Ezekiel 1, Babylonian Cosmological Scholarship and Iconography: Attempts at Further Refinement

«Many expounded the merkabāh and never saw it.»

TMeg 3(4):28

1. Introduction

One might think that everything has been said and written about Ezekiel's inaugural vision, that there is little to add to the authoritative treatments produced by distinguished interpreters such as Walther Zimmerli1, Moshe Greenberg2, or Othmar Keel.3 Zimmerli has written the most influential commentary on Ezekiel of the 20th century, in which he favoured a diachronic approach and made extensive use of literary and redactional criticism. Greenberg, who responded with another substantial commentary, aimed at a strictly synchronic or, as he preferred, holistic-exegesis. His approach built on the «working assumption that all the components of the celestial vehicle enumerated in the MT and all versions belong to its original conceptions»4, an original conception which he ascribed to the exiled prophet-priest of the 6th century BCE. As for Keel's treatment of Ez. 1 (and 10) in his seminal book on «JHWH-Visionen und Siegelkunst», it stands out among other recent monographs and articles devoted to Ez. 1 by its extensive use of ancient Near Eastern iconography as an essential aid for a better understanding of biblical visions.5 The strong impact of Zimmerli, Greenberg and Keel on current exegetis of Ez. 1 may be perceived, e.g., in L.C. Allen's more recent commentary on Ezekiel. While Zimmerli's diachronic criticism and Greenberg's holistic approach constitute the main partners of the exegetical dialogue, some of Keel's more salient iconographical «parallels» are reproduced in Allen's commentary in order to visualize major features of Ezekiel's marāḇāt elōhīm in chap. 1.6

In the present article, we suggest a few lines of thought that aim at further refinements and at a still better understanding of this crucial chapter. We are fully conscious that when trying to look a bit further ahead, we are standing on giants' shoulders. For reasons of convenience and space restrictions, we shall start our argument with the above-mentioned, acknowledged authorities and point out some debatable weaknesses of their interpretations. Our own argument will proceed on the three following levels:

(a) Diachronical methodology

Reactions to Zimmerli's literary and redactional criticism have generally split into two categories. Many authors writing in German (e.g., O. Keel, H.F. Fuhs)6 have followed Zimmerli's general model of multiple «Fortschreibungen» and accepted most of his conclusions. Other authors, particularly North-American scholars (among them L.C. Allen and D.I. Block), remain unconvinced and hold rather with Greenberg, concentrating on structural analysis and advocating an essentially unitarian reading. It seems to us that
critical to the relevant non-philological treatment (pp. 51-58) in Greenberg's commentary published in 1983, except for a short introduction and a postscript mentioning Keel's work without really interacting with it.

1 L. Dürr, Zezechiels Vision von der Erscheinung Gottes (Ez c. 1 und 10) im Lichte der vorderasiatischen Altertumskunde, Diss. Würzburg 1917 was the most important forerunner of Keel's work in this respect.
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Inhalt

Vorwort. Von Ernst Jenni, Basel ................................................................. 101

Beiträge aus der exegetischen Praxis

Le choix de l'ancêtre. Von Albert de Pury, Genève .......................................... 105
Jehus Kampf gegen den Baal von Samaria. Von Walter Dietrich, Bern ................ 115
Von Martin A. Klopfenstein, Bern ................................................................. 135
Ezekiel 1. Babylonian Cosmological Scholarship and Iconography: Attempts at Further Refinement. Von Christoph Uehlinger und Susanne Müller Trufaut,
Fribourg ........................................................................................................... 140
Akrostichie im Psalter. Von Klaus Seybold, Basel ............................................... 172
Alles nichts? Zur Theologie des Buches Qohelet. Von Thomas Krüger, Zürich ...... 184

Berichte und Dokumentationen

Lehrstuhl für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft und Spätisraelitische Religions-
geschichte in der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Zürich.
Von Odil Hannes Steck, Zürich .......................................................................... 199
Von Martin Rose, Neuchâtel .................................................................................. 210
Le Pentateuque samaritain de la Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire Fribourg
(Suisse) L 2057. Von Innocent Himbaza und Adrian Schenker, Fribourg .......... 221
Gehörtes Gebet. Retrakitation einer Predigt über die Konfessionen Jeremias
(Jer 12,1-5). Von Hans-Joachim Stoebbe, Basel ................................................. 227
«Hier ist mehr als...» Anmerkungen zu Gerhard von Rad.
Von Hans-Peter Mathys, Basel ........................................................................... 230

Projekte und Perspektiven

«Das Land der Kanaanäer mit der Seele suchend.» Von Othmar Keel, Fribourg ...... 245
History, Archaeology and the Bible. Von Ernst Axel Knauf, Bern ......................... 262
La fin de l’historiographie deutéronomiste et le retour de l’Hexateuque?
Von Thomas Römer, Lausanne ............................................................................ 269
Die Gerechtigkeit der Sophia. Biblische Weisheitstraditionen und feministische
Diskurse. Von Silvia Schöer, Bern ....................................................................... 281
enough space remains in between for a "third way" – or rather, a number of "third ways" – to be explored. It should indeed be possible to improve and refine the diachronic approach rather than switch to the other extreme of a purely unitarian reading. As a matter of fact or ultimate consequence, the holistic approach advocated by Greenberg denies the complex processual genesis of the biblical text, thus disconnecting it from ancient Near Eastern and early Jewish intellectual history. Numerous grammatical, syntactical and semantical tensions and irregularities strongly point to the composite nature and multi-layered growth of Ez. 1. For anyone who wants to read the chapter in relation to intellectual history, there is no alternative to diachrony. However, purely text-immanent literary criticism is all too often based on subjective and anachronistic criteria. Scholars operating in the fields of literary and redactional criticism are therefore bound to refine their analytical instruments and to enlarge the empirical basis of their method. This empirical basis can be provided by ancient Near Eastern epigraphy and literature or ancient manuscripts and versions of the biblical text. We anticipate particularly for the study of visionary texts that iconography has important additional evidence to offer. When correctly brought into the interpretative process, iconography may contribute to a diachronic hypothesis and strengthen its plausibility if assumed redactional stages and developments may be related to iconographical features which can both be dated to particular periods in time and/or placed within specific cultural areas.

(b) Synchronical coherence, astral and cosmological symbolism

It has become common sense among contemporary exeges that a literary- and redaction-critical hypothesis cannot limit itself to the analysis of tensions and contradictions nor consider the reconstruction of an original nodal ρ-source to be the primary aim of interpretation. A diachronic hypothesis is more plausible if it also leads the sensitive reader to perceive aspects of overarching coherence within a text. It is due to such coherence, and not only because of tensions, that a text could grow as a meaningful literary unit over centuries. We strongly favour an exegesis in which the diachronic and the synchronous, tension and coherence are not considered to be mutually exclusive but complementary concepts which a truly holistic exegesis should be able to combine in an integrative methodology.

The present writers would suggest that a major factor of coherence in Ez. 1, binding together apparently contradictory features such as living creatures (ḥayyōt) and wheels (ṿıṭānūm), should be sought in ancient Babylonian cosmology and astronomy. Cosmological theories have helped to shape Ezekiel’s inaugural vision from its hypothetical Grundschicht through various stages of redaction until its reception and debate in early Jewish and rabbinical literature, not to speak of later expansions in Jewish mysticism. It seems to us that astral and cosmological symbolism not only constitutes a major factor of coherence in Ez. 1, but also the hidden motor of several redactional expansions and reinterpretations. Curiously, this issue is almost totally absent from the above-mentioned authoritative treatments. Neither Zimmerli, Greenberg, Keel nor their more recent followers refer to specifically astral/astrological concepts and beliefs. Interestingly enough, however, astral topics seem to become en vogue in more recent biblical scholarship. It is time therefore to come back to Ez. 1 with questions informed by new evaluations of Mesopotamian cosmological and astronomical scholarship.

