

# Contemporary Reflections on Ezekiel 22:23-31 as a Depiction of Collective Responsibility of Leaders for National Demise<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Ezekiel 22:23-30 in which Israel's leaders are judged for their various abuses offers the notion that collective leadership responsibility for national demise demands serious attention in contemporary situations. However, Ezekiel's context is theocratic, to what extent does his prophecy apply to non-theocratic contexts? There is also in this oracle a quest for one man standing in the gap in order to avert divine judgment. How do we read that concept in contemporary settings?*

## A INTRODUCTION

At a recent platform known as Africa Forum on Religion and Governance (AFREG)<sup>3</sup> which took place in Lusaka, Zambia, 24-27 September, 2013, during the facilitation of a discussion on Transformational Leadership, Ezekiel 22 was cited as one of the key evaluative texts. It was at this discussion that my interest in the passage was kindled. It would be ideal to begin with a reading of the specific passage of primary focus:

Ezekiel 22:23-31 (NRSV)

<sup>23</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>24</sup> Mortal, say to it: You are a land that is not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation. <sup>25</sup> Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at The Seminar on the Prophets of the Old Testament at UNISA, on 21 October 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> AFREG is a movement of various Christian players concerned about leadership and governance on the continent where national and continental consultative forums are held to action specific recommendations (see [www.afreg.org](http://www.afreg.org)).

shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.<sup>30</sup> And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one.<sup>31</sup> Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord GOD.

A reading of the entire chapter reveals three juxtaposed oracles (Ezek 22:1, 17, 23) depicting Jerusalem's demise by the prophet Ezekiel. The oracles are based on Yahweh's kingship over Israel as a determinant of her future.<sup>4</sup> Pronounced between July 593 B.C.E. (Ezek 1:1-2), and April 571 B.C.E. (Ezek 29:17),<sup>5</sup> the kingship motif derives from the recurring rationale "you will know that I am the Lord"<sup>6</sup> (Ezek 22:16, 22) and the pivotal prophetic formula "declares the Sovereign Lord"<sup>7</sup> (Ezek 22:31) which concludes the indictment. The first of the three oracles (Ezek 22:1-16) confronts the inhabitants against the detestable practices summarily presented under the rubrics of shedding blood and idolatry (Ezek 22:3-4). The detestable offences are further explicated in 22:6-12 as indicative of direct violation of the Mosaic code. "Idolatry," on the one hand, is against the designations of the first four statements of the Decalogue (Exod 20:1-11, cf. Deut 5:6-15). On the other hand, "bloodshed," which represents extremity in disregard for neighbourly injunctions issued in the last six statements, reveals the breaching of the basis on which Israel's relationship with Yahweh was covenanted (Exod 20:12-17, cf. Deut 5:16-21).

The second oracle (Ezek 22:17-22), which utilises metallurgical imagery, ironically is an exposé of Israel's impurity paralleled to the valueless "dross" (Ezek 22:18, 19). Coming out of a priestly heritage, Ezekiel probably resonated with this prophecy the most (see Ezek 1:3). Duguid opines that

<sup>4</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 127, states that Ezekiel is one of the few Old Testament prophets who explicitly state Yahweh's kingship over Israel (see, e.g., Ezek 20:33).

<sup>5</sup> Larry Richards and Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 424.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the theonym and the entrenched divinity in its etymology with the meaning "to be" is an assertive way to actualise divine rule as the ultimate and final authority as the inhabitants of Jerusalem would soon find out.

<sup>7</sup> Here the names יהוה יְהוָה (ʾā-dō-nāy yhw̄h) are used as a title true of God with a specific focus on his authority and majesty as a ruler. See James Swanson, "יהוה יְהוָה," *DBLH* 151, #2.

the image of judgment as the refiner's fire, purifying the dross to leave only pure metal, appear several times in the Bible (notably in Isa. 1:21-31; 48:10; Mal. 3:2-3). But in Ezekiel 22, as in Jeremiah 6:27-30, the refining process has a purely negative product, with nothing but unpurged molten dross produced.<sup>8</sup>

As the shorter of the three judgments, the brevity seems to be deliberate. In tactically *the-less-said-the-better* fashion, the utter disdain for Israel's spiritual compromise is over and done with.

