

The Tragedies of Ezekiel

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VERY LITTLE GREEK TRAGEDY remains from the Hellenistic period. We do however have substantial fragments from a playwright named Ezekiel.¹ This paper examines those fragments in the context of modern criticism and of the ancient authors who preserved them, and suggests that instead of deriving from a single play, they are from a tetralogy.

Eusebius, in the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, preserves a lengthy quotation from Alexander Polyhistor, πολύνους ὢν καὶ πολυμαθῆς ἀνὴρ (a “thoughtful and much learned man”), author of *Περὶ Ἰουδαίων*.² Among the authors Polyhistor discusses is Ezekiel, ὁ τῶν τραγωδιῶν ποιητής (“the maker of tragedies,” 9.28.1). *Praep.Evang.* 9.28–29 contains excerpts from and discussion of a dramatic work called the *Exagoge*, which retells the biblical story of the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt. Polyhistor preserves 269 lines of iambic trimeter; some of these lines are also quoted by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 1.23.155–156), who refers to Ezekiel more specifically as ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαϊκῶν τραγωδιῶν ποιητής (“the maker of Jewish tragedies”). Nothing is known definitely about the playwright except for his name. But the common assumption, due to both his name and his

¹The fragments have been recently gathered, edited, and extensively commented upon by Howard Jacobson, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1983), and Carl Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors II* (Atlanta 1989); cited hereafter by authors’ names. References are to the text and line numbers of Jacobson.

²*Praep.Evang.* 9.17.1; the quotation from Polyhistor continues through 9.39.5. I refer to the edition of Karl Mraz (Berlin 1954).

subject matter, is that Ezekiel was a Jew.³ Common opinion also holds that he could not practically have lived anywhere but in Alexandria.⁴ Ezekiel makes use of the language of the Septuagint, providing a *terminus post quem* of the mid-third century B.C.E.; and Alexander Polyhistor flourished in the mid-first century B.C.E. Within those roughly 200 years, there has been great scholarly disagreement as to when Ezekiel lived, with Holladay concluding that “the question of dating Ezekiel is perhaps best left open and general.”⁵

Concerning the text itself, scholars have been able to mold these fragments into a “traditional” five-act structure.⁶ This can be done with little difficulty; however, it leaves little room for adequate development of plot, or for suitable choral passages, especially since most reconstructors assume the portrayal of at least one confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh.⁷ But the feature of such a reconstruction which has proved most striking to critics is Ezekiel’s apparent violation of the so-called Unities of Time and Place.⁸

Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, says that tragedies seek to take place within a single twenty-four-hour period (1449b12–16). Although there was no hard and fast rule that the action of a play

³Jacobson (5) and Holladay (301–303) provide the prevailing arguments, and other alternatives.

⁴Holladay 312–313.

⁵Jacobson 5–13, Holladay 308–12 (at 311).

⁶The five-act structure is a “tradition” going at least as far back as Horace at *Ars Poetica* 189–190. C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry I* (Cambridge 1963) 114, posits that five acts, while not Aristotelian, “are however likely to be Hellenistic.” And Niall Rudd, *Horace: Epistles Book II and Epistle to the Pisones*, (Cambridge 1989) on *Ars P.* 188–190, states that “one assumes [Horace] was using a Hellenistic scholar who attempted to divide tragedy into five parts or acts.” See Jacobson 33ff and Holladay 306–308 on how this five-act structure has been applied to Ezekiel; see also the recent article by Aleksandra Kleczar, “The *Exagoge* of Ezekiel: Analysis of the Dramatical Structure of the Play,” *Eos* 87 (2000) 113–118.

⁷See Jacobson 35.

⁸Notably Otto Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (Meisenheim am Glan 1966) 138–146.

must occur in a single place and in a single day, most of the surviving Attic tragedies do at least approach these guidelines. Certainly, even those plays which violate this “rule” never cover so great a span as does the *Exagoge*. A conservative estimate, omitting any presumed meetings between Moses and Pharaoh, is that there were at least four different settings: before the tents of Raguel, on Mount Horeb, in the palace of Pharaoh, and somewhere in the desert. And a vast amount of time must have elapsed between the scenes, with the whole action spanning at least several months, if not years. Admittedly, this departure from fifth-century practice may simply represent the natural evolution of the genre. Perhaps by the Hellenistic period tragedians were attempting works of epic scope. Ezekiel, however, breaks a much more important Unity: the Unity of Action.

Aristotle is fairly firm that a tragedy must have a single, unified plot.⁹ Admittedly, the Attic tragedians do not always adhere to this rule, either; but, as with the other two Unities, no one violates it to so great an extent as Ezekiel. It is hard to imagine how the extant fragments of the *Exagoge* could possibly be conceived of as a single plot. But these fragments, I suggest, do not necessarily come from a single play. Polyhistor and Clement do refer to Ezekiel’s work as “the *Exagoge*.”¹⁰ But rather than being the name of one tragedy, it could refer to a trilogy or tetralogy. Trilogy names appear in Aristophanes, and the scholia make it clear that the Alexandrian scholars understood that he was referring to a set of plays.¹¹ So giving three or four plays a collective title was a known practice in the Hellenistic period. Furthermore, Ezekiel’s use of language from the Attic tragedians shows that he had studied them, and therefore would have been familiar with the practice of writing

⁹ Among other places, *Poetics* 1450b23ff.

