

Up, Up, and Away!
Exploring Vertical and Horizontal Conceptualizations of Sacred Space in Ezekiel 40-42

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Ezekiel has been a book divided, as well as a book united. Early scholars, such as Hartmut Gese¹ and Walter Zimmerli,² focused on the book of Ezekiel as a patchwork of pasted sources in order to resolve some of the text's incongruities. Subsequent scholars, such as Moshe Greenberg,³ reacted to this textual dissection and instead examined the book as a coherent whole, finding alternate explanations within the Israelite tradition for some of those perceived incongruities.⁴ Concerning the book's final vision, Ezekiel 40-48 is now viewed as a work setting forth a complex picture of reality from the perspective of an exilic priest-prophet.⁵ Recently, scholars have dealt with Ezekiel's depictions of this "tiered reality" consisting of varying degrees of holiness.⁶ Ezekiel 40-42 describes a rather unique temple that stands in the

¹ See Hartmut Gese, *Der Verfassungsentwurf des Ezechiel (Kap. 40-48): Traditionsgeschichtlich Untersucht* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr / Paul Siebeck, 1957).

² See Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 1-24* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), and *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

³ See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) and *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

⁴ While there is some evidence of redaction, in this study I will examine the book of Ezekiel at the level of its final redaction.

⁵ For a discussion of Ezekiel's conceptual identity, see Marvin Sweeney, "Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile" in *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 125-143. For a holistic attribution of chapters 40-48 to Ezekiel, see Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," *Interpretation* 38 (1984), pp.181-208 and Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 285-289.

⁶ See Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton, eds., *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

midst of the land of Israel. Even within this quintessential sacred space, there are different degrees of holiness as one progresses through the temple. While almost all recognize the importance of graded holiness in Ezekiel's temple vision, there is no consensus among scholars regarding the spatial paradigms used to express sacred space within the temple compound. This paper will examine both the vertical and horizontal literary representations of graded holiness in Ezekiel's description of the temple compound⁷ as suggested by scholars and supplemented by my own observations. Following this discussion, I will look to Mesopotamian iconography to reconcile these two different scholarly conceptualizations of sacred space within Ezekiel's temple vision.

Structure

While Ezekiel 40:1 provides an introduction for the expansive vision in chapters 40-48, Daniel Block argues that Ezek. 40:1-43:11 may be treated as a "distinct redactional subunit."⁸ He suggests that "the introduction and conclusion to the description of the temple complex (40:4-43:11) are deliberately crafted so that the latter answers to the former."⁹ Specifically, he states that Ezekiel's charge to describe his temple vision to the people forms an "impressive *inclusio*" in Ezek. 40:3-4 and 43:10-11.¹⁰ Margaret Odell goes one step further and notes another element

⁷ A brief word on the terminology I use regarding the building in Ezekiel's vision: I refer to the entire structure (enclosed by the large outer walls) as the "temple compound" and the tripartite building containing the קדש קדשים "holy of holies" as the "sanctuary."

⁸ Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 506.

⁹ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 506-507.

¹⁰ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 506. Block notes that some include 43:12 in this section, but argues that the form of this verse ("this is the law of the temple") functions better as an introduction to the following legal discussion of actions within the temple (Ezek. 43:13 – 46:24). For a detailed discussion of this issue, see

serving to frame this literary subunit; she includes the vision reports (in Ezek. 40:1-3 and 43:1-9) as emphatic boundaries for this section of text.¹¹

As evidenced by Block and Odell's disagreement regarding the criteria for its exact boundaries, difficulties arise when dividing the vision's first literary unit using perceived thematic elements. The following presents a basic outline of Ezekiel's temple vision, based on structural features of the text:

I. Introduction: Date Formula (25th year; 10th day of the Month)	40:1
II. First Vision Account: Tour of the Temple	40:2-42:20
A. Vision Account Introduction (במרות אלהים הביאני): Setting:	
Land of Israel and a high Mountain	40:2
B. First stage (ויביא אותי): Outer walls and gates	40:3-16
C. Second stage (ויביאני): Outer Court and gates	40:17-27
D. Third Stage (ויביאני): Inner Court; south gate	40:28-31
E. Fourth Stage (ויביאני): Inner Court; east gate	40:32-34
F. Fifth Stage (ויביאני): Inner Court; north gate	40:35-47
G. Sixth Stage (ויביאני): Ulam	40:48-49
H. Seventh Stage (ויביאני): Heikhal and Holy of Holies	41:1-26
I. Eighth stage (ויביאני, ויוצאני): the priestly chambers	42:1-14
J. Summation (וכלה את-מדות): Measurements of the Temple Complex	42:15-20

Steven Tuell, *The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40-48* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 44-46, where he discusses the argument of Shemaryahu Talmon and Michael Fishbane, and in turn refutes their view that 43:12 concludes the previous unit, instead of introducing a new unit.

¹¹ Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), p. 485.

III. Second Vision Account: Halakhot pertaining to the Temple and the Land of Inheritance	43:1-48:35
A. First stage (ויולכני): East Gate; Entry of Divine Presence	43:1-4
B. Second stage (ותשאני רוח ותביאני): Inner Court	43:5-27
C. Third Stage (וישב אתי): Outer Court; Gate Closed; the Prince Eats	43:1-3
D. Fourth Stage (ויביאני): North Gate Before the Temple; Halakhot instruction concerning the priests and Levites	44:4-46:18
E. Fifth Stage (ויביאני): Northern Chambers of the Priests: Kitchens	46:19-20
F. Sixth Stage (ויוציאני): Outer Court; Corner Structures and Kitchens for the preparation of the offerings by the people	46:21-24
G. Seventh Stage: Return (וישבני) to the East Gate of the Temple with water flowing eastward	47:1
H. Eighth Stage: Out the north gate (ויוציאני) to outer Eastern Gate with water flowing eastward	47:2-6a
I. Ninth Stage: Return (ויולכני) to bank of wadi; Portrayal of New Creation; Description of Tribal Allotments and Holy District	47:6b-48:35

The linguistic structure of this entire vision account suggests that chapters 40-42 represent a distinct unit. Immediately following the initial dating formula, the author introduces the first vision account by describing his visionary conveyance to the land of Israel (Ezek. 40:1-3). He then describes his surveillance of the temple compound (Ezek. 40:5-42:20), guided by a bronze man (“איש מראהו כמראה נחשת” in Ezek. 40:3). The entire experience is punctuated with a particular guidance formula: ויביאני “and he brought me” (40:17, 28, 32, 35, 48; 41:1; 42:1). The unit then ends with the measurement of the outer walls of the temple complex (Ezek. 42:15-20).

This is followed immediately by a second vision formula (Ezek. 43:1-5), indicating the beginning of another section of the text. Thus, chapters 40-42 can be viewed as a distinct literary unit based on structural elements.

Other scholars have arrived at the same conclusion, albeit by different means. From a text-critical perspective, Jon Levenson suggests that the “great Temple vision” of chapters 40-42 is the earliest stratum of chapters 40-48.¹² Thematically, some scholars suggest that chapters 40-42 are themselves framed by an *inclusio* addressing the wall of the temple complex (Ezek. 40:5 and 42:20).¹³ Within these boundaries, the author outlines the “dimensions of sacred space”¹⁴ through a detailed measurement of the building. Regarding the intricacies of these temple measurements, Kalinda Stevenson suggests that “the issue in Ezekiel 40-42 is not the correct building of structures, but the creation of spaces, and even more importantly, keeping these spaces separate.”¹⁵ According to Stevenson, there is a conscious delineation of the temple compound’s sacred space within chapters 40-42. The thematic emphasis of Ezekiel 40-42, then, is on the conceptual measurements of the temple compound, and this will be the focus of the present study.

¹² Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), p. 40.

¹³ E.g. Paul Joyce, “Temple and Worship in Ezekiel 40-48,” in John Day, ed., *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 150.

¹⁴ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 539.

¹⁵ Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40-48* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 19. Susan Niditch argues that this “creation of spaces” suggested by Stevenson is akin to a cosmogony: “The detailed architectural measurements in chaps. 40-42...[reflect] such interest in the context of visionary speculation, a special variety of wisdom. Emphases on inner versus outer, on gateways, thresholds, vestibules, doors, and chambers, on holy and more holy, create a building geography, a cosmos in words at the center of which is the spirit of Yahweh (43:5), the life force. Such details reflect not merely a careful concern with engineering and architectural definition but also a process of cosmogony, of world-ordering.” See Susan Niditch, “Ezekiel 40-48 in a Visionary Context,” *CBQ* 48 (1986), p. 217.

