

Disorienting History: History and Identity in Ezekiel 20

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## Abstract

Ezekiel 20 retells Israel's exodus narrative tradition (exodus from Egypt and entry into the land of Canaan) as a means of disorienting traditional understandings of identity in order to prepare the prophet's audience for a new identity. To explore this chapter more fully and to try to understand why the author does what he does, I will look at questions of context and form and use those answers to help illumine the text. After a general contextual overview, I will take a closer look at trauma as a dominant exilic discourse and examine the way it functions in Ezekiel. I will then look at the genres operative in Ezekiel 20 with a focus on rewritten scripture and ancient historiography. I will conclude by considering how each of these elements contributes to an understanding of the function of Ezekiel 20 within the exilic community. Looking at Ezekiel through these lenses will help clarify the need for this text (trauma) and the ways the author reacted to that need by preparing them for a new identity through writing a disorienting exodus narrative tradition.

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## Introduction

The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel are disorienting. Written in an exilic setting, they contain judgments on Israel that range from mind-bending visions in the first chapter (wheels with eyes and mysterious creatures on top) to bizarre sign acts in chapter four (the prophet laying bound on his side for over a year) to devastating metaphors in chapters 16 and 22 (an adulterous wife and a bloody city). Chapter 20, one of the last judgments on Israel, forgoes the vivid descriptions of idolatry and violence found in chapters 16 and 22 for a history lesson. As the exilic audience has come to expect, though, this history is not dry or dull. It contains a telling of Israel's history in which the Israelites can never do anything right. It does not mention righteous or even mildly compliant leaders. It shows the Lord as more concerned for his reputation than for the fate of the Israelites. It even claims that the Lord gave the Israelites bad laws that might have something to do with child sacrifice. After engaging with this historical narrative, the audience is left with more questions than answers. In the midst of exile, what is the benefit of judgment? Why tell such a devastating history? How does tearing down Israel's past help the current generation?

Ezekiel 20 retells Israel's exodus narrative tradition (exodus from Egypt and entry into the land of Canaan) as a means of disorienting traditional understandings of identity in order to prepare the prophet's audience for a new identity. To explore this chapter more fully and to try to understand why the author does what he does, I will look at questions of context and form and use those answers to help illumine the text. After a

general contextual overview, I will take a closer look at trauma as a dominant exilic discourse and examine the way it functions in Ezekiel. I will then look at the genres operative in Ezekiel 20 with a focus on rewritten scripture and ancient historiography. I will conclude by considering how each of these elements contributes to an understanding of the function of Ezekiel 20 within the exilic community. Looking at Ezekiel through these lenses will help clarify the need for this text (trauma) and the ways the author reacted to that need by preparing them for a new identity through writing a disorienting exodus narrative tradition.

## Dating

As is common for much scriptural material, the general compositional setting for Ezekiel is debatable. The text itself claims that it was written in Babylon (with visions in Jerusalem) within 12 years of the initial deportation of exiles in 597 BCE.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship views this setting with varying degrees of credibility, situating the compositional setting between a few points on a continuum. One extreme places the main composition of the book in the third century BCE. This position, originally proposed by Charles Cutler Torrey and recently supported by Udo Feist, argues that it is best understood through the lens of apocalyptic literature and has linguistic and thematic elements that suggest a Hellenistic date. The main author of Ezekiel is writing pseudepigraphically and encodes the people and events of the Hellenistic period in terms that are reminiscent of the exile. According to this theory, the concerns of the author's audience are not exilic concerns but concerns of an audience that resides in Jerusalem and Palestine. This setting explains why

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42.

Jerusalem and not Babylon is the focus of most of the judgments. However, this position has been difficult to defend long-term due to disagreement about the linguistic evidence and its complexity. The work also shares more similarities with prophetic material (especially Jeremiah) than with apocalyptic material, and there are numerous theories (such as Jerusalem being the focus of the traumatic experience and also a significant figure of memory for the exiles) to explain the focus on Jerusalem while the audience resides in Babylon.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars have taken the focus on Jerusalem as the main indicator of the location and date of the composition of the text. Popular in the 1930's and 1940's and later taken up by William Brownlee, this position suggests that the first half of the work that focuses on Jerusalem, chapters 1-24, was written in Jerusalem between the beginning of the sixth century and 587 BCE. The second half of the work, which focuses more on redemption and a new Jerusalem, was written in Babylon after the destruction of the temple. The descriptions of violence and war in Jerusalem are not visions. Instead, they are descriptions of the prophet who is experiencing these events.<sup>3</sup> While this theory is more compelling than the one positing a Hellenistic setting, its proposal for a Jerusalem setting is unnecessary. The focus on Jerusalem is not necessarily a problem for the professed setting; instead, it suggests that the audience of the work was still very interested in Jerusalem.

Walther Zimmerli proposes a different theory about the compositional setting that suggests that the final form of the text represents the work of a prophet operating in the exilic community and a group of later disciples (mostly working in Babylon) whom he

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<sup>2</sup> Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 43-45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

refers to as the Ezekiel school. These disciples functioned as redactors working in the general style of the prophet, helping to transform the work of that prophet in ways that spoke most clearly to their audience. Other scholars, particularly Jörg Garscha and Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, have built on Zimmerli's proposal and argued that while there is a small amount of material from the exilic community, most of the text was redacted and rewritten over a few hundred years during the Persian period.<sup>4</sup> This position suggests that the main concerns of the text and its audience are concerns of a restored Jerusalem and a new Israel that is composed of both exiles and a remnant who remained in the land.

More recent scholars have adopted views that fall in between Zimmerli and Pohlmann. Andrew Mein, Jacqueline Lapsley, and Paul Joyce (and, for the most part, the position adopted in this paper) consider the text to be the work of the prophet and his immediate disciples and argue that these authors and redactors were working in the midst of exile (between 597 BCE and the beginning of the Persian period in 539 BCE). The specific context of these authors and redactors might be slightly different, but generally, they are speaking to similar audiences. They are writing in a time of exile, addressing an exilic audience that is either in the midst of the conquest or living shortly afterward.<sup>5</sup> The questions and problems that the text tries to answer are primarily problems caused by the audience's experience of exile.

## Setting

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<sup>4</sup> Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 3; Jacqueline Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 13; Paul Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 16.



