

God's Visions and God's Eyes in Ezekiel's Surrealistic Imagery

Edgar W. Conrad

This article is related to a larger research project that my wife, Dr. Linda Conrad and I are doing on a surrealistic reading of Ezekiel. I focus on the phrase, מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים, which occurs only in the book of Ezekiel (1:1; 8:3; 40:2; see also 40:3). The usual English translations render it as “visions of God” and interpret Ezekiel 1:4-28 as a description of a “vision of God” that Ezekiel sees. While God does appear to Ezekiel in these verses, my alternative reading sees them as a depiction of God’s vision – what God sees. Ezekiel beholds an “El-mobile” with eyes darting around with great speed moving in all directions and enabling God to view the world with commensurate ease. My reading highlights the significance of the recurring use of “eye” (עֵינַי) and “eyes” (עֵינַיִם) in 1:4-28, routinely overlooked by commentators. When Ezekiel says that he sees מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים, his claim is that he sees God’s visions; he sees what God sees. This accounts for Ezekiel’s capacity to see what is happening in the temple in Jerusalem while resident in Babylon, something that has troubled traditional critical scholarship.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase, מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים, occurs only in Ezekiel and is routinely translated as “Visions of God.” However, I translate the phrase “God’s visions” in the sense that Ezekiel sees what God sees. When God appears to Ezekiel, God enables him to see what God sees. The phrase appears at three strategic places in the book:

1. In Ezekiel 1:1 it introduces the appearance of God to Ezekiel by the river Chebar:

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים.

וַיְהִי בְשָׁלְשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּרִבְעֵי בַחֲמִשָּׁה לַחֹדֶשׁ וַאֲנִי בְּתוֹדֵי-הַגּוֹלָה עַל נְהַר-כְּבַר נִפְתְּחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וַאֲרָאָה מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים:

2. Ezekiel 8:3 commences the scene where Ezekiel sees events taking place in the temple and at the end he sees God depart from the temple:

... the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in מְרֵאוֹת אֱלֹהִים to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy.

וַתִּשָּׂא אֹתִי רוּחַ בֵּין-הָאָרֶץ וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם וַתְּבֵא אֹתִי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם בְּמֵרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים אֶל-פֶּתַח שַׁעַר הַפְּנִימִית הַפּוֹנֶה צְפוֹנָה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם מוֹשֵׁב סִמָּל הַקְּנָאָה הַמְקַנָּה:

3. Ezekiel 40:2 begins Ezekiel's view of a restored Jerusalem and temple that will be renamed "Yahweh Is There" (48:35).

He (the hand of the LORD) brought me, in מְרִאוֹת אֱלֹהִים, to the land of Israel, and set me down upon a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south.

בְּמִרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים הֵבִיאֲנִי אֶל-אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְנַיְחֵנִי אֶל-הַר גְּבוּהַ מְאֹד וְעָלִיו כְּמִבְנֵה-עִיר מְנֻגָּב:

Ezekiel sees "God's visions" (מְרִאוֹת אֱלֹהִים) by a river in a foreign land where he is living among the exiles. God does not appear in a sacred place as he does to Moses on Mt. Sinai (see Exod. 19:3) or in the Tent of Meeting (see Num 1:1, 7:28); to Samuel in the temple at Shiloh (1 Sam. 3:21); or to Isaiah in the temple in Jerusalem (Isa. 6). Instead God appears in Babylon, the city of exile. Ezekiel beholds what might be called an "El-mobile" with eyes darting around with great speed, moving in all directions and enabling God to view all areas of the world effortlessly. Ezekiel in turn was able to see God's view of the world, God's visions.

2. I LOOKED AND I SAW – EZEKIEL 1:1-28

When I read the portrayal of the appearance of God in 1:4-28, I am fascinated by the emphasis on motion. When Ezekiel looked, he saw a strong wind coming out of the north (1:4) revealing four creatures, and each one had four wings (1:6). Their wings touched one another and, without turning, the creatures moved straight ahead. They went wherever the spirit went (1:12) and darted in different directions like flashes of lightning (1:14). Each creature had a wheel within a wheel (1:15-16) enabling it to move in four directions without veering as it moved (1:17). The wheels moved when the creatures moved. When the creatures rose, the wheels rose, for the "spirit" was in the wheels (1:19-20). The spectacle that Ezekiel beheld was designed for travel and moved quickly and efficiently. This supports a major theme of the book – that God is not simply housed in one place but can move wherever he wishes in the world.