Setting

Literary

Ezekiel's temple vision (chapters 40-42) is only the first portion of Ezekiel's final vision (chapters 40-48). This entire vision, far from being an isolated literary unit, is closely connected to other chapters in the book. Steven Tuell argues that "the vision in Ezekiel 40-48 is closely related to the earlier visions, and it demands interpretation on the same terms."¹⁶ Susan Niditch agrees that chapters 40-48 are connected to an earlier vision, and argues that Ezekiel's first vision (chapters 1-3), along with his final vision (chapters 40-48) function as an *inclusio* for the book of Ezekiel.¹⁷ Walter Zimmerli agrees that there are literary connections between some of the vision accounts in Ezekiel, but instead only notes the relation between chapters 8-11 and chapters 40-41, basing their relation on the imagery of guidance through a temple in both sections.¹⁸

The most convincing synthesis of these two approaches is made by Paul Joyce and Steven Tuell. Joyce finds a number of similarities in the way that these three visions begin.¹⁹ Tuell demonstrates that chapters 1-3, 8-11, and 40-48 are linked by both mutual reference and

¹⁶ Steven Tuell, "Ezekiel 40-42 as Verbal Icon," *CBQ* 58 (1996), p. 656.

¹⁷ Niditch, "Ezekiel 40-48 in a Visionary Context," p. 215. She explains the significance of this connection in the following: "It is interesting that Ezekiel's work as now constituted opens with a vision of the heavenly throne and closes with a vision of the temple, God's earthly dwelling; it opens with a message about God's departure from the old temple and closes with the image of his glory's returning to the new one. Surely the heavenly and earthly temples are interconnected in the Ezekiel tradition itself" (p. 215).

¹⁸ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 344. His argument for this connection is: "The scene, with its guidance statements, recalls...the ecstatic vision of chapters 8-11. There too the prophet was led (though not by the leadership of a 'man') from the outside into the innermost part of the temple area" (p. 344).

¹⁹ Paul Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), p. 222.

similar imagery.²⁰ I find an additional reason for viewing these three visions together. In the first vision, the appearance of the deity is described using the phrase כבוד־יהוה “glory of the LORD” (Ezek. 1:28). The second vision refers to a similar manifestation using the phrase כבוד אלהי ישראל “glory of the God of Israel” (Ezek. 8:4). During the final vision, the author employs *both* phrases in describing God’s majestic return to the temple (which he does in the reverse order: he first mentions the כבוד אלהי ישראל “glory of the God of Israel” [Ezek. 43:2], and then mentions the כבוד יהוה “glory of the LORD” [Ezek. 43:4]). Thus, I would argue that this final vision of God’s glory is a literary culmination of both of the earlier visions.

Historical

While scholars still debate how much of Ezekiel 40-48 came from the same hand, signs in the text point to a 6th century composition of this entire unit. Joyce writes, “Whether or not it is all from Ezekiel, several factors favour a sixth-century date for Ezekiel 40-48 as a whole. There is nothing that unambiguously refers to events after the sixth century.”²¹ The emphasis on the actions of the priesthood in Ezekiel 43-46 also reflect an exilic concern over the proper role

²⁰ Tuell, “Ezekiel 40-42 as Verbal Icon,” p. 656. He explains: “Chaps. 1-3, 8-11, and 40-48 are...linked both by mutual reference (8:2 recalls the vision by the river Chebar; 43:3 refers to the river and to the vision of Jerusalem's destruction) and by the image of the *kabod*. Chaps. 40-48 and 8-11 are further linked in a pattern of exit and entrance: the *kabod* exits the Jerusalem temple by the eastern gate in 11:22, and it enters the visionary temple by the eastern gate in 43:4-5. We have, then, an interconnected network of three visions which stand as the milestones of Ezekiel's ministry and as key points in the structure of his book” (p. 656).

²¹ Joyce, “Temple and Worship in Ezekiel 40-48,” p. 146. Terence Collins agrees, stating that “the ordinances of the temple in chs. 40-48 could scarcely have been written after 515 BCE...The result is that we can think of 515 BCE as representing a *terminus ante quem* for Ezekiel.” Terence Collins, *The Mantle of Elijah: The Redaction Criticism of the Prophetic Books* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 96-97.

of the priesthood (both Levitical and Zadokite). Earlier, Ezekiel observed the corrupted social sphere of the priesthood in the Jerusalem temple (Ezek. 8:6-17). In his later vision of the temple, Ezekiel references the corruption of the Levitical priesthood (e.g. Ezek. 44:15 and 48:10).²² The laws instituted in Ezekiel 43-48 appear to be a corrective to this particular corruption. However, the priestly laws introduced in Ezekiel 40-48 differ in some respects from the laws in the Torah as they were practiced both before and after the exile.²³

In addition to the dearth of references to post-exilic places or priestly procedures, the description of the temple compound itself argues for an exilic-period composition. The depiction of the temple compound in Ezekiel 40-42 is problematic; nowhere does the deity or the author explain where (or when) this visionary temple exists. Tuell has done an excellent job summarizing the various scholarly hypotheses in relation to this question:²⁴ Some suggest that this unit describes a pre-exilic temple blueprint;²⁵ Others suggest that these chapters represent the blueprint for a post-exilic temple (either to be built by the exiles upon their return to their homeland,²⁶ or to be built by God at the end of time²⁷).

²² Block notes that “the picture of the spiritual condition of the priesthood at the time of the exile is far from favorable. Often rejecting the message of Jeremiah (Jer. 20:1-2) and coming under Ezekiel’s attack as well (Ezek. 22:26), they stood in opposition to [God’s] agenda for his people.” See Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, pp. 42-43.

²³ For a comparison of some significant parallels and differences between the Mosaic Torah and Ezekiel’s laws, see Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 498-501.

²⁴ Tuell, “Ezekiel 40-42 as Verbal Icon,” pp. 649-657.

²⁵ Talmon and Fishbane assert that “all scholars who have dealt with this restoration-vision acknowledge that the ground plan of the temple was not the product of Ezekiel’s imagination. Rather, he used a blueprint which came ready to hand, but to which were added various supplementations.” Shemaryahu Talmon and Michael Fishbane “The Structuring of Biblical Books: Studies in the Book of Ezekiel,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 10 (1975-76), p. 139. See also Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 412.

²⁶ E.g. Greenberg, “The Design and Themes of Ezekiel’s Program of Restoration,” p. 182.

The temple described in Ezekiel's final vision differs in many details from both the pre-exilic Solomonic temple and the post-exilic Second Temple. Joyce argues that if the Second Temple was in existence during the composition of Ezekiel's temple vision, "it would have been difficult to write in this way; the account would surely have been accommodated to the new reality."²⁸ Even if this account was written without the Second Temple in mind, the proposal that Ezekiel 40-42 functioned as the blueprint for a post-exilic building proposal is problematic. To counter these arguments for both a pre-exilic and post-exilic "blueprint" interpretation for these chapters, Tuell writes:

One must observe, nevertheless, that the temple vision, for all its detail, cannot serve as an adequate blueprint for an actual building. The detailed description serves to give us an overwhelming sense of the symmetry and order in the temple's design. It also enables us to share in Ezekiel's experience, to see in our mind's eye what he sees. But we cannot even begin to construct Ezekiel's temple on the basis of these measurements.²⁹

Thus, the purpose of this temple vision went beyond the concern for a physical building. What, then, was the author's purpose in communicating this architecturally impractical information?

Genre

The answer to this question lies in the genre of Ezekiel 40-48. Ultimately, the text itself declares its own genre; in the verse following the introductory dating formula (Ezek. 40:1), the author was brought to the land of Israel במרות אלהים "in visions of God," or, in "divine visions."³⁰

²⁷ E.g. Jon Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), p. 33.

²⁸ Joyce, "Temple and Worship in Ezekiel 40-48," p. 147.

²⁹ Tuell, "Ezekiel 40-42 as Verbal Icon," p. 652.

³⁰ See Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 506. See also Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, pp. 84-85 for a full explanation of this choice of translation.

The text, then, is a vision report. The author uses this same terminology to describe the earlier visionary accounts (Ezek. 1:1 and 8:3), which “require[s] that the same hermeneutical principles employed in the interpretation of the precious prophecies apply here, and that one interpret this block in the light of the previous visions of God.”³¹ The text does describe buildings and borders, but difficulties arise when scholars attempt to relate each item to a physical or historical reality. Block explains:

Whereas [Ezekiel] 37:26-27 had spoken of the establishment of Yahweh’s permanent residence among his people, following their homecoming, the present vision [in Ezekiel 40-48] picks up the theological theme and describes the spiritual reality in concrete terms, employing the familiar cultural idioms of temple, altar, sacrifices, *nāśî*, and land...The issue for the prophet is not physical geography but spiritual realities. As in his earlier vision, historical events are described from a theological plane, and the interpreter’s focus must remain on the ideational value of that which is envisioned.³²

I agree with this explanation of Block, as well as the other scholars who argue that Ezekiel 40-48 should be examined from a strictly visionary perspective.³³

The following study will argue that the author of Ezekiel 40-42 was, in fact, attempting to convey a conceptual understanding of sacred space resulting from his visionary experience. Embedded within this description of Ezekiel’s temple, scholars have discerned two competing conceptualizations of sacred space. In one organizational framework, sacred space is aligned along a vertical axis. In the other, sacred space is aligned along a horizontal axis. Instead of recognizing the presence of both conceptualizations, scholars have assumed one of these two perspectives, often ignoring the presence (or the possibility) of another conceptualization. This

³¹ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 496-497.

³² Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 505-506.

