the south may refer to more than the Negeb as such, the forest is specifically the forest or trees—living vegetation—of the field.

Who sees this great fire? Not the peoples in the lands nearby, but all flesh (*kol basar*), all living creatures. All life forms of the north and the south watch this destruction of natural habitat by God. This burning is not a natural process; it is not a fire ignited by a lightning strike or some such phenomenon. This fire is so total, so overwhelming, that all living creatures will know YHWH has destroyed their homes.

Adopting the perspective of the Earth community we may ask: what has the forest done to deserve this disaster? Why should the trees—the habitat for creatures of the field—suffer such a fire at God’s hands? The trees have not sinned and yet they have experienced the wrath of God. No crime, human or non human, is cited as the justification for this destructive deed of YHWH. The only reason given is that all flesh will see that YHWH

has caused the disaster. There appears to be no justice for the trees or life of the field. Even if we seek to interpret this oracle as a symbolic reference to Jerusalem, the destruction of harmless trees and the suffering of innocent life remains an ugly image of injustice. Earth is portrayed as suffering without cause.

b. Clearing the Mountains

The same innocent suffering happens, I would argue, in many other contexts; the lands or some part of the land suffer unjustly because of YHWH's judgement on the peoples of the land. Ezekiel's oracles against the mountains of Israel illustrate a similar pattern of injustice (Ezek. 6.1–14). Ezekiel announces doom on the mountains and valleys because they are the locations where Israelites have erected the idols, altars and high places unacceptable to God. The mountains presumably stand for the people—an example of metonymy. But why should the mountains and valleys as such be destroyed? It could perhaps be argued that the oracle only affects the people polluting the mountains. In the end, however, the whole land is made desolate, cleared of all life—regardless of whether all components of the land deserve God's judgement. The injustice suffered by the mountains is more than metonymy.

Kalinda Rose Stevenson has paid close attention to the oracles against the mountains. She claims:

As metonymy, 'the mountains' refer to the people who live in Edom and Israel, substituting the mountains for the people, the container for the contained. As synecdoche, 'the mountains' stand for the whole land, a figure of speech that substitutes a part for the whole. In the complicated figurative language of Ezekiel, the mountains are both a metonymy for the people and a synecdoche for the whole land. This figurative language itself obscures Earth. From our anthropocentric bias, we cannot see the mountains for the metonymy (2001: 157).

In her article in volume 4 of *The Earth Bible Series* she recreates a court trial in which Earth appears as a prosecutor charging YHWH with crimes against the mountains.

Through synecdoche, you have made the mountains stand as the representatives of my hills, my ravines, my valleys and my watercourses. What you have done to the mountains, you have done to the whole Earth. We charge you with assault, transference of guilt and discrimination. As evidence of these crimes, we submit your own words as quoted by your prophet Ezekiel (Stevenson 2001: 159).

What happens to the mountains, in the context of Ezekiel's cosmology, happens to the rest of Earth. They are part of the settled land and the removal of human activities means the clearing of life from the mountains—even though the mountains are themselves innocent of any wrongdoing.

c. Defending the Divine Ego

God's defence for these injustices against creation, according to Ezekiel, is summarised in the formula: 'Then they/you shall know that I am YHWH'. Ezekiel uses this formula more than fifty times in a wide range of contexts. No matter what violence is imposed upon humans, lands or other parts of Earth, it is justified by appeal to this formula. Some commentators have maintained a detachment from the negative force of this formula by designating it an 'acknowledgment formula' or a 'recognition formula' (Zimmerli 1979: 37–8; Eichrodt 1970: 15).

In the oracle announcing the burning of the forest cited above, the only reason given for the fire is that creatures may see that YHWH has caused the disaster. Why is a fire needed to vindicate YHWH's name? Why should the forest suffer so that, according to Ezekiel, YHWH's obsession with the divine name can be satisfied? In a similar passage (Ezek. 15.6–8), where fire is threatened against Jerusalem, the primary rationale for the destruction is so that 'you will know that I am YHWH'. Removing the sin or sinners of Jerusalem does not seem to carry the same weight as the need for YHWH to

vindicate the divine name. Compassion for human beings, lands or Earth plays no role.

A closer analysis of the formula in question reveals that Ezekiel is not only obsessed with the name of YHWH, but with making known the reality of YHWH. Ezekiel seems to portray YHWH as a deity with an ego problem: YHWH has an incessant need to have his name and his identity displayed as the banner associated with every violent deed. This formula could perhaps be more appropriately designated a 'divine ego formula'.

