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GENDER IN DIVINE SPACES AND VISIONS IN EZEKIEL

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EMORY UNIVERSITY

GENDER IN DIVINE SPACES AND VISIONS IN EZEKIEL

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE LANEY GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF
THE MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE
ADVISOR: PROFESSOR ROGER NAM

BY
RACHEL ERIN STUART
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ABSTRACT

GENDER IN DIVINE SPACES AND VISIONS IN EZEKIEL

In the Book of Ezekiel, unusual patterns of grammatical gender appear throughout the prophet's vision reports. The prevalence of feminine nouns is higher and the stability of assigned grammatical gender—indeed, of syntax overall—lower than in the book's more narrative and oracular texts. While unusual syntactical patterns have often been the subject of detailed discussion by textual and redaction critics, few engage to the same degree of detail in final-form interpretations. Within Ezekiel studies in particular, I have encountered few authors willing to suggest that these grammatical oddities have any relevance at all for interpretation of the text. Commentators such as Walther Zimmerli and Janina Maria Hiebel ignore them as redactional artefacts or ordinary oddities of Hebrew grammar, while Daniel Block remarks only that they reflect a faltering attempt to make sense of an incomprehensible experience. Instead, I argue that reflecting upon Ezekiel's changing use of grammar is essential for understanding the dissonance between the divine and human worlds he experiences. When the *ḥayyôt* of the ch. 1 vision—and, later, the bones of ch. 37—cannot be assigned a clear grammatical gender, the text reflects the ineffability of a mystical or theophanic experience. There is a holy chaos to the prophet's visions of the divine, and in his more poetic moments, he is able to recognize and appreciate that holiness. Outside those experiences, however, the prophet presents a very rigid portrait of social gender roles, one which is theologically weaponized to explain the destructive chaos of the exile as a punishment for the defiance of those rigid gender roles. Reading Ezekiel with a careful eye to these oscillations of gender throughout the book highlights the prophet's difficult task of searching for stability for himself and his people in the mortal realm while simultaneously acknowledging and transmitting the ineffability of the divine realm.

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CONTENTS

GENDER IN DIVINE SPACES AND VISIONS IN EZEKIEL

Introduction

Unusual patterns of syntax have an effect on the mind. We feel them, even when we do not

consciously register them. Poets use them to great rhetorical and artistic effect. Meme creators

rely on them for comedic content. They can telegraph our cultural background, or our degree of

fluency and formal education in a given language. They can even serve as the root of future

syntactical and morphological developments within a dialect.

In the Book of Ezekiel, unusual patterns of grammatical gender recur in reports of the

prophet's theophanic experiences. The syntax within these passages is at times inconsistent,

reflecting on a grammatical level the ineffability of a mystical experience. There is also a

dissonance between this more expansive use of semantic gender and the very rigid portrait of

social gender offered by the prophet in more narrative and oracular portions of the book. This

dissonance provides an intriguing lens through which to explore a more nuanced understanding

of Ezekiel's response to the trauma of exile through both formal theology and personal

spirituality. Reading Ezekiel through this lens highlights oscillations of gender throughout the

book which reflect the chaotic experience of exile and Ezekiel's difficulty with searching for

stability in the mortal realm while acknowledging the ineffability of the divine realm.

On Grammatical Gender in Biblical Hebrew

In the field of biblical studies, unusual patterns of syntax are most often the domain of

textual and redaction critics. Much ink has been spilled on the minute details of particular

grammatical inaccuracies, syntactical inconsistencies within a pericope, unexpected variations of synonyms, and even spelling differences. While all these indeed provide rich soil for any attempt to sift through the layers of redaction and transmission of a text, they are rarely engaged to the same degree of detail in final-form interpretations.

We know intuitively that the Book of Ruth looks and sounds different to other books of the Hebrew Bible. Its proliferation of feminine verb forms and pronouns creates a noticeably different sound for any listener familiar with the normal rhythms of Biblical Hebrew. Because masculine nouns and adjectives are largely unmarked in the language, an increase in feminine endings means an increase in rhyme. While it is possible that our ears are more sensitive to rhyme if we natively speak a language whose poetry is frequently organized by it, languages in which agreement is marked by mirrored endings often do not avoid the use of rhyme as a rhetorical or poetic device.[1] That is to say, the ears do not, merely as a result of inflected agreement, ignore the sound of rhyme the way most native English speakers ignore the difference between [p] and [pʰ] because it holds no significance for distinguishing meaning.[2] As a result, even for one who speaks only Biblical Hebrew, the increased rhyme of repeated -*at* and -*â* endings is an audible one—the book sounds different whether one is actively attuned to that difference in the moment or not. For the scribe, the difference is visual as well as auditory, and it would be especially difficult to ignore when copying manuscripts slowly and deliberately. The

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1. In part due to the influence of other languages, rhyme became an important feature of medieval Hebrew poetry such as that of ibn Ezra (Joseph Dana, "Meaningful Rhyme in the Hebrew Poetry of Spain: Selected Examples from the Sacred Poetry of Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 76.3 [1986]: 169–89). Rhyme features heavily in Arabic in both prose and poetry, including within the Qur'an and in pre-Islamic texts (Geert Jan van Gelder, "Rhyme," in *Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry*, Arabische Studien [Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012], 172–173). In other languages, the use of *homeoteleuton* was generally discouraged (William Harmon, "Rhyme in English Verse: History, Structures, Functions," *Studies in Philology* 84.4 [1987]: 365), yet this rule itself proves that rhyme is a noticeable sound to ears accustomed to hearing matching inflections.

2. That is, rhyme is not in such languages perceived as akin to allophony and therefore unable to signify relevant semantic, morphological, or rhetorical information and distinctions.

increased presence of the /t/ phoneme in verb forms and other key feminine markers is similarly

noticeable by both eye and ear.

By extension, then, one may expect that a higher proportion of feminine nouns in a given

passage would have a similar visual and auditory effect, even if the book does not center female

characters. Granted, many common feminine nouns are themselves unmarked—*rûᵃḥ*, *regel*,

nefeš, etc.—however, their associated verbs and adjectives will be inflected, and so the sound of

the passage will noticeably differ when feminine nouns are significantly more predominant than

average. I say noticeably, but I also want to argue that cognitively, the difference affects

interpretation and experience of the passage even if it is not a difference actively noticed by the

listener or reader.[3] That is, it is a difference that is noticed by the processing of the brain,

regardless of whether that observation rises to the level of conscious thought.

Due to the development of the Semitic gender system out of one which marked abstract

substantives and singulatives,[4] the ordinary distribution of masculine to feminine nouns in the

Hebrew Bible is roughly 3:1.[5] In the first chapter of Ezekiel, however, the ratio is 1:1. The

difference is stark, and made moreso by the 5:1 ratio that appears in the chapter immediately

following. That roughly 1:1 ratio of masculine to feminine nouns recurs in key moments in the

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3. This is an implication of the research done by linguists of the so-called "Neo-Whorfian" school, who demonstrate from experiments that "the habits that people acquire in...speaking a particular language will manifest themselves in their thinking even when they are not planning speech in that language" (Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics," in *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought, ed. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003], 62). That is, if people learn habits of language that implicitly affect their thinking, they also should implicitly recognize when that language is used in ways that are significantly dissonant from those habits. A more complete discussion of this theory within cognitive linguistics is discussed below.

4. Rebecca Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic (Part II)," *ZDMG* 164.2 (2014): 337.

5. All noun distribution data taken from Accordance, version 13.1.5. Note that numbers fluctuate slightly, but not significantly, when including substantive adjectives and nouns marked as "both" genders in Accordance but whose agreement is identifiable in Ezekiel.

book, such as the infamous 16th chapter and the vision of the dry bones in 37:1–14. In fact, throughout the book, more feminine nouns occur on average during vision reports than during narrative explanations thereof, or in reports of oracles from God. For example, we see a roughly 2:1 ratio in chs. 3 and 8 overall, but a heavy concentration of feminine nouns in sections reporting visions, such as 3:12–15[6] and 8:1–6[7]. As noted above, we must suspect that this repeated contrast is audible to the listener and visible to the reader, even if it is not consciously observed.

The implications of these significant syntactical details for interpretation of the book of Ezekiel have thus far gone unexplored.[8] Even if not consciously noticed, the unusual distribution of grammatical gender in this book has the rhetorical effect of drawing the audience into events that are out of the ordinary (that is, into the divine visions here described). Perhaps this is a deliberate rhetorical device on the part of the author(s), or perhaps it is a subconscious reflection of the extraordinary for the prophet as well. In either case, the effect on readers and listeners remains. If one attends to this distinction, the otherness of the divine space all the more readily captures the mind and draws one into the experience of the visions here recorded. In this way,

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6. 12 out of 79 (15%) total masculine nouns in ch. 3 occur in these four verses, and 11 out of 30 (37%) total feminine nouns. In other words, nearly 1:1 for the vision, but 2.5:1 overall.

7. 29 out of 76 (38%) total masculine nouns in ch. 8 occur in these six verses, and 19 out of 36 (53%) total feminine nouns. Notably, this passage contains several nouns marked "common" in Accordance which therefore are not flagged in either gender's search. Of these, *ʾēš* and *ʿayin* are consistently gendered feminine in Ezekiel, and *pānîm* is generally treated as masculine (all the default agreement). Including these three words in the totals provides a ratio of 30 masculine to 24 feminine. In other words, nearly 1:1 for the vision, but 2:1 overall. Of those thirty, three masculine nouns are divine names, and a fourth is the somewhat ambiguous term *ḥašmalâ*, on which, see page 44.

8. The only exception I have yet identified is Daniel Block, whose commentary very briefly offers an interpretation of the confusing grammar of the chapter (Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 89–91). For Block, everything from unusual spellings and gender inconsistencies to rhetorical style and poetic imagery are one and the same phenomenon of verbal confusion (89), all stemming from the fact that "the scene could not be captured without the excitement of the moment leaving its mark on the shape of the written record itself" (91). The fact that chapter 10 offers more concrete and consistent depiction of the vision is, according to Block, for the simple reason that Ezekiel has had time to process and interpret his vision enough to articulate it clearly (90).

several of Ezekiel's visions are akin to mystical poetry that attempts, however falteringly, to draw the reader into the experience of divine presence by somehow evoking that which is ultimately ineffable.[9]

In addition, the contrast between the use of grammatical gender in these visions and in the rest of the book draws attention to the difference between the experience of the divine and the experience of the ordinary world. The God that Ezekiel experiences is not entirely the same God that Ezekiel reports. The syntax of the oracles and narrative records of conversations with God about the nature of the exile and the reasons it has taken place is heavily influenced by the ordinary expectations of social gender in Ezekiel's patriarchal world. The visions, however, reveal on a semantic level a more expansive divine world than Ezekiel's conscious mind seems fully able to comprehend or explain.

On Linguistic Relativism

Broadly speaking, there are two main opinions regarding the idea that language may in some way influence thought. One position argues that language is merely the clothes that thought wears and nothing more.[10] Anything can be said in any language,[11] therefore all languages are

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9. Even mystical poetry which does not directly depict visions has a similar effect of evoking the experience of God's presence. In the case of Sufism, "Islamic mystical poetry may be thought of as a river in which one must drown before one can find one's Self" (Mahmood Jamal, ed. and trans., *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from the Mystics to Rumi*, Penguin Classics [London: Penguin Classics, 2009], xxxii). Dupré and Wiseman hesitate to lay down a specific definition of mysticism or mystical texts thanks to the significant variance in the use of the term through Christian history; nevertheless, they, too, highlight the centrality of the reader's experience: we call texts "mystical" when they offer "unique insight—at once cognitive and affective—in the spiritual nature of reality" (Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, eds., *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. [New York: Paulist Press, 2001], 3–5).

10. Or, in McWhorter's words, the "software for a particular culture" (John H. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], x), but, importantly, not the hardware. That is, language differences are more aesthetic than structural; while they may reflect facets of a culture, the effect does not occur in the opposite direction (xv).

11. Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Arthur Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 234–236. His remark that "languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey" (236) is quoted in numerous reflections on the topic by relativists and their Chomskyan opponents alike.

fundamentally equivalent in the realm of thought. Linguistic meaning is at least partly tied to

social context; however, any influence of cultural differences on meaning occur subsequent to

the process of thought formation and expression. Language can affect cognition only in a general

sense.[12] Languages are the vehicle of thoughts that exist independent of verbalization, but their

various differences do not affect what kinds of thoughts can be thought or how.[13]

The second position, sometimes known as the "neo-Whorfian school" or linguistic

relativism, argues that the details of syntax and vocabulary within a specific language can and do

affect the thoughts of speakers, especially native speakers, of that language.[14] This position is

often caricatured by its opponents[15] and exaggerated in popular media,[16] but most relativists

would agree that any language can communicate any thought. They also believe, however, that

differences in syntax and vocabulary from language to language change which thoughts come

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12. Andrea Bender, Sieghard Beller, and Karl Christoph Klauer, "Grammatical Gender in German: A Case for Linguistic Relativity?," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 64.9 [2011]: 1821.

13. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax*, ix, xiv–xv.

