CHAPTER FIVE
THE RHETORICAL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BOOK

To evaluate the rhetorical effectiveness of the book of Ezekiel, we need to take a step back and review the argument as a whole. If the preceding outline is valid, the book of Ezekiel was designed to shape the self-understanding of the exilic community. Torn between an apparently successful Babylon-centred nationalism and a loyal Jerusalem-centred nationalism, the readers are urged to find their identity neither in Babylon nor in the Jerusalem of the past. They are challenged "to relinquish the old city that is now gone" and helped "to receive the newness of God and act on the new historical possibilities now being made available." They are asked to dissociate themselves from a communal vision in which Yahweh is not central and to associate with the vision of a community that is first and foremost focused on and governed by Yahweh. The transformation anticipated is not from nation to religious community. The goal is a nation centred on Yahweh's sanctuary. A spiritual as well as a political transformation is required.

The book of Ezekiel never clarifies whether political restoration will precede or follow the spiritual renewal, but it seems clear that spiritual renewal can neither wait for the return from exile to take place, nor can it be complete without the re-establishment of the nation. Thus it is best to state that the book aims at a renewal which begins with the reading in exile, but will only be complete when Israel worships Yahweh "on a very high mountain" without again defiling the land. In this process of renewal the identity of Israel will have changed. The people's myths and symbols, their historical memories

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and central values, that is, those aspects that shaped the special character of Israel’s identity, will have been reinterpreted. While it is true that “a nation only lives through evoking its past,” the way in which the past is evoked is significant. In the book of Ezekiel remembering the past is not a reassuring exercise. In the battle between “cosmopolitans” and “nativists,” that is, between those who press for cultural adaptation to the life-style of the conqueror and those who seek to preserve the ancient ways, Ezekiel does not side with the “nativists.” Israel is not to be restored “as in the days of old.” Ezekiel’s doctrine of the complete annihilation of Jerusalem serves this purpose of dissociating the exilic community from Old Israel. I have therefore highlighted this feature of the book whose rhetorical function has not been examined before, even though the feature had been observed (e.g., Eichrodt, 483).

Furthermore, I suggested that the involvement of the readers was established in the first part of the book through a cycle of ever-increasing reader participation and then sustained through the use of metaphorical language and calls for the exilic community to repent. At first, the readers were only asked to see the end of Jerusalem as the result of her sin, then they were asked to “judge” Jerusalem, and with Jerusalem their own rebellious behaviour. In the oracles against the nations the readers were invited to see the same pattern of rebellion against Yahweh at work which had brought Jerusalem to its end. The readers are encouraged to see that rebellion against Yahweh reduces Israel to the level of other nations and does not have a future, since Yahweh will destroy pride against him every-

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3 I am especially indebted to Anthony D. Smith’s description of the character of ethnic communities in pre-modern eras in his The Ethnic Origins of Nations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Smith argues that ethnic identity is rooted in the myths, memories, values and symbols “which express and explain the community’s perception of itself, its origins, development and destiny, and its place in the cosmic order; manifested in a round of ceremonies, rites, artefacts and laws which bind the community to its celestial pantheon and its homeland” (p. 42).


5 The terminology is from Smith, Ethnic Origins, p. 56. He describes the latter position as “ethnicism.” He states: “Ethnicism is fundamentally defensive. It is a response to outside threats and divisions within. It seeks a return to the status quo ante, to an idealized image of a primitive past. It emerges when the group’s sense of ethnicity is attenuated and impaired, or when it is challenged by shattering external events” (ibid., p. 55). See also my considerations under “the social and social-psychological perspective” in chapter 2.