Moses’ Throne Vision in Ezekiel
the Dramatist*

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Somewhere between the end of the third and the beginning of the first century BCE,1 a Jewish poet, probably in Alexandria but possibly elsewhere,2 wrote a drama about the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. The poet’s name was Ezekiel,3 the play was called Exagoγe,4 and only about 20 to 25% of it has been preserved in bishop Eusebius’ excerpts from Alexander Polyhistor’s work, Peri Ioudaion, in the ninth book of his Praeparatio Evangelica (IX 28, 2-4; 29, 5-16).5 It is a drama of great importance in more than one respect. First, almost all of the extensive Greek dramatic literature of the Hellenistic period has been lost; Ezekiel’s Exagogē is the only play with considerable portions still extant (altogether 269 iambic trimeters). It is thus an important source for the study of the


1 There is a communis opinio about a second century BCE dating of Ezekiel. He must have written after the completion of the LXX version of Exodus and before Alexander Polyhistor, who made his excerpts from Ezekiel most probably in the first half of the first century BCE.


3 Very probably this was the man’s real name, not a pseudonym. It was admittedly used as a pseudonym by the author of the so-called “Apocryphon of Ezekiel” (see Denis, Introduction 187ff: and the text in Denis, Fragmenta pseudopigraphorum quae supersunt graece . . . , Leiden 1970, 121ff.), but the name was in use, albeit seldom, among Jews (and Christians), as were other great biblical names (like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Isaiah, Daniel, etc.; see the prosopographies and name-lists in Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum vol. III and Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum vol. I). Epistula Aristoe 50 mentions an Ezekiel as one of the LXX translators; there was an early Amorite Babylonian rabbi with that name; CIJ 1 630 has an instance (CPJ has not). A Christian named Ezekiel is mentioned in an Egyptian inscription in P. Preisigke, Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten I, Strassburg 1915 (repr. Berlin-New York 1974), nr. 543.6

4 Philo also sometimes calls the book of Exodus Exagogē (e.g. Migr. Abr. 14. Quis heres 251); see further J. Daniélou, “Exodus”, Realiwirkon für Antike und Christentum VII (1969), 77.

5 On Alexander Polyhistor see J. Freudenthal, Alexander Polyhistor (Hellenistische Studien 1 + 2), Breslau 1875; A. Lesky, Geschichte der griechischen Literatur, Bern 1971, 717. The extant fragments of Ezekiel’s drama can be found in Denis’ Fragmenta 207-216 (Denis prints the text from Mra’s edition of Eusebius’ PE in the GCS series), but have been better edited by B. Snell in his Tragicorum graecorum fragmenta I, Götingen 1971, 288-301. The only commentary is by M. Wiencke, Ezechiel’s Judea poetae Alexandrini fabulae quae [publicat EXAGOGE fragmenta, diss. Münster 1931 (a very one-sided treatment by a classicalist). A new commentary has been announced by Prof. Howard Jacobson of the University of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. It is to appear at the Cambridge University Press.
account of the complete destruction of the Egyptian army in the sea (Exod. 14). 15 In act five (vv. 243-269), scouts report to Moses that they have found a suitable and excellent place for the encampment, viz. Elim (Exod. 15:27), and describe at length a marvellous bird they have seen there, a phoenix: the second major non-biblical scene. 16

Turning now to the most puzzling passage of all, Moses’ vision and its explanation by Raguel, the lines translated run:

(68) I dreamed that on the summit of mount Sinai
(69) was a great throne which reached to the corners of heaven. 17
(70) On it was seated a noble man,
(71) who had a diadem (on his head) and a great sceptre
(72) in his left hand. And with his right hand
(73) he beckoned me, and I took my stand before the throne.
(74) He handed me the sceptre and he summoned me
(75) to sit upon the great throne. And he also gave me
(76) the royal diadem, and he himself descended from the throne.
(77) And I saw the full circle of the earth
(78) and what was below the earth and above heaven.
(79) And a multitude of heavenly bodies fell on their knees
(80) before me and I counted all of them.
(81) And they moved past me like a host of mortals.
(82) Thereafter I awoke from my sleep in a frightened state.