14. Among many others, see Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Philips, "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics"; Daniel Casasanto and Lera Boroditsky, "Time in the Mind: Using Space to Think about Time," *Cognition* 106.2 (2008): 579–93; Adina Williams et al., "On the Relationships Between the Grammatical Genders of Inanimate Nouns and Their Co-Occurring Adjectives and Verbs," *Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics* 9 (2021): 139–59.

15. For example, some opponents of the relativist position oversimplify the proposed mechanism of influence and critique the idea that individual word associations have any effect on thought (Bender, Beller, and Klauer, "Grammatical Gender in German," 1821–35). This criticism misses the relativists' point, however. No one correspondence creates the gender system, for example; instead, it emerges from the whole corpus of language use (Ellen van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 17–21). That is, gender is more than simply the fact of Jerusalem being portrayed as feminine in Ezekiel, or a woman being described by a specific adjective in a single verse, or a masculine noun doing a specific action in a single phrase. Rather, the implicit understandings of gender that build the gender system arise out of the full picture of language use in a given text corpus such as the book of Ezekiel and its relation to the formal and informal, secular and sacred, spoken and written language employed in the daily lives of a given cultural group.

16. Even McWhorter acknowledges that the public perception of linguistic relativism is far more inaccurate than the actual claims of relativists (*The Language Hoax*, xiv–xvii).

most automatically in which languages.[17] A very basic example would be those words and phrases commonly known to be difficult to translate into other languages, such as *joie de vivre* or *Schadenfreude*. These concepts can certainly be explained—easily, even—but it is often difficult to offer a single-word or single-phrase equivalent in other languages.[18] According to the relativists, the presence of a word like *Schadenfreude* in the mental lexicon makes the concept just a little bit easier for German speakers to think—though certainly not impossible for others. In other words, the emotion is one that any human being may experience, but conscious awareness and rational analysis of the experience may come a split-second more quickly to the minds of those whose language supplies a name for the emotion.

I take the position that there is indeed some effect of language structure on the structures of thought.[19] The effect is likely minor enough to pass unnoticed in everyday situations,[20] particularly during a conversation that will not be revisited again and again. However, the effect is not so insignificant as to leave no mark of any kind. I argue that careful attention to the syntax and vocabulary of a text can reveal subtle ways that habits of culture and language shape communication implicitly. Furthermore, close attention to those subtle details—especially in moments where the text deviates from what might be expected—can offer a unique lens that highlights the role of language in meaning-making. In the first chapter of Ezekiel, for example,

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17. Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips, "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics," 75.

18. On the process of translating meaning through differing language structures, see Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," 232–239.

19. However, I do not wish to overstate the effects discovered in relativist experiments. Like many psychology-related experiments, those demonstrating some degree of linguistic relativity have been difficult to replicate (Anne Mickan, Maren Schiefke, and Anatol Stefanowitsch, "Key Is a Llave Is a Schlüssel: A Failure to Replicate an Experiment from Boroditsky et al. 2003," *Yearbook of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association* 2.1 [2014]: 39–50), though some critical articles demonstrate flawed methodology in their own right (Bender, Beller, and Klauer, "Grammatical Gender in German").

20. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax*, xiv.

the cognitive structures of language support the literary content of the chapter. The result is that the prophet's experience of an incomprehensible vision is replicated on two levels simultaneously in the description of the theophany.

The Appearance of the Likeness of Genderfluidity: Cognitive Linguistics and Ezekiel 1

Translation

1 So it was, in the thirtieth year, the fourth month, the fifth day—I was with the exilic community along the River Kebar—that the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. **2** On the fifth of the month—she was the fifth year of the exile of King Yehoyakin[21]—**3** the word of Yʜwʜ became present to Ezekiel ben Buzi the priest in the land of the Chaldeans, along the River Kebar—there the hand of Yʜwʜ was upon him.

4 And I saw: behold, a storm wind came from the north, a great cloud, and fire rolling about, his[22] brightness all around. And from the midst of her,[23] the look of molten metal—from the midst of the fire. **5** And from her midst, a likeness of four *ḥayyôt*. And this was their[F] appearance: theirs[F] was a human likeness, **6** but there were four faces for each,[F] and four wings for each[F] of them, **7** and their[M] legs were straight, and the soles of their[M] feet like the soles of a calf's foot, and they were sparkling[M] like the look of brightened copper. **8** And hands of a human were beneath their[M] wings, on their[M] four sides with their[M] faces and their[M] wings, (all) four[M] of them,[M] **9** their[M] wings joining each[F] to her[24] sister, and they did not turn[M] themselves when they[F] went (somewhere)—each[M] went[M] in the direction of his[25] faces.

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21. Actually "Yoyakin" in this particular verse.

22. i.e., the cloud's.

23. i.e., the fire's.

24. i.e., the wing's, or possibly the *ḥayyâ*'s.

25. i.e., the *ḥayyâ*'s.

10 And the likeness of their[M] faces: faces of a human (in front), and faces of a lion to the right hand for the four[M] of them,[M] and faces of a bull to the left for the four[M] of them,[F] and faces of an eagle (behind) for the four[M] of them[F]—**11** so their[M] faces. And their[M] wings, from top to bottom: for each,[M] two joining to each,[M] and two covering their[F] bodies. **12** And each[M] went[M] in the direction of his faces—wherever the spirit was[M] going, they went,[M] and they did not turn[M] themselves when they[F] went.

13 And the likeness of the *ḥayyôt*: their[M] appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearances of torches.[26] She[27] was moving to and fro between the *ḥayyôt*. And the brightness of the fire! And from the fire, lightning was going out—**14** and the *ḥayyôt* ran out[28] and returned like the appearance of the lightning flash.

15 And I saw the *ḥayyôt*: behold, one wheel on the ground next to the *ḥayyôt* for the four of his[29] faces. **16** The appearance of the wheels and their[M] works: like the look of turquoise, with one[M] likeness for the four[M] of them.[F] And their[M] appearance and their[M] works: like there was the wheel within the wheel, **17** on their[F] four sides. When they[M][30] went (somewhere), they[31] went,[M] and they did not turn[M] themselves when they[F] went. **18** And their[F] rims![M] The height of them![M] And the terror of them![M] Their[M] rims[F] were filled with eyes, all around the four[M] of them.[F]

19 And when the *ḥayyôt* went (somewhere), the wheels went[M] beside them.[M] And when

---

26. Note that it's unclear what "burning" here (fp) modifies. The fire is feminine but singular, while the coals and torches alike are plural but masculine.

27. i.e., the fire.

28. The word *rāṣô'* should likely be corrected as from either *rwṣ* or *yṣ'*, and I have combined these two options for the translation.

29. i.e., the *ḥayyâ*'s.

30. i.e., the *ḥayyôt*.

31. i.e., the wheels.

the *ḥayyôt* lifted off from the ground, the wheels lifted[M] off. **20** Wherever the spirit was[M] going, they went[M] there (where) the spirit was going. And the wheels lifted[M] off alongside them,[M] for the spirit of the *ḥayyâ* is in the wheels. **21** When they[M][32] went, they[33] went,[M] and when they[M] stopped, they stopped,[M] and when they[M] lifted off from the ground, the wheels lifted[M] off alongside them,[M] for the spirit of the *ḥayyâ* is in the wheels.

22 And a likeness, over the heads of the *ḥayyâ*, of a firmament: like the look of dreadful frost, spread out from above their[M] heads upwards. **23** And beneath the firmament, their[M] wings (stretched out) straight, each[F] to her[F][34] sister: for each,[M] two (wings) covering them,[F] and for each,[M] two covering their[M] bodies for them.[F]

24 And I heard the sound of their[M] wings: like a sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai, in their[M] going; a sound of a rainstorm, like a sound of an army camp, in their[M] stopping; they relaxed[F] their[F] wings. **25** And there was a sound from above the firmament which was over their[M] head(s)—in their[M] stopping, they relaxed[F] their[F] wings.

26 And from above the firmament which was over their[M] head(s), (something) like the appearance of a sapphire gemstone, a likeness of a throne. And upon the likeness of the throne, a likeness like an appearance of a human upon him,[35] from above (the throne) upwards. **27** And I saw: like the look of molten metal, like the appearance of fire, a house around her,[36] from the appearance of his[37] lap upwards. And from the appearance of his lap downwards, I saw

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32. i.e., the *ḥayyôt*.

33. i.e., the wheels.

34. i.e., the wing's, or possibly the *ḥayyâ*'s.

35. i.e., the throne.

36. i.e., the fire? Or the throne? Or the *ḥayyâ*? Or the apparent human? It is unclear how to read the antecedent since the house appears to be in apposition to the fire which it grammatically appears to be surrounding.

37. i.e., the apparent human's.

(something) like an appearance of fire and brightness around him,[38] **28** like the appearance of the bow which is in the cloud on the day of rain—so the appearance of the brightness (all) around.

 It was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yʜᴡʜ. And I saw, and I fell on my face, and I heard a voice speaking.

<center>Cognitive and Interpretive Effects of Grammatical Gender</center>

The chapter has a more even distribution of masculine and feminine nouns (nearly 1:1) than would be expected from an average Biblical Hebrew text (the HB overall contains roughly 3:1, masculine to feminine),[39] and these grammatical genders are heavily intermixed throughout the chapter. For example, the chariot-throne is surrounded by *ʿānān* (m), *ʾēš* (f), *nōgah* (f), and *ḥašmal* (m) (v. 4b).[40] These are not remarkable in and of themselves—*ʿānān* and *ʾēš* in particular are, of course, quite ordinary words, and neither feminine noun is inflected to show its gender. What makes these specific choices (as opposed to other synonyms) significant is that they contribute to the even distribution of nouns throughout the chapter and thus to an increase in feminine-inflected forms. Though the nouns themselves are not inflected, they are accompanied by words that emphasize their grammatical class: *səʿārâ*, *bāʾâ*, *gādôl*, *mitlaqqaḥat*. The distribution of noun genders is audible through the interchange of pronoun, verb, and adjective inflections associated with those nouns. Similarly, the mixture of *dəmût* and *marʾeh* throughout the chapter draws additional attention to the unusual distribution of noun genders, audible thanks

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 38. i.e., the apparent human, or possibly his lap, or the throne.

 39. Note that some ambiguity in this distribution will always remain, as not all noun genders can be confirmed by an inflected verb or adjective present within the relevant text.

 40. To clarify, what is interesting here is not the mere fact of these nouns' genders—that they have different genders is a mundane fact of gendered langauges. It is not even merely that Ezekiel happens to choose two masculine and two feminine nouns out of all the possible words to describe stormclouds and lightning. Rather, it is that he makes this choice in the same chapter in which 1) the overall gender distribution of nouns is noticeably more even than normal, and 2) specific figures in the scene have unusual relationships with grammatical gender.

to the -*ût* and -*eh* inflections of these "likeness" words. Finally, pronominal suffixes match the nouns to which they are suffixed precisely as often as they do not, and the flow back and forth between these matched and unmatched inflections only serves to further highlight the role of grammatical ambiguity within the passage, even when the pronouns are correctly mapped to the gender of their antecedents.

The unusual usage of grammatical gender reaches its peak where the living creatures are involved. The inflected words for which the *ḥayyôt* are the antecedent are gendered profoundly inconsistently—in fact, the *ḥayyôt* are gendered in roughly the same distribution as nouns in Biblical Hebrew are in general: roughly 3:1, masculine to feminine. As I argue below, there is a sense in which the slipperiness of language, particularly in describing these divine attendants, evokes the destabilizing experience of seeing a theophany for the prophet's audience. Furthermore, it highlights just how alien and difficult to comprehend God must be that someone with priestly training cannot manage to assign these heavenly creatures to a category within creation's binaries.[41] By contrast, ch. 10 depicts essentially the same vision, but with a corrective concreteness that wholly alters the genre of the vision report.[42] Where the first chapter reads like evocative poetry meant to offer the audience a hint of the experience there described, ch. 10 reads merely like a narrative recounting of a significant event. The *ḥayyôt* of ambiguous gender from ch. 1 are glossed as consistently masculine cherubim throughout. When phrases are quoted from ch. 1, the gender agreement is corrected. The absence of grammatical oddities mirrors the

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41. See S. Tamar Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study in the Book of Ezekiel*, JSOTSup 368 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 9.

42. Chapter 10 appears at first glance to be a secondary addition in response to ch. 1, though the content of ch. 10 unrelated to ch. 1 seems to be original. The relationship between the two chapters is somewhat ambiguous, particularly given the individual redaction histories of each and the uncertainty as to when the gender irregularities of ch. 1 first appear (Janina Maria Hiebel, *Ezekiel's Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives: A Redaction-Critical and Theological Study*, BZAW 475 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015], 61, 115).

fact that the depiction is less fanciful in its imagery and features a more recognizably humanoid figure among the divine attendants. In Daniel Block's reading, this shift in imagery reflects the process of beginning, over time, to grasp and put to words an incomprehensible experience.[43]

Living Beings (m), or Living Beings (f)?