The third oracle (22:23-31) which is our primary interest in this study, presents, as Richard correctly espouses, Judah's moral flaw which runs through every strata of her society.<sup>9</sup> The judgment is that of institutionalised corruption as a culmination in Ezekiel's arrangement, firstly, of total disregard of the law (22:1-16), and secondly, disregard of personal purity (22:17-22). The stipulation of "princes" (22:25),<sup>10</sup> "priests" (22:26), "officials" (22:27) and "prophets" (22:28) before "people of the land" (22:29) suggests dysfunctional leadership as a moral conscience of the nation in curbing the fallout. If our reading of the leadership stipulation is correct, the prophet Ezekiel connotes that leaders in a theocratic society carry bi-vocational roles of professionalism on the one hand to ensure competent efficiency in service delivery, and spirituality on the other hand, to guarantee personal integrity, both for which the leaders are accountable. Predictably, the synthesis of the two notions forms the equilibrium of a functional society in relationship with Yahweh. Where this is not the case, anarchy becomes the order of the day and divine judgment is inevitable. This, in a few lines, represents Ezekiel's thesis. Let us look at this closely.

## **B DEPICTION OF NATIONAL DEMISE (EZEK 22:23-29)**

Commencing with the ׀ (waw) conjunction<sup>11</sup> "and" (22:23), Ezekiel's prophecy seems to confirm a consecutivity of the three oracles in ch. 22 perhaps to indicate a climatic effect in the challenge given in Ezek 22:30-31, where Yahweh has no option but to pour out his wrath. As the third oracle unfolds with

<sup>8</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 288.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence O. Richard, *The Bible Reader's Companion* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991; electronic ed. by Logos Research Systems, 1991), 497.

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew text here has נְבִיאֶיהָ ("her prophets") rather than נְשִׂאֶיהָ ("her princes" read by the LXX and followed by the NIV). "Princes" is used because of the nature of the sin of the ones being described as taking treasures and precious things, which princes had the power to do. The prophets "whitewashed" the situation (v. 28) with "false visions and lying divinations." The differing characteristics and the mention of both priests (v. 26) and "officials" (v. 27) between princes and prophets suggest that we follow both the LXX and the NIV.

<sup>11</sup> The conjunction is mostly a marker of an additive or of a sequence of closely related events which makes the consecutive reading of these oracles plausible.

the typical "the word of the Lord came to me"<sup>12</sup> (דְּבַר־יְהוָה) and the now familiar and equally significant בֶּן אָדָם "son of man" designation (Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 4, 10, 17, 25; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1, etc.; cf. Ps 8:4; 80:17; 144:4; Dan 7:3; 8:17; Matt 9:9; Mark 9:9; Luke 5:24; John 1:51<sup>13</sup>), the recipients are identified with the instruction to speak to the אֶרֶץ "land" (Ezek 22:24). Compared with עִיר "city" (22:2) and בַּיִת "house" of Israel (Ezek 22:18), and now "the land," the comprehensiveness of the intention is underscored by the variously implied connotations of this concept. The status of "the land" can be derived from the lead statement implying a place that has not been טָהַר "cleansed"<sup>14</sup> which suggests a metaphoric use since to be cleansed implies ritual purity (Lev 11:32).<sup>15</sup> The idea of lack is reiterated by the fact that the land had not received גֶּשֶׁם "rain" thereby depicting levels of desperation. Having been examined as per priestly custom, the "land" is thus found wanting in the day of זַעַם wrath" (22:25) which entails a curse that demonstrates extreme indignation (Ps 38:4 [EB 3]; 69:25 [EB 24]; 78:49; 102:11 [EB 10]; Isa 10:5, 25; 13:5; 26:20; 30:27; Jer 10:10; 15:17; 50:25; Lam 2:6; Ezek 21:36 [EB 31]; 22:24, 31; Dan 8:19; 11:36; Nah 1:6; Hab 3:12; Zeph 3:8).<sup>16</sup>

Having made this metaphoric reference to the un-cleansed recipients, the intended addressees who are inhabitants of "the land" in question are in turn specified, beginning with "her princes." The pronoun הִיא "her" (Ezek 22:25, 26, 27, 28) which precedes the named addressees intends to initially register the presence of these leaders *within* "the land" but paradoxically the absence of the necessary qualities within these leaders to evade judgment (Ezek 22:30-31). In which ways do the addressees contribute to the demise of the land?