If most of Ezekiel was written during the exile, the audience within the narrative of Ezekiel 20 (the elders of the exilic community) and the historical audience (the exiles in general) share many of the same concerns. The community in the narrative has just been through a devastating war. Most theories suggest that the exilic community only represented a fraction of the population of Judah, but this community was composed of administrative, cultic and military officials and their families.<sup>6</sup> Assuming the elite demographic of this community, it is probable that many of their concerns were focused on issues relating to the political and religious existence of Judah. Having participated in the political and religious life of Judah in Jerusalem, they now had to figure out what their life and identity looked like in exile. The elements of their previous life that were so important to them no longer existed.

In exile, they have to answer extremely difficult questions. Now that they no longer reside in Jerusalem or Judah, are the institutions and systems that they previously held so close still relevant? The first 24 chapters are ripe with judgments concerning those who would have been in authority in Israel:

Disaster comes upon disaster,  
 rumor follows rumor;  
 they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet;  
 instruction shall perish from the priest,  
 and counsel from the elders.  
 The king shall mourn,  
 the prince shall be wrapped in despair,  
 and the hands of the people of the land shall tremble  
 (Ezek 7:26-27 NRSV).

Much of the book seems to be answering questions about these institutions. Does a priest have authority in exile? Does the king still represent some form of authority? Can these

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<sup>6</sup> Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 54-58.

figures protect us? In addition to questions about the institutions and systems that governed their lives, the exiles also had to answer questions about their relationship with their god. Did the Lord abandon them? Why did the Lord allow this to happen? Are the Lord's actions fair? Chapter 18 presents a mock-conversation about these very questions. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?" (Ezek 18:25 NRSV) These questions concerning cultural institutions and the exiles' relationship with the Lord seem to dominate Ezekiel's exilic community. The exiles are trying to both understand the destruction of Jerusalem and their new exilic environment. Driving these questions are powerful psychological and social forces. Not only are the exiles trying to find their place in a new environment, they are trying to work through the trauma of war and exile.

## **Ezekiel and Trauma**

The use of shocking images and altered views of reality throughout the book have led some scholars to approach Ezekiel as a trauma text, a work that reflects the extreme experiences of its author and his community. Ezekiel contains disturbing images throughout, especially in the first 24 chapters. Chapter 5 discusses parents eating children and children eating parents. Chapters 16 and 23 graphically portray Israel as an adulterous wife and an adulterous sister. Chapters 22 and 24 portray Jerusalem as a blood-drenched city. The text is also inundated with altered views of reality, using particularly strange descriptions of the Lord and cherubim throughout and creeping creatures, *רמש*, crawling all over the Temple in chapter 8. These strange features have led scholars to look to modern research into the lives of refugees and victims of trauma to

help understand the bizarre world of the text. One proponent of this approach, Nancy Bowen, portrays the experience of the Babylonian conquest as one that disrupts the author's sense of the world as a meaningful and comprehensible place. In light of the disruption, the author tries to reconstruct the experience as a way of "alleviating the trauma and subsequent stress" of the exile.<sup>7</sup> Key to the success of this reconstruction is the satisfactory answer to two fundamental questions: what happened and why it happened.<sup>8</sup>

Taking a close look at this research into trauma and trauma literature will help shed light on the specific needs of the exilic community and why the author of Ezekiel reacted by writing such a disorienting text. In her work on trauma and trauma victims, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman claims that trauma disrupts the victim's narrative about herself and her world. She suggests that a catastrophic event, e.g. war, shatters the victim's assumptions about her invulnerability, the world as a meaningful place, and the self as worthy and decent.<sup>9</sup> Most modern people live with the assumptions that bad things happen to *other* people, that the world is an understandable and well-ordered place, and that their existence is meaningful. These assumptions allow them to function in a world plagued by accidents, crimes, and natural disasters. For the trauma victim, the catastrophic event "shatters" these protective assumptions so that the victim experiences feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, and confusion. After the catastrophic event, the narratives that the victim previously had told herself about her identity and her world no

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Bowen, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), xvii-xviii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "The Aftermath of Victimization: Rebuilding Shattered Assumptions," in *Trauma and Its Wake*, ed. Charles Figley, vol. 1 (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 15.

longer work. The trauma victim will try to reconstruct this narrative through answering those fundamental questions about the traumatic event: what happened and why did it happen.<sup>10</sup>

For many scholars, Ezekiel is more than a description of the aftermath of a traumatic event. It is the attempt of a community to work through their traumatic experiences.<sup>11</sup> The drama that the prophet enacts and describes is remarkably similar to the “drama of survival” that Susan Rubin Suleiman sees in people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She claims, “it is important to understand that trauma is not only a drama of a past event, but also, even primarily, a drama of survival.”<sup>12</sup> In order to survive the aftermath of a traumatic experience, a victim focuses on reconstructing her narrative about the catastrophic event, her world and her place within that world. Ehlers and Clark use the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle to illustrate the need for reconstructing a narrative. A traumatic event takes the victim’s narrative and shatters it like a jigsaw puzzle that has been thrown on the floor. The victim will keep tripping over the pieces of the puzzle until she picks up each piece, examines it carefully and fits it into the other puzzle pieces. Yet, the victim will not necessarily return to the previously held narrative; instead, she will try to construct a new narrative that makes sense of the world in light of the event. This new narrative is able to absorb the shock of the catastrophic event and

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<sup>10</sup> Janoff-Bulman, “The Aftermath of Victimization,” 15.

<sup>11</sup> For an early study, see David Halperin’s *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993). For a more recent study, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36.1 (2008): 280.

restore meaning to the world and the victim.<sup>13</sup> Understood as a work that is trying to put a narrative of the self and the community back together, Ezekiel is a working out of the community's traumatic experience. It is an attempt to pick up the pieces of their shattered narratives, to examine those pieces and to put them back together in a new way that makes sense of their traumatic experience.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ezekiel's Retelling of the War**

Read in light of the experience of trauma and trauma narratives, much of Ezekiel seems concerned with this “articulatory” process. Ezekiel demonstrates narrative reconstruction from three different angles: Ezekiel's attempt to reconstruct what happened, the attempt of the exilic community to reconstruct their own self-narratives, and the attempt of the author of Ezekiel to reject those attempts and present his own narrative of identity.

