

CHAPTER II

THE VISION OF GOD

THE THRONE OF GOD (1: 4-28)

IN the height of the summer of 592 B.C. Ezekiel was transported in a trance (3: 12, 14) to the banks of the "river" Chebar, one of the main irrigation canals of Babylonia. Tel-abib (3: 15), his home, was in the immediate vicinity of the canal. He saw a great storm cloud coming towards him from the north (1: 4). As it drew nearer he saw that it was the chariot-throne of Jehovah borne by four cherubim. It is a basic Old Testament concept that the sovereignty of God is revealed both in His control of nature and of history. Ezekiel is to be the bearer of the message that the deportation of the exiles and the coming destruction of Jerusalem are God's act, so he is first given a vision of the mighty thunderstorm as a mere attendant on God's throne.

Why did the throne come from the north? The glory of Jehovah dwelt in Jerusalem (ch. 8-11), and the vision of its forsaking of the Temple had not yet been given. Jerusalem lay almost due west, and there was no need for God to take the long way round by Carchemish that the captives had had to follow. The desert was no obstacle to Him. One reason was doubtless to impress on the prophet to be that the shame and ignominy of the captives was not hidden from their God. He was willing to go the way that they had gone. More important than this was the Babylonian belief that their gods lived in the far north (Isa. 14: 13). If the chariot-throne came from the north, it meant that whatever gods might live there had been vanquished on the way. This is not to attribute to Ezekiel any real belief in these gods, but it was the sign that there was no power in heaven or on earth that could stay Jehovah on His triumphant way.

The bearers of the throne are the cherubim. It is frequently claimed by scholars that Ezekiel's description of them resembles the winged man-headed animals so often found as the guardians of Mesopotamian temples. I am far from convinced that this is so, but if they are correct, it simply means that not only has Jehovah defeated the gods of Babylon on their own ground, but He has also carried off their servants to be His slaves.

The cherubim, as an order of heavenly beings, are often mentioned in the Bible, but little is told us as to their functions. The differences in the description here and in Rev. 4 show us that in both cases we are dealing with a purely symbolic picture which need have no approximation to the reality. We cannot even assume that they were represented in approximately the same form on the mercy seat and in Solomon's temple. Note that in 41: 18, 19, possibly for ease in reproduction, the cherubim have only two faces. This supports the suggestion that we are dealing with symbolic representations of heavenly beings.¹

Their appearance and their number, which again may well be symbolic, suggest that they are peculiarly the heavenly representatives of the earth. Modern man is strongly influenced by size, and even the Christian is inclined to depreciate the importance of the earth, a mere speck in the vast distances of space. This is especially the case if he is influenced by the old Greek dislike and suspicion of the material. But for the Old Testament this earth is the crown of God's creation and the especial revelation of His glory. So it is only fitting that His chariot-throne should be borne by beings who are particularly linked with God's creative and redemptive power here on earth.

It is doubtful whether much is to be gained by an attempt to puzzle out the details of the throne. The old rabbis declared that if anyone knew the secrets of the *merkabah*, he would know all the secrets of creation. This strongly suggests that the difficulties of the passage have little or nothing to do with the inadequacies of the English translation, but are due partly to Ezekiel's inability to describe what he saw with his spiritual eyes, partly to our lack of spiritual imagination. I shall content myself with elucidating some of the difficulties created by the translation and with pointing out some of the more obvious symbolic meanings.

Whether the ancients ever really thought of the world as square, I do not know, but the expression, the four corners, the four quarters, the four winds (37: 9) had become standard for the earth in its completeness; for this reason there are four cherubim (v. 5) forming a square, the representatives of the whole earth over which Jehovah holds sway. Theirs was "the likeness of a man" (v. 5), i.e. the human form predominated and they went upright. Their legs were straight (v. 7, RSV), the human aspect being once again stressed; there seems little meaning to be attached to their feet being like a calf's hoof. It

¹ Those interested will find a full discussion in Pember: *Earth's Earliest Ages*, pp. 168 *seq.* (15th edit., pp. 110 *seq.*).

seems probable that we are to understand that each cherub had two hands (v. 8); the four faces stress their nature as representatives of all living beings.