Let us explore this point in detail. From a syntactical perspective, the most significant example of the twisting, changing vision is the grammatical gender of the *ḥayyôt*. Feminine plural on the face of it, the word is variously gendered masculine and feminine throughout the chapter, switching within a single verse—even a single word—at times. This is a significant aspect of the depiction of Ezekiel's inaugural vision, and yet very few commentators give it even a moment's thought. Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, despite focusing on the "strange, almost hallucinatory," "dreamlike" imagery of the chapter,[44] has nothing whatsoever to say about the strangeness of the syntax which communicates that imagery. Solomon Fisch neglects gender to focus on the logistics of the creatures' wings,[45] while Marvin Sweeney focuses on discussing the symbolism of the four species.[46] Corrine Carvalho and Paul Niskanen say almost nothing of the living creatures whatsoever.[47] Given the possible implications for the gender of divine beings— perhaps even of God—one might expect the *Queer Bible Commentary* to say at least something on the matter. However, Teresa Hornsby instead focuses her article on the performativity of Ezekiel's sign-acts and the two problematic chapters feminist interpreters seem almost required

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43. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 40.

44. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 18, 20.

45. Solomon Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: The Soncino Press, 1950).

46. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2013).

47. Corrine L. Carvalho and Paul V. Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 16 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012); Fisch, *Ezekiel*; Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*.

to address in any work on the book: chs. 16 and 23.[48]

Even those few commentators who do address the confusing grammar do so only in passing. The inconsistencies are consistently chalked up to either redactional artefacts,[49] ordinary features of Hebrew grammar,[50] or both. The position that all gender inconsistency is due to redaction is exemplified by Walther Zimmerli, one of the few commentators to address the grammatical peculiarities even briefly. In his translation footnotes, he mentions the gender switch in v. 7 only long enough to note that some manuscripts correct the error, that "sparkling" has no clear antecedent because of the grammatical confusion, and that the text is probably heavily edited.[51] Despite the fact that in v. 10 the genders "alternate here in a remarkable way," Zimmerli gives no remarks of his own on the matter, observing only that others have used the inconsistencies here to attempt implausible textual emendations regarding the directions of the faces.[52] The three other references to grammatical gender confusion are equally brief and non-committal.[53] He elaborates somewhat in the following commentary section, but essentially only to make the claim that correct pronoun usage marks original text and incorrect usage marks later

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48. Teresa Hornsby, "Ezekiel," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM, 2006), 412–426.

49. For example, Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Klaus Baltzer, and Leonard Jay Greenspoon, trans. Ronald E. Clements, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 83–88, 95, 102–105.

50. For example, Hiebel, *Ezekiel's Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives*, 61. Hiebel supposes that, wherever they are not merely scribal errors or diachronic linguistic changes, the mistakes are the expected result of the collision of a feminine noun with a presumably masculine referent, or even simply because the 3fp suffix seems to disappear in late Biblical (and post-biblical) Hebrew. She also states definitively that she does not believe them original to the text. For my purposes, it matters little exactly why the irregularities are present since the cognitive effect of the current text on interpretation remains.

51. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 83.

52. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 84.

53. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 84, 86, 87.

stages of redaction.[54] The gender inconsistencies are used solely as a heuristic for determining

the redaction history of the text and not as an observation to be interpreted in itself; neither does

he acknowledge the effect of the oscillations in the current text resulting from that redaction

history.

The position that the gender inconsistency is entirely consistent with normal Hebrew

grammar relies on the work of grammarians such as Rebecca Hasselbach[55] and Paul Joüon and

Takamitsu Muraoka[56] to argue that masculine agreement for feminine nouns is quite common for

Biblical Hebrew, particularly when the agreeing verb precedes the feminine noun or the feminine

antecedent is far from its pronoun. These observations are, of course, true, but the conclusion that

there is, therefore, nothing worth saying about the grammar of Ezekiel 1 does not follow. It is not

merely in verb-initial clauses or the absence of a nearby *ḥayyôt* that the agreement switches to

masculine. Rather, the agreement switches back and forth repeatedly throughout the chapter, is

not always consistent in otherwise identical phrases, and often differs in adjacent words or

morphemes.[57] Whether this is the result of compiling multiple sources or no, the resulting

oscillations are significant and only contribute to the incomprehensibility of the vision described.

One may wonder if there is an implication that the *ḥayyôt*—and *ʾopanîm* (see below)—

are, like humans, bimodally sexed. With modern gendering eyes, we read something akin to

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54. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 102–105.

55. Rebecca Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic (Part I)," *ZDMG* 164.1 (2014): 36.

56. Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. Takamitsu Muraoka, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016), § 150.

57. Recall that grammatical gender is fundamentally a phenomenon of agreement. The gender of a noun is solely determined by the form of the adjectives and verbs with which it agrees. Where a single noun maintains inconsistent agreement within a single chapter—even within a single verse—its grammatical gender is, therefore, inconsistent. This is a noticeably bizarre phenomenon in a language that relies on grammatical agreement for consistent noun classes—Ezekiel's struggle with grammatical gender might in another context make him sound like a child or foreigner still in the first stages of mastering Hebrew.

genderfluid[58]—or perhaps genderfuck[59]—creatures attending the divine presence, indeed forming a part of that divine presence.[60] The *ḥayyôt* are feminine grammatically but have four masculine faces representing all aspects of creation[61] (v. 10). The default gender is masculine—linguistically, historically,[62] culturally—and yet the combination of these default signifiers does not itself default to masculine. These could just as easily have been called *ḥayyîm*, "living beings," in the same way that *šāmayim* sometimes refers to "heavenly beings,"[63] but they are not. They are *ḥayyôt*, feminine life forms with entirely masculine faces.[64] Nor are these *ḥayyôt* gendered consistently in repeated phrases. There are human hands under their[M] wings on their[M] four sides (v. 8), but wheels on their[F] four sides—and when they[M] move, the wheels follow (v.

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58. The term "genderfluid" refers to a person whose gender identity varies frequently or infrequently between some or many genders, deliberately or automatically (Alex Stitt, *ACT for Gender Identity: The Comprehensive Guide* [Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019], 42). Genderfluidity as we currently conceptualize it is, of course, a modern construct—though not without numerous antecedents (see, for example, Niko Besnier, "Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt [New York: Zone, 1996], 285–328). It is, however, the natural association for a modern audience to make with the grammatical oddities of Ezekiel 1, and so I hope that the reader will bear with my use of the term as a shorthand. I emphasize that I am using these categories for hermeneutical purposes rather than as emic ancient gender constructions. For another approach to adapting gender terminology to historical analysis, see Jane Nichols and Rachel Stuart, "Transgender: A Useful Category of Biblical Analysis?," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 1.2 (2020): 1–24.

59. According to June L. Reich, "genderfuck structures meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practice" ("Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo," *Discourse*, Essays in Lesbian and Gay Studies 15.1 (1992): 113). The term originates as early as the 1950s and is currently used both as a descriptor of gender performance and as the name of a gender identity ("Genderfuck," *Nonbinary Wiki*, accessed 21 Jan. 2022, https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Genderfuck). For examples of genderfuck used as a lens for biblical scholarship, see Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, Semeia 67 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 9–43; Erin Runions, "Zion Is Burning: 'Gender Fuck' in Micah," *Semeia* 82 (1998): 225–46.

60. On this point, see page 29.

61. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 21; Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*, 28.

62. Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic (Part I)," 56; "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic (Part II)," 337, 342; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 89 a.

63. For example, Deut 4:19; 17:3; 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4, 5; Isa 34:4; Jer 8:2; 19:13; 33:22; Zeph 1:5; Job 15:15; Dan 8:10; 2 Chr 33:3, 5.

64. Or are we to understand a female human, a lioness, and so on, despite the absence of specifically feminine terms for these animals?

17). Two wings cover their^{F} bodies (v. 11)—or do they cover their^{M} bodies for them^{F} (v. 23)?

Yes, it is very possible these inconsistent repetitions originate in differing sources, but the fact remains that someone(s) left them inconsistent so that the text we now have cannot assign a gender to the *ḥayyôt* to save its life. Even if one is not paying enough attention to catch changes nine and twelve verses apart, it is difficult to escape v. 23 without being at least somewhat caught off-guard by "cover their^{M} bodies for them^{F}"—what kind of them are they? Does it, on some fundamental level, matter to the editor(s) that it doesn't matter? When a priest('s son) is called to prophecy by a vision that cannot divide creation into clear binaries (unlike Genesis 1[65]), what are we as the audience to understand about the nature of God and the exile?

The Four of Them

Other portions of the chapter juxtapose the two genders for the *ḥayyôt* even more closely. Twice, v. 15 names the *ḥayyôt*, and yet there is a wheel on the ground for "his" four faces at the end of the same verse—agreeing in neither gender nor number. Similarly, when the *ḥayyôt* move, the wheels move beside them^{M}—inconsistent only three words later. When the *ḥayyôt* move, they do not turn^{M} when they^{F} move (vv. 9, 12). For each^{M} *ḥayyâ*, two wings join to each^{M}, and two cover their^{F} bodies (v. 11). Akin to v. 23's variation, "cover their^{M} bodies for them^{F}," the following two verses describe the *ḥayyôt* relaxing^{F} their^{F} wings as they^{M} stop.[66] Within a single thought, a single phrase, the *ḥayyôt* are able to be described as both masculine and feminine. Even when a pronoun immediately follows its governing antecedent, the gender is not

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65. Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 3–9. Kamionkowski argues that "gender ambiguities and reversals" in Ezekiel reflect the response of a priest who expects a world bounded by predictable and largely binary categories but must instead face the chaos and upheaval of exile (7). Her discussion centers on ch. 16, but her general argument applies to ch. 1 as well: "Ezekiel, especially as a priest, cannot admit to a world in which chaos plays a valid role in the universe, but this text does highlight the constant tension between an ideal world in which everything is black and white and the shades of gray in real life experience" (9).

66. While the infinitive is not itself gendered, I'm treating infinitive construct + suffix as a gendered verb form determined by the gender of the suffix functioning semantically as the agent of the verbal action.

consistent—"their^M appearance" immediately follows "ḥayyôt" in v. 13, a format which should

be the *most* likely, according to Hasselbach and Joüon-Muraoka,[67] to yield gender agreement.

And it does not stop there. Several times within a single word the *ḥayyôt* are multiply

gendered: in the phrase "the four of them," expressed in Hebrew as "four" with a pronominal

suffix. In the first two cases, "the four of them" is consistently masculine (vv. 8, 10a)—though

this phrase is an unusual gender construction of its own, thanks to the fact that the masculine and

feminine forms of ʿ*arbaʿ* take inflections opposite the usual.[68] For the rest of the chapter, the

suffix agrees with the form but not the gender of the "four," leaving the *ḥayyôt* multiply

gendered within the span of a single word (vv. 10b, 10c), and their wheels the same (vv. 16,

18).[69]

This is not merely a case of the artefacts of editing confusing the occasional syntactical

form. This is a persistent effect throughout the chapter, at every level of granularity, from the

description of the *ḥayyôt*'s appearance as comprised entirely of masculine faces to

inconsistencies within verses or phrases to oscillations within single words. The multiplicity of

gender for the *ḥayyôt* pervades the chapter and raises theological questions about what the

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67. Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic (Part I)," 36; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 150 r.

68. This is a point of confusion among Hebrew grammarians. In linguistics, the gender of a noun is solely determined by the form of the adjectives and verbs with which it agrees (Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic [Part I]," 33, 37–38, 41–42; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 89 a), not by any intrinsic property of the noun itself. Where cardinal numbers are concerned, however, grammars of Biblical Hebrew tend to contradict this definition of agreement in order to explain the chiastic concord of the numerals 3–10. Joüon and Muraoka describe the agreement as mismatched and speculate that the reason might be "an aesthetic tendency towards dissymmetry" (Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 100 d). Seow bluntly comments that "there is no agreement in gender" for the numbers 3–10 and offers paradigm charts that label them according to their endings rather than their agreement (C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995], 268–269). *Pace* these and others, the numbers should be analyzed according to their agreement, not their form, as they are in resources such as Accordance. (For possible origins of chiastic concord, see Hasselbach, "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic [Part I]," 58–61; "Agreement and the Development of Gender in Semitic [Part II]," 341.)

69. Note that this point holds true regardless of whether or not one follows the grammars for the gender of the numbers 3–10. In either case, there are two M-M "four of them"s and two M-F "four of them"s for the *ḥayyôt*.

description of Ezekiel's vision might mean for how we understand the gender of "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yнwн."

Of Rims and Wheels

While the wheels are much more consistently gendered (masculine) than the *ḥayyôt*,[70] they are, as mentioned above, twice described as "the four[M] of them[F]" (vv. 16, 18). Additionally, their rims receive a similarly strange treatment in v. 18 to the description of the *ḥayyôt*'s faces in v. 10: their[F] rims[M] are tall and scary, while their[M] rims[F] are full of eyes. In other cases, the antecedents of pronouns are not fully clear, in part due to the confusion around the gender of the *ḥayyôt*. For example, do their[M] wings join each[F] wing to her (the wing's) sister, or each[F] *ḥayyâ* to her (the *ḥayyâ*'s) sister (v. 9, 23)? More confusing still, is there a house around "her," the fire[F], the throne[M], the *ḥayyâ*[F], or the human-like being[M] (v. 27)? It seems more likely from context to refer to either of the two masculine options than to one that reflects gender agreement. On a similar note, it is also unclear what "burning[F] (pl.)" in v. 13 modifies. The fire is feminine but singular, while the coals and torches are both plural but masculine; the *ḥayyôt* are (apparently) feminine and plural but are the least plausible option syntactically.

