

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN EZEKIEL 18, 1-32

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Abstract:

Persoalan apakah anak mewarisi dosa orang tuanya atau apakah Allah menghukum seseorang karena kesalahan orang tuanya telah menjadi perdebatan yang seru di kalangan umat kristiani, para klerus maupun para ahli Alkitab. Beberapa teks Alkitab, seperti Kel. 20:5; 34:7; Bil. 14:18; Ul. 5:9; Yer. 32:18 sepertinya memang menekankan adanya dosa warisan. Namun banyak teks Alkitab lainnya, seperti Ul. 24:16; Yer. 31:29-30; Yeh. 18:4 menyangkal hal itu dan menandakan tanggung jawab pribadi. Ada yang menduga bahwa terjadi perkembangan atau perubahan dalam paham Israel tentang dosa. Pada mulanya Israel meyakini adanya dosa warisan, namun sejak abad ke-6 paham ini mulai diformulasi ulang dan puncak perubahannya ada pada Yehezkiel. Analisa atas konteks dan isi Yeh. 18:2-4 menunjukkan bahwa Yehezkiel memang menolak ide hukuman warisan. Namun apa yang dibuatnya bukanlah menyangkal teks-teks Alkitab yang sepertinya berbicara tentang hukuman warisan melainkan penafsiran dan pemakaian yang salah atas teks-teks tersebut.

Keywords: The sour grapes proverb, repentance, individual responsibility, collective responsibility, awareness of sinfulness, fatalism.

The existence of inherited punishment, that is, the passing of divine punishment from one generation to the next, is nebulous and has caused controversies. For example, believing in inherited punishment, some Christian charismatic groups in Java (Indonesia) organize what they call the “family tree” retreat (retret pohon keluarga). The main aim of this retreat is to heal or to free participants from the sickness, sufferings or curses which are believed to be caused by their parents’ or grandparents’ sins. This practice, which was likely inspired by Kenneth McAll’s book *Healing the Family Tree*, has angered many other Christians, both clergy and laity. The episcopal vicar of the Jakarta archdiocese issued a pastoral letter on August 27, 2003, urging charismatic groups not to support such retreats. However, no biblical arguments were given, and the letter roused dissatisfaction among those who still support this kind of retreat.

Several passages which contains a formula of inherited punishment (Exod 20,5-6; 34,6-7; Num 14,17-18; Deut 5,9-10) and the implementation of this doctrine (1 Sam 2,11-36; 2 Sam 12,1-25; 21,1-14; 1 Kgs 14,1-18; 16,1-4; 21,1-29; 2 Kgs 21,1-18) lead the readers to understand that the author (Deuteronomistic historian) is presenting the doctrine of inherited punishment.

The prophets Ezekiel, however, has been seen as abrogating the doctrine of inherited punishment when he assailed the popular proverb "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18,2; cf. Jer 31,29). Ezekiel affirmed that "it is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ezek 18,4)¹. Other passages in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (such as Jer 17,10; 32,19; Ezek 3,17-21; 7,9.27; 14,12-23; 18, 20; 33,12-20; etc.) also seem to emphasize the individual responsibility. Some scholars, however, such as Lindars and Joyce, argue that the central concern of Ezekiel was not individual responsibility but national responsibility².

Let us study Ezek 18,2-4 to see whether this text proves that Ezekiel abolishes the notion of inherited punishment.

1. The Context of Ezek 18, 2-4

The sour grapes proverb in Ezek 18,2 is part of a call to repent and to live (Ezek 18), which is placed in the middle of the judgment oracles (chaps. 15-17 and 19)³. Ezekiel announced that the punishment of Jerusalem was unavoidable (chap.14) because of their unfaithfulness (chap.15), especially because of their adultery, a symbol for idolatry (chap.16). The punishment was set into motion by Zedekiah, the king in Judah (chap.17), whose request for military aid from Egypt provoked a double death sentence both from Nebuchadnezzar (because he broke his allegiance to the vassal covenant with Babylon) and from God (because he broke his allegiance to the Lord's covenant). Chapter 19 then presents the lamentation over the deportation of the king and the ruin of the nation. In the middle of these judgment oracles Ezekiel summons Judah to repent and live (chap.18).

