

# Ezekiel's Bizarre Calling

## Confusing from the start

by Whitney Woollard

It's easy to get confused right off the bat when you open Ezekiel. The book begins with the most complex prophetic commission text in the Old Testament. Chapter 1 immediately launches you into a vision filled with strange things such as human-but-animal-like creatures, wheels within wheels, and fluttering wings that sound like an army. It's pretty bizarre. And if this psychedelic visionary experience isn't enough to stump you, chapters 2-3 recount how Ezekiel is commanded to eat (yes, eat!) and digest a scroll as a part of his prophetic calling. Not exactly low hanging fruit for heartwarming devotions. But don't rush past chapters 1-3. They're key to grasping the message of Ezekiel. All the plotlines and tensions are introduced here and then resolved in the remaining chapters. So if you want to understand the man and his message, you've got to figure out what's going on here.

## Priest Turned Prophet

In chapter 1, we find out that it's Ezekiel's 30th birthday. But there's no party. Any cause for celebration was ripped from this young priest-to-be when he was carried off into exile during the first Babylonian attack. Five years into exile, we find him sitting on the bank of an irrigation canal near the Israelite refugee camp outside of Babylon. It's here on his 30th birthday, the year he would have been installed as a priest, that he receives his prophetic commission from God. It isn't the kind of romanticized missionary calling we tend to envision. Not only will he not get to carry out his priestly duties in the temple (something he would have waited his whole life for), but he will have to act as a mouthpiece of Yahweh, warning Israel of impending doom. He is to preach judgment against the Israelite exiles, predicting the fall of Jerusalem and their beloved temple.

This would be devastating news for our young priest trainee. The temple was the center of Israel's religious life and the place of the divine presence. How could they continue as Yahweh's people if the temple was destroyed?! To add insult to injury, God tells him that the people won't listen to his message because their hearts are so hard (they are "stiff of face"). He would have to preach judgment against his own people day in and day out, knowing that he wouldn't see any converts—how depressing. Only a vision as glorious as Yahweh himself would sustain a priest-turned-prophet through such an agonizing call. And that's exactly what he gets.

## A Stormy Wind Approaching from the North

As Ezekiel sits by the Chebar canal, the heavens open and Ezekiel sees something like a violent storm cloud approaching from the north, the place of the divine presence and the city of the great king (see Ps 48:2). "Stormy wind" in Hebrew is *ruakh se'arah*, with *ruakh* meaning "spirit." This recalls God's activity in the creation account of Genesis 1, where the *ruakh* of God was hovering over the waters. Immediately Ezekiel realizes that this is no ordinary cloud. In fact, it's such an extraordinary *ruakh* storm that he grasps for words to describe it. He repeatedly uses "like," "likeness," or "as it were" to capture what is going on before him. It's not that it is these things, but it's like these things. So... what's it like?

He says it's like "gleaming metal" (Heb. *khashmai*), a term used only by Ezekiel. The vision is so terrifyingly glorious that he uses unique words for it. Inside it he sees four strange creatures with wings outstretched touching one another. The wings made such a loud noise when they moved that it was like the sound of rushing waters or the roar of an approaching army. These creatures had a humanlike

resemblance, but each had four faces: the faces of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Though the imagery is pretty bizarre for modern readers, it was common in ancient eastern culture to combine various beings to form complex deities. Thus, in part, Ezekiel recognizes that something supernatural is approaching.

Then he sees four wheels for each one of the living creatures and when they move they could go in any of their four directions. Somehow they could do the impossible—go straight in any direction without ever turning. Pretty sweet, huh? But don't get distracted by the mechanics of the wheels. The point is that they can roam to and fro anywhere in the earth; they're entirely mobile, which means whatever they're carrying is also mobile. That's the real shocker when Ezekiel finally pieces together what he's seeing.

Over the heads of the living creatures is the likeness of an "expanse." The Hebrew term is *raqi'a*, the same term Moses used to describe the expanse in the creation account that separated heaven and earth, alluding to a kind of "heaven and earth" separation taking place right there within the cloud! And above the expanse was a dazzling platform. On that platform was a throne and sitting on that throne was a humanlike creature, glowing and shrouded in fire. Ezekiel describes it as the likeness of a throne with the appearance of sapphire. This is another direct allusion from the Torah in Exodus 24 when Moses and the elders go up on the mountain and behold God in his glory. I think you see where this is going...

