The Social Dynamics Surrounding Yahwistic Women's Supposed Ritual Deviance in Ezekiel 13:17–23[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that in Ezekiel 13:17–23 we have an example of the ritual activities of Yahwistic women being undermined. However, rather than opening the hermeneutical crux of attempting to understand *what* it is the women are doing or *how* their ritual activity is functioning, I will focus squarely on the broader social dynamics in the text. Specifically, I pay attention to the way in which stereotypes are used as foils in the struggle to define authentic authority and power. Instead of dividing ancient Israelite society solely along gender lines, I will acknowledge the text's misogynistic undertones, but I will also attend to broader social questions. I use, as a heuristic analogy, examples of magic accusations drawn from Classics in order to illustrate the potentially complex social dynamics and tensions potentially underlying the text. I argue that Ezekiel's accusation, in and of itself, of the women's ritual deviancy is enough to damage the women's reputation. Likewise, I argue for the possibility that the women's ritual activity is an attempt to gain a sense of agency and control after the chaos of the Babylonian exile.

KEYWORDS

ritual, magic, Ezekiel 13, anonymity, power, anxiety

It is difficult to reach a clear understanding of women's professional work in the Hebrew Bible. This is because sometimes the secondary literature re-tells and sometimes even repeats the texts own polemics and values. This is the case for Ezekiel 13:17–23. For example, Eichrodt describes the anonymous women in Ezekiel 13:17–23 as "witches," "insolent women," "dangerous rivals … to genuine prophecy," and women who practice "heathen demonism."[2] Similarly, Taylor argues that the women are "witches or sorceresses" and "quacks" who "prey upon credulous and anxious minds" with their "occult powers."[3] Likewise, Zimmerli designates the activity from Ezek

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[1] I want to acknowledge the very significant amount of time and work that two anonymous peer-reviewers put into improving the quality of my writing, and to thank them, sincerely, for their help. This article is dedicated to these wonderful academics, whoever they are.

[2] Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1970), 170, 182.

[3] John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 123–124.

In this article, I reject the gendered slur "witch". When I use the term it is usually drawn from secondary material. The topic of gendered slurs has been researched helpfully, Lauren Ashwell, "Gendered Slurs," *Social Theory and Practice* 42 (2016): 228–239, tinyurl.com/GenderedSlurs; Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, eds. Gillian Russell and Delia Graff Fara (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 741–752, doi:10.4324/9780203206966. Diaz-Legaspe comments of the power of gendered slurs, arguing that they have far-reaching harm. This is because "among pejoratives, slurs have the strongest offensive power" so that even if they are aimed at a particular individual, "all the members of the

13:17 onward as "minor mantic acts and magic" and "lesser activities under the catchword 'prophetic.'"[4] The assumption that the anonymous women must be witches and that their work must be illegitimate because of Ezekiel's denunciation of them problematically repeats, endorses, and even gives strength to the misogynistic aspects of the text. The text does not actually state that the women are witches so these approaches could reasonably be critiqued for overlooking the potentially significant activity that the anonymous women are engaging in. By assuming the anonymous women in are not Yahwists, but are witches, and that their work is not legitimate but related to magic, any attempts to understand and debate what they might potentially be doing are dismissed. Worse still, certain assumptions that creep into scholarship, such as the idea that women may be witches betray a misogynistic mode of reasoning which unhelpfully introduces intersectional othering devices.

These responses in secondary literature to Ezekiel 13:17–23 are not surprising but align with a body of secondary evidence wherein problematic assumptions are made about women and magic or divination in texts.[5] Perhaps a part of the reason why these assumptions are made

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targeted group are potentially harmed by their use," Justina Diaz-Legaspe, "Normalizing Slurs and Out-group Slurs: The Case of Referential Restriction," *Analytic Philosophy* 59 (2018): 239, doi:10.1111/phib.12129. Perhaps a contributory factor in these gendered slurs is the role of Biblical translation. For example, the clear and memorable strong prohibition in the book of the covenant *mekashepah lo tekhayeh* "you must not permit a magician to live" (Exod 22:18). Although the term *mekashepah* appears as a feminine singular in the Hebrew, the Greek translation uses the masculine accusative (*pharmakous*) "magician," pointing to the fact that both genders practiced magic, as also evidenced by other texts that have male magicians (Exod 7:11; Jer 27:9; Dan 2:2). Nevertheless, many Biblical translations assume the female gender of "practice magic" must be translated "witch" (KJV; DBY; YLT; WEB; BRG; CEV; JUB).

[4] Walther Zimmerli, et al. *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 296–297. In this article I am using terms such as magic, divination, and necromancy as descriptive terms to indicate types of ritual practice. I am *not* using the terms in a pejorative or an emic way, save for when I am quoting from secondary sources to demonstrate the problems associated with emic approaches to magic, divination, and necromancy. Refer to Eidinow's insightful discussion of emic and etic approaches to magic, Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–14, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199277780.001.0001.

