

**THIRDS PACING THE EXILE IN EZEKIEL'S THEOLOGY OF DIVINE PRESENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS: AN IGWEBUIKE PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

*While the community in Judah considered those in exile as "other" because they had no temple and were not within the geographical location called "Judah" (cf. Ezek 11:15), this study leans on the critical spatial theories of Edward W. Soja and Wesley A. Kort to show that location does not guarantee the experience of the divine. What counts is not location, but praxis, that is, our orientation towards the Holy One. YHWH's expression (cf. Ezek 11:16), in reaction to the tension that existed between the exilic community and the remnant community in Judah, challenges the religious tension and religious exclusivism that characterize our world today. It shows that despite the existential peculiarities of each community of faith, there exists a theological minimum that can form the basis of our experience of the divine. Sometimes, we may think we possess the fullness of truth, as symbolized in the temple with its sacred adornments or as contained in the Torah, the Holy Bible or the Koran, but the reality of the experience of the divine does not necessarily lie in the one who possesses the truth. It is not the possession of the truth that matters, but how prepared we are to walk in the light of the truth that we possess, irrespective of our religious affiliations.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuike, Ezekiel, Theology, Divine Presence, Abrahamic Religions

**Introduction**

The idea of divine presence was imperative to the people of the ancient Near East. This was evident in their cultic practices. Temples, sacrifices and rituals ensured the deities were present to those who revered them. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were not exceptions to this concern for the presence of the divine. They may have depended upon the theologies of the ancient Near East in the construction of their theology of divine presence. However, "around the time of the neo-Babylonian empire, the Israelite prophetic writings began to show unambiguous evidence of a changing attitude towards some widely shared

assumptions about divine presence."<sup>1</sup> Notable among these literatures is the book of Ezekiel.

The book of Ezekiel is punctuated by three great visions linked together by the experience of divine glory. In the first vision (Ezek 1-3), the glory of YHWH comes to Ezekiel and his fellow captives in exile beside the river *Chebar* of Babylon (cf. Ezek 1:1). In Ezek 8-11 (the second vision), the glory of YHWH leaves the temple and takes a stand on the mountain to the east of the city (cf. Ezek 11:23). In the last part of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek 40-48), Ezekiel sees another vision of the divine glory returning and inhabiting the glorious temple.

In the above-stated visions (Ezek 1-3; 8-11; 40-48), one observes that the presence of YHWH is experienced in three different spaces: in the temple, in exile and on the mountain east of the city. These manifestations of the divine presence in different spaces challenge, not only the traditional priestly understanding of YHWH as exclusively "tabernacled" in the Jerusalem temple, but also the claims of monopoly on God from different religious groups in our world today. The religious struggles in our world today echo the religious tension that existed between the exilic group and those that remained in Judah, as both claimed to be the true *qahal* (assembly) of YHWH (cf. Ezek 11:15-16; 33:25-29). We live in a world polarized by religious conflicts and faith leaders' claim to exclusivity of truth and monopoly on God. This study will illuminate the reality that God cannot be monopolized or restricted to any particular group, a truth that echoes an *Igwebuiké* perspective.

To demonstrate this, I will, first and foremost, put the *Igwebuiké* theology in dialogue with Ezekiel's visions of divine presence, particularly with respect to the stands of the Jerusalemite community against the exilic community (cf. Ezek 11:15-16). Then I will lean on the critical spatial theories of Edward W. Soja and Wesley A. Kort, to show how praxis and mobility in the visions of Ezekiel bridge the gap between the sacred and "non-sacred" spaces. To achieve my objective in this study, I will also interpret the *exile* space as *thirdspace*. Since the exile motif is theologically rich and entrenched in the formation of Israel's self-consciousness, I will focus on the importance of space and memory, looking at the place of the temple/Jerusalem in the consciousness of Israel through the ages. This will enable us see the significance of the exile space - in its *firstspace*, *secondspace* and

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<sup>1</sup>Nathan MacDonald, *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post Exilic Judaism*, FZAT 61, eds. Nathan MacDonald and Izaak D. de Hulster. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013), XI.

*thidspace* elements. In discussing the exile as *thirdspace*, I will show how praxis determines the presence or absence of the divine.

The fruits of this study will subsequently shed some light on religion in our contemporary world, especially as it is practiced among the three *Abrahamic* faiths. The aim is to show how this study, on one hand, challenges the religious tension and religious *exclusivism* that characterize our world today and, on the other hand, lends its voice to the efforts and progress made so far in the area of inter-religious dialogue.

## **Ezekiel's Theology of Divine Presence in Dialogue with *Igwebuike*<sup>2</sup> Theology**

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<sup>2</sup> Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony. *Igwebuike and the Logic (Nka) of African Philosophy*, 14. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwe Bu Ike* as an Igbo-African hermeneutics of national development. *Igbo Studies Review*. No. 6. pp. 59-83. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwebuike* as an African integrative and progressive anthropology. *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 151-161. Kanu, I. A. (2018). New Africanism: *Igwebuike* as a philosophical Attribute of Africa in portraying the Image of Life. In Mahmoud Misaeli, Sanni Yaya and Rico Sneller (Eds.). *African Perspectives on Global on Global Development* (pp. 92-103). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Kanu, I. A. (2019). Collaboration within the ecology of mission: An African cultural perspective. *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*. Vol. 15. pp. 125-149. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuike* research methodology: A new trend for scientific and wholistic investigation. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH)*. 5. 4. pp. 95-105. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuikeconomics*: The Igbo apprenticeship for wealth creation. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH)*. 5. 4. pp. 56-70. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuikecracy*: The Igbo-African participatoryocio-political system of governance. *TOLLE LEGE: An Augustinian Journal of the Philosophy and Theology*. 1. 1. pp. 34-45. Kanu, I. A. (2019). On the origin and principles of *Igwebuike* philosophy. *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. Vol. 11. No. 1. pp. 159-176. Kanu, I. A. (2019b). An *Igwebuike* approach to the study of African traditional naming ceremony and baptism. *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. Vol. 11. No. 1. pp. 25-50. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African philosophy for Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria. In Mahmoud Misaeli (Ed.). *Spirituality and Global Ethics* (pp. 300-310). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African philosophy for the protection of the environment. *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 3. No. 4. pp. 28-38. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as the hermeneutic of individuality and communality in African ontology. *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 162-179. Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuike* and question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol.3 No1. pp. 131-138. Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuike* as a philosophical attribute of Africa in portraying the image of life. A paper presented at the 2017 Oracle of Wisdom International Conference by the Department of Philosophy, Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, 27-29 April. Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuike* as a complementary approach to the issue of girl-child education. *Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research*. Vol. 3. No. 6. pp. 11-17. Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuike* as a wholistic response to the problem of evil and human suffering. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3 No 2, March. Kanu, I. A. (2017e). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African modality of peace and conflict resolution. *Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars*. Vol. 1. No. 1. pp. 31-40. Kanu, I. A. (2017g). *Igwebuike* and the logic (Nka) of

