

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

Samuel Marinus Zwemer
Professor of the History of Christian Religion and Missions,
Emeritus Princeton Theological Seminary

Copyright @ 1951

by

Baker Book House Grand Rapids, Michigan

edited for 3BSB by Baptist Bible Believer in the spirit of the Colportage ministry of a century ago

~ out-of-print and in the public domain ~

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ezekiel's Wheels

EZEKIEL has been described as the prophet of hope in a dark age. He paints the rainbow around GOD's throne. He might also be described as the neglected prophet among the readers of the Old Testament. His book is not easy to understand nor is the character of the writer. But it is astonishing to learn that William Blake, the poet and artist, found Ezekiel fascinating.

When a child he once ran into the house crying, I have seen the prophet Ezekiel under a tree in the fields!

One of his most remarkable engravings is that of Ezekiel at the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:16). The prophet is represented kneeling, with his arms crossed and eyes uplifted in tearless grief; at his side is a solemn mourning figure bowed, with hair sweeping the ground, and in the background the shrouded corpse of Ezekiel's wife. Under the picture is inscribed, "I take away the desire of thine eyes."

Ezekiel, in contrast with Jeremiah, was the tearless prophet but he was equally fearless to proclaim GOD's day of doom to apostate Israel.

Hengstenberg calls him "a spiritual Samson, gigantic by nature and standing alone. He inspires the awe of holiness, and the greatest chapter of his great prophecy is the first."

It is of this first chapter and the vision of wheels within wheels that Milton gives a paraphrase in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*.

"Forth rushed, with whirlwind sound
The chariot of Paternal Deity
Flashing thick flames, wheels within wheels undrawn,
Itself instinct with Spirit but convoyed
By four Cherubic shapes, four Faces each
Had wondrous, as with Stars their bodies all,
And wings were set with Eyes, with Eyes the Wheels
Of Beryl, and careering Fires between;
Over their heads a crystal Firmament
Whereon a Sapphire Throne . . . "

There is a window in the Cathedral of Chartres in Northern France on which are depicted, somewhat grotesquely, the four Evangelists, each riding pick-a-back upon the shoulders of one of the Old Testament prophets. Matthew sits on the back of Jeremiah, Mark on Daniel, Luke on Isaiah and John on Ezekiel. The grotesqueness of this medieval idea conceals a great truth. John's Gospel of the Eternal Word and his great Apocalypse indeed ride into the New Testament on the back of the magnificent visions and imagination of the prophet Ezekiel!

He writes:

"Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."

"It was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity when Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, felt the hand of the Lord upon him."

He whom the German poet, Herder, called the Shakespeare of the Hebrews and of whose first chapter Jerome exclaimed, "it is an ocean and labyrinth of Divine mysteries," tells what he saw:

"And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: and they sparkled like the colour of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle."

And after describing the four living creatures, these cherubims of glory, he tells of **"burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning"** (v. 14).

But there was more:

"Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels."

This astonishing vision of the gyroscopic moving chariot throne of the Lord requires a Milton to describe it and one should read his vivid portrayal of the throne and Him who sits upon it, from whom heaven and earth flee away and Satan who rebelled is cast headlong into the abyss.

We are concerned here with the interpretation of the vision for ourselves and our own day. The key word is this: **"The spirit of the living creature (or of life) was in the wheels."**

The vision of chapter one is repeated in chapter ten and we have also in the book of Revelation, the fourth chapter, a reflection of it as in a mirror. Wheels and living creatures as the chariot-throne of GOD Almighty Who sits among the cherubim and rides on the whirlwind!

The symbolism is perhaps partially due to Ezekiel's Babylonian environment. On the ancient monuments of that empire we see winged creatures and grotesque images of power.

It was just after the terrible and sudden fall of Nineveh in 593 B.C. Egypt had been conquered. Israel had been led captive. It was an age of gigantic upheavals. The glory of Assyria was gone; the doom of Tyre was sealed. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel sang the great Recessional of the nations. They warned Israel lest they forget, lest they forget. Thrones were crashing; dynasties tumbling; dominions disappearing. The whole world was in deep unrest. There was confusion and chaos. There was fear and trembling in captive Israel.

But GOD was present and manifested His very presence and glory to Ezekiel in the land of captivity. **"I saw visions of God."**

Wheels and living creatures; mechanism and intelligence; law and love; the cosmos and the Creator.

It is easier to interpret the significance of the four living creatures in Ezekiel's vision than the wheels, for we have the history of Church art and the opinion of the Church fathers to guide us.