The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel are rife with examples of the prophet acting out and talking about the traumatic experience of the exiles (answering the question, “what happened”).<sup>15</sup> In chapter four, the prophet reenacts the siege of Jerusalem as a child might act out a familiar story. He uses the material that is available to him as a child might use a stick as a pretend sword. He sets up a brick to act as Jerusalem and sets out various siege works to make war against the brick. He uses an iron cooking pan as a wall. After acting

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<sup>13</sup> Anke Ehlers and David M. Clark, “A Cognitive Model of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 38 (2000): 337.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the vital importance of self-narratives for identity and mental health, see J.M. Adler, “Living Into the Story: Agency and Coherence in a Longitudinal Study of Narrative Identity Development and Mental Health Over the Course of Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Sept 12, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Bowen, *Ezekiel*, xviii.

out their suffering, he cooks bread over dung (at first the Lord commands him to use human dung) since captives would have used similar fuel for their fires. In chapter 12, the prophet takes traveling bags out in public (he is in Jerusalem after being carried there by the spirit of the Lord), digs a hole in the city wall, and carries his bags out through the wall. In each successive telling and retelling, the prophet is able to take that piece of the puzzle and examine it anew, trying to figure out how it fits in the overall puzzle. But, when he starts putting back the pieces of the puzzle, he does so in a way that is different than how it was put together before. This new puzzle tries to construct a coherent narrative about what happened, but it does so in a way that disorients anyone who wants to hold onto the previous narrative.

There are a few places in the text in which Ezekiel is reacting to the exiles' attempt to reconstruct their narrative in a way that the prophet finds problematic. Chapter 18 is particularly important in this regard. It begins with the idea that the exiles were appealing to a proverb to explain their exile from the land. "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?'" (Ezek 18:2 NRSV). Applied to the experience of the exiles, this proverb that the exiles are apparently telling one another answers one of the fundamental trauma questions, why did this happen. It constructs a narrative in which the exile is not the fault of the exiles themselves. In fact, the exile is the result of the disobedience of their parents and their ancestors. The exiles did not do anything to deserve this punishment. Ezekiel rejects this proverb and the narrative behind it. "As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only

the person who sins that shall die” (Ezek 18:3-3 NRSV). The author follows the rejection of the proverb and the reasoning behind it with the mock-conversation about the fairness of the Lord previously discussed. In this conversation in v 25, the exiles present another assertion of their innocence. The way of the Lord is unfair because the exiles do not deserve their current situation. They are innocent victims of the Lord’s mistreatment. Chapter 18 demonstrates one way the exiles are trying to reconstruct their narrative by shifting the blame for exile. In their new narrative, the exiles do not deserve their current situation and try to place the blame on anyone except themselves, including their ancestors and even the Lord.

## **The Exodus Narrative Tradition**

In chapter 20, Ezekiel is reacting to a different attempt by the exilic community to construct a new narrative for itself. This new narrative does not appeal to a proverb or even to a sense of justice. Instead, it appeals to a particular understanding of the specialness of Israel in which blessing accompanies that specialness. This new narrative is dependent upon an exodus narrative tradition found throughout the Hebrew Bible. While we do not necessarily have access to the “urtext” of the exodus narrative tradition that the exiles were appealing to in constructing their new narrative, we can try to understand some of its basic features through looking at various ways it has been told throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I will refer to each of these exodus narrative traditions as tellings of that tradition. This terminology, adopted from A.K. Ramanujan’s analysis of the diverse Ramayana tradition, helps provide a way of talking about a tradition with multiple “tellings” but no definite “urtext.” A.K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three

The narrative tradition that the author of this chapter is working with is an exodus narrative tradition found throughout the Hebrew Bible. One can see a basic outline of it in the way the narrative structure in Ezekiel 20 follows the basic structure of Gerhard von Rad's summary credo in Deuteronomy 26:5-9. Von Rad claims that this short passage represents an old confessional summary where the saving acts of the Lord are recounted throughout Israel's history. For von Rad, this summary strikes a note of thanksgiving and praise that will continue throughout Israel's history.<sup>17</sup> The credo also represents what von Rad calls an election tradition because it recounts the saving acts of the Lord specifically for the benefit of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Inherent in this credo is the concept of the specialness of Israel and an assumption that this specialness merits the Lord's favor and blessing.

This creed starts with a wandering Aramean (in context, Jacob) who goes down to Egypt and "became a great nation, mighty and populous" (Deut 26:5 NRSV). It continues with Israel's harsh treatment by the Egyptians, their cry to the Lord, and the Lord's response to their suffering. The Lord delivers them out of Egypt and takes the people into "this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:9 NRSV). While this telling is very basic, there are a number of themes that are important in this and other tellings of the exodus narrative tradition. From the very beginning, the Lord seems to have blessed the decedents of Jacob by making them prosper in Egypt. And, when they were suffering in Egypt, the Lord responds with compassion: they cry out to the Lord and the Lord delivers them from their suffering. Inherent in this story is

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Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South India*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 121-122.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



the idea that the special relationship between the Lord and Israel elicits compassion and blessings from the Lord.

Numerous other tellings of the exodus tradition follow this outline. Von Rad identifies Joshua 24 as a more detailed telling of this basic creed from Deuteronomy 26. It also recounts the exodus narrative, but begins with Terah, Abraham and Nahor. Like Deuteronomy 26, it emphasizes how the Lord hears the cries of the Israelites and delivers them from harm. When it discusses the Israelites' time in the wilderness, the Joshua telling merely says, "you lived in the wilderness a long time" (Joshua 24:7 NRSV). This telling shares with the Deuteronomy account the emphasis on the positive relationship between the Israelites and the Lord. The Lord is compassionate to the Israelites and blesses them with his favor. But, one significant difference between these tellings is that at the end of the frame story in v 14, the text indicates that the Israelites served other gods while they were in Egypt. While this tradition still presents a positive relationship between the Israelites and the Lord, the framing story introduces an element of disobedience into the picture. While the Lord has delivered the Israelites from the hands of their enemies and given them the land, there is an indication in Joshua that everything is not wholly right between the Lord and the Israelites.