Moses’ father-in-law then interprets the dream:

(83) Stranger, it is a good thing that God has shown to you.
(84) I hope to be still alive when these things happen to you.
(85) For behold you will raise a great throne
(86) and you will sit in judgment and be a leader of mortals.
(87) And that you saw the earth and the whole inhabited world
(88) and the things below it and the things above God’s heaven,
(89) (this means that) you will see what is, and what was before,
and what will be hereafter. 19

Most probably, his message is delivered to the Egyptian queen. This is a striking parallel

Aeschylus’ Persae, where the crushing defeat of the Persian army is reported to the Persian
queen, another well-known device for realizing dramatic scenes impossible to stage.

On this scene see my article mentioned in n. 8, where special reference is made to R. van


Lit., “folds of heaven”, but see R. Kannicht, Euripides: Helena 11, Heidelberg 1969, 31

(Heil. 44).

The Greek text translated here is that constituted by Bruno Snell (see n. 5), with the

End of v. 85, where Snell prints megan tin exanastaseis thronou (instead of thronon in

ms.), “you will drive away a great one (sc. Pharaoh) from his throne”; but this conjecture

nies that the phôs gen纳斯 in v. 70 should be taken to refer to the Pharaoh, which is

possible (see my article, n. 8, p. 108).
The first feature to be noted is that the introduction of a dream into a play is a classical dramatic device. Dreams predicting future events occur, for instance, in Aeschylus’ _Persae_ (a drama having much in common with the present work), in Sophocles’ _Electra_, and in Euripides’ _Hecuba_. These dreams foretell disaster, however, and are interpreted by the dreamer himself (or herself). But in the play _Brutus_, by Ezekiel’s contemporary, the Latin dramatist Accius, one of the main actors, has a dream that is interpreted by someone else. The contents of Moses’ dream-vision, nevertheless do not have classical antecedents. No doubt, the vision of God in human shape seated on the throne is based on the first chapter of the biblical Ezekiel. Furthermore, our author has been influenced by Exodus 24, with its anthropomorphic representation of God on Sinai. The same holds true for the scene in Daniel 7, where God bestows eternal kingship and most probably a throne on someone of human appearance. Finally, Joseph’s dream in Genesis 37 also has the motif of heavenly bodies falling on their knees before a mortal, and in Psalm 147 we read that God counts all the heavenly bodies.

These biblical reminiscences can, however, only be assessed when our passage is compared to later merkavah-treatises or hekhial-literture, especially the _Hebrew Book of Enoch_ (called _3 Enoch_ by H. Odeberg). Although this book was probably composed after the fourth century CE, much of its traditional material (especially in chapters 3-15 from which we draw the parallels) is considerably older. The story told there of Enoch, who is identified with the highest angel Metatron, bears a striking resemblance to what is said of Moses in the dream-vision. For instance, God makes a throne for Enoch which is similar to the throne of Glory, God’s own throne (10:1); God gives him a garment of Glory and a royal crown (12:1-3); God makes him ruler over all kingdoms and all heavenly beings (10:3); all the angels of every rank, and the angels of sun, moon, stars, and planets, fall prostrate when Enoch sits on his throne (14:1-5); he knows the names of all the stars (46:1-2); here is an explicit reference to Psalm 147:4 (“He [sc. God] counts the number of stars”); God reveals to him all the secrets and mysteries of heaven and earth so that Enoch knows past, present and future (10:5; 11:1; cf. 45:1; 48[D]:7); God calls him “YHWH ha-qaton”, the lesser Adonai, with reference to Exod. 23:21, where it is said of the angel of the Lord: “My name is in him” (12:5). It should be noted that some of these elements already occur in the earlier _1 Enoch_ (Eth.) and and _2 Enoch_ (Slav.). Like Moses, Enoch is assigned a cosmic and divine function that involves the wearing of regalia.

