

James Tomek
Thl 537
jtomek@deltastate.edu

The Call to Ezekiel

A hired assassin quotes Ezekiel while doing his job in Quentin Tarrantino's popular film *Pulp Fiction*. The protagonist in John Cheever's contemporary prison novel *Falconer* bears Ezekiel's name. And Julien Sorel, the first big anti-hero in French literature, in Stendhal's 1830 novel *The Red and the Black*, has an Ezekiel vision of an eagle, a fellow bird of prey, as he contemplates ascending in the social and economic order. When asked to choose a prophet to study, Ezekiel immediately comes to mind. I have little prior knowledge, but a lot of faith that something will happen.

Ezekiel is a prophet from a priestly family administering to the people of Judah during the first and second deportations to Babylon in 597 and 587. Whether he is with the exiles in Babylon or administering from Jerusalem is a debated topic. Guy Coutier in *The Jerome Commentary of the Bible* supplies some essential historical background to help us read Ezekiel's text better (300-301). After a century of rising power in the Near East, Assyrian dominance fades around 633. Up until that time Israel had been worshipping Assyrian/Canaanite fertility gods partially to placate the Assyrian officials in control. In 622, Josiah, the King of Judah takes advantage of the decline of Assyrian influence to do a major reform to help Judah and Israel back to the basics of Mosaic Law. At this time Babylon starts expanding, looking for a piece of the pie in the Fertile Crescent under King Nabopolassar, and his son Nebuchadnezzar, who takes over in 606. Egypt, under the Pharaoh Neco, has been trying to form an alliance with Assyria to stop the Babylonian aggression. When Josiah dies in 609, Neco becomes a surrogate suzerain of Palestine and puts Jehoiakim on the throne. With the influence of Egyptian deity on Judah, Josiah's reform of the Jerusalem Temple Cult is weakened. The Judah-Egyptian alliance fails to stop the Babylonian invasion of 597, and the result is Judah's first deportation-exile into Babylon. Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim is also exiled to Babylon. Then, Nebuchadnezzar replaces him with Zedekiah as ruler of Judah from 597 to 587. Zedekiah is caught between 2 political parties: those who want to submit to Babylon and those who want to resist by allying with Egypt. Zedekiah backs the resistance, but that party's policy fails in 587 with the second and more thorough destruction of Jerusalem. Zedekiah is blinded and exiled to Babylon in the second deportation/exile of 587.

As a Zadokite priest, Ezekiel believes that God elected the Davidic line as rulers of Israel with Jerusalem as the divine dwelling place. John McKenzie remarks that he experiences more raptures, ecstasies, and visions than the other prophets, from which some scholars question his mental balance. Arnold Tkacik in the *Jerome Bible Commentary* calls him the strangest of the Old Testament prophets, but does refer to him as the protagonist of the book. He is a poet, priest-theologian, prophet and organizer who is needed at this time by Judah to purify the institutions from the foreign profane influences. He also provides a structural balance to supplement the emotive power of his contemporary Jeremiah (344). Moshe Greenberg distinguishes between Ezekiel and the older Pentateuch priests. Ezekiel is more concerned with the structure of the Temple and the proper use of the sacred places in the rites, and less concerned with a systematic code

of ethical behavior legislated by the priests in the Pentateuch Books (233-4). Joseph Blenkinsopp, while pointing out his eccentricities, does believe in the power of Ezekiel's vision of God. He is a complex prophet in an age of transition.

The first part of *Ezekiel* (chs.1-24) contains his vision of God at the Chebar River in Babylon. He is predicting the fall of Jerusalem and recounts Israel's sins through a series of allegories and symbolic acts where he takes on the sins of his country. He is muted by God until Jerusalem is invaded. The second part starts with judgment oracles (chs.25-32) against the nations that ridiculed Judah when it was down. Then there are two sections of hope. Chapters 33-39 announce the fall of Jerusalem, but show the land of Israel capable of rising from within itself, within the power of its individual personalities, followed by a structural vision of the new temple (chs. 40-48) that will provide the outer structure for inner renewal.

