

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

«Many expounded the merkābâ 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 conception»⁴, an origi-

* The following pages summarize ideas developed independently by the authors within their respective research and teaching activities. S.M.T. has written a *mémoire de maîtrise* entitled «Les מראות אלהים d'Ezéchiël», submitted in April 1993 at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Paris, in which she strongly argued for a Babylonian astral-theological background of Ez. 1 on the basis of a largely synchronical reading and early studies on Mesopotamian astronomical divination. Her provisional insights proved instrumental for the present article, essentially written by C.U. The latter started his studies in theology in Fribourg in 1977, when O. Keel's seminal monograph on «JHWH-Visionen und Siegelkunst» (see below, n. 3) was published, and has thus been branded by many of Keel's essential insights. Having returned to Ez 1 and 10 during recent teaching both in rural Haiti and at Fribourg University, he developed the diachronic hypothesis outlined below, considered additional iconographical material and updated the tradition-historical argument on the basis of more recent studies on Mesopotamian cosmology and astronomy.

¹ W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel (BK XIII/1)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn (1955-)1969, ²1979 (engl. *Ezekiel 1. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trsl. by R.E. Clements [Hermeneia], Philadelphia 1979).

² M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20 (AncB 22)*, Garden City, NY, 1983; a revised German version is announced for the new series «Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament», ed. E. Zenger, Freiburg i. Br.

³ O. Keel, *JHWH-Visionen und Siegelkunst. Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4 (SBS 84/85)*, Stuttgart 1977, 125-173.

⁴ M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel's Vision: Literary and Iconographic Aspects*, in: H. Tadmor & M. Weinfeld (eds.), *History, Historiography and Interpretation. Studies in biblical and cuneiform literatures*, Jerusalem 1983, 159-168 (quote 159). These pages are virtually iden-

tial 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.

nal 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 iconography⁵ as an essential aid for a better understanding of biblical visions.⁶ The strong impact of Zimmerli, Greenberg and Keel on current exegesis 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 *mar'ôt 'elohîm* in chap. 1.⁷

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. Fuhs⁸) 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. Block⁹), remain unconvinced and hold rather with Greenberg, concentrating on structural analysis and advocating an essentially unitarian reading. It seems to us that

tical 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.

⁵ L. Dürr, *Ezechiels 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.

⁶ See further O. Keel, *Iconography and the Bible*, in: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York 1992, Vol. III, 358-374.

⁷ L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19 (WBC 28B)*, Waco, TX, 1994; no illustrations are used in the same author's preliminary article on *The Structure and Intention of Ezekiel I: VT 43 (1993) 145-161*.

⁸ H.F. Fuhs, *Ezechiel I: Kap. 1-24 (NEB Lfg. 7)*, Würzburg 1984.

⁹ D.I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24 (NICOT)*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997; see already his article *Text and Emotion: A Study in the «Corruptions» in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:4-28): CBQ 50 (1988) 418-442*.

Theologische Zeitschrift
herausgegeben von der
Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Basel

Redaktion

Redaktor: Prof. Dr. Klaus Seybold, Basel. Redaktionskommission: Prof. Dr. Christine Axt-Piscalar, Prof. Dr. Ernst Jenni, Prof. Dr. Georg Pfeleiderer, Basel, Prof. Dr. Hartmut Raguse, Prof. Dr. Martin Anton Schmidt, Basel, und Prof. Dr. Ivo Meyer, Luzern, als Vertreter der Schweizerischen Theologischen Gesellschaft. Redaktionsassistent: Jürg Luchsinger, Walterswil.

Adressen

Manuskripte bitte an: Prof. Dr. Klaus Seybold, Bruderholzrain 62, CH-4102 Binningen, Tel. (061) 421 03 67. Rezensionsexemplare, Korrekturen und andere Zusendungen an: «Theologische Zeitschrift», Leonhardsgraben 3, CH-4051 Basel, Tel./Fax (061) 267 28 99. Korrespondenz auch über E-mail: thz@ubaclu.unibas.ch. Für Besprechung oder Rücksendung unaufgefordert eingegangener Rezensionsexemplare übernimmt die Redaktion keine Verantwortung. Home Page: <http://www.unibas.ch/theologie/ThZ.html>

Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter dieses Heftes: Prof. Dr. Albert De Pury, Avenue de Miremont 5, 1206 Genève. – Prof. Dr. Walter Dietrich, Nesslerenweg 16, 3084 Wabern. – Dr. Innocent Himbaza, Departement für biblische Studien, 1700 Fribourg. – Prof. Dr. Ernst Jenni, Oberalpstr. 42, 4054 Basel. – Prof. Dr. Othmar Keel, Biblisches Institut, 1700 Fribourg. – Prof. Dr. Martin A. Klopfenstein, Fischerweg 12, 3012 Bern. – Prof. Dr. Ernst Axel Knauf, Evang.-Theol. Fakultät, Länggassstr. 51, 3000 Bern 9. – Prof. Dr. Thomas Krüger, Universität, Theologisches Seminar, Kirchgasse 9, 8001 Zürich. – Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Mathys, Bahnhofstr. 2, 4242 Laufen. – Dr. Susanne Müller, Departement für Biblische Studien, 1700 Fribourg. – Prof. Dr. Thomas Römer, Faculté de Théologie, BFSH 2, 1015 Lausanne. – Prof. Dr. Martin Rose, Faculté de théologie, 2000 Neuchâtel. – Prof. Dr. Adrian Schenker, Biblisches Institut, 1700 Fribourg. – Prof. Dr. Silvia Schroer, Evang.-Theol. Fakultät, Länggassstr. 51, 3000 Bern 9. – Prof. Dr. Klaus Seybold, Bruderholzrain 62, 4102 Binningen. – Prof. Dr. Odil Hannes Steck†, Wassbergstr. 53, 8127 Forch. – Prof. Dr. Hans-Joachim Stoebe, Gundeldingerrain 110, 4059 Basel. – PD Dr. Christoph Uehlinger, Biblisches Institut, 1700 Fribourg.