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- 1 Many scholars, such as G. von Rad, Brownlee, Taylor, hold that Ezekiel 18 is concerned to argue for "individual responsibility". See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, I, New York – Edinburgh, 1962-1965, 392-94; W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, London, 1970, 231-249; W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, WBC 28, Waco, TX, 1986, 50, 284, 292; J. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, London, 1969, 45.
 - 2 B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", *VT* 15 (1965) 452-467; Joyce, P.M., "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18?", in E.A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Biblica* 1978, JSOTSS 11, Sheffield 1979, 185-196; and "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", in J. Lust, ed., *Ezekiel and His Book. Textual Literary Criticism and their Interrelation*, Leuven 1986, 317-321.

1.1. The Structure and Content of Ezek 18

Ezek 18 is composed of several small units from different redaction levels⁴. Its literary genre may belong to that of the disputation speech, which (according to Murray) is made up of three elements: thesis, counter-thesis, and dispute⁵. The content of Ezekiel 18 can thus be sketched as follows:

- v. 1 : Introduction
- v. 2 : Thesis
- vv. 3-4 : Counter-thesis
- vv. 5-29 : Disputation
 - vv. 5-20 : Each generation is responsible for its own deeds
 - vv. 5-9 : The first generation is good and shall surely live
 - vv. 10-13 : The second generation is wicked and shall surely die
 - vv. 14-19 : The third generation is good and shall surely live
 - vv. 21-29 : Each individual will be judged on the basis of his or her present behaviour
 - vv. 21-25: First argument
 - vv. 21-23 : A wicked person repents and shall surely live
 - vv. 24 : A righteous person turns away and shall surely die
 - v. 25 : Conclusion
 - vv. 26-29: Second argument
 - vv. 26 : A righteous person turns away and shall surely die
 - vv. 27-28 : A wicked person repents and shall surely live
 - v. 29 : Conclusion
- vv. 30-32: Conclusion (summon to repent).

The *thesis* to be disputed is presented immediately after the introduction formula (v. 1) in the form of a question which challenges the people's opinion: "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?" (v. 2). Then follows a refutation of the thesis: "As I live, says the Lord, this proverb (*mâsal*) shall no more be used by you in Israel" (v. 3) and its theological basis: "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die" (v. 4a)⁶. Finally the *counter-thesis* is formulated succinctly: "Only the soul that sins shall die" (v. 4b).

The *dispute* proper begins in v. 5 and consists of two major parts (vv. 5-20 and vv. 21-29)⁷. In the first part the prophet buttresses the counter-

3 M.C. Lind, *Ezekiel*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1996 148.

4 G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse*, SBLDS 126, Atlanta, GA 1990, 34.

5 D.F. Murray, "The Rhetoric of Disputation", *JSOT* 38 (1987) 102.117-118.

6 D.F. Murray, "The Rhetoric of Disputation", 118.

thesis by describing the interrelated hypothetical cases of three successive generations within a family (vv. 5-18).⁸ These three generations are presented in three subsequent subunits which use a similar structure. Each begins with a protasis followed by an apodosis (verdict). First (vv. 5-9), there is a good generation: "If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right... he shall surely live". Second (vv. 10-13), there follows a wicked generation: "If he begets a son who is a robber, a shedder of blood ..., he will surely be put to death". Third (vv. 14-19), there follows a good generation: "But if this man begets a son who... does not do likewise... When the son has done what is lawful and right, he shall surely live". The cases insist on the individual responsibility of both the righteous and the wicked. Each generation is judged independently.

The first part of the disputation (vv. 5-20) concludes with the citation of the audience's question: "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the iniquity of the father?'" (v. 19a). This question repeats in other words the *thesis* found in v. 2. In response to this question the prophet not only reiterates the *counter-thesis* of v. 4b but also adds that parents will not suffer for their children's wickedness (vv. 19b-20). Thus each generation is responsible for its own behaviour and its consequences.⁹

The second part of the disputation (vv. 21-29) is concerned with the effects of a change of conduct on the part of the individual.¹⁰ The individual's life is no longer fettered by the sum of all the deeds he or she has done so far. Each person will be judged by God not on the basis of the sum of his/her deeds, but on present disposition and behaviour. Changes are not only possible but also have consequences¹¹. Two hypothetical cases are given. First, vv. 21-23: The wicked person who repents and does righteousness "shall surely live". Second, v. 24: the righteous person who turns away from his righteousness and commits wickedness shall surely die.

