Year: 2015

Virtual vision vs. actual show: Strategies of visualization in the Book of Ezekiel

Uehlinger, Christoph

Virtual Vision vs. Actual Show:
Strategies of Visualization in the Book of Ezekiel

Christoph Uehlinger

Summary

This paper addresses different ways of handling and manipulating visuality as displayed by the book of Ezekiel in reports on 'vision' (especially chs. 1, 10) and so-called 'sign acts' (especially chs. 4–5). In the central part, I summarize and update my previous studies, which followed a strictly historical-critical approach combining biblical exegesis with iconography and other ancient Near Eastern background materials. The introduction and conclusion address more theory-driven questions related to visuality, gaze, and visual culture. It is argued that ancient texts may reflect the particular visual environments in which they were authored or transmitted, and that the texts under review here display distinct visual culture backgrounds (roughly: Babylonian, Levantine, Egyptian), which may inform us on different locations of both authors/redactors and audiences; that ancient scribes may have been more or less exposed to such visual regimes, and hence their writings seem to be more or less familiar with visual features; that visualization serves different aims and strategies of communication when vision or 'sign acts' are reported; and that the reports also imply different cognitive stances (prophetic insight based on scholarly knowledge vs. persuasive performance) towards the objects of vision which they put on show before their readers' mind.

A personal, and epistemological, preliminary

This article originated as an invited paper presented at the SBL seminar on "The book of Ezekiel in its Babylonian context", held during the SBL Annual Meeting at Chicago in November 2012. I am grateful to the organizers for inviting me to speak at that session, and to those who took on them the burden of editing the proceedings.[1] Let me point out that I had accepted their invitation with mixed feelings. Having touched on the book of Ezekiel in occasional

---

1   I am grateful to Corrine L. Carvalho and Dalit Rom-Shiloni for taking the initiative, Madhavi Mevader and Martti Nissinen for witty and stimulating comments during the seminar, and to Bernd U. Schipper for having patiently but unremittingly insisted to get my thoughts published even in a somehow sketchy state of conceptualization. The paper has not been substantially modified, except that I have added some footnotes to point out how much my thoughts rely on the work of others. For more up-to-date scholarship, readers should turn to a volume announced at the time of final editing: Paul M. Joyce and Dalit Rom-Shiloni (eds.), *The God Ezekiel Creates* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies). London – New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. Contributions by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr ("The God Ezekiel Envisions"), J. T. Strong ("The God That Ezekiel Inherited"), Madhavi Nevader ("Creating a *Deus Non Creator*: Divine Sovereignty and Creation in Ezekiel"), Ellen van Wolde ("The God Ezekiel 1 envisions") and others will help put the present paper into perspective.

writing[2], and more regularly in my former teaching on the Hebrew Bible at the University of Fribourg, that is, in close interaction with Othmar Keel[3], I had not been able to keep up with the latest research on the book of Ezekiel since I left the Fribourg-based "Bible and iconography" research group in 2003[4] in order to take up new and considerably different responsibilities at the University of Zurich. In that new institutional setting, concerned with History of Religions/Comparative Religion, other areas of study have since required my full attention.[5] The book of Ezekiel did not remain a focus of my research, which implies that this paper cannot present genuinely new data or interpretations of the texts I shall address. Writing this paper did however give me the opportunity to look back at some of my earlier work from a distance, and to take stock of some criticism, alternative arguments, and further advances in the field.

Advances in historical research depend in no small a measure on contingent matters which we don't really control – like war in Iraq, which probably provided the background for relevant antiquities (in this instance, illegally excavated cuneiform tablets from the Nippur area mentioning Āl-Yāḫūdu ["Judah-town", earlier: Āl-Yāḫūdāya] and other places inhabited by Judahite exiles east and south-east of Nippur) to be smuggled out of the region before starting to profoundly affect present scholarship on the destiny of Judahites living in Babylonia during the Late Babylonian and Achaemenid periods.[6] Our choice

---

2 Ch. Uehlinger, „Zeichne eine Stadt…und belagere sie!" Bild und Wort in einer Zeichenhandlung Ezechiels gegen Jerusalem, in: M. Küchler & id. (eds.), *Jerusalem. Texte – Steine – Bilder* (FS Othmar + Hildi KEEL-LEU; Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus, 6; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag & Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 109–200.
   Ch. Uehlinger and Susanne Müller Trufaut, "Ezekiel 1, Babylonian cosmological scholarship and iconography: attempts at further refinement", *Theologische Zeitschrift* 57 (2001; Alttestamentliche Forschung in der Schweiz. Festheft zum XVII. Kongress der International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament in Basel), 140–171.

3 O. Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst. Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (Stuttgarter Bibel-Studien, 84/85; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977); id., *Die Geschichte Jerusalems und die Entstehung des Monotheismus* (Orte und Landschaften der Bibel, IV/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), esp. Vol. 1, 676–728.

4 Ch. Uehlinger, "Das Buch und die Bilder: 25 Jahre ikonographischer Forschung am Biblischen Institut der Universität Freiburg Schweiz", in: id. (ed.), *Images as Media. Sources for the cultural history of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (Ist millennium BCE)* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 175; Fribourg: University Press & Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 399–408.

5 Institutionally, as in most continental European universities, biblical studies are in Zurich associated with the theology department, whereas the study of religion \s evolves in a distinct department. Since, moreover, my faculty is blessed with a number of eminent biblical scholars it was clear that my own work should not duplicate theirs but cover different ground.

6 See F. Joannès and A. Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cunéiformes à onomastique ouest-sémitique (collection Sh. Moussaieff)": *Transeuphratène* 17 (1999), 17–34; Kathleen Abraham, "West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE. New Evidence from a Marriage Contract from Āl-Yaḫūdu: *Archiv für Orientforschung* 51 (2005/2006), 198–219; ead., "An Inheritance Division among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Pe-

of topics and ways of dealing with them from various perspectives also depend on changing conjunctures of theoretical models, scholarly paradigms and discourse conventions[7], disciplinary horizons and indeed the social and institutional organization of scholarly communities.[8] Such factors contribute to frame and shape our questions, methods and theories, and hence also the results of our understanding of ancient texts and other historical data.

In the context of an annual meeting of two major academic organizations (SBL and AAR), someone who has an institutional affiliation and hence professional obligations with the study of religion\s in a broader sense, but finds