Ezekiel is piling up one Old Testament allusion after another to tell you what it is he sees—the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. He's seeing the *kavod* of the Lord! The Hebrew term *kavod* means "heavy." It can be used metaphorically like, "that's so heavy," meaning weighty or significant. It can also be used to describe the physical manifestation of someone's significance. Someone's presence can be so important, so radiant, so significant that we would describe it as his *kavod*. That's how it's used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. It was God's *kavod* that rested over the ark of the covenant and filled the Holy of Holies. It was God's *kavod* that showed up on Sinai. And now, in Ezekiel, it's his *kavod* that's riding into Babylon on this royal, wheeled throne. Yahweh himself, in all his radiant glory, has just arrived in Babylon on the "God-Mobile"!

It goes without saying that Ezekiel will never be the same. Christopher Wright insightfully writes, "Nothing will ever be more significant for Ezekiel than this encounter with the living God; his whole life and message will be more uncompromisingly God-centered than any other prophet's" (*The Message of Ezekiel*). From this glorious vision, Ezekiel receives his calling and commission in chapters 2-3 to proclaim judgment on a rebellious people to restore God's *kavod* among the nations. So the revelation of God's *kavod* to Ezekiel is the logical way to begin a book that will focus primarily on the restoration of God's *kavod* among his people and the nations. Chapter 1 actually makes sense! But there's still one perplexing question.

### **What's the God-Mobile Doing in Babylon?!**

Babylon was Israel's enemy. It was a land of pagans, a land of uncleanness. It's not where the divine presence dwells. Everyone knows that the temple is the permanent residence of God's *kavod*, the place where heaven meets earth in the Holy of Holies. And that temple was in the heart of Jerusalem, not Babylon. But about fourteen months into Ezekiel's grueling task as a prophet, he receives another vision that's going to explain the whole God-mobile in Babylon thing.

In chapter 8, Ezekiel is "transported" to Jerusalem to get a virtual tour of the temple. It's a visionary experience like no other. He sees the kinds of things happening in God's dwelling place in his absence. In the outer courtyard, there is a large idol statue, and he sees the elders of Israel worshiping other gods both outside and inside the temple. He sees all sorts of idol images engraved on the walls and witnesses the

women of Israel worshipping a Babylonian god named Tammuz. There were even men in the inner court with their backs to the temple and their faces toward the east worshipping the sun. Idolatry and prayers offered to animal deities, sun worship, and cultic practices were all happening in the temple! This is like a husband having sex with multiple people in the very bed that's supposed to be reserved for the sacred intimacy of marriage. It's disgusting.

Their lewd behavior and flagrant idolatry had so thoroughly corrupted Yahweh's sacred space that he could no longer stay around to tolerate it. His own people were pushing him out. In Ezekiel 9:3 we see that "the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house." God's *kavod* is suspended in air towards the east as he executes judgment and prepares for his exit. Wright notes, "He was leaving, but not because he wanted to; rather, because his own covenant people were doing things that will drive [Yahweh] far from [his] sanctuary" (*The Message of Ezekiel*). In Ezekiel 11:22-25, the *kavod* of the Lord departs:

*"And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city." (Ezekiel 11:23)*

The vision ends with an "empty" temple full of covenant-breakers.

But notice how the God-mobile heads east, towards Babylon! It's here that we realize why the God-mobile appeared to Ezekiel in chapter 1. Israel's idolatry and covenant violation had become so blatant and offensive that God left his temple. But he didn't abandon his people. Tucked within Ezekiel 11:16, is an explanation of his purposes: he sent his people into exile, but would go with them and be a sanctuary for a time. In other words, the divine presence is a portable temple that has gone into exile with his people. He has not and will not forget his promise to be their God. He will live among them in Babylon, preparing a remnant to be restored through a new covenant.

Ezekiel 11:17-20 anticipates the theme of restoration and renewal through the Spirit, which is the focus of the latter half of Ezekiel. It's a beautiful passage worth meditating on because it will sustain you through a lot of judgment passages until the major shift in chapter 34.

*Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.' And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 11:17-20)*

What hope for covenant-breakers like Israel... and like us. Come back to this text as many times as you need during your reading in the first half of Ezekiel. It's such good news in the midst of a lot of bad news. Next we'll explore the restoration imagery in Ezekiel to see how God's people will be reunified under a new king (King Jesus!) and renewed under a new covenant by the transforming power of the Spirit. It's definitely a high point in the Old Testament.