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Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel: The Same (Prophetic) Coin, Yet Two Different Sides

While it is accepted that apocalyptic prophecies vary from religion to religion, it is less accepted that they vary *within* a religion. (How can they, when they share the same beliefs?) Thus, if prophecies do vary, then external factors must have played a role. Can a prophet's background influence their prophecies? If so, might this affect how readers approach their works? Jewish prophets Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel, with their shared theme of, yet different approaches to, Israel's salvation, are prime examples for this inquiry. Though both shared the theme of Israel's salvation, the former's comforting, undiluted focus reveals Deutero-Isaiah as the suffering messenger, whereas the latter's focus on salvation *through* judgment and purification reveals Ezekiel as the priest-turned-prophet.

As Deutero-Isaiah descended from pre-exilic prophets, he had a firmer foundation in the prophetic tradition than Ezekiel, who first found his place in society as a priest (Westermann 7; Eichrodt 3). Both wrote during the Babylonian exile, prophesying to a shaken community that saw the heart of the nation--the temple--destroyed before being split between the deported and the remaining (Bright 323-330). As such, the community longed to be saved and welcomed into a rebuilt Israel at the same time its trust in God was failing. Even though Deutero-Isaiah was similarly "flagging [in faith] and weary," his role as a prophet overpowered his role as a fellow Israelite; these sentiments seldom appear in his optimistic prophecies (Westermann 7). Instead, he repeatedly proclaims "good news" and the incomparable existence of God, thereby

comforting the people of their plight while rebuffing their doubts about the strength of their god (*English Standard Version*, Isa. 40). When the hopeless fixate on how Babylon's deity conquered their Yahweh, he answers by mocking the false gods, calling them "useless," immobile, and carved from flammable wood by human hands (Isa. 46). Moreover, Deutero-Isaiah includes the righteous *and* the "obstinate," the "[rebels]" since birth, and those who strike him, pull his beard, and spit at him, in his proclamations of salvation (Isa. 48:4-8; Isa. 50:6). He prophesies a restored Israel for everyone, writing to "sons from afar" and "daughters from the ends of the earth," "Go out from Babylon, say, 'The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob!'" (Is 48:20; Isa. 43:6). These optimistic and inclusive prophecies of salvation and God's power must have come "from outside himself," for how can a "weary," suffering individual proclaim such implausible prophecies of salvation for those who mistreat him (Westermann 7)?

However, it must be noted that Deutero-Isaiah does not wish for Israel to return to its former self. Instead, he imagines a restoration of Israel not unlike the restoration of a painting; the "dull," imperfect aspects are to be replaced with "rubies," "sparkling jewels," and "precious stones" (Isa. 54:11-12). A more righteous, and thus more beautiful, community will cover Israel's sinful past. Upon further inspection, Deutero-Isaiah's hopes for this new Israel, restored to God but not to its former habits, reveal his background as a suffering messenger, weaving his hopes for a welcoming nation within divine declarations that seem more laughable than possible in the face of exile.

In contrast, as a priest who was exposed to religious regulations and the numerous ways they were broken, and as a deported Israelite who witnessed and condemned his fellow exiles for breaking the "oath of allegiance" to Babylon, Ezekiel "knew too much about the caprices of human trustworthiness" for him to advocate for salvation for all (Eichrodt 5, 46). Imagining God

as a shepherd and Israel as his unruly flock, he separates the righteous from the unrighteous by distinguishing sheep from rams and male goats, denouncing the elite (the “fat”) who selfishly indulge themselves while tyrannizing the commoners (the “lean”) (Ezek. 34:17-19). Continuing his focus on purification, Ezekiel writes that God “will sprinkle clean water” on Israel, and bestow a “new heart” that, most importantly, will “walk in [God’s] statutes” (Ezek. 36:25-27). Whereas Deutero-Isaiah proclaims a rebuilt Israel for all, Ezekiel relies on his priestly--thus more legalistic--foundation, proclaiming a salvation that will only be achieved through a culling of the flock. If they do not repent and undergo purification, the “obstinate” who are forgiven in Isaiah 48 will neither be saved, nor “brought into [their] own land” (Ezek. 36:24).

However, Ezekiel does not neglect his prophetic calling for his priesthood; rather, he combines the two. Whereas priestly writing dictates that God “remain hidden,” God declares the glory of his own nature, repeating “I myself” and “I am the Lord” no fewer than four times each in the aforementioned shepherd-and-flock passage (Eichrodt 30; Ezek. 34:1-31). Furthermore, in Ezekiel’s vibrant visions, God appears with “gleaming metal” and “fire” before showing him the new temple (Ezek. 1:26-28; Ezek. 40-48). Violating the traditions of priestly writing by actively revealing God, Ezekiel emphasizes God’s glory and his plans for Israel. As with Deutero-Isaiah, the implausibility of these prophecies reveal Ezekiel’s role as a prophet conveying divine words. However, the focus on purification separates him from Deutero-Isaiah and reveals his additional background as a priest, a key witness to mankind’s fallibility.

While apocalyptic prophecies may share one theme, they can still vary in content and approach, much like how general literature varies within one genre. Though Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel are both exilic prophets, they took different approaches to the shared theme of Israel’s salvation. When one acknowledges Deutero-Isaiah’s focus on optimistic, undiluted salvation and

Ezekiel's focus on salvation through judgment and purification, each prophet's worldview comes to light, impacting how readers encounter the text. Forgoing the previous assumption (if prophecies are from the same religion, they must contain the same content), readers may now choose to read both instead of one. Conversely, readers may read only one, but possess the insight to choose which most interests them. Similarly to general literature, acknowledging the existence and reasons of variance in apocalyptic prophecies thus reveals the human behind the work, further enriching the connection between reader, author, and text.

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