CHAPTER FOUR

IMPURITY AND RETRIBUTION (I)

1. Introduction

That Ezekiel is influenced by the priestly tradition is rightly claimed by many scholars.¹ In particular, the priestly concern for holiness and purity² features prominently in Ezekiel. One scholar claims that the "Kern und Stern des ezehielischen Gottesgedankens ist...Jahwes Heiligkeit".³ Another is willing to go as far as to say that "Ezekiel evolved his doctrine of holiness with the consciousness, and in the manner, of a theologian" who "thinks...in a logical, consistent, coherent and systematic fashion".⁴ While not all scholars would agree with that, it is certainly true that Ezekiel employs the vocabulary of holiness and purity more than any other canonical prophet.⁵ For example, Ezekiel distinguishes himself in consistently designating the sins of the people as profanation and impurity.⁶ Ezekiel also stresses the holiness of God which is connected especially with his name.⁷ Although the language of holiness and purity is dominant in Ezekiel, not many studies have been devoted to examine this aspect of the Ezekielian theology. The earlier study by Baudissin is more concerned with what and who can be called holy in the OT in gen-

² The usage of “pure/impure” to render מַדָּרְסָה/אֳסָפֶה is not consistent. While BDB uses predominantly “clean/unclean”, DCH uses mostly “pure/impure”. The HALAT has “rein/unrein” which is translated in HALOT by a mixture of “clean/unclean” and “pure/impure”. Jenson (1992:43n.5) claims that “the word ‘purity’ in English has a positive content lacking in the Priestly יִשְׁדָא”. But in the following, no distinction is made between these two sets of terminology.
³ Brögelmann 1935:32. Similarly, Ackroyd (1968:104) says that Ezekiel has a “profound sense of the holiness of God”.
⁴ Gammie 1989:45.
⁵ The statistics provided by TLOT under, for example, the word מַדָּרְסָה show clearly that it occurs in Ezekiel more than any other prophet (Müller 1997:1106–1107). Similarly for מַדָּרְסָה, יִשְׁדָא and אֳסָפֶה. Cf. Muilenburg (1962:622), who says that “Ezekiel’s awareness of the divine holiness is more awesome, more sublime and majestic, more cosmic and ‘tremendous’ than that of his prophetic predecessors”.
⁷ Nine times in Ezekiel out of a total of 21 in the OT.
eral, and less in the individual books. Ringgren’s brief study devotes less than two pages to Ezekiel. Theological dictionaries do not necessarily discuss holiness in Ezekiel. There are some specific studies on the idea of holiness in Ezekiel, namely, those of Bettenzoli, Haik, Gammie and Miao, but these studies pay less attention to the idea of purity/impurity in Ezekiel. There is, therefore, a need to examine this idea more thoroughly and, in view of our concern, its relationship to retribution.

Since the idea of purity/impurity cannot be considered in isolation from its related concepts, we will start with a discussion of the general idea of the holiness word group, paying particular attention to purity/impurity. Then we will probe into Ezekiel’s idea of purity/impurity. This forms the basis for the next chapter in which we will deal with the relationship between impurity and retribution in Ezekiel.

2. Holiness and Purity: An Introduction

2.1. The Holiness Word Group

Since one cannot discuss the concept of holiness or purity in isolation from its related concepts, we will in this section briefly examine the holiness word group as found in the OT. The terms of the word group of holiness can be found in Lev 10:10:

\[ \text{הלברל בֵּין הַדָּקָּשׁ וּבֵין הָחוֹל} \]

\[ \text{ובין הָמַּמָּא וּבֵין הָ;;;;;;;;שׁוֹרְמָא} \]

to distinguish between the holy and the common

and between the impure and the pure

While each of the two opposed pairs, holy/profane and impure/pure, appears elsewhere individually, the two pairs are found together only again in Ez 22:26 and 44:23. The relations between these two pairs are subjected to various interpretations. The interpretation that

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8 Baudissin 1878.
10 E.g. Frocksch (1964:92–94) spends two-thirds of his discussion of holiness in the prophetic theology on Isaiah (and Deutero-Isaiah) but ignores Ezekiel.
12 This is one of Gammie’s critiques of Otto’s idea of the holy (1989:7–8).