[5] A popular tendency is to reduce the role of women to their reproductive organs. For example, Meyers suggests that "rituals surrounding pregnancy, labour, and birth, along with those securing fertility before pregnancy… constitute the religious culture of women," Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 17; cf. Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153–158, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199734559.001.00011. Similarly, Dever argues "women were acutely aware of and responded to the 'female aspects of deity' specially the goddess Asherah," William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 240. Stavrakopoulou's critique of this tendency is helpful where they argue that "goddesses tend to be categorised overwhelmingly as either 'fertility' deities or 'mother' goddesses—flattening their portrayed characteristics and functions into a reductive, 'biologically' essentialist frame of reference rarely imposed upon male deities," Francesca Stavrakopoulou, "The Ancient Goddess, the Biblical Scholar, and the Religious Past: Re-imagining Divine Women," in *Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood

in the secondary material is to do with notions of magic that "lead us to retroject later taxonomies of knowledge and values onto the past."[6] This could be because, as Stratton demonstrates, the idea of the magician and the witch are "powerful and enduring stereotypes in Western cultural history."[7] Regardless, one key simplistic binary that is often coupled with the idea of women's work and, that must be resisted is the idea of creating an interpretative dichotomy between official and popular religion. In creating this binary, popular religion is associated with women magic, and divination, and operates in the reign of the domicile. By contrast, official practices are associated with male elites, prophecy, and the cult.[8] It is important to distinguish between the way texts represent women and the practices such texts might represent. This is because is it our responsibility as Biblical scholars and students not to take Biblical polemics at their word, because simplistically repeating the values embedded within texts could potentially lead to misogynistic readings that reduce women to sexual beings. As Janzen argues, readers "create" texts through their interpretations "we need to create the best ones we can, where best is determined by the ethical criterion of liberation."[9] Therefore, it is worth acknowledging that the textual representation of the practices in Ezekiel 13:17–23 does not need to be taken at face value.

A further caution must be added here. Given the somewhat negative portrayal women and their work in Ezekiel 13:17–23, it is very tempting to assume that misogyny should be a guiding principle for interpretation. However, Reed makes an excellent case for pausing and reconsidering. Reed argues that instead of choosing various constructed totalising systems of knowing wherein "binary choices (female/male, magic/religion, nature/culture, negative/positive, passive/active) can appear to be our only options" we could potentially benefit

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 498, doi:10.1093/oso/9780198722618.001.0001. The problem that Stavrakopoulou highlights is one where the population is simplistically divided along the gendered lines.

[6] Annette Y. Reed, "Gendering Heavenly Secrets? Women, Angels, and the Problem of Misogyny and 'Magic'," in *Daughters of Hecate*, eds. Kimberly B. Stratton and Dayna S. Kalleres (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 110, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195342703.001.0001. Cf. Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[7] Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), doi:10.7312/stra13836.

[8] Meyers points out the problems arguing that "this separation into two mutually exclusive groups is … value laden and is especially problematic when elites are aligned with the official, and others, especially women, with the popular" (Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 150). Likewise, Stavrakopoulou suggests this tendency towards reductive binaries in interpretation orientalises women and such theories should be understood as a derogatory caricature, cautioning that "the othering strategies of both biblical writers and scholars themselves can often misrepresent the likely religious realities of ancient Israel and Judah" (Stavrakopoulou, "The Ancient Goddess," 496). Perhaps one reason for these types of binaries is "the weighty influence of structuralism across modern academia" leading to the "assumption of a world full of clear binary opposites," Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 25–26.

[9] David Janzen, *The Liberation of Method: The Ethics of Emancipatory Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2021), 25.

from a more nuanced approach.[10] Reed develops this point arguing that there are two key problems with this approach:

> First is the practice of reading references to women as always and everywhere meant to communicate something about gender, with the tacit implication that an author would have only included reference to men if he had wished to communicate human totality or universality, whereby the invisibility of masculinity is affirmed and the assumption of the male as model of the human re-inscribed. Second is the tendency to interpret the association of any form of knowledge or practice with women as a sign that this knowledge is being devalued or judged as negative, after which one applies the circular logic that its lesser valuation speaks to the correspondingly negative view of women. In both cases, common modern reading practices can result in a homogenization of ancient misogyny that forecloses further inquiry into what is distinctive in specific times and sources.[11]

These are very powerful and compelling points that highlight key potential problems in our reasoning process when it comes to engagement with texts that include women practicing ritual. Although it is helpful to point out that it is misogynistic to produce readings that emphasise the texts own biases, or worse introduce misogynistic ideas through interpretation, we simply cannot reduce the evidence to being only about gender. It is right to point out that there are misogynistic assumptions underlying some of our primary evidence, where it does occur. But however well-intended, focusing only gender and misogyny in texts such as Ezekiel 13:17–23 might eclipse other potentially interesting and complex aspects of these texts and the societies behind them.

