The Prophet and his Prophecy: The Vision of the Temple in Ezekiel in its Historical Context

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We are accustomed to think that prophecies about the future are timeless and as a result do not ask to what extent these prophecies reflect the personal characteristics and style of the prophets, or their time and place. In this article I will examine one of the many aspects of the transmission of prophecy from God to his people by means of his prophets: the tension between the divine timelessness that we are accustomed to ascribe to prophecy, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the connection of the prophecy to the network of time, place and personal outlook. To this end, we will examine the vision of the future temple in the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezek. 40-48). It would appear that despite the fact that this prophecy is the word of God in reference to future events, it contains elements characteristic of the conceptual world of the Jews of Iraq in the Neo-Babylonian period.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prophecy of Ezekiel is unique among the later prophets in that it is organized chronologically. The date and place of the reception of the prophecy are known and presented explicitly several times at the beginning of the book. We are therefore able to examine the relationship between the prophet and his environment more clearly with regard to Ezekiel than with any other prophet.

Words with parallels in the language spoken in Babylon during this period appear very frequently in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Extant Mesopotamian sources enable us to identify many words and motifs analogous to contemporary Mesopotamian culture which reflect the richness of language absorbed by Ezekiel from his Babylonian environment. The semantic field shared by the prophecy of Ezekiel and Mesopotamian culture is indicative of the influence of the surrounding Babylonian culture on the exiles from the land of Israel, among them Ezekiel. To this we can add the results of more current research, such as archeological discoveries and descriptions of Babylonian rite, including detailed descriptions of the structure of the temples and the ritual practice within them, from the immediate environment in which Ezekiel prophesied. Our discussion will focus primarily on chapters 40-48 of the book of Ezekiel, which depict the vision of the future temple, a subject very pertinent, for the reasons we have seen, to the examination of the question of the interaction between the prophet and his environment.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the first part of the book, Ezekiel prophesies the destruction of the First Temple, while the closing chapters of the book (40-48) describe the future temple. Throughout the generations there has been a strong yearning to build this temple. For example, the Malbim, (Meir Leibush Wisser) concluded the introduction to his commentary to the book of Ezekiel by expressing his hope for the building of the temple prophesied by Ezekiel: "I have built in the heavens, in my mind, to you my God in heaven, a Temple for you as the prophet envisaged it, it exists in my mind rebuilt…I have measured the plans, as I have learned from your seer, with a wick of flax and a measuring rod, and I have solved the riddle. Hear the prayer of your servant and his supplication, O Lord my God! Let your eyes be upon this house night and day, to rebuild its destruction and raise up its ruins ... and establish and build in high places your Temple, reveal it to us in your mercy, for our eyes are yearning and our souls are longing to establish it and build it, and to see it face to face."

The longing throughout the ages for the building of the future temple as it is described in the prophecy of Ezekiel lends an extra dimension to our search for answers to several questions: What is the nature of this temple? How timeless is its prophetic description? Is it possible that we are yearning for the building of a temple that is in many ways tied to the time of Ezekiel, the Neo-Babylonian period?[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the following pages I will attempt to illustrate how the geographic area in which the prophet Ezekiel was active, including his familiarity with Babylonian temples in his environment and the status of their priests, is reflected in the biblical text. I will do this by means of indirect proofs, which only partially complete what is known to us from the biblical text.

Ezekiel and his Babylonian Environment

The familiarity of Ezekiel with the temples in his Babylonian surroundings, which we will discuss below, is not sui generis. It is an extension of his familiarity with the political events of his time, to which he himself refers. Ezekiel describes the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon in Jerusalem and the exile of Jehoiakim the king of Judah and his officers to Babylon (Ezek. 17:12-14) and discusses the breach of the agreement between Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah (17: 13).[[4]](#footnote-4) Ezekiel was familiar with the methods of divination popular in his time (21:23-29), as can be inferred from his reference to them in describing the way in which the Babylonian king made

decisions: " … to perform divination: He has shaken arrows,[[5]](#footnote-5) consulted *teraphim*,[[6]](#footnote-6) and inspected the liver"[[7]](#footnote-7) (21:26). The process of making a decision concerning the advance of the Babylonian army upon Jerusalem, or Amman, is presented as influenced by magical rites practiced in his day. The prophet points to these decisions as proof that God rules over not only the people of Israel, but all of the rulers of the world. Recently, several scholars have pointed to additional connections between Ezekiel and his Babylonian surroundings.[[8]](#footnote-8) This trend continues to grow with the discovery of additional findings that illuminate Jewish life in Babylon.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Vision of the Future Temple in its Babylonian Context

Discoveries of remnants of buildings as well as many documents revealing details of daily life in the temples of Babylon in the Neo-Babylonian period shed light on, among other things, the period of the prophecy of Ezekiel. An examination of these findings even reveals many aspects of the Neo-Babylonian temples from this period which are reminiscent of the vision of the future temple in Ezekiel.[[10]](#footnote-10) A comparison of the temples in Babylon in this period with the vision of the temple in Ezekiel reveal a common concern: the need to preserve the sanctity of the site.

