



Book review: *Unleashing Yahweh: Ezekiel and the Northern Lights* by George Siscoe

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Many legends and myths have existed in human history attributed to, or based upon, the existence of the aurora. Just from population densities over the millennia, these exist largely from aurora sightings made in the polar regions of the Northern Hemisphere – the aurora borealis. Humans have described their auroral sightings in native languages and in petroglyphs, sketches, etchings, and paintings. At times, aurora have been seen at much lower latitudes, with one well-known instance being the dispatch in 34 CE of troops to Ostia by Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar when it was thought that the port city of Rome was burning.

A number of scholars, mostly – but not all – knowledgeable in the geosciences, have attributed the appearance of a low-latitude aurora to the spectacle in the sky described in the first chapter of Ezekiel in the Old Testament. How does Ezekiel’s report of his vision in about 593 BCE relate to an aurora, let alone relate to any of the many gods of the time that were worshiped by the peoples of the Middle East? This is the challenge that the eminent geophysicist George Siscoe addresses in his very readable book *Unleashing Yahweh*. Specifically, as Siscoe writes on the very first page of his book: why is the God Yahweh the one known today when there were more than 100 gods existent (he lists 165 from Wikipedia) at that time in that portion of the world?

The volume consists of five chapters, the first of which relates the removal of Ezekiel and the tribe of Israelites from their home region to exile in Babylon. Siscoe describes the Babylon location of the exiles, writing that Nebuchadne-

zar’s Babylon was “dedicated to the gods and to learning”. He notes that there were gates and temples to at least 10 gods in the city, none of which, of course, was Yahweh. The chapter also addresses an ongoing question among biblical scholars, “Who wrote the book of Ezekiel?”. A number of authors, commenting on the bizarre quality of Ezekiel’s first chapter compared to the rest of the book, have argued for multiple authors. However, quoting written and oral stunning reactions to auroral displays even by people who knew what they were, Siscoe convincingly comes down on the side of Ezekiel as sole author.

The geophysical discussions and arguments in the second chapter require a scientist that has deep knowledge of solar and Earth geomagnetic research. George Siscoe is that person. A Fellow of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) and a prestigious AGU Van Allen Lecturer, Siscoe was the long-time chair of the Atmospheric Sciences Department at the University of California at Los Angeles. He also served as editor-in-chief of the pre-eminent AGU *Journal of Geophysical Research*. His summary analyses of the location of Earth’s geomagnetic pole at the time of Ezekiel’s exile demonstrates the pole to definitely be tilted equatorward at the longitude of Babylon at that time, facilitating the possibility of a low-latitude auroral sighting. The latest peer-reviewed data on energetic solar particle events that he cites convincingly indicate very major solar activity at the time of Ezekiel’s vision.

Siscoe has assembled a large set of auroral images, sketches, and paintings as well as written auroral descriptions from auroral displays following major solar events. In his third chapter he uses these effectively in essentially one-to-one comparisons with the vivid images conveyed by Ezekiel. A particularly interesting comparison (analysis) is

of the four-headed “creatures” in Ezekiel’s verses 5 through 13 (his Chap. 1). Siscoe acknowledges that if taken literally, an auroral interpretation would not be possible. But Siscoe convincingly interprets the descriptions of Ezekiel metaphorically. One needs to read carefully his arguments for this.

The fifth chapter, titled by Siscoe as an appendix as well as a chapter, comprises almost 25 % of the book. He presents, in this chapter, four alternative interpretations of Ezekiel’s sightings. This is not done to totally refute any of them but to demonstrate that he has considered these others. And he considers them not equivalent to the solar–geophysical conclusion of aurora. He gives short shrift to a fifth interpretation: it was all made up. He writes that “no one seems to be suggesting that the vision was pure invention”.

The two-page Chap. 4 does not summarize Siscoe’s conclusion that an auroral vision led to monotheism. And yet it does. Ezekiel and his fellow Israelites, once under their god Yahweh in Jerusalem, were thrust into exile in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. They suffered under at least 10 of Babylon’s gods while their temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. And yet, far away from their land in Israel where Yahweh was always present, Yahweh manifested itself to Ezekiel under the form of an aurora. It became clear to Ezekiel, and he proclaimed it to his tribe, that Yahweh was a “God for universal dominion”. Yahweh did not only exist in the small confines of the land of Israel. Yahweh was universal, “a persistent, [and] still existing, dominant figure of the human story”.

From 2008 to his passing in March 2022, George Siscoe founded and operated the truly unique Old Professor’s Bookshop in Belfast, Maine, United States. The book shop and its holdings reflected George’s far-ranging reading and scholarship in the sciences and the humanities. And it provided him the opportunity to bring to fruition his lengthy studies of solar and geophysical processes at the time of Ezekiel’s visions. Nancy Crooker (AGU Fellow), George’s wife, thankfully saw the book through the publication process after George’s death. Over the years, I had the opportunity to discuss the ongoing Ezekiel studies with George, including many visits to his bookshop. I highly recommend this book for its thorough examinations of solar–terrestrial physical phenomena over the millennia and for the interwoven discussions of mid-eastern history.