Note: "And the name of the city from that day on [is]: “YHWH Is There” (Ezek. 48:35): Did Ezekiel Read Cuneiform?

Tova Ganzel

In Ezekiel 48:35, the prophet concludes his vision of the future with the name of a city, ה' שמה"", usually translated as "YHWH Is There". The accepted explanation of the name is that God, who has abandoned the city, will return to it in the future and remain there. The uniqueness of the name and the linguistic difficulty of its use in the verse is reflected in translations and commentaries through the ages.[[1]](#footnote-1) The meaning of the verse is also difficult to understand. First, it is unclear if the city referred to is Jerusalem. Second, while the future temple vision repeatedly describes the return of God's glory to the temple area, this passage would seem to indicate its return to the entire city.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The difficulties in understanding the verse are reflected in early translations. The Septuagint reads **"שְׁמָ**ה" ("its name") instead of "**שָֽׁמָּ**ה" ("there"), so that rather than meaning "the place in which God is present", the city's name is the name of God himself, YHWH.[[3]](#footnote-3) This interpretation is reflected in Targum Yonatan: the city is Jerusalem and it has been called by the name of God since its foundation.[[4]](#footnote-4) The sages also followed this interpretation when they derived from this verse that Jerusalem is called after the name of God.[[5]](#footnote-5) This explanation can also be found in modern commentaries. Rimon Kasher, for example, suggests that the verse is an attempted etymology of the name "Jerusalem". [[6]](#footnote-6)

However, the content of the future temple vision leads me to the opposite conclusion: Ezekiel intended to change the name of the city, to eradicate the use of the name "Jerusalem", not explain it, because, from his perspective, the name "Jerusalem" had only negative connotations. [[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, an interpretation has not yet been offered that explains the verse contextually: "YHWH is There"-- the geographical location in which God can be found. Because of the uniqueness of this phrase as the name of a biblical city, I would like to suggest that it was influenced by the Babylonian surroundings in which Ezekiel lived, and that on this basis we can discover the meaning of the name in its biblical context.

**The Names of Babylonian Cities in Ezekiel's Time**

In the Ezekiel's time, the sixth century BCE, the city of Nippur was an important metropolis.[[8]](#footnote-8) The name of the city is rendered in cuneiform as EN.LÍLki . The first part, written with the logograms EN.LÍL, represents the name of the city, and the second part, the sign: ki, is a determinative, marking the word as a geographical name.[[9]](#footnote-9) The two signs, EN.LÍL, when not attached to the determinative ki, signify the divine name "Enlil", the divine patron of Nippur.

If Ezekiel was familiar with cuneiform, when he read the name of the city of Nippur, he would have seen the signs "EN.LÍL", identical to the signs of the name of the god, followed by an sign indicating that this was the name of a city.[[10]](#footnote-10)

If Ezekiel was aware of the way in which the name of the city of Nippur was written in cuneiform, and its meaning—that is, the name itself, identical to the name of the god, with the addition of a sign indicating that this was the name of a city—this may have served as a source of inspiration when he singled out and isolated the new city (not Jerusalem), as was customary in his Babylonian surroundings.

If so, "ה' שמה" means "YHWH", the name of God, which is also the name of the city, with the addition of the word "שמה" functioning like a cuneiform determinative, indicating that in this case the name of God is being used as a geographical place name. This then is the meaning of the word "שמה" in the biblical text – an indicator of the appearance of a place name. Thus, the city mentioned at the end of the book of Ezekiel merited, from that day on, to be called by the name of its God, YHWH. This reading of the text likewise indicates that Ezekiel was aware of the use of the cuneiform determinative /ki/, to which the word שמה corresponds.

If my theory is correct, it solves difficulties in understanding the meaning of the verse. Although in Ezekiel's temple vision, God's glory returns to the temple alone, the entire city is called by the name of God, as indicated by the word שמה"". However, this city is not Jerusalem and God is not necessarily present in all parts of the city.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The written form of the name of Nippur is in fact unique; there is no other case in which the name of a city was also the name of a deity. As we have explained, the city's written version, which reads literally as "Enlil City", is in fact pronounced "Nippur". It can be assumed that speakers of Aramaic, who did not read Akkadian, knew the city only as "Nippur" rather than in its written form, known only to the learned readers of cuneiform. Therefore, to imitate this form, Ezekiel would have had to be literate in cuneiform.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, on a broader cultural level, not related specifically to Nippur, cities are named after deities. There are additional cases, from the first millennium before the common era, of names of deities appearing in the names of Babylonian cities. In some cases, the name of the god is included in the name of the city or place[[13]](#footnote-13) and in other cases the name of the god is itself the name of the city.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Therefore, in my opinion, it is reasonable to conclude that Ezekiel knew the names of these cities and the cuneiform signs used to write them. Given the growing body of research indicating Ezekiel's connection to his Babylonian surroundings,[[15]](#footnote-15) this is a possibility that should receive serious consideration.

