

A Look behind the Scenes

Worldview in Dreams and Visions in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament

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Introduction

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream. (Ps. 126:1)

What is meant when Ps. 126 speaks about dreaming? Is it speaking of something that is not real, only a strange shadow of reality or something too extraordinary to believe? Interestingly, later tradition changed כחלמים (“like those who dream”) to כחלומים (“like those being healed”).¹ Is it underestimating God’s power to describe the experience as “dreaming”?

Research interest in dreams and visions in humanities increased in the beginning of the third millennium, hand in hand with research on

This essay is a slightly revised version of my lecture read before the Faculty of Theology at Lund University on 23 May 2019. The doctoral degree *honoris causa* was conferred upon me the day after. I want to express my deeply felt gratitude to my friends and colleagues in Old Testament studies at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University, and especially to Professor Fredrik Lindström. The essay is about “seeing”, about dreams and visions. I am filled with gratitude for what my friends and colleagues saw and see in my work and in me.

1. See Peter W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms*, Leiden 1997, 107; Leslie C. Allen, *World Biblical Commentary: 21. Psalms 101–150*, Waco, TX 1983, 170–171. See also the LXX (Ps. 125:1): ὡς παρακεκλημένοι (cf. Isa. 38:16).

imagery and imagination in anthropological studies.² Old Testament research is following slowly.³ However, when dealing with dreams, we are faced with a general scepticism towards dreams and visions: Dreams belong in the realm of psychoanalysis or, what might be more acceptable on a factual level, they are part of neurologists' research on brain activity.⁴ A general scepticism towards dreams might have already had its roots in the Old Testament (Jer. 23:25–28; Num. 12:6–8; Deut. 13:3, 5).⁵ In addition, we have to admit that there is scepticism towards images in Protestant theology, with its emphasis on the word. Moreover, as a last suggestion, there is scepticism towards the idea that something so elusive as dreams might carry the label of communication with the divine.⁶ Such scepticism is as old as the engagement with dreams and visions itself. Ancient Near Eastern sources,⁷ as well as the Old Testament, bear witness to the question of true and false dreams and prophecies. And the Book of Job is as critical of dreams as it is of those ignoring them (Job. 4:13–14; 33:14–18).

In this essay, I will look at dreams and visions as phenomena that unlock a worldview (*Weltbild*).⁸ What do these dreams and visions reveal of worldview in terms of natural space, the mythological world, and a world beyond?⁹ What do they achieve? Bernard Streck points to the fact that the

2. Quite recently a handbook on dream and sleep has been published in German. It gives an excellent overview of how the subject is treated in historical science, philosophy, performing arts, media studies, and several other academic disciplines. Alfred Krovoza & Christine Walde (eds.), *Traum und Schlaf: Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2018.

3. See for example Shaul Bar, *A Letter That Has Not Been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible*, Cincinnati, OH 2001; Jörg Lanckau, *Der Herr Der Träume: Eine Studie Zur Funktion Des Traumes In Der Josefgeschichte Der Hebräischen Bibel*, Zürich 2006; Elizabeth R. Hayes (ed.), *I Lifted My Eyes and Saw: Reading Dream and Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible*, London 2014.

4. See Alfred Krovoza, “‘Kulturarbeit’ am Traum”, in Alfred Krovoza & Christine Walde (eds.), *Traum und Schlaf: Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2018, 8.

5. See also Deut. 18:9–12; Jer. 27:9. See Jutta Hausmann, “‘Ein Prophet, der Träume hat, der erzähle Träume; wer aber mein Wort hat, der predige mein Wort recht’ (Jer 23,28) – Ein Beitrag zum Verstehen der deuteronomistischen Wort-Theologie”, in H. Michael Niemann, Matthias Augustin & Werner H. Schmidt (eds.), *Nachdenken über Israel, Bibel und Theologie: Festschrift für Klaus-Dietrich Schunk zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, Frankfurt 1994, 166–169.

6. See Krovoza, “‘Kulturarbeit’ am Traum”, 11–12.

7. See Annette Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben im antiken Mesopotamien: Traumtheorie und Traumpraxis im 3.–1. Jahrtausend v. Chr. als Horizont einer Kulturgeschichte des Träumens*, Münster 2006, 353–368.

8. Therefore it is true for dreams what Belting says in general about images: “[Bilder] sind dazu bestimmt, Welterfahrung zu symbolisieren und Welt zu repräsentieren.” Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München 2002, 23. Dreams are an expression of how one experiences the living environment, an “Ausdruck lebensweltlicher Erfahrungen”. Rüdiger Lux, *Prophezie und Zweiter Tempel: Studien zu Haggai und Sacharja*, Tübingen 2009, 33.

