EZEKIEL

Chapter 1

*The Living Creatures and the Glory of the Lord*

**In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. 2 On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—  3 the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him. 4 I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal,  5 and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man,  6 but each of them had four faces and four wings.  7 Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze.  8 Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings,  9 and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. 10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.  11 Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body.  12 Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went.  13 The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it.  14 The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning. 15 As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces.  16 This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel.  17 As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not turn about as the creatures went.  18 Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around. 19 When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose.  20 Wherever 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.  21 When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. 22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome.  23 Under the expanse their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body.  24 When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings. 25 Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings.  26 Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.  27 I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him.  28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.**

The opening chapter affords Ezekiel, the prophet-priest, a vision into the opened heavens of the enthroned Glory of God. Thus the book of Ezekiel grants a proleptic view in heaven of what the apostles would see on earth: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The incarnate Glory of God would atone for the sins of the world by his death on the cross and rise again from the dead. He then would ascend and, as our High Priest, be “seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb 8:1). In Revelation the apostle John sees through the opened heavens the enthroned Christ and the divine liturgy of the heavenly host. In particular, Revelation 4 recalls Ezekiel 1, down to the details of the mysterious creatures who support the divine throne in heaven. (CC)

As we ponder this most mysterious prophetic book, then, we bear in mind that the realities we strive to understand through Ezekiel’s eyes find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The vision of divine Glory in chapter 1, though it transcends human comprehension, reveals the divine Glory to be manifested in the God-man, Christ our Lord. Likewise, when Yahweh speaks throughout the rest of the book (beginning in chapter 2), the words can rightly be regarded as those of Christ, the Word made flesh. (CC)

**1:1** *thirtieth year.* Probably Ezekiel’s age (see NIV text note). According to Nu 4:3, a person entered the Levitical priesthood in his 30th year. Denied the priesthood in exile, Ezekiel received another commission—that of prophet. (CSB)

AMONG THE EXILES – Ezekiel was “among the exiles” (1:1). Ezekiel uses the prepositional phrase בְּתוֹךְ (“among”) over one hundred times. Here it may simply indicate his general location in the exiled community. Although Ezekiel was living in that community, he may have temporarily gone to the banks of the river on the edge of the settlement, as 3:15 seems to imply. “Among the exiles” (1:1) may imply a consciousness on the part of the prophet that what he witnesses and speaks at God’s command is of central significance, not only for him and the little exilic community, but for all Israel. Because he was at the center of God’s work of judgment and salvation, his life and work has significance for the whole world and for all times. (CC)

*Kebar River.* A canal of the Euphrates near the city of Nippur, south of Babylon, and possibly a place of prayer for the exiles (see Ps 137:1; cf. Ac 16:13). (CSB)

“The Kebar Canal” (1:1) probably was a large feeder canal, which, then as now, can often be as big as many rivers. נָהָר usually means “river” and often refers to the Euphrates, but here “canal” is the accurate translation. This canal was large enough to receive a proper name, “Kebar.” Its precise location eludes us. It has often been identified with the modern, dry Shat en-Nil. We hear of it again somewhat over a century later in the archives of the Jewish Murashu family, whose members were bankers in the Babylonian city of Nippur. (See the map in the back of this book.) However, there it is described as merely “near” Nippur, not running through the middle of it, as the Sha en-Nil did in antiquity. (CC)

Ezekiel was standing by a stream of flowing (living) water on the occasion of his inaugural vision. Some of Daniel’s visions also came by streams: the Ulai (Daniel 8) was in Susa (in modern Iran), and the vision recorded in Daniel 10 occurred by “the great river, the Tigris” (Dan 10:4), roughly halfway between the Ulai and the Kebar. Since foreign lands were considered unclean (see Amos 7:17), exiled Israelites might naturally seek communion with God near flowing water, which was often used in purification rites (see “living water” in Lev 14:5–6, 50–52; 15:13; Num 19:17). The triune God is the source of “living water” for his people (Jer 2:13; 17:13; Zech 14:8; Song 4:15). Israelites would also recall God’s miracles of redemption through water such as the dry crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14–15); the dry crossing of the Jordan River (Joshua 3–4); and the salvation of Noah and his family through the flood waters (Genesis 6–9), which is a type of Christian Baptism (1 Pet 3:18–22). Flowing water would recall the river of Eden (Gen 2:10–14). It would also anticipate the eschatological, life-giving river in the new creation that flows from the temple (Ezek 47:1–12), which seems to be (in OT imagery) the same “river of the water of life” that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev 22:1–2). (CC)

