

Ezekiel's Vision of the Cherubim and Worship Structures Old and New

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Synopsis: The paper will address Ezekiel's visions (Ez. chs. 1, 10, 43), analyzing the aspects of the vision for the components represented in the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, etc. to show the convergence of imagery. The conclusion will address the relevant aspects of worship in the new covenant era.

TEXT:

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar 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 Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar 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 sole 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. 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. (Ezek 1:1-28 ESV)

'Zekiel saw de wheel of time
 Wheel in de middle of a wheel
 Ev'ry spoke was human kind
 Way in de middle of a wheel
 Way up yonder on de mountain top
 Wheel in d middle of a wheel
 My Lord an' de chariot stop
 Way in de middle of a wheel (Spiritual, anon.)



The visions of Ezekiel have been the subject of wild speculation, for example, “Even Before There Were Weather Balloons...” and “The Wheels of Ezekiel: A possible relationship to modern UFO phenomena,” not to mention, the paperback sensation, *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, a book written in 1968 by Erich von Däniken. which popularized the hallucination that Ezekiel saw an alien craft.¹

Beyond the UFO-variety of sensational uses, like that of von Däniken or Graham Hancock,² many evangelicals of Left-Behind persuasion have used Ezekiel as a paperback cash cow. *Disp-sensationalist* Hal Lindsey writes of the the “Ezekiel Factor.” “As I have written many times before, today's Middle East events are fitting exactly into Ezekiel's predictions recorded in chapters 36 through 39.” This plan includes “an all-out attack against Israel by a Persian-led Muslim confederacy, aided by Russia.”³ Most “Tribulation Force” readings of Ezekiel 38ff opt with the standard “cobra helicopter-dynamic equivalence” reading, e.g., “Great tanks, mechanized troop carriers, huge guns and all the latest in war equipment move as a mighty wave across the land” in this “vivid picture” of the Russian forces (William Hull).⁴ However, recently Thomas Ice has recanted of this since his “literal hermeneutic” compels him to accept literal horses, horsemen, bucklers, shields, and swords rather than “MIG-29s, laser-fired missiles, tanks, and assault rifles.”⁵ He reasons, “if the battle takes place in the Tribulation period, the conditions predicted for that time, such as seismic activity, meteor showers, increased solar effects, and other cosmic and terrestrial catastrophes (Matthew 24:7; Revelation 6:12-14; 8:7-12; 16:8-9, 18-21) would so disrupt the environment that present technology depending on satellite and computer-guided systems as well as meteorological stability would utterly fail.”⁶

Even these interpretations (Ice, et al) which claim a “grammatical-historical” approach, seem to be “lite” on the “historical” part of the “grammatical-historical.” Hence, they lead to a “pin the tail” on the current event revisionism (ala, Lindsey, et al). All this makes for great headlines and paperbacks, but affords the student of Scripture very little truth in terms of God’s covenant purpose for His people.

Other evangelical commentators, thankfully avoiding the sensational newspaper exegesis, nevertheless distill the visions (e.g., in chapter 1 & 10) to a generic otherness which obscures the historical precedents

¹ Published by Berkeley (New York), [1968] 1999. These articles may be found at URL: <http://ufos.miningco.com/library/weekly/aa052097.htm> & <http://www.atlantisquest.com/Ezekiel.html>

² Supernatural: Meetings With the Ancient Teachers of Mankind (Anchor: Canada, 2006).

³ http://hallindsey.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=28

⁴ Cited by Ice, William L. Hull, *Israel: Key to Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 35-36

⁵ Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2004), 47

⁶ <http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=321>

in the imagery. It is “the awesome holiness of God visualized”⁷ or “the awesomeness and majesty of God”⁸ or a theophany which “consists of a manifestation of God’s presence to a human.”⁹ This pushes in the direction of Ezekiel being confronted with completely unrecognizable imagery so that the meaning is confounding. For example, Mark Dever’s generally helpful, *The Message of the Old Testament* emphasizes the otherness of the vision, “God is not like us.” He calls the creatures “bizarre” and picturing the vision “an impossible task.”¹⁰

Critical commentators, tend to see the historical development of these images within Israel, yet inclusive of pagan iconography. “Virtually every component of Ezekiel’s vision can thus be derived from Israelite tradition supplemented by neighboring iconography...”¹¹ Katheryn Darr observes innovations in the vision related to extra-Israelite influence. Nevertheless she notes, “Knowledge of these religious landmarks--ark, cherubim throne, chariot, and theophany traditions--informs the ancient readers understanding of Ezekiel’s vision.”¹² One would think that Ezekiel would be the last prophet on earth to express a vision of YHWH with pagan iconography! After all the burden of the prophet is to express to the exiles that God has been driven out of the holy place because of some 400 years of state-sponsored idolatry - "...the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here...will drive me far from my sanctuary” (Ez. 8:11).