(c) Mesopotamian scholarship

It is well known that cosmology and the observation and interpretation of astral phenomena constituted the major field of 1st-millennium BCE Mesopotamian scholarship. According to the setting of the book of Ezekiel (1:1, 3:15 etc.), the prophet-priest lived among Judahite exiles at Tel-Abib near Nippur in southern Babylonia. That most of Keel’s iconographical parallels for Ez. 1, particularly Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid cylinder-seals, were produced by Mesopotamian workshops thus comes as no surprise. We shall add a few more pictorial sources hitherto overlooked in the discussion on Ezekiel’s vision. More important, the iconographical sources have to be properly related to the textual sources and to the overall history of Mesopotamian civilization.

13 For background information, see R. Zadok, The Nippur Region during the Late Assyrian, Chaldaean and Achaemenid Periods, Chiefly According to Written Sources: IOS 8 (1978) 266-332; id., The Jews in Babylonia during the Chaldean and Achaemenid Periods, Haifa 1979 (hebr.); B. Oded, Observations on the Israelite/Judaean Exiles in Mesopotamia during the Eighth-Sixth Centuries BCE, in: K. van Lerb erghe & A. Schoors (eds.), Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East (FS E. Lipinski; OLA 65), Leuven 1995, 205-212.
We shall argue that the origin and development of Ez. 1 are better understood when put against the background of Babylonian cosmographical and astronomical scholarship. Author and early redactors of Ez. 1, who were members of the intellectual elite among the Judahite exiles, seem to have interacted rather closely with Babylonian scholars and intellectuals. This interaction may explain the particular status which the book of Ezekiel long enjoyed in the Babylonian diaspora. It may also provide one among several reasons for the somewhat difficult reception of the book in Palestinian rabbinic Judaism.

2. Basic starting point: diachrony vs. synchrony, history vs. phenomenology

For anyone willing not to exclude diachronic analysis right away, Zimmerli’s commentary remains the necessary starting point. Zimmerli reconstructed an original Grundschicht («guter ursprünglicher Text» p. 30) of Ez. 1 which covers barely 30% of the final text, namely vv. 4a*.5.6b*11b.(12a...b)*.13aa.b).22a.26*27aa...b.28.14 Most prominent among his excisions are specifications concerning the four living creature’s physical appearance (straight legs, bull feet, hands and four faces) and the complex description of the wheels and their coordinated movement (vv. 15-21). These and other secondary features were attributed by Zimmerli to a «school» of Ezekiel which worked over an extended period of time, the last traces of the school’s activity being embedded in the differences between MT and G.

The reasons advanced by Zimmerli for his literary-critical excisions are manifold. They range from textual arguments (MT elements lacking in G), syntactical observations such as the well-known oscillations between feminine and masculine plural suffixes related to the four šārayyôth (fem.) and the šofanān (masc.), or tradition-historical arguments (e.g., concerning the lack of biblical precedents for multi-faced creatures) to quite subjective gusto judgments (most tangibly, on the aesthetics of two superimposed pairs of wings as implied by vv. 24-25). Surprisingly, Zimmerli made only moderate use of synoptic comparison with Ez. 10, but would not hesitate to refer to a «parallel» outside the book of Ezekiel when it fitted his literary-critical hypothesis. For instance, Is. 6:2 is cited in support of Ez. 1.6b and 11b originally belonging together. On a more general level, the ways in which Zimmerli achieved his results and their variable hypothetical nature are not always made clear to the reader. Still, his discussion provides a bright example for a synthetic final presentation of results by a real master of historical-critical exegesis.

One might have wished a more transparent exposition of Zimmerli’s procedure for the sake of scholarly debate, but the same holds true for comments by many of his contraditors. Greenberg’s response does not attempt a detailed evaluation of Zimmerli’s argument but is largely motivated by an a priori refusal – and actually a methodological incapacity – of the so-called holistic interpretation to properly engage in diachronic analysis.15 Greenberg did not want to depart from the MT in its final form: this was his leading «dogma» although he considered that «there is the highest probability» that during the centuries separating the prophet-priest from the Masoretic text «changes, inadvertent and deliberate, occurred in the transmission of these oracles by the prophet and by transcribers and later copyists».16 He was inclined to consider only minor textual change for his exposition but excluded any more substantial literary creativity on behalf of redactors. Persuaded that «the present Book of Ezekiel is the product of art and intelligent design»,17 he observed «a consistent trend of thought expressed in a distinctive style» to conclude with the «impression of an individual mind of powerful and passionate proclivities».18 He thus effectively blurred the basic distinctions between Ezekiel the prophet-priest (and possible author), his mind and the book named after him – in German one would call this a basic Kategorienfehler.

Still, one could accept Greenberg’s position would it have limited itself to a-historical and non-referential synchronic analysis. This, however, was not Greenberg’s aim. Despite his option for synchrony, Greenberg kept with history. «The persuasion grows on one as piece after piece falls into the established patterns and ideas that a coherent world of vision is emerging, contemporary with the sixth-century prophet and decisively shaped by him, if not the very words of Ezekiel himself.»19 All of a sudden, the gap of centuries separating the prophet from the Masoretic text is closed with a purportedly historical statement. This statement, however, does not rest on a strictly historical argument but on Masoretic fundamentalism.

Among Greenberg’s summary objections against Zimmerli and G. Fohrer, we read, e.g., that «their criteria for originality are arbitrary (e.g., the assumption of a system in the present vacillation of gender in reference to the creatures)», since «there is little reason to suppose that the original conformed ex-

14 Cf. his translation «nach Abhebung aller Bearbeitungszusätze», Zimmerli (n. 1), 33-34.


16 Greenberg (n. 2), 19.

17 Greenberg called this a «working assumption»; however, his commentary does not demonstrate whether and how he ever put to test this assumption.

18 Ibid., 26.

19 Ibid., 27.
acty and consistently to any single norm). Such an argument is not receivable, since it is simply not «any single norm» which is at stake. Diachronic analysis starts from a different, much more pertinent basic assumption, namely, that a learned Judahite prophet-priest would produce a highly elaborate vision report such as Ez. 1 in a sophisticated but intelligible, syntactically and semantically coherent language conforming to literary standards of his time and audience. This assumption relies upon and its validity may be tested against ancient literary documents of the 7th-2nd centuries BCE. As far as we know, no pre-Hellenistic epigraphical document (West Semitic or cuneiform) comparable in scope or complexity is so full of grammatical, syntactical and semantical difficulties and tensions as the Masoretic text of Ez. 1. On historical and empirical grounds, to attribute this text as it stands in its entirety to the exilic prophet-priest is inherently implausible.

Greenberg may be right when criticizing that too much energy has been spoiled by scholars interested in a diachronic approach in sterile literary-criticism based on arbitrary preconceptions of modern western academics. Literary and redactional criticism is certainly in need of a more secure empirical basis. Such a basis may be provided from three sides: first, studies in textual history offer a mass of empirical data for a better understanding of the transmission and expansion of biblical texts until very late stages of transmission; second, studies in the transmission of ancient Near Eastern texts and epigraphical data may provide an empirical basis for our assumptions on just how much coherence one may and should expect from an ancient literary work, including the nucleus of multi-layered biblical texts; third, iconography may provide further anchorage for specific concepts and visual images that could be known and used in a given geographical area during a particular period of time.