The rituals performed in the temples of Babylon are known to us, from among other sources, theEzida temple of Borsippa[[11]](#footnote-11) between the years 750-484 BCE, during a period in which this was second most important temple in Babylon.[[12]](#footnote-12) The ruins of this temple were discovered in the nineteenth century at Birs Nimrud, about 100 kilometers south of modern Bagdad and twenty kilometers south of ancient Babylon. The temple was erected at the end of the second millennium before the Common Era and consecrated to the god Nabu, the servant-chronicler of Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon. The temple was renovated in the time of Nebuchadnezzar II, the king who destroyed the kingdom of Judah, and was at the height of its splendor in these years until, at least, the beginning of the Persian period (in the middle of the sixth century before the Common Era), in other words, exactly the time in which Ezekiel prophesied. These discoveries can be compared to the vision of Ezekiel that begins with the exact date upon which he received the prophecy: "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, the fourteenth year after the city had fallen, at the beginning of the year, the tenth day of the month -- on that very day…" (Ezekiel 40:1).

According to the dates specifically mentioned in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet lived at least twenty-five years in Babylon, from 597 BCE, when he was exiled to Babylon with the exiles of Jehoiakim, until 573, the date mentioned in the opening verse of the section of prophecies in chapters 40-48. The premise that Ezekiel was to a large extent aware of what was happening in Babylonian temples in general, and the Ezida temple specifically, is reasonable, both because of the length of time that he was in Babylon and the fact that the activity within these temples resonated on the roads and the in the centers of the temple cities, especially during the Babylonian holidays. We have no information about the location of Ezekiel when he saw the "vision of the future temple" in the final years of his prophecy because his exact location is mentioned explicitly only at the beginning of his prophetical journey: "by the Chebar Canal " (Ezek. 1:1,3), apparently the Chebar Canal bordering the city of Nippur on the Euphrates, south-east of Babylon, adjacent to the Ezida temple in Borsippa (the estimated distance from Nippur to the Ezida temple in Borsippa is about 150 kilometers).

Many factors limit the validity of a comparison between the temples, the most significant of which is the disparity between, on the one hand, the presentation of a utopic vision in the prophecy of Ezekiel, and, on the other hand, the picture of the actual historical reality of a functional temple of the period, emerging from the Babylonian documents. Nonetheless, we must not ignore the fact that the vision of the temple in Ezekiel differs in many features from descriptions of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon, as well as from the biblical descriptions of the Second Temple at the time of the Return to Zion. None of these therefore can serve as models for the temple described in Ezekiel. The following examples reveal an indirect connection between the prophecy of Ezekiel and the physical environment in which he prophesied, including surrounding Babylonian temples. The comparison of the biblical text with the information we have about temples in this period defines, highlights, and explains the characteristics unique to the vision of the temple in Ezekiel, as distinct from the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon, and clarifies the way in which the prophecy of Ezekiel was received in his environment and among his contemporaries.

Extant descriptions of the Babylonian temples include their architectonic structure and in several cases even their exact dimensions.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is possible that some of these were written as plans for a future temple similar to the one in Ezekiel, rather than as a description of an existing temple. With regard to functionaries in the Babylonian temples, we may assume the Jews of Babylon were not familiar with the thorough lists of priests and other personnel in the Babylonian temples that we have today. Nonetheless, a comparison between the status of the functionaries in the Babylonian temples and the description of the priesthood in Ezekiel provides us with a context within which we can visualize the temple of Ezekiel coming to life and functioning as an operational temple. These documents are elucidating primarily because they reflect active temples and include, among other things, a detailed account of the division of resources among the priestly families throughout the generations and the various functions performed in the hundreds of different chambers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Temple Structure

The vision of Ezekiel begins with the measurements of the wall that surrounds the entire structure of the temple (Ezek. 40:5) and ends with a description of the same wall (42:20). This wall distinguishes the temple of Ezekiel from other temples in the Bible. The wall most similar to it is that of the Tabernacle whose enclosure was walled with a simple gate (Exod. 27:9-16; 38:9-20). The wall in the vision of Ezekiel is wide and enormously large. Three gates lead to the area of the temple. The route taken to pass through them is not completely clear but includes ascending flights of stairs, and passage between recesses and a vestibule (40:6-38). The area of the entrance also included an additional space unique to Ezekiel called the "vestibule of the gate" (40: 39-40, 44:3, 46:2,8).[[15]](#footnote-15) In contrast, the detailed description of the Temple of Solomon includes but one verse (!) describing the inner enclosure (1 Kings: 6:36) with no reference to either a wall or gates, nor a description of the means of access to the temple or egress from it. It thereby also lacks reference to the chambers and pavement mentioned by Ezekiel (40: 17-18) as well as additional details about the structures situated there (46: 21-24).

