Law and Life: Leviticus 18.5 in the Literary Framework of Ezekiel

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Abstract

While it is often recognized that Ezekiel alludes to Lev. 18.5 throughout Ezekiel 20, this essay seeks to show that the Leviticus text is referred to in various other portions of the book. These allusions connect two major motifs in the book of Ezekiel: Israel’s disobedience to the ‘statutes and judgments’ of Yahweh and the lack of life therein. These motifs are climactically fulfilled in chs. 36–37 where Yahweh causes Israel to obey his ‘statutes and judgments’ and breathes life into the nation. This suggests that the text of Lev. 18.5 was selected to highlight the conditional nature of these covenant stipulations, which amplifies divine agency in the program of restoration.

Keywords: Law, life, Leviticus, statutes, judgments, divine agency, human agency, conditional blessing

Introduction

Scholars frequently notice that Ezekiel alludes to, or uses the same language as, Lev. 18.5 (‘the man who does these things will live by...')
them’) three times in Ezekiel 20 (vv. 11, 13, 21). While commentators note its importance, no thorough examination has been made regarding the function of Lev. 18.5 in Ezekiel 20. The need for such an examination is heightened in light of the possibility that Lev. 18.5 is alluded to elsewhere in the book. Thus, the general purpose of this essay is to show that Lev. 18.5 is alluded to in various other places in Ezekiel and that its function is intertwined with various other motifs, indicating that the text played an important role in the theology of the book as a whole. Specifically, I will show that Lev. 18.5 is alluded to in Ezekiel 18 and 33, albeit more subtly than its appearance in ch. 20, and that the language inherent in the Levitical allusion comes to fulfilment in the restoration oracle of Ezekiel 36–37.

Before we proceed, a brief word concerning the relationship between Ezekiel and Leviticus is in order. Methodologically, this essay is a synchronic study similar in many ways to Moshe Greenburg’s ‘holistic interpretation’. Thus, my language of ‘use’ may be understood from a canonical standpoint, examining the relationship of these two documents in their final form. Nevertheless, though many scholars since Wellhausen (e.g. Smend, Herrmann) have argued that Ezekiel is either earlier than or contemporary to the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26, hereafter H), many recent scholars view Ezekiel as being later than and dependent upon it (e.g. Reventlow, Greenburg, Joyce, Allen). So, even from a diachronic perspective, it seems profitable to examine Ezekiel’s ‘use’ of Lev. 18.5 and thus to assume with most scholars that the prophet was dependant upon H as a whole.

Leviticus 18.5 in Ezekiel’s Literary Framework

We may begin by making a few initial observations regarding the language contained in the Lev. 18.5 allusion and its relationship to the structure of the book of Ezekiel as a whole. As is commonly recognized, the final form of Ezekiel displays a fairly unambiguous arrangement of material. Chapters 1–24 contain oracles of judgment against Israel. Chapters 25–32 contain oracles of judgment against the nations. The first half of ch. 33 is transitional in that 33.1–9 echoes the watchman motif of 3.17–21, and 33.10–20 picks up and reiterates the potential of life for the penitent wicked man expounded in 18.21–32. A new phase opens in 33.21ff. with the lifting of the ‘dumbness’ of Ezekiel, originally pronounced on the prophet in 3.22–27, initiating the oracle of restoration in 33.21–48.35.

Scholars often notice how this oracle of restoration picks up on many themes and motifs from the previous judgment oracle of chs. 1–24 and reverses them while amplifying divine initiative in the process. For example, the glory of the Lord is manifested in ch. 1, leaves the temple in

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1. The full text reads: ‘...καὶ τὰς ἁμαρτίας τὰς ἐκ τῆς ἡμῶν ἡμέρας συνέβησαν ἐν τοῖς ἔθεσιν τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἐν τῇ ἐπιφάνειᾳ τῆς χείρος τοῦ θεοῦ (‘and keep my statutes and my judgments which if a man does them he will live by them’).


4. Rudolf Smend, Der Prophét Ezekiel (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1880); J. Herrmann, Ezechielstudien (BWAYNT, 2; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1908). This has recently been defended by Klaus Gröndwaldt, Das Helligkeitssetz Leviticus 17–26 (BZA 271; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1999).