<sup>12</sup> Used mostly to authenticate the prophet's message (cf. Isa 38:4; Jer 1:1-2, 4; Dan 9:2; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 7:16; John 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1; Mal 1:1).

<sup>13</sup> The phrase occurs 182 times in the Bible and 93 of these in Ezekiel alone. This becomes the preferred self designation of Jesus Christ in over 70 references in the gospel accounts.

<sup>14</sup> NIV has the Septuagint reading of rain instead of "cleansed" (see NIV marg.) because "rain" seems to match showers better than "cleansed." However, there is no compelling reason not to follow the Hebrew "cleansed." Because of her disobedience Israel had not experienced cleansing (from sin); she had not received rain (blessings) in the day God sent his wrath

<sup>15</sup> Swanson, "טָהַר," DBLH 3197, #1. Cf. also Robert L. Thomas (ed.), *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries* (Place: Holman Bible Publishers, 1981; rev.ed., Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Swanson, "זַעַם," DBLH 2405, #1.

## 1 Her Princes (Ezek 22:25)

Although the Hebrew has the concept נְבִיא "prophet,"<sup>17</sup> her princes seems more appropriate (cf. NRSV, NLT and NIV), first, in view of the nature of the indiscretions described here. Secondly, it is in view of the fact that prophets are subsequently mentioned in Ezek 22:28, a repetition which would need further explanation. A similar oracle with which Ezekiel could have been familiar appears in Zeph 3:3-4 as well as Mic 3:11 and Jer 5:31 from which we can decipher a possible amendment of the text to equate the generic prophetic portrayal (see Zimmerli).<sup>18</sup> However, even if prophets are in view here (cf. ESV, NASB, and KJV), the blame remains that these abuses are taking place under their watch. The LXX translates נְבִיא "prophets" to ἀφηγούμενοι, which suggests those who lead the way or go first, implying perhaps those whose actions have a domino effect in wider society. Thus, beginning with קִשְׁר "conspiracy"<sup>19</sup> in the Hebrew word order, the concept has the ideas of "treason, rebellion," that is, a conscious, planned act of open defiance of authority, often to set up a new government (2 Sam 15:12; 1 Kgs 16:20; 2 Kgs 11:14<sup>(2x)</sup>; 12:21 [EB 20]; 14:19; 15:15, 30; 17:4; 2 Chr 23:13<sup>(2x)</sup>; 25:27; Isa 8:12<sup>(2x)</sup>; Jer 11:9; Ezek 22:25),<sup>20</sup> therefore reading the noun as "princes" in this prophetic polemic seems logical. Although false prophets can be described as conniving for treasonous intentions as Jamieson *et al.* reveal, it seems unlikely that the text at this juncture has that in mind.<sup>21</sup> Here the associated offence is preying upon people, forcibly taking their treasured possessions and leaving a blood trail in the process (Ezek 22:25). This description is more suited to those with capacity to carry out such offences and in a position of power to get away with it. Thus, the "lion"<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> An emendation subscribed to by a majority of scholars. See e.g. Walther Zimmerli, *Chapters 1-24* (vol. 1 of *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*; trans. R. E. Clements; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 465; Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 309; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (WBC 29; Dallas: Waco Books, 1990), 31; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: The Anchor Bible, 1997), 461; Katheryn P. Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel," (NIB 6; ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).1306.

<sup>18</sup> Zimmerli, *1-24*, 466.

<sup>19</sup> David Scheel & Craig Packer, "Group hunting behaviour of lions: a search for cooperation," *Animal Behaviour* 41 (2006): 697-709, interestingly do a research on the participation of individual lions during hunting for prey where cooperation was the main focus. It sounds like the prophet Ezekiel's metaphor is insightful.

<sup>20</sup> Swanson, "קִשְׁר," *DBLH* 8004, (electronic)

<sup>21</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Ezek 22:25.