An analogy may help to illustrate the point I am trying to make. In a recent article, Eidinow discusses a 4th century female clay figurine resting on her knees known as Sarapammon's doll or the Louvre Doll. The figurine is "hog-tied, her ankles drawn up to her buttocks, her hands bound low behind her back" and she is impaled by needles coming out of her head, eyes, ears, mouth, breast, ankles, feet, and genitals.[12] Upon first seeing the object (through a swift internet search), I was very shocked and assumed it was thoroughly misogynistic, because the nearest frames of reference that sprang to my mind were voodoo or sado-masochism. However, my assumption was wrong. The more compelling argument concerning the doll is that it is an example of a binding spell, or a love spell, because many similar examples of such have been found in the Greek Magical Papyri. This is a helpful reminder that "we cannot simply assume that ancient men and women thought and/or acted as we do."[13] This example illustrates the ways in which loaded language and concerns in secondary scholarship related to ritual activity can sometimes prevent us from engaging with the evidence in a way we might if we were not more aware of the effects

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[10] Reed, "Gendering Heavenly Secrets," 111.

[11] Reed, "Gendering Heavenly Secrets," 119–120.

[12] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 749–750.

[13] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses*, 750.

of said language and concerns. This is important because, as Stratton argues, as a "constellation of terms and ideas designating Otherness, illegitimacy, and danger" the term magic became a "key element in the construction of notions about legitimate and illegitimate authority in the formative period of Western thought."[14] Although Ezekiel 13:17–23 has not had the same popularity as the strangely-named "doll" the same may be said about the practice in terms of questions about legitimacy and power. Like the love spell of the Louvre Doll, it is possible that women's ritual practices in texts such as Ezekiel 13:17–23 may be more mundane than we might first imagine (though that does not mean the women are not valuable or without expertise). Perhaps, therefore, it would be helpful to pay attention to broader social dynamics associated with the ways that the anonymous female characters are portrayed in these texts and what these dynamics might convey about the contexts behind our texts. Before doing so, it is necessary to examine the text.

The Damning Depiction of Women's Ritual Activity in Ezekiel 13:17–23

Ezekiel 13:17–23 has confused interpreters over the years and this article does not seek to "solve" the exegetical problems, but instead to attend to broader social dynamics associated with the way the anonymous women are portrayed. In the second half of Ezekiel 13 there is a denunciation of the anonymous "daughters of your people who prophecy" supposedly "out of their own mind" (Ezek 13:17).[15] This is condemned in the chapter as having ritually "defiled" or "polluted" Yahweh's people, perhaps for payment although this is far from clear (Ezek 13:18).[16] What the women are practicing is described as "deception" and "empty" (Ezek 13:22, 23; cf. Zech 10:2). In contrast with this, Ezekiel twice employs the formulaic phrase that emphasises Yahweh's authority "thus says the LORD God" (Ezek 13:18, 20). Similarly, highlighting the authority of Yahweh and juxtaposing this with the idea of the women's lack of integrity, we are told that one God "tears" the *kesatot* and *mispakhot* and they will then "know that I am the LORD" (Ezek 13:21, 23).[17] Implied divine violence through the image of tearing the *kesatot* (magic bands?) is a

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[14] Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 177.

[15] The term *hammitnabbot* is a *hithpael* participle with definite article, and can very literally be rendered "the prophesying women." The *hithpael* form of the verb *nava* sometimes functions to convey the idea of "false" prophets, although it is not consistently used in this way (1 Kgs 22:18, 18 // 2 Chr. 18:9; Jer 14:14; 23:13). The sample size of all the occurrences of the verb in this form is not statistically significant enough to reach any firm conclusions.

[16] Payment may or may not be what is being conveyed by the text; the preposition *bet* may be interpreted a number of ways so is ambiguous.

[17] These terms (*kesatot* and *mispakhot*) are often translated as "bands" and "veils" but I have chosen to leave them untranslated in the main text given the significant difficulties around translation and given that the terms are hapaxes. As Evans states, "as best we can tell, these women were sewing magical charms or amulets in bands on clients' arms … and onto their own arms too (v. 20). What were the bands supposed to do: impart power

particularly strong condemnation within the text of the ritual activity that the women are undertaking.[18] Ezekiel places the prohibition "therefore … you shall not divine divinations" climactically and emphatically at the end of the speech and has it delivered authoritatively by placing it on the lips of Yahweh (Ezek 13:23; cf. Jer 14:14).

It is not at all certain *what* ritual activity the women here are participating in and this paper does not seek to resolve that hermeneutical crux. Some of the suggestions in scholarship include the idea of necromancy, ritual midwifery, and binding magic. For example, Bowen, who separates Ezekiel's attitude to the women from their actual activities, suggests the women's work concerns medical and ritual aspects of childbirth.[19] In contrast, Stökl compares the anonymous women with female practitioners of necromancy from twelfth-century Emar arguing for similar philological forms between the Hebrew term *mitnabbot* and the term *munabbiātu* found in the Emar texts.[20] Similarly, Korpel, who examines the way spirits of the dead are represented in avian ways in Ugaritic literature, argues that the women were engaged in necromancy and that the wristbands and headbands should be interpreted as bird nests that are used to hunt the souls of the dead.[21] Hamori connected the anonymous women with Yahwistic necromancy on the basis of the repeated term *nephesh* which, despite its wide semantic range, she suggests should be interpreted in context as referring to the souls of the deceased (Ezek 13: 18, 19, 20; cf. Lev 19:28; 21:1; 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:6).[22] In contrast again, Evans suggests that the women are using binding

