

Ezekiel saw a strange being in the northern sky about 2600 years ago, that zipped all over the sky. What was it?

As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man; and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four had also the face of an eagle. - Ezekiel 1:10

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Sources -

All bible text, unless otherwise indicated, is from the Public Domain Darby Translation from the e-Sword Bible program. ASV indicates the American Standard Version, with KJV indicating the King James Version. Quotations are often included from various classic Christian commentaries such as John Gill's Expositor, Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Robertson's New Testament Word Pictures, and others. Greek and Hebrew word definitions are often included from the Strong's Concordance, and Brown-Driver-Briggs' unless otherwise indicated. All of these sources, both the Bible text's, commentaries, and Strong's definition's are all taken from the excellent free for download source, the e-Sword Bible program, or from the Pocket e-Sword version of the software, unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction -

This lesson is meant to be a little light hearted in it's approach, and enjoyable, as we look at this unusual passage in chapter 1 of Ezekiel's prophecies. The prophet here sees a very strange creature, or object in the sky to the north of the area where he was in Babylon, by the Chebar river. There isn't that much depth, or originality of thought among commentators about the meaning of all the symbolism in the being that Ezekiel sees here. That's unfortunate because it is an extremely intriguing story no matter how you take it.

There is also the question, what was this creature or being that the prophet saw that had such an unusual appearance and darted around the sky at such incredible speeds. Let's enjoy ourselves here, and think a little, as we look at this strange object that Ezekiel saw in the skies north of Babylon some 2600 years ago.

Ezekiel Chapter 1:1-28 - ASV (American Standard Version)

1 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.

2 In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity,

3 the word of Jehovah came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of Jehovah was there upon him.

4 And I looked, and, **behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire infolding itself, and a brightness round about it, and out of the midst thereof as it were glowing metal, out of the midst of the fire.**

5 **And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man.**

Albert Barnes Notes on the Bible from the Pocket e-Sword Bible Program -

Living creatures - The Hebrew word answers very nearly to the English "beings," and denotes those who live, whether angels, men (in whom is the breath of life), or inferior creatures.

Darby's Notes on the Bible from the Pocket e-Sword Bible Program -

...These symbols are nearly the same as those used by the pagan inventors of idolatry to represent their gods. Formal idolatry began with a figurative personification of the attributes of God. These attributes became their gods, men being impelled to worship them by demons who governed them by this means, so that it was these demons whom men worshipped...

Comments -

All of these classic Christian commentators reviewed, saw the four symbols as representative of aspects of God's nature, which the pagans then took and worshiped as actually being gods. We know from the Bible that that did occur. But I think there is more meaning in the symbols or sights that Ezekiel saw in that stormy sky.

6 And **every one had four faces**, and every one of them had four wings.

Comments -

There were, it appears, more than one of these beings. They were not dumb creatures as the KJV translation might imply to us today since we use those English words differently today.

7 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 burnished brass.

Comments -

Burnished brass – i.e. brightened copper in appearance, See the definitions below.

burnished - H7044 קלל qâlâl kaw-lawl' From H7043; ***brightened*** (as if *sharpened*): - burnished, polished.

brass - H5178 נשת nêchôsheth nekh-o'-sheth For H5154; ***copper***; hence, something made of that metal, that is, *coin*, a *fetter*; figuratively *base* (as compared with gold or silver): - brasen, brass, chain, copper, fetter (of brass), filthiness, steel.

8 And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings thus:

9 their wings were joined one to another; **they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward.**

Comments -

they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward - Strange movement for living beings. The movement was always straight forward in one direction or another. Then they would zip off in another direction.

10 As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man; and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four had also the face of an eagle.

11 And their faces and their wings were separate above; two wings of every one were joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.

Comments -

None of the commentaries mentioned above noted that these four faces are the symbols of the four tribes of Israel that lead the four companies when marching. Each of the tribes had a standard or heraldic symbol. When the twelve tribes of Israel marched in formation, each group of three had a lead tribe. The four lead tribes with symbols that can be derived from their description by Jacob\Israel in Gen. 49 and by Moses in Deut. 33 are these; a man for Rueben, a lion for Judah, an ox for Ephraim, and an eagle for Dan. Do note that the modern state of Israel has adopted symbols for the twelve tribes on a series of postage stamps. Some match these interpretations, and some do not. My understanding is completely from the actual main items mentioned in these verses.

