

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST VISION: THE GLORY OF THE LORD

THE TIME OF THE VISION (1:1–3)

¹Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. ²(On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, ³the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the LORD came upon him.)

Verses 1, 2. Ezekiel's account of his prophecies begins with a narrative about his **visions of God**. These "visions" occurred in **the thirtieth year**. There is much discussion as to the meaning of this date.¹ Some scholars think that it is an attempt to date the prophecy more specifically than "in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile" (v. 2). Others suggest that this is an attempt to identify the date as the "thirtieth year" from the time when Hilkiyah the high priest found the book of Torah in the temple (2 Kings 22:8–13). In other words, Bible historians have counted backward from the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile (mentioned in v. 2), arriving at the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, when he found "the book of the law."

However, the more logical explanation is to link this date to

¹Anthony D. York offered several explanations as to the meaning of the "thirtieth year" in "Ezekiel 1: Inaugural and Restoration Visions?" *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (January 1977): 82–98.

the age of Ezekiel. (See “A Timeline of Ezekiel” in Appendix 2.) Ezekiel was a priest (v. 3), and a Levite entered his priestly ministry at the age of thirty (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 39, 43; see 1 Chron. 23:3). Therefore, Ezekiel apparently received this vision and his commission in the very year he began his priestly service. Thus God involved Ezekiel in a ministry immediately upon his becoming a priest, and we are allowed to witness the work of Ezekiel from his first commission.

The statement **I saw visions** is the first direct claim of inspiration for the book (v. 1; see Is. 1:1). As is explained in 1 Samuel 9:9, one who saw visions was a prophet. The fact that **the heavens were opened** indicates that God was allowing Ezekiel to see things both in and from the heavenly realm. No indication is given as to whether or not this event took place in a dream-like state. Notice that Ezekiel also saw “visions of God.” These incredible visions of God are described—in symbolic details—beginning in verse 4.

The vision came to Ezekiel by **the river Chebar**, a minor river or a canal in Babylonia. The location of the Chebar, if it can be identified with the Babylonian *naru kabari*, was between Babylon and Nippur.

The fifth [day of the fourth] month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile would be July 593(2) B.C. Jehoiachin was deported to Babylonia in 598(7) B.C. Therefore, Ezekiel received his commission in 593(2) B.C. It is significant that the year of King Jehoiachin’s exile is the focal point of all dating within the book.

Although Zedekiah was king in Jerusalem at this time, Ezekiel chose to date the prophecy from the reign of Jehoiachin, because Jehoiachin was still considered king. Zedekiah was not really the king; he was made king by Nebuchadnezzar in 598(7) B.C., after the second deportation, in which both the legitimate king and Ezekiel were among ten thousand captives taken to Babylonia (see 2 Kings 24:10–17).

Verse 3. The phrase **Ezekiel the priest** presents some grammatical ambiguity; the phrase “the priest” could either be referring to the father or to the son. It does seem, though, that Ezekiel himself was a priest. This makes two sections especially

significant: (1) chapter 4, where Ezekiel is asked to eat unclean food and (2) chapter 8, where Ezekiel is taken, in a vision, to see the abominations associated with the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is called by his name only one other time within this book (24:24). He is described as a “sign” in 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27. “By his action what Yahweh is about to bring upon his people is already present. The prophet belongs inseparably to the ‘message.’”²

Ezekiel was a priest and the **son of Buzi**. Nothing is known about Buzi—though, as Ezekiel’s father, he also would have been a priest. The fact that Ezekiel was a priest is significant to the whole of his book and his ministry. The text is filled with allusions to the law of Moses, including priestly responsibilities, the temple, and personal purity. Ezekiel was able to convict the people of violating God’s covenant and ignoring His laws and statutes.

The word of the LORD should be linked with the vision mentioned in verse 1. Those visions were, in fact, the word of the Lord. Ezekiel was not about to embark upon a discussion of his personal view of the ills of Israel. His ministry, like that of every true prophet of God, was to deliver the divine message. The phrase “the word of the Lord” occurs sixty times in the text of Ezekiel, clearly indicating the origin of his message (see 6:3; 25:3; 36:4).

