Understanding Ezekiel 18 in Its Literary Context

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Sin, Suffering, and the Problem of Evil

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Understanding Ezekiel 18 in Its Literary Context

Antti Laato

A. Introduction

Professor Fredrik Lindström has made several important contributions concerning central theological problems in the Hebrew Bible. In his dissertation, he discussed the problem of evil which, in some texts of the Hebrew Bible, is related to the essence of God.[1] In his major opus on the book of Psalms, he raised important theological questions concerning suffering and sin.[2] Lindström has also popularized these themes in his Swedish book which deals with life with, and experience of, God in the Hebrew Bible.[3] The aim of this article is to offer a contribution to the research area in which my colleague and friend has been shown to be a real expert. I will discuss the problem of sin, responsibility, and suffering as expressed in Ezek 18. Instead of penetrating deeply into the interpretation of Ezek 18 – an area where scholars have already made several important contributions[4] – my aim is to propose that the literary context should be considered when this *locus classicus* of sin, responsibility, and suffering is interpreted. In his dissertation, Lindström has emphasized the importance of contextual reading. I contend that it is the literary context which may help us uncover important interpretive perspectives to understand the text under discussion.

B. Ezekiel 18 and Its Royal Context

The beginning of Ezek 18 refers to the short complaint attributed to the people of Israel and which was circulated in the exile (Ezek 18:2; see also Jer 31:29): "Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted!" This pejorative complaint is an expression of the suffering of the exile and God's justice based on an older Israelite idea of retribution, according to which the iniquities of parents fall upon their children (Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:8; Deut 5:9). A

[1] Lindström 1983.
[2] Lindström 1994.
[3] Lindström 1998.
[4] See commentaries, and the following studies: Matties 1989; Mein 2001; Mol 2009.

similar attitude of desperation is also expressed in Lam 5:7: "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities." Ezekiel 18 contains a new theological treatment of this old idea of family retribution by introducing the concept of individual responsibility, and in this way, it aims to confront the complaint of Ezek 18:2. Even though Ezek 18:2 is parallel to Jer 31:29, the contexts of these two texts as well as the theological solutions are strikingly different. In the context of Jer 31:29, the central idea of the new covenant is that YHWH is active in creating new life and loyalty among the people. On the other hand, Ezek 18 aims to clarify the importance of repentance toward YHWH. Lindström rightly notices that the outcome of the new covenant in Jer 31:31–34 parallels Ezek 36:26–27.[5] This raises the important question as to why a similar theological solution, according to which a new human being will – more or less spontaneously – do the will of YHWH in the future, is not found in Ezek 18. Could the context of Ezek 18 explain the different treatment of the pejorative complaint (Jer 31:29; Ezek 18:2) in the book of Ezekiel? If that is the case, we should be particularly attentive to the fact that Ezek 18 has been edited between chapters 17 and 19, both of which deal with royal figures.

Scholars agree that the historical contexts of Ezek 17 and 19 are related to the crisis of the exile in Judah, i.e., to the period 598–586 BCE. The identities of the kings in Ezek 17 seem to be clear, while scholars disagree which kings are referred to in Ezek 19.

Ezekiel 17 contains a riddle (*ḥîdâ*) or parable (*māšāl*) in Ezek 17:2–10, which is interpreted in Ezek 17:11–21. "A great eagle" (= Babylon) took "the top of the cedar tree" from Lebanon (i.e., from the royal house of Jerusalem),[6] and deported it to "the country of merchants," i.e., to Babylon (Ezek 17:2–4, 12). This refers to the exile of Jekoniah in 597 BCE. After this event, the eagle "took one of the country's seeds" and put it on the throne, but the new king later caused a rebellion against the eagle. This king is Zedekiah (Ezek 17:5–10, 13–21). After the parable, there is a new text (Ezek 17:22–24), which in terms of keywords and content is clearly related to the parable, particularly to Ezek 17:2–4, indicating a hope that there would be a new beginning for the royal family of Jekoniah. This positive interpretive scenario towards the family of Jekoniah in Ezekiel is understandable because both the Deuteronomistic tradition in 2 Kgs 25:27–30 and the historical episode of Zerubbabel, the grandchild

[5] Lindström 1998, 199. See also Raitt 1977; Leene 2014.

