

## Ezekiel's Vision Reports in a Thai Context - The Use of the Thai Term "nimit" for the Hebrew Terms "ḥazon", "mar'eh" and "mahzeh" in the Book of Ezekiel

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### Abstract

This study aims to clarify the meanings of the Hebrew terms *hazon*, *mar'eh* and *mahzeh* in the Hebrew version of the Book Ezekiel and study the use of the Thai term *nimit* in the Thai Standard Version of 2011 (THSV 2011). Secondly, this research intends to define what happened when Ezekiel received a vision. Thirdly, it seeks to develop ways to communicate the Hebrew concepts behind *hazon*, *mar'eh* and *mahzeh* to Thai Christians.

It is found from the research that the noun *ḥāzôn* (7x in Ez) never appears in the vision reports and that the THSV 2011 consistently translates the term as นิมิต (vision). The term *mar'eh* (36 x in Ez) is found only in the visionary texts of the book. Depending on the sentence structure the THSV 2011 translates the term as ลักษณะ or นิมิต. *mahzeh* appears only once (Ez 13:7) and the Thai translation is นิมิต. The study has also shown that *ḥāzôn* and *mahzeh* (both come from the root h-z-ḥ) are used when God speaks to Ezekiel (Ezekiel receives a word from God). On the other hand, *mar'eh* (and *mar'ah*) is used when God lets the prophet see something.

When Ezekiel received a vision, the prophet gets access to the invisible, transcendent realm that the Hebrews imagined as a large space separated from the

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visible realm by the firmament – the place where God and the angels dwell. In this space, Yahweh lets the prophet see what will happen in the future.

**Keywords:** Old Testament, Prophetic Literature, Ezekiel, Vision, Thai Bible

## Introduction

When teaching Old Testament prophetic books at McGilvary College of Divinity in Chiang Mai (Thailand), the writer also taught about the visions men like Amos, Ezekiel or Daniel have seen. It was remarkable how in every semester at least two or three students related stories about someone who had seen a vision – in Thai nimit. It seemed like there was nothing special about nimit: Buddhist monks or Hindu Priests have seen visions. Christian believers and churches make plans and set goals for the future and call them nimit. Mediums travel to distant places in nimit and meet with spirits. These observations inspired the author to take a closer look at the visions in the Bible and in the Thai context.

This paper summarizes the outcome and puts the visions of Ezekiel into their historical context (chapter 1). The Book of Ezekiel is very suitable for this study, as roughly one third of the book are vision reports and Ezekiel puts special emphasis on the details of the process of receiving a vision. In the next section, the author describes the meaning of ra'ah and **h**azah, as they make the basis for five terms that are translated as nimit in the 2011 Thai Standard Version of the Bible (chapter 2). After that, the study will show in detail where nimit occurs in the Thai Bible and which Hebrew terms it translates (chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes what happened, when Ezekiel received a vision and tries to grasp its meaning. Before the author gives concluding thoughts in chapter 6, he compiles ideas and preunderstandings that Thai people might bring with them, when talking about visions in the Bible (chapter 5).

### 1. Ezekiel's Visions and the Babylonian Exile

Scholars generally agree that the Book of Ezekiel contains four vision reports (e.g. Zimmerli, 1979):

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|            |              |  |
|------------|--------------|--|
| Vision # 1 | Ez 1:1–3:15  | Vision of the Glory of God (1:4-28)<br>Vision of the Scroll (2:9-10) |
| Vision # 2 | Ez 8:1–11:25 | First Vision of the Temple   |
| Vision # 3 | Ez 37:1-14   | Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones                                    |
| Vision # 4 | Ez 40–48     | Second Vision of the Temple  |

For the present study it is essential to keep in mind that the four visions in the Book of Ezekiel are related to two deportations of Israelites to Babylon. In 597 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia exiled King Jehoiachin, members of the upper class, soldiers, craftsmen and smiths (2 Kgs 24:14-17). Along with King Jehoiachin, the prophet Ezekiel was brought to Babylonia (Ez 1:2) and stayed in a colony of exiled Jews at the Chebar canal (Ez 1:1). In the fifth year of his (and King Jehoiachin's) exile, in 593 B.C., he started to see visions of God and in the first vision, God called Ezekiel to be a prophet (Ez 2:1–3:11).

