

## **DIVINE GLORY—IN SYMBOL AND REALITY**

To the casual reader of the Bible, the books of the prophets seem very much alike. There seems no discernible difference between one and another as regards either matter, structure, or style. To some extent, this view is correct, and necessarily so. The Spirit of God is the author of them all through various human instrumentalities, and therefore there is a uniformity of character in them which distinguishes them from the products of diverse human authorship.

At the same time, there is a difference that becomes manifest to the close and constant acquaintance of loving study. It is not the difference of a different authorship, but the variation of excellence in which the wisdom of God delights, as in the diversified works of nature, or the differing spirit-gifts which that *“one and self same Spirit”* bestowed on the governing eldership of the apostolic age. Ezekiel is before us in today’s reading as a distinct illustration of this difference between one prophetic book and another. There is a beginning, middle and end to Ezekiel, in a spiritual as well as in a literary sense. He is a witness of the glory of God in a special form, with a special meaning at three different times.

First, we find him a captive among the first batch of captives that went forth to Babylon with Jehoiachin and his queen-mother, and a number of the principal men and inhabitants of the land about twelve years before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, at the time Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin’s uncle Zedekiah, king in his place. He is “by the river of Chebar,” one of the tributaries of the Euphrates. He is a young member of a priestly family, and presumably one of those who were an exception to the prevalent temper of the land, in pleasing God by his faith and obedience. At this time and place, he is appointed a prophet to the house of Israel. The process of his appointment begins with his seeing something, as was frequently the case in the calling of the prophets. What he saw he describes elaborately. His general summary of it is that it was the *“appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord”* (Ch. 1:28).

He saw in the heavens, approaching from the north with whirlwind like velocity, *“a great cloud and a fire enfolding itself”* and suffused with electric brightness *“as the colour of amber.”* From the heart of this self-feeding glowing fire-cloud, there emerged and came near to him a wonderful apparatus of wheels and living creatures, surmounted by a throne occupied by a shining human figure, and over-arched by a bow of intense prismatic hues. The living creatures and wheels were full of eyes and quivering with light and flame, and the whole ran and returned with the rapidity of the lightning flash. This *“appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord”* was one of *“the similitudes”* which God tells us by Hosea (12:10) He made use of in *“multiplied visions”* *“by the ministry of the prophets.”* It is therefore full of significances most interesting to search out. Dr. Thomas has given us the clue to their import which ordinary intelligence is able to trace out. The self-feeding fire-cloud stands as the symbol of the Eternal One: the throne-surmounted living creatures and the wheels represented to us the Israelitish form of the intended manifestation of His self-evolved glory upon the earth in His chosen sons and daughters, when they shall have acquired, in their change to Spirit nature, the added powers of divine locomotion and omniscience. The throne stands for the Kingdom, and the occupant thereof for him under whom it is His purpose to gather together all things in one (Eph. 1:10).

But there is place for a supplementary thought. Symbols may be symbols, and yet may have reality as literal accessories. Nearly all manifested power is by means of symbols which, though having only a symbolic meaning, are nevertheless literal realities. The throne room of any monarch exemplifies the point. The coat of arms surmounting the throne is a symbol, and only a symbol, yet it is a real thing as well. The throne itself is a symbol . . . (for any other seat would do for literal sitting purposes). But though a symbol, it is a literal reality as well. So with the numerous badges of honour among men . . . ribbons and medals and crosses . . . they are all symbols and understood to be such and only valued as such, and yet are realities first. May not this truth hold good with the manifestation of the divine glory? What was the flaming sword at Eden’s gate; the pillar of fire in front of Israel’s marching host; the chariots of fire escorting Elijah and surrounding Elisha . . . the dove form of the anointing Spirit at the baptism of Christ . . . what were these but symbols, yet realities as things used with symbolic import?