In Ezekiel, the presence of God is experienced, not only through the כְּבוֹד (glory), but also through the divine רוּחַ (spirit) and יָד (hand) [cf. Ezek 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 40:1; 43:5]. The spirit and the hand of YHWH share a connotation of power; they are, therefore, closely related concepts and are used in the visions of Ezekiel as instruments of divine presence and activity. However, for the sake of brevity, I will be looking at divine presence from the perspective of the כְּבוֹד YHWH. The כְּבוֹד (glory) represents an outward manifestation of the divine presence. It is what John T. Strong calls the "hypostasis of YHWH."<sup>3</sup> S. Dean McBride defines hypostasis as "a quality, epithet, attribute, manifestation or the like of a deity which through a process of personification and differentiation has become a distinct (if not fully independent) divine being in its own right."<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that Ezekiel experienced this visible manifestation of presence of the divine while he was with his fellow exiles in Babylon, specifically, by the river *Chebar* (Ezek 1:1). According to Pieter de Vries, "the *Chebar* was a canal near the city of Nippur and was part of an extensive system of irrigation channels that distributed water from the Euphrates and Tigris to Nippur and the surrounding district."<sup>5</sup> It is probably not without significance that YHWH first calls Ezekiel beside a river. In fact, de Vries further notes that "the countries beyond Israel were regarded as unclean (cf. Ezek 4:13; Amos 7:17). So, Israelite exiles preferred to seek communion with God in the vicinity of flowing water, to which cleansing power was attributed (Lev. 14:5, 50; 15:13; Num. 19:17)."<sup>6</sup> This definitely resonates with the psalmist who also presented a picture of the exiles "by the rivers of Babylon" (cf. Ps 137:1-4).

It is significant, therefore, to realize that it is in this same unclean land, in which the song of Zion cannot be sung (cf. Ps 137:4), that Ezekiel experiences the מַחְזְוֵי אֱלֹהִים ("visions of God"). In both the Priestly and the Zion theologies, the כְּבוֹד

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African philosophy. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1. pp. 1-13. Kanu, I. A. (2017h). *Igwebuike* philosophy and human rights violation in Africa. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 117-136. Kanu, I. A. (2017i). *Igwebuike* as a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology. *Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 14-22.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John T. Strong, God's *Kābôd*: "The Presence of YHWH in the Book of Ezekiel," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong SBLSS 9 (Atlanta: SBL 2000), 69-95.

<sup>4</sup>S. Dean McBride, "The Deuteronomical Name Theology" (Ph.D diss. Harvard University, 1969), 5.

<sup>5</sup>Pieter de Vries, *Kābôd Yhwh in the Old Testament: with Particular Reference to the Book of Ezekiel*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 236.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 236.

functions as a technical expression of God's presence.<sup>7</sup> The place in P (*priestly*) where God's glory descends<sup>8</sup> is the Tabernacle. In Exod 40:33b-35, we see how the Tabernacle is constructed and completed. But more importantly, the text provides us with information about the relationship of the **דָּבַר** to the Tabernacle:<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the **דָּבַר** YHWH filled the Tabernacle. But Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud settled upon it and the **דָּבַר** YHWH filled the Tabernacle (Exod 40:33b-35).

After the experience in Sinai, the Tabernacle itself "becomes a mobile sanctuary, a place of rendezvous for Moses and the **דָּבַר** YHWH."<sup>10</sup> However, even though the Tabernacle is a mobile sanctuary, it has no self-locomotive ability. The **דָּבַר** YHWH is housed in it, fixed and carried by its bearers until it has its final resting place in the temple, as the primary *locus* of divine presence for Israel.

Kutsko observes:

The ideology that characterized Zion theology of divine presence, especially during the monarchic tradition, is represented by the divine epithet **שֵׁיִתְּאֲבֹנֶהוּי** **דָּבַר**, that is, the "YHWH, the God of hosts who sits enthroned above the cherubim" (cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 2Sam 6:2).<sup>11</sup>

The transfer of this ideology to the Temple of Solomon, according to Kutsko, "championed a theology of God's election of and permanent presence in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Kgs 19:15)."<sup>12</sup> Thus, Ezekiel's **יִסְרָאֵל** ("visions of God") in a foreign and *unclean* land demonstrates a shift in the *status quo*. It fashions an image of God who is not restricted to the temple and provides an effective image of God's presence in exile.

However, the inhabitants of Jerusalem do not see the exiles as faithful. In Ezek 11:15, they share their opinion about the exiles. They say that "[the exiles] have gone far from YHWH; to us this land is given for a possession." In other words, the inhabitants of Jerusalem believe that the exiles are cut off from the Lord. For

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 83.

<sup>8</sup> except for the pre-Tabernacle texts in Exodus 16 and 24.

<sup>9</sup>Kutsko., 82.

<sup>10</sup>Kutsko, 82.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 83.

them, exile is synonymous with punishment and with being distanced from God. They think of exile as abandonment by God, whereas Jerusalem is proof of nearness to God. But they are flat out wrong.

In Ezek 11:16, YHWH responds to the theological position of the inhabitants of Jerusalem with respect to the exiles. They believe that YHWH has disinherited the exiles. But YHWH responds that He has not disinherited the exiles; rather, He will be for them a *שְׁמֵרָה בְּמִדְבָּר* a sanctuary in some measure. Some translate this as "a sanctuary in small measure." But no matter the translation, the basic point is that YHWH is accessible also to the exilic community in Babylon.