It is questionable whether the firmament (v. 22) is to be considered as supported on the wings of the cherubim. Rather their outstretched wings touching at the tips (v. 9) formed a protective square around the throne; such seems to be their role also in Rev. 4: 6. It is worth quoting the old rabbinic comment (Midrash Rabbah Shemoth § 23): "Man is exalted among creatures; the eagle is exalted among birds; the ox is exalted among domestic animals; the lion is exalted among wild beasts; and all of them have received dominion, and greatness has been given them, yet they are stationed below the chariot of the Holy One."

While the symbolic meaning of v. 12 is quite clear, it is not so obvious how we are to interpret the ability to go straight forward in any direction; the four-fold face is not paralleled in the rest of their bodies.

There can be no doubt that RV mg., RSV and Moffatt are correct in following LXX in v. 13, "In the midst of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire . . ." (RSV); it is likely that Moffatt is correct in omitting v. 14 with some MSS. of LXX. The mysterious something probably symbolizes the Spirit of God, who vitalizes the cherubim.

The chariot-throne has wheels presumably just because it is a chariot-throne (cf. Dan. 7: 9), thereby indicating that His rule is everywhere, not merely in heaven. Since the chariot does not go on the ground but in the air, we are not to think of them as necessary for its movements. Their strange vitality and intelligence (the eyes) are to be attributed to their being part of the throne of God. In the presence of God even inanimate matter is permeated with life: "the spirit of life was in the wheels" (v. 20f., RV mg.). There is perfect unity between the living guardians and the inanimate wheels (v. 19).

The usual modern explanation of v. 16 is that the wheels, which formed another square within that formed by the cherubim, were seen by Ezekiel from an angle that made them seem to interlock. In any case their ability to go in any direction without turning (v. 17) is as mysterious as the similar power of the cherubim.

Above the cherubim and wheels Ezekiel saw a platform (firmament) supporting the throne, like ice or crystal (LXX omits terrible); this becomes the glassy sea of Rev. 4: 6. Just as the living creation is represented in the cherubim and inani-

mate nature in the wheels, so the glory of heaven is seen in the platform.

If anything the vision of God (vv. 26-28) is even more symbolic than what has preceded. Above the chariot is a "likeness of a throne" (v. 26), its colour reminiscent of the blue vault of heaven, and round it is the glory of the covenant rainbow (v. 28). The dimly seen figure is a combination of fire and glory. Since God made man in His own image, He deigns, when He appears to man in symbolic form, to appear to him in "a likeness as the appearance of a man."

THE VISION OF GOD (1:26 - 2:2)

The effect of the vision of God was that Ezekiel fell on his face (1:28). Though it is not expressly stated, it seems clear enough that the vision had a paralysing effect on him, robbing him of all strength (cf. especially Dan. 8:17f.; 10:9ff., 15-19; Rev. 1:17). He needed Divine power and energy before he could look on the glory—"the spirit" (2:2) means the Spirit of God, but, as normally in the Old Testament, He is referred to impersonally, not personally, as normally in the New Testament.

It must be stressed that, however symbolic the vision, it was a real vision of God. It was not a vision of the chariot-throne, or of the cherubim, but of God. They all, in their manifold symbolism, are ultimately a revelation of God, for in the state He keeps we glimpse something of Him. To try and understand them as an end in itself is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the vision, and will bring little or no spiritual benefit.

It is quite common in popular piety to speak of seeing Christ. In its origin the phrase is probably a combination of certain passages of Scripture with the language of mysticism watered down to mean very little in particular. While it is undoubtedly granted to some children of God to have a vision of the risen Lord, such a vision is always a rare experience, which is bound to have the deepest imaginable effect on him who receives it. The hymn-writer was not sentimentalizing, when he wrote:

Show me Thy face—one transient gleam
Of loveliness Divine,
And I shall never think or dream
Of other love save Thine.

All lesser light will darken quite,
All lower glories wane;
The beautiful of earth will scarce
Seem beautiful again.

However popular the expression "seeing Christ" may have become with some to express a spiritual awareness of His presence, we would do well to reserve it for experiences comparable with those described in the Bible. Above all it should not be used for the ability some possess of summoning up a mental picture *of their own creating* of our Lord. To see God means to be transformed.

It should be noted and pondered that, so far as we have any record, it is not to man prostrate and weak before Him that God gives His prophetic message, but to man standing on his feet and strengthened by the Spirit. There are times and seasons, when the child of God will be found prostrate before the Lord, but when he is to be God's "fellow-worker," he is to stand upon his feet. "It is man erect, man in his manhood, with whom God will have fellowship and with whom He will speak" (A. B. Davidson). God's service is a willing and rational service, not the service of automata.