Ezekiel as a Written Text: Archiving Visions, Remembering Futures

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on Ezekiel as a text, i.e., a collection of writings meant to be read again and again. As a text, it presents a range of ideas in dialogue with one another—and sometimes in tension—thus providing ample space for continual discussion and reinterpretation of its ideas among its original communities of readers in antiquity. Ezekiel would have functioned as a kind of archive of speech and vision—an idea that challenges commonly held notions of prophetic literature’s function and understandings of its generic intersections with other Judean texts in antiquity. As a written text, Ezekiel would have stood as an organized resource for thinking about the past, and about divine communication in and through that past, in an open-ended way that left room for future possibilities.

Keywords: literary traditions, prophetic texts, chronology, historiography, Davidic kingship, prophecy

Ezekiel is a strange text, at home among the literary traditions of the Hebrew Bible and yet unique in a number of its features and themes. It is, too, a troubling text—while at the same time a text of restoration and hope. Its readers encounter divine abandonment and sexual violence, and yet they are also invited to imagine a utopia of temple and divinely promised land. This array of textual imagery has been the subject of scholarly study for millennia.

The concern of this chapter, however, is Ezekiel as a text. Ezekiel is a collection of writings apparently meant to be read again and again. It presents a range of ideas in dialogue with one another and sometimes in tension—ideas of humanity and divinity, temple and land, priesthood and kingship, among others. It thus provided ample space for continual discussion and reinterpretation of its ideas among its original readers in antiquity, within a kind of “textual community.” And over the centuries it has indeed been read and reread continually, aloud and silently, among groups and by individuals, in a variety of textual forms and editions—as a scroll, as its own codex or as part of one, as digital information displayed on a pixelated screen, and so on.
In this chapter, I examine Ezekiel as a written text within the ancient world. How does the fact of its “written-ness” inform our understandings of it as a source for Judean antiquity? Ezekiel, the text, is primarily writing about the past, but with a keen sense of possible futures. What knowledge of ancient Judean literary culture can we gain from a close analysis of its self-presentation and organization? The text presents itself as an ordered collection of speeches and vision reports. It also has a certain meta-generic character, evincing a close interrelationship with historical interests in particular. I argue, therefore, that Ezekiel would function as a kind of archive of speech and vision—an idea that challenges commonly held notions of prophetic literature’s function and understandings of its generic intersections with other Judean texts in antiquity.

1. Ezekiel as Prophetic Text

Generically, Ezekiel is a literary text that contains accounts of purportedly divine speech and action. It also contains accounts of human speech and action related to the deity’s speaking and acting. Prophecy, as a human activity meant to transmit divine communication, was widespread in the ancient Near Eastern world. Written sources from Mari, Nineveh, Babylon, Lachish, and other locales attest to the general commonness of prophetic activity throughout the region in antiquity.

However, prophetic texts like Ezekiel—i.e., like those we now find in the Hebrew Bible—were uncommon, perhaps even unique to ancient Judean literary culture. These texts contain a number of distinctive features. They are collections of oracles and reported visions that claim association with a single prophetic figure from the past, and they claim to contain knowledge about the deity Yahweh that would pertain to that particular past moment (e.g., Ezek 1:1–3). Even so, they also convey a sense of timelessness. In these prophetic texts, historical anchors—given as matters of fact in the texts’ introductory statements and occasionally reinforced elsewhere within the texts—often seem loose or flagging in the course of reading the texts’ main oracles and vision reports. Ezekiel appears firmly set in Babylonia around the turn of the sixth century BCE, frequently providing precise locales and dates for the prophet’s reception of the divine revelations therein. That being said, many visions lack contextual specifics—the famous vision of the dry bones coming to life at the words of the prophet, for example (37:1–14)—and thereby have proven meaningful as messages of future restoration for any number of diaspora communities, for well over two thousand years.

Biblical prophetic collections therefore participate in a recognizable generic category unto themselves. They contain messages from the past attributed to a prophetic figure in that past. Their messages appear to speak to situations of that past moment and its immediate consequences, in some cases quite directly and with a sense of restricted applicability. Often, however, the messages are directed toward some distant future, toward a time to be long awaited by the texts’ audiences. And in every case, the seemingly time-restricted messages are couched within a larger textual framework that blurs boundaries between past and future, between the already and the not yet, effectively erasing the here-
and-now of an implied readership in Judah’s post-monarchic era. Prophetic texts clearly imply an “exilic” or “postexilic” audience. That is, they assume Judean readerships situated in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods of the ancient Near East (sixth to fourth centuries BCE), at a time when Jerusalem was very slowly rebounding from imperial devastation. They point back to the events that eventually led to the collapse of Israel and Judah as independent polities in the Levant, and yet call attention to a future in which a utopian Israel/Judah/Jerusalem will be established. They recount reasons for the Jerusalem temple’s destruction, for the demise of Yahweh’s own dwelling place on earth, and yet they imagine the deity’s return to the land and the rebuilding of his house within it. They represent a “remembered future,” in that they depict a past in which a distant future (or a horizon of possible futures) was imagined for the people of Israel.