In the second deportation of 586 B.C., Nebuzaradan, one of the high officials of Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed Jerusalem including the temple and the city walls after two years of besieging the city (2 Kgs 25:8-10). In addition, he exiled King Zedekiah (v. 4-7) and all the population of Jerusalem except for the poor people in Jerusalem who worked as vinedressers and plowmen (2 Kgs 25:11-12). Besides that, upper class citizens of Jerusalem were brought to Riblah at the border of Israel and were killed there by the King of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:18-21). The third deportation in 582 B.C. (Jer 52:30) and a fourth one in 605 B.C. (2 Chr 36:6-7; Dn 1:1-17) are of secondary importance for the present study.

|  |                                   |                                      |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| First deportation of Jews to Babylon                               |                                   | 597 B.C.                             |
| Vision # 1   | Ez 1:1–2: year 5, month 4, day 5  | July 31, 593 B.C. (Block, 1997)      |
| Vision # 2   | Ez 8:1: year 6, month 6, day 5    | September 18, 592 B.C. (Block, 1997) |
| Second deportation of Jews to Babylon;<br>destruction of Jerusalem |                                   | 587 B.C.                             |
| Vision # 3   | <i>no date</i>                    | <i>no date</i>                       |
| Vision # 4   | Ez 40:1: year 25, month 1, day 10 | April 28, 573 B.C. (Block, 1998)     |

## 2. The Meaning of the Hebrew Roots r'-h and h-z-h

Basically, the five Hebrew terms that the THSV 2011 translates as *nimit* are derived from only two Hebrew roots: The nouns *mar'æh* (מַרְאֵה) and *mar'ah* (מַרְאָה) both consist of the root r'-h (ראה) with prefixed m-, whereas the nouns *hazon* (חֹזֶן), *maḥazæh* (מַחְזֵה) and the verb *hazah* (חָזַה) are based on the root h-z-h (חזה). As both roots translate as “to see”, it is necessary to see if there are differences in the meaning of r'-h and h-z-h.

### 2.1 The Meaning of r'-h

When r'-h, the common word for “to see” is used theologically, it stands for the act of seeing God or his face (Gn 32:31; Judg 6:22), his beauty (Ps 27:4) or his power and majesty (Ps 63:3). Belonging to the typical language of a vision report, r'-h denotes the occurrence of a vision and usually includes hearing as well (Block, 1998). The

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feminine term mar'ah stands for the visionary event in itself, and the masculine noun mar'æh can be used likewise (Block, 1998).

## 2.2 The Meaning of **h**-z-h

The root **h**-z-h is an Aramaic loanword in Hebrew and holds a similar position as its Hebrew counterpart r'-h. It can refer to the natural vision of the eyes as well as to supernatural, unusual experiences of seeing. Statistically, there are 115 passages that have a form of **h**-z-h throughout the Old Testament; out of them 86 are in prophetic texts (14 in Ezekiel). This particular association might come from the fact that derivatives of **h**-z-h are frequently used with the term nabi' ("prophet").

"What is meant, when ch**āzā**h, ch**āzō**n, or chizz**āyō**n is used in connection with a nabi? (...) The answer is unambiguous: not a visual image but a word from God. (...)" (Jepsen 1980, 283); visual manifestation plays no role, or at most a minor one. Jepsen however assumes that in the later period, all the special associations of **h**azon seem to have vanished. This is the reason why in Jl 2:28 (MT 3:1) visions (**h**izayon from **h**-z-h!) will be seen (r'-h, also in Dan 8:1, 2, 15; 9:21).

To sum up, r'-h and its derivatives are connected to the prophet seeing something in a vision (although vision reports often contain speeches of God and angels). **h**-z-h however is related to a revelation of the word of God.

## 3. The Occurance of nimit in Ezekiel in the Thai Version and the Hebrew Text

Altogether nimit appears 22 times and in 10 verses in the Book of Ezekiel. The following section will describe which Hebrew term is translated as nimit in each instance.