The description includes loud noise accompanying the appearance of the four highly mobile creatures. Ezekiel says, "When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings" (1:24). The repeated similes to explain the sound suggest that this sound was expressive of enormous and extraordinary power. Ezekiel's description of the wheels is intriguing and adds to the strange and remarkable spectacle. He says, "Their rims were tall and awesome, for **the rims of all four were full of eyes all around**" (1:18). That the creatures have wings as well as wheels for movement is bizarre, but that the wheels are filled with eyes is fantastic. This imagery suggests that what Ezekiel sees itself also has eyes to see. The huge and fearsome eyes filling the rims of all four wheels are able to see comprehensively by looking in all four directions at the same time. The image of wheels filled with eyes is found also in the book of Enoch, which lists the Ophanim together with the Seraphim and Cherubim as a group of celestial beings associated with the throne of God. Ophanim is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for "wheels" (אוֹפָנִים)¹

The Hebrew word for eye (עֵינַן) occurs five other times in Ezekiel's account (1:4, 7, 16, 22, 27) although it is not apparent in English translations. Hebrew lexicons suggest that in these instances where eye (עֵינַן) is used in conjunction with a precious stone it should be understood figuratively to mean "gleam" or "sparkle." Significantly, eight out of the nine places in the Old Testament where this usage is recorded occur in Ezekiel. Six are found in Ezek. 1 and two others in Ezek. 8:2 and 10:9.² These latter two passages also present Ezekiel's descriptions of the appearance of God. The six-fold use of eye (עֵינַן) in Ezek.1, even if it is to be understood figuratively, underscores the point that **what Ezekiel looks upon also has eyes to see**. When this text was read aloud to ancient communities, and all texts were intended for the ear since most people were not able to read, the community heard the repeated word for eye used in the description: "like the amber eye" (vs. 4), "like an eye of

burnished bronze” (vs. 7), “like an eye of Jasper” (vs. 16), “like an eye of crystal” (vs. 22) and “like an eye of amber” (vs. 27). On the basis of what Ezekiel is seeing, I am inclined to see in Ezekiel’s description a more literal use of the word עַיִן as “eye” rather than, or in addition to, a figurative use of “sparkle” or gleam. His description of what he sees uses the preposition “like” over and over again. For example, when he says that the soles of the feet of the creatures “were like the sole of a calf’s foot” (vs. 7), the likeness he talks about is not simply figurative; there is a resemblance between the foot of the feet of calves and the feet of the creatures. Similarly, “like an eye of amber” (vss. 4,27), “like an eye of burnished bronze” (vs. 7), “like an eye of Jasper” (vs. 16), and “like an eye of crystal” (vs. 22) suggest a similarity between an “eye” and the organ of seeing and the “eye” he sees on the apparatus on which God is enthroned. The description of God who is seated enthroned above the creatures is not simply metaphorical, but suggests a more literal correspondence:

“And from above the firmament that was over their heads was **something appearing like a stone of sapphire**, resembling a throne and above **the likeness** of the throne was **something appearing like a man** on top of it. And I saw its enclosure, the upper part of its loins, was all around **something like an amber eye, like the appearance of fire**. And I saw the lower part was like **an appearance of fire** and there was brightness all around it. **Like the appearance of a bow** that comes on a rainy day, such was the brightness all around. **It was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God**. After I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard a voice speaking” (1:26-28).

In Ezekiel’s description of seeing God, he uses language such as “likeness”, “appearance”, and even “like an appearance,” indicating that the manifestation of God is beyond description. But that likeness or appearance should not be divorced from literal correspondence. Movement and eyes are associated with the creatures that bear the throne on which God is seated, and the upper part of the loins of the appearance of God is enclosed by an amber eye. The entire point of this amazing description, full of eyes, is to emphasize one characteristic of God - **his capacity to SEE**. The emphasis on the SEEING GOD is important because in a moment Ezekiel will be allowed to see what God sees - to share in God’s visions, to be given access to the purview of God.

3. SEEING WHAT GOD IS SEEING

The description of moving eyes bearing the throne of God in 1:4-28 helps to explain the use of the phrase מִרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים later in the book where Ezekiel sees what God sees, where he looks through the eyes of God so to speak (8-11 and 40-48). In 8:2-3, Ezekiel says,

I looked, and there was a figure that looked like a human being; below what appeared to be its loins it was fire, and above the loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like an eye of amber. It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me **in God’s visions** to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy.

Ezekiel is transported by the spirit as he was earlier when the spirit lifted him up and took him to the river Chebar to be with the exiles (3:14-15). Being lifted up between heaven and earth by the spirit and transported to another place is reminiscent of the experience of earlier prophets such as Elijah rather than that of the latter prophets. A person who was asked to carry a message from Elijah to King Ahab is reluctant because he says, “As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the Lord will carry you I know not where; so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me . . .”(2 Kings 18:12). Of course Elijah also ascends into heaven in chariots of fire drawn by horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11).

The appearance (מְרֹאָה) of the glory of God was present in the story of Elijah just as it was when Yahweh appeared to Ezekiel beside the river Chebar (1:28; see also 3:11). In chapter 8 God repeatedly instructs Ezekiel to see what God himself is seeing.