Abonnement

Erscheinungsweise: alle 3 Monate. Umfang: je Heft 96 Seiten.
Abonnements-Bestellungen: Verlag Friedrich Reinhardt, Missionsstrasse 36, CH-4012 Basel.
Abonnementspreise (jährlich): Schweiz: SFR 106.- (für Studierende SFR 72.-); CEPT-Länder: SFR 112.-; übrige Länder: SFR 116.-. Einzelheft SFR 32.-.
Anzeigenpreise: ganze Seite SFR/DM 460.-; halbe Seite SFR/DM 260.-.

Publiziert mit Unterstützung der Schweizerischen Theologischen Gesellschaft (Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, SAGW).
Printed in Switzerland. Imprimé en Suisse. In der Schweiz gedruckt 2001. ISSN 0040-570 1. Layout und Satz: Redaktion; Druck: Friedrich Reinhardt AG, Basel.
Nachdruck verboten. Übersetzungs- und sämtliche andere Nebenrechte vorbehalten.
The LaserGREEK®, LaserHEBREW®, and Semitic Transliterator™ fonts used to print this work are available from Linguist's Software, Inc. PO Box 580, Edmonds, WA 98020-0580 tel (206) 775-1130.
© 2001 by Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, Basel.

Theologische Zeitschrift

herausgegeben von der

Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Basel

Jahrgang 57

2001

Heft 2

**Alttestamentliche Forschung
in der Schweiz**

**Festheft
der Theologischen Zeitschrift**

**zum XVII. Kongress
der**

***International Organization for the Study
of the Old Testament***

**2001
in Basel**

Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag Basel

Inhalt

Vorwort. Von <i>Ernst Jenni</i> , Basel	101
<i>Beiträge aus der exegetischen Praxis</i>	
Le choix de l'ancêtre. Von <i>Albert de Pury</i> , Genève	105
Jehus Kampf gegen den Baal von Samaria. Von <i>Walter Dietrich</i> , Bern	115
Hosea 9,7-9. Ein Lese- und Übersetzungsversuch. Von <i>Martin A. Klopfenstein</i> , Bern	135
Ezekiel 1. Babylonian Cosmological Scholarship and Iconography: Attempts at Further Refinement. Von <i>Christoph Uehlinger</i> und <i>Susanne Müller Trufaut</i> , Fribourg	140
Akrostichie im Psalter. Von <i>Klaus Seybold</i> , Basel	172
Alles nichts? Zur Theologie des Buches Qohelet. Von <i>Thomas Krüger</i> , Zürich	184
<i>Berichte und Dokumentationen</i>	
Lehrstuhl für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft und Spätisraelitische Religions- geschichte in der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Zürich. Von <i>Odil Hannes Steck</i> , Zürich	199
L'Ancien Testament à Neuchâtel 1984-2001 – un bilan. Von <i>Martin Rose</i> , Neuchâtel	210
Le Pentateuque samaritain de la Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire Fribourg (Suisse) L 2057. Von <i>Innocent Himbaza</i> und <i>Adrian Schenker</i> , Fribourg	221
Gehörtes Gebet. Retraktation einer Predigt über die Konfessionen Jeremias (Jer 12,1-5). Von <i>Hans-Joachim Stoebe</i> , Basel	227
«Hier ist mehr als...» Anmerkungen zu Gerhard von Rad. Von <i>Hans-Peter Mathys</i> , Basel	230
<i>Projekte und Perspektiven</i>	
«Das Land der Kanaanäer mit der Seele suchend.» Von <i>Othmar Keel</i> , Fribourg	245
History, Archaeology and the Bible. Von <i>Ernst Axel Knauf</i> , Bern	262
La fin de l'historiographie deutéronomiste et le retour de l'Hexateuque? Von <i>Thomas Römer</i> , Lausanne	269
Die Gerechtigkeit der Sophia. Biblische Weisheitstraditionen und feministische Diskurse. Von <i>Silvia Schroer</i> , 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 exegetes 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 <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 synchronic, 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 (*ḥayyôt*) and wheels (*ʿofannîm*), 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.¹⁰ 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/astronomical concepts and beliefs. Interestingly enough, however, astral topics seem to become *en vogue* in more recent biblical scholarship.¹¹ 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 Ist-millennium BCE Mesopotamian scholarship.¹² 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.¹³ 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.

¹⁰ See D.J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (TSAJ 16), Tübingen 1988.

¹¹ T. Podella, *Das Lichtkleid JHWHs. Untersuchungen zur Gestaltlichkeit Gottes im Alten Testament und seiner altorientalischen Umwelt* (FAT 15), Tübingen 1996 (esp. 200-207 on Ez. 1); M. Albani, *Astronomie und Schöpfungsglaube. Untersuchungen zum astronomischen Henochbuch* (WMANT 68), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1994; id., *Der eine Gott und die himmlischen Heerscharen. Zur Begründung des Monotheismus bei Deuterjesaja im Horizont der Astralisierung des Gottesverständnisses im Alten Orient* (Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 1), Leipzig 2000.

¹² For recent overviews on Mesopotamian astronomy see H.D. Galter (ed.), *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (3. Grazer Morgenländisches Symposium), Graz 1993. On astronomy and astrology, see further U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology. An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination* (CNI Publications 19), Viborg 1995; D. Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: from Babylon to Bikāner* (Serie Orientale 78), Rome 1997; D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (CM 18), Groningen 2000.

