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Chariots of fire: God's throne-chariot

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. (Ezek. 1.26)

God's throne-chariot

The image of God sitting on his throne is a strongly visual one and begs the obvious question: what did it look like? The places to begin to try and answer this question are the three great visions of God reported by Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, in which each prophet sees and attempts to describe something of the nature of God's throne.

Isaiah's vision of God

Isaiah's throne vision (Isa. 6.1–13) returns us to the temple. The location of the vision in the temple raises the question of whether Isaiah was himself a priest, maybe even a high priest who was present in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. This would certainly be supported by his closeness and access to the king (see e.g. Isa. 7) but is nowhere stated explicitly in the prophecy. The language used to describe the vision implies a blurring of the boundaries between heaven and earth. Isaiah sees God 'high and lifted up', with the hem (literally the skirts) of his robe filling the temple. This description is designed to give a sense of the magnitude of God – God is so great that even the bottom of his robe fills the temple to the brim. This poetic description puts into words some of Isaiah's wonder at his vision. It is not just the temple that is filled with God's presence, it is the whole of his being. This passage is reminiscent of R. S. Thomas's poem 'Suddenly', where Thomas speaks of an encounter with God in

which he doesn't look just with his eyes but with the whole of his being, and when he does so he overflows like a chalice with the sea. This is the kind of encounter that Isaiah describes here; the vastness of God's presence filling everything that Isaiah sees and feels.

The impression given in this passage is not just of the vastness of God but of the fusion between heaven and earth. God appears to be in both the heavenly and the earthly temple at the same time – an idea that may be picked up again later in Isaiah 66.1, where heaven is referred to as God's throne and earth as his footstool. Heaven and earth, then, are bound together not just by their creation side by side but by God, sitting on the throne, who stretches from heaven to earth.

Isaiah gives little detail about God's throne or what it was like. All that can be gleaned is that his throne was 'high and lifted up', possibly on the cherubim (though this is not made explicit here), and that he was attended by at least two seraphim, calling to each other in praise of God. The seraphim had six wings, working together in three pairs of two: two to cover their faces, two to cover their feet and two with which to fly. The words of their song are significant because they express the paradox that has already become clear in our study of heaven. God is holy, that is set apart: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts'; but his glory suffuses the earth: 'the whole earth is full of his glory' (6.3). God is separate from and integral to the earth at the same time – and so also is heaven the dwelling place of God. This seems to be the point of the whole vision, in fact, since Isaiah is then sent to be the mouthpiece of God to a people who will neither listen to nor understand him. Isaiah is called to be the lived-out symbol of the people's relationship with God. The seraphim declare that God is holy and that his glory fills heaven and earth, and yet his people simply do not notice him.

Ezekiel's throne-chariot vision

The other great prophetic vision which records the throne of God is Ezekiel's vision of the chariot (Ezek. 1). Although many people today naturally shy away from the extravagant imagery and complex vision that Ezekiel describes here, it has been one of the most influential biblical passages on writings that came after it. Jewish Apocalyptic literature from outside the Bible as well as New Testament texts such

as Revelation 4—5 can be seen to draw on Ezekiel's vision as they try to describe the throne and what it looked like.¹ In fact, such was the passage's popularity that the Rabbis believed that it could be dangerous and so (probably around the second century CE, though it may have been earlier), forbade either the reading² or the expounding of it.³

In Ezekiel 1 the same Hebrew word is used for God's throne as that used in Isaiah 6 (*kisseh*), but what Ezekiel describes as having seen is not a throne on its own but a chariot. Ezekiel saw four living creatures (which are identified as cherubim in Ezekiel 10), each with a wheel beside them. They had wings which they held above them touching the wings of the other creatures like a canopy, while over their heads was a *raqia'* or firmament and resting on the *raqia'* was God's throne. While the throne itself receives the simplest of descriptions – 'in appearance like sapphire' (v. 26) – the whole chariot is well described. The book of Ezekiel never actually uses the Hebrew word for chariot – *merkabah* – but the word very quickly became associated with God's throne or throne-chariot (see e.g. 1 Chron. 28.18). We should also note that it is unclear who or what Ezekiel saw seated on the throne. The text is vague in the extreme. On the throne Ezekiel saw 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD' (v. 28). It seems that the passage is leaving open the question of whether Ezekiel actually saw God or not.