HEAVENS WERE OPENED – In “the heavens were opened” (Ezek 1:1), the passive (Niphal) form of the verb should be emphasized: the unspoken agent is God himself. The expression is unique in the OT (most similar is Gen 7:11). In some other theophanies, the heavens are “torn” open (קָרַע in Is 63:19) or “stretched” open (נָטָה) like the curtains of a tent (2 Sam 22:10 || Ps 18:10]). In Ezek 1:1 the verb “open” (פָּתַח) may be evocative of the opening of the “windows” (אֲרֻבּוֹת) of heaven for either judgment (the deluge in Gen 7:11) or for blessing (2 Ki 7:2; Mal 3:10). The immediate import in Ezekiel 1–24 will be judgment upon unfaithful Israel, but God’s ultimate purpose is to reveal the Gospel (Ezekiel 25–48. At the Baptism of our Lord, Jesus, like Ezekiel, sees the heavens opened and hears the spoken words of God by a river (Mt 3:16–17 || Lk 3:21–22). (CC)

*visions of God.* A special term, always in the plural and always with the word “God” (not with the more personal “Lord”). The expression precedes this and the two other major visions of the prophet (8:3; 40:2). (CSB)

The opened heavens revealed to Ezekiel “a divine vision” (1:1). There are more divine visions in Ezekiel than in any other OT book except for Daniel, and than in any NT book save Revelation. (CC)

**1:2** *fifth year of the exile.* Verses 2–3, written in the third person (the only third-person narrative in the book), clarify the date in v. 1. (CSB)

*King Jehoiachin.* Led an early group of exiles to Babylon in 597 b.c. (see Introduction: Historical Background). Ezekiel was among them and received his prophetic call in 593. (CSB)

It is of no little significance that the date formula in this verse and in all other dates throughout the rest of the book (besides “the thirtieth year” in 1:1) is anchored to the date of King Jehoiachin’s exile. Jehoiachin was a son of David, and as long as he lived, he was the only legitimate claimant to the throne in Jerusalem. Both the Israelites and the Babylonians knew that. Thus, by no accident, 2 Kings 25 (and its doublet in Jeremiah 52) ends on the positive note that special favors, befitting royalty, had been shown to the exiled Jehoiachin by Nebuchadnezzar’s son and successor, Evil-Merodach. That favor (as well as some previous favor by Nebuchadnezzar himself) is also attested extrabiblically in Babylonian sources. Zedekiah (Jehoiachin’s uncle) had been placed on the throne after Jehoiachin’s deportation in 597 b.c. Zedekiah is often considered the last king of Judah, but he was really no more than a puppet of the Babylonians, and he obviously enjoyed the respect of neither his masters nor his subjects. (CC)

Thus, not only do the Israelites’ political hopes rest on Jehoiachin, but their religious ones as well. The messianic promise of the Savior, first given right after the fall into sin (Gen 3:15), explained further to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) and his descendants, and elaborated especially by Nathan to King David (2 Samuel 7), rested on Jehoiachin and his heirs: his “house” would never fail until the advent of Christ, who would reign on David’s throne forever (e.g., Is 9:5–6). By no means were all the implications of that promise understood until after the ascension of Christ (see Acts 1:6–9), and even we Christians today may not fully “understand” them. Nevertheless, this chronological framework of the book of Ezekiel remains a major part of the implicit theology of the book. The exile of Jehoiachin attests that God had executed judgment on unfaithful Israel, but his continued life, albeit in exile, signifies that God will still fulfill his promise of salvation for the entire world through the greater Son of David and King of Israel. (CC)