Is Ezekiel the writer of this book? Is there a circle of his followers who write it? Is it some writer in the second century doing propaganda for the new temple? Who is his audience and from where does this prophet do his ministry. Tkacik (345) and McKenzie (260-2) trace earlier 20th century scholars who doubt that there is a single writer and point to possibilities of a double ministry: to the exiles in Babylon and to those on his homeland. Later scholars like Joseph Blenkinsopp (168) and Robert Wilson find no evidence of him prophesying anywhere else other than Babylon. If his primary audience is the exiled, he would be preaching to an educated upper class of fellow priests and Jerusalem officials (Wilson (160). If he is in Jerusalem, his messages would be to a lesser educated group of people.

What are the messages in this text? A focus on one allegory and one metaphor will provide some insight. The allegory of the eagles, cedar, and vine in chapter 17 adds understanding to Ezekiel's view of monarchs and empires. According to William Brownlee in *The Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible*, two eagles engage in horticulture (421). The first eagle (17:3-6) is the King of Babylon who comes to Lebanon (Jerusalem – the temple was built from the cedars of Lebanon) and takes the cedar's topmost branch (Jehoiachin) along with twigs (other high officials), and puts them in the land of trade (Babylon). The eagle then takes the seed of the land (Zedekiah) and puts it in fertile land where it becomes a low spreading vine directing its branches (Judah's international connections) to this eagle alone (Babylon). A second eagle (17:7-10), the King of Egypt, appears, and the vine (Zedekiah) directs its branches to this eagle for water (military assistance). The vine is transplanted to a new fertile land and abundant water (the Nile). The poet-parable maker predicts that the vine cannot survive. The first eagle and the east wind (Babylon) will root it out. There is a section (17:11-21) that explains the allegory. Brownlee feels this explanation of the parable is a later addition since the allegory is propaganda against Zedekiah's alliances with Egypt, which Ezekiel would not openly admit. The chapter ends with God planting a new tree from a twig of the cedar. This tree shall house birds of every kind and all trees will recognize it.

Ezekiel, through comparative metaphors, is showing here how he is against the eagle type person who transplants nature to its doom. The eagles are the kings and empires that Judah and Israel must prevent themselves from becoming – the “capitalistic” trading Babylonians versus the good farming folks of Israel. By allying with the “capitalistic” empires of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, Israel becomes the same. The happy ending of the parable shows that God has not lost favor with the exiles, but will

restore them. All kinds of birds, not eagles, will inhabit the tree. Ezekiel reassures the exiles that their God has not become weaker than the Babylonian or Egyptian gods, and that their God is benevolent and ready to restore them to their land.

Through a more associative metaphor we see Ezekiel's theme of personal responsibility. In (33:1-9) the prophet cites the parable of the watchman who must warn the wicked or forfeit his right to live. This metaphor is a more linear figure of speech because the prophet really is a watchman who must act as an intermediary from God to humans. Prophets who work for the cult are biased to telling the people what the leaders want them to hear. Prophets, like Hannaniah, may not be so direct in pointing out their cult's wrongdoings. Other prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel tell the way it is, risking imprisonment. The parable also points to the individual responsibility that Ezekiel insists on. In this case we readers are all like him. We are pulled into his time. It is not so much a matter of what wins: right or wrong; good or evil. What matters very much is how we react to the wrong and to the evil that is going on.

In *Pulp Fiction*, the assassin quits his job. In *Falconer*, Ezekiel Farragut gets out of prison. And, in *The Red and the Black*, Stendhal warns his protagonist not to be like the Napoleon eagle he is aspiring to be. Thanks to the prophet Stendhal, Julien Sorel loses his life, but not his soul.

Works Cited

- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *A History of Prophecy in Israel*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- Brownlee, William Hugh. "The Book of Ezekiel." *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.
- Coutier, Guy P. "Jeremiah" *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Greenberg, Moshe. "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration" in Mays and Achemeier.
- Mays, James Luther and Acheteimer, Paul J. eds. *Interpreting the Prophets*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: MacMillan, 1965.
- Tkacik, Arnold J. "Ezekiel" *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.
- Wilson, Robert R. "Prophecy in Crisis: the Call of Ezekiel." Mays and Acheteimer.

James Tomek The 537

Blinded by the Riddle of Ezekiel's Eagles, Cedar, and Vine

We are always trying to solve riddles to figure out our existence. As an academic, riddles bring to my mind Oedipus, who in his battle of free will versus the destiny of the Greek gods, misreads his riddle and stumbles into his destiny of incest and violence. In another part of the world, Ezekiel's God poses a riddle. How we read this riddle will

give us insight to read Ezekiel better and to better understand our relation with our own eternal selves.