³³ E.g. Niditch, “Ezekiel 40-48 in a Visionary Context,” Tuell, “Ezekiel 40-42 as Verbal Icon,” and John M. Lundquist, *The Temple of Jerusalem: Past, Present, and Future* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), p. 10.

paper will examine the legitimacy of both perspectives as present in the text of Ezekiel 40-42. It will then explore the tension created by these two competing scholarly conceptualizations of sacred space and suggest a paradigm for resolving this tension.

Vertical Conceptualization of Sacred Space

As mentioned above, scholars have not come to a consensus regarding the purpose of sacred space represented in Ezekiel 40-42. Zimmerli's foundational examination of Ezekiel's temple vision made this claim: "What dominates the picture as a whole is not the sight of a building rising before one's eyes, as one would expect in a spontaneous vision, but a ground plan."³⁴ While Zimmerli is correct in noting the scarcity of height measurements in the otherwise meticulous description of temple architecture,³⁵ vertical architectural elements *are* present and suggest that the symbolism of a vertical ascent towards increasingly sacred space was a significant factor for the author of Ezekiel.

While not explicitly measured, the imagery of vertical ascent is implicit in the description of stairs in the temple vision.³⁶ After orienting Ezekiel on the east side of the outermost temple walls, the visionary guide ascends (ויעל) a flight of stairs (מעלות) in order to measure the first temple gate (Ezek. 40:6). There is another description of stairs as Ezekiel moves from the outer courtyard to the inner courtyard (Ezek. 40:34), followed by a final set of stairs leading up to the

³⁴ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 343. Block similarly notes: "The dimensions recorded are exclusively horizontal measurements, apparently without regard for the vertical distances required by architectural plans." (Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 510-511).

³⁵ The only two measurements of height (גבה) appear in the description of the sacrificial tables (Ezek. 40:42) and in the description of the sanctuary's golden altar/table outside of the קדש הקדשים "holy of holies" (Ezek. 41:22).

³⁶ Zimmerli observes: "The measurements of the ascent are...not given in cubits but simply in the number of steps, which regarded as a whole are counted in an unmistakably schematized way." Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 360.

sanctuary (Ezek. 40:49). In the systematic description of the temple's stairs, the audience moves progressively higher up the temple compound. Block notes that "the difference in elevation increases with each unit in this sacred complex, as one moves from the outside toward the center...The scene is impressive. The observer's eyes are drawn ever upward to the top of this temple mount."³⁷

This description of vertical progression, however, does not seem to be concerned with precise measurements of physical elevation. In the verse first mentioning ascent (Ezek. 40:6), the stairs are not numbered (and remain unnumbered until verse 22). Similarly, in the account of Ezekiel's final ascent, the stairs are not numbered (Ezek. 40:49).³⁸ Taken together, these passages suggest that the emphasis of the author was on the conceptual aspect of height and not a precise physical measurement. Such a conceptual view of height in Ezekiel's temple vision has precedent in another visionary account that shares a surprising number of features: Jacob's dream in Gen. 28:12-17.

Before proceeding to Jacob's dream, it is worth noting the emphasis that Ezekiel places on the character of Jacob / Israel. יַעֲקֹב "Jacob" appears twice in Ezekiel, and in each of those instances, it is in parallel with יִשְׂרָאֵל "Israel" (20:5 and 39:25).³⁹ Throughout the book of

³⁷ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 542-543.

³⁸ The Masoretic Text reads וּבַמַּעֲלֹת אֲשֶׁר יַעֲלֶה אֵלָיו "and with the steps which led up to it." The Septuagint reads καὶ ἐπὶ δέκα ἀναβαθμῶν ἀνέβαινον ἐπὶ αὐτό "and with ten steps they went up to it." Zimmerli explains this difference as a scribal error, wherein the scribe wrote אֲשֶׁר instead of עֲשֶׂה (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 342). While this is a clever explanation, another possibility may be entertained wherein the MT reading is retained; the author's emphasis may have been on the element of conceptual vertical space instead of a precise topographical measurement.

³⁹ The term בית יַעֲקֹב "house of Jacob" (Ezek. 20:5) is incredibly rare in Biblical Hebrew narrative. In addition to its use in Ezekiel, it only appears elsewhere in narrative contexts in Gen. 46:27 and Ex. 19:3.

Ezekiel, ישראל “Israel” is the name that the author prefers to use (a total of 186 occurrences).⁴⁰

The phrase בית ישראל “house of Israel” appears an astonishing 83 times in Ezekiel, accounting for more than half of the instances of this phrase in the *entire* Hebrew Bible.⁴¹

Block suggests that the phrase בית ישראל “house of Israel” “appears to have been a distinctive literary device” for the author of Ezekiel.⁴² Jeremiah (a contemporary of Ezekiel) uses the phrase בית ישראל “house of Israel” twenty times, but this number pales in comparison to Ezekiel’s use of the same phrase.⁴³ Thus, Ezekiel’s frequent use of בית ישראל “house of Israel” is unique in the Hebrew Bible. This may be a result of the unique exilic experience of the author.⁴⁴ In Akkadian writings, there are “numerous occurrences of the expression *bīt-GN* [geographical name] in which the proper name designates a geographic or tribal entity.”⁴⁵ Within this Akkadian conceptual framework, the use of *bīitu* also carries with it a sense of kinship “when followed by an appropriate genitive,”⁴⁶ as in the usage of בית ישראל “house of

⁴⁰ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 563.

⁴¹ Daniel Block, “Israel’s House: Reflections on the Use of *byt ys’l* in the Old Testament in the Light of its Ancient Near Eastern Environment,” *JETS* 28 (1985), p. 258.

⁴² Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 259.

⁴³ Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 258. Regarding the individual term ישראל “Israel,” Jeremiah uses this frequently (125 times), but this is balanced by his use of the phrase יהודה “Judah” (183 times). See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 564.

⁴⁴ For this suggestion, see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 564.

⁴⁵ Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 266.

⁴⁶ Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 268.

Israel” in Ezekiel. Thus, the use of the phrase *בית ישראל* “house of Israel” would not be uncommon if the author had been exposed to similar Babylonian literary conventions.

Aside from such possible outside cultural influences, there are other reasons why the author of Ezekiel would choose to put so much emphasis on the phrase *בית ישראל* “house of Israel.” In Ezekiel’s temple vision, God specifically commands Ezekiel to address the *בית ישראל* “house of Israel” and describe his subsequent vision of the temple (Ezek. 40:4 and 43:10). Given this association between the temple and Ezekiel’s role as a priest, Zimmerli suggests that the emphasis on the *בית ישראל* “house of Israel” may be the result of a priestly tendency to use this phrase.⁴⁷

Perhaps there was a more practical reason for Ezekiel’s use of the phrase *בית ישראל* “house of Israel.” By invoking the name of their tribal forefather, the author of Ezekiel may have been hearkening back to a time before the tribes had been scattered. The use of *בית ישראל* “house of Israel” may express a “family solidarity, [an] all-embracing total entity”⁴⁸ of all those who had been exiled by foreign nations (viz. Assyria and Babylonia).⁴⁹ Block argues that throughout the Hebrew Bible, the phrase *בית ישראל* “house of Israel,” functions as a unifying

⁴⁷ “In the case of Ezekiel, one might ask further whether he is not in addition influenced by priestly tradition, which already from early times addressed Yahweh’s covenant people as ‘Israel’ and previously also in the period of the divided monarchy allowed the use of different names to fade into the background.” See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 563

⁴⁸ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 564.

⁴⁹ Along these lines, Block writes, “It may be speculated that on the verge of the collapse of the nation as an independent political entity he deliberately adopted an expression with strong cohesive overtones.” See Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 262.

title compared to the phrase בני ישראל “children of Israel.” He writes, “It may be argued that *bny* Israel stresses the plurality of individuals of whom the whole consists, whereas *byt* Israel places the emphasis on the nation as a unified body.”⁵⁰ Ezekiel’s use of the phrase בית ישראל “house of Israel” reflects a desire to unify those in exile using the ideal image of Jacob / Israel.

Returning to Jacob’s dream as recorded in Genesis, the first verse of this account provides a significant link not only to Ezekiel’s description of the temple compound, but also to Ezekiel’s earlier visions of God. Jacob’s dream begins:

וַיַּחְלֵם וְהָגָה סֵלֶם מֵצֵב אֶרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוּ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהָגָה מִלְאֲכָי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵימָם
וַיֵּרְדִים בּוֹ: וְהָגָה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו

And he dreamed, and look- a stairway placed earthward and its top reaching heavenward; and look- angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And look- the LORD stood above it (Gen. 28:12-13a).⁵¹

Since this is the only instance of the word סלם “stairway” in the Hebrew Bible, scholars have suggested an Akkadian cognate in the word *simmltu*.⁵² The semantic range of this word includes “ladder, stair,” “stairs of a house, stepladder,” “stairway of a temple,” and “stairway

⁵⁰ Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 259. Similarly, A. R. Hulst observes that in the book of Deuteronomy, בני ישראל “children of Israel” emphasizes a plurality of individuals (“die empirische Pluralität”). He then argues that ישראל “Israel” used by itself in Deuteronomy carries with it a sense of religious unity (“[religiöse] Einheit”). See A. R. Hulst, “Der Name ‘Israel’ im Deuteronomium,” *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 9 (1951), p. 82.