Ezekiel is also unique with regard to everything pertaining to the description of the courts and their size. The circumference of the entire consecrated area is described in the following verses:

… and he measured off the entire area. He measured the east side with the measuring rod, **500 [cubits]—in rods**, by the measuring rod. He turned [and] measured the north side: **500 [cubits]—in rods**, by the measuring rod. He turned [and] measured the south side: **500 [cubits]—in rods**, by the measuring rod. Then he turned to the west side [and] measured it: **500 cubits—in rods**, by the measuring rod. Thus he measured it on the four sides; it had a wall completely surrounding it, **500 [cubits]** long on each side, to separate the consecrated from the unconsecrated. (42:15-20)

In these verses the unit of measure called "rods" (*kenim*) appears four times. This is a particularly large area, calculated, according to six cubits (*amot*) and one handbreadth (*tefaḥ*) per rod (40:5), as 3000 by 3000 cubits (approximately 1500 by 1500 meters).[[16]](#footnote-16)

In addition, the temple of Ezekiel has two courts, an outer court (40:17) including chambers, whose large area is intended for sacrifices, and a second, inner (or lower) court (40:19) entered by way of a network of gates and stairs (40:23-44) in whose more limited area stands the altar (40:47). The structure of the temple is divided into three parts: the portico (40:48-49), the great hall (41:1-2) and the Holy of Holies (41: 3-4). Surprisingly, Ezekiel barely even describes what was done in the area of these structures (in contrast to the descriptions of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon) and instead explains in elaborate detail the measurements of the gates and passages. We may conclude that this description of the wall and the courts is characteristic of the description of the temple in Ezekiel in its use of detail to emphasize the importance of the subject: **sixty-three verses are devoted to gates, courts, and the wall surrounding the temple, while only twenty-six verses are devoted to a description of the structure of the temple itself**.

It appears that the outline of a temple most similar to the one in Ezekiel is in fact to be found in the Mesopotamian world and in the immediate environment of Ezekiel, in descriptions we have of the Ezida temple. In addition, the detailed delineations of the gates found in architectonic descriptions of Babylonian temples include many features in common with the descriptions of the gates in the temple vision of Ezekiel. The Ezida temple in Borsippa contained very large courts adjacent to inner and outer rooms and a terraced entrance leading from a less holy area to the most holy area, which was also the most carefully protected. We have a detailed description of the way in which the priests entered the temple in Borsippa: through the main gate into the court, through several rooms, through another gate (the gate of Nabu) to the private area of Nabu and only from there to the innermost, holiest place. [[17]](#footnote-17)

It is impossible to compare the size of the Babylonian temples to the temple in Ezekiel with any precision, because, among other reasons, the exact purpose of the gates is unknown. In addition, scholars have not succeeded in reconciling texts describing the temple in Borsippa with archeological discoveries from the site of the temple. However, it is possible to point to a similarity in the basic plan of the two temples in which both the rooms precede the entrance to the inner room, a feature common to both the temple of Ezida and the temple of Ezekiel. The archeological discoveries at the site of the temple in Borsippa confirm the immensity of the courts. The location and purpose of the "chambers" in the courts of the temple of Ezekiel are similar to those of the temple of Ezida. There are also significant similarities between the description of the wall surrounding the entire consecrated area in Ezekiel and walls found in many temples in Babylon in this period and mentioned explicitly in reference to many of the kings of Babylon. Extant documents likewise reflect the centrality of the gates and courts.[[18]](#footnote-18) In Babylonian temples in general, and specifically in Ezida, the many gates and passages served to restrict access to the temple to authorized personnel, referred to extensively in the sources, to whom we will now turn our attention.

Temple Personnel

It is well known that there are many discrepancies between the descriptions of the ritual of the Priests in the Torah and those in Ezekiel.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the Tabernacle (Lev. ch.16), the Priests were permitted to enter the Shrine and the High Priest was even commanded to enter the Holy of Holies, while the Levites and the rest of the people were only permitted entry as far as the court of the Tabernacle (Lev. ch.16). When an offering was sacrificed in the court, the animal was slaughtered by the Israelite bringing the sacrifice (with the exception of the bird offering, in which the Priest severed the head) whereas the dashing of the blood and placing of the parts of the sacrifice on the altar was done by the Priests (Lev 1-3).

Although we do not have a detailed account from the time of the First Temple that could provide the missing link between what was done in the Tabernacle and what we find in Ezekiel, it is nonetheless clear that a significant change occurs in Ezekiel: each of the three castes is farther removed from the consecrated areas than it was in the Torah. The Priests are not allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and possibly not even allowed to enter the Shrine; the primary location for them to perform their tasks is the inner court itself. The Levites are permitted to be in the inner court, although they do not approach the altar at its center. Israelites are not allowed to enter the inner court; only the outer court is available to them. The Israelites do not slaughter the sacrifices themselves; this task is given to the Levites (Ezek. 44:11). The caste farthest removed are the foreigners, who are prohibited from even entering the temple compound (Ezek. 44:6-9) because their presence defiles it (7:21-22).[[20]](#footnote-20)

These changes in the structure of the temple and the tasks of the Priests and Levites outlined in the prophecy of Ezekiel have two purposes. First, the common people will be denied access to the inner areas of the consecrated ground whose sanctity will thereby be maintained. Second, the courts will become the center of activity in the temple because only a few, elite Priests will be permitted to enter into the consecrated areas. When the people come to the temple on the festivals, they will be forbidden to enter the inner court and will be permitted only to stand at the entrance to the outer court (Ezek. 44: 19). Only the Zadokite Priests will be allowed entry to the inner court (44:15-17).