[6] The royal house was compared with a garden (Jer 21:13–14) and was called Lebanon (see Jer 22:6–7, 23; Isa 10:33–34) because of the royal building projects which aimed to introduce the divine garden in Jerusalem. The royal palace itself was called, according to 1 Kgs 7:2, Lebanon-Forest-palace, indicating the connection between Lebanon and the royal house. Concerning Jer 21:13–14; 22:6–7, 23, see especially Holladay 1986, 577–579, 583–584, 600–603. Concerning Isa 10:33–34, see Barth 1977, 55–72; Nielsen 1989, 123–143.

of Jekoniah (as accounted for in Haggai and Zechariah, as well as in Ezra-Nehemiah), imply a similar benevolence to Jekoniah.

Ezekiel 19 contains two literary units which are thematically interrelated. In Ezek 19:1–9 the mother of royal princes is compared to a lioness who worked intensively to get her two whelps into the leading position. She managed in her efforts but, in both cases, nations came and caught the young lions, and so the lioness's plans became futile. In Ezek 19:10–14 the royal mother is compared with "a vine full of shoots" which became "stout stems for sceptres of rulers." However, the vine "was furiously uprooted" and the fire destroyed its stems. There is much that speaks for the lioness with the two whelps to be referring to Hamutal, the wife of Josiah, who gave birth to two princes, Shallum and Zedekiah, who became kings but were dethroned.[7]

The contextual reading indicates that, in Ezek 17 and 19, we have the figures from three different generations. The first generation is Hamutal (and Josiah), the second generation Shallum and Zedekiah (and Jehoiakim), and the third generation Jekoniah (the son of Jehoiakim). This presentation of three generations corresponds to the content of Ezek 18 where father, son, and grandchild are presented. The only relevant royal line which fits this depiction and the literary context is Josiah → Jehoiakim → Jekoniah. However, the first two are not addressed directly in Ezekiel, and therefore, introducing them in Ezek 18 is not self-evident. Even though Josiah is never mentioned *expressis verbis* in Ezekiel, I have argued elsewhere that the date "thirtieth year" in Ezek 1:1 has been calculated from the year of Josiah's reform (so also in the Targum). This indicates that Josiah's reform is a central theological starting-point from which to understand the covenantal theology in the present form of the book of Ezekiel.[8] There is an additional similarity between Ezek 17 and Ezek 18: the real focus is laid on the third generation, i.e., Jekoniah. He can return to YHWH and live – something which could make the promise in Ezek 17:22–24 relevant for him (or his family).

If Josiah can be indirectly introduced in Ezekiel by a chronological note, what, then, can be said about Jehoiakim who is never mentioned by name in Ezekiel? Can we assume that he is referred to in Ezek 18 as the second genera-

[7] For this view, see especially Lang 1981, 102–103, 111–113. Zimmerli 1969, 424, disagrees and argues that Ezek 19:1–9 refers to the deportation of Shallum in 609 BCE and that of Jekoniah in 598 BCE. The logic in the text assumes that the lioness (= queen mother) has two whelps (= royal princes) which are destroyed, while Ezek 17:22–24, in turn, indicates a more positive attitude towards Jekoniah. In addition, there are clear linguistic parallels between Ezek 19:8–9 and Ezek 12:13 (which clearly refer to the fate of Zedekiah). Therefore, I cannot follow Zimmerli's view.

[8] For this, see more closely Laato 2015, 53–61. This implies that the dating of Ezek 40–48 to Jekoniah's twenty-fifth year of captivity is the Jubilee year (calculated from the year of Josiah's reform).

tion – that is, as the son of the righteous man who began to live in a godless way? In order to understand the dynamic of three generations in Ezek 18, we must take into consideration the book of Jeremiah and its statements on Josiah and his family lines. Such a comparison may prove to be fruitful because scholars have often argued that there are connections between the theology in Jeremiah and Ezekiel even though the former followed Deuteronomistic theology and the latter the priestly theology.[9]

