Introduction

Ezekiel stands alone among the Old Testament prophets. Most of his fellow prophets make no attempt to describe their mystical experience, only Ezekiel describes his mystical ascent in detail. To understand his vision properly it is important to be aware of the historical and political background as well as Ezekiel’s psychology.

Historical Background

Around 724 BCE, Assyria (which was the major political power of that period) invaded Israel and deported 27,000 people. It was common at the time for a conquering nation to deport the population of its victim. This particular invasion eventually led to the loss of the ten tribes.

Assyria itself was conquered 125 years later by Babylon who then became the dominant middle eastern empire. Babylon then invaded Judah, the southern kingdom of the Holy Land in 597 BCE and captured Jerusalem. That year Ezekiel was deported with 10,000 others. Within five years, he had his famous vision on the banks of the River Chebar in Babylon during which he foresaw the destruction of Solomon’s Temple. That prophecy was fulfilled in 586 BCE during Babylon’s second invasion of Palestine which led to the deportation of another 15,000.

The Exile ended in 538 BCE and the exiles returned to the Holy Land. In 536 BCE work began on the second Temple, which was completed in 515 BCE.

Ezekiel

We know from the ‘Book of Ezekiel’ that he was the son of an established priestly family. If we consider the exile’s impact upon him, we can see that the huge movement of people across an enormous land mass was exceptionally disruptive to both him and his co-deportees. Between the deportation and his visions he lived as a recluse, seeing and speaking to no-one.

We also find that he was the only prophet who physically acted out his visions. For example, to symbolise the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah he shaved his head. To protest at the exiled community’s consumption of ritually unclean food he baked a cake on ashes and excrement and ate it. This behaviour is not apparent with the other ancient prophets.

Ezekiel was a religiously dogmatic prophet for a people who had been forcibly exiled from their homes. He served a community that needed to understand what they had done to deserve the punishment of exile and was desperately in need of spiritual guidance, particularly after the later destruction of Solomon’s Temple.

The Construction Of The Inner Temple
Until the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, Judaism had centred entirely around Temple rituals. Its destruction removed that focal point and the religion faced possible extinction as a result. Understandably this had a heavy impact on Jewish culture.

It is noteworthy that after the Temple’s destruction, mysticism underwent a renaissance. This was a direct response to the removal of the physical Temple in the face of a continuing need for communication with the Divine. When the second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the same trend recurred with the emergence of the schools of the Chariot Riders. They brought back the mystical traditions that had gone underground during the second Temple period. This brand of Chariot mysticism survived until the teaching of more visibly structured forms with the emergence of the Tree of Life diagram around the 11th Century.

**Interpreting the vision**

Prophecy is communication between the upper and lower worlds. During the prophetic vision spiritual truths become enveloped in allegorical and imaginative symbols that provide spiritual guidance for those who have no direct access to that communication. Ezekiel saw a peculiar reflection of the upper worlds filtered through his personality to reveal a complicated symbolic representation of the structure of the universe.

To understand the core principles behind the vision, those symbols must be decoded. This will be done by using the framework of the Tree of Life and Jacob’s Ladder diagrams and taking each element of the vision separately.

**Ezekiel’s Ascent**

What we see first is Ezekiel reflecting by the water. If we interpret this literally or allegorically, he is either looking into the water seeing his reflection gazing back at him, or he is peering into the waters of his psyche. Applying this to Ezekiel’s psychological Tree, we see him on the banks of the river at the earthly level of Malkhut, the Kingdom. He then rises above the lower psyche of the Malkhut, Hod, Nezah triad and has a glimpse of his self at Tiferet while he reflects. At this point the text says "the Heavens opened up." In other words, the spiritual triad of Tiferet, Binah, Hokhmah (where the spiritual world of Beriah overlaps with the upper psychological) opens to him. Through this Ezekiel saw "visions of God." That is, the black hole of Da’at opened up, and he gained spiritual knowledge of Heaven.

He then experiences a great stormy wind. This hallmark of mystical experience indicates that Heaven is present, through the element of air. Next he sees a huge storm cloud with light and a fiery glow (representing Divine radiance) breaking through its centre. In the centre of the light he then has a vision of fire, in the heart of which he sees "a vision like Hashmal.'

