

Ezekiel 1: The Throne Chariot (*Merkabah*) Vision

Ezekiel 1:4: *And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire enfolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire.*

Ellicott's Commentary: A whirlwind came out of the north.—The *north* is seen as the quarter from which the vision proceeded, not because the Babylonians conceived that there was the seat of Divine power (Isaiah 14:13-14), but because it was common with the prophets to represent the Divine judgments upon Judea as coming from the north (see Jeremiah 1:14-15; Jeremiah 4:6; Jeremiah 6:1), and it was from that direction that the Assyrian and the Chaldæan conquerors were accustomed to descend upon the Holy Land. The vision is actually seen in Chaldæa, but it has reference to Jerusalem, and is described as if viewed from that standpoint.

A great cloud. —As in the Divine manifestation on Sinai (Exodus 19:9-16). The cloud serves at once as the groundwork for all the other details of the manifestation—a place in, and by means of which, all are located, and also as a hiding-place of the Divine majesty, so that all may be seen which human eye can bear, and that which it cannot bear may yet be known to be there, shrouded in the cloud. The transposition of a single letter from the end of one word in the Hebrew to the beginning of the next will change the reading to “a whirlwind out of the north brought on a great cloud.”

A fire enfolding itself. —More literally translated in the margin, *catching itself*. The idea intended to be conveyed is that of flames round and round the cloud, the flashes succeeding one another so rapidly that each seemed to lay hold on the one that had gone before; there were tongues of flame, where each one reached to another. The same word occurs in Exodus 9:24, in connection with “fire,” and is there translated *mingled*. The vision thus far seems molded on the natural appearance of a terrific thunderstorm seen at a distance, in which the great black cloud appears illuminated by the unceasing and coalescing flashes of lightning. So, with all its impressive darkness, “there was a brightness about it.”

As the color of amber. —Color is, literally, *eye*. The word rendered “amber” (*chasmal*) occurs only in this book (here, and Ezekiel 1:27 and Ezekiel 8:2), and is now generally recognised as meaning some form of bright metal, either glowing in its molten state, or as the “fine brass” of Ezekiel 1:7 and Revelation 1:15, burnished and glowing in the light of the “infoling flame.” There is therefore now superadded to the first appearance of the natural phenomenon, a glowing eye or center to the cloud, shining out even from the midst of the fire.

Ezekiel 1:5: *Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man.*

Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto IV, Lines 38-48: *They showed themselves here, not because allotted / This sphere has been to them, but to give sign / Of the celestial which is least exalted. / To speak thus is adapted to your mind / Since only through the sense it apprehendeth / What then it worthy makes of intellect. / On this account the Scripture condescends / Unto your faculties, and feet and hands / To God attributes, and means something else / And Holy Church under an aspect human / Gabriel and Michael represent to you / And him who made Tobias whole again.*

St. Athanasius (4th Century), *On the IncarnaJon*: *The Son of God became man so that we might become like God.*

The critical phrase here is: *The likeness of a man*. For by referencing *likeness* Ezekiel is telling us that he saw a vision, not as heavenly things are *in themselves*, but rather heavenly things that have condescended to be fashioned as *symbols* so that Ezekiel can comprehend them and, as importantly, be able to describe them to us. The purpose of any theophany is to reveal, but for there to be a revelation, the receiver must be able to see it and to comprehend it, even if only partially. God condescends to man in every theophany, but He also rises man closer to Him by grace in every theophany. This is similar to how St. Athanasius describes the Incarnation: It is a descent by God and, simultaneously, an ascent to God. The mystery of spiritual ascent is that it must be occasioned by sacrifice, the *kenosis*, or emptying out of the superior down to the level of the inferior. There can be no spiritual ascent without this sacrificial love, and while God will sacrificially love man first for this ascent to be even possible, man must learn to love sacrificially in order to be *like God* for the reason that sacrificial love is an intrinsic character of divinity. This is critical, for non-Christian religions often associate spiritual ascent with a process of emptying of attachments, or releasing of psychological barriers, which presumably get in the way of the

natural inclination of our soul, when unfettered, to ascend. There is no particular necessity to love, which is to say, to put our sacrificial commitment to *the other* – God, truth, the universe, however conceived – above our emptying/releasing of barriers to spiritual ascent. What makes our Christian idea of spiritual ascent unique is that the ascent cannot happen if the ascent *per se* is the objective. Rather, the ascent happens as a byproduct of the objective of loving God. If we love God, first and foremost, then God may raise us up to Him, if, when, and however He is so inclined to do so, and then we may be able to learn of heavenly things. Even when recipients of grace, those heavenly things will be presented to us symbolically so that we may understand them. The presumption is that the more we become *like God* the more the symbolic masks will merge into the reality of heavenly things until, finally, we see things “*face to face*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). This is similar to the process by which we are educated until we have mastered a craft.