The three generations in royal line 1) Josiah, 2) his three sons Jehoiakim, Shallum, and Zedekiah, and 3) Jekoniah, the son of Jehoiakim, are treated differently in the book of Jeremiah. Josiah is regarded as a righteous king in Jer 22:15–16, which is understandable because the book of Jeremiah has traditionally been linked with the Deuteronomistic theology.[10] In the case of Jehoiakim (Jer 22:13–19; 36:30–31) and Jekoniah (Jer 22:24–30), Jeremiah argues that there will be no hope for this royal line. No one from it will ever sit on the throne of Jerusalem. Instead of this doomed royal line, Shallum is treated in a more positive way in the poetic passage of Jer 22:10, but the prose interpretation in Jer 22:11–12 contains a straightforward criticism. The relationship between Zedekiah and the historical Jeremiah on the one hand, and the picture of Zedekiah given in the present form of the book of Jeremiah on the other, is a well-known interpretive problem.[11] It seems to me that a more positive attitude (especially implied in Jer 32–34)[12] has moved towards a negative one in the treatment of Zedekiah (especially in Jer 21).[13]

This being the case, it is significant that while Shallum and Zedekiah are condemned harshly in Ezekiel, they are treated more positively in Jeremiah. And, *mutatis mutandis*, while Jekoniah and his father are rejected and their roy-

[9] At the International Society of Biblical Literature conference in 2019, held in Rome, Georg Fischer presented an important paper, "A Contest in Prophetic Mission: Ezekiel and Jeremiah," where he discussed this problem. I collected a lot of references from his presentation. See further Raitt 1977; Leene 1995; 2000; 2001; 2014; Rom-Shiloni 2005; 2012; Rochester 2012. Scholars often seem to argue that borrowings are made from Ezekiel to Jeremiah. My evaluation is that the book of Jeremiah is multilayered (as seen from different MT and LXX versions) and there is good reason to assume that Jeremiah material which was circulated was also influential in the formation of the Ezekiel material. Nevertheless, I think scholars are right to emphasize that the present Masoretic version of Jeremiah has been influenced by the book of Ezekiel (cf. also my conclusions at the end of this article).

[10] See, e.g., Weippert 1973; Thiel 1973; 1981.

[11] See, e.g., the following characterizations of Zedekiah: a relatively positive picture of Zedekiah is presented in Begg 1986; a negative picture in the present form of the book of Jeremiah is argued in Stipp 1996; finally, Zedekiah is regarded as a puppet in neo-Babylonian policy in Sarna 2000.

[12] In Jer 34:17–22 an explanation is given as to why the prophet's attitude changed.

[13] For this discussion, see Laato 1992, 100–103.

al line is cursed in Jeremiah, the situation is strikingly different in Ezekiel, as can be seen in Ezek 17:22–24. In order to explain this dichotomy in the biblical traditions, there is reason to discuss the textual evidence in Jeremiah more closely and to consider the positive traditions concerning Zerubbabel (who belonged to the royal line of Jehoiakim and Jekoniah).

C. Jekoniah in the Book of Jeremiah

The best way to proceed is to begin with Jer 22:24–30, which is a critical statement against Jekoniah. In this text, Jekoniah is rejected by YHWH with the statement that even if the king were a signet ring on the right hand of YHWH, YHWH would wrench it off (Jer 22:24). In terms of textual history, the verses 28–30 are interesting because the MT and the LXX differ from each other:[14]

Distinctive for the MT	*Common to Both*	*Distinctive for the LXX*
	Is he a shoddy broken pot,	
this man		
	Koniah, a crook that no one wants?	
Why are he and his offspring ejected,		Why is he ejected,
	hurled into a country	
they know nothing of? O land, land, land,		he knows nothing of? O land, land
	Listen to the word of YHWH!	
YHWH says this,		
	List this man as: childless	
a man who has no success in his lifetime,		man
	since none of his offspring will succeed in occupying the throne of David, or ruling in Judah again.	

In verse 28, the LXX renders the sentence in the singular and contains no counterpart to the Masoretic readings *hā'îš hazzēh* and *hû' wĕzar'ô*. In this case, the MT's expanded readings can be regarded as originating from v. 30, where Jekoniah is referred to as *hā'îš hazzēh* and where reference is also made to Jekoniah's offspring (these words are also in LXX Jer 22:30).

In verse 30, the phrases *kōh 'āmar YHWH* and *lō' yiṣlah bĕyāmāyw* are absent from the LXX. The first phrase is, in fact, an unnecessary repetition since v. 29 has already established that the following material is the word of YHWH.