⁵¹ This threefold visionary declaration describes the recognition of three progressively higher areas (first: the base of the stairway, second: the movement of the angels on the stairway itself, and third: the LORD at the top of the stairway). Similarly, the author of Ezekiel describes a three-stage vertical ascent (first: from the land outside of the temple up to the outer courtyard of the temple compound, second: from the outer courtyard up to the inner courtyard, and third: from the inner courtyard up to the sanctuary).

⁵² See *HALOT*, p. 757, s.v. סלם.

leading up to a city wall.”⁵³ While these last two meanings relate directly to Ezekiel’s temple vision, a final use of this word in Akkadian literature resonates with Ezekiel’s earlier visions of God and suggests that the imagery of a sacred vertical ascent is used purposefully in Ezekiel 40-42.

Akkadian authors sometimes used the word *simmiltu* to describe an ascent to the heavenly realm of the gods. In the story of Nergal and Ereshkigal, the gods send a messenger to Ereshkigal in the underworld, informing her that she cannot leave her realm in order to participate in the banquet of the gods. Ereshkigal then sends her servant Namtar in her stead to bring back a portion from the feast. Her instructions include the following: “O Namtar my vizier, I shall send you to the heaven of our father Anu. Namtar, go up the long stairway of heaven (*ēlâ Namtar arkat^{si} simmelat šamā[mī]*).”⁵⁴ Thus, a messenger makes a heavenly ascent to the chief deity by means of a stairway, just as in the account of Jacob’s dream and in Ezekiel’s temple vision.

Another significant use of *simmiltu* in Akkadian literature appears in the following Old Babylonian prayer: “O Shamash, you opened the bolt of heaven’s door, you ascended the stairs of pure lapis lazuli (*šamaš tepteam sī[kuri] dalat šamê tēliam similar uqnîm ellim*).” Here, the sun god Shamash is described as making his heavenly ascent along a stairway made for that purpose (just as in Jacob’s dream). This goes beyond the previous passage in describing the *appearance* of the stairway; it appeared to be made of *uqnû* “lapis lazuli,” a brilliant blue stone.

⁵³ *CAD S*, pp. 273-274, s.v. *simmiltu*.

⁵⁴ William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. I (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997), p. 385. The *CAD* translates this last phrase as, “Namtar ascended the length of the stairs of heaven” (*CAD S*, p. 274, s.v. *simmiltu*). The cognate to *arkat* in this passage is the Hebrew ארך “length,” which appears frequently in Ezekiel’s measurements of the temple (see *HALOT*, p. 88, s.v. ארך).

This particular description of a heavenly stairway relates to Ezekiel's first two visions of God in chapters 1-3 and 8-11 (which, as stated above, should be studied in the same context as Ezekiel 40-42). Several scholars suggest that the Akkadian *uqnû* corresponds to the Hebrew ספיר, the very word used in Ezekiel to describe the heavenly throne of God (Ezek. 1:26; 10:1).⁵⁵

As Jacob's dream continues, God reaffirms his promise of posterity, property, blessings, and protection (Gen. 28:13-15).⁵⁶ The dream concludes, and as Jacob awakes, he utters the following:

וַיִּקַּץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵכֶן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי: וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר
מֵה־נֹּרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה בֵּי אִם־בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

And Jacob woke from his sleep, and he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know [it]. And he feared, and said, “What an awesome place this is, for this is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:16-17).

The most significant phrases for the purposes of our discussion are בית אלהים “house of God”

and שער השמים “the gate of heaven.” These terms describe the preceding vision of the stairway

ascending to God. בית “house” is the term most frequently used to describe Ezekiel's temple

(being used eight times in chapter 40, sixteen times in chapter 41 [which gives a careful

description of the sanctuary], and once in chapter 42). However, the word בית “house” is not

⁵⁵ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, v. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 281. This connection provides an additional conceptual link between Ezekiel's first two visions of God (Ezek. 1-3, 8-11) and his temple vision (Ezek. 40-42).

⁵⁶ This passage contains yet another element relevant to our understanding of Ezekiel's temple vision. In describing the expansion of Jacob's posterity, God mentions the four cardinal directions. Ezekiel's temple vision, in addition to detailing the directions and measurements of the gates of the temple compound (an outer and an inner gate at three of the four cardinal directions), the final measurements of the temple compound record all four cardinal directions in close succession (Ezek. 42:15-20) and appear to be cosmologically oriented (see discussion below).

significant in and of itself.⁵⁷ Much more significant is its association with the word שַׁעַר “gate,” which plays an important role in Ezekiel’s vision;⁵⁸ it appears an incredible 43 times in chapter 40 alone.

As evidenced by the abundant use of שַׁעַר “gate” in Ezekiel’s temple vision, this architectural feature was a particular preoccupation of the author. In addition to mentioning these gates frequently, the author also emphasized their importance through their careful description. One study notes:

Several pronounced- even exaggerated- physical features further distinguish Ezekiel’s new temple from the other temples of the Hebrew Bible. The character of the outer gate buildings is a case in point (Ezek. 40:5-16; cf. 43:1-5; 44:1-3). They are simply colossal in size, and their importance is signaled by the intricate detail with which they are described.⁵⁹

In particular, the “colossal” size of the gates is put into perspective when compared to other significant temple features. Greenberg made such a comparison: “The massive size of the gate-houses verges on caricature: their dimensions (25 x 50 cubits) exceed those of the main hall of the Temple (20 x 40 cubits); their length is half that of the inner court (100 cubits)!”⁶⁰ In both the account of Jacob’s dream and Ezekiel’s vision, gates play an important role as the point of access to increasingly sacred spaces.

⁵⁷ “With its more than two thousand appearances, *byt* seems to have been one of the most frequently-used Hebrew substantives.” Block, “Israel’s House,” p. 264.

⁵⁸ Of the 51 times that the words בַּיִת “house” and שַׁעַר “gate” occur together in the same verse in the Hebrew Bible, thirteen come from the book of Ezekiel, and ten of those appear in relation to Ezekiel’s temple in chapters 40-45 (almost 20% of the total occurrences in the Hebrew Bible).

⁵⁹ Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton, “Introduction: Hierarchical Thinking and Theology in Ezekiel’s Book,” in *Ezekiel’s Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p. 14.

⁶⁰ Greenberg, “The Design and Themes of Ezekiel’s Program of Restoration,” p.193.

The account of Jacob’s dream (and its aftermath) contains one more item of interest for our study of Ezekiel’s temple. Jacob describes the place where he saw the stairway ascending to heaven as a בית “house” and as a שַׁעַר “gate.” The following verse records the name given to that site:

וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא בֵּית־אֵל וְאָוֶלָם לֹז לְרֵאשִׁיטָה:

And he called the name of that place Bethel (lit. “the house of God”), but the name of the city was Luz formerly (Gen. 28:19).

The author of this account points out that בית־אל “house of God” (also described as שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם “the gate of heaven”) was formerly called לֹז “Luz.” Instead of simply providing a chronology of toponyms, this association of בית־אל “house of God” with לֹז “Luz” provides another link to the description of Ezekiel’s temple.

The name לֹז “Luz” literally means “almond tree.”⁶¹ This word is unique to the Jacob narratives, as it “appears in Biblical Hebrew only in the story of Jacob’s sojourn.”⁶² Because places were often named after the distinctive trees that grew there,⁶³ לֹז “Luz” is “possibly an early place name derived from a particular almond grove.”⁶⁴ The almond tree was sacred

⁶¹ HALOT, p. 522, s.v. לֹז.

⁶² G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. XV (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 450.

⁶³ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 481.

⁶⁴ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 231.

according to certain strains of Israelite religious thought.⁶⁵ Elsewhere in the book of Genesis, trees are associated with sacred locations (e.g. Gen. 12:6-7; 13:18; 21:33). Some scholars suggest that “trees signal the presence of the holy...Where a sacred tree grows, there is life.”⁶⁶ Later in the Genesis narrative, Jacob specifically mentions God’s appearance to him at Luz (Gen. 48:3), *not* Bethel, which suggests that the association between this tree-related toponym and the presence of God was significant to the author / redactor.

Heinz-Josef Fabry notes, “The significance of sacred trees for Israelites can also be seen from descriptions of the temple...The multitude of decorations employing motifs from the plant kingdom (trees, fruit, flowers, leaves) underline the close association between vegetation and the holy.”⁶⁷ The author of Jacob’s dream utilizes the imagery of both sacred tree and temple; he combines the imagery of a sacred tree with the imagery of a sacred place where God appears. In light of these associations, the uses of סלם “stairway,” בית “house,” שער “gate,” and sacred trees

⁶⁵ For example, in Num. 17:22-23, Moses brings the rods of the tribal leaders “before the LORD” to see whose would bud (evidence that God had chosen the individual whose rod that was [see v. 20]). Aaron’s rod buds, bringing forth שקדים “almonds” (v. 23). Here, there is a connection between the presence of God and almond trees. Also, in Jer. 1:11-12 a play on words serves to connect these two elements. The LORD asks Jeremiah what he sees, to which he replies that he sees the branch of a שֶׁקֶד “almond tree” (v. 11). The LORD then declares that he שֶׁקֶד “is watching” over his word. Once again, the almond tree is identified as being associated with Deity and is therefore sacred.

