

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ezekiel 1 opens the book with a precisely dated theophany: in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile (593 BC), by the Chebar canal in Babylon, the heavens open and the prophet Ezekiel receives an overwhelming vision of divine glory. The vision unfolds in three movements. First, a storm cloud approaches from the north — wind, fire, and gleaming bronze — out of which emerge four living creatures, each with four faces (lion, ox, human, eagle), four wings, human hands, and legs like polished bronze. They move in perfect coordination, driven by a spirit, never turning as they move. Second, beside each creature stands a wheel within a wheel, full of eyes around their rims, moving wherever the spirit goes — these wheels are described as awesome (Hebrew: *yārē*'), and when the creatures rise, the wheels rise with them. Third, above the creatures stretches an expanse of gleaming crystal, and above the expanse a throne of sapphire, and upon the throne a figure of human likeness surrounded by radiant fire and the appearance of a rainbow. The chapter concludes with Ezekiel prostrating himself as he recognizes this as "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD."

Two structural features govern the whole: (1) the progressive layering of the vision — storm, creatures, wheels, expanse, throne, the one on the throne — moves the reader upward from earth toward the divine presence in deliberate, almost unbearable slowness; and (2) the careful hedging of language — "the appearance of," "the likeness of," "what looked like" — which insists on the reality of the vision while refusing to domesticate or contain the One revealed. This is a vision of the divine chariot-throne (*merkabah*), the LORD enthroned in mobile, all-seeing, omnidirectional sovereignty.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to accomplish a shattering reorientation in a community that has concluded, by circumstance, that He is either absent, defeated, or locally confined to Jerusalem and its temple. The exiles by the Chebar canal in Babylon are in theological crisis: their world-picture requires a territorial deity who lost, or a God whose covenant has simply ended. The vision of the *merkabah* does not merely teach that God is sovereign — it *shows* them, in overwhelming, undeniable, disorienting force, that the LORD is here, in Babylon, mobile and uncontained, surrounded by a glory that does not depend on Jerusalem's temple, and fully present to commission His prophet. God intends this vision to break the exile community's theology of divine absence and replace it with the terror and comfort of divine mobility — He has come *to them*, and He is not diminished.

Subject Sentence: The sovereign LORD appears in Babylon, uncontained, to commission His exiled prophet.

Primary Claim: God shatters the assumption that exile means divine absence — the LORD of glory is mobile, present, and sovereign wherever His people are, and He arrives not to comfort them on their own terms but to shatter every small theology of His limits.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and symbolism of the four living creatures: Jewish mystical tradition (*merkabah* mysticism) developed elaborate speculative systems from this passage, treating the vision as a blueprint for heavenly ascent and angelological hierarchy. This reading imports far more than the text warrants. The text does not present the creatures as the primary subject of the vision — they are attendants, conveyances, instruments of divine movement. The vision is not *about* the creatures; it is about the One enthroned above them. Ezekiel 1 resists being converted into an angelological or cosmological manual. Reformed exposition should **refute** this speculative use: the creatures exist to display the mobility, omnidirectionality, and unstoppable movement of the divine throne — not to furnish a map of the heavenly hierarchy.

Relationship to Revelation 4: There is significant overlap between Ezekiel 1's four living creatures and those in Revelation 4:6-8. Some interpreters read the connection typologically (Ezekiel's vision "becomes" the heavenly reality fully disclosed in John's vision), others harmonistically (both describe the same heavenly beings literally), others symbolically (both draw on shared ancient Near Eastern iconography to convey divine majesty). The Reformed reading should **acknowledge** all three contributions while insisting that each vision must be interpreted in its own literary context first. For Ezekiel 1, the operative question is what the vision accomplishes for the exiles, not how it maps onto Revelation. The canonical resonance is real and worth noting — God's throne-room glory spans both Testaments — but Ezekiel 1 must not be reduced to a Revelation 4 prequel.

The north as source of the storm-cloud: Some interpreters connect "the north" with Canaanite mythology (*Baal* enthroned on Mount Zaphon, the "uttermost north") and argue Ezekiel is deliberately co-opting pagan divine imagery. Others simply note the historical direction from which Babylonian armies invaded. The Reformed reading should **qualify** the mythological reading: while there may be deliberate subversion of pagan divine imagery (the LORD comes from the north — not Baal, not Marduk), this cannot be established with certainty from the text alone, and pressing it too hard risks making the passage primarily polemical when it is primarily revelatory. The historical note (Babylonian armies came from the north) is more securely grounded.

