

HOLY LOVE IN EZEKIEL 36:16–32

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ABSTRACT: This article demonstrates that intrinsic to the manifestation of Yahweh's *holiness* in Ezekiel 36:16–32 is a manifestation of *love* for his people. The paper first lays groundwork by summarizing Costecalde's lexical work of קדש (holiness) and briefly surveying OT texts speaking of God's holiness as his care and deliverance. The heart of the article begins by studying Yahweh's holiness in Ezekiel 36:16–32: Strong connections to the story and language of Exodus, plus a contrast between Yahweh's and Marduk's divine abandonment narratives, indicate that Yahweh's holiness includes not only his unrivaled power but also his unrivaled commitment to his people. The article then assesses the presence of divine love in the passage. Contra scholars who critique Ezekiel's alleged lovelessness, the article finds that the lavishness of Yahweh's promises, the wife and shepherd imagery which link to Ezekiel 36:16–32, and the mention of „mercy” confirm that love is indeed part of the manifestation of Yahweh's holiness. For Yahweh to vindicate his holy name in the sight of the nations and to show that „I am Yahweh,” the nations must see his love and not merely his power or judgment. The article concludes that in Ezekiel 36:16–32 Yahweh's holiness is revealed to be a „love-holiness,” or a „holy love.”

KEYWORDS: Holiness, Ezekiel, Mercy, Costecalde, Covenant Love

Introduction

When readers of Scripture think of God's saving actions on behalf of his people, the divine attribute that most commonly springs to mind is love or mercy. Holiness, by contrast, is more commonly associated with judgment. This is in part because holiness is generally misunderstood to mean *separation*, *otherness*, or *purity*. It is therefore striking that one of the most lavish pronouncements of God's salvation for wayward Israel in the OT explicitly stipulates holiness and not love as the motivation.

The exclusion of *explicit* appeals to God's love, graciousness, or mercy in Ezekiel 36 makes it a useful „controlled environment” in which to study Yahweh's holiness in some semblance of isolation. What will be found is that Yahweh's holiness is multifaceted, but includes within it evidences of genuine love. Intrinsic, then, to Yahweh's

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manifestation of his *holiness* in Ezekiel 36 is a manifestation of *love* for his people. Anything less would not fully vindicate his holy name in the sight of the nations or reveal what it means that 'I am Yahweh.' It is holiness, not love, that is the explicit basis of the restorative promises in Ezekiel 36. But Yahweh's holiness is revealed to be a „love-holiness,” or a „holy love.”

This article will first summarize the lexical work of Costecalde and others on שָׁדָק language and point to examples of Yahweh's holiness manifested in care or deliverance throughout the OT. The heart of the article will study the meaning and implications of Yahweh's holiness in Ezekiel 36:16–32, followed by an assessment of the presence of his love in the passage.

God's Holiness in the OT

The Meaning of שָׁדָק (Holy/Holiness)

David J. A. Clines surveys proposed „basic meanings” of שָׁדָק language in the history of scholarship (2021) and is referred to by HALOT. This paper argues that the claim is unlikely to be correct. In searching for the origins and rationale for this claim, which goes back at least to Reuchlin (1505). The most popular of these is associated with Baudissin's 1878 work on holiness, which was subsequently adopted by BDB and HALOT. Baudissin hypothesized that שָׁדָק derived from a root דָּק which means „cut, separate.” Thus, for him, the basic meaning of שָׁדָק language in the Old Testament is separation. Clines observes that this view ‘cohered perfectly with the thesis of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, one of the most important theological works of the century, defining the holy as the numinous, a mystery that is both terrifying (*tremendum*) and fascinating (*fascinans*), „wholly other” (*das ganz Andere*)’ (Clines, 2021: 485–486) and is referred to by HALOT. This paper argues that the claim is unlikely to be correct. In searching for the origins and rationale for this claim, which goes back at least to Reuchlin (1505). While the meaning of „separation” became the dominant interpretation of שָׁדָק, other proposals were made as well, including „be clean” (associated with Gesenius). Holiness as „separation” entered lexica, theological dictionaries, monographs, and countless sermons. Holiness as „purification” also came to color common interpretations, in some cases with a moral hue (in part due to NT connotations). However, as both Clines and Costecalde demonstrate, these definitions are based almost entirely on faulty etymological/linguistic assumptions, privilege an outlier usage, or fail to distinguish between connotation and denotation (Costecalde, 1986; Clines, 2021). „ISBN”: „978-2-7350-0138-5”, „language”: „fr”, „note”: „Google-Books-ID: YXgrAAAAMAAJ”, „number-of-pages”: „166”, „publisher”: „Letouzey & Ané”, „publisher-place”: „Paris”, „source”: „Google Books”, „title”: „Aux origines du sacré biblique”, „author”: [{ „family”: „Costecalde”, „given”: „Claude-Bernard” }], „issued”: [{ „date

-parts": [{"1986"}]}}}, {"id": 3958, "uris": [{"http://zotero.org/users/2358399/items/C7I-BMXQF"}], "itemData": {"id": 3958, "type": "article-journal", "abstract": "Most Hebraists are familiar with the claim that the 'basic meaning' of the Hebrew verb *qđš* is 'to separate.' It was adopted by BDB, and is referred to by HALOT. This paper argues that the claim is unlikely to be correct. In searching for the origins and rationale for this claim, which goes back at least to Reuchlin (1505).