### 3.1 mar'æh

There are five instances in two verses of the THSV 2011 that have nimit for the Hebrew mar'æh: Ez 11:24 (2x mar'æh) and 43:3 (3x mar'æh). It is remarkable that in

these cases mar'æh always has the article and it is always followed by a relative clause “that I saw” (ESV). Ez 11:24 is the closing section of the vision report Ez 8–11 and nimit clearly refers exactly to this vision. As we have seen (p. 3), the root r-'h also covers the passages where Yahweh speaks to the prophet (Ez 8:6, 8-9, 12-13, 15, 17-18; 11:14-21). Ez 43:3 calls the vision reported in Ez 40-48 a nimit and refers back to Ez 1-3 and Ez 8-11 as previous visions.

### 3.2 mar'ah

There are three cases in the THSV 2011 that have nimit as the translation for Hebrew mar'ah (apparently a synonym of mar'æh): Ez 1:1; 8:3; 40:2. Although a form of “to see” accompanies mar'æh only in Ez 1:1, each verse is part of the introduction of a vision report and mar'ah appears only in its plural form mar'ot.

### 3.3 ḥazon

In seven out of the 22 occurrences of nimit in the Book of Ezekiel the Hebrew original has the noun ḥazon (Ez 7:13, 26, 12:22, 23, 24, 27; 13:16). All seven verses with ḥazon are found in non-visionary texts. Besides that, except for Ez 12:27 and 13:16 a form of “to see” is not found in the context. As in Ez 12:21-25, 26-28 ḥazon and dabar (“word”) are used interchangeably, ḥazon here consists of the revelation of a word that God has spoken. Ez 12:27; 13:16 have the verb ḥazah (translated as “to see”) that refers to the receiving of a word of God.

### 3.4 maḥazæh

The word maḥazæh appears only in Ez 13:7. As the context of this verse (Ez 12:21-25+26-28) has ḥazon four times and as ḥazon and maḥazæh have the same Hebrew root ḥazah, it seems very likely that maḥazæh here means the receiving of a word of God, like ḥazon.

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### 3.5 hazah

In six instances the Hebrew verb hazah is used to translate nimit (Ez 13:6, 8, 9, 23; 21:29; 22:28). Remarkably, the word shaw ("emptiness") is the direct object of hazah in almost all cases (Ez 13:8 has kazab "falsehood"). In this context the false prophets claim that they have received words from God (Ez 13:1, 6, 7); it thus seems that hazah is not so much connected to false prophets seeing something in visions, but more likely to messages they claim to have seen - which is the genuine meaning of h-z-h.

## 4. What Happened when Ezekiel Received a Vision?

### 4.1 The Introductions of the Vision Reports

There are certain elements that occur in the introductions of the vision reports that contribute important hints towards an answer to this question.

1. To start with the unique element: Only vision # 1 (Ez 1–3) has the opening of the heavens (Ez 1:1). Block explains: "With the opening of the heavens Ezekiel is invited to observe glorious supernatural realities normally inaccessible to mortals" (Block 1997, 85).

2. Another element that is found in every vision is that the hand of Yahweh comes over the prophet (Ez 1:3; 3:14; 8:1; 37:1; 40:1). As the hand stands for power, this means that the prophet is fully under the power of God when he receives a vision (Block, 1997).

3. Besides that, in every vision, Ezekiel is lifted up and brought to another place. Usually these movements are a result of the working of the Spirit of Yahweh (Ez 3:12-14; 8:3; 11:1,24; 37:1). The prophet is given access to the transcendent world, and it seems that he enters the supernatural world as a whole person (not only his soul or his spirit; this issue will be further discussed in chapter 5).



In summary, the prophet Ezekiel was granted access to the unseen realm, the space where God dwells. It is unique though, for in that sphere, the prophet is able to walk in the temple, to talk with Yahweh and to see his divine throne and his glory. As a human being, he stands out as distinct among all the heavenly beings. This might be the reason that he is called “son of man” throughout the book: Altogether the phrase “son of man” is used for Ezechiel 93 times – in Ez 2:1 for the first time (Allen, 1994).

#### **4.2 The Content of the Visions**

Vision # 1 and 4 (Ez 1–3; 40–48) see that Yahweh, already having accessed his throne, reigns as king. This anticipates that in the future Yahweh will reveal his kingdom on earth as well – this is exactly what Ezekiel has announced elsewhere (Ez 20:33, 40-44; 43:5-7).