Cognitive Conclusions

The gender oscillations throughout the chapter force the reader or listener to pay close attention in order to follow the story as it unfolds in a haze of obscurity and shifting appearances. There is something vague and ambiguously gendered about the silhouettes and lights that form this chariot-throne, from the beings that accompany it to the atmospheric phenomena that surround it.[71] The divine realm and the presence of God are presented as fundamentally beyond human

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70. Roughly 5:1 for the wheels and roughly 3:1 for the *ḥayyôt*. (Intriguingly, the latter figure is about the same as the ratio of masculine to feminine nouns in the Hebrew Bible as a whole).

71. Even the words "appearance" and "likeness" themselves are strewn interchangeably throughout the description, until the final summary that this is the appearance (m) of the likeness (f) of the glory (m) of YHWH (v.

norms, expectations, and comprehension, and Ezekiel 1 demonstrates that alienness in part through fluidity in grammatical gender.[72]

While it is likely that many of these details might pass unnoticed on first reading or hearing the chapter, they nonetheless contribute to the overall description of the vision. As I argued above, the text is visibly and audibly different from the normal rhythms of Hebrew due to the increased presence of feminine nouns and the confusion regarding the gender of the *ḥayyôt*. Like mystical poetry, this text functions less to explain something that fundamentally is unexplainable and more to draw the audience into the prophet's experience by evocative imagery.[73] The increased presence of feminine inflections throughout the chapter creates a soundscape that draws the audience out of the natural world and into the unexpected, by virtue of its departure from the sounds of ordinary texts and, likely, speech. On the literary level, the prophet attempts to put into inadequate words an ineffable encounter with the divine; on the syntactic level, we see the grammar of human language is also inadequate to express the nature of the divine realm. In the midst of the destabilizing political reality of exile, Ezekiel's vision offers a different kind of destabilization. The presence of God experienced by the prophet undermines ordinary human categories and habits of language to hint at the promise that will become explicit in later chapters of the book—that God is rewriting creation over the long term for the benefit of the people of Israel.

<center>Shifting Appearances</center>

Thus, the syntactical elements of the chapter create a sense of instability through the

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28).

72. This phenomenon stands out even more starkly when the following chapter addresses the prophet as *ben-ʾādām* and utilizes a higher proportion of masculine nouns than average (5:1).

73. On this point, see footnote 9 on page 5.

absence of consistent grammatical agreement for the *ḥayyôt* and occasional other words. While it

is certainly likely that that lack of agreement may not be readily apparent upon first hearing of

the text, it is an effect that one may be implicitly aware of due to patterns of assonance and

rhyme that sound unusual compared to most other Hebrew texts, as I argued above. Furthermore,

upon examination, this inconsistency becomes readily apparent, particularly in those places

where mere words—or less—separate mismatched agreement. Thus, with increasing familiarity

among the audience should come increasing awareness of that sense of instability woven into the

very fabric of the text.

Upon this unstable base is built an equally shifting and unstable depiction of Ezekiel's

vision. The content of the words mirrors their form—unpredictable and difficult to pin down.

The introduction, relatively concrete on the face of it, is full of interruptions and asides such that

the vision begins in fits and starts (v. 1–3). The chapter opens with the date of the vision (v. 1a),

as is expected in prophetic reports,[74] but before Ezekiel can actually say what happened on that

fifth day, he jumps to an aside about the setting of the vision (v. 1b). After interrupting himself,

the prophet returns to his original sentence: on the day specified, he saw visions of God (v. 1c).

Before describing those visions, however, he gives the date again (v. 2a), then again cuts himself

off to give extra information (v. 2b). He finally introduces himself alongside his second

statement that God came to him (v. 3a), but it is only after he explains for a third time that God

came to him (v. 3a) that he finally begins his description of the encounter (vv. 4ff).

Under the Dome

The presence of God depicted in Ezekiel's mind's eye comes in concentric circles of increasing

complexity and decreasing clarity. The outer layer is a cloud, and a fire all around it—this fire

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74. E.g., Isa 1:1; 6:1; Jer 1:2–3; Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1.

possibly being equivalent to the brightness of the cloud (v. 4a; cf. v. 13). In the midst of the fire

(and presumably also the cloud) is metal[75] (*ḥašmal*) (v. 4b). By the end of the first verse, the

picture is already unclear: what is the relationship between the cloud and the fire? If the cloud is

indeed the antecedent of "his" brightness, as the gender would require, then what is the cloud's

position with respect to the metal? They are apparently both in the midst of the fire. As are,

according to v. 5, the *ḥayyôt*—perhaps these all are understood to be analogous to the fire's

contents swirling around and seeming at one moment a storm cloud, another a vat of molten

metal, and another numinous beings. After all, they sparkle like copper (v. 7)—or is that their

feet? Both are feminine, unlike the masculine "sparkling." Whatever Ezekiel is seeing, the text

does not clearly describe. We know only the relationship between the fire and each of the other

elements; we are not told how the cloud, metal, and *ḥayyôt* are positioned relative to one another

or whether any one is to be identified with another. This is not a narration of an event, not a

detailed description of a ritual object like the tabernacle.[76] This is evocative, almost poetic,

language designed to mimic the prophet's experience for his audience rather than relate the exact

content of his vision.

It is also a clear reference to the kind of theology reflected in the so-called archaic poetry

of Ps 18:7–15/2 Sam 22:8–16. In the psalm, the "rider of the cherubim" image of God[77] is united

with the storm-rider image of God[78] such that we find Yʜwʜ surrounded by the dark clouds of a

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75. Electrum, perhaps, or molten metal? The exact meaning is difficult to identify.

76. Cf. Gen 6:14–7:5; Exod 25–28; 1 Kgs 6; Ezek 40–48.

77. Cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 22:11/Ps 18:10; 2 Kgs 19:5; Isa 37:16; Pss 80:1; 90:1; 1 Chr 13:6.

78. Cf. Deut 33:26–27; Ps 29:10; 68:4, 7–8, 33; Isa 19:1. Note that the Isaiah example here may imply more of a sirocco wind than thunderstorm clouds; on this imagery, see Aloysius Fitzgerald, *The Lord of the East Wind*, CBQ 34 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2002).

severe thunderstorm (v. 11[79]; Ezek 1:4[80]) and brightness (v. 12; Ezek 1:4, 13, 27–28), riding a

cherub through the storm winds (v. 10[81]). From Y$_{HWH}$'s face come smoke (perhaps the cloud?)

and fire (perhaps the brightness?[82]) (v. 8; Ezek: 1:4, 27). From the clouds come coals of fire (v.

12; Ezek 1:13) and lightning (v. 14; Ezek 1:4, 13–14), identified in the parallelism with

hailstones and Y$_{HWH}$'s arrows, respectively. The winds (*rûaḥ*) are, of course, identified with

Y$_{HWH}$'s breath (v. 15), and the thunder (✓*rʿm, qôl*) is identified with the divine voice (v. 13; Ezek

1:24). Whether Ezekiel knew Psalm 18 itself or merely the theology underpinning it, the picture

is clear. It is not just the Y$_{HWH}$ enthroned on the cherubim in the Temple (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 2:6;

2 Kgs 19:15; Isa 37:16; 1 Chr 13:6) who is traveling with the Judahites into exile. It is the Y$_{HWH}$

that has employed the forces of nature to fight for the people since before there was an ark or a

Temple[83] (Judg 5:4, 20–21; Ps 18:7–15; 29:3–10) who travels with them—it is the Y$_{HWH}$ that

rescued them from Egypt who travels with them (Exod 15:4–5, 7–8, 10, 12). There is an implicit

promise in Ezekiel's use of this imagery not merely that God's presence is with them in their

grief and exile, but that God will again listen for their cry for rescue (Exod 3:9) and restore them

as before.

Ezekiel's vision, however, stands apart as especially difficult to visualize, especially

slippery to grasp.[84] As the vision zooms in on the *ḥayyôt*, the complexity of the images and the

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79. Versification given only for Psalm 18, for the sake of simplicity.

80. Cf. also Ezek 1:24 ("mighty waters" and "rainstorm") and 1:28 ("day of rain").

81. The cherubim, of course, are not present in Ezekiel 1 but are identified in Ezek 10:15, 20 as equivalent to the *ḥayyôt* of the first chapter.

82. The fire and brightness are equated in Ezekiel, at least (1:4).

83. Here interpreting Judges 5 and others as genuinely preceding the ark historically. This is, however, merely a figure of speech, and so the chronology is not crucial to the point.

84. Compare Isaiah 6, for example, which also presents a dramatic theophany but in terms much easier to conceptualize. Isaiah sees the Lord (6:1a), not the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Y$_{HWH}$ (Ezek 1:28). God wears humanlike clothes (Isa 6:1b) and is surrounded by seraphim with six wings whose positions and functions are

unreal physicality of the fire-cloud-metal increases still more. The creatures are human-like (Ezek 1:5) but have calves' hooves and animal legs[85] (v. 7)—mixed body parts like other ancient Near Eastern composite beings.[86] They also each have four faces and four wings (v. 6), though in the afterlife of this text, it becomes four faces total for the four creatures (Rev 4:6–7). Under their four wings, they have human hands—so far, so imaginable—but these are then described as "on their four sides with their faces and their wings" (v. 8). Does each side have four pairs of hands, one for each face? And now they have four wings on each side? Are these ḥayyôt separate creatures at all, or a single creature composed of four composites? Presumably not—there are, again, "four of them" (v. 8), yet the rest of v. 8 makes the numbering and position of hands and wings difficult to pin down. Futhermore, the wings join "each to her sister" (v. 9), which in the first place complicates the idea that these creatures could effectively fly without smacking each other constantly with overlapping wings. More confusing, however, is the antecedent of "each" and "her"—are the wings joining themselves together, and if so, how indeed could they possibly fly? (Are we to imagine something like skydivers holding hands?) Or are the wings joining the ḥayyôt to each other so that they fly like birds in formation? This seems a minor distinction, but if it is the wings joining to the wings, we are left with the further question: which wings? Are the wings joined from one side to the next of a single creature? Are they all the same wings, somehow appearing from each side as if facing normally for that side, or are there in fact sixteen

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described clearly and succinctly (v. 2). They speak in a language the human prophet can understand (vv. 3, 7), and they can interact physically with the prophet (v. 6). There is a sense of awe from encountering God, but the language of the vision does not directly capture the mystery and ineffability of that encounter in the way that Ezekiel's does.

85. Possibly? It is unclear what "straight feet" means, but one possibility is that it refers to the way many four-legged animals' knees are structured differently than human ones.

86. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 22 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 56–57; Joel M. LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts*, OBO 242 (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2010), 28, 38–50.

wings tangled up with one another in the shifting of the stormcloud which carries them? Or, indeed, do the creatures somehow share wings and fly by improbably synchronizing their movements? Nothing is wholly clear, and—I argue—nothing is meant to be.[87] Ezekiel does not fully understand what he is seeing, and we the audience are meant to experience his awe and alienation through the imprecision of his description.

As the prophet continues, we learn that the creatures do not need to turn in order to move in a new direction, not because they walk backwards and sideways without looking, but because each has four faces, and so the creatures are always facing the direction they are moving at any given moment (v. 9b). The four faces likely symbolize the totality of creation[88]—humans, wild and domesticated animals, and birds (v. 10). This part of the imagery is relatively clear, insofar as having four faces on a single creature is clear. Below their faces the picture is fuzzier; as mentioned above, it is unclear from the text whether each face or each creature has four hands and four wings, or if, perhaps, it changes depending on how they are moving and the angle from which one views them.

The arrangement of the wings is very slightly clarified next. Two wings cover their bodies, while two join to each (v. 11). There certainly seems to be a reference here to Isaiah's seraphim (Isa 6:2), but the mechanism of movement here is much more unclear. For Isaiah, the seraphim fly by the use of two of their wings. By contrast, we are not even told that the *ḥayyôt* fly at all, only that they float airborne in some unspecified way (Ezek 1:19). The verbiage is akin to Isaiah's, but the vision is less concrete—or at least more difficult to grasp. One even wonders

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87. In fact, we should probably not leave out the possibility that the homophony of "skirt" and "wing" is at play here and that perhaps their garments appear to be made of a single cloth, or that their wings and garments are difficult to distinguish in the vision.

88. Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*, 28; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 55.

if "wings" is the best translation for *kənāpayim* here: are the creatures perhaps sharing a single garment of sorts? Certainly, the idea of wings covering the bodies of the *ḥayyôt* and seraphim seems to be a pun on the double meaning of *kənāpayim*.

Whether they fly or float, we again hear that they move without turning because there is always a face facing forward (v. 12). "The spirit" leads them: though we later learn that the creatures' spirits reside in their accompanying wheels, there is no detail given here on the nature or origin of the spirit. For the moment, it appears that they are led by the divine spirit or, more indirectly, by the storm-wind surrounding the presence of God (v. 4). There is perhaps an implied connection between Ezekiel, the mortal servant of God, and these divine attendants when the prophet himself experiences movement by spirit (ex. 2:2; 11:1; 37:1).

