

**Ezekiel**  
*Lesson 54 – Part 2*  
**Who Is Like Our God (Part 2)**  
**(or Is This Any Way to Run a Railroad?)**

True confessions: I love comic strips. In the midst of a crazy and busy life, I find time daily to read and keep up with eight different comic strips. There is a wonderful comic strip page on the Houston Chronicle website that comes up on my computer and gives me the latest comics each morning.

If you do not follow comic strips, then you may not be aware of the current travails of Spiderman. Let me catch you up. Spiderman's wife, Mary Jane ("MJ" to Spidey fans), was subjected to a spell by Loki! Now, you are no doubt saying, "Loki? But he was a Norse god of evil, the brother of Thor. What is Loki doing in a Spiderman Comic strip?" Well, Loki has been working on getting Thor out of Asgard (the Norse home of the gods in Norse mythology) so Loki can reign supreme. In the meantime, Odin, the father of both Thor and Loki, is engaged in "Odin sleep" and not able to reign. Before going into Odin sleep, Odin decreed that should anyone leave Asgard, they would not be allowed to return. This prompted Loki to cast a spell on MJ, making her look like Thor's long lost love. Thor saw MJ through some otherworldly equivalent of a Hubble telescope, and then left Asgard to go get MJ! Of course, MJ is not *really* Thor's lost love, so Spiderman would not let her go without a fight. Thor scooped up MJ and hurtled his hammer into space headed back to Asgard. Spiderman hitched a ride with his webbing and landed in Asgard. (I hope you're following this). Once Spidey, MJ and Thor arrived in Asgard, Thor was refused re-admittance under his father's order. What is more, Loki's spell wore off MJ, and Thor realized he had been duped! With Thor unable to do anything in Asgard, it has fallen on Spiderman's shoulders to seek out Loki and bring him to justice! There we sit in the plot as I type this lesson.

"Only in the comics!" you say, yet that is not true! Grab your favorite book of Ancient Near Eastern myths, and you will find that Stan Lee and Larry Lieber, the writers of the Spiderman comic strip, are not too far off! In fact, if they had published this Spiderman strip 3,000 years ago, then they would have an audience not simply seeking entertainment, but believing what they wrote! As we discussed in Ezekiel part one, the religious mindset of Judah's neighbors (and unfortunately, much of Judah) in the sixth century BC shared much with that of the Norse people. They believed in a pantheon of gods, each of which had a role, a skill set, and *limitations*. These were gods who slept, who fought, who tricked and were tricked. They were gods of limited geography who had ties into the physical

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world. The gods interacted with, and to some degree needed, the effort of humans to sustain and carry out their plans. If there was to be fertility in the crops, then the fertility gods required that humans engage in fertility rituals with their temple prostitutes. If a god was going to be well fed for his godly chores, then humans needed to offer up sacrifices with nutritious fumes (odors). If a god was going to march out in victory over another god and his “territory,” the marching god would need his human counterpart to march out in battle against the other god’s human counterpart. The winner of a human battle conquered by the victory of his patron god over that of the other army.

Judah lived in this world. Many in Judah shared the mindset, as we see easily in both the Bible and archaeology. The Bible condemned the constant struggle of the Israelites who adopted the pagan theology rather than holding fast and growing in their understanding of YHWH, the one true God. The Israelites would join with prostitutes to appease the fertility god. They worshipped the storm god Baal, offering sacrifices to ensure good weather. Many kept altars in their homes to burn incense and seek out their family gods. They worshipped YHWH as well, typically combining that with the worship of the other gods. Well-known archaeologist William Dever uses the phrase “folk religion” in contrasting Israel/Judah’s worship of many gods, in spite of the “official position” of YHWH worship.<sup>1</sup> For most in Judah, YHWH was the God of their hill country, who lived in their temple, and kept Jerusalem, his holy city, safe from foreign forces and other gods. They found reinforcement for this poor theology in God’s protection of Judah’s hills and Jerusalem from the Assyrian menace that had destroyed the Northern Kingdom in the prior century. It seemed to the priests, the royalty, and the general populace that YHWH as part of their pantheon, was in control of Jerusalem and the people.