As above, there is a failure to grasp the connection between the vision and the fulness of the historical setting within Israel and biblical revelation. This also applies to the alleged “end times” event in chapter 36-48.¹³ But I must restrict this paper to the visions of the glory of God (chs. 1, 10, 43).

The connect that is often missing is ark of the covenant and thus the worship environments containing imagery and information relevant to this vision. An important interpretive key to this vision is the reference made to cherubim as an explanatory epiphany. “These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim” (Ez. 10:20). This is a remarkable and outstanding “behind the scenes” comment from Ezekiel which sheds light on the first vision. By referencing cherubim, Ezekiel connects his vision, which may seem rather unique to several biblical descriptions, which make more clear the imagery of the vision.

Connecting visions in chapters one and ten make it clear that God’s presence is manifest upon a cherubim-powered throne. This, however, was not uniquely revealed to Ezekiel. Frequently, God is pictured in relation to cherubim. He “sits enthroned on the cherubim” (2 Sam. 6:2, also Psalm 80:1, 99:1, Ez. 37:16). He rides on cherubim. “He rode on a cherub and flew” (Psalm 18:10, also 2 Sam. 22:11, Psalm 104:3). The connection of the cherubim as God’s glorious chariot is implied in the above texts, but it is explicit in 1 Chr. 28:18, describing the temple’s Holy Place wherein “the *golden chariot of the cherubim* that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the LORD.”

Ezekiel sees this cherubim-chariot-throne three times and these represent actions related to the presence of God (as in the Holy of Holies). a. At Ezekiel's commission and ordination which relates to his role as a

⁷ Expositors Bible Commentary, in loc.

⁸ IVP New Bible Commentary, in loc.

⁹ IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, in loc.

¹⁰ *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2006), 639.

¹¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel in The Anchor Bible* (Doubleday: New York, 1983), 58.

¹² *Ezekiel in the New Interpreter’s Bible*, VI (Abingdon; Nashville, 2001), 1120.

¹³ The events of the exile and post-exilic period adequately fulfill the concrete events of going back to the Land, the Gog and Magog battle and rebuilding the temple. The full glory of these (expressed in OT imagery) is fulfilled in the *totus Christ* (Christ and the Church).

priest in exile (the high priest of the exile). b. When God leaves the Jerusalem temple because of abominations (chs. 8-11). c. When God returns to His new covenant Temple in chapter 43.

a. The first vision (Ez. 1:4ff) represents God's glory-cloud presence. The purpose of this vision is not an equivalent of disco lights - rather God confirms His presence in the ordination and commission of Ezekiel (High Priest of the Exile) and confers God's communicable attributes to the prophet. Ezekiel sees waters above the firmament which reflect the rainbow of God's peace. This magnificent vision of the Manifestation of God's Glory Cloud and the Movements of God's Glory Cloud indicate the way the prophet will be called upon to act. Ezekiel will be moved internally by the Spirit in "right angles" of the army of holiness. Like the One on the throne, his face must be hard like metal (2:8). He flies like the eagles full of eyes seeing all that Israel is doing (1:10/3:12) and the fiery word of judgment will flash forth from Ezekiel to prophesy the first fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C.). His word, too, will be clothed in the rainbow garment of the covenant peace. Even in this book of judgment on an apostate Israel, God's covenant-keeping faithfulness will raise dead bones and measure out a new covenant temple. He will tabernacle with His people and their children (36:28).

b. Ezekiel 8-11, like chapter 1, is the vision of God's glory on the cherubim-chariot. Ezekiel sees the the chariot-throne of God which departs from the corrupt temple, just as "He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh" and pronounced it *Ichabod* (יְחָבֹד) (Ps. 78:60; also 1 Sam. 4:16ff, Jer. 7:11ff). This vision shows the cause of God's judgment (ch. 8) and shows the judgment from different vantage points. Ezekiel has seen the sins of Israel in Four Detestable Idolatries (ch. 8) and the passover Warrior Angels who slaughter all who do not have the sealing mark (the cross, the *tav*) (ch. 9). The actual events represented will shortly take place. God will destroy the city of Jerusalem and the apostate temple with its Egyptian sun-worshiping priesthood (586 B.C.). He sees vividly that the fire around the throne is God's consuming fire. It is the altar fire which is at the ark/throne and proceeds from God. Its coals are to be dumped on the city as judgment fire. The fast moving cherubim wheels represent God's omnipresence and the many eyes, his omniscient vision. He sees more eyes on the wheels in this vision which stands in contrast to the claim of the apostate elders that, "Yahweh does not see" (9:9). The faces which Ezekiel sees (like before) are now visible as an image in the spinning wheels. They are of a cherub now (instead of an ox), a man, a lion, and an eagle. These stand for the Priestly, the Adamic, the Kingly, and the Gentile World Emperor (the Kingdom Come). The cherub and the ox both represent the "priestly," but different aspects (the obedient and sacrificial ox, and the guardian cherub). Now the priestly ox, the only sacrificial animal of the four, has been replaced with the priestly flame-throwing cherub. This indicates that judgment has come. The sacrifice has been rejected and just like the case of Adam and Eve leaving the garden, now the Guardian face of the cherub is visible in the glory throne. Ezekiel realizes this - "and I knew that they were cherubim" (v 21). Ezekiel sees the same sight that the fallen priest, Adam saw: "So he drove out the man; and he placed Cherubs at the east of the garden of Eden, and the flame of a sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24).

