

**Ezekiel**  
*Lesson 54 Part 1*  
**Who Is Like Our God**  
(or Is This Any Way to Run a Railroad?)

I wonder what happened to Robert Howard? Robert was my best friend from 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He had moved to New York (where I was living) from Manchester, England, with his British father and Swedish mother. We spent many days and nights playing, becoming our favorite athletes on whatever field we happened upon, generally baseball or football. At some point, Robert convinced me to take up soccer as one of our pretend sports. In the late 1960's, I had never considered or seen anyone play professional soccer, except for the limited soccer we would play in school. Robert, however, brought me into the world of British soccer. I did not know exactly who Bobby Charlton was, or for that matter who his team Manchester United was. I just knew that it was important which one of us got to be Bobby Charlton when pretending on the soccer field.

I grew up before the advent of social media. We never had computers or the Internet, so of course, we never had any Facebook-type opportunities. In the middle of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I moved to Lubbock, Texas, and I lost track of Robert Howard. How he grew up, what he became, whether he stayed in the United States or returned to England, I do not know. If we had kept up, then would we still be friends today, maybe now attending soccer games and talking about whose kid is Bobby Charlton? Today, Robert Howard is a lost relationship from the past.

Moving far apart and the passage of time work a one-two punch on continuity in life. This was even truer in the deep recesses of history, before telephones, readily available books (and literacy), and easy transportation. We often speak of the world becoming smaller because it used to be so difficult to keep up with things far removed. The world was larger in 1972 when I moved from New York to Texas. Can you imagine how much larger it was in 600BC? Before the advent of television, radio, electricity, mass transportation, or any form of distanced communication? Back then, a geographical change was not just a new chapter in one's life. It was an entirely different book in an entirely different language!

Ask yourself a few questions:

- Whatever happened to the followers of the Mesopotamian god Tammuz? Did Ishtar's lover just disappear with no one to mourn his loss?

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- How about the Ammonite god Molech? Have you seen any of his worshippers around lately?
- Does anyone know any followers of the Moabite cult for Chemosh?
- For that matter, how many people do you know today who worship the storm god Baal as a potential solver to the problems of climate change?

Followers of these tribal gods are lost in the pages of history; their gods dissolving from reality as their followers were defeated. We read of these gods in the Bible as well as in other literature preserved from Biblical times, but no one observes their worship any longer. Historically, various tribes and people groups worshipped perceived deities that were inventions of their minds. These imagined gods were used to explain and give meaning to daily events whose causes were not readily known, such as weather and fertility. Certainly, the people used these imagined gods also to give meaning and purpose to life as people tried to grasp existence, love and longing. These imagined gods were sought out for hope where people looked for aid beyond themselves. They were objects of worship as humans tried to please external forces that seemed to control life.

Even a casual read of the extant writings about these gods show them to be creatures of man's mind.<sup>1</sup> Juxtaposed to the Biblical God who revealed himself to humanity, these gods were limited in multiple ways. They were controlled by human emotions and capriciousness.<sup>2</sup> They were also geographically limited. The various tribal gods had control over certain areas. When one nation or tribe rose

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough opportunity to review the extant writings in modern English, see the accumulation in Volume one of Hallo and Younger, *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, (Brill 2003).

<sup>2</sup> We read of Elijah mocking the storm god Ba'al for his failure to flash lightning and ignite a sacrifice in the altar showdown of 1 Kings 18:

And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (1 Ki. 18:27).

To the people of his day, this was not just an absurd mocking. The Canaanite gods were notorious for squabbling, preoccupation, and even sleeping! For example, in the *Ba'lu Myth* (An early version of the Ba'al cycle from the areas around Israel) the gods panic, scheme, fight, marry, and even die! (At one point Ba'al is fighting the water god Yammu. We read, "the maec whirls in Ba'lu's [Ba'al's] hand, like a hawk in his fingers, Strikes Prince [Yammu] on the head, Ruler Naharu [same god, different name] on the forehead. Yammu goes groggy, falls to the ground; his joints go slack, his body slumps. Ba'lu grabs Yammu and sets about dismembering (him), sets about finishing Ruler Naharu off." From this, the locals thought, came to rivers and bodies of water!) Translation in Hallo and Younger, at 249.

up against another in battle, it was seen as a conquest of one god over another, the territories going to the humans, while the divine control was transferred from one deity to another. One conquering people would give credit to their god who would then frequently be worshipped by the conquered. In a real sense, the power and rule of people on earth were often seen to be a reflection of power struggles among the transcendent gods of each territory.

