

Ezekiel 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 1. In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Kebar Canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

On the fifth day of the month, it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakim, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kebar Canal, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal, and from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance. They had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the soles of a calf's foot, and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides, they had human hands, and the four had their faces and their wings thus.

Their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.

Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward.

Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning.

[1 : 54] And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning. Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction, their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being, as it were, a wheel within a wheel. When they went, they went in any of their four directions, without turning as they went. And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them. And when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When those went, these went, and when those stood, these stood. And when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. Over the heads of the living creatures, there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult, like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings. And above the expanse over their heads, there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire. And seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around.

And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. Ezekiel is set in a time of radical change in the geopolitics of the Near East.

The collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the rise of Babylon had just occurred. Egypt and Assyria, had been defeated by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 BC, decisively turning the tide. Shortly after, Nebuchadnezzar became ruler of Babylon in place of his father.

The northern kingdom of Israel had been removed from their land around 721 BC by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah had continued, although it had fallen into the most wicked idolatry under Manasseh during the middle of the 7th century BC. In the second half of the 7th century BC, around 640 to 609 BC, Jeziel had ruled over Judah and sought to reform it.

However, the success of his reforms were limited and short-lived. After Jeziel was killed by Pharaoh Necho and following a brief reign by his wicked son Jehoahaz, Pharaoh Necho set up Jehoiakim in his place as a puppet king. Under Jehoiakim, during whose reign Jeremiah was prophesying, for instance, Jeziel's reforms were largely unworked. During Jehoiakim's reign, Judah was reduced to a vassal kingdom of Babylon. After Jehoiakim rebelled, Jerusalem was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar's men around 597 BC, and a large number of its elite, its military and its skilled artisans were deported, along with treasures from Judah and its temple. Daniel and his friends and others were taken as exiles to Babylon at this time, as was the king Jehoiakim, and Ezekiel himself, probably because he was a priest. For some of the period while he is prophesying, Jerusalem is still standing, and Jeremiah is ministering there. Many of the exiles ended up in the Jewish colony near the Kibbar

[6 : 03] Canal to the east of Babylon, in the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates. This is the context in which we find Ezekiel at the beginning of this book. Judah continued for a time under the puppet king Zedekiah. After Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians, Jerusalem and Judah were finally crushed and brought more directly under Babylonian rule around 586 BC. Gedaliah the governor was set up under the Babylonians, but after he was assassinated, many of the Jews fled to Egypt and other places, and there was another mass deportation. From this period onwards, there were large populations of Jews scattered throughout the wider world of the Mediterranean and Near East, although during this period they were mostly in Judah, Egypt and Babylon. By the time that Jesus came, however, there would be far more Jews outside of Judea than lived within it. The book of Ezekiel begins with a call and a prophetic initiation narrative. We find other such prophetic initiation narratives in the story of Moses at the burning bush in Jeremiah chapter 1, or in Isaiah chapter 6 with

Isaiah's vision in the temple. However, Ezekiel's call is the lengthiest and the most elaborate, taking up the first three chapters of the book. The book opens by giving the context of the vision with which Ezekiel's ministry starts, rather than speaking of the entire period of his prophetic ministry, as many other introductions to prophetic books do. We are given two datings, while the second, the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakim gives a recognised point of reference, leading to 593 BC, the first, the thirtieth year, the fourth month and the fifth day of the month is unclear. Various interpretations have been offered for it, but perhaps the commonest is that it refers to Ezekiel's own age. He is thirty years of age, the age at which priests were ordained to their ministry. The fourth month and the fifth day of the month was likely July the 31st. James Bajan, however, offers another possibility, one that I find quite compelling. He suggests that this is the thirtieth year of a jubilee cycle. He substantiates this claim by observing that the difference between this date and the crucial date of chapter 40 verse 1, dated in terms of the second dating system of the years of the exile, is around 19 years and two months.

Adding that to the first mysterious dating system, we discover that it completes a jubilee cycle, which, in the context of the actual text of Ezekiel, helps a number of further details to fall into place, and also helps us to understand why these numbers are given to us. Bajan also observes that the dating here, like many other numbers in the book of Ezekiel, subtly gestures towards the jubilee.

The jubilee is connected with the numbers 49 and 50, and throughout the book of Ezekiel, there are clever organisations of numbers designed to add up to 49, 50, and related numbers. For instance, here we see a seemingly redundant and awkward repetition of the fifth day of the month in verse 2.

However, if you add the numbers together, you get 30 plus 4 plus 5 plus 5 plus 5, which makes 49. Similar strange orderings of numbers will be seen elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel.

[9 : 17] Paying attention to such unexpected and peculiar features of texts can often be rewarding and can offer us indications of some of the deeper theological themes to which we should be alert.

In the opening two verses of Ezekiel, we are primed to keep our eyes peeled for jubilee themes. The heavens are opened, and Ezekiel experiences a dramatic theophany, appearance of God. It's a revelation of the Lord's glory, which forms part of his ordination to prophetic ministry.

The vision of Ezekiel is remarkable, mysterious, and strange. Many have seen in it something akin to a close encounter of the third kind, with the bizarre creatures being aliens, and the metallic throne chariot with fire flashing forth some sort of spacecraft. Such speculative associations should be handled with considerable care and caution, but not just by those inclined to hold them.