This brings us to iconography. Interestingly, Greenberg was aware of much Near Eastern documents, both textual and iconographical, and cited them extensively in his commentary (without however, illustrating a single visual source...). However, his use of comparative material remained purely phenomenological. In a phenomenological perspective, it does not make much difference whether a text or an image comes from the Akkadian, the Old-Babylonian or the Neo-Assyrian period, or whether it is Egyptian, Hitite or Elamite, and whether or not direct lines of tradition history can be drawn between a «parallel» and the biblical text. Once more, history is irrelevant.

To some extent, phenomenology was also a leading principle in Keel's iconographical study. This is confirmed by the third-hand use of images by L.C. Allen, whose recent commentary illustrates Ez. 1 with a 9th-century sculpture from Charchemish (an enthroned deity supported by lions), an Achaemenid-period cylinder seal (winged bullmen as sky-bearers), an 18th-century-bronze statue from Ishchali (a four-faced deity), a heavily reconstructed, 13th-century Hitite ivory panel from Megiddo (two-headed sky-bearers) and a well-known glazed brick from early 9th-century Assur showing a storm-god hovering in a fire-circle and drawing his bow. As valuable as these and many other illustrations supplied by Keel's monograph may be, they only demonstrate the knowledge of comparable concepts some time and somewhere in the Near East in antiquity but fail to provide truly historical clues to the interpretation of Ez. 1 as long as they cannot be fitted into the grid of a chronologically, regionally and socially differentiated intellectual history of the ancient Near East during the 6th-2nd centuries BCE.

What is at stake in this issue of phenomenology in comparative research is thus whether we aim or not at a really historical understanding of the biblical text. If exegesis should be relevant to the historian, and historical evidence relevant to the biblical interpreter, then there is no other alternative than to engage in diachronic analysis and in comparative studies which go beyond purely phenomenological associations of unrelated «parallels».

3. The relationship between Ezekiel 1 and 10

From a redaction-historical point of view, one aspect of Zimmerli's diachronic treatment of Ez. 1 (and 10) remains particularly unsatisfactory: He posited a great number of «Fortschreibungen», extensions and «sukzessiven Wachstumsschichten», doublets and glosses, but did not attempt to bring them into a precise relative chronology and at times even excluded the possibility of such an undertaking: «So ist auch hier mit einem Prozeß allmählicher Überlagerung des Textes durch Zusatzaussagen zu rechnen, ohne daß sich die...»

20 Ibid., 52.
21 Incidentally, the same comparative argument speaks against D.J. Block's thesis (n. 9) that the various tensions and inconsistencies should be explained by the prophet's extraordinary emotive experience and inability to properly express his experience. Not only does this explanation fail to properly distinguish between an experience and its formulation in writing, which must have occurred some time after the experience; more important, Block is unable to adduce comparative evidence for visionary reports both in and outside the Bible which would have been similarly affected on the level of syntactical, stylistic and semantic coherence by a prophet's overwhelming experience.
23 Historical differentiation is however at work when the visions of Yhwh by Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Zachariah are related to iconographical material dated to the 8th, 7th-6th or 6th-5th centuries. With regard to Ez. 1, Keel aimed at historical differentiation (note his comments on pp. 125-126) but only partly succeeded in this respect, not least because of basic hesitations between a minimalistic (Zimmerli) and a maximalist position (E. Höhne and others) regarding the literary growth of the chapter (note p. 162: «Ich neige zu einer mittleren Lösung, ohne mich genau festlegen zu können.»).
24 Cf. Allen’s lgs. 1-5 on pp. 20-37 of his commentary (n. 7).
Wachstumsringe im einzelnen noch sauber scheiden ließen."25 He thus not only left an open flank to critics who would question the general validity of his diachronic approach, but also failed to relate the redactional growth of the chapter to particular developments in Near Eastern and early Jewish intellectual history beyond the time of the prophet’s exile in Babylonia.

How could we move further in an attempt to clarify the relative chronology of redactional stages? One potential instrument remains underrated in this respect: namely, the synoptical comparison of Ez. 1 and Ez. 10 (resp. 8–11). It is instructive to note to what a large extent Zimmerly analyzed Ez. 1 and 10 independently. He described the relationship between the two chapters only one-way and assumed general priority for chap. 1 ("ursprüngliche Textgestalt") and secondary status for chap. 10 ("eine geglättete Wiedergabe der zunächst so seltsam undurchsichtigen Form von Kap. 1.").26 Keel’s study provided a helpful synopsis of Ez. 1 and 10.27 But Keel largely followed Zimmerli’s literary criticism and posited the same one-way dependency, although he expressed some astonishment "daß von der redaktionellen Arbeit in Kap. 10 nichts auf Kap. 1 zurückgewirkt hat."28 This curious situation is generally explained by the assumption that chap. 1 must have gained some <canonical> status at an early stage of redaction.29 Incidentally, this is just the kind of assumption which – once more – seems to exclude a priori the possibility of reconstructing the redactional history of chap. 1!!

In our opinion, a purely one-way relationship from Ez. 1 to 10 is intrinsically implausible. Some priority of chap. 1 is probable for several reasons: bisic visionary features fit better into the context of chap. 1 than into the scenery of the Jerusalem temple in chap. 10; moreover, the inaugural vision has another function and epistemological status (namely, to authenticate Ezekiel’s prophetic authority) than the visions of chap. 8–11 (which first of all serve to explain the reasons of Jerusalem’s disaster and why Yhwh was not subject to it but rather its ultimate author25). However, once the two chapters were explicitly related to one another as parts of an overall redactional scenario, and once the formulae were coined which state the virtual identity of features described in the two visions (most notably among them, the identification of the *bāyyôt* with *karûbîm*; cf. 8:4; 10:15, 20, 22), there is no reason not to assume that some formulations of chap. 10 would in turn influence chap. 1.30 This to-and-

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25 Zimmerli (n. 1), 68 on vv. 19-21.
26 Ibid., 28.
27 Keel, JHWH-Visionen (n. 3), 127-138. The synopsis is based on Zimmerli’s German translation. The to and fro is obviously better understood with a Hebrew synopsis.
28 Ibid., 151.
30 On this, see now J.F. Kutsko, Between Heaven and Earth, Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego, 7), Winona Lake, IN, 2000.