The similarities are clearly striking. But there is also a striking difference. In Moses’ vision, there is only one throne, God’s. And Moses is requested to be seated on it, not at God’s side, but all alone. God leaves his throne. This scene is unique in early Jewish literature and certainly implies a deification of Moses. In effect, since the publication of Wayne Meeks’ important article, “Moses as God and King”, we know that in some Jewish circles Moses was indeed regarded as a divine being. Alan Segal has in addition demonstrated that Jewish traditions existed concerning divine rule in which “a principal angel was seen as God’s primary or sole helper and allowed to share in God’s divinity. That a human being, as the hero or exemplar of a particular group, could ascend to become one with this figure — as Enoch, Moses or Elijah — seems also to have been part of this tradition.” The theme of Moses’ divine kingship over the universe can also be found in Philo of Alexandria. “Philo came to connect Moses’ installation as ideal king with (1) a mystical ascent read into the Sinai episode, and (2) the scriptural report that Moses was called _theos_. “In _Quaestiones in Exodum_ I 29, Philo writes that on Sinai Moses was changed into a truly divine person (cf. _ibid._ 40); and in _De Vita Mosis_ I 155-158 he says that God placed the entire universe into Moses’ hands and that all the elements obeyed him as their master. Philo calls Moses god and king, probably alluding to God’s words in Exodus 4:16 that Moses will be as a god to Aaron, or in Exodus 7:1, that he makes him a god over Pharaoh (cf. _Sacrific_. 9). Meeks remarks that “the analogy between Moses and God . . .
approaches consubstantiality. The same or similar traditions can also be found in rabbinic literature, again most often in the context of Moses' meeting with God on Sinai, which was widely regarded as an ascent to heaven.\[30\] One example may suffice. In Pesiqta de Rav Kahana (Supplement I 9),\[32\] the expression "Moses, the man of God" (Mosheh 'ish ha'elohim) in Deuteronomy 33:1 is explained as, Moses, a man ('ish), a god ('elohim); sc. he was a man when he ascended Mount Sinai, he was a god when he descended from Mount Sinai. Elsewhere, it is indicated that Moses in a sense shared God's kingship.\[33\] Nowhere in rabbinic literature, however, is Moses represented as a hypostasis of God or as a second god reigning in heaven. That traditions of this kind were opposed by the rabbis is clear, e.g., from Bavli Hagiga 15a, where Metatron is punished and humiliated as soon as the Rabbis (Elisha ben Abuya) think that there are "two powers in heaven" (shite reshuyot bashamayim), or from Sanhedrin 38b, where R. Idi says, "Do not put Metatron in God's place".\[34\] Segal has demonstrated that in some Jewish circles such traditions did circulate and, in his recent dissertation, the Norwegian scholar Jarl Fossum has pointed out with ample evidence that certain Jewish groups came to identify the figure of the angel of the Lord in different ways: as Adam, Moses, Enoch (Metatron), Melchizedek, Michael or Jesus.\[35\] This pluralitord of God, who possessed God's name (Exod. 23:21), was really the "Little Adonai" of 3 Enoch. Many Jews speculated about a principal angelic mediator hypostases of God with charge over the world. And, as Segal says, these intermediates "are not just angels, but become dangerously close to being antropomorphic hypostases of God himself. Often these intermediaries "began as humans and later achieved a kind of divine status in some communities".\[36\]

In a recent publication, Saul Lieberman argues convincingly that "Metatron" is not a name but a title, to be identified as the Greek word metathronos, which has the same meaning as the more common synthronos.\[37\] Lieberman also says that a synthronos theou need not necessarily be one with whom God shares his throne; it can also refer to one who has a throne beside the throne of God, like Metatron. This may be right, but my hypothesis is that the idea of a synthronos theou in the sense of one who sits on God's own throne, either alone or together with him, is the origin of the notion of a Metatron, a viceroy of God. In 1 Chronicles 28:5 and 2 Chronicles 9:8, we already come across the idea that God has set Solomon "on the throne of the Lord".\[38\] In Wisdom of Solomon 9:4 and 10, Wisdom herself is presented as sharing God's throne with Him. In the Similitudes of I Enoch, we find Enoch a co-occupant of God's throne, albeit only for the eschatological judgment.\[39\] In our Ezekiel, Moses is the sole occupant of God's throne. I surmise (for reasons that I have advanced elsewhere)\[40\] that in pre-Christian times there were (probably rival) traditions about Enoch and Moses as synthronoi theou; and I think that these ideas were suppressed (for obvious reasons) by the rabbis and replaced by the less unacceptable notion of a metathronos in the sense of one whose throne comes only second, after (meta) God's throne.\[41\] True, the original idea of the synthronia of Moses and God has been drastically modified by Ezekiel the dramatist in that he causes God to leave the throne. With this bold and almost shocking symbolic scene, he probably meant to convey that it is only in and through Moses that we can know God. To quote John 14:6 with a slight variation: "No one can come to the Father except through Moses".\[42\] It is only in and through Moses that God is active in this world, Moses' kingship expresses God's kingship. For Ezekiel, Moses is "an active and present power",\[43\] which is also divine. It is clear that all this has implications for the development of christology.