Also in Babylon, only the worthy were permitted entry to the court and unauthorized persons are explicitly mentioned. The gradation of the permitted areas of entry for the priests in Babylon is also very similar to the situation described in Ezekiel in which the status of a Priest determined his access level. [[21]](#footnote-21) The description of the personnel in the Ezida Temple in Babylon reveals a similar hierarchy of priests according to their functions in the temple. Also in Ezida many steps were taken to ensure the distinction and exclusivity of the place of the idol in the temple.

In Ezida, the status of the priesthood in general was based on similar factors: family origin, task in the temple and suitability to this task. The priests belonged to families whose priestly ancestry went back many generations and the caste of priests in the Ezida temple included different ranks. Of these, the members of the highest echelon held pivotal positions and by virtue of their stature were allowed to enter into the central area of the temple where they were responsible for the performance of essential ritual functions. Those of secondary importance were only permitted to enter the court. Documents from the sixth century before the Common Era reveal that the priests serving the idol had to meet the highest standards with regard to lineage.[[22]](#footnote-22) The ancestry of the Babylonian priests was scrupulously examined with particular emphasis that the candidate for priesthood be a legitimate biological offspring of a temple functionary. Likewise, in the prophecy of Ezekiel, the lineage of the Priests of the line of Zadok distinguishes them from the other temple functionaries who are cast aside. Rules about priestly physical perfection and marital prohibitions however are found already in Leviticus and are not innovations in Ezekiel.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This distinction is very similar to the distinction between the priests and Levites familiar to us from Ezekiel 44:11-14: "They shall be servitors in My Sanctuary, appointed over the Temple gates, and performing the chores of My Temple; they shall slaughter the burnt offerings and the sacrifices for the people. They shall attend on them and serve them. They shall not approach Me to serve Me as priests, to come near any of My sacred offerings, the most holy things. I will make them watchmen of the Temple, to perform all its chores, everything that needs to be done in it." Regarding the role of the Priests, we read in Ezekiel 44:15-16: "But the levitical priests descended from Zadok …they shall approach Me to minister to Me; they shall stand before Me to offer Me fat and blood…They alone may enter My Sanctuary and they alone shall approach My table to minister to Me; and they shall keep My charge."

It is possible to enumerate similarities as well as differences between Ezekiel's temple vision and descriptions of the Temple in the Bible. It would appear that the purpose of the changes is to more scrupulously safeguard the ritual sanctity of the future temple and to ensure the continuation of the Divine Presence within it for eternity. The principal changes include the addition of a court, the enlargement of the courts surrounding the temple, maintenance of strict surveillance on its gates, regulations regarding the suitability of priests for work in the temple, as well as restrictions on both the access of the prince (*nasi*) to specific areas of the temple compound and the level of involvement of the people in the sacrificial rite. All of the above were designed to prevent ritually unclean people from approaching the temple.

The various means employed to safeguard the sanctity of the temple by secluding it from those who visit it and work in it can be more clearly understood through a comparison to the contemporary situation in Babylonian temples. The comparison to the Ezida temple helps us grasp the way in which Ezekiel was understood in his day by his audience, living in a Babylonian environment, surrounded by its temples.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The Temple Vision of Ezekiel in Rabbinic Literature

The final question in our discussion is the degree of influence or correlation between Ezekiel's vision of the temple and the building of the Second Temple, in its various stages, as well as the description of the temple found in the Mishnah in Tractate *Middot.* [[25]](#footnote-25) The nature of the connections between the temple in Ezekiel and the Second Temple and the *tannaitic* periods, as well as the discussion of the level of its influence on the structure of the Second Temple and subsequently on the description of the Temple in Tractate *Middot* and the *Mishneh Torah* of Maimonides is beyond the scope of our discussion of the prophecy of Ezekiel in the context of his time and place. I will therefore confine this discussion to several principal aspects of the question.

From the description of the Second Temple in Tractate *Middot*, and especially the verses from the temple vision of Ezekiel quoted within it, it would appear that the Sages were aware of the connections between Ezekiel's temple vision and the Temple described in the Mishnah. Although the Mishnah does not discuss the structure of the Temple as a whole, it describes in detail the measurements of the buildings, gates, chambers and recesses within it. Opinions vary on the question of whether the discussion in the Mishnah accurately describes the Temple built by Herod or serves primarily ideological objectives. This is a difficult question to answer. It would appear that even an examination of the verses from Ezekiel cited in the Mishnah does not help us to form a conclusion because the Mishnah quotes verses from the temple vision of Ezekiel only in cases in which specific details are required to complete or to substantiate their description of the structure that is the subject of their discussion. Sometimes it seems as though the authors of the Mishnah believed that the temple described in Ezekiel had already been actualized in the past, in the Second Temple. For example, regarding the doorways of the Temple, the wickets (Mishnah, Tractate Middot 4:1-2), and the altar (3:1), the Mishnah quotes Ezekiel in reference to narrative related in the past tense.[[26]](#footnote-26)