---

riod", in: M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 206–221; W. G. Lambert, "A Document from a Community of Exiles in Babylonia", in: ibid., 201–205; Laurie E. Pearce, "New Evidence for Judeans in Babylonia", in: O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006, 399–412; ead., " 'Judean:' A Special Status in Neo-Babylonian and Achemenid Babylonia?", in: G. Knoppers, O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period. Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011, 267–277; F. Rachel Magdalene and Cornelia Wunsch, "Slavery between Judah and Babylon: The Exilic Experience", in: L. Culbertson (ed.), *Slaves and Household in the Near East* (Oriental Institute Seminars, 7; Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2011), 113–134 (on social polarization within the community of Judahite exiles); Cornelia Wunsch, "Glimpses on the Lives of Deportees in Rural Babylonia", in: Angelika Berlejung and M. P. Streck (eds.), *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B. C.* (Leipziger Altorientalistische Studien, 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 247–260; Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology, 28; Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2015) – note ibid. 9 comments on the archival coherence pointing to a single provenance, even locus (but as far as I can see, no information is provided regarding the archive's acquisition history); Wunsch (and Pearce), *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia in the Schøyen Collection* (Babylonische Archive, 6; Dresden: ISLET, in preparation); F. Vukosavović (ed.), *By the Rivers of Babylon. The Story of the Babylonian Exile*, Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 2015. See also M. Jursa, "Eine Familie von Königskaufleuten judäischer Herkunft": *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* (2, 2007) 23, #22; Y. Bloch, "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule": *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 1 (2, 2014), 119–172 (on processes of ethnic consolidation vs. assimilation among different social groups of Judahite exiles); R. Zadok, "Judeans in Babylonia—Updating the Dossier", in: U. Gabbay and Sh. Secunda (eds.), *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon. Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians and Babylonians in Antiquity* (Texts and Studies on Ancient Judaism, 160; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 109–129; Caroline Waerzeggers, "Locating Contact in the Babylonian Exile: Some Reflections on Tracing Judean-Babylonian Encounters in Cuneiform Texts", in: ibid., 131–146; and A. Winitzer's study mentioned below in n. 39. See further, more broadly on issues of "social integration", both horizontal and vertical, of foreigners and their *ḫadru/ḫaṭru* communities, K. Moukarzel, "Some Observations about 'Foreigners' in Babylonia during the VI Century BCE", in: M. J. Geller (ed.), *The Ancient World in an Age of Globalization* (Melammu, 7; Berlin: Edition Open Access, 2014), 129–156.

7 A book title like the forthcoming one quoted in n. 1 would have been virtually unthinkable 30 years ago.

8 T. Becher and P. R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*, 2nd edition, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001.

himself invited to a session concentrating on a single book of the Hebrew Bible and its historical background, inevitably faces the question whether the same topic and the same questions could equally well be investigated on either side of academia (with my new classmates, so to speak, as much as with my former ones); and whether I myself would frame and develop the topic in the same or in a different manner. I have tried to write this paper in a way that would be open to discussion in either context, that is, beyond the discipline of Hebrew Bible studies. Consequently, I shall not be concerned with 'iconographic biblical exegesis' in a narrow, discipline-focused sense[9], but with aspects of ancient *visuality*, visual culture, visualizing strategies, scopic regimes etc. as displayed in selected texts from the book of Ezekiel.[10]

When reading texts such as visionary reports (reporting something the prophet is said to have *seen*), accounts of so-called sign-acts (which, it is written, the prophet's contemporaries would have *seen*) and many other texts which refer to objects the prophet and his contemporaries would have *seen* or at least *imagined*, the average reader is continuously urged to him- or herself *imagine* what all these matters would have *looked like* and and how he or she, a modern reader, far removed in time, space, social background etc. from the text's early backgrounds and contexts should imagine them today.[11] If we are sensitive to such appeals to the visual and to imagination processes[12]

---

9 See, e.g., I. de Hulster and R. Schmitt (eds.), *Iconography and Biblical Studies. Proceedings of the Iconography Sessions at the Joint EABS/SBL Conference, 22–26 July 2007, Vienna, Austria* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 361; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), esp. de Hulster's paper entitled "Illuminating Images. A Historical Position and Method for Iconographic Exegesis" (ibid., 139–162); J. LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17", in: id. and K. H. Richards (eds.), *Method Matters* (Resources for Biblical Study/Society of Biblical Literature, 56; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2010), 143–168.

10 This sequence of concepts may give readers a sense of what I experienced as one of the major challenges and changes of perspective when crossing over from object-focused biblical studies to the more theory-concerned comparative study of religion\s. Whereas the object of inquiry seems to be a given in the former discipline, it generally needs to be conceptually construed and far more theoretically reflected in the latter. On visual culture and the study of religion\s, see Ch. Uehlinger, "*Visible Religion* und die Sichtbarkeit von Religion(en). Voraussetzungen, Anknüpfungsprobleme, Wiederaufnahme eines religionswissenschaftlichen Forschungsprogramms": *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 23 (2, 2006; „Das öffentliche Gesicht der Religion/en"), 165–184; id., "Approaches to Visual Culture and Religion: disciplinary trajectories, interdisciplinary connections, and some conditions for further progress": *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (4–5, 2015; "Visual Culture and Religious Studies", ed. D. Dubuisson), in press.

11 Cf. S. S. Scatolini Apóstolo, "Imagining Ezekiel": *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (13, 2008), 1–30.

12 Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking. Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca etc.: Cornell University Press, 1996); R. S. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance. Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism), Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Kate McFarlane, "Diaspora, Cultural Practice and Syncretic Visuality": *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 25 (2, 2004), 175–184; Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette Favrot Peterson (eds.), *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World* (Transculturalisms, 1400–1700; Farnham – Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

and at the same time want to root them as much as possible into a historically informed analysis of *ancient* visuality[13], *ancient* visual culture[14] and *ancient* gaze[15], we have probably no better means than (1) to turn to ancient Near Eastern *iconography*, that is the study of ancient images and visual repertoires from a well-defined context circumscribed in spatial and temporal terms, in a historical and comparative perspective; and (2) to investigate ancient visuality and visual culture on the basis of images and other material culture as well as ancient texts *about* viewing and about what viewing, visualizing, and the objects of vision *meant* to people in different historical and cultural contexts.[16] Of course we should ask systematically what people would or could have seen in any given context; but with knowledge on visual culture in various regions of the ancient Near East increasing, we should also ask what they would and could *not* have seen in a particular location, and possibly, what they would or could not even have imagined in their particular cultural environment.

The basic requirement for asking and researching such questions is familiarity with ancient visual cultures, that is, as much knowledge of primary evidence as possible. Needless to say, our attempts to reconstruct ancient visual cultures are fragmentary and hypothetical. But it seems a reasonable demand nevertheless that biblical scholars, whose profession is to deal with the interpretation of texts, some of which are particularly imaginative, should care not only for how authors and transmitters visualized the world (or worlds) the texts imagine, but also how modern scholars themselves (and after all, other readers) visualize that world (or worlds) the texts make them imagine. The following paper may thus be read as an exercise in historically informed, iconography-based controlled imagination.

More than any other biblical book, the book of Ezekiel is replete with images of different kinds[17]: vision reports, accounts of visually conspicuous ac-

---

13 Ch. Uehlinger, "Visuality", in: S. Engler and M. Stausberg (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), in press.

14 On Late Antiquity but suggestive for our concern: Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture. Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Greek Culture in the Roman World; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

15 See, e.g., Margaret Rose Olin, "Gaze", in R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 318–329; D. Mersch, "Bild und Blick. Zur Medialität des Visuellen", in: id. et al. (eds.), *Media Synaesthetics. Konturen einer physiologischen Medienästhetik* (Köln: Herbert von Halem, 2004), 95–122; D. Morgan, *The Embodied Eye. Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2012).

16 See, e.g., Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image. Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); ead., *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

17 "Surrealistische Visualität" and "Dominanz des Visuellen", in the words of Keel, *Die Geschichte Jerusalems* (n. 4), 678; see further id., "Zeichensysteme der Nähe Gottes in den Büchern Jeremia und Ezechiel", in: E. Gönke and Kathrin Liess (eds.), *Gottes Nähe im Alten Testament* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 202; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk), 2004, 30–64.

tions to be understood as signifying communication, mythopoetic descriptions, allegories, metaphors etc. This paper concentrates on two literary genres especially well-represented in the book of Ezekiel: vision reports[18] and accounts on so-called sign-acts.[19] The two genres have in common that they relate instances of unusual experiential and physical participation of the prophet; both attribute an essential social role to 'Ezekiel' as a medium communicating knowledge of a peculiar kind to his contemporaries. For practical reasons, I shall focus on the two literary units which I happen to have studied in more detail years ago (see n. 2–3) and which both have a particular relation to Ezekiel's "Babylonian context": chapters 4–5 (the inaugural series of sign-acts) and chapter 1 (the inaugural vision). I shall investigate how the historical study of visuality and historical visual culture impacts on our understanding of these texts and of the relationship they entertain with the visual.