5. I will be using the traditional understanding of the Holiness Code as consisting of chs. 17–26 for the sake of convenience. However, it should be noted that there is strong evidence for seeing the literary unit as consisting of chs. 18–26. See most recently the discussion and bibliography by Francis Watson in his Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), pp. 316–18.


8. From a diachronic perspective, my thesis only depends upon the existence of H material, not the final form of Leviticus as a whole.

in chs. 18 and 20 with their fulfilment in 36.25 and 37.24; likewise, there is a connection with the ‘life’ unattained by Israel in chs. 18, 20 and 33 and their new ‘life’ in 37.1-14. Here in the vision of the dry bones, the ‘life’ language is vividly used once again (vv. 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14) and thus the ‘life’ that was anticipated in the earlier portions of Ezekiel comes to dramatic fulfilment in Ezekiel 37 as God’s breathes ‘life’ into the nation. Thus, as the motif of the ‘glory of the LORD’ receives a dramatic reversal in ch. 43, so I will argue that the covenant obligation marked by the ‘statutes and judgments’ formula, and the life therein, is clearly unfulfilled in Ezekiel 1-24 but receives a dramatic (or divine) reversal in Ezekiel 36-37, and that the text of Lev. 18.5, and the language therein, was used by the prophet to summarize these covenant obligations. The general connection can be seen as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statues and Ordinances</th>
<th>Fulfilment through divine enablement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lev. 18.5</td>
<td>in Ezek. 36.27 and 37.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev. 18.5</td>
<td>Blessing of ‘life’ fulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek. 5; 11; especially 18; 20; cf. 33</td>
<td>in Ezek. 37.1-14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between the ‘statutes and judgments’ formula and the potential life therein is conveniently summarized in Lev. 18.5, a text referred to explicitly in Ezekiel 20 and implicitly in ch. 18 (cf. 33.10-20). Thus, even where Lev. 18.5 is not directly referred to, it is probable that this text had some import on the both the ‘life’ language and ‘statutes and judgments’ formula that occurs throughout the book.

Statutes and Ordinances in H and Ezekiel
H contains many summary-like statements (e.g. ‘walk in my statutes and keep my judgments’) that summarize the obligation for Israel to obey their covenant stipulations. For example:

Lev. 18.3-5:
... you shall not walk in their statutes (םְליָדַיְם). You are to perform my judgments (נְאָמִרִים) and keep my statutes (וְנְאָמרִים), to walk in them; I am Yahweh your God. So you shall keep my statutes (וְנְאָמרִים) and my judgments (נְאָמִרִים), by which a man may live if he does them; I am Yahweh.
Lev. 18.26 (cf. 18.30):
But as for you, you are to keep my statutes (יהוה) and my judgments (יהוה), and shall not do any of these abomina-
tions...

Similar statements occur in 19.37; 20.22; 25.18; 26.43 and 46 (cf. 22.31-33; 26.3-4; 26.14-15). These formulae summarize the entire narrative complex in H. In fact, the statements in 18.3-5 and 26.46 form the ‘bookends’ of H, strengthening the impression that these formulae are to be read as summary statements to the entire document. That the ‘statutes and judgments’ of Leviticus should be seen as a summary statement of the covenant is explicit in Lev. 26.15 where ‘the violation of the statutes, ordinances and commandments is equivalent to the breaking of the covenant’. Thus for H, Israel has upheld their commitment to keep the covenant when they have ‘done my statutes, and kept my judgments, so as to do them’ (25.18).

As seen above, Ezekiel frequently uses a similar ‘statutes and judgments’ formula and is most likely drawing it from H. For the most part, it seems that these ‘bound formulas’ are used throughout Ezekiel to evoke the entire narrative complex of the phrases in H and exploit the covenant ramifications of these requirements. Thus, ‘with the pair of words הידית/בטחPropertyName the entire content of the demands of Yahweh, for Ezekiel and also certainly for his contemporaries, is adequately and clearly outlined’. This is perhaps most explicit in 20.11 where the ‘statutes and judgments’ formula is bound to Lev. 18.5 to refer not to specific legislations but the entire revelation at Sinai. Thus it seems that Ezekiel utilized this formula to refer to the totality of the covenant stipulations, and even to the covenant itself (esp. Lev. 26.15). Nevertheless, among all the ‘statutes and judgments’ formulae in H, only Lev. 18.5 contains the promise of ‘life’. Given the fact that ‘life’ language is by far more pervasive in Ezekiel than any other prophet, it is evident that Ezekiel found Lev. 18.5 to be a convenient shorthand for the demands of the covenant and the potential ‘life’ therein. Thus, for the prophet, Lev. 18.5 has important theological implications contained in one expedient phrase—the man who does these things will live by them’. If Israel obeys the covenant stipulations, they will live (Lev. 18.5). If Israel disobeys, they will be punished (exiled—Lev. 26).