When Nebuchadnezzar brought ultimate defeat on Judah, deporting the people, ending the monarchy, bringing down Jerusalem, and destroying the temple, the theology of the people was similarly destroyed. The defeat produced profound theological questions. Paul Joyce is a well-known scholar on Ezekiel, and he has posed the predicament clearly:

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<sup>1</sup> Dever, William, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*, (Eerdmans 2005). Dever sets out the archaeological evidence, combining it with his interpretations of Biblical evidence in concluding that while the Bible sets out “official Yahwehism” as the appropriate monotheism, Israel and Judah lived a “folk religion” of polytheism. While I disagree with Dever’s conclusion that monotheism evolved from polytheism, he has marshaled good evidence showing the prevalence of polytheism in Israel in the era of Ezekiel. A main place I depart from Dever is his assumption that the prevalent “folk religion” and presence of idolatry during much of Judah’s history must mean that Judah was *always* that way. The Biblical record is of a monotheism taught and revealed, yet in constant struggle against the polytheism of the age.

Judah had lost her land, and with it, it seemed, her status as the chosen people of YHWH. She had been stripped of her city, her temple, and of not one but two kings. With all these elements of identity removed, it is hardly surprising that profound theological questions were raised... Had YHWH himself been defeated by the Babylonian gods?<sup>2</sup>

By human reasoning, this should have ended Israel and YHWH worship. Joyce continued,

This catastrophe might well have proved to be the end of Israel as a religious community. That it did not owed everything to a small group of theologians who boldly attempted to account for the disaster within the framework of faith in YHWH... Among the exiled community, this task apparently fell initially to just one person, namely Ezekiel.<sup>3</sup>

Ezekiel himself would not say that EZEKIEL was the reason for continued faith. The community of believers in YHWH was sustained because YHWH acted on behalf of his name. As discussed in part one of this lesson,

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 (Ezek. 36:21-23).

Ezekiel brought GOOD THEOLOGY into a messed up people on the brink of religious extinction. This brings up one last comic strip before we delve into part two of Ezekiel and his message:



“Sound theology has a way” of taking a great load off one’s mind! Spiderman makes for good entertainment, but Charles Schultz trumps Stan Lee in matters of

<sup>2</sup> Joyce, Paul M., *Ezekiel – A Commentary*, (T&T Clark 2007), at 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, at 18.

great importance! Ezekiel's powerful message of good theology is explored this lesson in two passages:

1. The vision of Ezekiel in Chapter 1 (the "UFO" passage!), and
2. The vision of Ezekiel in Chapter 37 (the "valley of dry bones").

### *1. The Vision of Ezekiel in Chapter 1*

In part one of this written lesson, we included a section on the sovereignty of YHWH over the world. In the oral presentation of the class, we were not able to cover that material, so much of it is reproduced here, but supplemented with additional material. The vision of Ezekiel in chapter one was wrapped in a larger section entitled *YHWH is sovereign over the world*. This theme and fact runs consistently through the book of Ezekiel. It was Ezekiel's concern and the good theology antidote for the bewildered and seemingly abandoned and defeated Judahites.

It bears repeating, Ezekiel was adamant that Judah's devastation was due to Judah's sin, not any weakness or injustice of YHWH. To the contrary, YHWH had always been, and would remain, sovereign over all the land and all powers, earthly or spiritual. The temptation for the exiled Judahites was to see YHWH as left cowering 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 hillbilly 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 lightening, 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.

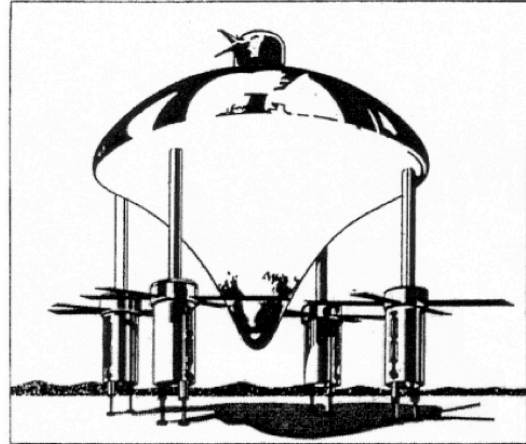
For example, in 1968 Swiss author Erich von Daniken (1935-present) published *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, asserting that Ezekiel chapter one contains a detailed description of a spacecraft landing on earth. Van Daniken is not alone. Former NASA design engineer Josef Blumrich (1913-2002) published *The Spaceships of Ezekiel*, in 1974, followed by an article on the same subject.<sup>4</sup> Blumrich believed that Ezekiel had encountered spacecraft (his picture is

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

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>5</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 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 straightforward. . . 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

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, at 333.