May it not be that there are divine insignia . . . actual symbolic things of Spirit form and substance that attend and express to the highest intelligence the inscrutable and incommunicable attributes of the Eternal? We do not know. We must wait and see. Some things like Ezekiel's vision seem to favour the idea. We must not limit our conceptions of the Eternal Father by our experiences and impressions as earth-borns. The universe is too vast and too diversified in its manifested power and glory to justify narrow views on the subject. The Father dwells in heaven, and must have actual surroundings . . . bright and incorruptible but real, and therefore having form. It may be that "*the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord*" seen by Ezekiel on the plains of Chebar, while displaying truth in symbol, forms part of the real garniture of the divine glory when literally manifested to the eyes of men. On the other hand, it may be on a par with John's "*seven golden candlesticks*," and "*ten horned*" seven-headed monster . . . mere mental pictures having no real existence beyond the impression produced on the mind of the prophet or apostle. It is a point on which judgment must be held in suspense. The absolute illimitability of the forms of power and wisdom displayed in the universe forbids dogmatism on the subject. There are heights and varieties of divine glory and power which offer a boundless prospect of intellectual gratification in the day when, if happily accepted, "*we shall know even as we are known.*"

The object of this manifestation of the glory of God to Ezekiel on the plains of Chebar was to make him known (and to communicate to Israel) the reason of God's impending departure from them. This reason is stated and reiterated in a variety of forms. The pith of it is contained in the following:

*"Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her. And she hath changed My judgments into wickedness more than the nations and My statutes more than the countries that are round about her: for they have refused My statutes and My judgments: they have not walked in them . . . Therefore thus saith the Lord God, behold I, even I, am against thee and will execute judgments in the midst of thee, in the sight of the nations . . . and the whole remnant of thee will I scatter unto all the winds . . . I will make thee waste and a reproach among the nations that are round about thee in the sight of all that pass by"* (Ch. 5:5-14).

This purpose and the cause of it were dramatised to Ezekiel and by him to Israel in the most striking manner. He was first told by God that the people to whom he was being sent were a rebellious people . . . "*impudent and stiff-hearted*" (2:3-4), but that he must deliver the Word to them undismayed by their threatening looks, and "*whether they will hear or whether they will forbear*" (3:4-11).

*"Behold," said God, "I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant, harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house"* (3:8-9).

He was commanded to make a representation of Jerusalem—a sort of model—and to conduct against it a mimic siege—as if it might be in the market place in the sight of the people, and to explain to the people that God purposed the destruction of the city because of their iniquity.

*"I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they shall eat bread by weight and with care, and they shall drink water by measurement and with astonishment . . . and pestilence and blood shall pass through thee, and I will bring the sword upon thee. And the slain shall fall in the midst of you and ye shall know that I am the Lord. Yet I will leave a remnant that ye may have some that shall escape the sword among the nations when ye shall be scattered through the countries. And they that escape of you shall remember Me among the nations whither they shall be carried captive . . . They shall know that I am the Lord, and that I have not said in vain that I would do this evil unto them."*

This may be called the first part of Ezekiel's prophecy. The glory of God is in it, as we have seen. In the second part, Ezekiel is himself made to see the reason of God's displeasure with Israel, and is shown the departure of the glory from their midst. He is brought "*in the visions of God to Jerusalem*," and shown a variety of abominations enacted in secret places in the city, under the idea on the part of the transgressors that—

*"The Lord seeth us not: the Lord hath forsaken the earth"* (8:12).

*“And behold the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain.”*

But the glory had ascended from its usual cherubic resting place, and stood on the threshold of the house (9:3). In this position, it summoned six armed men, and commissioned them to go through the city and—

*“Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children and women.”*

They were not to touch certain men on whom a mark was first to be placed, viz.:

*“The men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.”*

As regards the rest, the command was:

*“Defile the house and fill the courts with slain: go ye forth.”*

And the command was obeyed in Ezekiel’s presence. Ezekiel was painfully exercised at the scene and interceded with God. The answer was:

*“The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceeding great and the land is full of blood and the city full of perverseness: for they say, ‘The Lord hath forsaken the earth . . . and the Lord seeth us not’?”*

*“Mine eye shall not spare neither will I have pity: but I will recompense their way upon their head.”*

Then the full glory of the wheeled cherubim was displayed: and—

*“The glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house and stood over the cherubim, and the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth in my sight . . . The glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city.”*

From this point onward, the prophecy of Ezekiel has mostly to do with the desolation in Israel and other lands, consequent on the departure of the glory of God from His people. This is appropriate enough. The time of the Gentiles were just commencing. They set in a few years afterwards with the overthrow of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Since then with the exception of the Word communicated to Daniel in Babylon to Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi in support of the feeble restoration and to the closing revelation by Jesus and the apostles which may be compared to the last rays of the setting sun, the state of Israel has been one of darkness. *“Ichabod”* has been written on all things Jewish. *“Dry bones”* indeed are the fitting symbol of the Jews since God departed from them.