On the other hand, the Mishnah also quotes Ezekiel in reference to the temple that will be built in the future. These words, written at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, might reflect a yearning for the building of the temple of Ezekiel. For example, regarding the fact that the courts of the temple were not covered, we find: "The court of the women **was** … **and so they will be**, as it is said, 'Then he led me into the outer court …' (Ezek. 46:21)" (Tractate *Middot* 2:5). In addition, in the case of the water gate, it appears that the Mishnah is describing a feature that could exist as described in Ezekiel only in the future temple because it was not included in the Second Temple. In reference to the name of this gate, the Mishnah comments: "The water gate, why was it called the 'water gate'? …Rabbi Ekiezer ben Yaakov says, 'In it the gurgling water will in the future gush out from under the threshold of the Temple''' (Tractate *Middot* 2:6; based on Ezek. 47:1). This point has been addressed by Ben-Zion Rosenfeld:

The sage Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob, possibly of the generation of the destruction of the Temple, …bases himself on the words of the prophet Ezekiel that are quoted, in which he says, close to the end of his prophecy, that there will be a miracle in the future temple and living waters will gush out from under the threshold of the temple and will flow past part of the temple and will rise up until they become a mighty stream and will flow down to the Dead Sea whose waters will be sweetened and whose surroundings will bloom again. The sage identifies the threshold with the water gate, and in his opinion the gate is so named on the basis of future events, because the miracle will occur underneath it the and water will gush out and flow under part of the temple (Ezek. 47:1-12). Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob's identification of the water gate with the threshold mentioned in Ezekiel adds weight to the architectonic connection between the two structures as well as to the belief that there will be a future temple as described in Ezekiel and the Second Temple, which was destroyed, was built according to its plans.[[27]](#footnote-27)

We may conclude from this discussion that the descriptions in the Mishnah in Tractate *Middot* refer not only to the structure built by Herod but also to the future temple.

From the reference to Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob, who lived at the end of the Second Temple period and saw the Temple in both its glory and its destruction (Tractate *Middot*, 1:2), we may infer thatthese *mishnyaot* also reflect the Temple as it appeared at the end of the Second Temple period.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is possible that the references to Ezekiel in this tractate, written just before the destruction of the Second Temple, reflect a yearning for the building of Ezekiel's long-awaited temple. Perhaps we can understand the references to Ezekiel in Tractate *Middot* as a longing to see the Temple in all its glory, which did not exist at the time of the sages.

The Sages' difficulty with the content of the book of Ezekiel, especially the chapters describing the temple in all of its detail and its ritual, is reflected as well in references by the Sages to the book. The Babylonian Talmud in Tractate *Shabbat* (13b) attributes *Megillat Ta‛anit* (The scroll of the fasts) to a man by the name of Ḥananiah ben Ḥezekiah. In connection to this reference a saying is quoted in the name of Rav which credits the same man with rescuing the book of Ezekiel from suppression. Given the many contradictions in the book and their severity, its rehabilitation necessitated a lengthy and strenuous exegetical feat and this was accomplished by Ḥananiah ben Ḥezekiah, the "rescuer" of the book of Ezekiel.

Also Maimonides, at the beginning of his "*Hilkhot Beit ha-Beḥirah*" (The laws of the Temple) on the laws regarding the building of the future temple, assumes that the structure will be built according to the plan found in Ezekiel. However, his words reflect the difficulty in actualizing the building plan, as it appears in the book: "The Temple built by Solomon has been described clearly in the book of Kings, and **the Temple that will be built, although discussed in the Book of Ezekiel, is not clearly described or explained** and the people at the time of the Second Temple, when they were building the Temple at the time of Ezra, constructed it according to the Temple of Solomon and **in approximation to those features clearly described in the book of Ezekiel**" ("*Hilkhot Beit ha-Beḥirah*" 1:4). In other words, according to Maimonides, the builders of the Second Temple were unable to follow the model presented in Ezekiel and built "in approximation" to those features described clearly in Ezekiel.[[29]](#footnote-29) Although Maimonides does not elaborate upon the details of the actual construction, it is possible to see an illustration of this idea in his description of the shape of the altar and gates.[[30]](#footnote-30) Maimonides writes that according to tradition, the altar was built in the days of the Second Temple by returning exiles under the guidance of the prophet who returned to the land of Israel with them: "They made it similar to the altar **that will be built** and it must not be enlarged or reduced in size" ("*Hilkhot Beit ha-Beḥirah*," 2:3). One of the gates is also identified with the gate described in Ezekiel: "this gate is to be kept shut and is not to be opened" ("*Hilkhot Beit ha-Beḥirah*" 4:7, citing Ezek. 44:2).[[31]](#footnote-31)

We may conclude that the difficulty in correlating the temple vision in Ezekiel with the Second Temple, as well as the Tabernacle and the First Temple, is apparent in early Rabbinic Literature. We may also wonder whether the Second Temple had features bearing Persian influence, direct or indirect, transmitted by way of Ezekiel.[[32]](#footnote-32) Opinion is also divided on the following questions: For which time period was the prophecy of Ezekiel intended? Was it originally intended for the Second Temple, throughout its history? To what extent did Herod's builders (Tractate *Middot* 3:1)follow its plans? To what extent did this prophecy influence the Mishnah in Tractate *Middot,* which refers to both past and future temples? It is also possible that after the Second Temple was built not according to Ezekiel, an alternative approach was adopted in which the temple of Ezekiel became the temple that would be built in the future. This subject requires extensive and thorough examination in its own right and this will take time.