God's presence is available for the exiles, even without the institution of the temple. Although the exiles are far from the temple, they are not far from YHWH. This echoes what I see as the basic tenet of *Igwebuiké* theology, a theology that "challenges every separatist theory that tries to exclude people based on religion, tribe, ethnicity, nationality"<sup>13</sup> or even geographical location. In this theology, there is no "us" against "them." It is a theology that sees the entire human race as a family, a family of God's children. For, "when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful and can constitute an insurmountable force."<sup>14</sup> Thus, as a theological reality, *Igwebuiké* emphasizes that any human being, irrespective of religious affiliation or geographical location, is a child of God; has the capacity to experience God; and "can be an instrument in the hand of the divine for the global picture of salvation. It de-emphasizes those things that separate us."<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Soja and Wesley A. Kort shed more light on this, albeit, from a different perspective, using their spatial theories.

### **Critical Spatial Theory**

This study is influenced by works published in the field of critical spatial theory. These works have not only inspired biblical scholars, but in recent decades, the theoretical perspectives of this theory have been applied by scholars of biblical and religious studies in their respective works.<sup>16</sup> Liv Ingeborg Lied observes that

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<sup>13</sup> Malachy Theophilus, "The Role of Rehab in the Conquest Story of Joshua as a Manifestation of *Igwebuiké* Theology: A Narrative Analysis of Joshua 2," in *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 5, no. 8 (2019), 91.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony I. Kanu, "Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African Hermeneutic of Globalization," in *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2 no. 1 (March 2016), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Theophilus, "The Role of Rehab in the Conquest Story of Joshua," 73.

<sup>16</sup>See Liv Ingeborg Lied, *The Other Lands of Israel: Imagination of the Land in 2 Baruch*, (Leiden. Boston: Brill, 2008), 13.

in recent times, there has been a rise of theoretical interests in the human conception of space and place.<sup>17</sup> He further notes:

This field of theoretical debate has primarily developed in the social sciences, but contributions have also come from other academic disciplines such as philosophy, architecture, and geography.<sup>18</sup>

Among the scholars who have greatly ignited the interest in space and spatiality are E.W. Soja and Wesley A. Kort. According to Lied, "the works of the French philosopher Lefebvre<sup>19</sup> and the American geographer Soja<sup>20</sup> have held a special position in the field of biblical and religious studies. This is likely due to the investment in their works by the scholars affiliated with the productive SBL-forum: *Construction of Ancient Space Seminar*."<sup>21</sup>

Soja and his master, Lefebvre, propose "a change of spatial epistemology."<sup>22</sup> They do this in reaction to modern notions that interpret space as "passively-existing materiality."<sup>23</sup> For Soja, we create and form space by our practices. As such, space is not like an empty box; it is a cultural and social construct.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>19</sup>Henri Lefebvre's *La Production de L'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974) was published as early as 1974. It was however mostly unknown to the wider circles of scholars until it was translated into English in 1991 (H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Research of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London/New York: Verso, 1989); Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Lied, 13. The Constructions of Ancient Space Seminar ran as a joint project of the AAR (American Academy of Religion) and SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) from 2000-2005, the only cross-society venture of its time. For the first time in the development of biblical studies, participants in the seminar attempted to foreground and critically analyze space with the same theoretical nuance that biblical scholars have traditionally devoted to history. Cf. [www.case.edu/affil/GAIR/Constructions/Constructions.html](http://www.case.edu/affil/GAIR/Constructions/Constructions.html). Cf. among others J.L. Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Use of Theory," n.p. Online: <http://www.cwru.edu/affil/GAIR/papers/2002papers/berquist.html>; J.L. Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Construction of Ancient Worlds," in *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James H. Flanagan* (eds D.M. Gunn and P.M. McNutt, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 64-80.

<sup>22</sup>Lied, 14. Also see Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination," in *Architecturally Speaking: Practice of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (ed. Alan Read, London: Routledge, 2000), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup>Lied, 14.

<sup>24</sup>See Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles*, 13. See also Lied, 14.

Another important contribution of Soja is his focus on lived experience and social praxis as the decisive aspect of human spatiality.<sup>25</sup> Soja sees space as both material and as a product of imagination,<sup>26</sup> and describes the reconfiguration of both the material and the mental as *thirdspace*.<sup>27</sup> According to him, this space "is a product of a *thirthing* of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and the mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance and meaning."<sup>28</sup> Lied's felicitous representation of Soja captures the idea even better. In his words, Soja sees space as the "comprehensive recombination of material perceptions ('Firstspace') and mental conceptions of space ('Secondspace') in lived experience ('Thirdspace')."<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, Wesley Kort adds another nuance to critical spatial theory. He observes that place-relations<sup>30</sup> are often valued at the expense of mobility and the temporal associations carried by mobility. Indeed, this evaluation of place-relations over mobility often implies a contrast between attitudes that are in some way or to some degree judged as traditional and "sacred" in contrast to mobility and temporality, which are judged as modern and "profane" or "non-sacred."<sup>31</sup> Kort further notes that "many studies and literatures have ignored the value of mobility, and have thus overvalued the less mobile by assuming that rootedness is morally and spiritually superior."<sup>32</sup>

The high value currently placed on rootedness affects the status of the category of "sacred space." It becomes easy to pit "sacred space" against the "profane." Kort alludes to the work of Mircea Eliade as an example, holding that Eliade "continues to exert influence not because of the Idealism of his phenomenology of sacred space but because he posits sacred space as a contrary to modern history, which is profane."<sup>33</sup> Eliade says in the beginning of his work, *The Sacred*

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<sup>25</sup>Lied, 14.

<sup>26</sup>Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles*, 11.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>29</sup>Lied, 14. Also cf. "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope," 21-22.

<sup>30</sup>By "place-relations" Kort means human attitude towards a particular geographical location. This is what Soja technically calls "praxis." See Wesley A. Kort, "Sacred/Profane and an Adequate Theory of Human Place-Relations," in *Constructions of Space: Theory, Geography, and Narrative* vol. 1 edited by Jon L. Berquist - Claudia V. Camp (New York. London: T & T Clark 2007)33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Kort, 33.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

and the Profane, that "the first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is the opposite of the profane."<sup>34</sup> Kort concludes that the theories of sacred space, if they are to regain substance, should be based on a more adequate theory of positive place-relations, rather than on history constructed as sacred space's negative contrary.<sup>35</sup>

If we begin our investigation of the locus of divine presence from the concept of Soja's *praxis* or Kort's positive *place-relations*, rather than the sacred/profane dichotomy, then we will realize, as Larry E. Shiner says, that "space is a homogenous continuum ... Homogeneity means that every point is of equal value to every other point, that no direction has any privilege over any other, that space is continuous and infinite."<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that there are no places of awe. Places exist where we feel compelled to "take off our shoes" because of a perceived connection with the transcendent. However, it does not also diminish the possibility of a supernatural encounter in places that are not that awe-inspiring.

