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## The Inaugural Vision of Ezekiel

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

"Ezekiel is the strangest figure in the goodly fellowship of the prophets . . . probably no book of the Old Testament is as little read as his, and it may well be the least popular, as it is the least known of the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup> This is the verdict on the Book of Ezekiel in the most recent book on the Prophets of the Old Testament. It may comfort the modern Bible student to know that it has troubled the exegetes, Jewish and Christian, through the centuries. Luther<sup>2</sup> quotes Jerome as saying that the early rabbis considered its contents so profound and vexing that they decreed that no one should study the beginning and the end of the book before he had reached the age of thirty. Jerome<sup>3</sup> himself considered it the most difficult of the Holy Scriptures and spoke of it as an "ocean of divine mysteries." He needed the encouragement of his friend Eustochius to undertake the interpretation of the "labyrinth" which he found especially in the second part, chaps. 40—48.

Shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, 70 A. D., an effort was made by the School of Shammai to have the Book of Ezekiel withdrawn from public reading because it appeared to be in conflict with the Pentateuch. It took the resourcefulness of Rabbi Chananyah ben Hezekiah

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<sup>1</sup> Paterson, John, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets*, "Studies, Historical, Religious, and Expository in the Hebrew Prophets," 1948, p.160.

<sup>2</sup> St. Louis, XIV:45.

<sup>3</sup> Compare his *Commentary on Ezekiel* at the end of Ezek. 39; 40:13; and 45:10.

to harmonize these contradictions, and as a result the Council of Jamnia did not alter its status.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Fuerbringer says, "Hence his descriptions are often mysterious, dark and enigmatical, difficult to understand."<sup>5</sup>

Anyone who has at all looked into the book knows what makes it difficult. "It abounds in allegories and apocalyptic imagery, and it operates with grotesque forms and bizarre ideas. Its complicated figures and its 'wheels within wheels' (1:16) have offered ample scope for the ingenuity of Christian and Jewish commentators and for others less qualified who find delight in regarding the Bible as a book of conundrums or a volume of riddles."<sup>6</sup>

The inaugural vision, which we have chosen as our topic, is in the thick of these difficulties. It was one of the sections that prompted the rabbis to say to the inexperienced regarding the Book of Ezekiel, "Tarry at Jericho till your beard be grown," 2 Sam. 10:5. It is not brash foolhardiness, however, which prompted this attempt at an interpretation of so difficult a section of the Old Testament. Because the opening vision is so essential for the message and the understanding of the whole book, this modest contribution is made toward an appreciation of the vital message of this Old Testament book — a message that is so pertinent for the Church and the world of today.

The historical background of the book can be presented merely parenthetically here. When Nebuchadnezzar brought Ezekiel to Babylonia with King Jehoiachin and others of the upper strata of society in 597 (2 Kings 25:10-16), Daniel had been there almost ten years (Dan. 1:1). Five years later, on the fifth day of the fourth month, the heavens were opened, and Ezekiel, the priest, was called to the prophetic office (Ezek. 1:2). Perhaps he was thirty years old at the time.<sup>7</sup> When

<sup>4</sup> Steinmueller, John E., *A Companion to Scripture Studies*, II, p. 265 f. Tradition says that 300 jars of oil were consumed in the effort — "midnight oil!"

<sup>5</sup> Fuerbringer, L., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 169

<sup>7</sup> Ezek. 1:1: "Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." Much effort and ingenuity has gone into the interpretation of this "thirtieth year." To make it apply to the age of the Prophet is a very attractive suggestion. Thus already Jerome, alluding to the age of Jesus in Luke 3:23. It was at the age of thirty that a young priest

Jerusalem fell six years later, his prophecy of doom, as well as that of Jeremiah, his contemporary, was vindicated. His discourses are supplied with more specific dates than any of the other prophetic books.<sup>8</sup> The thirteenth and last discourse was spoken fifteen years after the destruction of the city—in the year 571 (Ezek. 29:17).<sup>9</sup> We lose the trail of Ezekiel in the tradition that he was murdered by leaders of the people whom he had reprimanded for idolatry.<sup>10</sup>

