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Abstract

In this paper I treat Ezekiel 1:4-28 as a report of an experience of awe, even though affective language is not found in this passage. Biblical scholars frequently attend to the lexical, narrative, form-critical and source-critical issues within the text, which yield insights into Ezekiel's historical milieu and the editorial history of the text. Recent scholarship has fruitfully mined the insights of trauma theory to explore Ezekiel as a victim of trauma and PTSD, and I suggest there are parallels between the characteristics of trauma (powerlessness and disruption) and the features of awe (vastness and accommodation). To demonstrate how awe can be discerned in the text, I use insights from cognitive linguistics, namely the concept of image schemas. I focus on how Ezekiel accesses two of the most foundational and embodied image schemas, LIVING BEING and HUMAN, and uses them to assemble his "experience story." Along the way, Ezekiel also expands the semantic possibilities of LIVING BEING and HUMAN, which expresses his own sense of awe and possibly has the power to inculcate it in others.

Introduction

In Ezekiel 1:4-28, the prophet describes flashing flames of fire; multi-faced winged, wheeled, yet anthropomorphic living creatures; the intricate, eyed, wheels themselves; a soundscape of roaring thunder, of many waters, and of an army; the architectural elements of a dome, a sapphire-like throne and, finally, the likeness of the glory of the Lord in human form (Ezek 1:4-28). Ezekiel's[1] vision report is shocking in both its intensity and its breach from the customary reticence of biblical writers to describe YHWH's appearance, and he strains against the possibilities of language itself as he presses his vision into words.

Ellen van Wolde describes the inaugural vision as "mind-blowing," and many readers will readily agree with her assessment.[2] Ezekiel's strong first-person voice in 1:4-28 enables the reader or hearer to journey with the prophet through the stages of his visionary experience. Walther Zimmerli observes how infrequently the first person refers to Ezekiel himself, referring instead to "the acts and words of Yahweh upon him, God's creature, who is throughout addressed by Yahweh as as בֶּן־אָדָם."[3] Given the immediacy of the first person voice in the opening vision report, it is surprising to note that the text of Ezekiel's vision contains no affective language, and his prostration (Ezek 1:28) is the only indication of some sort of emotional response to the theophany. Nevertheless, in her paraphrase of the vision, van Wolde concludes, "*Struck with awe*, I fell on my face, and then I heard a voice speaking."[4] Here, she inserts an affective statement: this is an entirely overwhelming ocular and aural event that suffuses Ezekiel with awe, even if it is not specifically

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[1] Throughout the paper I will refer to the author of the text as "Ezekiel" or "the prophet" in order to preserve a sense of the personality behind the text. Outside of citations, I will refer to the book as "the book of Ezekiel" to differentiate between the person and the text.

[2] Ellen van Wolde, "The God Ezekiel 1 Envisions," in *The God Ezekiel Creates*, ed. Paul M. Joyce and Dalit Rom-Shiloni, Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 607 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 88.

[3] Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 24.

[4] van Wolde, "The God Ezekiel 1 Envisions," 87.

stated. I entirely agree with van Wolde—Ezekiel is awe-struck—and I contend that the language used to describe the vision both reveals this awe and has the potential to inculcate awe in its readers or hearers.

Curiously, there is a dearth of exploration of Ezek 1:4-28 as an example of awe; modern commentators have tended to view the many irregularities in the text as indicative of a complex and sometimes sloppy editing process, and have frequently sought to recover the "original" account of the vision.[5] A notable outlier is Daniel Block, who states, "the reason why the account of the inaugural vision appears so garbled and contains so many obscurities lies in the emotional state of the recipient, who by internal data is purported to have been the narrator of the experience as well."[6] Block understands the vision produced in Ezekiel "an overwhelming sense of awe," rather than a crushing sense of sinfulness.[7] Block explores the grammatical and structural aspects of Ezek 1:4-28 to develop his thesis that the complexity is intentional and points to an authentic experience. When it comes to consideration of Ezekiel 1 as an emotional experience, it is essential to remember the the text is the record of the experience, not the event itself.[8] Religious experiences (REs) are much more complex phenomena than their written testimonies; as Rodney Werline notes, they are deeply informed by culture and are apprehended bodily.[9] Thus, although the text is the only artifact we have, I want to probe beyond the grammatical to illuminate how the author's description reveals a thoroughly embodied and culturally nuanced experience of awe.

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[5] After assessing the grammatical irregularities of the vision report, Walter Zimmerli concludes that the "original" version of Ezekiel's account is found in 1:4a, 5, 6b, 12, 13, 22, 26-28. The surrounding material, in Zimmerli's opinion, represents attempts of later editors to make sense of the vision. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 100–110.