<sup>22</sup> See Gert T. M. Prinsloo, "Lions and Vines: The Imagery of Ezekiel 19 in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Descriptions and Depictions," *OTE* 12 (1999): 339-

imagery which is usually associated with royalty is an appropriate metaphor (see Darr)<sup>23</sup> except that the metaphor now "turned against them, no longer portrays royal honour, as in Ezek 19, but the fierce greed and violence of the kings."<sup>24</sup> Walvoord & Zuck<sup>25</sup> correctly interpret the lion imagery as power used for material gain, ravaging of innocent people taking not only their treasures and precious things, but their very lives, and, at the same time, compromising the livelihood of the widows left behind with no economic means to survive.<sup>26</sup> Thus,

princes were the nobility or ruling class of Judah, members of the royal house . . . responsible for insuring law and order but had instead promoted murder, robbery, greed, and lawlessness. They only were interested in personal gain and lacked concern for the consequences that befell the nation or individuals.<sup>27</sup>

As we can decipher from the Chronicler and the writer of the narratives in the books of Kings, a nation's spiritual welfare and destiny, among other things, are determined either through the commitment to or forsaking of Yahweh by members of the royal family. According to Duguid princes "are specifically indicated because it was their responsibility to establish justice in the community, especially by protecting the poor and the weak (Ps 72:1-4)."<sup>28</sup> Zimmerli concurs when he reiterates that

Ezekiel 17 has shown how the guilt of the last day of Jerusalem was the direct responsibility of the ruler. Whilst the description of judgment in 7:27 . . . had in mind the particular king at the time of

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359; Karin Schöpflin, "The Composition of Metaphorical Oracles within the Book of Ezekiel," *JSS* 16 (2005): 78-87; Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Darr, "Ezekiel," 6:1314; cf. Ezek 19:1-9.

<sup>24</sup> Zimmerli, 1-24, 465.

<sup>25</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 1270.

<sup>26</sup> This is the reason widows alongside orphans conjure divine protection since in the absence of the husband/father they would not necessarily have the economic means to survive. Blatant murder that the princes are selfishly bent on courts the fiercest of divine indignation. See Mark Sneed, "Israelite Concern for the Alien, Orphans, and Widow: Altruism or Ideology?" *ZAW* 111 (1999): 498-508; Harold V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and Plight of Widows, Strangers and Orphans in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 23-70.

<sup>27</sup> Lamar E. Cooper, *Ezekiel* (NAC 17; electronic ed.; Logos Library System; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1994), 222.

<sup>28</sup> Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 286.

judgment, the reproach here reviews, in plural, the whole succession of kings (as already in v 6).<sup>29</sup>

As custodians of justice, the princes were not only failing the nation but as Darr postulates, also not preventing their subjects from following suit.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, the prophet Ezekiel retains the order of his fellow prophets Micah (3:11) and Zephaniah (3:3-4) where the princes as the ruling elite are at the forefront of the condemnation. Princes, in this case and not kings, also indicate that the offenders here are the next generation of rulers implying systemic corruption.

## 2 Her Priests (Ezek 22:26)

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, כֹּהֲנִים<sup>31</sup> "priests" are up next in what Zimmerli<sup>32</sup> aptly describes as a "priestly-prophetic book."<sup>33</sup> As the ones "responsible for instruction in the law (cf. Hos 4:6) and guarding the holiness and purity of the temple"<sup>34</sup> priests were in charge of anointing kings into office (1 Sam 10:1; 16:12-13; 1 Kgs 1:32-35) and in turn serving as royal advisors (2 Sam 8:18). The close working relationship between priests and royal members hinted in Ezekiel's arrangement, is actualised in the appointment of priests by Jehoshaphat recorded in 2 Chr 19:8.<sup>35</sup> To go back to the original priestly stipulations, the offenses related to holiness were within the sphere of their domain (Lev 21:1-24; Num 18:1,7). Therefore, the compromise of the priestly office can only

<sup>29</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 468.

<sup>30</sup> Darr, "Ezekiel," 6:1308.

<sup>31</sup> The concept *kōhēn* describes in its etymology "one who may draw near to the divine presence" according to Gerrit Gustafson, *The Adventure of Worship: Discovering Your Highest Calling* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2006), 97. This also entails "one who performs religious rites and rituals to God on behalf of others [as well as] other functions that included medical diagnosis, policing functions and teaching, but as related to the service to the LORD." See Swanson, "כֹּהֲנִים," *DBLH* 3913, #1. Cf. Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel P. Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, 2003), 385.

<sup>32</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 468.