- The image of jealousy at the north of the altar gate where practices are taking place that will drive Yahweh away from his sanctuary (8:5-6).
 - God said to me, "O mortal, **lift up your eyes** (שָׂא־נָא עֵינֶיךָ) now in the direction of the north (8:5).
 - So **I lifted up my eyes** (וּאֲשָׂא עֵינַי) toward the north (8:5).
 - "Mortal, **do you see** (הֲרֹאֶה אֹתָהּ) what they are doing (8:6)?
 - **Yet you will see** (תִּרְאֶה) still greater abominations (8:6).
- Creeping things, and loathsome animals, and all the idols of Israel portrayed on a wall. There were also seventy elders of Israel burning incense (8:7-11).
 - **I looked** (וְאָרָא), and there was a hole in the wall (8:7).
 - He said to me, "Go in, and **see** (וּרְאֶה) (8:9).
 - So I went in and **looked** (וְאָרָא) (8:10).
- The elders are in a dark room with their images and do not think that God can see them (8:12-15).
 - Mortal, **have you seen** (הֲרֹאִיתָ) what the elders of the house of Israel are doing (8:12)?
 - For they say, "**The Lord does not see us** (אֵין יְהוָה אֲתֵנוּ), the Lord has forsaken the land"(8:12).
 - **You will see** (תִּרְאֶה) still greater abominations (8:13).
 - **Have you seen** (הֲרֹאִיתָ) this, O mortal (8:15)?
 - **You will see** (תִּרְאֶה) still greater abominations (8:15).
- At the inner court are 25 men with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, prostrating themselves to the sun toward the east (8:16-17). This would appear to be a ritual alien to the followers of Yahweh but appropriate to the worship of another god.
 - **Have you seen** (הֲרֹאִיתָ) this, O mortal (8:17)?
 - **See they** (הֲנִם) are putting the branch to their nose (8:17)!

Throughout chapter 8 God is instructing Ezekiel to **see** what God himself is **seeing**. This chapter exemplifies very clearly the meaning of God's visions (מְרֹאֹת אֱלֹהִים) that Ezekiel refers to when God appears to him by the river Chebar. Ezekiel can see with his eyes what God himself sees while enthroned on the creatures with wings and wheels filled with eyes.

The final time that Ezekiel sees God's visions is in chapters 40-48. Ezekiel says that in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, "the hand of the LORD was upon me . . . and he brought me in God's visions to the land of Israel and set me down upon a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south" (40:2). There a man, whose appearance shone like bronze, carefully instructed Ezekiel to pay close attention to everything he saw.

The man said to me, "Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel" (40:4).

His ability to see the rebuilding of the city through God's visions opened up a future return to the temple that had been overturned in his initial experience of God's judgment. God now also appears to Ezekiel as he did along the banks of the river Chebar. This time, however, God appears to Ezekiel in the envisioned temple in a reconstructed Jerusalem, not in a foreign land.

4. CONCLUSION

The imagery of God's eyes suggesting that Ezekiel is taken in God's visions enabling him to see what God sees in the temple in Jerusalem and the restored temple is bizarre, not unlike the imagery in twentieth century surrealism. Scholars have sometimes noted this similarity, as does Henry McKeating in his excellent overview of Ezekiel scholarship (McKeating 1993) in his book *Ezekiel* in the series *Old Testament Guides*. He says,

. . . there is often a rather surreal or fantastic quality about Ezekiel's visions. The vision of the valley of dry bones in ch. 37 has this quality, and so, *par excellence*, has the extraordinary inaugural vision of ch. 1 . . . (McKeating 1993: 18)