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to the wearer, ward off danger, or perhaps 'bind' someone to the daughters in a controlling sense?" John F. Evans, "Death-Dealing Witchcraft in the Bible?: Notes on the Condemnation of the "daughters" in Ezekiel 13:17–23," *Tyndale Bulletin (1966)* 65 (2014): 62. A further exegetical problem is who is wearing these garments? For example, in verse 18 these terms are used for those coming to the women whereas in verse 20 the women seem to be wearing them, and in verse 21 either scenario could potentially be the case.

[18] The verb *qara* is regularly used for the rending of clothing, and it is often done in an intense state of emotion. For example, garments are ripped up during Jacob's grief supposing Joseph must be dead (Gen 37:34; cf. Job 1:20), on Jepthah's realisation that he has inadvertently sworn on his daughter's life (Judg 11:35), after Tamar's sexual assault (2 Sam 13:19), upon Athaliah's realisation of her own imminent murder (2 Kgs 11:14; 2 Chr 23:13), and by Ezra, dismayed after learning of the *golah's* intermarriages with foreign women (Ezra 9:3, 5).

[19] Nancy R. Bowen, "The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17–23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (2008): 417–433, doi:10.2307/3268182.

[20] Jonathan Stökl, "The מתנבאות in Ezekiel 13 Reconsidered," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013): 61–76, doi:10.2307/23488237.

[21] Marjo C. A. Korpel, "Avian Spirits in Ugarit and in Ezekiel 13," in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture. Edinburgh, July 1994. Essays presented in Honour of Professor John C.L. Gibson*, eds. N. Wyatt, Wilfred G. E. Watson and J. B. Lloyd (Münster: Verlag, 1996), 99–113.

[22] Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 172. Hamori's case is robust given the range of evidence for the use of bird imagery for spirits of the dead, as found in Gilgamesh, in Egyptian religion, in Ugaritic, and in Greek Funerary art, Mesopotamian and Canaanite winged demons, as well as noting Arabic and Persian concepts where the dead are understood as birds. They also note the avian language embedded within requests for necromancy in Isaiah (Isa 8:19; 10:14; 29:4; 38:14; Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 175–176. This makes her argument stronger, though the crux still seems irresolvable.

magic in a curative way, with similarities to Mesopotamian healers or exorcists.[23] They argue the women combine white (as opposed to black) magic, prophecy, divination, and visions as activities that are "legitimate, sanctioned, and 'religious' in the conceptual world of the ancient Near East."[24] What is particularly compelling about these contributions to scholarship is the deliberate attempt to overcome the polemical aspects of Ezekiel's representation and to seek to better understand the broader contextual and conceptual world from wherein the text emerges. As with Sarapammon's doll, it may be worth suspending judgement until we have a better grasp of our evidence.

Through uncoupling the representation of women and religious practice from the work they are doing these scholars make some compelling arguments. Hamori, for instance, suggests with regard to Ezekiel 13:17–23 that "'prophecy' and 'divination' are not phenomenologically different, and prophetic and other divinatory methods do not belong to separate spheres of activity."[25] Stökl makes a similarly powerful argument against the distinction between negatively represented popular (i.e. magic, divination), verses positively represented official religion (i.e. prophesy), suggesting that the differences between different types of religion are emic value judgements.[26] That means that "they are valid within the culture that makes them, but they are not based on 'objectively' observable data."[27] This is helpful because we need to approach our evidence with caution. Any claim to "orthodoxy" or claim that this or that practice is "heresy" is always subjective because these are perspectives, rather than ontologically fixed categories. Therefore, while the polemic against magic and divination must be recognised in the texts, it does not automatically mean that such practices should be dismissed as low-skilled and illegitimate without further consideration. This is advantageous because rather than taking the text at face-value as misogynistic and about "magic" or so-called "witchcraft" and then allowing that observation to end any meaningful engagement with the evidence, it instead encourages us to think carefully about why the polemic might exist and the social dynamics that may underpin it. A key question emerges: what level of monopoly on ritual authority might these women have possessed (whatever their actual activity) in order to warrant such a strong condemnation? In order to answer this question, I would like to address questions of agency and power related to

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[23] Several distinct kinds of healers exist in Mesopotamian medicine. These include the *ashipu*, a magician and exorcist as well as a priest, and the *asu* were closer to what we might call a physician, and in addition the *baru*, or diviner, cf. Markham J. Geller, *Ancient Babylonian Medicine: Theory and Practice* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

[24] Evans, "Death-Dealing," 75.

[25] Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 33.

[26] However, it is also worth noting that "an absolute split between the emic and the etic is impossible," Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 141.

[27] Stökl, "The מתנבאות," 62.

the social dynamics surrounding accusations of magic and use this material to facilitate heuristic analysis of Ezekiel 13:17–23.

