

## **Divine Abandonment in the Poem of Erra and the Book of Ezekiel**

The Poem of Erra and the Book of Ezekiel wrestle with the idea of deities abandoning their people and city to destruction because of cultic and moral offences made against them. The Poem of Erra is a Babylonian text that cannot be clearly dated; however, there is scholarly consensus that it was written as a religious reinterpretation of history as ‘a transparent mythologization of a specific historical event or period.’<sup>1</sup> The Book of Ezekiel claims to preserve the words of the prophet Ezekiel, who was exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Both texts attempt to understand why these events happened to their respective people. The authors’ conceptions of divinity can be analysed through the theme of divine abandonment, primarily evident in two main elements: cultic offences humans committed against their gods and how divine judgement and retribution are administered. From this, one is able to draw conclusions concerning similarities and disparities between the Babylonian and Israelite views on theological understandings of destruction, gods as embodied beings, links between divine power and the land, proper worship, mediating figures, and concepts of divine sovereignty.

The Poem of Erra presents humans’ arrogant behaviour towards the gods as the primary reason why intense destruction befalls the people. In the beginning of the poem, Erra seems unbothered by humans. He is not thrilled by the idea of waging war on them; he is depicted in the act of making love to Mami, and undecided as to whether he wants to break his rest (I 15-22). The author then depicts the creation of the Sebitti by Anu and the Earth – these are the seven creatures who will, alongside Ishum, convince Erra to go to war. Similarly to the epic of Atrahasis, in which the gods are bothered by the problem of overpopulation, Anu mentions to Erra when he creates the Sebitti that they should be used as weapons against humans when they become too loud (I 42-43). Human noise is depicted as an expression of disrespect to the gods. According to the Sebitti, overpopulation could become a threat to divine population, namely, the gods could become overwhelmed by the humans themselves (I 79). The Sebitti, for example, mention that the noise of the people has made it impossible for the gods to sleep (I 81-82). Moreover, even

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Machinist and J. M. Sasson, “Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 103, No 1 (Jan-Mar. 1983): 221.

the animals are depicted as holding the gods in contempt (I 77) and trampling the land (I 83) – effectively threatening ‘the life of the country’ (I 83)<sup>2</sup> – which indicates that the corruption created by humans has pervaded all of nature. This speech from the Sebitti is what convinces Erra to accept Ishum’s offer to go to war against humans.

Furthermore, the arrogant behaviour of humans depicted in the Poem of Erra is only made worse by the way they neglect the rightful worship of the gods. In Erra’s speech to Marduk, he points out that his statue is dirty and tarnished (I 126-128), which indicates improper worship and negligence on the part of his people. Erra tells him, ‘Why does the finery, your lordship’s adornment which is full of splendor like the stars of heaven, grow dirty? / The crown of your lordship which made E-halanki shine like E-temen-anki – its surface is tarnished!’ Divine images played a vital theological part in Babylonian cults, as the divinity was considered to be present in its image.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore imperative for the people to clean and preserve the statue, which they have failed to do. The idea that Marduk is physically present within his statue can be seen in the way Erra needs to convince him to leave it– and therefore leave Babylon – before he is able to destroy the city. Marduk’s presence in his statue and his link to the land is so strong that he explains to Erra that his leaving could cause intense cosmic consequences, such as the stars could slip from their right positions and the tie between heaven and earth could come undone (I 133-138). The central importance of the statue for the cosmic balance shows the gravity of the cultic offence the people have committed. By convincing Marduk that the people have failed him, Erra manages to get him out of his statue and out of Babylon so he can destroy it, while promising Marduk that he will take his place and watch over the world (I 180-189).