The tribal gods mentioned in the earlier questions were all limited gods, as understood by their followers. As the followers were conquered, the limitations and defeats of their respective gods burst the bubbles of those gods' reality. Not only did the gods dissolve in history, but the people groups did as well. Who reads of the Moabites today? This group that used to populate modern Jordan disappeared from history sometime during the Persian period. Have you read of any Ammonites around today? Not the mollusk, which is also extinct, but the people group from Ammon, the capital of modern Jordan. While some descendants of Ammonites are no doubt still alive today, as a people group they are last mentioned in the pages of history in the writings of Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165).<sup>3</sup>

Consider now the worship of YHWH, the God of Judah and Israel. In the sixth century BC, Judah was a tiny nation of mountain people, who worshipped their God YHWH. Judah was built around a promise of a land grant from YHWH, as well as around the premise that YHWH would dwell (or at least regularly appear) in a temple in the holy and protected city of Jerusalem. Judah's worship of its tribal God YHWH was centered on the temple with rites performed by genetically related priests. Judah's ruler was a king, who had no real international prestige or power, but was descended from the historical kings David and Solomon, who sustained great reputations within Judah itself. Then, came Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. The people? Gone! The land? Taken! The kings? Dethroned! The temple? Destroyed! In the minds of most people, the gods of Babylon annihilated YHWH and the other gods worshipped by many in Judah.<sup>4</sup>

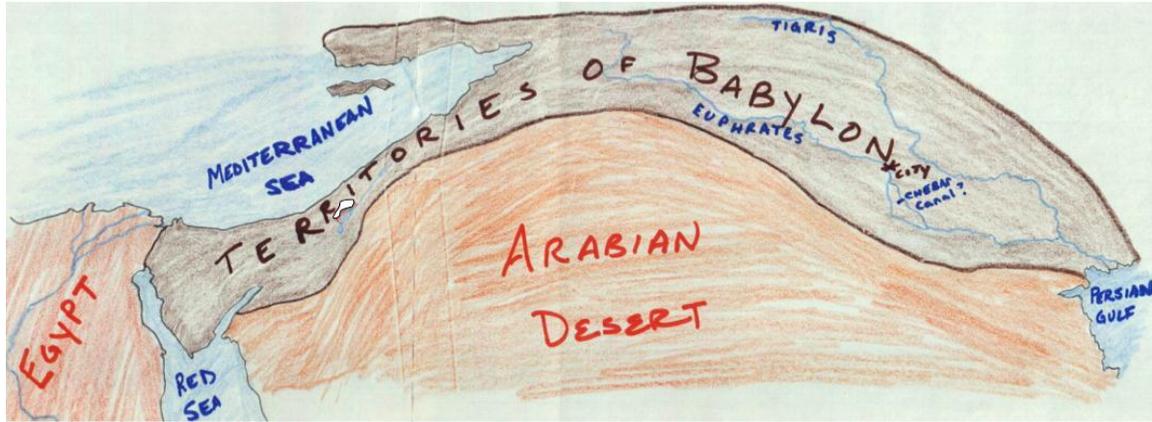
There is no human reason Judah or YHWH worship should ever come back from such a humiliation and defeat. The worship of YHWH should be lost in the annals of history. He should be relegated to some archive of long-forgotten tribal gods of small mountain cultures 2,600 years ago. To put this into perspective, when Judah was conquered and the people deported, the country was roughly one-half the size

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<sup>3</sup> Martyr, Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, at 119.

<sup>4</sup> We should underscore the Biblical record as well as the archaeological findings that even as many in Judah worshipped YHWH as their patron God, they still believed in, and many still worshipped, other gods (Asherah, Baal, etc.).

of Harris County (Houston, Texas).<sup>5</sup> In the below drawing, the territory of Judah is the little carved out dot between (and slightly under) the second “R” and the “I” in “Territories of Babylon.” Compared to Babylon, Judah was small; compared to the world, it was not even a dot!