**The Hashmal**

Although its standard English translation is amber, the Hebrew breaks down into two words; Hash and Mal. Hash means either swiftness or silence, and Mal means either stopping or speech. In other words, Hashmal is a combination of opposites. The word describes a silence that speaks, or a swiftness that stops; both of which are pertinent to the mystical experience. It represents the joining of opposites and the joining of above and below. At the core of this experience, Ezekiel sees the Divine part of himself (the Immanent God ~ God within oneself) and perceives that it also reflects the Transcendent Divinity above him.

**The Upper Worlds**

Ezekiel then sees the creatures of the Chariot in the middle of the Hashmal. In other words he goes from an internal experience to seeing a symbolic representation of the creatures that inhabit the psychological universe of forms and images ~ Yezirah. Beside these creatures he sees the Wheels of the Lower Yeziratic (psychological) processes which affect the physical world (Assiyah) at its base. He then sees the vision of the Throne and a vision that has the appearance of a man above the Throne ~ the Transcendent God.
Ezekiel progresses from experiencing Divinity within himself to seeing Divinity permeating existence. Finally, he sees the process of Emanation reflected in the light of the rainbow and his prophecy then starts as the Divine silence speaks to him.

We shall now consider the vision in a little more detail.

**The Chariot**

The first thing Ezekiel sees is four creatures, each with four faces ~ an eagle, a lion, a man and a bull. This indicates four levels of consciousness within the psyche and appears to be a vision of the personalities which characterise those levels in Ezekiel’s personal psychology. It also reflects the general structure of the psychological world. The role of humanity in this world is developed further by the creatures human hands. The human hands and face connect the creatures with both human beings and the Divine Being, indicating that the human elements of the psychological world mirror Divine principles more accurately than other aspects of that world. Accordingly Ezekiel’s own psyche reflects the Divine Man he later sees, as do all human beings.

The creatures also have legs which are straight like rods. In other words, they do not sit or walk the earth. This demonstrates that they never sit and therefore never rest, indicating that they incessantly work. As we will see below, they also obey all their commands instantly. Furthermore, wherever "the Will’ (meaning Divine Will) directs them, they go without turning. The creatures have four faces and move in the direction of each of their faces, but not turn as they go. How can this be? Simply put, this image tells us that they do not turn from their purpose. Wherever the Will directs them, they go without deviation. Therefore, the creatures are angelic as they follow Divine Will but not their own. Ezekiel too is subject to Divine Will during the vision as shown by the phrase "the Hand of God came upon him,’ indicating that his own will is of no effect during the experience.

Going in and out around the angelics he sees burning coals of fire, one of the densest levels of mineral earth brought to life by flame. This again symbolises the presence of Divinity. Ezekiel reports that lightning shoots out of these coals and that the creatures run and return like sparks from the lightning. Here we see four stages of Emanation within the psychological world. We see a symbol of Divinity (fire) releasing the inherent power of physical earth (coals), that radiance generating the electrical impulse of lightning, sparks then branching out from the lightning and finally, the manifestation of the Divine impulse with the beings running and returning. In other words, not only do the angelics act to manifest Divine Will without deviation, they also move without hesitation to accomplish their tasks and return in a flash.

**The Wheels**

Next to the angelics he sees wheels that do not turn when they move. Again, this demonstrates that when they move they do not deviate. The wheels are symbolic of processes moving in a continuum of endless motion. They also travel in all directions at once, demonstrating that once a process starts it is compelled to unfold and reach its natural conclusion without sentiment for the processes or personal discomfort of those involved. Additionally their form is described as moving like wheels within wheels; that is, within the larger process of each cycle there is a lesser process whose movement mirrors the whole. This can be observed in the experience of everyday psychological or physical processes.

Also of note is that all the wheels have one likeness; they are all exactly the same. This is in distinction to the four faced creatures which are multi-faceted. In other words, the wheels operate at a level of increased density and uniformity. In fact, Ezekiel describes the wheels as having the form of crystal, that is; as being durable, structured and compact, yet also having a translucence that indicates that they are still capable of refracting light.

Ezekiel then changes his description of the wheels. They suddenly have backs which fill him with dread and are "terrible and frightful.’ This demonstrates his sudden awareness of the great power and influence of psychological and angelic processes over the physical world and the vegetable and animal levels of consciousness within it.
He also describes the area around the edges of the wheels as "full of eyes.’ Eyes are points of communication. They receive light and convert it into intelligible images for their owner and also symbolise unsleeping watchfulness. This again demonstrates the presence of Divinity and its consistent manifestation throughout the worlds, surrounding and holding all the differing levels together. To demonstrate this further, Ezekiel goes on to say that the Will of the angelic creatures is in the wheels. In other words, the psychological processes direct the physical world. When the psychological processes move, the physical processes move, and when the psychological processes stop, the physical processes stop.