9. See among others Bernd Janowski, “‘Du hast meine Füße auf weiten Raum gestellt’ (Psalm 31,9): Gott, Mensch und Raum im Alten Testament”, in Antonio Loprieno (ed.),

worldview in ancient times was clearly arranged and bound to experience. The environment was understood as structured in terms of space and time, and of cause and effect.¹⁰ What is familiar to us is the ancient worldview organized in terms of a centre (temple and city) and a periphery (chaotic surroundings) on the horizontal level and height and depth (e.g. God's mountain and the pillars of the earth) on the vertical level. The experience of the natural world in terms of topography or geography supplements this cosmological model. In Mesopotamia as well as in Israel the orientation predominantly looks towards the east.¹¹ Yet, this orientation is held as also being relevant for the mythical world or the gateways to it.¹²

As Streck argues, this world is perfectly structured and needs to be kept in order. Yet, what happens when centre and periphery are no longer stable? And, as I asked above, what can dreams and visions achieve in such a situation?

We have to be aware of the fact that we look at dreams and visions as a literary product. That literary product, however, cannot be understood in isolation from the fact that the texts at hand communicate something seen.¹³

The examples chosen stem from the Ancient Near East as well as the Old Testament. They belong to different literary genres and cover dreams as well as visions. Before I can present those dreams and visions, I will give two brief introductions to dreams and visions in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament.

Dreams in the Ancient Near East

The Ancient Near East material on dreams is more than comprehensive. It covers several literary genres from epic literature to rituals, which are supposed to free a person from the influence of bad dreams. Two basic categories were defined by A. Leo Oppenheim (1904–1974) in 1956, who spoke of symbolic or message dreams.¹⁴ Yet, more criteria are necessary in order

Mensch und Raum von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, München 2006, 35–70.

10. “[Der Mensch] erfährt seine Umwelt zergliedert in Raum und Zeit, Ursache und Wirkung. Die Anordnung und Zuordnung der Dinge, ihre raumzeitliche Verortung und die für ihre Bewertung verantwortlichen Kräfte machen ein Weltbild aus.” Bernhard Streck, “Weltbild”, in Bernhard Streck (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Ethnologie*, 2nd ed., Wuppertal 2000, 291.

11. See Janowski, “Du hast meine Füße”, 39–41.

12. See Gilgamesh IX and his way on the path of the sun.

13. See A. Leo Oppenheim, “The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of the Assyrian Dream-Book”, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 46 (1956), 185–186; Achim Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen im Alten Testament: Sprachliche Eigenarten, Funktion und Geschichte einer Gattung*, Münster 2002, 10–13; Lux, *Prophezie und Zweiter Tempel*, 54–58; Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 242–257.

14. See Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams”, 184–217; Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 88–93, 248–254; Sally M. Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals*,

to come closer to the phenomenon. Because dreams are very often understood as coming from the outside and being given to a person, the sender of a dream is highly important.¹⁵ It might be the god of dreams or another god or something yet unknown.¹⁶ It is decisive for Mesopotamian thinking that these dreams are independent from the person seeing it.¹⁷ A rather typical action for a sender is to “step” or “stand” at someone’s head.¹⁸ For Bible readers the terminology is familiar because of Jacob’s dream in Beth El (Gen. 28:11). He puts a stone (אֶבֶן) at his head (מֵרָאשׁוֹת) and dreams. The recipient can be an ordinary person or a professional seer.¹⁹ Usually it is told that the recipient lies down,²⁰ and then he or she sees a dream.²¹ There is no specific term for dreaming.²² In these dreams, the recipient can move in space and meet people or gods.²³

Enkidu’s Dream of the Netherworld

I have chosen an example from the Ancient Near East that gives an idea about the vertical axis of Ancient Near East worldview. The protagonist Enkidu – the closest friend of the heroic Gilgamesh – moves, or better, is moved into a realm a living human cannot reach: the netherworld. The account stems from Tablet VII of the Epic of Gilgamesh as it has been found in Ninive in the Babylonian version. It was written by Ashurbanipal’s scribes in the seventh century BCE.²⁴

Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu killed the Bull of Heaven (Gilg. VI. 125–147). The gods came together judging the two, and the divine council

Münster 1998, 15–18.

15. Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 263, speaks about external dreams.

16. See Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 285–294; Bar, *A Letter*, 1.

17. Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 263; Frances Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests: Jewish Dreams in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras*, Leiden 2004, 1–2.

18. See Annette Zgoll, “Die Welt im Schlaf sehen – Inkubation von Träumen im antiken Mesopotamien”, *Welt des Orients* 32 (2002), 96–97; Joachim Latacz, “Funktionen des Traums in der antiken Literatur”, in Terese Wagner-Simon & Gaetano Benedetti (eds.), *Traum und Träumen: Traumanalysen in Wissenschaft, Religion und Kunst*, Göttingen 1984, 24; Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 21. See also 1 Sam. 3:10, where Yhwh stands (יָצַב) calling Samuel.

19. Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams”, 223; Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 32–34.

20. See Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 100; Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 20.

21. See Zgoll, “Welt im Schlaf”, 74–76.

22. For terminology, see Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 55–81; Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions: An Exegetical Study of Zechariah’s Vision Report*, London 2015, 24–25; Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen*, 355–371.