The Undermining of the Other through the Accusation of Ritual Deviance in Ezekiel 13:17–23

It is important to pay attention to the social function that magic and accusations of magic play. This is because questions about social dynamics and power struggles are as important as questions surrounding what the actual practice itself might have been. Whether it was necromancy, binding magic, or some other divinatory ritual, the ritual itself might be better understood by considering context. Given how prevalent accusations of magic and witchcraft are it may be helpful to analyse what types of social tensions potentially underpin them.[28] Stratton makes a really important case for thinking about ritually deviant behaviour and questions concerning legitimacy of access to sacred power in different historical periods in the ancient world. They suggest that,

> stereotypes of witches and sorcerers emerged in the ancient world as foils in the struggle to define legitimate power and authority. Similarly, in the twenty-first century, ideas about fanatical extremists arise in opposition to claims of freedom and democracy: each side of the conflict claims legitimacy by painting the Other as the barbaric and demonic rival.[29]

This is an important argument when considering ritual and its persistent connection to claims about legitimacy and authenticity. Said claims are highlighted through questions about the social dynamics between people. As such, it is important to acknowledge that magic can function as a discourse of alterity. By exaggerating the power and agency of the Other and simultaneously exaggerating the Other's negative characteristics, and often also bolstering this with the

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[28] This prevalence is particularly pronounced with regard to witchcraft accusations. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, violent retributive action against alleged witches occurred in England, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland, and the so-called witches were believed to possess supernatural powers that could cause physical injuries, sickness and death, Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Court cases about the occurrences of so-called witchcraft emerge throughout Africa in places including the Republic of Benin, Cameroon, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Africa, Tanzinia, Uganda, Zimbabew. Media reports of documented cases of witchcraft persecutions also emerge from places such as India, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea, Mensah Adinkrah, *Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2015), 5–14, doi:10.2307/j.ctt9qcswd.

These examples are anachronistic and culturally distant from the Biblical text and we must be aware of the stereotypes of the magician and the witch (Stratton, *Naming the Witch*). Nevertheless, the culmination of examples of these accusations illustrate the prevalence of magical beliefs about women.

[29] Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 180.

problematically intersectional idea of "woman as Other," those who make accusations of magic and witchcraft are able to construct a very damaging narrative about their opponents.

Another interesting example, this time from 158–159 CE in Sabratha, emerges in Eidinow's examination of ancient magic and social tension. Here an accusation of aggressive magic emerges in a trial of a philosopher called Apuleius of Madaurus. The man is taken to court by relatives of his new wife's (named Pudentilla) dead ex-husband. Apuleius describes the charge as the slanderous charge of magic, and defends himself against several accusations including the charge that he bewitched the widow Pudentilla so that he could persuade her to marry him. Eidinow makes the perceptive argument here that "the trial itself is a display of the kinds of rivalries and suspicions that could spring up in an ancient community, and it suggests the kinds of social configurations that might exacerbate them."[30] This is helpful because it illustrates very clearly that the question of magic accusation is not necessarily about magic at all every time it emerges. It can also be about agency and power. Furthermore, since we observed that different types of ritual activity may not be as are phenomenologically different as we at first may think, questions about language and narrative are important. Although Apuleius's trail is a small-scale example, it is nevertheless a helpful reminder that the slander and damage caused by the very *accusation* of magic is significant. Paradoxically, the accusation itself of ritual deviancy is given power through being publicly stated because it sows the seed of doubt about the victim of the accusation. The social dynamics here are important. Suspicions, hostility, access to resources may be greater forces at work in this example than the supposed bewitching of Pudentilla.

Eidinow's argument concerning social tensions and magic is instructive for how we reflect on Ezekiel 13:17–23. Perhaps, examining the way that Ezekiel communicates about the anonymous women may, in itself, be useful information about his relationship to their power and social standing? Or perhaps there are broader issues underpinning the accusation about the women's behaviour? For the latter consideration, the connection between risk, magic, and anxiety is interesting. Eidinow provides an example of binding spells that are used to protect communities from warfare or from supernatural hostility. Examples provided are the "Cyrenean Lex Sacra and the Lex Sacra from Selinus" which provide "city-sanctioned rituals" for such protection.[31] Likewise, they find similar examples in ancient literary accounts of Sparta and Athens of communities using magical action for protection from deity attacks. Eidinow observes that,

> contexts of crisis—situations of apparently insuperable difficulty—that are exacerbated by a sense
> of uncertainty, can engender a feeling of powerlessness for anyone, whatever their social status:

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[30] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 748.
[31] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 764.

"The performance (or commission) of a spell made it possible to regain the initiative and the hope that one could affect the outcome. The ritual thus offered both the community and the individual a means to master emotionally an otherwise difficult crisis."[32]

This is a helpful argument because it highlights the key psychological and emotional tolls that a perceived lack of agency can have on individuals and communities and the way that ritual activity can be a means of retaining some attempt at, or hope for, agency. Therefore, anxiety and uncertainty may contribute towards ritual activity (whether designated "magic" or otherwise) in an attempt to come to terms with trauma.

