

Colorful Glory
17th Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 26, 2020
Trinity Bixby
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Ezekiel 1:4-28
Colossians 1:15-20

If I were to ask you to name the most “colorful” story in the Bible, what would your answer be? Would it be Joseph and the “coat of many colors”? Or perhaps the end of the story of Noah, where God promises to never flood the whole earth by placing a rainbow in the sky? Some of you who have recently read Exodus’ description of the Tabernacle might lift up Exodus 26:1 – “Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple, and scarlet yarn...” Or maybe it’s Revelation’s gemstones that stand out to you: Onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst all mentioned in Revelation 21:20 as the foundations of New Jerusalem.

But, at least until the reading today, I doubt you would have lifted up the first chapter of Ezekiel. This chapter is filled with visual imagery, overwhelming amounts of it, and it seems like Ezekiel hedges everything, with the phrase, “it has the appearance of” or “with something like.” It’s so confusing to read or listen to, and interpretation of it runs the gamut, everything from “Ezekiel saw God directly” to “Ezekiel used the symbols of his era, or of Assyria or Babylon, to describe God” to, yes, even “Ezekiel saw a spaceship and aliens.” Because discussion of the whole vision could take literal hours, I’m going to focus today only on the meaning of the colors – and what we learn about God from them.

First, we start with the whirlwind of cloud and fire. Harkening back to the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through desert wilderness, it’s fascinating to see Ezekiel’s description of the fire within “glowing something like gleaming amber.” In Hebrew, “gleaming amber” is *chashmal*, a word that seems to have been used to describe both polished amber and electrum, the natural alloy of

gold and silver.¹ When the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek, in the document called the Septuagint, *chashmal* was translated as *elektron*, the Greek word that was also used for both amber and electrum. What you've probably noted already is a connection between *elektron* and electron, the basis of electricity. Since static electricity was first identified using amber, it has remained as the root of our modern world. Similarly, when modern Hebrew was in need of a word for electricity, they relied on the word *chashmal* – even though it originally meant something like a color of gleaming yellow-orange.²

The color of “gleaming amber” is associated strongly with divine power and strength in Hebrew. Here, it is the first glimmer of the divine presence, obscured by the wind and clouds. In the Jewish commentaries (the *Talmud*), there are warnings against studying *chashmal* too closely: “Wasn't there a certain youth who expounded the *chashmal*, and fire came out and consumed him, showing that such study is highly dangerous? ...His time to study such matters had not yet arrived.”³

Let's move along, then – as Ezekiel next describes beings that looked human, except for their four faces, wings, and hooves, sparkling like “burnished bronze.” A lot of translations use this “burnished bronze” – but the phrase is closer to “sparkled with the eye of bronze or brass.”⁴ Brass and bronze were not distinguished from each other in the ancient world, since brass was made primarily by accident of impurities in the copper – but polished brass made about the brightest possible reflection the ancients were aware of. Even a half-millennium later, when Paul refers to “seeing in a mirror dimly” – the mirror he refers to is made of polished brass. This is another warm color, but with tones of strength and longevity and, again, brightness. Since bronze was also used for armor, it has overtones of protection and safety.

Ezekiel refers back to these beings as “bright coals of fire” and “lightning

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electrum>

² <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/23194/whats-the-meaning-of-hashmal-electricity-in-modern-hebrew-in-the-bible-ez>

³ Chagigah 13a - <https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.13a?lang=bi>

⁴ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5178.htm/> Elana Levy, SoMuchBible (unpublished)

flashing back and forth among them” Bright, shining, and lots of active movement going on with the beings alone! But then, we get to what has been called Ezekiel’s wheel – for each of these four-fold beings was sitting on a wheel within a wheel – able to roll in any direction without turning. The wheels “sparkle as if made of beryl” and are covered in “eyes all around.” And here we run into a translation problem. The word that most modern translations claim is “beryl” is *tarshish*. This is a stone named for the traders that brought it to Israel – in the same way that turquoise in English references the Turkish traders who brought it to Europe. That’s great if you know the stone by that name, but there’s no description of what “Tarshish-stone” looks like, so that we can compare it to modern gems.⁵ Three possibilities have been suggested historically: yellow jasper, golden beryl, and chrysolite. Because it’s so nebulous, though, many modern translations just say “beryl,” a gemstone that comes in many colors – emerald, aquamarine, clear and golden being the primary types today.⁶ Basically, since we can’t know for sure what the color actually is, all we can know about it is that it is exotic to the Israelites – something from far-off shores, representing mystery to them.