23. See Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 262–276.

24. Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, vol. 1, Oxford 2003, 632–647.

decided that one of them had to die. It was the king of the gods, Enlil, who came to the decision that this should be Enkidu.²⁵ In the following, Enkidu is running a fever. He sees two dreams and tells Gilgamesh about it. The second dream begins as follows (Gilg. VII. 165–186*):

“Quite something, my friend, (was) the dream I saw during the course of this night!
the heavens thundered, the earth responded,
with me standing (there) between them.
There was a man, his expression was grim,
his face was like that of an Anzû-bird.
His hands were a lion’s paws, his claws an eagle’s talons,
he took hold of my hair, he was too strong for me.
[...]
[He bound] my arms like (the wings of) a bird,
to lead me captive to the house of darkness, the seat of Irkalla
to the house which those who enter cannot leave,
on the journey whose way cannot be retracted;”²⁶

Enkidu sees a dream in which he, a living being, is forced into the house of darkness by a daemon, part lion and part eagle. Heaven and earth react to this extraordinary event. Enkidu finds himself somehow in an in-between position. His connection with the earth is lost; he is neither there nor in heaven. We will find a similar experience in Ezek. 1, which I will touch on later. The daemon, the Anzu bird, lifts Enkidu and takes him away. The distance they travel is indescribable and only defined as “the journey whose way cannot be retracted”. Their destination is the house of darkness, Irkalla, the house of the dead and the house of no return (Gilg. VII. 191–208*):

On the door [and bolt the dust lies thick,]
on the House [(of Dust) a deathly quiet is poured.]
On the House of Dust that I entered,
I looked and (saw) the crowns stowed away:
there sat [kings], the crowned heads who had ruled the land since the days of old,
[...]
In the House of Dust that I entered,

25. The discussion among the gods can only be reconstructed because of a Hittite version. George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 478; Stefan M. Maul, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos*, München 2017, 101.

26. Quotation from George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 643, 645.

there sat *en* priests and *lagar* priests;
 [...]

 [there sat the] queen of the Netherworld, Ereškigal.
 Before her was squatting [Bēlet]-sēri, the scribe of the Netherworld,
 holding [a tablet] and reading aloud in her presence.
 [She raised] her head, she saw me:
 “[Who] fetched this man here?
 [Who] brought [*this fellow*] here?”²⁷

In his dream, Enkidu sees himself entering this special place. The text is clearly using the first person singular. “I” entered the house of dust, I myself. Enkidu is there, observed by Ereškigal.²⁸ Her questions make it clear that this is not the place for Enkidu to be, yet he is present. What kind of concept of the self stands behind such a movement? How is this possible? As Annette Zgoll argues, there are no theoretical writings that might answer the question. She suggests that *zaqīqu* (air spirits)²⁹ take the journey and that these spirits can be sent to a person, although humans generally inherit such a spirit themselves.³⁰ After the scene with the scribe of the netherworld and her questions, the tablet has larger lacunae. Only single terms can be identified. The text continues with Enkidu talking to Gilgamesh at his bedside.

Enkidu’s dream is literature, and it is part of literature with different addressees.³¹ Enkidu is the one who sees and suffers, but it seems that the addressee of the dream is Gilgamesh, who does not dare to help his friend because he is afraid. Gilgamesh the king has to hear³² that in the house of dust where former kings and powerful people are gathered after their death, the insignia of power, the crowns, are piled like waste. At this place, Gilgamesh the king has no power. His royal dignity does not help him.³³

27. Quotation from George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 645.

28. For Ereškigal as subject, see also George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 483. For [Bēlet]-sēri, the scribe of the netherworld as subject, see Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 274–275.

29. See Martha T. Roth (ed.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (CAD), vol. 21, Chicago 1961, 58–60. The term is also used for the god of dreams [Zi]-qi-qu Zi-qi-qu, DN; refers to the series ^d*Ziqiqu* (dream omens) or “soul” (CAD, vol. 21, 60). See also Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams”, 233–236.

30. For soul journey, see for example Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 26–27.

31. Regarding the importance of literary context, see Latacz, “Funktionen des Traums”, 14–27.

32. Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams”, 213–214, stresses that Enkidu has to report to Gilgamesh. One might say that Gilgamesh is not (yet) allowed to go where Enkidu has gone. This is different in Gilgamesh XII, an addition to the epic and not part of the Babylonian Gilgamesh. Maul, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos*, 40–41.

33. Isa. 14 has many similarities with Enkidu’s dream. Interestingly, the look beyond the

Irkalla, as presented in Enkidu's dream, is not only the lowest layer of a tripartite cosmic model (heaven – earth – netherworld); it is, as well as the world of the living, a structured social space.³⁴ Kings are still kings, yet they lost their crowns. Order is essential, even here – as represented by the scribe. The questions point to a disturbance of order.

Another addressee is the reader who gets information about a realm where living creatures are not allowed to go. In terrifying images the living are warned, and the powerful have to understand that their power will come to an end. Living in a world where knowledge of cause and effect is indispensable for life and the perpetuation of order, the look behind the scenes is of high importance.