Yet the multi-generational Babylonian exile was not the end of Judah, nor was it the end of YHWH! The people remained coherent as a group, and the worship of their God actually intensified and grew purer. In captivity, the voice of YHWH resounded, showing YHWH not simply as a mountain God limited in geography and defeated by Nebuchadnezzar’s god Marduk. YHWH was something much more than most of Judah had ever considered. We see that unfolding in the prophetic visions of Ezekiel, proclaimed to the people of Israel, and written for the future of YHWH’s people. Through Ezekiel, YHWH spoke loudly and strongly. He would not become a lost relationship!

## EZEKIEL - BACKGROUND

As we focus on the messages in Ezekiel, we do well to consider relevant background information. What we know of Ezekiel the man, we glean from the pages of the book that bears his name. Ezekiel’s name in Hebrew was undoubtedly a good one for parents to give a child. His name comes from two Hebrew words (*el* - “God” and *chazaq* - “to be strong”). In English, we would call Ezekiel, “May God Strengthen.” Viewed later, in light of his prophetic message, even his name spoke of God’s work through the prophet. As his name proclaimed, God used Ezekiel to strengthen his people and their worship.

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<sup>5</sup> Computed as roughly 772 square miles (2,000 square kilometers) from the maps of BibleBackgrounds with the assistance of Jim and John Monson (available at [www.Bibbackgrounds.com](http://www.Bibbackgrounds.com)).

Ezekiel's home life is referenced only briefly. A most disturbing passage in Ezekiel 24:15ff indicates that Ezekiel was happily married, but lost his spouse with little notice from God. God used his loss as a prophetic message of the disaster on Jerusalem, its temple and people. God warned Ezekiel about the coming death and instructed him not to mourn the loss publically,

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men." So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died (Ez. 24:16-18).<sup>6</sup>

The Lord's work in Ezekiel contained great sadness and pain, not only for the people, but also for Ezekiel personally.

The book tells us that Ezekiel was a priest. From that we can fairly infer that he had a solid education about the temple, its layout, its regimen, as well as the holy writings. His writings reflect this knowledge of Scripture as well as his awareness of temple ritual and even pagan worship.

Ezekiel was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, but became Jeremiah's prophetic counterpart in Babylon. Ezekiel was exiled into Babylon during the pre-destruction exile of Judah's king Jehoiachin, so while Jeremiah prophesied within Jerusalem and Judah, Ezekiel prophesied from within Babylon. His writings reflect this Babylonian influence, both in vocabulary, style, and message.<sup>7</sup> More so than most prophets, Ezekiel dates his prophecies using as a baseline the exile of King Jehoiachin. Many scholars readily produce charts setting out the dates of the prophetic visions and oracles. These charts indicate that while Ezekiel generally is in chronological order, that order is readily altered where it benefits the flow of thought. This causes the reader to pay special attention to the flow as written.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, no one should construe this exceptional occurrence as God's general instruction over mourning the loss of a loved one. As Ecclesiastes 3:4 notes, there is a time to mourn!

<sup>7</sup> At least sixteen times he uses Aramaic vocabulary and up to fifty times he uses words that come from Akkadian. Aramaic and Akkadian are Semitic languages in the same language family as Hebrew, but found in frequent use at the time in areas of Babylonian influence. About 120 words in Ezekiel are found nowhere else in the Old Testament. The unusual style and expressions scholars readily assign to the foreign influence.

<sup>8</sup> [Insert references to charts].

The passages that date the prophecies follow a general pattern (“In the \_\_\_ year, in the \_\_\_ month, on the \_\_\_ day of the month...”).<sup>9</sup> These passages allow for some interesting data, depending upon how one understands Ezekiel 1:1. That verse sets up the initial vision as occurring “in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month” as Ezekiel was “among the exiles by the Chebar canal” (see map earlier in lesson). Verse two adds that this was the fifth year of exile. A number of scholars consider the reference to the “thirtieth year” as referring to Ezekiel’s age when his prophetic visions began. If that is accurate, then the dating shows Ezekiel to have had these visions from age 30 to age 50. This is interesting because Numbers 4:1-4 sets out the service of priests in the tabernacle for those aged 30 to 50. In other words, as a priest, Ezekiel might have been expected to serve while aged 30 to 50. With the destruction of the temple, his service as priest was not to be in Jerusalem. God’s usage of him during his service age is found in a prophetic role instead. Rather than bringing the people to God at the temple, Ezekiel brought God to the people in Babylon.