There are confusing messages in Ezekiel. He brings hope to the exiles in Babylon, showing them that their God is the true God over all the pagan gods of Babylon and Egypt. Being a Zadokite Priest he stresses the importance of the Davidic line of priests being chosen by God to rule over Israel with Jerusalem as the divine dwelling place. The need of a good ruler, who will help his people, seems to be contradicted by a rebuke saying that a few good people will not save everyone (14:12-20). The theme of personal responsibility seems to be at odds with the need for a savior. Does God act in a transcendent or immanent way? Do we need a savior as outside help or do we need to adapt the inner qualities of the savior and save ourselves? In Ezekiel's world we live in a messy situation needing humility to seek the grace of God for answers.

In this paper I will focus on The Parable of the Eagles and Vine and chapter 17 as a whole with a goal of understanding the theology of Ezekiel. First I will focus on vv.3-10 and its meaning of oath/covenant breaking and punishment. Then we will place vv.3-10 in context with the entire chapter, including the prose interpretation of vv. 3-10 and the final salvation oracle. Then I will place it in its context in the allegory and metaphor section of chs.15-19, which focus on the breaking of covenants and promises, their consequences and their meanings both to Israel as a whole and to personal responsibilities, including the personal responsibility of the prophet as watchman. Is the prophet a role model for all us people to follow? Is his vision of the new temple something we all have responsibility to construct? The prophet's responsibility will lead to his vision of the new temple - - a sacred space for our soul to search its meanings with God. The concluding comments will show the progression from metaphor to reality as the eagle, cedar and vine become God's people in a Temple under God.

The Riddle of the Eagles and Vine vv. 3 – 10

The riddle is in poetry. In the first section, vv. 3-6, we have a beautiful eagle doing some positive transplanting.

3 The great eagle with great wings, with
 long pinions
 with thick plumage, many hued
 came to Lebanon
4 He took the crest of the cedar,
 tearing off its topmost branch,
 And brought it to the land of tradesmen,
 set it in the city of merchants.
5 Then he took some seed of the land
 and planted it in a seed bed;
 A shoot by plentiful waters,
 Like a willow he placed it,
6 To sprout and grow up a vine,
 dense and low lying,
 Its branches turned toward him,
 its roots lying under him.

Thus it became a vine, produced
branches
and put forth shoots.

The prose interpretation, vv.11-21, will tell us that the eagle is the King of Babylon coming to Jerusalem (the temple was made from Lebanon cedars) and taking the crest or Davidic King Jehoiachin to Babylon, the land of merchants. The eagle then takes the seed of Judah, Jehoiachin's son Zedekiah, plants it, and produces a fertile vine, the people of Israel, with its branches growing low, in obedience and allegiance, towards the eagle. The parallelism of the verses builds with repeated positive images of the eagle's wings, the Babylon capital, and the planting process. The chiasmic structures in v.5 and v.6 emphasize the creative act of planting and the obedient nature of the shoots growing toward the sower. The eagle-king as planter/creator shows his importance and the need to have respect for him in v.6 where the shoots originate from him and come back in allegiance. The vine is a counter to the high cedar tree. The cedar is the overlord to whom the vassal vine owes allegiance. Or is there a triple relationship of obedience and responsibilities among the eagle (overlord), cedar (vassal), and vine (people); the Babylon King, the Israel King, and the Israel people; and finally among God, kings, and people.

The second section introduces another eagle and a judgment oracle.

7	But there was another great eagle, great of wing, rich in plumage; To him this vine bent its roots, sent out its branches, That he might water it more freely than the bed where it was planted.	A B
8	In a fertile field by plentiful waters it was planted to grow branches, bear fruit, and become a majestic vine.	C D
9	Say: Thus says the Lord God: Can it prosper? Will he not rather tear it out by the roots, and strip it of its fruit so that all its green growth will wither When he pulls it up by the roots? No need of a mighty arm or a strong people to do this.	E D C B A
10	True, it is planted, but will it prosper? Will it not wither when touched by the east wind in the bed where it grew?	

vv. 19-21 Covenants with Kings identical to covenants with God

--judgment oracle

B

vv. 22-24 Salvation Oracle Yahweh does not break his covenants and becomes the divine eagle giving the people sacred space to live in eternal time.