[14] Concerning the text of Jer 22:28–30, see, e.g., McKane 1986, 546–552; Fischer 2005, 645–674, esp. 670–672.

The second phrase is also an expansion, the aim of which was to reinterpret vv. 28–30. While the archetype for the LXX refers to the idea that no one from Jekoniah's family will ever assume the Davidic throne, the archetype for the MT alters this idea so that Jekoniah will not live to see any of his progeny inherit the throne. This being the case, it seems that there is a tendency in the MT to shift the focus of Jeremiah's curse onto Jekoniah's offspring in such a way that it concerned only Jekoniah's own lifetime.[15] The later reworked interpretation seems to indicate a time when it became clear that Jekoniah's family was the only surviving branch of the House of Josiah (see 2 Kgs 25:27–30). An additional historical detail may help to explain why the harsh criticism of Jekoniah was softened in the Masoretic Text tradition. Jekoniah's grandson Zerubbabel was active in the building project of the second temple and expectations ran high that he could restore the dynasty of David in Judah (Hag 2:20–23; Zech 4). Haggai 2:23 seems to contain a direct allusion to Jer 22:24 (see the motif of "the signet ring") and indicates that Zerubbabel (or at least the possibility of him restoring the dynasty of David) was opposed by the utterance of Jer 22:24–30. In his prophecy concerning Zerubbabel (Hag 2:20–23), the prophet Haggai refers to Jer 22:24 and proclaims that Jeremiah's words of doom against Jekoniah's family are no longer valid because YHWH will make Zerubbabel like a signet ring. This led to the textual reworking of Jer 22:24–30. With some minor additions, the idea was introduced in the text that Jeremiah's doom was only for the lifetime of Jekoniah and not to be an overall curse against the dynastic line of Jekoniah.

Let me summarize the textual evidence as far as I understand it. The book of Jeremiah contains both positive and negative attitudes towards Zedekiah, and the only relevant assumption is that the positive has moved towards the negative. Both Jehoiakim and Jekoniah are condemned in Jeremiah, but in Jer 22:24–30, there is some later textual reworking which attempts to soften this criticism by limiting it to relate to Jekoniah's lifetime only. Jekoniah will not see his offspring take the throne in Jerusalem, but the question of whether

[15] According to Carroll 1986, 441, this anti-Jekoniah tendency is only one strand of Jeremiah because the book ends with a more positive picture of that king: Jer 52:31–34. However, this Deuteronomistic passage is not completely identical to 2 Kgs 25:27–30. At the end of Jer 52:34, there is an important addition *'ad yôm môtô* which is not preserved in 2 Kgs 25:30. This addition in Jer 52 becomes understandable in the light of Jer 22:26. Jekoniah died in Babylon as Jeremiah had predicted. In this sense, the book of Jeremiah differs from the Deuteronomistic History, where the hope that Jekoniah will return to Jerusalem and take the throne still appears to exist (2 Kgs 25:27–30 does not refer to the death of Jekoniah). It is, however, a plausible assumption that the aim of Jer 52:31–34 was to moderate Jeremiah's proclamation of doom against the whole family of Jekoniah. Perhaps Jer 52:31–34 already contains the notion that the prophet's doom in Jer 22:24–30 concerns only Jekoniah and was fulfilled in his lifetime.

someone else in the coming generation will do so is left open. As far as Jer 23:5–6, 30:8–9, and 33:14–16 (this latter is not attested in the Septuagint) are concerned, it seems that the Davidic dynasty will have hope in the future and, moreover, the only surviving royal line is Jekoniah's. Later, in the Persian period, the legitimacy of Zerubbabel was called into question on the basis of tradition which must be the judgement presented in Jer 22:24–30 (see Hag 2:20–23). Haggai emphasizes that Zerubbabel will become a signet ring – the metaphor mentioned above which is used in Jer 22:24 to reject Jekoniah, the grandfather of Zerubbabel. This positive attitude toward Zerubbabel may have inspired the textual reworking which is visible in the Masoretic version of Jer 22:24–30.