¹⁰ At *Praep. Evang.* 9.29.4, 9.29.12, 9.29.14, 9.29.15, and *Strom.* 1.155.

¹¹ Ὀρέστεια in *Frogs* (1124), Λυκούργεια in *Thesmophoriazusae* (135), with scholia.

three or four plays intended for successive performance, possibly covering a single story or theme, and all grouped together under a single title. Finally, composing a tetralogy rather than a single play would be in keeping with what Jacobson (12) describes as the “‘archaizing’ element” found in Ezekiel’s work.

In order to obviate the seeming violations of the Unities, I would suggest the following division of the fragments of Ezekiel into plays. The first play would begin with the extant introduction, a Euripidean-style prologue delivered by Moses,¹² in which he describes briefly the origin of Jews in Egypt and their subsequent oppression, and then his rescue as a baby by the daughter of the king (lines 1–31). Moses goes on to recount his upbringing, his slaying of an Egyptian, and his witnessing a fight between two men, which led to his exile from Egypt (32–58). This is followed by his meeting with the daughters of Raguel, a name equivalent to the biblical “Jethro” (59). In the next surviving passage, Sepphora describes to Moses both the land of Libya and its ruler, her father (60–65). According to Polyhistor, Ezekiel next spoke of the watering of the animals and the marriage of Moses and Sepphora.¹³ Then two lines of dialogue are quoted, in which Sepphora discloses to Chum, a figure not from the Bible, her betrothal to Moses (66–67). There has been much scholarly speculation as to who this man may be. Jacobson surveys the opinions, and concludes that Chum was a previous suitor who was displaced by Moses.¹⁴ If this is so, the main action of this first play revolves around a foreign prince (Moses) who is betrothed to a local princess (Sepphora), incurring the wrath of an earlier lover (Chum). This is a common theme in Greek and Roman myth—Medea and Jason, Lavinia

¹²See Jacobson 69–70 on the Euripidean qualities of the opening speech.

¹³*Praep. Evang.* 9.28. See Holladay 360 and nn.63–68 on Polyhistor’s comments.

¹⁴Howard Jacobson, “The Identity and Role of Chum in Ezekiel’s *Exagoge*,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature* 9 (1981) 139–146.

and Aeneas, etc. A betrothal with its ensuing complications features in some form in a number of Attic tragedies;¹⁵ and so including such a theme in the *Exagoge* would be in keeping with Greek tragic tradition. Furthermore, Chum's reaction would logically lead to what Aristotle says is the best kind of tragic plot, disaster among friends, e.g. the killing of a φίλος, whether accomplished or averted.¹⁶ Clearly, an entire play would be necessary to develop adequately the implications of the marriage.

At this point in the *Praep.Evang.* (9.29.1–3) Polyhistor pauses in his discussion of Ezekiel to compare the tragedian's version of the story with that of Demetrius (*FGrHist* 722). If Polyhistor were quoting from a single tragedy, it seems odd and arbitrary for him to stop here. But if the dialogue between Sepphora and Chum marks the end of Polyhistor's discussion of the first play, this is a very convenient and sensible place for Polyhistor to pause. Moreover, Clement does not quote from Ezekiel after this point, making it likely that he had access only to the first play.

The second play would portray how Moses became the leader of the Jews. It opens with the extant discussion between Moses and Raguel, who is now his father-in-law. If Polyhistor preserved a single play, an unreasonable span of time must be represented as elapsing after the previous scene with Sepphora and Chum; but if this is a new play, any amount of time can comfortably be allowed since the earlier talk of the impending nuptials. Moses and Raguel now discuss Moses' prophetic dream, in which he is adored by stars while sitting upon a great throne. Raguel interprets this as a sign of Moses' impending greatness (68–89). Then, presumably after a choral interlude, come the surviving fragments in which Moses on Mt Horeb

¹⁵E.g., Euripides' *Medea*, Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, and even Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

¹⁶*Poetics* 1453b14ff. See Elizabeth Belfiore, *Murder Among Friends* (Oxford 2000) 3–20.

receives his charge from God. This section portrays the incident of the burning bush, with the voice of God sending Moses to Egypt to free his people (90–119); it also shows God teaching Moses how to change his staff into a serpent and back again, and how to turn his hand white by placing it in his tunic (120–131). After this, God foretells the plagues He will visit upon Egypt and then sets down some instructions for the celebration of Passover (132–174). Next we can postulate another choral passage during which Moses descends from the mountain, after which is the extant passage in which Moses repeats God’s instructions to Raguel and his fellow shepherds (175–192), and he or they depart for Egypt. The prominence of prophetic dreams in Greek tragedy has been well noted.¹⁷ Furthermore, in this play the Hebrew god plays as active a role in directing the path of his follower as, for example, Apollo does in Euripides’ *Ion* or Dionysus in the *Bacchae*.