In his 1986 work, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*, Claude-Bernard Costecalde seeks to define biblical *qđš* language properly, by exploring its usage in biblical Hebrew and related semitic languages. Costecalde's inductive approach yields firm and helpful results. First, he finds that *qđš* or cognate equivalents always occur in religious contexts (Costecalde, 1986: 89). Second, he determines that Baudissin's definition of „separation” must be completely overturned; no evidence supports this definition of *qđš* or its equivalents. Third, *qđš* and equivalents actually mean something like the *opposite* of separation: consecration, cultic devotedness.

Costecalde zeros in on four clusters of occurrences of *qđš* derivatives in the Hebrew Bible: Tamar as a *qđš* in Genesis 38, the „mountain of God” in Exodus 3, Israel's encounter with God in Exodus 19, and Isaiah's encounter with the thrice-holy God in Isaiah 5–6. Each of the first three refers to persons or spaces that are cultically consecrated or devoted to a god or to Israel's God. Particularly salient for this article is the final cluster of examples in Isaiah 5–6, as here Yahweh himself—not a mountain or a people—is said to be „holy.” It makes intuitive sense to speak of entities other than God as consecrated or devoted to him, but what does *qđš* mean when it is predicated of God? What does it mean for God to be „consecrated” or „devoted”? Can we go any further than Clines, who urges that ‘when God is said to be *qđš*, no other characteristic or quality is in view than his deity, i.e., his being God’ (Clines, 2021: 496) and is referred to by HALOT. This paper argues that the claim is unlikely to be correct. In searching for the origins and rationale for this claim, which goes back at least to Reuchlin (1505)? If so, why then would Israel be called to be holy *as Yahweh is holy*? Complicating matters further is that other Mesopotamian and Ugaritic deities, including El and Ba'al, could also be called „holy,” and a Syro-Palestinian/Egyptian goddess herself bears the name Qadesh (Costecalde, 1986: 72, 83–86, 127).

While not providing a detailed answer to the question of Yahweh's holiness, Costecalde examines Isaiah 5:16: ‘Yahweh of hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness’ (יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת בְּמִשְׁפָּט וְהָאֱלֹהִים הַקְדוֹשׁ נִקְדָּשׁ בַּצְדִּיקָהּ, my translation). In keeping with the other *niphal* perfects of *qđš* in the OT (Exodus 39:43; Leviticus 20:3, 23:32; Numbers 20:13; Ezekiel 20:4, 28:22, 28:25, 36:23, 38:16, 39:27), this occurrence means that Yahweh ‘manifests his holiness’ in righteousness (Costecalde, 1986: 132–133). In Isaiah 5:16, then, Yahweh shows himself to be holy in

his doing justice; in bringing down the arrogant and exalting the humble. While holiness is still not to be equated with morality, Costecalde notes that there is a link here. Gentry, building on Costecalde, notes the importance of the ‘justice and righteousness’ called for by Israel’s covenant in understanding Yahweh’s holiness in this verse (Gentry, 2013b: 413–414). Along similar lines, Andrew Case points out that God’s ‘holy name,’ referred to frequently throughout the Psalms and other OT passages, is a summary of the declaration of God’s name to Moses in Exodus 34:6 (Case, 2017). God’s name as „holy,” therefore, reflects in part his character: ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.’¹

Because „holiness” language is only used in religious/cultic contexts, we cannot speak of God’s holiness simply as his „devotedness” to his people, contra Case (2017: 281–283). As Costecalde demonstrates, the language can only refer to consecration/devotedness to a deity or divine realm. This conclusion is confirmed by the predication of „holy” to other Canaanite gods—who were so-called because of their sacred, divine aura, not a covenantal devotion to their people. The plot twist, however, comes in the fact that Yahweh has a unique character viz-a-viz the other gods. The „sacred aura” that is Yahweh’s holiness includes—as Isaiah 5:16 reveals—all manner of moral and relational attributes absent from other gods’ holiness. It is this that is encapsulated in Yahweh’s self-revelation in Exodus 34:6–7, and, as this article will argue, undergirds Ezekiel 36:16–32.

Yahweh’s Holiness as Care, Forgiveness, and Steadfast Love

Robson reasons that ‘if „love your neighbour” is an expression of human holiness, and human holiness is analogous to divine holiness, then we would expect to find YHWH’s love to be an expression of his holiness’ (Robson, 2011: 124). Indeed, Yahweh’s love and care are intertwined with his holiness throughout the OT, grounded in Yahweh’s name in Exodus 34:6–7.

That Yahweh’s „sacred aura” definitionally includes his moral and relational character explains why he is often invoked as „holy” precisely when he comes to the aid of his needy people. The following is a sampling of such invocations (cf. Robson, 2011): In Psalm 77:13–15, God’s way as „holy” is described as God’s greatness in working wonders on behalf of his people, redeeming them from slavery and leading them ‘like a flock’ through the wilderness. In 1 Samuel 2:2, Hannah declares that ‘There is none holy’ like Yahweh, and then celebrates how Yahweh brings down the mighty and exalts the poor and needy (Gentry, 2013a). In Psalm 33:20–22, the ‘eye’ of Yahweh is ‘on those who fear him’ and who ‘hope in his steadfast love’ to deliver from death and to be their shield. This, the psalmist concludes, is what it means to ‘trust in his holy

1 Scripture quotations taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

name.’ In a passage reminiscent of Isaiah 5:16 (discussed above), the ‘high and lifted up’ one, whose name is ‘Holy,’ declares thus: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite’ (Isaiah 57:15). Robson comments that ‘one of the principal marks of God’s „high” holiness is his delight in dwelling with the lowly and the contrite’ (2011: 145). As a negative example, consider Numbers 20:12, where Moses fails to uphold Yahweh as „holy.” Moses’ action likely includes a failure ‘to impress upon the people YHWH’s faithfulness to them as their covenant God’ (Morales, 2024).