From a reader’s perspective, the present is usually not, therefore, present in the texts, except implicitly in the fact of the texts’ written status. That is, the texts’ concern for the here and now, for any present time, is evident only in the fact that they were written down and meant to be read by the community in which and for which they emerged, and by which they were preserved for subsequent communities to pick up and read in their present moments. By not directly addressing the present, the texts subtly preserve and reinforce the gap between distant past and imagined future for their implied and actual readerships.

The Hebrew Bible’s prophetic texts are, then, situated within the past and thoroughly interested in that past, even though their orientation—the temporal direction toward which they ultimately point—is the future. Elsewhere, drawing on theories of social memory and remembering, I have argued that readings of historiographical literature, in an ancient Judean context, likely informed readings of prophetic literature, and vice versa. I suggest we reconsider how we talk about the generic functions of these texts, especially the prophetic, within ancient Judean culture. The notion that Judean historiography might have had prophetic tendencies, for its ancient readership, is recognized already in Jewish canonical tradition, which has ascribed the label “Former Prophets” to the texts of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. But recognizing the reverse influence—that prophetic literature might have had historiographical tendencies, and that Judean readers might have picked up prophetic texts with an eye toward history—has not been a common line of thought.

Although prophetic writing is not usually viewed as history, in our modern sense of the concept, it nonetheless contains features that tend toward the historiographical and thus would contribute to and be informed by a kind of historical consciousness among its ancient readers. Prophetic literature contains a number of second-order reflections on other forms of Judean writing, and so the literature has a certain “meta” character. And among the many written forms and thought patterns on which prophetic literature draws and to which it contributes, its strongest links are perhaps with historiography and historical thinking and imagination.
2. Ezekiel as Historiographic Text

In a recent contribution, Michael Floyd asks whether the writers of prophetic literature were in some sense historiographers.\(^\text{15}\) He answers, provisionally, in the affirmative. He builds his argument around the idea that prophetic literature developed out of collections of recorded oracles. Evidence from Mari, Nineveh, classical Greece, and elsewhere suggests that scribes maintained records of spoken oracles because, for example, the oracles had proven to be true in some way, and thus might have significance beyond their present moment; or because the oracles’ significance was not immediately apparent, so the scribes wanted to preserve them for future consultation. Such record keeping involved organizing the oracles into particular collections, and such organization probably provided the basic framework for the emergence of prophetic literature in ancient Judah. Here Floyd builds on the research of Martti Nissinen and Armin Lange, as well as others.\(^\text{16}\) But he takes the argument further by examining the concept of “list” as a genre. By collecting oracles attributed to a certain prophet and recording them on a single scroll, Judean scribes were in effect making a list. Floyd shows how the act of reading such lists might have aided in the process of transformation from oracle collections to literary texts.

Lists, argues Floyd, contribute to a “multidimensional set of ideational relationships” and thus “revel in generous polysemy rather than reductive abstraction.”\(^\text{17}\) The act of organizing and forming a list opens up new possibilities for understanding—for finding connections and meanings previously undetected.\(^\text{18}\) If oracles associated with a certain prophet were indeed gathered together in list-form, which seems to have been the case in ancient Judah, this list-formation would enable the ongoing reading, interpretation, and reinterpretation of individual oracles within the list. The inherent polysemy of lists would thus allow Judean scribes, reading and interpreting oracle-lists in the Persian era, to think on these past oracles in relation to their present historical setting, and then to compose literary works based upon the lists themselves.

In Floyd’s words, “[Judah’s scribal elite] redefined prophecy in terms of the records of past revelations rather than oracles currently being spoken, and they reshaped the prophetic tradition by delimiting the prophets and oracles that make up the prophetic canon.”\(^\text{19}\) Persian-era scribes—composers of texts like Ezekiel—were thus “collaborative” writers “who imaginatively elaborated on the records of a prophet from the past.”\(^\text{20}\) Their aim was to draw upon these oracles of old, making comparisons with events and concerns of their present day—thus divining ongoing meaning in the history of Yahweh’s interaction with the people (cf. Sir 38:34b–39:3).\(^\text{21}\) This was a kind of historiographical work—collecting, interpreting, composing, as it were. And it was meant to inform Judean historical interests to some degree. The texts that resulted from this process of transforming oracle-lists into prophetic literature were meant to be consulted time and again, in order to mine the past and inform present concerns, to address questions of how and why the Judean people became who they were and got to where they were, in relation to their deity Yahweh.\(^\text{22}\)
In Ezekiel, the historiographical tendency of this literary process is most clearly evident in the text’s formulaic chronological statements. The text begins with a narrative statement of time, even specifying the day on which the prophet’s visions began (1:1). Unusual for a prophetic text, Ezekiel begins with the waw-prefix verb יִהְיָה wayhi (“It was...”), which introduces historiographical prose narratives such as the texts of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel (cf. Jonah). It then specifies the time frame of the subsequent descriptions, giving year and month and day. And it repeats this formula throughout, no less than twelve times, emphasizing that Ezekiel’s visions and prophetic activities occurred at precise moments in the past. Moreover, the formulaic statements are mostly chronological, with the exceptions of 29:1 and 29:17, which are out of order in relation to the dates that precede and follow in the text’s chronology. These two exceptions notwithstanding, the text begins with Ezekiel seeing his first “visions of God” and receiving “the word of Yahweh” circa 593 BCE (1:1–3); it then accounts for subsequent visions and prophetic actions, mostly in sequence; and it concludes circa 573 BCE with visions of a restored temple for Israel (40:1–3). The text thus builds an easily recognizable narrative framework for its readers. It guides them through an account of Ezekiel’s prophetic tasks over the course of a specific passage of time, from his initial reception of Yahweh’s messages in the early years of exile to an elaborate and utopian envisioning of the temple in Jerusalem, received some twenty years later.