The departure of the glory of God from their midst is the explanation of all. But if there was a departure, there was something to depart. The glory of God was in their midst before it went away. And this is the rock on which we stand—that God did truly in time past speak unto the fathers by the prophets, and last of all by His Son. The dreadful past in its fulfilment of the dreadful prophecy foretelling it, is the proof that the prophecy is true, and, therefore, the guarantee that what is not yet fulfilled will be so in due course.

And this introduces us to the third and last stage of Ezekiel’s prophecy—the glory of God at the end, as well as at the beginning and the middle. It comes in at a very significant place, namely, when all the desolations spoken of in the intervening portions of the prophecy have culminated in the Gogian invasion of the land of Israel, in *“the latter days,”* when God brings the armies of the Gentiles against the Holy Land, that a situation may be created in which the interposition of His mighty hand may be visible to all the world, preparatory to the setting up of His glorious Kingdom. That the final vision of the glory of the Lord should come in here, is most fitting. That Ezekiel’s prophecy should end with it is beautiful. Its description occupies the last nine chapters. These chapters describe a vision seen by Ezekiel fourteen years after Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and nearly twenty years after he saw the vision of the departing glory of the Lord. It is a vision of returning glory—never again to depart, for the last word of this concluding vision is,

*“The name of the city from that day shall be, the Lord is there.”*

In this vision, Ezekiel tells us that he was brought *“into the land of Israel”* and set upon a very high mountain from which he beheld *“the frame of a city on the south.”* Being conducted near the city, he was met by a man of striking appearance, furnished with a measuring reed of nearly 12 feet in length, and a line of flax, who told him he had been sent to show him the place and all things connected with it, in a detailed manner. The man then proceeded to measure the wall and the east gate and its belongings and the court inside and another gate on the further side of the court leading into an inner

court, crossing which, after sundry perambulations, they entered the inner house, the further limit of which introduced them to “*the most holy*,” being the top of the mount encircled. Having seen the immense building throughout, a city in its vast extent, yet one edifice in its entirety—the sanctuary of the Lord—whose construction, and character, and uses, the brethren will now very shortly have the opportunity of learning in detail from Bro. Sulley’s plans and exposition—he was then permitted to behold the glory of the Lord in the different character already referred to.

*“Behold the glory of the Lord came from the way of the east and His voice was like the noise of many waters, and the earth shined with His glory. It was according to the appearance of the vision I saw when I came to destroy the city: and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Chebar. And I fell upon my face, and the glory of the Lord came into the house by the way of the gate, whose prospect is towards the east. So the Spirit took me up and brought me into the inner court, and behold the glory of the Lord filled the house. And I heard Him speaking unto me out of the house (and the man stood by me) and He said unto me, Son of Man, the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel for ever, and My holy name shall the house of Israel no more defile” (43:2-7).*

The Truth enables us, not only to understand but to contemplate with rapture this exhibition of what God purposes to do in the end of His dealings with the house of Israel. That he has not made the earth in vain—that He means to fill it with His glory at the last—He has declared from the beginning. Here in Ezekiel, we are permitted to see the means of its establishment and the form of its manifestation. —A Kingdom established in the land of promise, with dominion over universal man, and having as its central feature a temple of extent and capacity never equalled in the dreams of man, acting as a pivot and purifier of universal life, diffusing blessing where little else than misery and the shadow of death now prevail. It is a matter in which we are practically interested. We have been called to be heirs of the Kingdom, and this is the Kingdom in manifestation. Nothing that has ever been on earth can be compared to it. It is a glory that is as certain to come as the desolation which long foretold has prevailed so long that men’s hearts are sick and their faith in coming goodness nearly dead. Let not our faith die. The grimy and oppressive surroundings of the present dispensation, though they seem so permanent, are as transient as the disturbed dreams of night. The hour will come when they will have disappeared from our view, and when nothing will be visible on the earth but the blessedness in Abraham and his seed—long promised and come at last.

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