Following the publication of J. G. Eichhorn's *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge commented in dismay on Eichhorn's sterile and reductionistic assessment of Ezekiel:

> It perplexes me to understand how a Man of Eichhorn's sense, learning, and acquaintance with psychology could form or attach belief to so cold blooded an hypothesis. That in Ezekiel's vision ideas or spiritual entities are presented in visual symbols, I never doubted: but as little can I doubt, that such symbols did present themselves to Ezekiel in visions—and by a law so closely connected with, if not contained, in that by which sensations are organized into images and mental sounds in our ordinary sleep.

Coleridge's point is that Ezekiel 1:4-28 surely contains some reflection of an intense supernatural experience.

Christopher Rowland, "Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity," in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April DeConick, Symposium Series 11 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), 41–56; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley (London: Routledge, 1980); J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung in Das Alte Testament*, 4th ed., 5 vols. (Göttingen: Rosenbusch, 1823).

[6] Daniel I Block, "Text and Emotion: A Study in the 'corruptions' in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:4-28)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1988): 433.

[7] Block, "Text and Emotion," 430.

[8] Colleen Shantz, "Opening the Black Box: New Prospects for Analyzing Religious Experience," in *Experientia, Volume 2: Linking Text and Experience*, ed. Colleen Shantz and Rodney A. Werline, Early Judaism and Its Literature 35 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 9; Rodney A Werline, "Assessing the Prophetic Vision and Dream Texts for Insights into Religious Experience," in *"I Lifted My Eyes and Saw": Reading Dream and Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Elizabeth R. Hayes and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (London, Minneapolis: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 5.

[9] Werline, "Assessing the Prophetic Vision and Dream Texts," 7.

The following discussion requires a combination of ingredients and will unfold as follows. First, I will comment on Ezekiel's historical context, as his status as a deportee has significant bearing on his experience of this vision of God.

Next, I will present Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's theoretical work on awe. Keltner and Haidt identify two essential "themes" of awe, namely a sense of vastness that is coupled with a need for accommodation in one's meaning-maintenance models.[10]Their conceptualization of awe assists in locating it as a distinct emotion in selected texts of the Hebrew Bible, and in Ezekiel 1:4-28 in particular, allowing for the development of Block's intuition that some kind of emotion accounts for the disrupted state of the text.

Yet how can biblical scholars locate awe in a text? The tools I will use for analysis of the vision report are drawn from cognitive linguistics, specifically the theory of "image schemas." This section engages in a synchronic reading of the passage unburdened by questions of an "original" text, in order to demonstrate that the characteristics of the text itself indicate that awe is the overriding emotion of Ezek 1:4-28. The goal of the paper is not to prove that Ezek 1:4-28 is a record of an awesome experience—that much is already apparent. Rather, my aim is to highlight aspects of the text that can be newly understood as indications of awe, rather than as evidence of mental illness or scribal sloppiness.

Historical Background

The Book of Ezekiel opens with two calendrical coordinates. The first is in the first person: "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezek 1:1). The second and third verses, which are likely editorial, provide the reader with the name of the "I" who speaks, and they clarify the date: "on the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel son of Buzi, the priest, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was upon him there" (Ezek 1:2-3).[11] This short introduction provides information that facilitates some reconstruction of Ezekiel's life both before and after his deportation.

Based on the biblical account in 2 Kings 24:8-16, and corroborated by Babylonian records, Jehoiachin of Judah withheld tribute from Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (597 BCE).[12] Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians on March 16, 597 BCE, and King Jehoiachin and the other elite members of society were deported immediately afterwards (2 Kings 24:15). Scholars assume that Ezekiel was among this first wave of exiles, along with his wife who died in captivity (Ezek 24:15-18). The date of Ezekiel's vision is reckoned to "the fifth day of the month … [of] the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin," which corresponds to July 31, 593 BCE.[13]

If the dates above are correct and Ezekiel was thirty years old in 593 BCE, it follows that he was born *circa* 623 BCE, during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. Josiah is most well-known for

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[10] Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): 304.

[11] I have modified the NRSV translation to reflect the ambiguity regarding whether Ezekiel is a priest or is the son of Buzi, the Priest, as, grammatically, both are possible. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 111; Nancy R. Bowen, *Ezekiel*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 2.

[12] Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 10–11.