I will now survey the relevant portions of Ezekiel 18; 20; 33 and 36-37. In doing so, I wish to demonstrate that the twofold ‘statutes and judgments’ formula in 36.27 and 37.24 is picking up on the previous formulae in the first part of the book, and that the ‘new life’ given to Israel in the dry bones vision in 37.1-14 is directly related to the conditional promise of ‘life’ held out in chs. 18 and 20 (reiterated again in ch. 33). All of this is drawn from the Lev. 18.5 allusions in chs. 18; 20 and 33.

Ezekiel 18

Ezekiel 18 has traditionally been understood as a defence of individualistic theology against the Deuteronomistic conception of corporate responsibility. There has been much support, however, set forth recently to show that the chapter has more of a national focus. Thus, it is not primarily defence of individualism, per se, but is using individualistic motifs to declare the guilt of Israel. The burden of the prophet in ch. 18 is to highlight the nation’s responsibility for the current disaster and thus to

15. Wong, Idea of Retribution, p. 79.
16. The combination of תורתPropertyName (‘ordinances’) and ידיתPropertyName (‘statutes’)…is found in the Priestly source whereas ב הנתיבות with ידיתPropertyName appears more often in Deuteronomy’ (Wong, Idea of Retribution, p. 91; so also G. Matties, Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse [SBDSL, 125; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], p. 178; Cooke, Ezekiel, p. 59, cf. 126). Zimmerli also notes a ‘particularly strong connection [between H and Ezekiel] in the formulas of the parenetic framework, which speak of “walking” (הלך) in the commands (_CommandsPropertyName) or laws (_CommandsPropertyName) of God and keeping (מקנה) and doing (فعلו) them with a changing order of elements’ (Ezekiel 1, p. 48).
17. Matties, Rhetorical Discourse, p. 179.
18. Sometimes the formula can be an allusion to a specific text in H rather than the whole narrative. For instance, Ezek. 5.6-7 (‘for they have despised [_CommandsPropertyName] my statutes and have not walked in my judgments’; cf. 20.16, 24) seems to be alluding specifically to the formulas in Lev. 26.15 and 43 (see the discussion in Reventlow, Wächter, p. 8). Likewise, the formulas of 20.11, 13 and 21 are specifically alluding to Lev. 18.5.
20. Zimmerli writes: ‘we must find in this a recollection of the comprehensive lawgiving at Sinai, admittedly in a quite loose formulation’ (Ezekiel I, p. 410).
22. On the relationship between Ezekiel and Lev. 26, see especially Wong, Retribution, pp. 78-87.
vindicate the just act of God (vv. 25, 29). Paul Joyce says: ‘By emphasising the demand of Yahweh, the call to repentance underlines the fact that Israel has had every warning and is wholly to blame for the crisis which is even now engulfing her’.24 This national focus is explicitly seen in vv. 25 and 29 where Yahweh addresses the ‘house of Israel’, indicating to whom the speech was intended. This ‘house of Israel’ was claiming to be the righteous sons of wicked fathers (18.2, 14-17) and yet it is clear that Ezekiel views the ‘house of Israel’ as the wicked man (vv. 10-13, 21-23). This is emphatic in the climactic section where Yahweh exhorts Israel to ‘Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may be restored if he repents (vv. 20a). The force of the message addressed to the ‘house of Israel’ is to reveal that just as the wicked man will be restored if he repents (vv. 21-23, 27-28, 30b-32), so too if Israel repents, her wicked deeds will not be remembered (v. 22).25

