

**The Influence of Ezekiel
and the
Throne Room
in the Book of Revelation
(Rev. 4:1-11)**

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Imagery from Ezekiel

In the Book of Revelation, it is very clear that there is great influence from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. In fact,

“The influence of the Book of Ezekiel on the last book of the Christian Bible is indisputable. It can be detected most obviously in the many allusions to the echoes of the Old Testament writing, permeating virtually every chapter of Revelation.” (Jonge and Tromp....Boxall, 147 in *The book of Ezekiel and its influence.*)¹

In the book of Revelation there are a number of images and scenes that are very clearly drawn from the Book of Ezekiel, such as Throne Room scene, (Rev. 4:6-7, drawing upon Ez., 1 and Ez. 10), those marked with the seal (Rev. 7, drawing upon Ez. 9), John’s eating of the scroll (Rev. 10 drawing on Ez 47) and the life-giving water (Rev. 22 drawing on Ez. 47).

Yet the book goes further than merely using Ezekiel’s imagery for the sake of merely copying images of God’s glory or merely showing that it too is a prophetic book. The sheer number of image he draws from Ezekiel shows that this book is influential not only for imagery, but thematically influential. John’s use of these images are meant to evoke themes from the book of Ezekiel which are integral themes to the book of Revelation and key for understanding the message being communicated in John’s apocalyptic book.

Themes of Ezekiel

To see this, one must first note some of the major themes of the prophet Ezekiel that are then taken up into Revelation.

Exile: First it is important to note that the historical context of Ezekiel was an exilic context. That he himself was living in exile from Jerusalem during the beginning of the Babylonian exile. He is prophesying while his people are in the process of exile, and sees the eventual sieging and ultimate fall of Jerusalem. Thus he is writing to a people who are certainly facing worldly persecution and seem powerless in the face of worldly powers. Thus it is after the fall of Jerusalem that the prophet sees a need to no longer speak judgment but then to speak words of hope and consolation; themes of speaking to the mobility of God’s Presence in the Temple that it comes and resides with those in Exile, and the eventual hope of the return and restoration of Jerusalem and God’s people Israel.

¹ Ian K. Boxall, “Exile, Prophet, Visionary: Ezekiel’s Influence on the Book of Revelation, in *The Book of Ezekiel and its Influence*, ed. Henk Jan de Jonge and Johannes Tromp (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 147.

Judgment and Hope: Thus Ezekiel is a book of judgement as well as a book of hope. The Talmud, in speaking of a comparison of the different biblical prophetic books says, “Jeremiah is all doom; Ezekiel begins with doom but ends with consolation; while Isaiah is all consolation.”² Indeed as its structure, there are two very clear halves in the book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24 contain oracles of judgment against Israel and 25-48 propose a variety of words of support and hope.³

We see this theme of judgement and of hope woven throughout all of the book of Revelation. And more subtly, though not less importantly, Ezekiel’s exilic theme and words of hope of returning to the longed for homeland of Jerusalem.

The Throne Room in Revelation

To demonstrate this, I will look at John’s use of Ezekiel in the Throne Room scene (Rev. 4:1-11), and how he draws on Ezekiel, the similarities and differences of the images he uses, and how it sets the thematic understanding for the whole book.

In Revelation 4, John has a “vision” of a “door open to heaven” (Rev. 4:1) and then describes the throne room and the heavenly worship. This vision is situated towards the beginning of the book, thus “setting the stage” for the whole rest of the book. It is preceded by a first vision being that of the son of man dressed in white standing among the seven gold lampstands (Rev. 1:9-20), and follows immediately after his letters to the seven churches (being the seven churches symbolized by the seven lampstands among which the son of man was standing (Rev. 1:20)).

The Centrality of the Throne: It is following this opening vision and the seven letters that we then have John’s second vision of the heavenly throne room. What is most obvious and striking about his description is the centrality and primacy of the throne, spatially and thematically. The first thing he describes as seeing is “A throne was there in heaven...” (Rev. 4:2), and then a description of resplendent one who sat on the throne, “whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian,” (Rev. 4:3). Everything else he describes in the heavenly scene is in relation to this throne. He describes the elders “surrounding the throne” (Rev. 4:4), torches “in front of the throne”(4:5), living creatures “in the center around the throne” (4:6), and that the glory, honor, thanks, and worship is directed to “the one who sits upon the throne” (4:9). In other words, “All the details of

² Lawrence Boadt, “Ezekiel,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown et al, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 305.

³ Ibid.

the vision – all beings, objects, and activities – are directly related to the heavenly throne as the focal point of John’s cosmology and find significance only in their placement around the centre of the universe.”⁴

This centrality of God’s throne and putting everything in relationship to it is an essential theme for the whole book. As we will see the book is then the unfolding of the judgment upon the world, and bringing all things back into right relationship to this throne. While the throne itself may not be the explicit focal point of each scene, it is very clear that in a way that this throne of God is the hinge point around which everything else turns. All things happen or are allowed to happen only because it was given authority by the One on the Throne. For in the words of the ones depicted in the Throne Room, He is the One “who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8), and who “...created all things; because of your will they came to be and were created” (Rev. 4:11). The throne being the locus and center of all the energy and activity is described well by Joseph Mangina.