[13] Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 10–11.

inaugurating a thorough cultic reform in approximately 622 BCE, following the discovery of "the book of the law in the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 22, here 22:8). The reforms focused on eradicating the worship of all foreign gods and idols from Judah in order to return to the monolatrous worship of YHWH that had existed in Judah a century before, during the period of Isaiah of Jerusalem (740-700 BCE). The success of Isaiah's prophecies, which promised protection for Judah in exchange for exclusive worship of YHWH (Isaiah 1-11), coupled with the belief in the everlasting nature of the Davidic covenantal dynasty (cf. 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2), led to a confidence among the Judeans of the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE, who regarded YHWH's protection as unconditional and not contingent on worship practices.[14]

Accounts such as 2 Kings 23 and Jeremiah 7 record the prevalence of syncretistic worship of YHWH alongside other gods and idols, suggesting a disregard for theologies that connected exclusive worship of YHWH with geopolitical sovereignty. In contrast, Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic writers espoused theologies of retribution: if the people did not repent and worship only YHWH alone, they would be removed from the land (cf. Deuteronomy 28; Jeremiah 3; 26-28). Since YHWH's presence was believed to reside in the Temple of Jerusalem (2 Kings 8; Ps 48; Ezekiel 9-10), and since Josiah's reforms had limited the worship of YHWH to the Temple,[15] deportation from Judah would have been recognized as entailing the cessation of communication with the deity. For Ezekiel, a member of the priestly class, deportation would have thoroughly disrupted of his role in society as mediator between the divine and human realms.

Although Katherine Pfisterer Darr portrays Ezekiel as a vigorous critic of the "the orthodox Yahwism of his day" (which rested on the aforementioned confidence of YHWH's protection),[16] there is no evidence to suggest that *prior* to his deportation Ezekiel was in any way a vocal opponent of lapses in rigorous Yahwism. In fact, the gap between Ezekiel's deportation (597 BCE) and his theophanic experience (593 BCE) suggests that he, too, was initially stunned and incapacitated by the seeming failure of the covenantal promises. As Psalm 137 paradoxically illustrates, a profound silence characterizes the initial moments of exile. It is only following his call (Ezekiel 1-3) that Ezekiel prophesies, as YHWH's spokesperson, of the coming, inevitable destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4-24) and the oracles against the nations (Ezekiel 25-35), before closing the book on a more optimistic tone (Ezek 36-48).[17] Throughout the book, the prophetic voice speaks in YHWH's name with such vituperative scorn that some scholars have suggested that Ezekiel may suffered through mental illness.[18]

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[14] Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction," in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1076.

[15] Pfisterer Darr, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 1083.

[16] Pfisterer Darr, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 1082.

[17] Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2017), 294.

[18] Edwin C. Broome, "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65 (1946): 277–92; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 17; Bowen, *Ezekiel*, 27; Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, trans. Deborah L. Schneider (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 27; George Stein, "The Voices That Ezekiel Hears - Psychiatry in the Old Testament," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 196, no. 2 (2010): 101–101, https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.196.2.101.

Recently, several biblical scholars have considered whether Ezekiel's prophecies exhibit indications of trauma and PTSD.[19] These trauma-based approaches offer significant insight into the more erratic and troubling aspects of the Book of Ezekiel by contextualizing the book into its exilic milieu, and by taking seriously the pain of social dislocation, extreme violence, and theological disruption the Babylonian exile certainly caused for the ancient Judeans. Traumatic situations are characterized by the twin experiences of *powerlessness* and *disruption*, when the "situation crudely disrupts the course of daily existence. One is cut off from a previously secure environment. The world no longer makes sense."[20] That is, traumatic experiences interrupt the customary ways a person makes sense of their day to day living, the *meaning* one makes of experiences. "Meaning" can be understood as "the mental representations that allow us to understand our experiences, whatever they may be, and however they may come to be understood." [21] Traumatic experiences are "meaning violations," wherein experiences are "inconsistent with the expectations that follow from these understandings." [22] Instinctively, humans engage in "palliative" efforts to restore meaning when it has been disrupted.[23] One such effort is to construct a "trauma story" – a narrative that makes sense of the disruption and provides a script for the survivor to process.[24] It is not hard to imagine that the deportation was a traumatic event for Ezekiel, and reading the Book of Ezekiel through the lens of trauma reframes much the book's contents; rather than solely representative of the worst side of chauvinistic theology, Ezekiel's experiences, speeches, and gestures are can be understood as strategies for processing and categorizing unspeakable horrors.

Can these trauma-informed approaches account for the "mind-blowing" account of Ezekiel's vision of God's glory in Ezek 1:4-28? It is certainly possible to interpret the vision report through the trauma characteristics of powerlessness and disruption. Yet the vision is devoid of the violence, guilt, shame, suffering, and anger that infuse later chapters that are more consonant with trauma literature (cf. Ezekiel 5; 16 and 23). Furthermore, the violence and anger of chapters such as the those just noted are cast as representing *YHWH's* emotional state, not the prophet's. Yet Ezekiel's prostration at the end of the vision signals an emotion *is* at play in chapter one, and it strikes me

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[19] Nancy R. Bowen, *Ezekiel*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010); Refael Furman, "Trauma and Post-Trauma in the Book of Ezekiel," *Old Testament Essays* 33, no. 1 (2020): 32–59; David G. Garber, "'I Went in Bitterness': Theological Implications of a Trauma Theory Reading of Ezekiel," *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 4 (November 1, 2014): 346–57; David G. Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (October 1, 2015): 24–44; Ruth Poser, *Das Ezechielbuch Als Trauma-Literatur* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012); Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, trans. Deborah L. Schneider (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 27–48; Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Reading War and Trauma; Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts," in *Interpreting the Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 253–74.