The “likeness of a man” on the throne (v. 26): Some Christological readings identify this figure directly as the pre-incarnate Christ (the Second Person of the Trinity in theophanic appearance). The Reformed tradition has generally been open to this reading — many of the Old Testament theophanies are associated with the Angel of the LORD and Christophanic appearances. This reading should be **acknowledged** as exegetically defensible within a canonical Trinitarian framework, particularly given John 12:41’s statement that Isaiah “saw his glory” in Isaiah 6, which parallels this passage structurally. However, the text itself does not specify which Person is revealed here. Reformed exposition should maintain the canonical openness without over-specifying what the text deliberately leaves in reverent, hedged language: “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”

The Reformed verdict: Ezekiel 1 is a vision of divine sovereignty and divine mobility given to shatter the exile community’s theology of defeat. The LORD is uncontained by geography, undefeated by circumstance, and fully present in Babylon. The vision’s hedged language is theologically intentional — it preserves the radical transcendence and holiness of the One revealed while insisting on genuine divine presence. Reformed exposition should honor both the *reality* of the vision (this is truly God appearing) and its *limits* (language strains to its edges to describe what it cannot contain).

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 24:9-10; 33:18-23** — Moses sees the sapphire pavement beneath God’s feet and is denied a full view of the divine glory; Ezekiel’s vision extends what Moses saw while maintaining the same principle of bounded, mediated revelation. Both passages ground the conviction that genuine divine appearance is possible and yet always exceeds full human comprehension.
- **Isaiah 6:1-8** — Isaiah’s throne-room vision in the Jerusalem temple shows the same basic structure: the Holy One enthroned in overwhelming glory, attended by heavenly creatures, resulting in the prophet’s undoing and commissioning. Ezekiel 1 recapitulates Isaiah 6 in Babylon — the throne has moved; the glory is unchanged. (See John 12:41 for the canonical Christological anchor.)
- **Psalms 139:7-12** — “Where can I flee from your presence?” — the theological claim that God cannot be spatially confined or exiled, which Ezekiel 1 *dramatizes visually* for the exiles who had assumed otherwise. The Psalm grounds the vision’s intent in the character of God.
- **Revelation 4:2-8** — John’s throne-room vision draws heavily on Ezekiel 1, placing the same four living creatures around the same sapphire throne, now fully disclosed in the presence of the Lamb. The canonical trajectory from Ezekiel 1 to Revelation 4 shows the progressive unveiling of the divine glory that is the same throne-room reality from Eden to New Jerusalem.

- **John 1:14 / Colossians 1:15-20** — The One who is “the image of the invisible God” and in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” is the final and full disclosure of what Ezekiel saw in hedged, layered, mediated form. The *merkabah* vision points forward to the Incarnation — divine glory dwelling among exiles — though Ezekiel 1 itself cannot see that far.

Aim

To confront every assumption of divine absence — whether born of exile, suffering, confusion, or unanswered prayer — with the overwhelming, disorienting reality of a God who is mobile, present, all-seeing, and cannot be confined by any circumstance, geography, or human theology of His limits.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1-3	Historical and personal introduction: fifth year of Jehoiachin’s exile, by the Chebar canal; Ezekiel identifies himself; “the heavens were opened” and the hand of the LORD came upon him	Precise dating grounds the vision in history, not mythology; the exile setting is theologically load-bearing
4	The storm approaches from the north: great cloud, fire flashing, gleaming bronze at center	Classic theophanic storm imagery (cf. Sinai); the north as direction of approach
5-9	Four living creatures emerge from within the fire: human form, four faces each (human, lion, ox, eagle), four wings, straight legs with bronze hooves, human hands beneath wings; move without turning	Each face represents a domain of creation; fourfold structure = omnidirectionality; moving without turning = no reversal, no retreat
10-11	Detail of the four faces: human facing forward, lion on the right, ox on the left, eagle at the back; two wings	Perfect symmetry; their coordination represents unified, undivided purpose

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
12-14	spread upward meeting adjacent creature's wing, two covering their bodies The creatures move wherever the spirit directs, without turning; their appearance like burning coals and torches; lightning flashing; creatures darting like lightning	The spirit (<i>rûaḥ</i>) controls their movement — divine will immediately executed; the fire imagery intensifies
15-21	The wheels: one wheel beside each creature, intersecting wheels (wheel within a wheel), full of eyes around the rims, same direction of movement as the creatures, rising when the creatures rise	Wheels = divine mobility across all directions; eyes = omniscience, nothing unseen; the wheels do not direct — they follow the spirit
22-24	The expanse above the creatures: awe-inspiring crystal; the creatures' wings spread beneath it making a sound like rushing waters, the voice of the Almighty, the tumult of an army	The expanse separates the creatures from what is above; the sound of the wings is overwhelming and compared to the voice of God himself
25-26	Above the expanse a voice; above the expanse a sapphire throne; upon the throne "the appearance of the likeness of a man"	The deliberate triple hedging — "appearance of likeness" — marks the limit of human language before divine reality
27-28a	The figure surrounded by gleaming metal, fire above and below the loins; the whole surrounded by a rainbow appearance	Rainbow recalls the Noahic covenant and divine mercy; fire connotes holiness and judgment
28b	Ezekiel recognizes this as "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" and falls on his face	The only appropriate response to the divine <i>kābôd</i> ; prostration precedes commissioning (ch. 2)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-3	The Vision Grounded: History, Location, and the Opening of Heaven
2	4-14	The Creatures: Omnidirectional Servants of the Divine Will
3	15-21	The Wheels: Divine Mobility and Omniscient Oversight
4	22-25	The Expanse and the Voice: The Threshold Before the Throne
5	26-28	The Throne and the Glory: The LORD Enthroned in Babylon

