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June 5th: Ezekiel 10 & Acts 10:1-23

June 4, 2021



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The divine throne chariot leaves the temple. The Apostle Peter's vision of the sheet.

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Transcript

Ezekiel 10. Then I looked, and behold, on the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim, there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in appearance like a throne. And he said to the man clothed in linen, Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim.

Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city. And he went in before my eyes. Now the cherubim was standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court.

And the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. And when he commanded the man

clothed in linen, Take fire from between the whirling wheels from between the cherubim, he went in and stood beside a wheel.

And a cherub stretched out his hand from between the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took some of it, and put it into the hands of the man clothed in linen, who took it and went out. The cherubim appeared to have the form of a human hand under their wings. And I looked, and behold, there were four wheels beside the cherubim, one beside each cherub, and the appearance of the wheels was like a sparkling barrel.

And as for their appearance, the four had the same likeness, as if a wheel were within a wheel. When they went, they went in any of their four directions, without turning as they went, but in whatever direction the front wheel faced, the others followed without turning as they went. And their whole body, their rims and their spokes, their wings and the wheels, were full of eyes all around, the wheels that the four of them had.

As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing the whirling wheels. And every one had four faces. The first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

And the cherubim mounted up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the Kibar Canal. And when the cherubim went, the wheels went beside them.

And when the cherubim lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the wheels did not turn from beside them. When they stood still, these stood still. And when they mounted up, these mounted up with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in them.

Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.

These were the living creatures that I saw underneath the God of Israel by the Kibar Canal, and I knew that they were cherubim. Each had four faces, and each four wings, and underneath their wings the likeness of human hands. And as for the likeness of their faces, they were the same faces whose appearance I had seen by the Kibar Canal.

Each of them went straight forward. At the beginning of his ministry, Ezekiel witnessed the divine throne chariot, described in the opening chapters of the book. In chapter 10, the throne chariot is once again central to a vision, this time as it leaves the temple.

Daniel Bloch suggests that the account of this chapter should be read as overlapping with the events of the preceding one, where we read in verse 3, Now the glory of the

God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. In this chapter the events mentioned there are expanded, viewing a single set of events from different perspectives, now foregrounding the Lord's departure from his house.

In the tabernacle and later the temple, the Lord was enthroned above the cherubim, a description we read in several books in the Old Testament. It was from the realm above the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, between the two cherubim, that the Lord addressed Moses back in Numbers chapter 7 verse 89. In Solomon's temple, two large statues of cherubim, in addition to the two cherubim upon the mercy seat, were placed in the Holy of Holies.

Each of the two with their wings outstretched, touching the other's wing in the centre, and touching a wall on the other side. In 1 Chronicles chapter 28 verse 18, these cherubim are described as belonging to the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and cover the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. In 2 Chronicles chapter 5 verses 7 to 8 we read, Then the priest brought the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

The cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the Ark, so that the cherubim made a covering above the Ark and its poles. The throne chariot, then, was represented in the inner part of the temple, in the Holy of Holies. We also encounter the divine throne chariot in Daniel chapter 7 verse 9. As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.

His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. Outside of the temple building, in the courtyard, there were also cherubim chariots carrying water.

In the vision of the divine throne chariot leaving the temple, we should recognise that the temple is, in many respects, a horizontal model of the vertical reality of the throne chariot. As you move in within the temple, you are moving up the chariot. What we are seeing in this chapter is akin to a soul leaving a body.

The temple building that remains, as the glory of the Lord departs it, is like a corpse. In chapter 9 verse 3, the glory of the Lord left the Holy of Holies and moved to the entrance of the temple. Now it is about to leave and to pour out fiery destruction upon Jerusalem.

As Ezekiel describes the throne chariot, he once more speaks of the firmament over the heads of the cherubim and the sapphire throne, as in chapter 1 verses 25 to 26. And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

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. The temple and tabernacle both correspond to the chariot. The firmament over the cherubim should be associated with the blue curtains and veil of the tabernacle and temple.

Seeing the divine chariot in the context of the temple in this chapter, the connection should be much more readily apparent to us. It is possible that Ezekiel only realised the connection himself in the course of this vision. The temple is an architectural symbol of the divine throne chariot's reality, but also itself was filled with that reality as the Lord's dwelling.

In the vision of chapter 1, the cherubim are referred to as living creatures throughout. Here, however, they are referred to as cherubim, but the connection with the living creatures of the original vision by the Kibar Canal is made explicit in verse 15. In verse 2, the linen-clothed man is instructed to take burning coals from between the cherubim, associating that realm properly with the altar.

In chapter 1 verse 13, the area between the cherubim was described as a sort of living fire. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning.

The cherubim might also be related to the four horns of the altar. Their wings are coverings, like blast shields for the fiery glory of the Lord, and also for covering their nakedness. In Exodus chapter 20 verse 26, we see that there were no steps up to the altar, so that the nakedness of the priest should not be exposed upon it.