Psalms 106 is another detailed telling of this narrative tradition and incorporates more aspects of Israel's disobedience into it. In it, the psalmist does not shy away from describing the sins and disobedience of the people. They are rebellious, idolatrous, and give in to wanton cravings. But, the psalmist also includes passages about Israel's belief, significant figures who were themselves obedient, and God's love of the people. A few

selections from this Psalm provide a brief summary of its telling of this narrative tradition.

7. Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt,  
 did not consider your wonderful works;  
 they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast  
 love,  
 but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea.  
 8. Yet he saved them for his name's sake,  
 so that he might make known his mighty power.  
 9. He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry;  
 he led them through the deep as through a desert.  
 10. So he saved them from the hand of the foe,  
 and delivered them from the hand of the enemy.  
 11. The waters covered their adversaries;  
 not one of them was left.  
 12. Then they believed his words;  
 they sang his praise...  
 21. They forgot God, their Savior,  
 who had done great things in Egypt,  
 22. wondrous works in the land of Ham,  
 and awesome deeds by the Red Sea  
 23. Therefore he said he would destroy them—  
 had not Moses, his chosen one,  
 stood in the breach before him,  
 to turn away his wrath from destroying them...  
 29. they provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds,  
 and a plague broke out among them.  
 30. Then Phinehas stood up and interceded,  
 and the plague was stopped...  
 43. Many times he delivered them,  
 but they were rebellious in their purposes,  
 and were brought low through their iniquity.  
 44. Nevertheless he regarded their distress  
 when he heard their cry.  
 45. For their sake he remembered his covenant,  
 and showed compassion according to the abundance of his  
 steadfast love. (Ps 106: 7-12, 21-23, 29-30, 43-45 NRSV)

In this telling, Israel and the Lord have a relationship rife with disobedience. But, when Israel is disobedient and the Lord punishes them, they come back to the Lord and the Lord looks on them with favor and love. Again in this telling, when the Israelites cry out,

the Lord answers their cry with deliverance. Even in the face of disobedience, the Israelites have a special relationship with the Lord. Throughout the narrative, the psalmist also points out righteous figures who intercede on the behalf of the Israelites. While Israel goes through periods of disobedience, it retains a positive, blessing filled relationship with the Lord, oftentimes through the intervention and leadership of righteous individuals.

While maintaining a similar narrative outline, each of these tellings has its own way of presenting the exodus narrative tradition. Von Rad's little credo in Deuteronomy 26 presents a short summary of the exodus tradition, but it does not mention anything about Israel's disobedience. The emphasis is on the cry of the Israelites and the Lord's response. The Joshua telling presents a more detailed picture of the narrative tradition, introduces an element of Israel's disobedience into its frame story, and maintains the emphasis on the Lord's response to Israel's suffering. The telling in Psalm 106 places much more emphasis on Israel's disobedience, but it also recounts the way the Lord responds with compassion to the cry of the Israelites. Psalm 106 also emphasizes that, despite their disobedience, there are righteous figures who prevent Israel's complete destruction and lead the people back into covenantal relationship with the Lord. Through examining various forms of the exodus narrative tradition, it becomes clear that the tradition emphasizes the special relationship between the Israelites and the Lord and the blessings that accompany this relationship.

In the face of trauma, it is not surprising that the exiles would appeal to the exodus narrative tradition to help them construct their new self-narrative. It provides them with a basis for hope that they will return to Israel. In the end, even in the face of

disobedience, the Lord has looked upon them with favor. In the exiles' new narrative, the Lord will not allow them to suffer for long. The special relationship they enjoy with the Lord dictates compassion, deliverance and blessing. Their disobedience is not what defines them; their special relationship with the Lord and the accompanying blessings provide them an unshakable self-narrative on which to build.

## **Ezekiel 20 and the Exodus Narrative Tradition**

The author of Ezekiel 20 is reacting to this attempt by the exiles to construct a new self-narrative based on the exodus narrative tradition. Ezekiel 20 contains a telling of the exodus narrative that rejects many of the elements of the other narratives, especially the elements that emphasize the blessings that accompany the relationship between the Israelites and the Lord. A close reading of Ezekiel's telling will show that through it, Ezekiel disorients his audience's understanding of this narrative tradition so that he can later reorient them according to a new self-narrative.

The chapter begins with "certain elders of Israel" coming to the prophet to consult with the Lord. At this point, the text makes a claim to authority that is common to many prophetic texts. In vv 2-3, it claims, "And the word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them..." The difference between what follows, though, and other prophetic claims is that through the words of the Lord, Ezekiel is going to retell a narrative tradition. These words of the Lord become the definitive telling of this narrative tradition, rejecting all other claims for authoritative understandings of it. This is a revelation from the Lord, mediated through God's prophet, and the revelation is a radical telling of the exodus narrative tradition.

At this point the Lord does not provide traditional counsel to the elders; instead, he continues the course set in one of his previous speeches. In chapter 14, when the elders consult with the Lord through Ezekiel, the Lord delivers devastating judgments on them. Even the form of the judgment in chapter 20, a retelling of Israel's history, is not necessarily new. The Lord has already delivered judgment upon Israel's history through the image of the adulterous wife in chapter 16. Ezekiel will expound on this image in chapter 23, with the telling of the story of Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem). Within this context, the Lord's treatment of Israel's past in chapter 20 is one piece of a larger puzzle that is concerned with retelling Israel's history. It is connected with these other tellings that disorient traditional understandings of history, and it does so with the purpose of reorienting his audience's self-narrative.

The Lord's judgment on the ancestors of the Israelites begins in full in v 5. It begins with the phrase, "Thus says the Lord God: On the day when I chose Israel..." This phrase indicates that the judgment is going to cut deep to the heart of Israel's identity; it is going to address Israel's history as the chosen people of God. The rest of this verse and the entire next verse place the history within a particular narrative tradition.

I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob—making myself known to them in the land of Egypt—I swore to them, saying, I am the Lord your God. On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. (Ezek 20:5-6 NRSV)

These words are reminiscent of von Rad's credo in Deuteronomy 26. Similar to the credo, Ezekiel's telling begins with Jacob as the primary ancestor. It continues with the outline the other tellings followed: the Lord delivers them out of Egypt into "a land

flowing with milk and honey.” Beginning the chapter with these shared themes initiates a narrative tradition that has been fundamental to Israel’s identity. It cues this figure of memory for readers or listeners as a means of setting it up for disorientation.