### **Application of the Spatial Theories to Ezekiel's Theology of Divine Presence with Particular Reference to the Sacred and non-Sacred Spaces**

Applying the theories of Soja and Kort to Ezekiel's theology of divine presence will help to understand the theological implication of the divine movements from the temple in Jerusalem (sacred space) to the exiles in Babylon (non-sacred space) in the visions of Ezekiel. But to do this, it will be pertinent to understand first, how the world of the ancient Near East saw and understood "exile," and second, the place Jerusalem and its temple held in the consciousness of the average Jew.

Dalit Rom-Shiloni notes that exile was a military punishment forced upon peoples, and usually designated as the last stage in a war. According to him, "subjugating peoples and territories led the neo-Assyrian, and later on the neo-Babylonian empires to rearrange daily life at both the center and the periphery of

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<sup>34</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley A. Kort, "Sacred/Profane and an Adequate Theory of Human Place-Relations," 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> Larry E. Shiner, "Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1972), 427.

their domains in diverse ways."<sup>37</sup>Exile in the ancient Near Eastern world was mostly partial. Not all the defeated and captured peoples were taken into exile. In most cases, some were taken into captivity, while others remained in the homeland. This is exactly the case with the deportations of Israel and Judah reported in the biblical literature (cf. 2 Kgs 15-17 and 24-25).

Historically, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah experienced a number of exiles. Worthy of note was the exile of 720 B.C.E., the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hand of the Assyrians. Those exiled were supposedly deported and scattered throughout the empire, although biblical archaeology has shown that many migrated to the southern kingdom of Judah.<sup>38</sup>Another important exile in the history of Israel as a people was the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah, otherwise known as the Babylonian deportations. In 597 B.C.E., the noble members of the society in the southern kingdom of Judah, including the prophet Ezekiel, were exiled during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. In 586 B.C.E., when the temple was destroyed, a new batch of the Judean exiles arrived in Babylon, but there was a significant number of Judeans who remained behind in Judah.

Alluding to biblical sources, Rom-Shiloni observes that the event of the exile" divided the Judean people into two communities, the exiles with King Jehoiachin in Babylon on one hand, and the People who remained in the Land under King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 40:6), on the other."<sup>39</sup>

For the exiled community, living in exile outside their homeland posed a theological crisis, a crisis that is poignantly captured by the psalmist:

By the Rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars of that land we hung up our harps. There our captors asked us for the words of a song; our tormentors, for a joyful song: "Sing for us a song of Zion!" But how could we sing the

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<sup>37</sup> Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "Ezekiel as the voice of the Exiles and Constructor of the Exilic Community," **Hebrew Union College Annual** 76 (2005),1-2. Rom - Shiloni also observed that "exile" had become an international imperial policy in the neo-Assyrian period, mainly under Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.E.) and his successors.

<sup>38</sup>See Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer, "Comments of the Historical Background of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis," *ZAW* 126.3 (2014): 317-338.

<sup>39</sup>Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts Between the Exiles and the People who Remained (6th -5th Centuries BCE)*. (New York - London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvi.

LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy" (Ps 137:1-6, NAB).

Thus, living outside the Promised Land without the temple was indeed a crisis of faith for the exiles. The ongoing existence of the temple and the daily life in Jerusalem advantaged the remnant community, who saw the exiles as the outcasts or better put, as "distant from YHWH" (Ezek 11:15). Following the Priestly and the Deuteronomic concepts of exile, the community in Jerusalem believed the exile community was punished for their sins (Deuteronomy 4:25-28; 8:19-20; Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-24). In other words, the temple and Jerusalem became for them the sign of *election*, as exile represents for them a sign of divine punishment.

Unlike the exile space, Jerusalem, in the history of Jewish religion, is a holy city, a *locus sanctus*, or an *axis mundi*<sup>40</sup> associated with historical events and eschatological expectations. It was the place for God to deal with God's people and to be a focal center of God's restored people.

Emile Benveniste, in his study of the ancient European languages, particularly Latin and Greek, observes that Biblical Hebrew does not differentiate the idea of the sacred from that of holiness, unlike Latin and Greek.<sup>41</sup> In Hebrew, both notions are rendered solely by *qodeš* and words composed from that same root. In the semantic field of Hebrew, according to Francis Schmidt, sacredness is situated between the positive and the negative poles. In his words:

Positively, *qodeš* refers to that which is in a relationship of belonging to the divine, that which is consecrated to it. Negatively, *qodeš* is defined by opposition to the profane, *tāmē*.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, in the above sense, the sacred in which holy objects or sanctified persons circulate, like the temple, is only understood in its relation to the profane. Thus, sacred and profane are characterized by their *proximity to the Divine*. Jerusalem

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<sup>40</sup>A perceived center of the world, where Heaven and Earth are connected.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. II. *Pouvoir, droit, religion* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 187-207; H. Fugier, *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine*, II (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1963), 25-86.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Schmidt, *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 90. One of the most characteristic formulations of this opposition is found in Lev 10:10 and Ezra 22:26; 44:23.

and its temple are sacred because in the eyes of the biblical Jews, God dwells there.

The temple is believed to be the epicenter of holiness because it is the abode of the divine and the primary locus of divine presence. This understanding of the temple is evident in Jewish religious history. The first book of Maccabeus recorded an event that happened around 165 BCE. The story was about Judas Maccabeus, son of Mattathias, a priest, who set up camp at *Mizpah* to the north of Jerusalem. He and his brothers fasted and wore sack clothes. Their faces were turned towards heaven: what were they to do since the abode of the divine had been profaned? The foreigners had profaned the temple.<sup>43</sup> These penitential acts show how important the temple was to them.