Around Ezekiel's vision grew up extensive speculation about what God's throne-chariot was like and about visions of that chariot. In the later period these speculations became so elaborate that subsequent scholars have gathered them together under the name *merkabah mysticism*.⁴ The great Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem argued strongly that *merkabah mysticism* was an important stage in the development of Jewish mysticism in the period before the much more well known *Kabbalah*.⁵ Other scholars developed his argument, maintaining that it also marked a mid-point in development between Jewish Apocalyptic literature and the *Kabbalah*.⁶ There is extensive discussion about the dating of this kind of mysticism, about its primary focus and even about which texts can be included as part of the *merkabah* tradition. Nevertheless a considerable number of scholars now acknowledge the existence and importance of *merkabah mysticism*, note its importance, and posit its influence on early Christianity.⁷

Although not their only emphasis, one of the foci of the loose collection of the texts that scholars associate with merkabah mysticism is God's throne-chariot (or *merkabah*). Following Ezekiel's vision, there grew up a belief that it would be possible to ascend into heaven and to see God seated on the chariot in the heavenly realms (although, somewhat confusingly, the people who do this are described as descenders to the chariot).⁸ Some of these texts describe a journey through various levels of heaven that culminates, at last, in a sight of God on his throne-chariot. In texts like these Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot became iconic not only of what had happened to him but of what could, potentially, happen to subsequent ascenders to God's throne.

This is not the only importance of the image. Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot also shifted understanding of God's relationship to the temple. Ezekiel's prophecies were spoken into a situation marked by conflict. The first part of Ezekiel seems to be set between the two big waves of exile that took place in the late sixth century BCE. In c. 597 BCE the Babylonians took the king, the king's court and the priests into exile in Babylon away from Judah; this was followed about ten years later by a second wave of exile when they took even more people away from Judah, this time destroying the temple as well. It is thought by many that the early part of Ezekiel addresses the exiles in the period between the first and second waves of exile.

This is where Ezekiel's vision of a throne-chariot becomes important. In the previous chapter we explored the key connection between the temple and heaven, and the importance of the temple as the place where God dwelt in the midst of his people. At the time of Ezekiel, during which the temple was destroyed, this raised some potentially huge problems. If God dwelt in the temple and the temple had been destroyed, then would this mean that God had been destroyed along with it? Ezekiel's vision of a moveable throne-chariot brought with it a slightly odd message of hope.

In chapters 10—11, Ezekiel returns to his vision of God's throne. Here he vividly describes God abandoning the temple because of the evil in the city. God's glory is described as ascending into the chariot and leaving the city and the temple before resting on a mountain to the east of Jerusalem (Ezek. 11.24). The message of hope that this offered was clear. God was no longer tied to one place but could move.

He had abandoned the old temple before it was destroyed. The message of hope might have been an odd one, yet it was nonetheless profound. God had not been destroyed along with the temple but had abandoned it already, and was ready to return whenever God's people returned to him. Indeed, later on in the book, Ezekiel is given a blueprint from which the temple can be rebuilt, and he records a vision of God's future return to that newly built temple (43.1–9).

Ezekiel's message of hope provided a way forward for God's people in a time of despair but also had a profound impact on the theology of God's presence. The temple was rebuilt after the exile, but God was never quite so closely associated with it from then on. Once it had been rebuilt the temple remained at the centre of Israel's life and worship, undiminished in importance, but the texts of the post-exilic and Second Temple period more often talk of God enthroned in the heavenly temple and less often of his enthronement in the earthly temple. A subtle but significant shift took place which influenced the way in which people subsequently thought about God's throne.

Daniel's vision of God's throne

Unlike Isaiah's and Ezekiel's visions of God's throne, each of which seems to take place while the prophet is awake, Daniel's vision takes place in a 'dream and visions of his head'. Nevertheless it is otherwise quite similar to the other two visions, although Daniel's vision is not just of God's throne but of events on earth – or more particularly in the sea – as well: in Daniel 7.2–8, Daniel sees four great sea monsters arising from the sea and causing chaos. John Collins has drawn a connection between these sea monsters and those that God fought and conquered in the Psalms.⁹ A good example of this is Psalm 74.14 which records God's defeat of Leviathan, a mythic sea monster who was associated with the waters of chaos.¹⁰

This connection is important. The sea monsters of Daniel represent the chaos of the political world at the time of the writer, but the image of these monsters juxtaposed with God's throne serves to remind Daniel's audience – as well as us today – that the God who was able to defeat mythic sea monsters is the God who is able to defeat all chaos, whatever its shape or form. The political powers who felt to Daniel's audience like uncontrollable monsters might appear to be

all-powerful, but are as nothing compared to God, seated on his throne.