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.

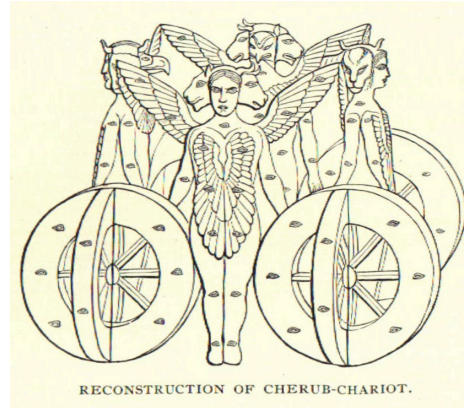
And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed 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>6</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 in light of the culture of the day, 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 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>7</sup> who travelled below 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. In a manner of exegesis not totally unlike that of Blumrich and Van Daniken, readers are quick to read into these creatures the issues of their times. Medieval rabbinic commentators considered these four faces to represent the four kinds of exalted

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<sup>6</sup> Haupt, Paul, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, (Dodd, Mead and Co. 1899), at 95.

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel calls them “cherubim” in Ezekiel 10.



beings, each set under the chariot of God so that they would know the kingdom of God is exalted above all:

Four kinds of exalted beings have been created in the world. The most exalted of all living creatures is man; of birds, the eagle; of cattle, the ox; and of wild beasts, the lion. All of these received royalty and had greatness bestowed upon them, and they are set under the chariot of God [citing Ezekiel 1:10].<sup>8</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) seems to be the first to read the gospels into this vision. He reasoned that the lion, the king of beasts, represented Christ's regal qualities as king of kings. The calf as an animal used in sacrifice represented Christ's sacrificial and priestly roles, the human represented the incarnation, and the eagle was the hovering gift of the Holy Spirit to believers. Irenaeus then applied these creatures to the gospels asserting the lion was John, who wrote of the pre-existent Word, Christ in his regal nature. The bull was the gospel of Luke because it began with the priest Zachariah offering sacrifice to God. The human was Matthew who opens his gospel with the human lineage of Jesus. The eagle was Mark whose gospel quotes frequently from the prophets and thus manifests the Spirit of God through those prophets.<sup>9</sup>

Our suggestion before reading any contemporary issues and thoughts into these visions is to first ask what the visions likely meant and conveyed to Ezekiel and his contemporaries. Combined creatures like these 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 predates 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



<sup>8</sup> *Midrash Rabbah – Exodus*, XXIII.13, translated by S. M. Lehrman (Socino Press 1939) at 291.

<sup>9</sup> 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 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).

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). These features in Ezekiel’s day were consistent representations of the gods and/or their counterpart-representatives on earth.



Many bulls adorned and protected the Ishtar gate

In Babylonian thought, the bull was the symbol of the god Adad, the weather god. The lion represented Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, love and war. As Nebuchadnezzar built up Babylon, he had a broad entry from the north into the city going through the Ishtar

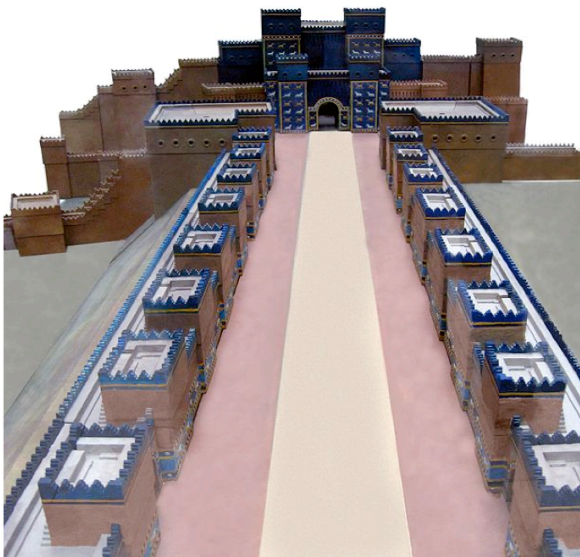


The lion symbolized the goddess Ishtar

gate, the grandest and most spectacular entrance to the city.