At the same time that Ezekiel is preparing the narrative tradition for disorientation, he makes a slight omission from the narrative tradition in Deuteronomy 26 that severely colors the mood of this telling. He does not specify the reason for the Lord’s actions in Egypt. There is no mention of the suffering of the Israelites and no mention of the idea that they cry out to the Lord. The Lord’s intentions are ambiguous. Without reason to think that the actions of the Lord are compassionate, it is easy to assume that they are for the sake of the Lord’s reputation (as stated in vv 9, 14 and 22).

The next two verses contain a surprising twist to anyone familiar with Israel’s history.

And I said to them, ‘Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.’ But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; not one of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.  
(Ezek 20:7-8a NRSV)

In these verses, Ezekiel continues to cast a shadow over the exodus narrative with an important point: the Israelites rebelled against the Lord and worshiped idols when they were in Egypt. The text emphasizes that every one of the Israelites engaged in these detestable practices. While Joshua 24 mentions the idea that the Israelites worshiped idols while in Egypt, this is the only example of a narrative that contains the prohibition against worshiping idols during their time in Egypt.<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel’s telling is the only one that

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<sup>19</sup> Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?*, 92.

emphasizes that this idolatry was directly against the command of the Lord. Even at this time, at the very beginning of their history, there were not even a few who were faithful to the Lord. Ezekiel takes their sinful behavior back to the very moment of the exodus from Egypt, insisting that there were none who deserved deliverance.

The text continues with a statement that it will repeat: “Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them... But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations” (Ez 20:8b-9a NRSV). In this phrase, the prophet does two significant things in relation to the exodus narrative tradition. First, the author claims that it would have been within the realm of justice for the Lord to destroy Israel at any time, even while they were dwelling in Egypt. For the exiles, this removes any grounds for someone to argue that there was a golden time for the Israelites’ relationship with the Lord. They cannot argue that if the Israelites were always disobedient, the Lord would have destroyed them earlier. The second impact of this phrase on the narrative tradition is that it gives a reason for why the Lord has spared Israel up to this point (especially since it is repeated three times throughout the telling). The Lord spares Israel not for a special love for them or for any merit on their part. The Lord spares them for the sake of his name, for the sake of his reputation among the nations. The Lord does not have compassion on Israel and (at least in this instance) does not treat them with any favor. Instead, the Lord spares them so that the Lord does not be powerless.

The next verses continue the themes of the Lord as wholly just and Israel as continually disobedient. It continues to play on the exodus narrative tradition with the Lord bringing the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. At this point, the prophet

continues to speak for the Lord, “I gave them my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live. Moreover I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, so that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them” (Ezek 20:11-12 NRSV). In these verses, the Lord provides the Israelites with ordinances that will promote life and even gives them the Lord’s Sabbath so that they will know that the Lord has set them apart. Unsurprisingly, the telling does not end here. The next verse discusses the rebelliousness of Israel. The Israelites reject the ordinances that promote life, and they profane the Lord’s Sabbaths. Even after the Lord delivered the undeserving people out of Egypt, they reject these good gifts. After this rejection of the Lord, the passage reiterates the previous phrase about the Lord sparing Israel for the sake of his name. But, this time the Lord introduces a form of punishment: the Lord will not lead them into the promised land because “their heart went after their idols” (Ezek 20:16 NRSV). This reference to the heart of the Israelites reinforces the significance of their disobedience. It has already established that there were no faithful Israelites in Egypt. Now, the narrative indicates that they are chasing after idols with their hearts. Other tellings (Num 13 and Dtr 1) discuss this punishment, but instead of attributing it to idolatry, they attribute it to the Israelites’ unwillingness to invade Canaan.<sup>20</sup> For Ezekiel, the sin of the Israelites is not one of cowardice or fear; it is the ever-present sin of idolatry.

The narrative follows this formula for the next couple verses with a few significant differences. There is now a new generation in the wilderness. The Lord gives them specific instructions not to act as their parents, chasing after idols and ignoring the Lord’s statutes. Unsurprisingly, the children act in the same way that their parents acted.

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<sup>20</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, eds. Frank Moore Cross and Klaus Baltzer (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 410.



Now multiple generations are repeating the sins of their ancestors, bringing punishment again and again down on their heads. The previous generations' hearts chased after idols and this generation's eyes are set on idols. The narrative is building an anatomy of sin. Everyone in Israel's past was sinful and their whole selves are tainted with sin, from their hearts to their eyes.

The transgenerational nature of the sinfulness of the Israelites reflects Ezekiel's previous revision of the traditional proverb, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek18:2 NRSV). In chapter 18, Ezekiel revised this tradition to emphasize that the Israelites are not being punished for the sins of their ancestors. They are being punished for their own sins. In chapter 20, v 23 introduces a new punishment for this new generation of Israelites. The Lord will scatter them throughout the nations because of their disobedience and because their "eyes were set on their ancestors' idols." This punishment foreshadows the situation of the exiles being scattered among the nations. Connecting this punishment with Ezekiel's previous revision of the proverb in chapter 18 reinforces the point that the exiles are no better than their ancestors. While the exile was set in motion long ago, it is still the punishment of those sitting, consulting with the Lord because they share this propensity toward sin.

Verses 25 and 26 are the verses that surprise most people, but they make sense when read in the context of this disposition for sin. Referring to the Israelites' time in the wilderness, the text says,

Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord. (Ezek 20:25-26 NRSV)

Thomas Krüger makes an interesting suggestion for interpreting these verses in a manner that fits in this context. He suggests that the focus in this verse should not be on the Lord giving the Israelites bad statutes and ordinances. Instead, the focus should be on the Israelites' obedience of these statutes and ordinances. The Israelites have disobeyed all of the Lord's statutes that lead to life up to this point. It is only when the Lord gives them statutes that are not good that they finally obey them.<sup>21</sup> These passages do not necessarily say anything about the Lord; instead, they say something about the Israelites. They disobey good statutes and obey bad statutes. Their rebellious nature transcends the quality of the laws. Jacqueline Lapsley makes a related suggestion for understanding why God would give the Israelites bad statutes. She argues that the point of the bad laws was to reveal the Israelites' sinful nature to them. The Lord gave them bad laws so that when they obeyed the laws that were bad, they would horrify themselves, making them finally realize their sinful nature. This realization would provide them with a chance to turn from their sinful ways.<sup>22</sup>

This recitation of Israel's history ends by showing Israel's disobedience in the land that will later become Judah and by bringing the narrative tradition into the audience's memorable past. Unsurprising, the people who enter the promised land chase after idols on "any high hill or any leafy tree" (Ezek 20:28 NRSV). The people in the prophet's immediate context act similarly. The Lord addresses the elders who came to consult with Ezekiel with this statement,

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Krüger, "Transformation of History in Ezekiel 20" in *Transforming Visions: Transformations of Text, Tradition and Theology in Ezekiel*, eds. William A. Tooman and Michael A. Lyons (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 163-164.