In contrast to the importance of proper worship of divine images in Erra, Ezekiel is concerned with the problem of idolatry. Ezekiel’s crucial message to the people is that the coming destruction of Jerusalem is a result of their worship of idols and false gods. He seeks to explain YHWH’s actions to the people in a one-way communication system, where he is a divine conduit used to communicate with the people without

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Poem of Erra are taken from Stephanie Dalley’s translation which appears in Volume 1 of *Context of Scripture*.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Kutsko, “Idolatry and Theodicy,” in *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, (University Park, USA: Penn State University Press, 2021): 56.

being allowed to appeal on their behalf. In chapters 8-11, he details a vision of the presence of YHWH in the temple. Chapter 8 specifically depicts the cultic atrocities that the people are committing against him. The sins outlined are delineated in four scenes in the temple that become more offensive as they get closer to the holiest place.<sup>4</sup> These depict a range of idolatrous practises, taken from surrounding cultures (Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian<sup>5</sup>), further alienating the people from YHWH, and ultimately driving YHWH to depart from the temple. First, in vv. 5-6, YHWH shows to Ezekiel an image of jealousy, a statue, deploring the fact that it is drawing him away from his sanctuary. Second, in vv. 7-13, Ezekiel sees unclean animals engraved on the walls of the temple to which elders of Israel are offering incense – a Babylonian practice, which is referred to again in Ezek. 23.14. The penultimate vision (vv. 14-15) is of women weeping for the Sumerian god Tammuz. The last vision, the most offensive to YHWH, is of men worshipping the sun and presenting their back to him (vv. 16-17). These cultic atrocities are only some of the ways in which Israel profaned YHWH's name, and chapter 8 concludes with the threat from YHWH that he will destroy his people (v. 18).

Four conclusions can be drawn about what the authors of the texts and their communities thought of their gods from the way they depict how the gods have been offended. To begin with, it is worth noting that both cultures turned to a theological explanation to make sense of the various calamities they are facing; this represents a belief in their god as sovereign over their nations, and in charge of their history – past and future – with complete control over the good and bad that happens to them. These cultures understood war, famine, or disease as a consequence of their own actions – a direct link between the way they treat their gods and the way their gods treat them.

Secondly, the analysis shows that both cultures understand their gods as quasi-embodied beings that can move around. Indeed, both texts agree that the gods are invisible beings that can choose to make themselves visible in different ways. In the Book of Ezekiel, YHWH renders himself visible to Ezekiel through what the latter describes as 'the glory of the God of Israel,' which seems to be a physical

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<sup>4</sup> All biblical quotes and references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 542.

representation of the deity, otherwise invisible to the human eye. Even though he chooses to dwell with the people of Israel, he is not contained within the temple nor within Jerusalem itself. Unlike in Ezekiel, where it seems the people have no physical contact with the visual representation of YHWH, in the Poem of Erra the gods are understood as composed of a physical element that is contained within their statue. Marduk's reference to the Flood damaging his statue (I 140-144) and Angal deploring how the people carried his statue away from his city (IV 65-72) indicate that the divine statue can be moved and damaged by humans as well as natural elements.

As a third point of comparison, both texts represent the deities as having their power linked to the land in some way. Babylon and Jerusalem are referred to as the centre of the world: the Poem of Erra describes Babylon as 'the bond of lands' (IV 2), the link between heaven and earth, whereas the Book of Ezekiel claims Jerusalem is the centre of the nations, with 'countries all around her' (5.5). In Ezekiel, Jerusalem derives its power from divine election, as YHWH claims to be the one who set her where she is. It is understood that Jerusalem is not indestructible without the presence of God,<sup>6</sup> but God's power is in no way hindered by being away from Jerusalem. This is evident in Ezekiel's visions of him in Babylon with the exiles (1-3). However, the same cannot be said of Marduk; in this case, the land is linked to him, indicating his spatial connection to the land as well. Like YHWH picked Jerusalem, Marduk states in IV 44 that he picked Babylon to be his divine city. Additionally, as Jerusalem is indestructible so long as YHWH is present,<sup>7</sup> it seems that Babylon is also inviolable so long as Marduk is there, as is shown by the fact that Erra does not seem to be able to destroy the city without Marduk's departure. However, once he leaves his statue, it does not appear that he has powers over the city anymore – Erra destroys it and its people without Marduk doing anything to save them. This may be a result of Marduk's power being tied to the land and therefore unavailable when he is away from Babylon.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Micah 3.11; Psalm 46.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lyons, *Introduction to the Study of Ezekiel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015): 148.