With respect to the text’s chronological framing, scholars have long puzzled over its opening statement: יִהְיָה בִּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה wayhi bishloshim shanah (“It was in the thirtieth year”). Its time reference is uncertain. Origen, writing in the early third century CE, suggested that it refers to Ezekiel’s age at the time of his inaugural visions, and a number of commentators have followed his lead. The text also refers to Ezekiel as “son of Buzi, the priest” (1:3), and the age of thirty is significant in prescriptions for Israelite priesthood. In the Pentateuch, Numbers 4 notes several times that levitical priestly service should commence at the age of thirty and conclude at age fifty (vv. 3, 23, 30)—a frame of twenty years, which corresponds with the narrative time frame of Ezekiel’s prophetic activity as outlined in the text. To be sure, Ezekiel is presumably a Zadokite, a descendent of Aaron and not a levitical priest, so one should be cautious of taking the comparison between Ezekiel and Numbers 4 too far. Nonetheless, the correspondence between time frames is striking. The text, by opening up the possibility for this comparison in its discourse, makes a claim about Ezekiel’s dual role as a prophet and priest, and about the import of this dual role for the text’s readership. It evinces an interest in interpreting Ezekiel’s prophetic activities and character in relation to priestly sociocultural conventions, and in relation to the import of priestly concerns for the community going forward. In other words, the text relays information about someone whose role was fundamentally altered by the fact of exile—a priest who, instead of serving in the Jerusalem temple, imagined its potentials from the confines of Babylon. It tells of a member of the priesthood whose term of service was to receive divine words and visions, to communicate messages from Yahweh to the deity’s people, far from the land of Israel.
An important observation to be made here is that the narrative structure of the text is mostly prosaic and chronological. One should also note the text’s presentation of the prophet—and in this case, priest—as a particular type of social actor in the past: one who would have contributed to the readership’s sense of group identity, origins, and future trajectories (who are we, how did we get to this point, and where might we be headed?). These are historiographical hallmarks—prose narrative, chronological sequencing, concerns with social identity and possibilities—even though they are contained within a text whose primary purpose is to recount divine communication.

Ezekiel thus hints at a historiographical function, giving its readers some basic information about the work of a past prophet-priest, but without fully developing his narrative. Indeed, “biblical writers and editors…saw the prophetic books as repositories for historical information,” writes Megan Bishop Moore, though these texts were not “histories” per se. Nevertheless, two aspects would combine to lend the text a “historiographical” tone: the text’s likely compositional process, namely its literary formation from an ordered collection—i.e., a list—of written oracles; and its inherent narrative structure, which has much in common with the concerns of history-writing. The text’s primary function in antiquity was prophetic, of course; but it also spoke of history.

3. Ezekiel as Analytical Text

Another noteworthy feature of Ezekiel, one that links it to history-writing but also distinguishes it from such writing, is its voice. “It was in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, and I was among the exiles by the river Chebar; the heavens opened and I saw visions of God” (1:1). The text opens in the voice of the prophet, telling us when and where he received his visions. It switches abruptly, though, in the following verses, to third-person deixis. “On the fifth day of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—indeed the word of Yahweh came to Ezekiel son of Buzi, the priest, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar, and the hand of Yahweh came upon him there” (1:2–3). And then in v. 4 it again switches back to a first-person perspective, the voice of the prophetic figure himself. Throughout the remaining text of Ezekiel, all aspects—divine proclamations and judgments, descriptions of sign-acts, visions, and the like—are framed with first-person narrative prose. Statements such as “the word of Yahweh came to me” and “the hand of Yahweh came upon me” occur dozens of times in the text, to introduce accounts of prophetic communication. First-person discourse is common enough in prophetic literature (e.g., Isa 6:1; Jer 1:4; Hos 3:1; etc.), but in Ezekiel it is ubiquitous, an outstanding feature of that text in its genre.

