**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Hiding Ezekiel**

The latter chapters of the Book of Ezekiel, including the portion read as Haphtarah for Parshat Ha-Chodesh, are controversial because of glaring inconsistencies with the Pentateuch.  The discrepancies pertain to the regulation of priestly behavior as well as details of the sacrificial cult.  For those members of the Bible Critical Studies camp, differences between Torah law and Ezekiel readily can be explained on the theory that the early sixth century BCE prophet predated the redacted Pentateuch and was unfamiliar with the work of the Priestly writer.  In contrast, the reader of Scripture who a) is committed to belief in Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch, b) assumes that Ezekiel was familiar with Torah, and c) believes in the veracity of Ezekiel’s prophecy while also is doctrinally committed to the immutable character of God’s law is left to struggle with a great crux.

The discrepancies are many:  Ezekiel instructs the priests to wear only linen vestments when ministering in the Temple’s inner courtyard (44:17).  According to the Pentateuch, the priestly uniform was made partly out of wool (Exodus 28:5).  Ezekiel forbids priests to marry widows, with the exception of women widowed from priests (44:22).  The Torah permits priests to marry widows.  Only the High Priest is forbidden to marry a widow and is required to marry a virgin (Leviticus 21:7, 13-14).  Ezekiel instructs priests undergoing the process of ritual purification to wait an additional seven days before re-entering the Temple compound (44:26).  No such requirement appears in the Pentateuch.  Numbers 19:19 states, without any caveat, that a person is entirely pure after the sprinkling ritual, immersion, and nightfall on the close of the seventh day.  Ezekiel forbids priests to eat carrion or the flesh of torn beasts, possibly implying that non-priests are permitted to eat such meat (44:31).  The Torah, however, prohibits all Israelites from eatingנבילה וטריפה (Exodus 22:30, Deuteronomy14:21).  Ezekiel instructs the prince of the nation to sacrifice a bull on Rosh Chodesh Nisan as a means of cleansing the Sanctuary (45:18).  There is no precedent for this in the Torah.  Ezekiel mandates a repeat performance of that sacrifice on 7 Nisan, though according to the Septuagint the text should read “in the seventh month” (45:20).  Either way, no precedent exists in the Pentateuch for such a ritual.  Ezekiel’s version of the holiday sacrifices (45:22-25) differs considerably from the Musaf offerings recorded in Numbers 28-29.  Most notably, he requires the same number and type of sacrifices on each day of Sukkot as on the days of Passover.  The Torah, famously, requires a diminishing number of bulls as the Sukkot holiday progresses.  Ezekiel’s Sabbath offering consists of six lambs and one ram (46:5), while the Torah mandates only two lambs (Numbers 28:9).  Lastly, Ezekiel calls for the same ephah measure of meal to be offered irrespective of which type of animal is being sacrificed (46:7), whereas the Torah requires different sized portions of meal to be offered as a function of whether the sacrifice is a bull, ram, or lamb (Numbers 28:12-13).

The Talmud states that the Book of Ezekiel was nearly taken out of circulation and hidden because of the passages that contradict the Pentateuch.  Hananiah ben Hizkiah ben Garon took upon himself the responsibility of trying to reconcile the contradictions.  He spent an extended period in his upper chamber until he believed he had resolved the various Scriptural difficulties.  His name is remembered for good as a hero of Judaism (Shabbat 13b, Hagigah 13a).  Unfortunately, Hananiah’s intellectual output did not survive the centuries.  Only one explanation, cited in the name of his son Elazar, remains extant.  He reconciled Ezekiel 46:7 with the Torah by claiming that “ephah” does not mean a specific measurement of meal, but instead is a generic term used to describe measuring vessels of various sizes (Sifre Deuteronomy 294).  [Hananiah was a Shammaite, and at a gathering of sages in his upper chamber the right-wing House of Shammai temporarily defeated the House of Hillel.  Elazar ben Hananiah was a leader of the Jewish Revolt against Rome.  The Zealot movement had a deep fondness for the Book of Ezekiel’s prophesies of restoration and millennial glory for Israel.  Accordingly, their intellectual leaders invested great effort in keeping Ezekiel in the Biblical canon and as part of the Judaic curriculum.]

