

# Ezekiel's First Vision

## Ezekiel 1: 1-28a

**DIG:** When Ezekiel sees this vision, where was he? Why was he there? How old was he then? How long had he been there? Why couldn't he perform the duties of a priest? What new career had "opened up" to him instead? How do you think the previous five years in exile had prepared Ezekiel, emotionally and spiritually, for his new ministry? What does Ezekiel see? Hear? What aspects of God's nature are revealed? How does Ezekiel react to this multi-sensory experience? What must Ezekiel have felt?

**REFLECT:** God obviously has Ezekiel's attention: What does God have to do to get your attention? The way ADONAI reveals Himself to you will differ radically from Ezekiel's "special effects" version. Why is that? Are feelings the engine or the caboose in your relationship with the Lord? Why was Ezekiel's vision unique, unlike yours? What "light" do we have today that Ezekiel didn't have then? What aspects of God's nature revealed here appeal to you the most? Which disturb you? Why? What is your bottom-line response to Ezekiel's God?

**July 31, 593 BC during the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah**

There are scenes in our lives, a sunset, children asleep, a sporting event, or a battlefield that seem indescribable. Yet we somehow find ourselves trying to describe them nonetheless. The same dilemma is true in much of religious life and experience. There are things that ultimately defy the capacity of human speech for description, yet somehow they must be described and written. The vision of **Ezekiel** was like this. The vision was above all an experience, initially not based upon speech, but upon sight and sound. We cannot share the vision; we can only read the description, fully aware that the limiting words cannot do justice to the awesome power of the experience itself.<sup>273</sup>

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, I was among the exiles by the Kebar River (Ezekiel 1:1a). Ezekiel was thirty years old when he began his priestly ministry (Numbers 4:3). Denied the ministry of priesthood because he was in exile and there was no Temple in which to minister, **Ezekiel** received another commission - that of a prophet. **And the heavens were opened. He** received this revelation from **God** in four distinct ways. First, **the heavens were opened**. With the possible exception of **Isaiah 6:1**, this is the only time in the whole TaNaKh where the heavens were opened for someone to see what was going on. **Isaiah 6:1** also records the fact that **the prophet** also saw **YHVH** sitting upon a throne. In the B'rit Chadashah we see it four times (**Matthew 3:16; John 1:51; Revelation 4:1 and 19:11**). **And I saw visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1b)**. This is the second way **Ezekiel** received revelation from **ADONAI**.

The rabbis call this the *merkavah*, or the vision of the divine chariots. The main feature of the *merkavah* drawn from the four-faced living cherubim was their mobility. This explains the wheels of Ezekiel's vision. Isaiah saw no wheels in his vision of the divine throne (Isaiah 6:1-7) or in any vision by any other prophet. Today the *ma'aseh merkavah*, or the work of the chariot, has become the central theme for all Jewish mysticism.

On the fifth of the month - it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin - Ezekiel received revelation from the LORD in a third way: the word of God came expressly (the Hebrew here is emphatic) to Ezekiel the priest (or a member of the tribe of Levi), the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There were several reasons that the rabbis had problems with this book. The rabbinic concept was that any prophet would have to receive his call in the land of Israel. He could prophecy outside that Land, but needed to receive his call in the Land. Yet it is clear that Ezekiel received his call outside Judah, in the land of the Babylonians (Ezekiel 1:2-3a).

This vision occurred in a most appropriate time, because in that year patriots in Jerusalem and some exiles in Babylon were planning a plot against the Babylonian invader. Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, saw in this movement a rebellion against YHVH's judgment and therefore a threat to the national existence of Israel. During the critical years that preceded the fall of Tziyon, Ezekiel's messages were in the nature of exhortations against this dangerous policy and a prediction of the final fall of Zion.

The fourth way the revelation came to him was that the hand of the LORD was upon him (Ezekiel 1:3b). This phrase always signifies a miraculous working of God's power. It emphasizes a gripping. Ezekiel was gripped by the power and the influence of the Ruach HaKodesh. The spirit of prophecy overwhelmed the prophet like the grasp of a mighty hand. And because of that gripping he became a conduit of divine revelation and was about to write Scripture that is without error.

Ezekiel declares that his thirtieth year, in other words, he was thirty years old on the fifth year of the exile. We know this because he mentions his profession as being a priest. When a Levite reached his thirtieth year he would begin functioning in his priestly office (Numbers 4:23, 30, 39 and 43). Ezekiel was taken into captivity in the second deportation at the age of twenty-five (see Du - Jehoiachin Ruled For 3 Months in 598 BC). As a result of this, there was no Jewish Temple in Babylon so he could not function as a priest; consequently, on the very day he would have started his priestly ministry, he was given a prophetic ministry. Now we have the vision of the Shekinah glory.