From a very early day the Lion, the Ox, the face of a Man and the Eagle were associated with the fourfold aspect of GOD's glory in creation and revelation.

More specifically they represent in Christian art, the fourfold gospel. Matthew, symbolized by the Lion; Mark, by the Ox; Luke, by the Man; and John, by the Eagle.

In the first gospel, JESUS CHRIST is portrayed as the King, the lion of Judah and His royalty is indicated by the early question, "**Where is He that is born king of the Jews?**" Even as in the last chapter, all power is ascribed to Him in heaven and on earth. The Sermon on the Mount is His royal decree and His genealogy is that of royalty.

Mark's gospel portrays Him primarily as Redeemer and sacrifice for sin, and therefore the ox is his symbol. Luke the physician tells of His lowly birth, His humility, and emphasizes His humanity and compassion. His is the Gospel of the Human face in which we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of GOD.

It is John who begins with the Eternal Word in the bosom of the Father; who soars like an eagle beyond all earthly horizons and portrays the essential and eternal deity of our Saviour, even in the days of His flesh.

All this is put into marble and on canvas by medieval architects and painters. They have made Ezekiel's symbolism familiar. Who has not seen the lecterns from which the Gospel is read, resting on a bronze eagle with outstretched wings? One fourfold Gospel for the four corners of the earth and the fourfold need of humanity. Like Ezekiel, when we study these records on our knees we may say, "**I saw visions of God.**"

But what do the whirling wheels of the Chariot of fire signify, around which the living creatures ceaselessly move as guard of honor? "**And when they went I heard the noise of their wings like the noise of great waters as the voice of the Almighty, the voice of speech . . .**" (v. 24). And above the wheels and the living creatures "**the likeness of a throne as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness of the appearance of a Man**" (v. 26).

Our faith is that when JESUS arose from the dead and ascended into heaven "**he sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.**"

So Ezekiel saw Him, and John on lonely Patmos and Stephen when He arose to welcome him (Acts 7:55) and Milton in his poem. The whirling wheels of this gigantic, gyroscopic chariot-throne are the wheels of GOD's providence in the history of redemption.

The Negro spiritual has caught the true and deep interpretation:

" Zekiel saw the wheel of Time
Every spoke was human kind
Wheel, O wheel!
De big wheel run by faith
De little wheel run by the grace of GOD
Wheel in the middle of a wheel."

In the dark days of slavery they, too, caught a vision of GOD in their captivity. Bound to the wheel of drudgery in the cotton-fields they saw the hand of Providence, "Little wheel run by the grace of GOD."

According to Ecclesiastes (1:4-12) all nature is a wheel and everything moves in cycles. From the whirling of protons and neutrons in the atom to the stellar universe, it is wheels within wheels. Everywhere we see velocity, order, intelligence; life controlled by GOD and not mere mechanism. The course of history is wheel within wheel. Revolution with progress or retrogression. Cycle upon cycle is the law of the universe. But it is not Blind Chance. GOD is on His throne. Providence rules destiny (Ezekiel 21:27). All revolutions point to the Second Advent.

Toynbee's *Story of Civilization* tells of twenty-one civilizations that arose, flourished and went under or became stagnant. Nevertheless, as he shows, History is His story who came at the water-shed of all history and molded it to the fullness of time for His purpose.

The history of the Jews is a proof of the Spirit in the wheels.

From Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, from thence to the rejection of the Messiah, the fall of Jerusalem, the European ghettos, the concentration camps of Hitler - and now back to the Promised Land. Ezekiel says the wheels are "**high and dreadful**" and also that they are "**full of eyes**" to those who can see.

And says Ezekiel, "**they returned not.**" Always progress toward GOD's goal.

"Careless seems the Great Avenger.
History's pages but record,
One death-grapple in the darkness
'Twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne!
But that scaffold sways the future
And behind the great unknown
Standeth GOD amid the shadows
Keeping watch above His own."

That is the interpretation of Ezekiel's wheels: GOD's hand in every man's life; His Providence in the long history of the church. The Old Testament gives many striking examples: Joseph sent captive into Egypt to preserve a whole nation by his wisdom and to save GOD's people; Moses called out of Egypt after his long preparation for a great task, learning all the wisdom of the Egyptians; then his sojourn in Midian and his call at the burning bush; till after forty years of wanderings he died on Nebo's lonely mountain.

What a story of GOD's Providence!