Dreams and Visions in the Old Testament

Most scholars access “dreams” in the Old Testament through terminology.³⁵ The Hebrew root חלם and the related noun חלום are usually used when Old Testament texts speak about dreaming and dreams. The Old Testament does not differentiate between an ordinary dream and a revelation,³⁶ and the typical messenger is God.³⁷ Jacob, Joseph, the cupbearer in the Joseph-story, King Solomon, and Nebuchadnezzar are all dreaming. The introduction into their dreams does not show any difference either. To dream relevant dreams does not necessarily involve a special ability or professionalism. This is different when it comes to the interpretation of dreams.

Attributes of dreaming are the reception during the night as well as the specific posture of the recipient. This includes lying down as well as a specific position of the head, which allows God to step in.³⁸ The reception of colourful images during the night fits in particular with Zechariah's visions. It is not entirely obvious whether he dreams or not. Zechariah says: “In the night I saw” (ראיתי הלילה; Zech. 1:8); followed by “And I looked up and saw” (ואשא את-עיני וארא; Zech. 2:1).³⁹ It is only in Zech. 4:1 that it is said that the angel awakens the prophet. It is not clear whether one wakes “to” the dream

scenes in Isa. 14 is neither called a dream nor a vision, but it is composed as a lament.

34. See Janowski, “Du hast meine Füße”, 44–50.

35. This approach is to be found for example in Bar, *A Letter*, 10–13. For form-critical patterns, see Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 39–44.

36. See Lanckau, *Herr der Träume*, 65.

37. See Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 55–56.

38. See note 18.

39. Only with slight differences also in Zech. 2:5; 5:1, 9; 6:1. The introductions differ when the “angel who talked with me” appears on the scene and interrogates Zechariah. For literary critical implications, see Martin Hallaschka, *Haggai und Sacharja 1–8: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Berlin 2011, 316.

or wakes “from” it.⁴⁰ It seems as if Zechariah’s night visions are somehow in-between a dream and a vision.⁴¹

Terminology such as נבא (“to prophecy”), חזה (“to see”), or ראה (“to see”) has a great impact on the definitions of prophecy.⁴² At some places the Old Testament texts try to explain the differences or the connections: “Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer’; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer” (1 Sam. 9:9).⁴³ The urge to make an exact differentiation, particularly between these three activities is closely linked to another question that must be answered: are we dealing with an “ordinary” dream or with a revelation?⁴⁴ Jeremiah and Deuteronomy show a general tendency by placing the word as revelation – before the image, identifying “dream” with image. This might be the reason why also visions are, at some point, identified with the word. In Ezek. 1:1–3, the vision of the divine vehicle (throne chariot) for example, a combination of seeing (ראה) and receiving the word of Yhwh (היה דבר יהוה) and (היה יד יהוה) is used. The prophet announces a vision of God, describes what he sees, and still the entire process is understood as receiving the word of God.⁴⁵

There are reasons to differentiate between dream and vision.⁴⁶ Yet, the definition as dream, vision, or word only becomes really important for different types of demarcation, for example true or false prophecy; or vision as

40. See Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams”, 190; Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 2, 20, 22–23, 44; Carol L. Meyers & Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York 1987, 229; Robert Hanhart, *Sacharja 1,1–8,23*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1998, 276. The question whether a recipient is dreaming or not arises also with Samuel in Shilo. Samuel is obviously lying down for sleeping (שכב; 1 Sam. 3:3, 5–6, 9) when he hears God’s voice, but wakes up because he does not understand what is going on. Eli tells him to lie down again so that God might continue talking. Nothing is said about dreaming. However, the fact that Samuel has to lie down to hear could indicate this.

41. Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions*, 20–22. See Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, Leiden 1996, 125–143, who understands חזון לילה as a subcategory of חלום. Jean-Marie Husser, “Songe”, in Jacques Briand & Edouard Cothenet (eds.) *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, vol. 12, Paris 1996, 1439–1543, on the other hand, understands חזון as lucid dreaming while חלום is connected to sleep. Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 62, 200, is very concerned about describing the prophet as fully awake, due to the fact that חלום or חלם is not used and because the angel awakens the prophet (Zech. 4:1). See also Lanckau, *Herr der Träume*, 68–74.

42. For several other aspects, see Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, Atlanta, GA 2003, 1–2.

43. See Amos 7:12–15; Hos. 12:11.

44. Such a distinction is rather problematic. See Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben*, 255–257. Interestingly, Ugaritic texts often place *hlm* (“dream”) in conjunction with *hđrt* (“revelation, vision”). Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 25.

45. For a text-critical discussion of Ezek. 1:1–3, see Walther Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 1–24*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1979, 21–22.

