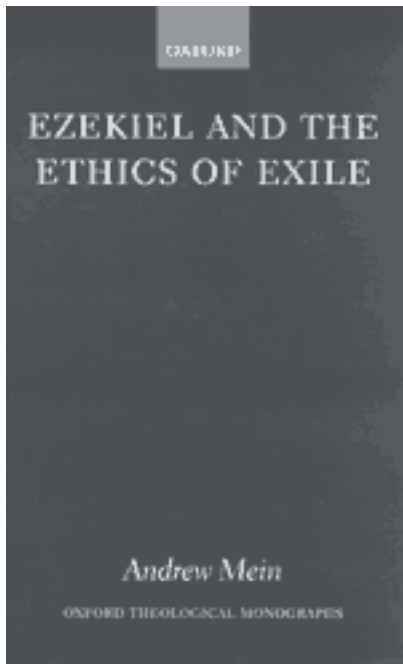


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**Mein, Andrew**

*Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*

Oxford Theological Monographs

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Andrew Mein's *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* is another addition to the growing number of treatments dealing with the ethics of the prophetic book. Mein attempts to demonstrate—through historical and sociological analysis—that Ezekiel's depiction of the moral failure of the Judeans is best explained as a response to the new historical situation of exile. While prior work on the ethical systems in Ezekiel centers on the depiction of individual responsibility in Ezek 18, Mein distinguishes his work from his predecessors by broadening the scope of his study to other portions of the book, investigating not only social ethical behavior but also treating the expression of Ezekiel's ethics through ritual.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other treatments of the issue include: Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Almond, 1989); Gordon Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); and, most recently, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel* (New York: de Gruyter, 2000). Though Lapsley's work does move beyond the focus in Ezek 18, it was not available at the time of Mein's publication. It would be interesting to place the approaches of the two authors in conversation as

Mein proposes that the exiles belonged to two different moral worlds. Before their deportation, the exiles belonged to the world of Judah's ruling elite, who were intimately involved in the decision making of governmental and religious life and whose ethical decisions revolved around sustaining institutions. After the deportation, however, the exiles found themselves in a new situation as a dominated minority stripped of their political and religious leadership and facing threats to their communal identity. According to Mein, the transition between these two worlds led to a shift from concerns of religious and state institutions to concerns of the individual and the family. In addition, this transition from powerful elites to exilic subjects led in a shift in the exilic community from moral responsibility (exhibited by the punishments in the judgment oracles as the result of individual and communal transgressions) to moral passivity (exhibited by the restoration oracles that present all restorative activity as the result of the divine hand at work).

The first chapter situates Mein's methodological approach among other scholars currently working on the ethics of the Hebrew Bible. Suggesting that the treatment of ethics in the Hebrew Bible has heretofore been dominated by theological bias, Mein begins with a critique of canonical critics, notably Brevard Childs, who advocate a normative approach: reconstructing biblical ethics for use in communities of faith. Rather than a normative approach, Mein favors a descriptive stance previously championed by sociological and historical critics such as Robert Wilson, Douglas Knight, and John Barton. Drawing upon the works of New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks and anthropologist Clifford Geertz, among others, Mein suggests that both symbolic and social contexts must be taken into consideration when describing the ethical perspective of the book of Ezekiel.

Though Mein correctly advocates the appropriateness of a social-historical approach to the study of Hebrew Bible ethics, he spends too much time arguing against the work of so-called normative approaches, and his critique runs the risk of further polemicizing the debate between normative and descriptive approaches rather than presenting them as different choices on a spectrum of current options. Mein, following Henry McKeating, rightly concludes: "Important as theology may be, it is far from the only influence on moral decision making." He goes on to suggest that "we need to take a step back from

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both deal with the tension between the people's moral responsibility (they are "subject to calls of repentance," in Lapsley's terms [4]) and moral passivity ("subject to a fairly strong determinism" [ibid.]).

theology and look at the constitution of society in ancient Israel" first (18–19). Yet even Mein cannot escape the fact that the primary sources used in reconstructing a picture of the constitution of society in ancient Israel are themselves dominated by competing theological (as well as social and political) concerns. One might question the ability to separate the often intertwined interests of theology and politics in the text and in ancient Judean society. Where Mein does treat theology, however, he successfully applies a descriptive approach.

One might also question Mein's suggestion that as one traverses the moral world from that of the elite to that of the displaced exile (paralleled by a shift from judgment to restoration), there is a natural movement from the concern for institutionalization to concerns for the individual and family. The shift in emphasis here seems to take place too smoothly. Namely, Mein argues that the oracles that tell of the fall of Jerusalem deal primarily with moral issues in the arena of religious institutions and state. These moral horizons being reduced in the exile, however, Mein suggests: "it is no longer possible to make decisions affecting the institutions of state" (261). Therefore, the moral world is now focused on family and individual concerns. In the restored temple vision of 40–48, however, the emphasis is on the hope of a restored institution. Though Mein is certainly correct when he argues that the exilic community experienced "an immediate drop in status" (257), the status drop did not prevent them from being hopeful for a future that would reestablish their former standing.

Mein avoids some of these problems when he suggests, following Steven Tuell, that 40–48 are the most heavily influenced by Persian-period redaction and that the addition of materials primarily consists of additional legal materials (251–52). However, since Mein himself attributes the core of the restored-temple vision to the exilic period (253), he still must consider that this section of Ezekiel is once again concerned with the restoration of a religious institution and that it hardly addresses issues concerning the family or individual. It seems that there is not so much a transition from the moral world of the elite to the exile but that both moral worlds coexist in the situation of exile. The elites do find themselves in a position of subjugation to a foreign power, and their own power is substantially reduced if not removed. But taking Ezek 40–48 as a window into the exilic community's concerns, they still seem to be hopeful for the future restoration of religious institutions and preoccupied with the envisioned maintenance of that institution. It seems that these two moral worlds, rather than existing on a continuum of the exilic experience, exist simultaneously, producing a tension within the ethics presented in the book of Ezekiel that is not easily resolved.

Overall, Mein offers an insightful investigation of Ezekiel's ethics as a response to the crisis of the Babylonian exile. Among his most impressive suggestions is the division of Ezekiel's stance into the two "moral worlds" that the exiles experienced as they transitioned from members of the Jerusalem elite to a displaced and disempowered refugee society in the Babylonian exile. While one may question whether the transition between these two moral worlds was as clean-cut as Mein suggests, the tension between elite and subject that he highlights is well worth further exploration. Mein eloquently describes the manner in which the exiles were able to continue to use the temple in Jerusalem as the central symbol for their community in Babylon even after its destruction. Mein's thorough research and suggestive hypotheses should serve as impetus for future research on the book of Ezekiel as a response to all problems—moral, political, and theological—raised by the new historical situation of displacement in which Ezekiel's exilic community found itself.