<sup>22</sup> Lapsley, *The Moral Self*, 95-96.

When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourself with all your idols to this day. And shall I be consulted by you, O house of Israel? As I live, says the Lord God, I will not be consulted by you. (Ezek 20:31 NRSV)

Even up to the present generation, Israel's nature is sinful. They were sinful in Egypt and have deserved the punishment of the Lord since their earliest generations. Even the people in exile have not learned from their past mistakes and from the Babylonian conquest. They have lost the land, and they still chase after idols. Ezekiel retells the exodus narrative tradition in a way that disorients his audience's understanding of it. While the Israelites have not lost their status as the people of the Lord, they cannot expect favor or blessings because of this status. Other tellings emphasize the specialness of the Israelites and the accompanying blessings, but in this telling, the Israelites are wholly sinful, and the cyclical nature of their sin brings up the question of whether they will ever be obedient to the Lord.

Reading through Ezekiel's telling of the exodus narrative tradition leaves more questions than answers. Ezekiel's audience has undergone the trauma of war and exile. Their personal and social narratives about their world and their place within that world have been shattered. Ezekiel is rejecting the exiles' attempts to create their own narrative, but why attack their past? In the midst of exile, why tell such a devastating history? How does tearing down Israel's past help the current generation?

## **Ezekiel and Identity**

To begin to answer these questions, examining the particular genre of the exodus narrative will help clarify its function in general and its function in Ezekiel 20 in

particular. The genre that the author uses in chapter 20 has been history writing. In his work on biblical and ancient historiography, John Van Seters suggests, “History writing is [...] not the result of an accidental accumulation of data but is a literary work that is written for, and becomes part of, the society’s ‘stream of tradition.’”<sup>23</sup> In describing/retelling Israel’s history, Ezekiel is engaging with Israel’s “stream of tradition.” In ancient Israel, tradition was used to “give meaning to the way things are, invest persons and institutions with authority, legitimate practices, regulate behavior, give a sense of personal and corporate identity, and communicate skills and knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> In particular, writing about history provides a way for communities to deal with social changes, particularly when traditional ways of understanding the world no longer work. It provides a basis for a new understanding of reality.<sup>25</sup>

## Cultural Memory

Of particular importance in history writing is the formation and reformation of cultural memory. Jan Assmann’s study of cultural memory provides a helpful framework for understanding the implication of creating and recreating the past. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs’ work on collective memory, Assmann uses the term cultural memory to refer to “all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination.”<sup>26</sup> The basis of his argument is that cultural memory is

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<sup>23</sup> John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9

based on fixed events in the past. “Cultural memory, then, focuses on fixed points in the past, but again it is unable to preserve the past as it was. This tends to be condensed into symbolic figures to which memory attaches itself.”<sup>27</sup> These events are far removed from recent memory and are upheld as defining moments in a culture’s history. They become symbolic of a past that no one really remembers. Assmann designates these events as “figures of memory.” Cultures maintain these figures of memory through institutions, sacred texts and rituals.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the fixed nature of these figures of memory, cultural memory is not itself fixed. In particular, during times of change, cultures are able to change their perspective on these figures of memory or forget them entirely. Assmann notes that

Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or transformation.<sup>29</sup>

As cultures change, their cultural memory also shifts. The community is able to adjust these figures of memory to align with their changing circumstances. In a community that experiences the trauma of war and exile, transformation of these figures of memory is necessary to adapt to a new understanding of the world and their place in that world.

In addition to symbolically representing the past of a culture, these figures of memory also provide a way for cultures to understand their identity. They provide a fixed point that people can build on for understanding the question that is central to identity:

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<sup>27</sup> Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, No. 65 (Spring - Summer, 1995): 129-130.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

“who am I.”<sup>30</sup> Assmann claims that the “I” of identity is intimately connected with the “we” of culture and society.

A self grows from the outside in. It builds itself up individually by participating in the interactive and communicative patterns of the group to which it belongs and by contributing to that group’s self-image [...] in other words, identity is a social phenomenon.<sup>31</sup>

Integral to this social phenomenon of identity is the creation of the past through discourse about the figures of memory.<sup>32</sup> Assmann claims that this type of identity formation through history writing especially occurs through scriptural texts. When texts are designated as scripture, they receive an endorsement from that society. Scriptural texts carry the culturally endorsed history and identity of that community.<sup>33</sup>

Ezekiel has attacked the Israelites’ figures of memory throughout the first 24 chapters. Throughout the judgments on Israel, Ezekiel destabilizes those who held power in Jerusalem. In chapter 11, Ezekiel condemns the counselors of the city who have proclaimed that they are safe in the midst of danger. He tells them, “You have killed many in this city, and have filled its streets with the slain. Therefore thus says the Lord God: The slain whom you have placed within it are the meat, and this city is the pot” (Ezek 11:6-7 NRSV). Chapter 22 deals a particularly strong blow to these figures that held power in Israel. Everyone seems to have blood on their hands. The rulers and governing authorities attract particular scorn and condemnation.

The princes of Israel in you, everyone according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood [...] Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have

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<sup>30</sup> Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129-130.

<sup>31</sup> Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

devoured human lives [...] Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. (Ezek 22:6, 25, 27 NRSV)

Even the priests and prophets are guilty of violence against the cultic life of Israel.

Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them [...] Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord God," when the Lord has not spoken. (Ezek 22:26, 28 NRSV)

After Ezekiel is finished with his judgments on Israel, there are few, if any, cultural institutions left standing. Each is guilty of causing the war and exile through their incessant bloodshed and greed.