⁶⁶ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. XI (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 271.

⁶⁷ Botterweck, *et al*, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. XI, p. 271. Similarly, Elizabeth Block-Smith notes that in Israel, “sacred trees [are] depicted in Late Bronze and Iron Age art. On cylinder seals...the stylized tree represented either divine bounty, when flanked by animals nibbling from the branches or reposing in the shade, or a sacred tree such as the biblical Trees of Life and Knowledge, when guarded by sphinxes.” Elizabeth Block-Smith, “Solomon’s Temple: The Politics of Ritual Space,” in Barry M. Gittlen, ed., *Sacred Time, Sacred Place* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), p. 87.

in this short passage (Gen. 28:12-17) should be taken seriously. Strikingly, these images are all inextricably connected in Ezekiel's temple vision.

As noted above, the temple compound is most frequently referred to as a *בית* "house" where the *כבוד יהוה* "glory of the LORD" could dwell.⁶⁸ Also, the gates of this sacred building receive particular attention, not only by means of the frequency with which they are mentioned, but also through the detailed description of individual gates. Each gate stands at the top of a stairway (Ezek. 40:22, 26, 31, 34, 37). Significantly, each gate is also decorated with palm trees (Ezek. 40:16, 22, 26, 31, 34, 37), the sacred tree of the Babylonians.⁶⁹ It is natural, given the pictorial and cultural influences of the Babylonian exile,⁷⁰ that Ezekiel would have used the palm (not the almond) as the symbolic sacred tree in his temple vision.⁷¹

To summarize, both Jacob's dream and Ezekiel's vision of the temple emphasize a stepped structure reaching heavenward to God, both describe that structure as a *שער* "gate" and as a *בית* "house" of God, and both locations were associated with sacred trees. Given the special attention that Ezekiel pays to Jacob / Israel (in terms of symbolizing social, political, and religious unity among the exiles), it is possible that Ezekiel's temple vision is an elaboration (or

⁶⁸ Ezek. 43:4 reads: *וּכְבוֹד יְהוָה בָּא אֶל־הַבַּיִת דְּרָךְ שַׁעַר אֲשֶׁר פָּנָיו דְּרָךְ הַקִּדְּיִם* "And the glory of the LORD came to the sanctuary (lit. 'house') [by] the way of the gate that faced east."

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the various scholarly arguments for the sacredness of the palm tree, see J. Andrew McDonald, "Botanical Determination of the Middle Eastern Tree of Life," *Economic Botany* 56 (2002), pp. 113-129.

⁷⁰ Botterweck, *et al*, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. XI, p. 267.

⁷¹ The two types of trees are not necessarily unrelated. Of the four categories of trees mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (cultivated fruit / nut trees, forest trees and shrubs, waterway trees, and wilderness trees), both the almond tree and the palm tree are in the category of cultivated fruit / nut bearing trees. See David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1331.

realization) of Jacob's dream; Jacob's ideal temple is made more concrete by Ezekiel.

Regarding this literary depiction of sacred space, the similarities in imagery between the account of Jacob's dream and Ezekiel's vision suggest that the description of Ezekiel's temple symbolizes a heavenly ascent. The use of this symbolism can be seen as emphasizing a vertical conceptualization of sacred space.

Mesopotamian iconography also suggests that a vertical ascent toward sacred space is present in Ezekiel's exilic vision of the temple. As mentioned above, an Old Babylonian prayer describes the ascent of Shamash along a stairway of lapis lazuli. A similar scene is depicted in the following seal impression:



The sun god Shamash climbs “what may be an artificial mountain with temple – perhaps a ziggurat” to reach the shrine / throne of Ea, god of wisdom.⁷³ This theme of a vertical ascent to the dwelling-place of a god appears in Ezekiel's vision: Ezekiel ascends a series of stairways to reach the sanctuary (culminating in Ezek. 40:48-49 and 41:1-4, the קדש הקדשים “holy of holies”), which God later declares to be his כסא “throne” (Ezek. 43:6-7).

⁷² James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 220.

⁷³ Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, p. 331.

The description of Ezekiel's temple altar also sheds light on the use of vertical sacred space within the vision. One of the most noticeable features of this altar description is the explicit mention of its height (Ezek. 43:13-15). Block notes that "the observations on the altar's height represent a significant departure from the preceding description, which has been satisfied to provide horizontal dimensions of the temple complex."⁷⁴ In addition, the author depicts this altar in terms suggestive of a mythic conceptualization of the space within the temple compound. Tuell notes that "the contrast between the description of the altar and Ezekiel's description of the Temple comes...in the mythic designations given to the parts of the altar in 43:13- 17."⁷⁵ Of particular interest is the terminology used for the base (חֵיק הָאָרֶץ) and the hearth (הַרְאֵל) of the altar (Ezek. 43:14-15).

Far from traditional labels for such features, Michael Fishbane notes, "It is striking that Ezekiel describes the base platform of the altar of the envisaged Temple as *ḥēq hā'āreṣ* 'bosom of the earth' (43:14) and its summit, with four horns, as *har'ēl* 'mountain of God' (43:15)."⁷⁶ These terms immediately bring to mind an element of both depth and elevation along a vertical plane. Regarding the significance of this conceptualization of the temple altar, Fishbane writes, "From this axial point...the new Temple, like the old, will be a font of blessing for Israel, a 'mountain of god,' linking the highest heaven to the nethermost earth."⁷⁷ Fishbane, then, sees

⁷⁴ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 595.

⁷⁵ Tuell, *The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40-48*, p. 46.

⁷⁶ Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 370, n. 132.

⁷⁷ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, p. 370.

the altar in this passage functioning as metonymy for the entire temple compound.⁷⁸ Just as the altar is described in cosmic terms, the temple, too, can be seen as taking on cosmic dimensions.

A number of Mesopotamian texts describe temples as filling the expanse of creation. Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, portrayed his temple-building efforts in this inscription: “I raised the top of Esharra [the temple] to heaven; Above, to heaven I elevated its top. Below in the netherworld, I made firm its foundations.”⁷⁹ This temple (and by extension, the king who built it) was so grand that its power extended vertically from “heaven” to the “netherworld.”⁸⁰

The same type of language describes Ezekiel’s altar. The uppermost tier of the altar is associated with the lofty heights of the “mountain of God” (Ezek. 43:15), and its lowest tier is called the “bosom of the earth” (Ezek. 43:14). Many note the different spelling of this first term הרֵאֵל “mountain of God” as an explanatory gloss of הרֵאֵל “altar” (which appears in verses 15 and 16). Tuell explains:

⁷⁸ Other scholars agree with this interpretation of חֵיק הָאָרֶץ and לְאֵרָה, likewise suggesting that the cosmic properties here ascribed to the altar also apply conceptually to the entire temple compound. See Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 139, and Sweeney, “Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile,” p. 142. Block, on the other hand, finds this etymology of הרֵאֵל as “mountain of God” suspect. He points out that this same hearth is called הרֵאֵל twice—once in the same verse (Ezek. 43:15) and once in the verse immediately following (Ezek. 43:16), and therefore the “extra” *yod* in these subsequent descriptions needs explaining. At the very least, however, he admits that “it seems best...to treat *har ’ēl* as an intentional theological play on an architectural designation for the flat surface of the altar on which the offerings were presented.” See Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 600.

⁷⁹ Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in the Light of Mesopotamian and North-West Semitic Writings* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 336.

⁸⁰ Similarly, the Papulegara hymn describes the temple of Kesh in the following words: “The head of the temple is lofty; Below its roots touch the netherworld. The head of the Kesh temple is lofty; Below its roots touch the netherworld. Above may its [...] rival heaven; Below its roots touch the netherworld” (Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, pp. 335-336).

This gloss accomplishes two purposes. First, it explains the ancient name for the altar hearth in a way that complements and contrasts with the designation of the foundation as חק הארץ, thereby making a profound statement in mythic terms about the altar's significance. Second, however, it ties the altar description firmly into its literary context. The designation of the altar hearth as הר אל ("mountain of God") recalls the הר גבה מאד ("very high mountain") of 40:2, as well as the ראש ההר ("mountaintop") of 43: 12.⁸¹

Both of the purposes that Tuell mentions deal with height, suggesting that the description of Ezekiel's altar served to emphasize a vertical element of sacred space in this text.

In his discussion of the significance of this altar, Block writes, "All that matters are its size and shape, the latter of which is seen to match the symmetry of the temple complex as a whole."⁸² Indeed, this three-tiered altar⁸³ corresponds nicely to the three-tiered temple compound described in Ezekiel 40-42, the top tier of which contains the sanctuary, the "place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet" (Ezek. 43:7).⁸⁴

According to these scholars, the temple appears as a vertical representation of the cosmos. Commenting upon the aforementioned altar language in Ezekiel 43, Levenson writes the following: "What all this suggests is that the Temple is not a place in the world, but the world in essence...In the Temple, God relates simultaneously to the entire cosmos, for the Temple...is

⁸¹ Tuell, *Law of the Temple*, pp. 50-51.