Verse 25 functions like verse 19. It concludes the counter-thesis by using the same words as at the beginning: "Yet you say". But this time the people do not object to the thesis itself but to the significance of the thesis, that is, they accuse YHWH of injustice, saying "the way of the Lord is not equitable".

Verses 26-29 repeat in inverse order and amplify the counter-thesis of vv. 21-25. Verse 26 deals with the righteous person's turn to wickedness, while v. 27-28 deals with the conversion of the wicked. The conclusion in

7 G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel* 18, 57

8 G.H. . Matties, *Ezekiel* 18, 57; P.M. Joyce, "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 187.

9 G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel* 18, 44.

10 W.A. Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel. An Inductive Study*, Chicago 1943, 134.

11 W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 241.

v. 29 is similar to that in v. 25. It insists that it is not YHWH who is unjust but the people.

1.2. The Purpose of Ezek 18

It has been argued that Ezek 18 is a combination of two originally separate units: vv. 1-20 (which is concerned with individual responsibility) and vv. 21-32 (which is concerned with repentance or with God's constant readiness to accept and save those who repent).¹² It is true that v. 21 introduces a new and different theme, yet the two themes are closely related and therefore do not necessarily indicate separate origins.¹³ They are two sides of the same coin.

The two parts (vv. 5-20 and 21-29) are bound together by the conclusion, which contains an oracle of judgment and an earnest plea for repentance (vv. 30-32).¹⁴ Allen rightly calls this chapter a complex disputation that culminates in a summons to repent, since the goal of the argumentation of the whole chapter is clearly repentance.¹⁵ The word *lâken*, which begins v. 30, indicates that all the preceding verses (vv. 1-29) are the reasons for the exhortation to repent (30-32).

The sour grapes proverb was probably attacked because it hampered Israel's repentance. In attacking this proverb two reasons for repentance are indicated. First, each individual is responsible for his/her own sins (vv. 5-20). In other words, each generation is responsible for its own behaviour, which is why the exiles must be held accountable for their present situation. Second, each individual is able to turn away from his/her old pattern of behaviour and will be judged according to present behaviour (vv. 21-29). Thus these verses set out the argument for repentance that the guilty (the exiles) can accomplish in order to turn aside God's punishment. The exiles are able to turn away from their old pattern of behaviour, which was marked by rebellious acts, without being hampered by family ties (18,5-20) or by their own former way of life (21,29).¹⁶

12 M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, *Ezekiel 1-20*, Garden City, NY 1983, 334-336; cf. G. Fohrer, *Die Hauptprobleme des Buches Ezechiel*, BZAW 72, Berlin 1952, 102; K.F. Pohlmann, *Das Buch des Propheten Hesekiel (Ezechiel)*. I. Kapitel 1-19, ATD 22,1, Göttingen 1996, 261.

13 Graffy argues that the disputation concludes at v. 20 and that Ezek 18,21-32 has an issue that is different from that of 18,1-20. See Graffy, A., *A Prophet Confronts His People. The Disputation Speech in the Prophets*, AnBib 104, Rome 1984, 58-64. His argument on form-critical grounds, however, is not convincing. Verse 21 does not introduce a separate theme but rather the argument developed for the counter-thesis. In fact, most commentators hold that verses 21-32 "forms a natural continuation of the debate about responsibility in verses 1-20". A. MEIN, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 204.

14 W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 281; cf. G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 34.

15 L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, WBC 28, Dallas, TX 1994, 267-268; W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 281.

16 H. Leene, "Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Promises of Inner Renewal in Diachronic Perspective", in

Verse 20 functions as the hinge between the two parts. Verse 20a (“The soul that sins shall die”) repeats the counter-thesis stated in v. 4b. It mirrors the case of individual responsibility in vv. 5-19. Verse 20bc introduces a new element that looks ahead to the argument of vv. 21-32.¹⁷ It states that not only shall the son not suffer for the iniquity of the father, but also the father shall not suffer for the iniquity of the son. Individual responsibility, however, does not cut off hope for the salvation of the wicked. Arguments for such hope are developed in vv. 21-29.

Thus in its present form this chapter seems to be intended by its author as a single compositional unit. The refutation of the proverb in vv. 3-20 would be incomplete without the call to repentance (vv. 30-31), the argument of which is given in vv. 21-29, since the refutation alone could lead to despair.¹⁸ Raitt rightly sees vv. 2-29 as a narrative framework which explains (in the third person) what occasioned the prophet to call the people to conversion.¹⁹ The uniqueness of the disputation speech in Ezek 18 shows that what is in question is no longer the validity of the thesis or the counter-thesis but something which is outside the framework of the disputation speech, namely repentance²⁰. The disputation speech was formulated to provoke Israel to repentance.