Finished but not Over

Let us return to the subject with which we began, the challenging question of how to understand the connection between the ritual practices in the temples of Babylon and the prophecies of Ezekiel in general, and the vision of the future temple in particular. Or, in more general terms, what should be the role of the findings emerging from research on the ancient Near East in understanding this prophecy? This question is but one facet of the larger question of the originality and uniqueness of biblical laws and beliefs, with which many generations of scholars have struggled, the most prominent of whom was Yehezkel Kaufman in *The Religion of Israel*. It would appear that in the case before us we may assume that the vision of the future temple in Ezekiel is to some extent similar to the temples that he saw around him. It was perhaps to this that Maimonides referred in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:32):

But the custom which was in those days general among all men, and the general mode of worship in which the Israelites were brought up, consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to bum incense before them; religious and ascetic persons were in those days the persons that were devoted to the service in the temples erected to the stars, as has been explained by us. It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used; it would in those days have made the same impression as a prophet would make at present if he called us to the service of God and told us in His name, that we should not pray to Him, not fast, not seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action.

For this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue; He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner; viz., to build unto Him a temple … to have the altar erected to His name … to offer the sacrifices to Him … to bow down to him and to burn incense before Him. He has forbidden to do any of these things to any other being

He made it obligatory that certain gifts, called the gifts of the Levites and the priests, should be assigned to them for their maintenance while they are engaged in the service of the temple and its sacrifices.

By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established; this result was thus obtained without deterring or confusing the minds of the people by the abolition of the service to which they were accustomed and which alone was familiar to them.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Maimonides believed that all temple ritual and sacrifices were nothing but a response to the need to imitate foreign practices, and, if so, it is no wonder that both the design of the temples and the rituals were influenced by the surrounding foreign culture.

Ezekiel is not unique in this respect. He is not the only prophet whose human characteristics, personal views, and immediate environment are reflected in his prophecies. This premise, that prophecy was influenced by the time, place, and personality of the prophets, that the prophets of Israel did not operate in a vacuum, has already been discussed by generations of traditional commentators, as can be seen in the well-known words of the Sages, "The same type of communication is received by many prophets, yet no two prophets express themselves in the same manner" (Babylonian Talmud 89a). So too, commentators in different eras, including Joseph Albo, Isaac Abravanel, and Malbim, discussed the question of the human dimension of divine prophecy.[[34]](#footnote-34) It would in fact appear that their words contain principles from which we can deduce that the language of prophecy is conditioned by the personal circumstances and abilities of the prophet, his history, life experience, the intellectual climate surrounding him, and his education.[[35]](#footnote-35)

It seems that we cannot determine with any certainty at what point we are encountering the prophet as a private person, expressing his personal qualities, thoughts and pain and at what point we are encountering the prophet as a messenger, revealing the words of God. These questions are larger than the examples that we have examined here and encompass all parts of the book of Ezekiel. With regard to the chapters in which Ezekiel prophesies about the destruction of the temple, we can ask whether the absence of love, compassion, and pain from the prophecies of admonition reflect the human qualities of Ezekiel or demonstrate another side to the relationship between God and his people, different in substance from that expressed in the contemporary prophecy of Jeremiah.[[36]](#footnote-36)

We can conclude that Ezekiel, at the time that he received prophecy from God, received in this prophecy, in a vision form God, the content of his revelations. His prophecy, spanning a period before and after the destruction of the Temple, describes a different temple, one suited to the circumstances of the people around him. The contents of the book reveal that Ezekiel was concerned with the causes that led to the desecration of the name of God, the removal of the glory of God from the Temple, and its very destruction, and the lessons to be learnt from them. However, his style, the way in which he phrased the divine messages he received, was influenced by a combination of factors, including, on the one hand, the associations and images familiar to him from the Temple of Solomon, and on the other hand, the surrounding culture and its images, including its temples. All of these are facets of his being which coalesced and impacted the content of his prophecy, as we know it today. If so, this prophecy is not only an expression of the sublime, the remote, and the divine. It is an expression of an encounter between God and man, and for that reason was given to men in the forms, contents, and concepts understood by them in their time and place.