Verses 13–14 further explore the relationship between the creatures and the fire but again do little to fully clarify what Ezekiel is seeing. The *ḥayyôt* are like burning coals in the midst of the fire—this much is consistent with the initial description in vv. 4–5. At the same time, they are like torches (v. 13a), which might imply that they are themselves the fire and not merely in its midst. In the next phrase, fire and creatures are definitively separate: the fire is moving about between the creatures (v. 13b)—or are the creatures moving about within the fire, striking out like lightning (v. 14)? The imagery here is clearly not meant to function as a simplistic metaphor. The creatures are not described consistently in fire-related terms as a way to explain their shine and movement by comparison to a known quantity. Rather, the images shift and overlap one another such that it is unclear where one stops and another begins. This is a complex mixture of metaphors not meant to combine perfectly: the crucial vehicle of meaning is not where the source and target domains of the metaphors do and do not overlap, but instead the slippery incomprehensibility of the way the images are layered together. What is depicted is not a

possible physical reality; in doing so, the prophet evokes for his audience the feeling of instability and ineffability experienced during the theophany.

The wheels, at least, are somewhat less bizarre to visualize. They correspond closely with the creatures, and there are four wheels for each (v. 15), or perhaps four total (v. 16a). The structure of the wheels in some way allows them to move without turning as do the *ḥayyôt*, though the exact construction is unclear (v. 16b). Their rims are lined with eyes (v. 18b), presumably another faltering attempt at explaining the radiance of the vision, as rolling literal eyes along the ground would likely be painful for any creature capable of sense perception. The wheels and creatures move together as one, rising and descending as needed for travel (vv. 19–21). The spirits of the *ḥayyôt* are in their wheels; thus, they move together as if a single hivemind-like organism (v. 21).

To sum up: the bottom half of Ezekiel's vision contains a thunderstorm that is also fire and possibly molten metal all at the same time. There are four hybrid creatures, akin to Mesopotamian examples in some ways and wildly distinct in others,[89] that are maybe the fire or maybe in the fire. They all have wheels that are part of them but not (as far as we are told) attached to them. They all move together as a unit, but the nature of that movement and whether their wings are involved in any way is unclear.

Above the Dome

Above all of that is something like the dome of the sky (v. 22) and yet more bizarre and incomprehensible images. The dome seems to look like a massive frost (v. 22b), perhaps a reference to snow on the peak of the mountain of God, or simply yet another weather phenomenon wrapped up inside this lightning storm. The *ḥayyôt*'s four wings cover their bodies

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89. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 56–57.

and shelter their heads (v. 23b), giving the implausible impression of fire-associated creatures bundled up against the cold frost. The wording is unclear, however; perhaps they simply carry the firmament with their wings rather than their hands (v. 23a).

Whatever their function, the wings are able to move enough to create a noise. When the creatures travel, Ezekiel hears the sound of the divine storm-rider traveling with the clouds (v. 24a). When they stop, they sound like the bustling of an army gathered at its campsite (v. 24b). Another sound comes from above the dome as well, but we are told nothing whatsoever about its nature (v. 25). Perhaps it is the sound of God speaking (v. 28), or perhaps it is an entirely different sound. In either case, the sounds of the *ḥayyôt* are perhaps the most comprehensible parts of the entire vision. They are the sound of the divine army marching into exile alongside the people. What that army looks like may be unclear, but at least the sound is identifiable.

The final verses of the vision depict what is apparently the figure of God enthroned above the dome. This last section is the most vague, thanks to the prophet's exaggerated hesitation about any kind of anthropomorphic or concrete depiction of God. Sitting on the dome is a something that might be like what a sapphire looks like, or what a throne looks like (v. 26a). Sitting on the something that looks like a throne is something that looks like something that looks like a human (v. 26b). Heaven forbid God look like a human, apparently—we need at least two degrees of separation to avoid anything like idolatry. Again, fire and *ḥašmal* are central to the vision. Just as they surrounded the storm clouds where the *ḥayyôt* flew, here they surround the figure upon the throne, forming some kind of radiant structure around the figure (v. 27)—perhaps implying a mobility not only of the divine presence but even of the divine house. Again, where the figure on the throne is concerned, there is an extra layer of distance from the imagery: it is not fire surrounding the figure as in v. 4, but the appearance of fire. The brightness

surrounding the figure in some way reminds the prophet of the rainbow (v. 28a) that represents

God's weapon and God's covenant with the earth (Gen 9:12–17).

"It was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yʜᴡʜ," the prophet summarizes

(Ezek 1:28b). At first glance, one assumes that this sentence refers to the figure upon the

throne—after all, there is a significant tradition referring to God as enthroned upon the cherubim,

as the *ḥayyôt* are called in ch. 10.[90] However, the consistent use of the terms "appearance" and

"likeness" throughout the chapter suggests that all of the appearances and likenesses so far

described together combine to create the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. Ezekiel

follows this summary with "and I saw" (v. 28c) with no further details. He sees the whole vision,

swirling in shifting appearances and likenesses that cannot be pinned down or explained. While

the dome functions as a clear separation between the creatures that represent creation with their

four faces and the enthroned figure representing the divine realm, they nevertheless are part of

one and the same vision of God's presence moving into exile with the prophet. The entire

vision—not merely the part above the dome—reads as the kind of incomprehensible that one

would expect from a theophany. Perhaps Ezekiel means only the brightness, or the figure, is the

appearance which is like the glory of God (v. 28), but I argue that it is also reasonable to

understand the vision as a whole as the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God.[91] The

creatures and their wheels, the weather patterns, the mobile dome of the sky, and every other

element of the throne-chariot thus becomes a part of the presence of God, and the syntactical and

literary confusion of the text work together to evoke for the audience the awe and ineffability of

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90. See footnote 77 on page 22.

91. Compare Genesis 1, where regular summaries that "God saw it was good" (e.g. Gen 1:4, 12) culminate in God's conclusion that "it was very good" (1:31), clearly an assessment not only of the humans just created but of the whole, completed creation. Here, too, each section of the vision receives a summary comment (e.g., "so their faces," Ezek 1:11), culminating in the final summary "it was the appearance of the likenss of the glory of Yʜᴡʜ" (1:28), presumably also a summary of the whole, completed vision.

the presence of God experienced by the prophet.

On the Role of Gender Throughout the Book

In the first chapter's theophany, Ezekiel establishes a perception of God and the divine presence as one which escapes description, evades understanding, and mixes gender. In many ways, his vision stands in stark contrast to the expectations of his priestly upbringing: that the world is categorizable, and that humans encounter God when they navigate the boundaries of those categories properly. Thus, the replacement for his priestly ordination in the absence of the Temple[92] reorients Ezekiel's reality. That reorientation then serves as the foundation upon which the rest of the book builds its reflections on the experience of exile and its attempts to comprehend and process what has happened.

The connection between foundation and reflections is indirect, however. Although the opening vision centers on a God who defies human categories, that God-beyond-comprehension is not the primary lens through which the prophet views and reflects on the exile. Instead—infamously[93]—it is human gender.

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92. Walther Eichrodt observes that, if the "thirtieth year" of verse 1 refers to the prophet's age, then it can be assumed he was taken to exile around age 25, which Eichrodt estimates for the age Ezekiel would have begun serving as a priest (Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003], 52). A few different ages for beginning Temple service are suggested in the laws: Num 4 implies that at least some of the priestly tribes began service at 30 (vv. 4, 22, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47), while Num 8:24 provides age 25 as the first year. In either case, Ezekiel's exile and visions begin around the time that he would otherwise have been preparing to begin his service as a priest.

93. For example, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel XXIII," *VT* 43.2 (1993): 162–70; J. Cheryl Exum, "Prophetic Pornography," in *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, JSOTSup 215 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 101–28; Carol J. Dempsey, "The 'Whore' of Ezekiel 16: The Impact and Ramifications of Gender-Specific Metaphors in Light of Biblical Law and Divine Judgment," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, JSOTSup 262 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 57–78; Mary E. Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *JFSR* 14.1 (1998): 5–18; Linda Day, "Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16," *BibInt* 8.3 (2000): 205–30; Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *VT* 50.3 (2000): 285–309; Peggy L. Day, "The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16," *BibInt* 8.3 (2000): 231–54; Corrine L. Patton, "'Should Our Sister Be Treated like a Whore?': A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, SBL SymS (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 221–38; Mary E. Shields, "An Abusive God?: Identity and Power/Gender and Violence in Ezekiel 23," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the*

The Book of Ezekiel subverts and inverts expectations of agency associated with gender. Where, in other texts, women are far more likely to be passive or receptive,[94] the Book of Ezekiel presents feminine agency as both the problem and the solution. In the prophetic marriage metaphor, we see a woman (Jerusalem) whose life is upended because she does not have agency when she needs it—when assaulted by invading Babylon—and because she misuses agency when she has it—by engaging in polytheistic and non-normative Israelite religious practices. Veering from approved religious practice (according to the male elite) is described as a form of feminine agency outside the bounds of the male authority which would proscribe such practices: *zānâ*-ing. Thus, Jerusalem's problem is one of agency, the prophet reasons in trauma-influenced logic: when agency is misused, it is lost.

However, it is not merely feminine agency that has been upended and destroyed by the exile. The Book of Ezekiel also reveals a world in which masculine agency is absent as well. In fact, on a syntactic level, masculine agency is the much more significant problem. S. Tamar Kamionkowski argues that Ezekiel's inversion of the normal expectations of gendered agency for patriarchal Israel/Judah is especially significant coming from a priest. The priestly tradition

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Bible: A Reader, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 129–152; Istvan Haag, Stephen Llewlyn, and Jack Tsonis, "Ezekiel 16 and Its Use of Allegory and the Disclosure-of-Abomination Formula," *VT* 62 (2012): 198–210; Holly Morse, "'Judgement Was Executed upon Her, and She Became a Byword among Women' (Ezek. 23:10): Divine Revenge Porn, Slut-Shaming, Ethnicity, and Exile in Ezekiel 16 and 23," in *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Katherine Southwood and Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, LHBOTS 631 (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 129–154; Ilona Zsolnay, "The Inadequacy of Yahweh: A Re-Examination of Jerusalem's Portrayal in Ezekiel 16," in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible, ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim*, LHBOTS 465 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 57–74.

94. By far the most common reported agency taken by female characters involves childbirth (√*yld* and √*hrh*). Otherwise, women are most often the recipients of the action, or are the subjects of only intransitive or stative verbs. Active agency is often considered a problem that threatens the social order (√*znh*). The Book of Ruth is, of course, the most obvious and consistent exception. Other exceptions include women such as Rebekah, Rachel, or Yael, who actively trick other characters in the narrative to advance their own agendas (Gen 27:1–29; 31:1–42; Judg 4:17–22; 5:24–27). Despite the overall rejection of female independent agency, many of these characters are not chastised in the narrative for their behavior—even Rachel, who is condemned neither for the theft itself, nor for undermining her father's authority, nor for lying about the theft, nor for the apparent polytheism underlying the action.

understands creation as established and ordered by God based on specific, predictable, paired categories with distinct and separated functions. The exile, Kamionkowski observes, throws the world into chaos, and Ezekiel reflects that chaos by throwing a significant category of the world—gender—into chaos.[95] As I argued in the previous chapter, this gender chaos occurs not only on the level of metaphor but also on the level of syntax, as Ezekiel struggles to capture the nature of the divine presence in his visions. As the book continues, the syntactical manipulation of gender to reflect the chaos and inversion of creation through the exile continues as well.

The Gender of Agency

As with every form of psychological trauma,[96] the central problem is the loss of agency. The war with Babylon and the resulting exile left the Judahites feeling helpless and unable to control their own fates. Their army was unable to stand against an empire. Their capital was unable to withstand the devastation of a siege. Their God seemed unwilling to defend them. They felt forced to try increasingly drastic measures to stay alive, including sacrificing their own children in a desperate attempt to secure divine help from anyone who would listen.[97] They were utterly

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95. Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 7, 9. Throughout her book, Kamionkowski highlights the ways in which Ezekiel staunchly reinforces the hierarchical binary of the Judahite social gender system in response to the feeling of utter chaos and powerlessness induced by the exile. Outside of chs. 16 and 23, however, I argue that Ezekiel spends far more time reflecting on the chaos of the world and the ambiguity of gender than is normally recognised. Throughout the book, there is a stark dissonance between the social and ritual gender binary he was taught and the unclear figures he sees in God's presence.

96. Catastrophic events cause trauma responses when they "cut[] so deep into one's sense of self" that they "alter the structure of the mind" (Sarah Emanuel, *Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma*, Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation 4.4 [Leiden: Brill, 2021], 4–5.) The memory of being unable to prevent some terrible experience (or the threat thereof) leaves the brain hypervigilant, with the goal of ensuring that any future situation is caught while it can still be prevented. Further experiences of limited or lost agency may become associated with the initial trauma in the mind and may worsen post-traumatic symptoms. For diagnostic criteria, see American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 272–277. For Complex PTSD as a separate diagnosis, see World Health Organisation, *International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision*, https://icd.who.int/en. Accessed August 9, 2024.