46. See Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen*, 377–386.

part of a commission contrasted to dreams of ordinary persons.⁴⁷ In general, we might observe that dreams are often relevant in wisdom literature and visions in prophecy.⁴⁸ However, both can be image or word; both take up the same pictorial programme (*Bildprogramm*).⁴⁹ These are good reasons to read dreams and visions together and to keep a critical distance to the Protestant tradition of putting the word before the image.⁵⁰ Whether we deal with a dream, a vision, or a word – they all need interpretation.⁵¹

Ezek. 1:1–3:15: The Vision of God and the Divine Vehicle

The chariot vision opens the Book of Ezekiel, followed by Ezekiel's calling to commission (*Berufungsbericht*).⁵² Ezekiel, sitting at the river Chebar in Babylon, sees a vision of God (אֱלֹהִים מֵרָאָה; Ezek. 1:1). Even though the entire report takes up several features of well-known visions (especially Isa. 6) and callings to prophetic mission, it is still rather unique.⁵³ The text is almost three chapters long. I will restrict myself to a few aspects. What Ezekiel sees in Babylon is, at first, an open sky allowing him to get a sight of another sphere. Accompanied by noise and strange weather

47. Especially in Mari dreamers were lay persons. See Oppenheim, "Interpretation of Dreams", 240; Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 29–30, 56. Other types of demarcations can be found in reception history, when dreams give orientation for the present while visions predict the future. See Iris Wenderholm, "Gottes unsichtbarer Pinsel: Bilder von Vision und Traum in der Kunst", *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 36 (2019), 112–115.

48. See Jean-Marie Husser, *Le songe et la parole*, Berlin 1994, 201–261, 269–270.

49. A larger variety of dreams can be found: besides ordinary or visionary dreams there are allegorical dreams (Gen. 40–41; Dan. 2, 4), oral experiences of the divine word (Gen. 20:3, 6; 28:13–18; 31:10–13; Num. 12:6–8; Joel 3:1; Job 33:14–16), and theophanies (Gen. 28:12–13a; 1 Kgs. 3:5; Job 4:12–16). See Lanckau, *Herr der Träume*, 67. For dreams as part of royal ideology, see Husser, *Le songe*, 29–88, 265. For correspondences between dream and vision see Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen*, 372–374; Lanckau, *Herr der Träume*, 73–75; Susan Niditch, *The Symbolic Vision in Biblical Tradition*, Chico, CA 1980, 18; Ina Willi-Plein, "Traum", in Manfred Görg & Bernhard Lang (eds.), *Neues Bibel-Lexikon*, vol. 3, Zürich 2001, 919; Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions*, 17–20, who offers a longer list of relevant literature to the question.

50. See Jean Marcel Vincent, *Das Auge hört: Die Erfahrbarkeit Gottes*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1998, 30–31.

51. The chosen picture is an illumination of the capital letter E, stemming from the twelfth-century Winchester Bible. It shows the tetramorph Ezekiel according to Ezek. 1. Especially striking for our subject is that the biblical text does not say that Ezekiel is dreaming. However, in the illumination the prophet is lying on the ground, his head slightly raised and his eyes closed. In fact, there is no difference expressed between vision and dream. The illuminator uses a scene and a staging that seems to be fitting for both. See Wilhelm Neuss, *Das Buch Ezechiel in Theologie und Kunst bis zum Ende des XII. Jahrhunderts*, Münster 1912.

52. A brief overview of the discussion of an original unity of vision and speech of God is given in Zimmerli, *Ezechiel*, 13–16. See also Christoph Koch, *Gottes himmlische Wohnstatt*, Tübingen 2018, 137–146.

53. This holds true also for the various elements of which the creatures and the chariot consist. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, New York 1986, 54–59.



Figure 1. An illumination of the capital letter E, stemming from the twelfth-century Winchester Bible. It shows the tetramorph Ezekiel according to Ezek. 1. Especially striking for our subject is that the biblical text does not say that Ezekiel is dreaming. However, in the illumination the prophet is lying on the ground, his head slightly raised and his eyes closed. In fact, there is no difference expressed between vision and dream. The illuminator uses a scene and a staging that seems to be fitting for both. See Wilhelm Neuss, *Das Buch Ezechiel in Theologie und Kunst bis zum Ende des XII. Jahrhunderts*, Münster 1912.

phenomena, as in a typical theophany, he sees creatures with four wings and four faces (human, lion, ox, and eagle; Ezek. 1:10), and beside these creatures are moving wheels. Over their heads is a dome (רקיע; Ezek. 1:22), and above the dome something similar to a sapphire (אבן ספיר) throne (see Ex. 24:10), above which something that appears to have human form is seated (דמות כמראה אדם; Ezek. 1:26).⁵⁴ Finally Ezekiel says in chapter 3:14–15: “The spirit lifted me up and bore me away [וריח נשאתני ותקחני]; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me. I came to the exiles at Tel Abib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days.”

The text demarcates space related to the prophet, the divine vehicle, and Yhwh himself. The prophet is sitting in Babylonia, in Tel Abib, at the river Chebar (see Dan. 10:4).⁵⁵ In the beginning of the vision he looks upwards,

54. On the hidden and revealed God, see Vincent, *Das Auge hört*, 48–50.

55. It is still not possible to say exactly which river is meant with Chebar and where to find

and finally he is moved upwards. The spirit lifts the prophet and carries him. Walther Zimmerli calms his readers by saying that it is only the subjective experience of the prophet while going home. There is, according to Zimmerli, no need to think of actual levitation.⁵⁶ Yet, the movement upwards is described, along with an additional horizontal movement, when he walks away after this staggering experience. Briefly: A wind lifted me... and took me, and I went... I came... I sat...⁵⁷ Later in the book the prophet says something more about the lifting of the spirit. In Ezek. 8:3 and 11:24 we can read about the spirit raising the prophet and bringing him to Jerusalem in visions of God (במראה ברוח אלהים/במראות אלהים). In these cases there is a larger distance that the prophet has to overcome.⁵⁸