Ezekiel is often spoken of as "an hard man." Hosea's and Jeremiah's human heart of emotion comes to the surface in their messages. Ezekiel's feelings are buried in the stern demands of his duty.<sup>11</sup> When his wife, "the desire of thine eyes," is taken from him in death, he is told: "Yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down," Ch. 24:16. His eyes remained dry also when the news of the

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began his ministrations in the Temple. Linguistic difficulties arise in the phraseology used here. The age of a person is expressed consistently by the Hebrew phrase: "He was the son of 30 years." Others have tried to find an era of time in this note. But no agreement can be reached on the *terminus a quo*. The reform under Josiah in 621 B. C. (2 Kings 22) has been suggested as marking the beginning of this new era. Others want to begin counting from the beginning of the Chaldean period, such as the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign in 625 B. C. Jewish interpreters (e. g., Kimhi) think it was the thirtieth year of the current jubilee year. If it refers to some era, it would be an otherwise unused basis of computation in the Old Testament. Other commentators solve the problem by resorting to emendations and theories of later annotators of the text.

<sup>8</sup> Besides the date of his call, thirteen other specific references to time are given: 3:16; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 29:17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1; 32:17; 33:21; 40:1. Almost without exception the month and the day are specified besides the year. The years are computed from the beginning of the captivity of Jehoiachin as in ch. 1:2.

<sup>9</sup> Since the latest date occurs in ch. 29 and references to earlier times follow in succeeding chapters, it is clear that the book is not arranged entirely on a chronological basis. The topical sequence breaks in as in the section dealing with foreign nations (Chs. 26-32).

<sup>10</sup> Other legends have grown around the person of Ezekiel. He is supposed to have been the teacher of Pythagoras or also the servant of Jeremiah. He is said to have been buried in the tomb of Shem and Arphaxad.

<sup>11</sup> Many writers regard Ezekiel as subject to cataleptic seizures because they believe to find abnormal elements in his personality. This view of Ezekiel began with the publication of Klostermann's essay in *Studien und Kritiken* in 1877. The most recent, thoroughgoing, and revolting treatment of this subject is an article by E. C. Broome, Jr., in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1946, Vol. 65, pp. 277-292. According to the author, Ezekiel was the victim of paranoid schizophrenia. Using modern psychological terminology, he arrives at results such as this: When Ezekiel receives a vision involving a sharp knife (ch. 5), he has hallucinations of castration!

fall of Jerusalem came. His rebuke of sin, and his threat of punishment, is almost unbrokenly stern. Luther says: "Hezekiel weissagt viel haerter und mehr als Jeremias wie Jerusalem sollte zerstoert werden und das Volk mit Koenig und Fuersten umkommen."<sup>12</sup> But under this hard devotion to his task we find a love for his people as strong as that of any other Prophet (cf. ch. 16 and his pleading for his people, ch. 11:13 ff.). He fairly revels in the portrayal of the good things that he is permitted to present after the fall of Jerusalem.

The Book of Ezekiel escaped the first onslaughts of the Wellhausen school of higher criticism. It is only about forty years ago that some scholars began in all seriousness to take the book apart. With varying degrees of negations and contradictory theories, the unity, authenticity, and Babylonian origin have been called into question.<sup>13</sup> However, McFadyen's statement is still true: "We have in Ezekiel the rare satisfaction of studying a carefully elaborated prophecy whose authenticity, until recently, has been practically undisputed. . . . the order and precision of the priestly mind are reflected in the unusually systematic arrangement of the book."<sup>14</sup> The Masoretic text suggests some difficulties so that even Moeller says: "Der masoretische Text ist oft recht dunkel und schwie-

<sup>12</sup> St. Louis XIV:44f.