¹³ For background information, see R. Zadok, *The Nippur Region during the Late Assyrian, Chaldaean and Achaemenian 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 Lerberghe & 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 *Grundschrift* («guter ursprünglicher Text» [p. 30]!) of Ez. 1 which covers barely 30% of the final text, namely vv. 4a*.5.6b*11b.(12a...bβ.13α.β).22a.26*.27αα...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 *ḥayyôt* (fem.) and the *ʾofannîm* (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.

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

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 contradictors. 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-

¹⁵ The principles of Greenberg's «holistic interpretation» are outlined on pp. 18-27 of his commentary, and in an article on The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8-11: A Holistic Interpretation, in: J.L. Crenshaw & S. Sandmel (eds.), *The Divine Helmsman. Studies on God's Control of Human Events*, Presented to L.H. Silberman, New York 1980, 146-164.

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.

actly and consistently to any single norm».²⁰ 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.²¹

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;²² 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

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Incidentally, the same comparative argument speaks against D.I. 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.

²² See J.H. Tigay (ed.), *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, Philadelphia 1985.

Old-Babylonian or the Neo-Assyrian period, or whether it is Egyptian, Hittite 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.²³ 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 Hittite ivory panel from Megiddo (two-headed skybearers) and a well-known glazed brick from early 9th-century Assur showing a storm-god hovering in a fire-circle and drawing his bow.²⁴ 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

²³ Historical differentiation is however at work when the visions of Yhwh by Isaiah, Ezechiel, 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 minimalist (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 figs. 1-5 on pp. 27-37 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 Zimmerli analyzed Ez. 1 and 10 independently. He described the relationship between the two chapters only one-way and assumed general priority for chap. 1 («ursprünglichere 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: basic 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 author³⁰). 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 *ḥayyôt* with *kərubîm*; 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. 1.³¹ This to-and-

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.

²⁹ D.J. Halperin, The exegetical character of Ezek. x 9–17: VT 26 (1976) 129–141.

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.

fro probably accounts for much of the well-known confusion of feminine and masculine suffixes in chap. 1.³² Unfortunately neither Zimmerli nor Keel did consider such an alternative model according to which both chapters probably influenced one another in a «complex process of redactional cross-pollination»³³.

To illustrate our point with an example, let us look at a particular feature of the wheels, namely their «eyes» mentioned in Ez. 1:18 and 10:12. Assuming a general literary priority for Ez. 1, most commentators address these «eyes» first as constituent parts of the wheels described in 1:15–21. However, they are generally at odds to explain the meaning and function of these «eyes». The *communis opinio* tends to explain them as nail fitments on the wheels' felloes, but there is no biblical or extra-biblical parallel for the designation of such fitments as «eyes» to support the argument. A closer look at 1:18 can show that already the early transmitters of Ez. 1 were not at ease with the notion of «wheels' eyes». In this verse, not less than three instances of a noun formed from the root *GBH* and supplemented by a 3rd pl. suffix construction follow each other. In our opinion, the two notations וְגַבְיָהֶם > וְגַבְיָהֶן should be regarded as variant notations while וְגַבְיָהֶם (וִירְאֵה לָהֶם) is probably an exegetical gloss to וְגַבְיָהֶם. For two reasons, וְגַבְיָהֶן seems to be the earliest of the three notations: first, the 3rd fem. pl. suffix originally related to the living creatures (*ḥayyôt*), a nodal feature of the vision from its inception; second, וְגַבְיָהֶן conforms most closely to וְגַבְיָהֶם in 10:12. In this latter instance, however, וְגַבְיָהֶם is part of a series of nouns describing physical parts of bodies of some kind. The description in v. 12 starts with *kāl-bəšārām* «all their flesh/body» and continues with *wəgabbəhām* «and their back», *widēhām* «and their hands/paws», *wəkan-fēhām* «and their wings». These bodies are said to have been «full of eyes» (*mələ'im ʿenayim*).³⁴ Clearly, the sequence of 10:12 cannot originally have meant the wheels (which the present text considers from v. 9 onwards), since nowhere else – whether in Ezekiel, elsewhere in the Bible or in comparable

³¹ True, this influence did not go as far as inscribing the species marker *kərubîm* in chap. 1. The reasons for this are not difficult to ascertain: clearly, the beasts of chap. 1 do not look as *kərubîm*, 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 *kərubîm* since the scenario there required traditional temple symbolism.

³² Keel has suggested that the apparent confusion could point at these living creatures' having been regarded as bi-sexuals or hermaphrodites. 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 verbal sentences where *ḥayyôt* is the subject the predicate is always masculine.

³³ W.B. Barrick, The Straight-Legged Cherubim of Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:7a): CBQ 44 (1982) 543–550, here 545.

³⁴ Note that *wəhāʿofannîm* in 10:12ba has no equivalent in 1:18 but is dependent on the sequence *hāʿofannîm* (1:16ff.) > *wəgabbotām mələ'im ʿenayim*.

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 *ḥayyôt* 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' fellows 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 overture 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-

³⁵ See Keel, JHWH-Visionen (n. 3), 268-270.

³⁶ M. Dijkstra arrived at a similar conclusion: The Glosses in Ezekiel reconsidered. Aspects of textual transmission in Ezekiel 10, in: J. Lust (ed.), Ezekiel and His Book. Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation (BETHL 74), Leuven 1986, 55-77, esp. 71-72.

lation of the relative chronology we assume for the complex redactional history of Ez. 1 and 10. Column I of the diagram lists visionary features which seem to have been originally designed for chap. 1 and/or first embedded therein. Column III lists features first embedded in chaps. 8–11. The intermediate column II contains features which seem to derive from and respond to the combination of the two visions and their respective contexts into a common redactional perspective and scenario.