He has also used history writing in other places to attack the Israelite's understanding of their identity. In two instances, he uses feminine metaphors to describe this history (Ezek 16, 23). Both of these metaphors are rather disturbing, and Ezekiel seems to relish discussing Israel's infidelity to the Lord throughout this history. Chapter 16 traces the development of metaphorical Israel from an infant into a grown woman. From early on, the Lord chooses to care for the child and marry her when she is old enough. "I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine" (Ezek 16:8 NRSV). The Lord cares for the young woman as she grows up, providing for her every need and desire. When this woman is grown and full of the Lord's splendor, she decides to abandon the Lord in favor of idols and other lovers. Furthermore, she sacrifices her own children to these idols. "As if your whorings were not enough! You slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering to

them” (Ezek16:20-21 NRSV). This history ends with a devastating condemnation in which the Lord abandons Israel to her lovers, who are now her enemies.

Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whoring with your lovers, and because of all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated; I will gather them against you from all around, and will uncover your nakedness to them, so that they may see all your nakedness. I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments. So I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you (Ezek 16:36-42 NRSV).

The message of this metaphor is clear. Israel has abandoned the Lord, and now the Lord has abandoned Israel. Through this metaphorical history, Ezekiel disorients any who might try to hold onto an understanding of Israel’s identity in which the Lord still favors or blesses the Israelites. To do this, he gives Israel a detestable identity. Israel is an adulteress who chases after other nations and their gods, even sacrificing her own children to them.

Seen through the lens of history and cultural memory, the exodus narrative tradition becomes a significant figure of memory. Von Rad refers to the credo in Deuteronomy as “out and out a confession of faith [...] with a close concentration on the



objective historical facts.”<sup>34</sup> According to von Rad, this narrative tradition is one of the most important narratives for the Israelites. In retelling the exodus narrative tradition, Ezekiel is cutting to the heart of Israel’s cultural memory and identity. As a figure of memory, this narrative provided the Israelites with a particular identity. Through destabilizing this narrative tradition and disorienting his audience’s understanding of the tradition, Ezekiel disorients his audience’s identity.

## **Rewritten Scripture**

The genre of history writing is not the only one operative in Ezekiel 20. The author is not simply writing Israel’s history of the exodus. He is taking a scriptural narrative tradition and reworking it for his own context. Israel’s more recent past and scriptural texts provide helpful example of what was happening when scribes were writing and rewriting Israel’s scriptural history. George Brooke claims that looking at rewritten scripture in particular is helpful for understanding this scribal process.

“Rewritten Scripture as the artefactual textual evidence of particular groups at particular times discloses how such groups had a rich capacity for reconstructing the past.”<sup>35</sup> Scribes in the Second Temple period wrote about history as a means of reconstructing their sacred past so that it adhered with their present. To do this, they oftentimes resorted to the

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<sup>34</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> George Brooke, “Memory, Cultural Memory and Rewriting Scripture,” in *Early Judaism and Its Literature, Volume 39: Reading the Dead Sea Scrolls: Essays in Method* (Williston: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 64.

process of rewriting scripture, selectively forgetting and augmenting scriptural traditions.<sup>36</sup>

The concept of rewritten scripture emerged in the 1960 in the work of Giza Vermes, who identified a phenomenon in Second Temple Judaism that he called Rewritten Bible. Since that time, the concept has undergone significant development in the work of scholars examining scriptural literature from the Second Temple period.<sup>37</sup> Molly Zahn suggests two ways to understand this phenomenon. One way is through the lens of genre. Rewritten scripture denotes a genre with a particular function: to re-present a scriptural text in a new context. Another way to understand this phenomenon is as a technique.<sup>38</sup> Rewriting scripture denotes the practice of scribes to “reproduce substantial portions of one or more biblical books, but modify the scriptural text by means of addition, omission, paraphrase, rearrangement, or other types of changes.”<sup>39</sup> This second, more inclusive way of understanding rewritten scripture is closer to the form of history writing we find in Ezekiel 20. It is not necessarily an attempt to re-present a scriptural text in its entirety. It is a technique employed by the author of Ezekiel to present a modified form of one scriptural narrative tradition.

Looking at biblical and Qumran evidence, George Brooke suggests that scribes did not necessarily have malicious intent when they rewrote scriptural texts. He claims that in the “precononical” stage, there was a place for textual development, even to the

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<sup>36</sup> Brooke, “Memory, Cultural Memory and Rewriting Scripture,” 64.

<sup>37</sup> Molly Zahn, “Rewritten Scripture” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dead Sea Scrolls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 323

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

point of developing contradictions.<sup>40</sup> These scribes, or authors, were motivated by a desire to make the previous text speak to the current generation. “Among other factors, the contemporary life setting of the author of rewritten Scripture influences the combination of ideas that create the *Tendenz* of the adjustments to the underlying tradition.”<sup>41</sup> Through the rewriting process, these authors were providing a new presentation of an older tradition that reflected the circumstances of the new generation.

Brooke provides the example of *Jubilees*'s omission of Sarai's cruel treatment of Hagar and Josephus's omission of the incident of the golden calf as one means of reconstructing a past that adheres better to the author's present circumstances. Brooke claims that while the authors that created these stories had their reasons for including them in their texts, the author of *Jubilees* and Josephus did not consider them beneficial to their contexts.<sup>42</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) provides another helpful example of rewriting scriptural texts. The Samaritan Pentateuch telling of Exodus shows the addition of a commandment to Exodus 20, where the Lord gives the Israelites a commandment to build an altar at the Samaritan site of Mt. Gerizim.<sup>43</sup> The author of this commandment in the SP took a known scriptural tradition and edited it to better fit his context.<sup>44</sup> In comparison to Ezekiel's reworking of the history of Israel, these examples are rather conservative, but they provide more tangible evidence for understanding rewriting history

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<sup>40</sup> Brooke, “Memory, Cultural Memory and Rewriting Scripture,” 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Eugene Ulrich, “The Text of the Hebrew Scriptures at the Time of Hillel and Jesus,” in *Congress Volume Basel*, (2001): 86-87.