Historiography is often framed with first-person discourse. For example, in response to Persian and Phoenician accounts of conflict with the Greeks, Herodotus states as part of his opening remarks, “I prefer to rely on my own knowledge, and to point out who it was in actual fact that first injured the Greeks; then I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities of men no less than of great”—he then proceeds to recount his version of the story in the third-person. Thucydides similarly offers first-per-
son description of his historiographical process, introducing his lengthy narrative work by commenting on his own investigative and compositional techniques. Peter Machinist refers to this ancient historiographical feature as the “analytical I.” These first-person statements reflect critical awareness, an effort to discern the quality of source-material and information in the process of compiling an account of the past.

However, texts from the pre-Hellenistic Near East, including those in the Hebrew Bible, lack first-person statements that are explicitly analytical. Deuteronomy features what we might call “pseudo-I” statements, a telling of Moses’s supposed words to the Israelites on the plains of Moab, in the leader’s own voice; and Nehemiah has the “autobiographical I,” a memoir-like account of efforts to restore Jerusalem decades after the Babylonian conquests. But no pre-Hellenistic text in the Bible has the kind of reflective personal statements about method found in Herodotus or Thucydides.

Machinist argues that this lack of the “analytical I,” in the Hebrew Bible and in pre-Hellenistic Near Eastern texts generally, has to do with conceptualizations of authority. In the ancient Near East, authority was confined to kings, sociocultural tradition, and divinity. Only the gods or rulers—who were bound by long-standing traditions and were ultimately subject to the gods—could chart the course of history. It was, thus, exceedingly rare in that context for a scribe to make his subjective, personal judgments about the past and its import explicit in a written text. And so in Ezekiel the “I” that repeatedly frames the narrative is not of the analytical sort. It is autobiographical (or perhaps pseudo-autobiographical), in that it aims to communicate a personal version of the story, but without necessarily taking a critical stance toward its sources. There is no readily apparent analysis of evidence, no questioning the validity of discrepant accounts of the past, in Ezekiel’s first-person claims. According to the text, the source of information, the one dictating the terms of the narrative, was Israel’s god—the prophet simply functioned as the deity’s mouthpiece. In this scenario there is, it would seem, no need for critical analysis on the part of the story’s teller.

That said, prophetic texts do take analytical stances in relation to the past and its ongoing import, just not in their first-person discourse. “The ability to discern variety is an inherent quality of history,” writes Alexander Rofé. He observes how historiographical texts in the Hebrew Bible represent various periods of past time; from the era of conquest to the time when the judges judged to the days of monarchy, boundaries between periods of Israel’s past are variously delineated, sometimes coinciding with the boundaries of the texts themselves, but sometimes not. Of course, some identifiable frames of time noticeably overlap (e.g., the complicated transition from judgeship to monarchy). But while historiographical texts tend to focus on past periodization and its various and even contradictory understandings, prophetic literature tends to highlight variety in possible historical outcomes.

According to Rofé, “prophecy, being bent toward the future, towards the new things the Lord is going to do, developed a dynamic concept of history and nurtured a strong historical intuition.” Prophetic texts indeed represent a “dynamic concept of history,” but they
do so through their various speculations about the future rather than through any explicit analysis of the past. In other words, their analytical voice is to be found in how they present possible outcomes for the past, not in discourse about possibilities within that past. The prophetic voice thus maintained divine authority over history, while it also left room for reflective analysis of historical meanings and trajectories in due time.42

Ezekiel contains telling examples of such analytical thought couched in written prophetic discourse. Consider, for example, its various images of future Davidic rule. As I shall now discuss, the text presents at least two such images (34:23–24; 37:24–25); furthermore, within its extensive vision of the temple, in chapters 40–48, the text makes repeated reference to an anonymous future ruler who has connections to Davidic kingship, but who is not necessarily a king.43

First, in 34:23–24, David appears as the “one shepherd,” as Yahweh’s chosen servant who will be נasi “ruler” over the people. It seems, however, that this rule will be rather passive. The text repeatedly emphasizes, via Yahweh’s voice, that the deity is the one who will do all the work with regard to the people: “I will gather them” (34:13); “I myself will shepherd them, and I myself will have them lie down” (34:15); “the lost I will seek, and the stray I will bring back” (34:16), and so on. Ezekiel 34:10–22, the passage that leads up to Yahweh’s announcement of David’s role as shepherd, contains no less than twenty-one first-person finite verbs, each one in reference to Yahweh’s future rescuing and shepherding of Israel—not David’s.44 In this case, David’s rule of Israel will return, but there will be little for him to actually do.45

David appears again in 37:24–25, in similar fashion but with some important differences. Here, again, he is Yahweh’s “one shepherd” who will serve as נסי, despite the fact that Yahweh is the one to do all the real work. But here David is also called מלך melekh “king”; and the text notes that his rule will last ל’לך olam “forever”—coinciding with ברית עולם berit olam “an eternal covenant” that will ensure Yahweh’s presence among the people “forever” (vv. 26–28).