Also in the book of Baruch, we read about the man Baruch, who "wasted from fasting, his clothing torn, climbs the steps of the temple mount and goes to sit before the doors that the sun lights up in the morning."<sup>44</sup> He laments:

Why from now on sow in the countryside? Why should the vine give wine? What good are the reservoirs for rain, of what use the heat of the sun? Why should the moon continue to set the sequence of months? Of what use are marriages and births? Since the Meeting Place with the Divine is destroyed, "how can they still speak of beauty, how can there still be question of grace!" (2 Bar. 10:17).<sup>45</sup>

This lament of Baruch echoes the plight of the people of Israel because the epicenter of their relationship with YHWH has been destroyed. In fact, in the two examples above, the main theological question is: since the primary locus of divine presence is destroyed, where and how can we encounter the Divine?

This understanding of the sacredness of Jerusalem and its temple informed the attitude of the remnant community in Jerusalem against the exile community in the book of Ezekiel. Ezek 11:15 reads: "son of man, your brothers, (even your brothers), your own kin, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, '*They have gone far from YHWH; to us this land is given for a possession.*'" Thus, the exile community is the *impure* that cannot be mixed with the pure, namely, the remnant community in Judah. The two spaces cannot meet in the eyes of the Jews.

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 86. Cf. also 1 Macc. 3:46–59.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 86. Also see 2 Bar. 10.5–19.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Ibid., 86–87

## The Exile as a Thirdspace

The exile space is not a neutral space but a contested one, or as Soja coins it, a *thirdspace*. For Soja, *thirdspace* encompasses *firstspace* and *secondspace* and is always vibrant, flexible and open to (re)interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

Soja holds that *firstspace* privileges objectivity and materiality. It aims at a formal science of space.<sup>47</sup> Thus, *firstspatially*, the reader is told where Ezekiel received his *וִּזְיוֹנֵי יְהוָה* (*visions of God*). He was "among the exiles by the river *Chebar*"(1:1). Here, the *firstspace* is his *existential* location. Ezekiel and his fellow exiles were in a susceptible and helpless situation, a situation that creates a crisis faith. It appears as if their patron, God YHWH, allowed them to be taken into exile, a reality that marked victory for Babylonian gods. Brandon Fredenburg captures this idea even better:

The Babylonian gods removed a contingent of leading Judeans for Judah's failure to meet its vassal duties. YHWH, the patron God of Israel, had permitted their deportation. The "official" view of those in Jerusalem was that YHWH had finally cleansed the capital of its troublemakers and allowed the favored to remain (cf. 11:3).<sup>48</sup>

Even though we do not know the exact location of the *real space* (*Firstspace*) of the exiles, the text tells us that it is beside the river *Chebar*. Daniel I. Block notes that the "Hebrew *nēhar kēbār* is the equivalent of Akkadian *nār kabari/u*, "Kabaru canal," which occurs several times in the 5th-century B.C. archives of the *Murashu* family in Babylon."<sup>49</sup> It is believed that *nēhar kēbār* is located in the vicinity of Nippur. Its conduit was "one of many branches of an elaborate canal system that distributed water from the Tigris and the Euphrates throughout the city and its

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<sup>46</sup>Cf. Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope," 23.

<sup>47</sup>Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles*.75.

<sup>48</sup> Brandon Fredenburg, *Ezekiel*. The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin : College Press Pub. Co., 2002), 37-38

<sup>49</sup>Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24*. NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 84. The archives, consisting of some 730 tablets, represent our main source of information on the population of the Nippur region at this time. Knowledge of the ethnic composition of the settlers is derived from the personal names that occur in these business records. For studies of these settlements see M. D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews at Nippur in the Fifth Century," *BA* 37 (1974) 6-12; idem, *West Semitic Personal Names in the Murašû Documents*, HSM 7 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975); R. Zadok, *The Jews in Babylonia during the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1979); idem, *On West Semites in Babylonia During the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods: An Onomastic Study*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem: J. J. and Z. Wanaarta and Tel-Aviv University, 1978).

environs."<sup>50</sup> It does appear that after the city was destroyed, the Babylonian king at that time, "repopulated the region with deportees from many parts of the empire; among them were Ezekiel and his fellow Judeans."<sup>51</sup> As earlier noted, we do not know for sure if the reference to *the Chebar Canal* means that Ezekiel was physically beside the canal at the time of the vision, or if the expression functions as a general description for the region where the Judean exiles lived. In any case, it tells us something, even if only partially, about the existential reality of Ezekiel and his fellow exiles.

The exile's *secondspace* would be the conceived or the mental space, which is culturally conditioned. According to Soja, "*Secondspace* is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world."<sup>52</sup> This viewpoint highlights the fact that the exiles are away from their native land, "removed from Jerusalem and the temple, the place from which YHWH's glory had emanated in the past."<sup>53</sup> Thus, in this sense, the exiles' fate becomes an incontrovertible proof of divine rejection. Exile's *secondspace* is thus a place of divine punishment (cf. Deuteronomy 4:25-28; 8:19-20; Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-24; Amos 6:7). This understanding creates a dichotomy between the exiles and the group that remained in Jerusalem, the latter saw themselves as superior and thus, the authentic "*qahal YHWH*" (cf. 11:15).

This calls to mind the words of William Scott Green: "a society does not simply discover its *others*, it fabricates them by selecting, isolating, and emphasizing an aspect of another people's life and making it symbolize their difference."<sup>54</sup> In addition, Green points out the parody nature of definition by *otherness*, which concentrates on the life of the collective and stereotypes the group according to one major characteristic.<sup>55</sup> Rom-Shiloni captures this sense with particular reference to the tension that existed between the exilic community and the community that remained in Judah. He says:

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<sup>50</sup> Block, 84. See also R. Zadok, "The Nippur Region during the Late Assyrian, Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods Chiefly according to Written Sources," *IOS* 8 (1978): 266-332.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles*, 79.

<sup>53</sup> Block, 83.