[20] Bowen, *Ezekiel*, xvi.

[21] Travis Proulx and Michael Inzlicht, "The Five 'A's of Meaning Maintenance: Finding Meaning in the Theories of Sense-Making," *Psychological Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (2012): 318.

[22] Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five A's of Meaning Maintenance," 318.

[23] Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five A's of Meaning Maintenance," 318.

[24] Bowen, *Ezekiel*, xvii–xviii; Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile," 32.

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that there is an overlap between the dual characteristics of trauma (powerlessness and disruption), and the attributes of awe identified by Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt.

Awe

In "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt describe awe as an emotion "in the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear."[25] In order to generate a "prototype of awe," Keltner and Haidt review descriptions of awe in various contexts, including religion, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. In their exploration of religious awe, they highlight Arjuna's encounter with Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita* and Saul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Arjuna has an overwhelming visual experience in which he sees the inner workings of the created order. He reacts by prostrating himself before Krishna, begging for clemency. Paul's experience likewise involves an ocular component and falling to the ground (Acts 9:3-7).[26] In both accounts, Arjuna and Paul embark on new trajectories in the wake of their otherworldly experiences.

After surveying different accounts of awe, Keltner and Haidt, "propose that two features form the heart of prototypical cases of awe: *vastness,* and *accommodation*."[27] They intentionally opt for "vastness" rather "power" in order to "capture the many aesthetic cases of awe in which power does not seem to be at work."[28] They define vastness as:

> anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference. Vastness is often a matter of simple physical size, but it can also involve social size such as fame, authority, or prestige. Signs of vastness such as loud sounds or shaking ground, and symbolic markers of vast size such as a lavish office can also trigger the sense that one is in the presence of something vast.[29]

Although YHWH does not have a lavish office *per se*, Ezekiel vision report conveys his glimpse of the heavenly throne with its attendants in language that accentuates his minimal stature in contrast to YHWH's enormity. That is, Ezekiel experiences *vastness*, and the next section I will demonstrate that it is possible to locate this in the text.

Keltner and Haidt describe *accommodation* as "the process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience."[30] This stage presumes the "disruption" noted in the trauma-based approaches of interpretation. In the act of accommodation, a person re-tools existing mental structures in order to make a new experience coherent and expressible. As I will demonstrate, the record of Ezekiel's vision draws upon existing categories, re-signifies them, yielding a vision report that draws upon familiar categories while reshaping them to new purposes.

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[25] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 297.

[26] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 298. The authors cite the *Bhagavadgita* II.45 and II.55.

[27] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 303. Emphasis in original.

[28] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 303.

[29] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 303.

[30] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," 304.

Like Arjuna and Paul, Ezekiel throws himself to the ground in response to what he sees (Ezek 1:28). This gesture serves to hide his face, which is, in fact, characteristic of awe-related responses in the Hebrew Bible. His posture is an important consideration, as it points to the culturally-based expressions of awe we would hope to detect in Ezekiel's account. The term that is customarily translated as "awe" is ירא√, an intricate concept denoting fear, reverence, and deference. For example, the Man and the Woman hide themselves "from the face of the Lord God" because they are afraid (ירא√) (Gen 3:8, 10). When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he "concealed his face for he was afraid (ירא√) to look at God" (Exod 3:6).[31] Eventually, Moses has to be reminded that seeing YHWH's face is not within the mortal purview, and YHWH permits him to see only his back (Exod 33:20-23). Yet just being in YHWH's presence is enough for Moses' own face to acquire a luminescence that causes others to fear him, and he must conceal his visage until the radiance dissipates (Exod 34:29-30). In Judges, the unnamed wife of Manoah tells her husband that "Man of God" appeared to her like an angel, and that he was נוֹרָא מְאֹד (ירא√), "most awesome/fearsome" (Judges 3:6). Later, when the Angel ascends in flame, "Manoah and his wife, watching, fall on their faces on the earth" (Judges 3:20). Gestures of facial concealment, then, are the proper response in the presence of God, and they tend to indicate the presence of the emotion of awe in the Hebrew Bible, which is characterized by fear, deference, and amazement. Ezekiel's prostration in 1:28 alerts us to his emotional state, best described as awe. I will now turn to the text of Ezek 1:4-28 to demonstrate how not only the prophet's prostration, but also the manner in which he describes his experience points to an experience of awe. I will employ the concept of "image schemas" drawn from cognitive linguistics to demonstrate how Ezekiel ciphers his experience through existing conceptual categories, expanding these categories as he goes.

