

Ezekiel
Week 2
Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision
Chapter 1

Ezekiel 1:1-3

Apocalyptic literature is characterized by visions filled with the imagery associated with God's manifold powers as creator. A divine messenger usually interprets the message that is conveyed to the prophet (see Rev 1:1-3). Apocalyptic literature is most recognizable in its use of rich symbolism that draws heavily on mythological motifs. In prophetic literature the symbols are rarely interpreted. Often the visions themselves do not symbolically represent a foretold happening but serve as occasions for a message concerning what God is going to do.¹

Kebar River. Rather than being an actual river, the Kebar was a canal that diverged from the Euphrates River north of Babylon and continued for sixty miles southeast until it rejoined the Euphrates near Erech. The network of irrigation and transport canals was known as the "waters of Babylon" (Ps 137:1). It served as a means of extending the arable land of southern Mesopotamia and provided water to small settlements along its course²

The fifth year of Jehoiachin's reign would have been the year 593 b.c., at the end of the month of July (the fourth month). This chronology takes into account Jehoiachin's accession to Judah's throne during the siege of Jerusalem, which according to the Babylonian Chronicle began in November/December 598. There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the meaning of "in the thirtieth year," because 593 is not the thirtieth year of anything. A common suggestion is that this simply refers to Ezekiel's own birth date and qualifies him to speak on these matters since he has officially reached the age required for admission into the working priesthood (Num 4:30).³

According to Numbers 4, Levites were eligible for their sacred work between the ages of thirty and fifty. Ezekiel would have grown up for twenty-five years in Jerusalem and known the workings of the temple and its priesthood intimately. He had probably trained for the day when he would enter that holy service himself—perhaps on his thirtieth birthday. Now that birthday had come, but where was he? Not in the temple in Zion, but on the other side of the world. Not in the focal point of the holiness of Yahweh's presence among his people in his own land, but in an unclean land, surrounded by idolatry and polytheism, mocked by his captors.⁴

¹ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 1:1). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Matthews, et al. Eze 1:1

³ Matthews, et al. Eze 1:2

⁴ Wright, C. J. H. (2001). *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*. (A. Motyer & D. Tidball, Eds.) (p. 44). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

Along with most of the royal court and many of the influential or wealthy members of Judean society, Jehoiachin was taken into exile when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar's army in 597 (see 2 Kings 24:8–17). Babylonian ration lists include mention of quantities of oil being supplied to the “king of Judah” along with other high-ranking prisoners of war and dependents of the royal household. Eventually, in 561 b.c., during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Amel-Marduk (the biblical Evil-Merodach), Jehoiachin was freed from his imprisonment (probably house arrest) and allowed the freedom of the king's court (see 2 Kings 25:27–30). He died in exile, bringing an official end to the Judean monarchy.⁵

The exilic community, of which Ezekiel was a member, was a relatively small group in 593 b.c.—perhaps ten thousand persons. However, looking at Nebuchadnezzar's list of deportees in 2 Kings 24:14–16, it would appear that they comprised the military, political and religious leaders as well as craftsmen who could be employed in the Babylonian king's numerous building projects. The trained soldiers were also probably pressed into service in the Babylonian army. It was only after 587 that a large portion of Judah's population joined their fellows in Mesopotamia. This policy of deporting hostages and large segments of a rebellious nation was widely used by both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The Babylonian practice of settling the exiles in self-contained villages is demonstrated in texts from Nippur. While it was a traumatic event for the people of Judah, they were encouraged to settle into their new situation (see Jer 29:4–23).⁶

Four expressions highlight the powerful nature of Ezekiel's experience. *The heavens were opened* (1) can describe torrential rain, which may be linked to the onset of the approaching storm (4). But more metaphorically the expression describes a parting of the invisible barrier between earth and heaven such that the observer can see what is going on in the very presence of God. *Visions of God*, or perhaps better, ‘divine visions’, describes not merely the appearance of God's glory that was already winging and wheeling its way across the horizon, but the whole experience of seeing divine realities behind the everyday, canalside perspective on events. *The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel*; this standard expression for the prophetic gifting completes the audiovisual experience. For Ezekiel it was not merely a word that he heard, but one that he absorbed into his whole being (2:9–3:3). Finally, *the hand of the Lord was upon him*. This speaks of overpowering pressure and compulsion, which in Ezekiel's case seems to have involved physical as well as psychological and spiritual manifestations. He uses the expression seven times in the book.⁷

A single word, however, captures the amazement of the moment more than any other. It is the simple expression *There* (3). Emphatic in its position, it focuses on the contrast between *what* is being described (or about to be), and *where* it is all happening. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is appearing, is speaking, is putting forth his mighty hand, *there*, in the land of exile, uncleanness and despair. Ezekiel, with his fellow exiles, most probably