Yhwh's coming from the north (מִרְהַצְפוֹן) points to another lateral movement (Ezek. 1:4). There is some discussion about whether "north" means the geographic direction, a country (see Zech. 2:10), or the direction where Yhwh has his mythical dwelling place, as said for example in Ps. 48.⁵⁹ The last suggestion seems to me the most probable one because "north" as a country would denote Babylon,⁶⁰ and also as a purely geographic direction it does not make any sense, despite the fact that Yhwh is not coming from Jerusalem. In the vision, Ezekiel sees Yhwh in something like a human form seated above the dome, the רִקִיעַ: meaning that the divine throne becomes visible even above the unclean and hostile country, without a direct connection to the Jerusalemite temple.

The connection between the divine throne and the earth are the chariots, whose wheels have contact with the earth (Ezek. 1:15). They are able to move freely in space, however, their movement is limited by the dome (רִקִיעַ). It could be asked if the sphere they reach is a sphere between earth and heaven. This specific formulation, earth and heaven and not heaven and earth, is not often used in the Old Testament. It appears mainly in Ezekiel and

Tel Abib. For further discussion on this, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 40.

56. "Was in der gegenständlichen prophetischen Sprache als ein Emporgehoben- und Entrafftwerden durch den Geist beschrieben wird, ist nach der subjektiven Erfahrung des Propheten sein Nachhausegehen in der Glut des aufgewühlten Geistes." Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 82.

57. See Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 74, who stresses especially the passage from vision to "real experience". He understands the wind as supernatural (p. 70).

58. In other cases, without calling it a vision, the prophet seems to be more or less physically present, for example in order to dig himself through a wall to see what is behind (Ezek. 8:7).

59. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 51–52; Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 42; Koch, *Gottes himmlische Wohnstatt*, 148–149.

60. As in Jer. 3:18; 6:22; 10:22; 16:15; Zech. 2:10; 6:6, 8. See Niditch, *Symbolic Vision*, 157–158; Corinna Körting, "Sach 5,5–11 – Die Unrechtmäßigkeit wird an ihren Ort verwiesen", *Biblica* 87 (2006), 489.

once in Zech. 5:9. In Zech. 5 it is again a specific sphere where the guilt of the people, captured in an Epha, a measurement vessel, is brought to Sinar/Babylon by winged creatures.⁶¹ Taking this into account, we can speak about “layers”: the earth, the sky with its birds, and the sphere where Ezekiel and the winged women from Zechariah’s vision can move, covered by the dome and the heaven above. Finally, two elements connect these “layers”. It is Ezekiel’s sight that goes through the dome into the heavenly sphere and the fire or something like fire burning around and among the creatures and inside the human-like being above the dome (Ezek. 1:4, 13, 27).

Ezekiel’s world, that is, the exiles’ world, seems to have lost its fixed centre. Neither Jerusalem, the temple, nor Zion are of importance. The vision collocates the world anew. Yhwh is where his people are; his holy abode is movable. This is a well-known part of the picture. Another aspect we can observe is the success of the vision of keeping a complex world together.⁶² It is more than just moving the place of God’s presence from Jerusalem to where his people are. The mythical north is included as well as different spheres and the prophet can observe and move between them.

Zech. 1:8–11: The Vision of the Rider among the Myrtle Trees and Three Horses

In the night I saw a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, “What are these, my lord?” The angel who talked with me said to me, “I will show you what they are.” So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, “They are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.” Then they spoke to the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees, “We have patrolled the earth, and lo, the whole earth remains at peace.” (Zech. 1:8–11)

This is the first of what ultimately became Zechariah’s eight night visions.⁶³ This short text describes a complex scenery. Zechariah sees a rider on a red horse, followed by three additional horses. The prophet addresses the “angel who talked with me” and asks for an explanation. However, it is the man standing among the myrtle trees who answers. In the final verse, it is the angel of the Lord who is standing among the myrtle trees, giving an extended answer to what has already been said in 1:10. All in all, we have three

61. See Körting, “Sach 5,5–11”, 482, 489.

62. See Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 48.

63. For the scholarly discussion on whether this happened at night or while the prophet was looking out into the night, see Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions*, 60–62.

designations for the man among the myrtle trees: rider (1:8), man (1:10), and angel of the Lord (1:11). The “angel who talked with me” seems to be identified with the man in 1:10.⁶⁴

The immediate impression is that the night vision does not distinguish clearly between interior and exterior world. The prophet can talk to the “angel who talked with me” while the angel is also part of the vision. This is even more striking in Zech. 5, when the “angel who talked with me” communicates with the prophet and takes a hand in the vision at the same time.