Ezek 18,2-4 should be attributed to the first exilic period between 593 and 587 BCE. The reasons are obvious. Ezekiel, a priest, was exiled to Babylonia along with his compatriots in 597. He was called to prophesy in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile (1,1-2) – approximately 593 BCE. His ministry took place entirely in Babylonia.²¹

The text portrays the prophet directly attacking his community, which quoted the sour grapes proverb (v. 2). They seem to quote the sour grapes proverb before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. This community accused God of acting unjustly (v. 26), probably – as Eichrodt suggests – because they felt that the really guilty parties (their compatriots in Jerusalem) had escaped punishment while they themselves were punished excessively.²²

J.C. De Moor – H.F. Van Rooy, ed., *Past, Present, Future. The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets*, Leiden – Boston – Köln 2000, 152.

17 G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 43.

18 J.S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSS 196, Sheffield 1995, 161; G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 44-45.

19 T.M. Raitt, “The Prophetic Summons to Repentance”, *ZAW* 83 (1971) 38.

20 According to A. Graffy (*A Prophet Confronts His People*, 64) the aim of the disputation speech generally is to contest and refute the thesis. But this does not mean that every disputation speech must have the same purpose. See G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 52.

21 P.M. Joyce, *Divine Initiative*, 43; ID., “Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18”, 188. For a discussion on the location of Ezekiel’s ministry see T. Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, Brill – Leiden – Boston – Köln, 1999, 27-55; G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 57.

22 W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 236; See also J.W. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, NCBC, London – Grand Rapids, MI 1969, 1982, 108.

2. Inherited and Individual Punishment

How should we understand Ezekiel's refutation of the sour grapes proverb of Ezek 18,3: "As I live, says the Lord, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel"? Is it an assertion of individual responsibility over against collective responsibility?

The context of the sour grapes proverb shows that the proverb was quoted by the exilic community, which considered itself innocent. By quoting the proverb, not only did they accuse YHWH of punishing the innocent: "the way of the Lord is not just" (18,25.29; 33,17a), but they also deny any responsibility for their own fate.²³ Thus the proverb was used as an excuse to unload their guilt on previous generations and to exclude individual responsibility.²⁴

At first glance the prophet's refutation of the proverb (v. 3) and the counter-thesis that insists on individual responsibility in v. 4b seem to abrogate collective responsibility. But there are at least four reasons why the prophet did not intend to do so. What is refuted by the prophet is not the content (inherited punishment; cf. Exod 20,5; 34,7; Deut 5,9)²⁵ but the wrong use of the proverb.

Theological Basis

The theological basis of the prophet's refutation of the thesis (the proverb) assumes that YHWH applies both individual and collective responsibility. It insists that YHWH is the owner and sovereign of every living person: "The person of the father and the person of the son are both mine..." (v. 4ab), which means that God is absolutely free in judgment. No one has the right to question His administration of justice, whether He applies individual responsibility or collective responsibility.²⁶ Accordingly, the emphasis on individual responsibility in v. 4c should not be understood as a denial of inherited punishment, as if YHWH applied only individual responsibility.²⁷

Such an understanding is in agreement with the many instances in the Book of Ezekiel (such as 16; 20; 21,3.9; 23) where the prophet admits that the exile was largely the consequence of the sins of the ancestors. For in-

23 G. Boggio, "Lectio Divina" del Profeta Ezechiele, Padova, 1997, 44; B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 463.

24 P.M. Joyce, "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 188.

25 K.D. Sakenfeld, "Ezekiel 18,25-32", *Int* 32 (1978), 297.

26 Cf. K.P. Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections", in L.E. Keck - al., ed., *NIB*, VI, 1258.

27 See W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 237.

stance, the dramatic threat announced in Ezek 21,3-4 (“I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked”) clearly echoes collective punishment. Thus the prophet can admit both collective or inherited punishment and individual responsibility as legitimate expressions of divine justice.²⁸