Some scholars have pointed out that a certain discrepancy exists between Moses' vision and Raguel's interpretation of it.\[44\] Whereas in the vision the emphasis is on the divine kingship, in the interpretation more emphasis is

\[32\] 1 Enoch 45:3; 51:3 (v. 1.); 55:4; 61:8, 69: 27-9. It is not necessary to enter here into the thorpy question of the dating of the Similitudes (1 Enoch 37-71), but a date before the second century CE seems to be defensible.
\[33\] See my article mentioned in note 8.
\[34\] For this explanation of the term metathronos see Odeberg, 3 Enoch (n. 22) 138ff. On "rabbinische Ausschaltung der Henoch-Spekulationen" see Odeberg, "Henoch", TLWNT II (1935), 555 (TDNT II, 1964, 558-559) and P. S. Alexander, art. cit. (n. 23) 176.
\[35\] In this connection, it may be useful to remark that according to some scholars the background of John 12:41 is a tradition that the Lord on the throne in Isaiah 6:1 is not God but Jesus; see Segal, Two Powers 214.
\[38\] E.g. Kuiper (n. 2) 59.
given to Moses' prophetic function. The final line of the interpretation runs as follows: "You will see what is, and what was before, and what will be hereafter" (v. 89). The late W. C. van Unnik demonstrated convincingly that throughout antiquity — pagan, Jewish and Christian — this was a "formula describing prophecy". Already Homer, in the first book of the Iliad (A 70), describes the prophet (mantis) Calchas as one who "knew what is, what will be, and what was before", and from Homer onwards it becomes a standard formula, as the wealth of material collected by van Unnik clearly shows. This observation led the American scholar Carl Holladay to believe that Ezekiel wished to depict Moses as a mantis, a prophet or seer, and that it is only in this way that the discrepancy between the throne-vision and its interpretation can be solved. He argues that the enthronement should be seen in the light of what Aeschylus says about Apollo's being enthroned by Zeus; he is to be Zeus' prophet (mantis) (Eumenides 18, 29, 616). Here Moses is modelled on Apollo, Zeus' spokesman sitting on a mantic throne, and Ezekiel "is consciously placing Moses in direct competition with Apollo". The point of the dream-scene, according to Holladay is that "Sinai replaces Delphi as the place where the divine oracles are issued; Moses replaces Apollo as the spokesman for God; accordingly, the whole of mankind is to seek the divine will not from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, but from the law of God given to Moses at Sinai".

Fascinating as this interpretation may be, it fails to do justice to several elements in the dream-vision, which as I have tried to show can only be explained against the background of merkavah-speculation or -mysticism, and of theories relating to a human, yet divinely, plenipotentiary of God. Moreover, Apollo never sits on Zeus' own throne. The seeming discrepancy between vision and interpretation is probably due to Ezekiel's making use of two different traditions about Moses, that of king of the universe on the one hand, and of great prophet on the other, traditions which were already merging in this period.

Compared to later merkavah-literature, Moses' vision is very rudimentary. It contains no elaborate descriptions of the hosts of angels and their leaders, or of heavenly palaces, or of the throne itself. Furthermore, the human shape of God receives no elaborate treatment, and no attention is paid to the fabulous dimensions of his limbs, so often discussed in detail in the Shi'ur Qomah speculations of later hekhalot-treatises. Even when compared with the earliest post-biblical merkavah-vision, 1 Enoch 14, Ezekiel's description is much more sober. He was not interested in merkavah-mysticism in itself. But he did see that the literary form of a merkavah-vision was quite suitable as a medium for expressing a notion of more importance to him: namely that Moses is God's vicegerent, that the man who liberated the people of Israel from the Egyptians is not merely a personage from the distant past but still present and ruling over the universe, and that through his heavenly enthronement the nation of the Jews is validated as divinely established.

[Postscript. In the meantime, Howard Jacobson's commentary, The Exagoge of Ezekiel, has appeared (January, 1983). His interpretation of the dream-vision is very different from mine. My review-article, "Some Notes on the Exagoge of Ezekiel", will be published in Mnemosyne].