**The four living creatures:** The vision begins in physical reality and quickly transcends into spiritual reality. I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north - an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light (Ezeki'el 1:4a). It came out of the north because that's where judgment comes for Judah as seen in Jeremiah 1:14. Although Babylon was east of Isra'el, the attacks always came from the north. Ezekiel also saw an immense cloud that when used symbolically, pictures God's glory. In fact, all these symbols used here were seen earlier on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19 and 20) to describe the visible manifestation of the LORD's presence in the form of the Shekinah glory.

The center of the fire looked like glowing metal (Ezeki'el 1:4b). This word is only used three times in the book (Ezeki'el 1:4, 27 and 8:2). In Modern Hebrew it is a very common word used for electricity. But here it is likely a combination of two Hebrew words meaning *the glowing of God*. Consequently, Ezekiel saw the glowing of YHVH Himself. The rabbis were hesitant to identify what this glowing metal was. So there was much speculation. The most common theory was that it was an angel. But because there was so much foolish speculation among rabbinic talmidim, the rabbis tried to discourage it. So they came up with this story. "A talmid was speculating on the identification of the glowing metal, and suddenly a fire came out of the glowing metal and consumed him." The prophet identified this vision of the Shekinah glory seven different times in his scroll (Ezeki'el 1:28; 3:12 and 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4 and 18-19; 11:23-23; 43:4-5) so we don't have to speculate and come up with stories about spaceships. We know exactly what it was.

And in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human. This is their most prominent feature; they tend to look human to some degree. Only later are these four living creatures identified as cherubim (Ezeki'el 10:15 and 20). In early Israelite poetry, cherubs are associated with YHVH, who drives His chariot across the sky (Psalm 18:10 and 68:4, 17-18). More to the point, they are associated with the ark, represented as a mobile throne, bearer of ADONAI-Tzva'ot, who is present above the cherubim (First Samuel 4:4). In the present context the basic idea is mobility, and it is intended to explain how the LORD, at home in the Jerusalem Temple, can now appear in the Babylonian exile.<sup>274</sup>

But each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze, which is a symbol of judgment in the TaNaKh. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. So there are four living creatures, each one is facing outward forming a square; no matter which way they went one of the cherubim was always facing forward and their wings gave them easy mobility (Ezeki'el 1:5-9).

**Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had human faces [the most prominent in front], each of the four had a lion's face on the right, each of the four had an ox's face on the left, and each of the four had an eagle's face [toward the rear]. Such were their faces on one head. They each had two wings spreading out and upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side, forming a united front with a hollow square in the middle; and each had two other wings covering its body, emphasizing their humility in the presence of God (Ezeki'el 1:10-11).**

**The rabbis teach that humans are exalted among creatures; the eagle is exalted among birds; the ox is exalted among domestic animals; the lion is exalted among wild beasts; and all of them have received dominion, and greatness has been given to them, yet they are below the chariot of the Holy One (Midrash R Shemoth).**

**Each one went straight ahead since each creature had a face in the appropriate direction. Wherever the spirit of life would go, they would go. They followed the spirit of life, coming from God, as one unit wherever it went. As God commands, then they move without turning. They didn't need to turn because they have four human faces facing in each direction. As they move, the appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches (Genesis 15:17). This fire in the hollow square in the middle of the cherubim moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. Burning coals of fire are used two ways in the TaNaKh: judgment and purification (Isaiah 6), but Ezeke'el uses it in the sense of judgment here. Then the prophet emphasizes their speed. The creatures constantly sped back and forth like flashes of lightning (Ezeki'el 1:12-14). The wind, cloud and fire are all symbols of the Shekinah glory (Psalms 18:8-13; Habakkuk 3; Jeremiah 4:11-13).**

**The wheels of Ezeke'el: The wheels made contact between the cherubim and the earth. As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. So Ezekiel saw four wheels, one beside each cherub. This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel at a right angle. That's why they can move in any direction without turning. There are two wheels at right angles. As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. Their rims were high and terrifying, and all four rims were full of eyes all around (Ezk 1:15-18). When the Bible speaks of something or someone having eyes all around, it stresses both the omnipresence of God, He sees everything, and the omniscience of God, He knows everything.**

When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. Therefore, the spirit that moves the four living creatures also moves the four wheels. Whenever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels (Ezeki'el 1:19-21). The spirit controlled the movement of both the cherubim and the wheels.