The cherubim now stand on the south side of the house. The destroyers that have been sent out, and the image of jealousy, are to the north. The inner court is filled with a cloud, the glory of the Lord.

In Exodus chapter 40 verses 34 to 35, and 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 10 to 11, there are descriptions of the glory of the Lord entering the tabernacle and the temple, respectively. In the 1 Kings passage, for instance, and when the priest came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priest could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Here, however, the reverse is happening.

The glory of the Lord is leaving his house. The linen-clothed man, dressed as we should recall like a priestly angelic figure, is instructed to take burning coals from the altar, and to scatter them over the city. We might connect this with the seven altars with bowls that pour them out over Jerusalem in Revelation, or with the fire from the altar of incense that is poured to earth in Revelation chapter 8 verse 5. Here, the linen-clothed man is

handed some of the fire by the hand-like thing beneath the wing of the cherubim.

In verses 9 to 17, the chariot is described once again. As in the water chariots of the temple, the chariot has wheels. The wheels are animated by the cherubim, the living creatures of chapter 1. Indeed, the cherubim's faces seem to appear within the whirling wheels.

They move straight in one of the four cardinal directions. The tabernacle itself was ordered according to the cardinal coordinates. We should probably, as James Jordan suggests, connect the cherubim, or living creatures, with the tribes of Israel ordered around the tabernacle, three tribes to each of its four sides, in Numbers chapter 2. The leading tribes on each of the sides can likely be connected with the four faces of the cherubim, Judah the lion on the east, Reuben the man on the south, Ephraim the ox on the west, and Dan the eagle on the north.

They might even also be symbolically connected with signs of the zodiac. The tabernacle is an earthly model of the divine throne chariot, which is a theophanic manifestation of the Lord's heavenly throne, which is itself a representation of the Lord's sovereignty, not just within creation, but prior to and above all created things. Back in chapter 1, the four faces of the four living creatures were described.

As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face, 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. Here again, they each have four faces, although the face of the ox is replaced by the face of the cherub. The order in which the faces are listed has changed from human, lion, ox, eagle to cherub, human, lion, eagle.

However, as Bloch argues, the change is more apparent than real. If we were to draw a diagram of the situation of each of the orders of faces, and presume that they are listed in clockwise order in chapter 10 verse 14, the order remains the same. However, whereas the man's face was facing Ezekiel in chapter 1, now it is seemingly the cherub's face, which is described in the place of the ox's face.

Perhaps the cherub's face is spoken of instead of the ox's face, because it is the ox's face of the cherubim that faces him. In verse 22, it seems that the faces are explicitly identified with those of the living creatures of the earlier vision, so this seems to be the most likely explanation to me. The second great vision of the divine throne chariot continues as the glory of the Lord rises up from the threshold of the temple, mounts the cherubim's chariot, the cherubim lift up their wings, mount up into the air, and hover over the entrance of the east gate, with the glory of the Lord above them.

A question to consider, where else do we find cherubim imagery associated with the tabernacle, temple, and other sanctuaries in scripture? Acts chapter 10 verses 1 to 23 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the

Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave arms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, Cornelius, and he stared at him in terror and said, What is it, Lord? And he said to him, Your prayers and your arms have ascended as a memorial before God, and now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.

And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants, and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and wanted something to eat.

But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance, and saw the heavens opened, and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once into heaven.

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate, and called him out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision, the spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise, and go down, and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.

And Peter went down to the men and said, I am the one you are looking for, what is the reason for your coming? And they said, Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say. So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose, and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.

In Acts chapter 10 we arrive at the great transition in the book of Acts, as the gospel starts to move to the Gentiles. Although we have already had some intimation of this move, as the gospel is received by the Ethiopian eunuch back in chapter 8, here in Acts chapter 10 it is Cornelius, a Roman centurion and his household that are the key converts marking this shift in the history of the people of God. As a centurion, as part of a larger cohort, Cornelius would have been in charge of about 100 men, one of six within

the cohort, that would have been part of a legion of about 6,000.

Caesarea was an important site of Roman administration within the land of Palestine, it was where the Roman prefect lived, and it was also an important harbour. The reader of the book of Acts who is familiar with Luke's gospel might recall at this point the centurion in chapter 7, who is commended for his great faith. Here Cornelius is described as a devout God-fearer, he fears God with all of his household, he gives generously, and he is committed to prayer.

It is worth bearing in mind at this point that conversions in the book of Acts are often not from unbelief to faith, rather they are from an old covenant faith to a new covenant faith, from a situation of a God-fearer in this case to the situation of a Christian. A similar thing seems to occur in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch. We might also recognise that with the three great conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and now Cornelius of Caesarea, we have representatives of all three families of humanity, Ham, Shem, and Japheth.