The Throne Of Heaven

Above the tips of the wings of the angelics is a Firmament that shines like frightful ice. In other words, the fluid waters of the psyche are held in that instant and given structure as ice. Then the angels let their wings down and form a circle by connecting them. There is then a voice from above ~ the voice of El Shaddai, the Living Almighty God, which is found at the Foundation of the Divine world ~ after which the scene unlocks. The frightful ice is released with "the sound of many waters’, the flowing of the waters of the psyche after having frozen to facilitate the Divine flow.

The noise of this is awesome, like the tumult of an army. This describes the sound of the Hosts of Heaven responding and resonating with the Divine flow. He then sees the Throne of Heaven, the spiritual world, and a Being sitting on it. From the loins of this Being downwards It sits on the Throne, again demonstrating the interlocking between the worlds ~ but It sits on it from above, demonstrating that It is a higher entity than the Heavenly Throne.

The word Rakiyah is used to describe the Firmament. This is the second Heaven, which is the Foundation of the spiritual world which inter-relates with the psychological world through the principle of Knowledge. If we consider this further, we see that the Firmament is also a barrier. It is described as a sheet of ice with the appearance of sapphire. It appears as a glass ceiling which Ezekiel does not see until it is revealed to him. This demonstrates another meaning of the principle of Foundation; it gives structure and support, which is also reflected in the sapphire Throne. It also demonstrates that Da’at (Knowledge) is a dark glass which remains unseen until it is Willed from above, and that such insight into the operation of Heaven is not lightly granted.

The Man On The Throne

At the peak of his experience Ezekiel describes a vision that has the likeness of a Man. In describing it in this way Ezekiel shows that he is two steps removed from this element of the vision and that it is seen through two filters of perception. Similarly, he shows that he is aware his vision of Divinity is filtered through his personal experience by saying "that was how the vision of the Glory of God appeared.’ The Glory in this context refers to Divinity, which is the "garment’ worn by the Absolute (God) by which created beings may perceive a limited amount about the true nature of Absolute existence. It must also be noted that he does not say he directly saw Divinity (the Glory of God), but that he saw a likeness of the Glory. This is consistent with the rest of the vision which only records various reflections of Divinity at each level.

He then says he had a vision of the Hashmal "as fire housed in a frame from His loins and above.’ This phrase indicates that the Divine presence is contained within a specific framework of operation. This upper part of the Divine Being is pure stillness (the swiftness that stops) and is the source of his prophecy (the silence that speaks). He also sees that from Its middle and below It is radiant ~ flame in air. In other words, the lower part of Divinity interacts with the world of Spirit. When Ezekiel describes the radiance he describes light in the process of diffusion, or Emanation. Pure white light passed through a prism breaks down into its constituent frequencies which we see as the colours of the rainbow. Ezekiel’s poetic phrase ‘like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain’ captures the beauty of pure white light emanating from the loins (the generative organs) of the Divine Being and separating into its diverse elements as it flows away from the Glory. After this his prophecy begins.

Conclusions

It is clear that this vision is a highly organised and structured insight into the operation of the universe. The history of this
knowledge went back beyond Ezekiel, past Isaiah (c. 759 BCE) to the construction of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness during the Exodus (around 1250 or 1500 BCE). Ezekiel may have been contributing to the ongoing development of the tradition but although his experience was personal, the knowledge was not novel ~ it was inherited and was passed on to later generations. Forty years later, Daniel describes a vision which has clear reference to Ezekiel, indicating that there was an established prophetic school which incorporated Ezekiel’s experience.

Furthermore, the general historical circumstances reveal that most of the major religions of the time underwent reform during that period. Ezekiel’s vision was in 593 BCE. Gautama Siddharta (who established Buddhism) followed shortly afterwards between 563 and 483 BCE. At that time we also have the reform of Hinduism by Mahavira (precise dates unknown). During this period there is also Confucius (551-479 BCE), and the establishment of Taoism by Lao Tzu (precise dates unknown). If we consider that there was no Christianity or Islam at the time we see that all the major religions of the day received some impulse leading to their reformation in the 6th Century BCE.