For 220 yards (roughly two football fields) a broad paved road passed between

high walls on the east and west. This road was called the *Aibur-shabu*, meaning, “the enemy shall never pass.” This road was protected by Ishtar and others, as shown by the approximately 120 lions made from molded glazed brick and plastered on the walls on each side of the road.<sup>10</sup> The British Museum has published some spectacular photos of the vibrant colors involved in these structures.<sup>11</sup> The black and white included here does not do justice!



The Pergamon Museum in Berlin has built this modeled reconstruction of the *Aibur-shabu* approach and the Ishtar gate.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the archaeological discoveries and the significance of the animal symbols, see Oates, John, *Babylon* (Thames and Hudson 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Finkel, Irving and Seymour, Michael, *Babylon: City of Wonders* (British Museum Press 2008).

The major emblem in Nebuchadnezzar's capital was that of the *Mushhushshu*, typically translated as "dragon." This was the symbol of the king of the gods, Marduk. This creature combined the elements of a lion, an eagle, and a serpent. There were many ceramic glazed representations of this composite creature throughout the Ishtar Gate. Marduk was so powerful, over time he seemed to embody the traits and functions of the other lesser gods.<sup>12</sup>



The "dragon" that represented the supreme god Marduk was a composite of eagle (rear legs), lion (front legs) and serpent (head and tail).

Ezekiel was not numb to these images. As a priest, it is fair to assume that Ezekiel would have had a natural affinity for studying and understanding the gods of the conquerors. At least he would have noticed them! They could not be missed. These gods were paraded in animal form annually from the north (their home) down the processional way and through the Ishtar gate. We also know from Biblical texts that Israelites were attuned to the gods of those around them (aside from the previously discussed addiction of actually worshipping the deities of their neighbors!). British Professor Saggs, well known for his writings on Babylon and Assyria, goes to great lengths to show that there was not only awareness, but often times incorporation of religious elements from Babylon, Assyria, and others into the religious worship of Israelites.<sup>13</sup>

In this light, we can now better understand Ezekiel's vision. The creatures that in Babylon symbolized their gods were set *below* the throne of YHWH. They were not YHWH's superiors, and they certainly were not his equal. As Fredenburg notes,

Far from respecting the territorial claims of Babylon's gods, Yahweh shows Ezekiel that things are opposite from what he and his companion suppose. The gods of Babylon are the obedient, throne-bearers of Yahweh!<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Scholars debate the import and meaning of texts that seem to indicate this. See in general, Oates at 172.

<sup>13</sup> Saggs, H. W. F., *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, (Athlone Press 1978), at 6ff. One example for Saggs is the ability of King Jehu to pass himself off as a Baal worshipper, even to the priests of Baal.

<sup>14</sup> Fredenburg, Brandon, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Ezekiel*, (College Press Publishing Co. 2002, at 41.



YHWH came from the north, the direction of the annual parade of gods for the Babylonians, and the symbols of Babylon's gods were nothing more than the angelic servants of YHWH, who travelled below his chariot and throne. In ancient Near Eastern carvings, we can see likenesses of their parades bringing out their figures (idols) of their gods and carrying them almost like Rose Bowl parade floats! YHWH needs no such people to carry him. He moves by the Spirit. YHWH himself is enthroned above an expanse that extends high above these serving creatures. YHWH himself 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. Fire and brightness are the repeated terms Ezekiel uses to describe the Almighty YHWH. To Ezekiel in Babylon, YHWH is awe-inspiring and sovereign. He is not simply some trifling tribal God of Judah!<sup>15</sup>



In this photo of Hatshep in Egypt one can see the typical parade carrying a god in idol form on the shoulders of men. This contrasts with Ezekiel's vision where YHWH moves by the Spirit: "Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went ."