Such talk of eternal covenants and of David’s ruling forever has thematic and linguistic links with Judean historiography and other prophetic texts (e.g., 2 Sam 7:8–16; 23:5; Isa 55:3). It evinces an overarching concern in Judean literature about divine promises made to the Davidic line—their potential meanings and import for the Judean community in its post-monarchic setting.46 Readers of Ezekiel 34 and 37 would have thought that Davidic rule will indeed return and perhaps even last in perpetuity.47 One could convincingly argue, however, that this view of David was something of a minority report or second opinion within the larger context of Ezekiel.48 It is unclear exactly how the text, on the whole, envisions this new David.49

In the book’s lengthy concluding vision, Davidic rule plays a more subtle role. Chapters 40–48 imagine the Jerusalem temple’s architecture, its altar and the offerings that will take place there, as well as its administrative personnel—and all this in fairly extensive detail. The vision also mentions, along with the frequently referenced Zadokite priesthood (e.g., 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11), an anonymous נשי, This ruler will have special ac-
cess to the sanctuary’s outer gate (44:1–3). He will inherit a certain portion of land in the new Jerusalem (45:7; 48:21–22). He is, along with his descendants, admonished to deal justly with the people—not to act like his predecessors (45:8–9; cf. 46:16–18). He will contribute grain, oil, animals, and so on, for the various cultic offerings (45:13–17, 22). And he will observe the priests as they work (ch. 46).

At first glance, these certainly look like kingly rights and duties. However, the vision uses the title נַשִּׁיא and not מֶלֶך. The נַשִּׁיא of chapters 40–48 connotes a kingly figure to some extent, yet he is clearly not a מֶלֶך. This vision mentions Israel’s past kings with considerable disdain—and in doing so, it emphasizes that in the new Jerusalem, Yahweh will have a throne that lasts “forever” (43:7–9). Compare 20:33, which employs the verb יָלֶם m-l-k in the qal stem: “As I live, says Lord Yahweh, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you” (after NRSV).

Elsewhere in Ezekiel, too, the title נַשִּׁיא seems to indicate something less than a מֶלֶך proper. In 7:27 the two titles are distinguished from each other (cf. 32:29); and on numerous occasions the rulers of Israel, those who sat on the throne in Jerusalem and led the people to disaster, are labelled as נַשִּׁיא (e.g., 12:10; 19:1; 21:12; etc.)—in contradistinction with the Babylonian מֶלֶך, for example, who captures Jerusalem and its inferior ruler (e.g., 19:9; 21:24; etc.). In much of the text of Ezekiel, then, נַשִּׁיא connotes a lesser ruler, even a vassal of the Great King, just as the kings of Judah were under the imperial rule of Assyria and Babylon.50 Likewise in Judean discourse, broadly speaking, the word נַשִּׁיא does not typically indicate kingship or monarchy; in Numbers, for example, where the word most frequently appears, it refers specifically to ancestral tribal leaders in Israel’s pre-monarchic past.

In contrast, in Ezekiel 34 and 37, David is called a נַשִּׁיא. David, of course, is known as a מֶלֶך throughout the Judean literature and functions as Israel’s prototypical human king, to which all other Israelite and Judahite kings are compared. There is no king more kingly than David. So there is perforce an implicit connection between the term נַשִּׁיא and kingship in these passages. And Ezekiel 37 makes the connection explicit by referring to David as both נַשִּׁיא and מֶלֶך.

So at least in Ezekiel’s David passages, the title נַשִּׁיא does have a direct link with kingship—thus muddling the connotation of the title throughout the book. What type of ruler, then, is this David supposed to be? How much or how little power does he have under King (מלך) Yahweh? Moreover, what is the relationship between the נַשִּׁיא envisioned in chapters 40–48 and the David of chapters 34 and 37? If they are one and the same, then it appears that this new David will be less involved than the David—and Davidic kingship—remembered in Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and elsewhere. In the historiographical books, for example, David and Solomon and Josiah offer sacrifices and lead ceremonies; this ruler in Ezekiel simply watches the proceedings. The נַשִּׁיא in Ezekiel 40–48 is a bystander, an icon of kingly power without much power himself; he devotes portions of his wealth to the cult but does little else.
The text of Ezekiel is conflicted about David and his dynasty, unsure what to do with him and his legacy. He seems either to have a prominent position in Judah’s political future, as the passages in chapters 34 and 37 would indicate, or to have none at all, as in chapters 40–48. The נִׂשיא of Ezekiel 40–48 might be the David of 34:24 and 37:25, but he might not be. Once again, the text of Ezekiel presents a horizon of images ready to be juxtaposed, overlaid one upon the other, or even blurred together by its readers.