What about the “eyes” on the wheel edge? We can keep going with the mysterious aspect, but Hebrew refers poetically to the stars in the sky as the “eyes of the heavens” – it’s possible that Ezekiel is saying that the edges of the wheel sparkle like the stars in the night sky.⁷ This certainly continues the theme of bright lights sparkling and shifting throughout the vision!

So far, we have a description of warm colors, primarily yellow, but with hints of lightning’s blue-white running through. But after the description of the four-faced beings and their wheels, the colors shift significantly. Above them, we hear, was a “surface like the sky, glittering like crystal.” Ach, literally, that’s “a dome with eyes of crystal or ice.” “Eyes of” something in Hebrew usually means “appears to the eyes like” – so, “glittering or shining like crystal” is still helpful.⁸ This is a colorless shiny

⁵ <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Tarshish.html#Xxsh7p5KiUm>

⁶ <https://www.biblestudy.org/bible-study-by-topic/gemstones-in-the-bible/beryls.html>

⁷ <https://blog.logos.com/2018/01/vision-ezekiel-1-mean/>

⁸ Elana Levy, SoMuchBible (unpublished)

surface, like a glass dome.⁹ Since it's colorless, it lets Ezekiel see through to the next part of the vision: the divine throne.

“Above this surface was something that looked like a throne made of lapis lazuli.” (or sapphire).¹⁰ Both sapphire gemstones and the mineral lapis lazuli are colored a brilliant blue. In Ezekiel's vision, the sky is blue because God's divine throne is blue, and the sky provides a glimpse of God's throne in the distance. It's not surprising that the temple, according to Exodus and Deuteronomy, was to be decorated with blue and purple designs – as God's “home away from home,” it was the way that God would be most comfortable. Now that Ezekiel and the rest of Israel are in exile, this vision of Ezekiel helps show the people that God's throne is still present with them. It's a reminder that God is not limited to Jerusalem, but is everywhere. Indeed, this entire construction, from strange beings on wheels that move across the land “in a flash of lightning” to God's throne above are deep reminders that God is present everywhere at once.

Seated on the throne is a figure resembling a human. Ezekiel describes the figure as “gleaming amber” from the waist up, and “burning flame, shining with splendor” from the waist down. Warm colors, contrasting with the cool color of the throne. All around this brightly shining figure is “a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day.” All of the colors of the rainbow, the full spectrum, surround God's divine presence in this vision. God's glory is refracted from the shining light of God's presence – a reminder that all the color of creation is a creation of God.

We see this, too, in the way the description advances the colors. Ezekiel, as a mortal, is *Adamah* – literally, red clay. Next, the fire of the cloud is amber, or orange/red. The legs of the four-faced beings are brass, or shining yellow. This is a bit of a stretch, but the wheels, described next in the text, are possibly an emerald beryl. Then, colorless sky revealing the sapphire throne, and the glory of God shines like rainbows throughout the sky. The only color of the rainbow explicitly missing

⁹ <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/ezekiel-1/>

¹⁰ In Hebrew, this is *ebensappir* - sapphire stone. Elana Levy, SoMuchBible, unpublished.

from the text is purple or violet!

Now, as to the “human-like form” – Ezekiel is really trying his best to describe what he sees, but the true majesty and glory of God is overwhelming! It is a true wonder that the majesty and glory of God, the full gamut of God’s divine presence, is made manifest in Jesus Christ, born as a baby, and grown to adult just like any one of us. Paul writes in Colossians 1 “The Son is the image of the invisible God... because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him, and he reconciled all things to himself through him... he brought peace through the blood of his cross.” Jesus, you see, is more than a “human-like form” – Jesus is God revealing Godself to us in a way we can understand and accept much more easily. Jesus is the visible representation of the invisible God – containing the full rainbow glory in true human form.

Ezekiel’s vision calls us to remember the awe-inspiring nature of God, and that God is present with us even in exile. Even greater than the forces of nature and the powers and principalities of our world is the one who created it all. So, let’s thank God again and again for the beauty of the world. Let us praise God for saving us from loneliness, from isolation, from even death itself. And let us follow Jesus to the ends of the earth, shining the light of God into the hearts of all we encounter. Amen.