Up to a point, Ezekiel and his audience doubtless agreed on Jehoiachin’s importance. On a key point, however, they totally disagree. The populace, encouraged by false prophets, cherished the false expectation that their exile would be of short duration; if they had sinned, their transgression was mild, and the punishment they had already received was enough, or was even more than was fair (Ezekiel 18). They expected that they would be released soon, the Davidic monarchy would be restored in Jerusalem, and life could continue at least as well as before; perhaps even a truly “messianic” era would be instituted shortly. Virtually the first two-thirds of the book of Ezekiel is devoted to demolishing such false hopes. On this point, Ezekiel and Jeremiah are in total agreement, as Jeremiah now preaches to those still in Jerusalem, who were not included in the deportation in 597. Superficially, Ezekiel’s initial message is sometimes compared to Cato’s diatribes to the Roman senate: *Carthago delenda est*, “Carthage [here substitute Jerusalem] must be destroyed.” (CC)

Only after all such false hopes have been dashed and the people were driven to repent and learned to depend solely on God’s promise of salvation by grace alone—whenever and however he sees fit to implement that promise in history (cf. Gal 4:4)—could salvation come to them. In Christological terms, this is Law and Gospel, a theology of the cross, a cruciform way of believing and living. The Christian recognizes in Ezekiel’s message the foreshadowing of Good Friday, when God’s judgment climaxed in the death of his own Son, and Easter Sunday, when God’s verdict of justification by grace alone was published to the whole world. The Christian pastor who preaches and teaches Ezekiel proclaims its message of Law and Gospel as part and parcel of God’s constant action *sub contrario* (working through apparent opposites). Ezekiel’s message is not rendered irrelevant by its climactic expression in Christ; rather, through Christ and his Spirit, it has been made part of the history of *our* salvation. (CC)

**1:3** WORD OF THE LORD – The formula of the coming (הָיָה לְ) of Yahweh’s Word, here and repeatedly throughout the book, surely implies the personal agency of God. Words emanate from people, who use words to communicate. If the speaker is God, an anthropomorphism is implied, and probably a personal, “incarnational” element as well. The sort of element that is merely implied here is made explicit in 3:17, for example, where the Lord refers to Ezekiel hearing “a word *from my mouth.*” In chapter 1, the incarnational element is even more up front because the vision described in the following verses obviously depicts the invisible God in anthropomorphic terms (albeit highly circumscribed, so no literalistic and idolatrous misunderstandings might ensue). Especially since the divine “Glory” (כָּבוֹד, 1:28) reappears often in the book, that personal form of the God who utters the divine Word is reinforced throughout the book. Sometimes in the OT too, the divine Word is a hypostasis of God, just as in the NT Christ is the incarnate Word of God—the Word who *is* God (e.g., Jn 1:1–3, 14; Rev 19:13)

*Ezekiel.* See 24:24. Means “God is strong” (cf. 3:14), “God strengthens” (cf. 30:25; 34:16) or “God makes hard” (cf. 3:8). Jehezkel (1Ch 24:16) is the same name in Hebrew but does not refer to the same person. (CSB)

*priest.* Member of a priestly family (see NIV text note). (CSB)

By adding “the son of Buzi” it implies that his father was also a priest. The Priesthood was hereditary in the OT. (TLSB)

*hand of the Lord.* A phrase repeated six times in the book (3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1), indicating an overpowering experience of divine revelation. (CSB)

This expression too is anything but unique to Ezekiel, since it and similar expressions occur throughout the OT. God’s almighty “hand” may bring either judgment and destruction or salvation and eternal life. Its role is such that it could almost be counted as another of the OT hypostases, pointing to the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. However, since the divine “hand” is qualified by “of Yahweh” rather than standing independently, it is usually classified rather as one of the major anthropomorphisms. Its classical expression probably comes in connection with the exodus: God redeemed his people “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (e.g., Deut 4:34; 5:15). In many other contexts, it refers to God’s (active) power or omnipotence. This biblical significance continues in the familiar assertion in the Apostles’ Creed of our risen Lord’s session “at the right *hand* of God the Father Almighty” (similar phrases occur in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds). (CC)