⁸² Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 597.

⁸³ Identified as such in Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 179. See also the depiction of this altar in Odell, *Ezekiel*, p. 500.

⁸⁴ Another Mesopotamian temple description also equates the heights of the temple with "heaven." The temple hymn to Ezida in Barsippa reads: "Barsippa resembles heaven; Rivaling Barra, is lofty Ezida...Its foliage reaches the clouds, its roots are founded piercing the netherworld" (Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, p. 336). Odell also notes the similarity between the stepped nature of this altar and Mesopotamian ziggurats. See Odell, *Ezekiel*, p. 501.

a microcosm of which the world itself is the macrocosm.”⁸⁵ He also explains that “the Temple is the epitome of the world, a concentrated form of its essence, a miniature of the cosmos.”⁸⁶ This was true of both the Mesopotamian temples and Ezekiel’s temple. Therefore, both the altar and the temple compound in which it was enshrined should be viewed with a vertically aligned cosmos in mind.

In addition to the comparisons with Mesopotamian temple descriptions, the final measurements of Ezekiel’s temple compound walls suggest that the author held a cosmological view of the temple (Ezek. 42:15-20). Embedded within these final measurements is a literary device that signals a transition in conceptual perspective:

וְכֹלֵה אֶת־מִדּוֹת הַבַּיִת הַפְּנִימִי וְהוֹצִיאֲנִי דְרֹךְ הַשַּׁעַר אֲשֶׁר פָּנָיו
 דְרֹךְ הַקְּדָיִם
 וּמִדָּו
 סָבִיב |
 סָבִיב :
 מִדָּ
 בְּקִנְיַת הַמִּדָּה רֹחַ הַקְּדָיִם

And when he finished the measurements of the inner temple, he led me out [on] the way of the gate which faces the way of the East (A), and he measured (B) around (C) [and] around (C'). He measured (B') the wind of the East (A') with a stick of measurement (Ezek. 42:15-16a).

⁸⁵ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 139. This view is strengthened by the fact that the author describes the temple as being positioned על־ראש ההר “upon the top of the mountain” (Ezek. 43:12), which is itself a location with mythological / cosmological overtones (See Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, pp. 5-8). This mythological language provides the context for interpreting the entire temple vision. Ziony Zevit suggests, “Although mythic space may be considered an extension of thematic space, mythic space is primal, part of a comprehensive religious world view that supplies the orientational key for interpreting thematic space.” Ziony Zevit, “Preamble to a Temple Tour,” in Barry M. Gittlen, ed., *Sacred Time, Sacred Place* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), p. 76.

⁸⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 138.

When laid out chiastically, the phrase דרך הקדים “the way of the east” is in parallel to רוח הקדים “the wind of the east.” While some translate רוח in this passage simply as “side,”⁸⁷ two factors argue against such a reading. First, this term is never used in the book of Ezekiel as a term for measurement prior to this point. Indeed, the previous passage invoking four directional winds (“מארבע רוחות” in Ezek. 37:9) refers to cosmological directions. Second, the author uses רוח only a few verses later (Ezek. 43:5) in its primary sense of “wind” or “spirit” as the means for transporting Ezekiel to the outer court in order to behold the כבוד־יהוה “glory of the LORD” as it filled the temple. The language used for these final measurements suggest that the author viewed the vision of the temple in cosmological terms, supporting the argument that Ezekiel’s temple can be viewed as a microcosm of a vertically aligned cosmos.

As demonstrated above, the author goes to great lengths to emphasize the element of a sacred, vertical ascent in the account of Ezekiel’s temple vision. However, is this the only possible way to understand sacred space within Ezekiel’s temple compound?

Horizontal Conceptualization of Sacred Space

Despite the plentiful evidence for Ezekiel’s emphasis on a vertical axis of sacred space, some scholars argue for a completely different emphasis in this text. While recognizing the importance of the altar and its vertical position within the temple compound, Margaret Odell finds an alternative framework for understanding the directional emphasis in Ezekiel:

⁸⁷ *BDB*, p. 924, s.v. רוח (definition 2b).

If Yahweh dwells in the temple, then it is no longer appropriate to think of Yahweh as ‘coming down’ to the altar to accept the offerings, which ‘go up’ to God (Heb. ‘*ôlah*, ‘go up’). The altar remains the meeting place between deity and people; in Ezekiel's temple, however, the intersection is worked out on a horizontal, *not* vertical plane, as offerings are brought in to the altar and Yahweh moves out from the temple to accept them there.⁸⁸

Far from being merely theoretical, this perceived emphasis on a horizontal framework within Ezekiel's temple compound finds a great deal of support within the text of Ezekiel 40-42.

Since a number of scholars have used the altar to argue for an emphasis on vertical sacred space within Ezekiel's temple, one might ask: where exactly was the altar located? In the following statement, Block represents the position of most scholars:

On the basis of the description of Solomon's temple (cf. 1 Kgs. 8:64) and the general symmetry of the present plan, one may assume that this altar was situated in the center of the inner court, equidistant from the north and south walls of this court, and visible through the inner and outer gates from outside the temple complex.⁸⁹

In almost every pictorial representation of the temple compound's layout, the altar is in the exact center.⁹⁰ Block cites 1 Kgs. 8:64 as evidence for the altar standing in the “center” of Solomon's temple compound, and transfers (without question) this imagery to Ezekiel's temple compound. A close examination of the passage in question, however, casts doubt upon this assertion.

1 Kings 8 describes the placement of the ark of the covenant inside the קדש הקדשים “holy of holies,” the subsequent appearance of the כבוד־יהוה “glory of the LORD,” Solomon's prayer, and his subsequent dedication of the temple by means of sacrifice. During this final section (1 Kgs. 8:62-64), the number of sacrifices is so great (22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep, not to

⁸⁸ Odell, *Ezekiel*, p. 502, emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 540.

⁹⁰ E.g. Odell, *Ezekiel*, p. 493, Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 508 and 509, Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 58, 59, 64, and 71, and Moshe Eisemann, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Brooklyn, NY: Messorah Publications, 1988), p. 604.

mention the unnumbered grain offerings) that Solomon must make a special provision for the offering of such a large number of animals. This special provision is described in the following:

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא קִדֵּשׁ הַמִּלְךָ אֶת־תּוֹךְ הַחֹצֵר אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי בַּיִת־יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה שָׁם אֶת־הָעֹלָה
וְאֶת־הַמִּנְחָה וְאֵת חֲלָבֵי הַשְּׁלָמִים כִּי־מִזְבַּח הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה קָטָן מִהַכִּיל
אֶת־הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־הַמִּנְחָה וְאֵת חֲלָבֵי הַשְּׁלָמִים:

On that day, the king sanctified the center of the court which was in front of the house of the LORD, for he offered there the burnt offering and the grain offering, and the fat of the peace offerings, because the bronze altar which was in front of the LORD was too small to hold the burnt offering and the grain offering and the fat of the peace offerings (1 Kgs. 8:64).

Block sees this verse as suggesting that the altar was at אֶת־תּוֹךְ “the center” of the courtyard.

However, this does not follow logically from the verse itself. It is *because* the altar was too small to contain all of the offerings that Solomon consecrated אֶת־תּוֹךְ “the center” of the courtyard to perform the additional sacrifices. If the altar was at אֶת־תּוֹךְ “the center,” then that space could not be consecrated because the altar would have already stood there. Thus, Block’s evidence for placing Ezekiel’s altar at the center of the entire temple compound is problematic.

Zimmerli is perhaps the most persuasive proponent of a horizontal emphasis in Ezekiel’s description of the temple compound. He questions this assumption that the altar must stand at the exact center of the temple compound:

Insofar as that is usually tacitly assumed to mean that it [the altar] stood in the middle of the court...then such a location reveals the unconscious influence of the square shape not only of the inner court, but also of the temple area as a whole. Must not this square layout have a center? And will this center not be the altar? Closer consideration, however, makes this assumption questionable.⁹¹

⁹¹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 355.

The unique square shape of Ezekiel's temple (in contrast to Solomon's temple) leads many to look for symmetry within its walls,⁹² while overlooking other important architectural features.

However, Zimmerli argues that the temple's layout "is not conceived symmetrically around the center."⁹³ If symmetry were the guiding principle of the temple vision, then one would expect each temple gate to have a corresponding gate opposite it. True, both the outer and inner gates on the north side (Ezek. 40:20, 23) are mirrored by outer and inner gates on the south side (Ezek. 40:24, 27). However, the gates on the east side (Ezek. 40:6, 23) have no corresponding gates on the west side of the temple compound. This is especially significant, considering the prominence of the outer east gate in the description of כבוד יהוה "the glory of the LORD" entering the temple (Ezek. 43:4).⁹⁴

Returning to the issue of the altar's location, it is worth noting the terminology that describes the position of the altar in Ezekiel's initial survey of the temple compound. Speaking of the inner court, the narrative reads:

וַיִּמְד אֶת־הַחֵצֵר אַרְבֵּי | מֵאָה אַמָּה וְרֹחַב מֵאָה אַמָּה מִרְבַּעַת וְהַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְפָנַי הַבַּיִת:

And he measured the court: the length 100 cubits and the width 100 cubits, a square; and the altar was in front of the temple (Ezek. 40:47).