“The scene is marked by a tremendous dynamism, an energy that flows, first of all centripetally: God, seated on the throne, occupies the center, while the other characters – the elders and the four living creatures – surround him, their gaze directed toward the brightness in their midst. But there is also centrifugal energy, as power flows from the throne out into the world: thus, flashes of lightning, the rumblings and peals of thunder, and most of all the seven Spirits of God, who are not static but are sent out into all the earth.”⁵

The Four Living Creatures: While this Throne Room scene certainly shares elements of others scenes throughout Scripture such as found in Isaiah 6, Daniel 7, I suggest that the detail of the “four living creatures” (Rev. 4:6-8), is more than just a dramatic image to put this scene on the same level as other great Biblical visions, but rather is very clearly allude us to the scene in Ezekiel. The image of the four living creatures depicted in Ezekiel 1 with faces of a lion, an ox, a human and an eagle, is without biblical precedent, thus unique to Ezekiel.⁶ Thus John is intentionally evoking a uniquely Ezekielian image. In doing so, he evokes not only this throne scene in Ezekiel, but even more so important themes in Ezekiel which are vital for understanding in this book.

First of all, what is the common symbolism that both Ezekiel and John are evoking with these living creatures? They are the highest of each of their kind. “Man is exalted among creatures, the eagle among birds, the ox among domestic animals, the lion among the wild beasts; all of them have received dominion.”⁷ They are the images of what is wisest (man), swiftest (eagle), strongest (ox), and noblest (lion), and thus they represent

⁴ Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 105.

⁵ Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 75.

⁶ Vincent P. Branick, *Understanding the Prophets* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 166.

⁷ Wilfren J. Harrington, OP, *Revelation, Sacra Pagina*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 80.

all of animate creation, the symbolizing the whole created cosmos.⁸ Both Ezekiel and John show these as subject to the One on the Throne.

Also in both Ezekiel's and John's throne scenes with these living creatures they are both demonstrating God's presence and glory as not bound to a particular spatial place. Ezekiel uses the images of wheels along with the creatures (Ez. 1:15-19), to emphasize the mobility of God's presence and glory.

“Ezekiel is depicting God as far more glorious and dominant than any local divinity, who is incapable of exercising dominion outside its own territory and is subject to conquest by other divinities. Ezekiel's God is the God of the whole universe, of all nations and peoples. This picture of the transcendent God may be the key of the whole Book of Ezekiel. It leads Ezekiel to fall on his face.”⁹

God's dominion over the whole universe is clearly a dominant theme throughout Revelation as well. And similar to Ezekiel this transcendent God is key part of understanding Revelation. However, John in fact emphasizes in a different way. Rather than the image of wheels and God's throne being a war chariot that can rush all over the face of the earth (and even lift up from it), John depicts a fixed, stationary throne, the fixed point around which the rest of the universe turns. It is not depicted in relation to any other spatial place, but simply “in heaven” (Rev. 4:2). “Here John makes clear that not only is he not in Jerusalem, he has been rapt to a place that cannot be located by any earthly set of temporal or spatial coordinates: ‘a throne stood in heaven’ (Rev. 4:2).”¹⁰

Besides the lack of wheels with the living creatures, there is another important difference that John makes in his description of the creatures. John's creatures have six wings, whereas Ezekiel's have four. This may seem like a minute detail difference. However it implies they are Seraphim not cherubim; and when these seraphim start exclaiming “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God...” (Rev. 4:8), it becomes clear that he is alluding to Isaiah's vision as well in Isaiah 6: “...I saw the Lord seated on a high lofty throne with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings...One cried out to another, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. All the earth is filled with his glory!’” (Isaiah 6:1-3).

John is taking the theme of God's transcendence and building upon it. Yet again, it is the difference in how he uses the scene that we can see his emphasis. Rather than having the four living creatures sing, “heaven and earth are full of your glory,” as they do in Isaiah, he instead emphasizes transcendent nature of God, beyond all bounds of time, by altering the words to “who is, who was, and who is to come.”

Here is setting up for the rest of the book, not only the universal dominion of God across space and time, but so too the universal application of the message of this book. This is a message that speaks to all peoples of all times. While he does address seven particular churches in particular circumstances just before this Throne

⁸ Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation*, Catholic Commentary on Scripture, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 103.

⁹ Branick, 166.

¹⁰ Mangina, 77.

Room Vision, he then gives us this vision to set the scene for a universal unfolding of events, that affects the whole universe in all time and space. The elders around the throne emphasize, "...for you created ALL things; because of your will they came to be and were created" (Rev. 4:11, emphasis added).

John's use of Ezekiel's themes

Judgment and Hope: Yet the intentional use of the allusion to Ezekiel with the four living creatures he takes up the theme first of all of universal judgement and hope. Ezekiel wrote of judgment of Israel and predicts the destruction of Jerusalem in Chapters 1-24. He then writes oracles against the nations, judgement upon the enemies of Israel (Chapters 25-32), and then writes a message of hope and restoration.