97. Ezek 23:37, 39 (which may be metaphorical). See also Jer 7:31. For a full discussion of this phenomenon, see Heath D. Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel*, Explorations in Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations 5 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

without options.

Ezekiel captures that loss of options in the way that he describes agency throughout the book. For both God and Ezekiel, that which acts is most often the feminine. In part, this is simply a result of Ezekiel's extreme hesitation to refer to God directly. His oblique references and metaphors rely extensively on parts or aspects of God sometimes regarded as hypostases, many of which are grammatically feminine. For example, God moves Ezekiel and leads him into visions by the feminine *rûaḥ* and *yād*. Already in ch. 1, that which accompanies the divine presence through the sky is the doubly-feminine *rûaḥ śəʿārâ* (Ezek 1:4), not the pillars[M] of cloud[M] and fire[F,98] of Exod 13:21–22, the man[M] of war[F] or divine fury[M] of the Song of the Sea (15:3, 7), nor the stars[M] of heaven of Judg 5:20. In Ezekiel, masculine aspects of God such as the *kābôd* do not tend to take direct action. They merely appear, albeit in impressive theophanies.[99]

The result is a portrait of the cosmos in which the expected patterns of agency for Ezekiel's patriarchal society are inverted. As in ch. 1, the syntax mirrors the content. The book will hold woman Jerusalem responsible for the exile, arguing that her independence is a misuse of agency whose consequence is the loss of agency for the people at large. The language used to express this problem will imitate it. Noticeably more feminine nouns will be used than is average

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98. It is worth noting here that grammatical gender is somewhat elusive where construct chains are concerned. Much of description in Biblical Hebrew is done through these construct chains rather than through the noun + inflected adjective pattern that is normative in several other languages. Since the construct chain preserves the grammatical gender of the describing noun, the linguist is left to wonder how to assess the grammatical gender of mixed construct chains.

For example, is the pillar of fire masculine because it is a pillar, and the fire merely describes its make-up? Is it feminine because it is fire, and the pillar merely describes its shape? Is it both, and if so, how would one determine the appropriate inflection for an associated adjective or pronoun?

99. I realize there is an irony to highlighting this after I just argued that the whole vision is the divine presence/*kābôd*, presumably including the strong wind in question. Presumably, the whole presence of God does take certain actions, and we are told clearly that the presence, at minimum, moves. Nevertheless, even understanding the *kābôd* as a summary of the entire vision does not undermine the point here about grammatical gender and agency. Fundamentally, the vision simply happens. The word "[becomes] present to Ezekiel" (1:3). The action of the scene takes place among the component parts of that vision, many of which are feminine nouns.

for the biblical corpus, and more of them will be agents of active verbs. Visible and active feminine grammar will argue that visible and active feminine people upend the patterns of the world and threaten chaos.

It is important to highlight, however, that the book is not univocal on this matter. There is a significant dissonance between the oracles and the vision reports on the subject of gender and agency. Mortal Ezekiel understands the mixing and upending of gendered agency in his world as a possible explanation for the chaos he experiences in the war around him. He feels without agency, and that puts him in the feminine category of the social dynamics he has learned. At the same time, the prophet also sees the mixing and upending of gendered agency when he sees God. The very thing he fears most, the very narrative he is using to comprehend the incomprehensible catastrophe of exile,[100] is the same chaos that infuses the Presence (*kābôd*) of the One who he believes created the world in predictable and clear categories like masculine and feminine. Thus, the book presents two opposing ways to interpret the changing gender dynamics of Ezekiel's world: as an abomination (ch. 16), or as manifestation of divinity (ch. 1).

After the Kebar Vision: Agency in Chapters 2 and 3

The conversation between God and the prophet begins with the first (of many) times the prophet is referred to as "mortal"—more literally, the doubly-masculine construct chain "son of Adam/ man" (Ezek 2:1). This gendering may seem a minor point, but it will become increasingly clear that Ezekiel is playing with the norms of gender as a significant part of his coming to terms with and understanding the exile. That Ezekiel is emphatically masculine throughout his conversations with God at once includes him in the vulnerable category (of this gender-inverted system) with the rest of his people and distances him somewhat from his people, who are

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100. Emanuel, *Trauma Theory, Trauma Story*, 5–9.

consistently described with feminine metaphors. He is included in the experience of trauma and the collective identity, yet stands apart enough to function as a prophetic voice and to begin to help the community come to grips with their circumstances.

From the very beginning of the conversation, we see the significant role that feminine nouns take in expressing God's agency throughout the book. First, God instructs the prophet to stand on his feet (2:1), but here where creation is in chaos, the act of speaking is no longer enough to make it so, as in Genesis 1. Neither is Ezekiel able to initiate his own response, for the exile has stolen his agency. Instead, a spirit[F]—presumably of God—enters[101] Ezekiel and stands him up (2:2). The use of the Hiphil for ʿmd especially draws attention to the role of agency here: Ezekiel's actions must be caused by another, prior agent. Furthermore, that agent is not the masculine deity, nor the masculine presence thereof, but rather the feminine spirit of God.

Once Ezekiel is standing, God continues to speak for several verses that include almost exclusively masculine nouns (vv. 3–7), a noticeable contrast to the even distribution of ch. 1. After this speech, another instruction is described. Again, God first issues the command: open up and eat (v. 8). Again, what actually acts in this exchange is a feminine agent, this time a hand (v. 9). "He" spreads the scroll out in front of Ezekiel, but it is presumably the hand[F] holding the scroll that actually does the spreading out (v. 10). The scene continues in ch. 3 with a reiteration of the command, again followed by feminine action to complete the command. God instructs Ezekiel to eat the scroll (3:1), and while Ezekiel is able to open his own mouth, God must cause him to eat (Hiph) the scroll (v. 2). The implication, of course, is that it is still the hand[F] actually

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101. Note also the possible sexual overtones of √bʾh here. To be clear, the sexual is certainly not the only, nor even the default, connotation of √bʾh in Biblical Hebrew. Neither do I wish to argue that it is meant to be read as such in this verse. Nevertheless, the fact that this is a very common word for sexual intercourse means that the (feminine) spirit entering (masculine) Ezekiel becomes yet another—presumably unintentional and largely unnoticed—example of the book's reversal of expected gender dynamics.

doing the feeding. Furthermore, it is not Ezekiel the whole (masculine) person who eats the scroll, but rather his belly[F]. The metonymy here is significant. God instructs the prophet to cause his belly[F] to eat and his stomach[M] to be filled (v. 3). Here, the agent of the Hiphil is the masculine Ezekiel, but notice the juxtaposition: he must cause the feminine agent (*beṭen*) to do the action of a transitive verb (✓ʾ*kl*), and the masculine agent (*mēʿe(h)*) that of a stative verb (✓*mlʾ*)— precisely the opposite of the usual pattern of agency among characters in the Hebrew Bible.

Also notice the pattern of inconsistency throughout between what is said and what occurs. When Ezekiel hears God speak, he hears the effective divine "make it so" of Genesis 1, and he hears commands to act directed at a masculine agent (himself), as well as commands to receive the action of another masculine agent (God). What actually transpires, however, is that the primary actors are feminine agents (the spirit, the hand, and the belly[102]) and that neither of the masculine agents who is supposed to be acting, apparently according to the assumptions of both, is actually able to make anything happen without the intervention of those feminine agents. Even in the opening chapter, Ezekiel frames the vision as something he actively saw (1:1), in sharp contrast to the report that "the word of YHWH became present to" him, presumably without his doing anything whatsoever (v. 3).

Thus, Ezekiel's perception of God seems to be heavily influenced by his patriarchal world. The evidence from his vision in ch. 1 suggests a divine world that is multifaceted, fluid, and difficult to describe using ordinary human categories. While his priestly mind may wish to place all things in stable categories—holy and ordinary, divine and human, male and female, etc.—the attendants to God's traveling throne defy such bounded categorization. When Ezekiel experiences the agency of God, he receives action mediated by grammatically-feminine elements

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102. Note that in this third case, we are not given the explicit narration of the action taking place.

of God's body and power—the hand and the spirit. His own body divides agency similarly. Nevertheless, when Ezekiel reports his subjective experience of his own and God's agency, feminine action is not what he describes. The prophet and the Deity are masculine actors engaging as expected by the patriarchal world of ancient Israel. Ezekiel's narrative mind and his immediate spiritual experience offer conflicting portraits of God, of creation, and of the nature of agency. On the one hand, the chaos Ezekiel experiences in his world is traumatic, and he wishes to return to some version of normal; on the other, the chaos he experiences in the divine realm is a reflection of some aspect of holiness. The dissonance between Ezekiel's poetic and narrative descriptions thus reflects the clash between these two types of chaos he has experienced—one negative, one positive.

God's speech continues for several verses, again with predominantly masculine nouns and no indication of a need for feminine agency to accomplish any action (3:4–11).[103] Then, more mystical things akin to ch. 1 take place, bringing a higher percentage of feminine nouns as before. Ezekiel is transported to the exilic community near the River Kebar (v. 12). One wonders if this is a flashback to just before ch. 1. Here, again, we see a feminine aspect of God acting (the *rûaḥ* lifting) and a masculine aspect receiving action (the *kābôd* being blessed).[104] We hear an

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103. Note that *gôlâ* here is feminine and may be part of the reason for the play of gender in this vision-conversation. Note further that feminine agency will be referred to later in the book as *tôʿēbâ*, itself a feminine noun. There is a self-reinforcing cycle in the use of feminine nouns to express negative assessments of feminine agency. In other portions of Ezekiel, the grammatical and social realities of gender are in conflict, as described above; where *tôʿēbâ* is concerned (16:2), the grammatical and social realities work in concert. The feminine city (*Yərûšālayim*, given 2fs pronouns) commits a grammatically feminine sin (*tôʿēbâ*) in misusing feminine agency (✓*znh*). The supposed sin itself may then be personified as feminine, thus reinforcing the interpretation that the ultimate problem of the exile is femininity itself.

104. It is fairly common for translations to emend the MT's *brwk* to *brwm*. See, for example, Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*. If the emendation is correct, then the *rûaḥ* and *kābôd* do equivalent actions: lifting and rising. Certainly, the emendation offers a perfectly reasonable syntax: "and I heard behind me a sound of a great earthquake, as the glory of Yʜwʜ arose from its place."

However, this brief interlude is a miniature vision report that otherwise recalls very closely the language of Ezekiel 1. In that context, the syntax, "and I heard behind me a sound of a great earthquake—'Blessed be the glory of Yʜwʜ!'—from its place" is not so out of place, so to speak. Ezekiel has demonstrated a habit of interjecting the next thing he sees or hears, partway through the description of the thing before. It is fully in keeping with the poetry

echo of ch. 1 alongside Ezekiel: "the sound of the *ḥayyôt*'s wings, each touching her sister,"

along with their accompanying wheels (v. 13). Ezekiel travels only because of the spirit's actions

(✓*nś'*, ✓*lqḥ*), and he is apparently grumpy about the hand of YHWH superceding his own agency

(v. 14). At first glance, "heat of my spirit" and "bitterness" (*mar baḥămat rûḥî*) seem likely to

refer to a general sense of grief about the exile; however, the immediately following "the hand of

YHWH was strong against me" suggests the emotion is at least in part a response to the action of

YHWH's hand. One might hope that the Deity would deliberately counteract the experience of lost

agency from the trauma of exile—and indeed perhaps God *would*, if Ezekiel could experience it

as such. Unfortunately, the traumatized brain often includes God among the parts of the world

that now seem unsafe, for how could the trauma have happened if such a powerful being did not

at least permit it?[105]

After being stunned for a week by the travel (v. 15), Ezekiel hears God speak further,

again with mainly masculine nouns and agency (vv. 16–21). In this section, there is an

implication of feminine agency twice, the same phrase both times. When God is warning Ezekiel

about his responsibility for warning the people about their idol-related sin, the penalty for not

doing so is Ezekiel's death on the people's behalf. However, it is not something that is done to

Ezekiel; instead, God "will seek their blood from your [Ezekiel's] hand" (vv. 18, 20). The

phrasing sounds like Ezekiel will be asked to kill the offenders, but it is clear from context (vv.

19, 21) that the one in danger of death is Ezekiel himself. Even in the place where it would be

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of ch. 1 for Ezekiel to report here the sound of the earthquake, then to interrupt and say that the earthquake sounded like praise of God (or perhaps this is his own expression of praise), then to note without clear antecedent that the sound is coming from the location of the *kābôd*. I would argue that the MT as it stands is just as plausible, if not more so, as an authentic representation of the prophet's experience.

105. This is, of course, one of the central questions of Job, who is finally able to begin separating his experience of God from his experience of trauma when God at last shows up in a divine whirlwind that commends him for his angry questioning.

altogether reasonable to state things as a masculine character receiving the action (being killed),

the text nevertheless emphasizes the upending of gendered agency by suggesting that Ezekiel's

own hand[F] will contribute to his death, without any apparent implication of suicide.[106] The

association of agency—crucially, of feminine agency—with culpability for sin and subjection to

severe punishment is essential to the rhetoric of the book of Ezekiel.[107] This early conversation

between God and Ezekiel establishes the gendered depiction of sin and punishment that will

recur throughout much of the book, and not only in those infamous chapters where the marriage

metaphor is front and center.