	I (chap. 1) Babylonia	II	III (chap. 10) Jerusalem
6th cent.	1. visionary nucleus: four <i>ḥayyôt</i> (fem., i.e. four-winged, <i>kusarikku</i> -like beings) support the heavenly firmament surmounted by a divine throne with an anthropomorphic deity seated on it		2. one (v. 2*, 4*) or two cherubim supporting a throne/ Yhwh's <i>kābôd</i>
	3. <i>ḥayyôt</i> = cherubim		
5th cent.	4. fire-g lance between the <i>ḥayyôt</i> (v. 13*)		5. burning coals between the cherubim
	6. fire-g lance = <i>galgal</i>		
4th cent.	7. wheel (sphere?) «on earth»		9. cherubim's bodies, backs, hands/ paws and wings covered with eyes
	8. four wheels (spheres?) related to the four horizons		
	10. four wheels = <i>galgal</i>		

3rd cent.	12. wheels (spheres) covered with eyes (stars?)	11. related to the cherubim (<i>chariot</i>)
	14. four-faced <i>hayyôt</i>	13. four-faced cherubim
2nd cent.		15. figure on the throne = <i>rûah</i> (!, 8:3 10:11.17 1:12b. 20a) determining overall movement
BCE	16. one <i>rûah</i> of four beings => the whole system is identified as one <i>hayyâ</i> (v. 20-21)	

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

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

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, *kusarikkū*-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 *kusarikkū* are unwinged, provides a further example for the concept of anthropomorphic, bull-footed genies (*kusarikkū*) supporting a major deity's heavenly abode. In this instance, the seal-cutter even represented the firmamental plaque (hebr. *raqîa'*) 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 *kusarikkū* 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 period³⁹ but rather belong to the Western, Egypto-Palestinian tradition. The same holds true for feature 9, the concept of eyes covering *Mischwesen* all over their body (fig. 3), and fea-

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 Siegesdarstellung: 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 *Mischwesen* with several *different* faces. Such creatures are only occasionally attested in Babylonia from the 4th century BCE onwards, notably on sealings 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 *ʾofān* (sg. 1:15-16, cf. 10:9-10; feature 7) or *ʾofannîm* (pl. in all other instances; feature 8) described in 1:15-21 and 10:9-17, and finally the latter's identification with *galgal* by some unidentified voice in 10:13 (feature 10)? According to both Zimmerli and Keel, the identification of *galgal* and *ʾofannîm* 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. 47:3, 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».⁴¹ 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.⁴² Keel thus understood the *galgal* as a complex of phenomena be-

³⁹ See A. Roes, *New Light on the Grylli*: JHS 55 (1935) 232-235; D. Collon, *A Hoard of Sealings from Ur*, in: M.-F. Boussac & A. Invernizzi (eds.), *Archives et sceaux du monde hellénistique* (BCH Suppl. 29), Paris 1996, 65-84, esp. 75-76 and pl. 22; for western examples, see scarabs from Tharros published by J. Boardman, *Scarabs and Seals: Greek, Punic and Related Types*, in: R.D. Barnett & C. Mendleson (eds.), *Tharros. A Catalogue of Material in the British Museum from Phoenician and other Tombs at Tharros, Sardinia*, London 1987, 98-105, 152 no. 7/23, 162 no. 9/23 with pls. 59:c and 60:a.

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 «Eher ist an das Geschiebe, an das Geröll, an den sich daherwälzenden Haufen von Wolkendunkel, von glühenden Kohlen und Blitzen zu denken, der die Erscheinung Jahwes begleitet» (Keel, *JHWH-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 *ʾofannîm* in 10:13, both Zimmerli and Keel considered this a kind of misunderstanding on which they would barely comment.

As for the *ʾofannîm*, 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 later development of these verses into the Jewish *merkābā* concept. Ceremonial chariots used in cultic processions are thought to have provided the actual models for Ezekiel's vision.⁴³ According to Zimmerli, the detailed description of the wheels and their coordination, which makes them move as one single system together with the *ḥayyôt*, 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) *rûaḥ* 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–5th 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 da-

⁴³ Weather-gods in chariots figure prominently on pictorial representations from Early Dynastic to Ur III, i.e. during the IIIrd millennium, but become much rarer in the IIrd and Ist millennia BCE. Clearly, the *ʾofannîm* «engine» is a much more complex entity than a processional chariot such as continued to be used in the Neo-Babylonian period. On the other hand, the description of, e.g., Marduk's chariot – which depends on an earlier Ninurta tradition – does not compare with Ez. 1 (despite some interesting references to astral brilliance); see W.G. Lambert, *A New Fragment from a List of Antediluvian Kings and Marduk's Chariot*, in: M.A. Beek et al. (eds.), *Symbolae Biblicae et Mesopotamicae F.M.Th. de Liagre Böhl Dedicatae* (SFSMD 4), Leiden 1973, 271-280.

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 *sebeti*, 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 beside a wheel (often clearly recognizable as such but sometimes stylized as a flower) over which may hover the lunar crescent and the *sebeti* (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 Mariaud 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 Šin 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

⁴⁴ E. Diehl, *Fragmente aus Samos II*: AA 80,1 (1965) 823-850, esp. 826-827 = D. Collon, *First Impressions. Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*, London/Chicago 1987, no. 573; P. Bordreuil, *Le répertoire iconographique des sceaux arméniens inscrits et son évolution*, in: Ch. Uehlinger & B. Sass (eds.), *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals* (OBO 125), Fribourg/Göttingen 1993, 74-100, esp. 79-81 with fig. 7.

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. 587-589 (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.

⁴⁶ Drouot-Montaigne, *Archéologie. Vente aux enchères publiques*, Paris, 22 et 23 avril 2001, no. 269.