<sup>33</sup> See Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 313 on the revelation that Ezekiel was 30 years old when he was called to this office in which he faithfully served for 22 years. At age 30 this is when he would have commenced his priestly service according to Numbers 4:3, but because of his being exiled there was no temple in which to exercise his levitical obligations.

<sup>34</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 222.

<sup>35</sup> *kōhēn* seems therefore to connote "confidential advisor." Cf. the further description of Zabud as "king's friend" and of David's sons as, literally, "the first ones at the king's hand" in the parallel passage 1 Chr 18:17. See J. Barton Payne, "כֹּהֲנִים," *TWOT* 959.

spell total collapse of national instruction on and upholding of divine requirements.

In this judgment, the priests are accused of *חָמַס*, of violating divine law, *תּוֹרָה*.<sup>36</sup> This is a strong term that is used for harm, laying waste and stripping off<sup>37</sup> to suggest aggressive disregard for the Law. The profaning of holy things is not only disturbing, but also shocking as the offenders were delegated with the sole task of preserving divinely accepted standards of holiness. For this reason it is not surprising to read of the priestly failure to distinguish between holy and common, and the inability to teach what should be non-negotiable standards of impure and pure which are at the core of their calling. The label that Yahweh is profaned among the priests who shut their eyes to keeping his sabbaths<sup>38</sup> suggests a total collapse of the priestly office as defilement spelt the end and inability to practice (Lev 21:10).

### 3 Her Officials (Ezek 22:27)

The concept *שָׂר* mostly translated "official" has various connotations including commander, captain, ruler as in a military officer, or prince designating someone of noble status in government or society.<sup>39</sup> This concept suggests that appointed government officials were not necessarily members of the royal family, but merely civil servants.<sup>40</sup> The concept *קִרְבַּי* (lit. inner parts cf. 22:25, 26) is figuratively used here to rightly situate the officials at the core of the city's activities. Sadly, instead of equitably dispensing justice and upholding the rights of the disadvantaged, as Cooper<sup>41</sup> rightly asserts, they routed the people with savagery (*טָרַף*)<sup>42</sup> comparable to that of ferocious "wolves." Known for opportunism and sometimes for group hunting and taking on prey much bigger than they are,<sup>43</sup> the officials (wolves) are bent on unjust gain. Bearing in mind

<sup>36</sup> *תּוֹרָה* describes the mandatory and regulatory requirements that had the legal prescriptions of Israel's way of life (Exod 12:49; Lev 6:2).

<sup>37</sup> Gesenius and Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew*, 288. Cf. Swanson, "חָמַס," *DBLH* 2803, #3.

<sup>38</sup> According to Herold Weiss "The Sabbath in the Writings of Josephus" *JSJ* 29 (1998): 380-81, Josephus, who had great personal reverence for the sabbath in that he never tires of reminding his readers of its obligations, regarded its observation as a true indication of piety. It is probably in this sense that Ezekiel presents the priests' disregard for the sabbath as an indication of the spiritual demise.

<sup>39</sup> "שָׂר," *BDB* 978. Strong's, TWOT, and GK references Logos Research Systems, Inc. (electronic ed.). Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> See Walvoord & Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1270.

<sup>41</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 223.

<sup>42</sup> The verb utilised here describes to "tear, mangle, i.e., a ripping apart of soft tissue with sharp teeth, with a focus on a violent, abhorrent death." See Swanson, "טָרַף," *DBLH* 3271, #1.

<sup>43</sup> See Hakan Sand, *et al.*, "Effects of Hunting Group Size, Snow Depth and Age on the Success of Wolves Hunting Moose," *Animal Behaviour* 72 (2006): 781-89 on



that princes (Ezek 22:25) already have been portrayed as lions, and in this instance the officials as "wolves,"<sup>44</sup> a much smaller animal but devastating regardless, the portraiture exacerbates the victimisation of the same people targeted by both predators. The statement "they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain" (עֲצָבָה)<sup>45</sup> reveals their *modus operandi*, thus notoriety for terrible cruelty recorded elsewhere (Mic 3:2; 3, 9-11; John 10:12). When those at the core of the city's activities are driven by greed to such an extent, then corruption is bound to be systemic.