Within this framework, Lev. 18.5 seems to be alluded to a few times in the chapter. Francis Watson picks up on this and even says that, ‘Ezekiel 18 as a whole should indeed be seen as a commentary on Lev. 18.5, and the understanding of ‘life’ here should be extended to the explicit Leviticus allusions in Ezekiel 20’.26 While understanding the chapter as a


25. Whether or not Ezekiel envisioned Israel as being capable of repentance, and thus able to escape disaster, is a matter of debate. Paul Joyce argues that the repentance motif does not lend out the real possibility that Israel can escape judgment since judgment has already come: they are now in exile. Rather, the repentance motif highlights two things: (1) the guilt of the nation for the disaster, and (2) the vindication of the name of Yahweh (see Joyce, Divine Initiative, pp. 33-60). Similarly, Fishbane, who argues that the chapter does offer support for an ‘individualistic theology’, says that here, Ezekiel’s ‘primary concern was not to call the people of Jerusalem to repentance but to expound in various ways upon the justice of YHWH to the exiles’ (‘Sin and Judgment’, pp. 147-48 emphasis his). Renz, however, though he agrees with Joyce that the chapter has a national focus, believes that the prophet highlights a real possibility of a new beginning for the late-exilic nation (to whom the oracle is addressed) (Renz, Rhetorical Function, p. 143). It seems difficult to answer the question by reading ch. 18 alone. What is clear from the message of the book as a whole is that God must cause Israel to obey (36.27; 37.24) and must breathe new life into them (37.1-14) for restoration to happen. There is not a hint in the later portion of the book that God restores Israel as a result of her repentance as Zimmerli writes, ‘In Ez. 37 ist von Umkehr nichts gesagt’ (‘“Leben” und “Tod”’, p. 507).


‘commentary on Leviticus 18.5’ may be overly optimistic, the force of the phrase is rightly seen in the following passages where the most relevant points of contact are underlined:27

Lev. 18.5:

and keep my statutes and my judgments which if a man does them he will live by them.

Ezek. 18.9:

[i]f he walks in my statutes, keeps my judgments to do them, he is righteous, he will surely live.

Ezek. 18.17:

When the son does justice and righteousness, when he keeps all my statutes and does them, he will surely live.

27. The presence of Lev. 18.5 may also be seen in 18.22

28. I have amended the MT’s reading— Heavenly (‘faith/truth’)—to conform with that of the LXX—οὐλία (‘them’)—following most commentators; see Greenburg, Ezekiel, p. 330; Zimmerli, Ezekiel 1, p. 371; Cooke, Ezekiel, p. 199, though the Targum retains the MT reading.

29. Allen sees an echo of Lev. 18.5 in this verse (Allen, Ezekiel 1-19, pp. 275, 277). The association of ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ here with the ‘statutes and judgments’ is interesting, though subsidiary to our purpose. For the use of these terms in the Hebrew Bible, see Moshe Weinfield, “Justice and Righteousness”—The Expression and its Meaning’, in H. Graf Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (eds.), Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and their Influence (JSOT Sup, 137; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 228-46. For a brief discussion of the terms here in Ezek. 18, see Matties, Moral Discourse, pp. 174-75. What is important for the purpose of this essay is that these terms (‘justice and righteousness / statutes and judgments’) are described here as being closely related, perhaps even synonymous. This will add weight for seeing the presence of Lev. 18.5 in ch. 33 (esp. vv. 15, 16, 19) where the language of ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ is used instead of ‘statutes’ and ‘ordinances’ (though see v. 15—‘statutes of life’). Thus, when it is stated that the penitent wicked man ‘does justice and righteousness, he will live by them’, it is probable that Lev. 18.5 is being alluded to there as well.
Ezek. 18.21:

הוֹרֵשׁ כְּשֶׁר יָשָׁר מִיעָל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר שָׁמָּה לְשָׁם אָדָם מֵהֵזָה מְשַׁמֵּשׁ מִבְּעוֹרִי מַעֲשֶׂה

But if the wicked man turns from all his sin which he does, to keep all my statutes and does justice and righteousness he will surely live.