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-lū-dāri, eunuch of Šulmu-šarri; 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.

winged disk. Examples include a seal from Pasargadae (fig. 9)⁴⁹, another from the Aleppo market kept at the Ashmolean Museum (fig. 10)⁵⁰, a seal recently collected at Horom in Armenia (fig. 11)^{50a}, 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 Pasargadae 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 symbol⁵³, 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-

⁴⁹ D. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford 1978, 178-179 and pl. 162:b = P.R.S. Moorey, *The Iconography of an Achaemenid stamp-seal acquired in the Lebanon: Iran 16* (1978) 143-154, here 148 fig. 6 (after D. Stronach, *Iran 1* (1963) pl. VI:A) = Collon, *First Impressions* (n. 44), no. 425. See now M.C. Root, *The cylinder seal from Pasargadae: of wings and wheels, date and fate: Iranica Antiqua 34* (1999; *Studies D. Stronach II*) 157-190, an article which came too late to our attention in order to be fully integrated into the argument.

⁵⁰ Buchanan, *Ashmolean* (n. 45), no. 673.

^{50a} Ph. Kohl & S. Kroll, *Notes on the Fall of Horom: Iranica Antiqua 34* (1999; *Studies D. Stronach II*) 243-260, esp. 258 with fig. 7.

⁵¹ W.H. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia*, Washington, DC, 1910, 336 fig. 1105 = Porada, *Corpus* (n. 45), no. 1148. Porada considered this item to be a forgery because «the circle with inscribed rosette appearing below the winged sun disk in this cylinder is unparalleled on genuine Achaemenian seals» (p. 162). This argument cannot be upheld anymore.

⁵² *Iconography* (n. 49), 148.

⁵³ Moorey here refers to R.D. Barnett, *The Gods of Zinjirli*, in: *Compte Rendu de l'onzième Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Leiden 1964, 59-87 (note esp. 77 fig. 12 and 86-87).

⁵⁴ Numerous further examples include Porada, *Corpus* (n. 45), nos. 817-818; Collon, *First Impressions* (n. 44), nos. 424, 574, 895; etc.

⁵⁵ See recently B. Jacobs, *Der Sonnengott im Pantheon der Achämeniden*, in: J. Kellens (ed.), *La religion iranienne à l'époque achéménide* (IrAnt, Suppl. V), Gent 1991, 49-80, esp. 60-61. The question whether the image in some way relates to the Babylonian «Man in the moon» tradition recently studied by P.-A. Beaulieu cannot be pursued further within the limits of the present article; see P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Babylonian Man in the Moon: JCS 51* (1999) 91-99.

tinguished 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 abode⁵⁶, 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 Šamaš-rēš-ušur, a local ruler resp. governor of Suhi and Mari (c. 775 BCE), shows the latter in adoration between Adad and Ishtar 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).⁵⁷ Three deities resp. their cult statues standing on pedestals also appear on a *kudurru* of Nabû-šuma-iškun (dated c. 750 BCE) of unknown provenance (fig. 14).⁵⁸ The identification of these deities is more difficult⁵⁹ (the first goddess holding the scimitar is probably some Ishtar 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 *kunukkū* cylinders: an unidentified god on fig. 15 found at Persepolis (note the birds with outspread wings attached to the garment)⁶⁰; Adad on fig. 16 from Babylon,

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ F.H. Weissbach, *Babylonische Miscellen* (WVDOG 4), Berlin 1903, frontispice and 9-15; see Ward, *Seal Cylinders* (n. 51), 369 fig. 1273; J. Börker-Klähn, *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs* (BagF 4), Mainz 1982, no. 231; A. Cavignaux & K.I. Bahija, *Die Statthalter von Suhi und Mari im 8. Jh. v. Chr.*: BaM 21 (1990) 321-411, esp. 398-405, 401 fig. 1.

⁵⁸ U. Seidl, *Die babylonischen Kudurru-Reliefs. Symbole mesopotamischer Gottheiten* (OBO 87), Fribourg/Göttingen 1989, 59-60, no. 103.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 194-197.

⁶⁰ U. Seidl, *Babylonische und assyrische Kultbilder in den Massenmedien des 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr.*, in: Ch. Uehlinger (ed.), *Images as media. Sources for the cultural history*

dated to the reign of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE); and Marduk himself on fig. 17, dated to the time of Marduk-zākir-šumi (854–819 BCE) and found at the same place.⁶¹ These *kunukkū* 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 Esangila 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. *nôgâ* 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.⁶²

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*.⁶³ 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 sy-

of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st millennium BCE) (OBO 175), Fribourg/Göttingen 2000, 89-114, here 102 fig. 9.

⁶¹ F. Wetzel et al., *Das Babylon der Spätzeit* (ADOG 8), Berlin 1957, 36-38 nos. 14-15, pls. 43-44 = B. Wittmann, *Babylonische Rollsiegel des 11.-7. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*: BagM 23 (1992) 169-289, esp. nos. 202, 218, 245-246, 262 no. 61, 270-271 no. 121 with pls. 24 and 32.

⁶² Note Albani, *Der eine Gott* (n. 11), 53: «Tatsächlich dürfte an den omnipräsenten und periodisch in stets gleicher Gestalt erscheinenden Gestirnen, vor allem aber an Sonne und Mond, die «theo-logische» Problematik von Einheit und Vielfalt des Göttlichen zuerst bewußt geworden zu (*sic*) sein. Nirgendwo sonst in der Natur war man mit derart konstanten und zugleich «ubiquitären» Erscheinungen wie den Gestirnen konfrontiert. (...) Den Gestirngöttern wohnt also *per se* schon eine Tendenz zur Vereinheitlichung des Göttlichen inne.»