In this verse, there is no mention of a תוֹךְ "center." Instead, the altar's location is described relative to the בַּיִת "house" within the precincts of the inner court. Zimmerli explains that this

⁹² In Susan Niditch's search for symmetry, she compares Ezekiel's temple vision to the creation of a symmetrical Buddhist mandala. See Niditch, "Ezekiel 40-48 in a Visionary Context," pp. 212-213.

⁹³ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 355.

⁹⁴ Zimmerli explains the absence of any gates on the west side of the temple compound in these words: "Thus then the west side, on which God's sanctuary lies, remains without a gate. One cannot approach God from behind. One must come before his face and bow there." Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 362.

description of the altar “does not signify a new center of gravity, but stands submissively in front of the sanctuary.”⁹⁵ This description of the altar coincides with the above description of Solomon’s altar; it was not described as being in אֶת־תּוֹךְ “the center,” but as being לפני יהוה “in front of the LORD” (1 Kgs. 8:64).⁹⁶ Similarly, while the exact location of the altar cannot be determined by the information in Ezekiel, the text does indicate its relative importance by describing its position in reference to the sanctuary.

The sanctuary itself receives special attention in Ezekiel 40-42. This significance is signaled by the order in which Ezekiel is shown the different locations of the temple compound. Ezekiel is guided through six gates, which he describes in detail (Ezek. 40:6-46). After passing the nondescript altar (Ezek. 40:47), he reaches the sanctuary. It is at this location that the heavenly guide finally breaks his silence and gives a name to one of the rooms within the sanctuary. Zimmerli notes, “The prophet's way leads through six gates to the building in which he reaches his goal, to the threshold of the holy of holies which alone is given a name by the figure of the guide.”⁹⁷ The sanctuary, with its most sacred room lying at the westernmost end of the building, is the climax of this tour.

A consideration of Priestly imagery suggests the prominence of this holy building within the temple compound. Each of the aforementioned gates had three chambers on each side (Ezek.

⁹⁵ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 355.

⁹⁶ Even the אֶת־תּוֹךְ הַחֹצֵר “center of the court” is described in its relation to the sanctuary: “In that day the king consecrated the center of the court *which was in front of the house of the LORD*” (1 Kgs. 8:64, emphasis added).

⁹⁷ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 361.

40:10), creating a tripartite passageway.⁹⁸ It is only after recording all six of these unique tripartite gates that Ezekiel approaches the sanctuary, which also exhibits a tripartite structure (the אֵלִים “porch,” the הַיְחִיבֵל “great hall,” and the קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים “holy of holies.” See Ezek. 40:48-41:4), and perhaps functions symbolically as a seventh gate.⁹⁹ Zimmerli suggests that “in two times three gates there is opened the access to the similarly tripartite seventh structure at the goal of this whole guidance. In this there seemed to be discernible something of the rhythm of the Priestly creation narrative with its culmination in the seventh, sanctified day.”¹⁰⁰ The focus on a most sacred seventh space by a priest (Ezek. 40:3) can hardly be accidental.¹⁰¹

In light of this discussion, the קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים “holy of holies” appears to be the climax of Ezekiel’s initial view of the temple compound. Zimmerli explains, “In the continuation of the leading of the prophet, which has its goal not at the altar, but in the temple building to the west of the altar and there in the most westerly room of that building, the holy of holies,”¹⁰² sacred space within the temple compound appears to be oriented along a horizontal plane, rather than a vertical plane. The west, then, takes on a clear significance in the sacred orientation (or occidentation?) of the temple compound.

Again, Zimmerli provides us with convincing arguments that the sacred nature of the temple compound should be viewed along a horizontal axis. According to Zimmerli, the east

⁹⁸ This gate structure is similar to the familiar Solomonic city-gate structures. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 352 and footnotes.

⁹⁹ My thanks to Professor Marvin Sweeney for suggesting this correlation.

¹⁰⁰ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 362.

¹⁰¹ For an excellent discussion of Ezekiel’s priestly concerns throughout the book of Ezekiel, see Marvin Sweeney, “Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile,” pp. 125-143.

¹⁰² Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 355.

gate (which is given sacred significance in Ezek. 43:1-4) lay “opposite the real center of the temple precinct, which is not to be equated with the geometrical center of the square sanctuary area.”¹⁰³ This western locus of sacred space provides a clear direction for worship, correcting an erroneous act of worship described earlier in Ezekiel:

וַיָּבֵא אֹתִי אֶל־חֲצֵר בֵּית־יְהוָה הַפְּנִימִית וְהַנְּהַפְּתַח הַיְכָל יְהוָה בֵּין הָאוֹלָם וּבֵין הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
 בְּעֹשְׂרִים וַחֲמִשָּׁה אִישׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֶל־הַיְכָל יְהוָה וּפְנֵיהֶם קְדָמָה וְהֵמָּה מִשְׁתַּחֲוִיִּתִם
 קְדָמָה לְשֶׁמֶשׁ:

And he brought me to the inner court of the temple of the LORD, and look- [at the] opening of the great hall of the LORD between the porch and the altar were 25 men; behind them was the great hall of the LORD, and in front of them [was] eastward, and they were worshipping eastward toward the sun (Ezek. 8:16).

The focus provided by Ezekiel’s temple vision “is not the easterly direction offered by nature, the direction of the rising sun, but the westerly direction- not derivable from nature, but, in the experience of Ezekiel 40f, quite simply determined by the will of Yahweh- that is revealed to Israel.”¹⁰⁴ While the emphasis on the west does serve as a corrective to the aforementioned false worship,¹⁰⁵ this direction is *not*, as Zimmerli claims, an arbitrary location “quite simply determined by the will of Yahweh.”

The imagery of the garden of Eden is prevalent in the architecture of the sanctuary.

While the six gates of the courtyards were all decorated with palm trees (see above), the walls of the sanctuary were decorated with both palm trees *and* cherubim (Ezek. 41:20). In addition to

¹⁰³ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 362.

¹⁰⁴ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 362.

¹⁰⁵ Even the positioning of the stairs going up to the altar requires the priests to turn their backs to the east and move westward in their worship (Ezek. 43:17).

these wall decorations, the two doors located on the east side of the innermost rooms of the sanctuary (Ezek. 41:2-3) are described in the following:

וּשְׁתַּיִם דְּלְתוֹת לְהִיכָל וְלִקְדָּשׁ:
וַעֲשׂוּיָהּ אֲלֵיהֶן אֶל-דְּלְתוֹת הַהִיכָל בְּרוּבִיִּים וְתַמְרִים כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּיִם לְקִירוֹת

And there were two doors to the great hall and the holy [of holies]...And there were made upon them- upon the doors of the great hall- cherubim and palm trees, like [those] made for the walls [of the sanctuary] (Ezek. 41:23, 25a).

This same imagery appears in account of the garden of Eden in Genesis:

וַיִּגְרֹשׂ אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקְדָּם לְגַן-עֵדֶן אֶת-הַכְּרֻבִּים וְאֵת לֶהַט הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת
לְשָׂמֹר אֶת-דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים:

When he drove out the man, he placed on the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and a flaming sword continually turning to guard the way of the tree of life (Gen. 3:24).

Here, Adam is driven eastward from Eden. Cherubim are placed “at the east of the garden of Eden” to prevent a westward return to the garden. Similarly, the cherubim on the doors that Ezekiel describes are stationed at the east entrances to the sacred inner chambers of the sanctuary. This positioning of protective figures indicates the supreme sacredness of a western direction within Ezekiel’s temple compound.

In the period immediately following the exile, Adam, Eden, and temple imagery became much more prevalent. Marvin Sweeney explains:

Later texts of the Second Temple period note that the priest in the Temple represents Adam in the Garden of Eden, which may explain the appellation *ben-’ādām*, ‘son of Adam’ or ‘mortal,’ that is consistently applied by YHWH to Ezekiel throughout the book. The fact that only the high priest may enter the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant is guarded by cherubim much like the Garden of Eden, reinforces this image.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Sweeney, “Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile”, pp. 141-142.

The text of Ezekiel 40-42 demonstrates that this conceptualization was prevalent in the mind of the author. However, Ezekiel's use of Eden-related imagery does not begin with his final temple vision.