With these considerations in mind, let us return to Ezekiel 17:13–23 afresh with a focus on what the social dynamics behind the text may be. The first thing to notice is that the women are anonymous. It is quite difficult to know what the significance of this could be given the scant evidence. We do not have access to the women's voices or perspective, only their representation by Ezekiel. The fact that they have caught Ezekiel's attention at all could be an indication of some level of ritual authority among them. If the women in the passage are specific people within the community, then failing to name them could be an indication of Ezekiel's lack of power: naming them may be too dangerous. In this case anonymity could be a device that attempts to minimise the women's ritual authority without repercussions for Ezekiel (think of Apuleius of Madaurus's court case in response to magic accusation). Alternatively, the passage could be directed at nobody in particular, but instead a more general condemnation of a specific type of ritual activity that women participate in, designed to be a more general warning. If the latter scenario is the case, then we must acknowledge the power of the *accusation* of ritual deviance: the very existence and publicity of the accusation creates a narrative that demonises any women who practices the ritual described in the text. Either way, through the device of anonymity, alterity is increased. This is because the women are able to be represented as "categorisable, subjugatable" objects, as opposed to self-interpreting subjects, so that the "ongoing performance of distinction" and of "repeating differences" unfolds.[33] Therefore, this could be either a way of scapegoating, discrediting, and disempowering women who engage in the ritual described, or of delegitimising a particular group of women indirectly. There is not enough evidence to make decisions with any certainty. It is impossible to determine, but paying attention to the social dynamics around the accusation has increased our awareness of the power of the accusation. Importantly, this is not only a verbal accusation: it is also written in text so quite possibly repeatedly read, with each reading producing a renewed suspicion even (as we noted) among

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[32] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 758–759. Cf. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[33] Jeremiah W. Cataldo, "The Other: Sociological Perspectives in a Postcolonial Age," in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana V. Edelman (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 4, 15, doi:10.5040/9780567659163.

modern commentators. Whatever level of ritual authority the women may have had (if any) it is deeply undermined by this accusation.

It is hard to miss the polemical tone through which the anonymous women in Ezekiel 13:17–23 are addressed. The passage culminates in a very direct instruction, represented as coming from Yahweh, not to divine divinations (Ezek 13:23). Authority here is again represented as being on the side of the prophet Ezekiel who speaks in the first-person in Yahweh's name to denounce the anonymous women's ritual activity. In contrast the women's activities are portrayed in a negative way that has all the potential for the reputation-damaging slander that ritual activity that is depicted as deviant brings. We are told the women "hunt disembodies souls," a phrase which is highly evocative of the so-called "whore" and the so-called "foreign" woman in Proverbs 1–9.[34] Playing on the wide sematic range of the word *nephesh*, Ezekiel suggests the women "cause death for those that should not die and keep alive the disembodied souls of those that should not live" (Ezek 13:19).[35] In contrast to Ezekiel's self-representation as

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[34] For example, Prov 6:26 refers to the "whorish woman" to whom a man is brought for a "piece of bread" who "hunts a man's precious soul". Many exilic and post-exilic texts display what Eskenazi describes as a problematic "feminization of the Other," Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Imagining the Other in the Construction of Judahite Identity in Ezra–Nehemiah," in Ben Zvi and Edeleman, *Imagining the Other*, 249, doi:10.5040/9780567659163. Note, for example, the ways in which the "foreign woman" is demonised in Proverbs 1–9, Nancy N. H. Tan, *The "Foreignness" of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); Stuart Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1-9* (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 128–129. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199291540.001.0001; cf. Laura Quick, "The Hidden Body as Literary Strategy in 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184)," *Dead Sea Discoveries: A Journal of Current Research on the Scrolls and Related Literature* 27 (2020): 234–256, doi:10.1163/15685179-02702003; 4Q184. The figure is explicitly linked to Sheol and associated with danger and death (Prov 5:5; 7:27; 9:18). Similarly, in Ezra-Nehemiah "foreign women" from the "people of the land" are emphatically depicted as a pollutant to the community through the range of strong terminology for defilement (*tame* "unclean"; *khet* "sin"; *maal* "sacrilege"), including the misogynistic implication that the group contaminated the land with "menstrual impurity" (*niddah* "defile" *piel* Ezra 9:11; cf. of menstruation Lev 15:24–25, 33; Katherine Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199644346.001.0001). Like Ezra, Malachi also connects the language of "abomination" (*toebah*) and the term "profane" (*khalal*) with the idea of the having married the "daughter of a foreign god" (Mal 2:11). For a more thorough discussion of the whore and witch tropes and foreign women refer to Hamori (*Women's Divination*, 203–216). Morse also notes the way in which sexualised language that occurs in Ezekiel is similar to modern misogynistic revenge porn and slut-shaming, Holly Morse, "'Judgement was Executed Upon Her, and She Became a Byword Among Women' (Ezek. 23:10): Divine Revenge Porn, Slut-Shaming, Ethnicity, and Exile in Ezekiel 16 and 23," in *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Katherine E. Southwood and Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 129–154.