1. Babylon was the name of a city (that was also a state) which exited for many years. In the middle of the seventh century before the common era, Babylon began to rule over large areas which became an empire. The period of time in which Babylon ruled an empire, from 626 BCE to 539 BCE (the rise of the Persian empire) is known as the Neo-Babylonian era. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the study of the Bible in light of discoveries from the Near East, see: Barry L. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1996), 81-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is however difficult to draw a blueprint of the future temple from the verses in Ezekiel, and even the classic commentators deliberated this point. See, for example, the commentary of Rashi: deliberation, (42:3-4), corrections and adaptations {unclear}(the responses of Rashi to the questions of Rabbi Samuel {name unclear- please provide English transliteration} on the commentary on Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in *Mikra'ot Gedolot, ha-Keter, Yeḥezkel* (Mikra'ot Gedolot Haketer : a revised and augmented scientific edition based on the Aleppo codex and early medieval MSS), ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2013), 321. This is in addition to the differences in the plans of the temple in the outlines of Rashi, Rabbi Eliezer Beaugency, ibid, 322-328. {unclear} [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Agreements of this kind were common in this period throughout the Assyrian empire (less so in the Neo-Babylonian period), see: S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, ed., *Neo-Assyian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, State Archives of Assyria, 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The reference is to a practice that was performed by filling a quiver with arrows upon each of which was written a different solution. The diviner would shake the arrows and the first arrow to fall from the quiver would be considered to contain the answer of the gods. Walter Farber, in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Jack Sasson, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1983), 1895-1910. {please provide title of article} [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The reference is to divination by means of statues (similar to Genesis 31:34; 2 Kings 23:24; Zechariah 10:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This reference is very reminiscent of archeological and textual findings from which we learn that in the past people would "look at the liver", in other words, divine their fate and the future according to the state of a liver taken from and animal sacrificed as an offering. In order to teach priests the art of liver divination, the shapes of livers were copied onto patterns made of silt and sometimes hand written explanations were etched into these patterns. Patterns made of silt were discovered in many archeological sites throughout the Near East. This practice was mentioned in *Kohelet* *Rabbah*, 12:8: "Rabbi Levy said 'Like those Arabs who slaughter a sheep and examine its liver'". Realistic descriptions of this can be found on the commentary of Shadal to this verse, where he explains that this was the practice of the Arabs. {reference} [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: A. Winitzer, "Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv: Ezekiel Among the Babylonian *Literati,*" in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon; Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians in Antiquity*, ed. Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). These connections are not unique to Ezekiel. For an example of the connection between the Assyrian environment and the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 6, see: S. Z. Aster, *Marbeh* *Hokmah*: *Studies Bible and the Ancient Near East in Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz*, ed. Yonah Shamir, Meyer Gruber, Shalom Paul, et al (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See: S. Z. Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels,* Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 384(Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 301-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See: Tova Ganzel and Shalom E. Holtz, "Ezekiel's Temple in Babylonian Context," *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014): 211-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Sages were familiar with a "Borsif" in Babylon. In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat*, Rav Ashi comments that that Babylon is now called Borsif and Borsif is called Babylon (36a); in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, Babylon and Borsif are described as two neighboring towns (109a), and in *Bereshit Rabbah*, the student of Rabbi Yoḥanan comments that he was exiled to the land of Israel from Borsif. (*Bereshit Rabbah* 58, 38, 11). It would appear that all of these references refer to the Babylonian town under discussion and it is possible that the ruins found there were known to the Sages, who believed that the Tower of Babel was built there. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Caroline Waerzeggers, *The Ezida Temple of Borsippa: Priesthood, Cult, Archives,* Achaemenid History 15 (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2010), In her comprehensive research in the last decade, she has delineated the status and position of officials in the temples of Babylon in the first millennium before the Common Era. See also: M. Jursa, *Neo-Babylonian Legal and Administrative Documents: Typology, Contents and Archives,* Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 1(Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On plans of temples see: A.R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts,* Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta, 40 (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In addition to these texts, hundreds of documents written on silt tablets in cuneiform script reveal daily life in the temple. On Mesopotamian temples, see: Michael Roaf, "Palaces and Temples in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Jack M. Sasson(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 423-441 and John F. Robertson, "The Social and Economic Organization of Ancient Mesopotamian Temples," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 443-454. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A comparison with the Temple of Solomon reveals that, even in comparison with a permanent temple, the temple described in Ezekiel is unique and different. It is therefore incorrect to ascribe these differences to the fact that the structure described in Ezekiel is permanent whereas the Tabernacle is temporary. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The area of the entire temple, including its courts, was much greater than the area of the first or second Temples. Indeed, in reference to the Second Temple, the Mishnah (Tractate *Middot*, 2: 1) describes the area of the Temple: "The temple mount was 500 by 500 cubits." There are those who thought that the measurement in the Mishnah was influenced by the measurement of 500 given in Ezekiel 42:20, summarizing the preceding verses that described the area of the temple mount without giving measurements: "500 [cubits] long on each side" (42:20). This is based on the commentary of Radak [David Kimḥi] on this verse which adds that these measurements are in cubits even though the word "rods" is repeated four times in the preceding verses. It would appear more natural to assume that the reference is to rods also in verse 20 (see Rashi and Eliezer Beaugency). However, modern commentators have pointed to the difficulty in saying that the entire consecrated area measured 500 rods and have concluded (from the absence of the word "rods" in the Septuagint in verses 15-20) that Ezekiel referred to cubits. (See: …please provide complete bibliographic references including name of publisher) and in this way they also compared the circumference of the temple appearing in Ezekiel to the description in Tractate *Middot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Waerzeggers, *The Ezida Temple of Borsippa*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A detailed description of these findings can be found in the article I co-authored with Shalom Holtz of Yeshiva University: "Ezekiel's Temple in Babylonian Context". (see above, note 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Sages pointed out the severity of these discrepancies when they related that earlier sages had wanted to suppress the book of Ezekiel, "because there were in it things that contradict the words of the Torah" (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 13b and parallel sources). A sage by the name of Ḥananiah ben Ḥezekiah ben Garon is remembered with honor because he "sat and interpreted", in other words, resolved the contradictions by means of interpretation (*midrash*). See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A similar gradation can be found in the Mishnah (Tractate *Kelim* 1:8) in which the entrance of non-Jews into the temple mount is permitted only until the *ḥayil* (outermost area) according to the levels of sanctity in the various parts of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See: Tova Ganzel, "*Ma'amadam shel Ba'alei ha-Tafkidim ba-Mikdash ha-Atidi be-Yeḥezkel," Shnaton le-Ḥeker ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mizraḥ ha-Kadum* 19 (2009): 21-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In addition to punctilious examination of physical perfection and moral integrity, reflected in abstention from serious sins. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It should be noted that although distinctions in status within the priestly caste is also found later in classical Rabbinic Literature (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Isurei Bi'ah*, 20), it does not exist in the Torah where strict attention was paid only to the preservation of the sanctity of the priestly families. (Lev. 21). קידושן? [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nonetheless, this comparison cannot solve all the difficulties raised by Ezekiel's temple vision and the questions outnumber the answers. An example of a crucial difficulty is the absence of almost all reference to temple vessels. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This discussion of Rabbinic Literature completes our discussion of the prophetic literature. It appears that the question of the level of familiarity with the vision of Ezekiel in subsequent generations and its influence remains unanswered also regarding the Sages. לעיון הנבואי? [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. From whence the builders of the Second Temple procured the plans for their structure is a key question that requires examination in its own right. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ben-Zion Rosenfeld, "*Yaḥas Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi ba-Mishnato le-Mikdash u-le-Yerushalayim,*" (The approach of Rabbi Judah the Prince to the Temple and to Jerusalem), *Ḥidushim le-Ḥeker Yerushalayim* 18 (2013): 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 2:2, and the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 16a, Rabbi Ekiezer ben Jacob was the *tanna* who taught Tractate *Middot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. It is believed that the Third Temple will be built by human hands. Maimonides in his *Hakdama le-Pirush ha-Mishnah, Maseket Midot,* (Introduction to the commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Middot) [in *Mishnah im Perush Rabenu Moshe ben Maimon*, ed. Yosef Kafaḥ, (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1967), 17] points out that *Maseket Middot* was included in the Mishnah in order that the builders of the Third Temple will know how to construct it, in accordance with the commandment in Ezekiel 43:10-11, and see Rashi there. See also the commentary of the *Leḥem Mishneh*, *"Hilkhot Ma'aseh ha-Korbanot,"* (The laws of sacrifices), 2:14, who has difficulty understanding why Maimonides thought that the prophecy of Ezekiel was about the third temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Maimonides refers indirectly to the difficulty of reconciling the details of the sacrifices as they appear in Ezekiel with those that appear in the Torah and determines that the verses in Ezekiel all refer to a one-time ritual at the dedication of the third temple. (*"Hilkhot Ma'aseh ha-Korbanot,"* 2:14) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller (known as "Tosafot Yom Tov") wrote: "Even though the future building has changes and is not comparable to the Second Temple, as anyone who examines the Mishnah and the book of Ezekiel will see, … the building of the Second Temple was only 'an approximation of some features clearly described in Ezekiel' and does not conform to everything that is written in that book." In essence he writes that one must rely upon the description of the Second Temple and adds: "When we merit to build the future temple the Holy One Blessed be He will open our eyes and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the lord so that we may understand the hidden meaning of the words of Ezekiel…" [Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, *Tzurat Beit ha-Mikdash he-Atid ha-Nirah le-Yeḥezkel* (The plan of the future temple as it appeared to Ezekiel) (Prague: Avraham ben Moshe, 1602)] Malbim made corrections and addenda to this book in his work *Tavnit ha-Bayit* . (Both works were published together at the end of Malbim's book on Ezekiel.) {What book? When was that published?} {I added the title of the first book.} [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The existence of new elements in the Second Temple connected to the return of exiles from Babylon can be inferred indirectly from the words of Maimonides in his Commentary to the Mishnah: "When they returned from Susa to build the temple, as is described in Ezra, the king commanded them to draw the design of the city of Susa in the Temple so that the fear of the king would be upon them and they would remember the days when they lived there and would not rebel against the king. They therefore drew it on the most eastern gate of the Temple." This subject also warrants further study. צרו = ציירו? שיבתם = ישיבתם? {reference?} [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. {Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander, 1904, 323}

    Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. with introd. and notes by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), ? [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. A collection of examples can be found in: Moshe Greenberg, "*Tefisot Yehudiot shel ha-Gorem ha-Enoshi be-Nevua ha-Mikrait"* (Jewish perceptions of the human factor in biblical prophecy), *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Rav Mordechai Breuer* (Mordechai Breuer Jubilee Volume), ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1992), 1:63-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Greenberg, ""*Tefisot Yehudiot*", 76. For an example in reference to Ezekiel, see Isaac Abravanel, *Perush al Nevi᾿im Aḥronim* (Commentary on the Later Prophets) (Jaffa: Torah ve-Da‛at, 1956), 434.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See the dictum of the Sages: "Raba said, 'Everything that Ezekiel saw, Isaiah also saw. To whom can we compare Ezekiel? To a man from the country who saw the king. To whom can we compare Isaiah? To a man from the city who saw the king.'" (Ḥaggigah 13b) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)