Repentance as the Goal of the Oracles

The view that the prophet was establishing the principle of individual responsibility is largely based on the presumption that Ezek 18 consists of two separate units describing two different issues (vv. 1-20 and vv. 21-32).²⁹ As we have discussed above, however, the two major parts of Ezek 18 do not represent two separate redaction levels. Rather they are logically related, united by their final goal: the repentance of the exilic community (vv. 30-32). The main purpose of the disputation was to make the exilic community accept responsibility for their own lives and to encourage them to repent – not to provide a purely moral or intellectual discourse on divine justice³⁰. Eichrodt rightly says that “Ezekiel is not speaking as a theologian, but as a prophet, whose duty is to proclaim what God has in actual fact willed and decided to do”.³¹

The prophet apparently faced two major obstacles to Israel’s repentance: 1) a lack of awareness of sinfulness which created a feeling of innocence being punished because of the ancestors’ sin³²; and 2) fatalism. The first obstacle was a denial of responsibility, which made repentance seem unnecessary. The second assumed that repentance is futile, since their fate and that of future generations was sealed because of the sins of their ancestors. If YHWH had already decided their fate, it hardly mattered whether or not they behave righteously, since punishment was already inevitable.³³ Thus the sour grapes proverb expressed the exilic community’s fatalism

28 J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, Philadelphia – New York 1990, 394. To defend his view of a consistent theology of individual responsibility in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, M. Weinfeld (“Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis”, *ZAW* 88, 1976, 36) argues that the prophecy in Ezek 21 may have been uttered before the concept of individual responsibility matured in Ezekiel’s mind. This argument, however, is not convincing and seems to be forced. In fact, as P.M. Joyce (“Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility”, 321) notes, YHWH’s dramatic threat in 21,3-4, “I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked” may be the clearest text demonstrating that individual responsibility is not a central concern of the Ezekiel tradition.

29 See, for instance, J.W. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 108.

30 W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 281, 292.

31 W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 237.

32 In Ezek 2, for instance, the exilic community is described as rebellious against YHWH and as yet unaware of Jerusalem’s coming annihilation. See T. Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, 39.

33 McKeating rightly sees the “sour grapes” proverb as the logical conclusion of the prophet’s declarations in chaps. 16; 20; and 23 about the inevitable downfall of the nation because of

and despondency, and it was used to argue that repentance would be useless in averting divine wrath.

In response to the exiles' lack of awareness of sinfulness and their denial of responsibility, the prophet insisted on individual responsibility. By using the example of three generations in one family (vv. 5-18) – which reminds us of the three generations in the inherited punishment formula – Ezekiel demonstrated that everyone is rewarded or punished according to his or her own deeds. In the first generation, the righteous person will live (vv. 5-9); in the second, the wicked son of a righteous father will die (vv. 10-13); and in the third, the righteous son of a wicked father will live (vv. 14-18). Thus “man is not bound by laws of generation to a fate”.³⁴ The implication is that the exilic community cannot consider itself as innocent and blame previous generations for their loss of state and homeland.

In response to their fatalism, Ezekiel develops his argument in vv. 21-29. He presents two other cases to show how past sins and past goodness do not determine one's destiny, since each person or each generation will be judged according to their present state.³⁵ In the first case, the wicked person who repents of past sins and becomes righteous will live (vv. 21-23); in the second, the righteous person who becomes wicked will die (v. 24). The audience objected to the judgment and accused YHWH of injustice (v. 25). This objection forms the basis of further disputation (vv. 26-29), which deals with the possible change of character – whether for better or for worse.

The first case should induce the exilic community, who according to Ezekiel were a wicked generation (2,3-4; 20,20-31), to repent and to obtain that life promised by God (vv. 5.9.10), since God would not hold their former disloyalty against them.³⁶ The second case should motivate the exilic community, whose members apparently consider themselves as innocent, not to rely on their past good deeds. They need to repent so that God might judge them in the light of their recent good deeds and ignore their former backsliding (18,30-32). One can repent and start anew. There is no place for fatalism, since YHWH takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather wants them to repent and to live (18,23.32).³⁷

the sins of past generations. If Israel's downfall is inevitable, how can repentance make any difference? H. McKeating, *Ezekiel*, Sheffield 1993, 83-84; cf. W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 281-282; K.P. Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel”, 1263; G. Boggio, “*Lectio Divina*” del Profeta Ezechiele, 47.