31 True, this influence did not go as far as inscribing the species marker *karûbîm* in chap. 1. The reasons for this are not difficult to ascertain: clearly, the beasts of chap. 1 do not look as *karûbîm*, as any educated ancient reader would at once have recognized, and they are first of all sky-bearers representing the horizons (see below). In chap. 8–11, on the other hand, they simply had to be identified with *karûbîm* since the scenario there required traditional temple symbolism.
32 "This has been regarded as bi-sexual or hermaphroditic. While such an explanation may well explain the final text, the lack of sexual markers both in text and iconography rather points to a sexual beings. Note that in metaphysical contexts where *bāyyôt* is the subject the predicate is always masculine.
34 Note that *waḥā’in* in 10:12a has no equivalent in 1:18 but is dependent on the sequence *hā’afā’īn* (1:16ff.) > *waγ̱abb-kitam māṯen* ēnāyn.
literature – wheels are considered to have «flesh» or «hands». It is much more cogent to hypothesize that in 10:12 the sequence «flesh/body + back + hands + wings ... all covered by eyes» was originally meant to describe the karûbîm. It is well known that in chap. 10 this latter designation substitutes the term hayyôt of chap. 1. Consequently, the most plausible genetic explanation of the «wheels' eyes» should start from the description of mixed creatures embedded in chap. 10, a description of creatures whose bodies included backs, hands and wings all covered by eyes. As a matter of fact, such beings are attested in Late-Egyptian and related Egypto-Phoenician iconography (see fig. 3).35 At a second stage, a redactor of chap. 1 who now had to work with the notion of creatures + wheels tried to harmonize 1:18 – part of his section on «wheels» – with 10:12, originally related to chap. 10’s section on karûbîm. Unable to relate the notions of flesh, hands and wings to wheels, he excised whatever he could not fit into his concept of wheels. The only elements he left were «eyes on their back», which from now on came to be understood as «eyes» – whatever this meant – on the wheels’ felloes by way of interpretative deduction.36

We may conclude from this somewhat complex development that at least this particular feature of the two visions should be considered primary within chap. 10, and derived within chap. 1. Consequently, the feature should not be interpreted on the basis of dubious speculations regarding Mesopotamian wheel technology. It rather relates to Western, Egypto-Phoenician concepts of polymorphous mixed creatures, probably of the well-known Bes pantheos type whose body is covered with eyes.

We cannot elaborate further on the relationship of chaps. 1 and 10. This peculiar example should have made clear however that

(a) both chaps. 1 and 10 show traces of a multi-layered literary history, and

(b) their redactional relationship does not flow one way only; redactors and glossators working in both directions seem to have tried repeatedly to coordinate – if not totally harmonize – the two chapters, taking into account the specific needs of the two visions' respective geographical and scenographical location (chap. 1 as inaugural vision and ouverture in Babylonia, chap. 10 as part of a vision within Jerusalem and her temple).

4. Towards the literary history of Ez. 1 and 10 (a working hypothesis)

By way of a working hypothesis and in order not to proceed on the sole basis of a single detail, we suggest the following diagram as a synthetic tabu-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>6th cent.</th>
<th>5th cent.</th>
<th>4th cent.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (chap. 1)</td>
<td>II (chap. 10)</td>
<td>III (chap. 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babylonia</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. visionary nucleus: four hayyôt (fem., i.e. four-winged, kusarîkku-like beings) support the heavenly firmament surmounted by a divine throne with an anthropomorphic deity seated on it</td>
<td>2. one (v. 2*, 4*) or two cherubim supporting a throne/ Yhwh's kâbôd</td>
<td>3. hayyôt = cherubim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. fire-glance between the hayyôt (v. 13*)</td>
<td>5. burning coals between the cherubim</td>
<td>6. fire-glance = galgal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. wheel (sphere?) «on earth»</td>
<td>8. four wheels (spheres?) related to the four horizons</td>
<td>9. cherubim's bodies, backs, hands/ paws and wings covered with eyes</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. four wheels = galgal</td>
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35 See Keel, JHW-Visionen (n. 3), 268-270.
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<tr>
<th>BCE</th>
<th>16. one ruah of four beings =&gt; the whole system is identified as one hayyâ (v. 20-21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd cent.</td>
<td>15. figure on the throne = ruah (1, 8:3 10:11.17 1:12b. 20a) determining overall movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd cent.</td>
<td>14. four-faced hayyôt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd cent.</td>
<td>12. wheels (spheres) covered with eyes (stars?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. related to the cherubim (chariot)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the limits of this article, we cannot argue in detail the pertinence of the redaction-historical hypothesis implied by this diagram. Let us stress however that the latter defines a relative chronology. The absolute dates given on the left are no more than tentative benchmarks between the probable point of departure (6th-cent. BCE Babylonia) and the redaction-historical terminal (2nd-cent. BCE Palestine).37

Moreover, we may recall at this point in which way iconographical research should and might be related to the diagram: Not just to provide phenomenological 'parallels' for one or another concept, iconic or literary, but as a real instance of external control and verification/falsification of the redaction-critical hypothesis. If the model and the hypothesis implied reflect not only our own scholarly speculation but actual developments in the literary history of Ez. 1 and 10, then particular visionary features attributed respectively to a Mesopotamian (Ez. 1*: Babylonia) or an (Egypto-)Palestinian background (Ez. 10*: Jerusalem) should find corollaries in the iconographies of East (Mesopotamia) and West (Palestine and Egypt) respectively, and this during the very periods under concern. Still, we should reckon with the possibility or even probability that not all the visionary features will find strict 'parallels' in iconography, since both authors and redactors of the book of Ezekiel were probably as much influenced by literature and written or oral traditions as by actual visual images. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that the weight of inner-biblical relatives increased with the growing literary development of the visions and the book's association with other prophetic literature, thus removing step by step the vision from actual iconographical models. However, as long as the redactors responsible for further expansions could remain evenly acquainted with or confronted to both media, texts and images, in their cultural environment – in Yehud, this would have been the case until the 2nd century BCE – images may have continued to influence even late redactional developments in the texts' redactional growth.

Once these basic principles acknowledged, it comes as no surprise that the best iconographical 'parallels' to the visionary nucleus of chap. 1 (feature 1) may be found in late-Assyrian to early Achaemenid glyptic iconography from Mesopotamia. Keel has provided a number of illustrations for the four-winged, kusarikku-like genies supporting the heavenly firmament above which a partly anthropomorphic deity is shown, although never seated on a throne (cf. fig. 2 for a closely matching example). Fig. 138, a Neo-Assyrian seal impression on which the kusarikku are unwinged, provides a further example for the concept of anthropomorphic, bull-feeted genies (kusarikku) supporting a major deity's heavenly abode. In this instance, the seal-cutter even represented the firmamental plaque (hebr. raqîr) rarely shown on images. The main deity on fig. 1 is probably Shamash, who regularly associates with the horse in Neo-Assyrian iconography and whose astral symbol often appears combined with the two other major luminaries, eight-pointed Venus and the lunar crescent.

In contrast to the four hayyôt of Ez. 1, the kusarikku always appear in pairs. This may be explained as an iconographical convention of two-dimensional images which concentrate on the primary horizons relevant for cosmology, i.e. east and west. The latter are the basic crossing-points, inter alia, for the appearance and disappearance of all celestial bodies. In contrast, the four hayyôt in Ez. 1 represent the four horizons or quarters of the universe; their number stresses divine mastery of the universe in his total extension.

Feature 2, the single cherub or paired cherubim, i.e. human-faced winged lions (not to be confused with so-called lion-dragons), are not known in Mesopotamian iconography before the late Persian period but rather belong to the Western, Egypto-Palestinian tradition. The same holds true for feature 9, the concept of eyes covering Mischwezen all over their body (fig. 3), and fea-

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37 Textual history may probably fix the terminal even later, extending into a CE date, according to a recent, yet unpublished PhD thesis by R. Van De Water, Reworked Ezekiel. An Early Rabbinic Response to Two Powers: Exegesis, Fribourg 1999.