**The expanse that looked like shining crystal:** Now Ezeke'el moves his eyes upwards and begins to describe something over the cherubs. Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads (Ezeki'el 1:22 ESV). The verb underlying expanse (Hebrew: *raqia*) means *something that is spread out, either by stretching it out like a tent (Psalm 104:2) or hammering it out like metal (Exodus 39:3), specifically, the stretching out of the earth at creation (Genesis 1:6-8, 14-15, 17 and 20; Psalm 136:6; Isaiah 42:5 and 44:24), or the spreading out of the sky (Job 37:18).*<sup>275</sup>

This is the same crystal expanse that Yochanan saw in heaven: From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had the face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures . . . never stopped saying, "Holy, holy, holy is ADONAI Eloheinu, God of heaven's angelic armies, the One who was, who is and who is coming" (Rev 4:5-8).

The expanse served as a platform, which was spread above the four cherubim. Under the expanse each cherub had a pair of wings spread out straight toward those of others, and each had a pair that covered his body. I heard the sound of their wings when they moved; it was like the sound of rushing water, like the voice of Shaddai, like the noise of a tumultuous crowd or army. When they stopped, they lowered their wings. Whenever there was a sound from above the expanse over their heads, they stopped and lowered their wings. Then there came a voice from above the expanse over the heads of the cherubs as they stood and lowered their wings (Ezeki'el 1:23-25). What that voice said will be told us in Chapter 2 (see Es - [Ezeki'el's Call to Be a Prophet](#)).

**The glory of ADONAI on His throne:** Looking even further up above the expanse that was over their heads was something like a throne that looked like a sapphire. On it, above it, was what appeared to be a Man. This is God appearing in the form of a man. I saw what looked like gleaming, amber-colored fire radiating from what appeared to be His waist upward. Downward from what appeared to be His waist, I saw what looked like fire, giving a brilliant light all around Him. When Ezekiel looked upward the fire appeared to be radiating upward; and when he looked downward the fire seemed to be radiating downward. Yet there was an obvious distinction between above and below. This brilliance around Him looked like a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day (Revelation 4:3). This was how the appearance of the glory of ADONAI looked. What Ezekiel had seen was God and the Shekinah glory itself (Ezekiel 1:16-28a).

This vision will be repeated to Ezekiel three more times. The first time it will be given is in 3:22-23 to predict the coming siege of Jerusalem; the second time is in 8:4 to foretell a four-staged departure of the Shekinah glory; and the third time it will be repeated is in 43:1-3 to prophesy the return of the Shekinah glory in the messianic Kingdom.

But because Ezekiel described YHVH in the form of a man, it gave the rabbis a lot of headaches. Rashi, the most famous commentator, simply wrote this, "It is not allowed to reflect on this passage." Moses ben Maimon [known to English speakers as Maimonides and to Hebrew speakers as Rambam] (1138-1204) who was the greatest Jewish philosopher of the medieval period, was a little bit braver. In his famous book the Guide of the Perplexed, he tries to say that Ezekiel was not really seeing God in any form when he wrote, "It is noteworthy that the likeness of the man above the throne is divided. The upper part being multicolored and the lower part being the appearance of fire. Now consider how the sages clearly stated the divided likeness of man does not represent God who is above the whole chariot, but represents a part of creation. The prophet likewise says this was the appearance of Shekinah glory. But Shekinah glory is different from ADONAI Himself. All the figures in the vision refer to the glory of the LORD to the chariot, and not to Him who rides upon the chariot. For God cannot be compared with anything" (Guide, III.7).<sup>276</sup>

Finally, we must not fail to learn from the geography of Ezekiel's vision. No less than the prophet, we tend to confine the experience of God to particular places and locations. It was one thing for Ezekiel to know of ADONAI's omnipresence; it was quite another thing to separate that knowledge from the deep-seated belief that God's presence could only be experienced in the Temple in Yerushalayim. And we too can confine YHVH's presence to a particular place, whether it be in a messianic synagogue, a church, a city or a country.

For **Ezekiel**, the experience of **Ha'Shem's** presence came in a foreign land . . . **Babylon**. But more than that, it was a place in which neither **he** nor **his** fellow Jews expected **the divine presence**. Being in **Babylon** somehow symbolized being cut off from **God**. The vision that came in **the whirlwind** blowing down **from the north** forcibly reminds us that **there is no place and no circumstances in which the experience of the Eternal One may be denied**. Perhaps it is even true that **the LORD's** presence is known at the place and in the circumstances in which it is least expected. Many centuries later, Rabbi Sha'ul expressed the experience of **Ezekiel** most powerfully when (under the inspiration of **the Ruach HaKodesh**) he wrote: **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, not any powers, neither height nor depth, not anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).**<sup>277</sup>