A. Divine eagle/covenant/faithful

Zimmerli believes that the prose explanations of vv.11-21 came later in the post-exilic canonical process period of putting Ezekiel together (363). Lawrence Boadt works on identifying the original presenter. When poetry is identifiable, there is a good chance it is the voice of the original prophet (Poetry 3-4). We do have a poetic inclusio in ch.17 of the two poems highlighting the experience of making oaths/covenants with Yahweh as the author and head eagle of oath-keeping. How does self-responsibility fit with the need for good kings and humility in seeking God's grace?

The Metaphorical-allegorical Chapters 15-19: National or Private Guilt?

In his exegesis in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Boadt sees the vine as the unifying theme of these chapters. The vine "symbolizes the contrast between Israel's lowly state and her hubris against God, a theme which links the five chapters as a whole together (316). Michael Fishbane sees a contradiction in these chapters between universal sin and individual punishment. The prophet is calling for individual responsibility, but the national crimes of ch.16 (Israel as daughter turned prostitute) and the international crimes of ch.17 (the betraying vine) have God putting Israel in exile because of the sins of a few (175-180). He believes that repentance is not an issue for Ezekiel. Sin and judgment are followed by God's mercy. Grace is the key message to the exiles as they wait for God's mercy. He cannot reconcile God's transcendent power with free will, using God's immanence in us humans to act.

Individualism and the Role of the Prophet -- Ch.17 and the Rest of *Ezekiel*

I see a connection of divine and human morality in ch.17. If the covenants between kings are just as sacred as covenants with God, it makes sense to believe that covenants between individuals must also be sacred. Ch. 18 uses father-son relationships to show that we are not necessarily responsible for the sins of our parents, nor other ancestors. William Brownlee notices that the language of ch.18 on individual responsibility has identical structures in ch.3 and ch.33 whose metaphor is the prophet as a watchman. He calls these 3 chapters the chapters on individualism (394). In 18:21 the wicked man can turn from his sin with greater ease if he realizes he is not doomed by his father to be in sin. Good acts can drown the memory of evil. Similar words are used in 33: 8,9, with the prophet as watchman for his countrymen.

If I [God] tell the wicked man that he shall surely die and you [the prophet] do not speak out to dissuade the wicked man from his way, he (the wicked man) shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked man, trying to turn him from his wicked way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself.

The prophet as watchman stands for all individuals who must speak out when they see evil. The fact that there is evil in the world is an important issue, but our reaction to it is even more important. Lawrence Boadt sees chs.15-19 held up by big poetic images of the vine in chs.15, 17, and 19. The section is bookended by the burning of the useless vine that stands for Israel and its broken covenant. Ch. 16 and 18 are more like poetic prose (10-11). They are more linear poetic explanations of Israel's wrongdoings (ch.16) and the hope that we are not doomed by previous generations (ch.18). The prophet must balance universal guilt with individual guilt through humility and faith in God's mercy.

Eagle/Cedar/Vine God's people/Temple/God

The parable in ch.17 shows the logic of sin and resurrection. Pride prevents us from seeing the source of good. We profane the holy name without seeing it or hearing it. Individually we need to strive to a higher language to communicate with the eternal part of ourselves. Through the language of metaphors Ezekiel has shown how Israel had profaned God's holy name. The temple is made from the cedar. The temple is a sacred place where we can contemplate God's presence and think about our relation to the eternal. Ezekiel's eagles become the Divine Eagle who plants cedars next to water so that they can multiply. In ch.47, Ezekiel's vision of the Temple has a stream flowing east from its gate. East is the direction of the resurrection. Moshe Greenberg sees it as an ideal place where there is equal sharing of the land (233). Just as God's cedar, with its nourishing stream, was for all birds, this temple will be for all of Israel. The physical temple is made of cedar wood, but the figurative eternal temple, where we can contemplate right and wrong and our existence with the divine, is constructed on the poetry of holy people. You might say that poetry is language that connects us to the divine. Our prose is ordinary language's attempt to understand its relation with the eternal. We have to interpret when a vine is positive or negative. We have trouble interpreting the signs. We are blind to our own misdoings, our betrayals. Vines have positive meanings of God's gifts in most of the scriptures. However, just because we are vines does not mean we are good or right. The poet/prophets put us in poetry so that we can see ourselves. I have a remaining image of the eagle's pinions, the underside outline of its multi-colored, multi-feathered wings. Is this plumage God's pen? The "dappled-dawn-drawn Falcon" in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover" will provide a modern intertext to deepen the reading.