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The sovereign LORD appears in Babylon, uncontained, to commission His exiled prophet.

Primary Claim: God shatters the assumption that exile means divine absence — the LORD of glory is mobile, present, and sovereign wherever His people are, and He arrives not to comfort them on their own terms but to shatter every small theology of His limits.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe the geography of divine presence. (*Mind/belief*) The exiles had a theology that located God in Jerusalem, in the temple, on Zion — and the destruction of those places had therefore functioned as effective evidence of divine defeat or withdrawal. Ezekiel 1 demolishes this geography theologically. God is not where we built His house. He is where He chooses to be — and He chooses to be with His people, in the hardest place, by the canal in Babylon, in the fifth year of the exile with no sign of ending. Wherever you have concluded that God is not — the hospital room, the fractured marriage, the career that collapsed, the city where you feel spiritually stranded — Ezekiel 1 arrives from the north with fire and wheels and a voice like many waters to say: you have drawn a boundary that does not exist. Repent of your theology of divine absence and replace it with the reality of divine mobility.

2. Let the vision do what it was designed to do: overwhelm. (*Affections/worship*) Modern readers are prone to immediately converting Ezekiel 1 into a symbolic diagram — cataloguing the four faces, mapping the wheels, identifying what each element “represents” — and in so doing, they never actually *experience* the vision. The vision is not primarily a theological chart. It is an assault on the senses designed to produce awe, undoing, and prostration. Ezekiel falls on his face. The appropriate response is not to draw a diagram but to be undone. Sit with the accumulating strangeness of this passage long enough that the God who appears in it is no longer manageable, explainable, or containable. You do not worship a God you can fully diagram. Let the vision restore a right proportion between who God is and how you approach Him.

3. Trust the wheels: God’s purposes move in every direction without reversing.

(*Mind/belief*) The wheels within wheels, moving in all four directions without turning, are not decorative. They are a theological statement about the nature of divine providence: God’s purposes do not reverse, do not retreat, do not get redirected by enemy action or human failure. The Babylonian army had moved from the north and appeared to have won. But the same north produces this vision — the same direction, a greater army, a higher throne. Whatever in your life appears to have defeated God’s purposes — whatever looks like the final word, the closed door, the irreversible outcome — the wheels are still turning. God does not back up. He does not lose the initiative. Trust the movement you cannot yet see.

4. Stop living as if your crisis is the most important thing in the room.

(*Affections/worship*) The exiles’ situation was genuinely catastrophic — Jerusalem destroyed, the temple gone, the Davidic line imprisoned, the covenant apparently in ruins. These were not small concerns. But Ezekiel 1 puts the exile in its proper proportion: it is real, and it is not the most important thing happening. Above the creatures, above the expanse, on the sapphire throne, surrounded by fire and rainbow, the LORD sits — entirely, completely, sovereignly present. The exile is not larger than that throne. Your cancer, your loneliness, your financial collapse, your fractured family — these are real and God does not minimize them. But they are not larger than the throne that appeared over Babylon. Get the proportions right.