It seems unlikely to my mind that the matching of the four faces with the prophecies to each tribe in Gen. 49, and Deut. 33 are just coincidence. As we look at these tribal symbols keep in mind that Ezekiel said he saw this entity in the north. That's important, because the symbol he would see the first would be the one facing south. The one on his right side would be actually facing to the east. The one to his left would then be facing west. The one left to mention would have to be facing away from Ezekiel, to the north. Watch how the four faces, facing in those directions, match the tribal arrangements of Israel's lead tribes with their prophetic descriptions.

The south – Reuben

Reuben was Jacob's first male child, manly, strong, and dignified. He seemed a natural leader. But he was unstable as water. He had, perhaps, too much sexual drive. His symbols derivable from this could be a man, and also water. Reuben lead the company of three tribes on the south side of Israel's formation. The south side of this entity is what Ezekiel must have seen first since he was south of it, and said he looked north. So the man's face that Ezekiel here sees first must be on the south side. It matches the manly figure that Reuben was in real life, and his tribe of descendent's, again, marched on the south side of Israel's formation.

Gen. 49:3 Reuben, thou art my first-born, my might, and the beginning of my strength; The pre-eminence of dignity, and the pre-eminence of power. 4 Boiling over as water, thou shalt not have the pre-eminence; Because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; Then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch.

The east - Judah

Judah was strong, and destined to rule. His symbol was the lion of the tribe of Judah. Everyone knows that. Judah led the company of tribes to the east of Israel's formation. This face of a Lion was on the right side of the entity Ezekiel saw which would place it on the east side of the being.

Gen. 49:8 Judah, thee shall thy brethren praise: Thy hand shall be on the neck of thine enemies; Thy father's sons shall bow down before thee. 9 **Judah is a lion's whelp**; From the prey, my son, thou art gone up: He stooped down, he couched as a lion, And as a lioness; who shall rouse him up?

The west - Ephraim

Joseph, and his lead son Ephraim were very powerful, and destined to be uncontrolled by the other world powers. Jacob gave the birthright blessings to Joseph. Thus, the fullest manifestation of Joseph's blessings will be seen in Ephraim the lead son. His main symbol was, I believe, the ream, a huge untameable wild ox, not a domestic ox pulling a plow. Ephraim led the company of tribes to the west of Israel's congregation, and this face of the ox was seen on Ezekiel's left side which was facing west.

Since Joseph, Ephraim's father, is described as a fruitful bough, or vine, that is well watered and overgrowing his wall, Ephraim is predicted to grow out of the bounds of Israel early in his history. Facing towards the west, the hint is that he would grow out of Israel toward the then developing western world. If that seems strange, consider that the heart and soul of Judah has always been back toward the land of Israel which is east, even though the vast majority of the Jewish people have been in the western world for a millennium. But they are now migrating back to Israel, and recent census figures indicate that a majority may now once again be in the land of Israel. They, as already mentioned, lead the eastern contingent of Israel. Their tendency again, was always toward the east, and a return to the land of Israel, east of the northwestern world. Joseph\Ephraim would tend toward the western world, where we see the wealth, huge food production, and the most powerful military. Joseph and Ephraim were promised those very things.

Deut. 33:13 And **of Joseph he said**, Blessed of Jehovah be his land, **For the precious things of heaven, for the dew, And for the deep that coucheth beneath,**

16 And for the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof, And the good will of him that dwelt in the bush. Let the blessing come upon the head of Joseph, And upon the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.

17 The firstling of his herd, majesty is his; **And his horns are the horns of the wild-ox**: With them he shall push the peoples all of them, even the ends of the earth: And they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, And they are the thousands of Manasseh.

the wild-ox - קֶרַח מִצֹּאֵר מִן הַבַּיִת re'êm re'êym rêym rêm reh-ame', reh-ame', rame, rame From H7213; **a wild bull** (from its conspicuousness): - unicorn.