The message of Ezekiel is both resolute in judgment and strong in hope. The first twenty-four chapters proclaim the doom on Judah and its people. Chapters twenty-five through the end provide consolation with promises of redemption.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars attribute this fairly stark division to the statement of the ancient Jewish historian Josephus (37AD - c.100) that Ezekiel “left behind him in writing two books concerning these events.”<sup>11</sup> The same differences in the beginning and ending of the book likely caused the early rabbis to place Ezekiel out of chronological order among the three major written prophets. While chronology would dictate the order of books to be Isaiah – Jeremiah – Ezekiel, the Talmudic rabbis ordered the books Jeremiah – Ezekiel – Isaiah. This placed Jeremiah first with its doom and judgment and Isaiah last with its promises of hope and reconciliation. In the middle was Ezekiel, with doom mirroring Jeremiah at its start, and hope mirroring Isaiah at its end. This ordered message strongly illustrates the title we have given this overview: Who is like our God? The strangeness of God’s ways also merits our subtitle: Is this any way to run a railroad?

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ezek. 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21, and 40:1.

<sup>10</sup> In fairness, we should add that in the first twenty-four chapters of doom, there are occasional inserts of consolation and calls to repentance. Similarly, in the last section amidst the consolation there are small sections of condemnation!

<sup>11</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 10.79, trans’n by William Whitson.

## EZEKIEL'S MESSAGE

### *The Sin of Judah (a/k/a It Wasn't God's Fault!)*

The first half of Ezekiel centers on the doom of Judah. Judah did not lose its war with Babylon because YHWH was a weak or defective God. Judah was conquered because of Judah's sin and rebellion. Judah had blatantly disregarded the covenant with God. In one of Ezekiel's most well known passages, Ezekiel 16 sets out Judah/Jerusalem as a faithless bride. In the extended simile, Jerusalem began as an unloved, outcast child:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices and say, '... On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised (Ezek. 16:1-5).

YHWH then recounts seeing the unloved and unwanted Jerusalem as a child picking it up and giving it life. Once the child came of age, YHWH entered into a covenant like marriage:

I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine (Ezek. 16:8).

YHWH then bestowed loving gifts and treated Jerusalem as a queen. Rather than stay true to the covenant, however, Jerusalem sold itself for pleasure and wasted God's special gifts

But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. You went to him, and he possessed your beauty. You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them (Ezek. 16:15-19).

YHWH tried to awaken Jerusalem to its sin, but to no avail:

So I stretched out my hand against you and reduced your territory; I gave you over to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who

were shocked by your lewd conduct. You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too, because you were insatiable; and even after that, you still were not satisfied. Then you increased your promiscuity to include Babylonia, a land of merchants, but even with this you were not satisfied (Ezek. 16:27-29).

For dozens of verses, Ezekiel continues the simile setting out God's certain judgment for the covenant breaches. He then makes a point that in his holiness, he would step in and redeem his people in the end, personally atoning for their sin:

‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you... So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign LORD’ (Ezek. 16:59-63).

While Judah was covered in sin and violating its covenant, it was never separated from YHWH's loving care. Even in judgment, YHWH was moving toward redemption where YHWH would atone for the sins of his people. YHWH would not, and indeed, could not tolerate the sins of his people. YHWH was clean and holy, even as his people were living in squalid debasing sin. In chapters 8 through 11, Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord depart from the temple and Jerusalem proclaiming, in essence, “I will not live in this kind of filth!” Repeatedly, Ezekiel used parables, similes, and metaphors to convey Judah's sin as causing YHWH's judgment.

#### *YHWH is sovereign over the world*

It bears repeating, Ezekiel is adamant that Judah's devastation was due to Judah's sin, not any weakness of YHWH. To the contrary, YHWH had always been, and would remain, sovereign over all the land and all powers, earthly or spiritual. As we put Ezekiel back into his historical context, it is important to recall the general religious beliefs of the people in that day. Monotheism was held by very few. Most everyone believed in a pantheon of gods who each held territories and responsibilities. There were gods responsible for weather, fertility, war, love, administration, etc. The different nations (and sometimes even tribes) had their own patron gods.

The temptation for the exiled Judahites was to see YHWH as left behind in the hills of Judah while the Babylonian conquering god Bel-Marduk reigned supreme.