Vision # 2 (Ez 8–11) foreshadows in 592 B.C. events that will happen five years later when Babylonian troops take Jerusalem (587 B.C.): Many Jerusalemites will be killed (Ez 9:5-7; Lam 2:20-22), the city will be burnt down (Ez 10:1-8; 2 Kgs 25:9) and the glory of Yahweh will leave the temple and the city (Ez 10:4,18-19; 11:22-23). The sudden death of Pelatiah son of Benaiah (Ez 11) anticipates the time when leading upper class citizens were killed by Nebuchadnezzar in Riblah in 587 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:18-21).

Vision # 3 (Ez 37:1-14) anticipates a new exodus of the Israelites out of Babylon into their homeland Israel and their resurrection as a nation. Indeed, after 539 B.C., following Cyrus’s edict, many Israelites came back to Palestine from Babylon.

In summary, after being granted access to the heavenly world, the prophet witnesses how the future events are ordained. Once they are established in heaven, they will surely come true on earth as well.

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## 5. Possible Preunderstandings of “nimit” in Thailand

### 5.1 About the Receiving of Visions

Firstly, Thai listeners might have heard about people using certain means in order to enter into a different state of consciousness. In her book “Trance and Healing in Southeast Asia”, Ruth-Inge Heinze writes that “Thai and Malay shamans enter trance seemingly effortless. After a brief period of meditation or some chanted evocations, they move into alternate states of consciousness” (1988, p. 87). She reports that Chinese mediums use loud sounds and noises, chanting, incense and dancing to induce trances (Heinze, 1988).

In the Book of Ezekiel this seems not to be the case. When Ezekiel receives a vision, it finds him totally unprepared; the hand of Yahweh just “fell” on him (n-p-l; Ez 8:1; 11:5). Like a shaman is possessed by an invoked deity, the prophet comes under the power of Yahweh; however, he did not prepare for it.

Secondly, the listeners might remember stories, where a spirit entered into a person and inspired him to see visions or do extraordinary things. Heinze relates how she once had encountered a Hmong Shamaness in her village on Doi Suthep (Chiang Mai, Thailand):

“She ‘rode’ on a board into the spirit world. [...] Her chant reflected her ride through the spirit world. Once in a while she curbed her imaginary horse and called the spirit she just met. Naming him, she incorporated his power into her body. Such chanting may go on for one up to two full days, depending on the seriousness of the patient’s illness. After several hours of ‘riding’ and charging her body with more spirit power, she felt prepared to cure a child who was suffering from a severe cold”. (1988, p. 299)

For the Book of Ezekiel however, it clearly is the spirit of the Lord that transports the prophet to a certain place within the unseen realm (Ez 3:12-14; 8:3; 11:1.24; 37:1). However, it does not appear that the spirit enters him, but Ezekiel surely comes under the power of Yahweh and his spirit.

Thirdly, the listeners might believe that Ezekiel lost consciousness when he received a vision. However, Ezekiel's mind seems to be absolutely clear when he dwells in the transcendent realm. It is only his language that is not enough to describe the heavenly things and beings he has seen.

Fourthly, the listeners might possibly assume that only Ezekiel's mind or his spirit travelled somewhere else: Ezekiel's body has stayed in Babylon at the Chebar canal (Ez 1:1-3) while his mind or his spirit went to Jerusalem. A colleague related that he once talked to a medium that had experienced a journey in trance. She served Mae Guan Im and was asked to cure a patient who was troubled by spirits and could no longer use his arm properly. After she had been told the town and house number of the patient, the medium went in a trance to the hometown of the man and into his rubber plantation many kilometers away. There she discovered something that appeared to be four teeth growing out of one of the rubber trees. The medium then asked the patient about these "teeth". The man could remember that he had removed them and became ill afterwards. An offering to the spirit on this tree (half a chicken, incense and half a bottle of liquor) helped him to use his arm normally (Horn, 2017).

In this example it seems like the mind or spirit of the medium became detached of the body in order to travel somewhere else. The text of the Book of Ezekiel however does not give any hint that this ever happened. This is because the Hebrews always saw a person as a whole, not composed of different parts that can

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easily be separated (Wallace, 1980; see also 2 Cor 12:3 about Paul's visionary experience).