Verse 3 says that **the hand of the LORD** came upon Ezekiel (see 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1). This phrase conveys more than just the idea that the prophet received a message from God; it implies the power of God and the submissiveness of Ezekiel. The word “hand” is often equivalent to power. (Compare Gen. 39:8 and Ex. 3:8 in the KJV and the NASB.)

Verses 1 through 3 provide evidence of Ezekiel’s divine call:

1. “The heavens were opened,” affording Ezekiel a special revelation given only to the true prophets of God. (Compare Ezekiel’s vision to the one given to John in Rev. 4.)

²Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trans. Ronald E. Clements, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 54.

2. "I saw visions of God." Ezekiel was allowed to see God in a special way.

3. "The word of the LORD" came expressly to Ezekiel. We see a clear indication of inspiration; Ezekiel was given—directly—a message from God.

4. "The hand of the LORD came upon him." God was going to give Ezekiel the strength to bear and proclaim the message. According to Ralph H. Alexander, "'The hand of the Lord was upon him' connotes the idea of God's strength on behalf of the person involved (3:14; cf. Isa 25:10; 41:10, 20), a concept . . . in the name 'Ezekiel' (*yehezqel*), which means 'God strengthens.'"³

THE VISION (1:4–28)

Ezekiel described his vision in figurative ("apocalyptic") language. Many people have decided to read the book, only to be discouraged after encountering the first chapter. While some find the apocalyptic images fascinating as well as challenging, others would prefer to receive their information without so much effort. Simply stated, the goal of this vision was to give a demonstration of God and His magnificent glory (vv. 1, 28). Why did God not just state truths about His glory in decisive terms? Why did He use the figurative method of establishing such concepts?

First, we must remind ourselves of the perfect nature of God and His omniscience. God knows the best and the most perfect way to communicate important truths. Since God is spirit (Jn. 4:23, 24), human terms cannot fully convey His glory. Therefore, the use of apocalyptic visions such as this one enables us to see His awesomeness and His magnificent glory in terms that we are more likely to appreciate.

Second, a difficult task lay ahead of Ezekiel. He was being sent to a stubborn and obstinate people (3:7). This vision would help him to recall the greatness of the God he was serving. By

³Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 6:755.

remembering this vision, Ezekiel would be continually strengthened and motivated to face the obstacles of preaching to such a people.

Third, we must remember that many people during Old Testament times believed that the gods of conquering nations were the stronger gods. This is the reason they deserted their gods to serve the gods of a conquering army. This point is illustrated throughout the Old Testament. What is remarkable is how the Israelites were so inclined to idolatry that they did what the other nations did not do: adopt the gods of the defeated nations! (See 2 Kings 16:3; 17:8.)

Ezekiel, as a result of the vision, would have sufficient evidence that the Babylonian gods—or any other gods for that matter—were powerless, unlike the one true God. He would be motivated to proclaim the excellencies of the Lord and encourage the people to renew their covenant with Him. If they would do this, they would find a God who was willing to forgive and reestablish them in their land.

What should we keep in mind when we are interpreting this type of literature? Ezekiel was painting a picture, and all the parts help to form a whole. These parts do not necessarily have meanings in and of themselves. Many times, phrases with the word “like” or “as” are used. This construction, called a “simile,” tells us that Ezekiel’s description is, at best, a likeness—an approximation—of what he was actually seeing. “Likeness” (לְמוֹתָהּ, *d^emuth*) occurs sixteen times in Ezekiel, and “like” is the preposition *k^e* (כִּי), found eighteen times in chapter 1 (166 times in Ezek.). In addition, notice the use of “like” with “appearance” (כְּמַרְאֵהָ, *k^emar’eh*).

In preparation for studying this incredible vision, we should note the four predominant aspects of the vision. Each one should be considered in regard to how it contributes to the picture of the glory, majesty, and power of God.

1. The four living creatures (vv. 4–14)
2. The wheels (vv. 15–21)
3. The expanse (vv. 22–25)
4. The throne (vv. 26–28)

The Four Living Creatures (1:4–14)

1:4–6

⁴As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire. ⁵Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. ⁶Each of them had four faces and four wings.