D. Confronting Deuteronomistic Retribution Theology

Next, I will deal with the question as to why both Jehoiakim and his son Jekoniah are doomed in Jeremiah traditions (and then softened in the MT version of Jeremiah). One explanation is given in Jer 22:13–19. Jehoiakim did not follow the religious reform of his father, Josiah. This reform is characterized in Jer 22:15–16 with the words: "Did he [Josiah] do justice and righteousness? He used to examine the cases of the poor and needy …" The expression "to do justice and righteousness" as well as the demand that the king must save the needy and ill-treated humans are programmatic statements in Jer 22:3 which speak about the possibility of the dynasty of David sitting on the throne of Jerusalem. The expression "to do justice and righteousness" is also used in Jer 23:5 and 33:15, which speak about the future ideal king of the Davidic dynasty.[16] This characterization, therefore, can easily be related to the Deuteronomic programme which Josiah, according to 2 Kgs 22–23, performed in Jerusalem. In the present form of the book, Jeremiah is clearly regarded as a supporter of the Deuteronomic programme of Josiah.

Another text which is critical towards Jehoiakim is Jer 36, which must be interpreted in the light of its parallel in Jer 26, and which is also dated to the reign of Jehoiakim. Both texts are clearly related to Deuteronomistic theology. This being the case, Jehoiakim was an example of a bad king who, according to the Deuteronomic programme, could not have received blessing in his life. Jekoniah, his son, was therefore condemned accordingly, as is expressed, for example, in Deut 5:9: "… for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me." If Deuteronomic retribution theology, according to which the son is pun-

[16] It is worth noting that the expression appears also in the texts of royal context (2 Sam 8:15; 2 Kgs 10:9; 1 Chr 18:14; 2 Chr 9:8).

ished for the sins of his father, explains the treatment of Jekoniah, there is no need for Jeremiah to argue what evil was committed by Jekoniah. The book of Jeremiah never mentions the details of the evil acts of Jekoniah. As Carroll rightly notes, Jekoniah was king for only three months, and only in the besieged city of Jerusalem, so he did not have much time to do bad things – and nothing which would justify criticism against him.[17] Therefore, a good explanation is that Jekoniah was condemned because of the Deuteronomic retribution theology: a sinner will not have blessing in his life. Neither will his offspring. This background and perspective from Jeremiah and Haggai of Jekoniah and his family present us with a new opportunity to understand why Ezek 18 has been edited between two texts which have a royal focus.

As we have already seen, Ezek 17:22–24 suggests that the positive scenario of the House of David must concern the family of Jekoniah, the only surviving line of the House of Josiah (and David) at the time of the exile (2 Kgs 25:27–30). This positive attitude toward Jekoniah's family is also apparent in the genealogy of David preserved in 1 Chr 3:17–24. As the episode of Zerubbabel demonstrates, the family of Jekoniah was opposed because of Jeremiah's doom prophesy in Jer 22:24–30, which, in turn, was related to Jehoiakim's rejection of the Deuteronomic programme. In Ezekiel, individual responsibility (see Ezek 3:17–21; 18; and 33:1–21) was an important theological cornerstone. The generation of the exile has a hope if it returns to YHWH. I am keen to interpret Ezek 18 in its literary context. I contend that the redactional position of Ezek 18 between Ezek 17 and 19 was made deliberately. How, in this interpretive scenario, can we understand the content of Ezek 18?

E. Jekoniah – A Sinner or a Son of the Sinner?

In Ezek 18 the Deuteronomistic retribution theology concerning sin, responsibility, and suffering is challenged. This challenge has not been done directly because, in its present literary context, Ezek 18 has not taken an individual and his responsibility in theological focus. Instead, Ezek 18 deals with how the Davidic dynasty can continue to exist after the crisis of the exile. For this reason, Ezek 18 has the frames Ezek 17 and Ezek 19, both of which deal with Davidic kings. It was this royal focus which gave the writer the opportunity to demonstrate why Deuteronomistic retribution theology cannot be applied when the sufferings of the exile (Ezek 18:2) are discussed.