38 The seal is part of the R. Schmidt collection presently owned by the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Fribourg Switzerland (inv. nr. VR 1981:110). It was first published by N. Yalouris, Athena als Herrin der Pferde: Museum Helveticum 7 (1950) 19-101, here 98-99 and fig. 16; P. Calmeyer & U. Seidl, Eine frühurartäische Siegeldarstellung: AnSt 33 (1983) 103-114, here 113 fig. 4; a photograph in O. Keel & Ch. Uehlinger, Altorientalische Miniaturkunst, 2nd ed. Fribourg Switzerland 1996, 45 Abb. 50.
ture 13, multi-faced Mischweesen with several different faces. Such creatures are only occasionally attested in Babylonia from the 4th century BCE onwards, notably on scarabs from Ur (fig. 4a-e) whose decoration has parallels on contemporary coins from the Eastern Mediterranean area.39 Although our hypothesis certainly needs further refinement, we may thus recognize that it finds at least partial confirmation in the polymorphous iconographical record of respectively East and West.

In order to add some substance to our working hypothesis, the remaining argument will now focus on developments within column I of the above diagram and thus concentrate on a number of features of Ez. 1 for which a Babylonian background seems most probable.

5. The 'galgal' and the wheels: throne-chariot or astral halo?

How should one understand the galgal of 10:2-6 (feature 6), the 'ofân (sg. 1:15-16, cf. 10:9-10; feature 7) or 'ofanim (pl. in all other instances; feature 8) described in 1:15-21 and 10:9-17, and finally the latters’ identification with galgal by some unidentified voice in 10:13 (feature 10)? According to both Zimmerli and Keel, the identification of galgal and 'ofanim should be regarded as secondary, although the word galgal certainly implies something circular such as a chariot’s wheel (cf. Ez. 23:24 and 26:10; Is. 5:28; Jer. 47:5, Ps. 77:19). Since the galgal is connected with burning coals in 10:2 and fire in 10:6, Zimmerli considered the possibility of understanding the galgal as a circular fire-place or hearth.40 Keel claimed that although galgal may refer to a chariot wheel, it does so «nicht unter dem Aspekt seiner Form, sondern seiner Dynamik».

Referring to Ps. 77:19, he suggested to translate galgal as «das Rollende», «the rolling>>, not to be understood as Yhwh’s chariot itself but rather as some thundering rolling of fire, coals and lightnings that would accompany Yhwh’s theophany.41 Keel thus understood the galgal as a complex of phenomena beh-


40 Zimmerli (n. 1), 232.

41 This hermeneutical principle would later form the basis of his ground-breaking commentary on Canticles, see O. Keel, Das Hohe Lied (ZBK-AT 18), Zurich 1986, 2nd ed. 1992, engl. The Song of Songs (Continental Commentaries), Philadelphia 1994.

42 «Ehre ist an das Geschehne, an das Getröll, an den sich daherwaltenden Haufen von Wolkendunkel von glühenden Kohlen und Bützen zu denken, der die Erschauung Jah- wes begleitet» (Keel, JWH-Visionen [n. 3], 160-161).

longing to «nature theophanies» and did not search for iconographical corollaries, which in the light of his otherwise strictly iconographical interpretation of other visionary features is surprising. Regarding the identification of the galgal with the ‘ofanim in 10:13, both Zimmerli and Keel considered this a kind of misunderstanding on which they would barely comment.

As for the ‘ofanim, they are understood by most commentators to be part of a gigantic vehicle or so-called throne-chariot. The main reasons for this interpretation are their number (four), their coordinated movement, and the latter development of these verses into the Jewish merkabah concept. Ceremonial chariots used in cultic processes are thought to have provided the actual models for Ezekiel’s vision.42 According to Zimmerli, the detailed description of the wheels and their coordination, which makes them move as one single system together with the haryot, was motivated by a genuine technical interest on behalf of an author who attempted to understand the actual mechanics of Yhwh’s throne-chariot. We cannot agree with this latter opinion. Had mechanics and technical practicability been the author’s main interest, he would have completely missed his point. As a matter of fact, no exegete has ever succeeded to provide a satisfactory explanation for the mechanics or engineering rules which command the movements of this peculiar «machine». It also seems highly questionable that an engineer whose primary interest was in mechanics would refer to (Yhwh’s) riyab as the directing principle of the putative vehicle. These verses neither explain the technology and the mechanics of the wheels nor their functioning as parts of a real «chariot».

It may be that we should look on other models for the galgal and the wheels. Hitherto overlooked Mesopotamian iconography of the 6th-7th centuries BCE may have a word to say on these matters, when properly combined with textual and archaeological background information on Babylonian astronomy and cosmology which flourished at the time.

We would like to draw attention to three types of images which may be relevant for our question.

Type A: a wheel (halo?) as a divine (astral) symbol. A wheel may occasionally appear as a divine (astral) symbol on Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals of the 8th-7th centuries BCE. This is most clearly the case on a chalcedony seal dia-
ted c. 800 BCE which was found on the floor of the Heraion at Samos; a six-spoked wheel appears among other astral symbols such as the lunar crescent, the winged sun-disk, the sebetti, the rhomb and the fish, which all stand for particular celestial bodies, planets or constellations (fig. 5).44 In a different composition, usually appearing on serpentine or other soft stone seals, a bull is shown kneeling besides a wheel (often clearly recognizable as such but sometimes stylized as a flower) over which may hover the lunar crescent and the sebetti (fig. 6).45 Two bulls appear on either side of an astral halo or wheel in the lower register of a recently-auctioned serpentine cylinder seal from the Mariadu de Serres collection (fig. 7).46 An interesting variant of such a wheel or halo figures on a serpentine cylinder seal of the Pierpont Morgan Library, where an anthropomorphic figure (presumably a god, although he does not wear a horned crown) appears within a wheel-like nimbus between two worshippers (fig. 8).47 This composition could perhaps represent an ominous celestial event, such as «If Sin is surrounded by a halo and Ninurta stands in it», a particular conjunction of the moon and Saturn.48

Type B: a wheel below the winged disk. On a number of Achaemenid-period limestone cylinder seals, a wheel is conspicuously placed below the winged disk. Examples include a seal from Pasargadæ (fig. 9),69 another from the Aleppo market kept at the Ashmolean Museum (fig. 10),80 a seal recently collected at Horom in Armenia (fig. 11),68 and a more provincially-looking item again in the Pierpont Morgan Library (fig. 12).51 According to P.R.S. Moorey, the wheel on the Pasargadæ seal «is to be taken here either as a sun symbol in its traditional Near Eastern role or in its later, more elaborate, Iranian guise as the 'wheel of heaven' embracing the whole of material creation».52 While hesitating regarding the wheel's purportedly traditional role as a sun symbol,53 we note its apparently astral and cosmological aspects in these representations.

Type C: the god in the lunar circle. It is tempting to connect the personage shown in fig. 8 with the somewhat later concept of a deity appearing in a lunar circle on Achaemenid-period cylinder seals (cf. fig. 2).54 The identity of this frequently-represented figure has not yet been established beyond doubt. Assyrian precedents and the frequency of this representation support an identification as a moon-god.55

At this point, Assyro-Babylonian astronomy and astrology should be brought into the discussion. We know that Assyro-Babylonian cosmology dis-


45 G.A. Eisen, Ancient Oriental Cylinder and Other Seals with a Description of the Collection of Mrs. William H. Moore (OIP 47), Chicago 1940, no. 76 («a sun disk in the form of a wheel»); for parallels see H.H. von der Osten, Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell (OIP 22), Chicago 1934, no. 413 («a circle decorated with wedges which point toward the center, in which appear remains of a now unrecognizable design»). E. Porada, Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections. Vol. I: The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library (The Bollingen Series 14), Washington, DC, 1948, nos. 618, 635, 646; B. Buchanan, Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum. Vol. I: Cylinder Seals, Oxford 1966, nos. 387-389 (lower register, wheel flanked by two kneeling bulls; note that Porada and Buchanan call the feature a «rosette» and apparently consider it to be a floral motif); etc.