Ezekiel 1:4-28 and Image Schemas

Cognitive Linguistics offers theories for probing an image-laden text such as Ezekiel 1. Specifically, Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green identify two theses that are central to cognitive semantics: "(1) the thesis that conceptual structure derives from embodiment, also known as the embodied cognition thesis; and (2) the thesis that semantic structure reflects conceptual structure."[32] Considered as stages, (1) our embodied nature determines the way we learn to conceptualize and understand our environments, and (2) how we learn to express these concepts in language. In between stage 1 and stage 2 we develop "image schemas": "Image schemas are relatively abstract conceptual representations that arise directly from our everyday interaction with and observation of the world around us."[33] Image schemas coalesce embodied experiences into conceptual structures. Once these conceptual structures are in place, they can be expressed in verbally in language, or in a semantic structure (the way a language works). Evans and Green depict the relationship between embodiment, conceptual structure, and semantic structure as follows:[34]
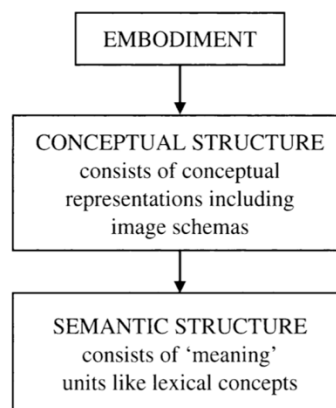
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[31] My translation.

Note that while they are not described as afraid, Abram "fell on his face" when YHWH appears to him (Gen 17:3) and Elijah, "wrapped his face in his cloak," when he hears the "voice of a thin whisper" (1 Kings 19:12-13). In these encounters, the human response involves limiting the ability to see and be seen by God.

[32] Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 176.

[33] Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 176.

[34] Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 177.

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│  CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE    │
│  consists of conceptual  │
│  representations including│
│     image schemas        │
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│   SEMANTIC STRUCTURE     │
│   consists of 'meaning'  │
│  units like lexical concepts│
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The diagram expresses the essential insight that, as forms of communication, languages are rooted in our embodied experiences of the world, and language systems constantly assume these embodied experiences. As Evans and Green explain, since our bodies are upright, affected by gravity, and vertically asymmetrical, our experiences (and from those experiences, our meaning-making of the world) are profoundly affected by the way we operate in our environments: "gravity ensures that unsupported objects fall to the ground; given the asymmetry of the human vertical axis, we have to stoop to pick up fallen objects and look in one direction (downwards) for fallen objects and in another (upwards) for rising objects. … our physiology ensures that our vertical axis, which interacts with gravity, gives rise to meaning as a result of how we interact with our environment."[35]

I would add two more observations about human embodiment that affect how we move through and experience our environments. First, our coronal (or frontal) asymmetry also affects how we experience, conceive, and express our experiences and thoughts. We have eyes on the front of our faces, not the back; knees that bend one way, not the other; necks that rotate only so far, and not all the way around. In other words, a clear distinction between "forward" and "backward". Second, humans, like other living creatures, are biologically sexed as male or female.[36] The physical expression of living creatures as male or female, and the biological possibilities inherent to each sex, give rise to culturally encoded expectations and assumptions grounded in maleness or femaleness. Evans and Green explain that image schemas are fundamental to our conceptual systems and are apprehended even before the "the emergence of language." We are, therefore, generally not conscious of them. As Evans and Green say, "we take our awareness of what it means to be a physical being in a physical world very much for granted because we acquire this knowledge so early in life."[37]

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[35] Evans and Green, 178; Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[36] I acknowledge the enormous complexity of human sexuality and gender. It is not my intention to insist on biological essentialism, but rather to highlight that human embodiedness also includes sexual components that result in different expressions of physicality between "male" and "female," and concomitantly, different ways of being in and understanding the world.

[37] Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 180. One only has to think about how difficult it is to contemplate the embodied experiences of spiders who have 8-12 eyes in addition to their 8 legs. Even if humans and spiders were similar in size, our epistemologies would remain completely different.

With the integrated relationship among embodiment, image schemas and conceptual structure, and semantic structure in mind, I propose that the vison report in Ezekiel 1:4-28 indicates that the prophet experienced a massive disruption in his embodied cognition that rendered his customary meaning maintenance models inadequate.[38] To accommodate this experience in the writing of it, Ezekiel reaches for two important image schemas, LIVING BEING and HUMAN,[39] and in reworking what these image schemes can refer to, he assembles "something like" a coherent account of his experience. There are two ways in which this discernable at the level of the text. First, Ezekiel's use of simile pervades the vision and intensifies in frequency as he nears the description of the glory of YHWH. The Hebrew preposition "כ" (for, like, as, according to) is used eighteen times,[40] and it is frequently attached to the term מראה, "appearance, vision, or sight," which is found sixteen times.[41] The term דמות, "likeness or shape," is found ten times.[42] These terms points to the ineffable nature of Ezekiel's vision as he strives to put multiple, overlapping sensory experiences into communicable narrative sequence.