The focus of most judgement passages in Ezekiel is not on the need for the Israelites to change their hearts and repent, not on the anguish of God over the sins of the people, not on the past compassion of their God. The focus is on the acts of violence and destruction that will create such a total devastation that it could only be accredited to YHWH in person; the extent of the devastation ensures that YHWH's name is proclaimed as the perpetrator.

The use of the divine ego formula in the oracle against the mountains (Ezek. 6.1-13) illustrates the prophet's obsession with publicising the divine name/identity in the context of violence. In the aftermath of destruction, amid the slain, the name/identity is known (Ezek. 6. 6). All this disaster is not in vain, because the name/identity is known (Ezek. 6.10). When the land is totally desolate and devoid of settlements, the name/identity is known (Ezek. 6.14). Any hint of justice for Earth or the community of Earth seems to be suppressed in order to promote YHWH's identity and satisfy YHWH's divine jealousy for his name.

Blaming the Victim

Julie Galambush (2000) has demonstrated quite convincingly, I believe, that Ezekiel treats creation as property. Creation has no intrinsic value and can be burned, battered or burned at will by acts of violent judgement. Both Earth and the Earth community suffer unjustly as YHWH makes the landscape desolate.

Reading from the perspective of Earth, however, I would like to revisit one of the findings of Galambush. At one point she writes:

As Habel has demonstrated, the images of Leviticus and Jeremiah reflect ideologies in which the land is understood to have rights that are defended by YHWH. The innocent land demands or receives restitution because of injury inflicted by its inhabitants. In Ezekiel the tables are turned. The land is not a victim, but party to its inhabitants' actions; it is guilty and therefore suffers for its own actions at YHWH's hands (2000: 15).

I agree that in Ezekiel we do not find YHWH, the prophet, or any other party suffering with the land or defending the lands. The lands have no allies, no one to give them voice. That fact in itself makes the lands victims. For the lands as such, and the landscape or the creatures of these lands to be accused of sins that the people of the lands have committed is a typical case of blaming the victim.

Ezekiel proclaims:

When a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine against it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, even if Noah, Daniel and Job, these three were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness (Ezek. 14.13–14).

Land may indeed refer to settled and inhabited land, but a distinction is also made between human beings and the rest of the land—specifically animals—in this passage. Yet they are all declared guilty—humans and non-human creatures of the land. All the land is made totally desolate and handed over to wild animals who are the agents of chaos. The landscape and the non-human creatures are made victims on two counts—they are objects of transferred guilt and unwarranted destruction. Because there is violence in the land, the land itself and the fullness of the land is guilty by association (Ezek. 9.9;

12.19–20). The land is condemned to suffer with those who deserve to suffer. Even the righteous may not escape the fury of God's wrath (Ezek. 21.3).

It may also be possible to interpret the violence towards Earth in terms of the theory of Rene Girard (cited in Hamerton-Kelly 1992). Blame is extended by God to land/Earth as an innocent victim; God, however, does not recognise the innocent nature of the victim. The lands and life of Earth experience violence and death at the hands of a jealous God. But whether Earth can be viewed as a genuine scapegoat or a surrogate victim seems dubious to me. The violence of God seems to be so encompassing that all lands where humans have settled or worshipped must be reduced to desolation.

Silencing the Victim

Not only are the lands and all the fullness of life within them forced to suffer, die and become desolate at the hands of a jealous overlord, their voice is also silenced. Ezekiel effectively suppresses the possibility that any party will identify with the victims and let their blood cry out for justice. The possibility of the land responding to disaster is evident when the land is appalled at the raging of a young lion (possibly Jehoahaz) in its midst (Ezek. 19.7). The land and its creatures have a potential voice, but that voice is silenced in the context of Ezekiel's razed-Earth policy.

All the lands condemned in Ezekiel are destined to become desolate, their voices silenced in the face of violent forces of death. This silencing is encompassed in the recurring formula of desolation. After the desolation, all voices of former life forms cease—whether they are voices of the landscape or of other life forms. The physical silencing of life and landscape through divine acts of desolation symbolises the silencing of their voices as subjects who have a right to be heard because they are innocent victims.

Keith Carley (2001) has examined the formula of desolation in volume 4 of *The Earth Bibl Seriese*. He interprets the desolation (*shemamah*) as a horrifying devastation, transforming a fertile and flourishing landscape into a

barren wasteland (Ezek. 6.14; 12.20; 20.48; H. 21.4; 33.28–9). This desolation is so complete and so repulsive that no human will pass through the land. This process of desolation, moreover, is not confined to Israel but extends to a range of lands including Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Egypt.