The connections that some have made between this appearance and accounts of alleged close encounters are suggestive enough to merit some closer thought and attention. Ezekiel saw it in terms of a technology familiar to him, a chariot, but perhaps modern witnesses might perceive and describe such a vision differently. Modern naturalistic categories, however, mean that our understandings of such potential non-human technologies and intelligences are radically deflationary, which will not do when we're understanding Ezekiel chapter 1. However, they probably do not need to be, and we should be at least open to the possibility that there are some connections to be drawn between angelic and demonic activity, and what we call UFOs and aliens. We should also be alert to the many resemblances between Ezekiel's vision and imagery in other Near Eastern cultures of the period, where composite-winged creatures with multiple faces of bulls, lions, and eagles are found in various societies. However, we should also be careful not to overstate these similarities. As Walter Eichrodt argues, Ezekiel was probably very alert to the differences between the imagery in his vision and that of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt in his time.

The throne chariot comes from the north in a stormy wind with fire darting to and fro, surrounded by a radiant cloud, presumably the glory cloud or the Shekinah glory, with gleaming metal in the midst. What exactly this would look like is not easy to visualize. Ezekiel's description of his vision is highly impressionistic and elusive, with lots of hedging language. Ezekiel's language and terms struggle to convey what he is witnessing. While we get some vague impression of what he saw, most readers will find it difficult to envisage the scene. The living creatures he sees emerge from the fiery cloud are composite, with metallic legs and feet like calves' feet. They have four faces and four wings, which cover four sets of hands.

[12:09] Their four faces are human, lion, ox, and eagle. In Ezekiel chapter 10, these creatures are described as cherubim. Similar imagery is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, for instance in the description of the cherubim on the ten bronze water chariots in the courtyard of Solomon's temple. We find visionary imagery that is highly reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision in Revelation chapter 4 verses 5 to 8.

From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. And before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. The first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within. All day and night they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. We should also recall the description of the Lord's throne in the temple in 1 Chronicles chapter 28 verse 18, described there as the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. We are told about the ordering of the faces. The human face points south, as it is in the front. The eagle face presumably is at the back, pointing north. The bull face turns east. The lion face points west. There are good reasons to believe that this is associated with the placing of the 12 tribes of Israel around the tabernacle, with four key tribes in the cardinal directions. James Jordan and some others have argued that there might be a zodiacal order here. Jordan has also argued that the non-human creatures are to be associated with the priest, the bull face, the king, the lion face, and the prophet, the eagle face. The fact that there are four of them, associated with the number four in various other ways, and closely aligned with the four cardinal directions, likely connects them with the four winds of heaven and the four corners of the earth and the altar. We see a similar association in Revelation chapter 7 verse 1. After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Each of the four four-faced, four-winged creatures have wings touching the opposite creature, so that they move in sequence. The touching wings of the cherubim probably reminds us of the description of the mercy seat in the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 25 verses 18 to 20. And you shall make two cherubim of gold, of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another. Toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.

The creatures also have wings with which they cover themselves, like the seraphim in Isaiah's vision in Isaiah chapter 6. They move by the spirit in swift, straight lines. Their appearance is like fire darting to and fro, once again described in elusive language. Each of the creatures has a composite wheel, wheels within wheels, associated with it, apparently with its own form of locomotion.

It's a wheeled throne chariot, again picking up on imagery we find elsewhere. They gleam like beryl, and have rims full of eyes. The wheels move with the living creatures in whatever direction the living creatures move. We now reach the most remarkable part of the vision. The hero catches their breath as Ezekiel's description rises up from the wheels and the living creatures to the expanse above them.

Presumably we are to connect the expanse with the firmament, with the veil between heaven and earth, which has been temporarily peeled away as the heaven is opened. This is revealing the glorious realm of heaven above and God's very throne. Ezekiel is not being caught up, as John is in the book of Revelation. Rather, he is seeing from below what is above. The description might remind us of the descent of the Lord upon Mount Sinai in Exodus, and also of passages like Psalm 18, verses 7 to 15.

[16 : 44] Then the earth reeled and rocked. The foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth, glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down. Thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew. He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him. Thick clouds, dark with water. Out of the brightness before him, hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows and scattered them. He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare, your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. They moved with an awe-inspiring sound. Above the expanse over the living creature's heads is a throne. The description here is once again similar to things we read elsewhere in scripture, in this case to Exodus chapter 24 verses 9 to 10.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. The language at this point in Ezekiel's vision becomes even more elliptical, as if struggling to get any purchase upon the wonder of what he is seeing. No direct description could do justice to it, so he speaks throughout of the appearance of, the likeness of, as it were, helping the reader to recognize that the vision is beyond anything that words could contain. There is a glorious humaniform figure on the throne. The description here is once again like descriptions we find elsewhere in scripture, in Daniel chapter 10 verses 4 to 6, for instance.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, that is the Tigris, I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. This is also similar to the description of Christ in Revelation chapter 1. The glory of the vision is multicoloured, like a rainbow. This, Ezekiel declares, is the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

We should associate it with the Ark of the Covenant in the temple. God is on the move, readying for some great action. He is in the land of Babylon. He shows his lordship over the gods and other forces there, but also his association with the exile community, far from Jerusalem and the land.

God is not bound to a little strip of land. He can be present with and act on behalf of his people anywhere in the world. A question to consider, how is this passage similar to the description of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke chapters 3 and 4?

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