The chapter ends with more mystical movement and instructions from God. God tells

Ezekiel to go to the valley and receive more instructions (v. 22), and Ezekiel goes. He goes

without the aid of the spirit (v. 23a), but only because the hand of YHWH is upon him (v. 22a).

Again, the masculine *kābôd* takes no action—it is merely "standing" when Ezekiel arrives (v.

23), just as it was "seen" at the river in 1:1, 28. As before, Ezekiel only stands when the spirit

causes it (v. 24), and as before, God's speech continues with masculine nouns and agency ("I will

open your mouth") (vv. 24b–27).

Intriguingly, God's speech suggests complete control over whether Ezekiel will be able to

follow directions and warn the people or whether he will be subject to death for failing to do so:

God variously shuts (v. 26) and opens (v. 27) Ezekiel's mouth when he is among the people. This

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106. It is worth noting that the use of *yād* as an almost-hypostatic expression of agency for a person is quite common in Biblical Hebrew, presumably because the hand wields everything from tools of peace to tools of war to tools of linguistic communication. What is notable here is not simply that the word is grammatically feminine—this is, of course, true wherever such metonymy is used. Rather, the unnecessarily-convoluted syntax emphasizes that Ezekiel's hand is one facet among many in the kaleidoscope of shifting gender roles and syntax throughout the book. Ezekiel rarely has agency as a whole person; his agency is mediated only through portions of his body. In a way, this structures him as oddly similar to God, who also tends to act solely through attributes and aspects. Ezekiel thus finds himself robbed of ordinary agency by the exile, even in the same moment that he finds his agency aligning with how he understands God's agency.

107. Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 7, 113, 127–128.

utter absence of agency on Ezekiel's part stands in stark contrast to the deliberate choice which will be attributed to the (feminine) city. If Ezekiel fails in his duties and is subject to the penalty for sin, it will, seemingly, be due to God's control over him. That the people have failed in their duties and become subject to the penalty for sin, however, will be described exclusively as their own choice, action, and intent.

<div align="center">The Gender of Angels</div>

The next major vision sequence begins in ch. 8 with what at first glance might seem to be the entrance of a new character from the divine realms, perhaps an angelic being. This figure appears briefly to escort the prophet to Jerusalem for his next vision sequence. Two things are intriguing about this from the outset. First, the prophet has not needed an escort previously—only the hand of Yʜwʜ or the spirit of Yʜwʜ upon him.[108] Second, this escort is not the actual agent of the journey in this case, either. The strange figure grabs hold of the prophet (8:3a), but it is again "a spirit" which actually lifts the prophet out of the exilic community and deposits him in Jerusalem for his vision (v. 3b). Furthermore, it is not altogether clear from the description that the figure is indeed a separate character from the divine *kābôd*. In fact, it appears that the person approaching Ezekiel is precisely the figure who was sitting on the throne in ch. 1. Why the figure now moves without the accompanying throne, attendants, and atmospheric presence is left unstated.

Regardless, the connection is made clear. The phrasing of 8:2 recalls almost exactly that of 1:26:

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108. Ezek 1:3; 2:2; 3:12, 14, 22, 24.

(8:2) And I saw: behold, a likeness like an appearance of fire.[109] From the appearance of his lap downwards: fire. And from his lap upwards, (something) like an appearance of brightness (*zōhar*), like the look of molten metal.

(1:26) ...And upon the likeness of the throne, a likeness like an appearance of a human .... (1:27) And I saw: like the look of molten metal, like the appearance of fire, ... from the appearance of his lap upwards. And from the appearance of his lap downwards, I saw (something) like an appearance of fire and brightness (*nōgah*) around him.

Again, Ezekiel sees "a likeness like an appearance of" something. In the MT, the something this time is fire; in the Greek, the phrase is copied almost identically, though with *andros*, implying ʾ*îš*, rather than *anthrōpos* (1:26) for ʾ*ādām*. Chapter 1's description is wordier and in the reverse order, but again "from the appearance of his lap downwards" is fire, and "from his lap upwards" is something "like the look of molten metal." This time, the brightness (*zōhar* here, rather than *nōgah*) is above the figure's lap, but in every other respect this is a direct echo of the conclusion of the vision at the River Kebar.

Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising that again the grammatical gender of the figure is ambiguous. As in ch. 1, what Ezekiel sees is a "likeness," *dəmût*, feminine. Yet the likeness has "his" lap as the dividing line. Or does the lap belong to the also masculine "appearance" that the likeness is like? Or, indeed, does the lap belong, most logically, to the Greek *andros*—or, least logically, to the Hebrew ʾ*ēš*? Regardless, all the nouns used to build the metaphorical depiction of this apparently masculine figure are feminine—even more so than in ch. 1. In ch. 1, there is *ḥašmal*[M] and an appearance[M] of fire[F] above, and the same appearance of fire alongside brightness[F] below.[110] Here in ch. 8, it is simply fire[F] below, and *ḥašmalâ* above (no

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109. Hebrew; Greek: "a man."

110. On the difficulty of assigning grammatical gender to mixed construct chains, see footnote 98 above.

appearance).[111] The only clearly-masculine descriptor for the figure in ch. 8 (other than the -*ayw*

suffixes) is the appearance^M of brightness^M also above the figure's lap.

Also strange about this vision is the fact that Ezekiel has dropped some, though not all, of

his pretense at avoiding any hint of anthropomorphism for God. This figure is clearly the

enthroned divine being of ch. 1, but is no longer enthroned in the heavens and obscured by

tempest and fire. This is a presumably-humanoid figure interacting face-to-face with the prophet,

on the ground, unadorned by the awesome Presence that accompanies the figure in ch. 1—

indeed, the *kābôd* explicitly does not appear here until after Ezekiel has been transported to

Jerusalem (8:4). Furthermore, there is less here distancing the vision's actual content from its

metaphorical depiction. The figure is still a "likeness like an appearance," but Ezekiel is willing

to refer simply to "his lap" (v. 2b) and simply to "fire" above it (v. 2a). For whatever reason,

between ch. 1 and ch. 8, Ezekiel has become ever-so-slightly more comfortable with describing

what he actually sees when he sees some form of the presence of God.

That distance between the vision and the description will continue to decline when ch. 10

retells the Kebar vision in full. Ezekiel has decided, upon reflection, that the *ḥayyôt* of ch. 1 are,

in fact, cherubim. The latter are more comprehensible, it seems, and more concrete. There is little

need to describe what the cherubim look like—they are simply cherubim (10:1–7), and over their

heads is the sapphire throne (v. 1). We are told only that they have human-like hands under their

wings (v. 8), as an explanation of how one cherub hands off fire from their midst to the

humanoid figure in linen (v. 7). These cherubim are definitively masculine, except when they are

also *ḥayyôt* (vv. 15, 17).

Throughout this version of the vision, the figure on the throne from ch. 1 has become a

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111. On the gender of *ḥašmalâ*, see the excursus on page 44.

man clothed in linen, moving amongst the cherubim and interacting with them directly. No longer is this "a likeness like an appearance of a human" at the center of the presence of YHWH (1:26); neither is this the likeness like an appearance of a man from the Greek version of ch. 8. This is simply a man (*'îš*), apparently fully separate from and taking commands from YHWH (10:2), that is, until the *kābôd* fills the house the instant the "man" enters it (vv. 3–5).

Despite Ezekiel's best attempts, however, it seems there is only so long one can manage to make a vision of God concrete and clear. The wheels are still ineffable, "like a sparkling stone of turquoise" and "an appearance...like there was the wheel within the wheel" (vv. 9–10). They are covered with eyes—a new detail—from "all their body" to "their rims" to "their hands" to "their wings" to "the wheels" (v. 12). Evidently it is still nigh impossible to tell where one creature stops and the next begins. They still have four faces, this time with a cherub face in place of the bull (v. 14).[112] The wheels still travel with the cherubim/*ḥayyôt* (vv. 15–17), but they no longer seem to be directly carrying the *kābôd*, which now moves independently to stop above the cherubim (v. 18)—and this is simply the *kābôd*, no longer "the appearance of the likeness of" it (vv. 18–19).

Even more strikingly, "she is the *ḥayyâ* which I saw under the God of Israel by the River Kebar, and I knew that they[M] were cherubim" (v. 20). The masculine plural cherubim are the singular feminine *ḥayyâ*, and she/they carry not the thrice-distanced "appearance of the likeness of the glory of God" (1:28) but simply "God."[113] In a single verse, this second version of the vision combines the grammatical uncertainty of an indescribable Presence with an increasing

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112. The cherubim whose faces are only one-fourth cherub parallel the creatures like humans whose faces are only one-fourth human (1:5, 10).

113. Notice that the feminine agent here simply exists under the divine presence, in contrast to the flurry of action and movement depicted in the ch. 1 version. Neither passage states explicitly that the creatures actively carry the divine throne, but it is heavily implied in ch. 1—not so here.

determination to capture and understand the God who appears in these visions. Perhaps, too, there is an element of Ezekiel beginning to heal: does starting the story of his trauma also begin to reassure him that he is not so unworthy to speak of God after all? Ironically, as the layers of confusion around the retelling of the vision begin to collapse, the layers of complexity to Ezekiel's experience of God and exile may only be increasing.

Feminine or Paragogic?: An Excursus on ḥašmalâ

Given the oscillations of gender in Ezekiel's vision reports so far, the reader might at first assume that the *ḥašmalâ* of 8:2 is a rare feminine form of the more usual *ḥašmal*. It is somewhat difficult to determine with confidence what a hypothetical feminine form of *ḥašmal* must be. Quadriliteral roots are relatively rare, and only a few feminine-inflected examples survive, only some of which use the *-â* ending. The words ʾ*almānâ* and *zalʿāpâ* suggest that the expected feminine form of *ḥašmal* would be **ḥašmālâ* (< **ḥašmalat*), with a long vowel in the penult.[114] One of the expected stages of development for **ḥašmālâ* would indeed be **ḥašmalā*,[115] and it is possible that the original short *a* would be preserved in pause, assuming a few additional conditions were met.[116]

That being said, it would require a rather specific scenario for *ḥašmalâ* to be interpreted as a true feminine form. Instead, it is normally assumed to be the ordinary *ḥašmal* with a paragogic suffix added solely for rhythmic effect or balance. Regardless of the morphological

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114. Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 88 K a.

115. Thomas Oden Lambdin and John Huehnergard, *The Historical Grammar of Classical Hebrew: An Outline* (Harvard University, 2000), rules 5, 7, 13a, and 13b.

116. Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 32 b. Most significantly, the chanted form of the chapter would need to have solidified prior to the lengthening of pretonic open syllables. Additionally, the stress would then have to recede in pause, as with verb forms such as the *waw*-consecutive (§ 32 e), since an unstressed final *-â* cannot normally be a feminine ending (§ 93 k). These two conditions do not normally occur together, as the stressed *-a* tends to lengthen in pause, with a few exceptions (§ 32 c).

origin of the ending, however, it is impossible to hear that final -*â* outside the context of a book that plays so extensively with gender—both in nouns and in metaphor. Whether the *ḥašmalâ* of v. 2 is a true, if abnormal, feminine form or is simply a masculine poetic form that happens to rhyme with feminine nouns, it can be assumed that the familiar sound of the final -*â* would remind the listener of the copious other feminine nouns included in the book. *Hašmalâ* thus becomes yet another drop in the bucket of audible gender chaos in the syntax that mirrors Ezekiel's experience of gender chaos in the world.

<div align="center">The Gender of Bones</div>

Translation of Ezekiel 37:1–14

1 The hand of YHWH was upon me, and he brought me out in the spirit of YHWH, and he made me rest in the midst of the valley—and she was full of bones. **2** And he led me through them,^M around and around. And behold, there were very many^F on the surface of the valley; and behold, they were very dry.^F **3** And he said to me: Son of man, (can) these bones live^F? And I said: Lord YHWH, you know. **4** And he said to me: Prophesy over these bones, and say to them^M: O dry^F bones, hear^M the word of YHWH. **5** Thus says the Lord YHWH to these bones: I will cause breath/ spirit to enter into you^M, and you will live.^M **6** And I will place sinews upon you,^M and I will cause flesh to rise upon you,^M and I will cover over you^M (with) skin. And I will place breath/spirit within you,^M and you will live.^M And you^M will know that I am YHWH. **7** And I prophesied just as I was commanded. And there was a sound as I was prophesying, and behold: earthquake! And the bones came together^F—bone to his bone. **8** And I saw, and behold upon them^M: sinews. And flesh rose, and skin covered over them,^M from above (the flesh) upwards. But breath/spirit was not in them.^M **9** And he said to me: Prophesy to the breath/spirit. Prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath/spirit: Thus says the Lord YHWH: From four winds, come, O breath/spirit, and breathe into these slain, and they will live. **10** And I prophesied just as I was commanded. And the breath/spirit

came into them,^M and they lived,^M and they stood^M upon their^M feet: a very, very large army. **¹¹** And he said to me: Son of man, these bones: all the house of Israel are they.^M Behold: they are saying^M: Our bones have dried out^M, and our hope has perished; we are cut off from ourselves. **¹²** Therefore, prophesy and say to them^M: Thus says the Lord Y_{HWH}: Behold, I am opening your^M graves, and I will raise you^M from your^M graves, my people. And I will bring you^M to the land of Israel. **¹³** And you will know^M that I am Y_{HWH} when I open your^M graves and raise you^M from your^M graves, my people. **¹⁴** And I will place my breath/spirit within you^M, and you will live^M. And I will make you^M rest upon your^M land. And you will know^M that I, Y_{HWH}, have spoken and will do it. Oracle of Y_{HWH}.