The character of Cornelius might also remind us of someone like Naaman the Syrian, another foreign military commander who comes to believe in the God of Israel through the ministry of Elisha. Cornelius is praying around the ninth hour of the day, this is the hour of prayer and the offering of incense in the temple, and the angel who appears to Cornelius at this point speaks of his arms and his prayers ascending as a memorial before God. There might be some suggestion here that his prayers and his arms are functioning as if they were sacrifices and offerings of incense.

We see such a way of thinking about prayer in places like Psalm 141 verse 2, Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Also in the story of Daniel in chapter 9, when the angel Gabriel appears to him around the time of the evening sacrifice when he's been praying, even though the temple is not in operation at the time. The angel who appears to Cornelius assures him that his prayers and his arms have been heard by the Lord, perhaps in a way that might remind us of the story of Zachariah back in Luke chapter 1 when the angel Gabriel appears to him.

The angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter who is staying with Simon at Tanna. Cornelius is not told why he should summon Peter, and this is a theme that goes throughout the story. People have only part of the picture.

Cornelius receives a vision, Peter receives a vision, and they need the two of them to come together to understand what the Lord is doing. The Lord is matchmaking two people, a Gentile and a Jew, and bringing them together in an act of mutual recognition. They should both see the work that the Lord is doing.

This might also help us to understand why the events are so often repeated within this

story. We hear of the initial vision of Cornelius as it is narrated by Luke, then as it is shared by the messengers to Peter, then as Cornelius tells it to Peter, and then as Peter tells it to the people in Jerusalem. Why all of this repetition? First of all, probably because it is emphasising the Lord's initiative in the action.

The Lord has done something and people are reporting and responding to that thing that the Lord has done. But also because the transmission of this information is very important. It is important that mutual recognition occurs.

God is bringing people together and their appreciation that the Lord has worked on both of their sides to bring them together is much of the point of the story. The Lord is matchmaking Jews and Gentiles in one new body of the church. As the messengers of Cornelius approach Joppa to meet Peter, Peter has a vision of his own while he is in prayer in the middle of the day.

A great sheet descends from heaven with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air, and he is instructed to rise, kill and eat. This happens three times and each time he resists it, insisting that he will not eat what is common or unclean. As the vision ends, Peter is confused, he doesn't understand what it means.

But then the messengers of Cornelius arrive and he is instructed to rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation. Perhaps we should see some similarity between this rise, kill and eat and this rise and go down and accompany them. The meaning of Peter's vision is not easy to discern.

What might be the connection between eating these unclean foods and accompanying these men to see a Gentile? I think that the answer is probably found in the recognition that animals represent persons. The dietary requirements in places like Deuteronomy chapter 14 are associated with the fact that Israel bears the name of the Lord, they have been set apart as holy. The dietary requirements are designed to mark out Jews from Gentiles.

Peter's vision then is among other things a sign that this division between Jews and Gentiles is no longer operative in the same way. In Christ the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. God has called the unclean animals clean, he has made them part of his household.

Like the domesticated and herbivore animals that Israel could eat, the wild beasts of the Gentiles will also be tamed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and will be included or consumed into the body of Christ. A number of commentators note the similarities between this story and the story of Ananias being sent to Saul. In both cases two unlikely people are brought together in an important act of recognition.

In both cases prayer and visions are very important. And in both cases an important

change of perspective has to occur. Peter has to change his perspective on Cornelius and other such Gentiles and Ananias has to change his mind towards Saul.

Both have initial reservations that have to be overcome. Peter has his reservations about associating with Gentiles and Ananias has reservations arising from Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church. In both cases we also see the power of the Holy Spirit in orchestrating these events.

The Holy Spirit is the one that is ultimately building the church and he is moving people around from place to place, bringing them in contact with each other and through these meetings and acts of mutual recognition helping them to see that the hand of the Lord is at work. James Spajan, Peter Lighthouse and others have also noted the themes of this story that connect it with the story of Jonah. In both cases something rises up to heaven from Gentiles, bringing them to the attention of the Lord.

In the case of the story of Jonah it's the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. In this story it's the alms and the prayers of Cornelius. In both cases the prophet of the Lord is found in Joppa.

They are sent to Gentiles. There is hesitation in both cases. There is a repetition of the number three in both cases.

And then of course there is the sheath that might remind us of a sail. Here the fisherman Peter is sent to cities by the sea where he will start to fulfil his calling as a fisher of men, starting to bring in people for the Lord from the sea of the Gentiles. Where the prophet Jonah was a reluctant prophet, Peter will prove faithful and will welcome the mission that the Lord has given to him.

A question to consider. Why is it that Gentiles as Gentiles could not be full members of the people of God in the old covenant, but now can? What accounts for the change?