5. Approach God only through provided mediation — and marvel that you may approach at all. (*Will/behavior*) Ezekiel’s careful hedging — “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” — is not false modesty or bad writing. It is the text protecting its readers from the conclusion that God is directly apprehensible on human terms. The vision is real; the distance remains real. The God who appears in Ezekiel 1 is not the God of casual familiarity or the therapeutic deity of contemporary comfort religion. He is the God who produces prostration. The gospel does not eliminate this distance; it crosses it through Christ, which makes the crossing all the more astonishing. Come to God in prayer and worship not as though you have a right to the presence on your own terms, but as people stunned that the One enthroned above the expanse has made a way for you to draw near through the Son — and draw near accordingly, with reverence and awe.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ezekiel 1 is one of Scripture's most concentrated statements of divine transcendence, divine omnipresence, and divine sovereignty. The vision teaches that God is not geographically confined — He is mobile, present anywhere He chooses to appear, undefeated and undiminished by the circumstances that appeared to have limited His activity. The *merkabah* — the chariot-throne — moves wherever the spirit directs, implying that divine governance is immediate, purposeful, and not subject to external obstruction. The vision simultaneously insists on genuine divine condescension (He comes to Babylon; He appears to Ezekiel; He commissions a human prophet) and radical divine transcendence (language cannot contain what is seen; Ezekiel falls on his face; every description hedges itself). This is not a God who can be domesticated by suffering, imprisoned by history, or deduced from circumstances — and it is precisely this God who is present with His people in their worst moment.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition's insistence on divine sovereignty — that God's purposes are not thwarted by history, human sin, or geopolitical catastrophe — finds one of its most dramatic visual expressions in Ezekiel 1. The *merkabah* vision directly confronts the two great covenant-destroying conclusions: that God has been defeated (and is therefore not sovereign) or that God has abandoned His people (and is therefore not faithful). Ezekiel 1 answers both with a single vision: the sovereign God of the covenant is *here*, in Babylon, more present and more powerful than anything Babylon represents. This is covenantal theology in theophanic form — God remains with His people through judgment, not in spite of it. Furthermore, the Reformed emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God and the necessity of revealed, mediated knowledge is perfectly expressed in Ezekiel's hedged language: "the appearance of the likeness." This is not agnosticism about God — it is a precisely Reformed epistemology of divine revelation: God is truly known through what He reveals, and truly exceeds what He reveals, and both truths must be held simultaneously.

Main Takeaway

The God you think is absent from your worst situation is the same God who showed up in a war refugee camp by an irrigation canal in Babylon with wheels full of eyes and a voice like many waters and fire that needed no fuel. He was not diminished by the exile; He was not defeated by Babylon; He was not confined to the temple He allowed to be destroyed. He is here — mobile, sovereign, omniscient, present — and the only thing between you and this

reality is a theology of His limits that the vision was designed to shatter. Fall on your face and then get up to receive your commission.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Converting the vision into a symbolic diagram and never entering it.** The most common homiletical failure with Ezekiel 1 is to spend the entire message cataloguing what each element represents — four faces = four domains of creation, wheels = divine mobility, eyes = omniscience — and to leave the congregation having learned the chart but never having been overwhelmed by the presence. Systematic decoding protects the preacher and the congregation from the actual effect the passage was designed to produce. The symbols should be briefly opened, not exhaustively mapped, and the congregation should be brought *into* the vision rather than handed a glossary of it.
- **Treating the theophany as a problem to be explained rather than a reality to be proclaimed.** Many preachers approach Ezekiel 1 apologetically — preemptively explaining how ancient Near Eastern imagery works, reassuring congregations that the strangeness is culturally conditioned, making the passage less strange in the service of accessibility. This inverts the text's intent. The strangeness is the point. God deliberately appears in overwhelming, disorienting form. Domesticating the vision in the name of clarity destroys its primary claim.
- **Missing the exile context as the theological key.** Without the exile setting, Ezekiel 1 becomes a generic vision of divine majesty — impressive but undirected. With the exile setting, it becomes a targeted theological assault on a specific false belief: God has been defeated and is absent. Preachers who skip past verses 1-3 to get to the vision itself will preach a different sermon than the one the chapter actually requires. The date, the location, and the community's condition are not introduction — they are the interpretive frame without which the vision's intent cannot be correctly stated.
- **Preaching Ezekiel 1 as if Ezekiel is the subject.** Ezekiel himself occupies almost no space in this chapter — he appears in verses 1-3, is mentioned again in verse 28 as falling on his face, and says almost nothing until chapter 2. The subject is not the prophet's experience or call — that begins in chapter 2. The subject is the God who appears. Sermons that frame this passage primarily as a call narrative ("Ezekiel's commissioning experience") center the wrong character. The commissioning is downstream of the vision. The vision is what the passage is about.
- **Abstracting "divine sovereignty" without the emotional force of divine presence.** It is possible to preach the correct doctrinal content of Ezekiel 1 — God is sovereign, omnipresent, omniscient, uncontained — while preaching it in a way that leaves the congregation theologically informed and existentially unmoved. The

passage is not primarily teaching the doctrine of divine omnipresence for catechetical purposes — it is *showing* an overwhelmed, devastated exile community that the LORD has come to them in power. The doctrine must be felt, not merely affirmed. The congregant who is living in their own exile needs to be brought to the bank of the Chebar canal, not handed a systematic theology index card.

- **Speculative identification of the figure on the throne.** The text's own deliberate hedging — “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” — is an explicit instruction not to over-specify what is being seen. Preachers who confidently identify the enthroned figure as “the pre-incarnate Christ” are going further than Ezekiel's own language permits, even if the canonical Christological trajectory is real and worth noting. Honor the text's reticence. The mystery is theologically intentional. Make the Christological connection with canonical care, not exegetical overconfidence.