The rider on the red horse and the other three horses in red, sorrel, and white (אדמים ולבנים שרקים) are coming back from patrolling the earth (ארץ). What they found is peace. Horses are fast and the fastest way to manage larger distances in the first millennium BCE, which is what they represent here.⁶⁵ Their riders know what is going on in the world – on the horizontal level. Whether the “world at peace” is good or bad news has been discussed. The Hebrew says that the world “sits” and is “quiet” (ישב and שקט). An alternative translation, instead of peace, would be “the earth stands still” – nothing is happening. The impact can only be explained in connection with the following oral experience in Zech. 1:12–13 and the divine oracle in 1:14–17. Yhwh shall make an end to the suffering of Jerusalem after seventy years.⁶⁶

The list of interpretations of the four horses in red, sorrel, and white is long.⁶⁷ I will give only one example of what is under discussion. The information that the horses are coming from roaming the earth led, for example, Hartmut Gese to try to identify the horses with continents: Asia is red and the most fruitful continent, Europe is sorrel and less fruitful, and Africa, the least fruitful one, is white.⁶⁸ Further comments at this stage seem

64. Martin Hallaschka has presented a convincing literary critical analysis, showing how this short vision developed. The main purpose of the additions was to include the interpreting angel and in the end the angel of the Lord. Martin Hallaschka, “Zechariah’s Angels: Their Role in the Night Visions and in the Redaction History of Zech 1,7–6,8”, *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 24 (2010), 13–27. Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 283–292, on the other hand, offers a synchronic reading. In his opinion, the author makes it difficult for the reader in order to gradually reveal that the person standing among the myrtle trees is really the angel of Yhwh.

65. See also coins from the Persian period showing horses. Othmar Keel, *Jerusalem und der eine Gott: Eine Religionsgeschichte*, Göttingen 2011, 100–101.

66. Zech. 1:8–11 belongs to the first part of the first vision. An oral experience (a communication between God and the angel of Yhwh in 1:12–13) and divine oracles (in 1:14–17) follow without any sign that the experience beginning in 1:8 is finished. See Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions*, 58–59.

67. Both the LXX and Zech. 6 name four colours. A good overview of the various interpretations can be found in Tiemeyer, *Zechariah and His Visions*, 62–84.

68. Hartmut Gese, *Vom Sinai zum Zion: Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur biblischen Theologie*, Munich 1974, 215–217.

superfluous, particularly as Egypt and the Nile were understood as especially fruitful. To make a long story short: it is impossible to identify the colours with ascertained places. Instead, they stand for diversity, and they make the image vivid.

The place where the rider stands is described as “among the myrtle trees in the glen”. The myrtle is not a very tall tree, only up to two metres.⁶⁹ For the demarcation of a special place this is not very impressive. The myrtle tree is not very often mentioned in the Old Testament. Isa. 41:19 and 55:13 are interesting because there the myrtle tree is connected with a time of salvation.⁷⁰ In Isa. 41 the myrtle is the tree Yhwh plants in the desert as a sign for new creation and salvation. It should also be noticed that the Hebrew word for “myrtle” (הדס) sounds almost like the Hebrew term for “new” (חדש).

The findings for “glen” (מצולה) do not yield much more in the way of information. Passages using the term מצולה describe a depression in the ground, covered with water, a dangerous and life-threatening place, either chaotic or connected with the grave.⁷¹ Still, the place mentioned here in Zechariah has often been identified as the gate of heaven. This is due to the traditional Ancient Near East standard image of a double-peaked mountain as the dwelling place of a god. Several examples can be found, particularly on seals.⁷² Two wings of a temple gate as well as the two pillars in front of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs. 7:13–22), covered with floral motives, also stand in the same tradition.⁷³ What we might say is that the place is deep and dark, probably a place of transition. Where, or what for, is another question. The rider(s) and horses have been sent out by Yhwh and are now back to give their reports. This speaks for the idea of heaven’s gate. It is a place of

69. See Holger Delkurt, *Sacharjas Nachtgesichte: Zur Aufnahme und Abwandlung prophetischer Traditionen*, Berlin 2000, 24.

70. Additionally it is mentioned in Neh. 8:13 as part of the material to build the sukkot.

71. Ps. 68:23; 69:3, 16; 88:7; 107:24. See also Jonah 2:4 and Job 41:23 (based on the root צול). See as well Delkurt, *Sacharjas Nachtgesichte*, 28–29. The LXX (based on the root צלל) translates Zech. 1:8 with μέσση τῶν δύο ὄρεων τῶν κατασκίων, “two shadowy mountains”.

72. See Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 38–42; Delkurt, *Sacharjas Nachtgesichte*, 22.

73. Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst: Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4*, Stuttgart 1977, 297–303; Henning Graf Reventlow, *Die Propheten Haggai, Sacharja und Maleachi*, Göttingen 1993, 41; Christian Jeremias, *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Stellung im Zusammenhang der Visionsberichte im Alten Testament und zu ihrem Bildmaterial*, Göttingen 1977, 112.

Connections to temple tradition as well as to the destroyed temple are the reasons why Wilhelm Rudolph, *Haggai – Sacharja 1–8 – Sacharja 9–14 – Maleachi*, Gütersloh 1976, 72, 75, calls this a place for prayer. Adam S. Van der Woude, “Die beiden Söhne des Öls (Sach 14:14): Messianische Gestalten?”, in Matthieu Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Travels in the World of the Old Testament: Studies Presented to Professor M.A. Beek on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Assen 1974, 267, and Jeremias, *Nachtgesichte des Sacharja*, 112–117, include Gilgamesh IX into their considerations.

transition, the demarcation of a border that Zechariah sees, but does not go beyond.