<sup>8</sup> Another understanding of Marduk's absence in the face of the destruction of his city and his people could be that as a leader, Marduk does not care about or see his people when he is away from the city; these are issues that will be discussed below, within the theme of divine retribution.

Finally, an analysis of each text shows that for both cultures there is a proper way of worship, and the central importance that it should occupy within one's life. Babylonians must preserve the statues, as well as respect the gods and fear their names; Israelites must follow God's commandments and above all worship no one but him. Despite the obvious difference between the two forms of worship – the use of idols and pictures – the consequences of improper worship brought about by the deities are the same: departure of the deities from their place of dwelling, and incredible destruction carried out by the deities against their people.

Divine judgement and retribution is administered in two steps: first, the deity leaves its dwelling place, and second, destruction and chaos falls upon the people. In the Poem of Erra, Erra convinces Marduk to leave his statue by pointing out to Marduk the way his people have been neglecting their cultic duties. This is the first step towards Erra's plan of destruction as Marduk's presence seems to render Babylon inviolable. Following Marduk's departure from his statue, destruction ensues. As aforementioned, Marduk's departure from his statue could have disastrous consequences for his people; however, the state of his statue is so important to him that he feels compelled to leave in order for it to be fixed. Once he leaves, he is hardly mentioned again; it is unclear whether he wants to come back or whether he disagrees with Erra's actions – either way, he is silent until restoration comes about.

As for the Book of Ezekiel, YHWH's presence is portrayed as gradually departing the temple; with each passing vision in chapter 8, 'the glory of the God of Israel' slowly leaves Jerusalem, as punishment for the atrocities committed. After YHWH's complete departure from Jerusalem, destruction and chaos befalls the people. Although YHWH departs from Jerusalem and condemns his people to either die there or be forced into exile, Ezekiel presents him as somehow present with the latter group. Ironically, those who are close to the sanctuary are the ones who are far from YHWH (8.1-18); the exiles are those who are nearest to him (11.16).

Once the presence of the deities have departed, the punishment – destruction – can take place. In the Poem of Erra, Erra is described as killing both sinners and righteous in his indiscriminate wrath. He states, 'Like one who plunders a country, I do not distinguish just from unjust, I fell (them both)' (V 10). Ishum accuses Erra of killing innocents (IV 103-112). In contrast to this, in chapter 9 of the Book of Ezekiel,

YHWH is portrayed as having a system within which he can differentiate the righteous from the unrighteous. YHWH imposes a sentence to the people, which is carried out by the seven executioners; one marks the people who will be saved, and the six others carry out the sentence. This concept is reminiscent of the Passover tradition. They are told to defile the temple by filling it with corpses (v. 7) while the glory of God departs. Although the vision is brutal to Ezekiel, who cries out in defence of his people (v. 8), his shock is met with implacability – once spoken by YHWH, the fate of Jerusalem is sealed. Both the poem and the Book of Ezekiel wrestle with the idea that, during war, righteous and unrighteous alike will be killed. By allowing the gods to wield all the power as to who dies and survives, the authors offer a reinterpretation of history in which all those who die, die for a particular reason known to gods but not to humans.

Of note, the motif of the seven executioners in Ezekiel finds a parallel in the Poem of Erra, where the Sebitti – seven divine beings – serve as Erra’s weapons of destruction (I 44). Both groups are given the same mission. YHWH tells the six executioners, ‘Pass through the city after him, and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity’ (9.5). In Erra, Anu commands the sixth and seventh to ‘Go through above and below, and [to] not spare anyone’ (I 37) and to ‘Lay low all living things’ (I 39). All of them are used as Erra’s weapons – as Bodi<sup>9</sup> points out, the commands given to the second, third, fourth and fifth (I 33-36) foreshadow how Erra’s destruction will take place: fire, lions, razed mountains and strong winds are elements that can be seen later in the poem, when the violence humans face is being recounted. Destruction of both cities is thus commanded by the deities in similar, hyperbolic language. However, neither YHWH nor Erra seem to carry out the violence themselves; both use a group of seven beings to do it for them.