The common elements between Lev. 18.5 and the references above are ‘life’, ‘statutes’, ‘judgments’ and the verbs ‘to keep’, ‘do’ and ‘walk’. In light of the explicit references to Lev. 18.5 in Ezekiel 20, and the commonalities between Ezekiel 18 and 20, it is likely that the prophet had this text in mind here as well. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the concept of ‘living’ as a result of ‘keeping/doing’ the ‘statutes’ and ‘judgments’ occurs only once in H (Lev. 18.5), suggesting that Ezekiel 18 is alluding to Lev. 18.5 when employing a similar Law—life matrix.

The prophet uses Lev. 18.5 together with the terminology familiar to criminal law (cf. e.g. Exod. 21.14; Num. 15.32-36), and applies them to the nation of Israel in ironic ways. While the righteous (or penitent wicked) person will enjoy the covenant blessing of ‘life’ by following

30. לְהָרִישׁ is mentioned twice in Lev. 18.3-4.
31. The burden of Ezek. 20, like Ezek. 18, is to link the generations of Israelite history together to show that the present generation is no different. This emerges clearly in 20.30 where for the first time God directly addresses the present nation: ‘Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your fathers and play the harlot after their detestable things?’ (see Joyce, Divine Initiative, pp. 46-47; cf. Block, Ezekiel 1-24, p. 616). Therefore, I disagree with Fishbane, who states that ch. 20 is ‘diametrically opposed to the teaching of the covenant’ (‘Sin and Judgment’, p. 143).
32. Granted, a similar connection occurs throughout Deuteronomy as well. However, Ezekiel draws upon H much more than on Deuteronomy and explicitly alludes to Lev. 18.5 three times in ch. 20. Therefore, Ezekiel’s conception of ‘living’ as a result of ‘keeping/doing’ the ‘statutes’ and ‘judgments’ should be connected to H and specifically to Lev. 18.5 (see further n. 16).
33. In criminal law, death is the punishment for the criminal and the innocent is allowed to live. Divine retribution is not the dominating factor. However, though Ezekiel uses the terminology of criminal law (esp. vv. 1-20), it is clear that divine retribution is inherent in the life/death language. Thus, the individualistic criminal law terminology is taken over and applied to the nation of Israel; see Joyce, Divine Initiative, pp. 37-41, and especially p. 54; so too Renz, Rhetorical Function, pp. 142-43; cf. Walther Zimmerli, ‘Die Eigenart der prophetischen Rede des Ezechiel’, ZAW 66 (1954), pp. 1-26.
34. Walther Zimmerli argues that the declaration of life here in ch. 18 (specifically 18.9) ‘is especially the gift given in the sphere of the sanctuary as the place of God’s presence’ (Ezekiel I, p. 376). He goes on to say, ‘From the keeping of the commandments and the confession of obedience, the priestly declaration which follows it, and the promise of life given in the sanctuary, there arises here a general description of the righteous and promise of life given to him’ (Ezekiel I, p. 377). This is largely based upon the ways in which the declaration, ‘he is righteous, he will surely live’ (18.9), reflects the priestly pronouncement to the uncovenanted person (cf. Lev. 13.6, 17, 22; see Zimmerli’s fuller discussion in his ‘Leben’ und ‘Tod’, pp. 499-500). Be that as it may, there is simply no textual support to indicate that the priests pronounced such declaration of ‘life’ upon those wishing to enter the temple. Furthermore, all the ‘life’ statements in the book are thematically related and cannot be interpreted in isolation, as I will attempt to demonstrate. Thus, the blessing of ‘life’ is essentially connected to the covenantal blessing held out in Lev. 18.5 (cf. Deut. 30). The ‘life’ promised to the one who obeys God’s statutes and judgments will come to fulfillment, albeit through a different agency.
36. For example, the ‘revelation of Yahweh’ to the Israelites in Egypt (vv. 5), Israel going after idols in Egypt (vv. 5-8), Yahweh’s ‘swearing’ to Israel in Egypt (vv. 6-7), Yahweh’s speech to the children of Israel in the wilderness (vv. 18-20), the excessive sinfulness of Joshua’s generation which in the biblical account is generally positive (vv. 21-26) and most emphatically the giving of the ‘no good laws’ to the wilderness generation (20.25). Lyle Eslinger’s comments are pertinent: ‘Given that this is a divine retrospect, conveyed through his loyal prophetic minion, the simplest solution is to accept this retrograde shift as a bit of divine hyperbole, accurately conveying the godly perception that the whole business was a disaster from the start’ (Ezekiel 20 and the Metaphor of Historical Teleology: Concepts of Biblical History, JSOT 81 [1998], pp. 93-125 [103]).
The structure of Ezekiel 20 has been a matter of much debate. Nevertheless, the basic movement from generation to generation in various stages is fairly explicit, as Rolf Rendtorff states:

In 20.5–26 the beginning of the History of God with Israel is depicted in three stages: the slave generation in Egypt (vv. 5–10); the same generation in the wilderness (vv. 11–17); the second generation in the wilderness (vv. 18–26). Three times it is said, ‘Then I resolved to pour out my anger upon them’ (vv. 8, 13, 21). But God does not do it. Israel lives under the announcement of judgment, but this was not consummated.

Beyond the two generations of vv. 5–26, a third generation of Israelites emerges as those who entered the land of Canaan (vv. 27–29). These are the fathers of the fourth and final generation—the present Israelite nation (vv. 30–32). It is this present group of rebels that are linked to the previous three generations. The purpose of Ezekiel in the historical overview is to exploit the wickedness of the ancestors of Israel and to show that their children (the present generation) are just like their parents. The rhetorical question of v. 30 (‘Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your fathers…?’) is answered with a resounding ‘Yes’ in the ensuing verses.

The threefold references to Lev. 18.5 reinforce what was implicitly stated in ch. 18: Israel has not lived up to her covenant obligations and therefore does not have the ‘life’ therein. Here in ch. 20, Lev. 18.5 is used to describe the giving of the Law at Sinai (v. 1), the subsequent wilderness rebellion (v. 30–32). It is this present group of rebels that are linked to the previous three generations. The purpose of Ezekiel in the historical overview is to exploit the wickedness of the ancestors of Israel and to show that their children (the present generation) are just like their parents. The rhetorical question of v. 30 (‘Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your fathers…?’) is answered with a resounding ‘Yes’ in the ensuing verses.

39. אֱלֹהִים אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָחָה אֲנָח
Irony flourishes as the family resemblance between the past and present generation is made explicit in the subsequent verses as these same ‘no good laws’ (child sacrifice to Molech) are kept by the present generation of Israelites.

Ezek. 20.31:
And when you offer your gifts, when you cause your sons to pass through the fire, you are defiling yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, declares the Lord Yahweh, I will not be inquired of by you.

The reference to ‘gifts’ and to Molech sacrifice in this passage are the same two descriptions that characterize the ‘no good laws’ of 20.25. These ‘offerings’ are made by the present generation and their fathers alike. Since the present generation of Israelites are obeying the same ‘no good laws’ of their fathers, the laws ‘by which they cannot live’, they too are incapable of achieving the ‘life’ promised in Lev. 18.5. As long as they participate in the ways of their fathers, they too will not be able to ‘live’. The imminent threat of death that hung over the nation in ch. 18 is brought one step closer to consummation as Yahweh’s laws of ‘life’ are transformed into laws of death.

Ezekiel 33
In Ezekiel 33, the guilt of the nation is amplified as the divine address to the wicked man takes centre stage. More specifically, Ezek. 33.10-20 picks up on themes and motifs particular to 18.21-32. In that previous chapter, we were left with the prophet exhorting Israel to ‘repent and live’ (18.32b). The words of 18.31—‘Why will you die, O house of Israel?’—‘poignantly acknowledge the fact that Israel is dying, suffering the fully deserved punishment of defeat and exile; and yet this question also anticipates the future which Yahweh wishes for his people’. In ch. 20, this threat of death is brought one step closer with their persistent obedience to the laws of death. Here in 33.10-16, this final section of the judgment oracle opens with similar sentiments, only this time it is the house of Israel herself that sees ‘life’ as a dying hope: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; of vengeance. For instance, in 9.7, God gives a command to ‘defile the temple’. In 14.9, God is said to be the cause of the deceptive prophet. Here in 20.39, Yahweh commands the present generation to ‘Go, serve everyone his idols’. It seems that a similar type of rhetoric is being used here.

how then can we live? (יְהֵן נִיהֳם (א)א)’ (33.10b). This establishes the main burden of the following verses: how can Israel live? ‘Life’ language is pervasive once again (vv. 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19) and the terse phrase (the statutes of life, v. 15) is perhaps genetically related to the Lev. 18.5 allusions in ch. 20. The presence of Lev. 18.5 may also be felt in 33.19-19—(‘But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does justice and righteousness, he will live by them’). These possible allusions, together with the deliberate connection with ch. 18 where the impact of Lev. 18.5 was seen, indicate that this transitional pericope can be read along the lines of the Lev. 18.5.