<sup>13</sup> The critical dismemberment of the book began with the publication of Hoelscher's book *Hezekiel, der Dichter und das Buch*, in 1924. Only 170 of the 1,273 verses in the first 39 chapters were permitted to stand as genuine. Millar Burrows in *The Literary Relations of Ezekiel*, 1925, moves the Prophet into the pre-Maccabean age. C. C. Torrey in *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy*, 1930, repeats Ezekiel's experience of ch. 8 and transports him to Jerusalem as the scene of his activity, but now it is the year 230 B. C. J. Smith in *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 1931, makes Ezekiel active among the captives of the Northern Kingdom and later in Jerusalem. Hertrich in "Ezekielstudien," ZAW 61, 1932, finds that Ezekiel was active only in Jerusalem and attributes the Babylonian background of the book to a later redactor. The latest publication of this nature is by Dr. William A. Irwin of the University of Chicago, *The Problem of Ezekiel*, 1943. He finds merely 251 authentic verses in the first thirty-nine chapters and rejects chs. 40-48 in toto.

<sup>14</sup> McFadyen, John Edgar, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1932, p. 187. Other champions of the unity of the book are: Kuhl, Curt, *Die literarische Einheit des Buches Ezekiel*, 1917. Kessler, Werner, *Die Innere Einheitlichkeit des Buches Ezekiel*, 1926. Haag, D. Dr. Herbert, *Was Lehrt die literarische Untersuchung des Ezechiel-Textes*, 1943. Moeller, Wilhelm, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1934. For a criticism of Dr. Irwin's method see *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. VII, 1945, p. 438ff.

rig; jedoch hilft in solchen Faellen auch die LXX nicht weiter." <sup>15</sup>

The fall of the holy city, ch. 33, divides the twenty-two years of the Prophet's activity. Before that event Ezekiel is, in the main, a stern preacher of repentance; after it he becomes the messenger of hope and comfort.

The exiles in Babylon, as well as the people at home, remained a "rebellious house." The deported considered the visitation of God an injustice. Ezek. 18:2: "What mean ye that ye use this proverb concerning the Land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?" They also shared with the folks at home the false notion that the Temple was inviolate. Jeremiah had as little success in opposing this misconception (Jer. 7) as Ezekiel. Hence the false hope was perpetuated that the exile would soon terminate (Jer. 29). Ezekiel shatters this false hope because of the abominations which he sees in full bloom in Jerusalem (chas. 8-11) and because of the idolatry which was practiced at Babylonia in spite of the punishment that had already come upon them (chs. 14, 20). "They shall yet know that I am the Lord, your God" <sup>16</sup> — God cannot but let punishment follow upon sin as effect follows the cause.

But God is also faithful in His promises.<sup>17</sup> Already before the fall of the city some rays of light entered the dark picture. Once the people have taken away "all the detestable things thereof and all the abominations thereof from thence" (Ezek. 11:18), "I will gather you from the people and as-

<sup>15</sup> Moeller, *op cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> This phrase occurs no less than 63 times in the book. It occurred previously, in Ex. 6:7, when God made a Covenant with His people through Moses. This relationship between Israel and God is reflected in this frequent refrain. As Israel's Covenant God, He cannot tolerate idolatry — a breach of that Covenant, Ezek. 6:7, 13, 14; 7:4, 9, 27; 14:7-8; 23:49. As a result, the impending punishment will be severe: His people will go into exile, Ezek. 12:15, 20; 13:14; 22:16; His Temple and His city will be destroyed, Ezek. 24:21, 27. Even the heathen are to see that God avenges unfaithfulness, Ezek. 12:16.

<sup>17</sup> These promises are again tied to the phrase and the Covenant concept: they shall know that I am the Lord, your God. There will be a new Covenant, Ezek. 16:62. God will lead His people out of the land of captivity, as he once brought Israel out of Egypt, Ezek. 20:42, 44; 34:27; 36:11, etc. The heathen nations will be punished and will recognize Him as the true God, Ezek. 25:5, 7; 26:6; 28:22-24; 38:23; etc., who is able to put His program of deliverance into effect. The Covenant concept as the basis for the message of Ezekiel is discussed in the book by Haag, *op. cit.*

semble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the Land of Israel" (Ezek. 11:17), "and I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and will give them an heart of flesh" (Ezek. 11:19). The news of the fall of Jerusalem had a devastating effect on the exiles. Some even believed that the claim of the Babylonians of Marduk's superiority over Jehovah was proved and turned their back completely on the true God. Even the faithful remnant was inclined to despair because they felt themselves rejected of God. They said: "If our transgressions and our sins be upon us and we pine away in them, how should we then live?" Ezek. 33:10. How could all the glorious prophecies of God be fulfilled when the Temple and the people to whom all the promises were tied had ceased to be? What a happy privilege it was for Ezekiel, then, to be able to paint the picture of the enduring Kingdom of the Messiah. All enemies go down in defeat before it (chs. 25—32); a new Covenant will be established in spite of Gog and Magog (chs. 33—39); God will dwell in the Temple of His people and receive their sacrificial devotion (chs. 40—48).