34 J.W. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 108.

35 K.P. Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel”, 1263.

36 L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 278.

37 Regarding the function of the repentance motif in Ezek 18, J.S. Kaminsky (*Corporate Responsibility*, 166) argues that “If one knows that one can repent and start anew, then it is easier to admit one's guilt”. However, the function of the call to repentance in Ezek 18 is more than

In short, the main message is clear. It is not about giving a new doctrine of individual responsibility but about showing the urgent need to accept responsibility and to release themselves from the bondage of practical fatalism in order that they will be able to repent and will be judged according to their new life. If the exiles discontinue the rebellious way of the past, they have a real chance to be part of Israel's future.³⁸

Responsibility of the Whole Community

Ezek 18 is concerned with the moral responsibility of the contemporary exilic community and not simply that of the individual.

Scholars such as Zimmerli, Begrich, Eichrodt, and Lindars have studied Ezekiel's language and have found significant similarities to legal and priestly language.³⁹ For instance, it is suggested that the phrase "the soul that sins shall die" (tWmt' ayhi tajexoh; vp,N<h;; v. 4b) was borrowed from the language of casuistic law (as found in Deut 24,16) and instituted as a principle of jurisprudence by King Amaziah of Judah (2 Kgs 14,5-6).⁴⁰ This legal formula typically has the subject in the singular not in order to contrast the individual with the community but "to address personally every member of the larger group".⁴¹ Begrich notes that the reference of ceremonial laws to individuals has been naturally applied to the nation as a whole ("the house of Israel").⁴² Lindars, who developed Zimmerli's and Begrich's ideas, concluded that one of the characteristics of Ezekiel's method is to apply to the people as a whole expressions that properly refer to individuals.⁴³ Joyce argues that the casuistic style referring to the individual ("if a man", or "if he...") in our text should be understood as referring to the entire nation. Thus he concludes that "the concern of Ezek 18 is to stress the responsibility of the whole contemporary house of Israel as community rather than the responsibility of a particular individual".⁴⁴ It is not an

just that the people accept their responsibility for the disaster but that the people amend their lives, return to YHWH and live. A. MEIN, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 208.

38 T. Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, 80.

39 W. Zimmerli ("The Message of the Prophet Ezekiel", 156) suggests that the language used in Ezek 18,5-18 is an imitation of priestly style, i.e. the language of the entrance liturgy at the Temple gates. Similarly, W. Eichrodt (*Ezekiel*, 238) suggests that Ezekiel adopted the priestly style of giving instruction (torah), of announcing the obligations for those who entered the temple, and of proclaiming the decision of the divine judgment for life or death (vv. 5-18). Cf. B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 460.

40 L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 272; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford 1985, 337-341; Brownlee, W.H., *Ezekiel 1-19*, 183.

41 K.P. Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel", 1134.

42 J. Begrich, "Die Priesterliche Tora", *BZAW* 66 (1936), 63-88.

43 B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 460.

44 P.M. Joyce, "The Individual and the Community", 86; and "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 322-321; ID., "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 185-196.

individual but the community as a whole which is challenged to repent.⁴⁵ Similarly Lindars says, "There is no suggestion that some may repent and live, while others persist in sin and die. Ezekiel is pleading for national repentance, that the whole community may be restored".⁴⁶ In short, Ezek 18 does not deny collective or inherited punishment since its main concern is national responsibility which is expressed in terms of the legal language of individual responsibility.⁴⁷

Inherited and Individual Punishment in Other Passages of Ezekiel

Apart from Ezek 18, other passages in the Book of Ezekiel (such as 3,16-20; 7,3.9.27; 9,1-11; 14,12-23; 33,10-20) seem to emphasize the individual's responsibility. But scholars such as Joyce, who has studied thoroughly the doctrine of retribution in Ezekiel, conclude that a number of important passages in Ezekiel emphasizing individual responsibility do not really reject corporate responsibility. In fact, they are not concerned with the issue of individual responsibility abrogating collective responsibility.⁴⁸

Ezek 7,3.9.27 states that YHWH will judge and punish Israel's conduct: "I will judge you according to your ways and will punish you for all your abominations" (7,3). But there is no indication here that Ezekiel intended to abrogate collective responsibility.