Following the two case studies, we shall venture into a comparison of the different kinds of relationship the vision of ch. 1 and the sign-acts of chs. 4–5 entertain with the visual. The terms "virtual vision" and "actual show" used in the title of this article should be taken as a heuristic device to mark significant differences between two types of visualization.

---

18 See, e.g., S. Tengström, "Les visions prophétiques du trône de Dieu et leur arrière-plan dans l'Ancien Testament", in: M. Philonenko (ed.), *Le Trône de Dieu* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 28–99; J.-M. Vincent, *Das Auge hört. Die Erfahrbarkeit Gottes im Alten Testament* (Biblisch-Theologische Studien, 34; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998); D. Bodi, "Images, visions prophétiques et présence divine virtuelle au Proche-Orient et dans la Bible": *Variations herméneutiques* 11 (1999), 5–40; A. Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen im Alten Testament. Sprachliche Eigenarten, Funktionen und Geschichte einer Gattung* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 292; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2002); D. F. Launderville, *Spirit and Reason. The Embodied Character of Ezekiel's Symbolic Thinking* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); W. A. Tooman and M. A. Lyons (eds.), *Transforming Visions. Transformations of Text, Tradition, and Theology in Ezekiel* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 127; Eugene, ON: Pickwick, 2010); R. Schmitt, *Mantik im Alten Testament* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 411; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014).

19 See, e.g., J. de Thomasson, "Actes-signes ou actes magiques? Ez 2–5 et *shurpu*": *Biblische Notizen* 64 (1992), 18–25; R. R. Hutton, "Magic or Street-Theater? The Power of the Prophetic Word", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995), 247–260; B. Lang, "Games Prophets Play. Street Theater and Symbolic Acts in Biblical Israel", in: K. P. Köpping (ed.), *The Games of Gods and Man. Essays in Play and Performance* (Studien zur sozialen und rituellen Morphologie, 2; Hamburg: LIT, 1997), 257–271; and see below, n. 22ff. These titles alone make clear how much contemporary biblical studies could benefit from more sustained theoretical and conceptual groundwork, lest it remains constricted by emic categories and a normative order it should study rather than duplicate. The very distinctions of signifying vs. magical act, or of magic operation vs. prophetic word, betray the long-term effects of conceptual prejudice deeply rooted in the 'European' (or Christian 'Western') conceptual order, in which the concept of "magic" has been used to disqualify non-conformist religious (ritual, therapeutic, and scholarly) practices. See below, n. 27ff.

Case study I: Ezek. 4–5

Let us start with what is arguably the most famous of Ezekiel's shows, namely the inaugural series of sign-acts related in chs. 4–5. The two chapters display the following sequence:

A. Non-verbal action

 (1) 4,1–2: model siege against an *unnamed city

 (2) 4,3…7: iron griddle, hard face and bared arm

 (3) 4,4–6…8: lying 390 days on the left, 40 days on the right side, with ropes

 (4) 4,9–11: rationed food
 4,12–17: ill-prepared, impure barley cakes

 (5) 5,1–2: shaving and dispensing the three parts of hair
 5,3–4: additional manipulation on part of the last third

B. Verbal explanation

 (a) 5,5: "This is Jerusalem…"

 (b) etc.

Each unit of non-verbal action is introduced by an explicit address to the prophet: *wə=ʾattâ* "and you". The actions follow each other in a logical sequence and gain in dramatic intensity: first, a siege is laid against a model city drawn on a brick (1); subsequent actions make clear that this siege is non-revokable (2) and that it will last over an extended period of time (3). As a result, food in the city will be scarce and rationed (4). Finally, the city will be taken and its inhabitants will die (5).

Various commentators have provided good arguments that ch. 4 had a rather complicated redaction history. This does not mean that the chapter cannot be understood without such an assumption (I would rather stress the contrary), but a redaction-critical approach can best make sense of a number of irregularities such as sudden changes of focus, apparent internal contradictions in the account, attenuations (human excrements replaced by cow dung, spare portion of the third part of hair…), phraseological links which tie the account to other parts of the book, etc. As argued by many commentators, including some who are not generally inclined to literary analysis and redaction criticism, it seems very probable that the original account was somewhat shorter and presented a more straightforward progression from initial siege through starvation to conquest and annihilation of the cities' inhabitants. Most important in the present context, two namings of Jerusalem within ch. 4 should be understood, one as a scribal gloss (v. 1: *ʾet=yərûšālāim*), the other as part

of a redactional amplification (v. 7: *wə=ʾel-məṣôr yərûšālaim tāḵîn pānekā*). Otherwise, it would indeed be difficult to understand why the verbal explanation of the performance should open in 5:5 with the divine statement: "This is Jerusalem…" (*koh ʾāmar ʾădonāy zoʾt yərûšālaim*).

In an article published in 1987 (see n. 2) I started from such observations in order to demonstrate some characteristic differences between visual and verbal communication: visual information is here encoded in a drawing of a city scratched onto a brick, a model siege and various typical actions that could easily be understood by contemporaries of the prophet and which appeal to stereotypical representations; language, in contrast, can attribute indexical information and put a name even on the most stereotyped of images of a city.[20] Against most commentators of the time, I argued that the scratch drawing on the brick did probably not represent a ground-plan but a vertical view of the city to be besieged, stylized according to the conventions of the time. Ground-plans of cities are attested in much earlier periods (early second millennium), but in the Neo-Babylonian period they are to my knowledge attested (or implied by texts) only for fields and individual buildings, not for cities. In this instance, then, the knowledge of historical visual culture allowed an educated guess about a detail which is simply not addressed in the narrative but which may be important insofar as, in contrast to a relatively technical ground-plan, the stylized vertical view of a city raises specific emotions: If the performance started with an isolated image of a city standing, this image would have had first of all a positive connotation and be understood as a symbol of strength and security – before being reverted into its opposite, fear.

One of the most interesting aspects of the nonverbal actions in ch. 4 seems to be the contrast between their absolutely clear content (siege, starvation, annihilation … after all, a *sign* or *signifying performance* is at issue here) and the large ambiguity of silence regarding the actual *identity* of the city and its inhabitants so represented. In a context of dispute among the exiled of the Jehoiachin (597) displacement, some would have regarded favourably the attempts of their Jerusalem relatives to resist the power of Nebuchadnezzar, while others may have held a more skeptical view. Until the very disclosure of the city's name, the siege enactment would not necessarily have pointed to one single political option. The prophet's actions could well be viewed in different ways and even allow for the possibility that the city under siege might represent Babylon. Even the performer's own role long remained somewhat ambiguous insofar as it changed from setting the scene to preparing aggression, from non-intervention to sympathetic suffering and self-humiliation. Only with the verbal explanation would the referent of these actions become definitely clear.

---

20 Hence, the necessity felt by Assyrian craftsmen working on monumental palace reliefs to sometimes identify a particular image of a city by adding its name in writing, in such cases where the correct identification of the city would have enhanced the understanding of its depiction.