Ellicott's Commentary: Ezekiel does not here say what these living creatures were, but in a subsequent vision, when he saw them again in connection with the Temple, he recognized them as the cherubim (Ezekiel 10:15; Ezekiel 10:20). Cherubim, whether here, or in the Temple overshadowing the mercy-seat, or in the garden of Eden keeping the way of the tree of life, always indicate the immediate presence of the God of holiness. The prophet again mentions these composite symbolic figures in connection with the vision of the Temple in Ezekiel 41:18-20. The origin of such ideal figures has been variously ascribed to the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, and the Arabs; but this symbolism was, in fact, almost universal throughout the East. Dr. Currey points out the striking difference between this symbolism and that of the Greeks. They tried to delineate the Divine attributes with the utmost beauty of form and harmony of detail under some human figure in which those attributes were conspicuous. In consequence, the mind of the worshipper lost sight of the ideal, and became absorbed in the sensuous imagery by which it was represented; while here, by the very strangeness, and sometimes grotesqueness, of the imagery, its purely symbolic character was kept in view.

Ezekiel 1:6: *And everyone had four faces, and everyone had four wings.*

Ezekiel 1:10: *As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.*

Revelation 4:7: *And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.*

Ellicott's Commentary: The cherubim, being merely symbolical figures, are variously represented. Those placed in the Tabernacle and in the Temple of Solomon appear to have had only a single face; those described in Ezekiel's vision of the Temple (Ezekiel 41:18-19) had two; the four living creatures of Revelation 4:7 were each different from the other: one like a man, one like a lion, one like an ox, and one like an eagle, and these four are combined here in each one of the cherubim (Ezekiel 1:10). Man is the head of the whole animal creation, the lion of wild beasts, the ox of the domestic animals, and the eagle of the birds.

Matthew Henry's Commentary: The likeness of the living creatures came out of the midst of the fire; angels derive their being and power from God. They have the understanding of a man, and far more. A lion excels in strength and boldness. An ox excels in diligence and patience, and will manifest unwearied discharge of the work he has been assigned to do. An eagle excels in quickness and piercing sight and in soaring high; and the angels, who excel man in all these respects, put on these appearances.

From *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* by John Metcalfe: The creatures, lion, ox, man, and eagle, represent the whole Creation, just as four is the number of the earth. They are full of eyes before and behind. Behind, their intelligent sight beholds all that was cherished in the garden of Eden, and in the entire Creation. Before lies a new Creation, and *they* see it, and pertain to it, though now they await the end of *this* world, and the consummation of all things...

If they had wings, this was for heavenly movement: that is, the heavenly ascent of Creation's concepts. If full of eyes *within*, that is of the Holy Ghost, and, glorifying Christ, signifies the creatures' innate intelligence that *they belong to him who was in heaven, who had been rejected on earth*. They corresponded inwardly with the mind, and the right, of God in and to his

own creation of the earth and its fulness.

Such creatures were first named - but not described - in Genesis 3:24, after fallen man was expelled for ever, when the earth was cursed, and the world had begun its mad and ever-accelerating career downwards through time into greater and greater evil, and more and more ingenious evil imaginations. But all this time the symbol of the cherubim stood at the gate of the lost paradise. Now 'cherubim' means 'grasped'. Man had let it all go. But God had let go nothing. It was 'grasped'. Those creatures, representing God's grasp upon the nature of the Creation, and of the creature, despite man's having brought *this* Creation and *its* creatures to perpetual ruin in the Fall, I say, these cherubim appeared in the tabernacle. They also appeared in the temple. In the holy place, God signified that nothing of *his* was lost, whatever *man* had relinquished.

Something of the like appeared also to the prophet Ezekiel, called by him 'living beings', associated with the glory of God, yet evidently earthly creatures with heavenly movement laying a claim to a dominion which man had lost, a Creation beyond that which man had irrevocably ruined, and a world and age that could never be answered by that which is present. For God had let nothing go: the throne of world dominion was claimed in his testimony set amidst a disobedient and rebellious people.