The other way the image schemas are revamped is through the "totally arbitrary" use of grammatical gender, wherein "the seemingly irrational interchange of masculine and feminine forms permeates the entire text and every conceivable context."[43] Block notes the inconsistency with the way pronominal suffixes are used, with the gender of verbs vis-à-vis the gender of subjects, and with the gender of nouns and their antecedents. For the purposes of paper, I share with interest Block's observation:

> Although the subject in vv 15-18 is the masculine *'wpnym* [wheels], and here masculine suffixes referring to this antecedent are expected, throughout most of the remaining text the subject is stated or assumed to be the feminine *'š* [fire] or *ḥywt* [living beings]. Nevertheless, the pronouns referring to these antecedents are in consistent, whether they are attached to prepositions, nouns, or verbal forms. Often the switch will occur within the same sentence.[44]

In other words, what would normally be expected to be quite stable–grammatical agreement— becomes fluid. Gendered languages with their customs of agreement of number and sex reflect embodied cognition; while exploring the depths of the relationship between gendered language

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[38] Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five 'A's of Meaning Maintenance," 317–18.

[39] Other image schemas, like WIND, FIRE, WINGS, and WHEELS, are also possible. I have chosen LIVING CREATURE and HUMAN because not only do they include WIND, FIRE, WINGS, and WHEELS in Ezekiel's vision, but they are embodied concepts used to describe the heavenly beings and the "appearance of the likeness of the glory of God," and I am aiming to draw out the transformation of embodied cognition this passage conveys.

[40] Ezek 1:4, 7 (2x), 13 (3x), 16 (2x), 22, 24 (3x), 26 (2x), 27 (3x), and 28.

[41] Ezek 1:1, 5, 13 (2x), 14, 16 (2x), 26 (2x), 27 (4x), and 28 (3x)

[42] Ezek 1:5 (2x), 10, 13, 16, 22, 26 (3x), and 28.

[43] Block, "Text and Emotion," 420.

[44] Block, "Text and Emotion," 420.

and embodied cognition is beyond the realm of this paper, I draw attention to it as an aspect that contributes to the upending of Ezekiel's customary meaning-making strategies.

At the start of the vision, Ezekiel sees "something like four living beings (f.)" (Ezek 1:5). To provide a smooth translation, the NRSV adds "something like," but the Hebrew itself reads: דְּמוּת אַרְבַּע חַיּוֹת, meaning "likeness/shape (f.) of four living beings (f.)." The term חַיּוֹת (from the root חיה) refers to living, created creatures, and is used to denote animals.[45] Yet these חַיּוֹת are nothing like Ezekiel has ever seen before, and they defy all aspects of the created order. They are in the midst of fire (Ezek 1:4) and each one, though being in the "likeness/shape" of חַיּוֹת are *also* in the "likeness/shape" of "human" (*'adam*): דְּמוּת אָדָם (Ezek 1:5b). The two image schemes of LIVING BEING and HUMAN are blurring, and the boundaries of possibility continue to shift. Though their "likeness/shape" is both חַיּוֹת and אָדָם, Ezekiel describes the four living beings thus:

> Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. … As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces (Ezek 1:6-8, 10-11a).

These four-sided, four-faced, four-winged beings with legs and hands have fire in the midst of them (Ezek 1:13), and while they only move straight ahead (Ezek 1:12), they also "dart to and fro" (Ezek 1:14). The living creatures also each have a wheel beside them—here it is unclear if the wheel is attached to them or not—and each wheel is the colour of beryl and is "like a wheel within a wheel" (Ezek 1:17). Each wheel is able to move in any of the four directions "without veering". Most curiously, the rims of the wheels are "full of eyes all around" and are "tall and awesome (lit. fearsome)" (Ezek 1:18). Here (√ירא) is used as an adjective in conjunction with "tall" to describe the wheel rims. Although it does not directly describe Ezekiel's emotional state, the combination of wheel rims with multitudinous eyes and great height suggests the vastness of the experience, as posited by Keltner and Haidt. Often there are attempts to rationalize the "eyes" on the wheels as rivets, nails, or ornaments; this type of explanation aims to make sense of the wheels as wheels, but it overlooks how the description of rims with eyes stretches the possibilities of what embodied language can do.[46] Verse 19 suggests that the wheels are separate from the living creatures, but they move synchronously. Verses 20 and 21 indicate that "the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels."

Commentators frequently understand the winged, anthropomorphic creatures as cherubim. This is due to Ezekiel's explanation in 10:20-22 when he clarifies that the cherubim he sees in chapter 10 are the "living creatures that I saw underneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar."[47]

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[45] See Genesis 1:25 where it appears in the singular. There it is translated "wild animals" by the NRSV, but is better understood as "living being."