#### 4 Her Prophets (Ezek 22:28)

A נָבִיא, a prophet by definition was someone who spoke or proclaimed a message on behalf of Yahweh (1 Sam 3:20; 1 Kgs 18:20; Lam 2:14).<sup>46</sup> Prophets were particularly known for confronting sin or other societal abnormalities (2 Sam 12:1-14; 1 Kgs 18:1-39; 21:1-29) as well as spelling out divine requirements for blessing and alternatively judgment for breaching these. It is rather absurd to have the variously described abuses by princes, priests and officials (Ezek 22:25-27) under the watch of prophets. The text (Ezek 22:28) uncovers prophets who טָחַטְּ "whitewash" as in covering up, overlaying or coating these totally unacceptable abuses by masquerading as true divine spokespersons. These prophets in their grave degeneracy have no option but resort to "false visions" and even מְסֻקָּה "lying divination."<sup>47</sup> Cooper comments:

These spokesmen were to serve as the moral and spiritual conscience of the nation. Instead of preaching against sin, they gave false prophecies and lying divinations; they whitewashed sin in general. In the face of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and fall of Judah, they continued to preach peace and safety. Ezekiel's

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hunting success rate of wolves on moose placed at 64% which is quite a high success rate. In using this metaphor, perhaps the prophet Ezekiel has such efficacy in mind.

<sup>44</sup> Predators next in rank after lions, this suggests a deliberate choice of the metaphor presented elsewhere in the same fashion (Zeph 3:3). See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 463.

<sup>45</sup> The noun here describes ill-gotten gain, or the ideas of plunder and severing as well as a strong desire for material things in various ways, in depicting dishonest gain, valuable things obtained by theft, deception, or other immoral actions. See Swanson, "עֲצָבָה," *DBLH* 1299, #1. See *BDB*, 130, on the literal reading of "unjust gain" as intimating gain made by violence.

<sup>46</sup> *BDB*, 611.

<sup>47</sup> Divination is a verb used always of the false prophets of the Hebrews, Deut 18:10, 14; 2 Kgs 17:17; Mic 3:6, 7, 11; Isa 3:2; of evokers of the dead. See Walvoord and *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1270.

indictment was consistent with his earlier exposé of false prophets and prophetesses in 13:4–23.<sup>48</sup>

The prevalence of falsehood and the naive acceptance of misleading guidance are particularly grievous in view of the fact that signs of destruction were all around them. Not only had the prophet Jeremiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel, warned these people, even the Assyrian exile of 605 was not a deterrent.

## 5 The People of the Land (Ezek 22:29)

It is not surprising that the “people of the land” come last. The phrase עַם הָאָרֶץ is employed to describe according to Darr a “designation of a landowning social class of considerable political, economic and social importance (see 7:27).”<sup>49</sup> The idea seems plausible in that the people of the land had to be in such a position to עָשָׂק “oppress,” עָשָׂק “extort” and גָּזַל “rob the poor and the needy.” This triad of abuses suggests a time of such insensitivity that the most vulnerable members of society are most to be taken advantage of. The same predicament faces the גֵּר alien<sup>50</sup> or foreigner who, like the poor, is עָשָׂק “oppressed” and בָּלֵא מִשְׁפָּט “denied justice.”

Bob Garratt adopted a Chinese proverb “*The fish rots from the head*” (2011)<sup>51</sup> for the title of his book, which hypothesises that bad leadership at the top filters all the way down. In Ezekiel’s case this thesis seems plausible where the people simply emulate the prevalent environment. Walvoord & Zuck comment:

Then Ezekiel denounced the people, the commoners who followed their leaders’ example. The populace too was involved in extortion and . . . robbery (cf. vv. 25, 27), and in oppression of the needy. So

<sup>48</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 223. Cf. Jer 23:16–22, and see F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (NAC 16; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 215–17, with regard to the “prophets of peace.” See also Jonathan P. Sisson, “Jeremiah and the Jerusalem Conception of Peace,” *JBL* 105/3 (1986): 429–42.

<sup>49</sup> Darr, “Ezekiel,” 6:1315.

<sup>50</sup> Israelites were forbidden from mistreating resident aliens among them on the rationale of their Egyptian bondage according to Lev 19:33. See Samuel S. Ndoga, “Psalm 133 as a Response to Xenophobic Attitudes in South Africa Today,” in *Psalmody and Poetry in Old Testament Ethics* (ed. Dirk J. Human; New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 156-165, for a fuller discussion on this.