Ezekiel put any such ideas to rest. YHWH was not some simple tribal god of Judah. He was not simply a patron deity that held some power or regional control over a set of hills west of the Dead Sea. YHWH was sovereign and judge over *all nations* and *all the earth*. In chapters 25 through 32, Ezekiel pronounced God's judgments over foreign nations. These judgments begin with Judah's neighbors:

- **God judges the Ammonites** – “Say to the Ammonites ... behold, I have stretched out my hand against you, and will hand you over as plunder to the nations. And I will cut you off from the peoples and will make you perish out of the countries; I will destroy you. Then you will know that I am the Lord.” (Ezek. 25:3-7).
- **God judges Moab** – “Thus says the Lord God ... I will execute judgments upon Moab. Then they will know that I am the Lord.” (Ezek. 25:8-11).
- **God judges Edom** – “Thus says the Lord God ... I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they shall do in Edom according to my anger and according to my wrath, and they shall know my vengeance, declares the Lord God.” (Ezek. 25:12-14).

The judgments expanded outward from Judah's neighbors to Tyre and Sidon (Ezek. 26-28) and even to Egypt and Babylon (Ezek. 29-32). No one was beyond the power and sovereign touch of YHWH.

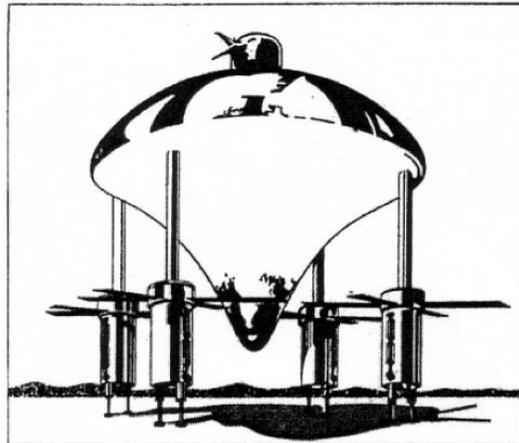
Even beyond the judgments proclaimed against the nations, God's sovereignty was shown in his usage of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. They were never a renegade power disrupting God's plans. They were in fact tools of God to bring about his judgment. Repeatedly, we read that it was God who brought forth Nebuchadnezzar and his army (Ezek. 26:7; 29:19, 30:10, *etc.*). As the people of Judah lived in exile under a king celebrated and revered for his accomplishments (Nebuchadnezzar was called “the king of kings”! Ezek. 26:7), they were to know the truth. YHWH made Nebuchadnezzar for YHWH's purposes. He was God's tool – plain and simple.

The 21st century reader can easily miss a further way God's sovereignty was communicated to Ezekiel's audience. In Ezekiel's day, certain stories and ideas we would today term “myths,” were well known by people, and were likely accorded truth in the minds of many. These stories concerned the many “gods” and legendary, larger than life, people, explaining the big questions of life. These stories gave meaning to physical features of the world (for example, thunderstorms and lightning, the presence of rain in the sky/heavens, fertility, *etc.*). They also gave meaning to the deeper questions of life, (serenity, love, purpose, *etc.*).

Ezekiel took many features from those stories and appropriated them, making them serve the purposes of YHWH God.

Here, it is important that we read Ezekiel in its historical context. Our tendency is to read and interpret the words in light of our own culture and experience. This flawed approach to exegesis can lead to almost laughable conclusions as one studies the somewhat bizarre symbols of Ezekiel. Reading Ezekiel fills one with unusual images that defy imagination right off the bat! We see in chapter one the text made famous in the old spiritual song *Ezekiel Saw the Wheel*. Perhaps more so than any other passage, modern readers looking for a Biblical twist interpret this one in a most un-Ezekiel manner.