Hence we can sum up the message of Ezekiel: God is faithful — He executes His threats and He keeps His promises. *Soli deo gloria!*<sup>18</sup>

What relation, then, does the vision have to this message?

It is central to the whole thought content of the book. In the awesome majesty of this vision, Ezekiel is called to his difficult task — "As I was among the captives by the river Chebar," ch. 1:1. Ezekiel could never forget that solemn event, and yet that same vision appears to him three times more in order to sustain the Prophet in his arduous task, to fortify him against any doubt of the fulfillment of God's Word, — the judgment would come although popular opinion scoffed at it, and the promise would be realized although outward appearances seemed to say that God's people had ceased to exist and could have no future. The repetition of the vision came to him at the strategic moments of his ministry, in the pivotal pronouncements of his message.

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<sup>18</sup> "So wird Gott voellig zu dem, was ihm gebuehrt zu sein: nicht nur Mittel fuer das hoechste Beduerfnis der Menschen, sondern hoechster Zweck ueber allen Zwecken." Niebergall, Friedrich, *Praktische Auslegung des Alten Testaments*, Vol. 2, p. 241.

The first reappearance of it comes soon after his call. In the third chapter we are told that the hand of the Lord was upon him and directed him to prophesy the main burden of his message: the destruction of the city in allegorical portrayal. Ezek. 3:23: "Then I arose and went forth into the plain, and, behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, as the glory which I saw by the river of Chebar. And I fell on my face."

He sees this same vision again when the doom of the city is sealed and its actual downfall begins in the visible departure of the Lord from the Temple and the city. In chs. 8—11 he had been brought by the Spirit to the Holy City to see the abominations of his people. "And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain," ch. 8:4. "Then the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house," ch. 10:18. "And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city," ch. 11:23. When God leaves, destruction has begun.

When the "constructive" part of his ministry begins, the vision comes a third time. In ch. 43 the Lord takes up His habitation again in the new Temple as a pledge of His abiding presence among His people and in His Church. Things looked bad for the future of God's plans. But "the glory of the Lord came into the house," ch. 43:4. "And the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Chebar," ch. 43:3.

If this opening vision is the motif of the whole book and the undergirding of its whole message, an effort to catch some of its meaning will be necessary. Before we take up its various aspects, we may state that its significance runs out in one main thought: the transcendent majesty and power of God. His will will be done: the sinner cannot escape; the faithful can trust in Him. When we examine the vision more in detail, we find each phase adding a stroke of color to this picture.

God has appeared in visions to other men. Moses saw God in the burning bush, Ex. 3:2 ff. From a "still small voice" God spoke to Elijah, 1 Kings 19:12-13. Micaiah told wicked King Ahab: "I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left," 1 Kings 22:19. Isaiah was overcome when he saw "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims," Is. 6:1-2.



But no other vision is described in such detail. Can this complete picture be accounted for merely by Ezekiel's style? In reading his book one cannot but be struck by the painstaking attention to detail with which he paints his word pictures. His description of the new Temple is the most obvious example. In his discourses, too, he strains himself to be sure that no feature is overlooked or forgotten. To our feelings of rhetoric he almost becomes tiring in his repetitiousness. He goes back and forth over the same territory to be sure that the reader follows and has not lost precious minutiae. No doubt the particular form of the description of the vision is in keeping with his characteristic genre. But there can be just as little doubt that each daub of paint on this celestial canvas has a purpose and meaning.