⁶³ P. Grelot, *GALGAL* (Ezéchiel 10,2.6.13 et Daniel 7,9): *Transeuphratène* 15 (1998) 137-147. On *melammu*, see the basic study by E. Cassin, *La splendeur divine. Introduction à l'étude de la mentalité mésopotamienne* (Civilisations et Sociétés 8), Paris 1968.

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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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»⁶⁶. Moreover, stars and constellations «maintain fixed positions relative to one another as if inscribed on a rotating sphere»⁶⁷. The principle of circularity based both upon fixed relation and annual repetition found a practical application in the planispheres listing the position of fixed stars⁶⁸ and on a distinctive instrument of Mesopotamian astronomy, the so-called

⁶⁴ W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (n. 56), esp. 151ff. For MUL.APIN, see H. Hunger & D. Pingree, *MUL.APIN. An Astronomical Compendium in Cuneiform* (AfO.B 24), Horn 1989. On the relationship of *mul.apin* and the astronomical book of Henoch, see Albani, *Astronomie und Schöpfungsglaube* (n. 11), 173-272.

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

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁸ See J. Koch, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Topographie des babylonischen Fixsternhimmels*, Wiesbaden 1989.

<astrolabes>⁶⁹, 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-figures⁷⁰ (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.»⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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 *bibbu* «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» (*Enūma eliš* VII 124-131)⁷³. 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 <individually> behaving celestial bodies or as a triad whose regular courses belong to the earliest and most salient features recorded by

⁶⁹ 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 *Enuma Elish* demonstrate that the Astronomical model of the <Astrolabes> was widely known, at least in learned circles» (*ibid.*, 165).

⁷⁰ Six-pointed in order not to be confused with the eight-pointed Venus.

⁷¹ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (n. 56), 154.

⁷² See B.L. van der Waerden, *History of the Zodiac*: AfO 16 (1952-53) 216-230; cf. R. Wallenfels, *Zodiacal Signs among the Seal Impressions from Hellenistic Uruk*, in: M.E. Cohen, D.C. Snell & D.B. Weisberg (eds.), *The Tablet and the Scroll. Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W.W. Hallo*, Bethesda, MD, 1993, 281-288.

⁷³ See Horowitz, *op. cit.* (n. 56), 115-116.

Babylonian astronomy.⁷⁴ 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)⁷⁵, or the four quarters of the earth (Akkad vs. Elam, Amurru vs. Subartu⁷⁶) – 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/Altaïr, Aquarius, Lion, Taurus).⁷⁷

The following list may help to summarize the respective correlations:

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

⁷⁴ According to a passage of the 16th tablet of the incantation series UDUG.ĪL.A.MEŠ (*uttukkū lemnūti*, «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 ll. 15ff.; AOT 139-141).

⁷⁵ On these, see Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (n. 56), 193ff. Note also the cumulative reference in Šurpu 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. Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination. The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enūma Anu Enlil* (AfO.B 22), Horn 1988, 57-63.

⁷⁶ 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 speculative 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 Astronomy-Astrology* (n. 12), 140.

⁷⁷ On the astral symbolism of the *ḥayyôṭ*'s faces, see most recently P. Grelot, *L'imagerie des quatre vivants symboliques*, in: *Études sémitiques et samaritaines offertes à Jean Margain* (Histoire et Texte Biblique 4), Lausanne 1998, 241-250. Note also the identification of the four winds with animals (cattle, sheep, horses and asses) 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.

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 Altaïr/Eagle. See A. Lemaire, *Coupe astrale inscrite et astronomie araméenne*, in: Y. Avishur & R. Deutsch (eds.), *Michael. Historical, Epigraphical and Biblical Studies* (FS M. Heltzer), Tel Aviv-Jaffa 1999, 195-211. For the theriomorphic symbolism of the four winds in Late-Egyptian iconography, see Keel, *JHWH-Visionen* (n. 3), 241-243 and the excursus by A. Gutbub, *ibid.* 328-353.

spring	summer	fall	winter
morning	noon	evening	midnight
north	west	south	east
right(!)	up/ <i>behind/over</i>	left	down/ <i>before/facing</i>
Akkad	Amurru	Elam	Subartu/Gutium
«eagle»(?)	lion	man(?)	bull
Marduk	Ninurta	Nabû	Nergal
Babylon	Nippur	Borsippa	Kutha

It is possible then that the four *ḥayyôṭ*, 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 Enlil 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 *ḥayyôṭ*'s four different faces probably relate to theriomorphic symbols of zodiacal signs connected with four major Babylonian gods. And the close link between the *ḥayyôṭ* and the wheels, one per living creature, probably hides some additional Babylonian astronomical speculation as well which we cannot yet disencode. Uncertainty in details notwithstanding, the compound of *raqîa'* (firmament), *ḥayyôṭ* and wheels strongly recalls the Babylonian concept of the lower heaven as solid sphere rotating according to a totally coordinated circular principle.⁷⁸

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

⁷⁸ We would like to point out in passing that two pieces of Plato seem to share a number of cosmological concepts with Ez. 1 and 10 and Babylonian astronomy: In *Republic* book X, 616-617 he puts emphasis on rainbow-like light holding together the revolving vault of heaven, the orbits turning around the spindle of Necessity, eight brilliant circles, generally understood to represent the spherical paths of planets and fixed stars; «and up above on each of the rims of the circles a Siren stood, borne around in its revolution and uttering one sound, and from all the eight there was the concord of a single harmony.» In *Timaios* (39-40) he relates the installment of the planets in a spiral-like movement in order to define and preserve time. Once time exists, God creates the fixed stars «which do not wander around, divine and eternal living beings (ζῶα, cf. *ḥayyôṭ*!) who always remain identical and rotate in their own position.»