For example, in 1968 Swiss author Erich von Daniken (1935-present) published *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, asserting that Ezekiel chapter one contains a detailed description of a spacecraft landing on earth. Van Daniken is not alone. Former NASA design engineer Josef Blumrich (1913-2002) published *The Spaceships of Ezekiel*, in 1974, followed by an article on the same subject.<sup>12</sup> Blumrich believed that Ezekiel had encountered spacecraft (his picture is on the right) using ancient terminology to describe the engine exhaust, helicopter rotors and the command capsule of a nuclear vessel that must have “operated in conjunction with a mother vessel orbiting the earth.”<sup>13</sup> Here are the words of Ezekiel chapter one that prompted Blumrich’s imagination and poor exegesis:



As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their

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<sup>12</sup> “The Spaceships of the Prophet Ezekiel,” *Impact of Science on Society*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4 (1974).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, at 333.

wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

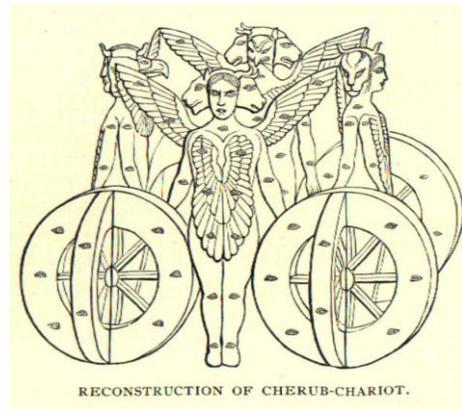
Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the

appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking (Ezek. 1:4-28).

Blumrich and Van Daniken have committed one of the most common of exegetical mistakes. They have interpreted scriptures in light of their own culture, experiences, and preconceptions, without first asking what the Scriptures say within the culture and context in which they were written. The writing of Ezekiel is not geared toward flying saucers or alien spacecraft. In Ezekiel, we are seeing a transition of prophetic form from a simple “Thus saith the Lord...” to one of images and pictures that symbolically convey messages beyond the simple words. We will probe this more, later in our study.

While Blumrich and post-UFO phenomenon types can read the Ezekiel passage and “visualize” spacecraft, 100 years earlier, the images provoked something quite different. A panel of “eminent Biblical scholars of Europe and America” published a translation of Ezekiel in 1899 that contained pictorial illustrations.<sup>14</sup> Their picture of the same Ezekiel passage is much more literal, and less science fiction. The contrast in the two reconstructions shows the stark difference Bible interpretation can make!



Rather than lift off into orbit with a fantastical reconstruction of Ezekiel that finds expression in our X Files culture, we return to the historical context of Ezekiel and read his prophetic words, trying to understand them for what they were, before we apply them to where we are!

Consider the images of Ezekiel chapter one. First, we should note the overall message that the image conveyed – the coming of YHWH into Babylon, where Ezekiel dwelt with the exiles. This was a stunning idea! YHWH was not simply a mountain God in Judah’s hills that was going to pass into history as the people dispersed into far away lands and distant cultures. YHWH was not a God limited

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<sup>14</sup> Haupt, Paul, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, (Dodd, Mead and Co. 1899), at 95.

to his temple or to Jerusalem. At this time (the fifth year of Jehoiakin's exile), we should remember that the temple was still standing in Jerusalem, yet YHWH comes to Babylon, and not *from the direction of Jerusalem* (southwest). YHWH comes from the north. Isaiah 14:13 indicates that the Babylonians thought their gods lived "in the far reaches of the north." YHWH was coming from the same direction, but not in weakness or defeat. YHWH came in great power, riding "a stormy wind," and "a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually." The Babylonians knew Adad as the storm god, those tribes closer to Judah's homeland called him Ba'al (the same god also worshipped by many Israelites). The storms were supposed to be Adad's chariots, the thunder his voice, the lightning his power. For Ezekiel, these earthly significances of the gods were subservient to YHWH.

The angelic messengers<sup>15</sup> who carried the throne of YHWH in Ezekiel 1 also show the subservience of Babylonian and Mesopotamian gods to Israel's true God. The angelic beings have four faces: human, lion, ox, and eagle.<sup>16</sup> Combined creatures were not unknown in Ezekiel's world. Frequently carvings of part human part lion, or some other combination carried the idea of one who had the traits of both (or more). There is an interesting set of ivories on display in the Louvre from a site in northern Syria (Arslan-Tash) that predate Ezekiel by about two hundred years. One Arslan-Tash ivory now on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem is a composite of the same four creatures as Ezekiel's cherubim. The ivory has a human face, eagles wings, lion feet in the front and some remains of ox feet in the back (that portion of the ivory is damaged). Ezekiel's cherubim that serve YHWH exhibit the traits of all the creatures—reason, wisdom, swiftness, and strength. These same traits were found in Mesopotamian gods, but for YHWH, they only serve as cherubim, angelic messengers in his service.