It must be clear from the outset that most of the features of this vision go back to previous media of God's revelation to His chosen people: the cherubim, the throne, the storm, the fire, the rainbow, etc. As we look at each of these, it also is apparent that in some instances there are either new details or in some instances rather pronounced differences from the previous manifestations of God's glory. The question will arise whether this fuller picture or its different features are added here because of the situation in which the revelation comes.

There was, in the first place, a reason why God employed the old symbols of His presence. We must remember that God is appearing in Babylonia and that the vision is meant for the people as such, in exile and in Jerusalem, as well as for the Prophet. To Ezekiel and the exiled Jews this meant much. It reassured them that God could appear in an "unclean" land. His sovereignty was not restricted to the Temple and the Holy Land. To the faithful who were faced with the prospect of the destruction of God's ordained habitation in their midst this was "to give a concrete pledge that through the imminent visitation of doom upon the sinful people and kingdom the essence of God's kingdom would not be obliterated, but that the Lord God would continue to reveal Himself as the living God and preserve His kingdom and in His own time would bring about its full glorification."<sup>19</sup> The same God

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<sup>19</sup> Keil, Friedrich, und Delitzsch, Franz, *Biblischer Commentar ueber das Alte Testament*, Vol. III, 1868, p. 28.

whose glory inhabited the Holy of Holies in the Temple was there in Babylonia, in their midst. Let the faithful take comfort. And if there were henotheistic aberrations in the minds of some, this vision was to reaffirm the true concept of God's universal sovereignty.

But another environment factor must be borne in mind. The Jews were in Babylonia. Here they were exposed to hearing the praises of Marduk and the other gods. Did not Marduk give victory to the Babylonians over the Jews? Did he not thereby prove his superiority over Jehovah? We are told expressly that Nebuchadnezzar did much to glorify the Babylonian gods.<sup>20</sup> He spent much to rebuild the temples and to equip them with the images and other sacred paraphernalia. The processions in honor of the gods were held with every possible pomp and circumstance. If any among the Jews was tempted to idolatry or at least to some syncretistic compromise, here was the warning: Jehovah is exalted above these idols. If some of the Babylonian symbols and representations of their gods seem to resemble those of the true God, they are meaningless and vain because God sits enthroned over them. The detailed features of Ezekiel's vision and the new elements in it seem to have their purpose also in this background.<sup>21</sup>

If we keep these two background factors in mind, the vision will have a fuller meaning as we examine its various aspects.

## I

Ezekiel sees the vision approaching from the north, ch. 1:4. He and his hearers were familiar with this origin of God's coming to judgment. Jeremiah had proclaimed: Jer. 4:6: "Set up the standard toward Zion: retire, stay not; for I will bring evil from the north and a great destruction"; and Jer. 1:14: "Then the Lord said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land." Let the heathen prate about the North as the primordial home of the gods, Jehovah is the One who controls world events.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar in *Die Neubabylonischen Koenigsinschriften* by Stephen Langdon.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Heinisch, Paul, *die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testaments, Das Buch Ezechiel*, 1923, pp. 27-32. Duerr, Lorenz, *Ezechiel's Vision von der Erscheinung Gottes im Lichte der Vorderasiatischen Altertumskunde*, 1917.

## II

Jehovah comes "in a whirlwind" and in a "great cloud." Thus He had come before to reveal His purpose to Elijah (1 Kings 19:11): "And He said: Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake." Again, Nah. 1:3: "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power and will not at all acquit the wicked. The Lord hath His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet."<sup>22</sup> God rules supreme over the forces of nature. Don't let the Babylonians tell you that Marduk is "the lord of the storm." Don't believe the account in *Enuma Elish* which portrays him as defeating Tiamat with "the flood storm, a great weapon."<sup>23</sup>