47 Porada, Corpus (n. 45), no. 685. Adad in conjunction with the pleiads is shown within a particular astral halo on the recently-auctioned cylinder seal of Bēlu-šu-ēri, eunuch of Suluḫ-sarrī; see Christie’s London, Fine Antiquities. Wednesday 25 April 2001, no. 48.

48 H. Hunger, Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings (SAA 8), Helsinki 1992, no. 154; cf. Brown, Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology (n. 12), 57. However, similar conjunctions involving other deities/planets are recorded and it is difficult for the time being to identify the image with just one particular incident.
tistinguished three heavens, of which only the lower two were considered to be visible to humankind: the heaven of Enlil, where the major god Marduk/Bel had his particular abode, and the heaven of Ea, or lower sky on which stellar and planetary movements could be observed. Eclipses and partial overlappings of stars and constellations were among the most prominent celestial features considered to bear ominous significance. Astral symbols are thus a very common feature on seals from the Neo-Assyrian period onward. When seen against this background, the wheel-like feature represented on the seals may well reflect some concept relating to the circular nature of heavenly spheres, or of a particular constellation, if not to the circular movement of astral bodies or of the stellar system in general.

The principle of circularity regulating astral movements both spatially (in the sky) and temporally (along the ideal annual cycle) is also reflected symbolically on the garments of major Babylonian deities represented on a number of monuments dated to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. A relief from Babylon of Śamaš-ēn-ūr, a local ruler resp. governor of Suḫu and Mari (c. 775 BCE), shows the latter in adoration between Adad and Ištar on his left, and Anat on his right side, or rather the cult statues of these deities which are identified as such in the accompanying inscriptions (fig. 13).\(^5\) Three deities resp. their cult statues standing on pedestals also appear on a kudurrū of Nabīšuma-isšu (dated c. 750 BCE) of unknown provenance (fig. 14).\(^6\) The identification of these deities is more difficult (the first goddess holding the scimitar is probably some Ištar because of the lion, and the god with the bow accompanied by the winged lion-dragon may well be Ninurta), but we are here only concerned with their garments which clearly show various astral symbols. Similar garments are worn by gods on Neo-Babylonian kunakkū cylinders: an unidentified god on fig. 15 found at Persepolis (note the birds with outspread wings attached to the garment)\(^7\); Adad on fig. 16 from Babylon, dated to the reign of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE); and Marduk himself on fig. 17, dated to the time of Marduk-zâkîr-šumi (854–819 BCE) and found at the same place.\(^8\) These kunakkū are tall lapislazuli cylinders cut in high relief bearing votive inscriptions; they are not actual seals but rather royal offerings to the gods and property of Marduk’s sanctuary at Babylon. It stands to reason that they were originally attached to major cult statues kept in the Esagila sanctuary.

The garments represented on these monuments show obvious differences in detail which probably relate to theological and cosmographical issues surrounding the respective divine identities. More important for our concern, it seems that such garments express to some extent a reflection on the common ‘nature’ of major deities. Clothed in mantles covered by the major celestial bodies and spheres (note also the stars on the tiarae on figs. 14 and 17), these deities display a definitely astral and cosmic identity. Conversely, the celestial bodies are viewed as a kind of heavenly mantle for the great gods, their exterior shining brilliance (cf. nōgō etc. in Ez. 1 and 10). Beyond this shining mantle visible to all humankind, the mystical scholar would have perceived the more hidden reality of the divine.\(^9\)

In a recently published article, P. Grelot has suggested that the galgal of Ez. 10 should be understood as a kind of mandorla, or halo, which he compared to the Mesopotamian concept of melammu.\(^10\) The latter comparison seems questionable since the melammu is a divine halo which may emanate from or accompany different kinds of gods and goddesses, whether they have a specifically astral character or not. The galgal seems to be a more specific concept referring to some rather unique reality of cosmic significance. The first part of Grelot’s argument is more appealing and would strengthen our assumption that galgal may refer to some cosmic halo, a system of brilliance and lightning related to the celestial bodies. Considering that the term is applied to the sky of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st millennium BCE) (OBO 175), Fribourg/Göttingen 2000, 89-114, here 102 fig. 9.\(^{11}\)

5 Compare VAT 891/KAR 307 30-33, an often-cited parallel to Ez. 1:26-27, in A. Livingstone, Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea (SAA 3), Helsinki 1989, no. 39, and comments by W. Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography (Mesopotamian Civilizations 8), Winona Lake, IN, 1998, 3-19. The implication of the ‘parallel’ would be that in the book of Ezekiel, Yhwh occupies the place of Marduk who had himself inherited Ninurta’s tradition and Enlil’s abode.


8 See ibid., 194-197.


11 Note Albani, Der eine Gott (n. 11), 53: ‘Tatsächlich dürfte an die omnipräsenzen und periodisch in stets gleicher Gestalt erscheinenden Gestirnen, vor allem aber an Sonne und Mond, die „theo-logische” Problematisic von Einheit und Vielfalt des Göttlichen zuerst bewußt geworden zu (sic) sein. Nirgendwo sonst in der Natur war man mit derart konstanten und zugleich „übiquiten”-Erscheinungen wie den Gestirnen konfrontiert. (…) Den Gestirnschatten wohnt also per se schon eine Tendenz zur Vereinheitlichung des Göttlichen inne.’

stem of four wheels in Ezek. 10:13, one is tempted to conclude that not only one single circle (the actual galgal), but the whole system of moving circles including the wheels – i.e., the overall system of stars and planets moving according to principles of spatial and temporal circularity – is viewed as a mysterious source of fire, lightning and shining brilliance.

Incidentally, the 'eyes' on the 'wheels' left in Ezek. 1:18 could then be understood as the shining stars belonging to the four celestial wheels (cf. 1:4, 7, 16, 22, 27 where 'ayin has the meaning 'gleaming, brilliance'). The whole conjunction of galgal and wheels may actually be interpreted as a kind of mysterious 'stellar system'. The vision's concern for the coordinated movement of the bodies described could then be understood as a reflection on the movement of astral spheres, which move along individual, circular paths, but at the same time remain connected to one another by some invisible commanding principle whose technical rules cannot be easily put into words.

6. Circles and wheels, planets and quarters – Babylonian gods and astronomy

In his thorough discussion of Mesopotamian cosmological geography, W. Horowitz has helpfully synthesized the 'geography of the sky' according to the so-called 'astrolabes', the compendium called MUL.APIN and related texts. The 'astrolabes' and MUL.APIN relate the annual pattern of stellar movement with the months of the ideal astronomical year according to a basically circular pattern. All stars, including fixed stars, constellations and planets (with the exception of the five 'modern planets' Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) maintain fixed east-west courses in the heavens, and each star maintains a fixed position vis-à-vis the other stars. Thus the entire pattern of stars in the sky seems to rotate from east to west over the course of each night, and individual stars are found in an almost identical position in the sky at annual intervals. Moreover, stars and constellations maintain fixed positions relative to one another as if inscribed on a rotating sphere. The principle of circularity based both upon fixed relation and annual repetition found a practical application in the planispheres listing the position of fixed stars and on a distinctive instrument of Mesopotamian astronomy, the so-called 'astrolabe', which helped astronomers in their attempt to systematize the movements of celestial bodies along the three skies during the year. In surviving circular 'astrolabe' fragments, the stars are either drawn as six-pointed star-figures (CT 33 11) or as circles (CT 33 12). More important, the 'astrolabes' register 36 major month-stars in three concentric rings representing the three celestial paths of Anu, Enlil and Ea (note the three major spheres on the divine garments of figs. 11-15). The month-stars in each ring continue in a clockwise direction from Nisan to Adar. The radial segment representing Adar borders the segment representing Nisan, so the stars of the 'astrolabe', like those in heaven, move in an unending cyclical progression from year to year. Rotating an 'astrolabe' allows the simulation of stellar movements, and consequently such an instrument is but an obvious reflection of the notion of astral regularity and coordinated movement. It was this concept underlying the 'astrolabe' which eventually gave rise to the circular zodiac in the 5th century BCE.