<sup>54</sup> William S. Green, "Otherness Within: Towards a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 49.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

Defining "us" and "them" is thus founded on selection, isolation and emphasis of one major divisive difference. In the conflict between the exiles and those who remained, geographic location – residence in the Land of YHWH versus foreign lands – has come to symbolize the difference, and the theological consequences of this division are examined in relation to the concept of God-People-Land.<sup>56</sup>

"The land has been given as a heritage to us"(cf. Ezek 11:15) points to the special privileges of the community that remained in Jerusalem over the land, as opposed to those of the exilic community that had been exiled from it. This concept of "land" is traceable to the Pentateuchal tradition of "land" from the perspective of promise and fulfillment. For instance the phrase, "the land has been given as a heritage to us"(cf. Ezek 11:15), echoes Exodus 6:2-8, a passage that connects the patriarchs and the exodus generation. The land that was promised to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) is here given to the sons of Jacob after their slavery in Egypt. This is probably the tradition the community that remained in Jerusalem alluded to when they claimed divine ownership of the land, and as such, gave a new interpretation to the theme of promise and fulfillment.

The *thirdspace* would be the refiguration of the physical *firstspace* and the mental *secondspace* of the exile. It is intrinsic to the narrative. It is a reconfigured space where the excluded become included, and outsiders become insiders. It is an alternative space to the temple/Jerusalem space, where election and boundaries of purity and holiness, upheld by some Jews, precluded some people from full participation in community. As an alternative space to the temple, it becomes a *locus* of divine presence as attested to by the words of YHWH: "I have been a sanctuary to them (in some measures) in the countries where they have gone" (cf. 11:16). In other words, YHWH has not disenfranchised the exiles. They are not excluded from the presence of the Holy. He will be for them a *מִקְדָּשׁ* (a sanctuary in some measure).

The *thirdspace* of the exile, where Ezekiel saw the visions of God, is best seen in the light of the wilderness experience in Exodus, where Moses has a vision of the Holy, despite the pains and testing of the wilderness experience (cf. Exod 3:1-17; Deut 8:2). From the *thirdspace* perspective, the exile space must not *myopically* be seen to be an unclean space nor the place of punishment, nor as Ezekiel would

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<sup>56</sup>Dalit Rom-Shiloni, 6.

put it, "a valley of dry bones" (cf. Ezek 37). Rather, it is a place of possibilities, a place where the presence of the divine could be experienced. The temple and the land of Israel, in the consciousness of biblical Israel, carry the notion of separateness and exclusivity, distinctiveness and superiority, sacred as opposed to non-sacred. However, the different manifestations of the presence of the divine in the visions of Ezekiel show that divine presence cannot be restricted. Even the so-called *unclean* exile space can become the *thirdspace* of divine presence and activities. In this space, the excluded become included, thereby bridging the dichotomy between the "privileged" remnants and the "faraway" exiles. Thus, Soja's *thirdspace*, unambiguously, shows a perspective of *Igwebuike* theology. It is a space of inclusion and complementarity, a space where all are united as a family of God's children.

The exile as *thirdspace* has another significant purpose in the narrative. It is a space for the *יְהוָה מְרִאֲתָרָם* ("visions of God"). This seems aimed at challenging and changing the people's mind-set toward the people who are in a location other than the land of Israel, especially the temple's religious leadership who thought it necessary to have a temple or to be in the land of Israel in order to experience the Holy One. These social realities and religious boundaries became an increasing problem that would undermine or restrict access to the divine to a selected "chosen ones." Thus, it is not surprising that Ezek 47:21-23 grants the *gērîm* ("resident aliens") in the new covenant the same status as native Israelites so that they receive an equal share in the inheritance. The new boundaries in the renewed city suggest that the new kingdom will preserve the laws of equity and eliminate discrimination against foreign residents, thereby making the experience of the presence of the divine open to all, not just the prerogative of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Gerhard von Rad rightly observes that one of the striking effects of Ezekiel's theology of divine presence is that of the divine mobility.<sup>57</sup> For him, Ezekiel's innovation was the revival of an older *נָחַם* tradition that inserted an element of mobility and impermanence into the conception of YHWH's presence.<sup>58</sup> Even in the older tradition, the *נָחַם* travels with the tabernacle as the tribes journey from place to place in their wilderness wanderings, while in Ezekiel the *נָחַם* comes to the prophet in exile by the river *Chebar* (Ezek 1-3). It removes itself from the

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. Gerhard von Rad, "Deuteronomy's Name Theology and the Priestly Document's *Kābôd* Theology" in *Studies in Deuteronomy*, ed. G. von Rad (London: SCM, 1953), 37-44.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 42-43.

Jerusalem temple (Ezek 8-11) and finally enters the grand temple of Ezekiel's last, glorious vision (Ezek 40-48). This shows, unlike in the older tradition, the self-locomotive ability of the  $\text{בָּר}$  .

Thus, the  $\text{בָּר}$  theology in Ezekiel, particularly its mobile characteristic, shows contrary to popular opinion,<sup>59</sup> that the divine presence cannot be boxed only within the four corners of the sacred space. This mobile characteristic of the  $\text{בָּר}$  is made manifest through the image of the wheels, which emphasizes divine mobility (cf. Ezek 1: 15-21; 10: 9-17). Thus, the movements of the divine from the sacred space to the so-called non-sacred space gives credence to the proposal of Kort on bridging the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.<sup>60</sup> Also, this further confirms the words of Shiner: "space is a homogenous continuum ... Homogeneity means that every point is of equal value to every other point, that no direction has any privilege over any other, that space is continuous and infinite."<sup>61</sup>

While the temple is the original site of divine presence, the accent on the mobility of the  $\text{בָּר}$  in the visions of Ezekiel demonstrates that the temple is not the exclusive *locus* of divine presence. God's presence can also be experienced in spaces like the exile. Hence, for Ezekiel, God's presence has no boundaries. The same  $\text{בָּר}$  YHWH that was *tabernacled* in the temple and departed from the same temple (Ezek 11:22-23) is the divine presence that Ezekiel experienced in exile (cf. Ezek 1:1-28).<sup>62</sup>

It appears that Israel's quest to be like other nations (1 Sam 8:5) probably led them to build a shrine in Jerusalem for their patron deity. But a closer look at 2 Samuel 7:5-7 shows that temple was not a necessity; YHWH only permitted it.<sup>63</sup> However, down through the ages, Israel came to deify this structure built by human hands. The destruction of the temple could have been to shatter Israel's sentimental attachment to the temple as the primary *locus* of divine presence, and extend the possibility to spaces other than the temple. It is important to note here that Ezekiel's experience of the divine in exile is not because the temple was destroyed and the divine was homeless, and as such finds abode amidst the exile. No, "Ezekiel encounters the  $\text{בָּר}$  YHWH in exile (cf. Ezek 1) while the

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<sup>59</sup>In Priestly tradition, the *kāb d* appears only in sacred space: first at the mountain of God (Exod 24:16, 17; 29:43; 40:34, 35; Lev 9:6, 23), later at the tabernacle (Num 14:10, 21, <sup>8</sup> 22; 16:19; 17:7 [16:42]; 20:6).