Ezek 3,16-20 and 33,10-20 should be understood in the light of Ezek 18. These passages essentially contain what is said in Ezek 18.⁴⁹ The repetition of the similar phrase in these texts may be intended to emphasize the need for repentance and to show YHWH's integrity and constancy. In Ezek 3,16-21 YHWH appoints Ezekiel as a "watchman" for "the house of Israel". In Ezek 18, then, we have Ezekiel performing his duty as a watchman, namely sounding the alarm and giving a warning in order that the

45 T. Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, 80.

46 B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 466.

47 P.M. Joyce, "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 185-196; ID, *Divine Initiative*, 36-37; ID., "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 317-321. See also B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 452-467.

48 See P.M. Joyce, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 317-321; J.A. Hoyles, *Punishment in the Bible*, London, 1986, 12; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 337-338; B. Uffenheimer, "Theodicy and Ethics in the Prophecy of Ezekiel", in H.G. Reventlow - Y. Hoffman, ed., *Justice and Righteousness. Biblical Themes and their Influence*, JSOTSS 137, Sheffield, 1992, 200-207.

49 For instance, the phrase "The way of the Lord is not just" in 33,20 seems to be a *verbatim* repetition of 18,25.29; compare also the phrase that the Lord "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked" in 33,11 and 18,23.32; and the casuistic teaching in 3,20; 18,21 and 33,18. K.P. Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel", 1450-1451; B. Lindars, "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 465.

exiles may acknowledge their sins, accept their responsibility, and repent.⁵⁰ After this warning the exiles acknowledged their culpability, but they were so demoralized and despondent (33,10) that they continued to complain and they failed to carry out their repentance (33,10.17). In response to their complaint Ezekiel renewed the call to repentance by repeating what he had said in chapter 18. Ezekiel insisted again that YHWH “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (33,11; cf. 18,23.31-32) but judges the exiles according to their deeds (33,20; cf. 18,30).

YHWH’s command to a man clothed in linen to mark all righteous individuals so that they might be spared punishment (Ezek 9,4) undoubtedly affirms individual responsibility, for only the wicked will be punished. Ezek 9, however, does not seem to show much interest in the possibility that there may be some righteous to be spared, for no mention is made of the righteous who were marked. The man simply reports that he has done what was asked (v. 11). Apparently the main concern of chapter 9 is not the exemption of the righteous from punishment but rather the imminence and thoroughness of the judgment.⁵¹ Israel’s sin, “blood” and “injustice” have reached their limit (vv. 9-10). Hence YHWH will destroy all that remains of Israel – old men, little children and even women (vv. 6.8). Kaufmann, in his commentary on Ezek 9,9, rightly wrote, “collective and individual responsibility are spoken of in the same breath”.⁵²

Ezek 14,12-20 states that God will inevitably punish the sinful country, even if three proverbially righteous men (Noah, Daniel, and Job) were within it. Their righteousness can save their own lives from God’s punishment but not the lives of others (vv. 14.16.18.20). This principle seems to contravene YHWH’s promise to Abraham to spare the city of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of only ten righteous persons (Gen 18,32) and YHWH’s announcement in Ezek 21,3-4 about cutting off “both righteous and wicked”. How should these passages be understood?

The main issue of these three passages (Ezek 14,12-20; Gen 18,32; Ezek 21,3-4) is apparently not the contrast between individual and collective responsibility but rather the total wickedness of the nation as a whole. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah ends with the total destruction of those cities (Gen 19,24-25), but Lot and his family escape.⁵³ Similarly, the phrase “both righteous and wicked” in Ezek 21,4 implies totality, for it is applied to the total population. Accordingly we may assume that what is intended in Ezek 14,12-20 is the magnitude of the nation’s sin and the subjection of

50 K.P. Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel”, 1134-1135.

51 P.M. Joyce, “Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility”, 318.

52 Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel. From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, tr. M. Greenberg, Chicago 1960, 439.

53 K.P. Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel”, 1214.

all to punishment.⁵⁴ Some sons and daughters will survive (Ezek 14,21-23) – not because they are righteous but in spite of their sins. They will survive because of God's grace. The purpose of the passage is to teach the exiles that they are not saved by their own righteousness.⁵⁵

Thus the concern of Ezek 14,12-20 is not individual responsibility but rather the fate of the nation as a whole. The text assumes the ideal of individual responsibility, but at the same time it articulates the certainty of the imminent, thorough and absolute judgment of YHWH.⁵⁶

3. Conclusion

There can be no doubt that in Ezek 18,2-4 and other passages mentioned above, the prophets were dealing with individual responsibility. At the same time we must be aware that the social-political context of the exile shows a tendency to think of responsibility in individualistic terms. However, it does not necessarily follow that the inherited/collective punishment principle was being abolished.