⁵ Matthews, et al. Eze 1:2

⁶ Matthews, et al. Eze 1:3

⁷ Wright. 44–45

believed that God was far away, or to be more precise, that they were far away from God's presence in the Jerusalem temple. The exiles felt despised and rejected by those who had been left behind in Jerusalem (11:15). Yet even there, in remarkable similarity to Psalm 139:7–12, the powerful presence of Yahweh in all his glory was about to be revealed. God is *there* in Babylon! What comfort! And yet, as the storm clouds rush in over the plain towards Ezekiel, he knows that God is coming in judgment, terrifying judgment as it will turn out.⁸

Although Ezekiel, like other Old Testament prophets, hears the word of the Lord, for him the visual aspect of God's revelation has a particularly prominent place. Thus the book is in important ways structured around the vision of God's throne-chariot prepared for action in chapter 1, that of the abominations that cause the glory to depart from the Jerusalem temple in chapters 8–11, the vision of the renewal of the dry bones in chapter 37, and the vision of the new temple in chapters 40–48. God is dramatically at work even in the apparently hopeless situation of the exiles, a work that the prophet is invited to "show and tell" to those around him.⁹

Ezekiel 1:4-28

The vision begins with a storm (4) and ends with a throne (26). It has thereby combined two very powerful theophany traditions that are found in Israel's worship. One describes Yahweh as 'riding on the wings of the storm', and includes such features as strong wind and lightning.¹¹ The other describes him as 'enthroned above the cherubim', or simply as seated on a throne above a heavenly platform. The combination of both kinds of theophanic imagery into one massive multimedia experience must have been virtually beyond description. Whereas the throne imagery spoke of static power and authority, the storm imagery transformed it into dynamic movement and freedom.¹⁰

Two kinds of imagery dominate the opening vision of Ezekiel: images of motion and images of judgment. In contrast to Isaiah's static temple imagery, Ezekiel's vision is filled with movement. Whereas Isaiah saw the Lord seated in the temple, Ezekiel's vision opens with the Lord in the midst of a motion-filled "windstorm" (*rûaḥ sē'ārâ*, Ezek. 1:4) in the land of the exiles. God is not dead or sleeping, nor is he restricted to the temple; on the contrary, he is living and active and on the move. The Lion of Judah is restless. In general, such a depiction of the Lord's coming to intervene in the lives of his people would be a positive development. However, in this case God's activity does not bode well for the temple or for Jerusalem. It is only a short step from Ezekiel 1, where the glory of God is in motion, to Ezekiel 10, where the glory abandons the temple, leaving it defenseless against the Babylonian invaders.¹¹

Ezekiel's vision, however bizarre it may seem to us, draws on a number of traditional ancient Near Eastern elements. The imagery of the Lord riding on the storm, surrounded by fire and lightning, was a common way of describing the coming of the divine warrior (see

⁸ Wright. 45

⁹ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 47). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁰ Wright. 46

¹¹ Duguid. 57–58

Ps. 18:9–14; Nah. 1:3). The wheels of Ezekiel’s vision represent a chariot, another typical aspect of the divine warrior image. Frequently, the image of God as a warrior was adopted by the prophets to speak of the Lord’s coming to deliver his people. In this instance, however, it is significant that the windstorm is coming “out of the north” (Ezek. 1:4), the traditional source of Judah’s foes. The divine warrior is here approaching to wage war against his own people, not to deliver them. The covenant-breaking people can find no comfort in the imminent personal arrival of their God.¹²

Four-faced creatures. The purpose of these creatures is also multifaceted. By being able to look in all four directions, the creatures serve the same function as the wheels of the chariot (v. 17), which could travel in any of the four directions. Both represent the power of the deity to be present anyway and to be aware of all events on earth. In addition, the animal bodies represented here (lion, eagle, bull/ox) all have parallels in Near Eastern art, and each symbolizes specific powers or attributes that signify the omnipotence of God: the lion indicates strength (2 Sam 1:23); the eagle indicates speed and gracefulness (Is 40:31); the ox indicates fertility (Ps 106:19–20).¹³

Early in the history of the Christian Church, these four faces came to be identified with the four evangelists, who, in spite of their different accents, all proclaim the same Gospel.¹⁴

As well as being God’s throne-bearers, the cherubim are the guardians of God’s holiness, God’s heavenly bodyguard. The threatening nature of their presence comes from their role as enforcers of divine judgment. Thus, when the man and the woman were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, cherubim were appointed to bar the way back into God’s presence, preventing any intrusion of the profane into the realm of God’s holiness (Gen. 3:24).¹⁵