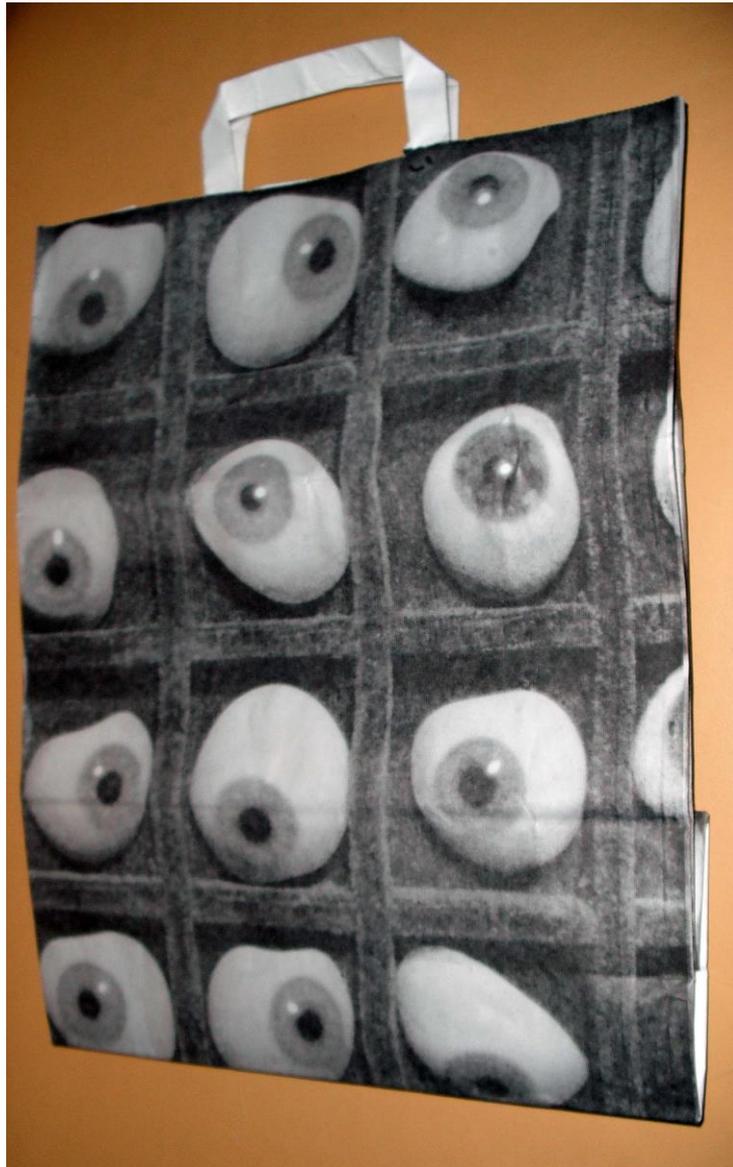
McKeating, like the majority of traditional historical-critical scholars, is not willing to highlight the surrealism of Ezekiel in the interpretation of the book. He says,

. . . though there seem to be, from a twentieth-century point of view, many elements of the bizarre both in Ezekiel's behavior and in the way he expresses his message, the *content* of that message is entirely rational. If the book at all represents his mind, the prophet was clearly a powerful, profound and courageous thinker, whose influence in reshaping Jewish religion to meet the needs of the postexilic age was extremely strong. It is not plausible that such influence could be exercised by a person of a deranged mind. (McKeating 1993: 29)

From a twentieth century perspective, that the imagery is characteristic of surrealism means that it does not originate from a "deranged mind" and that its interpretation does not require turning the bizarre into rational thought. The circumstances offered as the background for reading the book of Ezekiel are the collapse of those things that were seen as making sense of the world. There was exile from the land, destruction of the temple where Yahweh dwells, and an uncertain future. This collapse has similarities to the world in which surrealism arose. The first World War and its aftermath presented a challenge to the triumphal rationalism that had previously been seen as offering the world progress and security. In attempt to make sense of their changed world, the surrealists sought to understand the real world of thought unfettered by the rational. André Breton, in his "Manifesto of Surrealism," published in 1924 defined surrealism as:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.³

My reading of Ezekiel finds no necessity of turning him into either a rational thinker or a deranged man. I am suggesting instead that the book of Ezekiel is the product of thought that moves beyond the restraints of what is assumed to be rational. Ezekiel encounters an El-mobile with eyes, which moves around the world enabling Ezekiel to see what God sees: God's visions, not seen by his contemporaries, whose vision was limited by what they understood to be the real world.



This carry bag was obtained from the gift shop at the exhibition of “Surrealism, the Poetry of Dreams” held at the Queensland Art Gallery, 11 June to 2 October, 2011. Since I was working on this article at the time, I used it as an appropriate prop for reading an initial draft of this paper at the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar held in Brisbane 5 and 6 November 2011.

ENDNOTES

¹See Enoch 61:10: “And He will summon all the host of the heavens, and all the holy ones above, and the host of God, the Cherubic, Seraphim and Ophannim, and all the angels of power, and all the angels of principalities, and the Elect One, and the other powers on the earth (and) over the water;” and 71:7: “And round about were Seraphim, Cherubic, and Ophannim:/And these are they who sleep not/And guard the throne of His glory.” The book of Enoch, dated to about the 3rd century BCE, is written in Ethiopic and is accepted as part of the canon of scripture by the Ethiopic Orthodox Church. Fragments of Enoch found at Qumran occur in Aramaic and Greek, and the book was considered important at times by both Jewish and Christian communities. 61:10; 71:7 The Book of Enoch is available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/boe/>

² The other place where the dictionaries suggest that עִיִן has this figurative meaning is Dan. 10:6 where it is also used in the description of an “angelic” figure.

³ <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm> Retrieved from the internet 26/12/2011.

REFERENCES

McKeating, H. 1993. *Ezekiel*. Old Testament Guides. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.



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