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Kort, 34-35

<sup>61</sup>Shiner, 427.

<sup>62</sup>Kutsko, 92.

<sup>63</sup>Fredenburg, 358.

temple was still standing."<sup>64</sup> Thus, the departure of the כֹּהֵן in Ezek 8-11 was not "a consequence of the temple's destruction, but a necessary precondition for that destruction."<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, the condition for the experience of the presence of the Holy One is not really about location. It is not about the exile or the temple: both possess equal opportunity for the experience of the presence of the divine. In the final analysis, what counts is what Soja calls *praxis*, or, in the words of Kort, human *place-relations*. In other words, what counts is the lived experience of the people, with particular reference to their relation with YHWH. Righteousness and faithfulness to the covenant (with respect to Israel), at any given time, determine one's experience of the divine.

Block rightly observes that "the repeated references to the evils being committed in Jerusalem emphasize that YHWH's abandonment of the temple is provoked by human action."<sup>66</sup> This is evident in the offenses described in Ezek 8:3-18: "the introduction of the idol of jealousy into the court of YHWH's temple, the worship of carved images of every sort, the women weeping the Tammuz,<sup>67</sup> and twenty-five men paying homage to the sun."<sup>68</sup> YHWH accuses the people of social and moral crimes (cf. 8:7) – they have provoked the anger of YHWH by their sins. YHWH reiterates this accusation in Ezek 9:9. The text speaks of a land filled with blood and city filled with perversion. YHWH condemns these evils with the sharpest possible terms: *abominable* (Ezek 8:6a, 9, 13, 15, 17; 9:4), *detestable* (Ezek 8:10) and *wicked* (Ezek 8:9). As a result, YHWH's anger is provoked.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Steven S. Tuell, "Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong SBLSS 9 (Atlanta: SBL 2000), 102.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>66</sup>Daniel I. Block "Divine Abandonment: Ezekiel's Adaptation of the Ancient Near Eastern Motif," in *The Book of Ezekiel Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, SBL Symposium Series, (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 36-37.

<sup>67</sup>Most translations have them "weeping for Tammuz," however, Block suggests that Tammuz denotes a special genre of lament, rather than the deity himself. Since this scene follows immediately after the elders' assertion that YHWH had abandoned the land, it appears that these women have either equated YHWH with Tammuz or they are expressing their grief at their own deity's departure by adopting the Tammuz ritual. In either case, the people were replacing true worship of YHWH with a foreign lamentation. See Ibid., 37; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 294-96.

<sup>68</sup>Block, "Divine Abandonment," 37.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 37.

On two occasions, YHWH responds in a manner that makes evident the divine wrath, owing to the unrighteous living of the people. In Ezek 8:18, the Holy One says:

"Therefore I will act in wrath; my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them."

Also in Ezek 9:9-10 YHWH declares:

"The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city full of perversity; for they say, 'YHWH has forsaken the land, and the YHWH does not see.' I also will not have pity, my eye will not spare, their wicked deeds (ways) I will bring upon their heads."

First, these texts show that God's presence leaves the temple in reaction to sinful actions. Second, they indicate that divine presence is not a fixed and exclusive prerogative of the Jerusalem temple. On the contrary, God's presence is free to go when the people refuse to live up to the true tenets of their faith.

Thus said, it is righteous practice and faithfulness to the covenant, in the case of Israel, that guarantees the presence of the divine. Margaret Odell puts it even better in relation to both the Jerusalem community and the exilic community. She holds that "just as location does not ensure salvation for the Jerusalemites, neither does it guarantee salvation for the exiles. What matters is not location but orientation."<sup>70</sup> Those whose hearts continue to turn toward idols and against YHWH will not experience the presence of the divine.

### **The Implication of the Study to the Practice of Religion in our Contemporary World**

Here, I do not claim to give a theological overview of the relationships amongst the world's religions, as that would be claiming too much and is definitely beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I intend to restrict my discussion in this section to the theological relationship that seems to exist among the three Abrahamic religions in our world today. A relationship that seems to pitch one religion as superior to the other, or worst still, declare "war" on others who are non-adherents to a particular religion, seeing them as *infidels*.

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<sup>70</sup>Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel*, (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing 2005), 125.

Victoria S. Harrison observes that "Judaism, Christianity and Islam provide their adherents with distinctive conceptual frameworks for understanding the world they inhabit; in other words, each of the Abrahamic monotheisms provides its adherents with a worldview."<sup>71</sup> However, despite the vast similarities that exist among these religions, their attitudes toward each other, particularly with respect to their view on God and the way they interpret and practice their respective faith, sometimes tend to create dichotomy, instead of unity and understanding. We live in a world that has been bedeviled with religious conflicts and religious leaders' claims to the exclusivity of truth and a *monopoly* on God. According to Katayoun Kishi, in 2018 "more than a quarter of the world's countries experienced a high incidence of hostilities motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religion, terrorism and harassments."<sup>72</sup>

This echoes the religious tension that existed between the exilic group and those that remained in Judah; particularly with respect to which of the two groups is the true *qahal* (assembly)YHWH (cf. Ezek 11:15-16; 33:25-29), as this study has highlighted repeatedly. Religious intolerance has become like a cankerworm that affects the fabric of virtually every religious group. An online report by a 2018 Minority Rights Group indicates that "mass killings and other atrocities are increasing in some countries (Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh) all in the name of religion. Hostilities against Muslims and Jews also increased across Europe and the United States."<sup>73</sup> These religions, which are supposed to promote peace, love and harmony by their very nature, have become so frequently connected with intolerance and violence toward one another.<sup>74</sup>

Most times, intolerance and aggression are perpetrated by the dominant religion in a particular location against the minority, or by a religion that perceives itself to be superior and *more pure*, compared to the other. This was exactly the drama that played out in the vision of Ezekiel. The Judahites believed they were superior to the exilic community; and as such, they were the true *qahal* YHWH because they had the temple and the land (Ezek 11:15). However, the movements

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<sup>71</sup>Victoria S. Harrison,"Scientific and Religious Worldview: Antagonism, Non-antagonistic Incommensurability and Complementarity," *Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006): 349-350.