Beyond passages linking Yahweh’s holiness to his care and deliverance are crucial texts tying Yahweh’s holiness to his forgiveness and mercy to the wayward. Psalm 103:1–14 is particularly instructive: In verse 1, the psalmist calls on his ‘soul’ to ‘bless’ Yahweh’s ‘holy name.’ Verse 2 repeats the v. 1 invocation to ‘bless’ Yahweh, but the reference to God’s ‘holy name’ is replaced by a call to remember ‘all his benefits.’ These are God’s forgiving iniquity, redeeming, crowning with ‘steadfast love and mercy,’ working ‘righteousness and justice’ for the oppressed, and showing compassion. Central to discussion of these „benefits” which reveal Yahweh’s „holy name” is an allusion to Yahweh’s revealing of his name in Exodus 34:6–7: Yahweh is ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’ (Psalm 103:8). The psalmist’s emphasis on God’s forgiveness, mercy, and compassion are rooted in this revelation of Yahweh’s name—his „holy name.”

Finally, in Hosea 11:9 Yahweh’s ‘compassion grows warm and tender’ toward his wayward-but-loved people, and he promises that he ‘will not execute my burning anger.’ The ground of this promised mercy is that ‘I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst.’ As in Psalm 103, it is *because* Yahweh is the „holy” God that he will relent from his anger and show tender mercy to his people. God is not a fickle, vindictive „man.” As in Psalm 103, for God to be the „holy God” means to manifest the character of his name revealed in one of Hosea’s ‘base texts’ (Dearman, 2010: 291), Exodus 34:6–7: ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.’

With this groundwork laid for understanding Yahweh’s holiness in salvific contexts, we can proceed to an analysis of Yahweh’s holiness in Ezekiel 36:16–32.

Holiness in Ezekiel 36

In keeping with the whole of Ezekiel, the oracle of redemption in Ezekiel 36 displays the book’s ‘radical theocentricity’ (Joyce, 1989: 89). Yahweh repeatedly makes clear that the restoration of his people is „not for your sake” but rather for Yahweh’s own sake: ‘for the sake of my (holy) name’ and to ‘manifest/vindicate my holiness’ with the result that ‘then you (or the nations) will know that I am Yahweh.’

This section of the article will seek to determine what Ezekiel 36:16–32 implies for the meaning of Yahweh's holiness, in part by asking why his *holiness* gets vindicated in his restoring a wayward people. This section will proceed in four stages: first with an examination of the role of the nations in vindicating Yahweh's holiness, second with a brief comparison of divine abandonment and return occurrences in ancient Near East, third with an exploration of the Recognition Formula, and finally with conclusions for Ezekiel's use of holiness in this passage.

„The Nations” & Restoration „for My Sake”

Ezekiel 36:20–21 forms a chiasm, with the nations' inaccurate assessment in the center:

A: When they came to the nations

B: They profaned my holy name

C: *In that* the nations said (בְּאֵמַר לָהֶם)

B': They profaned my holy name

A: Among the nations where they came

The explanatory clause, 'in their saying about them' (בְּאֵמַר לָהֶם) explains how Israel's actions 'profaned' Yahweh's 'holy name.' To underscore that the adjective „holy” in the phrase „holy name” is not semantically bleached, v. 23 rewords the same idea using the niphal verb form of קָדַשׁ, 'to manifest/vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned,' and then simply as 'to manifest/vindicate my holiness' (dropping 'name' altogether). There is a close connection between the manifestation or vindication of Yahweh's „holiness” and of his „name” (my translations).

The concern in Ezekiel 36:20–21 is that Yahweh's holiness has been „profaned” among the surrounding nations; and v. 20 explains how: Non-Israelite nations said, 'These are Yahweh's people, and from his land they went out!' (my translation). If Israel is permanently ejected from their land, the nations would assume one or two things about Yahweh that defiled his name. Either Yahweh lacks power to keep his people in the land, or he lacks a commitment to them, or both. For evidence of the latter among the Judeans themselves, see Ezekiel 8:12, 9:9 (Block, 1998: 348). Greenburg (1997: 729) suggests an alternative explanation: the disgusting deeds of the exiles, per Ezekiel 12, 14, and 47, reflect badly on Yahweh's name; such a defiling would demand the kind of drastic heart transformation promised in chapter 36. Likely all three of these options are in play to some degree, but the initial two (power and commitment) will be focused on here.