Verse 4. As the stage was set for this vision, Ezekiel noted four features that seemed to indicate that severe weather was approaching. (1) He said that **a storm wind was coming from the north** which is frequently the direction from which God’s judgments are said to come (see Jer. 1:14; 4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20). (2) He saw **a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually**—suggesting a powerful electrical storm with continual lightning flashes. (3) He saw **a bright light** round about it, apparently shining brightly behind and around the storm clouds. (4) He saw **something like glowing metal**—lights in this storm that were atypical of any storm Ezekiel had ever seen. It had flashing lights with the vividness of hot metal when it was brought out of a fire.

Verse 5. Within this storm, Ezekiel saw four figures resembling **living beings** (see Rev. 4). Though the beings looked like men (having **human form**), each one “had four faces and four wings” (vv. 6, 9, 11; 10:5, 12, 14; 10:21, 22; see Rev. 4:8, where the living beings had six wings). Perhaps the reference to “human form” is because the creatures stood upright, with their legs straight (v. 7).

The use of “four” is thought by some to suggest completeness (see Is. 11:12). Notice the four faces and wings here, the four scenes of false worship in chapter 8, and the four plagues in chapter 14. In this context, “four” suggests God’s omnipresence: With His servants facing every direction at once, nothing can escape His notice. The face of a man was predominant, facing to the front on each being (v. 10), while the lion’s face was on

the right, the bull's (or cherub's; see 10:14, 22) face on the left, and the eagle's face on the back. The "four wings" would provide an extra degree of mobility. These beings were cherubim (10:18–22).

Verse 6. This verse refers to **each of them**. In the description, the gender of the verb and pronoun references to the creatures change. Out of forty-five references, twelve are the grammatically proper feminine plural; the others are masculine plural.⁴ The significance of this, as with other unusual grammatical features of the chapter, is unknown.⁵ Those who draw attention to these anomalies must remember that such inconsistency is common in apocalyptic literature.

1:7–14

⁷Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, ⁹their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. ¹⁰As for the form of their faces, each had the face of a man; all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies. ¹²And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went. ¹³In the midst of the living beings there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches darting back and forth among the living beings. The fire was bright, and lightning was flashing from the fire. ¹⁴And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.

⁴Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 22 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 44.

⁵See Daniel C. Fredericks, "Diglossia, Revelation, and Ezekiel's Inaugural Rite," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (June 1998): 197.

Verse 7. While the **straight** legs mentioned depict the creature standing upright like a man, the **feet** are like those of a **calf**, providing a high degree of stability and durability, as well as mobility. These feet also drew Ezekiel's attention because they were glowing brightly like **burnished bronze**.

Verse 8. Ezekiel observed **human hands** under the wings (see 10:8, 21). Perhaps this feature would provide the ability to do the many versatile works that human hands can do. The description reminds us that one of the primary functions of these beings is to serve God in ministering to mankind.

Verse 9. Two of the four **wings** were in the act of flying, so stretched out that the extremity of each touched a wing of the next living creature, which also had its wings outstretched (vv. 9, 11, 23). This was when they were in motion, although the text never says that the wings were *moving*. Movement of the wings might be assumed from the noise they made (v. 24). While Ezekiel described these beings as cherubim, the four wings mentioned here remind us of the description of the seraphim mentioned in Isaiah 6:2 (see Ezek. 1:6, 9, 11; 10:5, 12, 14, 21, 22; Rev. 4:8). The Jewish Targum on this passage explained the meaning of these wings and their respective positions: "Holy ministers are in the sky before Him, each with six wings. With two they are covering their faces, lest they see the Lord. With two they are covering their bodies, lest they be seen; and with two they are ministering."⁶ Ezekiel explained that two of the wings cover "their bodies" (v. 11). He also noted that when they stood still, they "dropped their wings" (vv. 24, 25).

Before describing the appearance of their faces, Ezekiel observed that their faces **did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward**. This point is repeated in verse 12 (also in 10:22). The four together formed a square and never altered their respective positions. The significance of this is seen in that the creatures never needed to be delayed by the act of turning. With astonishing quickness ("like bolts of lightning"; v. 14), they were able to respond to the bidding of God.

⁶A Targum is a somewhat paraphrased translation of a portion of the Old Testament in Aramaic. Tg. Ezek. 1:9 [Targum of Ezekiel].