## 2. *The vision of Ezekiel in Chapter 37*

Aside from their messages, Ezekiel's vision in chapter 37 of the valley of dry bones and the vision in chapter one share something else in common. Both visions have formed the basis of old spiritual songs. Ezekiel 37 finds expression in the song *Dem Bones*. Amidst the morbidity of this vision, lies a back-story that touches the heartstrings. This vision speaks not only to God's plans for his people, but also to his plans for Ezekiel.

The fourteen verses of this vision are fairly brief, and so we reproduce them here:

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on

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<sup>15</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.

the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”

In the ESV, there are three paragraphs to this vision. The first paragraph sets out the vision. Ezekiel is taken to an unspecified valley full of “very dry” bones. As a priest, these bones would be unclean for Ezekiel, but the text does not indicate any recoiling on his behalf. When asked if the bones could live again, Ezekiel does not answer, but leaves the answer to YHWH, for only YHWH would have the knowledge and power to bring that to pass! YHWH then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy life to the bones with the promise that God would bring the prophecy to pass, adding the flesh as well as the spirit/breath into the remade bodies. The end result would be knowledge of YHWH and his power!

The second paragraph is the narrative of Ezekiel doing as instructed. Ezekiel prophesies and the bones started coming together. In the words of the old song, “the toe bone connected to the foot bone!” After the bones reassembled, sinews, flesh, and skin came upon them, just as God promised. At this point there was no

breath in the bodies. This passage frequently uses the Hebrew word for “breath,” which is also the Hebrew word for “wind,” “spirit,” and for God’s “Spirit.” (*Ruach*). While there is room for wondering in its many uses exactly which meaning is intended, the import is easily captured. Ezekiel prophesies to the breath/wind/spirit or Spirit to “come from the four winds” and infuse the bodies with life. Much like the Genesis creation story, the humans are not active until they have spirit/breath. Ezekiel so prophesied and the breath came into the bodies that then “lived and stood on their feet.”

The third paragraph gives insight into the layer of meaning for Ezekiel and his day.<sup>16</sup> The “whole house of Israel” are the dry bones. These are the desolate and defeated from Judah. These people feel not only dead, but also long dead! They claimed, “our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.” Walter Eichrodt paraphrased the feeling well:

They [the people of Judah] had regarded Jerusalem as the ultimate guarantee of their survival as a nation, so the effect of its fall had been to make them feel as if they had been given up to be the prey of death.<sup>17</sup>

YHWH then instructed Ezekiel to prophesy God’s promise to open their graves, to bring them back to the land, and to put his Spirit into them. We should insert here, now that we have considered what God revealed to Ezekiel about the meaning, that YHWH gave a very specific instruction to Ezekiel in the first paragraph that has heightened meaning. Interestingly, Ezekiel’s prophetic words were to begin, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!” This is in stark contrast to Ezekiel 12:2 where YHWH tells Ezekiel that the house of Israel had “ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house.” After the death experience of captivity, the dead who have no ears are told to “hear!” It is in captivity that YHWH would teach his people to listen to his voice! Like so much else in Ezekiel, this makes the point that YHWH is God, the one and only.

Before leaving this vision, it is worth noting the back-story mentioned earlier. This is the only vision and promise in Ezekiel that is clearly linked to the actions and obedience of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is told to prophesy, and the promises of God do not come true without and until Ezekiel obey. YHWH was telling this exiled

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<sup>16</sup> We specify for Ezekiel and his day because the prophets are capable of multiple meanings. The New Testament church often reinterpreted them as having another layer of meaning finding fulfillment in Christ and his body. Andreas Kostenberger notes the amazing similarity of the message of Ezekiel 36 (preceding the vision of the valley of dry bones) and the language of Jesus’s encounter with Nicodemus. This sets the discussion with Nicodemus on the wind blowing and being born again of the Spirit. *Encountering John*, (Baker 2002), at 84ff.