From John Metcalfe's explanation we see that the Cherubim symbolize the created world when it is in harmony with God's will. It looks upon God for its direction – the eagle at the back of the head facing God. It reveals God's will to the person being instructed – the face of man centered on Ezekiel. It looks upon the fallen world more broadly knowing that it has the strength and the boldness of character to succeed over sin – the lion facing Ezekiel and also the side of Ezekiel. It looks upon the fallen world more broadly knowing that it will exercise diligence and patience as needed to overcome any obstacles ahead – the face of the ox facing Ezekiel and also the side of Ezekiel. It has this power because it *grasps* God and *is grasped by* God. While a revelation of the created world when in harmony with God, this is also a more personal revelation to Ezekiel that his prophetic ministry will entail *grasping* and *being grasped by* God. In a sense, the work of the prophet is like the work of the Cherub: He is God's messenger. He is God's revelation. His words and deeds materially and spiritually change the world around him to set the stage for the King's return. Just as God has let nothing go and retains His dominion over the world, notwithstanding how the world has fallen away from Him, so God will not let His

prophet go. This adds a definite urgency to the prophetic call: He cannot fall away from his vocation without directly abandoning God. At the same time, the prophet can go forward knowing that God is with him all the time in a more intimate and powerful way. The prophetic ministry is a kind of nexus point between the transcendence and the immanence of God: God is transcendently powerful because God is also most immanent. He is so big in that His voice at times can be so small, even to the point of total silence (see Psalm 8:3-4: *When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?* and see 1 Kings 19:12: *And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire [He was] a still small voice*). This is a foreshadowing of Our Lord, to be sure (see 2 Corinthians 12:9: *And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness*), but it is also a sign to Ezekiel of the character of his own prophetic ministry to come, namely, that Ezekiel's words and actions may seem altogether weak or impractical from the vantage point of the world, but they will have a far greater impact than apparent at the time because of God's transcendent power behind them.

Ezekiel 1:13: As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning.

The Pulpit Commentary: Like burning coals of fire, etc. It may not be amiss to note the fact that the phrase throughout the Bible denotes incandescent wood. The nearest approach to its use by Ezekiel is in 2 Samuel 22:9, 13. For "lamps," read, with the Revised Version, "torches." Here the vision of Ezekiel, in which the living creatures were thus incandescent, bathed, as it were, in the fire that played around them, yet not consumed, followed in the path of previous symbols - of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), of the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:22), of the fire on Sinai (Exodus 19:18), of the "fire of the Lord" (Numbers 11:1-3), and the "fire of God" (2 Kings 1:12). Speaking generally, "fire," as distinct from "light," seems to be the symbol of the power of God as manifested against evil. "Our God is a consuming Fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29). The red light of fire has in it an element of terror which is absent from the stainless white of the eternal glory, or from the sapphire of the visible firmament.

Ezekiel 1:15-20: Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the color of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as

it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.

From *The Wheels in Ezekiel 1* by Jeffrey Johnson: The wheels in Ezekiel 1; known as the Ophanim, were four-wheeled, eye-covered structures that moved alongside the four living creatures (cherubim) beneath God's throne. Their appearance was like a wheel within a wheel, sparkling like topaz or beryl, with rims that were high and "full of eyes". They symbolized the omnipresence, omniscience, and sovereign mobility of God, as the spirit of the living creatures dwelt in them, allowing them to move in any direction. We might tend to think of a throne as being fixed to one spot and naturally so, for earthly monarchs can extend their influence only so far. But God's sovereignty is quite unlike any human rulership, as Ezekiel was about to learn, as you read the account. There are no limits to God's sovereign power. In a very real sense, this God can exert his authority anywhere because he can move in any direction. In Ezekiel's vision, four wheels formed a divine, mobile throne-chariot for God. These wheels were not ordinary and possessed several distinct and symbolic features: These wheels are a profound symbol of God's omnipresence, omniscience, and sovereign providence, moving with purpose and control over all creation and human affairs, even in the midst of the prophet's exile in Babylon. The wheels that Ezekiel saw were so tall that they would cover a lot of ground with a single revolution. In fact, the vision suggests that the vehicle moved at the speed of lightning! Furthermore, the unusual four-way wheels suggest a kind of maneuverability that human engineers can only dream of. This vehicle can shift directions without slowing down or even turning! But it does not make such moves blindly. The eyes covering the rims vividly convey the idea that this vehicle is completely aware of everything around it, in every direction. Ezekiel mentions another unusual thing. Each wheel had a wheel inside it—of the same diameter, fitting crosswise into the base wheel. Only in this way could the wheels be said to "go on their

four respective sides." Instantly, the wheels could change direction because each wheel faced in both directions. The wheels conformed their direction of movement to that of the four cherubs. The entire vision, including the living creatures and wheels, is often seen as a representation of God's throne, which moves with divine power and authority. For the exiled people of Israel, the vision served as a reminder that God was not limited to the temple in Jerusalem but was with them wherever they were, and His plan would continue to advance. The wheels are often associated with the Ophanim, a class of angelic beings (along with the Cherubim and Seraphim) who guard God's throne and act as ministers of His providence.

