
CHRIST – THE CORNERSTONE OF CHURCH'S REVELATION

AN ANSWER TO THE ICONOGRAPHIC DIALOGUE IN 'THE MYSTICAL WHEEL' BY FRA ANGELICO

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Abstract

Inspired by the text of Ezekiel 1.4ff, Fra Angelico painted 'The Mystic Wheel' ('The Vision of Ezekiel') as a representation of mystical symbols. In Ezekiel's 'Mystic Wheel' the image of fire, the powerful lighting and noise accompany the revealed teaching of God. "The voice of the Almighty" (Ezekiel 1.24) becomes for Fra Angelico a message of the unity of the Revelation: the outer wheel represents the Old Testament and the inner wheel represents the New Testament. Gregory's argument, mentioned in the painting, is in consensus with the whole Church theology, first exposed by Augustine: "The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, and the Old Testament is in the New Testament Revealed". If we see the representation of Fra Angelico as a church cupola, in its centre we find Christ – 'The Cornerstone', the key of the Church Revelation.

Keywords: revelation, Book of Ezekiel, Fra Angelico, Merkavah, Jewish mysticism

1. Ezekiel 1 and 10: sources of inspiration for art

1.1. Premises of text interpretation

Prophet Ezekiel, born in priest Buzi's family (Ezekiel 1.3) in 622 BC is one of the 'great prophets' not only because of his extensive writing but mainly because of his deep theological message. Ezekiel's prophetic ideas have as source the Revealed Word, but the form that they were exposed, specific to the great Judean scholar, derives from his own experience of the Babylonian exile, in 597 BC (2 Kings 24.10-17), of the imminence of the fall of the Judah's Kingdom, of Jerusalem, and of the Temple, of the scattering of Israel who had become a slave among the heathen. The exile, the most tragic moment of his life, is augmented by the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24.18), so that his calling to prophecy, in the Babylonian Tel-Aviv, on the bank of the Khebar canal, near

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Nippur (Ezekiel 3.15), comes as a salvation of his own identity, a responsibility within the big family of the enslaved people of Israel.

Far from the Holy Land, Ezekiel does not hesitate in expressing his frustration regarding the lax attitude of the other exiles whom he names “a rebellious house” (Ezekiel 3.26-27, 25.8), and especially of those who remained, for a short while, in Jerusalem waiting for the miraculous political salvation through the direct intervention of Yahweh-Savaoth - ‘The Lord of the armies’. That is why his message goes from mobilizing threats to announcements full of hope regarding the descending of divine blessing this time not through God’s immediate intervention, but by that of the messianic king, Christ – the Lord. That is how one may explain why Ezekiel’s writing was so difficult to understand not only for contemporaries, but also for the later wise rabbis and Christian thinkers. The book surprises the scholar of the holy text by its style, often redundant, which made the rationalist critics deny his authority considering it the result of a post-exilic priestly school [1].

Even if Ezekiel was initially banned by Talmudists because of the textual lack of correspondence with the Mosaic Law [2], and also because of the prophet’s accuses against his countrymen, Ezekiel’s visions played an important role in mystical speculations in Judaism. The rabbi interpreters identified numerous much lack of correspondence between Ezekiel 4-7 and 34-37 with Leviticus 26. Trying to reconcile these fragments, rabbi Hanina ben Hezekiah burnt three hundred lamps during night time. *Shabbath* 13b: “Rab Judah said in Rab's name: In truth, that man, Hananiah son of Hezekiah by name, is to be remembered for blessing: but for him, the Book of Ezekiel would have been hidden, for its words contradicted the Torah. What did he do? Three hundred barrels of oil were taken up to him and he sat in an upper chamber and reconciled them.” [2]

The vision of the divine throne in Ezekiel 1, known to specialists by the Hebrew term *merkavah* (‘the chariot’), is part of this resource of mystical prophetic texts which must not be read and interpreted at random. In Mishna, *Haggigah* II.1, it is told: “It is forbidden to explain the first chapters of Genesis to two persons, but it is only to be explained to one by himself. It is forbidden to explain the Merkabah even to one by himself unless he be a sage and of an original turn of mind”. *Haggigah* 13a adds the words: “But it is permitted to divulge to him [*i.e.* to one in the case of the first chapters of Genesis] the first words of the chapters”. In the same paragraph, Rabbi Ze’era (3rd century AD) affirms with great rigor: “We may not divulge even the first words of the chapters [neither of Genesis nor Ezekiel] unless it be to a ‘chief of the Beth Din’ or to one whose heart is tempered by age or responsibility”. Nevertheless, another rabbi from the aforementioned century declares in the same context: “We may not divulge the secrets of the Torah to any (...)” [3].