<sup>17</sup> Eichrodt, Walter, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, (Westminster 1970), at 509

priest, who likely failed to have his day serving in the temple (see part one of lesson), that his role in the future of his people is key. Ezekiel was the tool God would use to bring his dead people back to life. They would live through the captivity and not dissolve, but return to their land. They would not do so alone, but with the Spirit and worship of YHWH. The job of a prophet could not be characterized as “fun,” but what joy there must have been knowing that God was working through him to the salvation of his people!

## CONCLUSION

Professor Saggs prefaced his book *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* as follows:

The religion of an obscure ancient Near Eastern people, the Israelites, continues to exercise a major influence upon the culture of much of the most developed parts of the world several millennia later. By contrast, religions associated with far more prominent contemporaries of the Israelites have vanished, if not wholly without a trace, at least to such an extent that vestigial survivals are recognized only by the antiquarian scholar. These are plain facts. The explanation of the facts is a matter of theory, and theories there have been a-plenty. One theory, which certainly should not be ignored...is that the one religion was true and the others false.<sup>18</sup>

The ways of YHWH are not the ways of man. The idea that God would produce a win by losing is not what normal people would think! Consider this over and over in Scripture. Jesus said you would find your life by losing it (Mt. 10:39). YHWH defeats Satan by dying on Golgotha. Paul cited God as choosing what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, what is weak to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27ff). Is that anyway to run a railroad? Not in human thought!

As Paul thought through and wrote on the surprising mysteries of Israel’s salvation, he specified the way God moved opposite of what we might expect in human wisdom. Paul wrote of Israel’s disobedience that resulted in God’s mercy on the Gentiles. Then after the mercy to Gentiles, the disobedience leads to the salvation of Israel! Paul sets up the seeming oxymoron that “God has consigned

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<sup>18</sup> Saggs, at vii.

all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32). We join Paul’s proclamation and praise:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”  
“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Now, that is good theology that would make Charles Shultz proud!

### POINTS FOR HOME

- (1) *“Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse... And above the expanse...the likeness of the glory of the LORD”* (Ezek. 1:22, 26, 28).

Of course we do not think of God as a hillbilly God with limits in his power. He is not a comic book character who sleeps like Odin or gets fooled like Thor. At least, we do not think that out loud. But, what is at the core of our choices when we decide to walk outside of his teaching and instructions? What are the real implications when we look everywhere for answers to our crises other than from his hand? How is it that we can go hours, days, maybe weeks without a real conversation with him, pouring out our gratitude, but also our petitions with our praise?

I pray that the actions of my life will mirror the faith I profess!

- (2) *“I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live”* (Ezek. 37:5).

There is a life apart from God’s Spirit, but that life is dead as dry bones. Real life comes from God and his Spirit. Jesus told his apostles, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Jesus sent his Spirit for the same reason. It is through the Spirit of God that we *truly live*. Paul helped the Galatians identify the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer, contrasting it with the works of the dead man living only in flesh apart from spirit:



Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these (Gal. 5:19-20).

In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit includes these virtues:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Like the dry bones vision, a unique aspect of the growth of fruit is that it grows from the inside out. This proceeds from the spirit, but it is no “magic” process. Paul instructed the Galatians to “walk by the spirit” (Gal. 5:16). It is something they were to choose to do.

As a believer, born again by the Spirit of God, I can live in the ways of the old dead man or the ways of the Spirit. I want to consciously make the choice moment by moment to follow my God in the Spirit!

- (3) *“I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound”* (Ezek. 37:7).

I like the role Ezekiel played. God placed Ezekiel where he needed to be, assigning a task uniquely prepared for Ezekiel. That is not to say that Ezekiel’s failure would bring the plans of God to naught. For surely the lesson of Ezekiel is that God will see his mission to completion, one way or another. But God put the message in Ezekiel’s mouth, and walked with him to see the task to completion. The nation of Judah was redeemed, the promised line was followed, and the Savior of the world was born into the family lineage of King David. The other nations passed away, along with their supposedly victorious gods, but YHWH remains praised by his people worldwide. Ezekiel was one man on a mission with God’s calling. It is amazing what God can do in one person. I want to be on mission with God!