Ezekiel did not object to the content of the sour grapes proverb – inherited punishment (cf. Exod 20,5; 34,7; Deut 5,9)⁵⁷ – but he did object to its perverse meaning and its cynical use by the people. Ezekiel rejected the usage of the proverb because it created obstacles to repentance (fatalism and the denial of responsibility). He actually insisted on individual responsibility, since the proverb was used to exclude it. But just as the inherited punishment principle admits individual responsibility in spite of the emphasis on collective responsibility, so the prophet's refutation of the proverb admits collective responsibility although it insists on individual responsibility.

One should also note that the principle of inherited punishment or collective responsibility is still insisted on in some passages of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 11,22-23; 13,13-14; 14,16.20; 15,1-4; 16,1-4; 18,21; 29,32; 32,18; Ezek 9,9; 21,3-4, etc.). Such insistence can occur side by side with a statement of individual responsibility. The citation of the inherited punishment principle in Jer 32,18, for example, is followed by a profession of belief that YHWH implies individual responsibility (Jer 32,19).

There are, in fact, no strong arguments to prove that the prophet is introducing innovation of individual responsibility.⁵⁸ Ezekiel may believe

54 P.M. Joyce, "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 194.

55 Fishbane, "Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel", *Int* 38 (1984), 137.

56 P.M. Joyce, "Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18", 194; ID., "Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility", 320.

57 K.D. Sakenfeld, "Ezekiel 18,25-32", 297.

58 K.W. Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, Cambridge, 1974, 115.

that the righteous should be spared punishment (Ezek 9), but he never claims that collective/inherited punishment was replaced by individual responsibility. Both individual and collective punishments were legitimate expressions of divine justice. Joyce has rightly concluded that “any attempt to plot the position of Ezekiel on a hypothetical evolutionary model of the development of individualism in ancient Israel is hazardous, indeed impossible”.⁵⁹

Many texts demonstrate that elements of both individual and collective responsibility appear alongside each other in all the periods of Israel’s history. For instances: the righteous who might save the city in Gen 18,22-33 which is in accord with Jer 5,1-8; the “*ebed* YHWH” (understood either collectively or as an individual) who is righteous but suffers for the sins of the others (Isa 52,13-53,12); and the rebellious who were threatened with punishment for their own iniquity and for that of their ancestors (Isa 65,6-7).⁶⁰

The view that the social, political and religious life of Israel in ancient times gave no importance to individuals is untenable. May, for instance, has shown that Israel always appreciated the individual and gave importance, value, and responsibility to each person.⁶¹ In his examination of the Psalms,⁶² where the petitioner can address God as an individual and then without transition speak collectively as Israel, May argues that for Israel the individual is mystically identified with the nation, even when the nation exists as a corporate entity and the individual maintains his integrity as an individual. It seems that there was no difficulty understanding Israel as one and many at the same time.⁶³ It is true that there was the development of the sense of personal culpability and individual responsibility in Hebrew Bible but the sense of sin as a social reality which calls collective responsibility did not diminish.

Perhaps what we can say about Ezekiel, however, is that he clarifies the meaning of inherited punishment formula. The formula is generally understood — as it is expressed in the writings of the Deuteronomistic historian and in the exiles’ citation of the sour grapes proverb — in terms of the children (the next generation) being punished because of their ancestors’ sins. For Ezekiel, that interpretation is not correct. The children are not punished because of their ancestors’ sins, since each person is punished on the basis of his or her own sins. What the people called inherited

59 P.M. Joyce, “Ezekiel and Individual Responsibility”, 321.

60 For more examples where individual and inherited punishment appear together, see: Deut 7,9-10; 24,16; Dan 9,16; Lam 5,7.16.

61 H.G. May, “Individual Responsibility and Retribution”, *HUCA* 32 (1961) 107.

62 Pss 25,22; 28,9; 51,18-19; 59,11-13; 130,7-8; 131,3.

63 H.G. May, “Individual Responsibility and Retribution”, 108; see also A.R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, Cardiff, 1942, 12-17.

punishment is actually the “inherited consequence” of sin. Thus, for this prophet there is only one responsibility in a strictly legal sense, that is, individual responsibility.

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Doktor teologi biblis dari Universitas Gregoriana, Roma; dosen Kitab Suci di STFT Widya Sasana Malang.

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