The sages attempted to reconcile the numerous inconsistencies between Ezekiel and the Torah that are described in the second paragraph of this essay. The verse in Ezekiel limiting the right of priests to marry widows was parsed to mean that only *some* (that is, all who are not the Kohen Gadol) priests can marry widows.  By skillfully adjusting the punctuation of the verse, and reading it in an unconventional manner, Ezekiel 44:22 was made to conform to Torah law (Kiddushin 78b).  Ravina explained the need for Ezekiel to prohibit priests from eating carrion and the flesh of torn beasts, despite the fact that all Israelites are forbidden to do so, this way: Priests eat the flesh of sacrificial birds killed by *melikah*.  That method of killing involves puncturing the back of the bird’s neck, thereby rendering the bird first a טריפה and then upon its death a נבילה.  Lest one extrapolate from the sacrificial code that priests are exempted from these dietary laws, Ezekiel reiterated their binding character even with regard to Temple officiants (Menahot 45a).

Rabbi Jose and Rav Ashi claimed that Ezekiel was foreshadowing the inaugural temple rites performed in the generation of Ezra, which were akin to the inaugural rites that had been performed in the Tabernacle in the days of Moses.  Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Yochanan both asserted that, in the future, Elijah the Prophet will properly explicate the controversial Ezekiel passages and how they mesh with the Torah.  Rabbi Yochanan was of the opinion that all prophets prophesied concerning Messianic times (Berakhot 34b).  According to Rabbi Yochanan, and irrespective of whether or not Ezekiel 44-46 might eventually be reconciled with the language and meaning of the Pentateuch, Ezekiel was, in any case, describing the normative temple cult of the Messianic future and not a one-time ceremony that took place in the Second Temple era.

Maimonides stated categorically that the sacrificial code as commanded in the Pentateuch is eternally binding and will not change even in Messianic times.  He claimed that Ezekiel’s instructions applied only to the inauguration of the Third Temple (Hilkhot Ma’ase Ha-Korbanot 2:14).

Rashi carefully interpreted Ezekiel 44-46 to conform to halakhah.  His interpretation is not the plain meaning of the text פשט.  For example, he renders אחר טהרתו, literally “after his purification,” to mean “after his departure from the corpse.”  The desire to avoid theological difficulty led Rashi to bridge the chasm between Ezekiel and Pentateuch through suspect interpretative means.  Radak, by contrast, was willing to acknowledge the differences between Ezekiel and the Mosaic Code.  He understood Ezekiel to mean that in the Messianic era the average priest would have to live by a more elevated standard of holiness, similar to that of the High Priest in the pre-Messianic era.  Unlike Maimonides, Radak accepted the possibility that in the future the sacrificial cult would be governed by a set of rules other than those appearing in the Torah.  Radak was not enthusiastic about proclaiming the non-immutability of the sacrificial code.  But he felt compelled to offer this seemingly heterodox solution for lack of a better explanation על כרחינו חידוש יהיה בקרבנות לעתיד.  Malbim realized the futile nature of Rashi’s approach.  But he was also theologically uncomfortable with Radak’s solution.  Like Maimonides, he read Ezekiel 45-46 as describing an inauguration process for the Third Temple extending 190 days from the Eve of Passover until Shemini Atzeret.

Ezekiel is one of five books of the Tanakh that could be described as antilegomena -- works whose authenticity or value were disputed.  The other four – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther – were nearly excluded from the canon on the suspicion that they were not written with Divine inspiration.  In halakhic parlance, the question was whether such books “rendered the hands impure.”  Ultimately, all were included, but only in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim, which is the least authoritative and is the latest chronologically.

Ezekiel is a book of prophecies.  Hence, there could be no doubt about its inspired status.  Furthermore, the Nevi’im section of Sacred Writ was sealed before the first century CE (according to most scholars).  How, then, could the sages have contemplated withdrawing the book from circulation?  Rabbi Moshe Feinstein sharpened this question in a responsum concerning the propriety of publishing books of questionable orthodoxy.  He noted that canonical prophecies are meant to teach future generations and become required components of the commandment of Torah study (Iggeroth Moshe Yoreh Deah 3:115).  Nonetheless, argued Rabbi Feinstein, the sages stood ready to withdraw Ezekiel from the public domain lest the book’s contradictions of the Pentateuch lead people to heretical conclusions.

In the post-enlightenment era, there has been an entrenched strand of pedagogic thought in parts of the Orthodox community that objects to the study of Tanakh because of concern that such studies could lead young minds astray.  The episode of Hananiah ben Hizkiah ben Garon shows that this attitude is unjustified and lacks Talmudic precedent.  Several chapters of Ezekiel were highly problematic.  Yet an awareness of the mere possibility of finding appropriate explanations, without even preserving those explanations, allowed the book to remain in the Biblical canon.  Clearly, the desired end was the preservation of holy writings and their widespread dissemination.  Hiding large portions of Scripture from the masses in the hopes of maintaining ideological purity is not, and should not be, the Jewish way.