<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel calls them "cherubim" in Ezekiel 10.

<sup>16</sup> The early church seized on these same features to represent the four gospel writers. Matthew was depicted as a human, Mark as a lion, Luke as a bull, and John as an eagle. Irenaeus of Lyons (c.125 – c.202) used this vision of Ezekiel and its association with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to argue against the Marcion and gnostic inclusion of any other gospel. See a thorough discussion of these early church's views in Christman, Angela, *"What Did Ezekiel See?" Christian Exegesis of Ezekiel's Vision of the Chariot from Irenaeus to Gregory the Great*, (Brill 2005).

YHWH himself is enthroned above an expanse that extends high above the cherubim. YHWH cannot be described in the form of any creature. He is on a likeness of a throne and has the likeness of a human appearance, but such an image is not adequate. To Ezekiel in Babylon, YHWH is awe-inspiring and sovereign. He is not simply some trifling tribal God of Judah!<sup>17</sup>

### *The Name of God - YHWH*

As we draw toward a close of this introductory lesson on Ezekiel, we add one more theme. As we have seen, Judah was devastated because of Judah's sin, not YHWH's weakness. YHWH was, and always is sovereign. The actions were taking place so that people would know YHWH as sovereign! These were actions to make the people learn of YHWH, not forget him!

Over 60 times, Ezekiel sounds the refrain:

Then they [or "the nations" or "you"] will know that I am the LORD.

This phrase becomes a formula that finishes prophetic explanations that God himself should be known, and will be known, by the actions God performs. For example, God says:

- "I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the LORD (Ezek. 5:13)."
- "And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land desolate and waste... And they shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 6:14).
- "I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 16:62).
- "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them" (Ezek. 20:12).

Reading through the 62 passages where God speaks like this, makes one realize quickly both the absence of man's acknowledgment of God and his sovereignty, and the absurdity of man's refusal to see God at work. Much like the shabby

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<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel's imagery of YHWH and others is a transition in the world of the prophets. Ezekiel's imagery begins a genre of literature that evolves into what scholars term "apocalyptic literature." We will delve into this more deeply as we continue our studies, but Ezekiel provides source material for the language, imagery, and religious thought of later apocalyptic works. A most famous apocalyptic work is the New Testament book of Revelation. Not surprisingly, Revelation references or uses imagery of Ezekiel more than any other Biblical book.

exegesis we discussed among the Ezekiel/UFO-ologists, we tend to translate the world around us with cause and effect of our own actions and understandings. We do not see the truth that God is at work in us, in our neighborhoods, and in the world around us. We are to see him and *know* who he is and what he is doing!

This goes hand in hand with Ezekiel's repeated concern over the "name" of God. Beyond simply YHWH ("the LORD"), the "name" of God is his standing and reputation. It contains his character and history. His "name" was not simply a label ascribed to God so he would know when he was called! The "name" of God denotes his power and might, his faithfulness and consistency, and his never changing nature.<sup>18</sup> It is not just who he is, but is also what he does.<sup>19</sup>

Repeatedly, we read in Ezekiel that God acted for the sake of his name:

- "But I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my *name*, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out" (Ezek. 20:22).
- "And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my *name's* sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD" (Ezek. 20:44).
- "And my holy *name* I will make known in the midst of my people Israel, and I will not let my holy *name* be profaned anymore. And the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel." (Ezek. 39:7).

God is God. He is not to be taken lightly. He will act out of his character and his actions will vindicate whom he is. Humanity is not and never will be God. History will bear out the difference!

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<sup>18</sup> Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 2001), Vol. 2, at 1549ff. Walton underscores the historical context of this as pertains to deities. In ancient cultures, things existed when they had both a function and a name:

the name of a deity is more than simply a moniker by which he or she can be invoked. It is the god's identity and frames the god's "existence."

Walton, John, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, (Baker 2006), at 92.

<sup>19</sup> We cannot pass this explanation without noting how this infuses great meaning and significance to the third of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7). To take God's name in vain, is more than simply a prohibition against verbalizing "God" or "Lord" or even YHWH. It is to discard lightly God's character and power.