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Verse 10. Their “four faces”—those of a man, a bull, an eagle, and a lion—represent the major areas of created life.

Man is God’s ultimate creation commissioned to subdue the earth; the lion is the king of wild beasts; the ox (or bull) is the strongest of domesticated animals; and the eagle rules the air. The chariot was borne aloft above the totality of creation, a symbol of the fact that nature is under the domination of the Lord.⁷

A Midrash to Exodus 15:1 supports the idea presented above:

... four kinds of proud beings were created in the world: the proudest of all—man; of birds—the eagle; of domestic animals—the ox; of wild animals—the lion; and all of them are stationed beneath the chariot of the Holy One. . . .”⁸

Only the greatest of animals are worthy to be the bearers to God Almighty.

The general meaning of the faces could be as follows:

- **Man**—rational and moral nature, suggesting wisdom and intelligence.
- **Lion**—majesty and strength, suggesting power, rule, and authority.
- **Bull** (“ox”; KJV)—patient and productive service, representing labor, strength, and energy.
- **Eagle**—winged velocity and swiftness, indicating vision and flight.

Ezekiel wrote, “. . . so I knew that they were cherubim” (10:20;

⁷Carl G. Howie, *The Book of Ezekiel, The Book of Daniel, The Layman’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 13 (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1961), 22.

⁸*Exodus Rabba* 23:13. A Midrash is a commentary on the Scriptures. The word transliterated “Midrash” occurs twice in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 13:22; 24:27).

see 10:21, 22). What are cherubim? These creatures always appear in a most intimate relation to the glory of God. They are seen as engaging in worship and service to God. In Ezekiel's vision, they were bearing up and transporting the throne of God (see 10:1–4).

Cherubim are spiritual creatures (Ps. 18:10; Heb. 9:5). Some think they are angels of the highest order, but that idea is not provable by Scripture; they are never called angels.

In ancient Israel, the cherubim were God's attendants and messengers. Representations of cherubim were found in the tabernacle (Ex. 36:35). Having these did not violate Exodus 20:4 because they were not worshiped. When Solomon built the temple, he had two gold cherubim, fifteen feet high, standing separately from the ark but still located in the most holy place (2 Chron. 3:10). Passages for further study include Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18–22; 26:31; 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 22:11; 1 Kings 6:26–35.

Verses 11, 12. Ezekiel noted concerning the wings that **each had two touching another being** (v. 11). This is reminiscent of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, whose wings touched above the ark (Ex. 25:18–22).

The spirit provided the leadership for the four living beings. Wherever the spirit would go, these beings would follow (see v. 20). Since this is a section about God's glory, it is logical that this spirit would be the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God. While it is possible that "the spirit" within them is a reference to their own spirit, it seems that the creatures were following the lead of the spirit (v. 12)—suggesting that they were following something independent of themselves. However "spirit" is understood, it would be contrary to the vision for these creatures to be operating apart from the will of God.

Verses 13, 14. Ezekiel saw something that looked like **torches or burning coals of fire**, as if coming from the bodies of the living beings themselves (v. 13). In apocalyptic literature, fire frequently symbolizes God's judgment (see Ps. 18:8; 50:3). This image seems to demonstrate that His judgment is quick and decisive, covering all the earth. Not only was **lightning** flashing from the coals of fire, but the living beings themselves **ran**

to and fro like bolts of lightning (v. 14). Their movements were quick and awe-inspiring. A vision of power was found among these creatures.

The Wheels (1:15–21)

¹⁵Now as I looked at the living beings, behold, there was one wheel on the earth beside the living beings, for each of the four of them. ¹⁶The appearance of the wheels and their workmanship was like sparkling beryl, and all four of them had the same form, their appearance and workmanship being as if one wheel were within another. ¹⁷Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions without turning as they moved. ¹⁸As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about. ¹⁹Whenever the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. And whenever the living beings rose from the earth, the wheels rose also. ²⁰Wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go in that direction. And the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels. ²¹Whenever those went, these went; and whenever those stood still, these stood still. And whenever those rose from the earth, the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels.