On the terms "foreigner" and "whore": ethnicity is a constructed identity not a primordial given, so this language needs careful scrutiny (Southwood, *Ethnicity*, 19–71). The gendered slur "whore" is inappropriate, despite its appearance in the Biblical texts.

[35] The word *nephesh* has a wide semantic range. The translation "disembodied souls" emerges as a result of Steiner's monograph where he makes a sustained case, taking inspiration from the Katumuwa Inscription, for this translation of *nephesh* on the basis that a *nephesh* could be separable from its physical being and visit a stele or accept a sacrificial offering, Richard C. Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The Nefesh in Israel and Kindred Spirits in the*

authoritative, the women's activities are portrayed as threatening and highly dangerous, but in a demeaning way. Their power is unauthorised because they prophecy "out of their own imagination" (Ezek 13:17). Their skills are dangerous yet confused, muddling up who should die and who should remain alive. But, paradoxically, they have too much power, and it stands in opposition to the community thus threatening to unravel the moral fabric of society. This can also be seen through the way in which the community labelled "my [Yahweh's] people" are set in opposition to the women by Ezekiel. The anonymous women "hunt the disembodied souls of *my people*" they are lying "to *my people*" and "*my people*" are to be "delivered" out of their hands (Ezek 13:18, 19, 23). The idea that the community need "delivering" (*natsal*) from these women also paints them as an enemy to society given that the *hiphil* form of the verb *natsal* regularly refers to deliverance by Yahweh from a dangerous enemy (Exod 18:9; Judg 8:34; 1 Sam 10:18). In these few verses, the anonymous women in Ezekiel are depicted as unprofessional, suspicious, confused, dangerous, ineffective, and moral inferiors who threaten the ethical and social fabric of society. The language of alterity looms large behind the accusation of deviant ritual. Pious-sounding language is used but behind it the gendered slurs bitch and witch are implied.

Moving aside from the question of stereotypes, it was also suggestive to consider the possibility, based on the analogy with rituals in the contexts of crisis, that the ritual the women are participating in may be linked to uncertainty or to the attempt to gain some sense of agency in a situation of powerlessness. A sense of context is helpful here. Ezekiel presents the prophet's activities as being dated from 593 BCE (Ezek 1:2).[36] It is as well to remind ourselves that the sixth century BCE brought to Yehud disaster on an unprecedented scale in the form of the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs 24–25; 2 Chr 36; Jer 52; Babylonian Chronicle). Given the scale of the trauma, the level of emotional and psychological impacts on exiled communities should not be underestimated. Secondary scholarship on the trauma instigated by the Babylonian exile has proliferated, serving as evidence of the seriousness of the event.[37] Lamentations gives us a

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Ancient Near East, with an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), tinyurl.com/DisembodiedSouls.

[36] There are, of course, lots of debates about dating but there is not the capacity in this article for a lengthy discussion. Refer instead to several commentaries on Ezekiel: Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: T&T Clark International, 2008), 3–5; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 1–6; Zimmerli *Ezekiel*, 9–16.

[37] A few examples include Chwi-Woon Kim, "Psalms of Communal Lament as a Relic of Transgenerational Trauma," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140 (2021): 531–556, doi:10.15699/jbl.1403.2021.5; David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Joanna Collicutt, "Bringing the Academic Discipline of Psychology To Bear On The Study Of The Bible," *Journal of Theological Studies* 63 (2012): 1–48, doi:10.1093/jts/fls059; Paul Joyce, "Psychological Approaches to Lamentations," in *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*, eds. Robert A. Parry and Thomas A. Heath (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 161–165; Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002).

unique insight into the psychological and emotional fracturing that was induced by the event.[38] Embedded within the physical destruction are ritual forms of violence, such as urbicide and the destruction of sites of memory and identity which remind us of the deliberate psychological violence induced by the event.[39] Crouch provides a particularly helpful and nuanced argument bringing together a range of social-scientific research including research concerning migration, trauma studies, and postcolonial theory in order to understand the impact of displacement on identity among the exiles and the colonised Judahites. They suggest that parts of Ezekiel may be attributed to exiles in isolated rural settlements "the ancient equivalent of a refugee camp."[40] This perspective could potentially align well with the primary evidence, where we seem to have scattered pockets of exilic communities.

Evidence for scattered Yahwistic communities emerges in the place name "the city of Judah" (e.g. *al-Yahadu*), as represented epigraphically on cuneiform tablets.[41] This picture aligns well to some of the later post-exilic Biblical depictions of scattered communities (Ezra 2:59; 3:15). Likewise, although dated slightly later, the evidence from the Elephantine Papyri and ostraca points towards a Yahwistic community rather different from the one in Jerusalem but with similar challenges relating to empire and colonisation.[42] The Murashû archive shows that some communities with Yahwistic theophoric names were rural.[43] However, as the Documents from Western Semites in Babylonia collection illustrates, some exiled communities were more mobile.[44] In this period significant differences in Yahwism would have emerged resulting in what Kessler labels a "complex tapestry of Yahwisms."[45] Some exiles would have assumed Yahweh was

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[38] Whether from exiled or templeless communities; cf. J. Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), doi:10.1093/0199283869.001.0001.