Ezekiel's declaration that the „holiness” of God's will lead to a future act of mercy in chapter 36 finds a parallel in 20:33–44. In chapter 20, the future promise is the climactic conclusion to a succession of similar instances in Israel's history. The first

of the three episodes that Ezekiel depicts ostensibly occurs when Israel is still in the land of Egypt (20:6–10). There is no explicit passage in the Torah describing this, but Joshua 24:14 may be in view (Schnittjer, 2021: 324), especially in light of Ezekiel 20:4 (Block, 1997: 628). The other two episodes (20:13–17 and 20:21–22) refer to Moses' two recorded intercessions for Israel, both of which are grounded in concern for God's reputation. In Exodus 32:12, the stated worry is that the nations will think that Yahweh brought out the people 'with evil intent.' In Numbers 14:13–16, the worry is that the nations will think that Yahweh was 'not able' to lead the people into the land. The Exodus episode highlights Yahweh's commitment and benevolent intent toward his people; the Numbers episode highlights Yahweh's power on behalf of his people. Both instances are closely tied to Yahweh's *name* (Exodus 34:6–7, Numbers 14:17–19 reiterates)—important for Ezekiel's concern for Yahweh's „holy name” and for all to know 'that I am Yahweh.' A summary in Deuteronomy 9:27–28 weaves closely together the two themes of Yahweh's power and his posture, in a way that may hint at their inseparability:

Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, „Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.” For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.

While Yahweh's unrivalled power must be understood as crucial to the vindication of his holiness in Ezekiel 36, such a concern seems inseparable from a concern to display his unrivaled commitment to his people. This has been hinted at so far in the dual reasons for having mercy on Israel in the past, and in the very fact that the power demonstrated is power *on behalf of* his wayward people (as opposed to an act of raw power over nature, for example).

Divine Abandonment & Restoration in ANE

The nations' inaccurate assessment of the cause of Israel's exile is based on the ancient deity-land-nation relationship assumed at that time (Block, 2013, pp. 26–27). If a nation was defeated or exiled by another nation, a natural conclusion was that the gods of the conquered nation had been defeated by more powerful gods. Such assumptions can be exemplified both in the OT (e.g. 2 Kings 18:32–35 // Isaiah 36:18–20, Numbers 24:15, 1 Samuel 5) and in other ancient Mesopotamian literature (Block, 2013: 73–99; cf. Kutsko, 1999: 104–109). Marduk and his associates are often said to have left their cities voluntarily, and many times, due to cultic and ethical violations of their subjects. Occasionally, however, no reason is given; and as Block suggests, the

rationalizations that are given are generally responses to the post-defeat spoliations of the divine image (Block, 2013: 95). This set of beliefs lies behind the nations' interpretation of Israel's exile in Ezekiel 36:20, and on Yahweh's motivation to vindicate his name. Allen thus describes the nations' assessment in Ezekiel 36:20 as an assumption of Yahweh's „weakness” and a „loss of prestige” on the part of Yahweh (Allen, 1990: 178). In this reading, Yahweh's holiness includes his unrivaled power, particularly power on behalf of his people.

The „loss of prestige” may not be an exhaustive explanation, however. Despoiled divine images could later be repaired and repatriated (Kutsko, 1999: 109–122), and it was common for future restoration to be depicted. In one case, Marduk can even be alleged to represent the city's interests in exile (Block, 2013: 81). But there is a highly significant difference between Yahweh's and Marduk's abandonment and return: Yahweh's deep, personal commitment to his people. As Block points out, Marduk and company seem more concerned with their *land* than with their *people* (Block, 2013: 99). Marduk gets „homesick” for his city and his goddesses and longs to return (Block, 2013: 87). But he and his colleagues do not have the stable, committed, covenantal relationship to their subjects that Yahweh does to Israel. In Ezekiel, the situation is different. The land is important, and Ezekiel 36:1–15 recalls an oracle showing specific concern for its restoration (cf. Block, 2013: 96–97). But the *people* are central to Yahweh's concern; they are the focus, as indicated by the repetition of the covenant formula (11:20, 14:11, 34:24, 36:28, 37:23, 37:27). Yahweh's relationship to them, his transformation of their hearts, and his presence among them are at the heart of this promised manifestation of holiness. Thus, the rehabilitation of Yahweh's name will not be complete until in 37:28 the nations know that ‘I am Yahweh who sanctifies Israel’ (my translation, cf. 36:38).

It is likely that this commitment has already been hinted at in Ezekiel 11:16. After Yahweh's presence departs from the temple, it moves ‘eastward to accompany his people in exile’; his כבוד would be available to the exiles ‘as it was available to Israel in the wilderness’ (Kutsko, 1999: 97, 99; cf. Evans, 2019: 145–146). Yahweh's declaration in v. 16 is difficult (וְאֵהְיָ לָהֶם לְמִקְדָּשׁ מְעַט), and could be understood as a „diminished” sanctuary (Allen, 1990: 164; Greenberg, 1997: 204) or even less positively (Chavel, 2021). However, it is probable that here Yahweh declares that he has been ‘a sanctuary in small measure’ or ‘for a little while’ (until restoration) with the exiles (מִקְדָּשׁ מְעַט) (cf. Vries, 2018; Lyons, 2015: 147; Kutsko, 1999: 98; Block, 1997: 349–350; Evans, 2019: 145–146; Joyce, 2009: 113–114). Zimmerli (1979: 262) sees the clause as a variant of the covenant formula. And the God whose presence did *not* abandon his exiled people would restore them in future (v. 17). This peculiar act of Yahweh further

points to the uniqueness of Yahweh's concern to demonstrate his holiness, to show what it means to be Yahweh and not Marduk.