As the other prophets, Ezekiel tries to give either a theological or a historical interpretation for the vision, adapting the divine message to man’s possibilities of understanding. Later however, the mystic Jews, profiting from the richness of images and from the mystery offered by them, did not look for a

logical meaning of the *merkavah* vision, but kept it in this unexplainable, ineffable, and incomprehensible framework without judging it deterministically, without applying it to the concrete, to the rational. For the mystic Jew, Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot meant a new experience of the sacred man's search for the divine, determined, as always, by the kenotic revelation of God to the man, a I-you meeting, an unveiling of the most secret learning which leads the man, again, to the "unseen". It becomes obvious that Ezekiel's *merkavah* ('the chariot') is not the destination of prophecy in itself, but the means to get into the unknown.

In the old Hebrew literature, Ezekiel is undoubtedly a precursor of the apocalyptic images [4], developed later in the writings of the prophets Zachariah (chap. 9-14) and Daniel, and also in pseudo-epigraphic works like I Enoch and IV Ezra.

1.2. The vision of the divine throne (merkavah) in the revealed biblical context

The image of the divine chariot with the four intertwined wheels appears in Ezekiel 1.4-28 and in the parallel text 10.9-19.

Ezekiel 1.4-28 *passim* [Translation from the English Standard Version, Edition, 2001]: "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. (...) 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. (...) 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 all around. (...) 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".

The vision of the divine chariot (*merkavah*) is the divine calling of the prophet to mission, a calling in which he is shown the glory of God in the image of a chariot carried by four celestial beings. The Term מְרֻכָבָה (*merkavah*) means

‘chariot’ and derives from the verbal root רכב ‘to ride’, which appears 44 times in the Old Testament. By being related to God, the chariot receives divine features, being accompanied by elements specific to revelations: wind, fire, very strong light. In this respect, the texts from Isaiah 66.15, Habakkuk 3.8, and Zechariah 6.1-3 lend to the image of the divine chariot presented by Ezekiel, new theological significance:

Isaiah 66.15: “For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire”.

Habakkuk 3.8: “Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? (מִרְכַּבְתֶּיךָ יְשׁוּעָה)?” The literal translation of the text מִרְכַּבְתֶּיךָ יְשׁוּעָה would be “your redemption chariots”, a clear reference to salvation through the intervention of divine power, on one hand as liberation from the power of exterior evil, of the enemies of Israel, and on the other, as inner spiritual liberation.

Zechariah 6.1-3: “Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses – all of them strong”. As in Ezekiel, in this text of Zechariah we encounter again a vision.

Because it was rode only by persons of high social rank, most of the times by the political and military leader, the chariot is the symbol of majesty, of authority, of absolute power on earth (see Genesis 41.43, 46.29; I Samuel 8.11; II Samuel 15.1; II Kings 5.21-26).

Some Hebrew texts (I Samuel 4.4; II Samuel 6.2; II Kings 19.15; Psalms 80.1; 99.1) support the idea that the Tabernacle’s cherubs made, with their wings, “a visible pedestal for the invisible throne of God” [5], a fact confirmed by I Chronicles 28.18: “And for the altar of incense refined gold by weight; and gold for the pattern of the chariot of the cherubs (הַמְרַכְבָּה הַכְּרֻבִים) that spread out their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord”. This throne of winged beings becomes mobile and even flying in Ezekiel’s vision, the multitude of representations of cherubs on the walls and the curtain of the temple contributing to this vision-image (II Chronicles 3.7).

Ezekiel’s *merkavah* is led by four חַיִּוֹת (*chayot*, ‘beings’), each of them having four faces: “They had the face of a man, they four had the face of a lion on the right side, they four had the face of an ox on the left side, and they four had the face of an eagle”. The Church Fathers identify the four beings in the vision with the four Evangelists: the man – Matthew, the lion – Marcus, the ox – Lucas, the eagle – John.

1.3. *Merkavah in art*

If the Talmudists, the Church writers and the Holy Fathers avoided the literal interpretation of the multitude, complicated and elaborated images presented by Ezekiel, it is likely that the same happened in the vaster and freer

territory for imagination in pictorial or sculptural art. Not surprisingly, Ezekiel's vision of a chariot carried by four beings with human, lion, ox, and eagle faces was a source of inspiration only for a few artists.