Kelvin G. Friebel's doctoral dissertation published in 1999 studies "Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's sign-acts" as examples of "rhetorical non-verbal communication".[21] To the best of my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive and most important treatment of prophetic sign-acts and performances published over the last 40 years.[22] I am lucky to report that as far as Ezek. 4–5 are concerned, Friebel seems to have accepted most of my 1987 suggestions, or come to the same conclusions independently:

"In the representation of the model siege (4.1–2), there was no ambiguity as to what the nonverbal artifacts represented—they illustrated the siege of a city. But there was probably ambiguity over specifics of the representation, such as what city it was and who the attackers were. (…) Due to the schematized nature of the drawing, (…) the specific identification of the city may well have been very difficult to ascertain immediately. Because of the popular theology, the audience may have thought or hoped that Ezekiel was representing the siege of Babylon itself, and thus declaring a message like other prophets (cf. Jer. 27–29) who were proclaiming Babylon's imminent demise. (…) If the nonverbal displays by the prophet were thus erroneously misconstrued by the audience because of their being filtered through the popular theological beliefs, the impact of Ezekiel's words 'This is Jerusalem' (5.5) must have been immensely shocking. It was a message the audience would not have anticipated hearing nor desired to hear. But their argumentative defenses would have been down, making the suasive impact more forceful."[23]

Like Bernhard Lang[24] and others, Friebel regards the sign-act narratives as accounts on actual public performances, which served a "suasive" purpose, namely to convince the exiles of the Jehoiachin generation of the impending disaster in Jerusalem. In the light of more recent studies by Dalit Rom-Shiloni[25] and others, one might consider if Ezekiel's public performances pre-587 should be regarded not only as warnings against those among the exiles who sympathized with the Zedekiah party at Jerusalem, but as first steps in disconnecting the Jehoiachin exiles from their Jerusalem relatives and in constructing a specifically exilic identity. (We should be careful, however, not to drift too much towards some sort of modern exegetical midrash by historiciz-

---

21 K. G. Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts. Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement 283; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

22 On Ezek. 4–5, see also Karin Schöpflin, *Theologie als Biographie im Ezechielbuch. Ein Beitrag zur Konzeption alttestamentlicher Prophetie* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 199–224; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity. Identity Conflicts between the Exiles and the People who Remained (6th–5th Centuries BCE)* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 543; London: T&T Clark, 2013), 173–178.

23 Ibid., 228–229.

24 *Kein Aufstand in Jerusalem. Die Politik des Propheten Ezechiel* (Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981); id., *Ezechiel. Der Prophet und das Buch* (Erträge der Forschung, 153; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981).

25 Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "Ezekiel as the Voice of the Exiles and Constructor of Exilic Ideology": *Hebrew Union College Annual* 76 (2005), 1–45; ead., *Exclusive Inclusivity* (above, n. 23).

ing a scenery and sequence which is after all known to us only through this particular, carefully crafted text.)

Another issue may be of interest when we address the "Babylonian background" of the book of Ezekiel: the debate whether Ezekiel's performances, or sign-acts, and specifically the ones related in chs. 4–5 have anything to do with the Mesopotamian tradition of so-called "sympathetic magic".[26] Writing in 1987, I had an argument with well-known and influential Georg Fohrer's study[27] on what Fohrer had called the "symbolic actions" (*Symbolhandlungen*) of the prophets. Although according to Fohrer the 'symbolic' actions of the prophets had much in common with actions known from Mesopotamian ritual series such as *Šurpu* or *Maqlû*[28], the German (and then, Protestant) scholar (and many others following him) would deny their 'magical' character because of certain theological preconceptions: In line with dominating theological thinking, he attributed the ultimate success of sign-acts neither to the prophet nor to the inherent power of prophetic communication, but to the divine will alone – thus assuming a tension that, to my own candid reading, is not so much inherent in the text but dialectically emphasized, and then resolved, by the exegete in the first place. This kind of argument seems unreceivable to me in a historically and theoretically informed close reading of the text.

Friebel too, for whom the sign-acts are essentially acts of nonverbal communication and whose epistemology is more sophisticated than Fohrer's, rejects any association or link with 'sympathetic magic'. I would argue that whether or not a link between some Mesopotamian 'magical' tradition[29] may be established or not will, on the one hand, entirely depend on the quality of parallels that can be adduced; such parallels alone may help to evaluate whether Ezekiel's actions are is better understood as an *ad hoc* or as a script-regulated

---

26 The concept of sympathetic magic goes back to James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, London: Macmillan, 1915ff (numerous reprints). While many of Frazer's views have long come under considerable fire, this concept continues to be widely used in humanities and social sciences. For an update on "magic", its vitality as a scholarly concept, and related matters, see R. Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; B.-Chr. Otto and M. Stausberg (eds.), *Defining Magic. A Reader* (Critical Categories in the Study of Religion; Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); B.-Chr. Otto, "Towards Historicizing 'Magic' in Antiquity", *Numen* 60 (2–3, 2013), 308–347; H. Röder and F. Röpke (eds.), *Zwischen Schein und Sein. Die Magieproblematik aus der Perspektive früher Hochkulturen* (Ägyptologie und Kulturgeschichte, 3; München: Wilhelm Fink, 2015); C. Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs* (London: Oxbow, 2015).

27 G. Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments, 54; Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1968).

28 See, e.g., Tz. Abusch, *Mesopotamian Witchcraft. Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature* (Ancient Magic and Divination, 5; Leiden: Brill, 2002); on the latter, see now id., *The Magical Ceremony* Maqlû. *A Critical Edition* (Ancient Magic and Divination, 10; Leiden: Brill, 2015).

29 The conceptual designation itself of a discrete 'magical' tradition rests on problematic assumptions, however well-established the concept may be among Assyriologists.

performance. On the other hand, and more importantly, we should be aware and acknowledge how much exegetical judgments on this issue are guided by theological prejudice and by the lack of adequate conceptual tools. Viewed from a distance, there is no need to make too strong a separation between acts of putative 'sympathetic magic' (that is, ritually controlled and divinely induced actions which the performer is convinced to be in severe correspondence with divine will and thus of necessary consequence), and performances such as the siege sequence of Ezek. 4. While there is no hint in Ezek. 4 that the performance should be regarded as the causal *movens* of what would actually happen to Jerusalem, it is quite obvious (and the verbal explanation of ch. 5 leaves no room for doubt) that the performance is meant to be in close correspondence to what would ultimately happen in Jerusalem. The basic assumption in *both* ritual and communicative performance is that the enactment *represents* a process unfolding in actual reality controlled by divine causality and ascertained by the performer. We should not exclude therefore that at least some of the prophet's sign-acts (for instance, the shaving and manipulation of hair) should be understood in quite the same way as what scholars tend to call 'magic' – all the more so since in this instance, "Ezekiel, a member of the Priestly family, was performing an action which as part of the priestly regulations was prohibited".[30] Some of Ezekiel's sign-acts were severely transgressive with regard to social and ritual expectations towards a priest. They would have raised astonishment, perhaps even scandal, among contemporaries as much as they do so for any informed reader of the book. It would be interesting to investigate further which and how many of these transgressions may have resulted from exposure of Ezekiel, a learned Judahite prophet and priest, to practices, procedures and background knowledge of Babylonian scribes, scholars, and possibly social activists.

Let us turn now to another testimony of transgression – or acculturation, if you will: Ezekiel's inaugural vision of ch. 1, which we shall study in its complex relationship to ch. 10.