Yahweh's „holiness” certainly includes his reputation as a god of unrivaled might. As the creator of heaven and earth, and the deliverer of a specific people, he purposes to be known not as a rival to the gods of the nations but as in a class of his own. But a display of power does not fully reveal Yahweh's holiness. Intrinsic to Yahweh's „holy name,” his reputation, his „holiness,” are characteristics that reveal him to be deeply committed to his people.

Recognition Formula: Knowing ‘That I Am Yahweh’

A crucial verse for exploring the meaning of Yahweh's „holiness” in Ezekiel 36 is given in the *result* of Yahweh's promised restoration, v. 23: ‘And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. *And the nations will know that I am [Yahweh] ...* when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.’ Likewise in v. 36, the nations will know that he is Yahweh when he ‘rebuilds the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate.’ The Recognition Formula (‘Then they will know that I am Yahweh’ or equivalents) occurs seventy-two times in Ezekiel (Evans, 2019: 97), and is very closely related to the manifestation of Yahweh's holiness (his „holy name”) (Joyce, 2010: 155). The majority of these occurrences pertain to Yahweh's judgment, either upon Israel or upon the nations. However, in several occasions Israel or the nations will ‘know that I am Yahweh’ when Israel is *restored*.

The sheer distribution of Recognition Formula occurrences suggests that Exodus is underlying Ezekiel's usage: the phrase occurs nine times in Exodus, the highest distribution outside of Ezekiel (also noted by Evans, 2019: 152). John Evans (2019) and Jo Bailey-Wells (2000) both demonstrate Ezekiel's broad dependence on Exodus—with intertextual allusions, shared terminology and themes, and similar narrative arc; Evans carefully demonstrates that Ezekiel's Recognition Formula is an allusion to the text and story of Exodus. There is a particularly fascinating link back to these passages (see Exodus 7:5, 14:4, 14:18) in Ezekiel 30:19: ‘Thus I will execute judgments on Egypt. Then they will know that I am the [Yahweh].’ Exodus 6:7, 7:5, and 29:46 are significant representative examples, in which knowing that ‘I am Yahweh’ entails a double-sided experience: fierce judgments upon Yahweh's/Israel's enemy on the one hand; and deliverance, land, and Yahweh's presence for God's people on the other. My conclusion is in line with Evans's: Rooted in the book of Exodus, Ezekiel's use of the Recognition Formula is intended to highlight ‘the divine intention ultimately to redo an exodus-like redemption of Israel and renew the covenant with an outcome never before enduringly realized: Israel and the nations ‘shall know that I am Yahweh’ (Evans, 2019: 248).

Conspicuously lacking in explicit mention in Ezekiel (contrast e.g. Jeremiah 32, 9) is the singularly most profound revelation of Yahweh's name in Exodus: Exodus 34:6–7. However, while a direct reference is absent, the dual themes of Yahweh's name are present in Ezekiel. Ezekiel spends considerable time reiterating Yahweh's wrath and judgment against his rebellious people and the corrupt nations. These judgments make known 'that I am Yahweh.' But as Block observes, and as we have seen in Exodus 3 and 6, this is only one side of how Yahweh has revealed his name in Exodus 34 (Block, 2013: 70). Any full revelation of Yahweh's name, and therefore his holiness, would have to include both his „not clearing the guilty” and his being „merciful and gracious.” This two-sided template from Exodus is indeed what Ezekiel conveys (Evans, 2019: 238), with Yahweh 'abounding in steadfast love' visually depicted in the repeated restoration oracles culminating in the new temple vision of chapters 40–48.

Yahweh's Holiness: Multi-Faceted

For Yahweh to vindicate or manifest his „holiness” is multi-faceted. It is, in fact, as multi-faceted as the characteristics that make him Yahweh. This certainly includes Yahweh's unrivaled power as the true God over all the nations, who can fulfill all his purposes. It also includes Yahweh's expressions of wrath and judgment upon the rebellion of his people and the wickedness of the nations. But a full manifestation of his holiness also must include an expression of Yahweh's deep commitment to his people—to deliver them, to restore them, to forgive them, and to 'be their God' and take them as 'his people.' In Ezekiel 16, this is portrayed as Yahweh taking back his beloved bride; in Ezekiel 34, as Yahweh seeking and protecting his lost sheep. This is a crucial part of how the nations and Israel would know Yahweh's holy *name*.

The remaining question to be asked is this: can this act of restoration for the sake of Yahweh's holiness be rightly called *love*?

Love in Ezekiel 36

Our sketch of Yahweh's „holiness” in the restoration promise of Ezekiel 36 suggests that a vindication of his „holiness” includes a full manifestation of who Yahweh is, and particularly what he is for his people. It is a full manifestation, in dramatic action, of the revealing of his „name” to Israel in the past; a revelation which includes his steadfast love as well as his judgments. However, Ezekiel 36:16–32 and context seem to downplay or explicitly exclude a love-based motivation for Israel's promised restoration. This section of the article will first face objections to finding divine love in Ezekiel, and will then construct a positive cumulative case built on the following evidences: the lavish nature of the promised restoration, the repeated covenant for-

mulas, the „wife” and „shepherd” metaphors of Ezekiel 16 and 34 (respectively), and the explicit mention of divine „mercy” in Ezekiel 39.