All these traditions are based on some form of experience and have survived by altering their formats during different historical periods. The Perennial Wisdom (or Teaching) which underlies them is always present regardless of period or cultural forms, simply because the Teachings can only be truly realised through personal experience. Ezekiel’s vision is part of this pattern of development and demonstrates the importance of personal knowledge and experience in the continuing evolution of both individuals and civilisations.

The following translation of Ezekiel's vision has been compiled from a variety of translations to enhance its clarity and avoid the cluttered English that sometimes prevents the reader from experiencing its beauty.

**EZEKIEL**

**Ch.1**

1. It was in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was in the community of exiles by the River Chebar, that the heavens opened up and I saw visions of God (Elohim). 2. (On the fifth of the month, it was the fifth year of the exile of King Yehoiachin) 3. The word of God (YHVH) came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans, by the River Chebar. And the Hand of God (YHVH) came upon him there.

4. I looked, and behold, a stormy wind (Ru'ach) was coming from the North, a huge cloud and flashing fire surrounded by a radiance (Nogah); and from its midst a vision of Hashmal in the midst of the fire.

5. In the centre of it was the form of four Living Beings. And this was their appearance -- they had the likeness of Man. 6. And each one had four faces, and each one had four wings. 7. And their legs were straight legs, and the soles of their feet were like a round foot, and they shone like a vision of burnished copper. 8. And Human hands were beneath their wings on all their four sides, and their faces and wings were the same for each of the four.

9. Their wings were joined to each other and they did not turn as they went; each one moved in the direction of their faces as they went.

10. The form of their faces was the face of a man, with the face of a lion on the right of each of the four, the face of an ox to the left of each of them and the face of an eagle to the four of them. 11. And so were their faces. And their wings were extended upwards: each one had two wings joined to those of the others and two wings covering its body.
12. And each one went in the direction of its face. Wherever the Will impelled them to go they would go, without turning as they went. 13. And the form of the Living Beings had the appearance of burning coals of fire. Walking among the Living Beings was a vision like burning torches of fire, and there was a radiance (Nogah) to the fire and lightning came forth from the fire. 14. The Living Beings appeared to run and return like sparks from the lightning. 15. And I gazed at the Living Beings, and behold, there was a single Wheel (Ophan) on the Earth next to each of the four-faced creatures.

16. The form of the Wheels and their work had the appearance of crystal (Tarshish) and all four Wheels had the same form; the form and workings of each were as if there was a wheel within a wheel. 17. And when they moved, they moved toward their four sides; but they did not turn as they went. 18. And the Wheels had very high backs that were filled with dread and full of eyes round about, so it was for the four of them.

19. And when the Living Beings moved, the Wheels moved with them. When the Living Beings rose from the Earth, the Wheels also rose. 20. Wherever the Spirit (Ru’ach) propelled them, they would go. The Wheels would move wherever they were directed by the Will of the Spirit (Ru’ach), the Spirit of the Living Beings was in the Wheels. 21. When one moved, the other would move; and when one stood still the other would stand still. And when they rose above the Earth, the Wheels were lifted beside them - for the Spirit of the Living Beings was in the Wheels.

22. Above the heads of the Living Being was a vision of a Firmament (Rakiyah). And it shone like a frightful ice spread out over their heads. 23. Beneath the Firmament, each one had one set of wings straight out, pointing to those of the others, and with the other pair, each covered it’s body.

24. Then I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of mighty waters. It was like the voice of Shaddai - The Almighty, when they moved. It was a tumultuous sound like the movement of an army. But when they stood still they would let down their wings. 25. And there was a Voice from above the Firmament that was over their heads. They stood still and let down their wings.

26. Above the Firmament that was over their heads, like a vision of sapphire was the form of a Throne, and upon the form of the Throne was a vision that had the likeness of a Man, on it from above. 27. And I had a vision of the Hashmal as fire housed in a frame from the likeness of His loins upwards. And from the appearance of His loins downwards, I had a vision of a fire that had radiance (Nogah) all around it. 28. Like the appearance of a rainbow that shines from the clouds on a rainy day, such was the vision of the radiance (Nogah) that surrounded Him. That was how the vision of the Glory of God (Kavod - YHVH) appeared. When I saw it I fell on my face. And then I heard a voice speak.

Ch.2.

1. And It said to me "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you." 2. And the spirit came into me as It spoke and set me on my feet, and I could hear that which spoke to me."