WORKS CITED

Boadt, Lawrence. "Ezekiel." *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, eds. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990.

_____. "The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 59 Issue 1 (Jan 97), pp. 1-15.

Brownlee, William H. "Ezekiel's Parable of the Watchman and the Editing of Ezekiel." *Vetus Testamentum* Vol. 28.4 (Oct 78), pp. 392-408.

Fishbane, Michael. "Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel." In Mays and Achtemeier.

Greenberg, Moshe. "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration" in Mays and Achtemeier.

Mays, James Luther and Achtemeier, Paul J. eds. *Interpreting the Prophets*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Zimmerli, Walther. *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel, chs. 1-24*. Trans. Ronald Clements. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

James Tomek Thl 537

Reading Ezekiel in the New Empire

The Israelites of the 590s BCE were detached from their native land with anxiety that their God deserted them. Today, globalization is slowly effacing differences between countries as we are slowly being regulated by a world market and transnational corporations. In a new world without countries as the primary sovereignty, where do we look for security? In Ezekiel's time, I would have believed that a human looking God talked directly with the prophets. What is the nature of that Divine Revelation today? In this paper I will look at how a Catholic Scripture Scholar, Sandra Schneiders uses contemporary hermeneutics, mainly structuralist techniques, to read the sacred in the scriptures. I will use her terms to arrive at a deeper meaning, or at least at I meaning to which I can relate, to Ezekiel, especially ch.17 and the parable of the eagles, cedar and vine. I will explore the present situation of globalization and see if we can carry Ezekiel's message to this world with modern hermeneutic reading tactics.

B1. The Lens: Structuralist Poetics and the Revelatory Text

Sandra Schneiders, scholar was strongly influenced by the 1968 student revolts in Paris and the revolutionary aspects of Vatican II. The meaning of the title of her study *The Revelatory Text* can be found in the French translation *Le Texte du rencontre*. It is a pun on "the tent of the meeting" where the Israelites encountered God through the mediation of Moses. The text of the Scriptures is the place where we encounter the divine and are transformed (xix). She says she discovered new hermeneutical practices in Paris to supplement the historical critical method which she found limited. Jonathan Culler, a literary scholar of French literature and literary theory, defines structuralism as a method of using linguistics to explore other texts or disciplines, such as theory, history, sociology etc. (*Structuralist Poetics* 4-6). Modern linguistics, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century, gave these philosopher readers new ideas about interpretation. The rationale of structuralism is that if language is a major way of knowing, then knowing how language works will give us insight into how the various disciplines obtain knowledge. Disciplines "learn" like people. The emphasis is on how language works (signifiers –how the sign means) rather than focusing on meanings (the signifieds) as an end. Structuralism and post structuralism (deconstruction) place emphasis on the role of the reader in producing meanings of the text. This collaboration of reader and text is the anchor to Schneiders' theory.

Schneiders builds on the collaboration of reader and text to form a transformational hermeneutic that will make the biblical text available as a faith resource for oppressed as well as privileged readers (5). "Oppressed" applies to the situation of the exiles in the 590s BCE, as well as my situation as a non-trained biblical reader. The biblical texts are grounded, not only in their own history (behind and of the text), but also

in the worlds before the text of various readers at different times in history. This grounding for interpretation requires an interdisciplinary cooperation in reading, including historians, sociologists, philosophers, biologists, cultural studiers and whatever other discipline that would help a particular moment in a text. All readers are invited.

Beyond the goal of being intellectually enlightened, Schneiders wants to establish a religious praxis (a practice whereby the practitioner is changed for the better) where the reader is transformed through the text (14). It is an existential project where readers create their own essence in the act of reading. To Schneiders existential becomes spiritual when the project is in the religious sphere (14). As a specialist in John's gospel, Schneiders believes Christ Jesus is inviting us to dwell in His Word, become his disciples, be free, and bear fruit. The image is to be a member of His vine (John 15:1-11). This message will help us sooth the rather harshness of Ezekiel's punishment oracles against the vine.