Objections to Divine Love in Ezekiel

Ezekiel faces serious criticism from scholars who claim that Yahweh in Ezekiel is loveless. On the negative side, notably (and curiously) absent from Ezekiel is an allusion to Exodus 34:6–7. Absent also is the term *hesed* or other terms for “love,” „kindness,” „graciousness,” and „redemption” (Lyons, 2015: 140). This is widely recognized by scholars (e.g. Zimmerli, 1983: 247–248; Block, 1998: 352, 2013: 49; Joyce, 2010: 152–153; Sloane, 2022: 73). „Mercy” (רחם) occurs only once in the book (39:25). On the positive side, the book is full of harsh judgments against Yahweh’s people, and promises of restoration are explicitly said to be based *not* on Israel but on concern for „Yahweh’s name.” Sloane (2022: 72) points out that in chapter 36 Yahweh has „pity” (חמל) on his *name*, not on his people.

Some scholars therefore see Ezekiel as depicting a selfish, egotistical God who is concerned only for his own prestige. Even the promises of restoration, in this view, are insincere: ‘YHWH’s purpose is to *shame* the people for their iniquities,’ and he ‘intends that they be filled with *self-loathing*’ (Darr, 2015: 22 italics original). Tiemeyer writes that ‘Israel’s restoration is entirely loveless. As there is no love, there is very little in terms of *forgiveness*, *consolation* or *comfort* in Ezekiel. In the rare cases where these words are used, the intention is sarcasm’ (Tiemeyer, 2010: 484, italics original; quoted in Block, 2013: 46). The perspective of Schwartz (2000) is likewise dim; Block summarizes (Block, 2013: 45):

Schwartz focuses on the restoration oracles and visions, but he finds God in Ezekiel to be completely devoid of covenant faithfulness or love. YHWH promises unilateral action to restore the nation in spite, to cause Israel „to feel the eternal remorse that the exile failed to bring about.” The prophet never speaks of Israel’s restoration „as an act of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, deliverance, redemption, kindness, joy, faithfulness to the covenant, reconciliation, or consolation.” Rather, the restoration of Israel’s fortunes will be „the act of a raging God of zealous justice (קִנְיָה) who acts out of self-interest and a consuming concern for his reputation.”

Sulzbach agrees with Schwartz’s general position (Sulzbach, 2023: 475), and goes so far as to call the final temple vision the ‘prison’ of those ‘reduced to pious automatons’ (Sulzbach, 2023: 482).

Some of these objections should be taken seriously. As is readily apparent, Ezekiel simply does not sound all of the same notes as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Hosea (Block, 1998: 352; Lyons, 2015: 140–141). The other prophets speak more of Yahweh’s un-

failing love and compassion for his people, while Ezekiel speaks more of Yahweh's concern for his name. There is a different tone, a different emphasis, and a different *Sitz im Leben* in this work; Ezekiel's unique voice should not be flattened out. Sloane's caution not to read love into the text should be heeded (Sloane, 2022: 74).

However, some of the more extreme objections simply fail to read the whole of Ezekiel in a fair or charitable manner, and they overlook certain contradictory textual evidence (Ganzel, 2010; Block, 2013: 44–72; Lyons, 2015: 115–164). For example, the language of 'loathing yourselves for your iniquities' after restoration (36:31, 16:63, 20:43) is more likely to refer to the ability to feel genuine grief, repentance, and accurate self-knowledge than some kind of perpetual psychological torture (Lapsley, 2000; Lyons, 2015: 137). Some of the remaining objections will be best handled by examining positive evidence.

Before proceeding with positive clues for Yahweh's love in Ezekiel, one additional ground-clearing note is in order: Block points out that the use of למען in 36:22 does not necessarily mean that the action is not for the *benefit* of Israel. It rather specifies that Israel's behavior / merits are not the *basis* of the saving acts; Yahweh's name and holiness are (Block, 2013: 66). Such a reading coheres nicely with Ezekiel 20:44: 'And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds.' The contrast here seems to concern the *basis* of Israel's salvation. Additionally, both in Ezekiel (e.g. 39:25) and in Isaiah, Yahweh's self-concern and his care for Israel are not mutually exclusive. See for example Isaiah 43:4, 25, which combine the two motivations in the same oracle (cf. Lyons, 2015: 144). One of the unique dynamics in Ezekiel's restoration oracles is that, contrary to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Israel's restoration is *not* predicated on their repentance (Joyce, 2009: 26; Block, 2013: 71; Evans, 2019: 237). Absent repentance as a trigger to initiate divine mercy, Yahweh's holiness steps in.

Lavishness of Restoration Promises

The first positive hint of divine love in Ezekiel is simply in the lavishness of the depictions of the restoration promises. The radical promises of restoration in Ezekiel seem incommensurate with a simple concern to display power or save face. Yahweh promises not merely to return Israel to her former conditions, but to radically escalate his blessing and presence. His Spirit will be poured out on them (36:27; 37:14), his dwelling will be permanently with them (37:28), their land will become like the garden of Eden (36:25), northern and southern tribes will be reunited (37:15–22), a good shepherd will be over them (37:24). Ezekiel's „everlasting covenant” comes with no covenant curses, only its blessings (Lyons, 2015: 134). When the nations observe this and recognize that „I am Yahweh,” what they see will be something far more than

a return to the land or a crushing of enemies. They will see a lavish outpouring of presence and commitment to a people. He would be the Holy One ‘in’ Israel (39:7), blessing them forever. As Pikor observes, ‘The salvation oracles in Ezekiel 34–37 end with a triple statement emphasizing that Yahweh will forever be present among his people and the sanctuary God’s dwelling place (37:27) will be a sign of his presence (37:26, 28)’ (2018: 168). The final vision of the book—the new temple—is a literarily extravagant ode to Yahweh’s full life-giving presence among his renewed people, closing the book with the words ‘Yahweh is there’ (Lyons, 2015: 149–150; cf. Ganzel, 2020). Though not quoted, Ezekiel’s depictions seem consonant with the ‘with all my heart and all my soul’ language of Jeremiah 32:41 (cf. Deuteronomy 11:13).