Some unsigned miniatures attributed to the 13th century French miniature school, which are now part of the 'Paris Bible' of the Koninklijke library in Hague, depicted Ezekiel sleeping and right above him the revelation of the four beings, represented as the four Evangelists. Another famous representation is that of Raphael, *Ezekiel's Vision*, made in 1518, which is kept today in Palazzo Pitti in Florence (Galeria Palatina). The divine throne in Ezekiel's vision appears on one of the versions of *Luther's Bible*, Nuremberg, 1702. Other representations by unknown authors are kept in *L'histoire du Vieux et du Nouveau Testament* of Nicolas Fontaine, the editions from 1670 and 1699, and *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgat[am] quam dicunt editionem*, editor Jean Benoit, 1552. In 1931-1939, Marc Chagall paints *Ezekiel's Vision*. In 1964-1967, Salvador Dali created 105 lithographies, published in 1969 in *Biblia Sacra*, among which one, titled *Ecce quasi filius hominis in nubibus us caeli*, refers to Ezekiel 1.4.

Among these representations of the divine chariot from Ezekiel, a special artistic vision belongs to the most important painter of sacred inspiration in Quattrocento, Fra Angelico (1395-1455) [6-9]. The great Italian painter, canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, made a painting on wood, in 1451-1453, *Armadio degli argenti*. Preserved today at the San Marco Museum in Florence, *Armadio degli argenti* (The Silver Chest) comprises forty images of the same dimension, (38,5x37 cm) and one of double size, out of which six have been lost. These present scenes from the Life of the Saviour framed by three special scenes: *The Vision of Ezekiel* or *The Mystic Wheel*, *Jesse's Tree* and *The Last Judgement*.

2. Theological symbols in 'The Vision of Ezekiel' or 'The Mystic Wheel' by Fra Angelico

2.1. The description of the scene

The elements that characterize the presence of divinity in Ezekiel's vision are also depicted by de Fra Angelico: the exterior wheel is surrounded by fire, its rungs are golden, sign of a radiant light, the idea of the spinning wheel leads to the name it was given by Ezekiel, *galgal* – 'whirlwind', and the texts in the upper part of the image seem to be uttered by the all mighty voice of God who reveals Himself. Ezekiel himself (1.24) states that the sound that was produced by the flapping of the wings was "like the voice of the Almighty" (כְּקוֹל־שָׁדַי) (*keqol Shadday*), on one hand an anthropomorphic description of God's manner of communicating, on the other hand, as the Judaic and Church tradition understood, a manifestation of the prophetic spirit through which God revealed Himself.

The exterior wheel represents the Old Testament, portraying twelve of its most important prophets: Moses, Solomon, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Micah, Jonah, Joel, Malachi, Ezra, Daniel, Isaac, and David. Moses, flanked by King David on the right and King Solomon on the left, is the central character, holding the two tables of the Commandments. From those aforementioned, Isaac is the only figure of the Old Testament who was not a writer.

The interior wheel represents the New Testament, portraying John, Simon Peter, Marcus, Judah Thaddeus, Lucas, Jacob son of Alpheus, Matthew, and Paul.

Not surprisingly, the four Evangelists are placed in such a manner that they form the sign of the cross. Like the four sides of the Cross, the correlation among the four Evangelists and the four faces of the celestial beings brings forth the symbolical significance of number four, as an expression of the idea of universality. Attentive to details (let us not forget that Fra Angelico exercised miniature, too, probably working with his elder brother, Benedetto, also a Dominican monk [10]), Fra Angelico depicted the four with the faces revealed to Ezekiel: in the upper part John, with an eagle's head; on the right Marcus, with a lion's head; at the bottom Lucas, with an ox's head; on the left Matthew, with a man's/angel's head [11]. They hold codex (bound books) in their hands, in contrast with the other Apostles portrayed with scrolls in their hands.

The theological idea that the painter-monk wants to highlight is that God gave his Word through four accounts, differing in form but identical as regards the gist, united by the same Holy Ghost. The identity of the Scripture is linked to the identity of the source of its revelation, the Holy Trinity. That is why Jeronimus states: "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the Lord's team of four, the true cherubim or store of knowledge" [12].

In Fra Angelico's representation, the background for the Old Testament prophets is dark, as of the "people that walked in darkness" (Isaiah 9.1), who, in the New Testament "have seen a great light", so that over those who were living "in death's shadow" light will come, represented by Fra Angelico by the blue image of the sky. The exterior circle does not delimits, but leads to the centre, to the interior, to the mystery, justifying thus John's text: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1.5, parallel with John 8.12, 12.35-36, 46; Luke 2.29-32; II Corinthians 4.6). It is also noticeable that there is continuity between the centre and the poles of light of the two Testaments' representations.