<sup>51</sup> Bob Garratt, *The Fish Rots From the Head. The Crisis in Our Boardrooms: Developing the Crucial Skills of the Competent Director* (London: Profile Books, 2011), argues that organisational crises begin from the boardroom and filters their way down. He attempts to provide curbing measures in this account.

rulers oppressed the common people, and the common people oppressed the helpless.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, Cooper makes the compelling observation in terms of the demise of the people as they simply reflect the prevalent conditions:

What kind of people would such leadership produce? It should be no surprise that the people were extortioners, robbers, oppressors, the inhospitable, and subverters of justice. Their society was a showcase of violence, greed, graft, indifference to suffering, and general neglect of God's word. There was no discipline in the homes (22:7). Moral and sexual perversions and indiscretions were commonplace (22:9–11). Crime and general lack of moral restraint was the order of the day (22:12).<sup>53</sup>

### **C THE GRAVITY OF NATIONAL DEMISE (EZEK 22:30-31)**

The oracle ends with the gloomy prospects of the ארץ "land"(cf. 22:23) where Yahweh has no option but to destroy it. Corruption was so prevalent that when Yahweh searched for *one man* who could "stand in the gap" and prevent the city's destruction, none was found. With Jeremiah as a contemporary of Ezekiel stationed in Judah, and Ezekiel himself speaking to the exiles, it is surprising that no one could be found to stand in the gap. For this reason, we have to conclude that the absence suggests not necessarily the personal qualities of the individual sought, but one with the stature respectable enough by the remnants to heed his voice. "No one in a position of authority in Israel had the moral qualities to lead the nation aright."<sup>54</sup>

Richards reminds us not to underestimate the power of an individual to affect the future of his or her nation.<sup>55</sup> His proposal brings to mind a similar proposition recorded in Gen 18:22-33 where Yahweh would spare the city if he found ten righteous people. The situation was rather daunting as Carson reveals:

Ezekiel must say to the land: "You are arid (24): your rulers oppress the people (25); your priests profane my law (26); your officials kill to make money (27); your prophets give false oracles (28); your people extort, rob and oppress (29). I looked for someone to stand

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<sup>52</sup> Walvoord & Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1270.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 223.

<sup>54</sup> Walvoord & Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1270.

<sup>55</sup> Richards, *Bible Reader's*, 497.

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firm on behalf of the land but could find no-one. So I will pour out my anger on its inhabitants" (30–31).<sup>56</sup>

The pronouncement of judgment is not surprising as these sentiments are echoed earlier on in the passage (Ezek 22:13-16, 19-22). It speaks more about the level of demise to which the inhabitants originally described in 22:1 as a "city of bloodshed (cf. Nah 3:1) had deteriorated. Eichrodt is right in saying that "moral and cultic sins are thus linked together as indissolubly associated expressions of hostility to God, as the prophet had already demonstrated before (cf. e.g. 8:16-18).<sup>57</sup> The prophet regards the law of God as a single integral whole [that the people had irreversibly broken]." It makes sense that no one could be found to stand in the gap especially if the leaders of the people were this corrupt.

## **D REFLECTIONS**

In hearing Ezekiel's message properly, contemporary reflections are necessary. Bearing in mind that this prophecy is issued within a theocratic context, what message for today does this oracle provide for a non-theocratic society?

### **1 God Always Takes a Keen Interest in Human Activities**

The oracles that are here juxtaposed as much as the entire prophecy by Ezekiel provide notional validity on divine concern for humanity. In issuing his laws or requirements to guide human conduct, these seemingly debilitating stipulations are inexorably daily guidelines to curb self-inflicting damage on the part of humanity. Weiss is right in deducing:

The superiority of the Jewish way of life, therefore, is traceable not only to the superiority of the vision of God granted Moses, on the basis of which he drafted the best laws of any human society, but also to his inclusion in the law of prescriptions addressing the details of everyday life.<sup>58</sup>

### **2 The Kind of Leaders in the Land Determine the Prevalent Environment**

In reading Ezek 22, one realises that judgment has already been comprehensively pronounced (22:1-5, 13-16, 19-22). Along with that one decrypts the impression that no one was exempt from both the offences and the corresponding punishment. The stipulation of leaders and their specific offences in Ezek 22:23-31 serves here to show how the nation got to the deplorable states

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<sup>56</sup> Donald A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed.; Leicester: Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994; rev. ed. of Donald Guthrie and J. Alec Motyer [eds.], *The New Bible Commentary*; 3rd ed.; 1970), 730.