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 «monotheism», 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 disencode 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. Bodi⁷⁹ and others have highlighted the close relationship between certain texts in the book of Ezekiel and

⁷⁹ R. Frankena, *Kanttekeningen van een Assyroloog bij Ezechiël*, Leiden 1965; S.P. Garfinkel, *Studies in Akkadian Influences in the Book of Ezekiel* (unpubl. PhD diss., Columbia University), New York 1983; B. Maarsingh, *Das Schwertlied in Ez 21,13-22 und*

various works of cuneiform literature, whether «canonical» or not, such as the *Poem of Erra*⁸⁰, the *Underworld vision of an Assyrian prince*⁸¹, other compositions from the category of «mystical, mythological and cultic explanatory works»⁸² or the *Šurpu* collection of magical incantations.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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 curriculum already during the early days of the *golah* and even enter the arcana of privileged esoteric information (*pirištu ilāni rabūti* «secret of the great gods»). Ezekiel would not have been an isolated case.

Such contacts between scholars and intellectuals must have perdured over centuries, as we may conclude from recent studies on early Jewish astronomy and apocalyptic literature.⁸⁶ It is also well known that late-Babylonian scholarship to various degrees found its way into the Babylonian Talmud. Interestingly, a rabbinical tradition considers the *merkābā* (i.e., Ez. 1) one of the

das Erra-Gedicht, in: Lust (ed.), *Ezekiel and His Book* (n. 23), 350-358; D. Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra* (OBO 104), Fribourg/Göttingen 1991.

⁸⁰ L. Cagni, *L'epopea di Erra* (Studi Semitici 34), Roma 1969; id., *The Poem of Erra* (Sources from the Ancient Near East 1,3), Malibu, CA, 1977; F.N.H. al-Rawi & J.A. Black, *The Second Tablet of «Išum and Erra»*: Iraq 51 (1989) 111-122; S. Dalley, *Erra and Išum*, in: W.W. Hallo & K.L. Younger (eds.), *The Context of Scripture*. Vol. 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, Leiden 1997, 404-416.

⁸¹ See now Livingstone, *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]).

⁸³ J. de Thomasson, *Actes-signes ou actes magiques? Ez 2-5 et Šurpu*: BN 64 (1992) 18-25.

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 scribe should not be confused with 7th-century «Shumaya, astrologer of the new company» who was based in Ur 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).⁸⁷

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 *merkābā* (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 *pirištu ilāni rabūti* 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 (*hayyōt*): 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.»⁸⁸

In conclusion, it would seem that once Ez. 1 was interpreted in terms of a *merkābā*, 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, 103 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. 5* Collon, *First Impressi-*

ons (n. 44), no. 573. 6* Eisen, Moore (n. 45), pl. IX:76. 7* Drouot-Montaigne catalogue (n. 46), no. 269. 8* Porada, *Corpus* (n. 45), pl. C:685. 9 Root, *The cylinder seal from Pasargadae* (n. 49), 160 fig. 1. 10* Buchanan, *Catalogue I* (n. 45), pl. 44:673. 11 Kohl & Kroll, *Notes* (n. 50a), 258 fig. 7 left. 12* Porada, *Corpus* (n. 45), pl. CLXXV:1148. 13* 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.

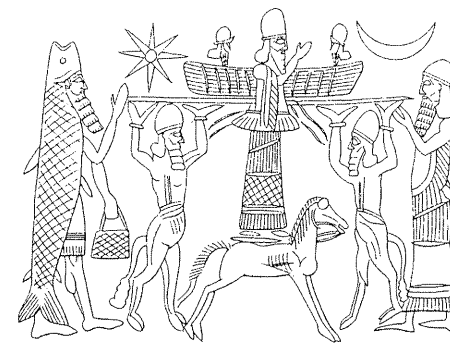


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4 a-e

⁸⁷ See Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (n. 10), 3-4.

⁸⁸ *The Babylonian Talmud. Seder Mo'ed*, vol. IV, ed. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, London 1938, 74.



Fig. 5

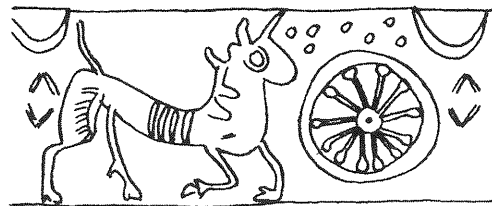


Fig. 6

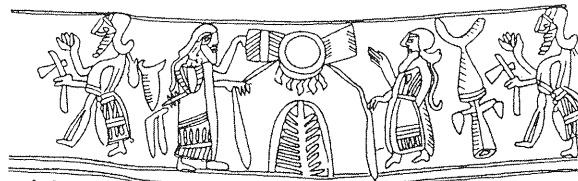


Fig. 7

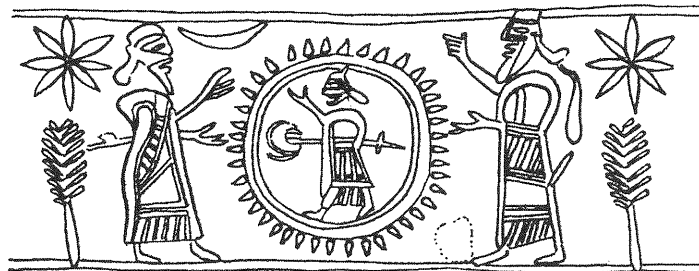
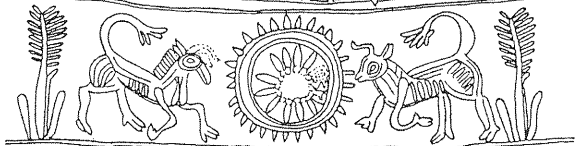