First, the future of the dynasty of David as attested in Ezek 34, 37, and 40–48 is related closely to covenantal thinking. This covenant implies that the Da-

[17] Carroll 1986, 441: "What could a young king three months on the throne have done to warrant such hostility?"

vidic prince must be loyal to YHWH and his priests, which parallels well the Deuteronomic ideal in Deut 17:14–20. This explains why, in the present form of the book of Ezekiel, the chronology has been calculated from the reform of Josiah (Ezek 1:1). If this is the case, the righteous father in Ezek 18 represents Josiah.[18]

Second, the behaviour of the righteous man is expressed four times with an idiomatic saying, "do justice and righteousness" (Ezek 18:5, 19, 21, 27), which in Jer 22:15–16 has been used about Josiah and in the programmatic exhortation to the House of David (Jer 22:3; 23:5; 33:15).

Third, the question formulated in Ezek 18:19 ("Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?") seems to refer to the retribution theology presented in Deut 5:9 and elsewhere (see also Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:8). It was this Deuteronomistic retribution theology which was used to reject Jekoniah (because of his father's sins), as I have argued.

Fourth, when Ezek 17–19 is read as a larger literary unity, it becomes clear that it shares the anti-Zedekiah attitude which belongs to the later textual stratum in Jeremiah. Additionally, Ezek 17–19 does not agree with the anti-Jekoniah attitude preserved in the Jeremiah traditions. In my view, the answer of the book of Ezekiel to the anti-Jekoniah view presented in Jeremiah traditions is found in the idea of individual responsibility. Every man is responsible to YHWH for his own deeds and not for those of his father. This is illustrated in Ezek 18 by means of the relationship between father, son, and grandson. The father is depicted as righteous, the son as godless, and the grandson as the one who, seeing all the evil things done by his father, is moved to return to YHWH and follow his commandments as his grandfather had done before him. Ezekiel 18 is intentionally placed between chapters 17 and 19 because its content is connected to the problem of the continuance of the Davidic dynasty. The composer has noted in the frames (Ezek 17 and 19) that the sons of Hamutal (and Josiah), Shallum and Zedekiah, have no offspring and thus no future on the throne of Jerusalem. The only possible continuation of the House of David is through Jekoniah (Ezek 17:22–24), whose line, however, is rejected in Jeremiah traditions. By adding Ezek 18 immediately after the pro-Jekoniah pronouncements in Ezek 17:22–24, the redactor of Ezek 17–19 wanted to formulate an apology for Jekoniah who, according to traditions preserved in Jeremiah, must suffer because of his father's sins (see Jer 22:24–30 and the curse uttered to Jehoiakim in Jer 36:30–31). If this assumption is correct, then the father, the son, and the grandson in Ezekiel 18 must stand for the Davidic

[18] It is worth noting that in Ezek 17, Zedekiah is apparently criticized when he became disloyal to the Babylonian king even though he had given oath in the name of YHWH – something which follows typical vassal treaty tradition in the ancient Near East. For this, see Tsevat 1959, 199–204.

kings: the righteous father Josiah and his evil son Jehoiakim. The grandson, who sees all the evil done by Jehoiakim, is Jekoniah. The composer of Ezek 17–19 wanted to set the curse uttered against the family of Jekoniah in Jeremiah traditions in a new light: it is possible for Jekoniah (and his offspring) to inherit the throne in Jerusalem if he (or one belonging to his family) turns from evil and follows YHWH's commandments.

The above-mentioned interpretation of Ezek 18 is possible only in its present royal context provided by Ezek 17–19. Other details in Ezek 18 indicate that it is based on older Ezekielian material (cf. Ezek 3:17–21 and 33:1–21) which has been used by the composer of Ezek 17–19 to justify the dynastic line Josiah → Jehoiakim → Jekoniah as legitimate in spite of the curse against this Davidic line in Jeremiah traditions.[19] The redactional unit, Ezek 17–19, suggests that it can be read in the inner-biblical relationship with the book of Jeremiah. In such a reading, the central role of Josiah becomes apparent and he typifies the righteous king, even in Ezekiel. In addition, it shows that the theological framework of Ezek 17–19 may also have influenced the present MT version of the book of Jeremiah, where criticism against Jekoniah has been softened.

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[19] Ezek 33:10–21 is especially important because, in that text, the expression "do justice and righteousness" has also been used (Ezek 33:14, 16, 19) and the text deals with a similar problem of suffering in exile because of parents who have sinned (Ezek 33:10).

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