<sup>72</sup> Katayoun Kishi, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/21/key-findings-on-the-global-rise-in-religious-restrictions/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/publications/peoplesunderthreat2018/>

<sup>74</sup>See <https://minorityrights.org/publications/peoplesunderthreat2018/>

of the **יהוה** YHWH from the temple in Jerusalem to the exile dismantle any form of religious *triumphalism*. The divine manifestation in the *thirdspace* of the exile challenges the *status quo* and demonstrates that no group should see itself as superior to the other. As such, just as Soja observes, *thirdspace* seeks to resist the dominant order, be it social or religious ideology, including its predetermined notions of pure and impure, holy and profane, insiders and outsiders.<sup>75</sup> If we see every religion as having equal access to the divine, then this will go a long way toward curbing the religious intolerance that has bedeviled our world today; as a consequence, religious plurality would no longer be a challenge but a blessing to our world. Although each religion differs in its social and religious categories, each, like the exile space and Jerusalem temple, is a setting in which God can reveal Himself and relate with people. This understanding will help strengthen the strides made so far in inter-religious dialogue, especially among the three Abrahamic faiths.

The three faith communities hold a belief in "One God, maker of heaven and earth," especially in worship.<sup>76</sup> Pope Gregory VII echoes this, even though partially, in his letter to King Anzir of Mauritania. The pontiff says that Christians and Muslims not only believe in the same God but also praise and worship Him daily as the creator of all ages and the sovereign of this world. Although they might express this belief in different manner from each other, it is still to the same God.<sup>77</sup>

Michael Walzer has a theological equivalent to this argument. In his book, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, he introduces "two different but interrelated kinds of moral argument — a way of talking amongst ourselves, here at home, about the thickness of our own history and culture ... and a way of talking to people abroad, across different cultures, about the thinner life we have in common."<sup>78</sup> Amy Pauw, applying Walzer's argument to Christian relationships with other faith traditions, holds that the intramural theological agreement among Christians will be thick; that is, the richly referential, culturally resonant

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<sup>75</sup>Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles*, 68.

<sup>76</sup>Amy Plantinga Pauw, "The Same God?" in Miroslav Volf (ed), *Do We Worship the Same God?: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dialogue*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 46.

<sup>77</sup>Gregory VII, *Letter to Anzir, King of Mauritania*, in Jacques Dupuis, *The Cristian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), 418-19.

<sup>78</sup>Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), xi.

locked into a locally established symbolic system or network of meanings.<sup>79</sup> Pauw further observes that "theological agreement across religious traditions is by contrast thinner, focused on convergence points."<sup>80</sup> This convergence points are seen to be similar, though expressed in different modes and reflected in different histories.<sup>81</sup> Thus, if not in other ways, at least in worship, the thin agreement around God as creator is rooted within the thick theological traditions of each faith community. Pauw puts it even better. She holds that "this agreement among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that they worship the same God who is creator of heaven and earth is a theological minimum."<sup>82</sup> Consequently, it provides a foundation for these religions to come together. But as Walzer also puts it, by its very thinness, it also justifies them to return to the thickness that is their very own.<sup>83</sup>

This *theological minimum* of Pauw, or what Walzer calls moral *thinness*, could possibly be likened to the divine expression in Ezekiel's second vision of the יְהוָה YHWH with respect to the exilic community. There, YHWH says of the exiles: "I have been a מִקְדָּשׁ קָטָן (a sanctuary to them in some/small measures) in the countries where they have gone" (cf. 11:16). This shows that despite the existential peculiarities of each community of faith, there exists a *theological minimum*, a *small measure* that can form the basis of our experience of the divine who is the origin of the human race. *Nostra Aetate* puts it even more lucidly; it holds that the human race has in common what draws them to fellowship. First, their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. Second, their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all humanity, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.<sup>84</sup> So everyone has the possibility of connecting with the divine. However, what we do with that possibility determines our actual experience of the presence of the divine.

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<sup>79</sup>Pauw, 47; also see Walzer xi.

<sup>80</sup>Pauw, 47.

<sup>81</sup>Walzer, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Pauw, 47.

<sup>83</sup>Walzer, 11.

<sup>84</sup>Declaration on The Relation of The Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, no. 1.

No one religion has the monopoly on God. The Holy One is accessible to all. In his words: "When you seek me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with a sincere heart" (cf. Jer. 29:13). Therefore, this is a clarion call to all religions, be it Christianity, Islam or Judaism, to internalize how it sees itself and others and reevaluate beliefs and practices that create tension along the line of the universal accessibility of the divine to all, so as to foster solidarity and a better understanding among different religions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study has shown that interpreting the exile as *thirdspace* and paying close attention to the movements of the יְהוָה YHWH in the visions of Ezekiel, not only echoes *igwebuiké* theology, but also helps to bridge the gap between the sacred and the non-sacred spaces. The manifestations of the presence of the divine in both the sacred and non-sacred spaces have opened the door for the possibility of the experience of the divine to all, irrespective of location or religion. The experience of the divine is not about location, nor is it all about religious affiliation. What actually counts is *praxis*—our lived experience, with particular reference to our relationship with God. Righteousness and faithfulness to the dictates of the divine at any given time determine one's experience of the divine. What matters is not location but orientation. Those whose hearts continue to turn to evil, as opposed to good, will not experience the presence of the divine. Hence, it does not matter one's religious affiliation, nor does it matter one's location. What matters are *righteousness, justice and love* in obedience to the dictates of the divine whom we call God, *Adonai, Allah, etc.* These and other good acts guarantee the experience of the presence of the divine. Sometimes, we may think we possess the fullness of truth, as symbolized in the temple with its sacred adornments or as contained in the *Torah, the Holy Bible* or the *Koran*. But the reality of the experience of the divine does not necessarily lie in the one who possesses the truth, for it is not the possession of the truth that matters, it is how prepared we are to walk in the light of the truth that we possess. Only this guarantees the experience of the divine.

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