Fig. 8

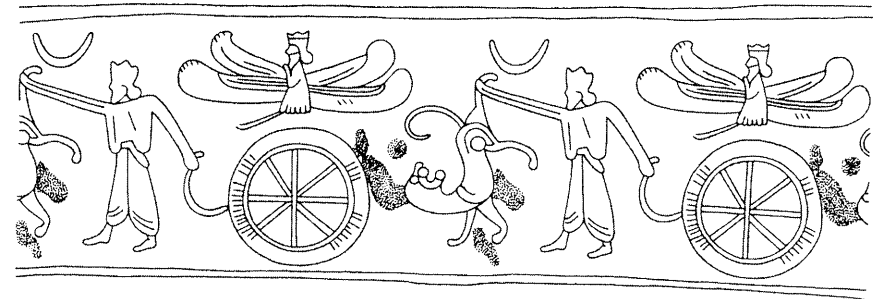


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

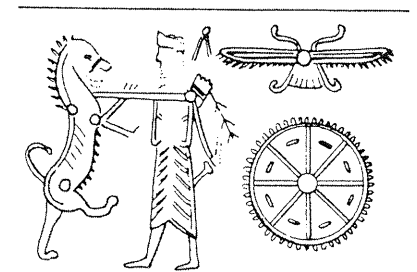


Fig. 11

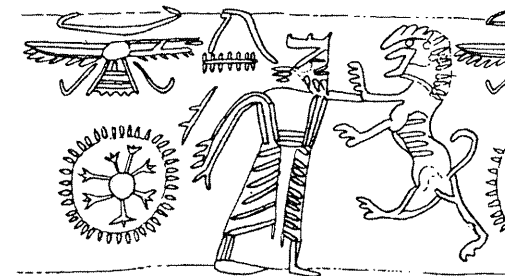


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

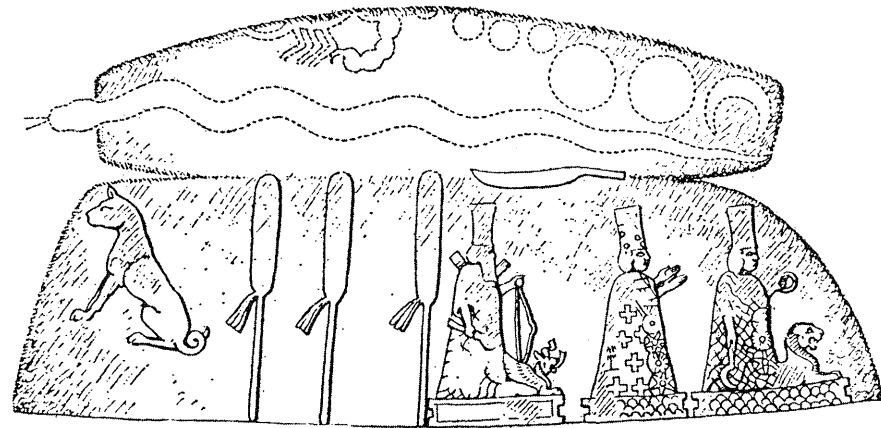


Fig. 14

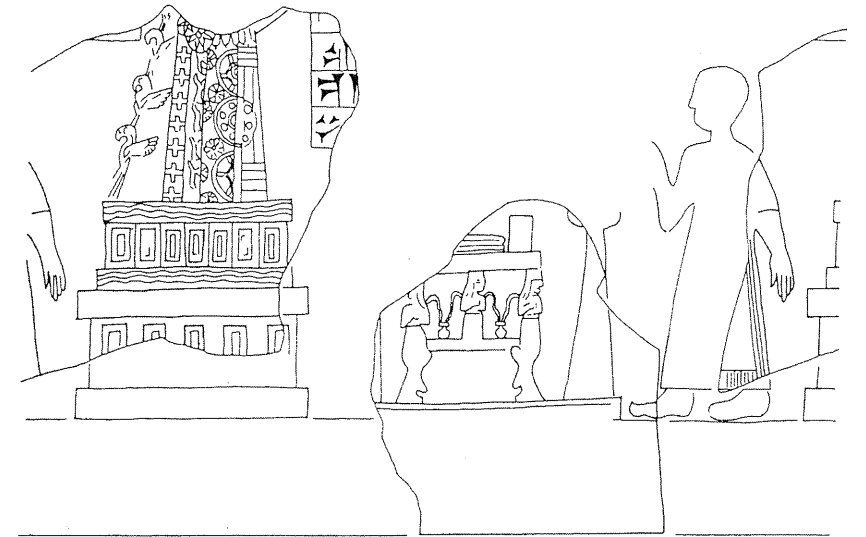


Fig. 15

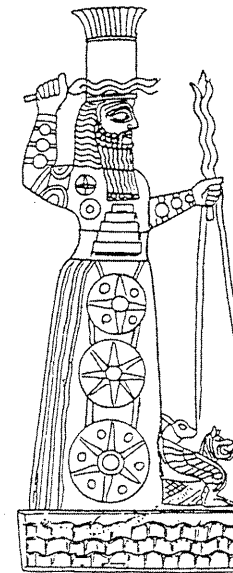


Fig. 16

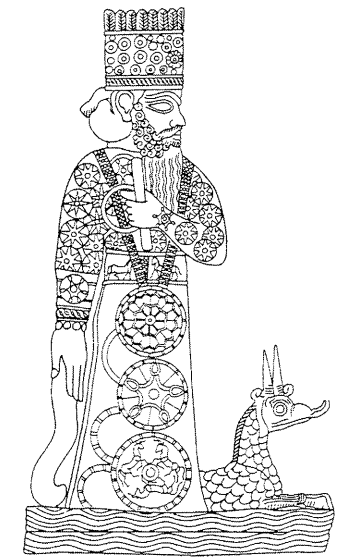


Fig. 17