The north - Dan

Dan was destined to be independent, as seen in some of his promises, and far reaching in his wanderings from the land of Israel. He seems, from some Bible passages such as Jdg 5:17, as well as possible hints in ancient history, to have begun his wanderings very early in Israel's history, possibly even before the people of Israel had left Egypt. He was to judge or establish the other peoples of Israel in some manner.

Gen. 49:16 Dan shall judge his people, As one of the tribes of Israel. 17 Dan shall be a serpent in the way, **An adder in the path**, That biteth the horse's heels, So that **his rider falleth backward**. 18 I have waited for thy salvation, O Jehovah.

There is some play on the words here for the name Dan means to judge. His symbols, from all of this, could be a snake, as well as a rider on a horse. No eagle is mentioned in Jacob's blessing, but this passage in Ezekiel 1 seems to hint that in some way the eagle became attached to Dan as a symbol. Notice that in Deut. 33:22 Dan is specifically given a second heraldic symbol.

Deu 33:22 And of Dan he said, **Dan is a young lion; He shall spring forth from Bashan.**

Some of the tribes did have more than one symbol given to them. So having the eagle as a secondary symbol is not impossible. This is the last face mentioned by Ezekiel because it was not readily visible since it was facing away from him toward the north. The tribe of Dan lead the northern configuration of the people of Israel.

Num 2:25 The standard of the camp of Dan shall be northward according to their hosts; and the prince of the sons of Dan shall be Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai;

Here Dan is credited by the prophetess Deborah with being so completely involved in shipping and maritime industry, that they ignored military concerns of the other tribes of Israel.

Jdg 5:17 Gilead abode beyond Jordan; **And Dan, why did he remain in ships?** Asher sat on the sea-shore, And abode in his creeks.

Dan also migrated northerly into Phoenician territory (to Laish), making it likely they would merge somewhat with the Phoenicians, and their well known shipping concerns.

Jos 19:47 And the border of the children of Dan ended with these; **and the children of Dan went up and fought against Leshem, and took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and took possession of it, and dwelt in it, and called Leshem, Dan, after the name of Dan their father.**

Jdg 18:29 **And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel; howbeit Laish was the name of the city at the first.**

Note also, that Dan had a marked tendency to leave the name of their forefather, Dan, everywhere they went, leaving a trail of Dan-like names on the map. The Phoenicians were already starting to move west in the Mediterranean, establishing more and more ports and outposts.

12 And they went every one straight forward: whither the spirit was to go, they went; they turned not when they went.

Comments -

Ezekiel seems to describe the movement of these beings as straight forward, moving in only one direction at a time. There wasn't any circular or arcing turn in their movement. Only a straight single vector of direction at a time. The result must have seemed like a zig zagging, start and stop, type of movement.

13 As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches: the fire went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning.

Comments -

They seemed to have a bright glowing light, or perhaps an arc type of light, appearing and moving in and around their formation or around each being. There were sparks or an arching of energy from these torches of light.

14 And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Comments -

Their movement was incredibly rapid, as they zipped off in one direction, and then returned where they were. This sudden zig zagging type of movement was repeated in many directions. They seemed like lightning because they moved so rapidly, or they actually displayed lightning arcs as they moved around. Admittedly, this was a strange sight that Ezekiel saw, whatever the beings were.

Conclusion -

This lesson in Ezekiel chapter 1 was a light hearted study, meant to be enjoyable, thought provoking, and hopefully informative as well. The prophet did see a very strange being, or object of some kind, in the skies north of Babylon, from somewhere around the river Chebar. Not many traditional Bible commentators have delved into the mysteries of Ezekiel's description of these beings, nor of the Israelite symbolism in their appearance. But it is very intriguing for those of us who do take the time.

Beyond that, an interesting question is this; what was this being, or object that the prophet Ezekiel saw to the north of Babylon that had such an unusual appearance, darting all over the sky in jerking, lightning like bursts of speeds. What do you think Ezekiel saw in the sky 2600 years ago?