Verses 15–17. The wheels are the *second part* of the vision. Translating the description is challenging. The Hebrew term *שִׁשְׁבִּיט* (*tharshish*) has been suggested to mean **sparkling beryl** (v. 16), chrysolite, yellow jasper, or topaz.⁹ It is important to remember that the wheels are a symbol for something and are not meant to be interpreted literally. The wheels probably represent the idea of the activity of God or His *movement*. The Jews in Babylonia perhaps did not believe that God could come to them there. The idea existed in the ancient world, and in many Jewish people's minds, that God was confined to one geographical

⁹John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 56–57.

area (1 Kings 20:23, 28). They may have believed that He was limited to the area surrounding Jerusalem and therefore could not be with them in Babylonia. These wheels show otherwise. The omnipresence of God is being described in apocalyptic terms.

Within another could mean that the second wheel was concentric to the first wheel, like an archery target, or that it was perpendicular to the first wheel. This construction would allow the wheels to be rolling constantly, never needing to turn (v. 17).

Verses 18, 19. While discussing the wheels of this divine chariot, Ezekiel described the rims as **lofty and awesome** (v. 18). This expression indicates not only that the rims were very high or tall, but also that they had a frightening appearance.¹⁰ It has been well documented that kings in ancient cultures surrounded themselves with various objects signifying power. This vision far surpasses anything an earthly king could create or anything one could imagine for a pagan god. The **eyes** emphasize the all-seeing nature of God. Even though the children of Israel were in Babylonia, a faraway country, God could still see what they were doing—both good and bad. This introduces the concept of individual responsibility, which is covered more completely in chapter 18 (see 8:12; 9:9; Ps. 94:7). The wheels and eyes, combined, demonstrate both the omnipresence and the omniscience of God. Certainly, the “glory of God” is being fully realized in this spectacular vision. Moving in complete harmony, **the living beings** did not move independently of the wheels (v. 19).

Verses 20, 21. These wheels were not inanimate objects; they had spirits inside them (v. 20). The fact that Ezekiel repeated this point is noteworthy. How were the wheels and the living beings able to move in perfect harmony? Ezekiel explained: **For the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels** (v. 21b; emphasis added). The same spirit that led the living beings also dwelt within the wheels. Such a characteristic is apparently not

¹⁰Nahum M. Waldman, “A Note on Ezekiel 1:18,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (December 1984): 614–18. Waldman offered this translation: “As for their rims—these having majesty and fearfulness—their rims were filled with eyes all around, all four of them” (617).

something Ezekiel could witness, but he knew this truth through revelation.

The Expanse (1:22–25)

²²Now over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal, spread out over their heads. ²³Under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward the other; each one also had two wings covering its body on the one side and on the other. ²⁴I also heard the sound of their wings like the sound of abundant waters as they went, like the voice of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army camp; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings. ²⁵And there came a voice from above the expanse that was over their heads; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings.

Verse 22. The **expanse** is the *third part* of the vision. This word is the Hebrew word *רָקִיעַ* (*rakia'*), the same word used in Genesis 1:6–8 for the hard plane dividing the upper from the lower waters. The word “firmament” is used in the KJV, although this is not a good translation. The expanse seems to represent the widespread influence of God. Ezekiel did not dwell upon the expanse. He merely described that which provided the inspiring backdrop to the whole scene. Nevertheless, it appears that the expanse provided a firm, level surface upon which the throne of God was resting (see Rev. 4:6).

Verses 23, 24. It is obvious that the **wings** of the living beings continued to impress Ezekiel (v. 23). In this section he repeated their location, but this time elaborated on the tremendous sound (v. 24) being made by these wings. He offered three analogies: The noise was **like the sound of abundant waters**, which provide a tremendous roar—almost a deafening sound to one standing near a waterfall. It was **like the voice of the Almighty**—a voice that completely terrified those gathered around Mount Sinai in Exodus 20, but sometimes a term referring to thunder. The **sound of tumult** [was] **like the sound of an army camp**—which would involve a variety of sounds, from

the clanking of gear and weapons to the grunts, groans, and cries of the soldiers. Not only was Ezekiel impressed with what he was *seeing*, but he was also awestruck with what he was *hearing*. He was able to witness God's glory in different ways.

Verse 25. In spite of all the noise generated by the wings of the four living creatures, Ezekiel was able to hear **a voice from above the expanse**—from the location of the throne of God. Ezekiel mentioned no words that were uttered, at least not yet, but the Lord spoke to him (see ch. 2).