Schneiders emphasizes the role of interpretation. Without the reader in front of the text, the texts stay at the level of information. Transformation occurs when readers confront texts and appropriate them, not only for information, but for performative strategies in their own lives (16). The need for interpretation comes when texts are not easily determined, at big moments in history, including Big History, and in our own personal histories (18-19).

Schneiders takes pains to explicate her theory of the metaphor and symbol in interpretation. Metaphors, like the eagles and the vine in Ezekiel being like the kings of Babylon and Egypt and the exiled people of Israel, have to be more than similies. They have to point to new ways of meaning (28). Staying at the metaphoric literal level is a cancer to the imagination (30)! There is a need to make a drama out of the metaphor by placing it in a sentence. She says that metaphors have a tendency to become banal, but certain root metaphors generate meaning. "God is our father," the "reign of God," and the "word of God" are examples of root metaphors which become symbols (30-32). How the "word of God" becomes the "Word of God" or Jesus Christ or Divine Revelation is a drama that readers have to participate in. The book becomes revelation through collaboration when readers confront metaphors and transform them to symbols that generate more meaning.

The sacredness of language was a goal of the symbolist poets of 19th century France, including Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud. Wallace Fowlie's interpretation of symbol and metaphor can help me clarify Schneiders. The symbolists wanted to elevate the role of language and pay homage to how language explains meaningful experiences in the world, and creates the world at the same time. The symbol is the drama of the metaphor, the expression of its meaningful experience. This goes back to the Aquinas's four fold interpretation of the bible that Fowlie found in Dante's letters. The literal level is the historical moment, mainly in the Old Testament. The allegorical is how that moment appears in the New Testament. The tropological is the moral interpretation, how we are to live. The anagogical would be the final destiny if we act in the way of it. For example, the rock of Peter refers to the law of Moses in the OT and Christ being cleft in the NT. We have to be strong like a rock to follow Christ's way, but if we do we will reach the rock of the heavenly kingdom (Fowlie 7-8). The symbolist poets were looking for this dynamic power of words. So is Schneiders.

The “word of God” has its referent as Divine Revelation or “Word of God (capital letters).” It is not the literal book, but the dynamic process of where God invites us into his interiority. A whole complex of meanings arises. When we put our revelations into someone else we are giving them the most intimate part of ourselves. To work, there has to be a sharing on the other end (33-34). Otherwise, the attempt at revelation and intimacy ends in frustration. God, too, is inviting us. Schneiders again uses Christ’s invitation in John to be members of His vine. After the vine metaphor Christ invites us to be friends (John 15:15). We become more than servants. We actively participate in His life and share. Christ allows us to be friends by taking an active part in interpreting His words.

The symbolic nature of language is what connects us to the Divine Revelation (38). History is symbolic. Our bodies are symbolic. Symbols are always embedded in mystery and invite further exploration. Levinas says that biological wants are concerned with satisfaction while metaphysical wants create a desire for deeper exploration (Sedgwick 176-8). In the OT, the law is a symbolic place of encounter with God and the Israelites where God freed them, gave them land and security (Schneiders 38). The writing of these events is a way of recollecting God’s revelation. New groups came and interpreted Christ as the messiah or word of God.

If we revere the bible as an art object or magic thing, we are treating it as an idol and acting in bad faith. If we actively interpret the words and seek meanings, we are using it as an object of art in a dynamic and realistic way (Schneiders 43). That is our goal in reading Ezekiel’s words, especially in our postmodern empire.

B2. The Text: (a.) then and (b.) now

a. Ezekiel’s message to the exiles is complex. He tells the Israelites why they are in exile and offers consolation that Yahweh is still their God, whose grace will save them one day. Moshe Greenberg sees chapter 17 and the parable of the eagles, cedar, and vine on the importance of law and keeping covenants. There are dualities throughout (317-320). The letters A,B,C are Greenberg’s: the As concern the parable; the Bs, the interpretation; and the Cs the salvation oracle coda.

A. VV.1-2. God tells the prophet to pose a riddle and tell a fable.

A1. VV. 3-8. The first eagle (Babylon King) plucks a twig (Zedekiah) from the cedar (Israel) and plants it in Babylon. This vine is passive and grows in obedience until it actively turned to the other eagle (Egyptian King)

A2. VV.9-10. the punishment will be twofold: earthly and divine. The first eagle will uproot the vine and punish the second eagle. Then, Yahweh or the east wind will finish the job.