Only the planets do not behave according to a circular movement within a fixed relationship to the other celestial bodies. As a matter of fact and observation, they move differently and would therefore be called bibba «wild sheep» by the Babylonians in contrast to the stars which behave like domesticated cattle under the guidance of Marduk's planet nēberu/Jupiter «who holds the turning-point» (Enīma elīt VI 124-131). However, although the planets' movement may seem «wild» and/or stronger when compared to the stars, it is obviously not totally out of order but simply follows other rules more difficult to establish. Among the ancient planets, moon, sun and Venus played a particular role and have to be put apart from the others. They were either considered as almost indvidually behaving celestial bodies or as a triad whose regular courses belong to the earliest and most salient features recorded by

66 According to Horowitz, 'Astrolabe' is a modern misnomer given to a group of ancient astronomical texts. True 'astrolabes' are instruments that were used to determine the altitude of stars, but the function of the Mesopotamian 'Astrolabes' was completely different. The Mesopotamian 'Astrolabes' purport to identify stars that rose each month in the Paths of Anu, Enlil, and Ea. Hence the 'Astrolabes' list 36 month-stars, one star for each path every month (Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography [n. 56], 154). 'The production of 'Astrolabes' over the course of a millennium in different sites and the reference to the 'Astrolabes' in Enūma Eliš demonstrate that the Astronomical model of the 'Astrolabes' was widely known, at least in learned circles (ibid., 165).

67 Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography (n. 56), 154.


69 See Horowitz, op. cit. (n. 56), 115-116.


65 Cf. Horowitz, op. cit. (n. 56), 188-192.

66 Ibid., 153.

67 Ibid., 15.

Babylonian astronomy. On the other hand, the remaining four, i.e. Jupiter and Mercury, Saturn and Mars, may be considered as a more coherent group. Most interestingly for our concern, these four planets were not only connected with the four winds, the four compass point directions (east and west, south and north), or the four quarters of the earth (Akkad vs. Elam, Amuru vs. Subartu87) – and, incidentally, heaven –, but also with four major Mesopotamian gods (Marduk and Nabû, Ninurta and Nergal) as well as with four related constellations (later zodiacal signs) and their respective symbolism (e.g., Eagle/Altair, Aquarius, Lion, Taurus).88

The following list may help to summarize the respective correlations:

- **Jupiter**
- **Saturn**
- **Mercury**
- **Mars**

84 According to a passage of the 16th tablet of the incantation series *UDUG.BULAMEŠ* (umatka *lammâti*, «evil spirits»), the triad was installed by Enlil and Ea in order to protect the firmament against the seven destroying demons, who are described as «lightning flashes» (CT 16 Pl. 19:20-11. 15f.; AOT 139-141).

85 On these, see Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography (n. 56), 193ff. Note also the cumulative reference in Surpia 17:165-167 to «the stars of the south wind, north wind, east wind, and west wind» (ibid., 205); for the four winds and their mantic significance in astrology in connection with meteorological factors, planets and stars, see F. Roehrborn-Halton, Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination. The Lunar Eclipse Tables of Enûma Anu Enlil (AIO B 22), Horn 1988, 57-63.

86 Within the scholarly system, these four regions or quarters do not always correspond to their respective compass directions on a modern map, but may also be redistributed according to shadow direction (reversal) or speculacular rules; moreover, they are related to the twelve months of a yearly cycle, each region being associated with one month within the three paths of Anu, Enlil and Ea. Cf. Brown, Mesopotamian Planetary Astrology-Astronomy (n. 12), 140.

87 On the astral symbolism of the *hayyôt* faces, see most recently P. Grelot, L’imagier des quatre vivants symboliques, in: Études sémantiques et sémitaires offertes à Jean Marquis (Histoire et Texte Biblique 4). Lausanne 1990, 241-250. Note also the identification of the four winds with animals (cattle, sheep, horses and ass) in the late-Babylonian scholarly work AO 8196 IV 33-36, re-edited in Koch-Westenholz, Mesopotamian Astrology (n. 12), 187-205, esp. 202-205.

88 The correlation of the four creatures’ faces (human, lion, bull and vulture/eagle) with the four deities, resp. four constellations or possibly zodiacal signs still represents a major enigma, since the animals or mixed creatures usually related in Babylonian tradition to the four deities mentioned in the list do not correspond to those mentioned in Ezekiel, nor do mixed beings with eagle- or lion-faces appear among supporters of heaven in late-Babylonian or Achaemenid iconography. Note however, that an Aramean bronze bowl shows the following correlations for the four main compass directions: moon (with an inscribed human figure), bull’s head, sun (with inscribed lion’s head), and an angular sign which may be related to Altair/Altair, see A. Lemaire, Coupe astrale inscrite et astronome arameen, in: Y. Avishur & R. Deutsch (eds.), Michael. Historical, Epigraphical and Biblical Studies (FS M. Heltzer). Tel Aviv-Jaffa 1999, 195-211. For the theomorphic symbolism of the four signs in Late-Egyptian iconography, see Keel, JHWH-Visioen (n. 3), 241-243 and the excursus by A. Gutbub, ibid. 328-353.

It is possible then that the four *hayyôt*, which certainly stand for the four horizons as they hold up the heavenly firmament (i.e. the plaque separating the lower, visible heaven of Ea from the middle heaven of Enil where Marduk or Yhwh has his abode), should also be understood on the background of this complex Babylonian system of astral and cosmic symbolism. The *hayyôt*’s four different faces probably relate to theomorphic symbols of zodiacal signs connected with four major Babylonian gods. And the close link between the *hayyôt* and the wheels, one per living creature, probably hides some additional Babylonian astronomical speculation as well which we cannot yet discern. Uncertainty in details notwithstanding, the compound of *raûqat* (firmament), *hayyôt* and wheels strongly recalls the Babylonian concept of the lower heaven as solid sphere rotating according to a totally coordinated circular principle.89

We should not forget that all this is said to have been revealed to Ezekiel within a shining weather cloud brought forth by a storm-wind from the north. On the background of what we know on ominous correlations of astral and meteorological phenomena in Babylonian divination, this compound could almost certainly be interpreted in terms of a precise ominous significance by a 6th-century scholar living in Babylonia.