After his vision of the sea monsters, Daniel sees the enthronement of the Ancient One: 'As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire' (7.9). It is not clear where this throne was. On the one hand Daniel can see the sea monsters rising from the sea. He can also see the thrones which are set in place, a phrase implying that they were not there before and needed to be in position before judgement could happen. On the other hand, in the famous verse 7.13 ('As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [or Son of Man] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him'), note that the Son of Man 'comes with the clouds', which may suggest arrival at a heavenly location.¹¹ Although not relevant for our present discussion, the decision made about the throne's location has important implications for the reference to the Son of Man which became so significant in Gospel tradition. N. T. Wright has argued that the reference to the one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds is a reference to him going *from* earth *to* heaven, not as was traditionally supposed *from* heaven *to* earth.¹² For Wright the importance of this is that the one like a Son of Man is a representative of oppressed Israel and is vindicated by the Ancient of Days by being given dominion, glory and power in heaven. (Of course, if the throne is on earth, the question of where the one like a Son of Man came from with the clouds – and where he went to – opens up again.)

It is noteworthy that, like Isaiah but unlike Ezekiel, the author of Daniel has little interest in the appearance of the throne itself and gives more attention to what happens around the throne. The key theme here is judgement. The Ancient of Days, surrounded by 'the court' (for more on this see Chapter 4), sits in judgement over the world and rules in favour of the one like a Son of Man (and by implication against the beasts from the sea), giving to this being the right to rule as the Ancient of Days, king and judge, does from his throne. The only details given about the throne-chariot itself are that it is fiery, as are its wheels. This suggests that Daniel 7 was among the first of

the many expositions of Ezekiel's vision throne-chariot to which we referred above (see Ezek. 1.4, 16–21).¹³

The enthronement of Jesus

It might be tempting to assume that this slightly alien and unfamiliar tradition about God as king and judge is characteristic of the Hebrew Bible and not the New Testament, and therefore of little relevance to us today. In fact, the throne tradition continues into the New Testament and is vital for understanding a large number of its passages.

The throne and the New Testament

By the time of the New Testament, references to God on his throne are almost exclusively to God in heaven and not to God enthroned in his temple; though it is also quite interesting to observe that explicit references to *God's* throne are rare in the New Testament.¹⁴ References are often more oblique. Indeed the New Testament develops a shorthand for speaking about God's throne which avoids referring directly to it. One of the regularly repeated New Testament phrases refers to Jesus sitting at the right hand of God – the implication being that God is also sitting there on his throne (Matt. 26.64; Mark 14.62; 16.19; Luke 22.69; Acts 2.33; 5.31; 7.56; Rom. 8.34; Eph. 1.20; Col. 3.1; Heb. 1.3; 8.1; 10.12; 12.2; 1 Pet. 3.22). Indeed, of all these references, only Hebrews 8.1 explicitly states that Jesus – the high priest – is seated 'at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens'. In fact this phrase had become so well known and well accepted in the New Testament period that 'the right hand of God' appears to be shorthand for 'sat down at the right hand of the throne of God where he received the honour, power and authority due to him'.

In the Gospels other references to thrones are to the throne of the Son of Man, for example 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory' (Matt. 25.31; see also 19.28). This takes on the tradition of Jesus sitting on a throne in heaven and looks forward to the time when the whole created order will observe him sitting on the throne and realize at last who he is.

For the Gospel writers the throne tradition takes on a new twist, as it becomes clear that Jesus' enthronement on earth is not in the temple but on the cross. This is made most explicit in John's Gospel but is also implied in the other Gospels, not least in the conversation between Jesus and his disciples about who will sit at his right and left hand (Matt. 20.21–23; Mark 10.37–40). Jesus' enthronement on the cross invites us to view the throne of God in an entirely different way. Jesus, king and judge of the world, expresses his righteousness through enthronement on the cross. The righteousness and justice that form the foundations of God's throne (Ps. 89.14; 97.2) remain thoroughly intertwined with enthronement, but here they are manifested not in glory and power but in suffering and death. In his enthronement on the cross, Jesus the king demonstrated not only who he was but what his kingdom was like, a kingship and kingdom marked not only by majesty and glory but also by love and humility.