B. VV. 11-12a. Yahweh tells the prophet to ask the Israelites if they know the meaning, and then to tell them.

B1. 12b-18 The first eagle, the Babylon king, will punish the vine or Israel for breaking its oath or covenant with Babylon and entering into treachery with Egypt. We have punishment on the human and civil plane.

B2. VV. 19-21. Punishment is also on the divine plane. Breaking oaths and covenants is a religious wrong also. God is the ultimate author of law and punishment.

C. VV. 22-24. The salvation oracle has God as the eagle planting a new fruitful cedar (C.1) where all birds will dwell. God is also recognized for reversing nations' fortunes, making the high tree low and vice-versa (C.2).

Greenberg says that the structure is built around the theme of law and oaths. Oaths even to a Babylonian king are sacred. Being unfaithful to oaths is a central sin. The unfaithfulness with regard to favoring Egypt also points to idolatry. Lawrence Boadt sees the vine parable as a part of a major chiasmic unit (Ezk:15-24), focusing on ch.20. There we have a history of Israel and its unfaithfulness to God (Boadt 13-15). There is also a promise of a new creation and the need to rely on the grace of God.

b. If the major focus of Ezekiel is God's saving grace, and not the need for personal repentance, as Michael Fishbane reasons (184-187), how do we reconcile the theme of personal responsibility so important in Ezekiel 18. Where is the fault? Is it bad kings or bad individuals not accepting responsibility? Sandra Schneiders would emphasize the need of personal interpretation. The reader has to actively engage in the text's signs. In chapter of the eagles and the vine, the middle section is interpretation, and is about interpretation. Moshe Greenberg sees the "surely you know the meaning" question by Yahweh as an understatement that there are possibilities of misunderstanding, and that it is necessary to tell the right one (321). Schneiders, I believe, would say that the whole symbolic act here is the act of interpretation.

Ezekiel becomes a reader of god's word. His role is more than to inform his people about meanings of signs and metaphors. He is a model of a person who engages in texts, seeks God's revelation in them, and become transformed from within. As a present day reader, I find Ezekiel a little too self-righteous, and hard-hitting at times (Ezk23), unless I see him as a model of a person who has lost his way and seeks the divine interpretation of God's human world signs. Bruce Vatter sees Ezekiel as self-critical and associated closely to the sins he is making visible ((56-458). The symbolic acts he performs tie him intimately with the sins of his judgment oracles.

His personal problems and symbolic actions of interpretation of his new situation will more easily allow us readers to see our own situation. As a Zadokite priest, he has a worldview that Israel will always need a king in the Davidic line residing in Jerusalem. This view seems to have ended living under foreign rule in foreign places. Margaret O'Dell sees the book as a drama of Ezekiel losing his priesthood (234-237). As Israel loses its God and Temple, Ezekiel loses his priesthood. He goes through a reverse ordination and assumes a new role as prophet. His task now is to assure Israel that God's glory can reside in other places besides Jerusalem. Schneiders would say that the temple of chs.40-48 would be a metaphor of sacred space. It is not necessarily a real cedar wooded temple, but the space created in believers' minds, where their symbolic acts of sacrifice and prayer unit them to the divine.

Ms O'Dell also reminds us of his new role as writer. She refers to Ellen Davis's notion of "scroll eating" as the symbolic act of writing (232, 241). Writing will start to be an important medium to communicate with God's people who no longer reside in the borders of Israel and Judah. I hope Schneiders would be pleased with the following deconstruction of writing based on Jonathan Culler's concept (Culler, *Deconstruction* 84-86). Writing is usually considered a supplement to the spoken word, which has priority in communication. If we say that writing actually precedes speaking, we mean that our

sentences are structured in our minds before we speak them. Therefore, to understand the language of our superiors, masters and teachers, we have to learn how to “read” the writing of their speech acts. Our new role as people of God under Ezekiel is to learn how to interpret what is divine revelation. We are personally responsible you know.