Wherever the spirit would go, they went. Neither wings nor legs play any role in the movement of the creatures. *spirit.* Hbr *ruach*. In v 4, it meant “wind.” Here, it must mean “spirit,” but whose? It could refer to the will of the creatures. But God’s Spirit plays a prominent role elsewhere in Ezk, often lifting Ezekiel himself up and carrying him various places. The divine element cannot be eliminated here, much as the NT describes our human spirits as indwelt by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

beryl. Likely a bluish-green stone, one of the precious stones in the breastpiece of the high priest (Ex 28:30; 39:13).¹⁷

throne chariot. Since the gods in the ancient Near East often participated in processions, there were vehicles used for their transport. Engraved cylinder seals from the end of the third millennium show a deity standing in a four-wheeled chariot/cart drawn by a

¹² Duguid. 58

¹³ Matthews, et al. Eze 1:6

¹⁴ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1310). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

¹⁵ Duguid. 59

¹⁶ Engelbrecht. 1310

¹⁷ Engelbrecht. 1310

composite quadruped with a lion's head and wings. Assyrian reliefs show wheeled thrones for both kings and gods that also feature poles for bearers to use to carry the throne.¹⁸

The climax of his vision now arrives. Above the creatures was a vast crystal *expanse* or 'dome' (nrsv),¹⁹ which sparkled with *awesome* white brightness. Although above the outstretched wings of the living creatures it was not actually supported by them, since it remained in place when, for once, *they stood still and lowered their wings* (24). Nevertheless, their position is certainly reminiscent of the sky-bearing posture of similar creatures in ancient near-eastern art.

Being crystal, this great platform had a transparent quality, so that Ezekiel could see through it to what was higher still—*what looked like a throne* (26). In contrast to the gleaming whiteness of the platform, the throne was a brilliant, rich blue, as though constructed from one of the most precious stones of the ancient world, lapis lazuli. And on the throne, with all the added brilliance of contrasting fiery amber in the centre and all the colours of the rainbow around the radiant edges, *was a figure like that of a man*. The climactic vision of the deity himself is in human form—though Ezekiel is careful to qualify all his descriptions here with repeated use of 'appearance of', 'something like' (nrsv).¹⁹

glory of the Lord. Hbr *kebod yahweh*. Esp important in Ezk. Sometimes "glory" simply implies "splendor, fame." But here it implies nothing less than God Himself in preincarnate revelation (cf Ex 33:18). The word refers not only to the divine figure on the throne but also to the apparatus underneath it. After the incarnation, the NT describes Christ as glorious (e.g., at the transfiguration [Mt 17:2; Mk 9:2-3; Lk 9:29-31]; at the throne scene [Rv 4]; in Isaiah's vision [Jn 12:41]; at the second coming, [Mt 19:28; 25:31])²⁰

The word essentially has to do with 'weight', or 'substance'. It portrays the sense of God's majestic reality, the overwhelming power of his presence, the 'weight' of his eternal Being. At least four other dimensions of the glory of Yahweh are implied in the dynamic symbolism of Ezekiel's vision.²¹

While the emphasis of Ezekiel 1 is almost exclusively on the gathering clouds that threaten rain, yet the mention of the rainbow (v. 28) allows the possibility of a ray of hope even in the midst of the gloom. That hope does not deny the possibility of judgment, any more than the rainbow denies the possibility of rain. Indeed, without the rain there could be no rainbow! What the rainbow asserts is the faithfulness of God even in the midst of overwhelming judgment. It is a sign of God's self-commitment to his promise. God's judgment must fall on his rebellious people, yet because of commitment to his covenant he will not wipe them out. In the darkness of exile, God's covenant faithfulness, his *hesed*, was Israel's only hope.²²

¹⁸ Matthews, et al. Eze 1:26

¹⁹ Wright. 50-51

²⁰ Engelbrecht. 1311

²¹ Wright. 51

²² Duguid. 59

Themes

- Exile

“Exile. It is not simply being homeless. Rather, it is knowing that you do have a home, but that your home has been taken over by enemies.

Exile. It is not being without roots. On the contrary, it is having deep roots which have now been plucked up, and there you are, with roots dangling, writhing in pain, exposed to a cold and jeering world, longing to be restored to native and nurturing soil. Exile is knowing precisely where you belong, but knowing that you can't go back, not yet.”

Tamara Eskenazi, “Exile and Dreams of Return,”²³

- Presence of God with His people in exile
- Sovereignty of God
- Power of God in exile

²³ Duguid. 48