[39] Jacob L. Wright, "Urbicide," in *Ritual Violence in the Hebrew Bible: New Perspectives*, ed. Saul M. Olyan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147–166. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190249588.001.0001.

[40] Carly L. Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined: Migration, Trauma, and Empire in the Sixth Century BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 49.

[41] F. Joannès and A. Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cuneiforms à l'onomastique oust-sémitique," *Transeuphratène* 17 (1999): 17–33.

[42] Katherine Southwood, "Performing Deference in Ahiqar: The Significance of a Politics of Resistance in the Narrative and Proverbs of Ahiqar," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133 (2021): 42–55, doi:10.1515/zaw-2021-0002.

[43] Matthew W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašû Archive, the Murašu̱ Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te İstanbul, 1985).

[44] Tablet 45 is particularly interesting given it could potentially be understood as evidence of "a group of Judeans settled in Babylon" who "remained in contact with other Judeans from the providences," Laurie E. Pearce, and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2014), 170–173.

[45] John Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists: Power Identity and Ethnicity in Achaemenid Yehud," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschitz and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 141.

defeated by Marduk and simply embraced other gods (Ezek 8; Jer 29:5–6; 44:18). But, as the Biblical material attests, others continued to worship the deity Yahweh.

One helpful insight into responses to the trauma of exile emerges in Faust's use of the idea that Yahwists at the time might be compared to a post-collapse society, wherein the past is treated as a golden age, differences of opinion form over what caused the collapse, and once in motion collapse continues through epidemics, famine and instability.[46] In particular, the idea of differing notions of what caused the disaster are relevant when examining Ezekiel. The response to trauma that we encounter in Ezekiel more generally is so emphatically concerned with a theology of judgement and a call to take absolute responsibility for what happened that it is "as though Ezekiel wishes these things upon his own people."[47] But it is important to remember this is crisis literature, written in a very extreme context. Ezekiel's attempt to come to terms with trauma through responsibilisation of Israel and through emphasising Yahweh's judgement is evidence of the evolution of a specific form of Yahwism that emerges through the crucible of exile. Perhaps it is worth also considering that the Yahwistic women whom he encounters are also survivors of exile's trauma? Ezekiel's interpretation of the women's ritual deviance may be otherwise understood as evidence pointing towards Yahwistic women within Ezekiel's community attempting ritually to recover a sense of agency given the uncertainty created by the crisis of exile. Whether it is necromancy, ritual midwifery, binding magic, or something else, their ritual activity so condemned by Ezekiel may point to an attempt to exercise control in a situation that feels chaotic and stressful. Obviously it is impossible to determine with any level of certainty given the brief and convoluted nature of the evidence. But is a distinctive possibility as way of reframing the women's activity.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to reframe Ezekiel 13:17–23 by thinking carefully about accusations of deviant magic and the social dynamics surrounding them. It noted the loaded nature of the terms such as magic and witchcraft and repeated the important point that different types of ritual activity may not be as are phenomenologically different as we at first may think. It recognised the prevalent tendency in the field of Biblical studies to repeat and even intensify Ezekiel's negative polemic, especially through use of gendered slurs including the term witch, a term which has taken on a life of its own as a persistent cultural stereotype. I noted the text's misogyny, but

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[46] Faust's focus is on Judah specifically, but the ideas related to post-collapse are relevant more broadly, Avraham Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2012), 167–180, doi:10.2307/j.ctt5vjz28.

[47] Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 17.

did not allow that to be a guiding principle foreclosing my research. Instead, I argued that Ezekiel's accusation that the women are involved in practicing ritual deviancy could be helpfully illuminated by other examples of magic accusation, specifically pointing out that the power of the accusation in and of itself would be enough to be very damaging to the women. This is because with Ezekiel's ability to create a text comes "[t]he power to construct and institutionalise shared representations of the Other is tantamount to the power to engineer consent negatively by associating challenges to the status quo with threats to society."[48] I argued for the importance of the social dynamics surrounding accusations of ritual deviance, pointing out that sometimes questions of power and control can be significant considerations in such accusations. I suggested that Ezekiel's polemic against the women undermines their ritual activity, authority, and legitimacy. I also noted the context, wherein I emphasised the significance of exile and trauma, and entertained the possibility that the women in Ezekiel 13:17–23 may be attempting to regain a sense of control following the psychological and emotional debris created by the crisis of exile. As Eidinow suggests,

> both the practice of magic and accusations of magical practice can provide a role for human agency in otherwise inexplicable or uncontrollable events. Whether the users are practitioners of magic or accuse others of magic-working, magic offers them a tool for participating more effectively in social interaction, making and shaping relationships, gaining power.[49]

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[48] Ben M. Debney, *The Oldest Trick in the Book: Panic-Driven Scapegoating in History and Recurring Patterns of Persecution* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 12.

[49] Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses,* 771.

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