Case study II: Ezek. 1[31]

The argument to be developed in this section can best be exposed in five theses:

(1) Considered from a perspective of iconography, ancient visual culture and visuality, it appears quite clearly that the report on Ezekiel's inaugural vi-

---

30 Friebel, op. cit. (n. 22), 243.

31 See recently, e.g., Schöpflin, *Theologie als Biographie* (n. 23), 127–145; Margaret S. Odell, "Ezekiel Saw What He Said He Saw. Genres, Forms, and Visions in Ezekiel 1", in: M. A. Sweeney and E. Ben Zvi (eds.), *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003), 162–176; S. L. Cook, "Cosmos,

sion is a *composite* entity, which draws on cultural knowledge of different periods and socio-cultural environments.

(2) The earliest content of Ezekiel's inaugural vision can be recovered at least in its basic contours, which clearly place it in a *Babylonian* cultural environment. Some features of the vision, however, could not possibly have been imagined in Babylonia and must be explained otherwise.

(3) Ezekiel's inaugural vision is not only a new and on first sight unusual description of a *deity*, or of theophany, an aspect on which most commentators put their strongest if not exclusive focus. It envisions the deity as the most eminent entity in a more complex 'system', which is itself consistent with Assyro-Babylonian (or Late Babylonian) cosmological conceptions more than with anything else we know from the Bible or the ancient Near East. As much as with theology, the earliest layer of Ezek. 1 is concerned with *cosmology*.

(4) Such matters were of interest not so much to the average Judahite exile, whose primary concern was to acculturate to Babylonian society in terms of a living, i.e. business, administration, and law – if anything, the newly-published documents from the Nippur area have confirmed this particular point.[32] And it did probably not concern the average prophet or priest among the exiles. In Babylonian society, sophisticated cosmology mattered to advanced students and scholars only. It stands to reason that the author of the inaugural vision had considerable exposure to Babylonian cosmological scholarship, as retrievable to us in a variety of cuneiform sources and genres, including the so-called mystical and ex-

---

Kabod, and Cherub: Ontological and Epistemological Hierarchy in Ezekiel", in: id. and C. L. Patton (eds.), *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World. Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (SBL Symposium, 31; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press & Leiden: Brill, 2005), 179–197; Kirsten Nielsen, "Ezekiel's Visionary Call as Prologue: From Complexity and Changeability to Order and Stability?": *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (2008), 99–114; Alice Wood, *Of Wings and Wheels. A Synthetic Study of the Biblical Cherubim* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 385; Berlin – New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 95–138; Jill Middlemas, "Exclusively Yahweh: Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ezekiel", in: J. Day (ed.), *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel. Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 531; New York – London: T&T Clark, 2010), 309–324; B. N. Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context: Ezekiel's Message Understood in Its Historical Setting of Covenant Curses and Ancient Near Eastern Mythological Motifs* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 182; Eugene, ON: Pickwick Press, 2012), esp. 97–140; Th. Wagner, "Ez 1 – verständlich unverständlich": *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125 (2, 2013), 234–248. Our 2001 article mentioned in n. 3 was noticed by Schöpflin, but it did not make it into the scholarly discussion at large. Most recent studies content themselves with rehearsals of the large commentaries (esp. those of D. I. Block [below n. 44], M. Greenberg [n. 43], and W. Zimmerli [n. 41]); Janina Maria Hiebel, *Ezekiel's Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives. A Redaction-Critical and Theological Study* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 475; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2015) could not yet been consulted at the time of writing.

32 See above, n. 7.

planatory works[33] and learned commentaries[34], by which Mesopotamian scholars added new levels of meaning to traditional knowledge as exposed in their canonical literature.[35]

(5) As is often the case with scholarly insights, especially when they are first packaged in a condensed manner and later worked upon and expanded by others, Ezek. 1 became the object of multiple readings and interpolations, which differed in terms of sophistication and concern. The expanded Masoretic text itself, whose redactional growth I have tried to disentangle in a joint study with Susanne Müller Trufaut[36], includes additions which try to be in line with the vision's original cosmological concern, while others seem more interested in imagining the fantastic world of intermediate beings and still others interfere in matters of mechanics to the result that later readers would look for a divine chariot, a rather traditional concept, as it were, but here perceived in a very particular way. [37]

In short, I suggest that we consider Ezekiel's inaugural vision *in its earliest form* as a piece of scholarship as much as a testimony to the early and exceptional acculturation of a learned Judahite exile to the Babylonian academia.[38] It is probably within learned circles as well that the author of Ezek. 1 would have been exposed, if ever, to actual iconography of the time related to what he expounded in the vision report.[39]

The complexity of ch. 1 has, on the one hand, always been acknowledged (compare the Tosefta's laconic saying: "Many expounded the *merkabâ* and still, they, never saw it" [TMeg 3(4):28]), and it has, on the other hand, prompted numerous attempts to reduce the challenges of complexity of con-

33 A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

34 E. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries. Origins of Interpretation* (Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record, 5; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011).

35 Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context* (n. 32), 18–23 even discusses the notion of Ezekiel having been "reeducated".

36 Art. cit. (n. 3), esp. 147ff.

37 Note Scatolini Apóstolo's comments on "Ezekiel's fantastic virtuality", art. cit. (n. 12), 13–17.

38 On this very intuition, see P. Kingsley, "Ezekiel by the Grand Canal: Between Jewish and Babylonian Tradition": *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* IIIrd ser., 2 (3, 1992), 339–346, and now the much more sustained demonstrations by A. Winitzer, "Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv: Ezekiel among the Babylonian *literati*", in: U. Gabbay and Sh. Secunda (eds.), *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon. Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians and Babylonians in Antiquity* (Texts and Studies on Ancient Judaism, 160; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 163–216; and D. Vanderhooft, "Ezekiel in and on Babylon": *Transeuphratène* 46 (2014; J. Elayi and J.-M. Durand [eds.], *Bible et Proche-Orient. Mélanges André Lemaire* vol. III), 99–119 (on acculturation as evidenced by Ezekiel as "an intellectual go-between").

39 As Martti Nissinen has keenly observed in conversation, iconography can often be especially useful when we try to elucidate the *emergence* of visually charged texts. In addition, it can of course document the sometimes extraordinary career of a visually charged text in the visual arts, which may well be understood as particular *responses* to the text (as much as to other factors prevalent in their own particular context).

tent through diachronic literary analysis. Walter Zimmerli's approach has been the most influential especially in German-speaking scholarship[40], but it did not produce consensual results because it relied on a quite heterogeneous set of criteria, some of them quite arbitrary. This is even more true for alternative suggestions, for instance by Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann[41], whose obervations are often acute but show no interest at all in ancient visual culture, visualization or imagination. Since it is easy not to be convinced by the literary critics' suggestions regarding Ezek. 1, it comes as no surprise that the chapter has remained a central piece in the architecture of so-called 'holistic' approaches, which claim literary unity for it in spite of all the textual evidence speaking against it. Interestingly enough, however, scholars who argue for the literary unity and for a single-handed authorship (for instance, Moshe Greenberg[42] or Daniel I. Block[43]) regularly resort to explanations of the kind that since the object described is of mysterious nature, the alerted reader should not expect straightforward coherence or clear understanding of the details. I cannot but express my skepticism against such an interpretative stance, which in my view installs mysticism in the wrong place. When we modern scholars do not understand an ancient text, we should not put the blame on those who produced it; neither should we surround them with an aura of admiration or project on them modern or a-historical assumptions about the manner mysterious realities would have been expressed in antiquity. Modern critics should be interested in the 'mysterious' as a category for understanding and a key for disclosure only, rather than using that key to prevent critical analysis.[44]

The literary analysis and diachronical explanation of Ezek. 1 cannot operate without taking into account chs. 10 and 11, where in another vision report the

---

40 W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* (Biblischer Kommentar, XIII/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, [1955–]1969, 2nd. ed. 1979); engl. *Ezekiel 1. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trsl. by R. E. Clements (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

41 K.-F. Pohlmann, *Ezechielstudien. Zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Buches und zur Frage nach den ältesten Texten* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 202; Berlin – New York: W. de Gruyter, 1992), esp. 88–95; id., *Das Buch des Propheten Hesekiel (Ezechiel). Kapitel 1–19* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch, 22/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); id., *Ezechiel. Der Stand der theologischen Diskussion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008).