## 5.2 About the Meaning of Ezekiel's Visions

According to the Thai Dictionary of the Royal Institute of 2011 the term nimit is a Pali / Sanskrit word that has been taken over into the Thai language (Royal Institute, 2011). Even though nimit can either be a verb or a noun, this study will only discuss nimit as a noun. The previously mentioned dictionary mentions the following synonyms of nimit to grasp the meaning:

1. khruân mā:y (เครื่องหมาย) "symbol" (Thiengburanathum, 1977, p. 207)
2. la:ŋ (ลาง) "good or bad omen" (Ibid., p. 815)
3. hē:t (เหตุ) "reason, cause or origin of something" (Ibid., p. 1032)
4. kháu mu:n (เค้ามูล) "primary cause, motive, source or origin" (Ibid., p. 208)

It is remarkable how many aspects of the term nimit fit well to the meaning of the visions that this study has found in the Book of Ezekiel.

1. Due to the fact that they deal with transcendent things which cannot be easily expressed by human language, Ezekiel uses symbols and figurative language. To give an example, the animals in Ez 1 that are used to describe the faces of the four living beings (man, eagle, ox, lion) contain the most powerful species in the air (eagle), of domestic animals (ox) and of wild animals (lion) (Greenberg, 1983). They serve to illustrate the supreme power of the one seated on the throne: Yahweh.

2. During a lecture, one student explained that nimit has always positive connotations and refers to something positive that will happen in the future. The word used in Thai for a negative omen is la:ŋ (ลาง) According to the Dictionary of the Royal Institute however, la:ŋ can announce both positive and negative things in the future:

“Bees building a nest at the east side of the building are believed to be a good omen. Spiders beating their chest [against the wall and making a snapping sound] are believed to be a bad omen” (Royal Institute, 2011, p. 1051). As *la:n̐* and *nimit* appear to be synonyms (see above p. 8), it seems as if *la:n̐* is the genuine Thai word and *nimit* the Pali-Sanskrit word for both positive and negative omens. *Nimit* thus catches the future aspect of the visions of the Book of Ezekiel. They almost all (except for Ez 8), refer to the future (see p. 5) and are anticipating future events in Israel’s history. *nimit* is used for both positive [as the kingdom of Yahweh (Ez 1 and Ez 40–48) and the resurrection of Israel as a nation (Ez 37:1-14)] and negative future events [as the destruction of Jerusalem, the death of Israelites and the departure of Yahweh’s glory (Ez 9–11)].

3. and 4. As it can clearly be seen from the Dictionary of the Royal Thai Institute, *nimit* also means “reason, cause” in some instances. This fits well with the visions of Ezekiel, as what Ezekiel sees, brings the future into being in a sense. There is no space to intervene, not even for the prophet.

## 6. Concluding Thoughts

Whenever one preaches or teaches about the Book of Ezekiel, and especially about texts from the vision reports, the above points may be used to prepare the speaker: Listeners might ask questions or contribute stories that are similar. Besides that, the speaker should always appreciate the experiences or stories of his listeners. The fact that the listeners are familiar with stories about trances and visions should be used as a starting point. Ezekiel has made similar experiences, but with some decisive differences: His visions deal with so much more than just the fate of one single person, family or business. The whole of Israel’s future is at stake when Ezekiel encounters Yahweh who is much more powerful than any spirit or other God ever can be.

Finally, some thoughts about the term *nimit* in a Christian context. Some churches use *nimit* to describe longterm goals, strategy or core-values. Although the

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envisioned future is something positive and good, a nimit in the biblical (Ezekielian) sense comes directly from God and reveals his future plans. There is the danger that an organisation misuses the term nimit in order to highlight its own plans. Directly inspired from God, they cannot easily be criticised.

Besides that, some Christians claim to have received visions from God. They seek to preach these visions to the congregation, because God has given them. In this case it is the task of the church leadership to make sure that the visions are in compliance with the Bible for two reasons. Too big and too serious is the danger, that private dreams, wishes and opinions have found their way into the vision (Ez 13:1-3). Secondly, Satan is able to let people see visions – the temptation of Jesus in Mt 4 being the most prominent example (v. 8). In sum, the fact that the Bible is the highest guiding principle when it comes to examining visions before one passes them on to others, it relativizes the relevance of visions. Therefore the strive to receive visions and the search for the right means in preparation are unjustified. Instead of pursuing visions, one should pray constantly, plan boldly, and then hope that God will bless each step into the future.

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