From *The Many Eyed Ones* by Walther Zimmerli: The Ophanim refer to the wheels seen in Ezekiel's vision of the chariot (Hebrew *Merkabah*) in Ezekiel 1:15–21. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls construes them as angels; late sections of the Book of Enoch (61:10, 71:7) portray them as a class of celestial beings who (along with the Cherubim and Seraphim) never sleep, but guard the throne of God. In some systems of Christian angelology, they are one of the choirs (classes) of angels, and are also identified as Thrones. These "wheels" have been associated with Daniel 7:9 (mentioned as *galgal*, traditionally "the wheels of galgallin", in "fiery flame" and "burning fire") of the four, eye-covered wheels (each composed of two nested wheels), that move next to the winged Cherubim, beneath the throne of God. The four wheels move with the Cherubim because the spirit of the Cherubim is in them. The late Second Book of Enoch (20:1, 21:1) also referred to them as the "many-eyed ones." These angels function as the actual – not just symbolic – wheels of God's Heavenly Chariot Throne (*Merkabah*). *De CoelesJ Hierarchia*, or on the Hierarchy of Angels, a Fifth Century work on angelology adopted by Eastern Orthodox Mystics and later incorporated into Western Catholic angelology by Saint Thomas Aquinas, defined the Ophanim as follows: *The name of the most glorious and exalted Thrones denotes that which is exempt from and untainted by any base and earthly thing, and the super mundane ascent up the steep. For these have no part in that which is lowest, but dwell in fullest power, immovably and perfectly established in the Most High, and receive the Divine Immanence above all passion and matter, and manifest God, being attentively open to divine participations.*

Ezekiel 1:26: *And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as*

the appearance of a man above upon it.

Benson Commentary: *Above the firmament was the likeness of a throne* — Namely, the throne of God. God having given his prophet emblems of his attendants and ministers, while he was coming forth in the chariot of his power and justice, to execute judgment, and of the mysterious dispensations of his providence toward his church and the world, he now proceeds to discover to him some glimpses of his divine glory. The prophet does not say that he saw a real throne, but only the *likeness of a throne*, emblematical, doubtless, of God's sovereign power and dominion over all creatures, whether in heaven or on earth. God is described in Scripture as *dwelling in light*, and *clothing himself with it*. So the throne of God is here described as made up of light resembling the colors and brightness of a *sapphire-stone*. *And upon the likeness of the throne, as the appearance of a man* — When Moses and the elders *saw the God of Israel*, Exodus 24:8, or the glory of God, as the Targum explains it, they saw no determinate figure, but an inconceivably resplendent brightness, that they might not think God could be represented by any image. But in this vision the form and shape of a man are represented to Ezekiel, as a prelude or figure of the incarnation.

Ezekiel 1:28: *As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.*

Benson Commentary: The meaning is, In the brightness, or light, that was about what I saw, was the appearance of the rainbow. The rainbow, as we learn from Genesis 9:12, &c., was appointed as a sign or symbol of God's covenant of mercy with men: therefore an appearance of a rainbow in this vision signified that amidst his severe judgments God would remember mercy, and not forget his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; one part of which was, that their posterity should not become extinct, but should always remain; so this appearance gave an assurance that the Jewish nation should not be wholly destroyed, though it should suffer very grievous judgments. And inasmuch as this vision was an evident representation of the WORD that was to be *made flesh*, whose incarnation was to be the foundation of God's covenant of mercy with mankind, a rainbow, the symbol and token of mercy, was a very fit attendant on such a glorious vision. This is a description of that glorious vision wherein Jehovah appeared and whereby he made manifest his attributes and perfections. The prophet terms it, not the appearance of *the glory*, but of *the likeness* of the glory, because the full discovery of the glory of God to any human creature is not consistent with the state of mortality. Exodus 33:20-23, but

is reserved for the life to come, 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2. *And when I saw it I fell upon my face*

— Through a reverential sense of God's majesty, and his own frailty and meanness; or struck down with fear and astonishment before such glory. *And I heard a voice of one that spake*

— They that are first humbled are most prepared to hear the voice of God, whether it be the voice of instruction or consolation, Matthew 5:4; Matthew 11:28.