There is historical analysis to be found here, or at least the questions that lead to such analysis: what was the import of Davidic kingship in relation to the textual community’s present state, in relation to Yahweh’s ongoing power to rule his people, and in relation to the power of others, both within and outside Judean sociocultural contexts? Ezekiel’s historical-analytical tendencies may not be stated outright in its first-person discourse, as one finds in the texts of Herodotus and Thucydides, but the text reflects such interests nonetheless. The text has diverse stories to tell, an array of interrelated images to reveal to its readership; but in the end, it never overtly questions the validity or trustworthiness of the various narrative possibilities that it presents for consideration, on account of its proclaimed ultimate source and voice: the deity Yahweh.

4. Discussion and Conclusions: Ezekiel as Archive

What, then, do we make of Ezekiel as a written text, with its apparent historiographical tendencies along with its preference not to question the past—and thus the past’s divine author—in and of itself? To review and conclude, in this final section, I would like to synthesize the ideas presented above, to work toward a heuristic concept for thinking about Ezekiel as an ancient literary artifact.

In response to my argument that Ezekiel has important historiographical tendencies, one might protest that, if this text was meant to be some kind of history or (pseudo-)autobiography of the prophet Ezekiel, it is rather thin on narrative details about the person himself. It sets the scene in Babylon, telling us a bit about his role as a priest and how Yahweh began communicating with him (1:1–3), occasionally recounts his dealings with the people’s elders (e.g., 20:1), and even tells of his wife’s death (24:18). But in the end readers learn very little about Ezekiel as a person or about his and his community’s time in Babylon.

For this reason, I think we should emphasize the functional process of the text’s formation in relation to historiography, rather than its supposed connection with any particular ancient genre. Although Ezekiel is not historiography per se—the text shares features with ancient prophetic records, (pseudo-)autobiographies, as well as historiographies—the process by which it came about was, in a sense, historiographical. This is why the text tends toward the historiographical. Its composition involved the transformation of an organized collection of written oracles attributed to a certain personage into a chronologically arranged narrative (thin though it may be) about that personage and his divinely
commissioned work in the past. The text aims to tell a story about a past figure and his role as a priest and divine messenger, as one whose work had informed, and would continue to inform, the intended readership’s identity vis-à-vis their deity. Historiography, in its recollection and preservation of narratives about the past and in its attempts to answer questions about collective identities and social formations, takes similar aims. Furthermore, it comes together in similar fashion, through the (re)organizing and representing of certain data sets—facts about the past deemed relevant (by the writer in his or her context) for the questions at hand.

Notable in Ezekiel’s historiographical composition is its (mostly) meticulous documentation and organization of chronology. The text, in the end, may not relay much of a story about its subject—with regard to characterization, plot development, and so on—but it does provide a solid structure for one. And it is the text’s historiographical structure—which serves as a container, so to speak, for its reports of divine speeches and visions in the past—that I suggest provides a productive conceptual framework for thinking about Ezekiel as a text in relation to its readership, especially in antiquity. Many scholars have commented upon the importance of those chronological statements as structuring devices; Tyler Mayfield, for example, whose work I already noted above, has recently argued that they are the key structural element for the entire text.  

The text reads like a chronologically organized catalogue of Ezekiel’s prophetic activity, yet it stops short of providing a fully developed narrative account of it. To draw again upon Floyd’s list-making thesis concerning prophetic literature, it is as if written oracles attributed to a priest named Ezekiel were collected and ordered and given a narrative framework—even a typically prosaic narrative beginning (1:1 יִהְיָה)—but the person(s) responsible for the text hesitated to build upon that framework, to form a history of the prophet per se. Instead, the text would be left to stand as an organized resource for thinking about the past, and about divine communication in and through that past. In this way, it would function like an archive of Ezekiel’s speeches and visions, at the ready to inform interest in the readership’s past—including its interrelationship with Yahweh’s knowledge and knowledge of Yahweh, and all its ongoing and possible outcomes.

Our modern concept of the “archive” is of course anachronistic in relation to the ancient Levant. The Judeans did not have archives such as those that national museums or state governments or local interest groups have today. To be sure, Judeans had libraries or collections of texts—ranging from mundane economic records to arcane literary works—but it is debatable whether these were anything like the Greek ἀρχεῖον, the home and record of official legal power, or like any of the other official record houses in the ancient world. In any case, the concept of archive, as it has been theorized in recent years, can be productive for thinking about Ezekiel as a written text, as a locus of power and source of recorded and ordered information, one that informs possible futures by accounting for the past.

Jacques Derrida, via his deconstructive readings of Sigmund Freud, argues that the archive is at once a place where authority is held and from whence it comes; the archive
recalls order and imposes it, conserves power and institutes it. In other words, archives organize and preserve what has come before, but they do so with the result of fostering possibility. One of Freud’s most famous texts, notices Derrida, hints at this archival function: in Civilization and Its Discontents, the psychoanalyst observes that while it seems he is saying nothing new, he is in fact reassessing what has come before—in order to re-chart the course of analytic theory and its doctrine of the drives. Freud has gone to his own archive, so to speak, for a fresh perspective. There are several issues here that can inform our reading of Ezekiel as a written text.