<sup>44</sup> Recent scholarship has started to question the direction of dependence between the SP and MT regarding this particular story. Regardless of the direction of dependence, though, Ulrich's point still remains. A scribe edited a known scriptural tradition to better match his context.

as a means of reshaping cultural memory. In these instances, the authors of the texts omit or add something to “clean up” these figures of cultural memory so that they better fit within the author’s context.

There are some distinct advantages to understanding Ezekiel 20 as a form of a rewritten scriptural narrative. The study of rewritten scripture understands the original texts or traditions as scriptural. Using literary terms like allusion makes no claims about the referent text. In rewritten scripture, editors and authors are not simply working with any text or tradition; they are working with one or more that have a special relationship to a community. During times of societal change, cultures also begin to alter their perception of figures of memory in the scriptural traditions. In rewritten scripture, these perceptions are crystalized into their new forms. During crystallization, individuals within the community begin to specialize in the organization and formalization of the new cultural memory.<sup>45</sup> The author of Ezekiel takes on this role. He turns to history to begin the process of the transformation of the society’s figures of memory after the Babylonian conquest.

In chapter 20, Ezekiel transforms his community’s major figure of memory through rewriting the exodus narrative tradition. Through addition and omission in the exodus narrative tradition, he rejects tellings that uphold the blessings and favor that accompany Israel’s status as the people of the Lord. This rejection and destabilization disorients the audience’s identity. The war has already done much of this work, and Ezekiel continues it when they try to construct a new narrative for themselves that relies on this exodus narrative tradition. But, this disorientation is not the final word. The

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<sup>45</sup> Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 131-132.

author does not leave the Israelites disoriented without a reason. He will help reorient them to a new identity.

## **Israel's New Identity**

The end of Ezekiel's telling of the exodus tradition begs the question, "What now?" Ezekiel has disoriented his audience and its perception of its own identity, so now there is a vacuum that he needs to fill. Zimmerli and others claim that vv 32-44 are later additions, but despite their later date, they still provide a hint of Ezekiel's understanding of Israel's new identity (which Ezekiel follows up with more fully at other points in the text).<sup>46</sup> To those disoriented by Ezekiel's exodus narrative, vv 32-44 provide some solace. In a style that resembles the credo in Deuteronomy 26, the Lord tells the exiles,

What is in your mind shall never happen—the thought, 'Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.' As I live, says the Lord God, Surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered. (Ezek 20:33-34 NRSV)

In the face of these thoughts of idolatry, the Lord indicates that he will bring them out of exile, and when he does the Lord will judge them, purging the rebellion out of them. But, after this judgment, the Lord gives a picture of a new life in right relation with the Lord.

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<sup>46</sup> There are both stylistic and thematic reasons for considering the second half of this chapter a late addition. Zimmerli provides numerous stylistic reasons for approaching it as a later addition (still added before the Persian period), and also significant is the thematic difference that works the devastating judgment of the first half of the chapter into a promise for future hope. Many see this transition as too abrupt. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 404.

For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord God, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land; there I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts. (Ezek 20:40 NRSV)

After the Lord purges out the rebellion from Israel, they will exist in right cultic relationship with the Lord. They will worship the Lord, and the Lord will accept them and their gifts.

While this new tone is not in any way joyful, the tenor of this part leaves questions about the drastic thematic shift between Ezekiel's exodus narrative and this new life. In Ezekiel's exodus narrative, there was little sense of hope for the Israelites. The Israelites seemed stuck in a cycle of disobedience and there were no indications that the cycle would stop without the Lord finally destroying them.

Throughout the text, though, the author of Ezekiel provides similar hints that despite Israel's sinful nature, God is not finished with them. In her book, *Can These Bones Live?*, Jacqueline Lapsley claims that the author of Ezekiel is trying to transform the Israelites' sense of the moral self. Instead of morality residing with the Israelites, morality is dependent upon God bestowing it upon them. They are completely incapable of obeying God, so God must provide them the means to do so.<sup>47</sup> The author of Ezekiel imagines this new reality in the last third of the book. Chapters 33-48 cast a vision for a renewed Israel in which the Lord will repair their disobedience, give them a new heart, and will put his own spirit into them.

I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before

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<sup>47</sup> Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?*, 185-187.

their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek 36:23-28 NRSV).

Through the renewal of Israel, the Lord will sanctify his name, and the Israelites will live in right relationship with the Lord, following his statutes that give life and living in the promised land. While Ezekiel's telling of the exodus narrative disorients his community's identity, this disorientation is for the purpose of reorientation. The people no longer look to the past and significant figures of memory for their identity; instead, they look to the future hope of the Lord's promise. This is a future hope in which the Israelites will have a new heart and new spirit and will live in their land accepted and faithful to the Lord.

## **Conclusion**

Ezekiel 20 presents a telling of the exodus narrative tradition that disorients his audience. They are already suffering from the trauma of the Babylonian conquest and exile, and this telling exacerbates that suffering and disorientation. The war has destroyed the cultural institutions that provided them an identity, and Ezekiel makes sure that these cultural institutions remain lifeless. Their narratives about their safety, their world, and their place within that world have also been shattered. When the exiles try to put their lives back together, reconstructing a narrative about what happened and why it happened, Ezekiel rejects the narratives that emphasize the innocence of the Israelites or the

blessings that their status as the people of the Lord elicits. Ezekiel accomplishes this rejection and disorientation by rewriting the history of Israel and providing a new telling of the exodus narrative tradition. Through history writing, Ezekiel cuts quickly to an identity forming narrative. The exodus narrative tradition is a significant figure of memory that provides the Israelites with a sense of hope. In other tellings of this tradition in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and the Psalms, the Lord has compassion on the Israelites and answers them when they cry out. By rejecting these other tellings and disorienting his audience's understanding of this narrative, Ezekiel destabilizes this figure of memory and destabilizes their identity.

The purpose of this disorientation, though, is not to make the people feel worse than they already do. Ezekiel has helped bring them to a place where they are ready for a new identity. Through Ezekiel's disorienting history, the words of the Israelites are truly the words of the dry bones in chapter 37. "They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely'" (37:11 NRSV). In the face of this disorientation, Ezekiel and the Lord are able to provide them with a new identity, providing them hope for the future.

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil (Ezek 37:12-14 NRSV).

They are now prepared for this new orientation in which their identity is not found in cultural institutions and past figures of memory but in a new future in which they can truly live.



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