The Throne (1:26–28)

²⁶Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. ²⁷Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. ²⁸As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.

Verse 26. The **throne** is the *fourth part* of the vision. What Ezekiel saw was not an actual throne but something **resembling a throne**. It was **like lapis lazuli**, a sapphire-like stone that was very valuable in the ancient world. Ezekiel did not dwell on the throne itself, because He who is on the throne is far more important. Nevertheless, a throne is always an image of power and authority. The word “throne” is a key word in the revelation. Here, Ezekiel was relating the universal power of the “King of kings.” God's throne rises above the feeble attempts of authority and rule of man; it is far more glorious than the imagined thrones of pagan gods.

Ezekiel described God in symbolic terms, saying that He had **the appearance of a man**. He took great pains to avoid making

God creature-like, because God is indescribable and cannot be compared to anything or anyone.

Verse 27. The awe-inspiring portrayal of God in this verse emphasizes three primary features: His *fearsomeness*, His *radiance*, and His *majesty*. God is depicted as being surrounded from His waist up by something glowing like electrum (**glowing metal**). From His waist down, Ezekiel said that He was encompassed by what **looked like fire**. The entire figure, then, was encompassed with splendor (כְּבוֹד, *nogah*).¹¹ “Fire” is that which can destroy (in judgment) or can illuminate. Ezekiel would announce the fiery judgments of God.

Verse 28. The description in this verse includes the image of a **rainbow**. For Jews, the rainbow was a symbol of God’s mercy and God’s covenant (see Gen. 9:13). A rainbow comes after a storm. In this case, the storm of God’s judgment was coming—but there was hope. There would be a rainbow after the storm, providing hope for the future. “Just as the colors of the rainbow are not real but merely the effect of sunlight, so the likeness of the glory of the Lord as visualized by the prophet was only the reflection of the Divine light.”¹²

The Hebrew word translated “glory” (כְּבוֹד, *kabod*) is a technical term describing God (Ex. 16:7; 24:16; 40:34; Lev. 9:6, 23; Num. 14:10; 16:19; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 7:1). His “glory” was generally associated with either the tabernacle or the temple. It was not seen elsewhere. By having Ezekiel see His glory far from the temple, God helped the Israelites to understand that He is not limited to one place—specifically, the temple at Jerusalem. Before, they would have felt cut off from God Almighty, but now He made them realize that they could still have a relationship with Him. The divine glory was not identified with storm clouds, angelic beings, or flashes of lightning. It was something peculiar to God Himself. While He exhibited certain human appearances or characteristics (1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22, 23), God obviously is something far different than human beings.

¹¹Ibid., 618.

¹²S. Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino Press, 1950), 8.

In each vision Ezekiel was careful to distinguish between God's glory and its attendant circumstances.¹³

This is the first occurrence of the phrase **the glory of the LORD**, one of the key phrases in the book (1:28; 3:12, 23; 10:4, 18; 11:23; 43:4, 5; 44:4). Ezekiel seems to have structured his book around this phrase; the word "glory" occurs twenty-three times. In chapter 1 the glory is described, in 10:18 the glory departs, and in 43:5 the glory returns.

When Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord, he said, **I fell on my face**. Why did he do this? Death resulted if one looked upon the face of God (Ex. 33:20). When Ezekiel realized who he was seeing, he dropped to the ground and covered his face so that he might live. Ezekiel is one of many who were overwhelmed by witnessing the glory of the Lord: Jacob (Gen. 32:30), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6), Isaiah (Is. 6:5), Daniel (Dan. 10:8, 9), and John (Rev. 1:17) all responded with similar reactions.

APPLICATION

God's Great Attributes

This apocalyptic vision presents God's greatness and majesty.

Three truths are taught about the nature and the attributes of God: (1) He can bring judgment. He has the power—*omnipotence*—to do this, as represented by the four living creatures. (2) He can bring about righteous judgment. He has the knowledge—*omniscience*—to do this, as represented by the wheels and the eyes (see Eccles. 12:13, 14). (3) He will bring about universal judgment. Because of His ability to be everywhere—*omnipresence*—His power is not limited to Judea, and no man can escape justice (see Rev. 20:11–14).