1. \* I would like to thank my colleagues, Dr. Yuval Levavi, Professor Jonathan Ben-Dov and Professor Shalom Holtz, for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.

   This combination of words appears in only one other place, Deuteronomy 28:37: "among all the peoples to which the Lord will drive you", but its meaning there is different. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The syntax is also problematic in the connection between the word "מיום" and the words "ה' שמה"; however, from an examination of biblical parallels it appears that the meaning of "מיום" is "from this day on", as in, "Take note, from this day forward—from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month" (Hag. 2:18). See also Ezra 3:6, Nehemiah 5:14, among other examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some have suggested that the translation in the Septuagint is either a misreading or is based on a different *Vorlage*. See: W. Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (Hermeneia) ?, James D. Martin (trans.), (BKAT XIII; Philadelphia, 1983), p. 545 and D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (NICOT 2; Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 1998), p. 735, note 11. p. 545. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “and the name of the city, designated from that day that the Lord makes His Shekinah rest upon it” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra, 70b, based on this verse with the change in vocalization to "**שְׁמָ**ה". Rashi quotes the Targum and emphasizes that the city was founded in the days of Abraham.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Kasher, *Ezekiel: Introduction and Commentary, Volume 2: Chapters 25–48* (Mikra LeYisraʹel: A Bible Commentary for Israel) (in Hebrew), (Tel Aviv, 2004), p. 934. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jerusalem's absence from Ezekiel's future temple prophecy is not coincidental. On this subject see, among others: J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh’s Wife,* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On the city of Nippur during the first millennium BCE, see G. Andrew, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (OLA 40; Leuven, 1992), pp. 143-162; S. W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times c. 755-612 BC*. (SAAS 4; Helsinki, 1996); M. W. Stolper, “Fifth Century Nippur: Texts of the Murašûs and from their Surroundings.” *JCS* 53 (2001): 83–132. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is also a phonetic transcription that is rendered: *ni-par*ki. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. When the name "Nippur" is written as "en.lílki" there is no use of the determinative for divinity, "dingir". {I changed wording for clarity}. See, R. Zadok, *Geographical Names According to New- and Late-Babylonian Texts*.(RGTC 8 ; Wiesbaden, 1985), pp. 239–242. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Unlike Zimmerli, (p. 547), who suggests that: “the last sentence of the book of Ezekiel shows how the old tradition of the city of God has forcefully obtained justice for itself against the priestly reform project, which, through the separation of city and temple, has robbed the city of much its dignity” and see P. M. Joyce, “Temple and Worship in Ezekiel 40-48.” in J. Day (ed.) *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 482; New York, 2005), p. 145–163. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Unlike the city of ‘Assyria’, for example, which was named after its god, and both names were pronounced the same way: Aššur (kur(.d)*aš-šur*ki), Zadok, p. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Other examples include: Ālu-ša-Amurru (UEU *šá* dKUR.GAL), Zadok, p. 8; Ālu-ša-Bēl (UEU *šá* d+EN), Zadok, p.9; Ālu-ša-Nabû (UEU *šá* dPA), Zadok, p.15.

    It should be noted that every geographical name (city, village, etc.) is accompanied by an identifying sign (determinative): "KI" following the word, in the case of large cities, or "URU" preceding it, in the case of smaller towns. There are places where it is not clear if URU is being used as a determinative (and indicates the pronunciation) {unclear} or is itself a logogram for the word "*ālu"* meaning "city". [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Such as: Bānītāya (uru.dDÙ-*tú/u*4*-a-a),* Zadok, p.64; Bēl (uru.d.+EN; uruURU d+EN), Zadok, p. 73; Bēltiya (uru.d.GAŠAN-*ia*), Zadok, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Such as: D. S. Vanderhooft, “Ezekiel in and on Babylon,” in J. Elayi and J. Durand, (eds.), Bible et Proche-Orient. Mélanges André Lemaire III,  Transeuphratène 46 (2014): 99–119; A. Winitzer, “Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv: Ezekiel among the Babylonian Literati,” in U. Gabbay and S. Secunda (eds.), *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians*, (Tübingen, 2014), pp. 163–216; J. Stökl, “A Youth without Blemish, Handsome, Proficient in all Wisdom, Knowledgeable, and Intelligent: Ezekiel’s Access to Babylonian Culture,” in C. Waerzeggers and J. Stökl, (eds.), *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, (Berlin, 2015), pp. 223–252. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)