If any further evidence is needed of the lingering significance of enthronement, the place to look would be Revelation 4–5. This contains the most extended reference to the throne in the New Testament. In chapters 4–5, John describes being summoned into heaven by a voice and standing before God's throne.¹⁵ The throne itself is described in little detail, as the focus of the description is instead on the one sitting on the throne and on what surrounds the throne. So the one sitting on the throne is said to 'look like jasper and carnelian' while around the throne is 'a rainbow that looks like an emerald' (4.3). These three stones may not be exactly equivalent to our modern precious stones – though most are agreed that the ancient emerald was green – but the significance seems to lie in the fact that precious stones refract light in a colourful way that dazzles the eye. The idea that God's presence is 'brilliant' in this sense is a common one, as his presence is often associated with lightning (e.g. Exod. 19.16) and bright light (Matt. 17.2; Mark 9.2). The conundrum is the emerald rainbow. Some suggest 'rainbow' is better translated as 'halo' or 'circle of green', while others wish to maintain 'rainbow' because of its resonance with the covenant to Noah after the flood.¹⁶ It is most likely that, like the references to the precious stones, it comes from Ezekiel 1 where in verse 28 the splendour of the throne is likened to a rainbow: 'Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all round.' The green colour of

the rainbow suggests that it is the shape, not the colour that makes it a rainbow in the mind of the author, and that the colour simply illustrates the brilliance of God's presence.

Jesus enthroned at God's right hand

All these references indicate that the throne is as important in the New Testament as it was in the Hebrew Bible. As Eskola puts it, in the New Testament 'we find the same symbolic world as in Jewish apocalyptic'; a world whose language and symbolism the New Testament authors reused to talk about who Christ was.¹⁷ The language of enthronement – formerly used only of God – is borrowed and adapted in language about Jesus.

One particular example illustrates this well. In Acts 2, Peter explains in his speech at Pentecost how God raised Jesus and exalted him at the right hand of God (2.32–33). Woven into this passage are references or allusions to a number of Psalms. Acts 2.34 quotes Psalm 110.1: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."' And Acts 2.30, 'he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne', alludes to Psalm 132.11, 'The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back.' Both of these Psalms were used to talk about David's enthronement as king, but were also later used to look forward to a time when a future David figure would come and save God's people. In Acts 2 Peter brings together this expectation of a future David figure with the idea that Jesus has been exalted by God at his resurrection and Ascension to sit at his right hand. As a result, Jesus' enthronement as a king and judge like David is not, as one might expect, on earth but at the right hand of God in heaven. Peter declares Jesus to be a true Davidic king figure but beyond people's wildest dreams. Jesus reigns as king not as God's representative, as David and his successors did, but as co-regent at God's right hand in heaven.¹⁸ Acts 2 took the Davidic tradition and turned it into something far more significant.

An intriguing question to ask at this point (though admittedly one that is impossible to answer) is whether Jesus is thought of as seated on his own throne at the right hand of God, or whether he shares God's throne. The New Testament is unclear. The Gospels talk about the Son of Man coming on the throne of his glory, which may imply

a separate throne (Matt. 19.28), but in Revelation 22.1 the river of the water of life is described as 'flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb', which may imply a single throne. Also interesting is Hebrews 8.1, which refers to Jesus sitting literally 'at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens'; this leaves open the question of whether he was on a separate throne or sitting next to God on God's throne. In a sense the literal question of whether there are one or two thrones is unimportant; what is important is the metaphor of Jesus' enthronement alongside God after his resurrection and Ascension. After his resurrection and Ascension Jesus is enthroned – either on his own throne or on God's – as co-regent with God. This image evokes the whole elaborate and complex metaphor of God as king and judge which was so important throughout the Hebrew Bible and applies it to Jesus, risen and ascended.

In stating that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, the New Testament writers were employing this metaphor of God and then associating it with Jesus. The language of enthronement in heaven at God's right hand is, in my view, a very powerful statement about who the earliest Christians thought Jesus was. It cannot alone answer the question of whether or not the early Christians thought Jesus was divine, but it certainly makes an important contribution to the debate. As Matthew 28.18 makes clear, Jesus' authority is not just on earth, but on earth *and* in heaven – 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' – where he reigns alongside God over the whole created order. Exalted through his resurrection and Ascension to the right hand of God, Jesus rules alongside God as king and judge of all; a reign that will be seen by all on earth when the Son of Man comes again in his glory.

The references to Jesus at the right hand of God come so thick and fast throughout the whole of the New Testament that we cannot ignore them. The language of sitting at God's right hand only makes sense if we understand it against the background of God's kingship, enthroned on the cherubim. This symbolic world of kingship and God's throne-chariot is employed to powerful effect when associated with the risen and ascended Jesus who now sits next to God in heaven. Jesus, whose nature as king was perfectly revealed in his enthronement on the cross, now reigns with God – powerful in majesty and in righteousness, whose love and mercy know no end.