42 M. Greenberg, "Ezekiel's Vision: Literary and Iconographic Aspects", in: H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (eds.), *History, Historiography and Interpretation. Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 159–168; *Ezekiel 1–20* (Anchor Bible, 22), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983; German trsl. *Ezechiel 1–20* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2001).

43 D. I. Block, "Text and Emotion: A Study in the 'Corruptions' in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:4–28)": *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), 418–442; id., *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1–24* (New International Commentary of the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

44 Once more, critical revision should start with the conceptual tools, in this instance, the deconstruction of the very concept of "mysticism". See D. E. Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2, 2003), 273–302.

kābôd is said to have left the temple of Jerusalem. Zimmerli's literary-critical analysis was flawed by two methodological limitations: He analyzed ch. 1 only for itself as a self-contained composition, and he assumed a one-way influence from ch. 1 to ch. 10 only but not *vice versa*. Once we analyze the parallel chapters synoptically, it becomes easier not only to establish an inventory of the commonalities and differences between the two visionary descriptions; it also becomes clear that there must have been some effect from ch. 10 on ch. 1 once the two chapters figured on the same scroll. On the assumption that the visionary saw the same deity in a consistent cosmological environment, once in heaven and once moving from the temple, ancient scribes musing over these texts and copying them anew must necessarily have been inclined to add to their consistency.[45]

This is not the place to (re-)develop the details of a literary analysis and a model of diachronical growth based on the comparison of ch. 1 and 10.[46] Suffice it to recall the outlines of my understanding of the inaugural vision and its successive reworkings and amplifications as argued in the already-mentioned article published in 2001 with the assistance of Susanne Müller-Trufaut. According to that analysis, the visionary nucleus, appearing to 'Ezekiel' from the midst of a dark mass of cloud and lightning, first consisted of four 'beings' or 'creatures' (*ḥayôt*) of human likeness with human face and arms, but straight legs and young bull's hooves as well as four wings each, "and they sparkled like burnished bronze" (v. 7). Above these creatures appeared the heavenly firmament (*raqîa?*), "shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads". Above this expanse appeared a lapis lazuli throne, on which was seated an anthropomorphic deity, whose precise contours were however difficult to ascertain to the visionary since they appeared again in an exceptionally brilliant light of burning amber. The deity was enclosed by a shrine (*bayit*, rather than just a "receptacle"), again of exceptionally glaring brightness.[47] That this finds a remarkable parallel both in Exodus 24:9–10 and in the description of Bēl/Marduk's abode in the Late Assyrian text *KAR* 307 ll. 30–33 has often been noticed and was recalled at our seminar by Abraham Winitzer.[48] I have nothing to add to his interpretation. My intent here is rather to make clear that

---

45 On the topic of divine presence, absence, and movement, see further 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: Eisenbrauns, 2000); J. T. Strong, "God's *Kābôd*: The Presence of Yahweh in the Book of Ezekiel", in: Margaret S. Odell & id. (eds.), The Book of Ezekiel. Theological and Anthropological Perspectives (SBL Symposium Series, 9; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 69–94; S. S. Tuell, "Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel's Prophecy", ibid., 97–116.

46 For practical reasons, I may refer readers to the article mentioned in n. 3 for relevant illustrations.

47 On this motif, see Sh. Z. Aster, *The Unbeatable Light. Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 384; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012); on Ezek. 1 ibid., 301–315.

48 See above, n. 39.

some details in the text may *best* be understood with reference to *visual* material, or contemporary iconography (especially the ḥayôt, who are *kusarikku*-like representatives of the four horizons holding up the heavenly plaque[49]); while *other* features (such as, for obvious reasons, the accompanying soundscape or the text's insistence on the creatures' coordinated movement) *cannot* have a correspondence in contemporary iconography.[50]

One feature which has puzzled generations of interpreters and could well have been part of the original vision account may be adduced to stress that *iconography* can provide one set of background information but must whenever possible be supplemented by textual background information. This is the *one* "wheel" or "sphere" (*'ôfan 'eḥad*, v. 15) appearing on the ground between the creatures (v. 15), a feature to which later expansions would add significant complexity. Such a feature occurs indeed in roughly contemporary iconography, though more often of early Achaemenid date, in the form of a wheel which sometimes seems to be stylized as a shining or brilliant entity (hence the rosette- or spokes-like representation).[51] While this feature may appear together with other planetary and astral symbols in Neo-Assyrian glyptics, it also appears alone, and always so, on somewhat later seals. The latter consistently place this 'wheel' under the winged disk, which both represents the heavens and often one of its major inhabitants, whether the sun-god (the most visible to the human eye when appearing on the lower sky) or the major god of the middle sky above. Although these later images generally do not show the hooved sky-bearing genies anymore, such are known to have survived on other Achaemenid seals and sealings. In earlier glyptics, an anthropomorphic lunar deity may occasionally appear in a circle in the same position underneath the winged disk. In these instances it is not altogether clear whether we should understand the circle as just a halo or, like the wheel, as a feature indicating circular movement.

The close and differential analysis of roughly contemporary iconography can thus give us at least a direction in which to search for a background and meaning for Ezekiel's *'ôfan 'eḥad*. However, it does of course not tell us the whole story. What is at stake in this concept of a wheel or sphere is, if you will, *circularity*, that is the *regular movement* of astral bodies visible to the human eye on the lower heaven. This idea of circularity is further (maybe later?) developed in the text in the concept of *four 'ôfanîm*, a concept that goes beyond what we know from contemporary iconography. In ch. 1, the *'ôfanîm*

---

49 Note, however, that neither of which is designated with the appropriate Babylonian terms, but all four are grouped together as 'beings' or 'creatures' (ḥayôt).

50 I follow Keel's lead (n. 4) with regard to the first proposition, adding to it a diachronic, redaction-historical dimension; instead of making a general claim, I depart from that lead with the second statement.

51 See Uehlinger and Müller-Trufaut, art. cit. (n. 3), 168f figs. 5–12; also reproduced and augmented in a subsequent treatment of Ezek. 1 by O. Keel, mentioned below in n. 54.

are related to the creatures and their movement; they appear alongside each creature, hence four wheels, which apparently are meant to have operated one inside each other (v. 16). The principle of circularity is thus brought to a higher level of complexity. In 10:13 (but not in ch. 1), this whole device will ultimately be identified with the *galgal* also mentioned in 10:2, 6, a feature interpreted by Pierre Grelot[52] and others as once more some kind of circular halo.