## III

"And a fire infolding itself," Ch. 1:4. Ezekiel and his hearers would recall Deut. 4:24: "For the Lord, thy God, is a consuming fire, even a jealous God." Isaiah had said, ch.10:17: "And the Light of Israel shall be for a fire and his Holy One for a flame; and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briars in one day." Fire is the symbol of the destroying power of God. This meaning was further made clear in a later vision, Ezek. 10:2: "And he spake unto the man clothed with linen and said: Go in between the wheels, even under the cherub, and fill thine hand with coals of fire from between the cherubims and scatter them over the city. And he went in my sight."<sup>24</sup> Did Marduk and the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and the Temple? No, this consuming fire emanates from Jehovah.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also Ex. 19:18; 1 Kings 19:11; Job 37:1 ff.; 38:1; 40:2; Is. 30:27; Hab. 3; Ps. 18:10 ff.; 50:3; 68:8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Heidel, Alexander, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 1942, Tablet IV, lines 45-49, p. 28:

He created *imhullu*: the evil wind, the whirlwind, the hurricane,  
The fourfold wind, the sevenfold wind, the cyclone, the wind  
incomparable.

He sent forth the winds which he created, the seven of them;  
To trouble Tiamat within, they arose behind him.

The lord raised up the flood storm, his mighty weapon.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. also Gen. 15:17; Ex. 3:2; 19:18; Is. 4:5; 30:27; 66:15.

## IV

"And a brightness was about it and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire," Ezek. 1:4. Light is a symbol of God's essence. Israel followed the pillar of light through the wilderness. Ps. 104:1-2: "Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord, my God, Thou art very great. Thou art clothed with honor and majesty, who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain." The New Testament even says: "God is Light" (1 John 1:5). Remember, O Israel, Jehovah is Light. Shamash, the sun god, is darkness.

## V

God appears to Ezekiel on a throne. Ezek. 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." Isaiah had seen the throne of God. Is. 6:1: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple." Micaiah saw the Lord upon a throne in the presence of the kings of Israel and of Judah (1 Kings 22:10). Jehovah is higher than the combined kingdoms of Ahab and Jehoshaphat. He is higher than the throne of Nebuchadnezzar and Marduk.<sup>25</sup> Nothing is over Him; everything is under Him.

## VI

One of the best-known parts of the vision is the conveyance upon which the throne of God rests and by which it, together with the cherubim, moves in all directions. It had a wheel at each corner. Each wheel in turn was constructed so that "it was, as it were, a wheel in the middle of the wheel." Just how these wheels were connected with the cherubim and the throne is not stated. As a celestial chariot it is not bound to the ordinary laws of locomotion. The one thing that they clearly signify is that Jehovah's will moves into execution;

<sup>25</sup> No doubt the Israelites heard the hymns extolling the Babylonian Gods. "There is no god like Marduk' is the burden of the many hymns," Jastrow, Morris, *The Civilization of the Babylonians and Assyrians*, p. 207. Thus in a text found at Sippar these lines occur:

Mighty lord of lords, strong Marduk —

Lord of lords, king of heaven and earth, granting prosperity.

His commands are carried out everywhere, instantly, without the loss of time, Ezek. 1:17. The Jews in Babylonia and at home were familiar with God's chariot of fire. 2 Kings 2:11: "And it came to pass, as they still went on and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire and parted them both asunder, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Hab. 3:8: "Was the Lord displeased against the rivers? Was Thine anger against the rivers? Was Thy wrath against the sea, that Thou didst ride upon Thine horses and Thy chariots of salvation?"<sup>26</sup> Marduk and the gods of Babylonia also rode in chariots. In colorful processions the exiles saw how they were moved about the streets and made the object of veneration. This custom had its roots in their mythology. When Marduk subdued Tiamat, he mounted his chariot. The sun god, Shamash, has a chariot and a driver, Bunene.<sup>27</sup> O Israel, forget not Jehovah's chariot of old; see, in the land of Marduk, it is Jehovah's chariot that stands ready to carry forth His decrees.

## VII

In the interpretation of the vision the prominence given to the number *four* dare not be overlooked. There are four cherubim with four faces and four wings; there are four wheels, "when they went, they went upon their four sides"; the whole makes up a square of four sides. This can only refer to God's sovereignty over the whole world. The term "four corners of the earth" denotes the universality of God's providence. Ezekiel in a later chapter (7:2) applies the term "four corners" to the Land of Israel when he wants to emphasize its complete destruction. It is used in the same sense by Isaiah (11:12): "And He shall set up an ensign for the nations and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth."