A New Kebar

After many chapters—and presumably years—filled with strange prophetic sign-acts, ominous oracles, and troubling portraits of God, Ezekiel finally reports another vision of hope. Like his other ecstatic experiences, this vision begins with the prophet in the receptive role. Y_{HWH} comes upon him, brings him out, causes him to rest, leads him through the valley, and speaks. The human man is the agent of very little, acting only when and as Y_{HWH} commands (37:7a, 10a). As is the case earlier in the book, the deity here acts primarily through grammatically-feminine aspects: the *yād* and the *rûᵃḥ*.

Much has changed since the Kebar, however. No more is this "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of" (1:28) an unknowable and ineffable deity. Neither is this simply "God," but a God who moves through thunder and cloud, accompanied by terrifying, four-faced, eye-covered cherubim-wheels (10:20). Instead, we see here a God much more like that of Genesis 2–3—one who moves among humans, speaks directly with them, and personally breathes life into creation. A small layer of distance does remain between the prophet and the deity: the power

Yʜᴡʜ has over Ezekiel manifests through the *yād* and the *rûᵃḥ* (37:1), and the power Yʜᴡʜ

exercises over the bones comes through the *rûᵃḥ* (vv. 6, 9–10) and the unspecified source of the

earthquake (v. 7). Still, when Yʜᴡʜ speaks to Ezekiel, it is simply Yʜᴡʜ that speaks to Ezekiel.

Moreover, when Ezekiel responds, it is actually Ezekiel who responds. No longer does it

take Yʜᴡʜ's action to make his belly eat and his stomach be filled with the words he must

prophesy (3:2). Neither does Yʜᴡʜ need to open and shut Ezekiel's mouth for him (3:26–27). He

may yet act only when and as Yʜᴡʜ commands, but he at last experiences his agency as his own.

Though the hand of Yʜᴡʜ is upon him, though he cannot yet contribute much to the conversation

(37:3, "Lord Yʜᴡʜ, you know"), he is the originating agent of the verb ✓*nbʾ*—Qal, not Hiphil. It

seems it is not only the dry bones who are returning to life in this valley.

In many ways, the vision here recalls the vision at the River Kebar. The bones are

ambiguously gendered, as were the *ḥayyôt* of ch. 1. Spirit figures prominently in both as the

animating force of agency, movement, and life. The "four winds" here echo the recurring fours

of the faces and the wings and the wheels of the *ḥayyôt*. The earthquake that draws the bones

together evokes the sound of the creatures' wings (ch. 3 in this case). Both visions close with the

voice of Yʜᴡʜ speaking. The latter vision is hardly a simple retelling of the theophany at the

river, yet the parallels are significant.

Like the *ḥayyôt* of ch. 1, the *ʿăṣāmôt* here are nominally feminine but are used with

variously-gendered pronouns, adjectives, and verbs. The most significant oscillations occur

during the first portion of the passage, when the vision is in full swing. Yʜᴡʜ places the prophet

in a valley full of bones^F, and leads the prophet through them^M. They are many^M but dry^F (37:2).

When Yʜᴡʜ asks if the bones can live, the verb is feminine (v. 3), but when they are told to hear

God's word, the imperative is masculine (v. 4). Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to them^M, but

told to address them as dry[F] bones (v. 4).

As the passage goes on, the vision becomes more like an oracle or a simple narrative. As it does so, the bones become increasingly human, and the gender oscillations begin to evaoprate. Though YHWH had asked if the bones could live[F] (v. 3), the prophet promises that they will live[M] (v. 5). Every second person pronoun applied to them in the passage is masculine (vv. 5–6, 12–14). One further time, the bones are given a mixed gender: they will come together, a feminine verb form, but they will join "bone to his bone" (v. 7). From then on, the bones are consistently masculine, despite the feminine inflection of *ʿăṣāmôt*—even when they refer to themselves as dry (v. 11), the one word that had thus far been consistently inflected feminine.

By the end of the passage, the image has left the realm of mysticism and entered the ordinary world. The bones are no longer the denizens of a divine vision; they have become symbols of the real, human house of Israel. With that shift comes a shift in gender dynamics from those of God's world to those of Ezekiel's. In the realm of theophany, God's presence and God's angels are impossible to map onto human categories. When the bones are only a part of that world, they genuinely reflect the whole house of Israel, masculine and feminine and everyone in between. When they exit the realm of visions and become the real house of Israel, they become subject to the expectations of the human world. The default human and the default warrior[117] is masculine, and so the bones are masculine. Ironically, in the moment they are called "the whole house of Israel" (v. 11), they are a less complete representation of that totality.

Conclusions

The vision of the dry bonus thus serves as a microcosm of the dissonance Ezekiel experiences between the negative chaos of the world around him and the positive chaos of the

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117. And the default plural form.

presence of God. The eruption of predictable and coherent categories of creation grounds his entire understanding of the exile. He reads non-normative religious practices from other Judahites as equivalent to a woman undermining normative masculine authority.[118] He inherits sexualised metaphors for the invasion and defeat of his city.[119] He interprets God as aggressively punitive when the people do not behave as proper vassals within the covenant. The world as Ezekiel knew it has collapsed, and he assumes that can only be because no one is following their assigned role within the created order.

At the same time, he experiences a God who seems to utterly undermine that understanding of exile. If mixing the basic categories of creation is so dangerous and destructive, then why is that mixing at the very core of the presence of God? Ezekiel recognizes the divine chaos he sees, and he describes it for what it is in the first chapter of the book. As time goes on, however, his assumptions about the world begin to alter his memory of the vision, or to make him hesitant to give the full picture. The more he retells the story, the less chaos we see in the essence of God. The deity becomes something more predictable, more contained, more suited to human categories and comprehension.

The strangeness of Ezekiel's opening vision is apparent on the surface of the text, but the full impact of that strangeness comes when careful attention is paid not only to the imagery of the text but to its grammatical structure as well. The presence of more feminine nouns on average leads to the presence of more feminine-inflected forms on average, and the passage as a result has a different sound than most other biblical texts. Aurally, the audience is caught off-guard (if,

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118. See especially Ezekiel 16 and 23.

119. On the "Jerusalem Complex" used to describe the Israelite war with Assyria, and its later reception in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, see, for example, Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, HSM 62 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 60–140.

perhaps, subconsciously), and as the vision unfolds, the confusion increases. The imagery overlaps in ways that cannot represent a consistent physical reality, and the ḥayyôt receive grammatical agreement that cannot represent a consistent linguistic reality. On both a conscious and a subconscious level, then, the chapter works to invite the audience into the destabilizing experience of theophany that Ezekiel describes, and by extension, into the destabilizing experience of exile that Ezekiel feels. The audience may not be able to see what the prophet has seen, but they can feel the likeness of what he has felt through the poetry of his words.

We know that trauma can disrupt the linguistic processes of the brain,[120] and so perhaps we should not expect a prophet traumatized by exile to provide a wholly coherent narration of his experiences with the divine. All the more so when he is surrounded by a prevailing theology that snatches agency away from the Judahites' captors by attributing the traumatic act of exile to God rather than to Babylon. Even when the healing process is near complete, it is difficult for the brain not to revert to trauma-based patterns in the presence of the traumatizer[121] since these patterns are inherently developed as coping mechanisms for surviving the presence of the traumatizer. We see in the rest of the book (e.g., ch. 16) that Ezekiel seems to have wholeheartedly adopted this theology of exile, and so it is perhaps not surprising that Ezekiel would have such difficulty describing his visions. Not only is he struggling to find words because describing a theophany is normally difficult, but he has also attributed the trauma of exile to the God he experiences and thus is likely in addition experiencing the kind of loss of words that comes from trauma.

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120. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 43–45, 98–99, 232, 244, 247.

121. On the effects of PTSD triggers on language, see, among others, van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 53, 232, 246 (in addition to the above).

On a semantic level, the texts also mirror Ezekiel's experience of the loss of agency that comes from trauma. In so much of the book, the primary actors are feminine. Ezekiel experiences the presence of God through feminine aspects both of himself and of the Deity, while their masculine aspects remain relatively passive. Even as the agency that is blamed for the exile is attributed to the feminine Jerusalem, feminine grammatical agency also becomes a representation of the absence of agency for the masculine prophet and the defeated warriors of his people. At the same time, feminine grammatical agency expresses the undefeatable presence of a God who follows the people into exile and continues to inspire prophetic visions and oracles, despite the worry that God has abandoned the people to destruction as a form of punishment for misused agency.

The theological implications of this reading are significant. The most vivid and, so to speak, untranslated account of a vision of God in the Bible (ch. 1) depicts a Deity that cannot be fully grasped. God is not shrouded in the mystery of darkness—that would be too basic a metaphor for divine incomprehensibility. Instead, God is surrounded by weather patterns that cannot be clearly identified and seem to change as one watches them. The presence of God is not definitively restricted to a single figure, but instead seems to encompass the full picture of a figure enthroned on a sky carried by creatures and wheels who defy description. These creatures, and to some extent their wheels, defy linguistic categories of gender and thus, presumably, also defy human categories of sex and gender. That they form part of the divine entourage and even the divine presence itself suggests that Ezekiel sees a God who defies human categories of sex and gender. The soundscape of the vision is different from that of an ordinary text, just as God's world is different from the ordinary human world. The God who follows Ezekiel and his countrymen into exile is not merely the God who caused the exile and will eventually undo it—

no matter how much that is the theology Ezekiel uses to cope. Rather, the God who goes into exile with the people is a God that upends cognition through language to reveal the divine world even in the midst of a land that did not seem all that holy to the exiles.

When the same vision returns in ch. 10, the oscillations in grammatical gender have vanished. The *ḥayyôt* of ambiguous gender from ch. 1 become cherubim, consistently masculine. Phrases which would be quoted verbatim from ch. 1 see one significant change: the absence of gender mismatches. The creatures no longer go^M in their^F going (e.g., 1:12), but instead receive masculine pronouns throughout the chapter. The gender ambiguity of ch. 1 is no longer present in the distancing from direct experience of God either; there is no appearance of the likeness in ch. 10, only the glory of God (vv. 4, 18, 19), or even simply God (v. 20). The absence of these syntactical oddities mirrors the fact that the depiction itself is less fanciful and features a more recognizably humanoid figure among the divine attendants. However, when the *ḥayyôt* gloss returns (10:15, 17), the pronoun is once again consistent in neither gender nor number: "...cherubim^M: she^F is the *ḥayyâ* I saw..." (v. 15)/"when they (mp) rise, [the wheels] rise with them^M: for the spirit of the *ḥayyâ*^{F} is in [the wheels]" (v. 17). Likening the creatures to cherubim, it seems, gives Ezekiel a way of concretizing and conceptualizing what he saw at the river in terms of categories he can understand, while the *ḥayyôt* as such defy explanation.

Ezekiel faces chaos in his world and deeply desires a sense of stability. At the same time, he experiences chaos in the presence of God and deeply desires a way to understand and explain God to his people. As the book unfolds and the visions continue, Ezekiel's depictions of God become more concrete, more immanent, and less chaotic. As he begins to heal, he begins to feel less distance from the God whom he feels is at least partly responsible for the exile. In the process, he also becomes more reticent to describe the fullness of who God is.

Ezekiel himself might have argued that the dry bones become more isolated to a single gender category because this is the way creation is meant to be. But nowhere do we see the utter incomprehensibility of the *ḥayyôt* condemned. These creatures are the attendants of God, the manifestation of the divine storm, and the bearers of God's chariot-throne. As I argued above, they might even be understood as a part of the presence of God itself. If this is the portrait of gender ambiguity offered by the divine character in Ezekiel, then surely there is more to the vision of bones than the mere correction of creation.

Perhaps the ambiguity of the bones is not a chaos to be corrected at all, but is instead the same kind of divine chaos we see in the *ḥayyôt*. It is a hopeful chaos that transforms the traumatic chaos of the exilic experience into the waters from which a new creation may begin. The origin of those waters may be painful beyond description, but the movement of God's spirit among them is able to bring forth a holiness beyond description nonetheless.

In the visions of Ezekiel, we see a God whose entire self follows the people into exile, despite their traumatized feelings of isolation and rejection. In the absence of a Temple and an ark to serve as God's house and throne, the vision at the valley offers an alternative: the very people of Israel themselves will serve as the site of God's presence. No longer is it only the creatures of heaven who can bear the throne of God. From now on, the firmament resides above the heads of the people, scattered as they are into exile. Where they move, God will move. After all, the spirit of the God is in these dry bones.

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