Ezekiel refers to “the hand of Yahweh” six times, usually with הָיָה and עָלַי (“was … upon me”), as here, although sometimes stronger language is used (e.g., the adjective חָזָק, “strong,” in 3:14 and the verb נָפַל, “fall,” in 8:1). Thus “the hand of Yahweh” embodies divine urgency, pressure, or compulsion upon the prophet to do something. One may compare the effect of Yahweh’s hand on this OT prophet to the way Jesus, the supreme Prophet, used δεῖ, “it is necessary,” to describe his obligation to make his way to Calvary. The most striking applications of “the hand of Yahweh” in Ezekiel are his transportations from Babylon to Jerusalem in 8:1–3 and 40:1, where we shall have to discuss the expression further. Most often in Ezekiel, Yahweh’s “hand” is associated with the prophet’s personal receipt of a vision. (CC)

**1:4** *I looked.* Introduces the first part of the vision: storm and living creatures (vv. 4–14). The “I looked” of v. 15 introduces the second part: wheels and the glory of the Lord. (CSB)

*windstorm.* See Ps 18:10–12. (CSB)

What is to be made of the storm cloud coming “from the north” (Ezek 1:4)? It may simply be another case where something ostensibly quite ordinary is transmuted into a divine appearance (cf. the burning bush of Exodus 3). In this case, it would be God’s use of a natural meteorological circumstance. The head of the Persian Gulf is dominated by a zone of very low pressure during the summer months, often producing severe sand or dust storms. Various details of the vision might be read as “transfigurations” of a storm. However, “north” (צָפוֹן) is often the direction from which evil—especially military invasions—comes upon Israel and Judah in the judgment oracles of the prophets. This direction is determined by geography: Canaan sat at the western leg of the Fertile Crescent, while the Persian Gulf forms the end of the eastern leg (with mostly desert in between). (CC)

GLOWING METAL – חַשְׁמַל (translated “electrum”) is of uncertain meaning, but its other uses by Ezekiel (in 1:27 and 8:2), as well as an apparent Akkadian cognate (*elmeshu*, a quasi-mythical precious stone), indicate something of a dazzling brilliance. The word prepares us for the supernatural description that follows. (CC)

**1:5** *four living creatures.* “Four,” which stands for completeness (cf. the four directions in Ge 13:14 and the four quarters of the earth in Isa 11:12), is used often in this chapter—and over 40 times in the book. The living creatures, called “cherubim” in ch. 10, are throne attendants, here (see v. 10) representing God’s creation: “man,” God’s ordained ruler of creation (see Ge 1:26–28; Ps 8); “lion,” the strongest of the wild beasts; “ox,” the most powerful of the domesticated animals; “eagle,” the mightiest of the birds. These four creatures appear again in Rev 4:7 and often are seen in the paintings and sculpture of the Middle Ages, where they represent the four Gospels. (CSB)

**1:7** *like those of a calf.* Perhaps indicates agility (cf. Ps 29:6; Mal 4:2). (CSB)

**1:12** *the spirit.* See v. 20. (CSB)

**1:16** *chrysolite.* The precise identification of this stone is uncertain. See Ex 28:20 (and NIV text note), where the stone appears in the priestly breastplate. (CSB)

*a wheel intersecting a wheel.* Probably two wheels intersecting at right angles in order to move in all four directions (see v. 17). The imagery symbolizes the omnipresence of God. (CSB)

**1:18** *full of eyes.* Symbolizes God’s all-seeing nature. (CSB)

**1:22** *expanse.* The same word occurs in Ge 1:6–8, where its function is to separate the waters above from the waters below. Here it separates the creatures from the glory of the Lord. (CSB)

**1:26** *a figure like that of a man.* Ezekiel is reporting his vision of God, but he carefully avoids saying he saw God directly (see Ge 16:13; Ex 3:6; Jdg 13:22). (CSB)

**1:28** *likeness.* See note on v. 26. (CSB)

*glory of the Lord.* When God’s glory was symbolically revealed, it took the form of brilliant light (see Ex 40:34; Isa 6:3). What is remarkable about Ezekiel’s experience is that God’s glory had for centuries been associated with the temple in Jerusalem (see 1Ki 8:11; Ps 26:8; 63:2; 96:6; 102:16). Now God had left his temple and was appearing to his exiled people in Babylon—a major theme in the first half of Ezekiel’s message (see 10:4; 11:23). In his vision of the restored Jerusalem the prophet saw the glory of the Lord returning (43:2). (CSB)