Covenant Formula

The „covenant formula” (‘You will be my people, and I will be your God’) appears in Ezekiel 36:28 and elsewhere in Ezekiel (11:20, 14:11, 34:24, 37:23, 37:27), ‘solely in the context of promises of salvation’ (Rendtorff, 1998: 35–37, 76–78, see list on p. 94). A foundational passage for the covenant formula—as well as the Recognition Formula, with which it is linked—is Exodus 6:2–8, where Yahweh announces the establishment of an intimate bond between himself and Israel (Rendtorff, 1998: 47). Yahweh promises to redeem them from bondage and then take them to be his; he will dwell with them and bless them in a flourishing land.

While the origins of the term are debated, Sohn argues that the covenant formula in the OT is based on marriage and adoption formulas in the ancient Near East (Sohn, 1999): ‘The Israelites borrowed the concepts of marriage and adoption to describe their relationship with Yhwh, since these covenants represented the most intimate and personal relationships between partners’ (Sohn, 1999: 372). Such a background fits perfectly with the dual motif of marriage and adoption in Ezekiel 16. The occurrence of the covenant formula in Ezekiel 36 and its recurrence elsewhere in the book thus signal to readers that Yahweh’s restoration promises envision a return to the relationship he established with the nascent nation in Exodus—a relationship depicted in Ezekiel itself as an intimate and loving one.

„Wife” in Ezekiel 16, Shepherd in Ezekiel 34

Joyce claims that ‘all of the phrases’ in Ezekiel 16 ‘appear to be either legal or sexual; we do not find here much evidence of warmth of affection’ (Joyce, 2010: 153). It is true that the passage takes on dark and violent language, but Joyce’s conclusion overlooks some evidence. First, v. 5 strongly implies that Yahweh „pitied” and „had compassion” on the abandoned newborn. Next, in Yahweh’s declaration to ‘Live!’ in v. 6 he adopts the infant as his own daughter, who will now be responsible to care for

her (Block, 1997: 481). Yahweh then pledges himself to the now-matured woman in v. 8, and proceeds to tenderly wash her and lavish everything he could upon her (Block, 1997: 485). ‘The present washing and anointing with oil [in v. 9] seem to have been part of the wedding ritual itself, a tender expression of love and devotion’ (Block, 1997: 484). The ‘lavish provisions [of vv. 13–14] portray a husband whose love for his wife knows no bounds’ (Block, 1997: 485). Eichrodt’s summary is fitting: ‘Here Ezekiel is really speaking of a springtide of love’ (Eichrodt, 1970: 206). Eichrodt points to a parallel in Ezekiel 20:5–7: ‘One cannot miss the note of love, sounded in the description of the careful choice of Israel’s new home’ (Eichrodt, 1970: 266).

Finally, 16:60 ‘comes arguably close to nostalgia’ (Lyons, 2015: 144). Thinking back to those early days described in vv. 1–14, Yahweh states, ‘Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.’ ‘Here the author’s belief in the relational impulse that led YHWH to rescue the abandoned child Israel (16.6–7) and enter into a covenant with her (vv. 8–14) is the grounds for the hope that YHWH will be impulsively moved to enter into a relationship with restored Israel’ (Lyons, 2015: 144–145). Note at this point the similarity to Hosea 11:9, discussed above. Dearman notes the overlap with Hosea 2:14–15 (2010: 277).

The relational intimacy suggested here may also be presupposed in the use of קָנָה language in Ezekiel—‘passion’ over marital love betrayed (e.g. Song 8:6). Block points readers to Ezekiel 6:9, where Yahweh speaks of ‘how broken(hearted) I have been over their promiscuous heart’ (Block’s translation) as a reminder that ‘Yahweh’s response to Israel’s infidelity is neither loveless nor heartless’ (Block, 2013: 63; cf. Lyons, 2015). It is against this background, Block avers, that Ezekiel’s jealousy language (קִנְיָה) should be understood: ‘It is God’s legitimate passion for one whom he loves’ (Block, 2013: 63).

It is highly relevant, then, that Ezekiel 16:59–63 contains considerable points of overlap with Ezekiel 36:16–32. ‘Ashamed and confounded’ language in Ezekiel is found only in 16:52, 63 and 36:32 (occurrence in 32:30 is not relevant). ‘You will remember your [evil] ways’ occurs only in 16:61 and 36:31. ‘Eternal covenant’ appears in 16:60 and 37:26. Some form of cleansing water shows up in 16:4, 9 and 36:25. The parallel of metaphorical adultery and idolatry are key motifs in each passage, respectively. Some form of blood uncleanness appears in both passages (16:8–9, 36:17). Finally, a form of the Recognition Formula appears in both (16:62; 36:23, 36; 37:13, 28). Readers should, therefore, recognize Yahweh’s love for his ‘bride’ under the surface in Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel 34 employs another tender metaphor for Yahweh and his people: shepherd and sheep. In this chapter, Israel’s corrupt leaders are framed as butchers rath-