Like an archive, the prophetic text of Ezekiel provided for its readers a catalogued record, in this case a chronologically organized record of divinely inspired speeches, visions, and actions of the priest Ezekiel in the land of Babylon. Like an archive, the text played a role in a kind of historiographical process, but it was not the end product of any such process. The text was meant to be read, reread, and continuously consulted (researched, so to speak) for fresh insights concerning the past’s role in shaping things to come (cf. Hos 14:10; Sir 38:34b–39:3). The question of what to do with David and his legacy, as outlined above, is a prime example in Ezekiel (as it is in other prophetic texts). As the archive contributes to historical thought and historiographical pursuits in our day, so the text of Ezekiel would contribute to knowledge of the past, and the continual reshaping and application of such knowledge, in its day. Its job, however, was not to offer a critical assessment of the past’s various conflicting narrative possibilities, a task that historians frequently call their own. Its purpose was simply to represent and make apparent those possibilities inherent in past time, as they were revealed through Yahweh’s messages to his people, and as they might have ongoing import for those people.

Within Ezekiel, Yahweh’s ultimate rule and authority over Israel (and the world) are never questioned, of course. Even so, problematic aspects of the people’s past existence in relation to Yahweh—monarchy, exile, temple, priesthood, and so on—are repeatedly laid bare, with a variety of possible future outcomes in view. Like an archive, then, Ezekiel would preserve Israel’s past and its variety—remembering its future possibilities.

Bibliography


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Notes:

(1.) Several colleagues read drafts of this work and offered helpful feedback as it developed. My thanks go to Brandon Alakas, Andrea Korda, and Joseph Wiebe—my writing group at Augustana—and to Michael Floyd and Jacqueline Vayntrub for their incisive comments and questions, all of which shaped the final product in one way or another. That said, any missteps in the work are entirely my own.

(2.) Brian Stock, working on Medieval Christian literature and its historical contexts, makes the important point that the division between “oral” and “written” culture has never been definite; the oral/written dichotomy, often employed in scholarship, is generally oversimplified or even false; Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 22–24, 140–158. See also F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, On Biblical Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 234–235; and Jacqueline Vayntrub, “Proverbs and the Limits of Poetry,” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015, 7–10; with additional references in each. Textuality has both oral and written functions, which are often closely related in societies organized around a textual tradition. In the Medieval era, for instance, when literacy rates were particularly low in European societies, many Christians nonetheless had a strong sense for the written word, the idea of which informed self-consciousness as well as group identity and social relations; Stock, Listening for the Text, 145–146. The same may be argued for societies in the ancient Levant, including Judah in its early Second Temple era, where literacy rates were low but where there existed a small group of intellectual elites, as it were, which produced and maintained literary traditions that likely informed and reinforced a broader group identity (cf. Ian D. Wilson, Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah [New York: Oxford University Press, 2017], 1–17). On the complex interrelationship between orality and writing in the context

(3.) Little ancient manuscript evidence for the text of Ezekiel exists today. From Qumran, we have less than four hundred words of text spread across only six fragmentary manuscripts, conveniently collected in Eugene C. Ulrich, ed., *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 2:584–89. Beyond that, portions survive from a second- or third-century-CE Greek manuscript (Papyrus 967; or p967, for short), which contains versions of Ezekiel, Daniel, Bel and the Dragon, and Esther. The portions of p967 that survive imply that the text of Ezekiel circulated in “variant literary editions,” well into late antiquity, as did the texts of other biblical books; see Eugene C. Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 8–12. For an insightful study of p967 and Ezekiel, see Ingrid E. Lilly, *Two Books of Ezekiel: Papyrus 967 and the Masoretic Text as Variant Literary Traditions* (Vetus Testamentum Supplements 150; Leiden: Brill, 2012), which takes three different, but ultimately synthetic, approaches to the papyrus—analyzing it as a witness to the Greek textual tradition, as a variant of the Hebrew textual tradition, and as a historical codex.


for example, with its seeming unboundedness, is a more appropriate conceptual category than “book” for these particular texts (recognizing, though, that “digital” is thoroughly anachronistic too). She encourages scholars to think along the lines of “textual clusters, mosaics of fragments, and expanding archives” (15). On account of Mroczek’s challenge, I have avoided the label “book” in this particular essay. But I am not prepared to abandon it entirely. As Ron Hendel argues, a single book may exist in various instantiations, so in the case of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, or even Ezekiel—to cite a few examples that seem to have been relatively stable texts in the Second Temple era, in terms of their discursive contents—“book” might still carry some explanatory weight in discussions of ancient Judah’s literary culture; “What Is a Biblical Book?” in From Author to Copyist: Essays on the Composition, Redaction, and Transmission of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Zipi Talshir, ed. Cana Werman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 283–302.