The main purpose of the present article is to raise questions and put forward a number of suggestions concerning the tradition-historical, religious and scholarly background of some prominent features in Ez. 1. Once this
background is established and granted our hypothesis is not too far off target, we should then ask what function these features now play within the particular visionary setting of Ez. 1 and within the book of Ezekiel as a whole. For reasons of space, answers to these questions cannot be developed here. For the time being, we should only point out the interesting perspective that the vision applies a number of definitely Babylonian conceptions derived from cosmology, astronomy, meteorology, and Marduk theology to Yhwh and his power in history. This particular intellectual and religion-historical perspective has obvious theological consequences. The supreme god is here conceived as the one master and creator of the universe whose ordering power is apparent to the "mystical scholar" in the coordinated movements of celestial bodies, but who may at any time release from heaven his instruments of wrath and redemption. The latter are themselves identified with cosmic and meteorological entities, such as the Pleiades (sebetti), the four winds, etc. Clearly we are here on the way to "monotheitism," to an inclusive, almost monotheistic Marduk/Yhwh theology which, however, does not exclude the notion of subordinated mediators of judgment and redemption.

As far as Ez. 1 is concerned, we do not know yet whether the perspective opened by this inaugural vision of cosmic order and its supreme master implies a clear announcement of destruction and punishment or of redemption. The reason for this uncertainty may lie in our present inability to disenode the ultimate ominous significance of the vision. It is only with the following chapters of the book, and particularly with the vision of chaps. 8-11, that the particular accent on destruction will become clear even to the modern reader. It is possible however that an ancient reader would have detected more easily the pending wrath and potential catastrophe already on the basis of Ezekiel's inaugural vision.

7. Conclusion: Judahite exiles and Babylonian scholarship

Our suggestions imply that Ezekiel or the authors and redactors who designed his inaugural vision of Ez. 1 and the related vision of Ez. 10 in a redactional process of growing complexity, had some contact with Babylonian scholars trained in matters of theology, cosmology, and astronomy. Such an assumption does not seem to be unrealistic; on the contrary, it may be supported by the following arguments:

1. Studies by R. Frankena, S.P. Garfinkel, D. Bodi and others have highlighted the close relationship between certain texts in the book of Ezekiel and various works of cuneiform literature, whether "canonical" or not, such as the Poem of Erra, the Underworld vision of an Assyrian prince, other compositions from the category of "mystical, mythological and cultic explanatory works" or the Surpu collection of magical incantations. All these works belonged to the domain of learned Mesopotamian scholars, who were professional literati. The Book of Ezekiel shows particular influence from theologies and scholarship that flourished at Babylon, Kutha, and Nippur.

2. We have mentioned in passing (n. 56) an often-cited Babylonian parallel to Ez. 1:26-27, namely a cultic commentary best known through tablet VAT 891/KAR 307. Incidentally, another tablet probably from Babylon, which contains a text closely related to VAT 891, was written by a scribe whose Hebrew name "Shemaya" mentioned in the colophon betrays an Israelite or Judahite origin. The colophon also says that Shemaya's copy depended on models both from Babylon and Borsippa. This provides undisputable proof that Western exiles could make it into the Babylonian scholarly curricula already during the early days of the golah and even enter the arcana of privileged esoteric information (pirīstā iliān ḫarābīt «secret of the great gods»). Ezekiel would not have been an isolated case.

Such contacts between scholars and intellectuals must have perused over centuries, as we may conclude from recent studies on early Jewish astronomy and apocalyptic literature. It is also well known that late-Babylonian scholars to various degrees found its way into the Babylonian Talmud. Interestingly, a rabbinical tradition considers the merkāhā (i.e., Ez. 1) one of the das Erra-Gedicht, in: Lust (ed.), Ezekiel and His Book (n. 23), 350-35; D. Bodi, The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra (OBO 104), Fribourg/Göttingen 1991.


81. See see al-Rawi, Court Poetry (n. 56), no. 32.

82. This general genre terminology is used with reference to A. Livingstone, Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars, Oxford 1986 (many texts republished by the same author in SAA 3, 1989 [above, n. 56]).


84. Similarly, a number of texts in Deutero-Isaiah clearly imply knowledge of Babylonian cults and rituals, although they reflect an attitude towards Babylonian theology and scholarship which is markedly different from Ezekiel's (see now Albani, Der eine Gott [n. 11]).

85. Cf. Livingstone, Court Poetry (n. 56), xxiv-xxv. This scribal should not be confused with 7th-century «Shumaya, astrologer of the new company» who was based in Uru and is attested in a number of Neo-Assyrian astrological reports, see Hunger, Astrological Reports (n. 48), nos. 175-180, 499.

86. E.g., Albani, Astronomie und Schöpfungsglaube (n. 11).
most arcane texts of Scripture, which should be read and commented alone only by a «scholar who has understood on his own», i.e. the mystic (MHaG 2:1).

3. From the Hellenistic period onward, astronomical scholarship seems however to have been considered with growing mistrust by Jewish rabbis of the Babylonian diaspora. Among the rabbis' arguments against reading the book of Ezekiel, one is again related to the merkabâ (or Ez. 1). The visionary text is considered to look too closely into mysteries whose knowledge should be reserved to God Himself (cp. the Babylonian pirsitta ilâni rabitàt argument). Interestingly, however, the very discussion on this issue in BHag 13a contains an interpretation of Ez. 1 which clearly implies a cosmological reading based on the notion of several heavens:

«The distance from the earth to the firmament is a journey of five hundred years, and likewise, the thickness of the firmament is a journey of five hundred years, and likewise the distance between one firmament and the other. Above them are the holy living creatures (hayyôt): the feet of the living creatures are equal to all of them together; the ankles of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the legs of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the knees of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the thighs of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the bodies of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the necks of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the heads of the living creatures are equal to all of them; the horns of the living creatures (sic) are equal to all of them. Above them is the throne of glory: the feet of the throne of glory are equal to all of them; the throne of glory is equal to all of them. The King, the Living and Eternal God, High and Exalted, dwelleth above them.»

In conclusion, it would seem that once Ez. 1 was interpreted in terms of a merkabâ, early Judaism could develop a cosmological reading of Ez. 1 that avoided its too precisely astronomical implications. But to the modern reader even this alternative cannot disguise its ultimate origin in an Assyro-Babylonian tradition of scholarship, a tradition which never totally disentangled empirical observation and theological speculation, mystical intuition and mathematical precision in a multiplicity of approaches to the mysteries of cosmology and their bearing on history.

Sources for illustrations (* new drawings by Ulrike Zurkinden, Fribourg)

1 J. Black & A. Green, Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary, London 1992, 163 fig. 82. 2 Keel, JHWH-Visionen (n. 3), 214 Abb. 166. 3 Ibid., 270 Abb. 194. 4a-c Roes, New Light (n. 39), 234 fig. 2. 4d-e Collon, Hoard (n. 39), pl. 25:12. 5a-c Collon, First Impressions (n. 44), no. 573. 6a Eisen, Moore (n. 45), pl. IX:76. 7a Drouot-Montaigne catalogue (n. 46), no. 269. 8a Portada, Corpus (n. 45), pl. C685. 9 Root, The cylinder seal from Pasargadae (n. 49), 160 fig. 1. 10a Buchanan, Catalogue I (n. 45), pl. 44:673. 11 Kohl & Kroll, Notes (n. 50a), 258 fig. 7 left. 12a Portada, Corpus (n. 45), pl. CLXXV:1148. 13a Börker-Klähn, Bildstelen (n. 57), no. 231. 14 Seidl, Kudurru-Reliefs (n. 58), 60 Abb. 22. 15 Seidl, Kultbilder (n. 60), 102 fig. 9. 16 Ibid., 100 fig. 7. 17 Green & Black, Gods (fig. 2), 129 fig. 105.

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