One hundred and twenty years of His guidance!

David as a shepherd-boy learned that the Lord was his Shepherd and then, by devious pathways, dark sins and in the furnace of affliction, he probed the depths of human experience and the heights of forgiveness and restoration - all to give the wide world his bundle of Psalms, a legacy for the ages.

The book of Esther is a striking story of GOD's overruling providence for the Jews and yet the name of GOD is strangely absent from the record; but the Spirit of Life is in the wheels. When the scaffold for Mordecai is already built, Royal insomnia leads to speedy reaction and complete deliverance of the doomed race (Esther, chapter 6).

In the New Testament we have a phrase used by Paul only once, "**the fullness of time**" (Galatians 4:4); yet so pregnant in significance that volumes have been written on how the Spirit in the wheels prepared the time, the place and the very hour for the Incarnation - that greatest event in human history.

On the blank page between Malachi and Matthew you may write an outline of the Divine preparation for the Advent.

Four men, Socrates, Alexander, Julius Caesar and Judas Maccabeus; each to prepare the way of the Lord and build highways for the feet and the minds of the apostles.

Four great cities flourished, each a future cradle for the Church: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome.

Three great languages made one world of law, culture and ethics; Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Their appearance over a Cross on Calvary was deeply prophetic.

The Spirit of redemption was in the wheels of providence in the History of the Church for twenty centuries. Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* finds its key in Harnack's *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*. Two empires came into collision but CHRIST was triumphant.

The history of Modern Missions is replete with miracles to those who have eyes to see and hearts to understand. Again and again what seemed like disaster or defeat became victory because GOD "**stood behind the shadows keeping watch.**"

- The Indian Mutiny in 1856;
- The Partition of Africa around a table in Brussels;
- The Armenian massacres (1900-1918) gave birth to new nations and the abolition of the Caliphate.
- The Boxer uprisings in China.

What were they but the birth-throes of a new era. After them came the forward movement in Missions.

The bombardment of Manila, unjustified it may have been, but GOD over-ruled it for the good of the whole Philippine archipelago.

We are too close to the First and Second World Wars to see the whole pattern of GOD. We gaze at the underside of His weaving and see the tangled skeins and broken threads. But the warp and woof of all history are in the hands of a Weaver who sits at the loom and knows and cares. His is **"the good and acceptable and perfect will"** in its origin and progress and final goal. We are willfully blind if we fail to see GOD's hand in history.

The vision of Ezekiel applies also to the individual.

Your belief in special Providence is the gauge of your piety, the measure of the nearness of GOD's living presence. Even the magicians of rebellious Pharaoh had to say finally, **"this is the finger of God"** (Exodus 8:19).

Look which way you will on the wheel of Providence in your own life and it has a face toward you. **"The wheel is full of eyes."**

There are no blind forces in nature. GOD's face is everywhere. The Bible constantly speaks of the strength of His arm, of the work of His hands; even the starry firmament is the work of His fingers (Psalm 8: 3). The same GOD who telleth the number of the stars and calleth them all by their names, healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds (Psalm 147:3, 4).

Every man's life is a plan of GOD; we make or mar it. Our disappointments are His appointments. All things work together for good to those who love GOD and are the called according to His purpose. If you will observe providences, you will find providences to observe.

The Heidelberg Catechism has a question and answer on this subject which I learned by heart as a boy but understand better after eighty-two years in my heart.

"What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?"

"The Almighty and everywhere present power of GOD whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all its creatures, and so governs them, that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

That is true and practical Christianity. It shuts out barren discussion of GOD's decrees and predestination.

The daily round, the common task is the wheel of GOD's providence. He is the Potter and we are the clay.

"Time's wheel runs back or stops;
Potter and clay endure . . .
He fixed thee in this dance
Of plastic circumstance.
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent . . . "

It is eccentricity that misshapes the clay. Is your life centric or eccentric to the will of GOD? There must be rest at the center if there is to be power at the circumference; for the, Spirit of life is in the wheels. Then also there is no friction.

"This," said Ezekiel, "was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake" (1:28).

"Or ever the golden bowl is broken or the silver cord is loosed, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then the dust shall return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:6, 7).

O GOD, Thou art our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear though the earth be removed and though the mountains be cast into the midst of the sea. We shall not be afraid of evil tidings for our hearts are fixed. Thou art in the midst of every circumstance and wilt help us right early. Amen.

1 *Paradise Lost*, Book VI, lines 649-658.

~ end of book ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