c. In chapter 43 we read, "The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple" (43:3-5). This passage is set with the final vision of a new restoration temple. The vision has four basic parts: (1) the description of the temple (40:5-42:20); (2) the return of God's glory to the temple (43:1-9); (3) the temple regulations (43:10-46:24); and (4) the topographical surroundings and inheritance (47:1-48:35). The temple vision is the culmination of Ezekiel both in the literary structure and the theological content. Israel will be restored and the central connecting point

between God and His people, the temple with the priesthood and inheritance, will be more gloriously manifest.¹⁴

Observations Relating to Worship

Regardless of other differences, Dallas Theological Seminary commentator Charles Dyer very perceptively states about the first vision of Ezekiel: "This place where God was enthroned was called 'the chariot' (1 Chron. 28:18). Since the earthly tabernacle and temple were a copy of the heavenly reality (Heb. 8:5), Ezekiel's vision was of the actual throne-chariot of God, borne by cherubim."¹⁵ Hebrews 9:24 likewise says the "man-made sanctuary was only a copy of the true one," (ἀντίτυπα τῶν ἀληθινῶν). Thus, these old covenant environments of worship in the Bible "pattern," "model" or copy the heavenly sanctuary wherein God the judge of all is seated.

The worship structures of tabernacle and temple including the "order" of sacrifices and rites helped the believer "draw near to worship" (Heb. 10:1). In our day, we have moved beyond the era of an actual "model" temple of metal, stone and wood. This was made historically and theologically demonstrable by the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. Now Jesus has entered the real sanctuary as a Man and we through Him, following the pattern that has been established. While the scaffolding (the old covenant structures of worship) of the true house of God has been torn down, the writer of Hebrews characterizes our worship in terms of these rites of approach. Thus, we are encouraged as living sacrifices to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). The writer goes on to characterize the new covenant approach to God as the heavenly reality of Zion. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant . . ." (Heb. 12:22-24).

The term to describe this approach to God is *leitourgia* ("liturgy") - literally "work of the people" (laos + ergon). It is used of the temple service and order of sacrifices (Heb. 10:11) in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:35) and the temple (2 Chr. 31:2). The NT makes an explicit connection between the *leitourgia* of the temple with the worship service of the new covenant assembly (λειτουργίᾳ, Heb. 10:11). It was during their "service" to the Lord (Λειτουργούντων δὲ αὐτῶν τῷ κυρίῳ) that Saul and Barnabas were called to missionary activity (Acts 13:2).

My primary point is that such a reading of these themes of biblical revelation must inform the new covenant worship service. NT era worshipers did not come to the assembly *tabula rasa*. Biblical worship must be cognizant of the "approach" to God that was patterned in the previous era. Our services should reflect this pattern, the rite of passage to the heavenly sanctuary. Therefore, our hermeneutic of worship must be a "whole-Bible" interpretive principle, not a New Testament-only (with Psalms and Proverbs) approach.

¹⁴ How will this new temple vision be fulfilled? One view is that there will be a rebuilt temple during the "Tribulation" and that during the "Millennium" physical Jerusalem will have a functioning OT sacrificial system with Jesus on the throne, incarnate. According to this view, "an earthquake will destroy...the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and The Dome of The Rock, so The Jews can build The Third Temple." This Premillennial vision is based upon a misreading of . . . the Bible. The Reformed view is that Jesus fulfills the Abrahamic covenant which was to "undo" the fall of Adam. Israel failed to do their mission, but True Israel succeeded. Jesus's body (literally and spiritually) is the place indwelt by God, the temple. The temple of the OT is fulfilled by the body of Christ, the living stones in which God dwells (1 Pet. 2:5). God purposes to redeem this creation by the renewal of hearts. It will not help to create an artificial 1000 year period with a better OT system. In history, there is an initial fulfillment of this in the post-exilic rebuilding of the temple recorded at the end of Chronicles and in Ezra, which sets the stage for the coming of Christ (cf 2 Chr 36:22-23 ESV). "All the promises of God find their Yes in him...through him we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus' body was destroyed and raised (Jn. 2:21). By faith we are in the body of Christ and are "living stones" "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1Pet. 2:5).

¹⁵ *Ezekiel* in the Bible Knowledge Commentary (Victor Books: Wheaton), 1228.