[46] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation (Louisville, HY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 22.

[47] van Wolde, "The God Ezekiel 1 Envisions," 92; Bowen, *Ezekiel*, 4.

However, while the term "cherubim" appears twenty-one times in Ezekiel 10,[48] it does not appear at all in Ezekiel 1, suggesting that in the initial recording of his vision he had not yet categorized these entities.[49] Moreover, in Ezekiel 1 they are consistently called the חַיּוֹת —the living beings— and they are so bizarre their appearance strains the entire image schema of LIVING BEING nearly beyond what it can bear. This is indicated by the notable frequency of the language of similitude in the verses describing the appearance of the living beings (Ezek 1:4-21). In these nineteen verses, language of similitude occurs twenty-two times (115% of the verses).[50] The only thing that is clear is that for Ezekiel what he sees is very *un*clear.

The second image schema that is disrupted is the image schema HUMAN. In Hebrew, the term is אָדָם (*'adam*). This is a significant image schema to discuss for two reasons. First, אָדָם is the basic term for "human" in the Hebrew Bible. Although it is grammatically male, it is used to refer to both male and female humans (cf. Gen 1:27). Through its semantic assonance with the word אדמה (ground), אָדָם expresses the materiality—the embodiedness—of humanity. Second, beginning in Ezekiel 2:1 and continuing through the rest of the book, God's term of address for Ezekiel is, בֶּן־אָדָם "Son of *'adam*". Ezekiel's humanness vis-à-vis God is his fundamental characteristic.

The vision destabilizes the image schema HUMAN signified by the term אָדָם, first by using the following phrase to describe the living beings: וְזֶה מַרְאֵיהֶן דְּמוּת אָדָם "*and this was their appearance: likeness/shape of human*" (Ezek 1:5)[51] This translation is awkward, but it is important to try not to obscure the quality of the phrase, which includes two terms of similitude ("appearance" and "likeness") that refer to אָדָם. What does Ezekiel mean by this, especially when he goes on to describe the luminescent living beings, unconsumed by fire, with their four faces (only one of which is human), and four wings, calf-like feet, and human hands? As explored above, the living beings do not cohere with anything the term LIVING BEING (חַיּוֹת) would normally represent, and Ezekiel adds the term HUMAN (אָדָם) to describe what he sees. This has the effect of clarifying the former term while disrupting the latter. A basic anthropomorphism still exists, despite the strangeness of the living beings. They have faces, straight legs, and hands, thus their structure preserves the vertical asymmetry of a human. Their human hands are a significant detail, as these are the appendages that (in conjunction with our intellect), have most allowed humans to differentiate from other animals. Yet the living beings Ezekiel sees both are and are not human-like, and the use of the HUMAN image schema to describe them erodes the most basic physical self-understanding of אָדָם.

The HUMAN image schema is further complexified when Ezekiel describes his vision of the throne:

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[48] The term appears in both the singular and the plural. The plural appears in both the regular and *plene* spellings. Ezek 10:1, 2 (2x), 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 (3x), 8, 9 (3x), 14, 15, 16 (2x), 18, 19, and 20.

[49] Block, "Text and Emotion," 431.

[50] The term כ "like, according to": Ezek 1:4, 7 (2x), 13 (3x), 16 (2x), 22

The term מראה "appearance": Ezek 1:1, 5, 13 (2x), 14, 16 (2x)

The term דמות "likeness/shape": Ezek 1:5 (2x), 10, 13, 16, 22

[51] The words in italics are my own translation.

> And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was *(the) likeness/shape of the appearance of human* (דְּמ֤וּת כְּמַרְאֵ֣ה אָדָ֖ם).[52] Upwards from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all round; and downwards from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendour all round. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (Ezek 1:26-28).

Ezekiel names the shape he perceives as HUMAN, yet it is not as clearly demarcated as the living beings, with their faces, wings, legs, feet, and hands. The only "human" aspect to this anthropomorphic shape are the "loins" (NRSV). This is an unnecessarily sexualized translation that obscures the Hebrew term מתנים, meaning "hips" or "waist."[53] Oddly, both upwards and downwards from the hips, Ezekiel does not describe any further human-like shape.[54] Instead, the hips are swathed in brilliance. His *gestalt* summary of this part of the vision is:

כְּמַרְאֵ֣ה הַקֶּ֡שֶׁת אֲשֶׁר֩ יִהְיֶ֨ה בֶעָנָ֜ן בְּי֣וֹם הַגֶּ֗שֶׁם כֵּ֣ן מַרְאֵ֤ה הַנֹּ֙גַהּ֙ סָבִ֔יב ה֕וּא מַרְאֵ֖ה דְּמ֣וּת כְּבוֹד־יְהוָ֑ה וָֽאֶרְאֶה֙ וָאֶפֹּ֣ל עַל־פָּנַ֔י וָאֶשְׁמַ֖ע ק֥וֹל מְדַבֵּֽר