There is precedent for the use of Eden-related imagery elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 28, Tyre is compared to עֵדֶן גַּן־אֱלֹהִים "Eden, the garden of God" (v. 13). In Ezekiel 31, Assyria, Egypt, and other unidentified nations are compared to the עֵצֵי־עֵדֶן "trees of Eden" (Ezek. 31:9, 16, 18) that were found within the גַּן־הָאֱלֹהִים "garden of God" (Ezek. 31:9).¹⁰⁷ Fishbane suggests that the imagery of Eden was also used in Ezekiel 36-37. He describes the use of this imagery in the following:

Longing for order and spatial restoration, the prophets imagined the ancient national centre as an old-new Eden from which the people were evicted. But, quite unlike the old Adam, this new national counterpart will return to Edenic bliss- this being the return to Zion and to national dignity in the land. Perhaps for this reason, Ezekiel (or his redactor) juxtaposed the oracle of hope that the old Eden would be restored (36: 35) with the parable of dry bones, whereby he envisages the re-creation of the corporate body of Israel- much like a new Adam with a new flesh and a new spirit (37: 4-9). By this coupling of Edenic and Adamic imagery, national nostalgia and primordial fantasies are blended.¹⁰⁸

The yearning for a symbolic return to Eden was a result of the trauma experienced by those in exile.¹⁰⁹ From the perspective of the exiles, they, like Adam, had been driven eastward. A return to Eden meant a return to the sacred land of their inheritance. Regarding this view in Ezekiel 40-

¹⁰⁷ For a more complete examination of the imagery of these two chapters, see Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48*, pp. 25-36.

¹⁰⁸ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, p. 370.

¹⁰⁹ Fishbane writes, "It was not until the woe and dislocation of the exile, and with it the destruction of the land and Temple, that the symbolism of Eden emerges with singular emphasis. In the mouths of the post-exilic prophets, this imagery serves as the organizing prism for striking visions of spatial renewal." Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, pp. 369-370.

48, Levenson explains, “[Ezekiel’s] stress on Eden traditions in his description of Zion is a way of reorienting the hopes of his audience from the east, where Eden had been thought to lie, to the west, the direction of Israel’s future.”¹¹⁰ Thus, the literary allusions in Ezekiel 40-42 to the account of the garden of Eden, combined with the exilic situation of the author, strongly suggest a purpose for such an emphasis on the west as a sacred direction.

In light of the previous discussion, both the vertical and horizontal conceptualizations of sacred space seem valid, backed by ample evidence. However, scholars have implicitly assumed that only one of these views could have been held by the author of Ezekiel’s temple vision. As demonstrated above, one group of scholars assume that the author of Ezekiel 40-42 had in mind a vertical conceptualization of sacred space. Tuell suggests that the author was preoccupied with “the proper conduct of the sacrificial cult in the Temple: all else is related to this central organizing principle.”¹¹¹ Block also argues for the “centrality of the altar in the new order”¹¹² which is reflected both in its description and its location. Regarding the altar’s description, he writes, “The isolation of this object for such detailed description reflects its centrality in the cultus.”¹¹³ Regarding its location, Block assumes that the altar stands “in the inner court at the exact center of the 500-cubit-square temple complex.”¹¹⁴ Those offering sacrifices (including

¹¹⁰ Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48*, p. 32.

¹¹¹ Tuell, *Law of the Temple*, p. 103.

¹¹² Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 595. See also p. 511.

¹¹³ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 596.

¹¹⁴ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, p. 595. For a refutation of this assumed location of the altar, see above.

the עולה “burnt offering”) must vertically ascend a series of מעלות “stairs” in order to reach the sacred center of the altar.

Other scholars disagree with this view of a vertical supremacy of sacred space. As mentioned above, Odell saw the description of the temple focusing not on the vertical plane emphasized by the altar and its associated עולה “burnt offering” (literally, “going up”) sacrifices, but on a horizontal plane with the קדש הקדשים “holy of holies” as its sacred endpoint.¹¹⁵

Zimmerli, while recognizing the importance of Ezekiel’s description of the altar, argued that “[the altar] does not signify a new center of gravity, but stands submissively in front of the sanctuary whose core is in the holy of holies.”¹¹⁶ Later, he referred to the קדש הקדשים “holy of holies” as “the real center of the temple precinct.”¹¹⁷ Thus, according to these scholars, the author of Ezekiel 40-42 was trying to convey the primacy of a horizontal conceptualization of sacred space.

These two groups of scholars appear to be in conflict regarding the “correct” conceptualization of sacred space within Ezekiel’s temple compound. However, did such a conflict exist for the author of Ezekiel?

¹¹⁵ Odell, *Ezekiel*, p. 502.

¹¹⁶ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 355.

¹¹⁷ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, p. 362.

The lamassu Statue: A Reconciling Paradigm

In understanding sacred space within Ezekiel's temple, scholars suggest that one must choose between accepting either a vertical conceptualization (with the altar as its focus) or a horizontal conceptualization (with the קדש הקדשים "holy of holies" as its focus). This, however, is only a false dichotomy created by scholars. Iconographic evidence from Assyrian temples and palaces would argue that these two conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive.



This image¹¹⁸ depicts a statue commonly identified as a *lamassu* (or *šēdu*) and was recognized as a protective deity.¹¹⁹ Such statues / deities were often guardians of temples¹²⁰ and were sometimes referred to as the *lamassi É puzra* "protective spirit of the temple."¹²¹ While there is a strong similarity between the function of these *lamassu* and the כרובים "cherubim" in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 9-10), the artistic technique used to depict these beings deserves special attention.

¹¹⁸ Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, p. 212.

¹¹⁹ Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 51.

¹²⁰ K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 449.

¹²¹ CAD L, p. 63 1b, s.v. *lamassu*. In the Neo-Babylonian period, these protective deities "usually introduc[ed] worshippers into the presence of important deities." Black, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 115.

The *lamassu* statue picture above is an example of a unique artistic device employed by Assyrian artists. In examining these particular statues, Julian Reade explains:

If one looks at one of these monsters from the side, one sees that it has four legs, striding purposefully forward. If one moves head-on, from the front, it has two front legs at rest. Both views in isolation are satisfactory and logical, as the figure might have been drawn by an artist looking at it either from one direction or from the other. The three-quarter viewpoint, in contrast, with both front and side visible at once, shows an animal that has not four legs, but five.¹²²

While these particular 5-legged statues have thus far only been excavated from areas that were north of the likely areas of exilic settlement,¹²³ their presence suggests that this type of artistic device was available to artists in Mesopotamia as early as the Neo-Assyrian period.¹²⁴

Using this artistic device as a paradigm for understanding Ezekiel's temple description, the tension (perceived by scholars) between vertical and horizontal conceptualizations of sacred space is relieved. The position that only one of these conceptualizations is valid is akin to an observer's confusion at noticing five legs on a *lamassu* statue. Just as the artist did not intend for the viewer to examine the statue from multiple viewpoints at once, perhaps the author of Ezekiel 40-42 did not intend for the audience to view the temple from both vertical and horizontal perspectives at the same time.

As demonstrated above, both the vertical and horizontal representations are appropriate ways of conceptualizing sacred space in Ezekiel's temple compound. The tension comes when one stands at a conceptual "three-quarter viewpoint," seeing both possibilities present at the same

¹²² Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 28.

¹²³ Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 84.

¹²⁴ "Such figures adorned the palaces of the more important Assyrian kings from Assurnasirpal II (reigned 883-859 BCE) until Esarhaddon (reigned 680-669 BCE)." Black, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 51.

time, yet assuming that only one conceptualization can have precedence. For the artist of the 5-legged *lamassu*, “this device was used to make them appear complete from both points of view,”¹²⁵ without respect for which view was “superior.” Likewise, *both* the vertical *and* horizontal representations of sacred space in Ezekiel’s temple vision appear complete when viewed in isolation, and both are clearly significant.¹²⁶ Thus, Ezekiel’s temple vision can be seen as portraying multiple emphases. Incidentally, this concept may have been alluded to in the first chapter of Ezekiel with the introduction of the חַיִּוִּת “living beings” (Ezek. 1:5ff) which are described as having the ability to move in multiple directions simultaneously.¹²⁷

Such a counter-intuitive dual emphasis uniquely describes a complex “tiered reality” where humans must progress through a gradation of increasingly sacred space in order to approach their God. Thus, the author of Ezekiel skillfully weaves together two different spatial paradigms: a very Israelite emphasis on the horizontal, westward approach to a Holy of Holies, and a much more Mesopotamian emphasis on the vertical approach to a sacred summit. In doing so, the exilic priest-prophet demonstrated a level of literary sophistication that has baffled scholars who have been steeped in a binary interpretive paradigm. This rich textual tapestry continues to reveal its secrets and deserves careful, continued study.

¹²⁵ Cyril John Gadd, *The Assyrian Sculptures* (London: The British Museum, 1934), p. 14.

¹²⁶ In fact, the measurements of both the altar and the קֹדֶשׁ הַקֹּדְשִׁים “holy of holies” suggest that these two seemingly opposed locations are equally significant. Odell notes, “The altar’s size in comparison with other elements in the temple also indicates its importance...In area, it equals that of the holy of holies.” See Odell, *Ezekiel*, pp. 502-503. See also the reconstructions of these two locations in Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, pp. 541 and 598.

¹²⁷ See Ezek. 1:9 “They each went in the direction of his [four] faces” (read with vv. 6, 10 [four faces on different sides], and 15-17 [mentioning a “wheel within a wheel” *not* a hub]; each face points in a different direction and has its own wheel- probably also pointing in each of those four directions- and moves in each direction at the same time).

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