er than shepherds, while the people themselves are oppressed, lost, suffering sheep. Yahweh promises to return as their shepherd, and his words are strikingly tender and caring (vv. 4–6, 11–16, 25–31). Israel's current shepherds are chided for ruling with 'force and harshness' (v. 4), precipitating the scattering of Yahweh's sheep with no one to „search or seek for them” (v. 6). Yahweh himself promises to 'seek out' and 'rescue' his sheep (vv. 11–12), 'bring back the strayed,' 'bind up the injured,' and 'strengthen the weak' (v. 16). They will be 'secure' in the land, with 'the bars of their yoke' broken, and no enemies 'make them afraid' (vv. 27–28). They would no longer 'suffer the reproach of the nations' (v. 29). Immediately following are both the Recognition Formula and the covenant formula (v. 30). Whatever the basis or primary motivation for this restoration may be, one would be hard pressed not to see gracious care, pity, and love depicted. As this passage is alluded to again in Ezekiel 37:21–28, readers should detect Yahweh's loving shepherding under the surface in Ezekiel 36.

Finally, the word „mercy” (רחם) does make a lone appearance in Ezekiel 39:25, in a key location at the very conclusion to the restoration oracles (Ganzel, 2010: 208). Positioned where it is, readers are intended to interpret the preceding oracles of restoration (chs 34, 36–37) as *mercy* (Ganzel, 2010: 208n51). What had not been stated explicitly is now, in this single word, uncovered. Significantly, the explicit mention of mercy occurs in the same verse with a reference to Yahweh's being 'jealous for my holy name.' Much as in Isaiah, so in Ezekiel Yahweh's acting for his name is not incompatible with his genuinely showing mercy. The explicit mention of 'mercy' (רחם) in 39:25 underscores that what looked like mercy in Ezekiel 36–37 indeed is.

Yahweh's Love: Embedded in His Holiness

My claim in this article is not that love is the basis of Yahweh's restorative promises in Ezekiel 36. My claim, rather, is that intrinsic to Yahweh's manifestation of his *holiness* in Ezekiel 36 is a manifestation of *love* for his people. Yahweh's holiness is a love-holiness. As Zimmerli states, Yahweh's honor 'at the same time signifies the acknowledgement of his inner faithfulness' (Zimmerli, 1983: 247). While love is not the 'basic reason for his restoration of Israel,' genuine grace is still 'absolutely characteristic of Ezekiel' (Joyce, 2009: 27–28). In Eichrodt's words, 'God's compassion for his guilt-laden people, his efforts to bring them into a new fellowship of love, is not repudiated' by the statement that 'it is not for your sake' (Eichrodt, 1970: 496).

Conclusion

Contrary to much popular opinion, holiness is not „separateness” or „otherness”; nor is it mere transcendence. Human holiness is cultic devotedness to a god, and the call to be 'holy to Yahweh' includes imaging his own ritual and moral holiness. Yahweh's

holiness is multifaceted, as it is the aura, the ethos that manifests who he truly is. Part of Yahweh's holiness is his unrivalled power, both over nature and particularly on behalf of his people. But central to his „holy name” is Yahweh's self-revelation at Sinai: he is ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love’ even while he „does not clear the guilty’ (Exodus 36:6–7).

Ezekiel 36:16–32 functions as a „controlled environment” for studying how Yahweh's holiness looks when it is claimed as the sole motivation for Yahweh's restorative action. In Brueggemann's words, ‘All hope for the future rests in the very character of God, for their God will take seriously being God’ (Brueggemann, 1987: 79; cited in Allen, 1990: 180). What does it look like for Yahweh to be moved to act not so much by love or pity but by a concern to demonstrate his holiness? Ezekiel's allusions to Yahweh's commitment to Israel in the past, the Recognition Formula's strong connection to Exodus, and Yahweh's unique concern for his people even during divine abandonment reveal this: Yahweh's holiness includes not only his unrivaled power but also his unrivaled commitment to his people.

However, the lack of explicit language of „love” coupled with the repeated assurance that restoration is ‘not for your sake’ has led some scholars to deny that Ezekiel's restoration promises include genuine commitment to or love for Israel. While wishing to honor the unique emphases of Ezekiel, this paper has demonstrated that Ezekiel 36:16–32 does indeed portray genuine love. Yahweh's promises are lavish, and center on his everlasting presence with an ultimately blessed people—a people bound once again by the intimate covenant formula. Genuine love and tender care are to be found in the wife and shepherd imagery of Ezekiel 16 and 34 (respectively), both of which passages are literarily linked to Ezekiel 36. And the appearance of the word „mercy” capping off the restoration oracles confirms that Yahweh's restoration indeed includes his love.

This article does not claim that love is the basis of Yahweh's restorative promises in Ezekiel 36. This article has instead demonstrated that for Ezekiel 36:16–32, included in the ultimate manifestation of Yahweh's holiness in Israel's *Heilsgeschichte* is a manifestation of his ultimate *love* for his people. If he is to take seriously „being Yahweh,” and if the nations are to know him as such, they must see his power, justice, and merciful love. In the end, to say that God is holy is not altogether different to saying that God is love. Central to Israel's calling to be ‘holy as I am holy’ was the command to love (Leviticus 19:2, 18) (Robson, 2011). And God manifests his holiness in lavish demonstrations of his love to a wayward people. In the Holy of Holies, after all, was the mercy seat.

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