<sup>26</sup> A chariot is also a part of Daniel's vision, Dan. 7:9: "I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like the pure wool. His throne was like the fiery flame and His wheels as burning fire." Cf. also Deut. 33:26; Ps. 67:17; Is. 66:15.

<sup>27</sup> In *Enuma Elish*: He mounted the chariot, the storm incomparable (and) terrible; Heidel, *op. cit.*, Tablet IV, line 50, p. 28. Special wagons and chariots were maintained in the Babylonian and Assyrian temples. On New Year's Day the statue of Marduk was driven about the city in solemn procession. The kings delighted in furnishing these ornate conveyances for the temples. Duerr, *op. cit.*, p. 13 ff.

The Book of Revelation speaks of "four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth," Rev. 7:1. Nebuchadnezzar may claim to be the ruler over the "four quarters of the earth." This is but an empty boast; Jehovah holds them in His hand.

The many eyes which are found in the wheels can only denote a similar thought: God is aware of all things, and nothing will escape His eye.

### VIII

The most prominent feature of the vision is the group of cherubim. These ministering spirits of God were well known to every Israelite. He found them in almost every book of the Old Testament, and every priest could tell of their use in the symbolism of the Temple. They appear in the beginning of man's history as the divine guardians of the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had been expelled from its bliss (Gen. 3:24). From the Book of Exodus everyone knew that God had commanded Moses Ex. 25:18: "And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat"; and Ex. 26:31: "And thou shalt make a veil of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work: with cherubims shall it be made." In the Temple, "within the oracle, he [Solomon] made two cherubims of olive tree, each ten cubits high," 1 Kings 6:23. 1 Kings 6:27-29: "And he set the cherubims within the inner house; and they stretched forth the wings of the cherubims, so that the wing of the one touched the one wall and the wing of the other cherub touched the other wall and their wings touched one another in the midst of the house. And he overlaid the cherubims with gold. And he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers, within and without." "And he made ten bases of brass . . . and on the borders that were between the ledges were . . . cherubims," 1 Kings 7:27, 29. "Between the cherubim" is the dwelling place of God (Is. 37:16; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2). When God came to manifest Himself, "He rode upon a cherub and did fly; yea, He did fly upon the wings of the wind," Ps. 18:10.

However, two aspects of the cherubim in Ezekiel's vision must be noted. In the first place, they are described more

fully here than in the other accounts. The only feature mentioned by the other writers is their equipment of wings. In the second place, even a casual reading cannot fail to note that these four cherubim differ in several important respects from the brief description of the others. The cherubim in the Temple and Tabernacle appear to have at most two faces, that of a man and that of a lion, but Ezekiel sees four faces on each cherub; the former had two wings each, and these are equipped with four wings. Even the cherubim of Ezekiel's own Temple have but two faces (Ezek. 41:18).

Have these heavenly denizens always appeared in the form in which Ezekiel describes them, and is the difference merely this, that Ezekiel gives us a fuller description of them? This is possible. However, if they are spirits, they may at God's command become manifest in various shapes and forms. It is also quite likely that the very minute description of these celestial beings in Ezekiel has a purpose, which can be found in the place and time of this vision.

The place and time again are Babylonia and the exile. In this heathen environment the Jews saw many fantastic pictorial reproductions of their gods, and they heard them described as creatures of composite nature in their literature. Genii with horned caps (indicating divine rank), human in form but supplied with wings, guard the tree of life. As the Jews passed the temples and palaces, they could not help seeing the many sculptured winged lions and bulls with human heads guarding the entrances of these buildings. Or they saw them in relief work on the walls of the towers and passages. Thus the processional street in Babylon was flanked by a guard of sixty such lion colossi. These composite creatures are also depicted as upholding the divine throne or as directly bearing up the god. In the hymns sung in honor of the gods many animals are included in the imagery. The ox is the metaphor of robust vitality and power, hence the gods are called "strong ox" or "great ox," and Adad, simply the "celestial ox." Shamash, Ishtar, and especially Enlil are called "lions," the king of the animal world. The sun god is represented by the eagle, the king of birds. On the cylinder seals some deities are depicted with more than one head. Even the name "kuribu" is found. Esarhaddon reports that he erected a "kuribu deity" in the sanctuary of the temple of Ashur.