(7.) Wilson, Kingship and Memory, 182–222.


(9.) Wilson, Kingship and Memory.


(11.) On utilizing prophetic literature to refine historical knowledge of ancient Israel or Judah, see, e.g., Megan Bishop Moore and Brad E. Kelle, eds., Israel’s Prophets and Israel’s Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History in Honor of John H. Hayes (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 446; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), which is devoted entirely to this issue (a central focus of Hayes’s career), and which includes insightful historical examinations of Ezekiel. Yet few scholars have thought about prophetic texts as historiographical works themselves, in their ancient contexts.


(21.) Floyd, “New Form Criticism,” 28–29. See also Sir 24:30–34, in which the seeker and teacher of wisdom compares himself to a canal watering a garden; and 33:16–19, in which he compares himself to a grape-picker preparing the vintage. Based on these metaphors, Mroczek argues that ancient Jewish writers, named and otherwise, saw themselves as contributing to fluid and open traditions: they were channels funneling water.
from its source to its ultimate destination; or harvesters reaping the fruits another had sown, while crafting the wine that others would drink; *The Literary Imagination*, 86-113.


(23.) On Ezekiel’s chronological formula, with detailed discussions of each chronological statement, see Tyler D. Mayfield, *Literary Structure and Setting in Ezekiel* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2/43; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 84-117. See also Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (Anchor Bible 22; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 7–17, for comments on the dates and their broader historical context.

(24.) Unless noted otherwise, all translations are my own.

(25.) See 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 29:17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:17; 33:21; and 40:1.

(26.) Mayfield discusses the problem and interpretive options; *Literary Structure and Setting*, 90–91, 110–111. I am inclined to agree with Moshe Greenberg, who, following other commentators, argues that the material concerning Egypt was arranged *en bloc* because of Egypt’s political status, despite the chronological difficulties that such an arrangement caused; *Ezekiel 21–37* (Anchor Bible 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 612–613.


(29.) On Ezekiel and the Zadokite priesthood, about which our historical knowledge is limited, see Alice W. Hunt, “Ezekiel Spinning the Wheels of History,” in Moore and Kelle, *Israel’s Prophets and Israel’s Past*, 280–290.


(32.) Herodotus, *Histories* 1.5; trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt.
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(33.) Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.1, 20–23.


(37.) The question of Ezekiel’s authorship is moot, although some scholars do argue that the prophet himself wrote much of the text; e.g., Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel*, 3-4; Andrew Mein, “Ezekiel: Structure, Themes, and Contested Issues,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 192–193. In any case, the identity of Ezekiel’s author(s) would have no effect on my argument concerning the text’s nature as writing.


(40.) Cf. Wilson, *Kingship and Memory*, 77–130.


(43.) On these texts, and references to additional scholarship, see Wilson, *Kingship and Memory*, 211–215.


(45.) Compare this imagery with the strikingly similar imagery of Jer 23:1–8. In Jeremiah, however, David appears to play a much more active role. For further comments on the interrelationship of these texts, see Anja Klein, *Schriftauslegung im Ezechielbuch: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Ez 34–39* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 391; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 42–59.


(48.) Further, Ezekiel itself was perhaps a minority report in the context of the early Second Temple, a text that “occupied a marginal place in the comprehensive cultural horizon of late Persian and early Hellenistic Yehud”; Philippe Guillaume, “The Chronological Limits of Reshaping Social Memory in the Presence of Written Sources: The Case of Ezekiel in Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Yehud,” in Wilson and Edelman, *History, Memory, Hebrew Scriptures*, 192.


(51.) This has led Madhavi Nevader, for example, to argue that the references to David in Ezekiel—“ill at ease” in their context—are insertions meant to bring the book closer in line with the other major prophetic works Isaiah and Jeremiah; “Inserting David: Royal Dynamics in Ezekiel 34 and 37,” paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting, Vienna, Austria, 2014. Cf. Greenberg, who states that 34:17–31 was composed as a supplement to 34:2–16, with Jeremiah serving as source material for the composition; *Ezekiel 21-37*, 707–709.

(52.) Mayfield, *Literary Structure and Setting*, 84-117.

(53.) Floyd, “New Form Criticism.”


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(58.) Wilson, *Kingship and Memory*, 198–216.

(59.) Ezekiel, it should be noted, adds a somewhat ironic twist to its apparent historiographical tendencies and archival function, a twist that reinforces my contention that the concept of archive is a productive heuristic for thinking about the text and its reception among a reading community. Not only does the text act like a kind of archive, a means for containing the past as a resource for the community’s future; in Ezekiel, the prophet himself—his body—serves as a container or home for Yahweh’s written communication (2:8–3:3). The corporeal prophet is thus, in the text, represented as something like an ἀρχεῖον. On the body in Ezekiel, see Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97–120; and Vayntrub, “Tyre’s Glory and Demise.”

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