<sup>57</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 309.

<sup>58</sup> Weiss, "Sabbath in the Writings," 368.

described in 22:6-12 and 22:17-18. Starting with the rulers and stipulating the remainder of the influential leaders, Ezekiel takes the entire leadership to task as responsible for the land's demise. Ending with the people in the land suggests that the inhabitants are simply buying into the corruptible ways that the leaders of the day exhibit.

### **3 A Domino Effect is Implied where Unaccountable Leaders at the Highest and Most Visible Level Filters through Every Level of Social Strata Until it Affects Ordinary People**

Our take on this is that princes who represent the ruling élite in the land who are the first to be portrayed as tyrannical and greedy, next to priests who are ineffectual in setting the required standards, and the officials follow suite in the exploitative agenda realising they can equally get away with murder, and prophets become debased and finally the ordinary people complete the cycle of corruption. Carson deduces the following:

Ezekiel must say to the land: "You are arid (24): your rulers oppress the people (25); your priests profane my law (26); your officials kill to make money (27); your prophets give false oracles (28); your people extort, rob and oppress (29). I looked for someone to stand firm on behalf of the land but could find no-one. So I will pour out my anger on its inhabitants" (30-31).<sup>59</sup>

The above comments show that a lack of accountability propagates irresponsibility for one's own life on the one hand and for everyone else who is affected thereby on the other. The absence of responsibility suggests the lack of answerability that pervades society begins at the highest level of leadership. Moral decadence follows spiritual decay where leaders can retain their functional titles but in actuality lack the necessary integrity.

### **4 The Unavailability of One Person to Stand in the Gap Intimates the Point of No Return that the Inhabitants had Reached**

As already indicated, we know for sure that Jeremiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel was in the land at the time of this pronouncement. As Walvoord and Zuck reveal, "No one in a position of authority in Israel had the moral qualities to lead the nation aright. Obviously Jeremiah had these qualities, but he lacked the authority to lead the nation from the brink of disaster."<sup>60</sup> History also sheds some light on the fact that during times of such existential challenges, God had relied on individuals strategically placed to reverse the outcomes. Smith comments:

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<sup>59</sup> Carson, *New Bible*, 730

<sup>60</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1270.

Throughout the entire nation God was searching for a real man (cf. Jer. 5:1), someone who would "build up the wall," i.e., the moral and spiritual wall which was Judah's true protection from external threat. The Lord was looking for a national leader to "stand in the gap before me," someone who would personally intervene where that wall had fallen into decay. Someone who put his life on the line. Someone who would beseech the Lord to spare the city, and who would match that prayer with mighty works of reformation. Such a national leader could avert the destruction which God had been threatening. God, however, could find no one who could or would fill this role (22:30).<sup>61</sup>

Could similar realities exist today as are typified in the kind of systemic corruption and anarchy where people become numb to sensibility, and the degeneracy has reached such proportions that even if someone could be found to speak it would be utterly futile?

## E CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, we share Cooper's sentiments when he postulates that "those who have places of leadership also are duly held responsible. They are responsible for their own lives, but they also are responsible for those whom God places under their charge. When those who lead distort or misrepresent the truth of God, they not only deceive themselves but others also (Ezek 22:23–31; cf. Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1–5)."<sup>62</sup> By the same token we must recall "whenever such moral and spiritual crises have gripped nations, God has sought for a solitary individual who would be willing to be used (v. 30). He found such a person in Noah, in Moses, in Deborah, in Daniel, and in Ezekiel."<sup>63</sup> There is no scriptural record on the withdrawal of theocracy where God is no longer sovereign. For this reason, Ezekiel's complaint against the leaders of his day in being individually and corporately responsible for national demise still applies today. Following John Maxwell's maxim, "Everything rises and falls on leadership," perhaps we should qualify that leadership in this estimation ought to be spiritually sound and at the same time professionally competent.

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<sup>61</sup> James E. Smith, *The Major Prophets* (Joplin: College Press, 1992), 423.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 224.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 223.

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