I would argue that the content matter of all this goes beyond what Othmar Keel, who highlights the theophanic aspects like almost all modern commentators, has called the "Herrlichkeitserscheinung des Königsgottes"[53], which would essentially be a matter of theology. Rather than being concerned with the hierophany of a (*the*) deity alone, Ezekiel's inaugural vision provides an insight into a whole *cosmological system*. The supreme god is an essential part of that system which operates under his authority; but the system clearly operates according to *mixed rules*, combining technicality (the wheels), agency (the creatures) and a governing intentionality (*rûaḥ*). Such a system implies a blending of mythology (as condensed in the figures of the *ḥayôt* and the concept of a supreme deity enthroned in a heavenly shrine) with elementary technical knowledge about planetary movements. Such a blendover based on canonical mythology, centuries of astronomical observation and the synthesis of both in compendia and learned commentaries is well attested from Assyrian and Babylonian scholarly literature. For the advanced Late-Babylonian scholar, canonical mythology and astronomy represented and provided different levels of understanding of the same reality. The connection between the two was developed in the learned commentaries and so-called 'mystical and explanatory' works. Cuneiform scholarship had long developed over centuries as a multi-layered knowledge system within an epistemic culture that favoured cumulative knowledge and a "multiplicity of approaches" to reality.

How much of this epistemic culture and knowledge system would be accessible to Ezekiel, the exiled Judahite expert turned scholar-student, in a basically foreign environment he had to cope with and adapt to at least to some extent? We do not know for sure and lack well-grounded information about the availability and accessibility of Babylonian scholarship to a Judahite outsider – surrounded as some of the more advanced scholarship may have been by rules of secrecy (that is an etiquette controlling access to sensitive material). We should not speculate too much in the absence of conclusive evidence, but I would postulate that the author of Ezek. 1 (in its initial version) had *considerable* exposure to Babylonian cosmological scholarship; that he clearly *shows*

---

52 P. Grelot, "*GALGAL* (Ezéchiel 10,2.6.13 et Daniel 7,9)": *Transeuphratène* 15 (1998), 137–147.

53 O. Keel, "Die Herrlichkeitserscheinung des Königsgottes in der Prophetie", in: H. Irsigler (ed.), *Mythisches in biblischer Bildsprache. Gestalt und Verwandlung in Prophetie und Psalmen* (Quaestiones disputatae, 209; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2004), 134–183 (see ibid., 145–149, for a generous, balanced response to the article mentioned above in n. 3).

interest in such knowledge; and that he *integrated* at least part of it, in the way he would have been able to, into his own evolving worldview.[54] He must have considered that knowledge to be advanced and meaningful, the ultimate asset of a society he probably experienced as considerably more complex and sophisticated than the one he had left behind in Jerusalem. More than that: If we take seriously the place of this vision at the head of all that follows, both in the book and according to the book's chronology, the enhancement of traditional theophanic motives with considerably more sophisticated Babylonian cosmological knowledge seems to have provided to the prophet-priest the epistemic foundation for a new perspective on the supreme god's dominion, a god whom the Babylonian scholars called Marduk or Bēl but whom Ezekiel himself and his followers would recognize as Yahweh. The more I muse about this vision, the less I am surprised that the book of Ezekiel, unlike the books of Jeremiah or Isaiah, is devoid of polemics against Babylon and her gods or cults.[55]

To be sure, my account up to here rests on a hypothetical reconstruction of an early stage of the inaugural vision. This is not the place to tell in detail the further development and interrelated expansions of Ezekiel chs. 1 and 10. Interestingly enough, the physical appearance of the *ḥayôt* and the coordination of their movements seem to have generated further reflection and extrapolation much more than the appearance of the deity himself and of His heavenly abode. Let me sketch the most conspicuous developments.

In line with a more western iconographical tradition, attested for instance, in the tenth-century temple of ‛Ain Dārā[56], the four *ḥayôt* were physically individualized by attributing them different faces, whether of a bull, a lion, a vulture or a human. The faces themselves were then multiplied to four each, which added vision on all sides to those beings. Other developments were necessary once the inaugural vision was brought together with the visionary materials of chaps. 8–11. Ch. 10–11 tells how the divine *kābôd* left the Jerusalem temple before the city came to be besieged again. In an early stage of these chapters, the *kābôd* was related to the *kǝrûbîm*. Once brought into the same literary

---

54 A. Winitzer concluded on entirely different grounds (from Ezek. 4:4–8, Ezek. 28 and the Epic of Gilgamesh) to "an awareness of learned sides of the host environment. These, moreover, are impressive for their range: in terms of subject, contextual setting, size, technicality, and (alleged) date and location in the prophetic book, Ezekiel reveals an impressive knowledge of the Babylonian *learned* landscape. (…) the possibility that this early Jewish prophet reached the Babylonian schools and drank from the very source of Babylon's stream of literary tradition cannot be denied" (art. cit. [n. 39], 205f.).

55 Further differences have been recently discussed in K. M. Rochester, *Prophetic Ministry in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology, 65; Leuven: Peeters, 2012).

56 A. Abū-‛Assāf, *Der Tempel von ‛Ain Dārā* (Damaszener Forschungen, 3; Mainz am Rhein: Ph. von Zabern, 1990); M. Weippert, "Berggötter, Löwen-, Stier- und Vogelmenschen. Rekonstruktion des Sockels G1 aus dem Tempel von ‛Ain Dārā in Nordsyrien", in: C. den Hertog, U. Hübner and S. Münger (eds.), *Saxa Loquentur. Studien zur Archäologie Palästinas/Israels* (FS V. Fritz; Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 302; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003, 227–256.

horizon, the question arose how the one entourage (of *kābôd*) related to the other (the *kərûbîm*). The *ḥayôt* were thus straightforwardly identified with the *kərûbîm*, the *ʾôfanîm* with the *galgal*, etc., inducing an ongoing process of harmonization during quite some time guided by the need of scroll-internal consistency. That scribes working and reworking ominous literature should attempt to accommodate what they must have perceived as variant descriptions of one single divine reality comes as no surprise.

As mentioned, one major effect of this coordination process was the identification of the *ḥayôt* in ch. 1 with the *kərûbîm* of ch. 8–11. In the context of our investigation on visuality, we should remark that such an identification would have made no sense to a Babylonian expert, whether craftsman or scholar, since the human-bovine *kusarikkû* and the more leonine *kərûbîm* are really not of the same kind nor did they ever have the same functions in Mesopotamian mythological thought. That Judahite scribes could identify the two (and ultimately produce literary creatures which had no clear correspondence in contemporary iconography anymore) implies that their concern and task was not affected by actual visual culture and imagination, but related to the scroll and to ongoing debates about the latter's ominous meaning. To be sure, the iconographical repertoire of subsequent periods can provide occasional insights in the continuous process of hybrid formation. For instance, that the bodies of the *kərûbîm* were covered with eyes may perhaps be related to late-period Egyptian images of winged Bes, and sometimes Bes Pantheos covered with eyes to demonstrate universal ocular control.[57] For our present concern, however, what matters most is to recognize that such images were unknown in Babylonia and would for sure have been misunderstood as *monstrous* creatures in a Babylonian context. The same holds true for another feature, namely that each of the *kərûbîm* (and by consequence, of the *ḥayôt*) should have had four different faces. Both developments must have occurred at a time (roughly the fourth century BCE) when the Ezekiel scroll was in the hands of scribes operating in Palestine, that is close to Egypt and the southern Levant, and not in Babylonia.

Incidentally, the scribes' increasingly scroll-internal and ultimately 'inner-biblical' concerns would also lead to a progressive disconnection of our chapter from actual cosmological discourses, as they continued to be developed among Babylonian and Levantine scholars, and a growing tendency toward literary fiction. Step by step, the process produced a representation of Ezekiel's inaugural vision that had more to do with the 'fantastic' (we might say, anachronistically, with science fiction) rather than with ancient cosmological science. An interesting feature of that kind are the eyes covering the *kərûbîm*'s bodies which in the final text of ch. 1 are said to cover the wheels (or spheres).