There were at least three major symbols to Judah that YHWH reigned powerfully among them: temple, king, and land. As long as they lived in the land ruled by their God, under the king who was an agent of the God, with a temple as the visible presence of the God, then all was well. When the enemy conquered their land, killed/abducted their king, and destroyed the temple, then they thought their God was defeated and the enemy's gods were more powerful. When Israel lost its land, king, and temple it created a crisis of faith. Ezekiel's answer was that YHWH wasn't defeated by Babylon; he actually *did this himself!* Not only did he do it, he predicted he would do it. When it happened, it didn't prove he was defeated, it proved how powerful he really was!

There are a number of other themes worthy of consideration in Ezekiel. These themes will come in the next lesson as we explore the holiness of God, God's departure from Jerusalem's temple and Ezekiel's vision of a coming temple.

## CONCLUSION

If we consider again the concepts set forward in introducing this lesson, then we see insight from Ezekiel. The idea that a small mountain tribe's worship of their perceived local deity would survive a dispersal of the people, a removal of their temple, a loss of their "God-protected" monarchy, and destruction of their capital seems preposterous and against all odds. History shows it to be. However, the worship of YHWH is billions strong today. How did this worship survive?

Ezekiel 36:16ff explains how. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel and confirmed that the people brought the devastation upon themselves. They lived in the land in a way that "defiled it by their ways and their deeds" (Ez. 36:17). The devastation was YHWH's "wrath" poured out upon them. YHWH scattered and dispersed the people in judgment. Doing so, however, affected not just the people. It also affected YHWH's reputation. For everywhere the people landed, others saw it as demeaning YHWH at his inability to hold his own territory. They saw the Judahites in captivity as a sign that YHWH was simply a minor territorial God who had no real power when matched up with the strong deities of Babylon. The foreigners would say,

These are the people of YHWH, and yet they *had* to go out of *his* land" (Ez. 36:20, ESV with emendation on YHWH for "LORD" and with emphasis added).

It was this that moved YHWH to action:

I had concern for my holy name... It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name... I will vindicate the holiness of my *great* name, which has been profaned among the nations... And the nations will know that I am YHWH, declares YHWH God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes (Ez. 36:21-23).

Here, we see why YHWH did not disappear. Neither he nor the Israelites dissolved into a footnote of history. From a mountain people in a really small dot on the globe 2,600 years ago, YHWH has become the faith of billions of Jews and Christians alike today. To God be the glory!

### POINTS FOR HOME

- (1) “*Thus says the LORD God... I will*” (Ezek. 25:11, etc.).

In 1961, John Bertram Phillips published a book entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. In the book, Phillips pointed out that most people have such a small view of God that they deem him inadequate for meeting their real needs in life. People are missing the God of Ezekiel. He is not too small! Whatever your needs, whatever my needs, he is able to meet them and more. Paul affirms that he is “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). God is not a passive spectator. He does not show up for the game to watch. He is an active participant. He will move history towards the consummation he has promised. He will hear our prayers and answer them, working in us with the power he used to raise Christ from the dead. If our God is too small, he is not YHWH God! We need to remember whom we serve!

- (2) “*...you trusted in your beauty...*” (Ezek. 16:15).

A frequent greeting in my circles is, “How are you doing?” My internal response (and frequently my spoken response!) is usually, “Better than I deserve!” All of us are like the barren child abandoned and left to die from exposure. But the LORD has reached out and cared for us with kindness, with faithfulness, and with tenderness. He has gifted us and clothed us with great blessings. We read the Old Testament and learn the lessons of Judah. We should be acutely aware of the hazard of taking God’s blessings and, rather than acknowledging the gifts and the giver, we use those gifts for purposes other than God’s. We ignore him who gave us so much, even with Jesus’ admonition, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much

will be required” (Lk 12:48). May God have mercy on us, and may we seek to serve him with all we have.

- (3) “A stormy wind came out of the north” (Ez. 1:4).

It is interesting to see how God works. God sent Judah into captivity, a likely way for Judah to dissolve and YHWH worship to disappear. Yet by the sovereign hand of God, this was just the next step in purifying God’s people and preparing for a coming Messiah. In Romans, as Paul was writing about God’s judgment of the Jews, and his ultimate and coming redemption, Paul notes his own amazement over God’s work:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways (Rom. 11:33).

God showed himself to his people in a time and a place never expected. God used means we would never anticipate to bring about his plans for Judah. It really is stunning and we should bow in amazement. From a human perspective, it is no way to run a railroad! But then, who is like our God?