Like the appearance of the bow which is in a cloud on the day of rain, thus the appearance of the surrounding splendor. This was the appearance of the likeness/shape of the glory of YHWH (Ezek 1:28a).[55]

Through the use of simile, Ezekiel tries to accommodate what he sees into a communicable form. Bowen observes, "the closer one gets to the center of the vision, the vaguer the description."[56] Specifically, in Ezek 1:26-28 (three verses), there are nineteen instances of similitudinous language (633%!).[57] As YHWH manifests to Ezekiel, Ezekiel's foundational image schemas fray and he grasps for the most embodied and concrete image schema he can access, namely HUMAN. In the process, however, he recodes what the image schema HUMAN can refer to. As Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, in Gen 1:26-27, humanity is created in the likeness of God; in

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[52] The words in italics are my own translation.

[53] מתנים is a dual term (meaning that it refers to something that occurs in pairs), and so, while "waist" is possible, "hips" is a better translation.

[54] van Wolde's interpretation assumes that a "humanlike body" is simply covered over by the encompassing brilliance. I am less certain about what is hidden by the radiance that parts to reveal the "hips." van Wolde, "The God Ezekiel 1 Envisions," 91.

[55] My translation.

[56] Bowen, *Ezekiel*, 3.

[57] The term כ "like, according to": Ezek 26 (2x), 27 (3x), and 28.

The term מראה "appearance": Ezek 26 (2x), 27 (4x), and 28 (3x)

The term דמות "likeness/shape": Ezek 26 (3x), and 28.

Ezek 1:27-28, "God appears in the likeness of humanity."[58] Unsurprisingly, when Ezekiel sees it, he falls upon his face (Ezek 1:28b).

In Ezekiel 1:4-28, Ezekiel reports an experience in which he undergoes a thorough destabilization of how he conceives of living existence in the world and how he understands YHWH. This is indicated by the disruption of meaning in the image schemas LIVING BEING and HUMAN, which become absorbed into descriptions of YHWH's entourage and radiant glory. As van Wolde says, "All linguistic data in Ezek 1 point in one and the same direction: the storm, wind, fire, radiance, and the warrior's bow are intended as the representations of the *kabod* of YHWH."[59] To this statement I would add that the linguistic data of LIVING BEING and HUMAN are pressed into service to describe this theophany, revisioning the semantic range of these schemas in the process.

One final consideration is how this vision report could itself inculcate an experience of awe in its hearers or readers. Katherine Pfisterer Darr encourages a "reader-oriented" approach to the Book of Ezekiel, which sets aside the diachronic concerns of historical-critical methods and instead focusses on a sequential reading process by readers unfamiliar with "the 'big picture.'"[60] She imagines this reader to be a second generation Judean living in Babylon, someone who is familiar with both the traditions of Judah and the new world of the diaspora, as well as authoritative texts (such as they were) of the day. She notes that her imagined reader is literate, and engages with the text of Ezekiel in scroll format, unrolling it as he reads.[61] Despite Zimmerli's insistence on a shorter version of Ezekiel's vision report, Block points out that there is "remarkable agreement between most of the copies of biblical texts found at Qumran and the MT, [thus] it is hard to imagine that all of the proposed scribal influences would have crept into the text in the intervening years."[62] Assuming for a moment that the early imagined reader has access to a copy of Ezekiel that is largely similar to what we know today, what happens to this reader as he reads, and as he encounters the jumbled grammar, the bizarre embodied language, and the convoluted syntax of Ezek 1:4-28? Does he too, fall on his face?

Concluding Remarks

Ezekiel's vision report suggests that he endured a massive meaning disruption. YHWH's manifestation to Ezekiel in exile is thoroughly inconsistent with customary expectations of the deity's dwelling in Jerusalem. By accessing the image schemas of LIVING BEING and HUMAN, Ezekiel accommodates the vision by finding a way to account for the experience, through language drawn from his "cultural bank" and his own embodied cognition.[63] Assembly refers to the process by which a person constructs "meaning frameworks in response to a given violation—in a sense, creating a new way to make our experiences feel familiar."[64] By describing his vision in terms that had ordinary usage but using them in extraordinary ways, Ezekiel assembles an account of his

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[58] Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 22.

[59] van Wolde, "The God Ezekiel 1 Envisions," 106.

[60] Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction," 1094–95.

[61] Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel," 1098. Her imagined reader is male, which I do not contest.

[62] Block, "Text and Emotion," 428.

[63] Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five 'A's of Meaning Maintenance," 325.

[64] Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five 'A's of Meaning Maintenance," 328.

vision that gives his hearers something to anchor in their imaginations while simultaneously conveying the awesomeness of what he has seen. This enables him to express the powerful, vast, otherness of YHWH.

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