Yet John in emphasizing the universality and transcendence of the Throne Room sets up the universal nature of this judgment and destruction. This is not just a judgement of just Israel or some nations of Israel's enemies, nor just a prediction of destruction and restoration of a particular city, but rather of the whole world and indeed the whole cosmos!

Exile: John too, like Ezekiel, in a way, writing to people in exile about the coming judgment and destruction. John, like Ezekiel, is writing to a people who are suffering, who are being attacked and destroyed. Like Ezekiel, he is trying to spur people to repentance before it is too late, and says if they are faithful there will be a return home, a hope of restoration.

"In John's visionary world, God's people are called to wake up to the shocking news that they are once again in exile. Babylon may now bear the features of imperial Rome, its cult and its commerce, but it is as ruthless and seductive as ever before. Revelation's apocalyptic challenge, with its interweaving of consolation and critique, is for God's people to acknowledge their exile status, and make the decision to come out of Babylon (Rev 18:4), in order to journey by way of another Exodus to the new Jerusalem. In this visionary retelling, John's exiled predecessor Ezekiel has played no little part."¹¹

However, in accentuating the universal quality of this message, John is not writing to a particular nation exiled by another, but rather to all humanity, who exists in exile from their heavenly homeland. If they remain faithful, he gives the great message of hope that all will be restored, all will be set right.

¹¹ Baxwell, 162.

The Message of hope

Yet I do not think the message of hope to these “exiles” is merely that if you are faithful you will get a reward at the end of all things; while there are certainly things that will not be fulfilled and set right completely until the end of all things, the message of hope seems to imply that some of that beauty and serenity of the throne room can be experienced by the believers here and now. It seems to imply this for a few reasons.

First of all, because we have the detail in the description of the throne room of the seven flaming torches burning before the throne (Rev. 4:5). While the text tells us that these are “the seven spirits of God” one cannot help but also think of the seven gold lampstands in John’s first vision (Rev. 1:12-13). In this first vision, we are told these gold lampstands are the seven churches, to whom John then writes the seven letters. Among these lampstands (which are the seven churches) stands one like a son of man, who is described as resplendent, white, and brilliant, “whose face shone like the sun at its brightest” (Rev. 1:16), and who is the “first and the last” (Rev. 1:17), not unlike the one who sits on the brilliant, resplendent throne “who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). I posit there is a connection between the seven lampstands and the seven torches in the throne room. Of the seven torches, Gallusz writes, “The number seven may refer to the fullness, indicating the deity of the Spirit, but at the same time it may also be related to his presence in each of the seven churches address in the messages of chs. 2-3.”¹² Thus these churches which are clearly being actively persecuted, in the midst of their suffering and affliction are already dwelling in the presence of God in the Throne Room, that the one who holds the keys to death stands among them, and they are in the presence of the Almighty One in his resplendent beauty. Their hope is more than just a far-off distance thing, but a living presence of the serenity of the Throne Room dwelling among them and in them in the face of terrible persecution.

Second, building on this idea, throughout the Book of Revelation, there is the juxtaposition of the beauty and serenity of the Throne Room and the horrific destruction on earth. Again I think the simultaneous actions of what is happening between this heavenly Throne Room and the doomed earth are not meant to be totally different spheres, but overlapping spheres of being, not mutually exclusive, but that the suffering believers can already experience the indwelling of that heavenly sphere on earth, as it continues to break forth more fully into earth. Furthermore, while the book unfolds in something of a chronological nature, I think it is precisely the temporally transcendent nature of the Throne Room, as mentioned before, which indicates that the dwelling in the heavenly sphere does not necessarily follow chronologically our dwelling in the earthly sphere, but rather there can be some level of dwelling in the heavenly sphere while still on earth.

Third and finally, and perhaps more concretely, the beauty of that heavenly sphere, the Throne Room is entered into and encountered in the experience of communal worship. It is precisely in the worship of God

¹² Gallusz, 106.

which we do so with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, that we share a part of the experience of the Heavenly Throne Room. This is especially true of liturgical worship as there are liturgical dimensions to the whole Throne Room scene with communal hymns of praise and communal gesture of falling down before him.

Conclusion

In looking at the influence of Ezekiel in the Book of Revelation, especially in the Throne Room scene, we can see both in the similarities as well as the substantial differences John is able to draw in themes of other prophetic works, most especially Ezekiel, but to communicate to a more universal message to people in every place and every age. Thus what was discussed here can be used in the modern-day context of the presence of God in the midst of suffering and the reality of the a deep, heavenly beauty and serenity that we can dwell in our hearts when our lives are oriented properly to the One on the Throne, centering our lives on that Throne, allowing Him to be the fixed still point around which the rest of the chaos of our lives turn. It also allows the book of Revelation to speak more fully to our human sense of yearning for something more, the longing for fulfillment, as it speaks to us as exiles still on the way to the heavenly homeland. Thus we can both experience something of the heavenly serenity and beauty of the Throne Room, here and now, and yet also there is the hopeful longing for the day when we will be able to enter into and see it in its full splendor.

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