---

57 Note Keel's assent in *Die Geschichte Jerusalems* (n. 4), 698f.; id., "Die Herrlichkeitserscheinung" (n. 54), 146.

I do not pretend that this feature would not make sense at all, since the eyes on the spheres could easily be identified as stars. But this very idea is probably a secondary rationalization of a difficult textual feature; more important for our present concern, it has no relation whatsoever with iconography or visual culture.

As we know, the ultimate result was *merkābâ*, a term not attested in Ezek. 1 but consistently read into that chapter since the Hellenistic period (1Chr. 28:18, Sir. 49:8, mHag 2:1 etc.) until this day.[58] The very concept of *merkābâ* (which of course draws on the archaic concept of travelling deities, especially storm-gods) provides emblematic proof that with the scroll's transfer from Babylonia to Palestine, and its removal from a sophisticated scholarly environment to a more parochial scribal community, *mythological* imagination would take the lead over once *cosmologically* interested knowledge, and this to the detriment of science. Commentators over centuries have been labouring to no avail to make sense, in terms of properly working mechanics, of the complicated movements of the *ḥayôt*, *kərûbîm* and *'ofanîm* according to the Masoretic text of Ezek. 1 and 10. In my view, the ultimate source of the problem is the co-existence in these texts of two hardly reconcilable concerns for movement: cosmology requires models of spheres and *circular* movement; the displacement of *kābôd* from the temple mount to the Mount of Olives and beyond, however, is a *linear* movement. The two cannot be reconciled in terms of engineering, if only by the mystic.

Far from showing the ultimate coherence championed by readers of the 'holistic' confession, Ezek. 1 looks to me like a composite text which testifies to an intense and fascinating struggle for meaning by several generations of scribes. The original key of the ominous visionary message seems to have been lost at some time, probably when the scroll was disconnected from its originally Babylonian background. One consequence in the later Jewish tradition would be the development of a 'cosmology in a new key' of sorts, that is, an 'esoteric' cosmology interpreting the cosmos according to putative revelation and mythology alone rather than in accordance with empirical observation. This far-reaching issue cannot be pursued further here.

Visualizing strategies in the book of Ezekiel

Let us come back to what I announced as the primary topic of this paper, the interest in ancient visuality and visual culture in their relationship to the one book in the Hebrew Bible which is most conspicuously concerned with im-

---

58 D. J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Texts and Studies on Ancient Judaism, 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); P. Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

ages of many kinds. To sum up squarely, we have observed both in sign-acts and in visionary texts some significant features which can only be understood with reference to the visual culture of a Babylonian background; others which can best be explained through visual culture, but not of Babylonia; still others which cannot be understood from visual culture at all, whether Babylonian or otherwise.

We have seen that the sign-acts and the inaugural vision draw on very different types of visual knowledge: The former operate with easily identifiable stereotypes, whereas the latter mobilizes much more elite knowledge. That knowledge seems to have been acquired through formal education and/or interaction with Babylonian scholars, but also apparently through the medium of cylinder seals. It may be significant to point out that the latter were at that time slowly running out of fashion, being more and more supplanted by conoid stamp seals that could serve for sealing both clay tablets and bullae. Cylinder seals continued to be produced but for a minority of traditionalists or high-level officials only. They seem to have had greater prestige though, and were considered so precious belongings that they would sometimes be transmitted as family heritage over several generations. Persian-period tablets from the Persepolis Fortification archives include sealings which were apparently made from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals.[59]

Although Ezekiel's sign-acts are known to us only through carefully crafted literary accounts, they seem to operate in the mode of actual performances addressing a public audience. I am not quite sure whether the term "street theater" used by Bernard Lang is an appropriate label, since at least some of the sign-acts seem to go beyond pure show and operate with the seriousness of an incantatory performance. But they do seem to have been actual shows staged in public space. Moreover, in contrast to one Hananyah's or Jeremiah's performances, those described in the book of Ezekiel carry a certain ambiguity and reflectiveness which would well befit an 'intellectual', as David Vanderhooft put it during our seminar (although the concept may still be slightly anachronistic in the context of sixth-century Babylonia).

Street theater is meant to raise attention in public, and the performance succeeds if it captures its public. It is probably not by accident that Ezekiel's sign-acts are presented more than once as openly transgressive operations. In contrast, visions and vision reports function along quite different lines and codes of communication. Visionaries claim to have been granted special knowledge; their authority, the authority of the claim and of the visionary himself rest on the recognition of the medium by their audience or readership. Such recognition may be a matter of already well-established, non-transgressive prestige

---

59 See M. B. Garrison and Margaret Cool Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. Vol. 1: Images of Heroic Encounter* (Oriental Institute Publications, 117; Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

and social capital, or depend from the attractiveness, plausibility and cultural capital of the visionary content. I have argued that the inaugural vision of Ezek. 1 seems to draw considerable knowledge from Babylonian scholarship and elite visual culture. It comes with the full weight of higher education and cultural capital, something that may have more impressed the elders gathering in Ezekiel's house rather than the commoners in the street among the Judahite exiles.

Sign-acts and visions (or rather, reports on visions) may be considered as two different genres operating on two different levels of communication between a god and his Judahite subjects, a process controlled by the prophet-priest acting as the intermediary. While the vision is certainly meant to legitimate the medium, it still needs to be recognized by the latter's audience. The same holds true for the sign-acts. Martti Nissinen has rightly stressed at our seminar that we don't know much about Ezekiel's audience and that we cannot compensate this lack by just bringing into the picture other Judahites as we happen to know them from the Āl-Yāḫūdu or the later Murāšû tablets. As it happens, the Āl-Yāḫūdu, Murāšû and other lots of tablets are interested neither in cosmology nor in politics; the Āl-Yāḫūdu tablets do not carry any iconography, nor the Murāšû tablets any motif of the specific iconography Ezekiel's inaugural vision draws upon. This difference of concern certainly represents significant evidence to be pondered by the critical historian.

But the sign-act accounts and the vision reports both have an *implied* audience, in addition to audiences explicitly mentioned in chs. 12 and 24. The implied audience they require would presume considerable cultural knowledge and reflexivity, including visual competence. That we would not be able to read these texts were they not products of an *actual* history might be a commonplace observation. But it raises the challenge for future studies to investigate whether the implied audience of the texts and the actual Judahites known from Babylonian cuneiform documents were people who inhabited and shared the same real world. King Jehoiachin himself provides an important link between documentary history and the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel's loyal attachment to the young exiled king of Judah, whose family is known to have been economically supported in exile by the Babylonian administration[60], may well have been at the roots of the prophet-priest's active and positive engagement with Babylonian high culture and learning, including his involvement with visual and scholarly culture, and with Babylonian political interests contradicted by the more domestic political options of Zedekiah. As Dalit Rom-Shiloni has convincingly argued, Ezekiel 'constructed' a peculiar new 'identity' to the mem-

---

60 See, e.g., M. Gerhards, "Die Begnadigung Jojachins – Überlegungen zu 2. Kön. 25,27–30 (mit einem Anhang zu den Nennungen Jojachins auf Zuteilungslisten aus Babylon)": *Biblische Notizen* 94 (1998), 52–67.

bers of the first, Jehoiachin community of exiles in Babylonia.[61] His active in-
volvement with and truly intellectual interest in the culture of his host society,
including matters of cosmology and some ingredients of theology, may well
have been a particular momentum in this process.

---

61 Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity* (n. 23), esp. 140–185.