The judgement of Edom (Mount Seir), for example, results in a perpetual desolation and wasteland with mountains full of slain bodies and streams polluted with rotting corpses (Ezek. 35.1–9). The voices of the mountains and the streams, the animals and the land itself, who all suffer this desolation, are silenced with the dead. It is a sad testimony to the attitude of Ezekiel, that on the one occasion that Earth is given a voice to rejoice, Earth rejoices over the desolation of Edom. Earth is portrayed as expressing a *Shadenfreude* that effectively silences the cries of the victim—Earth herself (Ezek. 35.14).

When the land of Egypt is made desolate, it too is stripped of all its life, its fullness. The women of the other nations raise a lament, but the voice of the victims—the livestock and land of Egypt—is suppressed (Ezek. 32.13–15). Neither Ezekiel, nor the God he—as a prophet—seeks to represent, seem to have any sympathy for the victims or willingness to let their voices be heard. Ezekiel must suppress every form of grief—even his own grief for his wife. As Carley says:

There is no hint within the book of Ezekiel that the prophet himself was concerned about the impact on Earth of the judgement he delivered. His older contemporary, Jeremiah, whose activity Ezekiel is likely to have known, heard the mourning of the desolated land (Jer. 12.2, 11). But Ezekiel appears to have had feeling only for his wife, and he claimed God told him to suppress every sign of grief even for her death (Ezek. 24.15–17).

Ezekiel proclaims the existence of a range of divine agents designed to devastate and silence the lands: famine, pestilence, wild animals and sword.

The agent which brings home to me the horrific silent scenario reflected in this desolation is fire (Ezek. 15.2-8; 19.45-9; H. 21.1-5; 21.31-2; 22.31; 30.8, 16; 39.6). A total burning reduces all settlements to ashes, destroys all livestock, and renders the landscape a barren wasteland. All life is killed and all voices are silenced.

As a youth in the Australian outback I experienced bushfires where thousands of acres of countryside were made desolate. On a typical fire day, when the hot wind blew from the north—like the enemy in Jeremiah 4—my father would sit on the verandah and watch the horizon for smoke. When a bushfire raged through the land, we escaped the area to save our lives.

To walk through the landscape next day was heartrending—the scene was black as far as the eye could see. We faced bloated dead sheep, blinded kangaroos, smouldering stumps and twisted implements.

And the silence! Wherever we walked the land suffered in silence—a suffering I could not help but feel deeply. In those walks through the bleak bush I believe I knew, already then, something of what it meant to be one with the land, with Earth, with all flesh.

Ezekiel hears none of the suffering of the lands—or if he does, he does not permit their pathos to be expressed. Some readers may choose to move from these silent wastelands to the transformed cosmos Ezekiel envisages in the future with mountains shooting branches, fields sown, abundant fruit and inhabited towns (Ezek. 36.8-10, 29-30; cf. Ezek. 40-48). These scenarios of new life, however, do not negate the acts of injustice and devastation wrought on innocent life and lands. Divine acts of rejuvenation do not excuse divine acts of injustice against Earth. Giving life back to the land does not excuse the suffering and silencing of the victim. Ultimately, the land—though a part of creation and thereby of value—is not the reason for rejuvenation nor is it God's compassion for the chosen people of Israel. Renewal happens 'for the sake of my holy name' (Ezek. 36.22).

Conclusion

Reading the judgement oracles of Ezekiel from the perspective of Earth exposes a decidedly negative bias towards creation. For the urbanite Ezekiel, the cosmos is intended to be a series of settled lands with God's chosen city as the sacred centre. Beyond these lands lie realms of disorder. The natural world is not portrayed as having intrinsic worth, but as property at the disposal of those who make it a human habitation.

Ezekiel's portrayal of God's judgement on the peoples of these lands is a depiction of extreme violence. The outcome of this violent divine action is that the lands are made desolate and all life on the lands is destroyed. The lands and life on the lands suffer unjustly: they have done nothing to deserve the desolation they experience. They are victims of a divine rage against any nation who has offended YHWH. For Ezekiel's God, publicising the divine name is more important than compassion for creation.

Not only do these victims suffer unjustly; they are also included among those identified as the guilty objects of YHWH's wrath. Ezekiel portrays YHWH as an angry God who blames the victims along with the perpetrators of the crime. In addition, these suffering victims, who are forced to share the blame, are silenced. The lands have no voice, no advocate, no venue for crying out against the injustice they experience. All is desolate. The silence of the lands is total.

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