B3. The Present Situation: the New Empire in Post Modern Times

We are in a postmodern era of mass consumerism, controlled by the transnational corporations. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi have edited a collection of essays on globalization, mostly pointing to the dangers. On the positive side globalization will free local cultures from their dominant parent country and allow them to participate in the international economy. On the negative side all these local cultures will be swallowed up by the transnational organizations that control the world market (Jameson xii-xiii). We are similar to the Israelites in exile. All our ethnic cultures seem to be fading into a massive consumer society.

Michael Hardt, an American literary theorist, and Antonio Negri, an Italian political philosopher have co-conceived an idea and book called *Empire* which is a philosophical and historical approach to globalization, with history seen as a drama of the sovereign powers versus the masses. Empire is the sovereign political subject that governs globalization. Globalization is defined generally as the irreversible system of exchanges, both economic and cultural, of people, technology, money and goods (xi). Empire succeeds the nation-state system of modernity, which covered the past 600 years of European expansion. The concepts of immanence and transcendence play a big role. Modernity is defined as a shift, in the years 1200 to 1600, from the divine to the human (70). Humans declared themselves masters of their own destiny, producers of cities and history, and inventors of the heavens – a move away from the transcendent God who governed feudalism. During the second phase of modernity there was a counter-revolution of the nation-state and religion to regain transcendent control. Empire is a deterritorialization and decentralization of modernity’s nation-state structure. The Transnational Corporations and the global market are major forces that produce goods. The US and the G7 (Europe and Japan) still regulate currency and provide police action, but their power is secondary to the market. Empire is an “immanent” type revolution where capitalism learned to expand from within. Through virtual connections via computer technology, laborers are able to communicate more readily with other areas of the globe to see where their labor is in demand. When the nation states could no longer expand, workers crossed borders and gained a new subjectivity (233, 253). The authors for see possibilities of new supranational areas of government modeled on the United Nations, but more effective. World laborers are called the “multitudes” who will form virtual unions and have democratic power.

B.4 Ezekiel, Schneiders, and Hardt: Prophets, Clowns, and Rebels

Who is the eagle we owe allegiance to? Who and what are the idols today? Reification is the tendency to reduce all reality to the visual for the purpose of consuming it (Jameson, *Signatures* 9-16, 90-92). The danger is that we bypass reality in the act of buying it (I was too busy buying postcards to see the real Grand Canyon.). In our age we

have to interpret the news daily. What are the benefits and dangers of the global market? Do we go to war against Iraq? Do we side with the American eagle? We have to be humble and pray for God's grace.¹ Wrong interpretation is our nature. We follow popular kings. We need to rebel sometimes. The word rebel and rebellious is used a lot by God and Ezekiel. Sometimes it sounds like God is a father complaining, but also liking his rebellious kids. God did make us free. Rebelling against authority can be a positive growth method. Not all authority is worthy of following. The same rebellious action that causes us to turn from good can cause us to turn back. Ezekiel rebels against his situation of being stripped of his priesthood and winds up revealing God's word to us readers of sacred writing. He was laughed at then. He was laughed at in my class on the prophets. But we like clowns in our time. Picasso started off the 20th century. Maybe Ezekiel and other "clowns" like Hardt and Schneiders will keep us humble and reading in the 21st.

Works Cited

- Boadt, Lawrence. "The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59.1 (Jan 97): 1-15.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975.
- _____. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Fishbane, Michael. "Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel." *Interpreting the Prophets*. James Luther Mays and Paul Achtemeier, eds. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Fowlie, Wallace. *A Reading of Dante's Inferno*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Funk, Robert W. "The Looking Glass Tree is for the Birds: Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Mark 4:30-32." *Interpretation* 27.1 (Jan 1973): 3-10.
- Greenberg, Moshe. *Ezekiel 1-20*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1983.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Introduction." *The Cultures of Globalization*. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1998.
- _____. *Signatures of the Visible*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- O'Dell, Margaret S. "You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117.2 (1998): 229-248.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. 2nd ed. Collegeville, MN., The Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Sedgwick, Peter. *Descartes to Derrida: an Introduction to European Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001. (179)
- Vawter, Bruce. "Ezekiel and John" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26.4 (Oct 1964): 450- 458.

ⁱ Robert Funk says that Christ humbles the mighty cedar to the mustard seed shrub. The moral is that if we have even the smallest faith we can develop into a plant where other birds and Christ reside. The key is humility.