The people of whom Ezekiel told this vision could very well understand it. Like the other aspects of it, the cherubim emphasized God's majesty and power as unchallenged and supreme over everything. The cherubim have a human head. Man is supreme on earth by reason of his intelligence, but he is God's creature made in His image. The second face is that of an ox, the strongest among the domesticated animals. A human king is compared to an ox in 1 Kings 22:11 because he will "push the Syrians until thou have consumed them." And Jehovah Himself is called the Strong One (*abir*), a word of the same consonantal structure as the word for ox. The lion, the third face, as king of the beasts, was well known as a metaphor of terror and as inspiring awe. In the blessing of Jacob we read, Gen. 49:9: "Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up?" God's threat of judgment is said to be the roaring of a lion in Amos 1:2: "And he said, The Lord will roar from Zion and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither." The eagle, the fourth face, is king of the winged creatures; his flight is high and fast. Deut. 28:49: "The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand." Hos. 8:1: "Set the trumpet to thy mouth. He shall come as an eagle against the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed My Covenant and trespassed against My Law." Jer. 4:13: "Behold, he shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as a whirlwind: his horses are swifter than eagles. Woe unto us! for we are spoiled." Ezekiel, in ch. 17, compared the kings of Babylon and Egypt to an eagle. These four-faced celestial beings are equipped with wings to execute God's decrees with dispatch. They have hands in order to work in His service. The "fourness" of the features again makes for the picture of completeness.

Have you Israelites seen the mythological creatures and demons in Babylonia? Are they exalted as lords of the universe? Is victory over you ascribed to their operations? Don't be misled. God's ministering spirits have their combined attributes of power, and they are His servants standing



at attention, as it were, ready to do His bidding, at His beck and call. Jehovah is God. He is; all other gods are not. He rules also in this foreign and hostile territory. His purposes are always and everywhere carried out.

## IX

The description of the vision ends with these words: "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," Ezek. 1:28. God's power and majesty as it appears in this vision is not merely bent on destruction. The rainbow is also in the picture. Just as the Deluge had to come as a result of man's rebellion, so "this rebellious house" will also go down in disaster. But in the skies of the destinies of God's kingdom there shines the symbol of His promise of enduring grace. "Behold, I establish My covenant with you and your seed after you," Gen. 9:9.

With the meaning of the main features of this formidable vision in mind, we recall again that it comes to Ezekiel not only at the time of his call, but that it is repeated at the crucial turning points of his ministry as indicated above. In fact, every word of Ezekiel proceeds from its focus as the spoke of a wheel from its axis. It sustained the Prophet when he pronounced doom upon the Temple, the city, and the nation; it sustained his faith when he predicted the everlasting temple and people of God's Kingdom of Grace. It should have meant all this to everyone who heard the Prophet or who read his message.

And it should mean this also to us. We can visualize the shape of the vision if God should choose to appear today as He did to Ezekiel. He might appear in the fire of His righteousness over the trappings of the church that has the form of godliness but not its power. He might appear in the rumblings of thunder over a Protestantism which says, "The temple, the temple," but has filled it with the abominations of its own making. He might appear in a storm cloud over a nation that worships the dollar sign and idolizes the power that is in things. He might appear in the avenging brightness of His truth over all the multiheaded creatures of falsehood that spawn in modern propaganda, diplomacy, and politics.

The comfort of this vision would have many applications, too. To the Lutherans who had languished under the Hitler regime and now suffer in the mines of eastern Europe, He might appear enthroned over the swastika and the hammer and the sickle. To the Protestant, suppressed by Roman imperialism, He would appear exalted over the triple tiara and the cardinals' crimson. To the fearful heart, He would appear in supreme might above the fissioned atom and the wings of the supersonic airplane. To the doubting souls, He would appear in undiminished glory over the triple A of the Association for the Advancement of Atheism and the laboratory instruments of science. God's children, take comfort.