Two conclusions can be inferred about the authors’ conceptions of divine departure and destruction: there is a mediating figure carrying out the divine action and there is a wrestling with the question of divine sovereignty. In the Book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel himself is presented as a mediating figure, though he has no power over YHWH’s actions. Ezekiel functions to make known ‘the author of the judgement and the just

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, (Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 1991), 101.

grounds for its execution'<sup>10</sup> to the people. However, the line of communication between him and the deity goes only one way; he is not allowed to mediate in favour of humans. In a rare moment of self-expression, in chapter 9 v. 8, Ezekiel cries out, deploring the fact that YHWH is seemingly destroying the entirety of the people, but YHWH tells him that the guilt of Israel is 'exceedingly great' (v. 9). It must be noted that although YHWH chose Ezekiel as a prophet, Ezekiel remains human. This ontological difference may be the reason why YHWH does not allow Ezekiel's pleading to change his mind. However, in the Book of Ezekiel the divine realm is solely inhabited by YHWH, therefore, it cannot be said whether he would let his mind be swayed by other divine beings, such as he was, for instance, in the prologue to Job. It can only be inferred that he would not listen to a human.

In the Poem of Erra, Ishum represents a mediating figure for Erra's anger. Here, in contrast to the Book of Ezekiel where the figure is human, Erra allows another divine being to give him advice. The poem, almost entirely formed of speeches, allows for a much more introspective view of Erra's emotions and thought process, in which no humans ever make an appearance. Ishum's mediation of the situation is more concerned with the relationship between Erra and the rest of the divine pantheon than with humans. Much of Erra's emotions are influenced by Ishum as most of the dialogues take place between them. The latter is seen to both convince him to go to war and then to end the war; it seems that both enraging Erra and appeasing him were Ishum's responsibility. The author goes as far as claiming that Ishum himself is entirely responsible for the ending of the war: 'How Erra became angry and set his face towards overwhelming countries and destroying their people, / But Ishum his counsellor placated him so that he let a remnant!' (V 40-41). In contrast to Ezekiel, it cannot definitively be said whether Erra would let his mind be swayed by a human because none appear. It can however be said that Erra allows another divine being, Ishum, to define the range of his emotions and behaviours.<sup>11</sup>

In the poem, the theme of sovereignty is addressed with reference to both Erra and Marduk. The destruction Erra enacts is done so the people respect his name and know that he is sovereign. This is the information that Ishum uses to convince Erra to stop the carnage: 'Warrior Erra, you hold the nose-rope of

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<sup>10</sup> John F. Kutsko, "Idolatry and Theodicy," 26.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Machinist and J. M. Sasson, "Rest and Violence," 226.

heaven, / You control the whole earth, and you rule the land.' (III 148-149, with a speech extending to 160). The extreme display of violence served its purpose: the people fear Erra, and they shall remember his name. In the last tablet of the poem, the poet mentions that both men and gods are expected to recite the song (V 48, 59) to prevent Erra's destructive behaviour from taking place again. This demand shows that Erra's anger was not only designed to trigger fear and respect in the hearts of humans, but also for the other gods to acknowledge his supremacy. For Erra to become such a vision of overarching sovereignty, Marduk must appear weaker, and be represented as lesser than Erra – an issue hardly addressed by the author.

As for the theme of sovereignty specifically in reference to Marduk, it must be noted that though Marduk is aware of the consequences of his departure from Babylon, he still leaves. This raises the question of whether he is a just god or if he is a weak god. It is unclear whether the author is portraying Marduk as having been tricked by Erra into departing from his statue, or whether Marduk consciously decided to leave, which would mean that he was uncaring about the possible repercussions on his people. Either way, at the time of the dialogue between Erra and Marduk, the former promises the latter to keep the cosmic balance safe and take over his duty, claiming in I 181-184:

Prince Marduk, until you re-enter that house and  
Gerra cleanses your robes, and you return to your place,  
Until then shall I rule and keep firm control of heaven and earth..  
I shall go up into heaven, and give orders to the Igigi;  
I shall go down to the Apsu and direct the Anunnaki.