The rainbow reminds us of God's mercy. God made the rainbow as a sign of His covenant with Noah. Though we are sinful, God has shown us mercy. His new covenant offers hope for salvation through Jesus' blood (see 1 Jn. 1:7; Eph. 1:7).

D.P.

¹³Everett F. Harrison, "A Neglected Apologetic," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 95 (October-December 1938): 478.

Preaching in a Difficult Time (1:1–3)

Every preacher should observe the kind of prophet Ezekiel was: He was a unique prophet for an extreme time in history.

He had a divine ministry. Ezekiel had a word from God. Through him, God was going to reveal His message to the people in captivity.

He had a relevant ministry. Ezekiel was placed among the people. He would not be sending them a letter, but he would give out God's message from the midst of them, as one of them.

He had a compassionate ministry. Ezekiel stood with God's message at a stressful time. From the viewpoint of Judah, these were the worst of times. They had been driven from their land and had received the sentence of living in a foreign land. This tragedy resulted from their sin, but God's mercy was still extended to them.

Ezekiel's Vision of God (1:4–22)

What does this vision tell us about God? Ezekiel saw God in a representative way, as he had never seen Him before.

First, we are reminded that God had not forgotten His people. We will give up on ourselves before God does.

Second, God is glorious and beyond our ability to picture. These symbols leave our minds spinning with wonder and amazement.

Third, God is almighty and omnipresent. The vision suggests God's greatness and His eternal nature.

We should fall on our knees in reverence and respect for God. In the presence of the true and living God, Ezekiel's heart quaked with the solemn reverence that is due Him.

E.C.

"Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" (1:15–21)

The wheels of Ezekiel 1 have received much attention and spark the imagination to ponder what they looked like and what purposes they served. Did they look like ancient chariot wheels? Could they have looked more like a space station or transporter? Questions like these are sometimes asked when reading apocalyptic literature.

One must approach prophetic studies responsibly. While an

eager literalist can misinterpret the symbolism found in Ezekiel, another reader may have an aversion to difficult passages in the Scriptures. This person may erroneously conclude that the Book of Ezekiel is not worth the effort to read. What we must recognize is that apocalyptic literature, although both sensational and difficult, has its own unique beauty.

Try to imagine the exiled Jews' situation. They were displaced. Not only were they suffering the pains of a foreign military's occupation and the destruction of their way of life, but they also were learning how to live in a new culture and speak a new language. The gods of Babylonia seemed to be the victors of this terrible battle; and the Jews' own conception of Yahweh, who allowed these things to happen, was being challenged.

As a people defeated, displaced, and distressed, they needed theological answers for their plight. How appropriate were the wheels of God's transport! At a time when they needed Him the most, the message Ezekiel delivered from his vision reassured them of God's universal presence. Indeed, even though the nation of Israel had rebelled against their Lord, He continued to move among them—no matter where they were—and to provide another opportunity for their deliverance.

The Voice of the Lord (1:24, 25)

In verses 24 and 25 we see two references to a voice. One sound was "like the voice of the Almighty," and another was the "voice" from the throne of the Lord. This theophany must have been an amazing and fearful experience. In several places in Scripture, God's powerful voice is compared to earth-shaking thunder.

In Exodus 20, when God announced the Ten Commandments, we read that "the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and . . . when they saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance" (v. 18).

When God interrogated Job from the whirlwind, He asked, "Do you have an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like His?" (Job 40:9).

Psalms 29 is perhaps one of the most elaborate depictions of

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God's voice as thunder in the Bible.¹⁴ In this psalm God is represented as a thunderstorm moving across Palestine, and "the voice of the LORD" serves as a metaphor for thunder. As we read "the voice of the LORD is powerful" and "the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness," we are to imagine His presence and might as awesome as this severe weather wreaking havoc in the wilderness.

The Almighty knows how to capture our attention. When His Word is brought before us, the question we must ask ourselves is whether or not we are ready and willing to obey.

T.P.W.

¹⁴For a good discussion of Psalm 29 see Eddie Cloer, *Psalms 1–50, Truth for Today Commentary Series* (Searcy, Ark.: Resource Publications, 2004), 383–95.