While 33.10-20 picks up on much of 18.21-32, this section expresses an even bleaker view of Israel’s ability to turn and live. In 33.10-20, it is the penitent wicked man who takes centre stage. Even the righteous person will die if he simply trusts in his own righteousness: ‘When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he trusts in his righteousness and so commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered’ (33.13). The human capacity for righteousness as a means to ‘life’ is significantly downplayed. This adds to the focus of the passage: Ezekiel 33 amplifies the portrait of a dying nation began in ch. 18 and carried on in ch. 20, and thus prepares the reader for the divine reversal of the events that will occur from 33.21 onwards. Although in principle the wicked house of Israel can ‘live’ if they turn from their sin, even they acknowledge that such an event is not likely to happen (33.10b).

Ezekiel 36.16-28; 37.24
This oracle of restoration opens in 36.16 picking up where ch. 20 left off. For example, in ch. 20 (esp. vv. 8, 13, 21), ‘Israel lives under the announcement of judgment’; but here in ch. 36 judgment has been poured out (36.18). In 20.23, Yahweh promises to scatter Israel among the nations. This ‘scattering’ is now a past event in 36.19. Chapter 20 commonly notes that Israel was ‘unclean’ (טָעִים) in her ways (vv. 7, 18, 30, 31, 43). The same predicament is reiterated in 36.17-18 and reversed...
by divine cleansing in 36.25 (‘from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you’). In 20.9 (cf. vv. 14, 22), Yahweh’s concern for his ‘holy name’ forces him to relent from destroying the nation. This is the same motivation that brings Israel back to the land (מָשְׂרוּ; cf. 20.34) in a ‘new exodus’ from among the nations in 36.20-21.51 In light of these and other connections, this great restoration oracle is a direct response to the desperate situation portrayed in ch. 20.54

This observation is necessary to understand the connection between the ‘statutes and judgments’ formula of the previous sections (last mentioned in 20.25) and the program of restoration in 36.16–37.28. This formula is mentioned again in 36.27–37.28, only here it is Yahweh who causes Israel to obey:

Ezek. 36.27:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים מַעֲקַבֶּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' לְעַל עַל מִשָּׂרֵי עַמּוֹ צֶרֶס

And I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to walk in my statutes and you will keep my judgments and do them.

In the light of the tight association between 36.16ff. to ch. 20, it seems prudent to see 36.27 as a divine response, or reversal, of the disobedience of Israel to the ‘statutes and judgments’ of Yahweh of the previous dispensation. Therefore, the ‘statutes and judgments’ formula is not a random choice of language by the prophet, but is intended to evoke the previous narrative thread of ‘statutes and judgments’ formulas in the oracle of judgment. What was previously held out as a conditional possibility is here fulfilled by Yahweh himself in his program of restoration. A similar formulation is made in the last occurrence of the ‘statutes and ordinances’ formula in Ezekiel 37:

Ezek. 37.24:

נְפָרָה לְרֹאשׁוֹ יֵהָיִם וּרְוֹנָתָו אֵלָיו יֵהָיִם לְמַעְשֵׂי לָבָא מְלָכָה לָבָא מְלָכָה

And my servant David will be king over them and they will have one shepherd for all of them, and they will walk in my statutes and keep my judgments to do them.