The vision is dated to the second year of Darius (519 BCE). Judah is under Persian rule. Political sovereignty and the temple are lost. This is the background of Zechariah's night visions. If we look again at the worldview, the borders on the horizontal level are the borders horses would reach – the Persian Empire as the entire world. This axis is crossed by the vertical axis. This is not as clear as it is in Ezek. 1, but the point of transition is demarcated by the myrtle trees in the glen. Although Zechariah does not see beyond this point, the world behind becomes part of the vision, first due to the meeting point and the rider, identified as a heavenly being,⁷⁴ and second because Zechariah hears and sees angels “discussing”.

The Look behind the Scenes: Worldview in Dreams and Visions

Enkidu's dream and Ezekiel's and Zechariah's visions do not simply report a sequence of images, but inform us about the worldview of the Ancient Near East in the second and first millennia as well as of Israel in Persian times. Even seen in a situation of suffering and distress, Enkidu's dream points to a world that is structured and in order – and under the control of the gods. This was part of the message for Gilgamesh and the reason for taking a look behind the scenes. Yet, Ezekiel's and Zechariah's visions stem from a situation where the centre and the periphery of the world are no longer stable, due to a loss of centre (Jerusalem) or due to a periphery (the unknowable dimension of the Persian Empire) that cannot be captured. Dreams and visions allow a new worldview without the constraints of space.⁷⁵ The reality of the world as a whole is made visible – including the mythical world.⁷⁶ Dreams and visions allow a look behind the scenes which organizes what seem to be disparate states: the exile in Babylon and the throne of God, the gateway of heaven and the ungraspable dimensions of the horizon. In this respect, these dreams and visions give new orientation.

74. Hanhart, *Sacharja*, 80, points to Gen. 18:3 and 19:18 and identifies the rider called ארני with Yhwh. Christoph Uehlinger hypothesizes that the horsemen are members of the heavenly host. This is already clear due to the identification with the angel who talked with me and the angel of Yhwh (see Job 1:7; 2:2). However, it is not necessarily based on their connection with horses. Probably of greater importance to the chosen image is the prominence of a riding horseman in Achaemenid iconography. Christoph Uehlinger, “Riding Horsemen”, in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking & Pieter W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed., Leiden 1999, 705–707. See also Jeremias, *Nachtgesichte des Sacharja*, 121–123. The horses are interpreted as symbols of war in Delkurt, *Sacharjas Nachtgesichte*, 33–39.

75. See Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 6.

76. See Friedhelm Hartenstein, “Die Welt als Bild und als Erzählung”, in Sylke Lubs et al. (eds.), *Behutsames Lesen: Alttestamentliche Exegese im interdisziplinären Methodendiskurs*, Leipzig 2007, 67, 71, on the nagû-regions of the Babylonian world map.

Finally, those seeing dreams or visions walk at the frontiers of reality and faith. However, they are not only allowed to have a look behind the scenes, they are involved. In the current theological debate and in cultural studies it is central to speak about the human being as the *Ort der Bilder* (the place of images).⁷⁷ It is human imagination that produces them in order to speak about the otherwise inexplicable.⁷⁸ They capture both the tangible and the intangible.⁷⁹ In this sense they are a basis for religious speech. Neither the composers of the Epic of Gilgamesh nor Ezekiel would have been speaking of an “imaginary place” – they saw and they were involved. Dreams and visions do that; they reveal and they involve. However, as an Old Testament scholar, one can at least say that the texts one deals with, dreams and visions, push the imagination⁸⁰ and therefore involve the reader, inviting him or her to see the entire world across its whole breadth and depth. ▲

SUMMARY

The worldview (*Weltbild*) in ancient times was clearly structured in terms of centre (temple and city) and a periphery (chaotic surroundings) on the horizontal level and height and depth (for example God's mountain and the pillars of the earth) on the vertical level. The experience of the natural world in terms of topography or geography supplements this cosmological model; and this orientation is held as also being relevant for the mythical world or the gateways to it. Dreams and visions are a phenomenon that unlocks worldview. The three examples chosen give an idea about a world in order, which includes the netherworld. Enkidu's dream of the netherworld is such an example. Even in a situation of suffering and distress the world is under control of the gods. Without the constraints of space, humans are able to see and to get an overall picture of the natural world, the mythical world, and the world beyond as one. In times of crisis, as Israel experienced it during the exile, dreams and visions allow a new world view. The pictorial programme, for example in the visions of the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah, organize what seems to be in disparate states and give orientation. Centre and periphery can be defined anew.

77. Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 57–58.

78. See Malte Dominik Krüger, “Wie wirklich sind Träume? Überlegungen aus Philosophie und Theologie”, *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 36 (2019) 51–70.

79. See Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 47.

80. See Lux, *Prophetie und Zweiter Tempel*, 61.