At this point in the *Praef.Evang.* there is no intervening discussion of Demetrius or any other version. But there is an intriguing oddity. After line 192, Polyhistor refers for the only time to τῷ δράματι τῷ ἐπιγραφομένῳ Ἐξαγωγή (“the play called the *Exagoge*”: 9.29.14). All his other references are either to τῆ τραγωδίᾳ (9.28.3) or simply to τῆ Ἐξαγωγῆ (9.29.4, 12, 15). Thus, I suggest that the third play, which in fact dealt with the actual Exodus, was called *Exagoge*, and that this name, for some reason, also was applied, confusingly, to the tetralogy as a whole.¹⁸ It does appear that Polyhistor is interested in making a distinction between the preceding lines and the following ones. The logical assumption is that they come from different plays.

The third play would be similar in structure to Aeschylus’

¹⁷On the common use of dreams in Greek tragedy see Holladay 437 and Erich Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism* (Berkeley 1998) 130–131.

¹⁸Clement also refers to his source as τῷ ἐπιγραφομένῳ δράματι Ἐξαγωγή (*Strom.* 1.155). But since he provides lines only from the first play it is likely that his copy of the work contained only the first play, labeled with the tetralogy name, which he sensibly mistook for the name of the first tragedy.

Persae.¹⁹ Accompanied by a lamenting Chorus of Egyptians, the queen of Egypt would recount the meetings between Moses and Pharaoh, the plagues, the decision to let the Jews go free, and the subsequent decision to get them back. Then the Egyptian soldier enters and delivers the extant fragment, reporting the disaster at the Red Sea (193–242). Finally, the queen would be left to mourn and lament, just as Atossa wept over the defeat of Xerxes. One would be justified in imagining that Ezekiel followed Aeschylus' lead and let the ghost of the dead Pharaoh make an appearance.

At this point, Polyhistor again pauses to discuss Demetrius (*Praep.Evang.* 9.29.15). As before, this interruption would seem intrusive and arbitrary, unless the soldier's speech that precedes and the scout's speech that follows derive from different plays.

The final fragments, in which a Hebrew scout tells Moses about the discovery of an oasis and a phoenix (243–269), would then belong to a fourth drama, occupying the satyr play's position. Ezekiel was familiar enough with the works of Euripides to know that the fourth play did not literally have to involve satyrs,²⁰ but it should be different in tone from the previous three. The relief of the Jews, having escaped from bondage and arrived safely at an oasis, together with the strange account of the mystical bird, would suitably lighten the mood.²¹

¹⁹Several commentators on the *Exagoge* have noted similarities between this scene and the *Persae*: Holladay 494ff; Jacobson 136–140; Bruno Snell, "Ezechiel's Moses-Drama," *AuA* 13 (1967) 150–164; J. Wieneke, *Ezechielis Iudaei poetae Alexandrini fabulae quae inscribitura Ἐξαγωγή fragmenta* (Munich 1931) 93–94.

²⁰Ezekiel's familiarity with Euripides and other classical Greek authors is evident in the frequent references to them in his verse; such references are noted by Jacobson and Holladay (see especially 303), where they occur.

²¹Although the fragment does not use the word "phoenix," nor contain the most obvious attributes of the phoenix (its miraculous death by flames and rebirth from its own ashes, or its set cycle of recurrence), the physical description of the bird, its gait, and its being the "king of birds" is enough to confirm Polyhistor's identification (1.29.15). See R. van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix according to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* (Leiden (1972)).

This division into four plays fulfills a number of functions. First, it explains why Polyhistor and Clement refer to Ezekiel as the “maker of [plural] tragedies.” Second, it divides the story of the Exodus into discrete actions. Third, it alleviates the objectionable violations of Time and Space. Each play can now take place within sunrise and sunset of a single day; and only the second play requires any change of setting, from the foot of Mt Horeb to the top and back down again. Fourth, it allows for the leisurely development of stories, characters, and ideas, as well as giving room for choral passages, none of which would fit comfortably in the rapid shifts across times and places required if all the fragments came from one play. Finally, it fits with the way Alexander Polyhistor presents the material, interrupting his discussion of the fragments at places which coincide with logical breaks between plays. Since he explicitly names the third play *Exodus*, we can guess that the first play might be named *The Daughters of Raguel* and the second *The Shepherds of Libya*, after their respective Choruses, while the fourth could be *The Phoenix*, *The Oasis*, or even *The Scouts*. But whatever their names, it is sensible to think that the fragments of Ezekiel’s work come not from a single play, but from a tetralogy.²²

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