This formula is evidently Yahweh’s way of ‘life’ language is associated with either of these formulations. There is a connection, however, between 36.27a (‘And I will put my spirit within you’) and the revivification of Israel in 37.1-14, where the ‘life’ language is filled in. In 36.27a Yahweh puts his נָפֶשׁ within them’, and in 37.1-14 it is this same נָפֶשׁ that causes Israel to ‘live’ once again. Leslie Allen succinctly highlights this link:

The editorial function of 37.1-13 in its present position is to throw light on the gift of the spirit in 36.27a. That of 37.15-23 is to clarify a means by which Yahweh would bring about the obedience of 36.27b, namely via a Davidic king who would impose order among God’s people, uniting southern and northern elements with his royal staff or sceptre. In turn 37.14a represents an editorial rounding off of the unit of vv. 1-13, which uses the vision with its ninefold occurrence of נָפֶשׁ (‘breath/spirit’) as an illustration of the restoring power of God in 36.27a.57

With this correlation in view, there exists an intricate union between the ‘statutes and judgments’ as a way to ‘life’ in chs. 18 and 20, which was left unfulfilled, and the divine enablement to keep them in the new age (36.27) through the revivification of the spirit (37.1-14). It is the collapse of the previous program in the oracle of judgment that generates the radical activity of Yahweh in the program of restoration.

Ezekiel 37.1-14
‘Life’ language abounds once again in 37.1-14,58 and together with the link to 36.27 mentioned above, this vision of the dry bones brings to fulfilment the much-anticipated motif of ‘life’ throughout the book. In 16.6, Yahweh walks by the abandoned child (Israel) and declares to her ‘live’. Chapter 18 says that only the righteous can ‘live’, but since Israel is wicked, she needs to ‘repent’ in order to ‘live’ (18.32). Yahweh has

53. Renz notes that the term נָפֶשׁ (instead of נַפְשִׁי) is widely used in exodus traditions; Rhetorical Function, p. 203.
54. Along with Rendtorff’s article, see also Greenburg, Ezekiel, I, pp. 382-83; Renz, Rhetorical Function, pp. 110-11.
55. On this construction, see Cooke, Ezekiel, p. 395; cf. GKC, §157.
56. For the Davidic king enabling obedience, see Renz, Rhetorical Function, pp. 115-16; Wong, Divine Retribution, p. 113; Allen, Ezekiel, II, p. 194; Eichrodt, Ezekiel, p. 514.
58. נָפֶשׁ and its cognates are used in vv. 3, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 14.
revealed his Law for the purpose of giving Israel such ‘life’ (20.11), but they have disobeyed and thus they are dead. ‘How then can we live?’ cries the generation of exiles (33.10; cf. 37.11b). ‘Turn back from your evil ways...and live’, replies Yahweh (33.11), and yet no hint of repentance is found. The grand vision of revivification in Ezekiel 37, then, has been long anticipated throughout the narrative. Here, Yahweh must breathe life into the nation for her to be spiritually renewed.

The dry bones vision is a direct response to the situation presented in 33.10-20. There, the people cry out ‘we are dying’ (33.10) and here in 37.11b this process of dying is consummated as they exclaim ‘we are dead’. As pointed out earlier, 33.10-20 is picking up on ch. 18, especially with regard to the ‘life’ language, and also exhibits some points of contact with ch. 20 via the Lev. 18.5 citations. This anticipation of life in the face of a dying nation is fulfilled as Yahweh breathes ‘life’ into his people. With ch. 37, then, the relationship of Lev. 18.5 to the framework of Ezekiel is complete and may be laid out by the following diagram, modified slightly from the one at the beginning of this study:

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What was previously held out as a conditional promise—‘the person who does these things will live by them’—is now in the age of restoration replaced by divine causation. Israel will indeed walk in the ‘statutes and ordinances’ of Yahweh, albeit through a different agency. The ‘life’ therein will be gained by spiritual revivification.60


60. Though not crucial for my argument, it should be recognized that the ‘rivers of life’ in Ezek. 47.12 reiterated again the unconditional nature of Israel’s ‘life’ in the new

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Conclusion

This essay has examined the function of Lev. 18.5 in the book of Ezekiel. I have argued that not only is this text utilized in various passages outside ch. 20, but it also generates the pervasive themes of Israel’s disobedience to the ‘statutes and judgments’ and the promise of ‘life’ held out therein. These themes, most dominant in chs. 18, 20 and 33, are integrally connected to the restoration oracle in chs. 36–37 where God causes Israel to walk in his ‘statutes and judgments’ and breathes life into his people. The conditional potential of life held out in the judgment oracle is unconditionally fulfilled in the oracle of restoration. The conditional nature of Lev. 18.5 (‘which a man must do...’) is thus replaced by divine intervention.