This passage seems to convey Marduk's supremacy over the cosmos as somewhat transferable. Erra is portrayed as being able to keep safe the bond between heaven and earth, and to be capable of authoritative claims over creation. This implies that there is nothing intrinsically superior about Marduk as a god if Erra can simply take over his place. To some degree, the entire poem places Marduk in a precarious position as a leader. If he can be tricked by Erra, he is a fallible god; if he does not care about the terrible repercussions of his departure on his people, he is not a just god; if Erra can take over his duties as keeper of the cosmic



balance, he is not all-powerful; if he leaves Babylon and is unable to come back, his power is only as strong as his presence in the land. His apparent silence between the moment Erra takes over and the moment Erra's anger subsides can either indicate that he agrees with Erra's actions or that he is impotent to take the power back from him. In one of the dialogues between Erra and Ishum, Ishum states to Erra, 'nobody can stand up to you in your day of wrath!' (V 19), which could indicate that Marduk is indeed unable to stand against Erra. In either case, the silence is theologically significant for the people: it means that their god either will not, or cannot, save them from the chaos that Erra is creating.

This vision of Marduk as a god who is disconnected from his people once he has departed the statue can be compared to YHWH's presence in relation to those who were exiled. Ezekiel comforts the people by recounting his visions of YHWH in Babylon (1-2), and the fact that he was a sanctuary for them during the exile (11.16). In connection to the above discussion of the deities' links to the land, it can then be inferred that even during the destruction and chaos, YHWH was always present in the land of Israel (as seen in 3.10), all the while being present with his people in exile. Even though Ancient Near Eastern cultures associated 'both international loss and victory with the gods'<sup>12</sup> – which renders it difficult to defend YHWH as a powerful god when his people are in exile – the author of Ezekiel never lets the reader doubt YHWH's supremacy over all creation. It cannot be reasoned from the text that YHWH was unable to defend his city, or that he was weak or negligent. Ezekiel portrays YHWH as the one who ordered and enacted (through a mediating figure) the violent destruction of his people (cf. chapters 8-11). This serves the same purpose as Erra's: the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile forced upon his people, were carefully enacted punishments so his people – and all the nations – would know that he is the only sovereign over them (20.5-44). All of this is done so his name would be glorified and respected, as can be seen through the repeated use of the formula that this is done so 'you/they shall know that I am the Lord,' which appears throughout chapters 1-39.

In conclusion, to make sense of the destruction of their people and cities both authors mythologized history such that the destruction and death are seen as just punishments – enacted by their gods – for the

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<sup>12</sup> John F. Kutsko, "Idolatry and Theodicy," 54.

sins committed against them. Through comparison of which atrocities were committed by humans, and how divine judgement and retribution were administered, it can be argued that the Babylonian and Israelite sources understood their gods to be similar. They are gods who require specific methods of worship, who impose a threat of incredible destruction as punishment if done insufficiently, and they are gods who seek glory and respect for their names. Both cultures show an understanding of gods as overarching sovereigns; the Babylonian text shows that this sovereignty is somewhat transferable, whereas the Israelites understand YHWH as the only possible god. Though the texts disagree on the level to which mediating figures can allow gods to pity humans, they appreciate that divine abandonment is not a permanent state. Neither text initially claims that restoration will come or that a remnant will be left. This is evident in Erra's anger at the beginning of the poem, leaving no place to think he may stop, and in YHWH's call to Ezekiel to solely proclaim 'words of lamentation and mourning and woe' (2.10). However, it seems both cultures agreed that estrangement from their gods could not be permanent and although they may not be restored right away, reconciliation remained a possibility.

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