Fra Angelico surrounded the exterior wheel of the Old Testament with the Latin text from Genesis 1.1-5: "In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae super faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas dixitque Deus fiat lux et facta est lux. Et vidit Deus lucem quod esset bona et divisit lucem ac tenebras appellavitque lucem diem". The interior wheel, of the New Testament, is surrounded by the Latin text from John 1.1-3: "In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum. Hoc erat in principio apud Deum. Omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est". It is obvious that the texts chosen by Fra

Angelico for the two wheels begin with *in principio* ('in the beginning') and this is to show the unity of God's revelation in the two Testaments.

2.2. 'The New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New'

In *The Vision of Ezekiel*, Fra Angelico highlights two fundamental characteristics of the revelation: the unity of the Scripture, from the first to its last word, and the intrinsic relation between the Scripture of the Old and the New Testament.

More textual clues from Ezekiel 1 and 10 led the Church Fathers to the argumentation of the idea of unity of the divine revelation. The four beasts/cherubs look identical (1:5-8) and that is why they are identified in Ezekiel 1:22; 10:15.17.20 by the singular *היה* ('being'). Their unity results also from the fact that "their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel" (Ezekiel 1.16). "Wheel in the middle of a wheel" is an image of the two Testaments' unity, an idea completed by other Old Testament theological images as of the cherubs "face to face" on the cover of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25.18, 22; Numbers 7.89) among which God reveals Himself.

Ezekiel's wheel may be viewed as a sun with rays that burst from the center, and being itself as a continuous and infinite relation. As source of light, the wheel of revelation of the New and the Old Testament is the icon of God's light, of the eternal discovery of God's timeless love.

At the bottom of the representation appear prophet Ezekiel, on the left, and Saint Gregory the Great, pope of Rome in 590-604, on the right. The text on the upper part quotes a fragment from Gregory's homily on Ezekiel's book, a text first translated in English not earlier than 1990 [13]. Gregory the Great refers to Ezekiel's idea of wheel within wheel, with application to the two Testaments. It is important to underline the fact that Fra Angelico refers, in his painting, to Pope Gregory and not to Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.), the one who established as dictum the phrase *Novum in Vetere latet et in Novo Vetus patet* (*Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, 2.73).

As biblical arguments for the idea of the unity of revelation and of the intrinsic relation of the two Testaments, Fra Angelico reproduces under each image from the complex *Armadio degli argenti* two scriptural texts: the first one is an Old Testament prophecy and the second one is a New Testament text that shows the fulfillment of the first. Each pair of texts exemplifies the idea of "wheel in the middle of the wheel" and demonstrates the authenticity of the holy text, and the reality and unity of revelation. God is the One Who speaks and the One spoken about. The revealed Word in the Old Testament is the Embodied Lord in the New Testament (Revelation 19.13).

3. Christ – the Corner Stone of Church Revelation

Ezekiel's vision is, of course, pre-Christian, but it reveals Christ the Messiah. In Fra Angelico's representation, the elements of revelation – fire, wind, light – are not Revelation in Itself. It seems that God is not present in the scene. But, if in Ezekiel, on the throne, in the middle, there is “the likeness as the appearance of a man” (Ezekiel 1.26-28), prefiguring God's Incarnated Son, in the center of the Angelico's ‘wheel’ is represented a big circle, full of light. If Ezekiel saw God's glory shining over the ‘human face’, than this is nothing else but the glory of Christ the Lord because, as Saint Paul says: “For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Corinthians 4.6). ‘Christ's light shine over everybody’ redeems the old man so that he goes from the death of sin to eternal life.

If we make an exercise of imagination, Ezekiel's wheel, when seen three-dimensionally, becomes a Church cupola. From this perspective, the centre of the image – the Christ-Light – is “the stone which the builders rejected” (Psalms 117.22; Matthew 21.42; I Corinthians 10.4), the corner stone about which Zechariah also spoke in the Old Testament (Zechariah 3.8). The depiction of the four Evangelists in the centre, placed in the sign of the cross which has Resurrected Christ, full of glory, sends us in time, to the association cross-church, to the cross-shaped architectural type that appeared in the 5th century. The Church, the place where God is always preached, is a meeting place of man and the divine, a space where man answers and fulfils his vocation towards sainthood. The calling of Ezekiel to the river of Khebar turned him into a messenger of divinity; our calling to the cross-shaped space of the church obliges us to an apostolate of God's glory, fulfilled first through prayer. Under this cupola of God's and the saints' providential presence, the Voice of the Almighty is a ‘like the noise of great waters’, which calls all who want to know God, like a bell. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2.19-20).

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